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## Fire on the Tongue: A collection of Poems

Nathan Adam White

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**FIRE ON THE TONGUE: A COLLECTION OF POEMS**

**Nathan Adam White**

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Fire on the Tongue:  
A collection of Poems

Nathan Adam White

Columbus State University 2013

We, the members of Adam White Copyright by Committee, confirm that Adam has met the requirements for his Nathan Adam White and has successfully defended that thesis today, December 9, 2013.

2013

Sincerely,



---

Rick Norwood  
Thesis Committee Chair



---

Patrick Jackson  
Committee Member



---

Natalie Tennison  
Committee Member

We, the members of Adam White's Senior Thesis Committee, confirm that Adam has met the requirements for his Senior Thesis (ENGL 4999) and has successfully defended that thesis today, December 9, 2013.

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Nick Norwopod  
Thesis Committee Chair

Patrick Jackson  
Committee Member

Natalia Temesgen  
Committee Member

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I will never know you. You will never know me.

I wrote many such childish verses bemoaning what I believed to be the falling of words, of poetry, and of myself. But still I wrote poetry. Once I had begun writing poetry, no amount of doubt or discouragement could stop me from continuing. And my relationship with poetry has continued.

Aside from crediting the value of knowing from where one has come, I mention all this for two reasons: first, to illustrate my main purpose for writing poetry and the force that drives me; and second, to provide rationale for my primary focus in composing this collection. As to the former, my intention is and always has been to communicate intimately, to create shared experiences through words. As to the latter, my primary consideration has been clarity, to find ways to express those things most difficult to express as clearly as possible. It has been

Contradictions and Tensions: The Influence of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney

My relationship with poetry has been complex. I once felt that poetry, my last friend and greatest hope, had betrayed me, had shut me out and left me very alone. My pen lacked the power that poetry had promised as the last refuge of those who wished to breathe deeply, speak intimately, and inspire intensely. Others had the power to move me, but I seemed incapable of moving others; my lines lacked clarity, my phrases caused confusion. In a mood of irritable desperation I wrote these lines:

You live in the world, I live in the head.

Words convey thought as rain the sea;

if you want to know the sea, go swim.

I will never know you. You will never know me.

I wrote many such childish verses bewailing what I believed to be the failing of words, of poetry, and of myself. But still I wrote poetry. Once I had begun writing poetry, no amount of disdain or discouragement could stop me from continuing. And my relationship with poetry has convalesced.

Aside from crediting the value of knowing from where one has come, I mention all this for two reasons: first, to illustrate my main purpose for writing poetry and the force that drives me; and second, to provide rationale for my primary focus in composing this collection. As to the former, my intention is and always has been to communicate intimately, to create shared experiences through words. As to the latter, my primary consideration has been clarity, to find ways to express those things most difficult to express as clearly as possible. It has been

particularly difficult to maintain clarity because of my dedication to contradictions and dichotomies. Such subjects often, by their nature, give the impression of the oracular. And far worse than lacking clarity, such poems can give the appearance of vacuous trickery, of misdirection intended to distract the reader from the poem's lack of substance; nothing could be worse than to write a poem that appears to mean nothing.

The poet whom I admire most, Ted Hughes, is similarly devoted to contradictions and dichotomies, and while his poetry is often challenging, one would not accuse it of the type of aforementioned misdirection. Hughes's poetry demands of the reader that he or she become involved as creators and join in the dialogue of the poetry in which, as Terry Gifford puts it, Hughes "enter[s] negotiations with both the forces of life and the forces of death equally [and] explore[s] their reliance upon each other" (6). This is only the most striking of a series of dichotomies with which Hughes is engaged: light and dark, beauty and ugliness, truth and lies, words and deeds, male and female, animal and human, creation and destruction, and the list goes on. The dichotomy that has most interested me is that of mind and body, and to this end I have taken philosophy, psychology, and religion as my subjects in many cases. Hughes has similarly explored the duality of spirit and materiality, highlighting the "need [for both] to be held in balance, against the temptation to privilege spiritual insight" (Gifford 8). I have fought against myself to maintain this balance in my poetry and in my life. Hughes has managed to achieve clarity in his work even though, as Rand Brandes observes, Hughes is willing to "sacrifice mass-appeal and easy access" in order to more fully realize his vision of a poetry that creates, through the power of myth, a kind of "liberation theology" (69).



Much of Hughes's success in representing tensions and dichotomies within his poetry is dependent on this use of myth, the "highly symbolic language" of which is "similar to the language of dreams" (Brandes 70). Though critical of Hughes's use of myth, Rand Brandes concedes that "myth gives Hughes spontaneous access to creative spaces he could not otherwise reach" (79). As a student of anthropology, Hughes had at his disposal a "vast array of myths, symbols and magical arts [ . . . ] from around the world" which he drew upon and supplemented with the "depth psychology of Carl Jung and Mircea [Eliade]" as it pertains to comparative religion (Brandes 68).

In *Winter Pollen*, Hughes harkens back to Plato in validating the use of myth and legend which "can be seen as large-scale accounts of negotiations between the powers of the inner world and the stubborn conditions of the outer world, under which ordinary men and women have to live. They are highly detailed sketches for the possibilities of understanding and reconciling the two" (151). My poetic goal has often been to represent or to navigate a secular, if quasi-spiritual, reconciliation of the inner and outer world in a way that benefits both. I have done so with the occasional aid of religious myth but without the vast mythic knowledge of Hughes. Though I lack Hughes's mythic vocabulary, I share his goals. I have attempted in the past to demonstrate similar concepts through more abstract avenues with less success. My poetry has consequently become more lyrical, and I have attempted in this way to demonstrate the same tensions that I had previously strained to depict through what might best be described as metaphysical meditation.

Much of Hughes's time was spent in Ireland "which became his spiritual home" (Brandes 74), and this likely contributed to the friendship between himself and Seamus Heaney. Hughes

revered Ireland as the one part of the Western world that might not be beyond redemption (Brandes 74), and wrote in a 1989 letter to Heaney of his excitement regarding what Heaney, “as the voice of Irishness,” might be able to do with his new appointment at Oxford (*Letters* 564). I have spent five weeks in Ireland and have spent much time studying Irish literature over the past two years. Joyce and Yeats have been among my greatest inspirations, and Seamus Heaney has inspired me more than perhaps any other poet. Heaney has been such an inspiration to me in part because his work is, in a sense, representative of the inverse of my own. My eye has always turned inward, whereas Heaney, by his own account, has always kept his ear open for that which is outside of himself. In my poetry, I attempt to balance meditation and observation but still must struggle against the imbalance caused by my meditative tendencies. Heaney reminds me more powerfully than any other poet of the concrete world that I am now struggling to incorporate into my own work.

In his Nobel lecture “Crediting Poetry,” Heaney reflects on the way in which he took in all the sounds of his childhood as if in a “doze of hibernation” (415). He describes his childhood life as an “intimate, physical, creaturely existence” in which he “took in everything that was going on” (415). He recalls the “rain in the trees, mice on the ceiling, [and] a steam train rumbling along the railway line” (415). He describes this experience of absorption as “ahistorical, presexual,” and recalls being “as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in [their] scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence” (415). This attentiveness to sound and to surrounding is evident throughout Heaney’s work.

My own childhood was meditative, reflective, historically situated, and overly aware of the inner-workings of my life. Far from “intimate, physical, and creaturely,” my childhood was isolated, intellectual, and filled with fear of the flesh. The wind that whipped the window produced a fearful sound, and I fancied I heard the cackle of demons scavenging for souls. I felt the oppressive presence of sin weighing on my soul and could not listen blithely to the sound of birds without measuring their temporal freedom against my eternal bondage. I was (and am) plagued by physical illness, depression, anxiety, and the frequent threat of death. My existence was one which precluded the search for sounds outside of myself, for I was busying myself trying to understand that which was inside of me and how best to communicate it; the language of the inner world can sometimes find itself at odds with that of the outer world.

I put quite a lot of faith in words, hoping that I would someday find the means of expressing to others what it was that I felt inside. But this often produced the opposite effect: an overreliance on words, left-hemispheric abstractions, had deprived me of the use of sound and symbol. The concrete world in which shared experience is possible was a foreign thing to me. I had not yet learned to point to the ripples in the bucket.

I still struggle to find the concrete in my poetry. I am much more comfortable with abstractions and must struggle to move outside of myself, to find the shared symbol that will allow true communication. On the other hand, I feel as if I have come closer to achieving the goal of creating powerful sounds within my poetry, though they are still based primarily on finding the most euphonic way to express some abstract thought.

I return to the inspirational words of Heaney in his Nobel lecture; his assertion that poetry “can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of

the poet's being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket" is as encouraging to me as his assertion that this is an "order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew" (417). I am encouraged because I know that I have not yet finished growing up to that which I have stored. The memories I have stored throughout my life need still to be teased out, and can yet be made "true to the impact of external reality," thus finally creating a space of shared experience and understanding without sacrificing the "inner laws" of my being. I might point to "Trying to Feel" as a poem in which I have come close to achieving this goal. In this poem I address the sexual confusion of my childhood while relating it to the difficulties of sexual maturity. The poem ends with a concrete symbol of loneliness; one that I hope is universally relatable.

Heaney's early approach to poetry was also an inverted form of my own. Initially, Heaney "wanted that truth to life to possess a concrete reality, and rejoiced most when the poem seemed most direct, an upfront representation of the world it stood in for or stood up for or stood its ground against" (417). Heaney lists John Keats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Frost, and Chaucer as early favorites for the various ways in which they applied concrete reality to their poetry (417). He goes on to list Wallace Stevens, Rainer Maria Wilke, Emily Dickinson, and T.S. Eliot as poets whom he resisted for their abstract opulence and inwardness (418). In stark contrast to these lists, I early resisted concrete poets such as Keats, Elizabeth Bishop, and William Carlos Williams, while celebrating the works of Cummings, Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Eliot, and even metaphysical poets such as Donne. This, I hope, illustrates why I need the inspiration of a poet like Seamus Heaney: to provide a counterweight to my own tendencies.

For while Heaney matured into a poet who by no means disdained abstraction, he always remained firmly rooted in the concrete, striking a balance between two extremes.

Living in Ireland during the “troubles,” Heaney found himself compelled to write of the conflict, to make his poetry “true to the impact of external reality and . . . sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being” (420). Heaney felt himself torn regarding the situation, deploring the violent tactics of the IRA while being appalled by the ruthlessness of the British forces and feeling that change was long overdue (421). However, “the dream of justice became subsumed into the callousness of reality” and the result was “a quarter century of life-waste and spirit-waste” (421). Much of Heaney’s work has explored this “life-waste” and “spirit-waste” whether directly, as in “The Strand at Lough Beg,” or symbolically, as in “Punishment.”

I too have felt compelled to write of “life-waste” and “spirit-waste,” though in a very different way and for very different reasons. The circumstances of Heaney’s life provided him with a grim picture of the world filled with waste in pursuit of impossible ideals. My life has lacked such drama, but by dint of certain aspects of religion to which I had been exposed at an early age, I have always been hyper-aware of death, suffering, waste, and ideology. Furthermore, as Heaney notes, “only the very stupid or the very deprived can any longer help knowing that the documents of civilization have been written in blood and tears, blood and tears no less real for being very remote” (423). I adopted an anti-dogmatic, anti-ideological stance at a young age, identifying dogma and ideology as the greatest sources of suffering and waste. I have no specific social or political calling such as Seamus Heaney, but it is in this way that I feel compelled to be “true to the impact of external reality and . . . sensitive to the inner laws of” my being.

It may be that I sometimes come across as dogmatic in my own way of thinking, though I attempt to avoid this through contradiction and dichotomy; if one poem presents an unwavering point of view, I hope that another poem acts as a counterbalance. It is almost certain that I appear to be dogmatic concerning certain metaphysical assumptions, but this is simply the result of a bad habit that I hope to rectify.

Heaney notes that amid all the “blood and tears” of both past and present it has become difficult to “credit human nature with much constructive potential [nor] to credit anything too positive in the work of art” (423). Heaney admits to having succumbed to the weight of the world, “bowed to the desk like some monk [. . .] knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture” (423). This can be seen in much of Heaney’s writings including the collection *North* which includes a number of the “bog poems.” I too have found myself bent beneath the weight of the world feeling impotent and desperate to say something that addresses the condition of humanity if it does not offer any aid. However, I should once again look to Heaney’s example and “[straighten] up;” I must “make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvelous as well as for the murderous” (423).

In order to illustrate his point, Heaney briefly recounts the story of St. Kevin, who, out of pity, allowed a blackbird to nest on his arm for weeks while he kneeled in the “posture of endurance” (423-4). Heaney describes this story as “true to life if subversive to common sense, at the intersection of natural process and the glimpsed ideal, at one and the same time a signpost and a reminder” (424). It is a story that moves the hearer, and this, more than the impossible circumstances of the story, is a testament to the potential for goodness in humanity. The

murderous is perhaps currently more fashionable than the marvelous, but each moves the soul equally. And if one may be permitted at every turn to subvert common sense to make a point about the ugliness of human nature, then the same allowance should be made for making a point about the potential for goodness. This is a lesson that I need to learn.

Heaney takes Yeats's "Meditations in Time of Civil War" as an example of how a poem can "satisf[y] the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust" (428). It is for a similar reason that I have felt contradiction to be essential to my poetry. Life can be experienced as one long crisis, and this is the way that it is typically dealt with in my poetry; thus it is that contradiction is necessary. There is a need for hard, just truth, for a truth that is consistent with the experience of crisis; but there is also a need for a less definitive truth, a truth of possibility wherein there is hope that the crisis might be resolved, even if the answer is not readily apparent.

Moreover, it is an observation that seems too rarely credited, that tension and contradiction is the very essence of life. I won't go into the details of codependent dichotomies (e.g. light and dark) which are frequently discussed, but I would like to point out the necessity of tension. A loose spring is lifeless and static; a spring that is held taut against its own nature has a spark of life. The foot must have the earth to push against and gravity to bring it back down. If there were no opposing force (and we might call this an "enemy"), there would be no movement. Every act of kindness is preceded by some cruelty that has created the necessary circumstance for kindness to occur. A poem without tension or contradiction is similarly lifeless.

Because tension and conflict is everywhere, the very stuff of life, and because humanity has become increasingly familiar with it in its various forms throughout the world, "we are in danger of growing immune, familiar to the point of overfamiliarity" (429). Poetry, for Heaney, has the power to shake us from our malaise, to move the callous, to "bring us to our senses" (429). There is perhaps no better way of phrasing it: "bring us to our senses." Because that is what poetry should do: it should bring back to our senses those things that have become overfamiliar and purely intellectual. It should re-sensitize us, we who have become desensitized. Poetry should remind us of the universal from which the particulars come. It should seek to unite the mental and physical. It should seek to remind us of what humanity truly is within its context: creatures, neither idealized nor demonized, half-brilliant, half-confused, longing for eternal, beautiful truth, aware of the difficulty (or impossibility) of such a hope, but, for good or ill, persisting, always persisting.

The lesson that I try hardest to learn from Heaney is that of the effective use of sound. Heaney says of himself that "as a poet [he is] in fact straining towards a strain, in the sense that the effort is to repose in the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds" (429-30). In lyric poetry, Heaney observes, "truthfulness becomes recognizable as a ring of truth within the medium itself. And it is the unappeasable pursuit of this note [. . .] which keeps the poet's ear straining to hear the totally persuasive voice behind all the other informing voices" (429). I often strain in vain to find this "ring of truth," but when I do find it, I can feel it. It is the pairing of sound and sense that creates a truly memorable and moving poem. Heaney's poetry demonstrates a mastery of sound that cannot be easily imitated, but he will be my teacher for years to come as I continue to study his work.



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## Cackle *My Sister's Wedding*

Forever I fear I might laugh aloud  
from the blackened hollows deep within:  
the cackle casts a terrible shroud  
upon my mirth which must not be endowed  
with the character of the cackle's sin.  
Forever I fear I might laugh aloud.

For one who knows what my soul has allowed  
to be made jest or who's heard the din  
the cackle casts a terrible shroud.

My own heart shivers to hear it grow loud  
from the low rattle at which it begins:  
forever I fear I might laugh aloud.

I've fallen to the floor in fits, unproud,  
what shame to be seen, what shame it has been:  
the cackle casts a terrible shroud.

My throat should be shut; my head should be bowed.  
I hear in my snicker, the devil's my kin.  
Forever I fear I might laugh aloud;  
the cackle casts a terrible shroud.

### After My Sister's Wedding

From a distance of a hundred yards,  
I hear their shouts, but only can see little streaks.  
But I know they're little children dressed  
as adults in dresses and suits that run  
and play like the children they are.  
In the parking lot I clutch a Dixie cup  
of wine, and as I smoke I laugh, alone,  
and wish that I were with them.

Yet the Alexandrian Library  
collapsed in fire;  
and with time all flames  
must relapse and return.  
Fuel is exhausted, fire dies,  
leaving ash to burn, cover, and hide.

## Fire on the Tongue

Certain words and certain sounds  
make kindling of the ear,  
drown the heart in gasoline,  
and set the soul on fire.  
Fire flourishes on the tongue.  
It flicks from there to other ears;  
the blaze, once begun, cannot be stopped,  
though the first spark glimmers or disappears.  
Yet the Alexandrian Library  
collapsed in fire,  
and with time all flames  
must relapse and retire.  
Fuel is exhausted, fire dies,  
static ash is born, covers, and hides.

## Posture of Revolt

Splash black on the canvas;  
 there's nothing else to do,  
 while smoking cigarettes  
 at two in the morning,  
 having made yourself  
 impotent,  
 having been made  
 responsible,  
 having done  
 what can't be undone,  
 provided  
 a clean and meaningless slate.  
 Let us all  
*splash.*

over and over again.

With nothing to do,  
 awake at four in the morning,  
 I took a shower.

Shivering amid the steam,  
 through seething jet and sudden stop,  
 the fear that nothing could be done,  
 this fear would not rise off.

## Still Awake Thinking

There had to be something I had to do.  
Awake at four in the morning,  
I took a shower.

Awake at four in the morning,  
I was afraid, like  
most nights, of turned faces, flickering eyes.

I was afraid like  
when I was a child, a visionary,  
Eye-fearing Christian.

When I was a child, a visionary,  
worried dreamer, I dreamt my  
mother's face turning

over and over again.

With nothing to do,  
awake at four in the morning,  
I took a shower:

Shivering amid the steam,  
through seething jet and sudden stop,  
the fear that nothing could be done,  
this fear would not rinse off.

## Philosophy

There are no more like Socrates;  
no one need drink any hemlock.  
The gadflies have gone mad or else  
they've gone chasing their tails.

Things have changed since Socrates.  
The unexamined life, the life examined,  
what difference remains, does it still matter?  
And what should be asked, what examined?

But at least we can agree:  
the biggest questions cannot be answered,  
the most important questions have already been asked,  
and no one really needs philosophy.

## Dark Fire *My of Phineas Gage*

Pastor Senn, *born to Phineas Gage?*  
 he took his time *worked the rails —*  
 talking about hell: *with the eye*  
 the fire without light *revived. But*  
 that melts the flesh *wasn't Gage anymore.*  
 but never the nerves.  
 No, every nerve *his brain; he should not have survived.*  
 will burn forever *quiet, and for some time,*  
 in the black, black *ings, could not keep a job,*  
 nothing perfected; *it was certainly changed,*  
 all pain condensed to a moment, *as he was Gage.*  
 all eternity crushed to nothing.  
 Alone, apart from All that is Good, *self.*  
*down there,* God won't hear you anymore.  
 He touched us on the forehead; *himself.*  
 like the others, *or being expected*  
 I fell down. *of the same?*

*But most folks didn't know what to expect,  
 and everyone wanted to see.*

*In your photograph, your chin is set high,  
 and you can barely see the scars. Your eyes  
 it's simply done. The man's in your hand.*

*You kept on, and people had to dig  
 for the mysteries inside your head.  
 They feel about you, they need you,  
 and now they're suspect your brain,  
 and look at me, I'm using you too.*

*Phineas Gage was a man who worked the rails,  
 and survived the loss of his left frontal lobe.  
 We made of him a myth for the deniers,  
 And why speak of evidence?  
 And why Phineas Gage?*



## The Anatomy of Phineas Gage

And why return to Phineas Gage?  
—a foreman who worked the rails—  
who, pierced through the eye  
by a tamping iron, survived. But  
his friends said he wasn't Gage anymore.

It drove through his brain; he should not have survived,  
but instead he was quiet, and for some time,  
he did reckless things, could not keep a job,  
he hastened to anger, was certainly changed,  
but despite what was said, he knew he was Gage.

And he was. As far as he knew himself.  
As far as one can know. He was  
what was left. What was worse, Phineas:  
being changed or being expected  
to have stayed the same?

But most folks didn't know what to expect,  
and everyone wanted to see.

In your photograph, your chin is set high,  
and you can barely see the scars. Your eye!  
It's simply shut. The iron's in your hand.

You kept on, and people had to dig  
for the mysteries inside your head.  
They lied about you, they used you,  
and now they've mapped your brain,  
and look at me, I'm using you too.

Phineas Gage was a man who worked the rails,  
and survived the loss of his left frontal lobe.  
We made of him a myth for the demystifiers.  
And why speak of evidence?  
And why Phineas Gage?

## Trying to Feel

I see cranes of my life  
are they but blinding

Sex perplexed me as a boy.  
The mechanics were not mysterious,  
my blood did not rush at the thought:  
I'd forsaken the flesh for Fear.  
I understood feeling,  
but this made no sense.  
More than childish curiosity,  
I needed to know.

II  
It has the way of the world  
of making things

Taboo forgotten, I learned about sex.  
I learned it's hard to feel without hurting,  
hard to feel, and harder still to be felt.  
At night I rub one foot to the other, numb.

ask if I have eyes  
to know or taste the best  
I know this

There is suffering  
greater than I  
or you know

and we sing song against the  
raining, bleeding, bleeding  
balance of life's figure

this sings of wanting to be saved  
is worth being heard

## No Song

The crises of my life  
 are tiny but blinding.  
 I, crying, curse my birth,  
 but fortune treats me fine.

I know enough of  
 pain to suffer  
 more for knowing  
 that I never really have.

There's no reason for the world,  
 but it has its way of rhyming,  
 of making things  
 that make sense of things;  
 when I hear false songs  
 sung against the rhythm  
 of truth, I claw my ears  
 and, in the silence,

ask if I have right  
 to know or name the beat.  
 I know this:

There is suffering  
 greater than I  
 or you know,

and no song sung against the  
 pulsing, blending, bleeding  
 balance of life's fugue

that sings of waiting to be saved  
 is worth being heard.

## Smoking *the Life*

A cigarette *when I'm drunk I feel*  
 is *always just what you think it's going to be;*  
 Marsha Norman said it well.

Too little or perhaps too much has been said  
 about cigarettes; *compassion,*  
 but I speak of them too.

I can't help but feel *to other people*  
 that to share that I'm smoking  
 is to say something real

and worth saying, *interest,*  
 like you might understand better;  
 but it's all misunderstood.

Herr Freud misunderstood many things,  
 but eros is real, *called "good,"*  
 and thanatos too. *drunk.*

By which I mean *no apology*  
 But Marsha Norman said it well:  
 cigarettes are what you want them to be,  
 and cigarettes are *quiet.*

*unworthy of consideration;*  
 at I was *once told by an intelligent man:*  
 "You are drunk.  
 Forget your thoughts and sleep."  
 Forget my thoughts -- of course he should wish  
 me to wash my hands of it.  
 But no.  
 I've made up my mind.

But still: *like I almost understand,*  
 I feel like life is worth living.

## To Feel Like Life

Sometimes when I'm drunk I feel  
like I almost understand,  
but that's when I'm drunk.

But still, I almost think I feel what  
(I guess) you call compassion,  
like life is worth it,

like what life means to other people  
who don't see bad in the baby  
and curse the womb.

Others and I often intersect,  
but I hasten to deadbolts  
and shun the cross.

And I rebuke god for making this  
terrible thing he called "good,"  
but remember I'm drunk.

By which I mean no apology,  
though I might beg one since I seek  
to spare confusion.

For god is a trifle  
unworthy of consideration;  
as I was once told by an intelligent man:  
"You are drunk.

Forget your thoughts and sleep."  
Forget my thoughts—of course he should wish  
me to wash my hands of it.  
But no,  
I've made up my mind.

But still, like I almost understand,  
I feel like life is worth living.

**Marked**

And feeling myself grow weaker, smaller,  
I turn away.  
From everyone and everything I love  
or want to love.  
Because I'm wasted potential,  
an ugly thing.  
And it shows on my flesh like a mark  
from God  
saying, "this one turned away from Me,  
now watch him decay."  
I see it in the mirror:  
where once I was lean, I'm coated in fat.  
My chest droops and my stomach sags.  
But worse, far worse, is the twitch  
that makes my own lip curl  
at the sight of my face: contempt.  
And sometimes my nose retreats  
and my lip contracts: disgust.  
And the twitch will not subside until  
I've turned from the image in the mirror  
and fully forgotten the filth that was there.  
So how could I ask to be loved  
when I've put upon myself the mark?

## Schopenhauer

*Life is suffering*, says Schopenhauer:  
 we fret with the strain of stress and suffer  
 or mad with boredom rummage through rubbish.  
 Or look a bit further, anywhere really:  
 life is struggle and strife and suffering.

I'm tempted to believe it's true:  
 life's a loosening spring that must be rescrewed.  
 But I see something Schopenhauer did not:  
 between the suffering poles, there's contentment and joy.  
 And sometimes like a child, I climb a tree,  
 and there no stress nor boredom finds me.

God bless environment! And food! How cheap!  
 God bless tranquillity! How easy to find!  
 Two blades of grass! How green! How soft!  
 But God damn the business process of pills!

No rain! The curtains came crashing down!  
 The black returned with a weighty hand.  
 The darkness went for watching every light,  
 the memory laughs at me, waves, and cracks.

Rx *Human Animal*

No more! She wouldn't stand it.  
I needed pills. Medicine would fix me.  
I had lost the will: why resist any longer?  
I was ill and took what the doctor gave.

No more! She couldn't stand it.  
I needed more time. The pills took too long.  
She left me with my pills and my illness  
days before the revelation –

No more! The fog had lifted!  
And on Christmas day! I had been half-blind:  
now, snow-covered, the world was not concealed  
behind curtains of black, and I was free.

God bless serotonin! And God bless drugs!  
God bless tranquilizers that calm anxious blood!  
Two blissful months! God bless them still!  
But God damn the broken promise of pills!

No more! The curtains came crashing down!  
The black returned with a vengeful howl.  
The darkness worse for having seen the light,  
the memory laughs at me, sneers, and mocks.



## The Human Animal

God did not make woman from a man's rib.  
 Man was not crafted from dirt.  
 Adam did not name all the animals.  
 Temptation did not bring man's curse.

Man is cursed by his nature:  
 the animals named us, gave us our charge  
 to reflect on the earth and wallow in dirt,  
 lonely observers of flesh, spirit, and stars.

To know what we are, to dream what might be,  
 to rise and fall with conscience and instinct,  
 to see ourselves only half-distinct  
 makes the life of the animal human seem ugly.

But there's something in woman,  
 though we often repulse,  
 I want close to my heart,  
 not a rib but a pulse.

Cursed is the skull  
 that cages the brain  
 with harm, for the brain  
 itself is cursed,  
 and the skull, on a day  
 may find itself striking  
 a wall,  
 for its cursed charge  
 is ready to burst.

## First

Cursed is the womb  
 that bears the child  
 with pain, for the skull  
 itself is cursed  
 to case so much mass,  
 its horrid, large shape  
 is the greatest, the first,  
 and the worst of the bursts;  
 the soft-spotted skull  
 protects and enshrines  
 that which creates  
 and bestows every hurt,  
 and as the bone thickens  
 it will come to protect  
 vast swarms of thought  
 that cannot be dispersed.

As big as it is,  
 as much pain as it's caused  
 the skull has more yet to grow.  
 The brain must be large; there's much to be done.  
 And with mass so great  
 it may wonder one day  
 why the mother should suffer so much.  
 For the sake of the brain? for the sake of  
*the brain?*

Cursed is the skull  
 that cases the brain  
 with harm, for the brain  
 itself is cursed,  
 and the skull, on a day,  
 may find itself striking  
 a wall,  
 for its cursed charge  
 is ready to burst.

## Red Cross

I have no real hope when the phone rings.  
And I'm not really disappointed with the call.  
It's the Red Cross again; they're after my blood:  
B positive.

*Be positive, I think, they're just after my blood.*

And I should give from my excess  
what I can which is much.

But there's something left in me  
that stirs when the phone rings.

## More Words

How much time have I wasted  
putting thoughts into words  
trying to describe feelings  
better left undescribed?  
Why do I insist on trying?

Onomatopoeia is worthless  
because it cannot speak the sizzling,  
rumbling sound one hears  
when one's teeth clamp like a vise,  
and one's eyes squeeze  
until red is replaced by starbursts,  
and one's lips contradict the clamp  
of the teeth, distending,  
and one's throat bubbles hot  
with the silent scream.

### Perception/Analysis

a painter might say that the world is flat  
and be quite right in saying that  
depth is a trick of the eye  
a painter tries not to deceive  
the trick of the brush  
reveals the state of the mind  
and how the eye perceives  
a painter sees no danger  
without defense and unafraid  
the world looks different when you paint  
no objects, only colors and shades,  
one unanalyzed unity  
pleasant but vulnerable  
fear remembers time and space  
remembers TREE and LINE and LAND  
and BUSH and ROW and PLOT  
fear remembers the unseen snake  
and the picture is lost  
swallowed whole by four dimensions

