

WORDS FOR THE SEASONS

Al Fritsch

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Winter

NEW YEAR'S DAY

Adieu, whistles blew, noise grew, brew too;
Spent year subdued, Auld Lang Syne renew.
Wring out the time-worn bitter sting,
Jump start the orbits' spring.
For good reason some stayed apart,
No fresh season can ever start
by losing sleep. That's not very smart;
For a clear head makes for a steady heart.

It's strange the wags are gonna say
To launch a year with a holy day.
Rise good hearted and with no delay,
Dress warm, hurry now, come to pray.
Good News relay; strong tones convey;
A sacral season's sublime bouquet.

January, 1998

WINTER'S HIDDEN HOPE

What more to do but stay alive
Holding firm yet steadfast in silvery statuary
Clinging tight to ashen memories of yestersummer.

Birds seek shelter from the howling blast
Bone-chilled wildlife venturing out when hungry
 from calm brush-cover;
Trees, long shed of greenery,
 now stand sentinels of a coming spring.

Nature sleeps
But it is now a fitful rest,
With sap rising
 to bring forth life anew.

We Christians accept our Lenten fasting,
Another late winter of playing dead,
Foreboding of a final winter
 making ready for eternal spring.

Will spring ever come this year?
Will the sun be strong enough to erase snow drifts?
Will the season cycles remember to repeat themselves?

Yes, yes, yes, the hesitant but lengthening day proclaims --
Winter is not forever, even if for this moment
 it seems to be;
Earth's cyclic death contains the germ of hidden life.

The brief span of ice-crystal mornings
 cannot continue indefinitely,
For each day is longer, sunlight stronger;
and the wind's chill itself will leave us soon.

Let our hopes be bathed in sunlight.

STEPHEN'S ORDEAL

Who was ever more outspoken in all of Scripture
than you, Deacon Stephen?

Who dared so many, so much, all for one man?

Who braved such hostility from upraised stones?

Who turned from hate-filled eyes to look to heaven?

Who was the first to see the coming of the Son?

Who felt the first blow,
and the second of all those
who were to be witnesses after you?

Who struggled with his last bloody breath
and found in it Pure Light?

Revised December, 2000

PORTA SANCTA

A trembling but determined hand
breaks a hole, makes a gateway clear;
he strikes the plastered barrier
a symbolic blow that opens this Holy Year.

It is a new time, Christ's time
beginning in a Holy Land at a humble site
opening to us as we see it anew;
God steps on Earth on this Holy night.

Give us the strength to bring glad tidings
to the poor; to proclaim to captives liberty,
recovery of sight to the blind too,
and let the oppressed go free in jubilee.

Lord, open the gateways of our life,
the closed parts that pen us in;
open us to freely pass as porters
so that these greater deeds may soon begin.

NEW MILLENNIUM

Time, not ours but God's, passes through our fingers
As we brag of deeds not really so,
Tell of phantasms in our aged minds
As though faded memory could really know.

It's now here -- a new millennium, century, year --
But for those of us who picked life's flowers.
Does history's grace belong to us in the first place --
Now by divine destiny -- will it be ours?

The West's millennium, was it theirs or anyone's?
America's century, was it a surrealistic climb?
The Computer's decade, is it not a dumb tool-turned-idol?
Or is a year of tall deeds shrunk to mega time?

Lord teach me to count how few days we have
and so gain wisdom of heart.*
Help me to see this coming day, not ages past,
as saved in grace -- a new start.

* (Ps. 90:12)

ODE TO THE FEBRUARY-BORN

When winter extends itself in frosty clime,
and spring won't come, nor poems rhyme.
Such is the shortest month sublime,
but longest, by far, in psychic time.

Sing out winter's final dirge,
Fault the neighbor's mall-led splurge.
Exercising urge, fasting purge,
Greenhouse starts, when spirits surge.

A birthday rite, a feast of light,
When days get longer, an hour less night.
Hear the mourning dove, bird-starved delight.
Listen! the tree sap's finding height.

Pouring molasses in January's a chore,
but molasses in February is still slower.
Winter, winter, may it ebb away?
Modest delay, oh fibbing February!

And deep down when I think this month's a crime
I find the finest born came at this time.
There's George, Tom Edison and Honest Abe,
and many years ago, Paul Rothkrug, a babe.

God made the February-born doubly great,
for these learned early to smile and wait,
To defer to those who come by late,
to stand for justice in place of hate.

On Paul Rothkrug's 85th birthday

LINCOLN MEMORIAL

It took me a while to come to like him
Shining white cast, cold marble seated seraphim.
Though we share torn northern-southern sympathy,
Growing up lean and gaunt in ole Kentucky.
In flesh I find a right friendly fellow
Humble by birth, certainly no marshmallow;
Grows up working hard on farm and wood,
Trying to live as everyone should.

He's learned by a log fire after nightfall;
He started slow, heeding a distant call;
Postman, boatman, soldier, storekeeper
But as lawyer his thoughts ran deeper.
He struggled to see all created free,
Antietam's guns, presidential decree.
Then when Civil War was truly won,
Booth's bullet laid him; thy will be done.

What we get from Abe's disquieted life
Is to boldly face ongoing strife;
Don't disguise big questions, let them be.
Shouldn't Third World indebted also be free?
Why with poor folks' many basic cares
Should paid-for laws allow billionaires?
No, this good Earth needs Abe's honesty,
"All must be free," Lincoln's prodigy.

February, 1998

Love is --

the atmosphere surrounding our service for others,
the unattained goal of life towards which we strive,
the most elementary form of early communication,
the stirring deep within our bones,
the unsolicited smile to another,
the craving of our very souls for peace,
the unquestioned devotion of our pets,
the kind words when others have forsaken us,
the sacrifices of our parents and guardians,
the constant demands met without thanks,
the hurts that we endure

but do not return,

the momentary meetings of eyes with someone served,
the calluses on work hands,
the arms joined with others in prayer,
the desire to be united with another,
the many pleasures of life shared with another,
the grateful feeling of surviving the night,
the pause by a cook after serving

a favorite dish,

the attraction mixed with spiritual fulfillment,
the sincere kiss,

the time spent quietly with a loved one,
the radical sharing by those with little,
the heartbeat in unison with an unborn child,
the stark reality of enduring another's foibles,
the sincerity of the poor,
the rush of joy at the returning soldier,
the quest for protection by the vulnerable,
the hug by a speechless friend

at the time of someone's passing,

the goodbye between two when one is going to harm's way,
the appreciation by an elder

for a youngster's kindness,

the joy on a kid's face on a parent's coming home,
the firm assurance that all is okay,
the eyes of gratitude from the sick bed,
the pride in a job well done by a loved one,
the pleasure in watching a garden grow,
the confidence of the nurse with the patient,
the sincere thank you for help given,
the making-up after a quarrel,
the night's embrace,
the final meal with friends,
the peace of soul at Holy Communion,
the attraction to the deepest Mystery

at the moment of death,

GOD.

FIRST ROBIN

No migrant so earns our gratitude,
When you bid the south adieu.
Perky, alert, wired and clued,
A soon-laden robin with ova blue,
To start a new brood
When that nest is through.

You honor us, your choice of place;
You could have graced another homestead;
The welcome mat is our greenspace.
You feast upon our space instead --
A sign that no chemical trace
Will harm what you have bred.

Cars passed them by on the Daniel Boone,
avoiding risks perhaps but leaving them cold and stiff –
A lift-needing twosome with a third in womb.
A flash from thumbing days sent me brakeward.
I'll just pick them up if nobody's on my tail
for it's not my luck playing chicken with a coal truck.

A word of gratitude from these young Perry Countians
coming back home. He, ex-serviceman; she, ex-waitress;
autumn sun-belt bound, winter broke and no work found.
I offered them fruit -- looked hungry but ate little,
talk less; why break their thought-laced faded dreams,
or maybe of kin with whom they'd soon be home again.

Their silent but powerful presence made me wonder --
there's able-bodied Joe, a stat in the labor pool of
federal crafting, remembered only for taxes and drafting.
There's another pregnant Mary deep in mothering thoughts
or just embarrassed to be on the road. Already
too many fears and tears to enjoy her late teen years.

Their lives like all of ours are short, precious,
filled with unachieved goals, frustrations,
with no pay coming for standing idle on a working day.
What about their new one whose birth upon this Earth
ought to be a time of joy? Will there be a tomorrow
with good springing from folks with threatened humanhood.

The Hazard turn-off came up short.
I let them out. They said, "Thanks!" I, "good luck!"
to soothe their need while basking in an imperfect deed.
As I hit the gas it struck how hitchhikers move me to
see that mine is but an inn-on-wheels, which turned them out
to fight the meanness of the early winter night.

Misplaced shame? Maybe. I'm not the Earth's innkeeper --
though we might be. I've no keys to give such seekers rest
or jobs -- but we do. Within holds a revolutionary clue.
How can we have much and others little? We open doors
to let them pass to find a livelihood in distant places
and then sneak back, victims of economic slack.

We offer a season's cheer, a bite to eat, a ride, a feeling
of being satisfied. For these riders and their unborn we need
to try yet untried: to give them back their human pride.

Christmas, 1984

THE ROCKCASTLE SPEAKS

If we but listen hard we hear the river's voice,
Quiet now, for we need be in tune to the sound;
It carved this valley through a half million years
and allowed trees to cover this holy ground.

"Yes, in grace and spirit, my waters saved you
Jerry Waddle, truly home-grown boy,
You played on my banks and swam the holes
and by canoe you drank in my river joy.

You went off to Turkey and lands far away
So others could swim here and be free;
But you came back to find your happy end
Like a contented salmon from the sea.

Instead, you found some had freely cut my trees,
My cover, and desecrated earth by field and mine,
and ORV riders raced on my fragile banks,
Wildcat's trenches flattened for a dollar sign.

Waddle, if you were saved through my waters,
You vowed to save the waters in return.
You spoke to 15,000 youth of forested watershed
and of their need to carefully discern.

You created the Rockcastle River Rebirth
and helped form the Kentucky Waterways Alliance.
You spoke out against the litter all around
and led the cleanup in the face of local defiance.

You were first in this state's tradition
To sue a Governor for not stopping solid waste,
And in credit to you he changed a state policy
and started cleaning up the land in haste.

I heard you say, 'I want a raised bed garden next year;'
Thus it is, the mound under which your body lies.
Bones strumming to the music of my river's course,
Sentinels heralding a day that never dies."

We ducks and people miss you, but your love is contagious
You gave us courage as a pristine reborn model.
If, like you, we express our hearts in deed,
We continue your work with a light-hearted waddle.

Dedicated to Jerry Waddle - January 2, 2002

APPALACHIAN WINTER

Sing of spring, simmer in summer, enthrall in fall,
Brave souls enter and enjoy Appalachian winter.

Unclothed mid-year's greenery, bare-breasted knobs,
Naked landscape, stripped, clearcut, littered over.

The countryside reveals a million shades of gray:
Farm ponds, tulip tree bark, briar patches,

Swinging bridges, grape vines, dried goldenrod butts,
Icicles hanging from north slope roadcuts.

Squealing playgrounds of vanishing snow patches,
Just before the rare sun transforms the landscape.

A jumble of intertwined curvy graveled roads
without shoulders and with no distinguishing codes.

The squat barns sit on coved in hillsides
hunkered down like contented nesting hens before.

Some roadside plots show last year's tobacco stumps,
Amid green sprigged winter wheat and rye.

Hay rolls punctuate the livestock fields,
picked at by scruffy heifers or old plugs
who earn their retirement where they were born.

And there's manure piled knee-deep, shed filled,
partly composting, left to March and windy climes.

If you like black and white photos,
with many shades of gray,
You'll love Appalachian Winter.

CONSOLATION

Words of support
refresh the parched soul
like cool, bubbling water
from a hillside spring.

They are all the more welcome
when unexpected, and arriving
just when I'm down and out,
and have nowhere to turn.

They awaken within me
a sense of renewed hope
that I'll speak consoling words
to refresh another.

March, 1999 In America at the Millennium

EARTH-MOVERS

An ear-splitting blast, a shattered hope,
mine spoil rolling down the denuded slope,
Amid uprooted twisted tree branches, trunks,
a cloud of dust, a shower of rocky chunks.

This is a herald's voice in the wild,
telling of a broken community's child,
moving to lower places not yet found,
uprooted, psychically gorged so deep down.

Where land and people are bonded brother,
breaking up one, splits off the other,
Intertwined in fortune, a give and take,
bobbing like boats on a choppy lake.

God's Spirit moved across this land,
shaking the depths with a creative hand.
A billion years compressed to a fateful day,
Can we bring back the bonds to stay?

The dove's call is first song about,
For just a little winter time it's clear.
Soon street cacophony and migrant birds drown out
its solo sound for another year.

Today in late winter's slow moving course
I heard the first sound of the mourning dove
To others perhaps lament, no, a spirit-rushing force,
Spring's morning, a name better thought of.

Through the year it has a sorrowful moan;
Time to get up it seems to say;
Nest-making, eating, spring seeds are sown,
"Get going, let's start a new day."

Doves are the bearers of peace.
An olive sprig back to Noah's ark,
It bears to us a similar word at least.
This growing year now has its animated spark.

March, 1998

Harbinger of Spring # 2

They call you *Zenaida macroura*, how sad.
They brand your song mourning, that's bad.
Little is it known by the naming folks
That you, gray bird, have other strokes.

First you're a dove, global sign of peace
Bringing back olive branches on release,
But few olives grow here you understand,
You're not nesting in a peaceable land.

Instead, you're hunted game by my macho cousin,
Who loves to bag you by the dozen.
Astounding, since cooked you're hardly a bite,
It's body counts that bring delight.

I'd settle that mourning describes your coo
Except that you have another service too.
You break bitter winter's endless sting,
Great and glorious harbinger of spring.

When I heard that sound on February second,
How glorious it broke the silence, I reckon.
Witch hazel, groundhog, woolly worm, others?
Mourning doves, if I had my druthers.

Quercus Falls

Chips like sparks, wood like steel,
A two-man saw sounding an even squeal;
A breath of fresh air, one more stroke
And we'll bring to earth this princely oak.

Deep in the lore of folk
One finds the strength, age, and size of oak;
An out-worn saying sums the three:
From the tiny acorn, the mighty tree.

Few greater sources of aesthetic joys,
Or Homer's concept of battle noise,
Than a giant oak falling from a mountain crest
With a deafening roar when it comes to rest.

Die Alte Eiche, a Teutonic tale,
Of a proud tree's thought that it was hale;
With an aged laugh at a dancing day-fly,
And that stormy night both chanced to die.

Power the Romans admired at length
For their *robur* meant both oak and strength.
What's a harder pull? What's a tougher strain
Than pulling a saw through this log's grain?

A flash of lightning, a sound of thunder,
A trembling oak's a mighty wonder.
Here's a hundred-year history about to close.
Watch out boys! There she goes!

Timber-r-r-r.

Light Prayer

God, Creator of light,
Your presence broke the bonds of darkness,
A quantum, which struck as spark,
Proceeded to photosensitize the world.

A burning bush, a leading star,
A fiery sword
You gave
To lead the sinful world.

To him, Light of the world, a burning Word
Whose illumination is the first of Faith
Whose death sparked a darkened world
With a heavenly splendor.

You are the resurrection and the life.

O Spirit who touched the Apostles
With the pentecostal tongue,
Photosynthesize us to become a lighthouse
to the wayward, to the material world.

Consume us in the fire of charity,
O God, three in one,
Help us to consume the world
With Your eternal blazing fire.

MOMENTS OF SORROW

Our mountains move -- yes sliding, tumbling
as fragile cover is skimmed away,
exposing jet-black coal, the fuel
that turns the urban night to day.
The soil and saplings slip downslope,
and they can't climb back up again;
down, down to rivers and streambeds
to smother fish and wildlife den.
Mountain movers dig up the dead
and bury down the living fold,
root up graveyards and oaken groves,
erase homes two centuries old.
All for pockets of distant wealth,
and when the silent land calls down--
Reclaim! Reclaim! Wager it'll be
profiteers reaping a second round.
Will hills take in our compassion
and forgive all offenders' sin?
Will we cease to make the hills fall
and start to build them back again?

DIRECTION

From north, sharp winds of winter won
can strike us when we try to run;
from east, rises the spring-found sun,
reminding Earth that cold is gone;
from south, the summer's heat has spun
to test the road that we are on;
and autumn's bright west-setting sun
shows our journey has just begun.

DIVINE SENSATIONS

From the low hills the shadows cast,
Bethlehem, peace-loving site,
A glow within a stable fast,
faint at first, now eternal light.

From the cold of first winter's air,
Numbing chill, sharp with bite,
Heaps of straw, a gentle touch where
God's warm breath fashions all aright.

From the quiet comes a baby's voice
Out of the pitch black void of night,
Soft music and then a trumpet sound;
Tingle, jingle, utter delight.

We strive to taste the Bread of life,
Dough made ready to reunite,
yet needs to bake in bitter strife,
When God will make all things right.

Scents strong and weak perfume the gloom,
Give earthy fragrance to the plight,
But somehow a red rose does bloom
For the sweet Lord is born this night.



Spring

THE SEASONAL CALLS

Icy stillness in that timeless span,
A cipher in the majestic divine plan,
Spoken against first winter's spell, "God-man."
Within that majestic spoken Word
Our names are called, though the sound be blurred,
But, by another, first heard.

Spin the rushing wind, the earthquaked rocks rend,
--Or is it maybe a kid's boom-boxed din?
And then a blissful moment's silence when
God speaks to me in gentle whispers hence,
Mockingbird, dogwood, redbud dispense
Early springtime's luminescence.

Summer's bright red comes rightly soon,
Blazing sun, heat waves at life's high noon,
Drifting upward as though an endless tune.
Vows and promises of youth seared by heat, a retreat
And within God's sweet sounding drumbeat --
Repeat, repeat the words, repeat.

Gold and crimson autumn's scene arrived,
Fast lane's withered leaves survived;
But mercifully my soul is not deprived
Of the chance to soar. Wiser, I can't ignore
Any whisper, any roar; still God does implore --
There's more in store, explore the more.

Then finally winter's frost-covered finality
or is it unworthy dignity
In reaching to the light of eternity?
An Ave's mercy at the hour of death;
Only a curtain call is left, encore bereft;
Beseeching new birth in dying breath.

JOGGER'S LAMENT

Lord, what makes people jog,
in sunshine, wind, sleet and fog,
spending time in shoes that clog,
dodging cars, potholes, excited dog?

Why do they endure such pain,
weary legs, muscle strain,
raw groins, ankle sprain,
and yet they seldom complain?

What makes them run the extra mile,
to pass another with a fleeting smile,
or dress just right to be in style,
with the social grace of the rank and file?

How can they keep the furious pace,
turning every day into a prize race,
or heading out to a meeting place,
or just establishing breathing space?

When will they stop -- in their old age,
or when falls make them turn a safer page,
or when they don't need the center stage,
or begin to earn a steady wage?

Don't jogging questions need reply,
like running gear that one must buy,
when preparing for that runner's high,
that natural way to reach the sky.

Count the steps, meditate;
observe the scene, contemplate;
reach the wall, hallucinate;
call it fun, rejuvenate.

Now good Christians please step aside,
keep the competitor from breaking stride,
and come right up to the finish tide,
step back and overcome perverse pride.

It's time now to call it a day,
when one is unsure of the step or way,
may younger ones continue the play,
fun while it lasted, hey, hey, allay.

SPRING HAS SPRUNG

I heard the mockingbird again at daybreak,
 holding a varied tune of all that brings on spring.
I suddenly realized that time's moved on
 and yet patterns stay put as sort of "winter cling."

That season's gone and another has slipped in unnoticed.
 Dandelion carpets are now yellow and green.
The tree buds swell and four-legged mammals scurry about,
 Nature's hesitant resurrection all color and sheen.

While we have a mantra about hating winter --
 and those frosts and flurries past due time
that threaten apple blooms and early plantings
 and fail to let the mercury climb.

Nature comes again in fits and starts
 and we, too, have seasonal changes in hymn and song,
but we become more willing to spring than cling
 to that worn expression -- "winter's clung too long."

COMPASSION

Blue-green orb dashing, jewel in vastness splashing,
Lightning flashing, rocks smashing, waves crashing.
God enthused made Adam, Eve, but liberty was misused,
Their progeny abused, Babel confused, Israel refused.

Earth breathless waiting, David's house,
Promised land, chosen people, Joseph's spouse,
At last expected advent, virgin birth!
Divine and human life, true mirth for lord and serf.

Fresh-spirited he departed, mission started,
Grace imparted, melted hard-hearted.
Some were dismayed by his motley parade,
But his trusted one laid a plot; he was betrayed.

They brought him in accused, sad display,
Thorn crowned, clowned, bruised and led away.
Life's final breath rebounded from that mound,
Christ. A slumped corpse overhung this bloody ground.

Time fleeting, sweaty I scrambled to the place,
Midway up, paused, tempted to stop my race;
Height attained, my fingers touched the rocky rend,
Where his cross recast foe and friend.

Suddenly, sorrow, lamentation, deep down worth!
"Look what's been done to my Earth."
Rebirth new-found, I bounded down,
To hound all desecrators of now holy ground.

Flood Tide

In turn of century times when Grandma wore huge hats and
Grandpa waxed his mustache, loads of rich folks took the "waters."
On the other end of that money spectrum,
in the hills and hollers of these parts, waters implied – that's flood tide.

Waters can be saving, healing, fire-fighting, or crop-sucking.
Waters give resurging life or a moment's drowning death.
Trickling creeks soothe the bones, but rain drops on a tin roof make a
child afearred, whose mommy died -- at flood tide.

I quake in rainy weather in this narrow soggy valley,
when the weatherman calls for two more inches.
We stir ourselves and bring out garden truck and tools,
because they can't outride -- the flood tide.

And we feel the helpless stillness all around,
but listen, that distant roar tells us the earth's gone wild,
and when raging foam hits the road bank and sweeps across the
blacktop at breathless speed, it can't be denied -- it's flood tide.

We feel a sense of blessing for being on high ground,
and then awhile later we wonder about dwellers downstream,
who may be sleeping through the radio or the siren.
and never hear when neighbors cry -- at flood tide.

It brings back other swollen river stories.
Daddy saw coffins floating down the Ohio in '37,
and waved goodbye to some noted deceased citizens
on their last free ride -- during flood tide.

Flood waters shift streams' meandering courses,
they break down mountains, mud up dales.
They write in indelible strokes the words, "Po folks,"
as though a mark of pride -- in flood tide.

The channel's liquid yoyo is up and down, up and finally down, and now
that promised faint overhead rainbow.
Nothing's left but diapers in trees and empty milk jugs
or "Kentucky ducks" and mucky riverside -- after flood tide.

MY FAVOR RESTS

Curtained bright land, a moment's darkened cloud,
Graced holy place, chosen race, hope endowed,
Loud the proud, silence of the cowed,
He rode into a cheering, soon turned jeering, crowd.
Aloud, aloud. Hosanna! Like a plowed,
Furrowed landscape on this earthen shroud.

Rood of God and us, Heaven professed this plan
"My beloved son in whom my favor rests." When
As Jordan's swift current to the Dead Sea ran;
On Tabor's highland -- brief career's mid-span.
Now at a skull-faced hill faintly heard again;
But how can favor rest when lights descend?

And Earth's word is cleft in gasping breath?
Dispersed light from afar focuses, rescinds.
Wait. Favor does rest on a restless crowd,
Even when thunder-like it comes aloud.

Favor rests on John to Mary, to her a new son;
He graced this act of maternity,
A dark moment's rest becomes eternity,
Here rests the heart of our beloved one,
Beating to an end, that has won
For us our unmerited fraternity.

Leave land's shadows to the lit-up hill,
Prismed light condensed to a moment still.
Afflicted individuals and species ill,
Enlivened spirit, creatures thrill,
Fly monarch, shrill whippoorwill,
Rainbow rays rout the planet's chill.

Fast forward. Is "favor" a prophetic word,
When sharing wealth remains unheard?
And who favors turning the stampeding herd
That says "enough" is utterly absurd?

ROYAL TITLES

Word from the Father's heart begotten;
Earth-bloom from Mary's womb;
Light dispelling gloom and doom;
Mercy's model giver, New Hope awaken;
Good Shepherd to the forsaken;
Sheep Gate for the left-for-rotten;
Emmanuel to the ne'er-do-well, forgotten;
Sacred Heart, your nom de plume.

Sower, mower, white harvest reaper;
Wind-blown, on that blessed day;
Bearer of a Roman lance parlay;
Cross-fixed with thieves, True forgiver;
Grace-filled Flood, Nature's river;
Holy Water, Precious Blood, Gatekeeper;
Redeemer quiver, Hell shiver, divine sweeper;
New Passover, pray come, come we pray.

PASCHAL MYSTERY

Faith, God's gift to each of us,
For some, fame, glory, beauty plus --
Nature lovers on a wind-swept hill
Sunsets when hugging breaks the chill.
Gusto! Sound health is the moment's clutch,
Life is such. Wine, dine, Midas touch,
Their sign is but an empty cross.

Choose life or death, the Good Book implores,
Faith cast in deeds, James underscores.
The choice is blessing, not curse or worse.
Imprisoned, purgatory on Earth, hospice nurse,
When life ebbs during the final strife,
"I am the Resurrection and the life."
With a final scene, a bier beneath the rood,
And then the solemn rites conclude.

The scene, the temple, holy place for all
Faith-Justice personified in the Spirit's call
For those who push and shove lowly ones about.
Righteous anger, upturning tables, he drove them out.
It's a place of prayer not a den of thieves.
Then they plot to halt what he believes,
The final scene, Calvary, a broken reed,
The just one, a living crucifix indeed.

Named in Jesus, faithful service the aim,
We teach, preach, disclaim, proclaim
Here or elsewhere, explore, restore, implore.
Alone, I do so little, together we do more.
Make clean the moneyed coffers of our land,
Sharing with others, a world's rightful demand.
If peer, friend, advisor sneer, don't veer.
Our lonely cross, a jubilee that's near.

Modern temple-cleaning, an unpraised task,
We find no applause, a bit of glory from the past,
Visit the sick, do mercy's works for sure,
Follow Jesus, bearer of the poor.
Accompany him in this desecrated world indeed
Stand up with others, take Abe Lincoln's lead,
Don't tolerate a world half indebted, half free.
Yes, a sign of cross in awesome Trinity.

April, 1998

DEDICATION OF A HICKORY SLAB

LAST HICKORY, LAST. COUNTER WINTER'S BLAST.
BASK WITH FOLKS IN SUMMERS' PAST,
NESTS FOR BIRDS, CHIPMUNK MAST,
CAST SWITCHES, WHEN BRITCHES WEARERS SASSED.
FRAN WILLIAMS KNEW ITS TAN-BARKED SPAN,
HIGH COMMAND OF HER HARDWOOD STAND,
FANNED THE FLOOR WITH ITS PIG NUT BRAND,
GRANDSTAND IN KENTUCKY WOODED LAND.
STILL FOR THREE HUNDRED YEARS ON THAT HILL
WHERE CHILL BREEZES CAUSED A FOLIAGE SPILL,
WINDS ON 9-20-95 WEREN'T SHRILL
TILL THEY HIT THAT HICKORY NEAR BONNIEVILLE.
CROWN OF THE TREE CANOPY, HIGHLY RENOWNED;
HOUND-SOUND AS THE FOREST ECHOES RESOUND
EARTHBOUND AND BROUGHT A WOODED ACRE ROUND
DOWN IN ITS DEATHFALL TO THE GROUND.
ONE-HUNDRED FOOT TRUNK NOW LIES PRONE
THROWN OVER AFTER ITS MIGHTY GROAN;
MOWN TO CROSSCUT SLICES AND POLISHED FAST.
HICKORY, OH HICKORY! LAST, PLEASE LAST.

May, 1997 - In Tracing Shade

THE SANDS OF DUNKIRK: APPALACHIA'S TREASURE

We stand on the sands of Dunkirk
waiting for someone to come and save us;
We made new hopes on the bloodfields of Flanders,
but all is naught and passing.

How can we give awards on this windswept beach
when a blitzkrieg swirls around us
and we only hope to save our sweet lives
and the island over the channel?

Is it a dream that we see boats coming?
The hundreds of common little people
are trying to save our brave expeditionary force
seemingly devoid of future fight.

Wait, are not the sands of Dunkirk
elsewhere? Our piece of Berea town?
A land, yes, hurt by human misjudgment
and yet finding hope in migratory birds.

It is not a dream; it is a fact,
and we hear the singing and chant:
we can rescue you, if you but wait
and hope and fight on for each island home.

We see the sands of Dunkirk now stretching
beyond our town to distant hollows and hills.
They too have survivors who know their treasures
but don't have precious time to savor them.

We bring in others to be compassionate
learners in the field, who are open
and willing to help rescue our isolated folks
and give them the will to fight on

-- for Appalachia's treasure.

Virgo Potens

Weak from anguish though strongly endowed,
You pressed on through that bustling crowd,
And stopped and stood on a rocky knoll
While a rushing sword pierced your soul.

You heard him with his faltering breath,
At the very moment he approached his death,
Give you to another, all other,
His last possession, his mother.

Look, mother, we're too breathless to pray.
We've been rushing through that crowded way.
But on this mound we'll delay some length
For want of breath we have no strength.

Behind are others in that endless maze,
They are blinded by possessions, distorted in gaze.
And dazed by their ever quickening pace.
They scarcely notice this holy place.

See how we're vexed by demonic powers,
Which control our press and radio towers.
To escape we must turn our muddy feet
And come for a moment to your retreat.

Beg, powerful Virgin, for the saving grace,
Which can check us in our maddening race.
Beg for the love that'll conform our wills
To the Omnipotent Maker of the eternal hills.

The Question

To be or not to be is not the question,
rather it is "to be or to do?"
I find it hard to just be
when there is so much to do.

I know it is more perfect to be
than to do, but
is it wrong to be a Martha
in this busy world?

It is a question,
unless we realize that some
of us are called to do,
so that we may someday be.

2007

Mixed Mesophytic Forest

Verdant ancient garment of America's East
Oak and hickory-stitched, chestnut deceased,
spring flowers, refreshing showers, and firetowers,
elk, bison, deer, geese, and the Indians cry "Ours,"
while trailblazers say, "My gun empowers."

Remnant of a distant past,
you did survive the glacial mast,
but can you now outlast pollution's blast,
or timber worth more than price of land
or off-roaders who grand stand this grandest stand?

We know how different axe and chainsaw sound,
one hacks and thins, the other mows it all around.
Trees can regrow, but forests don't rebound
from traffic flow of loader, skidder, dozer,
justified as canopy's exposure -- true foreclosure.

"Shelterwood's" the Forest Service name,
but rape's the same however came,
even to the non-virgin and the tame.
Crashing trees release a made-made breeze,
and in an instant the wildlife flees.
Must this mighty forest cease?

1994 - in Edge of Twilight

WONDERFUL

We wonder --
how much the perfect world we dreamed,
will actually come to be,
whether our land will stay numero uno,
what words will linger into eternity.

We wonder --
how much of what we say
will remain a solid legacy,
or will the books be forgotten
and life's truer gift is progeny.

We wonder --
what comes along our rough-trod paths
that tend to go so easily asunder,
Please Lord, help us to keep always
our childhood sense of full wonder.

2011 - In memory of Mary Davis

APRIL'S FADING MEMORIES

What month of the past has more vivid memories?
Twinkling Christmas lights or new-fallen snow?
Or summer steady heat or autumn colorful leaves?
What about April's scenes unfolding in fits and heaves.

April is the month of tulips and daffodils,
of carpets of yellow dandelions
in close-cropped pasturelands,
of multicolored wildflowers in happy clans.

Spring brings the hope of an eternal Easter,
of sprinkling Easter water on the fields,
of spiritual empowerment to our mirth,
and springtime cheer awaiting summers's birth.

April brings on warm welcome showers
soaking newly plowed garden soil
and gives the produce's early stroke
with rosy radishes and sprouting poke.

April ushers in the strengthening sun
that reddened unprotected arms and necks,
giving joggers sweat-soaked chins,
and aching feet, and skinned up shins.

April's memories hold a present tense,
since past emotions stick to the bones
and seem to almost eternally reign
to produce the pleasant thoughts recast again.

True, past memories are unconfined to certain times,
but in reality on closer thought
spill forth when sought to be of comfort,
and left forgotten when a disturbing sort.

April may become a favorite month
with its faded memories of past events,
with the great outdoors inviting once again
and a bare-foot season raring to begin.

Nightmare

I hear the sound of jackboots
stumping, trumping, clumping;
Are they coming from a distant past
of crooked crosses and hands raised
to give pledges expected to last,
with hearty yells and stiff salute

Shades of history past, now a nightmare?
Only a memory tingling, jingling, mingling
into a congestion of supposed things,
that truly rings with nonsense:
Millions! Concrete barriers and railcars,
panicked moms with crying kids to bear.

Could it happen now when the angry swear?
No blessings, guessings, caressings,
only chanting gatherings in mindless ways,
crazy thinking a party failed somehow:
feather-floating policies and plans,
empty promises, grand but threadbare.

Wake me up! Stir me to rise and see,
Nightmare odes aren't my normal fare.
It's true and now the day is sunlit,
What can we do to halt the mad dash
of lemmings rushing to the sea
of spoiled out-tided democracy?

Silver Showers

I hear it's gently sprinkling outside,
showering, you might say, in spring tide,
Gentle silver streaks on a window pane,
answering a constant need for ample rain.

Water sounds: they hound, and pound, and bound,
and scare all young and old around,
Winter floods and summer storms harm,
keeping little kids in full alarm.

But living water comes in many ways,
Some passing through a sleety, crinkly phase;
Others more quietly as bubbling springs --
Harbingers of future blessed things.

Be assured: God gives us all we need,
Some golden gifts we can't exceed,
Gifts far beyond our feeble powers,
Few equal vernal silver showers.

Resonance

It's in no place yet; it's all around --
breaking, quaking moments, sure rebound;
Does it ring forth from a distant chime --
Big Bang that shook our span of time?

I feel deep harmony e'er so fine:
yellow-colored, scented dandelion,
flitting mockingbird about to play,
gentle breeze, late winter's sunlit day.

I find it all so baffling, so quaint,
it confounds my hearing, oh so faint;
Yet it gives me presence with others,
adding "and" to sisters and brothers.

All respond in varied cults and tribes
to groomed, bloomed, heirloomed vibes
that make us truly a special stand;
yes, spawn from that mighty creative hand.

We yearn for a moment when pulled and swayed,
attracting, resisting, staid and flayed;
Echoes perhaps but who only knows,
Trinity dancing on their toes.

2016

Magnificat

Our souls proclaim God's greatness as we say today
a bang, a cosmic flash, a universe in ageless delay,
comes in a moment, Christ-laden in a sublime and quiet way,
to one who partakes in a divine and human play.
Tis a simple maiden ready to say a sincere fiat,
and then give the world its grand magnificat.

Certainly blessed is she and also we,
but still in such a lesser degree
than she, in the words of writer Charles Peguy
"To her who is all faith and all charity
For she is also all HOPE," the world's light,
womb-hidden, now translucent to our delight.

Some try to shout aloud, proud and haughty in places sky high
inflated by their roles amid the hawker's cry.
Note their making, breaking profit-laden try,
even buy rules that announce that "nothing goes awry."
They will come down, either a miracle making things aright
or by our God-granting, temple-cleansing new-found might.

Bringing low the high by divine stroke, perhaps not so;
The anawim must be lifted up for all to know
and discover our God in utter gratuity, not false show,
even while tempted to seize what is rightly ours to bestow.
However, it's not ours to grab, nor the rich to give,
rather in mercy's freedom we come to share and live.

But how can this sharing be, if some refuse to yield
property, not theirs entirely but a commons field?
Here magnificat gives us its plan unsealed,
only by lowly work can a world be healed.
We, like Mary, utter a new fiat and are Christ bearers
taxing, prodding, forcing wayward wayfarers.

Painted red unfairly, instead, covered in her mantel blue,
Easter people find the risen Lord's power breaking through.
Revolution, dawning when a restless Spirit blew
a Pentecost of hope on many, not a privileged few.
Converging in a global glue, not chosen words the only key,
but God-given mercy shown by us in deed. Indeed, let it be.



Summer

FOCUS

I try to pray, Oh Lord, to you
yet it is a trail of things to do.
As I survey the overwhelming milieu
with moments too few, too few.

Again, I pray the liturgy of the day,
again as before the thoughts delay
My feet of clay get in harm's way.
Please deliver me from this fray.

Battle plans, legal stands,
helping hands, threatened lands,
Endless fights, warring clans,
Who knows the time spans?

Make me like a moth going to the light
make the night a cloak of might,
In the darkness keep it bright,
Focused clearly on a way-off sight.

CLOSIN' DOWN THE HOME PLACE

Mama didn't like to be alone on the farm anymore,
and so she moved on to Charlie and Kathy's place.
Given a chance, she would have stayed the rest of her life.

No one remained and so the farmstead was sold and turned over
to another, a good soul with a sudden heart attack -- and he
sold it to a developer type. C'est la vie!

Yes, I remember the day I patted the trusty ole shotgun
and pledged that no one would take it from the Fritsches.
But they have, and a poverty vow allows no fight.

Others don't see "home" the way I do. That's unfortunate.
I'm Kentucky where folks often love land more than people --
and I'm too young to forget and too old to cry.

Well, didn't Jesus weep over Jerusalem? He knew, just like I know,
that a stone wouldn't be left on a stone. Today's Roman Titus
is a land developer, and his legions -- bulldozer operators.

We never gave the farm a name. It would've been a bit pretentious.
Rather it was just home, a humble place like folks from peasant
Alsatian stock who left their homes behind as well.

Walmart's only a mile away now and next to the Double A Highway
that goes through the back of what was ours. They leveled the
Saffel Place and then the Newell Place and now it's our turn.

My grandmother got it as a bargain trade with the Dukes -- tobacco
people who turned the old home place into a wild game reserve.
She got a big barn and good land that gave 75 years of livelihood.

I, like most of my siblings, was born in that house. It was built
on a tobacco patch and near the foundation we found the thin
stalks of that dry summer of '30.

It's dry again in '99, so dry that the clay has lost its moisture
and houses all over Mason County show big cracks, as does the
home place, as though it was built for only two generations.

This threatened place leaves many memories. Would that we had
the time and resources to keep it homelike, but that is
beyond my power, and tells much of who and where we are.

Ultimately home is Earth and home is Heaven. To be too attached is
not right. But neither is it right to ruin a place
and call it development.

Written with a heavy heart, September, 1999.

FLY IT PROUDLY

Too much blood has been shed by patriots who gave all,
with their lives, their limbs, their peace of mind.
Then many returned to home soil, flag draped,
taps in the background, a sob, a word, and then to dust.

For their sakes we fly this flag with pride.
We may not need a constitutional amendment to act,
but free citizens treat this emblem with respect,
not burning, not desecrating it through commercial greed.

Respect calls for not leaving a flag flying overnight
in the dark. Thus we suggest and install a solar spotlight,
with daylight -- renewable energy -- stored and transformed,
so that the sun never sets on Ole Glory.

August, 2001

LAZARUS' PEOPLE

Dimming eyes may be a blessing in disguise,
for we fail to see what a well-tuned ear can hear,
the cracking whips, rattling chains, squeaking shackles
of yesteryear.

Surely, surely they have not returned to haunt us,
for we are prone to make-believe, half-baked lies.

Is allowing destitution condoning slavery too?
Is Dives' doorstep our Internet? Our TV glue?
Are pharisaic calls for liberty hollow indeed,
a greatness trapped in democratic ways, where greed
sequesters much and hides rags, forgetting terror reigns
and even cajoles, holding out empty rice bowls?

The propertied cling to divine right of kings,
and belittle rightful taxes for the wealthy few:
"Let them play the lottery and become rich too;
Let's forget to Whom all wealth truly belongs;
Let's cheapen the "commons" until it is dethroned;
Let's wring out joy and goad the crowd to sing."

-- Another wide-eyed, hopeless, and hungry wantabe,
"Let's take what is rightly ours by violence or otherwise;
Let's bless the suicidal vest, shoot in the air,
and dare chide Wall Street and the billionaire."
Let all come to see, the treasures are for us all,
the world's poor are our own -- a part of WE."

-- O God of mercy, turn scarlet to white, false hearts true,
the silent to speaking, contented to uneasiness,
and help us, the deaf and blind, for we surely need
listen to Jeremiah's words and see Moses' deed,
for we fail to hear and see and heed.
Our prayerful words need be few -- help us renew!

DEEP SERVICE

Nine ninety-nine and still more kind
of serving folks; some mean, some don't mind:
Service stations, public relations,
church, military, United Nations;
Health, finance, guidance, tax preparers,
grief bearers, auto repairers, travel carriers;
Some measured by punch clocks that dispense
incomes spelled in bucks and cents.

The Master of service came for others,
obedient to Father, gathered sisters, brothers,
Toiling, praying, snatching sleep,
harvests to reap; promises to keep,
Took no wife, worked wonders, cured the ill,
and on that Friday on a windswept hill
gave up his life for sister, brother,
and gave his mother to the care of another.

In a vernal call we vowed to serve,
never to swerve, reserve, lose nerve.
In the flush of youth it worked a while,
wonders, yes and self-made style.
Now autumn's mist brings unrequited deed,
few wonders, not success, not fully freed,
Loving fidelity alone, it's all we own,
God speed, intone! God Speed!

"Come you Blessed into the Kingdom"

Sometimes we experience blessed moments, blessed events, blessed grace. Sometimes the people who enter our lives have been blessed by God. We feel our brother in Christ, Albert, is one of these -- a blessed moment in our lives, a person blessed by God.

Even though his dad died when he was nine, he was blessed to see his children's children, to inspire them, and to teach them.

While he was born before the airplane and he saw his horse and buggy replaced by tractor and car, he remained constant in his fidelity to this faith.

While frugal and watchful of the resources the Lord had entrusted in him, he was blessed with a generous heart for those who were in need.

Although he was unable to receive much formal schooling, he was blessed with an agile mind and a great desire to learn, assimilate and create.

While having a million things to do, he took time to chat and talk with others.

While tending the soil and having a deep respect for the land and God's creatures, he was blessed with seeing the need for change and adaptation.

While loving his farm and home, he and Mary Elizabeth encouraged their offspring to be mobile in mind and body.

In his golden years he was blessed with good memory and enormous energy.

In giving love, he was blessed with love in return.

He accepted his status in life with humility, even though possessed with immense creativity.

He believed in God but never turned his deep faith into sentimentality or false devotion.

He loved life but learned to accept and not fear death. He tried to teach each of us to do the same: to love life; to meet death as part of life; to live the Resurrection every day.

He was highly skilled in wood and iron and soil -- turning rough blocks into carvings for others, transforming eroded land into green pastures, making iron scraps into useful items. We mention this because he blessed the simple cast-off things he found and made them useful.

He blessed and prayed more with his hands than with his lips. His hands showed that he prayed -- rough, like words elevated into something new and delicate and meaningful.

So on this gentle summer day, when God blesses us with mockingbirds and blue corn flowers, we pause to return Albert to the dust from which he came -- a blessed moment and a blessed person in our lives. Let us thank God for him.

At A.A. Fritsch funeral, July 1, 1982

HANDS OF APPALACHIA

Patty cake in new life lease,
reach for young hands soft as fleece,
both outstretched to catch the geese,
always moving in a play's release.

Hands of gesture, joy increased,
drumming hands at a dancing feast,
swirling, whirling, time's own yeast,
till fiddlers in the wee hours cease.

Welcome hands, beckon the meek,
signing hands when one can't speak
holding hands at love's first streak,
tear-soaked when all hopes turn bleak.

Work life makes its mark on all
wide or narrow, large or small,
calloused hands, stamp a miner's call,
scarred hands, uncover a sudden fall.

Diamond rings so better adorn
tell-tale hands that poor folks scorn,
which picked beans and shucked corn,
tucked shyly under an apron torn.

Aging grace needs to unfold.
hands fever-warmed, good as gold,
beckoning the kinfolds' hold,
shriveled hands that'll soon turn cold.

God give us strength, renew this land
where pioneers plowed, and Indians ran.
Let clinched fist be forever banned,
offering instead a helping hand.

FOOL'S WAY OR BEING TRUE

Encrusted in millions these came -- famed Charity;
Wealthy parity. Their insincere propensity
To dispense their bankrolled density, fogged from clarity.
Yes, Tax-evaders par excellence.
Standing on others' necks and heads,
Waving their strict rules of recompense
Turning fools to nervous wrecks and chowderheads.
Do any simple souls refuse giveaway nonsense?

She gave no heed to their grantsmanship,
No nod of assent, no change of heart.
She said their funding was but a rip;
Though tempted to make a hoop-jumping start,
She still resisted, following a clearer light;
Steady Renny, living out her Appalachian part.

February, 1998

The first off-road vehicle site in Kentucky;
very convenient for the riders from other states,
just off I-75 at Exit 49.

It's also ever so nice for green eco-people,
who show it to the media and other voyeurs,
like a paraded freak, without involving local people.

The odd part is that most all ORVers disobey the law
driving more than a quarter mile on public road,
using private land with no written permission.
Who dares denounce tourism -- budding business number one,
except that leakage here -- tourist money going outside
is at one of the highest rates in the world.

Residents know there's something mighty wrong,
and we're reaching the limits of tolerance.
One deceased ASPI board member said he kept the
watermelon patch free of ORVers by using piano wire.
We vacillate; my days of a trusty shotgun are gone;
these holes of ass now are allowed to trespass.

Just what won't work:
Posturing about closing off the area by decree;
Elites feeling sorry for the land and people;
Talking to the ORV association as though they have power;
Asking manufacturers to stop the ads
that show vehicles on fragile lands.

I hate resorting to booby traps
with a host of shysters in the wings
to sue and take our property in a wink.
"Somebody might get killed," you say! As though the
five or more ORV riders killed each year
are not really dead -- just pretending.

Let's get some things straight;
those in the public interest aren't runnin' for office
and we don't care a whole lot about feelings.
We'd like your support in whatever fashion given,
but so-called hillbillies, the last such slur,
crave something more, respect for land and people.

July 25, 2001

PAX AMERICANA

No one cares, no one seems to wonder
whether God still rules the thunder.
Awake, en masse, are these bombs, nerve gas
escaping his notice, weapons of crass
misguided souls, wound in righteousness,
or calloused licentiousness?
So we ponder our leaders' blunder
blasting burrowed innocents asunder.

Will it cure the madman's dream,
or throw off his cruel regime?
Or do we seem to deem
our army, navy, marine
reign globally supreme,
on airwaves beam and torrid stream,
with high tech head-of-steam,
and misplaced U.S. self-esteem?
Redeem us, Lord. Redeem.

(Written while expecting Bill Clinton's bombing of Baghdad)

THE GRAVEYARD'S TALE

Becky Simpson invites us to a Harlan County spot

to film her father's forebearers' burial plot;
Logging dozers overshot the legal 300-foot line.
If we bring a four-wheel drive we'll do fine,
for that uphill roadway is mighty rough,
and, if we slip off, rescue's pretty tough.

We pass the finest hemlock, oak, hickory stand
in this untouched part of Cranks Creek land.
We pause where her grandma's homestead stood
at a rippling crickside where water's good.
Yes, we smell cherry pie and feel warm hugs,
but nothing's left, only woods and birds and slugs.

We walk woefully the last mile by design,
as we scan ahead to the Virginia/Kentucky line --
Dozer power -- push through anyone's right-of-way,
who's too poor to prove or pay a land survey.
You'd think centuries-old tombstones
stand utterly silent, but we swear each moans.

We film Becky walking and talking with grandson Chris
about uncle and aunt, mister and miss.
Some died in childbirth, others outlived the flock,
a story of pioneer stock, tough as rock;
But over the bluff comes another shock,
beyond a tree screen, a massive choppers' block.

Something catches my eye. Where the north edge flows
the headstones are lined in partial rows.
Chris stirs leaves and thatch from the fresh bulldoze
and finds pieces of marble. You can suppose
with the plain tombstone writing that the story grows --
markers splattered, scattered, shattered repose.

Becky's too mad to cry, but her jaw and chaw give,
"Chris, don't forget this as long as you live."
Even our team allows them a little space,
and so we stroll off to see the timbered place.
We look out over to mother Virginia's green landscape;
its upslope's clear-cut writes a tale of rape.

The whole trip is a kind of retreat
as we slip back downhill there're questions replete:
If the old order passes away, what will the new one be?
Do we hear one dragging a tree to Calvary cry
"If they do it to green wood, what happens when it's dry?"
Can we turn forests back to "commons" before we die?

August, 1995

WILDSCAPE

Where a lawn of bluegrass in regimental code,
Once was sowed, mowed and chemically bestowed;
Now dare we grace this untamed place,
With chicory, cornflowers, Queen Anne's lace.

Phlox and yarrow with spring beauty whose
Colors bemuse, patterns enthuse, scents transfuse.
Weekly altered petaled collage; false dragon's head,
Poppy red, ox-eyed bed, aster tapestry outspread.

Embolden this once addicted patch with iron weed, marigold,

Red clover, goldenrod; the uncontrolled take hold.
Let's sow cosmos to buck the zoning trend,
Let primroses begin, larkspurs befriend, bluets amend.

Resentment is not for critters, insects and butterfly
Who like the trumpet creeper and the Joe Pye.
Black-eyed Susans bring the greenlace wing,
And make mockingbirds sing and crickets ring.

The picturesque sunflower and scarlet flax command
A grand canvas plan, a hand-made meadowland.
But human art fails when nature's designs unfold,
Retold in bold splashes. Wildscape behold.

July, 1998 - In America at the Millennium

SEPTEMBER REFLECTIONS

Labor Day and all's quiet after summer play,
Blooming ironweed, goldenrod and ragweed seed,
Good smells at tobacco harvest time,
when leaves are golden and hands are grime,
First autumn chill, longer cool nights,
foggy valleys, misty lakes with steamy sights,
Flocking birds in the evening breeze,
seeming to overwhelm the roosting trees.

Tomatoes have now acquired an autumn taste,
and peppers appear as though post-haste,
Elderberries are not eaten raw, and why?
They're destined for a steaming pie.
Root cellars contain butternut and winter squash,
and all sorts of apples, not just MacIntosh.
Prepare the greenhouse for the frosty fall,
we all know well the season's call.

Summer, 2004

AMERICA ATTACKED: SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

Twin World Trade towers came down and more,
so did our false security end in white smoke.
We're pulling back together again for a little while,
stuttering how much we need each other.

It's not only a nation under attack,
but a global dream of material goals,
piled in a rubbish heap of plaster and CDs,
groping for the God in whom we trust.

THE KNOCKING SOUND

I find no door to knock upon for You to hear,
 Except my breast, my heartless chest.
Can it be the gate to heaven, to my soul as well,
 at this late hour, the autumn of my quest?
I hesitate because I'm ill-prepared,
 for the long-journey's mud is on my shoes.
And I'm too stiff to bend and clean them now,
 too hesitant to judge, too wise to excuse.

Some few enter quickly, and I envy them,
 for, in one moment, martyrs allow their fate,
Earth does not cling to them, but they find light
 with the fatal blast of gun or drop of weight.
Others are purged clean in old folks wards,
 in prison cells, in tenements, and slums,
Bearing it well, or willing to learn how,
 as the hourglass drops its final crumbs.

As for me, and others too, it may be
 that our feet are a dirty sight;
We have to discard all baggage but love,
 and cling only to that with all our might.
I believe you are the Light, and we need prepare
 by making this an earthly prepping ground;
Yes, I beat my breast, and hope and hope and hope,
 That You, good Lord, hear the knocking sound.

While rabbit hunting, we happened to stumble upon
An old forsaken plow, half hidden amid the briers;
Handles, paint-peeled and rotted,
Protruded like a dead calf bloated in the summer sun.
Rough handles worn smooth by smooth hands turned rough
While pleading a livelihood from rocky soil.
That blade lay partly buried in the gully clay,
Rust-covered, mud-covered, frost-covered,
Coatings, which that sword-beaten share never knew,
When little kids stooped and grinned
to see their faces on its clean used surface.

Colters, skimmers, prairie breakers,
Crooked sticks, wood, bronze, iron, steel plows --
All had brute animal flesh before and human flesh behind,
Who spent the warm spring daylight hours
In raising and turning a dark brown ribbon of sod.
For crude and toilsome though that labor was,
The one who guided stood master of his course;
And his pleasure seemed to be the art
Of drawing plants from sweat-soaked soil.

So-called poets write of those with hoes,
Who in the drudgery of their work
Saw only despair,
Who beat sun-hardened clods from dawn to dusk
And never lived but to some day
Be settled in some nameless urban slum.
Write instead, poets, of the killdeer
Running across the fresh-plowed field,
With its plaintive, piercing cry;
Or of the cowbird hovering around the straining team
Just to snatch the uncovered earth worm.
Write of the farmer calling to the team ahead --
"Gee," "haw," "whoa."

Speak of the drawling, fortunate country folk
Whose words were living testimony to slow lives,
The way of people with time to live and talk.
These farm people could pray for rain or sun,
Or trust that God would keep the frost away,

Or ask for winds to dry and showers to moisten,
Never satisfied but always trusting and pleading.
Old toilers with battered hats and leather skin,
Stubborn, free, proud, wiry race;
Who would make you leave your soil?
Who would ever bury you but in your blessed earth?

Landholders, your fields are wanted by thousands:
By business people, developers, politicians,
Wealthy with new wealth.
Your small farms are gone and in their place
Are large estates of gas-fed and wet-back slaves.
Tillers, your chestnut Belgians have long since died
And never left sired offspring in their passing.
Now crawls a grunting tractor hungry for gas --
Destroyer of ten millennia of ox and camel and horse.

Settlers, your offspring have left their homes.
Did it crush you the day you tried to stop them
And found the reasons the farmer's life is good
Far too noble to be expressed by mere words?
Plowers, freeholders, teamsters, tenants:
Those plows, those testimonies of toil now tossed away.
Do you really want us to turn back the clock?
Remember, you made straight furrows by a steady eye;
We doubt if you would have us retrace those steps
Or revive that sweaty art of nameless folks,
Which had a beauty found in clear-cut fence rows,
And tall dry barns, and rat-free grain bins.

Thank God, we still have piles of junk and rusty reapers.
We are grateful for old stables with hand-hewn beams,
And gray stone walls, and forgotten ruddy roads,
The last reminders of a hearty strain of people.
On we hurry, and like grave visitors in the twilight,
We pause and salute the strong and gallant generation
That cared to live, and in due time did prepare to die.

-- and we leave that plow rusting on the ground.

STEADFASTNESS

We strive to stand firm,
not moved by shifting winds,
or rushing tides, or darkened skies.
We affirm the Faithful One
Who gives us steadfast love
with gifts that eternalize.
That divine faithful love
takes root in Earth herself
where sufferers personalize.
We too give another our word,
steadfast promise unwritten
through voices that legalize.
Let us the restless ones
speak in a mountain way,
on our word we solemnize.

CREATION'S EIGHTH DAY

Look out! Grinding rocks, drifting sands,
earthquakes, seawaves, aftershocked lands,
creeping, calving blue glacier dies,
icebergs form before our eyes,
avalanches of roaring snow,
upturned trees in tornado's tow,
muddy debris on flooded plain,
seashore pounded by hurricane,
sleet-covered trees at bough-lost price,
boulders split by expanding ice,
rivulets on an eroding Earth --
yes, ever-yearning, giving birth.

Eagles and Butterflies

I suspect eagles admire butterflies,
their grace, busyness, and flying style,
and their ease to know what's down below.

I suspect butterflies admire eagles
their majesty, grandeur, watchfulness,
they soar and try to reach up high.

And I doubt whether they ever eat each other;
you see, butterflies are herbivorous
and eagles aim for larger game.

You understand Sally was our golden eagle,
ferreting flaws that we overlooked,
watching what had begun as simply fun.

Sally, also admired the butterflies --
their color, beauty, their charm,
Captured in photos we never tire to admire.

Sally soars on above us like an eagle;
she flits about like a butterfly, a
social soul with ease who strives to please.

The moment Sally died her friend looked up,
a soaring raptor's shadow passed above;
a second shadow passed by, a butterfly.

2011 - In memory of Sally Ramsdell

Let's Celebrate Indian Summer

Indian summer is autumn now half spent,
a whiff of bountiful summertime
coming amid fading falling leaves;
It is a melancholy moment,
harking to time gone forever,
not redone -- but why should it be?

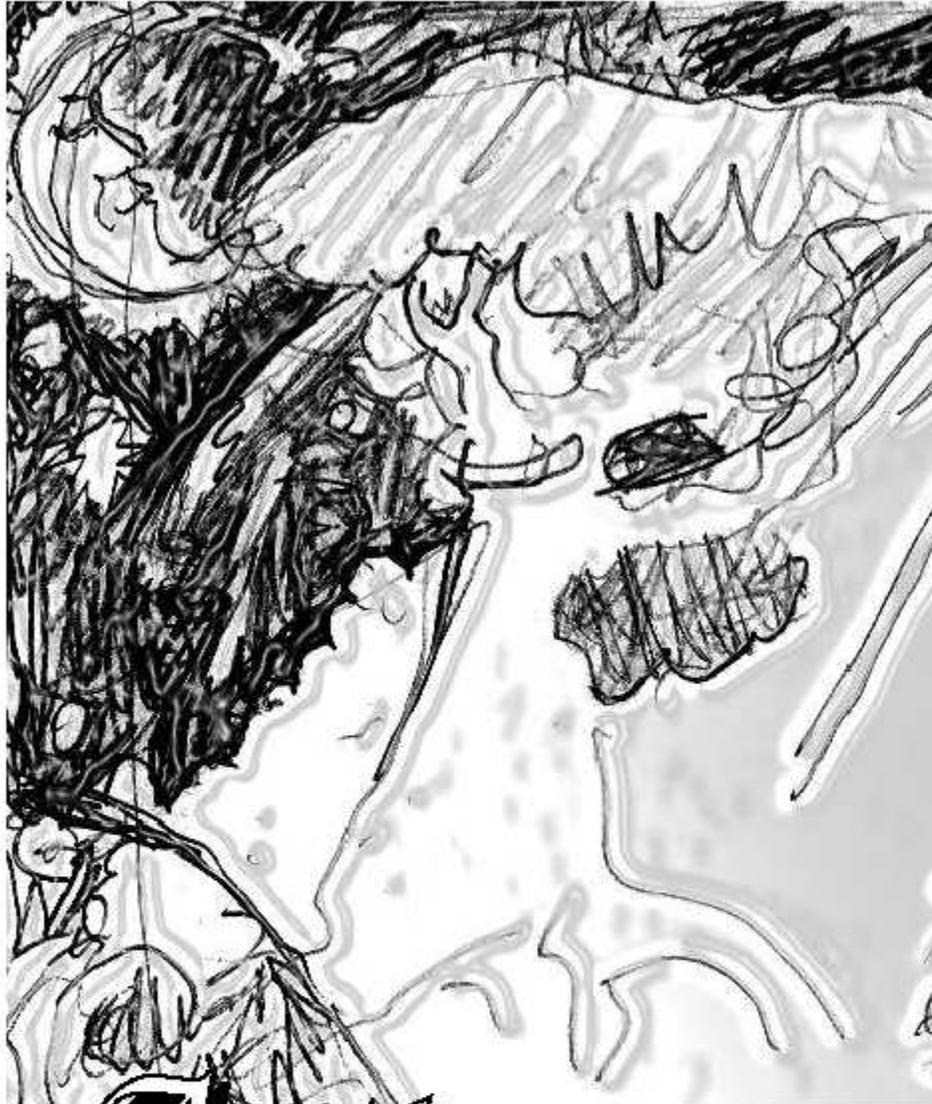
Indian summer is crystal clear weather,
allowing us to look out to the horizon
through the cluster of naked trees;
Isn't it better to look ahead than back,
lest we stumble into our past once more,
or think it better than it really was?

Indian summer means that last bit
of an ever-shortening growing season,
that fleeting passing present moment;
We take it with open hands, thankful
and knowing the present is God's gift,
only borrowed and rented, not possessed.

Indian summer is a weather event
that mirrors human life in final stance,
present but not lasting forever;
It is the foretaste, even foreshadowing
of what lives ahead as an eternity
among the changing seasons of our lives.

Indian summer in the fullness of its spell
tells us that brevity has its place
for us to take in and breathe deeply;
We are here now and pause
as the climate changing weather does,
hoping that worse things won't arise.

Indian summer is a promise
that what was good is still good
even if changing again tomorrow;
Celebration is the better thing to do
because our full living is worth exalting
and opens us to new life. Rejoice!



Auttuumn

AN AUTUMN MESSAGE

A change confronts us, a whisper, a hint,
Dawns come later, evenings soon spent,
A profound stirring in nature's fraternity,
Breaking summer's seeming eternity.

Crimson, scarlet, rust and gold are seen,
mixed with verdant pastures and evergreen,
to form a grand finale, a season's clue,
the ebbing of life's cycles which are renewed.

Smells of fall -- dry decaying leaves,
pungent wood smoke hanging at the eaves,
iodine-like black walnuts out to dry,
The scent of mothballs, one can't deny.

Soundscapes tell the time -- the swish of birds
in winter flocks, the cawing of crows -- avian words,
the screech of debris that the raker claims,
the yell in unison at the hometown games.

One can taste the change -- picked tomatoes hardly hale,
replaced by endive, turnips, mustard, kale,
and pumpkin pie, squash, pears, mince meats,
and fresh-pressed cider and other apple treats.

Feel the chill, sense the autumn sun at noon,
tempt one's lunacy by the harvest moon,
Goblins, spooks, witches everywhere
foreshadow the coming darkness we fear.

We hastily do the chores of fall -- antifreeze,
chimney-cleaning, caulking, cut fallen trees,
stacked woodpiles, roof patches, roadway rock.
and that annual turning back the clock.

Our senses tell us something's on the wane,
as nature's cycle cuts into our own fast lane,
that summer's flowers must wilt away,
and our bloom of life has had its day.

If fall must come, then let it be,
a time to hear, smell, taste, feel and see,
and give thanks for seasonal friends,
gently announcing our own earthly ends.

Times are Changing

Labor Day and all's quiet after summer play,
 Blooming ironweed, goldenrod in colored array;
Good smells at garden harvest time,
 farmers' markets at their prime;
First autumn chill, longer cool nights,
 foggy valleys, misty lakes, cloudy heights;
Flocking birds in the evening breeze,
 seeming to overwhelm the roosting trees.

Tomatoes get that late season taste,
 and peppers appear as though post-haste;
Elderberries are not eaten raw, but why?
 They're destined for a steaming pie.
Root cellars with butternut and winter squash,
 and all sorts of apples, not just McIntosh.
Prepare the greenhouse for the frosty fall,
 we all know well the autumn call.

FINALITY

Each season gives clues to where we are,
and how the journey goes.
An energetic telling, a life's unfolding,
which the Puzzle Maker heralds.

Fall draws a line of our earthly time,
and yet returns as circle again;
for lines and circles form the spirals
of our life.

These sweep our beings far beyond,
up snowy roads and iced potholes,
past naked trees on silent hillsides,
to wood fires and yuletide carols.

9/5/96 Revised 2006

Dull human heap,
Greedy, famished bewildered band
Raises with gnarled and calloused hand
Monuments that will not stand.

Proud dreams sweep
Young flabby minds, which then extend
To revolts that always end
On fields blood-red with fallen men.

Students keep
Nature's laws, a divine affair,
And entropy, source of despair
Not matter's faithful prayer.

Bright shades creep
O'er fall foliage soon out-cast;
By north wind's indulgent blast,
So eager for its repast.

White lights peep
Across horizons boundless crest,
Guiding souls to timeless rest
At God's unchanging breast.

Campion Circle - November, 1958

ODE TO A TOUGH ROCK

A sandstone rock, yes, and more
a lasting boulder,
Leaning down as though to guard the hill,
for keeping other things away.

Sweat-soaked we worked to break it,
tough and interlaced with iron streaks.
It calloused us all the more
and broke our hammering tools.

We gave up only after some breaking away
had reduced it by three tons;
Undeterred rock you conquered us
and made us come to realize our finitude.

November, 1983

Amoeeta Sequoyah

With earth-touched wisdom he came years ago
to this misty wooded valley,
giving the rutted roads a sense of purpose, peace.

He knew how to walk without making footprints.
unlike B&W's indelible violence
that forever marks the distant hillside.

He saw the trees that bowed in 74's winds
toward this mountaintop holding Cherokee bones,
as sentinels bent in humble adoration.

He heard the whippoorwill close the day,
the rustle of the small life,
the trumpet of Rockcastle frogs.

He climbed the cliffs, penetrated the caves,
drank the water, tasted the wild grapes,
but left no mark except his healing.

He sang and danced the "trail of tears"
that wrung his heart,
but left no trace of bitterness.

nuclear
Three years ago he held us spellbound;
at TVA's Sequoyah he spoke with greater than
power of his impending end and maybe others' also.

We raise this rough-sawed yurt, not lasting,
for nothing is, not wealthy for none of us are,
not showy, for he is not now seen.

now.
We stand it amid these trees
garnished with bright September leaves,
and speak of him who walked softly, but is silent

at dedication of ASPI yurt September 26, 1982

FAINT VOICES IN THE HILLS

Autumn brings nature's fainter voices,
 When frost makes croaking frogs still,
And mutes the sound of growling corn,
 And drives to deeper south the whippoorwill.

It's time to listen to the mountains talk,
 Even the scarred ones are callin'.
Takes more than ears to hear harmed hills;
 After all the leaves have fallen.

Highlands tell us folks a story
 of cosmic heaves and birth,
When in a prayerful gesture
 They burst through the crust of the earth.

Unshakable mountains? Not so. They quake,
 Rise and fall, melt like wax,
Bow low to greater majesties,
 Find time to sleep a million years -- and relax.

They tell how the creator favors them:
 Rest of ark; laws' carving place;
Summits of beatitudes; transfiguring site;
 Springboard of prophets; ascending space.

Mountains also suffer from human greed,
 Robbed, stripped, beaten, crucified,
Footprinted by backhoed treasure seekers,
 Wasted by macho pride.

You laugh in utter disbelief?
 If God really loved them so,
Why are these mountains barren now,
 Where hardly briars can grow?

You say God has no favorites. Not true.
 The mountains are, we know.
How come we know? The Good Book and
 Nameless hills tell us so.

See any discarded knob or ridge
 As nature's heaven-pointed steeple.
Let the mountains and hills bring
 A message of peace for all the people.

Hear our wounded hills faintly say,
 "Peacemaking power you'll find
If you but reclaim us now,
 For wounds unattended do violence to all humankind."

THE EARTH HEALER

Earth-loving heart, you didn't strive to gush
nor blush in the headlong rapid rush,
nor seek a polluting firm's free lunch;
nor did you steal, nor cheat, nor punch
your way to the top executive suite.
They did not crush nor reward in sullen hush;
no, no fame did greet, no glory treat,
no funded crutch, no Midas touch.

You simply accepted being ignored,
and by prayer, will, and zeal implored,
you conquered these tests, taking milder ways
and forewent comfort rests in public gaze.
Constantly, you aided all who fought
to expose desecrated water and air,
through lawsuits, reports, petitions you brought,
All that a resource-short group could share.

And still you chose the open firing line;
they bunched you with New Age, gushy hearts;
blamed you for wasting prime time,
for slowing progress, for unearthing grime,
your cross -- being despised, called unrefined.
Poor Earth, poor people, you led the blind
again to fresh air, full-spectrum sunshine,
crafting a New Heaven/New Earth intertwined.

Dedicated to Irene Dickinson - 1997

Thanksgiving

God-blessed, sacred places, noble lands:
Soaring raptorial birds, thundering bison herds;
Natives, settlers, late-comers as passing through;
Fertile soil, now plow-turned sod;
Snowy mountains, uplifted over a billion years;
Forests -- cool green, calling, alluring;
November prairie flowers -- faded, now fragile;
Rushing waters, gurgling, never staying;
Nature's precious moment, unearned, spurned.

A holiday, rest-turned, partial lesson learned:
After baking, traveling, phoning, playing;
Football youth, tamed, programmed, agile;
Gathering in a solemn moment, bonding, adhering;
Our frightened people with Iraq-filled fears.
Yet make this day to turn to God;
Yes, times we pause are very few;
Oh, let us not be lost for words;
We give our Grace with uplifted hands. Amen

November, 2003

SIMPLE THANKS

Thanks for the spark that gave me life,
the moment of joy and that of pain,
the time good folks made ready and brought me forth,
the family warmth to receive and nurture us all.

Thanks for the waters that cleansed me,
the bread that sustained me, the oil that strengthened me,
the words that renewed me.

Thanks for the joy of youth, the fresh air,
the freedom to explore,
the liberty, the promise yet unconquered,
the hopes for a future and better days.

Thanks for the books, the schools, the sacred times,
the power to read and write and think,
the places and zest to go,
the rest and silence in just staying.

Thanks for the colors we see, sounds we hear, smells of fall decay,
the feel of rusty leaves soon to pass from sight,
the taste of good cooking.

Thanks for all of these and the power to move,
and climb, and skip and jump, and dance,
and crawl and jog, or at least to be satisfied
not to have all these movements.

Thanks for the peace and our own hope to establish it,
being loved and to be loved,
being trusted and to be trusted,
for happiness and the times of sadness with others.

Thanks for the glorious sun in the morning,
Whippoorwills, the heralds of evening,
Mourning doves, the announcers of spring,
Crows, the voices of the autumn.

Thanks for letting us grow up,
for responsibilities and concerns,
for labor and sweat,
for achievement and knowing when it fails us.

Thanks for gray hair and strength to be wise,
for the memories and good times to recall,
for the chance to see our failures and learn from them,
for the knowledge that it's never too late.

Thanks for allowing us to endure,
to live fully each moment,
to know that quality of days, not length, are important,
and to live once more.

Alleluia!

Hear Christians that God is light
and in Him is not a bit of darkness.
Ears of Christians attend to the shout,
"Day is dawning; the morning star is rising."

Eyes of Christians open wide to faith
for these organs are your bodies' lamps.
Evil eyes, filled with darkness,
open wide and become illumined.

Tongues of Christians extend
and receive your Lord and God,
Who has said so many times,
"I am the light of the world."

Adopted sons of God, a new creation,
see with faith, expect with hope, burn with love;
Light the world with your combustible zeal,
for you are the light of the world.

The city on the mountain shines forth,
Jerusalem has no need of the sun,
For the glory of God illumines it
and the Lamb is the lamp thereof.

The end draws near in this poor act
or will it end?
The light of Genesis has a wave front,
an end, a limitation.

The apocalyptic radiance will have no end,
no limits in space or time,
For then we shall rise before eternal Light
where there can be no night.

HE'S ONE OF US

It's that season to think once again
of an event a long time ago, when--
he was born bone poor in a shaded glen,
of north hill folks of a noble blend.

He stayed near home for three years times ten,
helping his dad to build, patch and mend,
then up and said "goodbye" to kith and kin,
joined the exodus of highlands men.

He toted little that'd make for freight,
his talk betrayed him, the way he ate,
walked the back roads with a hill-like gait,
and taught all to love, never to hate.

He worked wonders in his simple way
to the poor, the sick, and those of clay,
spoke of his own father far away,
withdrew with his friends awhile to pray.

He got quite a name in that fair land
though he wrote but once and that in sand;
Quietly took the barbs of his own clan,
bein' a peaceable soul, a kindly man.

Way underneath he had another side
that found the time to speak and chide;
Angry with those who'd hurt poor folks' hide
through meanness, greed or maybe pride.

When he hit a big town he barged right in,
shook them up when they overlooked sin;
Told them where he stood time and again.
Ne'er the likes heard from hill countrymen.

He stayed around, and so did expound,
told'm it was his -- sacred ground;
Broke up the gamblers with a whipping sound
and the established wrath came tumblin' down.

They up and nailed him right 'twixt two hoods,
on a garbage mound with all his goods,
no help from friends who probably could,
so he died alone on a beam of wood.

You might want to end with a loud amen,
but he's right back with us once again,
givin' us power to stand taller when
they call us "hillbilly" women and men.

Once Again It's That Time

Again, the leaves have turned and fallen
the hills show their jagged wounds,
our people stack wood, tape cracks and
brace themselves against winter's winds.

Again, the hunters stalk our woods, shooting deer,
rabbit, squirrel and everything that moves.

Again, the struggle for justice takes on a somber note --
at strife-ridden Jericol and at Stearns' coal mine,
among SOCM folks south of the border
and other of our public interest friends,
in front of J.P. Stevens plants,
and against the B & W Land Development Corporation,
which is stripping coal from the Rockcastle
banks across from our future demo center.

Again, we're thankful for service to Appalachians --
through our flooding and blasting studies,
through talks and conferences and interviews,
through organizing on nuclear issues,
and through our "Citizens' Appalachia" factsheet.

Again, we let the hills and mountains bring a message
of peace
to all people,
to the rugged texture of our land,
to people filled with song and dance,
in the patterns of a quilt,
or the words of our sages.

Again, we bear witness this Christmas
to birth and rebirth,
to a destiny controlled by Appalachians,
to the sun which now grows stronger,
to new life in the coming spring,
and to our continued existence, God-willing.

Again, remember our needs and concerns
during this season of joy.

Christmas, 1978

WHEN HE RETURNS

Of all Scripture phrases this haunts me most,
for I sometimes doubt my faith-filled boast,
that we are advent people awaiting his coming,
and can excite others through constant drumming.

Will he find us steady in our own end of time,
expecting him, not in today's passing paradigm,
but rather in salutes of wind and drum, not fear,
trusting that a new creation will surely appear?

I hear his question echoing in my daily praying,
challenging my feeble soothsaying,
seeking success in what's always been done,
and hoping that today's run will go on and on.

Are steely eyes burning with fundamentalist light,
haters of all worship not theirs, so right?
Are we ritually correct to openly yearn,
and gradually learn to eagerly await his return?

Will he find faith on Earth?
Will we be ready to help in planetary rebirth
of this wounded and fragile land,
fresh and ready for the coming Son of Man?

October 22, 2001

GOD ONLY KNOWS: DIVINE CHALLENGE

Billions of years preparing
for this last moment in geologic time.
Out into the icy darkness of the universe
beat warm hearts of living creatures.
In random fashion, flora and fauna evolved,
each nodding its "yes" to the Creator.

Finally came the final second of time
when Adam and Eve ate forbidden fruit.
They forgot that Heaven and Earth did intertwine,
God walking with them among shaded vine.
They, with divine gift of freedom to affirm,
instead uttered a "no" from Eden.

Divine presence faded, but loving mercy spoke
through prophets a promised Messiah.
In the fullness of time God walks again,
our savior, healer, teacher, friend.
Coming in soft-lighted liturgical setting
and fulfilling the incarnate word, "Christ-mass."

God's loving mercy is in that walk with us,
and we, in original form, have tasted fruit
in our Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil --
Nuclear powerplant, ripe for terrorist bombs.
Will we say "yes" to God and dismantle these
weapons of mass destruction in our midst?

God only knows!

Varmints

Furry friends, it's hunting time;
The real wildlife have come alive
With shotgun, Yuppie gear, four-wheel drive.
Distant folks come, locals too,
Leaving their TV football behind
To target you, who through summers thrive.

Are hunters hungry? Goodness no.
Their litter shows; Big Macs, Bud packs,
All sorts of sugary snacks.
A good excuse if they want stew,
Ingredients for frontier burgoo.
They just want to take a trophy back.

Animals a threat? Hardly so.
Bunnies don't bite; deer aren't vicious,
Coons not poisonous, wildcats aren't malicious.
Populating too fast? Rarely so.
Thinned out polecats and possums
Find night traffic inauspicious.

Why do folks shoot at all that move,
At lumbering groundhog, squirrel perched on a log,
At croaking frog, foxes trotting in a fog?
It's all to do with numbers:
Golf scores, wages earned, phones logged,
house rooms, degrees gained, miles logged.

Hunters are victims of the numbers game;
Body counts all add to fame.
We're deadened to size, enormous scale;
Powerplants the forest kill, the lake fish slay,
but must spew out for the GNP --
and even the wildlife pine away (Hosea 4:3).

Pointing to others can make me numb,
No better than the rest did I become,
Cut down game with my twenty-two,
Shot a lot and hit a few,
Dared wardens to stop our bearing arms.
That's the youth from which I grew.

You hunted victims of our hunting sprees,
We really know so little about you.
Were you in Appalachia before the name?
Did you travel far? Are you really tame?
Do you grace the woods with your scent?
In the distant hills do you lay a claim?

It's that time of year to give regrets,
To bolster the forgotten, to stop the threats.
Peace on Earth and good will again; breath-frosted oxen
and sheep nod okay, and hidden away Varmints sing, "Amen."

THE REAPERS' EULOGY

Adieu, adieu, and now with God my rendezvous,
A million miles of travels almost through.
Eulogies are meant for us when life's untwined,
but let's grant this to those who stay behind,
Carrying on work I'd never mind, but find
exhausting, with no time left for me to do.

Let me entrust my tools to budding Jeremiahs,
in Romero's words, "Be good servants, not messiahs."
I made grand plans, wild dreams sublime,
founded in fresh-plowed fields of springtime.
Full of wonder at emerging yet undefined paradigm,
but limited by my spoiled, toiled jambalayas.

I thought Earth-wounded would soon be Earth-healed.
But I reeled out, sealed in and overspilled.
I did a wee bit, God alone knows how much,
grace-filled, but not quite Midas' touch as such.

The seed bag I now must let go, unclutch,
God loaned sower's health, a gifted grip I have to yield.
To six thousand, million folks I pass the sickle bar,
My Viaticum will only go so far, so far.

I bemoan windblown seeds, sown quite alone,
Let happy reapers be shown by us soon unknown,
But who prepared fields where white harvests groan.
I take my leave. Auf wiedersehen. Au revoir.

December, 1998

LITANY OF THE EARTH

Earth, mother of the human race,
Repository of past civilizations and geologic ages,
Dust from which we came,
Cradle of our infancy,
Room for our romping feet and ever stretching hands,
Schoolyard of our intellect's quest,
Garment of our loves and yearnings,
Lap of our sorrows and joys,

Bearer of our transgressions:

Marked by our heavy footprints of time,
Eroded and scarred by highwalls of human greed and negligence,
Crowned with pointed mountains and occasional rainbows,
Comforting, situating, directing us forward,
Welcoming new life of every form,
Giving all space to roam and find themselves,
Glorifying in their presence,
Recalling through quakes and shakes what is transitory,

Provider of the birds,
Nourisher of flowers and plants of every kind,
Supporter of the trees,
Preserver of wildlife
Dwelling place of the human race,
Economic commodity at desecrating hands,
Battleground and memorial of the warring,
Haven from sea storm and air flight,
Autumn's last bloom, telling of our end,
Urn of our bonds, grave of our people. Our home.

Autumn's Dangers

I go out and hear birds congregating
all chirping wildly at the same time,
'winter is coming -- maybe so, maybe so.'
How else to interrupt their animated chatter?

They fly within the leafed tree in a flutter;
just as abruptly they depart for another place;
Is it the intuition of impending seasonal change,
or induced excitement of sheer number?

When they pass over in such number,
I shield my eyes for fear
their dropping might miss the good Earth
and hit me right between my eyes.

2006

Do We Have Time?

My friend, I do not HAVE time,

for to have is to hold,

and time, for several reasons,

is not something you can hold:

First, time does not belong to me --

and having is belonging.

Second, having time requires that I grasp for it

like reaching for a floating goose feather;

The very breeze created by my hand

sends the floating feather helter-skelter,

and it takes everything I can do to grasp it;

once grasped it is only a crumpled feather.

Third, time flows and does not stand still.

Our past time is history now, of which we learn --

and have faith that it's worth the learning.

Our future time is not yet, but we help make it --

and have hope that we can truly do that too.

Our present is the fleeting moment and hardly time,

a gift from God, something that we truly cherish.

Really, love is what we've got --

and it affords us the instant to share with others;

For time is not ours to have, only ours to share.

Asking Soteriological Questions

Christ saves us all, we say,
and is that the total message's worth?
Is all saving a matter of Christ's sole action?
Or do we help save our wounded earth?

What is this our imitating role:
Securing what in theory is already gained?
Proclaiming a deed that will unfold?
Or adding chorus to a grace-filled refrain?

Is presumption saying Earth will be saved?
And despair saying it will not?
Or is hope's mission what Christ's members say:
"Earth will be saved, if we but.."?

2010

The Blooming Cosmos

God comes to us in gentle ways,
yes, in flowers, when words have interlude,
and our hearing sinks in utter solitude,
and future chorus melts into a silent maze.

A cosmos bouquet on Kristin's final day,
Kevin says it was her favorite flower,
and has a photo of her immersed in a Korean patch,
a celestial rapture, a cosmic ray.

I sow cosmos, my Grandma's favorite also,
among vegetables to enliven and draw butterflies.
On this October frost-prone day when impulse tries
to compost the stripped stalk -- a voice says, "No."
After the funeral, on returning from Wisconsin,
I find the stalk is in full bloom,
even amid the drought-ravaged, bone-dry garden.
Mini-miracle? Natural autumn growth again?

Thus I gather the fifteen blooms now here,
to adorn the Berea altar at Kristin's memorial,
To show God's favor rests on her writing career,
cut short at the end of her fifty-third year.

My homily is meant to touch what God lets us know
in the Good Book's immortal words of love.
But we are speechless in letting go of a friend,
only cosmos' brilliant pink says all miss her so.
When will the blooming end? After shared words glow,
I return to the garden and there the stalk
has bloomed again. In dying, Kristin teaches us
that all is miracle for those who let go.

2010 -- In memory of Kristin Johannsen

Sic Transit Gloria

Glory struts a moment, but like October passes on;
its fading is a fleeting night-traveler's dream,
like untried soldiers in battle parade.

Colorful glory passes as fast as green summer tones
changing before our eyes into fall's earthy rainbow:
red, yellow, crimson, and gold.

Fluttering leaves are a new season's venue,
heralding a foreboding naked-forested November
through clouds of Halloween ghosts and witches.