

TENDENCY TOWARD NIGHT,

by

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For my wife

Lisa

For my friends

Jim and Leslie

For my teacher

Jonathan

Contents

I The Long Evening

The Cats Locked Away	3
Watersnake	4
Waiting	5
The Dancers	6
Like Love	7
Poem for a Soap Opera Watcher	8
Suburban Fugue	10

II Night

The Shadow	13
A Matrimonial	15
Crossing Fulton Bridge	16
Jessie	17
For the Lost and Lovely	19
La Conquistadora	21
Something Broke	23
Behind Grandfather's House	25
For the Waters	26

III Dreams for Morning

Winter Night at Mud Springs	28
The Fire-Cat	30
The Visitor	31
The Snow-Man	33
The Poets and Philomela	34
Souvenir	35
Runner Followed by Turkey Vultures in August	37
Life and Art	38

IV Critical Apparatus 39

I The Long Evening

— And so I sing as does the boy by the Burying
Ground — because I am afraid.

Emily Dickinson in a
letter to Higginson

The Cats Locked Away

We have locked the cats
away
in a separate room.
If left to run the house
they claw the furniture
and leave strange scents
lingering in soft carpetted corners.
So we are compelled
to keep them hidden
from the guests in the parlor
as we smile through
our polite conversations
and each properly mannered
pause for emphasis.

But late at night
when I sit alone in the empty den
I hear strange yowls
and feel
the dark monkey-paws
prying
 at the door

Watersnake

watersnake wind
in the summer shade
under cool stone
the smooth body laid
like a swath of river reed
with two black eyes

watersnake glide
in the glassy pool
in grassy green
of evening cool
like a silent river ripple
with two dark eyes

watersnake slide
in the silver sand
like a slow breeze
among river strands
moves like sound of unseen hand
in blink of one black eye

Waiting

Here the rooms are dark
with or without you —
the lamp is feeble and I
have no place to go.
Lighting my cigarette
the flame sends a shadow
across the wall. It arches
at the window, miming
notes my neighbor makes
on his stale violin.

Outside I can hear
a mother's voice
tremulous with the syllables
her mouth emits in the still
anticipation of no answer.

Her calls go on, and on —
sounding like "Laura,"
a name melting in a vowelled
distance, a patient music
that is its own consolation.

It is silence which interrupts —

the voice trapped in the clench
of her throat as the violin
creaks to a stop. A thought
strains across the space
of one long inhalation —

Somewhere in the blue insistence
of evening we are still
waiting for Laura ...

The Dancers

Last night we watched
as four rose to the floor
leaving him alone at the table
rocking his body faintly with music.
And you said you felt
like asking him to dance
because he looked too quiet
and perhaps would not presume
too much. Such are the moments
of opportunity and I was reminded
of other lives, how sympathy remains
always an infinite possibility
requiring no invitation.

In the lamplight
your eyes were far away
but because we were too close
you never moved, and now
that I am alone again
it is almost easy to think
of those others straying shyly
across the space between them,
how a sadder music plays
along the bars of the heart,
how you might have been
warm and capable in his arms.

Like Love

The cat makes a nuisance
of affection —
how it is always waiting
among the familiar habits of home:
light steps to the doorway
where my approach sends it
in a soft curve around ankles
mewing for attention.

The things it wants
are almost innocent:
ears rubbed, pink flesh
it can't reach caressed;
it wants to taste salt
on the flat of its tongue
and to feel sure fingers search
the slender links of its spine.

The warm trill it makes
within its throat is like love
in return for food, water,
a body's warmth at night

and even as I have seen before
pressed against a window
towards birds on a wire —
the slow involuntary movements
of its jaws is like love.

Poem for a Soap Opera Watcher

(in a voice and accent suggesting Cary Grant)

"Oh Bertha, Bertha, Bertha
moulting on the living room couch,
chocolates melting in your mouth
as well as in your hand;
As the World Turns
so goes your channel selector
in its incessant flipping, flipping, flipping
as you try to focus in on Another World.
The throbbing screen becomes
your Guiding Light
and all of Ryan's Hope
becomes your own.

Oh Bertha, Bertha, Bertha
the Days of Our Lives are much
too short for such tomfoolery.
How surprised you look
when your One Life to Live
wavers and topples across
the Edge of Night.
You believed too fervently
in repeats, my dear;
you forgot that prime-time
is a transitory experience
and eventually we all end up
opposite the 11 o'clock news,
unreeling towards a most pale midnight.

Ah Bertha, Bertha, Bertha
lost in the idle electric hum
and myopic stare;

transfixed before the sightless eye,
transmuted in the X-ray glow —
an electron flashes and fades upon the darkened screen:
you have cast your wishes out
upon a false falling star."

Suburban Fugue

I have been with them
in evenings of inconclusion,
watching through windows
webbed with branches darker
than my comprehension of random detail.

Through luminescent gas-gray boulevards
the gleaming mad bodies
throb the dusts of Main Street —
boys wheeling their bright machines,
throttling engines for the speed to make
a delectable pulse of motion.

Below, down the hill, the horizon
tangled in rosy sirens: hometown girls
drifted upon a necessary corner
accept the curious mugging
through windows; fleshy eyes
tugging at curves of sweater,
a flurry of brows, and the declamation
rises, squealing from the tires,
and floats in blue fume behind them.

Dusk floats a blue fume
in the exhausted causeway above
the bank-clock, necessary
churches, the glowing supermarket
where housewives in stretch pants
are pushing down aisles
toward jello, instant macaroni,
to detergents, inevitable check-outs
of tellers, thratcheting machines,
and the doors are opening

without taction into parking lots
where grails of shopping carts
lean listless silver into twilight.

Through the cool elmed evening
of tree-lawns and rowed
paint-worn houses, the hum
of wheels and throat
of engine paces the waking dream —
the car's grill leans
through the carbon wind
cylinder-urgent
in a white-knuckled ungearing
down the nether-edge of asphalt.

My eyes are retained
in an upstairs window, watching —
wishing the headlights filled
my sockets, the whole mind
beneath the hood —
a curious racing tugs from my chest
and courses dimly away, outpaced,
the taillights loaming into distance.

The walls guide my gaze,
I smile through a doorway,
my wife puts on her coat —
"A movie? the show?"
It doesn't matter;
the car is always waiting.
Roll down the windows.
We are still wheeling
toward some incident,
some destination.

II Night

It is dark and I walk in.

It is darker and I walk in.

Mark Strand

The Shadow

— Who knows what evil lurks
in the hearts of men? —

I've been this way all my life —
waiting for that other shoe to drop,
thinking it would only be
someone undressing —
not the sound of my own body falling.

I heard it one night when the jackhammer
in my head was pounding
up and down the streets of Manhattan,
hoping for a shade carelessly hung,
a twisted slat on a venetian blind
on the window of Delta Gamma sorority
that would convince me for good
all desire is aimless.

But near the university apartments I saw
almost by accident, a woman
in panties twining tresses
around her little finger
the same way I found myself
circling the block
where I imagined your flesh
reclining in front of the TV.

At the door I was half-hoping
no one was home
though the knob was throbbing
and my knees went weak
when it cracked open.

I remember wanting to shout
"I'm no good, can't you see,
I'm no good!" But smiled instead.

Later I was disappointed
the earth never moved,
but all I could think
was how much I love you
when you cry.

A Matrimonial

It's the neighbors again
slinging epithets at 2 a.m.;
she is stamping her foot
sending shock waves
through the common floor,
whining aloud some pain
she wants to share
which he wants no part of
and so makes some excuse
that sounds like his open palm
momentarily ending all conversation.
And we, wide-eyed,
lie in our bed —
fingers clenched on fingers
and thoughts roll thick as thorns
across the slanting room.
This is something
we have already learned,
discovering only after
the clustered vows,
another:
This is my hand
like a promise
that will always hurt you.

Crossing Fulton Bridge

A half-mile up Fulton Avenue
the offices of the Lysey brewery
are crumbling with infinitesimal
rumbles from the trainyard.
The mulberry trees we used to rob
with buckets are dead
and soot stains the doorways
where Puerto Ricans now live.

People will tell you
crossing Fulton Bridge at night
is taking life into your own hands;
perhaps because a cemetery
is on the other side. All around it
wrought iron works like ivy
on the mind and stones stake out
their own black bits of horizon.

And standing here I think of Catherine
who worked 20 years for my father.
Her son Danny, who I didn't like,
caught three bullets in his own front
yard on Labor Day, wondering
just how many ways there were
to get away from here.

Below in the groaning valley
flatcars crease the rails
in a frictioned ease of going —
and eight miles east the Cuyahoga
lugs long waters past the steel mill
and foams its dead into the lake.

Jessie

She must have howled all night with rain,
the lightning kicking up streaks of blood
in the whites of her eyes, thunder choking down
each wail in her throat, so that no one heard
much of anything, but the cracks and long rolls
of sky coming down the granite riverbanks.

It must have been the wind or something in it,
the way the stench of bear around the garbage dump
made hounds roll eyes and go crazy-tongued against leashes,
that sent her flying out at chicken wire,
her red mouth foamed white as water pushing
down Meeshaw's stone-bulged rapids.

In morning there was no way to follow
tracks or blood, the rain washing everything
into that awful brightness coming over pines,
too bright for imagining the dark current that leapt
within those limbs, the heart that flailed like a torn-
lipped trout in the broad red creel of her chest.

We walked the river eight miles into noon, stopping
to ask locals for directions or clues, too ashamed
to parley details: the old Indian who maybe guessed
and could only shake his head at the ways
of men to pen things better left running.

Down to the stone-sloped shoulders of the Pickerel
running into the French, past Lost Child Bend
where my wife's great-uncle spent his last breath
kicking in boots too heavy for deep current there,
wading through the knee-high tugs of junipers, clambering
rocks cracked with the roots of hemlock,

calling endlessly her name up into the stilled
and shadowed stands of jack-pine and black larch,
out to where we could see the bent makeshift crosses
on the island of the missionaries long ago
murdered by Algonquins, we trailed the sickness
in our own hearts, boot-heavy, heavy with shame,
bone-wearied with dreaming that blind-panic leap
and leap against wire, the yielding and cutting
of each mad muscled press of the body after
what was lost, the sure tearing and sudden opening,
finally tail-up running into the cloud-blown
swayed-tree blackness of somewhere we had no way of getting to.

Sick at moving on to where there was nowhere
to move on, sick at turning back, we turned back
to the only place we knew how to get to.

This evening Dry Pine Bay is alive with the feathered
throats of loons mimicking that dark mad music,
come for good fishing the bass leaping Meeshaw's billowed foam.
Broken boughs of pine float the westering water
and where I sit on the storm-bent dock I trail
limp fingers and fetch one up, carefully stripping
it branch and branch, needle by needle, down
to its rough brown bone. With my lock-blade I cut
one end into a point white as a willow stem,
thinking that tomorrow I might throw it hard and high
into that thick unyielding wilderness
and somehow it may find its way back to me.

For the Lost and Lovely

It's an old strained story, like boy
meets girl (and vice versa), and
something happens, magical as polio

and sinkholes in Florida. Nothing can stand
in the way. Things get swallowed up:
mobile homes, Datsuns, whole swimming pools
with people in 'em treading water for entire
lifetimes who suddenly find they're caught
in a current, a luminous blue undertow,
because the bottom's dropping out ---

This is a rule, like gravity, which makes
things heavier than they really are.
This is the stuff that trembles apples off
apple-hooks onto the shiny heads of philosophers,
unto the quivering fingers of virgins
mythical, peeling the skin back
until there is something white and squishy and totally
truth-like turning yellow in the palm.

And here's the part that makes me think of you

at night, under trees where other fingers are breathing
like small salamanders across your skin,
the touch and tickle of moist promises
made belly-deep in dirt and darkness
where all the chameleons go stone-still
among veiny leaves and iguanas drop their tails
when grasped earnestly from behind, leaving
the cold-blooded appendage of something better
twitching like blown paper in the hand.

And here's the part that makes me think of me

pawing water more than heart deep, the tight suck
of lungs for something without surface, the unquenchable
burning in the back of the throat that drinks
the body down, bit by bit, into its own limp gestures
of understanding, of acceptance: arms floating upward
and empty, the mouth gaped around an imaginary
syllable, maybe a promise or some kind of answer, unable
to articulate what has gone wrong, what is really necessary.

It's no use denying the facts of life, the reasons
people get nervous and die in their sleep, dreaming
unblemished apples, still water, some Narcissus gone
lame and stupidly drunk with the guilt of weakness,
the need for forgiveness. Here I deliver you back
the love that is like the sin of our fathers who wanted
too much: umbilical, a breech baby tied into a world
of circumstance where there is always
some hope and no one truly to blame.

La Conquistadora

This is fatal, like romance —
already the last mournful note
rises from the lips of the trumpeter...

There you are composed in sunlight
flashing a picador's smile
from atop your high horse.
You control the prodding lance
that urges the dim beast,
deftly stirring passion
from his indolence.

Now you regard him cautiously
as you stand there eye-to-eye
bearing a brocade of mixed intention;
yet, hold your ground admirably
and incline your head as if in whisper
casting feathered needles
into the shoulders of the dark.
Grimly he trots the ring around you,
barbed hooks ballasted in flesh
near the spine.

(bright colors bob gaily from the wounds)

This is a most dangerous proposition —
the manner in which he advances
affixing the dull staring eyes.
But your splendid capework of conversation
dumfounds — so many skillful passes
and genteel circumlocutions
vexing the power of his haunches
to an obliquity of inches.

Ah such poetry
this motion in abstract
and such daring!
(the horn brushes the breast)

But the moment of truth always approaches —
your tender hand poised at waiting blade
as the beast plods in with lowered head:
your back arches, arm extends
but the resolve is infirm.

(this is turning into messy business)

Another lunge, but the point lists
from the mark!

(this gypsy is a butcher)

There is a final awkward rush
and sudden thrust —
a plunging blade searching out
the glow of marrow.

(silent roses are falling limply from the sky)

The animal thrashes downward
eyes rolling wildly
foam flecking the lips
as he collapses in a spasm of riotous sand ...

Está finido. It is done.

Once again you are composed in sunlight
that glimmers dimly from the far edge of the arc.
The petals of pink light are fading from your cheeks.
You stand there aloof ... without peer, torera mía;
you get the years and the tale.

Something Broke

It was not you
or me or the new car or the washing machine.

There was no sound, no sense of words,
no sudden jolt or cry. It was

perfectly natural in the silence
while I was reading, while you were sketching,

while the clock ticked and the bed was turned down
and the steady breath poured in and out,

something broke. I knew you knew
by your body's shuddering in sleep,

how your mouth opened and your throat
strangled the words back into the heart's

bad dream, how we woke and it was ourselves
we found staring back from the dark centers

of eyes, feigning detachment, going on as though
each glance were careless, each silence

an accident, each night only another night
we propped pillows beneath our heads

and molded our limbs to the hollows
of each other's bodies, pressing flesh

tight against the wound of air between us
as though we were seed molded in the shape

of the pod, or fruit molded to the shape
of its seed: waiting, growing, tightening

with certainty, the whole time the eyes
were open and staring off

into different corners of the dark.

Behind Grandfather's House

for Charles Dorner

Out in back was a black tarp
with snakes underneath it in summer
steaming in moist grass and the stink
of manure. And we'd lift the edge
and he'd bring his bare hand down after them
like a skinned mongoose, testing the quickness
of those arcing throats. He did this for fun
or because it was his nature, and he only caught one
the wrong way. I remember watching him squeeze
his thumb so that it grew bright red eyes.
Let me say that I was impressed, but
this is the way the mind works
in one who prefers his reptiles
at the end of a stick, having always
taken them too seriously. And perhaps
it was fear — that rotten smell, the shapes
that slithered in an arm's length of darkness.
And Grandfather, it was something else,
not exactly there. It was what I was afraid
was missing, the way I lift the blank edge
of this page and cannot clearly see
to find them, the way you folded up
your newspaper one morning
and went to sleep.

For the Waters

Lying here listening
to the repetition of rain
on roof and window
murmuring its passage through drains

it is nearly like sleeping:

knowing we live in a placid universe
of lulling waters
trickling brightly down
the lengths of houses, fences,
trembling in pools
on quiet suburban drives
tangling the trees and grasses
in some lush mystery
of unresistance
of perfect sympathy in clinging
in letting go
in passing
down the great stone back
of the world.

What was it in the soft glaze
of window
the dim scene beyond
I could not see
that made me believe I was dreaming
of water
and only the water?

III Dreams for Morning

The fires go out. They are lit again.
The snow comes. The ancestors of
ancestors huddle in our bodies.
Their dreams rise to our heads.

Stephen Dunn

Winter Night at Mud Springs

— stone is cold
and blood warm —

There is no good reason
for my being here.
The cattle have all gone down
into a sheltered valley,
the wide lake is locked
with ice. There is no wind
or sound of wind
to stir even the faintest
sense of nativity.

I have seen other moons
like this, rising high
and white in the plateaued night.
But this light above
the snow meadow
is cold
and stars wink
in silent collusion
having undone so many.
Only the glow in my bones
warms the night
in the marrowed margins
of the living.

Out of stilting shadows
of tamaracks
through fields of thistle
and ghostly snow
I paced fugitive heaven
with my eyes
and conspired in the mountainous
caress of frozen distance

a glimpse of something
like a god.

So I have descended
and come, tabletless, to tell
of no icons or icy avatars —
only the steady psalmings
of the blood, antiphonal
from the heart.

The Fire-Cat

I have allowed for the yellow one, puniest
of the litter now gone, torn by cries
of dogs, coyotes, the squeals of tires
done with turning away from the inevitable.
I give it whatever it will take,
which is whatever can be scraped together —
fat, skin, and water in a tin cup.
It lingers beneath the porch at night
and will not come to be petted.

II

She tells me I am cruel in preparing for things
not meant to be, and warns of what breeds
in its necessity and indifference. She is right.
There is no telling what can come of something held
halfway to the heart, and I have heard it yowl
at night, deep in its furred throat, heard it yowl
and yowled myself the gaped and guttural phrase
of something I could not touch with my tongue
or press back into the cavity of my body.

III

On the rim of a rusted garbage can, the fire-cat
bristles and slinks. Flames dance and ash smoulders
in a crackling pile of chicken bones. Soon it is
dancing itself, nimble on the heated edge,
its yellow head weaving the flames, furred with smoke.
It knows what it is not to be touched, to keep
itself from that other burning. It snatches
what it can, and drops clear.

The Visitor

In the cool of morning I find myself
walking in a familiar neighborhood with streets
named for trees and white houses glazed
with rain and a sense of distance. Strange
it seems to me now that I lived a life
here among so many green petals, the willows
with their wet fingers dragging skyward
over the rafters. From the sidewalk I can see curtains
swing as though caught on breezes
inside, faces bending shyly to windows
with pink indecipherable smiles. I smile back.
I wave. I am ridiculous in the clear light.
And standing here in front of a lawn
that was my own, I see how the crabgrass
has finally been routed, the ailing sycamore
with its nest of bluejays has been removed.
I was told that the red porcelain
sink in the kitchen was the first
to go and that all I dreamed of doing
has been done. I am afraid to meet the hands
that pruned my grapevines out of the apple
trees, that turned the screws on the lock
of the new front door. I'm not exactly sure
what to do with this indecision: whether to run
up the walk and try all the keys in my pockets
on these words in my mouth forming like an apology
for my existence, or to pull the perennials
my wife planted up by the roots
just to show them how hard it is to go on blooming.

A mailman comes up, full of conversation
that includes me only in this vague misunderstanding.
He gives me envelopes posted to a wrong adress.

I nod my head. I wait. When he is out
of sight I tuck the letters beneath
my coat and silently steal home.

The Snow-Man

If I had a son, I would go to his room
at bedtime and tuck him in. I would sit
close beside him and touch his hair and talk
of the long day, how night comes and we sleep
to be better for tomorrow. Or maybe we'd
sit in a chair by the window and look
at the sky and I would point out the moon
and the north star, and he would be tired
or too young to ask questions and would not learn
that that is all I know of stars. And if it was
winter and the house popped and creaked
as houses do, I would speak of what cold does
to the joints, how the ground settles and wood
contracts with the simple arguments of air.
Or maybe I'd pretend that it was the snowman
we'd built, risen from the front yard and unable
to sleep with the family still awake,
walking on the roof to pass the time —
how we might keep him from our warm beds
simply by closing our eyes. And then I'd leave
the door open an inch from the jamb so light
from the hall might slip in to reassure him.
And going to my bed at night, the house creaks
and pops, and I lie awake and dream of how
I have no son, of how silent and still the tree-
tops are, and the white roof, how my footprints
glow in ice behind me. The sky is beautiful
and full of stars. And it is cold and I am cold.

The Poets and Philomela

Virginia Woolf commented of her second nervous break-
down how the birds seemed to chatter in Greek and the King
of England squatted in the bushes spouting obscenities.

the words are made
 without a mouth
without the blood or skin enough
to hang lips upon

the wrenched tongue
 wriggles for the taste
of nothing it can give: the true terror
thought and deed

to set before
 the destined guest
diced so fine he cannot tell
nourishment from utter blasphemy

and so he takes
 his time and comes
to pluck the seed from out his teeth
savoring the taste of what seems

familiar but changed
 the way the mind tightens
around a discovered error
the throat around a sudden cry

the way beauty
 takes dominion
over every human circumstance
or accident of pity

Souvenir

On the island of Hispaniola
stones drop like beads of sweat
from the mahogany trees
and grow large and hard as the chocolate
eyes of children.
They call this amber,
and when the red tourist bus climbs
the long hill going up to the Hotel Cayeco
the calypso band plays
the women are full of hips and laughter.

What you want to remember is like this:

the green hill glistening after rain
how you climbed high above coconut trees
through the steam of grass and your wet shirt
and little girls with flowers for nickels
waited at the bottom.

Maybe it was the sun hovering
in all that blue,
the way each step in spongy earth
held you for a moment
in a different moment,
and stopping to catch your breath
against the smooth trunk of a palm tree
you wondered of another life
and dreamt it full of silence
and green shadows folding down around,
hoping to be caught
in that constant bloom forever.

Far away

the ship waited
girls walked home
with fists of red bouquets
and you were thinking of the price
of innocence
the white sand and soundless bay
how the insect crouched in a lacquered stone
and what you left became what remained.

Runner Followed by Turkey Vultures in August

Here, you don't have to lie
down or die to get noticed:
only break stride, stumble,
push harder than what's intended
to find yourself knee-
deep in your own body.

Here, mortality rises
with you out of dust
and sweat — out of gravel
caught in your skin, breath
you can't keep in your lungs —
lifting over the tops of cotton-
woods, dark as the taste of blood.

What's necessary is a way
of believing in distance,
in the road beneath your feet
and wherever you've already been,
without the trouble of this horizon
or these shadows pressing
into the mind's soft wax.

What's needed is a way
of coming to yourself
alone
in the glare of noonday grass,
of finding that it is always
yourself circling in familiar flesh,
that the road goes on,
casual and changeless,
and is never the way home.

Life and Art

The alligators at Parrot Jungle
weren't much. They never moved
a muzzy muscle, covered with shit
as they lay on the rocks, gloating
with fat almond eyes, and my brother
Jeff spat a hawket right on one
which didn't twitch or blink
to signify he was even alive or
existed much or that there were really
orchids and bananas in the tropics or sun-
light slashing down through green
cords of bamboo, and the flamingos
were beautiful and bright as roses
or a dream maybe of effeminate military
men marching on hipless pink legs
across the emerald lawn, pretending
every now and then as they minced
and spread the dark undersides of wings
that they might fly off or ripple
the silver glass of water or maybe
even copulate, while the alligators
sipped mud and stank and ate up
those pink bodies with their eyes.

IV Critical Apparatus

— Remember, what we're doing here is kid's stuff

from a conversation
with Richard Hugo

I don't expect this to be an easy task — offering up what amounts to a critical analysis of my poetry. A voice in my head keeps reminding me of the words of D. H. Lawrence: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it." I intend to discuss poetry here, not fiction, but the implication of these words still applies: that the artist, being so closely involved with his own work, knowing its inspiration and intentional design, often lacks the objectivity or distance by which to appraise what the work is communicating to others; what is actually "happening" in the work within or underneath or behind the intention. Furthermore, an artist commenting on his art sometimes feels a need to justify, explicate, or rationalize an intellectual "meaning" for a work. This often results in a kind of paraphrase — an explication that limits the possibilities of a poem, short story, or novel — an enclosure of meaning that carries substantial authority since it arises from the source of the work himself.

A case in point is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" in which he re-traces, quite rationally and mechanically, the steps by which "The Raven" was created. This essay is interesting and useful. It testifies in behalf of conscious method, of "craft," and identifies the reasonable goal of any serious artist to "create an effect," to have an effect on the reader.

The major shortcoming of this essay, however, is an undue attribution of art to the realm of the artist's intellect — to suggest that one may think and calculate toward earnest representations of emotion, to suggest that rational formulas exist by which art may be attained. There is, of course, some truth to this. But to my mind, Poe over-reacted to the Romantic view of the artist composing in a "frenzy of inspiration" when he equated the composition of a poem with "the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." What especially bothers me about the essay is its tone, which, purporting to be descriptive, implies prescription. It is the unstated "This is how we write a poem" that gets my goat.

In a sense, my complaint about Poe hinges on extrapolating Lawrence's words into a new meaning: that perhaps the function of the critic is not only to save art from the artist, but to save the artist from himself as well. Just as the artist commenting on his own work may overlook or purposefully ignore what he cannot explicate or paraphrase in a rational mode, he may fall into the same trap concerning the process of composition. He may find himself reacting to an intellectual or academic pressure to emphasize those elements of his art that are "in control," are designed purposefully and testify to the artist's sense of craft. Thus, there exists a document like "The Philosophy of Composition," which, though useful, perhaps even to its composer, smacks a bit of untruth. One wonders if Poe, or anyone for that matter, could compose poetry in such a rigid, methodological fashion.

All of this serves as a preamble to analyzing my own method of composition which, I suspect, I will be unable to tie into such a neat package as Mr. Poe's. Some loose threads will go straggling, flitting in the wind. My goal is not to wrap these cords too tightly. I want for a bit of space. In the words of William Carlos Williams in "Danse Russe," "I am best so!" I am "the happy genius of my household" and I don't want to impinge on this happiness by having to explain the movements of the dance. I just want to dance.

My defensiveness in this regard is based on more than wanting to hide behind the Romantic facade of "inspiration," of asserting that "control" has no province in the composition of poetry. The problem is that I have only recently reached a point regarding my method of composition where I have freed myself somewhat from that tyrant, "the rational mind" — that limiting, logical, analytic, linear-thinking half of the brain that wants to control or explicate away so much of experience. For my own part, I often see the process of composition taking place in a balance or tension between the intellect and the emotional or intuitive faculties of the self. This balance is difficult to maintain since, after all, I am a rational man living in the midst of Western culture. Indeed,

I believe that I think too much. If I find that I am "thinking" as I compose a poem, if I let the rational faculty dominate the affair, the poem suffers.

I suppose that what I'm referring to here is my necessity to suppress the ego since if it is allowed free reign, it suppresses the id — it limits the emotional or intuitive faculties. It wants, above all, to establish order on the logical plane. It wants to stick to the point at any cost. It wants to be "true" after the pedantic fashion. It wants to dissect experience, pin and label its parts, and then be applauded for a neat bit of work. This is what I have tried to divest myself of in my work: what Keats referred to in regarding Coleridge as an "irritable reaching after fact & reason." What I have tried to foster for myself is that sense of "negative capability" which involves a negation of the ego. I have attempted this through empathy, through an immersion of the self in the chaos of experience where there is no right or wrong or clear-cut incidence of cause and effect, no neat way of summing things up. What I am after is an open-mindedness that allows imagination to move or dance as it pleases, without wearing the rational mind's straightjacket. This is what I believe Richard Hugo meant when he advised "writing 'music,' not 'truth,' since if one follows his 'music,' 'truth' will come of that." Similarly, the poet Dave Smith warned me once of poetry that is too much "talk," and which follows the lead of "logic," rather than moving through intuitive or psychological associations.

What I'm trying to emphasize is that the process of composition is currently for me a process of discovery. This "discovery" can be successful, it seems, if the poetic subject or experience is approached in a state of empathetic awareness that is engendered more by emotion or intuition than intellect. I don't want to "force" meaning, but rather let it surface "by itself," to allow it passage through the id onto the page in a way that will affect the reader's feelings, not his brain.

I should clarify this point. Of course I want to affect the reader in his mind, but more appropriately I want to affect his emotions first. I want the reading of the poem, especially the first reading, to cause

an emotional reaction. I want him to feel the poem. Then, afterwards, if he wants to puzzle it intellectually, well that's fine. But my premise is that he won't really bother with it unless he's gripped by the poem first, somewhere inside; the gut or heart or wherever those little hooks take hold. This leads me into a specification of why I write poetry, or at least of how it starts. For me, it begins, when it begins rightly, with those little hooks in the gut or heart. It begins with what Wordsworth called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Thought is involved here, of course, but it cannot occupy a position of dominance; thought and feeling must be allowed to modulate each other, to exist in balance.

For me then, this process of self-criticism is a bit representative of something I have been trying to exorcise, and it has allowed for a temporary loss of balance as far as the writing of poetry is concerned. Fortunately, it has also been a valuable experience — one of discovery in its own right. It has clarified for me what is ultimately important to me since I am evidently compelled to write about it or them. It has also provided me an opportunity to discover what has been taking place in my poetry in the last three years from the standpoint of technique. My poetry has changed greatly in this time period, much of this through a conscious concern for "growth," but only now can I see a bit more clearly what this has meant.

Most of my earlier poetry was not very good. It was overly dependent on the image and involved an unnatural distancing of the self from the poem, and for these reasons was rather static. Much of this, I surmise, was related to a preoccupation with the Modernists and an ignorance of contemporary poetics, something I have made it my business to overcome.

The poems in this collection are representative, for the most part, of a conscious concern with "what is happening now" in contemporary poetry. The poems are more intensely personal than my earlier efforts — the salience of an "I" in the poems is an obvious aspect of this. Also,

I have attempted to capture more movement or drama in the poems than heretofore had been a concern. For this reason the poems utilize narration, dramatic (or melodramatic) monologue, and images presented through a series of private psychological associations. I have also attempted a movement toward "sincerity" and "simplicity" by toning down the language of my poetry; by avoiding the "poetic" or baroque, unless the poetic subject or experience warrants and can sustain such extravagance. This is an approximation, I suppose, of Wordsworth's dictum regarding "a selection of language really used by men," a concept whose current application was articulated more directly and potently, for me, by Jonathan Holden in his essay "'Affected Naturalness' and the Poetry of Sensibility."

But enough of this kind of generalization, and on to others.

The title of the collection, Tendency Toward Night, resulted from thoughtful observation and analysis, not only of the content of the poems, but of their composition. All but a few were written at night — a time I define approximately as 8 p.m. to 4 in the morning. They testify to my insomnia and penchant for nocturnal meditation. Not surprisingly, given this condition, most of the poems allude to night or darkness, or the "action" of the poem is defined as occurring at this time. Thus, what I've attempted in constructing the collection and designing its format is to focus on this discovered element that runs through most of the poems.

The title of the collection is intended as a metaphor for what I've discovered — a vision of darkness and isolation that in my little room at night with the cigarettes, the cup of tea, the blank page in front of me, is just as real as anything else I can hardly get a firm grasp on. I don't mean for all this to get perfectly dismal, but I am a rational being and think too much. I want experience or "life" to have meaning, form, substance. I want to know just what the point is.

This quest is a bit ridiculous, of course. Maybe even a bit funny to an existentialist with a sense of humor. But this is the bottom line regarding the poetry here: that the author sees experience as essen-

tially fluid and chaotic, marked by two "facts" — that we are living now, and that this will not always be the case. From here begins the search for form or "meaning" that is circumvented by this "tendency toward night": this gathering darkness; this intellectual, moral, and emotional uncertainty that allows for no "right" answers; this proposition that we are beings alone, precariously positioned, and that time, slowly but with a certain pace, is running out.

The earlier poems gathered here are concerned with this, even to a kind of excess. And surely a person could get psychotic dwelling on this exclusively. So I don't, and with good reason. For life, or we ourselves, provide for the moments of consolation: a temporarily lucid insight; a moment of trivial, but real, happiness; an awareness of the beauty that is constantly available. The later poems in the collection try to affirm these things, to testify in behalf of "going on." And in back of this, too, sometimes springs the thought that we often take ourselves too seriously and sometimes deny or limit our possibilities by doing so. That maybe the best course is to jump right into the whole mess and make as big a splash as we can — that the best revenge is to live as intensely as possible.

The first section of poems is entitled "The Long Evening." Though their "subjects" differ, what is common to all of them is the way they intimate uncertainty; are pervaded with a little tension that I might approximate in the word "fear." They are afraid to say "what is wrong" or they suggest that something is "going wrong."

"The Cats Locked Away" is the opening poem of this section. Somewhat conspicuously Poe-like (referring to the effect of his stories, more so than his poems), the mood of the poem is dark and controlled, the diction a bit lofty and affectedly polite. The poem concerns itself with the sociological and psychological contexts of the self. The cats have been "locked away" in a room in the house, a house not unlike Roderick Usher's in one of Poe's stories, which is metaphorically the self. The poem alludes to the persona's desire to maintain a social veneer, to be polite and mannered and essentially unobjection-

able to others, "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," in Eliot's vernacular. So he keeps his cats hidden; he exercises control over whatever the cats represent to the self, whether they are like Poe's "imp of the perverse" or manifestations of subconscious desires or fears. The poem ends, however, by focussing on the felines' tenacity — by emphasizing that something, or perhaps some part of the persona, is groping for contact, wanting to be loosed. The poem, I hope, finishes on a note of foreboding, of tension taken to a discernible pitch.

The next poem relaxes a little. "Watersnake" is an older poem written during a period of intense preoccupation with imagist poetry and fascination with the music of Wallace Stevens. I don't know why, but this poem always looks a little blue to me, as though a colored slide had been projected over its surface. The poem is a bit static, as is much of my earlier work, and the self is so distant, it is accessible only by realizing that the poem represents the perceptions of a certain consciousness. This consciousness observes the watersnake in its idyllic landscape — one presumably shared by the perceiver. Everything is quite pastoral and languid until the snake suddenly makes an inexplicable movement "like the sound of unseen hand." Here, for the first time, the perceiver is made aware of the snake's "unnatural" nature, the possibility that the tranquil landscape belies something startling and capable of threat. The "slow wind," the "unseen hand," and the snake all intimate danger. The allusion is, for me, and perhaps a bit obscure for others, to death.

"Waiting" is a strange poem. It's a bit impressionistic and seems to have some "dead spots." I'm still debating whether this is arguable as organic form or if the poem is just too static. Here there is a persona in a situation of physical, psychological, and, hints exist, aesthetic enclosure. There is the thinnest bit of narrative involving a "dramatic situation" — the woman calling her daughter who does not answer. This situation is "eavesdropped" upon by the persona and apparently by another neighbor who is playing his violin (badly). The

mood of the poem is one of anticipation cued by the persona's boredom and restlessness; the "staleness" of the neighbor's violin, which suggests that he is playing it without much enthusiasm; and the calls of the woman which are not returned. All are awaiting impetus, or response, or some kind of resolution. Of course the poem ends without supplying it. It tries to imitate life.

"The Dancers" is a tough poem for me to explicate. Now it seems somewhat personally obscure. It concerns a dramatic situation involving a man and a woman who are seated at a table in a bar and she is attracted to a male at another table. The persona intimates his tension because of the situation, maybe because he is a little jealous. The woman perhaps realizes this and "... because we were too close/ ... never moved." After the persona is removed in time and location from this event, he wonders at the space between people, how they get across it, and reassures himself with a fleeting daydream about the romantic possibility being fulfilled. The fact that he himself goes home alone, describes love as "sympathy," and employs a metaphor like "bars of the heart," relates perhaps to his own fear of incapacity, his inability to get across the space to another human being.

"Like Love" is a poem that I like. It's quiet and controlled, mixes rhetoric and image well, starts off in a nice sentimental way and does something creepy at the end. The persona is akin to that of "The Dancers" in that his meditation relates to the romantic — here proffering a kind of definition of love, one removed by simile. What seems to fascinate him is his awareness that something belies the cat's affection, that it is "almost innocent." Indeed, the details he relates about the animal seem more related to instinct or need than "love." At end, the persona poses a perverse equation of love superimposed on the image of the cat's jaws quivering in carnivorous, rather than carnal, lust. There is probably just a touch of Poe here at the end, as well as a dash of Freud.

"Poem for a Soap Opera Watcher" is an experiment in pushing word play and farce toward "seriousness." It uses humor and tries to enter-

tain. Hopefully, there is enough irony and reality in the poem to redeem it from being just a piece of "fluff." It is designed as a dramatic monologue delivered by a Cary Grant-type person. It doesn't have to be the real Cary Grant, just someone with enough charm, or charisma, or good looks that the bored, middle-aged, mythical Bertha in the poem might listen to him. The monologue itself is a mix of word play and melodrama. Like others of the poems, it start off casually (if one buys the initial premise) and gets a little somber. It asks for just a little meditation at the end; on what I'm not certain: stalled lives, the ways people try to escape. It's an early poem.

"Suburban Fugue" is a poem that came out of the pen of its own volition, for the most part, and is related strongly to the influence of three poets. The first is T. S. Eliot. Thematically, the poem is preoccupied with The Wasteland. There are references to the urban landscape, to technology, and to the manic psychological pace of contemporary America: the cars, the "thratcheting" cash registers, the "carbon wind," and so on. There are also suggestions of materialism: the "bank-clock" and the "grails of shopping carts." Primary to all this is the concept of de-personalization — that in this place people are reduced to faces peering through moving windows or posteriors in stretch pants going down the aisles of supermarkets. The persona of the poem enjoys an Eliotesque distance throughout most of this. Like the persona of "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," he perceives himself in the midst of bedlam, but is somewhat detached. Though Eliot's persona returns to his room for his own private nightmare, here the intimation is that the persona will go out and participate in the chaos around him. Perhaps, as suggested by his daydream of becoming part and parcel with the car, he thinks that he may find a way within "the machine" to actually escape it. In any event, he wants to keep moving.

Dave Smith also informs this poem, at least from the standpoint of composition. This was one of my first experiments involving a stress on "movement" in the poem to sustain the reader's attention and to suggest mania or desperation. In composing the poem, I employed nar-

ration, but relied primarily on free-association which generated images and provided a way of getting across the spaces between them.

Another influence on this poem is Hart Crane, specifically his book, The Bridge. There is a bit of his vision in the poem regarding the human becoming fused with the technological. The use of heavy alliteration, assonance, and obscure word choice is also related to my reading of Crane.

Section II of the collection is the most expansive and probably darkest, and is entitled "Night." The quotation from Mark Strand is my approximation of what happens in most of these poem: they confront the darkness. Most of them do not intimate, but experience disillusion, fear, personal failure, "things gone wrong."

The first of these, "The Shadow," reflects my reading of Stephen Dunn and his penchant for using the seamier side of fantasy in his poetry. The poem is posed as a dramatic monologue, or more precisely, as a "melodramatic" monologue, as cued by its epigram. Suggesting the possibility of melodrama, I hoped, would allow the persona to be suspicious and sordid, without wholly alienating the reader's sympathy because of the possibility of his exaggeration. In relating his nocturnal wanderings, his desires of a voyeuristic and carnal nature, the persona reveals himself in a state of desperation — an almost comic desperation, I suppose, since his preoccupation is contemptible on one hand, and quite trivial on the other. His real "tragedy," if there is such, is that he indulges his obsession to a point where he evidently cannot be happy, even when he apparently succeeds in realizing his desires. There is something here of the "ideal" vying against the "real." The voyeuristic and sexual experiences end in disappointment because they don't match up to his expectations. The "love" he speaks of at the poem's end is perhaps suspect in that it is engendered in another's pain; maybe it is a kind of mirror held up to his own frustration at being unable to attain the ideal, or maybe at being unable to interact honestly with another person.

"A Matrimonial" is a dark poem. I always picture it going on in

black-light. It hints at the tenuous edge between love and hate, affection and violence, in human relationships. It also comments on the self, on the way that the emotional edges inside sometimes blur, or fuse, or break down so that we sometimes feel intensely, but in what logically may be called "opposite directions." On another level, the poem deals with the tension of lives that are enclosed upon one another. The poem suggests physical enclosure by its setting and alludes to psychological enclosure — the thoughts tangled like thorns. Some of this dismalness might be relieved by the poem's end when it reminds that this is something we have a choice about. It might not.

"Crossing Fulton Bridge" is a grim little piece based in experience and memory and an Eliotesque perception of an urban landscape. It has a kind of "rites of passage" theme, but one which is purposely subdued. Most of the intention here was to present a picture of a place I no longer was or cared to be. The physical details are, I hope, potent psychologically — an "objective correlative," I suppose.

"Jessie" is a poem about a friend's dog I took care of once. The poem's location is Dry Pine Bay in French River, Ontario. The dog was never there, but I was. The poem was written in about three hours and perhaps reflects a latent desire to be Jack London. It was composed in a state of mania or hyper-tension, or something akin to it, and for this reason, I believe, is a bit over-written, a bit insistent on piling up images, in "moving," in using "hard-sounding" language, in exaggerating a sense of tragedy. All this relates to Dave Smith. Thematically, the poem involves a Frostian view of nature — nature as alien to man and his desires — something akin to his poem "Storm Fear." It is also concerned with "loss," its inevitability, and the pain borne of trying to recover the irrecoverable.

"For the Lost and Lovely" involves this last theme too, but is more overtly concerned with it regarding romantic love, "the old strained story, like boy/ meets girl...." It involves disillusion, a male ego indulging itself in the perception of being "victimized" by a less-than-

true female. It tries to move beyond this, however, by approaching the concept of romance in a dialectical fashion, noting the contradictions of ideality and reality that such a relationship involves, and attempting to resolve them through "philosophy." The poem is basically pessimistic, however, in that it ends on a note of bitterness and depicts romantic desire as always being thwarted. In many ways I'm dissatisfied with the poem's retreat into abstraction, its reliance on symbolism, and its sententiousness. Perhaps this is for reasons of "defensiveness." I do like some of the images and much of its language. It was one of those poems that "had to be written," and I feel that it is moderately successful.

"La Conquistadora" is in the same ballpark as the last poem. It deals with failed romance and is steeped in symbolism. It operates on a framework of ritual: comparing that of the bullfight to that of "court-
ing." It, too, descends into pessimism. In many ways it is overtly "poetic" and suffers because of it.

"Something Broke" relates to the two preceding poems in subject matter, but is a much later work and exemplifies my current concerns of beginning the poem in a clear and concrete situation, using plain language to facilitate a tone of sincerity, and attempting to avoid what is overtly discursive or "poetic." Though on its surface it concerns a troubled marriage, it alludes to the brittle framework of romantic expectations -- the fact that romance is a transitory aspect of marriage and that if this, as an ideal, is desired too intensely, well then, something breaks.

"Behind Grandfather's House" is my only satisfactory attempt at writing an elegy. It occurs out of childhood memory and is a variation on the old theme of innocence confronting death. It has a "rites of passage" theme, though the persona does not pass very far beyond his own fear and uncertainty regarding his grandfather's death. His grandfather is perhaps emblematic of that type of person who can deal with, even grab by the throat, those elements in life that make for fear -- a person who tests himself against the uncertainty. The persona, on the other

hand, prefers these things "at the end of a stick, having always/ taken them too seriously." He tries to come to terms with his fear, to itemize exactly what it was or is that he cannot deal with. Primary to this is the "something else," what he fears is "missing." This ambiguous allusion can be taken in a number of ways, essentially because it is a number of things. It is, on one level, the snakes themselves that flash about in the grass around his feet and move, as snakes do, through moments of visibility and invisibility; it is also, perhaps, the absence of an apparent "good," an absence of the loving, caring God of Christian mythology; it is also the proposition of nada, the concept of existence comprised of random events with no sense or meaning behind them.

"For the Waters" is a poem that I like for its simplicity and music. It is a little too dependent on image, but I don't think that it is as static as other poems I've written of this type. It flows right along. The end of the poem is still a bit unsatisfactory for me, despite numerous revisions. The "turn," that point in the poem where authorial statement suggests a new dimension to what has been presented beforehand, is a little forced. Like "Watersnake," the poem alludes to the inevitability of death. It seems "darker" to me than that poem for the simple reason that there is a persona, an "I," to experience this realization, though he tries to cover it up by referring to his awareness as a "dream" concerning "water/ and only the water."

The last section of the collection is entitled "Dreams for Morning" and the poems gathered here are among my most current. It is, I like to think, an aspect of maturity that these poems are more affirmative in nature than my earlier efforts; they try to move a bit beyond the creation of tension, the awareness of things going or gone wrong, and try to offer some kind of consolation, to come to terms with it all.

The first of these, "Winter Night at Mud Springs," is the earliest in composition and perhaps shows the strain of trying to provide "solution." Essentially, it is a "religious" poem in that there are a number of Biblical and Catholic allusions: the concept of the Nativity, the

Eucharist (imagistically posed by the white moon rising over the plateaus), the wandering of John the Baptist, and the journey of Moses up and down the mount, to name a few. The poem is also related to T. S. Eliot who late in his career became a member of the Anglican church. The poem, of course, rejects the traditional Christian scheme and suggests instead a movement toward the secular humanism of someone like Wallace Stevens, of heeding "... the steady psalmings/ of the blood, antiphonal/ from the heart." There is also a bit of Hart Crane in the poem, evidenced primarily through word choice.

"The Fire-Cat" is a hard poem for me to explicate. It was inspired by watching a cat attempt to snatch food from a flaming garbage can. This seemed like an image that belonged in a poem, so I constructed one around it. In many ways the poem relates to "The Cats Locked Away" and "Like Love," directly by using the cat as an emblem of something akin to human desire, maybe love. Anyway, this seems to be a peculiar tendency of mine. I used to think I knew what the poem "meant," but various criticisms from others have seemed as valid, or more so, than my own. I see the poem as saying something about surviving desires that, if pursued too intensely, can be dangerous to one's well-being. The poem also says something about the need for "distance" in intimate relationships. It occurs to me, after the fact, that Stevens used the emblem of a fire-cat in "An Earthy Anecdote," but I'm not sure the two poems are related in any other aspect than this.

"The Visitor" is a poem that began in autobiography and was a way of "coming to terms" with feelings of displacement and transience. It is a little "flat" or "talky" at points, but I felt that this was necessary for setting up the poem's "situation" and for affecting sincerity. The end of the poem "gambles" a bit in relying on "word play": "... I tuck the letters beneath/ my coat and silently steal home." The concept of "stealing home" is, of course, ironic and double-barrelled. Part of what I hoped to suggest is that "home" is a place existing in memory, yet a person also has the capacity to make "home" an aspect of the self: to be "at home" wherever he is.

"The Snow-Man" is a poem that indulges in the sentimental and tries to evoke from it a sense of tragedy, to suggest a little bitterness underneath the syrup. It relates to my own little idyllic fantasy about having a son, but was not intended as an affirmation of the Whitman-ish theme regarding procreation. More directly it relates to a poem by Wallace Stevens of the same name, though this was not a wholly conscious design. It was, perhaps, more a matter of shared sensibility, of beholding the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Some critics have noted that the Steven's poem remarks of the need for "negative capability"; my intention was similar. At the poem's end, the persona finds himself childless, on the roof like the imagined snowman. Yet, he observes that even in this context there is beauty ("the stars"). The last statement: "And it is cold and I am cold," is a deliberate attempt not to end on a note of complete resolution. It suggests that the world is, after all, cold and hard, with or without a son. But hopefully it also suggests the concept of acclimation, of being able to survive in this world, in this uncertainty.

"The Poets and Philomela" is the result of some kind of backlash from the tendencies of these later poems to begin with a banal, concrete situation, to use an "I" as the subject of focus, and to avoid the conscious use of allusion. This poem is almost entirely allusive and overtly "literary," and for these reasons works on a plane of "thought" instead of emotion. It is, I suppose, a poem about writing poetry; specifically, poetry that wants to approach "truth." On another level, though, the poem is about life and its real or imagined tragedies, and relates to Emerson's "doctrine of compensation" — the optimism that allows for seeing the "good" beyond any apparent "evil." In this vein, the poem also alludes to Keats and my interpretation of the last lines of "Ode on a Grecian Urn": that the perception of beauty should have precedence over the search for truth. Keats, I am certain, said it better.

"Souvenir" is my souvenir of a visit to the Dominican Republic where nature is kind, but life is not — except for tourists. There is something of the real versus the ideal working thematically in this poem.

The persona, for example, climbs "the green hill" as a kind of escape into an idyllic landscape. It is not directly stated, but implied that it is to get away from the "put-on" hoopla of the natives and the children selling flowers, who, though appearing happy, have "hard" eyes. Throughout most of the poem, the persona exemplifies a human tendency to ignore what is disagreeable or to actually retreat from it. This concept surfaces most explicitly in the fourth stanza when the persona has a momentary desire to fully realize this retreat and merge with the landscape. Of course he is called back into the "real" world in the last stanza, specifically by the sight of the waiting ship, which will, he also realizes, leave without him if he desires to miss it. Yet, there is a "price" for this kind of "innocence" — here it is imagistically posed as a piece of amber, liquid that solidifies into stone around an insect. Total retreat, then, from what is disheartening or hard about life is posed as a kind of stasis which prevents growth. A kind of death.

Another aspect of the poem, one that may seem peculiar to a perceptive reader, is the use of "you" rather than "I" as a point of focus. The "you," in fact, really is an "I." It is the persona talking to himself. The strategy here was to emphasize the concept of "distance," that the poem's events are actually being replayed in the memory. This is part of the ideal versus real dialectic that the poem is concerned with. Hopefully this is cued explicitly enough by the line, "What you want to remember is like this:" suggesting that the persona wishes to distill experience, to screen out unpleasantness. He does not wholly succeed on this point. In addition to this, using "you" was a simplistic attempt to play upon the Bergsonian concept of durée — of the potency of memory to modify the present consciousness. Thus, the obscure idea was running through my head that though the persona is physically removed from the event he is relating, he exists in it as an object external to himself in the memory. The last line of the poem is a kind of offering of solace: "and what you left became what remained." The suggestion is that though the momentarily achieved idyll had to be forsaken, one may still experience it, exist in it, through memory.

"Runner Followed by Turkey Vultures in August" is the longest title I've ever tacked onto a poem and was necessary to cue the poem's "situation" before taking off on some meditations regarding the obsession of some people to always be getting somewhere, to reach for what is always a bit out of reach. This concept is often referred to euphemistically as "growth" or "progress." What becomes "dangerous" about the concept is that one can be seduced by the ideal to such a point that current experience becomes unsatisfactory; sometimes a person cannot be happy wherever he is standing in the present moment because his eyes are fixed on a point external to himself that he hopes to reach. The poem offers a kind of "solution" in emphasizing the need to see the self "alone" — without external barometers of growth or progress like money, position, or status (publication in literary magazines might be included here). The poem also relates to mortality, to death, which, in the context I've just mentioned, can be seen as the ultimate growth or progress — that place where all roads lead, which is not, perhaps, such a great place to try hard to get to.

The last poem in the collection is entitled "Life and Art" and it was a lot of fun to write since it came out of the pen in about twenty minutes one night when I was a bit more than legally drunk. I had no idea what it "meant" until the next morning when, after re-reading it, the title jumped into my head. This is a true story.

In retrospect, I see now that there is a great deal of Wallace Stevens' influence here: the exotic setting, the use of color, the emphasis on music and image. There is even a Stevens' theme here akin to "The Idea of Order at Key West" or "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" -- the playing of imagination upon reality which gives it "meaning"; specifically, for me, beauty.

By now it should be apparent that this writer has attempted, through poetry, to come to terms with his uncertainty regarding the substance or meaning of his existence. He has rejected the concept of being able to "know" this through the rational mind, and instead has attempted to

grasp it through intuition. This is, perhaps, the strategy of someone with a Romantic sensibility; a sensibility fostered by the dialectic of what is real and what is desired. The poems, in many ways, attempt to achieve a balance between these extremities — a balance that hopefully allows for survival and productivity in life. It may be noted that the poems are also pre-occupied with death to a great degree. Well, this is because it is the "grand fact" of existence — the undeniable, inevitable "it." This writer has attempted to overcome his morbidity in this regard by taking to heart the words of Richard Chase in writing of Whitman that "... imagination is a mode of our sense of death."

TENDENCY TOWARD NIGHT

by

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TENDENCY TOWARD NIGHT

In this collection of poetry and its analysis, the author attempts to come to terms with the fluidity and apparent chaos of his existence where the search for "truth" becomes an exercise in ludicrousness which is exacerbated by the "tendency toward night" — a metaphor for the contradictory elements of experience that threaten and confuse, and an allusion to the final certainty of death. The poems are presented in three sections, followed by a critical apparatus. In the first section, "The Long Evening," the poetry is concerned with the tension of uncertainty, the fear of "things going wrong." The second section of poetry, "Night," dwells upon "things that have gone wrong," and is overtly pessimistic about such subjects as romance, frustrated desire, and mortality. The last section of poetry, "Dreams for Morning," attempts to provide consolation, to turn pessimism toward optimism by stressing the need for self-knowledge and emphasizing the awareness of beauty over the search for "truth." In the critical apparatus, the author complains about the task of self-criticism, citing the "danger" of allowing logic precedence over emotion or intuition in composing poetry. He then goes on to note the influence of other poets on his work, and to explicate, one by one, the poems he has presented and how they relate to his vision.