

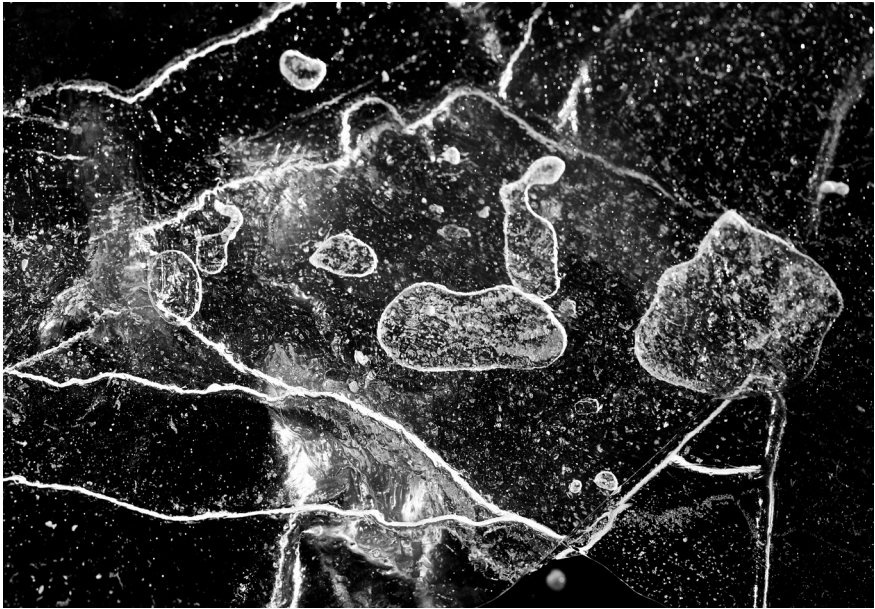
On Its Edge, Tilted

John Levy

Copyright © 2018 John Levy
ISBN: 978-1-387-72229-7

Interior & Cover Design: Sarah Gzemeski // sgzemeski.com
Cover photos: John Levy

Published by Otata's Bookshelf // <https://otatablog.wordpress.com/>



On Its Edge, Tilted

John Levy

for Leslie

Contents

Acknowledgements // 9
Note to a Late Goat // 13
Water Pistols // 14
Heavy Traffic in Las Vegas // 15
My Wife // 16
ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh // 17
Green // 19
Suicides // 20
To What End // 21
Hercules, by Pablo Picasso // 26
Of My Father, My Childhood, Dirt Floors, Israel, Bus Rides, DeLillo, My Mother // 27
An IOU // 30
Zoo // 31
The River //32
Letter to Paul Matthews from a Parking Lot in Tucson // 33
Two Israeli Poets // 36
2/4/18 // 37
Letter to Don Cole // 38
Communities // 41
[My] // 42
Bio Note #62 // 43
[the girl] // 45
Watteau, Helicopters, Time, Fellini // 46
[half asleep over its] // 49
This Poem // 50
Talking with a Spider // 52
On the side of // 54
Poets at Work // 55
For Example // 56
Dear Richard Hugo // 57
There Sky // 59
Shortage // 60
Placing // 61

Home, Tucson // 62
True Story // 63
The Socially Defeated Mouse // 64
When & Most // 65
Paris // 67
Shimmer // 70
Pocket // 71
Two Mothers // 72
The Emptiness Above // 73
Inside and Out // 74
1976-77 // 75
One Giacometti // 77
Misplaced X-Ray of My Head // 78
Postcard to My Wife // 79

Acknowledgements

The poets Ken Bolton, John Phillips, Boyer Rickel and Peter Yovu helped me focus and edit this selection of poems. I am grateful for their friendship, generosity and advice. The poets Alan Chong Lau, Paul Matthews and Philip Rowland have also provided encouragement and assistance. A heartfelt thanks to my daughter Allyson, my son Nathaniel, and my wife Leslie Buchanan, all three of whom inspire me and provide invaluable support. Finally, a giant thanks to the poet John Martone for publishing this book and for decades of friendship and encouragement.

The poems "Shortage," "Placing," and "Shimmer" are from a collaboration with John Phillips in which we reply to each other's poems. "Green" was inspired by an artwork entitled "Classic Illusion" by Carolie Parker. "Communities" was inspired by an artwork entitled "forest's edge: greenhouse" by Carole Kim.

Some of these poems (occasionally in earlier versions) have been published in the following magazines and I thank the editors: NOON: journal of the short poem, otata, Otoliths, Stride, The Haiga Galleries (The Haiku Foundation), and Wild Plum: A Haiku Journal. Also, one of the poems appeared in the Smallminded Book "Imagine a Whale."

Attention is the natural prayer of the soul.

—Malebranche

Note to a Late Goat

If there's an afterlife there's no reason
you wouldn't be there. I met you once
on a hillside near the Greek village where
I lived two years. I doubt any of us exist
in any fashion after death, yet I love
thinking of you among trillions

of goat spirits, happy, still an individual, the one
with whom I spoke that afternoon. I started
trying to speak Goat because I wanted to hear
what you'd say if I began. You replied
and I responded. You answered and
I answered you. Nothing sounded like a question.

Neither of us interrupted. The communication lasted
surrounded by olive trees and sky. Finally
I reluctantly turned to leave and you
called

as I stepped further and
further
silently

away from your voice 32 years ago.
I don't imagine that if we survive death
we'll meet, though if we did
I love believing we'd speak a common language,
if speech is necessary for understanding
once we leave time.

Water Pistols

On the walk (promenade?) in La
Jolla two small boys carry green
and orange plastic guns, toting

them comfortably and pointing them
at each other as all the passersby
dodge them. The boys' parents don't

speak to the boys for the five
minutes it takes to reach the
cove, where they descend

to swim. The smaller
of the two is more eager to shoot
a brother. It is a

pleasure to point
even an empty threat
and watch the brother who

plays along and finally—
down on the sand—clutches
his chest as he falls backwards. These

boys with bright
weapons
seem accustomed to parental

silences, the father
in a muscle shirt and the
mother walking ahead of them all.

Heavy Traffic in Las Vegas

My Serbian taxi driver spelled
the Serbian poet's name three
times—I still

didn't get it and didn't admit to him that
I didn't. We were exchanging names of

modern Serbian poets in the rain at night on the drive to

the airport. I followed his spelled-out
poet with Vasko Popa and Aleksandar Ristović. He

knew Popa, not Ristović. "Ivo Andrić
won the Nobel Prize," he exclaimed
three times. The Nobel Prize! Ivo Andrić won

the Nobel Prize for my taxi driver on this wet night

in the traffic, red rectangular and circular
brake lights blurring all around us.

My Wife

My wife is painting
the ocean. It,

the ocean, looks
real

sort of, on the
watercolor

paper
because

she (my
wife, not

the ocean)
is excellent.

I
can't

judge

the ocean.

ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh

After reading this morning's *New York Times*
obit—of Irina Ratushinskya (1954–2017) I
put my coffee down and take out

scissors. I hadn't heard
of her before, but should've. In
a gulag she wrote poems with burnt

matches, on pieces of soap, memorized
the poems, would then wash
her hands and send the poems

down the drain. She'd copy
the poems later and smuggle them out
on cigarette paper

to her husband. Her last name
is pronounced ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh
and the obit quotes a single

poem
about the beauty of
frost on a prison window.

I tape the obit to the inside of my study
door, then retrieve my coffee. Floating
atop the coffee is a dead black

bug, small as a period in 12
point font. No obit
for it, unless this counts. I intended

to write about this
late bug and yet began this poem with a title
taken from the obit, a guide

to how to pronounce the late poet
and dissident's
name. The coffee did go down the drain, although

just a bit of it—a spoonful
the bug starred in, sharing
the two leading roles in this poem (its

costar Irina ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh, whose
poems I plan to
Google later today, a Saturday

in July). “You know nothing, Jon Snow,” I
unexpectedly recall my wife quoting
from “Game of Thrones,” then asking

the name of the slain character who kept
telling Snow how little he knew. Neither of
us could remember right then.

Ygritte. Irina's middle name
was Borisovna
and for a moment, reading her obit, I thought

that name was perhaps her mother's
maiden name, but it turns out
her father's name was Boris and so

perhaps if she'd been a boy
her first name would've been Boris.
I wonder (morbidly) if the bug's

last moment, last vision, was of
what may have seemed a sky, but was
a kitchen ceiling.

Green

Where does green belong?
Eden? At the end

of stalks and twigs? In the strands
of dyed hair girls

and boys, men and women
flaunt, brandish, dare

someone to love? The elusive
green moment

as the sun drops under the ocean.

Suicides

For each suicide there must be the one
final look
into a mirror, perhaps an hour

before. Maybe more
or
less.

How long do some
gaze
at the face they're about to

desert?

Yes, I know this is not a pleasant
thought. A number
of thoughts don't show up by having won

any award for being pleasant.
The Pleasant Award. I suppose
they did win, somehow, though, in some

electrical and/or neural way I'll never
understand—because they beat the
competition; whatever audition occurs

I'm frequently unaware of it and that's
a blessing. Whoever said "Count your blessings"
the first time perhaps was obsessive-compulsive

and the counting itself could've been
number one in the list. Any relief
is welcome.

To What End

one yellow butterfly (or moth?) out
the window
in the desert
under the mesquite tree and
heading
over to the ocotillo
now another
just as bright

and finally two at the same time
this August

quail startled
lift off the dirt
I sit in a community
college library
wait for my daughter to
take her psychology
and philosophy classes a
roadrunner
now
stalking, head low running fast
out of view

to end what
creature's
life? philosophy
and psychology
but I'm reading poetry

—as usual—

and somebody loud says
behind me

“My head’s been elsewhere
for a couple of years”

they almost shout here
in the library

there goes the roadrunner with a
little something
hanging from its
beak, the last inch of
a tail the roadrunner
too fast for me to
figure out

what life was over in its mouth

a quail crosses the
dirt road
no one asks why

maybe in philosophy class the
prof
could begin with that, “Why
did someone ask why the chicken
crosses the road
rather than a quail or a woman, say? And
don’t all raise your hands at once”

I was reading
Ken Bolton’s poem,

“Footprints,” then
I began writing this
because the yellow butterfly (or more likely moth)
distracted me

I am trying to not
listen
to the voices
behind me I want
to get back to the poem

on the page

Bolton
has just listed
adjectives
for days, including
terrific, inelegant, eloquent,
impenetrable, literal, saddest

Ken's
combo of psychology and
philosophy

that voice again
answering someone else's
question:

“How are you doing today?”

“First day of classes, I'm
running around
like a chicken with his head cut off”—

hey, I could tell him that
just a few minutes ago I
was thinking about a chicken

though the chicken in my mind
had a head attached to a moving body
before and after crossing the road

now I really do
return to the Bolton poem,
“Footprints,” a long
piece named
after the Wayne
Shorter tune
Ken was listening to
early on

“I feel like a temple must feel”
Ken states

and a little later

“ideas for poems float by”

I shouldn't go
in and out of Ken's poem this way—
a black moth (butterfly?) just
flew west
five feet off the ground—but I do

and a yellow one now
four feet above the earth also
bumpily travels west

no wind
moves anything
on the tree until I
write that and a branch
trembles
to prove me wrong

now Ken writes

“I feel like a temple without a saint”

now, finally, what's definitely
a butterfly (elaborately patterned) flies
up and into
the window
before leaving for the famous
Parts Unknown

Ken's poem

“where there is a sense of
forever”

Hercules, by Pablo Picasso

In this 1890 drawing, Hercules
holds, in his left
hand, a club no larger than
a small cucumber. Picasso

was nine years old
when he drew this, based
on a sculpture, encouraged
by his father

to make “real” drawings. This
is the earliest
to survive. The arm
holding the club is

rendered twice (one in front
and partly inside the other). Neither
the child nor the father
felt it necessary

to erase

or maybe one did and one didn't
or there was silence and no
discussion, only the sound of
pencil on paper, two bodies

breathing.

*Of My Father, My Childhood, Dirt Floors, Israel, Bus Rides, DeLillo,
My Mother*

My father didn't like using paper napkins and
even when the rest of us in the kitchen
used ours, he used his cloth

napkins. Sometimes they'd
be rolled up, waiting, in a wooden
napkin ring. I could've said

my late father, but he seems
so here at the moment
that calling him late feels misleading.

I don't remember him ever taking us
to a restaurant or café with a dirt floor—
not in the U.S. He owned a restaurant

once, in Nogales, Arizona, *Harry's Hunger Hut*
(his name was Harrison) and when
I was a bus boy in it one summer, age

13 and 14, a man whose table I'd served
tossed me a silver dollar as a tip and
I caught it forever. We probably did eat

in at least a place or two in Mexico (the
Yucatán and Cozumel) on our one
big trip into Mexico—places

with dirt floors. When I was
in Israel, working for two weeks
on a kibbutz, age 19, one day

I was in the chicken coops shoveling
chickenshit around and the supervisor
came to check. I forget exactly

what I said, but I referred to
what I was shoveling as
dirt. He immediately became angry

and told me it is Earth, not dirt.
I never asked and still don't know
if part of the problem was that in Hebrew

there is something derogatory about
what translates into dirt compared
to Earth. I was surprised and disappointed, alone

in a place that stunk where
I'd been working hard and thought
he might be at least half-impressed.

Now on a Tucson bus the two women
in front of me whisper a word I
realize is cunnilingus just before

they both laugh. One is blonde and the other
brunette and in my 60s now my mind can go from
their hair to the apartment buildings

slowly blurring by with a few trees
and I don't feel anything but happy
to hear their laughter. Then I recall

a passage by Don DeLillo in
"Cosmopolis" when a man is in Times
Square and looking at a stock ticker watching

prices plunge as it begins
to rain
and this is the sentence I recall:

“Yes, the effect on him was sexual, cunnilingual in particular, and he let his head fall back and opened his mouth to the sky and rain.”

Even if I had the book with me
on the bus, opened to page 106
where those words (without line breaks) exist

I would never
even consider
saying something to these two women,

such as, “Hey, since you happen
to be on the subject of cunnilingus, perhaps
you may enjoy a sentence by Don DeLillo that

sort of expands, so to speak, the noun.” Getting
back to my father, he loved James Joyce and
especially “Ulysses” and so

if he were alive and I were going to call him—long
distance (he’d probably be in Phoenix, at home,
but let’s make this 15 years ago so he would be thinking

very clearly, the way he did almost
his whole life)—he might have enjoyed an anecdote
about the two women and then DeLillo’s

sentence, though if my late mother were on the phone
she’d probably be offended despite the fact
that she wasn’t prudish. I think she’d

be the one to ask me if I were making up
the overheard conversation on the bus, perhaps
as a segue to the DeLillo sentence.

And then I’d feel I had to answer her.

An IOU

*“I owe you the truth in painting
and I shall tell it to you.”*

—Cézanne

He gives us mountains of truth, the truth of color, the truth in jugs, in apples, the truth of a blue napkin, the truth snatched, the truth as this IOU, the truth of sunlight and the truth of white, the truth of a delicate practically impossible balance, different from the last almost impossible balance achieved. Parts and shards and bits of attention all over, intention and giving up at the same time.

Zoo

In Polish it is also *zoo*. I was a little surprised. I was reading a Grzegorz Wróblewski poem with the Polish across from the English. The last word in a poem entitled “Penguin” (“Pingwin”) is

zoo

on both pages. So to double-

check I Googled an English to Polish site and yes, *zoo* and *zoo* matched there too. Though then I noticed two other possibilities for *zoo* in Polish:

ogród zoologiczny

zwierzyniec

and it’s as if I were at our zoo here in Tucson in the aviary enclosure and three birds land on my outstretched legs (I’d sit down on the path because I’d be alone so no one would realize I’m odd nor would I scare any children) and one is a sparrow

on my right knee and the other two appear fabulously more foreign and are big and complicated and weigh

down my left leg and surely possess exotic names I could find, but

would forget within a minute. No penguin though. Our zoo doesn’t have penguins. I’ll have to revisit his poem, which ends (spoiler alert) with Wróblewski—no no, I shouldn’t give away anything about his poem except the final word. I can’t avoid that.

The River

you get wet twice
when you step into the same river

the first time your bathing suit
dries because it's a hot day

it is still hot
when you enter again

"Heraclitus," says your daughter,
in the beach chair she bought

with some money she earned,
"was born in 544 B.C."

she bought the book too

you put your same head
under the water, eyes open

again, happy to be a father
and seeing blurred stones in the light

Letter to Paul Matthews from a Parking Lot in Tucson

Dear Paul,

I'm sitting in the back seat of my parked car, waiting for Allyson in the gym. I now own Richard Hugo's "31 Letters and 13 Dreams," though I already emailed you that news

yesterday. What I didn't tell you is that after about 40 years of occasionally holding the book and never buying it, I finally saw what's

on its black-and-white cover. I don't know how I managed to never recognize it earlier. Somehow I imagined it a boring abstract pattern. But it's a photo of an envelope out of which rises a stalk

with two flowers (daisies?); the envelope is on its edge, tilted, as if upon a surface with light from below projected through it and through the grey petals. It reminds me of an X-ray, which I doubt

was the photographer's hope. Leslie said it looks like a dream, which fits the book's title—I wouldn't have thought that, but as usual she nails it. You've told me for years

you love Hugo's poem for your cousin, Bill Matthews, and over those years I've read that poem several times; it *is* fantastic. The river sound behind me is traffic

and an American flag hangs in front of a plate glass window, almost still, and reflected so it's a bit like wings in front of the barber shop over there. The other day

when I parked here (Allyson again—
the gym) a man got out of a car
in front of that shop and blew a dense
cloud of cigar smoke up

above the shiny black roof of his car
before he slowly walked
into the shop, smoking. My mother's father,
Lou, a dentist, smoked cigars. As did

my mother's brother, a psychiatrist, Jimmy.
I think of Freud and then back
to Hugo's poem to Bill Matthews, which
ends by speaking of the faith he shares

with Bill, "...faith
we process what grows to the end, the poem."
It's quiet inside the car, the flow of
other cars a noise uninterrupted by honks.

I look again at the title of Hugo's poem:
"Letter to Matthews from Barton Street Flats."
It's a political poem, anger at what happened
to the Japanese during World War II, how

the government forced Japanese "...like
so many pigs to single thickness walled shacks in Wyoming
where winter rips like the insane self-righteous tongue
of the times. In Germany, Jews. In America, Japs."

Delicate flowers on the book cover.

You and I email each other about Trump, all
the anguish many of us experience daily and now
it is exactly one year and a day since
he was elected. Inside my parked car

I thank you for reminding me to read Hugo's poem
again. Allyson will be coming out soon. We will
go home, a short drive, a
November day, nearing noon. I look once more

at the book cover, wondering how it's possible
I never saw the envelope and flowers. Now Allyson
opens the front passenger door, says
"Hello"

and isn't surprised I'm back here
writing. I've told her I'll finish
in a second.
Goodbye.

Two Israeli Poets

Yehuda Amichai carried in his duffel bag
Leah Goldberg's book of poems,
"From My Old Home," when he fought in 1948

in the Negev desert. Pages
got torn; he protected them
with Band-Aid strips

and knew by heart what words
were beneath opaque tape. He wrote
her a letter, when he was

24 and a commando in the Israeli Army
and she was 37. In it he said
that frequently, in between battles

or "in the gloomy wasteland of the
Negev" he'd read her and that afterwards
"all was good." He wrote, much later,

after her death, she had
the only eyes that could
compete

with his
father's
for being sad.

2/4/18

The sun is shining
and the desert in early February
shines back.

I recall clients of mine who
told me their boyfriends or husbands
threatened to slice them up into pieces that

would fit into a suitcase they'd bury
in the desert. These clients
would be in a jail visitation room with me

while the men who made the threats
would be in their homes, free. Perhaps
one or more of my clients

exaggerated or lied—maybe on purpose—but
if there are such suitcases
underground

they may never be found. All I did,
and could do, was represent the clients
in front of the judge—and go home.

Letter to Don Cole

Dear Don,

I am about to read
various translations of Homer's
"Odyssey" and I wish
you'd painted—or would—your
visions

of some of the best
scenes. I can almost see
the Cyclops you'd paint,
his one eye (blue? green?)

still in his massive
face and Cyclops blinded, his horrible
socket above a grimace or
howl. Then your

Sirens. I imagine
standing before them in your
studio, entranced, suddenly
alone with them—as I imagine it
you are not in the room—

or your Circe perhaps
surrounded by pigs. Or maybe you'd
do a portrait of her and Odysseus,
the moment when she comes at him
swinging a sword. I know I'd

hold my breath
looking at what you'd create—
as with the paintings and
collages you've already

brought to life. This
Thursday morning you're
most likely on Vashon Island.
I'm in Tucson, as usual, and
Trump is in China basking

in Chinese flattery like
the wise leader Trump
will never be. In my
study it's quiet, Leslie
is off at Safeway buying
supplies for us while I'm
supplying these words

to both you and me at the same time.
I'd like to think
that as I write
you're painting something
I couldn't guess, something even
you wouldn't have known until

you make it
exist. Easy for me to
think myself into your studio—
I've been there so often, in both
your half and Joan's.
Joan—who was and is there with you—Joan

who creates
marvel after marvel with her
art. Perhaps the two of you at
this moment are in the two halves
of your studio working
or you could be at the gym or
in Seattle, but the good thing

is knowing you're "out there," as
they say, out there
and in my head, vivid, active,
moving. Ezra Pound begins
"The Cantos" with his "Odyssey"
translation:

"And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas. . ."

I can imagine us, in your kitchen, reading
this aloud, perhaps pausing
at *canvas* while thinking (maybe
aloud?) of your own work
on canvas, not beneath
the "bellying" sails. The pieces of yours
that hang in our house

take me out, onward—and
back to you, too. The painting in our living
room of the mountains, half-
abstract and all
crammed with presence and life—the collage
in my study, wild and perfect. And

more, other pieces
in our home, alive and vital. And right
now I have to go out
into the world—an appointment
to keep—and so will
head out to the car, set tires
to earthen driveway and go forth
into the godly world we share.
I wave goodbye and wish you well.

Communities

for Carole Kim

the trees aren't trying
to do something else

they don't overthink
line breaks

any tree is sum
and sumptuous

every tree is part geologist

the trees are a standing ovation

they are and are

we bring our
words to them

My
thoughts, she replied, are
like looking at a moving
whale with a magnifying
glass.

Bio Note #62

Yesterday

I found this line in a “Paris Review” interview with Thom Gunn:

“I write poetry when I can and when I can’t. . .”

Me too. A bio note is expected
to be a bit of a self-portrait, though some use it
to make jokes or steer

away from who they are
into the think-about-something-else-please

mode.

In a “Twilight Zone” last night
a pair of State Troopers
enter an isolated diner in winter where
seven bus passengers

sit at tables; the question for the Troopers is
which one is the Martian whose tracks
they followed through snow into
the diner. (The bus driver tells them

six passengers had boarded his bus
earlier.) My daughter guessed
correctly

while I focused silently
on the black-and-white sign on the wall
for **Pie à la Mode** and the 35¢ beneath it. It seemed
expensive for the early 1960s. On May 26, 1961, when
“Will the Real Martian Please Stand Up?”
first aired, I was nine and didn’t see it.
I waited until reaching

66 to find myself in this diner, wondering
about the price of the pie and ice cream, unable
to name (for myself, my daughter
didn't ask) any of the actors I recognized. Resorted
to Google. Barney Phillips is great
as Mr. Haley, who seems
to own the diner and stays

behind the counter the whole time. It *is*
a *whole* time: intact, complete, concentrated.
Perfect
in black-and-white.

the girl
casts
a girl
of shadow

longer
now
and
again

leaves
make
their
noise

a rush
in
the air
is how

they
sound
while
she walks

Watteau, Helicopters, Time, Fellini

I discover I can order
a hand-painted copy
of Watteau's

“L'amour au théâtre italien”

for \$342.99
on September 24th, 2017

almost by accident
by Googling
Watteau.

I don't, but admire the painting
as I continue
to consider what Ken Bolton writes
about another Watteau:

“Watteau's happy people make us cry.
They do not see what surrounds them—

Time, & a lot of
big trees, fugitive sky.”

There's more to his poem.
There's more to

almost everything
before our Time

endeth. I make
a joke out of that,

though
that “deth” that is two-thirds
of *endeth*
is awfully

close to *death*, just
needs
an a
dropped in. . .by a helicopter. Let’s
use the chopper

from Fellini’s “La Dolce Vita”
with the same sound

track
and clouds, but instead of Jesus

hanging from a chain

and the sexy women in small
bathing suits standing and waving

the same beauties
will wave and be excited by the lower
case
a. Then

shall we leave
before the a
lands

between the
e and t? PRESTO,
we’re back to Watteau:

Love
in the Italian Theatre. A torch

held by a man
under the moon, and again
this isn't

the painting
Bolton
writes about in his
poem, that painting is

“Pilgrimage to Cythera.”

half asleep over its
geometry homework
winter daydreams

This Poem

This is going to be one of those poems
that goes on and on and calls. . .
calls itself a poem, looking in

one of those sets of mirrors
joined by hinges so that this poem can
see itself in profile

or from the ass backwards perspective,
a poem written on a Sunday afternoon, the sun

up and my wife walking
the dogs around the yard,
the poem is about to say it is going

along like the trains I saw as a child
in my mind out in nowhere with flat land
all around and the train goes through and

I'm seeing it as a child from a distance.
The flat
nowhere with the dried-up stream

of consciousness and the brief
bridge over the dried-up stream the poem
goes over, so fast you miss it if you glance at your wrist-

watch
or at the floor or at the sky or your palm, sore
finger or old shoe. This poem is going
to say almost nothing and the almost

is itself close to nothing in many ways,
ways no one will bother to count because
the poem keeps going and there's

no time to count much beyond one
line after another and it would be
pointless to begin counting anything as the poem,

say, preens a moment in the mirror, passing
a stanza over its body in what could be mistaken
for a caress, but it turns out is just a scratch—

the itch about the size of the dot above the lower
case i. This poem circles that dot
and rejoices in the space around it.

This poem, in fact, is primarily about that space
and how the space
looks in the mirror around it, the legendary

negative space. This poem is going to say
almost nothing about what's positive about
the negative space, or almost

positive, or fractionally, though now it finds
a sliver of positivity and then another, using them
like rails in a train track. Stand back.

Talking with a Spider

Pablo Neruda wanted to. At least that's what he wrote in a poem, that he wanted to have a talk with a spider. As for me? I'd prefer to do an interview rather than have an informal back-and-forth. Perhaps it would be something like this:

Q: Where did you learn everything you know?

A: From my mother. My father died before I was born.

Q: How do you come up with your ideas for webs? Do you wait for inspiration? Or do you simply begin and see what happens? Or maybe you make a plan before you begin?

A: You can't wait for inspiration, it comes while you are working. Henri Matisse said the same thing.

Q: Have you ever spun a web and had the feeling that you would never be able to match that web? That all your future webs would be inferior?

A: No. I have to believe that whatever I'm spinning now is the best. Otherwise I'd be depressed because it would seem I'm going downhill.

Q: Are individual lines or strands more important to you than the entire web?

A: No. It all must work together, all the individual lines, the intersections, angles, spaces, shapes, the density of my silken strands, all the elements must be right by themselves and also must create something complete that never existed before I traveled out into the air to create it.

Q: Would you ever work with another spider on a web? In other words, how do you feel about collaboration?

A: I couldn't work with another spider. The creative act involves a delicate inner balancing. There are a hundred little decisions and balancing acts involved in every inch of web. Plus, I feel different from day to day and my webs don't satisfy me unless they are in harmony with my body. For example, if even one of my legs is stiff then I create a totally different web than, say, if one of my eyes is swollen shut.

Q: If you were a human what occupation would appeal to you?

A: I think of myself as a gravedigger in the air.

Q: Are there any of your webs that you regret creating?

A: No. Listen, what I do regret is talking to you rather than working on my latest web. You may ask one more question.

Q: How do you react to the criticism that you are a control freak?

A: Freak? Yeah, I love control. But freak?

On the side of

the metal drawer (beige) of
my filing cabinet a
sticker (paper) that says

WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THE
QUALITY OF THIS PRODUCT
INSPECTED BY 767

1192-92

and yes, I even enjoy
the line breaks on the sticker, not
to mention the spacing that
seems

not totally utilitarian

and I wonder
if 767 is
a man or a woman and
still alive

and if
he or she was the one
who glued this
little label in such an unobtrusive

place
so far from
a child's
dreams of

posterity

Poets at Work

for Peter Yovu

Your typical Wednesday morning, 9:30,
parking lot in front of the grocery store
packed, no one inside the open
store. Each driver, alone in a car, pretending

they're alone in the universe, each
talking aloud while writing a poem
about potatoes. There's time, after finishing
a few, to shop—but now's

when each mind in each vehicle
strives
to place the potato
squarely, solidly, fragrantly,

unforgettably, perhaps even
angelically, into syllables
and rhythm
shaped by breath.

For Example

“For *you*, anything, babe,” whispers
a man to a gorgeous woman sitting
on the bus bench reading “The National Enquirer”
and wearing white ear buds, which could be why

he feels the courage to talk
to this stranger. She rocks back-and-forth
to her music. He stands
to her right, bow-legged,

with dusty black cowboy boots
and what a gorgeous woman might call
“a desperate comb-over.” I pretend
I can’t hear him. He doesn’t care

about me anyway, I can tell
by how he looked at the book
I was carrying as if its title were
“Only Losers Read Me.” The bus

is nowhere we can see, although only he and I
look west, down the empty street. His
cowboy boots begin to sink
through the sidewalk and then

he follows them, as if he were being
swallowed by quicksand. I won’t throw him
a rope and she doesn’t even know
he used to be there. He misses every future bus.

Dear Richard Hugo,

You've been dead a while. Does
it matter how long? I met you
at the Boulder Writer's Conference
when I was a dumb kid, about 19.
Intimidated. I recall you,

massive, sitting on a curb
surrounded by other students.
You seemed like a tough guy while
Denise Levertov, also teaching
that week, was almost

motherly. Finally, a little more than 45 years
after I saw you around but never—if
I remember correctly—said
more than a few words to you
I can read your book of letter poems to friends

and realize how superb they are.
I'm sorry I have no true sense of
who you were and
what it was like simply listening to you, taking in
the Hugoness that went along with the

physical hugeness you
set down on that curb, unceremonious,
generously giving your time to anyone who cared.
Now your poems do that. I doubt—even if I'd been
able to appreciate your letter poems

back then—I'd have
dared write you a poem
modeled after your own. Or, if I
did have the courage, that I would've
sent it to you. Now I don't

have to worry, of course, about any
reply, can just write you with
your book near me. Your letter to Levertov
reveals your insecurity at being invited
to teach that same session with her, and

Herbert Gold and Issac Bashevis Singer. Yes,
an allstar group and surely you
were the only one to write anything
about feeling out-of-place. In the letter
to Denise you happily report you've heard

from many of the students from that summer.
I'm sitting in a parking lot writing this, waiting
for my daughter who is in the gym.
For the first time I noticed a tree, out the car
window, and it's halved, the trunk forks

(it's a cottonwood) and one half rises
three feet and then is sawed off, smoothly.
A homeless-looking man just ambled by, a
sort of odd bounce and
spring to his step, although walking slowly. It's

his clothes that make me think
he's got no home—the sort of
person you'd put in one of your letter poems
about “the cruelty of poverty, the embittering ways
love is denied. . .” You're gone—and the homeless man

crossed the long parking lot
and is somewhere else now, out of sight.
Cars are moving, trees are not
because there's no wind at all.
I'm sorry I missed the chance to know you.

There Sky

the bare trees
point out
how far they don't go

Shortage

Before death we lose one thing
and a person or two at a time, sometimes
just one thing without a person
or two, but the loss

tends

to be gradual, tends
to us
as if loss were a gardener
pruning

often poorly, sawing down

live branches
or snipping the better flower.
Before death we lose

the way a soapy dish slips
out of a hand, the way
a friendship we might have valued
we didn't bother to even attempt. Before

death

we lose most of yesterdays
and more of yesteryears
and friends die. Before death
memory keeps

track

of countless and sometimes un-
expected paths
of a loss down that way and
another over there.

Placing

I look at myself in the mirror
through the wrong end of the binoculars.

I'd like to get further away, as in a movie
when you see someone fairly close

then retreat until you're looking at
miles of earth and further out the earth

as the round marble in space.
Down there in many beds

people are holding each other and
saying *Yes Yes* or *My God* or

Touch me here as they take a hand
and guide it, I want to think, gently, with

love and tenderness and hope and joy, that's
the earth I want to return to from space.

Home, Tucson

All up and down the dirt road on which I live are houses with windows and doors and coffee cups and paws (who doesn't have a pet on our dirt road?). Shall I list the pet names? I know Buddy, Sydney and Martin live next door, dogs. And Maia and Clea live here, dogs. I forget people's names just as fast—or faster? No, slower.

Every house on the dirt road has prickly pear cactus in the yard, plus mesquite trees, palo verde, barrel cactus, pincushion cactus, and much more. Cactus wrens. Cactus wins. Wind through cactus stands. Deer who nibble at prickly pear cactus fruit. Coyotes. Rabbits. Lizards. Snakes. Spiders. Scorpions. Welcome home. Hummingbirds.

Rarely any snow. About a week ago, in early March, a brief small thick downpour of hail. Let's talk about the weather, the earth says with flowers.

True Story

I was glancing at the man in line
behind me in this bank when he
pulled out a flask and took a drink.
He offered it to me and no one
watched as I downed *whatever it was*
it tasted like grimace with toffee at first

then orange notes followed by
caramel and barley. It warmed, no,
burned, no, increased my mass, but
then the ceiling sparkled and a mother two people
behind me told her little girl that everyone

has been wrong, very very wrong, and the earth
is flat. The man pried the flask from my grip
as the teller waved him over even though, as I
carefully noted earlier, he was *behind* me.
At first I thought it was me the teller wanted to

snub—"snub" is too short a word for how I felt myself
wobble, massively, at the insult of having the smiling
teller use all five fingers of a hand to neglect my
Being. The after-

taste, a touch of dried flower petals, black pepper, tobacco
leaf and chocolate was no consolation when I viewed the man
pass the flask to the teller, which she took with the very same
fingered hand she'd waved in the atmosphere. The view

was nearly identical to looking through pillars at the Acropolis
if the Acropolis were a bank and we were all tourists
so none of us spoke Greek. The girl, inches behind me now,
guffawed after her mother whispered loudly, "Some men are

invisible, darling, and to think
that they can help it
is very very wrong."

The Socially Defeated Mouse

It avoids the dominant
mice. It is prone to weight

gain. It is slower
than the normal (control)

mice
to

build
a nest. The socially

defeated mouse's
dreams

are, as of this
date, undiscovered, just

as the other mouse
dreams

are closed to our prying.
I hope that in their dreams the socially

defeated mice enjoy balance,
serenity, sexual bliss, delight

in architecturally pleasing nests, and
profound love for their pups. May their

defeats
not follow them into sleep.

When & Most

“But for him it was not an important failure. . .”

—W. H. Auden,

from “Musée des Beaux Arts”

When I die, most
of my important failures, the
knowledge and memory

of them, will
die with me. Reading Auden’s
“Musée des Beaux Arts” I think

my lesser failures
include all the great poems
I haven’t read. The more important,

how I’ve let down
people I love—people I
have loved, or should

have loved. A word like “success”
seems out of place (though
as a criminal defense lawyer

I did consider good results
successes). When Ken
Bolton wrote me, the other day (after I’d mentioned

that my late mother was happy
at my poems being anthologized)
he commented, “That’s great that your mother

followed your success so closely.”
I was surprised at the word, success—then
realized that he had put

himself in my mother's
place, seen the inclusion
in an anthology as

success. Reasonable
enough. I miss her again
and wish I could read her Auden's

poem and hear
her thoughts. She'd have
wanted to buy whatever Auden book

I read it from, she often
bought copies of books I loved. And
she would've bought Ken's

books too, after I read
a poem of his (*any*
poem of his)

over the phone to her.

Paris

(1)

the sign says SEX

in a color photo of a shop
called COUR DRAGON
in a book of photographs Tom
gave me in August 1976 entitled

“THE ROOFTOPS OF PARIS”

that I open once
in a while
like just now
randomly

the caption to the photo:

“Pizza, dragons and sex: a Parisian bouillabaisse”

COUR DRAGON

the words painted somewhat un-
professionally on a metal
facade
above the smaller, yet eye-
catching

SEX

in big black letters followed
for some reason
by a hyphen

as if another word
would arrive
or had been torn down

(2)

this is Montparnasse (words on the
opposite page
reveal)

and on that page is a photo of a building
being demolished
next to the somewhat grubby

The Hotel Départ

the caption under this:
“The Hotel Départ bids farewell to an old friend.”

personification, that’s
my old friend

one man
stands
inside the now roofless dilapidated
mess (what the caption’s author deemed
the hotel’s “old friend”) his hands
up against a wall

doing what?

as if he could push the wall over

dust rises
around him

I look back at the other page at
SEX and
the hyphen

and close the book

Shimmer

Shimmer doesn't sound
like what it means

to me. Though
it gets closer

when I think
harder, the hard

shimmer

softening and
almost

tremulous. *Tremulous*

oh

to be in your lover's
arms,

tremulous

shimmering

to *be* there—and
not bothering to shape
breath into words
when so much else

is

so much

and not *almost* and
not *almost* and not *almost*

Pocket

There was a time.
The trees lasted up.
Clouds acted

as my books
as well as my books with
pages. I had

two pockets in my
pants
and when there

was a white
piece of string in one
I carried it with my mind.

Two Mothers

“The Small Square” is a poem by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. The poem is narrated by a daughter whose mother is dying. As for *my* late mother, her death arrived quicker than Andresen’s (assuming Andresen’s

poem is autobiographical). My mother, my father and I were in New York City for a funeral and it was freezing in the cemetery. Then I flew back to Tucson while my parents were supposed to enjoy New York City for a few days before returning to Phoenix. But my mother

had a heart attack. Andresen had time to prepare and adjust for her mother’s death, at least that’s what her poem says. My mother died almost nine years ago. I had to count on my fingers; thinking of her death turns me into a child. Her child.

The Emptiness Above

I cut out a street lamp
from a magazine—a bookmark
for a book of poems. The lamp
photographed at dusk
is not lit. My scissors
with bright orange plastic handles

lie atop highlighters and a pencil
in a drawer. A glass globe
does not glow
in this photo. A buzzard, sometimes
two, hunts near a café on November
5th in a Tom Pickard prose passage while here

it's March 3rd. An airplane
roars over our home. Now
another plane. The sound
at a different pitch
in the Pickard passage: there, the wind
“whistling through gaps in the window frame.”

If the wind could speak, how would it complete
this sentence: *I would if I could _____*
_____. Although we speak
of windbags, the wind
might be terse, at least when stating
a wish. Fill-in-the-blanks

look more inviting
when not in a test, the underlined emptiness
above the lines reminds me of trampolines.
A streetlight, given legs, would love
bouncing on a trampoline—and if
granted speech too, would it
ask for a pair of wings then fly
with small legs tucked beneath?

Inside and Out

a few doors down
inside the flower

1976-77

when I wandered
around Paris, which I did
every day, every day
wandering (I was 25
then 26)

I had part-
time work

babysitting for a Canadian single
mother, her five-
year-old-son and

another part-time job
as a secretary/typist for a retired
diplomat, and when not

working sometimes I'd sit
on a bench near the Seine
where almost no one
came by
and read or
look at the water

write yet another version
of a poem about the river
juggling diamonds
or
of the poem I wrote dozens
of versions of about the woman I loved
who was elsewhere, the tree

behind that bench
reminding me of her
because its
trunk
curved as it rose

and seemed so beautiful I could never
get it right

One Giacometti

statue of a man

his head a wedge

his torso a wedge

one arm raised

one stretched and pointed down

with one finger pointing out

is called, not surprisingly,

“Man Pointing”

dated 1947

and the man’s head turns

in the direction he points

and anyone who sees him

pointing

can decide

whether or not to imagine

what is being pointed out

out there where nothing gives us

a clue

Misplaced X-Ray of My Head

It was big, that
piece of film, in a slightly bigger
envelope. I thought I'd keep it
because I like skulls
and did way back before they
decorated everything from t-shirts to
almost anything else for sale. Maybe

it will turn up someday, in one of the boxes of
almost everything I've ever owned. It's a wobbly
negative
heavier than a giant
birthday card. If I don't find it before I die
my wife or children will, maybe

laughing (lovingly I hope) at all
the shit I kept—and now THIS?—
after they open the
huge envelope and find what is no
greeting card
I'd choose to send them.

Postcard to My Wife

12/25/17

Dear Leslie,

As you know, sometimes I blather. What is *her* doing in *blather*, near the nonsense of *blat*, like a husband and wife, like us. You're the dear one, next to a blat, the dear one who gives birth. You gave birth to our two children, an act of giving, to them and to us. You made me a father and brought them onto this planet and you love them before you think of yourself. I send you this postcard with one word on the other side, LOVE, hand-painted, seeming to rise above all else, all upper case because you keep it up so skillfully, so carefully, with such kindness.

Love,
John

