

Appendix

PLAGUE JOURNAL 2020

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RETURN TO THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN
I am dying and the world is dying.
I wanted Leslie Friedman for the part
but she wasn't available. So Corasue and I
have created a virtual cave of phagocytic shadows.
You reach a point where life just goes on
while you can't. Yet the corner must be
turned, going upstairs or downstairs
or staying on the same level.
Memorial Day was pivotal,
dance of the dead on the beaches,
a mask-less masquerade ball.
Today indoors it is so hot
I can note the viral index
wearing only my underpants. Walker
aside, I may still be able to get up though
by pushing down on the computer table,
but leave that till later. Corasue
hasn't made her appearance,
and I am beginning to think
this could be going somewhere,
if only outdoors to feed the starlings.
Looking up, I see a jet trail,
which means that someone must be above it all
without feeling the burning inside,
or is that a cinder at the end of it
or perhaps the NIPSCO burn-off?
Today may be the day
when I won't be able to bend over far enough
to put my socks on,
so maybe I'll clang around in here
barefoot among the stalagmites
when I present myself to the waking day
feeling every bit of detritus
leftover from last night's unconscious ramblings
where if I can't walk by myself
I can still fly up walls and over rooftops
and make swordplay my diversion of choice.
But then there is the RLS
that interferes with the PLS
to keep me from sleeping all day.
If Haggard and Hallo were still around
I could send this in
and maybe get online or at least
give whoever is published today a shot
of my critical adrenalin,
but there isn't even a weekly Front Porch
for me to treat others
to my nonsense and empathy.
So this is it,
and I'm the only one left.

HERE COMES MORE
Clank goes the sky
and it pours
more vertical advance for plants
and horizontal decline among people.
My wife has just mowed our lawn
of pandemic grass
and already it has grown
as great in percentage as Terre Haute.
I with my imbalancing disease
have given up turning corners,
and she, alas, may be
as overcome by this exercise in reduction
as Jewel's unmasked market in profusion.
The tide is not turning,
we believe, but changing color
like the liberated sunbathers
jumpstarting their tan.
Let the sporadic robins
enjoy their upstart worms
while I further my sleep
to twelve hours of waking life
until this is all over
and I arise to a brave new world
without friends but unaffected species.
Clouds may keep blooming white
on a blue horizon then turn grey
for another onslaught of luxuriance,
just as my insistence to pee
subsides to keep my genius going
past the brink of my unconscious.
That is, until my restless legs fall off their joints
like Wagner's barbecued ribs
to lie helplessly on the bed
or at chair-side. I may be doomed
in my increasing sedentary way
to create as profound a malignancy
as anything in nature,
seeing as we are all part of it
without knowing how to deal with it
but in dreams, which even though
they be nightmares deliver us to the relief
of everyday phenomena,
re-encouraged to stand up
to tasks of the moment
however inglorious and shortsighted,
thanking our spouses
for taking them over
and praising their outcome.

LOOK AT ME

I'm as deranged
as a Picasso and dismantled
as a drunkard,
not knowing my right foot
from my left as they
prevaricate the living room.
Yet I am used to this
worsening condition as a chick
gradually making its way back
to its shell. Whereas once
I went up and down stairs
two steps at a time with a bound,
all I can do now is keep hold of the railing,
while a decade ago I could scale
Trail 9 and back in five hours,
maneuvering my way along Trail 7
with my walker takes two,
and having bicycled for miles in my youth,
I can't even mount one without
tipping over. Yet I can negotiate our shelter
from chair to sofa arm to wall to bathroom doorknob
without my walker, keeping it only as
a brace between the recliner and the DVD player,
and can still put on my underpants
and tie my shoes, although retrieving
anything dropped on the floor
remains a trying undertaking.
I can still cook—some tried and true meals—
and take out and return
the garbage receptacles, rake leaves into piles
but not tarp them, a heavy snow may be
too much to shovel, and, as you know,
my wife has taken over mowing the lawn.
While the PLS isn't supposed to kill me,
it may render me home-bound by Christmas,
so that the increasing difficulty
of my getting in and out of the car
may exclude that day's visit to relatives,
if not my helping Corasue trim the tree,
although I may have to submit
to directing her from my armchair.
But then my being virtually quarantined
keeps me from following her
into the supermarket where, masked or not,
I would be exposed to the virus.
Yet what would happen to me,
if she were to succumb, and all the things she does
to keep our household together
fell on my depreciating shoulders?

A COMMUNITY OF WIDOWS

I actually have two walkers:
the one I keep upstairs in the video room
and one in the car
for negotiating curbs to sidewalks
on our infrequent carry-outs
and parking lots to trails
on minimal joint excursions
into natural areas.

Both are gifts—from a lady up the road
and another in Miller—previously
owned and operated by their late husbands.

Why should we buy one
when these were no longer needed?
The husband of the lady next door died,
as did a lady's on a nearby street,
and one further off.

The husbands of two friends in Chicago
and one commuting between there
and Bethesda are dead.

I know them all collectively
as "my wife's friends." We get along alright.
They came to the house occasionally—
before the stay-home advisory—
and now Corasue calls and emails them
periodically to check up on how they are doing
and takes walks with three.

They don't visit anymore, which,
for my incapacities, I, and they, I presume,
are just as glad. I, for being the odd man "in",
so to speak, feel uncomfortable with them,
and I think Corasue gets overdosed
with their sympathy in advance. But then
I don't have any friends except my wife,
one in California, and an erstwhile buddy in Brazil,
the latter who may have succumbed by now to the pandemic.

At the Front Porch I was friendly
with many people, but not friends.
In most cases the relationships prevailed
only that Thursday evening. Mostly musicians,
they were my often quizzical audience
and I always their enthusiastic advocate. Again,
I felt odd being among them
and not understood or appreciated
except when our talk turned to them,
which I always by compensation facilitated. Still,
despite our transience, most of them
loved me, as I did them. Yet,
not as innately gregarious as my wife,
I doubt I'll ever see them again.

ON MY OWN

I can still drive by myself, when needed.
Today I took the car in for an oil change,
early, which my wife doesn't like, but I prefer,
because I don't like waiting around
in a lobby full of customers and TV talk.
She doesn't either, yet not enough
to get up before six to get over there
before seven, the opening time. I intend
to be first in line and the first one out.
Not one to wheel myself under the vehicle,
empty the dirty oil, get up and put in a new can,
and then test the level—which now I couldn't
begin to do and have never wanted to, although
I've stood and watched the procedure countless times—
I pay the semi-annual \$27.20. Still, the procedure—
drainage, dipstick, and all—appeals to me as much
as a doctor's visit. At least with the oil change,
you figure there's an improvement; with the doctor
things only get worse. Some new test, prescription,
or proscription is required, and add to those
my worsening condition, which can only be monitored.
So this morning just after dawn, happy
to put on my mask and get some fresh air,
I ventured out on my own into the pandemic universe,
whose death count in our country had just topped
100,000. No masks but mine anywhere. None
on the passersby, none at the shop. There was a sign
on the door saying no one was allowed in the lobby
and that oil change customers either had to
wait in their cars or elsewhere. Being elevated
in my car while the workers operated on it
would make me feel worse than at the doctor's.
At least watching in the garage, I could see
what they were doing under there and follow
their departures and returns. What if they did
something abnormal, such as forgetting
to put back the oil cap or leaving a wrench
behind in the works, or went off
and just left me up there with no ignition key
to open the windows and call for help?
Without a mask, where else would I have waited:
a contaminated McDonald's, the killer street?
And in the garage, where I habitually
stationed myself, were my counterparts keeping
any more social distance than customers
in the lobby? No, they were at close range.
“Out of curiosity,” I coughed involuntarily,
“why are you guys not wearing masks?”
“The boss said we didn't have to,” they chorused.
“And he wouldn't ask it of customers.”

SOME PROSPECTS

Just taking a false step at home
or on a curb or patch of grass,
I could trip and hit my head or hip
and it would be all over. The head
could total me; the hip portend
arduous rehabilitation, which,
if plausible, wouldn't be possible,
given my progressive deterioration.
My world could change drastically
in an instant, like the world at large.
One moment we were caught up
in our customary lives; the next,
hearing about keeping social distance,
preferably staying home, closing
our businesses, not going out to eat
or to any gathering. In a second,
if I were still conscious, I could see
myself dying or at least having
everything I was trying to hold on to
taken away, which I did when
the COVID-19 alarm went off. And
with the latter, it was everything
we took for granted: the food, drinks,
movies, TV shows, concerts, sports,
holidays, get-togethers, sales, services,
the personal things we need or want
along with all whom we care about—
gradually, suddenly, going, gone,
leaving those left with only a space
to hole up in and hoard, or a car
and with a little gasoline to try
to get somewhere else and running
into others on the way. If it were
just me tripping and falling and not
going into a coma, it would be a bed,
hopefully at home, my wife Corasue
to take care of me, and my imagination.
There, waking or sleeping, I could find
consolation and terror, hope and despair,
regret, acclamation, decline, bolstering;
if not a solution or resolution, then
personal honor for giving it a try. If both
were to happen, it would probably go
the same way; much as it is now, focusing
on intermediate drop-offs and edges,
media predictions and my own projections.
In some ways, I may be getting better.

LOOSENING RESTRICTIONS

Nowadays,
after an oil change,
given a partly sunny day,
we may put other prospects aside
and drive off together
under creampuff clouds
towards Shipshewana
to stock up on meat, cheese, and eggs,
and on the way
stop at Middlebury
for carryout sandwiches,
pie slices, coffee and soda
consumed at an outdoor picnic table
instead of indoors,
winding through rolling
Amish countryside along
clip-clopping carriages,
enjoying the sights
of grazing cattle, free-range chickens,
and roadside market signs,
then, stomachs and cooler full,
marvel again all the way back,
except for my disgruntled
wonder where my cap could be
I had on my head that morning,
not spying it looking around the car,
giving up, looking again,
provoking driver Corasue's
interest, my telling her
and asking her if she's seen it,
her replying no,
she can't even recall
my wearing it, my wondering
if I could have left it
on the picnic table or
hanging on a restroom door,
doubting either but also myself,
shrugging at last thinking
it will turn up or my having
plenty more at home; only,
as we pull into the garage
and I prepare to get out,
finding it squeezed
between the gear box and seat;
my thinking life can still be good.

SIGNAL

Hatchet faced, red crested,
black and white streaked,
beady eyed, large, clinging
to the dead oak limb, pecking.
“Quiet. Don’t move.” It flew
into a cluster of branches.
Seen in woods far afield, now
it had chosen here to probe,
leave in an eclipse of leaves;
the first in our back yard,
maybe the last, I mused:
a pileated woodpecker,
a red, white, and black arrow
I could feel in my lungs
burning, heaving, leaving
in its moment, once rare,
now legion, its singular
devastation of all I knew
and treasured, fear’s first
show beyond foreboding,
dread hit home dead center.
I had to get out of there—
a perfect noon of patio chairs,
Sun Chips, and ginger ale
abandoned to sheltered shade—
but stayed with an ephemeral
host of latent dream images
seizing my consciousness
numbing my buttocks. She,
my wife, had withdrawn
to dress for a get-together
on a friend’s lakeside deck
to which I too was invited,
but I was Theseus in Hell
unable to get up. So as it was,
I took the chair with me
and sat down to chat about
masks and beach revetment,
when all I wanted to do
was sit back home upstairs
and put that signal thrust
on our patio into words,
which I knew from the start
would be forthcoming.

GRASS

growing through the pavement,
streets, sidewalks, and driveways,
floors, cupboards, cabinets, ceilings,
porches, patios,
garages, sheds,
beyond the lawns,
under the swings and jungle gyms,
amidst the overturned bicycles,
swimming pools, reservoirs,
highways, ramps,
parking lots, and office suites,
factories, stores, parlors, taverns, malls,
barns, silos, stables, pens, corrals,
tractors and abandoned cars,
overriding the fields, pastures,
museums, churches, stadiums, theme parks,
choking alleys, sewers, cisterns,
along fences, walls, barricades,
up signposts, utility poles, chimneys,
down tracks, channels, runways,
into the garbage dumps and onto the landfills
soon sprinkled with wildflowers.

HARD TO REACH

Socks lying on the floor,
dropped underpants, trousers,
scraps of paper, crumbs
I find hard to reach,
an agony between them and me
of my bending over
and extending a hand—if
only two fingers—to nab them
and bring them to the level of
my feet, waist, wastebasket.
It's a strain getting down there
and as though they're resisting me
they seem to be further away
than I see, so that my thrust
has to stretch a back-straining inch
more before it can grasp.
And there's the chair shoulder,
the wall, the corner, the floor lamp
I have to connect with
before reaching the table
on my precarious way about the house,
always a stretch. And then
the raised carpet edge backing off
from the linoleum I calculate
will take three steps when it takes
four or more. All at a petty remove
that may trigger a tip or a fall.
The towel on the rack, the toothbrush
and floss dispenser on the sink,
the toilet paper drooping low. Each
day by day reach becomes more of a contest.
Yet I convince myself I can make it—
the whole nine yards—
before losing my balance
in making up the distance.
I grow used to it.
Outdoors is another thing:
the curbs, sidewalk levels, doorways
require unique often extreme negotiations.
Inside someone else's house
is customarily a labyrinth
of not quite attainable
footings and grips
where my tentativeness
shows off my handicap. Yet,
oddly enough, as I discern through
these exercises, I reinforce my sense of self
in its discrete relation with the world.

GETTING AHEAD OF MYSELF

On my birthday, the day of my annual dune hike, after a five year lapse since the mailbox incident, I set out on my walker over the boardwalk and up Trail 7, actually leaving Corasue behind at first to negotiate its giving way on her own. I was inspired by the idea that with six legs under me instead of just two, I could make it up around and then back to the parking lot. No mean feat, but 40 plus years of experience on Trail 9 told me I could overcome at least these two medium-difficulty miles despite my disability. So I kept going. The walker's prongs dug in; I wobbled less than anticipated. The next traverse of a steeper incline that followed put me on top of the naked ridge overlooking the treetops of succession I had undertaken before, up the back of Mt. Tom, its tallest, steepest precursor. There I waited for Corasue. "Are you sure you want to go any further?" she panted. "No problem," I replied regarding the decline of the winding trail ahead. She insisted on being in the lead then. Pronging on, I could see her glancing apprehensively back. At an abrupt decline near the end she waiting up for me offered her hand, which I cavalierly waived to angle the walker tentatively down. I made it. Bolstered by this success and my wife's acclaim, I thought my handicapped progress on an upswing, so much so that the next day I was prancing along the asphalt of our neighborhood the mile up to its lake overlook at over a mile an hour when a squad car slowed down. "Nice day for a hike," the smiling officer said through the open window in those pre-mask days. "Couldn't be better," I said keeping my merry pace. Back home I was spent, wondering if he were the same one on patrol who had driven me home five years ago when on my half-mile trek to the mailbox in the other direction my feet ran unanticipated ahead of me to the point the only way I could stop them was to wind myself around a stop sign, where the officer picked me up. It was then that I decided to see a neurologist. Not thinking more about it that day after my birthday, the next day, still on my high, I went after the mail on my walker only to find it getting ahead of me and my having to dig in its forelegs to slow down. After that my legs began wincing whenever I moved, and I got over the idea I was on my way to recovery.

PROTESTS, RIOTS, LOOTINGS
set off by an act of violence
waxing pandemic, radiating
throughout the world,
organizing anger erupting in chaos
switching into personal gain
at the community's expense,
tired of being cooped up,
wearing masks, maintaining distance,
wanting it all for ourselves,
a group thing with one overweening tight mind
inadvertently bringing the invisible germs,
their heat, heaviness, convulsions
back on itself, making reason
intolerable, patience a lost cause,
the right thing hidden by the turn in the tunnel
showing us, despite our mutations,
we are still animals
in the aggressive opportunist sense
controlled by instinct for self-preservation gone awry
against the principles of humanity
beginning with fear then launched by indignation
beyond control into destruction of livelihood
overcoming any moment of reflection
by continuous self-indulgence
whereof I speak inconsiderately
of my problems matching our world's
in all their invasive particulars
overwhelming us by interconnectedness,
breaking into our own shops,
filling our streets, and pressing down
on our necks till we can no longer breathe,
much less speak of all the terror
inherent in us for all we in our intelligence can't
quite imagine tossing the tree leaves,
scattering the clouds,
latching to our tongues and nostrils
communicated by our stiff spastic imbalance
to anyone within range,
we ultimately for all our singular enterprising dreams
of creating a universe
answerable to our needs
coming home to us
in the most incoherent, incalculable, insurmountable ways
only a few can predict,
not listened to until we are destroyed.

GOLDEN ZIPPERS

I dreamt it was Christmas Eve,
but it was hot outside,
in the 90s,
leaves drooping from the trees,
a torrid midsummer night's eve.
On the television
a choir of children
in green robes
stood on a tower
of inclining ramps
in the shape of a Christmas tree
singing
"All I want is golden zippers,
golden zippers for my teeth"
to the tune of
Harry Belafonte's Scarlet Ribbons
("scarlet ribbons for my hair")
and miraculously
from their opened mouths
all their teeth glittered gold.
I was inspired
to go out on that sultry snowless night
to the two spruces
in our front yard
that towered either side of our driveway.
As I neared them
on that magic eve
I began to see they too
glittered gold
though they were scraggly
and in many places
bare of needles,
having grown more so for years.
Drawing closer,
I examined the bare golden boughs.
Their twigs
were pieced together
by tiny luminous
spruce bud worms—
the parasites an arborist had shown us
that would eventually
zip together
to take over the trees entire
and leave them needle-less skeletons.
I stood there
sweating with exultation
at the marvel
of that summer winter's night,
afraid to wake up.

CORASUE COUGHING

Corasue's been coughing
sporadically for some days now,
a dry, rasping cough
relatively short-lived. I've asked her
if she's all right, and she says
she thinks it's just an allergy,
the kind she gets every year
about this time, in late spring
when the leaves have budded, catkins fallen,
and the various seasonal plants are blooming.
She takes half an allergy tablet to keep
the symptoms at bay
and her drowsiness in check.
Not prone to such allergies,
I cough sympathetically, I believe, with her,
although my nose runs a little
and my eyes water. The air
seems hazy as it always does
in early June. I imagine that's due to the pollen
blown about that one can't perceive
in particular but only en masse.
She goes on to say her throat
is a little sore, and I confess mine
feels a bit grainy. But I take echinacea
to boost my immune system, although
the bottle says it's out of date.
She continues weeding, carrying brush out front,
and has taken over mowing the grass.
She comes in coughing, sneezing, tearing,
saying not to worry, she's got it under control.
She's the one who goes grocery shopping
and comes home complaining
more than half the shoppers aren't wearing masks.
She takes periodic hikes outdoors
with friends in the flourishing, fragrant air,
mask-less, sharing binoculars to identify birds,
and comes home more tired than usual.
Age she attributes that to.
She wakes me up at night coughing, sneezing,
grabbing a Kleenex from the headboard,
waking up in the morning weary.
I suggest a video chat with our GP. Maybe.
My throat is getting worse.
I'm feeling a bit feverish, as does she.
We decide to leave off kissing.

CAN WE SURVIVE WITHOUT THE INTERNET?

Can we start the day
without waking up the computer
to find out the weather, news,
late night emails? Can we go through the day
without emailing and responding
to others, shopping online, catching up
on a favorite funny site, looking up
medical advice, hunting down a word,
playing a game, checking a website?
The Internet is the greatest invention
since the computer. What if it goes too,
along with the rest of our lives' resources
whose restrictions temporarily loosening
could be undermined again
by a new wave of loss? Then we would know
the world as we know it has disappeared.
Meaning the workaday populace
behind the technology is gone.
For me it would be like there not being any more
trains going by our house day and night:
nothing to transport, produce or produce it with.
If the screen went blank on Kohl's or Walmart,
we would find no Kohl's or Walmart. We would find
no customer ratings of products, because
there would be no customers,
there would be no products,
there would be no places to sell them. Say
we phoned a friend to find out what was going on.
There would be no working device to put us through.
There might be no friend. The greatest invention
a century ago would be gone too, along with
all the media after and before. Would there be
gas or electricity to light our stoves, heat our homes,
run our devices? No. We would have to
open up stocked cans of soup, light fires
with matches to warm them up, grow things,
dig wells for water. Our nearest information
might be a neighbor down the street, if not next door,
not our monitors or cell phones. And without
goods and connections, living friends,
yet with still breathing CEOs managing to stay above it all,
would we even want to survive? The Internet
gave us access to everything we wanted to live and die for.
Gone, what would be left
but inklings of how to get by and fading memories?

THE PERFECT POSITION

Yesterday afternoon
I lay down on the futon
on my right side
my head on the bolster pillow
facing the patio,
my left hand
tucked under the pillow,
my right inserted
between it and my head
clutching a handkerchief
with my baby finger sticking out
just shy of my nose,
and realized after a moment or two
I was in the perfect position.
Neither my left leg
nor my right
was kicking,
my right hip
hadn't begun to ache,
I lay perfectly still
without feeling the need
to shift my position.
Outdoors green leaves swished,
a redwing, a blue jay, a goldfinch
darted to and fro,
a hummer kept visiting its feeder.
Indoors the cockatiels
were quietly settled in their cage.
Corasue was upstairs on the phone,
so the one down here wouldn't ring.
I could have drifted off to sleep,
but didn't; instead,
eyes open,
I watched the birds and leaves
and thought I could die like this
and be perfectly happy.
But then I thought,
why die? Why not go on
living like this
as though this was what life were all about.
I could see myself
staying here forever,
not moving, not thinking,
just holding on to that one thought.
Eventually though I had to pee.

WORKING

My wife is a worker.
Even though we're retired,
she's always working at something:
weeding, mowing the lawn,
planting, watering, rubbing on After Bite;
dusting, vacuuming, doing the laundry,
cooking, cleaning up,
paying bills, keeping our accounts;
keeping up with girlfriends,
going on hikes with them;
reading assiduously, looking up information,
playing mind-challenging computer games.
Everything she does—
even watching movies with me at home,
which she analyzes, predicts the outcomes,
and identifies the actors—falls under the category of work.
Yesterday I caught her
dabbing the rim of the basement doorway
with a brown felt tip pen.
What was she doing that for?
Although the colors didn't match,
she was trying to cover up the telltale scratch marks
of the previous owners' dogs,
mars to the woodwork I'd never noticed before
or, for that matter, known they'd had dogs.
She's very acute, very wary, very obligated to put a hand to
anything she perceives needs doing.
And she can never get ahead of that game:
there's always something more to do.
She's always been this way, I believe,
but now I'm wondering if it's become an obsession;
specifically as a defense against our looming destruction:
my progressive deterioration, the increasing pandemic.
She works at looking into any matter of things
that could alleviate my condition: wheelchair, medicament, massage;
when I see it inevitably worsening,
which nothing can help, and my just getting used to it.
She works at thwarting the virus on all fronts:
staying at home as much as possible,
keeping socially distant when we can't,
purchasing the most germ-resistant masks and hand sanitizers;
when I see humanity evolutionarily doomed
by our own desires and shortsightedness,
which will be interesting for us precautionary few to observe.
But then I'm picking most of this up from her,
who in her not so quiet desperation
complains about all human inadequacies,
our overpopulation, and innate blindness,
and views herself, left on her own much of her life,
as the sole one to compensate for them.

LIMP CARROTS

The stew calls for
stew meat of course,
potatoes, carrots, celery,
beef broth, and pepper,
salt to taste. She has
everything on hand, but,
handling the carrots, finds
they are limp. Well,
they'll be cooked anyway,
so what's the difference? No,
they'll be mushy then and not fresh.
She's been to the grocery store
just this morning, so now
she has to go back to mingle with
the crowd of afternoon customers,
most without masks. The meal is important.
There a maskless CIT child
sneezes on his father's cart of food
directly in front of her in the checkout lane.
The checker, though gloved,
bags the food, rings it up, and then rings up and bags the carrots.
She, the carrot buyer, gives the checker exact change,
takes the bag, gets out of line,
and rubs her hands with sanitizer.
At home she washes the carrots,
cuts them, and adds them to the stew.
Two hours later she sits with her husband
over delicious bowls of stew,
mentioning the sneezing incident in passing,
but not the penny dropped by a mother
to pay for her daughter's mechanical pony ride
she, the carrot buyer, retrieved for her ungloved off the floor.

EATING ANGUISH

Your throat constricts,
grows tight, so tight
you can't swallow, yet
you don't choke, there's
more coming you can't
block, cough up, seepage
though trickling through
mixing with acid reflux,
both ends at an impasse,
ingestion the equal of
revulsion, the way out
unknown, the dilemma
however, inescapable,
yet you keep eating,
gorge yourself on it, if
only it would go down,
but indigestible, it stays
at the standoff, building,
becoming your being's
core you can't surmount,
bypass, dissolve, expel,
that keeps backing up,
still there is something
about your agony with it
that's sustaining, nothing
so great you have had
to deal with you are now
dealing with, as it comes,
you go, make your move
against the world teeter-
ing at your consumption's
effort, no holding back
or it would devour you,
realizing at last perhaps
you are the consumer
of choice, you are the one
affected who is giving way
to let it all come in, and if
it can't, that must be your
overpowering it, refusing
with your deepest guts
to partake of such a meal
although you are willing
to indulge whatever it
may bring to the table.

BIRDS, SQUIRRELS, AND DOG WALKERS

After dinner, Corasue and I
often sit in the living room
gazing through the windows
at the front yard, the trees, and the street.
There an upright robin usually stands
for a moment, hops a few steps, then stands again,
a squirrel squiggles along a branch, leaps
to another, then may descend head-first to browse,
someone walks by with a dog running ahead
on a leash who then may stop, sniff, lift a leg or squat.
There may be other birds besides the robin,
another squirrel, and many dog walkers
some of whom we know by name
and nearly all by sight. They don't see us.
The unlit living room is dark to them
as the sun completes its dazzling,
while we sit and talk, make note of them perhaps.
They are our evening show, which we
occasionally delight in from our theater cave.
They stand and start and stand again,
cross over and come down, parade, return,
and in their business, whatever that may be,
seem as content to overlook us as we to sit
and watch them. Who are we after all
but those as nondescript as they
repeating themselves no further than the dusk
we hide behind carrying on
whatever conversation there between us may transpire?
We on each side of the glass
are as separate as they, of different species entirely,
not to mention the occasional bug
bounced off the window
as though trying to get in,
and the tiny flying silver things appearing this increasing hour.
And why do we two in particular
return in separate armchairs opposite each other then
to look at them as much as one another?
To share some time together
elusive as the day
yet as predictable,
holding on to what is left to us
as it grows dark outside,
to contemplate observing
these others fade and our reflections overcome them,
and then get up, go on to something else.

MY RIGHT LEG

My wife and I sleep in the same queen-size bed. I like to start off the night lying on my back, because it settles me down and feels most comfortable—but only for a couple minutes, then my RLS kicks in, right or left, which I can't defeat just lying there. So I switch to my right side, away from my wife, as hers is the left side of the bed. There on the right, I can cross my left leg over my right or squeeze it under my right—depending on which leg is acting up—which helps to suppress it. Then the culprit usually settles down so I can get some sleep. However, for whatever reason, my right leg tends to slip from either below or above my left leg to protrude outside the bed. Either way, I'm aware of it, because of its exposure and gravity. Even now, a sheet our only bedcover, I am aware of my leg's contact with the air, and that annoys me. Its weight is also disconcerting. So I have to pull it back in and shift my body to the left, which may disturb my wife. After a while, though, it slips out again. My only remedy is to switch to sleeping on my left, which again may disturb her. Why does this happen? In bed alone, it happens repeatedly, giving me the thought the bed, without her compensation, slopes to the right, inducing the leg to gravitate that direction. But why then, if her presence makes it level or even sloping slightly to the left, does the leg jut forth? All I can tell you is that in keeping with my RLS it's a trick leg and my being on the right side triggers its ejection—so much so it's carried me with it onto the floor, making my wife scream and me, with luck, on the verge of sleep, reel with dizziness and befuddlement, if not injury as yet. I'm thinking now it may be the death of me. Though the distance be only a few feet—to the floor—I could get caught up in a semi-conscious freefall to the abyss. The world has already signaled my collapse, and others', my doom is imminent, and another such drop-off could make it, if head-down, complete. Vertical, on my feet, I consciously do all I can to stay upright, maintain my balance, not trip—lest the reverse prove fatal. In that twilight interim supine in bed, defenses down, when I am about to drift off, my impromptu leg may gain the advantage and pull me over. Or worse, for all my tossing and turning and wrenching our covers this way and that, my wife may on her end may be compelled or compelled to kick me out of bed.

SNOW IN JUNE

Outside it is snowing:
bits of fluffy white down
drifting past the green
full-fledged leaves
onto the verdant lawn;
not much, a flake
here and there, though
sometimes a flurry
driven horizontally,
not visible upon
making contact
with the ground,
yet when aloft, enough
to catch the eye
in a trompe l'oeil.
No, it is not snow
but blossoming cottonwood,
the common tall dark tree's
tiny sporadic efflorescence
in its dispersion
taking on an air of faery.
Going out, you can delight
in its sight and touch
and realize it clings
to the grass, as well as
your clothes and hair.
Its trees may be
nowhere in view
yet this, their seed,
is omnipresent
if scattered, borne
on a breeze and born
of nothing at all,
it seems, its own
individual phenomenon,
were it invisible
would not be known
except for other sensations:
a tingle, thrill, perhaps
a sting at its locale
in time or place,
and if not upon,
inside, without a trace
of how it got there,
floating so freely, widely.

GOSLINGS

Long necks down the road
at the intersection
of pond and shoulder:
brontosaurus
seen at a great remove
or the hydra within
walking distance,
flexing their adolescence,
how much they have grown
already since two weeks ago,
almost to their parents' size,
yet gangly and jaundiced,
a far cry
from the yellow
cotton balls
just up on legs,
darlings under supervision
all in a line
walking or afloat,
after a day
less lemony, more sallow,
but still scampering off at the approach
of someone big on foot or in a car
while a grownup spreads its wings and honks;
soon they will be on their way
to making it, taking care
of themselves, straying, paddling, flying
away from the family
they will desert to reconfigure into a flock,
migrate, re-gather, pair off to hatch their own chicks.
Yet let us catch them here
still growing out of their clothes,
unsure whether to eat or be fed,
wondering what wings are for,
observe them as we were,
coax and corral them,
give them advice and criticism,
guess ourselves when to stand off and let them go,
for us to begin again.
What would we do different?
Would we raise them beside a road?
Would we look for a home with better pickins?
After this brood, will we have any choices?
Will they in their uncanny way
within their own perimeter
of surliness and doubt
make it possible or impossible
for any of us to survive?

EXERCISES

Corasue and I do them together
before breakfast,
in the living room
standing facing one another first
doing arm stretches
out to the side
and over our heads.

Then she gets down on the floor,
I poise on the edge of an armchair,
and we flex our legs and torsos
in prescribed ways each of us is wont.
Eventually I get down on the floor
and do some sets, get back up
on the edge of the armchair
and do a more strenuous version
of what I did before, and then get back down
to strain myself yet more.

When I'm done, she gets up and comes over
to stretch my legs five times apiece
as far up as they'll go; something
I can't do on my own but she can on hers.
Our reward is breakfast.

Though some days we get up
at different times and do our exercises alone,
or say we have, and then let the other
go ahead or not. If I had my way
in this wicked world,
I would never exercise,
because I don't think or feel
they do me any good. Those I learned
were under the guidance of a physical therapist
who agreed with me our routines
weren't helping my condition.

Unlike Corasue's, mine continues to worsen,
and not just because of age. While
she feels better after our exercises,
I feel the same. Oh, maybe wearier
and glad they're over, but not
any stronger or more flexible. I don't let on.
She tells me how important they are
to both of us. I agree, enough to join her
when we both show up on time, to keep the peace
between us, but it could be they're hastening my decline.
Each day I get out of bed a little stiffer, out of joint, in pain,
but I'm not one to complain. I mean so what?
Their advantages outweigh their disadvantages,
so as long as I can get from the chair to the floor
and back again to chair and floor, I'll do them
whenever we're together, as long as we're together.

MOWING AND SHAVING

My wife did let me know
it would be easier on her
if I could mow our lawn's
east side, so obligingly I
took out the mower and
paraded back and forth as
far as the shoulder then
around the spruce tree to
my driveway invasion and
around and around in ever
tightening circles. Simple?
It's not. I angle and turn,
pull back, push ahead, bow
under the spruce boughs
at first and then negotiate
the remaining circuit's
unevenness, tipsy at best.
I never have found it less
than challenging and now
just shy of upsetting. Done,
I wheeled the apparatus
back in the garage doubting
I should bring it out again.
Shaving is like mowing only
on smaller terrain but with
ridges, dips, and, on my face,
crannies almost impossible
to get at sans subterranean
seepage. True, balance isn't
as important, but my hands
can lose their touch, having
to go over and over an area,
and, unlike mowing, there
shouldn't be anything left
of the turf. Also, lawns don't
need lathering beforehand.
It takes a while for me to
recover from either. Now
that I've proved I can mow,
I'll probably do it more, as
my wife's unwillingness to
kiss me after a couple days
unshaven makes me return
to the bathroom mirror.
The basic problem of both
lawns and beards is that
they too recover in as many
weeks as days, and make
as pandemic a revival.

DOORWAYS

I can't go through them
without a twinge of foreboding.
They press in on me from both sides
telling me I won't be able to make it.
In a doorway's interim
I have the feeling
where I have been and where I am going
don't match. There might as well be
a wall. Even though I can see
daylight here and there, the air there
will be different. I won't know how to breathe.
I'll choke. Mucus will rise up and take over.
While I know, once I go through,
things will clarify
and I will be different from whom I was
in a way that could make sense to the others,
the part that is still me
holds back. No, don't go there,
it says. There you will die
of a disease they will give you
you can't be cured of.
It will possess you like something
from another part of the world
against which you have no defenses
and make you feel wretched.
At this point,
I'd rather die of any disease I know
rather than go meet this one,
I'd rather jump off a cliff,
dive into a sea. It is a wall
that is not a wall but a portal
to unimaginable annihilation.
Imagine you are I
at the threshold of this doorway
I am describing to you.
Do you have the will to turn back?
Do you believe in your sense
that where you are headed is wrong,
that you are not like the others
and are not wrong?
On the other hand,
couldn't you be saved
by realizing your foreboding is just a twinge
we may all feel?

IT MAY WELL BE

Someday I won't be able
to push myself up from my computer table
and will have to call for help,
in which case I won't be able
to make it by myself downstairs,
even with the railing,
so I'll have to stay down there,
probably in a wheelchair,
and wheel myself up to the kitchen table for meals
then into the living room
perhaps for a transfer to my easy chair
and eventually the hide-a-bed sofa for sleeping.
Even with a ramp from the porch
to the walkway, getting me from the wheelchair
into the car wouldn't be easy,
not to mention getting me out into
whatever conveyance the car could hold.
But then there would be nowhere to go:
no stores, no malls, no restaurants, no friends.
We'd be wearing all our old clothes,
eating out of cans, and talking to ourselves.
So, dismissing the bygone Internet and phones,
conversation would remain pretty much as it is now.
If there still were electricity, we could watch old movies,
but we're already getting tired of the ones we have.
It would be hard to get me
down the two steps to the den
and out to the patio, so maybe
I could look out at the world
through the living room windows.
No dog walkers, lone hikers, or kids on bicycles,
but plenty of squirrels, birds, and trees.
I could watch the latter form buds and leaves
and the leaves turn color and fall off.
I could watch the grass grow and turn brown,
the rain rain, the snow fall and melt,
and the spring's cottonwood fluff mush in the gutters.
Of course there are always books to read
with pictures to look at, although all that
would seem relegated to the past.
Corasue, when she has time off from cleaning, laundering,
keeping the cave in order, and looking after me—
if not outdoors weeding, mowing, raking, and shoveling, and feeding the birds—
might keep on drawing and making collages. I might write,
but again, those pursuits may only pertain to the life we knew.

STONES

Spread out on the living room table
between the two armchairs
are a number of stones,
beige to dark grey, oval to round,
all of them almost perfectly so, which,
over the many years we've lived here,
Corasue has picked up from the beach.
Recently she set them on the table
to get a good look at them,
see which she should save,
which she wouldn't, though
it would be hard to take any back,
since the beach scarcely exists anymore.
These however she treasures,
rearranges by color, shape, and size,
her eyes aglow, thinking
how they have traveled through the years—
thousands—under ice, water, and sand
broken down, honed, rounded,
finally selected, collected, displayed.
To me none of them seems
remarkable enough to bend down for,
carry home in my pocket,
but then I don't have her perspective
for appreciating their individuality,
showing them off together,
seeing how they compare.
Evenings we sit across from each other,
looking out the windows
at the hoppers, climbers, passers-by,
and then back at the stones
distinct and distinctive,
two decades worth of amassing
from a great lake onto our little table.
Once she goes upstairs, I stay behind,
transferred to my easy chair
for a more direct look out the windows.
From there the setting sun
shockingly rims the floor lamp
behind the one armchair
and scatters its light on the wind-rustled leaves outside.
I see the shadows of the leaves dancing on the living room wall,
fascinated as a child, look briefly back out the windows, look back at the wall.
It is blank.