**PUBLISHED POEMS 2012 – 2018**

Seaglass (2013)

*for John Elsberg (1945 - 2012)*

A bottle washes up

On the Eastern shore

Some boys break it

& years later the sharp pieces

Are worn smooth as stones

But they retain their colors

Glinting amid the dull real

Stones that erode all around us

Reflecting ancient starlight

Bringing it all back home

November Nights (2014)

I find your face

on a pillow of leaves,

lately adrift.

Blankets absorb

our body heat

while we breathe

cold cedar air

on long fall nights.

The downstairs Buddha

gathers our dust

in its ceramic folds.

Water shapes itself

into each glass vase.

Outside our window

windchimes play

stray climbing scales,

while underground sleepers

dream on, in no time.

The Search (2014)

Treasure hunters

with metal detectors

search the earth

in likely areas

where architecture flourished

for signs of civilization.

In mounds of peat

we seek for flowing milk.

It will be a happy moment

in the debris field

when the black box of love is found.

Out in deep space our old light

travels to new eyes.

Another sunrise warms earth.

A newborn protests the sudden light.

Belated starlight winks back.

Human tears make a deposit

in a pink cloud bank

on the Western horizon.

In the fading daylight,

seven hundred lamps

in this room we call our own,

& still the shadows beckon.

Lifelines (2014)

As a young sailor I learned

to handle the lines. I’d stand

on the slippery bow to toss

the bowline to the dockhand, balanced

against the backwash

of the engine & the wave action,

hoping that the catcher on the dock

could grab the line from mid-air.

Later, in the Coast Guard, I trained

in the use of the line-throwing

gun, a 12 gauge shotgun

that shot a steel rod

over the bow of a drifting boat

with a small line threaded

through the heavy rod-head, a difficult

task in rough water.

If your aim was off, the rod

could hit, maybe even kill

the very stranded boater whom

you were trying to save. You had to

arc it just right, so that it fell

across the bow, so the boater

could retrieve the line & connect

it to his bow, so you could rescue him.

But sometimes lifelines break.

Nylon tow-lines stretch way out.

We stand behind a cyclone fence, in case

the rope might snap. The sudden recoil

could kill a man or knock

him overboard, to tread water

until someone bobbing nearby

can throw *him* a line.

On turbid days, afloat on

dark, forbidding waves, we need

strong lines, to lash us

to something solid on shore,

a post or a pier that might stand

against the wildly surging swells.

In dreams of flight above rough seas,

I search for you, to throw you these lines.

Gypsy (2014)

In the grasping hands of snow

Beneath the ancient astrodome

Beside a cat with an empty belly

An old woman sat alone

On a soapbox of divinity.

Her eyeglasses flashed

Like metallic windows after dark

Before the fires sputtered & died

In all the great world libraries

From which we crawled, evolved

After centuries of soft neglect,

Beyond bones & muscles & blood.

Her breaths rose like chimney smoke

To shatter like cold glass on the stone floor.

Concrete (2014)

Her parents named her Zora,

meaning ‘light of dawn.’

They lived in a drafty wooden shack

on the outskirts of a burned out town.

All the best houses in Serbia

were constructed of concrete.

Zora always dreamed of living

in a concrete home of her own.

When she fled to America

she became a live-in nanny

for a rich man who sold time-shares.

She cared for his four children

during the hot Louisiana days

& spent her nights in a small room

in his massive stone mansion.

She saved her money every week,

still dreaming that she’d erect

her house of solid cement.

As the days solidified into years,

the house became more real

in her recurrent dreams,

but before she could build it

in the whirlpool of the real world,

she died of a massive heart attack.

They put her into a concrete vault,

where her light could not get out.

In Our Eyes (2014)

My father died looking in my eyes.

He was fifty-four. I was thirty.

He’d collapsed on Division Avenue,

walking home from a party store,

his bottle clutched in a brown paper bag.

The hospital called me at work.

I was the last to arrive.

When I got to his room, my sister & brother

made a place for me by the head of his bed.

“He’s unconscious.” my mother said

as she leaned against the wall.

I looked at his closed eyelids for a moment.

He opened them, & gazed deeply into mine.

He squeezed my hand once, then his eyes

rolled up to show the whites.

Everyone there cried, except for me.

I didn’t cry for ten more days,

until the night my first son was born.

My father never saw my children.

I went home, alone, the night the first was born.

I sat in my attic & cried through the night.

I wept for both birth & death.

At the funeral home his mother & I sat

on a red love seat & she saw into me.

“You look more like your father

than ever before.” she said.

“It’s in your eyes.”

West Wind (2014)

In a Westerly wind

the seagulls scatter.

The lake is turning over.

Around my kayak

suspended sediments

achieve neutral buoyancy.

The gulls swim away

from one another.

In an Eastern wind,

they float together.

The water around me

is thick with green floaters.

The surface flashes

as if on fire

beneath the old wind.

I smile & breathe it in.

Free Beach (2014)

Swimmers play

beneath a blue sky,

where big puffy clouds

make their ways

to parts unknown.

A small boy

hooks a splashing fish

& looks amazed

as it tries to swim

away from him.

In a splash of light

both of them are free.

The swimmers on the beach

scream in wet delight.

Cloud shadows pass

over the blue water.

The boy throws stones

at minnows that cruise

along the long shore.

Seagulls flutter above us,

flashing like silver coins

thrown across the sun.

Time to move on.

Angels Of Death (2014)

Back when I was a social worker

for developmentally disabled children,

it was not uncommon to lose a child,

often one whom I’d worked with for years.

They were children who breathed

through tubes, who ate through tubes.

Some could neither hear nor see.

Some were bright but confined by their bodies.

Some had normal bodies with mental prison cells.

Their life spans were usually short.

As workers, we used gallows humor

to deal with harsh realities.

It gave us some temporary relief.

A worker whom everybody loved,

sweet and cheerful, a beautiful woman

who never joined in the sick joking

had a long streak of infant deaths

on her overloaded caseload.

So, we called her the Angel Of Death.

The teasing went on for several weeks.

She put up a good show at first,

but then another child on her load died.

After that, she didn’t come in for a week.

Then, she quit and moved to Minnesota

to become the manager of a Hallmark shop.

Children continued to die off all our caseloads.

After the fourth year, I couldn’t handle it.

I would burst into tears at funerals,

sometimes using a whole box of tissues.

I finally fell away, imaginary wings broken.

In House (2014)

Here in my house of skin,

safe inside my warm dream,

while wild white storms rage on

outside these weary walls,

in transit through dark rooms

of long gone memories,

all the clocks run backward.

Here the rooms have muscles

& the passageways lead

to doors with broken locks.

Beneath a roof of sense

down to my crazy cellar,

shadows rise & descend

on stairs that never end.

The Climb (2014)

Tough leather boots

crunch in the loose scree

of a crumpled mountain.

Later they pant by the fire,

with their tongues out,

grinning like good dogs,

sore but ecstatic

in their memories

of running on soft needles

through fragrant pines.

The climber reclines

in his nylon cocoon

to watch the fire story fade.

He dreams he is spinning

in a whirlpool of galaxies

but he feels right at home.

Still Here (2014)

I slump

in my black chair.

Whole lives pass

beyond brown eyes.

My thoughts

are with hawks

but engines whoosh

in my spatial ears.

I turn up the music

& dance to the spheres.

My old knees squeak,

knocking against space.

My shelf life

is longer

than my journey.

Seeing a woodpecker

bang an old oak

I think of the time

a lovely redhead

listened to my chest

then struck it repeatedly

in the heart.

Even the continental drift

is nothing

compared to these lost days.

I’m glad I still have you.

The Wind (2015)

Blowing up from

the deep holes

inside the earth,

the nympho wind

is pure desire.

The wind laughs

through our bodies

like wayward lust.

The wind sings

old siren songs

of love & pain

into our rainy brains.

You can feel it

kissing your skin,

& then you hear

your own wild breath

join with the wind

that cries out

like a poem

just before birth.

Mickey (2015)

When I was eight, after Dad left,

my mother got me a kitten.

I named him after a famous mouse.

He was black & white, & very cute.

I’d hurry home after school

to find him waiting to play.

Full-grown, he fought the other male cats,

heroically defending his territory

from atop a garden fence post.

Everyone was amazed that he came to me

when I called him from the front porch.

He came, reliably, on the first call.

After a few years, another big cat

became a serious territorial contender.

Mickey began to come back with chewed up ears ,

or with open bite wounds on his neck.

Although he often lost, he never quit.

He still came faithfully when I called.

Then one dark evening in late summer

I called him but he didn’t come right away.

Then a raw cat moan came from the bushes.

He’d dragged himself there, a bloody mess.

Mother took him to the vet but returned alone.

I named the next kitten Buddy, after my father.

Breakfast For Paranoids (2015)

He’s 6' 6", 250 lbs.,

With shaved head.

He raises a dark eyebrow

& barks orders:

“Hash browns,

Not American fries.”

They must be crispy,

With onions.

He wants bacon.

It must be crisp.

He challenges the waitress,

“Are real blueberries

Used in your pancakes?”

After her relieved confirmation,

He orders one,

“With real butter,

Plus three more orders

Of the bacon, crisp.”

Outside, the bumper

Of his GMC truck

Is right up against

The wall of the building.

He sits by the window

Where he can see his truck.

Inside it, three large pitbulls

Are watching him.

They smile in toothy hunger,

Their heads out the window,

Waiting hard for their breakfast.

Overnight (2015)

A clear winter night

here in my warm den.

The cedars are bent with snow

by the shores of the frozen lake.

I wake alone to a dying fire.

Drivers on the road

go by but do not see

how moonlight floods the sky.

They just don’t look up.

Tonight the bridges are closed

& travel is dangerous.

I wandered lost for years.

Now here I am,

huddled by a fading ember.

Fall Schedule (2016)

Night dew burns off

throughout early morning,

until the sky is clear

enough to see & hear

squadrons of Canada geese

migrating southward.

Their calls echo above

the blare of noon traffic

on the busy human highway.

In the bright afternoon,

chrysanthemums smile vividly.

The cornfield is infatuated

with the hot white sun,

but she slips away too soon

as the sky dome darkens

like a theater after the curtain.

The Plumber (2016)

George grew up on a farm.

He was a loner even then,

& liked to fish or hunt alone.

He kept his feelings bottled up.

He became a self-employed plumber.

He had a helper who went with him on jobs,

to carry his toolbox & spare his bad back.

He’d open up & talk while he worked,

telling him how water flowed,

how valves & joints controlled

a home’s circulation, how rust

corrupts the arteries from outside

while sediments block the flow

from the inside, & need to be drained.

The only time he cried

was when his dog Jeff died.

Jeff was in his twenties, blind

& also deaf. They’d been together

since he was a pup. George put him out

of his pain with a .22, & then he wept.

The Dancer (2016)

*for Maria Sorenson*

Maria was born in Uppsala.

She married young

to a man who turned out

to be a bad drunk.

She divorced him, against

19th century Swedish mores.

She fled to Chicago

with her daughters, remarried

& moved to the suburbs.

She loved to dance.

So did her new husband.

No matter what happened

during the work-week,

they always went dancing

on Saturday night, right up until

the day he died, at age seventy-five.

Maria polkaed through her eighties

& waltzed through her nineties.

She wouldn’t wear hearing aids.

She feared they made her unattractive,

& men wouldn’t dance with her.

She died at one hundred & three

from an infected, broken leg,

just days after her last elated dance.

Fly Fishing In The Rain (2016)

*for Gary Metras*

The pool pops and rolls, alive

All the way up to the clouds.

Branches on the side of the brook

Shake in the downpour, like a laughing man.

Down below, in the boiling depth,

Rainbows swirl, breathe deeply

While you, in boots & rain gear

Smile the foolish, happy grin

Of one whose lines sustain him.

From the depth, your wet heart beats

Vibrations through the rivers

Of your body, through your hands

That cast out & wait, feet that wade

The fast flow of blood & water.

No Fear (2016)

Don was a skinny

wiseguy from Detroit

who knew no fear.

He’d swagger up

to a gang of toughs

& mouth off

like he was invincible.

I saw him do it once

at a basketball game.

I had to save him,

explaining that he was

emotionally disturbed.

Being his therapist

was frustrating.

When I told him

what could happen

if he kept pushing,

he wouldn’t believe me.

He was belligerent

& ran away

back to Detroit,

where he was stabbed

in the heart

on a street corner

by another skinny boy

who knew no fear.

Ambition (2016)

When Harold was young,

he played drums in a band.

Eventually, he became the leader.

As a young man, he was tall & proud.

He held the center of any room,

holding forth, cracking loud jokes.

He learned tool & die, but soon

was put in charge of the plant.

He got awards, & retired

to a lakefront home

with a cabin cruiser.

After he retired, he repaired things

around the neighborhood, until

everything was under control, then

he grew bored, had a stroke, & took

his hard-earned final promotion.

The Weight (2016)

*for Ruth Moon Kempher*

When our dog got old

& was unable to walk,

we carried her down the street

so she could check her pee-mails

on the grassy spot where the dogs stop.

She would reward us afterward

with a furry smile, or sleep

sweetly at our feet, face gone white.

We loved her even more because

we knew we were going to lose her.

At the end, her eyes reflected

the light at the end of the tunnel of love.

It was then that we realized

that it was she who had carried us.

Summertime Blues (2016)

*“There ain’t no cure. . .”*

– Eddie Cochran

It’s a hazy summer night

for an outdoor blues concert.

The small green stage is set

on a hot asphalt parking lot.

The drummer takes off his shirt.

The bass player adjusts his ball cap.

The rhythm guitar unzips his jumpsuit.

The crowd is alert & ready to party.

A local D.J. introduces the band.

They open with *Johnny B. Goode*.

The frontman is yellow

after his recent liver transplant.

He no longer drinks alcohol, but

he can still play pentatonic scales

all night long or even in his sleep.

Two drunken biker chicks

sway-dance up front by the stage,

over a hill neither saw coming.

Their bleached hair looks tired

despite pink & blue streaks.

Most of the men wear black, with

greasy leather chaps & vests, &

big trucker wallets chained to belts.

They’re in perpetual mourning,

afraid someone will steal their money.

The beer line is long, but

the lemonade man has no takers.

The older bikers sit on lawn chairs,

& arrive in cars or trucks,

but they dress like they still ride.

The younger bikers stand or sit

on or by their big Harleys,

keeping them always in sight.

They stay on the periphery,

where they almost feel comfortable.

But, the band sweats it out

& the crowd gets the beat.

The oldsters sway in their chairs

while tipsy dancers rub the stage.

Grace notes rise to the pink sky.

A slow blues hymn ends it

like a cool unexpected breeze.

Bike engines roar on the edge.

A wet encore soars aloft

in the sanctified sunset.

Bargain Buddha (2016)

My mother bought it on sale

at a dirty discount store

when I was eleven years old.

It was shaped like a big one in Kyoto,

but ours was painted a gaudy red

with random specks of gold.

Our Buddha was two feet tall.

It was made of plaster instead of stone.

It began as a Buddha in bad taste,

but Mother spray-painted it flat black,

& it looked better with makeup.

Many years later, it sits in meditation

on the mantel of my fake fireplace,

its cheap red flesh thinly concealed.

Now it reminds me to let small shit slide,

to be humble & kind, & to look beneath

the superficial surface of the world.

Monument (2017)

*for Evelyn Jarvis*

Evelyn fled Poland

at sixteen years old,

first to Paris,

then to NYC via steerage,

ahead of the German army.

She worked as a seamstress

in the Garment District

until she met & married

a wounded soldier

& moved to his small hometown.

He supported their family

trapping beaver in a cedar swamp,

while she planted & harvested

two large gardens.

Their children sold carrots & onions

door to door

as the country came out

of the Great Depression.

Their son was killed

in World War Two,

at the age of nineteen.

Neighbors saw Evelyn kneel

as if in prayer

in her big flower garden,

her skin brown

from the days spent

under the sun.

She claimed that she grew

every flower

that would survive

Northern weather.

After her husband died,

she bloomed alone

until the morning

they found her in her garden,

looking as if she’d napped

beneath the dogwood tree

that she’d planted

as a monument

to her growth on this earth.

Another Old Photo (2017)

In the old photo my parents are still young.

I am cradled in my father’s arms.

We are all smiling because I’ve been born.

Our first little cottage is behind us.

Its tar shingles & open rafters are gone now,

replaced by a Marathon Mini-Mart.

My mother is small & happy in a plaid skirt.

My father is tall in cuffed dungarees.

I wear a diaper, a knit hat & booties.

Mother has long black hair down to her waist.

Father has black hair, slicked & parted.

I am bald, both yesterday & today.

Now I am old, & they are both deceased

except in this snapshot, stolen from the past.

No sign here of the tragedies yet to come,

the births & deaths, the divorce

of my parents, our little family gone

like a glimpse of an elusive Red Fox.

No indication of future diseases,

promises, send-offs or receptions.

Nothing is predicted or foreshadowed here

in this yellowed print of three strangers,

a photographic monument to potential,

no blood on our hands yet, just mercy & hope.

Family Funeral

Our emaciated patriarch

is on display in an alcove,

dead from COPD & heart failure.

He’d smoked his beloved briar

between hits on an oxygen tube.

He’d slept sitting up

due to his congested heart.

He’d refused all visitors

for the past eight months.

His oldest son was sent away

on the day that he died.

No one really knew why.

Now old forever friends & family

gather in a gilded parlor.

It is standing room only

on the thick red carpet.

Tasteful gold decorates

the wall-niches & corners.

Padded folding chairs surround

the edges of the milling crowd.

People pilgrimage to the coffin

to verify or nullify what is real

or take a final mental photo,

to be filed in brain or heart.

Cousins separated by years

catch up on triumphs & disasters.

Two mismatched brothers-in-law

argue the outcome of a coming election.

Near the alcove where Dad’s body lies,

old friends share memories of him.

Tears & smiles break from old masks.

They brought flowers against his wishes.

Screaming erupts in an anteroom!

The dark crazy sister is still mad

that everything didn’t go as Dad

told her it should. “Fuck you,

mother fucker!” she shouts

at her older sister, who wanted a buffet.

But the corpse doesn’t care,

ensconced in his last bed,

his rosary in one hand, & the pipe

that killed him in the other.

The Sunken Dream (2017)

A young man built his first house

in a lovely wooded valley

beside a slow-moving river.

He worked all summer on it.

He was proud of it, so it hurt

when he received the notice

of their plans to build a dam

that would flood his little valley

& leave his home & the homes

of his neighbors, two churches,

a cemetery & a small town

submerged, monuments

to technological progress.

People moved to higher ground.

Their skeletons remained

sunken beneath a dim surface

sometimes calm, often angry.

For years afterward, things

left behind floated to surface.

Once he found a soggy hope chest.

Some rebuilt on hills, some in ravines,

but after that he never put his heart

into another house made from lumber.

He blamed the government, but

his thoughts were persistent.

When he dreamt of his gone home,

he always struggled to rebuild it

though the stubborn waters still rushed in.

Bullies (2017)

He wore a black leather jacket, boots

with cuban heels, a greasy

duck’s-ass haircut swept way up, & a nasty

sneer on his cruel pimpled face. He was

the youngest of four brothers. They were

all bullies. Their father was a surly

man with thick brows who looked

like a mobster. My bully had two years

& sixty pounds on me. We had

the same first name. Once I saw him

beat a small child with a 2" x 4." He would

slug you without any warning. He hated me &

I feared him. If he saw me on the

street he’d hit, push or threaten me until

he tired of it. I kept a wary eye out

for him & developed many creative

alternative routes. The terror went on for

three long years. One Spring day I rode

my bike down the sidewalk. He was walking

toward me. I speeded up & I hit him

hard, & he fell over a hedge. Then I

picked the bike up over my head & I

threw it on him before he could get up.

I saw his face in tears & years of

fear disappeared. He never bullied me

again. We had too much in common.

White Nights (2017)

Here in the North

the nights are white.

The cloudless sky

glows from starlight

unobscured by city glare.

The looming moon

is a white stone.

Green grass looks yellow

in the muted moonlight.

Luminous white flowers

sing a soft moonsong

to fireflies sparking

tips of tall grass.

A snowy owl

releases its long note,

adding a red spark

to the dark earth canvas.

Alberta Clipper (2017)

I wake to a white blizzard

blowing down from Canada.

My canine companion

wants me to stay in bed,

but the porch geraniums

want their curtains open

so they can bask in the light.

The weather-woman predicts

that lake-effect wind & snow

will accumulate all day.

The dog already knows.

She will be lazy & sweet

on my lap or at my feet,

so I won’t get a walk

unless I go by myself.

I know & accept the drill:

Michigan, mid-December.

We do it every year.

We dress in thick layers,

cling together for warmth,

long to see the nearest star.

Fire Man (2017)

When I see my old friend Bob

I always think of fire. It’s not

just his red hair & beard. It’s

something more. He built

his first home on the ashes

of an old farmhouse that

he burned down. I’ve seen him

start a bonfire in the middle

of a frozen lake, with nothing

but dead leaves, wet branches,

and a frail BIC lighter.

Now he lives alone with five cats

in a small cabin in the woods

that he heats with wood.

Firewood is stacked up all around it,

just waiting for a flame.

He doesn’t have electricity, or

watch television. But

every night, when the woods

gets dark, & the coyotes howl,

Bob lights a fire. He sits there

until the embers glow, often

in the company of refugees.

The Walls (2017)

You put your solemn

walls together, fitting

solid stones to solid

stones, the grapefruit

size, the basketball

size & the occasional

overripe pumpkin. The

ubiquitous baseballs are

small enough to hurl

through enemy windows,

large enough to do some

real damage. The biggest

stones are difficult to

move, as heavy as empty

rooms. They each have a

special place in the

long argument of your

humble walls. They fit

together as one solid

thought on the established

border between two neighbors.

Storm Flowers (2017)

I bought chrysanthemums

on the last day of summer.

I made sure to get some in bloom

(white as nothing, yellow as

a soothing dream song) & some

big plants loaded with buds,

ripe with hope. I like to get both,

to carry us through to the season

when snowdrifts obliterate.

We planted them in rows,

bloomers & budders arranged

to maximize our viewing pleasure.

A week later, bent on revenge,

a storm came with angry wind

& rain that flooded our yard.

In the aftermath, blossoms

floated in a muddy flood

that flowed inexorably into

the thirsty, sucking storm drain.

New blooms opened the next day.

Paternity (2017)

*for Murry Harralson*

I resisted him like a knot

resists a crosscut saw.

I didn’t want a step-father.

I missed my real father

like a tree bereft of branches.

I never called him father. He didn’t

like me any more than I liked him.

He was an ex-Marine,

a strong, silent man of few words.

We co-existed through my adolescence,

but as adults, we warmed to each other.

I hung out with him in his garage

where he carved & burned wood.

We’d have a beer & a late night hot dog,

& he’d tell me about the world war.

Tears came to his blue eyes

when he spoke of Guadalcanal.

In his late sixties, he got into cats.

He built ramps so they could climb

up into the rafters of the garage.

His favorite cat was a feral stray

who had to be tamed. She scratched

& bit him many times before

he became her trusted feline love.

In his mid-seventies he was struck by

congestive heart failure. He

could only sleep while sitting up.

They gave him six months to live.

During that time, he opened to music.

I would sit on his bed & sing to him.

On the day he died, I played him asleep.

It was the last thing he heard.

As his son, I inherited his carving tools.

I also got his uncompleted carvings.

Over the years, I finished some of them.

Others were thrown away, but I kept

the tools, just in case I might find

some wood badly in need of a shape.

Wings (2018)

The ocean cannot be contained,

but it can be heard inside a small shell.

Stars we named after ancient Gods

enter & depart in a dream.

They reverberate through

our collective neurons,

back beyond the big bang,

to an infinitesimal compact

of impacted selves,

their endings encoded in

expanding beams of energy.

We move toward the unknown,

blind in every dimension

but our poor human senses.

It’s time to pack our weary trunks

for a much colder climate,

to share each other’s warmth

like stranded survivors of an avalanche.

Molecules material but mortal,

beam to black space as errant waves,

each atom alone but connected,

quarking indeterminate but immanent.

Sweet orgasmic magic of our imaginations

plays on all the pages & stages of our days.

We take a break for the sake of sanity,

as they speak to us, through us & for us.

Then we cast them into the frozen fire,

transformed again into invisible wings.

Open Season (2018)

November has come & gone

& the lake across the street

from my old stone house

is happy to be left alone,

except for twenty seagulls

that float far from shore.

My canoe sleeps hull up,

sleek in the cold morning rain.

It’s been raining all week,

but the nights are good sleeping,

beneath warm blankets,

with the window opened

just a little, like my heart

in this season of slumber.

First Best (2018)

*for Joe DiLorenzo*

We found each other on the first day

of Kindergarten. Happy gravitational

chemistry drew us together. We

laughed with & at each other

for twelve years, until H.S. graduation.

I remember the fun we had

in Elementary School, the times

we hid out on the playground

& refused to go back to class after

recess, or later when you & Phil tried

to launch a rocket but only succeeded

in scorching your parent’s garage door.

We went from Debate Nerds to cool

when you got your Mustang.

I remember your flight lessons, how

I’d accompany you to the airport

& watch you take off & land. I

always admired your bravery, but you

were never afraid to leave the ground.

I remember Senior year. We sold

tuxedo rentals for your Dad. We got

into trouble when a cop stopped us

for an open container that was only

a carton of chocolate milk.

After school, most of us boys went

into the service. The Vietnam Era. I went

Coast Guard & you joined the Air Force.

You were always wind to my water, before

life’s storms blew us away from each other.

High School Reunion (2018)

*"If you wait by the river long enough,*

*the bodies of your enemies will float by.*"

– Sun Tzu

Outside the little building

where my 50th reunion was held,

I saw the ghost of the girl I loved

throughout my H.S. years.

A man about my age

stood in front of the door

smoking a guilty cigarette.

“Are you a former classmate?” I asked.

He wasn’t, but he went to school

with my old girlfriend.

He knew her real name.

As I entered the crowded room,

she was with me again.

Although we were all the same age,

it no longer looked that way.

A man I’ve known since childhood

had the colorless bend of old age.

I hoped the class bully would be in bad shape,

but he looked younger than the rest of us.

I remembered the time he sucker-punched me

when I beat him at ping-pong.

His hair was long and full, his posture straight.

He tried to connect but no one spoke to him.

He hovered on the outskirts

where he talked to the smoker

who didn’t go to our school.

The girl who developed too early

was there with her husband.

She looked like a woman in the 9th grade,

but at 68 she still looked a young 50.

Genes seem to have their own agenda.

The mean girls hadn’t changed.

They gossiped in loud whispers

about the former valedictorian

who had started a mission school

in Bangladesh. She had a tall smile

& a jolly husband. She was attractive.

The mean girls weren’t. “She was

such an ugly duckling in school.”

declared one makeup-muddied malcontent.

A former perky cheerleader

buzzed around the noisy room,

flying between groups, pollinating,

just as she’d done in high school.

A man who had been a snobby jock

looked grumpy, tired & overweight.

The “good guys” that survived

were as good as they were before.

An old friend from childhood adored

his grandsons, was married forty years,

& owned his own company.

My first best friend still made me smile.

We had laughed & joked

through 12 years, together.

He was still married

to his high school sweetheart.

They had two sons.

Other faces evoked gusts of wind

that carried dusty feelings.

We spoke of the missing & the dead,

of cancer, heart attacks & AIDS,

& remembered little incidents

that we thought we’d somehow lost.

Fifty years used to seem

like a very long time, but now

I think the only distance exists in the mind.

Cruel April (2018)

The snow is gone for another year.

I take down the bird feeders.

As soon as I leave

four blue jay brothers blow in.

Not finding what they want,

they fly off, sudden as they arrived,

squawking their raucous war cries.

A swift red squirrel skitters by,

snags a stray sunflower seed,

& retreats up the trunk

of a maternal white pine.

Last, the sparrows arrive.

They’re hungry, & they settle down

to scratch & search for seeds.

I hope the hawks stay away.

Shorelines (2018)

6AM morning campfire, orange

firing up the dawn. Fresh

green spearmint by a clear

stream. Water flows from

cold springs to feed the blue

lake. Minnows gather in

curtains of light. A ski boat

circles, sending waves to smash

the shore, throwing light

skyward, projecting brief

rainbows. Weeds grow from

cracks in an old pier. Rusted

steel upangles from white

sand. Two old dogs play at

waters edge, puppies

at heart. A whoosh of wings

pumps over the lake: white

swans in explosive flight. Down

flutters down to float

on a fluid surface. Boats

sit at tilt on a pebble

beach. A seagull worries

a dead fish, its eyes

long gone, sockets staring at

a sky that stretches out

over clueless cities, by seas

that birth tidal waves aimed

at distant shores, where

campfires blink innocent eyes.

Spring Dawn (2018)

Dawn sneaks up on me while I sleep.

Old romances arrive by dream train:

Wind swirls black silk to dance & sway

Seductively beside my old bed.

All night long, loud wind & pelting rain

Lulled me into the other place

& countless blossoms were blown free.

Suddenly awake, I hear explosions:

Crows have come to chatter & argue.

They like to occupy my garden gate.

Only the birds use it these days.

Why worry about the warring world

When I am unmoored & drifting free,

Miles away from familiar shores?