Dream Driving

Don Russ

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Florida-born poet Don Russ has taught writing, literature, and film at Kennesaw State University, the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Louisiana State University. His poems have appeared in The Antigonish Review, New Orleans Review, Poems, Southern Humanities Review, Poetry Northwest, Xavier Review, and many other periodicals both in this country and in Canada and England. He is also the author of the chapbook Adam's Nap (Billy Goat Press, 2005). Recently retired from teaching, he now lives and writes in the Atlanta area.

Don Russ’s Dream Driving is, in the great spiritual tradition of Western poetry—deeply Platonic, as it explores how we are all dream driving in this life while trying to believe ‘the dream that the dream is not a dream’. Even if that dream is a lie, a delusion, or a fading hope, we have art like Don Russ’s own elegantly articulated vision to comfort us in the here and now. “However Heaven goes, the song’s our reason / to sing—now as long ago in Eden.”

Andrew Hudgins, Poet
Ohio State University

I have been an admirer of Don Russ’s poetry for almost two decades, and Dream Driving is a welcome and long-overdue volume. These poems refuse the easy cynicism of so much contemporary poetry. Instead they are big-hearted and, in their own quietly insistent way, life-affirming.

Ron Rash, Poet and Novelist
West Virginia University

Don Russ’s Dream Driving is no typical first book of poetry. These poems are mature and beautifully crafted. The sensibility here is Southern, as is the landscape, but these poems reach far beyond the American South. They are wonderful evocations of all the mystery and astonishment we feel when confronted with the beauty, pain, and profundity of the original dream.

David Bottoms, Georgia Poet Laureate
Georgia State University

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"Don Russ not only tests his own language against itself and against his experience, but he also draws upon strong traditions in poetry—the requisite rigorous thought, metaphor-making, and commitment. In his poems a powerful commitment to saying not only what is true but also what matters, to saying things that are accurate and significant... [I]n the very best sense, his commitment is to art, to art as it unfolds—even tears at but again unfolds—the categories of our daily existence as we reinterpret them, often years later, using instruments that are identified by, and are given their characteristics by the pressures of tradition, the crucible of self-reflection, which may be the most heated of all for such a poet as Russ, and the crucible of honor."

Robert W. Hill
Professor of English
Kennesaw State University

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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More praise for Don Russ’s *Dream Driving*:

It takes a strong heart and a confident technical skill to craft poems like these where the official stories of family and friendship are challenged and rewritten in the service of a deeper intimacy. “Heart must hold its place / in flight and find in falling— / yes, a colder grace,” Russ writes in “Wife at Window.” Reading these beautiful poems, I feel inclined to believe that grace is the state we create with every heartfelt risk.

Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Poet and Scholar
Appalachian State University

A book full of this much healing can change us. “The halt, the goitered, the gummy-eyed blind.” This is the “wedge of heaven” Don Russ chooses. He loves it all to mending, and he does it beautifully, patiently.

Austin Hummell, Poet
Northern Michigan University
Dream Driving
In Memory of My Mother
and surely it is not a melancholy conceite to thinke we are all asleepe in this world, and that the conceits of this life are as meare dreames to those of the next, as the Phantasmes of the night, to the conceits of the day. There is an equall delusion in both, and the one doth but seeme to bee the embleme or picture of the other; we are somewhat more than our selves in our sleepes, and the slumber of the body seemes to bee but the waking of the soule.

Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*
I thank Bob and Jane Hill, Brent and Angela Martin, Cheryl Stiles, Amy Whitney, and John and Dede Yow, all important readers of my poems over the years. I thank Linda Tucker, who not only always said to me how much she liked my poems, but when the time came, proposed to KSU Press their publication. And finally and especially I thank Bob Hill, the acuity and generosity of whose advice have meant more to me and my writing than he is likely to have been able to guess.
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Foreword

Don Russ is a poet and a gentleman, but his gentilesse is steeled by a relentless pursuit of what is true and accurate. Jane Hill calls his poems both “incredibly well-crafted” and “genuine.”

As with all poets of any stature, Russ is a diligent, respectful miner of memory. But of course we all dig into memory from time to time. Testing it against language that we bring to that task is the work of the poet. Don Russ not only tests his own language against itself and against his experience, but he also draws upon strong traditions in poetry—the requisite rigorous thought, metaphor-making, and commitment.

In his poems is a powerful commitment to saying not only what is true but also what matters, to saying things that are accurate and significant. He is not a political poet; that’s not where his particular energies lie. For, in the very best sense, his commitment is to art, to art as it unfolds—even tears at but again unfolds—the categories of our daily existence as we reinterpret them, often years later, using instruments that are identified by, and are given their characteristics by the pressures of tradition, the crucible of self-reflection, which may be the most heated of all for such a poet as Russ, and the crucible of honor.

More than for any public display, he works to honor human experience and to honor those who have been part of that experience with him. So words like commitment and truth are, for Don Russ, inextricable from words such as beauty. And music.

His passion for the glorious voices of Leontyne Price and Jessye Norman, his emotional stamina to devote TV time with me to watch the entire Seattle Opera Ring Cycle, his meticulous dedication to learning and re-learning piano music in tribute to his childhood piano teacher—are all of a piece with much traveling to art museums, loyalty to friends, discernment in food and pottery, affection for both his finest crafts—teaching and poetry.

A genuine man. The best poet I know who, before now, had no book.

—Robert W. Hill
Professor of English, Kennesaw State University
Dream Driving—the title just about says it. Life is a journey. It has its dream-like stages and stops, its turns, and—in the dark—its apparitions, visions, and revelations. The journey itself is in some ways a dream, a sleep-wandering among the labyrinths of the mind, of the imagined world, of even the “real” world. What can we finally know for sure? Do we not at least partly create what we see in the act of seeing it? Do poets and artists not?

A great many of the poems are concerned with literal journeys of one kind or another, some of them as small as a confused young son’s walking a wooded lot with his father or a grown son’s anxiously showing his aging mother the way to her nursing home’s dining room. Some of them are as illusory as a momentary sensation of driving into the cloud-world of some apocalyptic Florida sunset. All of them seem to me somehow significant, and some of them are as large and archetypal (not to say not still intensely personal) as Odysseus’s or Jacob’s or Jonah’s wandering involvement in the destinies of nations. I begin Section I, though, with a personal dream journey, a night journey—literally a nightmare’s playback of a hellish night scene from childhood—and then take up journey after journey, vision after vision along the way, all of them involving childhood and family.

Later, in Section II, the journeys are perhaps even more inward, the vistas more deeply interior, taking place as often as not in the chambers and passageways of memory and dreams, an occasional glimpse of other, outer worlds notwithstanding. Poems there allude to the great underworld journeys of past literature, and many of them at the same time deal with matters of isolation and personal relationships. I have never forgotten that in Orpheus Descending Tennessee Williams has his underworld drifter/musician say that we are sentenced to solitary confinement inside ourselves (though—later, in Section III—I allow my own re-invented Eurydice to choose her final journey, her separation from Orpheus, and to return to the underworld).
Section III is more concerned with the end of the journey and what if anything the journey finally means. The section has its share of allusions to resurrection, however ironic some of them may be, and there among a scattering of poems specifically dealing with cemeteries and death lies the book’s greatest concentration of allusions to Platonic shadows, Pauline dark glass, and Homeric descents. The book’s title appears in a late poem, where questions regarding the end of the journey are left unanswered: “the end?—what end?” (as the voice in the head of the dream driver might be understood as taking over and almost defiantly asking). Seen from some ultimate, metaphysical point of view—that point where physics and the final (?) nature of the universe are indistinguishable from metaphysics—there is perhaps no imaginable end, only the endless reblooming of everything.

Don Russ
Marietta, GA
Here

If he could live again, even my father would not deny it.

—Oedipus at Colonus

It’s gray here where day can’t make it
or make much difference if it could.
It’s always now. And the placelessness
is gray too, for place is how it feels
to be there wherever it is: old mistakes
take hold, faces come again—guilts,
nameless illnesses of my soul.

We’re in the Chevrolet it seems.
My father is driving and the three of us—
my brothers and I—are in the back,
packed in. We’re moving to another town.
My wrathful father is alive again
and we’re moving to another town,
another house, another dark street
somewhere up there in the dark ahead.

But Mother up front with him
is glad: it isn’t true some dream she’s had,
us grown and him dead. I alone
seem to know. Blood crashes in my head.
I know. Wheels turning, the slow miles
burning under us, my father holding
his flashlight’s dimming light to the road,
cursing an infernal August night—
I know this is the dream and try to cry out.
He turns to me then. Black with stopped
blood the face turns and it says again,
“Look, Donny—the moon. The moon is up.”
In the Driveway

Like leaves themselves the kids
go scuttling up the street—one or two
at a time, quiet, brightly clothed
against November.

The week’s debris
of yellow leaves has mostly blown away,
and when the kids have gone
I get the paper.

Even wet leaves have blown away,
leaving shadows of leaves, the ghosts
of maple leaves in stone,
echoes of dead stars.
Once when our father took us walking,
took us each by the hand, his sons, one for each
of his unaccustomed hands, we walked into the woods
and walked and walked. It was afternoon I think

and the pine trees moved above us in the high blue sky
of our childhood. Somewhere a woodpecker—there would
have been a woodpecker—tat-tat-tatted at the sleepy edges
of our attention. We knew a painted-wood one too

you pulled a chain to tap at the wooden frame
of our dark front door. All this is like a dream now,
this and what then happened. We came to a house.
At the end of the woods we came to a dark house

and the house was ours. Was it not?
And was it not our mother stood there looking out
across the clothesline like someone I should have known?
I looked at my father then, at someone

who looked like what I thought my father looked like,
and I knew not to speak. I would have asked him “Who are we?
Where have we been?” I would have asked him “Why?”
But I knew myself he could not speak.
fauns

Once More for Mrs. Andrews: “Les Sylvains”

Hers is Church Street,
Methodists across, Baptists and Presbyterians
blocks west. I walk.

In the afternoon we sit there.
In the cool dim living room of her house
she counts, I labor down
to a place she marked last week.
Or in the quiet she writes: faster now, think
in groups of three, soft.

Soft! The fauns!—or is it
where fauns have passed? The shadows dappling
after? Something. Something happens

as she plays. Like this, she says.
That widowed preacher’s wife, so old,
her only son long dead: like this!

My breathing turns to leaves,
the lighted world as green and sad
as laughter far away.
For a while I was a butterfly
in my grandmother’s garden. And then
I skipped into the garden next door.

Oh look, I heard Miss Summers say,
and I skipped and made my wings bump.
Oh mother, come look, there’s a lovely
yellow butterfly in our garden. I loved
Miss Summers and her mother.

They stood tall and sweet in their doorway,
her mother saying, Mr. Butterfly, come in,
you must. Come see. We have some lovely
new things to show you.

Everything about them—their rooms,
their clothes—was always lovely and new.

Then my sister screamed.
He’s in my pageant costume! Mother!
My May Day costume! You made it for me!
I’d wanted her to make it for me.

From her bedroom my grandmother called,
and I knew she’d tell Daddy. I started to cry.
It was her old ugly house, her son.

Later Miss Summers would say to me,
wingless at her door, bring me in a violet—
the sweetest blue violet you can find.
Had they been spooned
into cups of vinegar and blue
food color?

Into pink and green?

Had their shells been punched
some swirly purple load
of rooster juice?

That is, baptized? Booster-shot
some god-like father’s distant hue?

Or had their mothers
been stunned to that clucking
mother-grace by chunks of rainbow
from the sky?

On the sidewalk outside
McCrory’s I couldn’t have asked,
my basket that full of glory,
those glory-babies mine.
Front-wheel drive or not it seemed
foolhardy to me, the suburban ark
you required—back-loading for big pictures
and any street-side sofas you saw to pick up—
spinning, skidding down from Lindbergh
in a sort of Currier and Ives nightmare
with of course no Yankee tire chains
this far South. I was the hardy fool.

You got it there and got me back
and I was the one with ice-backed blacktop
left to go alone, disembarked as I was
the far side. I stood at sea there, sweating,
steadying my unbelief, not thinking then
that any water I’d try to walk again
would have to be that hard to stand up on,
that white, a tide packed gray and in places
slicked to glass black enough to sink
my heart in. And I’d have to try.

Picturing, I’d still have to try: pelvic bowl,
ghostly thighbone with its four bright pins
harpoon-tipped, toothed like bits digging in—
sticks, sockets, the rattled cage so strangely
empty of me. Complications, old age, pain:
I’d still have to try. Baby again:
Daddy had to call and call
before I’d come. And if I don’t know this
to hold the grudge, I know my mother does:
my turning, letting go the gate
he’d hung me to, and sooner than I wanted
stepping out.

But here, now,
no hands held out demanding
and in a minute not even you to see.
Just me on two feet freezing,
seeing how simple, how quick it could be,
skiing, skating, staying up—that graceful
footed falling of us all.
A Little Visit

In Memory of the Missionary Widow Shute

Nice boys, polite,
so quiet we might be allowed
a glimpse? For our instruction?
A little visit?

She couldn’t help but notice,
you know. So many parents don’t
train their children up in the way
they should go.

And us so cute, too.
You never never know the seed
you sow, falling on good ground:
the young, she grins—

not upon rock. Her grin
widening just for me. Her room
feeling tomb-like, its two windows
too high. Now let’s see:

down the sides the brownish
yellow photographs of stones,
of hatted ladies, veils swept back—
of men in whiskers

standing in the dust
of holy lands. Dug up, enshrined
behind glass, a crumbling sun-
baked brick,
broken clay, clay bowls,
all of it the same to me, the same
pale color of the past, the color
of ash, of faded paper

sky. Outside
I wait till I’m afraid again
then race through deserts of light
to my mother’s side.
The Bachelor Tells a Family Story

My aunts—my mother, too, and she was too young to remember—all of them always said that as soon as the creek went down he headed out. Now I might wonder about it, how days, how even a week had left them in such need. Maybe it’s how they wished to remember it, how I want it to be.

I see them, the hungry children, their mother standing still young in a cabin door and, when he’s out of sight, not waiting but watching for him, the children at some solemn play. But this story isn’t about father back from town. Not yet. It isn’t about what happens next. It’s about me.

When I hear my great-grandmother come singing down the other side, see her come singing out upon the black flood, her great bared feet finding their blind way out along the fallen tree, her great apron before her filled as with food for the children of the world, I know that the story has an ending now. and the end is me.
The ladies are waiting, not waiting, for lunch, some of them blubbing, some tied up. Unnoticed

Mother stops among them. It’s coming, she comforts. It’s coming, it’s coming. And slowly

passed, their afghans, their angled footrests at last behind us, I ask can she find the dining room alone.

She stops again. What month is this? I ought to get out and pick us a mess of poke greens.

It’s December, Mother. Remember? It’s Christmas. I’m leaving soon. Can you find the dining room alone?

She looks small and lost in her walker. You don’t go yet, do you? Don’t go.

We rest and I turn us toward the dining room. She says she ought to pick her sister some, too.
Habits of love outlast
the love. Not the love exactly but life
the love once crowded in.

Tomorrow she may be surprised
to see me and days from now not know
I’ve come and gone. And even

unknown to her I know I’d return.
At lunch I’m telling her she mustn’t stay
so much in her room

when in some new contentment
she begins: I prayed for you, you know,
and I know what she’s going to say.

When the others came
I was praying for a girl. But not you. You
were my prayed-for son.

And when they showed you to me
I thought you looked so ugly and long.
Even your fingers looked long.

But all I knew was it was you.
She forgets to tell me how beautiful
I became, how soon. I let her go.

Even if she forgets me
I can see she’s my mother and know
it was me.
People used to pick them
in spring, in early summer. We did
when we were kids,

and later when I was home
Mother and I would drive into the country
and fill the back seat with leaves.

Spring tonic, she’d say—
your Indian grandma’s: boil them and pour
the poison off.

And later still
they came from the deep-freeze and always,
to our amusement, at Christmas,

boxes of frozen poke greens
boiled again, brothers joking with sons
how backward we were back then.

The boxes gave out
before dinners at the house and now
we’re closing the house.

She turns
from her untouched tray
and smiles my way.
By the time she got back to the car
I’d cried my hands full of snot and slobber.
She cleaned me up and mother that she was
did something which must have startled even her.
She marched us back inside the tent. Not
to our seats, not to hide ourselves in that sea
of faces waiting to see how heaven moved,
but up front. She lifted, someone hauled me up
and back to sit above her on the stage.

Then we waited. What she thought about it all,
the halt, the goitered, the gummy-eyed blind
who turned their anxious ears our way—
what she thought about the great man himself,
disturbed at that greater work, I don’t know.
I don’t know now what I thought. He came though
and knelt, held my head in his hands. He said
to God what she wanted said. And when I felt
his hands and the man himself behind me, his heat,
his words, the hurting stopped. If let down,
standing again in sawdust, I felt it start again
it wasn’t bad. Mother kept my hand.

Ice cream paid for, lights of a late-night market
islanding behind us, we rode into the dark.
We didn’t speak. We were headed home at last.
And out there past the last black field, in the place
we always waited to see, a little airport’s searchlight
searched and searched among the under-clouds.
Don’t look back, God said.

And God’s old skinny hand came down and there she was, Lot’s wife—a saltshaker Mrs. Bearden had pinched from the old-folks dining room.

She leaned back satisfied. We kids had always done our part believing her silver powder-box a king’s sweet-smelling house and all the rest: little David’s shelf of what-not sheep come sniffing at the baby in the hay, a powdery mirror turned sea you walked or cut in half to make your getaway.

Obedience, she reminded us, smoothing the green-felt plain before us—o-bee-dience. Oh, yes, there were lessons at that picnic table down behind the old-folks home. There was life to think about.

But we ignored the world around us, the pine trees, piled-up summer clouds, and smiled above the little one we’d made.
Lovers Lane

Once equipped with knowledge of the dynamics that occur along this “edge of chaos,” scientists should, in theory, be able to explain the origin of all patterns in all systems—galaxies, stars, planets, genes, bacteria, plants, animals, ecosystems, social systems, stock markets.

—Langdon Winner, “If You Liked Chaos, You’ll Love Complexity”

Day—dark day beneath trees,
a day with its own cold faraway
moon—and two kids. This begins
an old story, theirs

but mine, I think, and yours.
It isn’t a love story. The lovers
have been and this is the noon
of a winter day.

But one, the one in front,
says to the other, “This way,”
and they push into the labyrinth
of tracks, back

into ruined woods.
They pass cans, pass the flattened
fruit-like skins, the brittle
blooms. “This one’s new,”

he says, “it’s juicy,”
and kicks it at the other’s head.
And when he’s stopped and dropped
his bike

he unbuttons the moon
of his white belly. “I’ll go first.
OK? I’ll show you first, then you
can be the man.”
He doesn’t pant and the moon-
white bead of dew which brims
between them they don’t understand.
Daylight, night

coming: they don’t need
to understand. The road going out
the other side a road again:
they go. They are,

we are ourselves,
the endless world, the blind,
the blundering wide world’s
endless need to be.
The Missing Chum:
Retired, the First Ned Remembers River Heights

No longer will boyfriend Ned Nickerson be a mere escort. No longer will the ever popular 18-year-old be single-minded in her pursuit of villains and thieves. Nancy Drew has joined the '80s.

—Tami Dennis, "Nancy Drew Investigates Case of the Modern Teenager"

As in a dream I know the way.
Or maybe it’s just that any way I go must get me there. And there like something seen before—some early summer morning dream I’ve dreamed before—the world in its secrecy and light: blue sky, a curve of river turning bright beneath a green horizon, a little river road forever rounding on a view of town I’ve always known will be there.

Beyond the tilt of continental silence her father’s train comes sweeping out of sleep across the plains. She waits, her smile begun. His playful kiss, his exclamation of amazement at the mystery he’s missed—these are her true and only motivation and then she can begin. Then one mystery end and another one begin, the day turn whisper-dark down larkspur lanes, girlfriends motor out and try a darker door. Then the maps, the hidden stairways, the passwords to forbidden dens they didn’t need me to see them to.

I wait too—and wait and wait. And as happily as I do Hannah Gruen waits—somewhere at the straight and dustless heart of order stands and waits.
For half a second some disgusting something, 
hide, scrap of brown rug—I try not to look too close. 
Black meat, nothing strung out. Nothing blue 
buzzing, ballooning in the sun. No laughing jaws. 
Not bad. With grass and lavender flowers again 
I let my breath go. The windows were up.

After he found a rabbit popped at the curb 
Bobby—the baby—quit drinking his tomato juice. 
He screamed even seeing dogs cross the street— 
our dogs, anybody’s, once two together oblivious 
or half oblivious to traffic, caught in some crazy 
eight-legged shamelessness I couldn’t understand. 
They made it and he was okay, but Mother driving 
ever said a word. I didn’t ask again—not ever. 
And then I knew. I thought I knew.

Years later with a woman I thought I knew 
I started out of one of those gridded green suburbs 
of Miami and it all came spilling back, my brother, 
the uncertainty, some inexplicable thrill of guilt. 
It was a pack of dogs I saw bobbing, boiling up 
over the green edge of a ditch and out into the street. 
And as I watched not able not to, the bitch 
crumpling under the car ahead, dragged down, 
her one sharp yelp cut off. It was my breath cut, 
my heart large against my throat. The stragglers 
began ducking away, but one big one in front 
was still coming, pushing himself up behind
his nose as we passed, rump-end pumping, shoving into the air as if it would get there first. “Animals are disgusting,” she said in awhile, and meant men. I thought she meant me.

2

There was this friend of ours who showed us his dad’s old stags, half a dozen of us, just kids half-triggered, gathered in the dark afraid. The one I remember was of one old stripper long since dead and even then, in the scratchy bleached-out placelessness of our makeshift screen, a shadow of imagined lust. No sound, no story, just smiles and shadowy heaves and thrusts and the part which we knew was coming, the part with the men. She was down then and the men moved in, ordinary men, men who might have been our fathers. White and paunchy unheroic fathers of ordinary mortal sons. She smiled one black-lipped splitting smile whatever they did.
Mummy of Child or Dwarf, 
With Mask

No Disney princess this—and not asleep. Whatever it is it’s dead. Whatever it was. Its new glass casket so clean, so creepily matter-of-fact it looks like some movie sicko’s kitchen tabletop: sticks of bone poked up through tarry rags of skin and swaddling, dark hair still there.

And what am I, bending above the crib? Gourmand of mausoleums? Kiddie ripper? For sure no prince with a resurrection kiss. This is matter past cure or any caring.

“Fifteen minutes, sir. You’ll need five to find your way out.” And from a deeper room, his voice dimmer: “Fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes.” Alone again, I stare.

Atop the cranial egg cracked off its jaw, across the blackened face, the blackened parasitic lids, the beak through which with loving hooks they pulled the brain like boogers, beauty painted whole and new looks back with hopeful open eyes.
I wander from room to room
in my head as sometimes
I’ve wandered through houses,
past walls of pictures, walls
with windows like pictures,
each its own still mystery
of world outside.

Head is house and body
is house. Houses themselves
are somehow me, the walls of me.
In dreams the ceilings leak,
the drains back up. Rooms
go cold with dread.

Down on a sloping floor
I build my Christmas-card house
but, even lighted, the room
can frighten me at night.

Which is the story inside
and which is the story I’m in?

In a picture above the bed
the yellow house looks empty
in this empty yellow light.
It isn’t here. It isn’t even now. It’s east of here tomorrow: white light in strings and globby beads shot there and sinking in a sea of green air, the sea floor of streets beneath it blossoming suns—

gorgeous really. A dream. But in stutterings of silence not as much as that. My mind is as empty as the emptiness I imagine is the mind of God.

Dust of Akkad and Ur, dust of everything, of things to come, my dust: in this grainy sea light I’m nothing. I drown.
After the News

I feel my way into the hall,
the space all wrong, doors—where space
is even framed by doors—
misplaced.

I feel the floor stand up.
On hands and knees I creep out over
midnight sky. And then my bedroom shines,
my tree-house leafy streetlight
breathes in place.

I get up laughing and lie
where you would lie, where I
would call outside your wall of sleep and wait
and make you laugh at me again.

The sheets are cool.
I close my eyes and let my shadow
self swoop down and skim
my shadow sea.
Morning Call:
In Another Part of the Garden

He was asleep he knew
or half-knew, rooting aimlessly
in lascivious pink sheets.

But backed-up among the pillows
he was able to say, “I was thinking of you.”

Leaf light had slatted through,
but the room was still cool and she sounded
as close as close beside him.

“I was,” he said. “I was thinking hard.”

When she laughed he was back.
He heard mockingbirds—his and then
at her end hers. They started to work
one song inside his startled head.

He hung up. Ready or not
he had to man the world again.
I hear the gold-red
rooster-call of sunrise and smile:
it’s I who make the day.
I open my eyes.

Leaf-stars, fishes, feathers
in the deep already-feathered air.
The shapes, the danced substantiations
of light. They’re mine.

I move. I paint. I creep
among the creeping things I’ve named
and made a place. I rest
in branchy green.

In time will come the moons
and spangled dust of moths, gigantic
fumblings of a summer night,
blue fiery fugue of night.

I’ll know. I’ll hold
these worlds inside my head
and somehow know. The universe
is just a room.
White on White

1

White pig bigger than I had imagined—
white butterflies I hadn’t imagined, slapping
about its sleeping head: pig dream,
pig itself in flight.

2

Spring night, spring’s old light
still holding white in the cold white heads
of plum above us.

I don’t try to speak. I don’t see,
don’t need to see your face. I feel inside
the ghostly clothes the only you I know.
I feel, I know you feel, my weight,
my clumsy blood come up again.

Settling among roots
you let me buck and shove
until I’m through.
3

Chalk moon, the fallen ash
of leaves beneath a white-skinned tree:
the smoky romantic flash—and after that
the mathematics of bone.

4

The same straight snowfall
at all windows so slow, so steady
it seems the numbness in the world’s one matter
coming close, these rooms a few
last thoughts.
Room Inside

I’ve always loved a room
inside another room, a still one,
a shadow box, and the flick
of goldfish in a bowl.

Castles I stacked to see
their sandy ruin, the cards’ collapse.
Sometimes dollhouse windows
into silence,

a stereoscope’s old quiet
yellow dread. I love at night
your head next to mine, inside mine
inside yours. I dream

Alaska in glass balls
and bluebird honeymoons,
dovecote hotels. A snow-white
traffic back and forth,

a singing, a wingy
flutter in what might be, just be,
the big blue mind of God.
Accommodation

As like a shell as it was, as like the rim of an empty shell just tilted into noon or a plume upon blue stillness, some ghostly fruit unstemmed and dimming there, the moon was soon enough the moon.

And the sun went down not round but pumpkin-shaped and pumpkin-colored, its unintended fence—as it seemed—antennae. As it seemed. And it ended that way if even ending wasn’t what it meant.

Stars twinkled. In the dark the spaces declared the spaciousness of space. And in the mended carapace of our intentions we prepared a pair of TV-rerun dreams and dreamed them unfazed.

However Heaven goes, the song’s our reason to sing—now as long ago in Eden.
Leafed with feathers, loud with feathered fruit, a tree of blackbirds rises into air. It seems the tree itself can’t last—tree of smoke the winter wind will blow away.

She knows each day is the day she makes today. Heart must hold its place in flight and find in falling—yes, a colder grace.
There are crows on Snow Hill,
real crows like those she would have seen.
And we imagine her sad face and think
that if she sees, she sees her garden green—

not them, not us among the autumn ruins.
Moving shadows, intruders in a dream,
we stop beside the black pool and look back:
no one at that window now.

In still rooms we have sometimes heard
her wind chime. We have seen the blue glass
wings of the butterfly spun among motes
of early Sunday morning sun.

We have seen ourselves in yellow
mirrors. Whispering, we have wondered
if some of sadness is the happiness
of others yet to come.
It comes to this anyway, separate beds, separate bedrooms, stepping off into our separate cellars at death. It’s sometimes even nice, my nest my own now, my smell, my slow soiling, my body coiled into itself like a seashell. At the bottom of a sea of white sleep my body coiling, uncoiling. I’m the sea’s sloped shelf sometimes. As I slip into my sleep my fingers feel like fingers of land, my lips like cliffs the fish drift down in clouds. Strange it isn’t now I dream of touch, of love, but at waking. And even then as much the touch of strangers as one I’ve known, seen in streets their bodies pressing, fleshing out their breath of clothes, men and women, children flowering in innocent skin. Love like blood shoots hot behind my ribs and fills my fingertips. I thumb
their hips. I root their collars
back and kiss their fragile collar-
bones to light. I taste the daylight
body’s tainted hope.

2

I’ve imagined that breathing knot,
that heap of bodies sleeping one sleep,
brother with brother grunting—
sisters, cousins: snug

in one another’s dream, one
autumn dream of undiminished sun
and the endless rut among one’s own kind.
And imagined the one

first come to, himself among kin,
his separate flesh still warm. One rising
from the dusty earth to see at last
the winter of the world alone.
In the belly of the black
it’s you who make the world
come back, dreaming you’re dreaming
your way back to Tarshish,

the sailor’s shouts fishing you up
from sea-deep dreams, his fingers
feeling in the steerage dark.
But this is now, spat blind

upon a burning beach, gasping
for your breath in an amniotic slop
of bile and brine. How now
the rest of life? What next?

Will you make your house
of leaves? And in the shade
stay to see the streets catch fire?
Every Ninevah must die.

2. Virtual Reality

Wired into new skin, eyes
visored for sky-wide dreams,
what am I free, what am I too afraid
to dream? I fly. I float

from the opened abdomens
of star boats, myself inside
my suit, inside my head. My ears
stopped, I hear music. I hear

my own slow breathing in the night.
Blond children snuffle in bed
and the monkey in my gut gets mean.
Mother groans.

I creep into stinking burrows
of lovers’ bones I keep. I sleep.
There’s nowhere isn’t waiting
made for me alone.

3. Painting the Cave

Done and come again
into the world of women and men,
mud of another world like old blood
upon us, upon our clothes,

we’ll dream in sleep.
Till then in this flickering room
our shadows dance and shadow
bison dance with us

in the only world we know.
When the dreamer of the world awoke
and dreamed no more, he left
the dreaming up to us.
Vermeer Interior

One of two rooms—rooms
with windows, rooms with views,
one presumes—and doorways
through which one sees indeed

still other rooms. And in it
the only world there is,
its light—Delft light—lighting
a dream he’s dreamed before:

table, textured red folds
of rug, old silver, a map at back
to show the world which used
to be—and standing

among them the woman
always home. No shadow, no
reflection suggests his presence.
Husband? Doting father?

Indifferent painter
of kitchen-maid charades in silk?
Whatever he is she’s there.
Whatever, she’s there.
Naked ladies,  
thumb-smudged pulpy pages of them.  
Will you look at that, he says.  
Yeah boy!

Something in his voice  
confuses me. I am looking:  
pretty ladies perfect  
in their pretty skin and hair.  
It’s his big-boy’s voice.  
Wanna put your nose in that?  
Huh? Huh?

I duck from under his hand  
and look again. They seem pleased  
in their world without men.

Okay, put it back.  
Grab a basket. They ain’t paying me  
to explain to babies.

They smile to themselves  
among dunes, against sky. They spill  
across pillows in rooms,  
their own silky rooms.
As if any
in that room of old women would do
I bent above the metal-sided bed. And always
the thoughtful son

had touched her,
said again that I had come,
when something about her shut eyes
stopped me. Something

about her frown,
her fretful baby’s brow too pink,
too stubborn to be hers.
“Mother?” I said.

Those pictures
pinned among the flowery cards—
were those my nephews? Nephews’ sons?
I looked around.

Were those my flowers
wilted, silly now in the understench
of endless lives? “Wake up!
Mother, wake up!”

And where was the calendar
I had sent? Silly conscientious me—
those soft-eyed lively kittens?
“Mother, it’s me!”

Someone Else’s Son
At night, the light
shining from behind us, we watch
the sleepy climblings of frogs
among heart-shaped leaves,
their glimmering
white bellies soft against the porch's screen.
And safe in your voice I feel
the darkness of the yard,
in my body the syllabled
lullaby you sing. Ba-o-bye, ba-by. Ba-o
bye-bye. I feel the breathing
of my brother
in your other arm
and, by and by inside,
my bed, my own quiet bed, its sides
pulled high.
I breathe.
I fly. I float
inside myself
alone.
She wouldn’t wake.
When she turned her face away
I knew my life was mine.
What use

a useful son?
What could I say or ever
have said or done?
I turned then—

free, too frightened
to speak—to see my mother,
gray and needy stranger
waiting in another bed.
Her wrists small and blistered with age, her hands—all wrong across the coverlet. Or right. She might be sleeping and I might have caused the frown just tightening about her eyes. Here, Mother, you can’t be comfortable. Here. Let me.

Shrunken beneath lilies, white orchids thick, fixed like clouds of waxy wings around her crib, she breathes.

We see it, we all agree. A trick of light. In this half-lighted room a trick of the eye and mind. As if to read another card

he’s found among the flowers my youngest brother squats between his own grown sons. He’s trying not to cry.

He was afraid of the shadow flapping behind him in the sun. At night he’d reach from his outgrown baby bed and hold my hand.
Now is all I have.
Here is all there is,
this flesh, these nerves,
queer dreams of him

come riding up,
blond god, and me
blond goddess of his need.
Lips flower,

our hooked bellies
strip and slip their seed.
I die, I breathe
for his return.

But a cloud house?
A battle call? One-eyed
father watching all,
all tender might?

Sister, oh
my sister. On this rock
of the world it’s my turn.
It’s my turn now.
Something snaps each night inside
the wall, west wall, cooling after afternoon sun.
Something snaps in me.

Called back into muscle and blood,
ready, bed itself thumping with my readiness,
I lie there eyes wide and know

what body knows: death is everywhere.
Soul floats free dreaming, but this is me
the body beast behind.

And something come bristling up
an afternoon in traffic, maddened at the sight,
some man ahead, some man too close

behind, stewing in his own
testosteronic stew: best man get there first,
get his, get off his best genetic shots

and leave no woman for the next.
That’s me too, I guess, evolution revving up
and wifeless me not even thinking

women now. I feel silly
inseam snagging, the lascivious shutters
in my eyes snapped back,

something dogged in me still
pumping out that glandular man’s perfume.
I feel old.
In the humblest parts and functions of our troubled dust
we know it most, the mumbling of the gated blood.
And hands and muddied heart in taking make
an adoration of such fumbled acts as must,
at least until the plumbing goes, the thumping flood
subsides and leaves us with just another ache.
With carnalest of eyes we seize the body’s white
desiring, with knees and thighs the belly’s second need.
The mouth which feeds us, mouth which tastes and tears
a carrion sufficiency of our numbered days, delights
to kiss and kissing even sings. If never freed,
our dreamings never cease unfolding on the air
the winged complicities of hope and lies, the schemes
of light—the dream that the dream is not a dream.
III
I dream even now strange dreams. In this strange land even my waking is a dream, my days a troubled sleep of heat and endlessly whitening sky, endless white streets. Waking I wait to see. I sleep. I sleep again. I eat. Somewhere, stone eyes wide, the strange gods sleep. I don’t know if life is what it seems, my sons old men, sons of my sons’ sons laid squalling across my knees. Sometimes all I hear is wind. Sometimes silence. Sometimes, walled in, I hear the Nile’s green slither to the sea they speak of. I wake again and wait. I have never seen the sea.

At the last what was I but a shadow among shadows in my father’s eyes? What was a son to him, one son, another, when his eyes had whitened into blindness? What was life? He waited and when his days came—nothing, an old man’s dream: gray shapes, one son’s name, another’s voice. Esau, is it you? he whispered. Esau? He could smell my brother in the clothes I wore. Esau? So soon? I leaned close in Esau’s clothes, in Esau’s smell of fields,
of blood, and kissed him, let his old man’s lips quiver in the wool she had tied at my wrists, along my arms and throat. Yes Father, back with your hunter’s supper as you asked. Old fool, what difference if he was pleased? I was the one deceived. When he blessed me, when my brother’s blessing was mine, my brother undone at last—when the laughter of our triumph rose in my mother’s throat—I wept. Hold me, I wept into his beard. Love me, Father. Love me!

3

I left them, lived among my mother’s people, east. It was easy. But the dreams had begun—and voices, lights: heaven let down, white light around my bed, strange men in blinding white skin skimming in the light. One of them once laid hold and naked made as if to try me. I woke crying out. Day had come and I stumbled on my way. My wedding night I dreamed my mother leaned in at the doorway laughing—and behind her my brother, brutish other half of me. I could see his feet. See? she said. See him? Smooth as a baby! I knew it was Esau tall behind her, silent. Even his feet were hairy. She laughed and together they were gone. With dawn I saw what all had known. The woman in my bed—lying wet-fleshed and open in our bed—was my Rachel’s sister. I left her sleeping, even my night with her a dream.
My smooth one, she always called me—
my beauty. Suckling unmatched sons,
the two of us at once, my mother knew
which pulled her heart, one dull, the other
too beautiful, born too full of rage to keep
Like some matted animal Esau lay fastened
at her breast already. She whispered to me then
and when my father’s longing for Esau pained me.
She soothed my young man’s pride. Wait,
my beauty, my smooth one, she whispered.
Wait and see.

And maybe—maybe somewhere
he still wakes, my brother. Maybe sleeps.
He in my place as I in his, the two of us
the same old man at last. Even Esau
must have dreamed and I soon sleep
the dusty sleep of beasts.
Out of nowhere
a lone crow walking,
all the emptiness of Arizona
sky behind it,

all the desert floor.
We stop and watch: walking
across the last asphalt yards
of parking lot,
past trash cans,
its great beak gaping
as if to speak. It follows us
partway down the walk.

Out at the end I grip
the rail and lean into the wind,
out above tumbled stone,
the lengthening

blue shadows,
as if I might read the signs
our guidebook said
we’d find,

as if even those
so long returned to burnt earth
might signal something
back to us.
We exhumed, we made you
human again. We hacked and scratched
away the frozen waste.

You lay there waiting,
not patient exactly, the doubt
in your opened mouth.

We’d expected indifference,
yours no less than ours. Instead
we loved you, bathed and touched your wounds.
Shy lovers, looked.

Thawed arms, dark thawed garments
pulled aside—you denied us nothing
breast or belly, belly’s twist of dark hide,

but kept that look of someone puzzled,
someone somewhere else, as if
we’d dragged your body back.

No hero—
but we had to know.

In old stories you might have been allowed
white hell and out some sudden realignment
of your own night sky.
It’s called a parkway now,  
the airport road, hot and dusty  
beside the quarry. You see the planes  
before you see the runways.

Waiting in traffic at traffic lights  
you can see the men themselves busy  
in air. And you think you can see  
what they see,  

the gutted hills, the landscape  
crisscrossed now and crusted white  
with shopping malls. Still, rising  
in the sun they seem free.

Behind the airport,  
beneath a remnant of their green,  
they’ve lain in peace for years  
and years.
New Earth

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

— The Revelation of Saint John the Divine

Clouds are great.
You can make them anything:
sheep’s clothes, castles, for God
a downy couch. A ladder,

angel traffic down
and back. Anything. Behold,
in fact, a bird—. A plane—.
No, one like the son of man

come vapor-trailing
clouds of glory. In Sanford, in a place
we lived in when I was six or seven,
I found a box of snapshots

of Jesus, of Jesus’ face
in whipped-cream cloud—same face
in hundreds of prints. I believed
in Heaven then.

It’s tricky but I can still
drive west on 470, some level stretch,
and if it’s sunset and the scraping
of the wind
is as hot and steady
as body’s blood and the ditch bugs
buzz like blood one steady buzz I can
tilt the earth and hold there

above new earth perfectly still,
oceans and intricate coasts of old light
spread out below me
Florida sky.
New Year’s Eve it snowed so much
some of us didn’t go home. I suppose it was the snow.
Next day I got up dead.

The garden out back had just begun to gray
and with daylight I could see down there among the twigs
a brittle crown of bird’s nest filled with snow.

I imagined the fish black shadows hung in ice.
Our host had told us his fish pond sometimes froze
enough his fish froze. In spring they would rise and pop
like sodden bulbs dug up again. Standing at the glass
I felt the sack of brains against my skull.

Others up, we laughed. I laughed.
Hunting the subway back I began to heave.
The streets had sunk beneath the snow.
King Street had. Even Sixth.
Our house flattened—that could happen and God be praised. Mama said our Father’s house would last.

I had pictured us in pews asleep. At midnight crashing glass, a blast of black wind and Jesus with his new-found lamb in pieces on the floor.

But down in holy ground was where she’d wait. We made the basement home, the rooms we’d known, those folding chairs, old leaflets, flannel board a little strange—like Sunday school at night alone.

I could see above us empty street and, when the end began, the streetlights fixed in rain: ghostly circles, ghosts in ragged skirts and sleeves of rain.
Somewhere among the paths,
the drying grasses, stands of some spindly
late October yellow flower, I stop.
The city’s sounds have stopped.

Up ahead a bird has stopped
atop an ancient gravestone—a mockingbird
as still itself, as gray, as stone.
It has turned the other way.

Nothing—. Shall I say it?
Nothing I do will make it sing or go away.
The yellow dying, like daylight,
lasts and lasts.
Behind their shadows on dusty glass
I see the leaves themselves, green
and deeper green: a million little wings
in wind, in stillness. A stiller sun
sinks yellow into afternoon.

Someone I know has died.
I lie here thinking into useless words
all this—for her, for me. I hear
my even breathing and close my eyes.
I feel my heartbeat’s dark mooring
in the tide of light.
Sea spray, the taste
of salt—things of this world
altered: the boatmen’s white sun
broken over wings,

the weightless footfall,
the fear. I’ve known them too:
the shining at a faded prow,
green silences of leaves.

Something comes—
in space, in ordinary time, unfurled
in burning morning-glory blue—
some sudden bit

of bigger truth.
Their sea birds wheeled. Their sea
went holy white. They tried to close
their boatmen’s eyes.

I want to be blinded.
In this patched Aegean stone,
this shadow room, I want to see
whole light.
Plato of the Morning Glories

For half the day blue flames
among the shadow leaves,
the shadow vines—sometimes
hundreds at a time,

all new. All as old
as worlds and every one the one
I knew when I stood, a child
beside a wall: wild blue

thing in my head,
blazing in my lungs and blood.
Breath of forever, heaven
in my dying brain.
The Rapture
For Lamar

I’d seen it, big silver-bellied shad
snatched into sunshine, as smooth, as newly still
as if beginning its breathless transmutation midair.
I hadn’t so much imagined

its shattered sky—seething white shock
of talons from some other sky—as felt myself its flight
once freed, streaming above the water grass
and cypressess. I felt new wings:

among my cracking ribs new ribs,
cold new clutchings at my lonely heart, new muscles
flooding, flaming into feathers at my back.
Above the dying of the lake,

above the shadow glass of only-now,
I rise in agonies of light.
His squatting, body bent, his arms between his knees: all awe—the mass of him balanced, the sackcloth fallen back from his awestruck face. This is the way it was. No halo, no congregation of bright-clothed birds, but here in bronze the hope and knowing all we’ll ever know.

Above the Waccamaw the April sun pulses in its distant heat. The oaks—these old, old planted rows of oaks—breathe morning. And set in heaviness of my own, I would answer yet. Would weep or even sing.

His hands fold over his dusty toes. His child’s eyes go wide. I scrape an empty dauber’s nest from a crevice of his hem and hear my winging down the great world’s great green now.
Out of nothing, out of shadowy green deeps
of steam and sunshine, the mockingbird now begins
his world’s improvisation.

And somewhere half there, half somewhere
inside my head, someone wakes as if to hear the end.
The end? he whispers in leaves—*the end*?

Speeding east in a stillness of sleep,
I see the tree. I see the great white hearts of bloom
which break and bloom again.
In deep green-scented heavens of evergreen
snowflakes make stars. And snow—like fields, whole fields
of heaven, white—lies deep beneath what seems
a deeper field, its stars an unannealed

and endless white-hot flowering of the icy blue.
Who but we have passage here?—and light and eyes
to see? In this mystery of winter worlds, who
but you and I the words to wonder why?
Eurydice Returns

The light dies, and the flowers—pale now and stemless—float as if on rising floods of night.

He’s tilting an empty bottle above his glass and I can just see his lips, the deepened purple sulking of his mouth.

“I’ve really missed you,” he sighs, beginning his recitation again, not looking. *His* loneliness, *his* empty house, *his* bed: nothing has changed. I stand and lift the jacket he spread for me. “Put this back on,” I say. A car glimmers at the curb—my car. At the end of a driveway, of a path back in fireflies and blue stars.
I can almost taste
the dreamy taste of pink and pale green,
of coconut in clouds of toasted snow.
It’s mostly show, I know—

something for the moment
sweet: crumb crust, the cream blown in
like sleepy angels’ heads, oh luscious
thoughts of nothing much at all.

Wet-green kiwi moons,
sliced fruit: we’re swirled in firmaments—
lemon moons, red berry moons,
the one big night’s white sky.

I think I’ll have my wedge
of heaven now—my scrumptious
little flight to nowhere.
I’ll buy it by the pie.
Without wings, not singing now,
you’ve come among us, unfamiliar flesh
but flesh the same, gray pieces
saved in laboratory trays,

your gathered brightness
trucked across the desert floor.
No matter now which cooling heaven
sped you here.

You’re just another
configuration of the under-dust,
you’re one of us. We’re in
our only world alone.
Come unbelted from the sea Odysseus
was something else, as any quick-eyed goddess
at the beach could see: gold-work curls and then
the golden hide, quite a lot of it, sodden but clean.
They buff up nicely, these beached heroes,
and O. Laërtiadês—his eye was wild to live.

And couldn’t he live who’d died once already?
Who’d in his very flesh known heaven? Several
times? In a lady’s sea-cooled cave couldn’t he croon?
They always heard it through, his sea song: cannibals
on the coast, currents sucking, certain sea birds
screeching out their lethal second verse.

He had it pat. They knew the happy ending
he was getting at and let him. Let him let them
stop his mouth with kisses, stop his howls and kiss
away his epic tears (one epic hip come somehow
working out those borrowed skivvies once again).

Homesick O. less lonely, deity praised: well?
No one was had, exactly. No one got off free.
The telling done, hot heart’s other tongue
run down for now, he snoozed another day away.
And Calypso? Lovely, lovely Calypso?
She smoothed his brightly crumpling brow and sighed
the tiny deaths she measures her forever with.

Happy Ending
It begins a dream, body’s
deep deep body-dream of touch,
of skin and breath, my flesh
impetaled in your flesh,

your dream perhaps my own
but only till the end, and then
the separate deaths. Breath
come back I dream again.

I dream I wake
and hear you say I’ve spoken
in my sleep. I wake. It’s you
who near me speak asleep.
“Fauns”: “Les Sylvains” is a work for piano by the now largely forgotten French composer Cécile Chaminade. The title has usually (although somewhat inaccurately) been translated in English as “The Fauns.”

“Lovers Lane”: Published on Valentine’s Day, Langdon Winner’s review of two books on complexity theory (a theory which could explain “the origin of all patterns in all systems”) does not mention the possibility of explaining the mysteries of love and sex.

“The Missing Chum”: *The Missing Chums* (1928) is a volume in the Hardy Boys juvenile detective series now published by Simon and Schuster. The Tami Dennis review was published at the time of Simon and Schuster’s release of two new volumes in the girls’ detective series, which was begun in the 1930s. Some details of the poem allude to Nancy Drew titles, characters, and situations.

“Many Mansions”: The artist Walter Anderson spent much of his obscure and troubled life at Shearwater, the Gulf Coast compound of his family in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Revealed to the public only after his death, the four-walls-and-the-ceiling “mural” has since been removed from his studio and installed in the town’s Walter Anderson Museum of Art.

“Woman”: In Wagner’s opera, Brünnhilde replies to one of her Valkyrie sisters that, punished by their father with expulsion from “misty Heaven” (and thereby rendered as mortal as the also-doomed hero whose kiss has awakened her from Wotan’s spell), she can no longer even understand what she is being told. Thus, she will not be persuaded to give up the ring her Siegfried gave her—even to save Valhalla and the remaining gods.
“Winged Victory”: Now famously incomplete, the “Winged Victory” at one time clearly depicted the goddess Nike at the moment of her alighting on the prow of a Greek naval vessel. Although Walter Anderson is known to have made an early trip to Paris, I have imagined for myself his visit to the Louvre and his contemplation there of a sculpture which would have appealed to both the mariner and the naturalist in him. He seems to have been particularly fascinated by winged creatures.
Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the following publications, in which these poems or versions of these poems first appeared:

