

**Richard Selig**  
(1929 – 1957)

POEMS



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IN RICAARDI SELIG  
PIAM MEMORIAM  
VIRI ANIMOSISSIMI  
MENTIS IGNAEAE  
ARTIS SUAE  
DISCIPLINIS PROBATI  
NATURA FORTIS  
DISCRIMINE GENUINI AMORIS  
PATIENTIS FACTI  
ATQUE HUMILIS  
AMABILIS  
ADMIRABILIS

## INTRODUCTION

Richard Selig was a young American poet of the greatest promise, who died in New York in 1957 at age 27. These poems are a small proportion of those he wrote between perhaps 1951 and his death. Most of the comparatively early ones survived haphazardly in a file, and some only by being printed in magazines. Not long before his death he made a rigorous selection of his own poems, some of which he then revised, but at the same time he destroyed the bulk of what he rejected, so that although the present collection has been made from everything that could be found, it represents his own wishes at some points more closely than others. He had listed fifteen poems, entirely excluding the early ones (not all of which he worked through) and with no prediction of the last handful he was to write. The list made in pencil in a single evening with a calculation about pages, and never afterwards revised; it decided him at the time he had too few poems for a book.

This book was conceived in the belief that not only his boundless promise and the individual temper of his talent, but the actual size of his achievement were of such importance in his generation that they justified some collection, however small. He died on the threshold of his success. Wishing that the book should be the most adequate picture it was possible to give of an important poet of my own generation, I was very anxious not to encumber it with second-rate work, and I hope I would not have been deterred from confining it to ten or eleven good poems, if that had been necessary. But soon after the news of Richard's death came the first copies of a series of poems that had fulfilled his promise in such a way that his voice took on in them the authority of a complete and new poet. Some time after this, many fascinating poems and fragments we had never seen came to light from a huge folder of early work which had somehow survived the general slaughter. Their interest was great enough to make them candidates for what seemed likely to be his only book.

At the last moment, an important folder of Richard's poems and a verse play came to light in his old rooms at Oxford. The poems in this folder were all or nearly all written in America in 1951 and 1952; some of them, but not all, survive in manuscript versions in his diaries and notebooks. The folder has a title page, Lyric and Prose Poems, and it may represent his first attempt at a book. One or two of the poems were included in his Fantasy pamphlet,

but there are others better than these which simply dropped out of sight. The verse play is lightweight; I had heard him speak about it with a certain scornful affection, but he never overvalued it. The best two lines in it are:

*Actaeon was chased by his very own hounds*

*And he was killed by their accurate wounds....*

There are many better fragments in his other unpublished poems.

In the choice of his last work I have tried to be absolutely rigorous. With the poems of the period when I knew him, when he was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, I may have been a little more generous than he apparently was himself, but still parsimoniously just. Although I included everything on his own list (in a few cases with reserved judgment) I left uncollected poems he printed during his lifetime. The small selection I have given of his early work has been chosen for its variety and the light it throws on his development. It was mostly written when he was studying writing under Theodore Roethke. One or two poems had an experimental interest, or were the first treatment of a theme he later made important. In no case anywhere in the collection has a poem been included for the sake of a single or a few good lines.

The development of Richard's poetry appears in the light of his unpublished work as steadier and more interesting, because more purposeful, than had at first seemed clear. It was not unconnected with the size and nature of his subjects. His style had undergone the sternest academic refinement under Theodore Roethke, and he was interested from the beginning in a variety of poetic forms. There was an airy and insubstantial canzonetta, for which he still felt an affection several years after writing it, startling to those who were used to the massive vigour of his Oxford poems. But his advance was sure-footed, and always in an area central to his subject. His verse became more and more fitted to say the things he had to say; the light strength of his first experiments combined in his last few poems with the powerful rhetoric he had adapted to slowly maturing thoughts, and which he was finally able to fuse into a few direct and compact lines.

His interest in a long, searching, rather Elizabethan line was not an Oxford discovery, although its development certainly fitted his Oxford preoccupations, the study of Shakespeare and the hammering out of his own

philosophy of life. The greatest issues were at that time the nucleus of his mind's life. They were already present in December, 1951, his earliest poem, and in *The Green World*, written a year or two later. Poems like *The Phoenix* were a direct development of these. At the same time he never ceased trying to temper the strength of these brooding poems, and his early, probably unfinished poem *The Soldiers*, and a poem like *The Prairie* show the same bias for particularity (perhaps the most genuine sign of an authentic poet) that made possible *The way I see you*, and in the end *A small request*.

His own written and published lines worked for years in his imagination, both the conceptions and the lines themselves. In several unpublished poems there are lines which Affected him in this way, and the strong conception of human life and of the universe which was the core of so many of his poems was present in the earliest. The conception underwent a development impossible to separate from that of his poetry. It was not only their technique which altered, but the growth was at once linguistic and intellectual: the poetry he in the end wrote would not have been attainable except as a personal development. To put it in the opposite way, his most personal process was his poetry, and the power which determined his poetic development was the pressure of his growth.

Richard was everything that he experienced. He was the great cat in the zoon downtown, he was the boys in Brooklyn growing old and the Young Criminal beautiful as lilies, he was Orestes and the boy Theseus, he was the birds above the estuary at Seattle, and the motorcyclist on the Wall of Death.

*Mankind mounts his metal Pegasus,  
And rides the walls his spine a stiff horizon,  
His arms an effeminate branch loose at the wrists,  
His thighs grip the grumbling equine engine....*

Images of bewilderment, of aggression, and of rough life carried in his later work the overtones his voice carried, tones that were latent or implicit in his violence from the beginning. He fell on books as he did on life with a violent and exigent hunger, and the history of his talent is also the history of its dissatisfaction.

*...when the keeper throws you meat, you're not grateful.*

There are questions of biography too deep and far-reaching to be asked by a friend or a critic, and even if that were not so, my intention is to discuss here only what directly concerns his poetry. But it ought to be said that he was not unhappy, that his restless, comprehensive love of life was one of his most permanent qualities, and that in the last year and a half before he died his poetry was certainly affected by his very happy marriage. It was also of course affected by his disease, from the consciousness of which some of the terrible but beautiful images of his poems seem to have come.

*But the soul is relentless and, thought it is the most*

*Susceptible to, is the least alterable by pain.*

Factual accounts of Richard Selig's life and tributes to him have appeared in *Gemini* (now no longer printed) and in *Encounter* for April 1958, and elsewhere. Thanks are due to Mr. Wesley Wehr for collecting some early work, to the President of Magdalen College Oxford, to Dr. Bennett, to Mr. Alan Pryce-Jones for advice, and to Mr. Quentin Stevenson, who at an early stage made an accurate and most helpful choice of the twenty best poems.

All the journals, manuscripts, typescripts, and some letters are in the Library of Harvard University.

Of Richard himself no more need be said, since his poems say enough, and this collection is not a monument of piety but of poetry.

Peter Levi, sj

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Richard Selig's poems have appeared in:

A Fantasy Press pamphlet (Eynsham, Oxford)  
Oxford Poetry (Fantasy Press)  
The Pocket Book of Modern Verse (ed. Oscar Williams)  
New Poems 1956 (Fantasy Press)

Experiment (Seattle)  
Trio (Oxford)  
The Times Literary Supplement  
New World Writing (Mentor books)  
Poetry London New York  
Isis (Oxford)  
Encounter  
Botteghe Oscure  
Gemini (Oxford & Cambridge)  
Granta (Cambridge)  
Harper's Bazaar  
The Listener  
Listen (Yorkshire)  
The London Magazine

## SECTION I

### REFLECTION

Narcissus, looking backward, saw the astonished  
Light. The morning air was full of its surprise.  
The breezes trembled as if struck by bells  
Unheard by him, and yet so fair of tone  
The breezes chimed and grasses bent to them.  
Narcissus could not see or hear what thing  
It was that so beguiled his comrades, Light  
And Air; and turning, downcast, looked  
To see if Water, too, had been beguiled.  
Water held a boy so beautiful  
She lay quite still and let him strain.

### FROM THE SIXTEENTH FLOOR

Pardoning this borough for its evil,  
I look past the tops of buildings, to where  
The sky is. Remembering that man's malice,  
This man's fate: the former's cunning,  
The latter's jeopardy – seeing the sky,  
Placid in spite of soot and heartache,  
I am reminded to pray. Redemption,  
Like our janitor, comes as we go home:  
A stooped man turning out the lights.

### THE FOUNTAIN ( to T.S.E.)

He walks in the valley, through still glades, by streams,  
Up bill to the sunny level, or down to the shore.  
He can imagine Paradise and can describe to you  
Blade by blade, flower by flower, its lovely slopes;  
But wherever he inhabits nothing survives for long.  
His breath soughs mortality across the land.  
As far as he can see the green leaf turns brown.

He worships the naked lineaments of sunlight  
As if the sun itself substantiates his own mind,  
The bare sun burning the senses like grass.  
Nature he despises. Her multiplicity,  
Her changes, her alien presence in his blood  
Obscure the single radiance he seeks: naked Truth,  
Cruel Beauty – flames without bodies – parch his  
mind.

The arid landscape he chooses to inhabit fits  
The sapless mind that animates him. Like a desolate  
fountain  
(A marble Psyche rising from its centre) that pours  
No longer, his mind still hold the shape of Beauty  
Yet he cannot reproduce it, nor will his fancy take  
Impression from it. Nothing will eject the dry  
Perfection in his mind, but the cold night will shatter it.

### SOLILOQUY FROM NEW YORK

Wherever turbine turns or derrick pumps,  
Wherever steel and granite stands upright,  
Wherever gravel rattles, concrete sets,  
Rubber hums or claxon carks the ear,  
Wherever busy Mammon builds, there I am

A citizen; and there the arts like scented ladies  
Gather in the museum's mutual scrutiny;  
There my effete capacity for glory,  
Pleasure, lust revives in darkened cinemas;  
There I try my courage crossing streets;  
And there, if I ignore the signs, I may  
Get lost as Ulysses, and not get home.  
Those heavy breathing trucks could surely eat me.  
Or those efficient women tear me limb  
From limb. For I (this blank verse does not lie)  
Am hectored Orpheus, the urban poet,  
Who sings the language of cement and girders.  
My words are like the thoughts of physicists.  
My soul is like a great incorporation.  
My heart and lungs inspire the physician,  
Being full of fat and blood and air,  
Susceptible to cancer, other things, and death.  
My fame depends on five strategic factors:  
Inclusion in anthologies and text books,  
Analysis by well-know academic critics,  
Citation by the leading Freudian of the day,  
Bust best of all: a vice, and not a style,  
That once can imitate: and fifth, you fool.

### ON READING SCOTT'S LAST EXPEDITION

The hazardous career meets death half-way;  
Who chooses active dying must endure  
The thought of death much longer, see it lure  
Him past all hope and one by one betray  
His chances until mercy is a brief delay  
Before the ice immures the blood: make sure  
They know ill-luck, not fear, was cause of failure;  
And silent, then, explore the last white day.

### THE POLESTAR

Here, no foothold is sure. Like huge water  
The night sky flows overhead. The stares flicker.  
The source of their faint radiance stands above them.  
In that country the land is firm, the light is constant.

Orion hangs head down. The Dog Star's glazed look  
Crosses heaven like a rabid beacon. The stiff Crab  
floats by.  
I look for Polaris: and there, rounding its tiny circle,  
My lodestar spins. All is flung in pieces, far flung.

Beneath me the cooling star-fragment I stand on  
Prepares upheavals that will smash the man-fashioned  
stones  
I prize the most, and cast the bones that upheld the men  
I most admire into lava or the depths of a new sea.

A SMALL REQUEST

You who feel the instructive hand of God  
Raise boils and welts upon your chosen skin,  
Whose self-affliction quells the offended rod  
And gets you up the hillside out of sin,

You whose suffering is a sign of grace,  
You whose privilege is to feel more pain,  
Whose hope is Heaven and to see God's face –  
Please recall how gently falls the rain;

And when, if you remember me, you pray,  
Pray thus for me: "Though he loves the earth  
Too much, do not send his soul away:  
Give him a small garden and a hearth".

WHERE BUBBLES DAWDLE

Where bubbles dawdle, green wands wave and  
tadpoles jerk;

Where slow pond water slowly scurling flows,  
Seeming still – the sky and half the meadow mirrored;  
And moderate Nature rests in pondside reeds,  
Drowns in the meadow, dreams in water volumes:  
Everywhere one looks, tranquillity does soothe the  
gaze,

Peace placates the wild senses, and truth lies sleeping.  
Look down into the pond, change your element.  
Let Fancy take you. Plunge down. Your ear cannot  
hear,

Your lungs dare not stir. Yet blood buzzes:  
Fancy feeds you air. Your eyes are clear.  
You swim among silence in the green world.

*(Beginning of a long poem unwritten. This was the last  
thing he wrote.)*

## SECTION II

### DECEMBER 1951

On Solemn journeys of the mind the blood  
Is full of ships and death; dreams, of grief;  
Sleep is metaphor of none: what the race  
Intends by the march is lost by the way  
In the sound of engines; and the human voice,  
Shocked into song, records the first birds  
In Paradise, and then: the continuous commerce of  
flesh.  
Having no angels to trumpet home the sick,  
No knowledge of the changing skin of continents,  
Atoms' quiet centre, numbers of nothing,  
Space between time and God's face,  
We celebrate our eyes: -

In the doorway,  
On the shore, in the glance at the burning city,  
In the silent falling of stars, the whispered  
Anger of lovers, in the fears that make alive  
The useless thought, it is only the loss  
That speaks, judgment not spoken, actions not taken.

### BOYHOOD OF THESEUS

He came as if from tunnels. The green field  
First stabbed, stunned, then calmed his sight:  
He was home, The dark worm whose guts he filled  
With longing, he left happily for light.

He did not then perceive that sky, too, was skin  
He could not penetrate nor long abide,  
That each emergence brought him deep within  
Himself, himself more visibly inside.

Over the rippled road, past the green outhouse,  
The stuttering windmill, the grey silo,  
Where all alone the bull, tethered, bellows  
Roaring the roofs of the grass down; where roots lie  
low

He stands at a distance to gaze, a small boy  
Admiring the black flanks and rich unquietness  
Of that voice full of seed and storm and joy,  
Great in that city of muscle and bone, his smallness

Withered, sired by this beast, he suddenly grows  
Strong in his tower of coming manhood, leaps the  
shore  
Of short breadth and little time to what he knows:  
His spirit shall destroy the Minotaur.

### THE PHOENIX

As great as earth with child or sun with fire, the dawn  
Of his life breaks. Annunciation cancels the cold  
Nest of ashes where he lies dead. Now the winged  
spawn

Of love's hot mystery grows young while we grow old.  
If sudden or slow agony, if sleep or pain  
Find out the fire, choke the source and drown the man  
Then in that limp shell may the busy princes reign,  
May the bee suck and the slow sun kindle another man.  
In the heart's red image of feast and flame  
The cool, arterial wine rots in the house of his name.

As busily as stars gnawing the hot heart of heaven  
He pecks his grave, greedy again to be born.  
Cold ashes that were his death are now his leaven  
Raising the flesh once more to bleed upon a thorn  
And share his limbs into the infinite mouth  
Of human kind to feed the hunger of that fire  
Where spirit melts and merges into the hazardous truth  
And man and God burn with one desire.  
Love's gain and loss, the heavy claims of earth,  
The mortgage of all living kind cannot escape his birth.

With one desire heart breaks and angels fall,  
God dies and man corrupts: who knows the remedy?  
The stars recede, the elements increase, and small  
And weak as grass we and our citadels decay.  
As we prosper something dies without a cry,  
A child that chokes in the womb; unseen calamities  
That haven't the docks and derricks, the rich quay,  
The markets, factories, all monuments of avarice.  
Trading among the continents the cunning Ulysses  
Grows rich while elsewhere he, the willing soldier,  
dies.  
Ambiguous the dead to live again, the living to live  
On dying: who can puzzle it? And yet our lips  
Without horror his flesh and blood gladly receive.  
Bearing him to distant war go the grey ships.  
Money like rain slakes the parched roots of the state  
And metal magnifies the glory of man's fear and greed.  
Who rises from the city planted with our hate?  
Who rises from the ashes, who on ashes feed?  
Who dares to venture in the mortal flame  
And bear once more the torture of man's name?

### ULTIMATUM

And there I stood like Absalom,  
Feet on the air,  
Denouncing father, king and home:  
Like a fish on the hook;  
But the indifferent oak  
Pulled my hair.

### POEM 1953

Apollo, hard master of my felicity,  
Deliverer, who blinds me to see,  
Make me whole or else unmake me all.

See how he dangles, see

How the light holds in the watery sense.  
Hooves on the beating mind  
Undo the loose-bound elements:  
I am deformed and free.

Let desire, the winged boy  
Find another and not me:  
I measure all such joy  
Against fish in the sea,  
Or birds in the sky-  
What all the unlucky flesh can be.  
Let lust find another: I am no more I.

#### ON THE VERGE OF SUMMER

On the verge of summer rocks, waves, bones break  
On the beach of the year where Achilles summoned  
His mother from the sea: I hear that loud lament –  
The son and the mother and the hero's inchoate death.  
Whether with sperm or ships, the universe is crowded.  
Reigning by chance, dread sovereign to a deeper  
Imperfection of limbs and senses, anarchic lord  
Of this hour when the tides assume the shape of his  
woe,  
The hero is in the sea; his anger equal to the indifferent  
Storm, his god's confusion cosmic in the waters,  
His prayer has turned the tide; his mother is the mist,  
Her voice the lamentations of the wind.

#### TIME, WHOSE PRESENCE IS REMEMBERED

Time, even whose presence is remembered, now  
interns  
My four and twentieth year. Past grey siloes and the  
barns,  
Through the shuddering grain and the tall corn's  
Green whisper, past liberty, all that man shapes,  
All human aegis beyond the mortal and the measured  
slopes,  
Time goes before and siezes: no lyric thought returns.

My self, my song, a hunter, disfavoured by the wind,  
Stalks the unseen enemy lurking in the mind,  
And hopes—his senses tricked—its danger be made  
clear,  
And hopes, than time, this enemy prove friendlier.

As a lean and gilded hawk unhooded climbs the sky,  
Swiftly from the hunter's wrist, to seize its prey,  
So I prey on heaven divinity,  
Grapple with love, and tear from flight all hope, all joy.

#### THE PRAIRIE

In that strange return when even the leaves were angry,  
Small birds broke from the boughs in savage singing.  
It was late May: drought champed the new stalks,  
The sun shingled the pale earth, the wind coughed.  
My sweat was all the juice from east to west  
That freely flowed, my veins the fullest river,  
My skull the coolest cave. Winter wheat lay stacked,  
The buzzards wheeled, the lean jack rabbit jumped

And lizards licked their supper from the air.

How can I tell you, stranger? Is drought more harsh,  
Prairie more desolate, because some painted man  
Whom space and pride had taught that beasts were  
spirits  
Wandered here and fought unequal skirmishes  
Against strange weapons and a stranger greed that  
could not stop?

#### RUINS: MYCENAE

That citadel was crushed, where princes bathed and  
bred,  
By patient weather, hoofs of sheep; by weeds, the wild  
Anemone; by poor, dirt-breaking men, their seed  
So numerous it rots the stone and plants the child;  
By slack and secret water, roots of olive trees;  
By mincing scrape of tourists sucking like bees

Their ruined portion from an ancient treasury.  
Dispelled from roofless chambers, that lethal vanity,  
Those legends buzz in the brain like locusts suddenly  
One sees the sky, how the light falls, where mountains  
lie,  
Knowing the view is similar when the great ones die.

Between the human and the inhuman, between charged  
womb  
And raging clouds; scuffed shoe, tumbled column,  
Potsherds and bones—and that cold law beyond the  
tomb  
Diminishing man's dignity, ignoring him—  
The Cyclopean is too small, too soft and loose,  
To last out change of weather or of use.

#### THE WAY I SEE YOU

Like the steel hulls of ships, man, you move out.  
You go out on a terrible wide sea.  
You go and you keep going, till there are storms  
Where all except you get smashed up;  
And in the morning of the next day the sun shines.

Like the great cat in the zoo downtown  
You look sad and you walk up and down,  
Thinking of grasslands a long way east of here;  
And when the keeper throws you meat, you're not  
grateful.

Seeing the geese going north last week  
Across the harbour, you felt sad.  
This week you saw buds turn to leaves,  
And someone you knew died. But you cannot  
Decide whether, if Sunday is fair, you should  
Go to the shore or to the mountains.

#### A VISION

In the factory I heard the gulls cry;  
The wind distressed me as it came,  
Burning of machines in a single eye  
Leaves mind a fragment of hammers and hurt noise-  
Who shall enter the bodies of workers, the dream  
Electric; who touch the spent souls; what voice  
Like God's shall come in midnight at the lamps

To hurtle this darkness of stiff limbs out  
To the stars, break love open on the steel ramps,  
Raise flowers in pained cylinders, so that  
Complaining engines shall no more be heard  
And all, all be human in the first cry of a bird?

#### TWO UNDERWORLDS

In the garden of Persephone trees grow in the dark.  
*A strong wind blows when trains come.*

In Hades there are four rivers, and there are the dead.  
*It is never cold. You never see birds.*

Odysseus, Aeneas, Orpheus went there and escaped  
alive.  
*You rarely see three-headed dogs on week-days.*

To get there one crosses the Styx by ferry. Charon is  
the ferryman's name.  
*When you get on, one man closes all the doors.*

The architecture of Hades is either Classical, Gothic or  
Baroque.  
*Among the white tiles there are signs telling you where  
you are.*

Poets find Hades an evocative image, being the  
kingdom of death.  
*It is best to concentrate on one's newspaper.*

The Christian counterpart of Hades is the Inferno.  
*People seldom excuse themselves when they push you.*

Jesus Christ harrowed the place, leading the good  
people to paradise.  
*Between stations the tunnel is dark. It is too noisy to  
sing.*

#### HOROSCOPE

When, at such hour that we meet to change our myth,  
Assure and calculate our dreams with money,  
Merger fates, then troop from the darkened cafe:  
You whom now I do not know shall be  
My great, predominating Venus;  
I, your Mars. Our influential way—  
Half war and half in Jove—shall change, and change.  
For lo! the starless and the starry streets  
Shall lose the navigator's fix and count.  
With new, with unknown numbers willingly appear  
(And run to north and south) the avenues  
With future names. We, each other following  
Through all the other fables fixed forever,  
Believe our own more free.

But dawn reveals

The crystalline Apollo; night brings dim Phoebe,  
Orion's bands, Libra's blindfold, Cancer's  
Claw, and Scorpion's eternal poison.

#### THE ISLAND: NOVEMBER 1953

Who dwells here dwells in the wind. Only the flesh is  
past,  
Concealed under dirt are its inexplicable ways;  
Only the sigh remains, only the unbidden stays,

Only the rocks contain, the sun heaps up the last  
Injunctions to the conscious animal that rest  
Is the grail of all its agony, that death is the happiest  
Welcomer, the surest healer for the sickened brain;  
For this ungainly beast hopes heartily but dies in pain:  
Because its flesh is mutinous, its thought runs wild,  
Its gnarled tendons snap like twigs and the mild-  
Mannered worms lunch on its rageless spleen.  
Who dwells here dwells in the wind. The wordless sigh  
Is what's left, and beaches, ruins, greenery,  
Some scuttling foragers, tame and indifferent scenery,  
An island bleak and no home to this poetry.  
Let strange guests depart from the stranger dead;  
Let them sail away as they came, still uninstructed  
By the elusive agony which drove them to islands;  
Let them go as they came, unanswered and in silence;  
This is no place for the living, where the wind sighs  
In endless dalliance with speech but never speaks,  
For the word stops at the roots of grass, leaks  
Into the maggots' mouths, slides humming, slips and  
cries.  
Who breathes this air warms no angel in the lungs,  
Wind comes no nearer to spirit than trees  
To heaven, nor comes flesh nearer to love than seas  
Do to the moon: angels and things speak in alien  
tongues.

*/ come to this island, Circe, to be changed by thee  
Into another animal: this trip is too long.  
Troy was a great city; I wrought her great wrong:  
Her men were as good and handsome as we,  
But they were men, and more dangerous than brutes.  
Their strange language, the harsh notes on their flutes  
Enraged us: yet dying for them seemed no different.  
The crash as they fell, the alizarin blood, the groan:  
These seemed the same. And suddenly reverent,  
We gathered the limp slain like lovers left too soon  
alone  
And put them in fresh graves as if to sleep:  
So change me, Circe, for as a man my image makes me  
weep.*

#### ORESTES

What grave at midnight opens, what oracle comes true,  
What dark mouth opening under a bare bough?  
The long lean tomb of a tall man, taller than life,  
Of Agamemnon's son whose glory, stained on a knife,  
Still shines with crime's renewal, Abel's death, your  
wish.  
Those ancient bones will tell you: feeble was the leash  
Tethering the righteous man from the unrighteous act.  
What law his mind was tethered to, his heart had  
lacked.

Cassandra saw and prophesied: beneath the friendly  
mask  
Lay the king's death, the queen's lust, the lover's  
obscene risk.  
Mycenae's stone received the blunt fall of heads  
And choking streams of blood, but never any sorrow  
sheds;  
For witnessing such crimes cannot disturb its sleep.  
Yet stones can dream, blood can dry, and mortal reap

From dreaming stone the shattered moment of his death.

Because the good Orestes came—straight as youth  
Seeks out its noblest aptitude—to find the dark house  
That bred him, he doomed his strength into a bitter cause.

Step by step the story when retold retells  
How peace is paid for crime by crime. Blood falls  
Repeatedly in seasons: history is one great year  
In which a liturgy of violent acts, deep fear,  
Wronged innocence recurs as do the season's storms  
And man is never safe from harms and doing harm.

#### SONG FOR THE BRIDE

She lost in the furrow of need  
The gentle ways of her kind,  
Fierce as the bursting seed  
Love taught her to unwind  
Bright leaves to the light.  
To keep her ripeness full  
Stem and root held tight  
Till sky and she held all.  
With ways to offer the air,  
With kisses for the ground—  
For growing is all her care—  
By love her love is unbound.

#### EROS

His heart held a hundred roses,  
Roses red as thundering Mars:  
His heart was a city full of love,  
Assaulted city, sieging stars.

The rain that fell all day  
From heaven, down from heaven falling,  
Could not melt his heart away  
Nor flood, that red vine killing.

Green stones, dark earth, O love!  
The lips of all the world foretelling,  
Red lips foretell that city's fall

And darkness falling over all.

With falling dark the milky stars,  
Cold white stars encircled him:  
Around the city heaven's wars  
Did rend him limb from limb.  
But limb by limb revived, O love!  
The single sun came up once more.  
A strange explosion in the heart  
Did, in her arms, that vine restore.

#### EVEREST

What is man that drives him to the skies?  
Ambition's child tumbling in the snow,  
Chancing his spindly bones against the slow  
Flow of the blue rock-cracking malice of ice:  
Is it the fault that lost the original prize  
Now guiles him up to gasp where thin winds blow,  
To near the light, to go where no men go,  
Scaling, half-blind, the ridge to Paradise?  
A mountain has been God, the home of gods,  
Asylum of peace, prelude to violence,  
And the hazardous hard way up of the blest:  
Because he walks on the world's roof and treads  
The high ground where heavenly footfalls once  
Passed lightly by, man can never rest.

#### A VOYAGE

Beginning another, stranger voyage, stars shook  
From sails. The water eased against my skin.  
Shawled in wind and salt I took the last look  
At what I was: wine-dark, dark as blood as wine.  
With wind for courage, water salty as my tears,  
I gave to grief its due and drowned it with my going.  
Because the land, too still, too slow and full of fears,  
Was out of sight, I sank unsteady roots, began my  
growing  
There, in a feminine, indifferent element  
Where nothing seems to change and nothing stays.  
Accepting all the moods of heaven, kind or violent,  
She held and pleased me upon unquiet thighs.

### SECTION III

#### THE TIGER

A beast, from whom all pleasure seemed to fade,  
Who hated trees and patches of green shade,  
Grew heartsick in the forest where he lived  
And cursed his Fate from every bush and glade.

"Alas!" cried he, "This life is far from good!  
I, the greatest tiger in the wood,  
Am grown so sad I fear my gentlest prey  
And cannot eat. I need some other food!"

The tiger sighed. He stalked and groaned.  
He leapt into a wintry stream. He moaned, he wept,  
And all his tears fell melting in the water.  
Beside the stream he dried himself and slept.

#### *He dreams*

Great flatness stretched before his dreaming sight;  
The sky, too pale and pierced to bear its height,  
Receded and descended frail as breath,  
Made frailer still, shot through, with threads of light.

The level land, yellow as purest saffron,  
Heaved its wide palm against an empty heaven.  
But looking cannot bear such purity:  
The skull's liquids shiver, straight sways uneven,

Heat coils, while the sun's fins furl and spread.  
In sleep the aching vessels in his head  
Poured their substance into darker pools;  
And in his dream the spawning sun exploded.

#### *The tiger wakes*

Waking, his eyes reeled on light's spindle,  
A spiral without end, a blazing tunnel,  
A crown, a mangold, a sapphire's heart  
A ring, a wheel, a lucid ochre funnel

Whose furious outpour forced him know his need:  
He must escape the forest, leave all dread  
And go seek out the wilderness he dreamed  
Where heat confirms the heart, and there is no shade.

#### *He sets out*

His bony links and spare muscles screwed,  
Strained and bore him up. He yawned and stood.  
His purpose soothed him, making motion easy;  
And, a striped coat lilted, away he strode

Following the stream which led him as a lane  
Down to a river, downward to the plain,  
A barren plain naked as his hope  
Where sunlight fell but never snow nor rain.

#### *Time passes*

As one short-seasoned flower blooms and fades  
White as faith untested or crane that raids  
And fractures the sky's too delicate reflection—  
The water webbed with circles as he wades,

Or, standing, footless, solider than all  
Among the mirrored clouds, and whiter than all,  
Until, light's alteration wooing,  
He rises to the light's original

And flying, like to like, the skies outpale him:  
So, too, the moon, having risen solemn  
But late and stood a while alone and full,  
Paled and flew before the coming sun.

#### *He reaches the plain*

Dawn met him at the forest's edge.  
He faced it standing on the last high ledge  
That overlooked the plain. A waterfall  
Plunged down, streamered with uprooted sedge,

And junctured with a river far below,  
A silver river, drawn by the sun's glow,  
Wriggling eastward, its mouth sucked by sand.  
Morning quickly overtook each shadow,

Unbridled the cold wind. The air grazed  
The tiger's fur softly, then gently raised  
And bouted with his ears. He smiled and yawned,  
Feeling the warmth flow round him, and was pleased.

#### *He descends*

The tiger, lithe lord of sinew, lust  
And all mortal hunger, glory of dust  
And warm blood, his live nerves thrilling,  
The passionate seeker, hazarded the cliff's breast;

Sliding, slipped down its jagged front, claws  
Raking crevice and gnarled branch without pause  
Nor ledge to rest on in that deep descent,  
Dragging the soft resistance of his paws

Across the indurate nipples of dark stone,  
Tumbling and writhing nearer the yellow plain,  
A fragment of helpless strength hauled down  
By the rough earth, giddy with fear and pain.

#### *He rests and then goes on*

He sat beneath the cliff on hot, dry day,  
And when he stirred it caused the dust to stray  
In yellow puffs about his nose and ears  
To clot his wounds and peel the blood away.

Then straightaway eastward over the blank land  
He folded distance under him; and spanned  
The blazing ridges of the air by speed  
And cooling glances. His green eyes ruled the sand.

The dunes unfurled their banners to the wind  
Of saline dust that looping, rose and spined  
The twisting air; and acrid serpents lashed Unseen.  
Membranes cracked like fruit and brined

For days on end, he took no rest nor food.  
The tiger stalked the sun across the broad  
And barren desert. Hope and pain sustaining  
Him, bleak light and steady stars defined his road.

*A reflection on mortality*

By instinct cloistered and by sense confined,  
By flesh mortgaged and by need struck blind,  
The pining animal makes way for more:  
Progenitor and victim of his kind

Through love; and through that self-same mystery  
Protects, instructs the tender enemy  
To watch his ebb translated into youth  
In love and rage that only death sets free

*The tiger, ignoring his afflictions, finds serenity*

Like the womb from which the Maker made  
The world; like the first dawn that once laid  
Bare impossible wonders; like the nothing  
Whence he came, pristine and unafraid,

Emptied of the toxin of mortality,  
A tranquil part of all that he could see,

The tiger stood, gazing at the sun,  
At the lean, sere earth, his spirit once more free.

*His serenity and freedom are a respite*

The tigress leaned her length along green boughs,  
Crouched and crept under the fronds of shadows.  
Her lithe lankness and her perfumed breath  
Made drunk the air and caused the breeze to drowse.

Light trickled like a liquid treasure down  
Through sumptuous leaves and gilded branches blown  
By tender winds that plucked the humming twigs  
And pilfered from each flower its hoard of pollen.

She lay in wait until the tiger found  
Her dreaming ambush, till they together crowned  
The plenty of that place by gentle combat—  
Each other's limbs in ardent armour bound.

Their eyes grew dim beneath the strokes of war;  
Blood locked within their brows but not for anger.  
Heat, touch and smell controlled their skirmish—  
In mutual darkness, neither vanquisher.  
*Oxford, Oct. 1955/Atew York, Jan. 1957*

## SECTION IV

### THE ELEMENTS

The brain is crowded with its own past substance. Perhaps it is the house of the soul and perhaps not. For the soul travels and is never at home. If my finger hurts it is because the soul wishes to eject an unnecessary distraction. She centres there and pushes. Her effort causes my pain. For pain is the encounter of the less dense with the more dense. A rock encounters my finger, the finger encounters the soul and I feel pain. What is the soul's occupation: She is busy avoiding encounters. Being the least dense of all things, including light, she is the most susceptible to pain. For the desire of everything is to sustain its qualities. And pain obstructs the completion of that desire. Pain alters the identity of everything. That which is most dense occupies the least space; that which is least dense may occupy all space. I say "may" because the soul, for example, attempting to fill its rightful domain, often encounters usurpers. But the soul is relentless and, though it is the most susceptible to, is the least alterable by pain.

The most durable of substances—rock—for example, is slowly hewn and sundered of its nature by the subtle processes of wind and water; and may even be boiled by the igneous invader. Metal corrodes by exposure to oxygen; its envy compels it to combine with the freer element. The ignorant waters, seduced by the liberties of warm air, sublime into a vapour and ascend. But like the best of lovers air blows warm and cold, and the sad waters will not be had again and so they freeze. But what of air? Is he not victimised also? Is he inaccessible to pain? No. Light is less than he. Light comes invisibly across vast emperies of space from the bubbling sun to make the wind and the day. Air refracts and forms a whole society of currents to elude the ravishment of light. But to no avail. And having no recourse, vengeful and desperate, he seeks to occupy another's place: he hacks at the ocean, saws at mountains and bridges, and moaning topples the great trees.

### ENTRANCE OF THE GLADIATORS

In a minute I'm going out there. It is time now to think. There won't be any time later. And at least this is my own part of ritual. When my thinking ends they take over: the emperor and his girl friends and thousands of Romans.

I think of my friends—the only friends I have ever had—the friends whom I have killed in this arena. It is all in this, something they cannot know: to kill a man as I do I must first make his acquaintance, find how to love him and then kill him. It can be done no other way. We are after all only human.

It is time. His name is Canabillus, a tall man from the northern provinces. I have never met him. He comes towards me. They expect a real fight.

I can see his eyes now. They are blue. He has not waited. He looks at me lovingly. I have saluted.

### EIGHT PROVERBS

1. The lion when he roars is more frightened than frightening, he therefore roars again to dispel his own fear.
2. When he attacks the gazelle his least reason is hunger: the gazelle is swifter and more beautiful than he is.
3. In his own country he is king, in my country he is a circus performer.
4. For the rose to open it must accept the inherent responsibilities in despair.
5. When the rose is resplendent it must also consider the possibility of being observed in decay.
6. When the petals drop who has remembered to mourn the loss of Paradise?
7. When God is on the thorn the rose is resplendent through eternity.
8. When a rose is given it is to be remembered in perfection.

### MID-MORNING OF A GOOSE

I've been standing here since sun-up squawking. But no one comes out of the house to ask me what's wrong. Humans I've never seen before are setting up machinery all over the place. It isn't farm machinery. I wish I, too, had hands: I'd make me a flute or something to make another kind of noise. I'm tired of my own voice. Its distress is beginning to sound foreign to me.

For the past week the sun's risen about eight. I haven't seen the family who lives in the house since yesterday. The blinds are drawn. Men are pulling down green cloth. Because of all their metal I can't see the corn fields or the blue hills and what's worse they don't have animals with them.

Trucks are coming.

### LANDSCAPE

To the white animals the new snow was like grass. This was their perfect time. The danger of spring and summer was passed. The world was once more bright, feathery and solid beneath them. All that remained was to eat. But from the snow nothing grew except the flowers the wind made. Everything was perfect, everything beautiful: the round unsetting sun, the perfectly clear azure sky, the endless white. White birds had flown away in banners. Everything was still and perfect like in a painting. Nothing happened. But somehow joy managed to move out of this beautiful scene. All that remained was to eat.

Random spots of blood introduced a new element. One harmony was despoiled to make way for another more complicated less perfect one.

## IMAGES OF A SWAN

I see me a swan; long neck, beak and eyes pointing downward to my belly where trouble is busily gnawing its way out. The damp mirror of the lake supports and reflects me, an immense feathery bag with a distant knob for a head. This absurd image accompanies my endless, circular voyages. Nothing about me ever diminishes and because of this I have only one song and this I am saving for the end. And what a joy it'll be! I'll never have to look at that thing again. Because I am the more patient one I'll beat the mirror at last. But my belly—Pandora's box, cornucopia of foulness—may win after all. I can't see what goes on there, but there are warnings. Yesterday I heard a strange noise . . . the sound I am told rat's feet make in damp cellars; then: wind against a city's gates, humming, the indigestible sound of tearing iron.  
This morning I heard fountains

## APRES NOUS....

For several days it had been raining. By the lake I saw two dogs deep in conversation.  
"Neighbours," I said to them, "will this rain let up soon do you think?"  
I think it was the male who looked up and said with a trick of pity in his voice: "My fiancée and I just noticed that raft out there has broken loose. We were about to swim out to it when you walked up."  
"Were you planning a voyage?" I asked him.  
"No, but certain urges of ours have informed us that the rain will not stop until the whole countryside has been deluged. So, being neither fish nor winged we have decided on that raft."  
"What should I do, do you think?"  
"Your place is at home," the female answered.  
"Goodbye, friends," I said and went home to wait.

## TALE

I knocked. The door opened. Naturally I was looking level with my eyes. So as not to show any surprise I lowered them slowly. It was the dwarf Hoffman. "It's you," he said. I couldn't hide it: this startled me. "Yes, it's me," I said. He nodded and waddled aside to let me in. In Hoffman's presence I always felt deformed. Margaret, Sheila and Betty were not in the room. It was six o'clock and they were getting ready for the evening's work. Powder, bath salts, camphor slid above the head of Hoffman. A radio in another room announced the movement of troops.  
"You came for this," Hoffman said.  
"I did," I said.  
"If you do your part, there will be the same for you tomorrow."  
"With luck," I said.  
"Good night."  
"Good night. So long."

## OVERHEARD IN THE GARDEN

The branches of the rosebush were languid because of summer; and because the roses themselves were heavy and half-sickened by the continuous buzzing invasions of bees.

"So much heat and plenitude is indeed a foretaste of what is to follow," announced a particularly effulgent rose, high up on the bush.

"These endless ravishments must stop," sighed another, trembling delicately, admitting another bee.

"The Owner seems to have abandoned us, left us to proliferate without a word of admiration; and the gardener and his wife sleep all day. There is no one to trim us, pluck us or smell us."

A newly opened rose, far over on the eastern side of the bush, said: "This morning I saw the Owner pacing in the Cypress groves by the river. He was frowning and never looked up from the ground."

A kestrel stooped on its prey. The Gardener's wife, weeping, tried to attach leaves to her naked skin.

## MY FRIENDS: A Fable

IN MY BACKYARD there lives a Swan, a Zebra and an Ape. The Swan floats in the pond on hot days, and on cool ones she squats on the grass. The Zebra stands near the fence, "because it is so becoming next to my stripes." Zebra is quite vain, you see. But that's not all her fault. If you had stripes, you, too, would often be reminded of yourself, and you, too, would be concerned about whether things matched you or not. Swan, who is the most beautiful of my friends, having no stripes, never worries about her appearance. Ape lives in the house with us during the winter. In the summer he likes sitting under trees. There are two trees in my backyard.

Now that I am grown up. Not that I am growing old. Now that I am certain that I will die, I look at my friends more often and ask them questions. At first I was surprised at how much I didn't know about them, but now I am not at all surprised. You see, everybody but people are full of surprises, and once you stop being surprised at this, you can learn and learn.

Ape is a clumsy fellow. I can't remember when he came to my backyard, but it must be a long time ago. His hands and his chest have silver hairs growing on them. Ape says very little. He's rather simple-minded. Only when he's sewing can I get him to talk. He has a hard time with the little needle and thread. His eyes get crossed. "My goodness!" Ape says, "This is too hard for an ape!"

"Would you rather ride my tricycle?" I ask him.

This is a great joke. Ape laughs and laughs till he feels sorry for himself.

"Why must I be here and not there?" Ape moans. "All my life I've been here and not there." Ape starts weeping, and goes out to sit under the big tree.

Swan is a dour bird. Sometimes I stand on the bank of the pond for hours, muttering questions that puzzle me; but never am I so foolish as to expect Swan to answer. Swan just swims around, pretending to ignore me. Swan is aloof and she is beautiful. Swan is wise and fortunate. But Swan is very sad, because she knows about wickedness. Swan lived on a river that ran through a great city before she came to my backyard.

One day I sat down on the grass by the pond because I was tired of standing.

"You are an idle creature," said Swan.

"What would you have me do?" I asked her.

"Count the stars!"

"But Swan, it is daylight. I can't even *see* the stars."

"You are an idle creature," repeated Swan.

"Please, Swan, be reasonable. How can I count the stars, if I can't seem them?"

"If you counted the stars only when you could see them, you'd never finish," Swan scolded.

*me* day when I hadn't been eating anything, because I was ill with fever, Unicorn came in to see Swan. I saw him from my bedroom window, but I didn't say anything.

Unicorn came in through a hole in the back fence. He wasn't very big. He was shy, though, and I could see that Swan was having a hard time with him. She kept to the middle of the pond, her head down facing him. She managed to look very cross with Unicorn, and Unicorn hung his head shamefully. Swan kept saying things I couldn't hear, and Unicorn nodded and wept. Then Swan became more gentle. She went nearer to Unicorn. She waddled out of the pond to stand beside him. Unicorn sat with his forelegs out and hindlegs folded under him, but only for a little while. Soon he was up: "Goodbye, Swan," I heard him say.

"Goodbye, Lord," Swan said.

The next day I wasn't ill any more. I went out to talk with Swan.

"Swan! Swan! Who is Unicorn?"

Swan went slowly around and around the pond saying nothing.

"Please tell me, Swan. He's such a charming fellow, and I would like him to come again."

Swan nodded her head slowly up and down.

"You called him 'Lord', Swan. Is he a grand person? He's rather small and delicate. I ..."

"You talk too much!" Swan said.

"You're not very polite, Swan. You don't answer my questions. I have to ask and ask for hours sometimes before you say anything at all."

"And you don't *think* before you ask your questions!" Swan replied.

"Please don't be angry, Swan."

"I'm sorry, Man," Swan said. "Unicorn is very royal, and some of your kind were hunting him when he took refuge in your backyard. He said that he wanted them to find him, but that he was afraid. You see, they have been chasing him so long they are angry. They sought him for love in the beginning. I told him not to let himself get caught."

## SECTION V

### TO HIM

Whose unclean skirmishes with ghosts  
Brought forth a tribe of innocents, the enemy,  
Made love death's image and, with the brave hosts,  
Waking in exile, found that to be free,  
In the world's holy cities, one talked alone in prison  
Drawing on the walls the obscene solders in a vision  
Labelling sexual angels, one on one, arisen.

### THREE SONGS IN ANTICIPATION OF SPRING

#### 1 - *blood*

The bees thought it was sour. They mumbled  
one to another by the hour.  
'Quite a curious thing,' they said,  
one stumbled in  
and was turned quite red.  
He fumbled,  
cried, 'How sweet', and then fell dead.

#### 2 - *youth*

As if it were stolen like Prometheus his fire  
I take down the rain until it floods  
And I am filled with flames, sperm, and mire;  
Full of starry contumely; eager like buds  
For shaking forth, or fish forth to spawn:  
This courage is easy, a quality of my age—  
I inhabit myself with fear and outrage.  
T could when old steal quiet from a cold dawn.

#### 3 - *opening*

Such as the wild beast among dry grass My skin  
untames green sheaves, Sucks up their juice and  
breathes and grieves; The white sky, the green plains  
pass Like a touch, for nature's word is braille; For sight  
is the longest touch;  
for the brass  
God in the temple cannot eat the frail Flames of the  
pomegranate or the beads Of the full moon

Strung

On the

Wet

Reeds

### RETURN

In early sunlight, small voices in the rain,  
The dead begin in the first words:  
The miller's daughter, the courageous knight,  
he father who fears, too, the imagined swords,  
The inevitable snow;  
and lonely at twilight,  
On the immense desert, lions defend  
Those vast and complicated tombs:  
I know that silently, in the inviolate rooms  
Of my past, rises a fresh wind.

### OMEN

Shudder of the hawk, long wings beating  
Grip and remain in the solid air,  
Fair and full the dark moon hunts,  
The dove in the heart is falling there:  
So the ghost wanders and Hamlet waiting

Cannot grieve but only laughs and once  
The tomb is open what father calls  
Vengeance to a stop, what son falls  
To sleep and dreams his heart is a woman's?

### IN THE FABLED KINGDOM

In the fabled kingdom of my heart  
The Hawk pursues his love,  
Breaks from the sky with talons hooked  
To claim the tender dove.

No hawk knows better grace  
Nor dove a deeper pain  
Than I, alone in this dark place.  
Loved by beasts of the brain

### WHO HAVE GONE

Who have gone before me,  
Stronger by the breath they give,  
I recall the men of my race,  
Grave ghosts in whom I live.

I receive their many blessings  
For a journey from flesh and bone,  
Questioning their shadows, saying.  
Fathers, were you alone?

### TWO SONGS FOR MUSIC

#### I

#### THE REMEMBRANCE

A torrent of gold hair, and eyes  
That twinned both night and day,  
Round and soonest gay;  
Tall as tall birds and trees  
She, her own garden, grew  
More lovely than I knew.  
Within all her limbs were all her praise:  
All beauty's state,  
Precise and delicate,  
Rolled in her long fingers whose  
Gentle touch  
I could not love too much.

#### II

#### ADVICE

Hope like Sap climbs up the Tree  
And Love is Flowers we bear.  
Then comes the engendering Bee  
To hive in the heart of Care.  
She stores such sweetness there  
That heart and root and what we are  
Are sweetened in serenity.

Sorrow, burden of this air,  
Or sun that will not shine for me,  
Or all unseasonable despair Invite this gentle  
Bee And with her share  
Both Care  
And your sanguinity.

An Introduction to a Longer Poem tentatively entitled  
'SEATTLE'

On high ground among the pines  
And odour of brown needles,  
Keen as an ape, I watch the Sound.  
I follow the sun to strange seas;  
Follow the land to its end;  
Find islands; and beyond,  
Where the mist begins,  
I know the straits:  
The wash of small waves in the fog,  
The moist silence, close in the currents.  
Outside these walls the winds of the world!  
The cry of the tern  
Wheeling its dark woe  
From end to end of the earth.  
Jutting a cracked finger  
Into the frozen fields of water,  
The land of the Aleuts.  
Ghosts of ancient travellers  
Wail in this white night of the dead seals.

### THREE SONGS (iii)

(The third of three)  
Man, the angels come like snow,  
Their fury falls, a deathly white,  
On fatal wrestlers in the night;  
Cruelly, the winds of heaven blow.

### THE GREEN HOUR

With oracles of sunlight in my veins,  
Exclaiming silence on the tongues of flowers,  
I come as a child in a sullen season,  
Come in a green hour.  
The sun I have received lights up the hollows  
Of the heart with red and yellow boulevards,  
Stripped in a sad time of grey clowns  
And prophets with no dreams.  
I say there's not a number in this time  
No dancer in the clock, no chronic bird  
To keep time's heart implacable with laughter.  
I know these flocks of boys and their long sorrow,  
Burning in a green hour, know their hands,  
Swords in their hair, fondling a sweet corruption.  
And I say I love them, love them  
For the burning harvest in their hearts.

### SOLDIERS

Soldiers return to their beds of shame;  
Torment whispers from quiet cannons,  
Lonely winter has come, love lies with bones.

Barren wives shall curse their sheets;  
Virgins hot on stones  
Of old temples; the fruit of terror beat  
On the wind and whine for a breast.

The rolling boys shape summer to their thighs  
And swell the fields with kicking and with sighs.  
These birds will shiver and break  
Like one muscle to a perfect flight.

### WORSHIP

Solemn as trees priests in their pale robes  
Transfigure the early air, engraft the sight  
With fruit-heavy, death to the bearer, ribs  
Of branches, watery fingers, words.

People rooted to floors and walls falter  
Like ferns, all motion at the top,  
At bottom decay, for God cannot stop  
To pluck them out: stars float on the altar.

Solemn as trees monks in their dark robes  
Deliver the skin of things to itches and rubs;  
For wear is their way, weary by prayer, worn  
More holy by the world's failure to be born.  
Because the long womb is stuffed by chance,  
Because stars glisten on the heads of saints,  
leaves dance.

### IS RIPENESS ITS OWN EXCUSE?

Does the full fruit fall of its own weight  
Or does the resentful wind scythe it  
Which obstructs and obscures the flower's fate,  
The seed's need, or does he, Lord-like, tithe it?

The trees bare their bones for love and change,  
For water's claims they hold upright  
Stiff and pained into an element strange  
With their hard deciduous need for light.

And the small bright birds choose  
The ripest and sweetest to fell with their worry,  
With tiny kisses shaking a mountain loose,  
Trembling they destroy and are not sorry.

But this ripeness cannot be unmade;  
Before it falls it must be eaten and obeyed.

### A SEASONAL PIECE

Lit with summer lights the garden of the mind  
Spreads out and fecundates our every motion,  
Yields happy fruit to a joyous tribe, kind,  
Quick, gracious, whose soul is nourished on devotion  
To delicate changes, infinitesimal gestures, refined  
Allowances for love, hate, loss, gain, paradox  
And pain; each lifting of the hand, each glance,  
configured face,  
Is another and another universe set spinning into space;  
The moon rises on their brows a cold eye for clocks;  
Tides rush in their veins, and stars erase  
The sudden dream of stop and silence, for death  
Has no time or place where trees abide and the sheath  
Rattles: they are building a temple a long while  
Never to be finished or destroyed for here is no exile.

ON THE WORD

There's ample sense in echoes to remind  
The poem's maker that sound holds  
Its history like lovers love; for what's designed  
Is only mimic by the mind  
Of what's enforced by living: the world unfolds  
That last intensity before a change;  
Speech as flesh to thought cannot arrange,

Order or sustain an action's sequence,  
The wild woods' growing or the events  
Which lead from prophet to pestilence,  
Catastrophe to singing; despite St. John  
The Word comes after God, we began  
With creation's ending, one chaos gone,  
The Word won't come again until  
The universe is made destructible.

## Biographical Note: Richard Selig

Richard Selig was born in New York City on October 2nd, 1929, the son of Ambrose Selig, a Wall Street corporation lawyer. He graduated from McKinley High School in Washington, D.C., with the American Legion medal.

He studied Psychology at the Occidental College of Los Angeles, Art at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Drama and Greek at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., French at the Sorbonne and English at the University of Washington in Seattle, from where he graduated in August 1952, and where he later held a teaching fellowship.

During his college days there were intermittent periods when he undertook

various trades: picture frame maker, woodworking, mechanic on the Boeing 707, stoker on the collier s.s. *Isaac T. Mann*, motion picture extra and actor.

From 1953 to 1956 he resided at Magdalen College, Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar from the Pacific Northwest.

In July 1956, still at Oxford, Richard Selig married the Irish singer-harpist and tv personality, Mary O'Hara. In September he left England and returned with his young wife to New York where he worked as a public relations writer with the Western Electric Company.

He died on October 14th, 1957.