

WHOLENESS CALLS

LONGING ANSWERS

poems and poetic writings by

MICHAEL BRATNICK

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“You who hold doing so dear,
if I hand you a cup empty of tea,
would you grow full
in the drinking?”
--Field Work

“One day I will rush past you through that gate at the far end of life and
know again for the first time what I knew before.”
--Ends, Odds and Short Takes

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Author's Note

The writings in this volume span a 15-year period. I saw them as guidance from my greater self on what I needed at the time and rarely shared them with others. Yet I've felt for some time that they are not mine only and that I should free them to find their way in the world.

Once cancer made its appearance in October 2007, I assembled this volume as a gift to those in the concentric circles of connection about me, from family and friends to the many communities I am or was a part of, to the greater body of humanity. It is a relief to have done so.

I'd initially planned a 30-poem chapbook, but the content grew to include nearly 60 poems, an essay on the poetic process, source notes for a poem on breath, and an extended section of my shorter writings that illustrates the never-ending flow of my ideas.

Contents

Introduction

The How of Longing

Experience and Dreams

Ice

Groundhog War

Who Wrestles

Cutting Words

How Sees the Angel of Death

Only the Same Once

Guantanamo

So Dies a Piece of Heart

Let's Hear it for Non-Lawns

Sonoma Sea Cliffs: Sketches

Crockett's Cove, Vinylhaven, Maine 2007

Desert Sleep

Approaching Wisdom

Mathematics of the Heart

Prime Time

One Way to Overcome Loss

Rectum

Cats in Fog

Dragon Deeds

Why Cows Return

The Jesus Dog

Music of Days

Family and Self

Dad's Greatest Gift
Drawn to Daven
Seeing my Mother after 18 Years
Dancing without Clothes
So Says a Solitary Voice
Tether
A Possibility of Missing no More
Desert Baskets
How Many Forms Can a Guy Hold
Spore the World
Living for Lost
Swimming through Stone
Blue Ridge Awakening
Standing in Herself: For Ann Julia, April 2005
22 and Finding: a Birthday Poem for Stephanie
What Was and Will Be: For Raechel on Her 60th
Michael Turns 60

Seeking and Finding

Likelihood of Dawn
Both-And
Third Thing
Dark Sight
Field Work
Let us Walk the Sea
Collapse and Its Blessing
Wisdom's Keys
Freshness of Rain
Chaos Is as Chaos Does

Love of Branching
Longing for Desert
Plasm
Possibility's Angel
Preacher
To Lao Tzu
A Song for Small Hours
Two Prayers and a Coda

Writings

The Poetic Field
Seeking Breath: a Journal
Ends, Odds and Short Takes

Biography

In Memoriam by Raechel Bratnick

Blue Thread
Music

Introduction

This volume pays homage to wholeness and longing and the diversity they engender. It touches on family and play, psychological difficulties, the spiritual quest, struggle, resolution, limits, lack, joy, victory and more. In essence, it explores the life-long endeavor to claim ourselves just as we are in a just-as-it-is world.

Wholeness and longing are as common as breath, so much a part of the fabric of our being they often remain unseen. They meet us everywhere, setting direction, not detail. All we do answers their call. The shapes we build about them become a life lived, unique in time.

May this book, one of its poems or even a handful of lines bring greater clarity to your longing and the realization of the wholeness you already are.

Michael Bratnick
January 23, 2008

The How of Longing

Longing is what you make of it...

or perhaps what it makes of you.

A shadow of wholeness shaped to your will,

it may lift toward God,

bring mother to child

or push for sex and candy.

Sometimes it's the scent of roses in still air.

Other times it's all rush and sudden storm.

Often it's a deep lava strumming your soles

on its way to the sea.

Go ahead, grab wholeness round the waist

and wrestle it to the mat.

It won't mind if you win.

Just know the prize is need amid plenty.

In time, all incomplete ways complete,

you sing the song your reaching sings

and wholeness succors

your thousand daily journeys.

No thing is too small or large then,

not the eyes of a child

nor dew at daybreak nor moonrise,

not stock markets nor illness nor war.

When you know longing in its many guises,
 where it lives, what it eats
 and the cities of action
you've clustered about it,
reaching becomes its own reward,
all open arms and nettles,
a bittersweet, have-and-have-not thing
cutting both ways.

In this just-so place, wholeness rises to meet you,
 a compass out of time tracking true direction
 or some great, gravity-setting mass
 drawing self closer to Self.

There are no demands.

 Just ever-changing, restless becoming
 and you as you are at every moment.

EXPERIENCE AND DREAMS

Ice

January's cold hardens
behind a north wind,
fixing ice in patches
to street and curb.
People, their minds
on more important things
than the moment,
pay no mind until
friction fails them.
Footings's sudden loss
pulls them present,
arms hauling air for balance.
They slide on in a heel-heavy,
bent-kneed way,
scanning for slick spots,
thoughts of elsewhere
and else-when gone.
Ice is such a teacher.

Groundhog War

Craving the perfect garden,
I hauled aged horse manure,
added compost and peat moss,
turned clay to soil.

I fenced,
rototilled,
raised beds,
planted,
weeded.
I awaited the first heavenly zucchini.

Then, with peas, squash and tomato nearly full,
it struck.

Ok, I can deal with this.
I meditated and asked it to leave.
I spread pepper.
I spread blood.
I set humane traps.
Still it fattened on my dream.

Virtue shifting,
I lay awake in loathing,
plotting my kill.
First the large, flat stones to block its tunnels
and then the smoke bomb.
It died gasping, sucking an air gone foul.

So what am I now?
Surely more than I thought.
Life sits in my hand,
and I'll play the death card if pushed.

Two years later,
 another groundhog moved in.
It cleaned the old tunnels,
 shoving my former adversary's
 bones to the surface.
Here's my undoing made visible.
 No remorse.
In a preemptive strike,
 I smoked the little shit.

Where in the name of mercy is my mercy?

Who Wrestles

The day I became New York champion
I knew I couldn't wrestle.
Good thing my body could.
It leaned and bunched of its own.
It coiled and countered each opponent,
move upon move,
so much more skilled than I.
Even so, it listened to advice.
Watch the kid from Wagner, I said,
he throws shoulder-to-shoulder rolls.
No talk of strategy,
just a word to the wiser.
And sure enough,
midway into that final match,
there it was...
His left shoulder folded.
His chin snapped down.
Such a perilous move against the forewarned.
I let him turn as a shaft
in the circle of my arms
and bound him as his feet
pointed to the ceiling.
My weight bore him to his blades.
He bridged and spun to his belly.
Still, crucial points for a near pin.
Later, the trophy,
the applause,
the winners' photo,
the article in the paper,
the Little Joe Grappler award.
And the right to tell others,
with an ego's pride,
of my wrestling prowess.
But who, exactly, had won?

Cutting Words

He's the kind of poet
who barbers verse.
Snip here.
Layer there.
Condition and gel.
They look good
and smell good
and are welcome in polite company.
People clap at their cleverness
and return to their canapés.
But where are
the cowlicks
and dreadlocks
and unruly curls?
Where's original wildness,
that unkempt, lawless streak
with something
true to teach?
If he'd stow the scissors
and comb words with his fingers,
tone and meter
and natural grace
might send tendrils
through his heart,
through the tight box
of his desire to please,
all the way
to
the
ground
and
beyond.

How Sees the Angel of Death

The angel of death has kind eyes,
half-smiling eyes,
eyes reaching for a punch line.
They'd be at ease anywhere, those eyes,
watching Monday night football
or children at play
or fireflies across a field on a July night.
They are of the earth, those eyes,
but then again not.
They glow with fierce purpose,
missing nothing,
losing nothing,
and span a different spectrum...
measuring the readiness
of worth in its time.
And should you ring with ripeness,
when true sweetness
condenses about the seed,
his eyes root you.
He hands you one of two cards
given your belief:
"Master of endings," says one.
"Midwife," the other.
They flare cleanly then, those eyes,
as gateway and blade,
severing body's tie to soul,
soul's tie to body,
so each, free,
expresses
in the great ground of being.

Only the Same Once

Change has many heads,
but a single mind;
many ends,
but one goal.

It asks one question...what's new?

The model of patience,
it always gets its way,
which is all ways
and no way at all.

It gives advice freely,
but never says the same thing twice.

It loves new cities
with their strange streets and strange foods.

It spends each night in a different bed,
buys old books on impulse
and scarves it wears once and gives away.

It nurtures chaos
and the order hidden there.

It was before and will be after,
acting in time, but living elsewhere.

Mutably immutable,
it whispers in God's ear
as servant and master.

Guantanamo

I break like a stone
torn on the wind
through endless turns
of heat and cold.
Will they ever end,
these forces
peeling me in layers?
I am shattered.
All I'd needed and held dear, gone.
Yet I remain.
Fear, terrible fear,
of uncertain violence
and what these people will do next,
fills my days.
How can I go on?
How can I be stripped bare,
yet have so much of myself?
How can this place,
with its forced intimacies and impositions,
with its denial of my faith
and borderline tortures,
make me more than I was?
The answer lies in this small circle of vastness,
where, shrunk to essentials,
I follow the God of my Fathers
beneath a sky domed clearer
than ever I'd imagined.

So Dies a Piece of Heart

He slides sideways
 away
 from
 beseeking
 hands
 reaching through glass
 for one more touch,
 away
 from
 pain
 and
 loss
 beyond pain and loss.

He travels far in an instant
 to build a solitary hut
 by a solitary ocean
 for the new-torn and broken.
 He bids them stay,
 and, leaving little food,
 hurries back,
 diminished,
 dulled.

The bus departs,
 sealing his heart's triage.

Let's Hear It for Non-Lawns

A lawn's a fearsome thing,
out of place in the natural world.
So who made it king of suburbia?
Who decided grass
trumped fields and woodlots
and instituted the violence of
fertilizers, herbicides
and repeated mowing?

Let a lawn go for a month
and wildness reasserts.
The grass reaches for height
and the right to seed
and perennials, vines and shrubs
take root to match the destiny
of that bit of earth.

There's essential learning
in our yards.
If we cease dumbing them down
to a single species,
they would teach us
of our place in the world
and our dominion
over living things.

Sonoma Sea Cliffs: Sketches

All change.

All movement.

All the time...

as shifting light and tide,

as sometime fog,

as wind.

As cormorants and buzzards

tilting and wheeling

and the queer, tiny land birds

Raechel named "muties"

who quick-step into burrows

as we pass rather than wing away.

Long walks along high cliffs at the ocean's edge:

cove after cove,

eroded headlands,

stacks stepping out to sea.

Weathered wooden steps lead to coarse sand

and algae-lined tidal pools,

green in excess against black rock.

Streamlets sheet the cliff face and

braid dark channels in the lighter sand

in a last assertive act

before the ocean claims them.

The north end of the beach:

a mystery of rounded cobbles.

Why here and no where else?
I pile them on a whale-sized log
 silvered by the sun in
 a precarious assemblage
 for the eye of the next passerby.

The incessant breeze off the water
 shears wave tops,
 lifts ready-winged birds,
 tugs at our clothes.

It cants the low evergreens
 just back from the rim,
 sinewed in thickened stands,
 thickened as only life thickens
 after besting repeated storms.

Why, I wonder,
 doesn't the land
 stretch tight
 with all that air
 and, once full,
 blow it all back?

Crockett's Cove, Vinylhaven, Maine 2007

It's a mud-ugly world
when the tide recedes.
How comforting.
Nothing in this small bay is hidden.
Not the ooze, nor the scattered rocks
nor the orange-bladdered seaweed they anchor.
Not the blue-black mussels
nor the snails gliding on anything solid.
It's comforting to know
what holds the water
when it runs full,
as it does twice a day.

I sit in a century-old house
ten feet above high tide
breathing with the moon,
six hours in, six hours out.
I rise and fall, rise and fall,
flooded, then laid bare,
opening to feed,
then closing like the barnacles.
And all the while,
the ducks swim in deeper water,

never hurried, diving now and then
for morsels on the bottom.

All is rightful
and in its proper parts.

I freewheel here.

Life is spacious
and questions grow simple.
Will the offshore fog enshroud us?
Should I jog our dirt road early on
or face the gauntlet of late day
mosquitoes awaiting a blood meal?
Drivenness drops away
and I inhabit a neutral shade of time
that receives anything I shape
with equal grace.

Desert Sleep

Lemon-breathed women astride fiery camels
feed me humus in a dry world.

Their eyes,
flashing gray-bright at midday,
turn sultry after midnight,
when heat,
rising from sand
and bodies on sand,
seeks the clear-starred sky.

Anchored on a cooling earth,
I enter the universes
to face light
and bring light
to time's journey
through time.

Dawn turns with the earth too soon,
and I return
to long shadows,
cold stone
banked fires
and sloe-eyed women
newly astir.

My eyes,
full of distant suns,
greet the single sun
and what is to feed me this day.

Approaching Wisdom

[A man of 60 years sits on a stool in a single spot on a stage. A woman in provocative clothes stands in a second spot 10 feet away. They look at each other.]

“Hey grandpa, you checking me out?”

“I love beauty.”

“Well, for a price you can do more than look.”

“So you sell your beauty?”

“That’s what I do.”

“Well, you’ve got it backward.”

“What do you mean?”

“You should pay me.”

“For what?”

“My wisdom. In fact, I’ve got a sale on today. Ten bucks an hour.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Try me. Ask a question. The first one’s free.”

“Ok. Why did my daughter die?”

“I don’t know.”

“I thought you answered questions.”

“No. I help you find questions. The answers are yours.”

“So that’s it.”

[She gets up to leave.]

“Perhaps that was not your question.”

“It is.”

“So you had a daughter?”

“Well, I would have if Thomas not made me abort her.”

“And Thomas is?”

“My pimp.”

“So you do have a different question. Just be quiet awhile.”

[Two minutes pass with much fidgeting on her part.]

“I do have a question.”

‘Yes?’

“Why am I a prostitute?”

“Now that’s a good question. Okay, our time is up. Let me know if you find an answer or if you have another question.”

[She departs. Thomas enters.]

“Old man, you’ve been bothering my girls. They show me less respect and argue with me more. Leave them alone.”

“Do you have a question?”

Mathematics of the Heart

There's a mathematics of the heart
beyond exponents and imaginary numbers
where love raised to a higher power
goes to infinity
in a beat.

And a physics of connection
outside gravity, bosons and superstrings
where the net of unity
turns from theory to certainty
in a glance.

And a study of Self
within an expanding universe
where true knowing
fills the surrounding emptiness
in a breath.

Prime Time

There's no end to primes
whole unto themselves:
each a lineage of
longing and action.

17, so lonesome,
seeking other's eyes.
How different from 7,
gathered firmly in the world
and setting the stage
for 11 to learn its lines
at the edge of self-knowing.
Or 3, fullness embodied,
that blooms at 13,
becomes at 23
and ripens for the first time at 31.
Always there is 1 and its binary 2,
whole from the start,
pure comfort in all that arises.
And why this sudden fondness at 41
and its nearest of kin, 43?
Of course...
they turn new ground,
planting strange seed
for the final fruit
decades away
in prime's last fling.

One Way to Overcome Loss

He was a bare-knuckled, hard-edge kind of guy. His pulled-up, pushed-out chest and over-direct eyes let people know where but not who he was. He was at the top of his game until his wife left him. No note or scene. Just a message on the answering machine from somewhere. He fell from swagger in a descent that dragged his shoulders and chest to his belly.

The door to his heart swung open. A terrifying moment. He stood staring into the closet at his clothes on one side and her bare hangars on the other. After some thought, he began to bring her back. He found a handful of her clothes in the hamper, acrid and sweet with her scent. He hung them in the closet. He put the CDs and books she'd left behind there too and taped her photo inside the door.

He moved a small table in front of the closet and placed a chair facing it. He ate there from then on, telling her about his day, his victories and defeats. He told her jokes and spoke of odd items in the news. He asked her advice. She was, finally, the attentive wife he'd wanted. With her door always open to him, the old, rolling gait returned and life bounced off him once again.

Rectum

Pity the poor rectum,

butt of jokes,

it gets no respect.

With billions of ass holes on the planet,

there's not one fan club

or lobbyist

to protect its interests.

Enough of this turn-up-the-nose,

never-in-polite-company stuff.

Let's honor what's been long hidden

in globes of flesh.

Why value the beginning more than the end?

We'd be shit out of luck without them both.

Besides, imagine the marketing possibilities:

Rectum beauty contests,

and living-end centerfolds.

Rectal cosmetics.

Enema recipe books.

Designer rectal thermometers.

And off-Broadway, the 'rectal monologues.'

Think also of the IPO possibilities

and venture capitalists in a frenzy

at the thought of being left behind.

Cats in Fog

When fog steals down the coast,
fell cats follow its leading edge,
pouncing on tendrils,
hoping for that one-in-a-million mist creature
whose sweet flesh
feeds dreams.

But joy in movement is reward enough
in the still hours before dawn.

Miles later they swing home,
wet furred and weary,
having wrestled fog to a draw.

How lazy they seem on hearth and hammock.

Yet round the edges,
like far bells,
a marrow-deep pull
stirs the urge to prowl
the next gray-white bank
for the
unmet unseen
barely beyond reach.

Dragon Deeds

Dragons play amid wild roses
on the cusp of May into June
when flying's easy and food's plentiful.
It's a manic time for
improbable beasts
with grandiose tendencies.
Anything's possible
when growing things thrive
before rose petals give way to hips
and lawyers and accountants
counsel caution and balanced books.
Much later, the memory of that cocky time
births sudden smiles,
stirring hearts
weary with limits and tending.

Why Cows Return

It was a butter and jam day,
when the cows left home.

Caught between smoothness and sweetness,
they followed the spun-sugar sky uphill
to settle on soft earth,
aloof in those timeless hours.

The loss sent me wandering
half-wild slopes,
seeking until the
dim hour before dusk.

Who am I if they are not mine to tend?

Cow eyes tracked me all the while
from copse and tall grass
until cow hunger outed them
in a line behind me
as I turned back.

I should have known.

Cowdom is, after all,
more about stomach than selfhood.

The Jesus Dog

The grinning dog sang of Jesus
in a clear, high voice
for those who tiptoe through life.

What pipes.

What phrasing.

What an undoglike thing to do.

But that's the point.

If a dog can chant Gregorian,
where might your voice lead
if heel follows toe downward
to a whole-souled stance?

Music of Days

Avoid crooning cats and whistling horses.

They soothe their ears, not yours.

Find your own songs amid

oversized hats with broad brims.

You'll grow into them all too soon.

Use whatever comes:

early winter rain,

chance flirtations,

stiffness in hips and hands,

even strawberry pie.

There's no end to the music of days.

Simply grow receiving ears

so your tunes hum you

as tones and overtones,

in the sounding board

of each cell.

FAMILY AND SELF

Dad's Greatest Gift

He lay in a barred bed,
 an old man in diapers
 in a too-hot room.
"My head went pop," he said.
Then sleep caught him
 from one breath to another.
I chattered on after he dozed,
 speaking to an absence
 as I had so often before.
His once ample, laborer's frame shrunk.
 Stick legs and stick arms.
 Gray skin and gray stubble.
He lived those last, post-stroke days as before,
 adrift in acceptance,
 good natured,
 just out of reach.

Yet he gave the gift at last,
 the one he'd wrapped at my birth,
 the one I'd awaited so long.
As I rounded a corner in that nursing home,
 he saw me from his wheel chair and smiled.
 "Look, it's my first-born son,"
 he told the attendant.
And that simple phrase,
 even in my 50s,
 watered me
 and planted my feet.
The earth opened
 and took my roots.
It's good to be here.

Drawn to Daven

My father's riches lay in the names of God
and the promise of the Western Wall.
Though family and furs claimed his waking hours,
he lived a monkish life,
inward turning and apart,
a monastery of one.

Each workday the same: up at 5:00,
lay *tefillin* and leave the Bronx to open
a Garment Center synagogue by 7:00.
Chanting those names under his breath,
he walked the early streets.
At *shul*, he sat alone awhile amid
tallis, *siddur* and the odor of prayer,
swaddled, comforted.
Empty of mind, full of heart.

Other men, gray-haired and *yarmulked* like him,
gathered until they were a *minyán* or more.
Their fervent stanzas droning as one word
fired his mind; his rhythmic rocking
joined that word and his body.
The room hummed with devotion.

He *davened*, eyes half closed,
as the ancient bond to God
scribed in his cells since *cheder* in Poland
filled him yet again.

All else dropped away.

He was home.

Notes: *Chedar* – Hebrew school. *Daven* – prayer. *Minyan* – a quorum or 10 men. *Shul* – synagogue. *Siddur* – prayer book. *Tefillin* – phylacteries. *Tallis* – prayer shawl. *Yarmulke* – skullcap.

Seeing My Mother After 18 Years

She fixed me with the firm eyes of frailty,
catching time
in a windless place,
her gaze more direct
than ever before.

We crossed back and forth to each other
on the bridge our eyes made,
freed of the constraint
that had divided us.

Something in me had shifted.

Judgment, blame and other miasmas
vanished like mist before a risen sun,
and kindness
became the ground
beneath my feet.

I simply stood at her left side,
leaning into her hospital bed,
her hand in mine as she dozed
or showing her photos of her granddaughters,
speaking softly of my gratitude,
or simply smiling down on her smile
lifting toward me.

She reached through the gauze of her mind,
one moment bright with memory,
the next clouded in soft misperception.

She spoke of my childhood nose bleeds
and the rush to Fordham Hospital
after I fell from a tree when I was eight.

Without pause, she said. "This bed
is too small and has mice."
She asked me to stay the night:
"This isn't my place, you know.
See if they'll let you
sleep under my bed."

I entered and left her room many times
in those two hours as nurses tended her.
Each return to unguarded vision a surprise.
Always there was her heart,
so near the surface,
its fear wrapped in an open hand.

So I became her babe in arms again,
held in her eyes.
Yet she was also my babe,
held in my eyes.
In the silence of that seeing,
we named the end
and the beginning
and all between...
and the wonder of finding
and of losing
and of finding again
and finally of the loss
that does not depart.

Dancing Without Clothes

I hid in a cigar box
with my marbles, yo-yo,
and comic books.
I hid my hunger to be heard and feted.
I hid desire and expression.
I hid well and forgot I was lost.

A discard among discards,
the box awaited memory's turn.
Years of digging placed it in my hands.
Years of habit impelled me to put it back.
Too late.
The old undenied won't be redened.

So I read my poetry to a beloved friend,
who listens with the silence
of a dry forest welcoming rain.
And once begun,
once received,
I cannot stop.
Such shame at the yearning:
Take me in.
Tell me how good I am.

I'm six again:
Watch me dance.
Do you like my drawing?
I'd vowed never again.
So raw.
Such a hole,
this needy,
naked,
unfed me.

So Says a Solitary Voice

Hold it boy.
Hold till it hurts.
Then hold some more.
Don't matter if you die.
Just keep quiet.
Don't risk those waters.
Don't push too far
(Even a little may be too far.)
or you'll get pulled into that rip
like those kids off Orchard Beach
who drowned within sight of land.
So swallow yourself.
Give way.
Keep yourself
your secret self
your desires and dreams
and strong beliefs and stubbornness
to yourself.
Take no chances.
Be smooth and flawless
so what comes
beads and runs off
like water on a well-oiled wall.
Be untouched.
Better withheld than held
in open arms hiding chaos.
The world can turn without warning
and sweep you into that empty ocean
where unseen beasts brush your legs
and land is a distant memory.
Better to make a home in yourself.
Better half-whole than lost beyond loss.
It's the only sane way to stay sane.

Tether

When your cord's cut
and your mother doesn't catch the end
because her hands are too full of loss
you fly off
even as you reach for her.
You try real hard to be her child
until you both believe it
but at your core you know
no hand holds you
and you are adrift.

Again and again it comes.
The longing.
The flying off.
The forgetting.
Yearning and disappointment
cycle through
until you lose heart
until your hands freeze
half extended
not quite reaching
for what never reaches back.

And now
cushioned by
the familiar sadness
of your loss
you turn
at last
knowing you and only you
can catch that long-ago,
ever-present end
and be the tether
that brings you here.

A Possibility of Missing No More

No burial or wake
ended my beginning
when I turned up missing
and presumed alive at age six.
No one noted my absence
or how loss split me,
searcher from searched for.
Days have burned bright since then;
some even leaned into me.
Little mattered
as I strayed,
eyes down,
a clue seeking clues.
Slow hints in odd places
when I was least ready
led to tales of my unmourned self.
Now, after all the decades,
is it possible to own again
what looks through my eyes
just beyond grasp?
Is it possible at last
to be finder, not seeker?

Desert Baskets

There's no denying self.
Even sheep in wolves clothing
eat grass on the road to muttonhood.
And you, with strange beliefs
and early fingers
clamping your throat to a whisper
even you are truer to your Self
than you know.
So strive down dim passages
past fruitless doors
shed burdens
and beware the smiling ones
and grim-face gods
who would pry you from yourself.
Shun protection
and walk apart though together
into those beckoning spaces
where self-knowing and salvation lie
where trees are just trees
and open arms are just open arms
not possession
and where desert grasses
can be woven as baskets
to catch the bits of essence
falling in their time toward you.

How Many Forms Can A Guy Hold?

Amber-black winds toss me
one way then another
over soft ground and hard.

Sometimes I lift off.
Mostly I luff along
or hide in the wind's shadow.

At times my toes
touch empty space.
But how much falling
can any day hold?

It's not my call,
and I fall after all.

Unsettled things find me then,
things I've worried smooth
like stones in rough surf.

Here, distrust in a chancy world.
There, secretiveness.
Or independence masking need.

Or overwork as a diversion
from what circles close.

I flirt with chaos,
yet sleep beneath a pillow
for the safety of softness.

Deeper still,
there's cinnamon
and distant tambourines,
enticing, comforting...
the seeds of yearning.

I am so many
ceaseless, tumbling forms,
glowing and dark.

There's no saving myself.
Not from places opening as they will
nor from wind
nor from what wind carries through.

Spore the World

Don't bet the farm
on lines, planes, spheres or cubes.
Forget smoothness, order
and an everything-in-its-place life.
Nature spins rough shapes in great detail,
and we're the better for it.

Rather dig your nose in a forest floor,
pulling loam deep in your lungs
so ferns and fungi grow there at will,
swaying to your breath.
The spores you exhale
will travel the wind...
bits of yourself seeding the world.

Someday,
up a blind canyon,
clinging to a cliff,
you may meet yourself anew
and wonder
how the hell you got there.

Living for Lost

When there's no place to go,
the going gets good.
Like staring at passing headlights,
daring fate to hold the way clear
in that sudden blindness.
Choice passes to another realm
where anything can happen,
and does.
Where you drink strange teas
and find kinship in strangers
and your life's work finds you
by chance
in an elevator
or a Thai restaurant.
Purpose takes your hand
with a knowing smile:
Life is safe.
You sleep well.
But blinders are a chancy thing,
bound to slip by their very nature.
There comes a morning, eyes freed,
when you stand
shivering at dawn
on another road
in a trackless place,
clothed only in faith,
deliciously lost again.

Swimming through Stone

I'd clotted in stone far too long
when, quickened
by hope and desire,
I muscled outward
to part the encasing rock.
I freed in degrees,
reverting slate to shale
to mud to soil-laden water.

I now crawl, backstroke and butterfly,
dive and breach,
through stone undone.
I hum with the power of it.
I will do this thing!
I will face my past.
I will have my voice.
I will follow my hurt and my heart.
I will be affected
and be seen
and bump against others
and be as brilliant as I am
and birth my world.

Each kick and pull
sends new fluid
past my eyes,
into my mouth.
The force of my passing
ripples outward
telling the horizon
I'm on my way.

Blue Ridge Awakening

My 30th year was like early spring
in Virginia's Blue Ridge,
when trees gathered energy for growth
in a time before leaves
and white trillium and dogwood blooms
signaled return against forest floor and canopy,
like late stars in a night sky edging toward dawn.
Walking those woods was a care-less thing.
The rising force fed my legs
so they sped off the ground
as if gravity had taken a holiday.
Sunshine felt it too,
bounding ahead and behind
as we climbed Old Rag
through last year's leaf litter and
new ferns curling outward.

I too was awakening from a long winter
and held dear my early flowers,
seeing them against the shadows
that still held sway.
It was a precious interlude
 free of the call to do or succeed.
I'd broken with the past,
 tapping funds from my time in science
to follow tenuous currents
drifting toward the main channel.
And in that season of arising,
I greened to a sense of self
 expressed in stone walls and sculpture,
 trail building, body work, spiritual paths and more.
Having waited three decades for that year,
 I let it live me to the full.

Standing in Her Self: For Ann Julia, April 2005

Her smoothness and angles
tune the gross,
the ghostly
and the willful
to things of beauty.
They come as order and disorder,
no less or more than
the distant sounds of traffic,
birds at first light
or simple stories.
Limits fall.
Vision firms.
The world parts before her,
closes behind,
changed in subtle and
not-so-subtle ways
by the intent of her passing.
In the end, only miracles abide,
fleeting or enduring,
for the woman who lives
in herself.

22 and Finding: A Birthday Poem for Stephanie

Stephanie tears the caul anew
on the way to another year.
The world pushes towards her.
She rushes to meet it
with the verve of an old soul
on a beloved journey.
Her gathered what and who
binds her dearer to life.
As own teacher,
she is frequently lost
in the finding.
Forces gather about her.
She peers out windows
into the beckoning dark
for hints of what is to come.
Her reflection peers back.
It is the only
clue she needs.

What Was and Will Be: For Raechel on her 60th

The joys and tears of ample years
met and met again
on roads of dark
and roads of light
and places in between
make your heart its own reward.

The 60-year yes
in reaching and having
in longing for life
bring you dreams
of worlds beyond worlds
and patterns within patterns.

Your knowing feeds knowing
and opens new ways
to birth the many
as one
and send
the one out
to fill the fullness you are.

So turn on the tide of your life
in your shallows
and your depths
swinging as long fronds
rooted but free.
So much have your waters
yet to give
in decades yet to be.

Michael Turns Sixty

Life in the land of sixes:

 No change.

 New eyes.

And time, time,

 all gentle slope

 and billows.

How had I never noticed before?

New ears, too.

Descend with the decade, I hear.

Attend falsehood and fear

 shame and judgment

 habit and hurt.

The smaller the better.

Question each ripple

 each wavelet

 each whitecap.

Be the water,

 I hear,

 not what runs along it.

SEEKING AND FINDING

Likelihood of Dawn

I embrace the narrow
edge
of dawn,
that point tipping
dark to light
so intimately
they are as one.

Here is the shaping of the world,
the threshold of
formless as form.

Here creation lives
unadorned
at full bore,
before becoming this and that,
before unity
hides in plain view,
and I form opinions,
make choices,
take stands.

Here the me of me arcs
inward and outward
so I am that potential
again
in which all
is likely.

Both-And

In the grand *both-and*,
or is a low wall
in a large field
with no power to divide.

And time, unbound,
like animal time or wind time,
sends its seconds
in all directions
at once,
always balanced
on the now,
so the once-was
and the might-yet-be
grow thin and flat.

The call is
to turn
and enter,
so doer is deed
and pray-er is prayer.
Here is being and becoming
and the many-as-one
and grace lived
from the inside out.

Third Thing

As the mantle of silence
descends amid the din,
and I remember
my past
the way a meadow at midday
remembers
the mists of morning,
the hand of being
rests softly on my head
and all I meet.
I am between then,
a foot to either side,
so all I am
and all I was,
all I cherish
and all I push away,
are one.
In stillness, I lift and drop.
I become an
up-down, high-low thing
and know the song
opposites hum to each other.
I join in,
pitch-tone perfect at last.

Dark Sight

The darker the dark,
the clearer I see.
Like walking blind in a wood.
Everything drawn close –
trees, roots, duff, deadfall,
sudden declines.
And wind and sound and smell
and the world below the world
in that old and
early part of my brain
before sight.
No risk's too small,
simple and plain, quiet and calm.
Like holding to feathers
in wings in flight.
Or carried in water,
breaking and joining.
Aloft or immersed, what matters?
Just inner and outer speaking...
and speaking again
moment to moment
in bridging conversation
so insight finds itself.

Field Work

You who hold doing so dear,
if I hand you a cup empty of tea,
 would you grow full
 in the drinking?
Or if I tap you lightly,
would you toll true sound
 the air's longing says
 was there all along?
Would you dissolve then
 so what you are
 and how you are
 nest in each other as
 a fan and its breeze,
 your heart and its call?
Afterward, would you rest,
 awash in the field,
 sails full open,
 destination in mind,
 and let random winds
take you where they will?

Let Us Walk the Sea

Come.
Take my hand.
Go with me
to the sea within the sea.
We will open there,
you and me,
to each wave
as if it were the first
ever to spend itself
on that shore.
We will walk that place
in the full light of a summer sun
and the promise of a young moon.
We will become
scud and spume
and water soft about our ankles
and black flies on still afternoons.

We will let the days
play through our hair
and the rhythms of our breath
and the rhythms of the sea
carry us
until we are who we are
and fill the volume
we were meant to fill.
We will become
our own horizons then,
you and me,
as vast and as close
as light off
foam-flecked sand.

Collapse and Its Blessing

Then there are
the users and absconders,
dreamers and deniers,
who stand outside the moment
and the only life they have.
Their loss feeds on itself,
cutting canyons through
the layers until the walls,
sheer and towering,
cave of their own weight.

When the dust of undoing settles,
daylight streams to their depths
and choice, precious choice,
opens the hidden and dismissed.
Here is rebirth
in the midst of crisis
and wisdom's chance
to build true shelter and
cobble roads from the fallen stone
amid tall grasses and scattered trees
to the near horizon.

Wisdom's Keys

Be curious.
Study hard.
Learn all you can.
Build spires
and domes
from bricks you fire
to house your knowledge.
If you're lucky,
the tome-tiered corridors
will ring empty at striving's end
and the seeking
there all along
will stretch full length.
It will say,
"be done
with what others know."
It will call you
to follow your arc
from light
to dark
and back,
gathering keys
along the way
to doors that open
only for you.

Freshness of Rain

Life is a freshness of rain,
a destiny of drops
offered and filled
on a wandering earth.

Learning brightens
at the moment of wetness.
Hair and skin stream water,
and the body becomes fluid
inside and out
running and joining
its way to the sea
in the company of
all other rivers.

Chaos Is as Chaos Does

Creation scribes tales
of species, storms and mountains
in fractal letters
large and small
detail by nested detail.

Singular beings
embracing the whimsy
of one-time events,
entrust their safety
to attractors
and their laws.

Chaos may not be an easy way
to run a universe or a life,
but no one has found a better way
than making complexity
its own master.

Wisdom in the face of chaos
is a shifting place where
action endlessly seeds response
seeds action
seeds response.

So choose a cause, any cause,
and learn from its effects.
Choose another and learn.
Choose again.
Learn again.
Again.
Again.

Love of Branching

When a tree's soft light
sends it branching to find
what was not lost,
the eternal shade beneath steps back
so what would dance can dance
on that hallowed ground.

Novelty wakes in surprising shapes then
as six-legged bodies,
and crustal plates,
and carnivorous flowers,
and an upright creature
adept at cultures and tools.

The great profusion
soars cathedrals to diversity
in ecosystems and economies.

But what of tight minds
that prune forests to stumps,
or limit fields to one genotype,
worship to the true way,
and nations to a single race.

They may thrive awhile,
spending precious coin.

But forced simplicity opens a dark door
and chaos, sealing all exits, enters
in spasms and night sweats,
in starvation and plagues and unholy wars.

Branching soon gains the upper hand
and potential again
leads the way.

Longing for Desert

Desert days are like any other
but for the call to leave the world
and walk deep sand
beneath a fierce sun
where the world shimmers near then far
like a heart tracking its own beat.
Here I too shimmer, near then far,
under a hotter, inner sun.

Seared within and without,
I roil and bubble, ever anew.
Having and losing
share the moment.
I am saner than ever I remember.

All that is not me falls away.
I am exposed and
take my name from harmony.
It has always been so, I see,
though I've spent myself on the known
and hid from the sun.

Striving slows and sharpens,
and I spin toward myself.
Only light matters.
In this I am no different
from the mesquite and saltbush
dotting this arid land
where desire sleeps
in the arms of being
and I am
who I am
that I am
as I am.

Plasm

The same smile smiles
on the sessile and the motile,
the benthic and the littoral.
It greets their arrival
and departure
as the pulse of life
calls progeny to parenthood
and the ground of being
draws them back again.
Wave upon wave breaks
on the fullness of time.
Only the ocean endures
and the ghost of that grin
in spore and seed and sperm.

Possibility's Angel

The angel fell inward,
 evermore bound,
 until curiosity found an end.
Content, he returned,
 this being of light,
 bearing hard-won shadows,
 brighter for the contrast.
He'd earned the sweep of dark spaces,
 the pain of distance from source,
 the simple weight of things.
Cratered and scored,
 his heart brims a first-hand kindness
 for those snared by
 stubbornness, denial and dread.
So he closes the circle,
 dropping again without falling,
 along that harried way.
He gathers
 the bottomed-out,
 end-of-the-line,
 ready-to-return
 and seeds them a promise:
 Desire to desire to begin,
 and I will hold to your side
 as companion and guide.
He condenses possibility
 for all who would be touched
 and sparks hope
 in the journey and its end.

Preacher

Listen up.

I'm talkin' worship here.

I'm talkin' about

an end to beseechin' God

to open doors and windows

when you have

the hands to do it yourself.

I'm not talkin' about

that fall-on-your-knees,

passive, prayers-of-your-father stuff.

I mean worship from your gut.

I mean partnerin' with God,

upholdin' your side of the covenant.

I mean ecstatic carin'

for His plan for you

and movin' it out.

I mean worship in action

with you as the bridge

between God out there

and God right here.

Don't you know

the world holds its breath

until your lungs give it air.

Listen. It's simple.
Just follow your heart.
No more. No less.
And if you don't know your heart,
if life's floods have buried it deep
in mud and uprooted trees,
why start diggin'.
This is between you and your maker.
Go deep into hunger, hurt, hate,
shame, pleasure...all of it.
No holds barred.
See what you like
and what you don't.
Live in revelation.
Cherish what you find.
If you do, I guarantee
the way your worship
wants to come to life in you
will make itself known.
Amen.

Note: read this sermon poem aloud to yourself in the voice of a rural Appalachian preacher.

To Lao Tzu

He had the face of a dragon
and his words
fired the soul.

He was at home
in the company of bones,
a surprise to the earth.

He took simplicity as his master,
moving like wind and water
through the world.

He was one of the few
whose heart did not die
at the altar of obedience.

He knew neither justice
nor vengeance,
yet his kindness weighed them both.

He lived his days
with hands cupping truth
for those sturdy enough to drink.

A Song for Small Hours

May I sing You in the small hours
when all is close
and notes fade in the dark
as they leave my lips.

May I greet that solitude
as Your home
and know,
beyond illusion,
Your hand in mine,
warm and firm.

May I take comfort
from even the basest voices
crowding in then,
for they too are me,
are You,
are life speaking to life.

And should I shatter
in that empty time,
may the shards,
resting miles apart,
form a greater being
holding the world together.

Two Prayers and a Coda

Slow my hand, dear God,
and slow my mind.

Slow my heart
and its desires.

Make being mine,
so I hold cold no less than heat,
loss no less than gain,
self no less than other.

Gather me deep, dear God,
and gather me wide.

Gather my many selves,
distant and near.

Bid them rest
each in the other,
so peace abides where
strife now reigns.

And finally, dear God,
help me follow
that being and peace
wherever it leads.

WRITINGS

The Poetic Field

Poetry is a twofold act arising from what I do and what springs from a larger perspective. It calls me to live in the gap between seeking poetic expression and finding poetic expression. When compelling ideas and words arise, as they always do, I craft them into verse that pleases me. The exchange is a back-and-forth, line-by-line thing built on curiosity, the willingness to be lost without rushing to judgment, and receptivity to a greater field as it coalesces around my intent to explore poetry.

The poetic field is not some magical thing, but simply one of the countless fields about us. In truth, we are field creatures. We create fields and use them to order the stuff of reality at every scale. In a room, we could map the field of people, furniture, air currents and hundreds of other things. Such local fields overlap, interrelate and combine to form more inclusive fields as systems or environments or taxonomies. We write books on them, like dictionaries for the field of words or biology texts for the field of life.

I find relating to the poetic field much like sight, with its interplay of focused and peripheral vision. Just as the point of focus floats in the broad field of perception, like the moon in the night sky, so the poetic field extends far beyond my normal way of writing.

Try a sight experiment. Look at an object about 10-feet away and soften your eyes so you are aware of both the object and the peripheral field. The peripheral world, rather than sharp and clear, is one of movement, sensed shapes, patterns and blocks of color. In holding both focus and periphery (this can take some practice), you enter the full visual field. Similarly, in poetry, I hold my focus as the shape and patterns of lines stream in from the periphery.

Because I want to write new and novel lines, I select from the peripheral poetic field words wrapped in surprise and delight. This is especially true of first lines, many of which come at me like fire crackers on a dark night. Their light and sound catch me off guard and I lean toward them, cupping my inner ear to hear what comes next. Here are some first lines that started me down the road to poems:

- "Don't you know the world holds its breath until your lungs give it air."
- "Even sheep in wolves' clothing eat grass on the way to muttonhood."
- "We will become our own horizons then."
- "When there's no place to go, the going gets good."
- "I break like a stone turned on the wind through endless turns of heat and cold."
- "Who made grass king of suburbia?"
- "If I hand you a cup empty of tea, would you grow full in the drinking?"

Perhaps one in 20 or 30 such lines end up as a poem. Many lines intrigue me, but have yet to go beyond themselves, for instance:

- "Circles in emptiness scribe centers without circumference, everywhere and nowhere at once."
- "The silence stretched between us like gentleness on soft ground."
- "Grow original things in an easy gradient back toward yourself."
- "Our eyes met. For the briefest of moments I laid my antiquities at your feet and you laid yours at mine."
- "It's absolutely crazy to let go the handlebars, but how else to free your hands to shape air."
- "Carpals and tarsals and their meta brethren worship different faces of God."
- "Behold black and the excess potential of its days."

Since the poetic field is everywhere in the greater field of language, lines also come from the outer world. My job is to grab them as they go past and make them my own. Here are some:*

- "The lawn was full of south." I've spent some early-morning hours trying to put flesh on this Emily Dickinson line. It nags at me still.
- I keep this line adapted from a William Stafford poem by my desk and go back to it time and again: "They want a wilderness with a map. But how about...the many places a road can't find."
- My friend Terry said that when his cat Cinnamon passed on "her eyes stopped reflecting the moon...and the moment cracked in two."
- "The inches we need are everywhere about us."

- From a radio interview with a musician just before he played live on the air: "I have suffered for my music, and it's time you did too."
- Here's a statement attributed to John Phillips Souza when asked about jazz: "It makes me want to bite my grandmother."
- And another by a major league pitcher about the slugger Hank Aaron: "Trying to sneak a fastball by him is like trying to sneak sunrise past a rooster."
- In talking about the differences between his world and the Western world, an Afghani tribal leader told the US ambassador: "You have all the watches. We have all the time."

I've gone on at some length with these lines to give you a sense of the richness that streams toward me simply because I look. The endless flow of striking lines says poetry is always within reach.

When I am in harmony with the poetic field, the lines that visit are simultaneously inclusive and wide and narrow. If my focus is too limited, I fixate, become overly literal and tend to confirm what I already know. If I am too loose, I can't hold the tension between focus and field. I lose the field's shape and my resonance to it. I know I've lost my balance when what I write bores me.

My ability to land on enticing lines depends on a soft stance, much like juxtaposing focused and peripheral vision. Doing so leads beyond the ground I know to a place where I give the emerging voice its voice and the wisdom below my wisdom a podium.

Poetry moves in my field because I welcome it. My predisposition to novel wording brings novel wording. My presence affects the poetic field, so I walk in a self-created Michael subfield that surfaces familiar ideas in strange garb. Here I seek at the edge of the known driven by the spirit of inquiry and the spacious of not knowing. I simply need to embrace as much of the field as I can and welcome what comes "moment to moment in bridging conversation".**

* Some of my notes on these lines did not include full attribution. My apologies to those to whom I did not give full credit.

** From "Dark Sight"

Seeking Breath: A Journal

The previous essay speaks about lines that arise spontaneously around a held intent. But at times I go after a topic, worrying it from this angle and that, repeatedly cycling through it.

Finished poems are like tumbled stones worked and reworked until their sheen and shape are perfect in the eye of the poet. I include this journal to share a bit of the messiness of writing poetry. I began it when I heard of a Zen master who asked his students to bring him a novel insight into their breath each day. Before writing an entry, I attended to my breath for 15 minutes or more. The following set of statements on in-breath, out-breath and the still points between them will be a springboard for a yet-to-be-written poem. It is a snapshot in mid process before discrimination and polishing begins. Nestled in the repetition and inane lines are promising ideas for a poem I've yet to start.

• • •

Day 1 My breath breathes itself. I'm along for the ride.

Day 2 The bottom of my breath is forever. I cannot stay there yet.

Day 3 My breath enters a vast cavern, echoing off far walls.

Day 4 My breath has its own mind. Any thought I have is irrelevant.

Day 5 The fullness at the top of my breath turns towards empty on
a knife's edge.

Day 6 My in-breath abounds with life like the plains of Central Africa. My out-breath is a near-desert stretching life thinly.

Day 7 My breath rises from the unformed and returns to it, as a thrown ball follows gravity's arc back to earth.

Day 8 My breath at rest sleeps in soft darkness.

Day 9 My in-breath bears the serenity of no-breath, much like a finger dipped in water carries a film of wetness when lifted away.

Day 10 Though no-breath seems as dense as the root of a mountain, it shifts at the slightest quirk of vapor.

- Day 11 When no-breath opens, I could stay on and on but my body's compulsion sadly speeds me away.
- Day 12 My breath goes from clear to cloudy when thoughts claim me.
- Day 13 Breath awaits, no matter what my mind engages.
- Day 14 No-breath sags in the middle like a drum head in gravity. I roll about and find rest at its center.
- Day 15 I cannot find my no-breath after running. Just a rapid pumping to meet my cell's demands that compacts the bottom to a swift bounce.
- Day 16 No-breath is a velvet, black-body space.
- Day 17 My inner eye sees crisply on the in-breath, but dims and drifts on the out-breath. I lose focus entirely during no-breath.
- Day 18 No-breath is vaster and more energy rich than the space stretched between the subatomic world and galaxies.
- Day 19 Where does no-breath start? My in-breath and out-breath have beginnings, but out-breath slides into the infinite, coming closer and closer to it until it is still.
- Day 20 Only in-breath takes work. Once over the top, the loss of air is effortless.
- Day 21 The emergence of breath from no-breath mirrors the birth of matter. From no-time and no-space, dimension explodes outward on an inrush of air.
- Day 22 I long to linger in no-breath, but the ceaseless pull to breathe is beyond any I control.
- Day 23 My mind slips away from the world and empties along with my lungs as I breathe out.

- Day 24 When a veneer of thought obscures my breath, awareness cuts through to the rhythm beneath in a version of the game 'rock (breath) – paper (thought) – scissors (awareness)'.
- Day 25 I can control my breath for a few cycles before my body's basic wisdom returns breath to its natural state.
- Day 26 I know the mind of filling, the full-bodied creation of form along with breath. But the emptying mind, the backside of evolution and breath, is still a strange land.
- Day 27 The back side of breath is dissipation and disintegration in an open slide to the eternal.
- Day 28 Waves ride the stillness at the bottom of my breath. My heart beats with them.
- Day 29 Each breath is unique in the space of its strange attractor. How to savor the virtues of each one? I'm learning.
- Day 30 I free-fall on the out-breath without a parachute. No wonder thought collapses.
- Day 31 In-breath and out-breath form a shape like my thoracic cavity: a fullness up front and a sharp drop down my back.
- Day 32 Rest-rise-rest-fall-rest. Functional words, but how limited a way to describe infinite breath.
- Day 33 Following my breath, I find renewed energy, focus and deeper sensing.
- Day 34 I drop from thought to breath and am disoriented. Like a familiar road gone strange, I lose my bearings and wait for breath to show me where I am.
- Day 35 The start of in-breath is sluggish, as if I push my chest into a viscous fluid. Soon the effort grows effortless, a sort of respiratory shear thinning.
- Day 36 Out-breath relieves the building tension of in-breath. How sweet the slide to neutral ground and the end of doing.

- Day 37 Dropping into breath forms an alliance with the order underlying it.
- Day 38 Though no-breath is independent of space and time, its echo is present throughout the breath.
- Day 39 I focus to infinity as I breathe, keeping no-breath in sight as I rise and fall.
- Day 40 As I embrace no-breath, it spreads across the rest of my breath bringing clarity and ease.
- Day 41 Dropping into breath from thought is like adding eyes where none were before.
- Day 42 The very top of breath is undefinable and too elemental for the mind to grasp.
- Day 43 My breath emerges from no-breath as a broad sheet that collects into a single strand.
- Day 44 The shape of breath is invisible, but solid. I skate its surface.
- Day 45 The rhythm of respiration is everywhere in me at once, as much in my right index finger as in my chest.
- Day 46 Breath has no meaning! Depth. Speed. Color. Yes. Thoughts that try to link me to it only separate us.
- Day 47 Have I ever travelled a full breath? I don't think so. Like some manic firefly, I flicker in and out of reality.
- Day 48 Time depends on where I live in breath. In emptiness, time stretches till I think it may never return. It contracts to the moment when I rise to fullness and flip to descent.
- Day 49 Breath does not judge. It takes all air molecules at face value no matter who or what had used them before, whether saint or beggar, elephant or fern.
- Day 50 Try and hold breath at its full point. Like dancing on a rolling log in water, I may balance awhile but eventually succumb to a top-heavy instability.

- Day 51 Breath is a rhythmic unity, syncopated in time so no part is possible without any other.
- Day 52 If you seek faith, look no further than breath. It reaches for air and never doubts it will be there.
- Day 53 I imagine the top of my breath and hold an inner hand at the right level facing the source so its turning just kisses the center of my palm.
- Day 54 It is fullness I resist. I stop breath well before I reach capacity. When I go all the way, my chest wall cracks.
- Day 55 Funny thing how breathless full breath feels.
- Day 56 Subtle tones shaped by my breath's passing as it reverberates over sinus and septum are not unlike those in a flute from a master craftsman.
- Day 57 In-breath lifts me higher than I fall on out-breath. How can it be that going forth and return are unequal yet equal.
- Day 58 My in-breath and out-breath have their textures, velocities and content. One is smooth, sprightly, buoyant. The other, thick, unrestrained, dark.
- Day 59 My in-breath pinches off in panic as it pushes into unused capacity.
- Day 60 My in-breath at its far limit reaches for infinity, cresting the rails like an errant roller coaster before falling into the next valley.
- Day 61 My feelings interact with the passing breath to form a resonant space, a convection cell in which they circle each other.
- Day 62 Breath infused with fear does not dare. It tests the air cautiously and expels without savor in an impotent exchange that denies creation.
- Day 63 The breath of fear sends air around the margins, as far from the heart and belly as possible.
- Day 64 My stuffy nose reveals breath like dust in a spotlight beam. Snot and swollen tissue scatter and restrict the flow, forcing eddies and stagnant places.
- Day 65 When breath becomes the main event, ideas drift about like ghosts from a parallel realm where thought believes it is consciousness.
- Day 66 I lose my breath as thoughts, like flashes of distant heat lightening, capture me. Will I ever be one full breath?

- Day 67 My breath does not insist, compete or seek attention. Its tidal path unfolds whether I attend or not.
- Day 68 In that split second when I find breath, the sutures of my skull swing wide and my tail drags the earth. I become a bridge to the heavens.
- Day 69 I am an avatar of the Method of Successive Approximations, approaching each breath but never quite reaching it. Each iteration brings me breath anew to know for the first time.
- Day 70 Having been with me from the start, my breath knows my original face before life set it in stone.
- Day 71 Breath is the road of return to my original face if I truly want to go home again.
- Day 72 Today I breathe like a turtle. My chest and belly a rigid carapace shielding my inner rising and falling.
- Day 73 Motes of light dance in my in-breath on waves of respiration, independent and unresisting. They are a comfort.
- Day 74 My breath has a low center of gravity like those inflatable punching figures weighted to spring upright when hit. No matter the buffeting, my base rooted in no-breath lends stability and always returns me to center.
- Day 75 Energy gathered as in-breath pushes out near the crest, searching the surrounding unformed space for creative purchase.
- Day 76 There is so much sweetness in my breath, like honey hugging the back of my throat and pooling in my belly. I am uneasy at the depth of the pleasure.
- Day 77 Organ pipe breath. Big empty tube breath. Growling breath below the threshold from wherever breath begins.
- Day 78 Whatever path my breath takes, it always returns and says: "Attend! You are not lost."
- Day 79 My breath passes through those broken places where great trees litter the ground and only random splinters stand above the desolation. It flies on untouched.
- Day 80 Each breath comes from afar. If I focus, I can sense where it was born in the tang of sea air, the cold of a snowfield or the heavy green imprint of a swamp.

Day 81 Breath arises as tendrils from the mists of no-breath to enliven the muscular trunk of my body.

Day 82 My breath is easy today as if the way was prepared for it, much as the leader of a lightening strike softens the air for the surge of exceptional voltage.

Day 83 My breath receives the next new thing and the next. It fills and empties, empties and fills.

Odds, Ends and Short Takes

More important than if lines come or how I approach a topic is my ongoing commitment to write some each day, usually in early morning. The free writing I do then is like pulling a card from a large deck. There's no telling what I'll draw, perhaps advice or an insight on an aspect of the world or a person, or even a short story.

Some of these writings are inane and soon discarded, but others turn my head and make my heart sing. I cherish the latter and take inspiration for poems from them. This section, distilled from my journals, shares this surging creative source in lines, paragraphs and short verse. I gave them no particular order so they capture the unexpected flow of ideas emerging from one moment to the next.

• • •

Some questions on opposing roads have the same answer: How important would today be if you went on forever? How important would today be if this is all there is?

• • •

We're all beings from elsewhere stitched into life, moving in and out of view as the needle draws the thread above or behind the fabric.

• • •

I've been crowned king of the bone yard, endlessly worrying the same four ghosts – your fault, why me, if only you had, if only I had. They chase each other like dust devils on a dry field in August. When my attention makes them solid, dawn dies in my hands and the rest of the day follows it to the grave.

• • •

What sends thought to pioneer places on a wandering journey where sudden insight may erase the map?

• • •

She had a flypaper personality, all glue and tell me but no wax for my wings and no sense of where she stopped and I began.

• • •

I am your almost nothing, fulfilled every where at once. A laughing man may yet become a dancing bear.

• • •

It's harder above the clouds where the sun knows its full power and lays light full about.

• • •

Carpals and tarsels and their meta brethren worship different faces of God. Tribes of reachers and supporters, each about a different business, compose yet another duet within creation.

• • •

I am the warp...
 the weft...
 the shuttle.
 I move in circles...
 in cycles...
 in patterns.
 I am color...
 texture...
 vision without end,
 No less the loom
 than the weaver's hands.

• • •

Our penchant for shoes, sandals and sneakers leaves our soles longing for the ground. Picture trying to smell perfume through glass or caressing the one you love while wearing gloves. In this proprioceptive vacuum our feet grow soft and uneducated and we lose true partnership with the Earth.

• • •

Wilderness, fierce and full, visited me yesterday. A hawk, fully a foot tall, flashed onto the limb outside my window. I was captured as surely as a mouse in its talons by its echoes in me, by the wind-over-wings feeling of soft flight, the parting air in a dive towards prey, the fullness of hunger in winter.

• • •

Nobody lives a ruler-drawn life, straight-lined from beginning to end. In truth, our paths waver like the scribblings of a child, rambling over the page, stopping and starting as the pencil leaves the surface entirely and descends to it again.

• • •

I will miss my toes when I die. They make so much else possible, especially balance amid the storms of life. How will I find purchase in other realms without them?

• • •

Such a slow learner! Perhaps 10% of what I'm taught takes root, and perhaps 10% of that bears flowers and fruit. Even so, after six decades, my garden is full.

• • •

The future knits my present into garments I'll don when I awake tomorrow or next month. Don't bother me with details. It's all I can do to laugh or cry as the present unravels me for the stitches yet to come.

• • •

Five-year plans offer false hope, filling time, never space, ever hungry, never full.

• • •

A string's catenary in gravity is simple compared to a person's. What shape does a life take suspended between the poles of birth and death amid the pull of genes, family, culture and the freeform dance of chance? Our early shape sets the support from which the roadbed of our lives is hung. It guides our choices—who gets a smile or a scowl, do we splurge or save, where we hold or freely give. Those who gain in wisdom can slip the bonds of imposition and align with their true field, bridging greater distances and bearing greater loads. Winds blow through them and, though they sway, their integrity is never in doubt.

• • •

Will you open the door for the fierce ones brimming with compassion and let them see the majesty of their place through your eyes? So few stand aside. Fewer still grow into the gifts they bestow.

• • •

Laughing sand-in-the-mouth,

sand-in-bathing-suit laughs,
 they ask the next wave for another tumble.
 Such joy between buoyancy and bottoming.

They say:

Take me.

Toss me.

Teach me what spume knows.

Help me thrive as a plaything of forces
 so much larger than I.

(Children at Island Beach State Park, N.J.)

• • •

Like crankcase women in whiskey bars, I've known the hard and known the soft and still believe in Jesus. I've walked the night in silk and steel and still believe in mercy.

• • •

Would you find a continent in a bath tub or a horse in your desk? Keep looking. You never can tell. But there are better ways to spend your time.

• • •

Behold black and the excess potential of its days.

• • •

Compassion your world with bricks and flowers,

• • •

My bridge ends in mid span, reaching for the far shore. I didn't sign up for this, this calling into the dark, arms outstretched towards the other side, hoping someone will build their bridge toward mine.

• • •

Want ad: Tough old bird with tender plumage seeks fair-haired fortune finder.
 Object: creation.

• • •

I awoke early and walked naked into the predawn, clasping a cup of tea to my belly for warmth. Quiet set itself in me and I swore to carry it on. But the sun's first rays

also lifted my fears and pain above the horizon. I'd forgotten that light's secret is the darkness it also bears.

• • •

Squatters in the house of wholeness are soon evicted.

• • •

Poetry dances down the aisle at its own wedding and marries me for a while.

• • •

If I've learned anything it's to walk in softer circles and let my heart speak louder than my words.

• • •

May I be the last against which God shapes shoes for the foot-sore and the weary.

• • •

No matter how you practice disaster, difficulty will enter in ways different than you had imagined.

• • •

He collapsed in a Paris Metro station the day after Christmas 2003. Dozens of strangers looked on as other strangers stripped him to his underwear and tried to start his heart. He said to me in death, "It's so simple. Just a step beyond. I'll see you soon."

• • •

The angel of return deeds you land to build alters of possibility and becoming.

• • •

I am the clapper and the bell, the hand that draws them together, and the tone that seeks awaiting ears.

• • •

He took charge of the silence, stretching it until the sun shone through.

• • •

Know yourself as perfect plates of snow falling through the years, softening the shape of sharp things. You glisten as crystal mirrors beneath the sun and moon, embodied and reflecting.

• • •

She sits and sorts,
 careful of the seeds before her,
 sensing where the life in each leads
 and which calls to fullness.
 He waits, knowing those she selects
 will bear full harvest,
 repaying his effort
 in sowing, tending, reaping
 many times over.
 (Dream image)

• • •

It's been years since that porcelain toilet sat amid the trees by the road past the town dump. We'd joke about finally knowing where bears go to shit in the woods, and squirrels and raccoons too for that matter. Images of hairy rumps balanced on the edge of that bowl brought smiles each time we passed it. I still look for it in the leaf litter, that shiny, white, incongruous object, and with it the presence of my six- and eight-year-old daughters who delighted in it and delighted me.

• • •

There's no end to conversation in a world where a thing is itself yet touches all else.

• • •

When rightness catches your eye and bids you follow, pack your bag and take leave of your senses.

• • •

I value some words more than others. So much for wisdom. Take chatter. I've prided myself in rejecting surface words, lightly uttered, as so much foam dispersed by the barest breeze or as hanging in space like bridges to nowhere. Better the silence that holds all things, I tell myself, and the words beneath words.

Yet many find social conversation like honeyed tea, sweetening the way to more profound tastes. They see shallow and deep as each other's preface and postscript, each bearing fruit in the soil of connection.

The time has come to reckon with my unease with myself and allow harmony with others no matter what is said by following my curiosity's fascination with each utterance.

• • •

Turn a corner
 on your love of life.
 Invite kittens to play
 where spite had camped for years.
 Wear surprise
 like a flea-market shirt.
 Let shadows vanquish habit
 and soften your belly.
 Take no for an answer
 and make it sufficient for love.
 Become simple
 so you grow full at empty tables.

• • •

Let's name you as you are: a finite being with infinity at your beck and call. Simply close your eyes to see how your mind goes on forever, how the smallest of the small and the broadest of reaches leap into view. Truly you are a vastness that wakes to the morning and the eternal that walks at night.

• • •

Rain is a flowing, wet thing that touches and moves on. It should not go solid. Yet here it is glazing the world, surfacing the wonder of reflection and the freshness of taken-for-granted shapes. Walking is chancy until I give into the lack of purchase and live a glide-step-glide existence. There is such pleasure in a world gone strange.

• • •

Choose your paths on the slopes of being with care. Those well trod and paved keep you flaccid and empty. Those ending at impossible cliffs and unfordable rivers leave you impotent and forced to backtrack.

• • •

I love the stream and the dipper and the full canteens I strap to my body. Why can't I remember to share what I carry even as I slake my thirst?

• • •

Solid air and concrete water await mere speed to prove their case.

• • •

Two people, butt to butt, alternately bowing. “You wash, I’ll dry,” they say. (dream image)

• • •

We hold the pry bar of history in our hands. But when to lift and when to let be?

• • •

Give grass a warm winter day and up it comes. It doesn’t scan a calendar and say, “Hey, it’s January. Let’s sleep.” Instead, it’s more like, “Toasty. Go for it.” It simply spends itself on the chance that today’s 60°F will be tomorrow’s 60°F.

• • •

Surprise upon surprise in great gouts of wonder lift me and tumble me as would surf rolling landward from distant winds. Upended and bearing gone, I am another form the sea can shape. A quick touch of bottom, a flash of sky. Who I am in contact with the sand is not who I am in the light. I am renewed by each if I give over to the laws of breaking water, the pull of the moment, and my yearning to be just as I am.

• • •

We are a forcing race, setting our will upon the world. But here’s the rub, push a system and it pushes back. Change within complexity tugs on all manner of things so outcomes grow uncertain and instability rules the day. Each meddle or tweak sets off shifts that have us dance to tunes not of our making no matter how we fancy ourselves the master.

• • •

What if the faces we trace in the clouds are real? What if all opinions are true, no matter how far fetched? What if all minds, stable or unstable, are divine and occupy a rightful place in the universe?

• • •

Raechel returns from 12 days in Italy: The loofah is back in the shower, and I am two in one again.

• • •

Poems are flakes of gold separated from common gravel at the bottom of a rocker box after all the sluicing is done.

• • •

Will you be your own tourniquet and stop the bleeding?

• • •

I listen for my true voice and find it everywhere.

• • •

I grow slow and empty headed. Brilliance flees. It is a time to hold confusion precious.

• • •

Incarnating angels sing broken hallelujahs. Their imperfect praise of creation lights the night sky and their basic wholeness shines through their conflicts, fractures and failures.

• • •

Gratitude is sewn into the garment of reality as a continuous thread that says, "Everything opens to God and is worthy of praise."

• • •

A peach is a pit's ticket home.
 Given the right sweetness, it will be
 desired,
 taken,
 devoured,
 discarded.
 And, should fortune smile,
 it will find soil
 moist and friable
 for the next ride round.

• • •

The best poems are where you find them, breaking the rules as veiled things do. Some crash through the foliage and others move only at night while danger sleeps. Like any other bush meat, such poems are fair game for wandering hunters. The heft

and flair of their verse make them more or less worthy for sale in back-country markets. Those who buy seek to sate their heart's hunger to hear its song sung back by another and relearn words it has said to itself hundreds of times before.

• • •

Oh make me a mystery solid and spare, breathed to life by your lines and shadows. Here sleeping dogs converse with open windows, careworn boots go on forever, and flame transcends heaven and hell, enlivening in one what it consumes in the other. (After seeing the Andrew Wyeth 2006 retrospective in Philadelphia)

• • •

Snow liltng straight down in still air, all softness and expectation, opens that time between breaths when gathering and spending rest in each other's arms.

• • •

The heart never beats alone. Even in isolation, it crafts golems from the past and snatches of the present and tunes its ear to them.

• • •

Distant thunder at 2 a.m. The night drips and spatters.

• • •

Stephanie at 10, budding poet, never let her inability to spell stop the tumble of words taking shape as her pen sped the page.

• • •

Once you've taken the leap, enjoy gravity's journey.

• • •

I am life walking as a man, more made by the world than I've made it. Even so, the making in my power is beyond imagining. Wonders spring from my hands. Do I dare?

• • •

If you plant peppers, yet pray for tomatoes, you'll still get peppers.

• • •

Raechel's said her eyelids dropped suddenly one morning, both at once. They'd been softening for days and now it no longer made sense to wear eye shadow.

• • •

The silence stretched between us like gentleness on soft ground. "Relax in me," it said. "Give me your weight." Though I held above its comfort and made inane comments, that moment lives in me now, remembered as if it were a fine meal shared with a friend after a long day of striving.

• • •

Moths flaunt flames.
 Their singed wings
 and charred bodies
 follow a pull beyond pain.
 Go to light!
 Go to light!
 Whatever the cost.

• • •

I pass you on the street. Our eyes meet. For the briefest moment I lay my antiquities at your feet and you lay yours at mine. We know each other in our cells as only fellow travelers on a billion-year journey can. At root there is only one of us.

• • •

The shards of shattering – perhaps a betrayal, car crash or illness – brighten areas we've refused to explore. Moving on, we can either embrace the new constellation as a higher harmony or selectively cobble events together to regain the world we knew. Mostly we do both: grow where we are ready and reassert the old balance where we are not. Such is the path of healing and the seedbed of the next crisis.

• • •

If I could sleep but one more hour, what whispered wisdom might surface from that strangeness called dreams.

• • •

I swallowed other's systems by the dozen. But with a gut full of my own beliefs, they passed clean through. Now I no longer even pretend.

• • •

I make empty things and sell them for a lot of money to those who judge them full. While I think the joke's on them, I'm the silly one for only emptiness sustains, not the passing forms I fill it with.

• • •

I welcome my demon du jour and feed it from my larder. It rewards me with familiar tunes. I am without volition. Though I stop to catch my breath time and again and edge toward the beckoning garden, my feet pick up the steps again. Eventually I dance in and through my compulsions and other roads become possible, roads to fuller states where demons roam but do not rule.

• • •

From bones out, I won't be defined, won't be told what I need. Don't try to know for me, know with me.

• • •

Chondrules from the origin speak of eternity in the present and its possibilities.

• • •

One day I will rush past you through that gate at the far end of life and know again for the first time what I knew before.

• • •

How might the world taste if I wandered it unencumbered by my bowels like an infant freely pooping anywhere and everywhere? How might I walk without a tight sphincter? And how might I think and feel? It would be, I suspect, a sort of twilight place, where the memory of control and mastery vies with heady, spontaneous expression. The world would simply pass through and sustain me on its way elsewhere.

• • •

Water on a polished floor beads to droplets. On a 'surfacted' surface, it forms an even coat. Between the two lie patterns shaped by competing forces, an unsettled place honoring the unpredictable and ephemeral.

• • •

He's an expensive ax cutting water, all power in the upswing and downstroke, though only bubbles mark his passing. For all his brilliance, his vision and common sense

failed him and he's become a mixed metaphor: water-ax. How did the reality of swimming and wood disappear?

• • •

Unhinge your mind and find hinges beyond hinges in endless progression, each opening more improbable than the one before. Play in such a universe explores the sudden corridors and rooms you open through attention and desire.

• • •

I often awake with the desire to visit that schoolyard in the Bronx for a quick game of stickball. Enough tasks for others and the loss I feel before sleep of yet another day outside myself.

• • •

The fears and jeers, once yours, are mine now. Thanks a lot.

• • •

You ask where the compass points? Inward, ever inward.

• • •

I know what you're not thinking and where you don't live. I see the gaps where vibrant life should be, where your sap runs sideways on its way from root to crown. Here lawfulness grows stale, tangling right and wrong, and your heart wanders backwaters scummed by duplicity so your hands grab what love gives in a one-sided exchange.

• • •

I cherish the shape of lives, their complex geometry, their intersecting planes and hidden forms. They turn and tumble, catching light and giving light, each a beauty to behold.

• • •

Down that road, unsettled by fire, awaits the thing that will set you free.

• • •

Grow original things in an easy gradient back toward yourself.

• • •

Whirlwinds dance across my mind. Sometimes they catch me unawares and blind me with sudden grit. I am beset by the fear they bear. Afterward I wonder at the strangeness of my vulnerability to such spare forms chasing their tails until they unwind in a far corner of my psyche.

• • •

No matter our age, we remain cisterns filled by seeps from a deep source. Some water goes to sustain us, but most is meant for the world. Dam your riches at the risk of drowning.

• • •

True giving starts as a trickle, like the first opening of floodgates in a dam. I climb to the great wheel and turn the gears that slowly uncheck the flow. There's no rush when it comes to unbinding waters, just the one-way journey of giving in its time.

• • •

There is the hope of snakes on a summer's day for a meal and a doze on warm rock. There is birdsong just for the sake of it and the slow dance of seasons. And then there is you and me and the wonder we are together.

• • •

Hills are so similar in gravity it is easy to forget the one that shaped me, but my heart knows where it began. It sets all land forms against that slope where Fairmont Place empties into Southern Boulevard with its traffic, stores and brooding church towers. Here was my first village. A Bronx hill town, both refuge and hell. I return to make sense of it all. Why there? Why then? Why those people? That street and its alleys became my home and my friends became my family when my apartment grew uninhabitable. I walk there often at night.

• • •

Long before I hefted words into verse, I hauled 50- to-75 pound shale slabs and stacked them into stanzas as walls and waterfalls. Here is poetry for the ages, a kinetic form at one with falling water and gravity. I turned those constructions loose. Now, 30 years later, they still hold the shape I gave them.

• • •

I take the light streaming towards me and give back to the light givers. My albedo may run bright or dim, but still I glow toward the heavens in a spectrum all my own.

• • •

Secrets peer from dark windows in closed rooms, flickering round my edges. A simple welcome calls them home.

• • •

Clouds open far beyond their name. How many just-right forces must act to make water visible. It's a wonder they do so at all.

• • •

What do age spots talk about in the middle of the night watching blood rush past them?

• • •

When surprise is the order of the day, order takes surprising shapes.

• • •

What has not travelled under before over? Been hidden before found? My name was before I was, as was yours.

• • •

The cedar by the spring house calls me still. So many hours spent in its shade watching slow-rising water and cress in soft waves below the surface, just as the unknown lifts from my depths and plays in my shallows before continuing elsewhere.

• • •

Blessed are those who make today's ceilings tomorrow's floors. Doubly blessed are those who also make today's floors tomorrow's ceilings. They follow a ready yearning that joins roof and basement and all between into a structure holding all parts as one.

• • •

My mother at 93 sleeps sedated in her nursing home bed, a bridge between worlds, more there than here. Her skin, drawn tight over cheek and forehead makes her look years younger. She intones a mantra in her drugged state I imagine she spoke as a child, "Leave me alone." Here is a cry to have herself and her volition without the impositions of those who should have cherished her. When I stood at her bed and jostled her awake, I became another shadow human who wanted her to be there for

them. “Let me sleep. Who do you think you are?” I back off. She quiets and the room fills with her shallow, frequent breaths. (Beth Abraham Hospital, Oct. 3, 2006.)

• • •

Poetry, the art of new eyes, follows tidal rhythms all its own, sometimes neap, sometimes flood. It fills my low places, renews my life. Some of my watery creatures move beyond the margin to become grass and grass-eaters, worms and winged things, each a wonder. They explore my finity in a crawl or in leaps that taste random patches leagues apart.

• • •

Reflux is my teacher. It returns me to choices I made an hour or three ago. Did I eat wisely knowing my stomach’s track through time? Or did I let the food of the moment override good judgment? Acid’s flood or ebb is driven by the pull of appetite and how I ride it.

• • •

Know a person by what they eat and what eats them, who feeds them and who they feed.

• • •

Let your heart slip its mooring to sail before the winds of happenstance. Become fast friends with fear and fulfillment and extend beyond your limited perspective. Tumble with events, inner and outer. Catch those you can as they surge past and fashion them into new ways to spend your days.

• • •

Wind-driven rain is a sideways thing, plastering your hair and sheeting your face. Learn its ways and follow the contours of whatever you pour yourself against, wet it fully and pass on. It’s a fair exchange: take a bit of each intimacy with you as you leave a bit of yourself behind.

• • •

Listen to your endings. Like the dregs in the last glass of good wine, they hold the taste of what went before and the wistful knowledge that no other will be as this one was, though other good wines will come.

• • •

Each flaw in glass, each bubble and fracture, each gathering of otherness, turns light from its course. What began as pure source follows a twisted path round countless detours, illuminating the beauty inherent in imperfection.

• • •

Am I as thin as yesterday, or will today fatten me for some purpose all its own? Ask me tonight. I'll weigh myself against the day's events and if I took sustenance in sweets or true food, added flab for easy living or muscle for stronger standing, reaching, shaping. Ask me tonight and I'll let you know if the coming hours make me more or less than I am just now.

• • •

Give thanks for the map makers and those who author cookbooks and manuals. They may not invent or explore, but they show the way. And give thanks too for the source of candles and light bulbs. Their handiwork brightens darknesses they'll never see.

• • •

If you ride a mare the first time out, she's likely not your horse. If you solve a riddle upon hearing it, it's not your puzzle. If you see your mark clearly years ahead, it's not your life you're planning.

• • •

The true way is uncertain in the fog of being. While the mists may clear momentarily to reveal vistas, finding sure footing on the ground you tread brings you back to the now. This is as it should be, for we're legged not winged creatures, and each step must live in us before the next is to be taken.

• • •

If I gave in to gravity, to what center would I fall? Surely not the one where I rework the known world in familiar ways like a child moving blocks endlessly about a table. There are new rooms with new toys awaiting. What else am I about if not leapfrogging the self-same for the never-before in a search for new mastery.

• • •

I used to be fog, but now I'm happy to report I've become a pain in the ass. Before, people would walk through me, a bit confused, muttering. Now, they bounce off, still muttering, but at least they know who's who.

• • •

Avoid mauves and taupes when they come round, those trendy medium violet and soiled gray moods that would shunt you down false paths. Hold out for hues of true substance: tart yellow; dense blue shot through with white; and red shadows tinted black.

• • •

Flowers in a vase from the local market.

Behold the winners.

In exchange for beauty,
they gain a charmed life
pampered at every turn,
fed and watered in a world
without competitors.

Flowers in the field beyond my bedroom window.

Behold the free.

They live on their own terms,
taking their chances,
at one with the world.

• • •

Time, up close and personal, converges and I am all ages at once. A heartbeat separates my kindergarten role as the seventh Indian in the Ten Little Indians from my joy in mapping mesoscale eddies on the Gulf Stream from the leap into husbandhood, fatherhood and business owner.

• • •

A compass needle is not north, nor is a second hand a now.

• • •

A marriage of equals, like some giant bird in flight across the wind, finds its own vector through space and time. It travels in great sweeps, touching down as desire or whimsy decide. Partners to such a marriage belay each other past the rough places. They treasure the eternal they hold and become exceptional to each other. They span the distance between their hearts with bridges of stone, steel or hemp so goodwill can cross to gain goods crafted of understanding and vision.

• • •

In the field of emptiness, circles center everywhere and nowhere. You become tangent, arc and radius at every turn seeking expression, never definition. In this place the tail of certainty never leaves the mouth of doubt so questions and answers entwine as far as the eye can see and knowledge is ever fresh.

• • •

It was a leap day and a hub day, a pivot day, an axis day and a fulcrum day. It was a rare step-change day when gathered forces moved in consent about the center and direction found its voice. It was an all-inclusive day full of promise and shouts of yes to the joining of paths.

• • •

The three sister logs, part of a branch as big as a middle-aged tree broken by ice off the ancient oak at my back door, had graced my woodpile for a year. They now sit on the andirons blazing quickly, spending the suns of yesterday with great abandon. They grow gaseous and insubstantial again, giving back the carbon, oxygen and hydrogen they'd borrowed. Sixty pounds of cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin devolve to gray ash in minutes. The wonder of their burning is exceeded only by the beauty of the liquid, yellow-blue flames they flare.

• • •

If responsibility is your lodestone, you shortchange those you hold dear.

• • •

Touch your heart to your toes. The ground's long awaited your return.

• • •

Only say how you are in exile to begin the journey home.

• • •

Feed your longing and your love. They'll do all the work.

• • •

McDuff died two days ago, put to sleep after a long decline. In his puppy years, he mainlined the vitality of wind on a March day, never still, brushing all within reach. Then there was the extended time of evenness, where he lay at the feet of life, giving heart and receiving heart. It was here I knew him best and loved him best. It was here we played chase or fetch and I gazed in his eyes, sharing his timeless place. I remember most the tactile things: his Bijon fur all curls and softness and his spare

body, surprisingly slight for such a substantial presence. I take comfort from having known him. (For McDuff Shulman, August 2007)

• • •

What comes of struggle when the best we know to do carves us deeper into the known? Not to worry. Eternal sameness is its own medicine, eventually succumbing to its own weight.

• • •

I've known those breasts through many seasons. They were tits when I first found them, firm and high with nipples gazing straight ahead, pert and welcoming. When they flushed with milk to feed our daughters to toddlerhood, they grew globular with nourishment. Now they've settled into matronly form, broad and full, gathering the world.

• • •

Trees touched by the wind become composite, vapor-solid beings far more than wind and tree alone.

• • •

I tread the same paths repeatedly and call them new. I tell myself the same stories and am captivated time and again. Newness enters my door, and I file it in prepared categories on prebuilt shelves, preempting disruption and disorientation. I take change in tiny doses and think I welcome it.

• • •

There are days the world and I sit holding hands like new lovers, shy in discovery. Other days, it is as if we face each other across a lawyer's table, jaws set, negotiating divorce.

• • •

I am an interrogative, a dot in a question mark. The inquiry curls about me refusing to let go: What do I truly want?

• • •

Make me wise dearest God
 in your ways,
 just as I am.
 Help me cherish your night

no less than your light
down all my days.

• • •

Solitary life for a herd beast is like a finger without its hand.

• • •

What grand design altered the cervical trapeze when man stood upright? The shoulder tells tales of dependence on soft tissue, free movement in space and loads borne and released. Bone alone won't do when flexibility is as vital as strength. Only a floating construction stayed and guyed by muscle and tendon will do.

• • •

My curiosity rises like a kite in a fresh breeze, ascending the string to grow eyes to see to a far country.

• • •

The old ones sent out as emissaries from a magnetic sun dance across the heavens, towing lines of force and great curtains of light. (Upon seeing the aurora borealis.)

• • •

In turning 60, I asked for meaning and insight. It came in part in a dream: "He travels the night in a bowl of knowing. The ground arrives calf high 20 feet ahead and disappears at the same height and distance behind. New things come as strange stains on the roadway, oddly branching trees and sudden dips. They enter and leave him, but traces remain. The road becomes a darting needle patterning seams across disparate parts, uniting him simply from his desire to meet what is."

• • •

Blankets knotted. Bottom sheet sweaty and pulled loose. I war with my bed, as if sleep were a battleground and ancient forces I keep at bay during the day clash in me.

• • •

It's a complex face, this 59-year bevy of lines and hollows. Though it holds resolve and directness, it also harbors a gauzy quality as if it might drift away at any moment. And always deep-set eyes behind glasses, watching, holding. It is a face in waiting, offering little until a smile opens its planes and deep creases arc from orbit to

mandible along old lay lines. The humor hidden there then emerges to share with the world jokes it has been telling itself.

• • •

The silence between notes on a solo sax is snow's song on a windless night.

• • •

Give me your elbow or hips and I'll give you my shoulder or thigh in return. What, after all, are friends for?

• • •

Even after the main struggle is done, guerillas arise from hidden tunnels to test my resolve in old ways.

• • •

Let go of things past their prime: old computers and shoes, cars, friendships and jobs. Practice loss. Pull the bar that sends them spinning from your side. It will happen even if you don't do so, but at a greater cost to your peace of mind and ability to get on with your life.

• • •

In the open, sparsely treed meadows above Rio Caliente, I walk the early morning hours alert to flowers hidden in knee-high grass. It is how I would live: noticing small vividness close to the ground in soil born of ancient heat. Each day has its dimension, be it rolling ridge tops as far as the eye can see or a waterfall at the source of a steaming river or ancestral groves of oak and pinon pine. The basics at 5,000 feet, a bit askew from those at sea level, steady my gait and free my vision. (Near Guadalajara, Mexico, August 2000.)

• • •

Whatever you got from your parents is not enough, for currents will sweep you beyond their reach toward your own vulnerabilities and revelations.

• • •

No matter what your mother told you, scabs are for picking. Keep at your sore points before they find a home between your cells so you can battle them in the open rather than in house-to-house combat.

• • •

I would like to write poetry like this fire, all wood at odd angles and random flares of blue-hot gas above sequestered coals.

• • •

In a world that values flowers more than roots, I wish you great bouquets of roots. I wish you roots in profusion deep and strong, roots nurtured by Self and anchored in essence, so you grow true, full and vibrant. Trust your roots for they tap experience long before it breaks the surface, opening the most surprising places and fostering the most improbable shoots. (For Steph when she turned 18.)

• • •

—

End Notes

Cutting Words – I'd flirted with writing poetry for two years when I came up against the question of the kind of poet to be. This is the answer I gave myself.

How Sees the Angel of Death – I have felt that this angel has gotten a bum rap, pictured as the grim reaper complete with black robe and scythe. Here's an alternative, more benevolent view.

Guantanamo – written June 15, 2005 after hearing the experience of a prisoner who had been detained at U.S. Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

So Dies a Piece of Heart – A news photo from the Bosnia upheaval in November 1995 showed a ten-year-old boy being bused from a besieged village.

Sonoma Sea Cliffs – Impressions from Sea Ranch, California, March 29 to April 1, 2007. This was a time apart for Raechel and me between work and a week with a dear friend in Sebastapol.

Desert Sleep – This poem is based on a vivid dream that would not loosen its hold on me until I wrote it out in this form.

Prime Time – We mark our life by the linear flow of birthdays. Placing the field of prime number (those divisible only by one) atop this flow turns up relationships in disparate years, highlighting the wholeness that is a life.

Dad's Greatest Gift – My father, by constitution and early shaping, was an internal man little given to expression. Though we shared time, his heart remained hidden. His love for me did not step forward until the moment described in this poem.

Drawn to Daven – My father arose early for much of my youth to open a synagogue in the Garment Center in Manhattan for those who would worship before work. In childhood, I saw that place as a rival, taking him from me. Now those feelings are in the distant past, and I've been imagining what it must have been like for him to have taken on this commitment.

Seeing My Mother After 18 Years – Family splits are strange affairs. Strains hidden in odd corners join as rifts difficult to cross. One such split kept my mother and me apart for the last 18 years of her life. As in "Dad's Greatest Gift", we found each other just before she died and healed much of what went before. This occurred October 8, 2006 in Westchester Square Hospital, the Bronx, about a month before her 93rd birthday. She died three weeks later.

Biography

Everyone's traverse across the face of life is an outer and inner journey. The outer story is easier to tell. In rough strokes, mine extends from a Bronx childhood to an early and intense involvement in science that led to six years as a senior research oceanographer in my 20s.

Subsequent careers involved 11 years as a psychological and spiritual counselor (Pathwork helper, Core Energetics practitioner and a general therapy practice based on continuing study in many approaches), as well as 30 years as a technology-oriented publicist for companies in fields as diverse as high-performance plastics, energy, telecommunications, and engineering and construction. I ran my own public relations company for 18 years.

Then there is my marriage to Raechel and being father to Stephanie and Ann Julia, my abiding connection to building stone walls, clearing trail and other things of the earth, and a hunger to express in artistic form. I also spent decades exploring my inner world psychologically and spiritually.

I'm at a loss to know exactly how my path over the years opened wisdom, but the desire to express my synthesis of truth as profoundly as possible emerged in my early 50s. The constancy of this place informed all I've done since then and blossomed into this book.

• • •

How finds me on the open road,
 seeking experience.
He takes my staff,
 the one I've leaned on all these years.
What, I ask
Exactly, he says.

• • •

In Memoriam

Michael Bratnick, April 4, 1942 — February 2, 2008

At age 65 at the peak of Michael's professional life, at the moment when he was pondering how to begin to give back to the world of his hard-won spiritual consciousness, he was diagnosed with advanced cholangiocarcinoma, cancer of the biliary duct. It was a shocking turn of events that we never fully understood, as he had been a very healthy, active man his entire life. He lived for four months, suffering from jaundice, severe itching, sleeplessness, deep exhaustion and repeated infections. He was frequently hospitalized, where he made friends with other valiant men, fighting cancer. During these four months whenever he had energy, he sat at his computer polishing his writings for publication. He was determined that these poems and gems of consciousnesses would be disseminated to the world as his legacy and be manna for those of us still struggling to awaken to life as it is.

On February 2, 2008 just as the sun rose over the East River, the time of day that was Michael's favorite time to write, he died in the ICU unit at Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York City.

Michael and I were together for 32 years. Our relationship was a dance of shared interests, talents and capabilities. Over the years we both had public relations careers, counseling and healing careers and a strong interest in spiritual exploration and helping others. We shared parenting. We loved to travel together. We were passionate about creating art and writing. We ran his business together out of our home for the past 15 years. In short, we were best friends, as well as lovers and husband and wife. I knew him in his many forms, this unique man of many talents and interests.

Growing up, he led a sheltered life in the Bronx, yet his mind was that of an explorer. He was very interested in the physical world. At City College of New York he took up a new sport, wrestling. He was very proud of becoming a state champion in 1963 and receiving the Little Joe Grappler Award for the most improved wrestler of the year.

He loved learning new things and exploring new territory. While studying at the University of Wisconsin, he found a farmer willing to let him help out on the farm during weekends. At another point in his life while living in the Blue Ridge Mountains, he learned to clear trails and put his knowledge into action, clearing overgrown logging trails at the original Pathwork Center in the Catskills (now known as Menla). While there he documented the natural and social history of the valley back to the Ice Age. He also built stone walls, including a waterfall wall which he built in 1978 and is still standing. He went spelunking in wild caves, kayaked white rapids in Wisconsin, and to his great delight, hiked into the Grand Canyon with his men's group in 1994, exploring the side canyons and rafting the river for ten days, often in a kayak.

He was fascinated with science and the natural world. He earned a masters degree in meteorology. At the University of Wisconsin he headed a project charting Lake Superior, which led him to become an oceanographer for the Naval Institute of

Oceanography, where he commanded an aircraft charted the currents in the Bermuda Triangle for six years. His early research in both places continues to support current oceanographic advances. He took very early retirement, moved to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia with his dog Sunshine, learned carpentry and sat Zen meditation. When the Pathwork acquired land in the Catskills, he joined the staff as assistant manager

When he returned to New York City, he wanted to become a physical therapist so he volunteered as an assistant in the burn unit at a local hospital. When he did not get into NYU's physical therapy program, he turned to the study of massage and developed a thriving practice. He loved the physical body; he always said he wanted his own cadaver to dissect.

In 1976 he entered the corporate world of public relations and eventually built his own business, CoreCom, Inc. where he worked with Fortune 200 companies in diverse technological and scientific fields. He loved the multitude and variety of projects, which utilized his avid scientific mind and knowledge.

Then there was his spiritual life. He was always a seeker. For over 35 years he studied in different traditions. One of the traditions that he became most proficient in was the Pathwork, where he studied for over 20 years and became a Pathwork helper and teacher. With commitment and diligence, he created the first index of the 258 Pathwork lectures, given by Eva Pierrakos. Among the many groups and classes he led were couples groups, a process group for students at the Core Energetics Institute in NYC, a workshop on the Power of the Word, and a Pathwork group in NJ. I assisted him and learned from him how to lead groups. He completed four years of Integrated Kabbalistic Healing training and became an apprentice teacher, where once again we had the privilege of working together. His work as a psychotherapist, helper and healer was sensitive, intuitive and empowering of others.

Michael had a vivid artistic life. He loved creating: sculptures with driftwood and wax candles, hanging macramé designs, steel sculptures and stone walls. In the past 15 years, he focused his creativity on writing poetry and memories of his family of origin, while also investigating chaos theory, the breath, and peripheral vision. He kept a notebook of ideas he wanted to explore in the future, and on vacations gathered driftwood and bones for sculptures he intended to make.

Curiosity was the glue that tied all of these forms together. He was endlessly curious and avidly engaged with whatever life presented. I always knew that when I was exploring an idea, if I shared it with him, he would immediately be engaged, offering many different and enticing strands to explore.

He was a natural artist. He created from within and never formally studied art or the writing of poetry. He always had his own vision. When he was well into his poetry, he began consulting with Sondra Gash, a mentor of writers and poets, who described him as a solitary artist, one whose art came solely from his own exploration.

While he was a solitary artist, he was also a family man. He treasured being a father to two daughters and was endlessly proud of being able to give them varied experiences in the world. He fostered their curiosity and passion for creativity. He didn't care about material things or how much money they would earn. He wanted them to love their lives and do what they love. He was the same way with me. He is the only person in my life who consistently wanted me to have my own creative expression. He always supported my longings.

So the world has lost a unique and inspiring being. And we have the gift of these writings to inspire us to delve more deeply into life and become the fullness we already are.

Friday afternoon, two days before he entered the hospital for the final time, he wrote his last pencil edits on the manuscript he had been working on for the last year, and he saw the cover designs for the first time. After he died, I discovered these two poems among the ones he had not chosen for this book. I want to share them with you.

The Blue Thread, written in 1999 while we were vacationing at the beach, describes how he wrestled in this lifetime emotionally and deeply longed to free himself. His illness was the unexpected blue thread which unthreaded his shroud. The callus fell away and he was left open, with a heart full of tears.

The second one, *Music*, is how he lived day to day. He loved music. He put a radio or CD player in every room in the house, including his workshops. When he entered a room, the first thing he did was turn them on; he even kept his old reel-to-reel and box of reels from the 60's in his office. His voice was always off key, but he sang anyway and always said, next life I'm going to give myself perfect pitch. During his illness he never had an acupuncture treatment without his Ipod and in the last days of his life we sang to him, gave him musical therapy with live guitar and harp, and placed his headphones in his ears to play non-stop his favorite classical music.

Michael, may your spirit bless those who discover your poetry. May your unique voice sing in our ears and in our hearts.

Raechel Bratnick
June 2008

The Blue Thread_

Wrestling with deep, early loss,
a gauze settled between me and my core
and thickened from barest of films to
impenetrable mat.

It left me to stand alone,
fighting those who nurture or teach.

Shrouded, living less than half my due,
giving a fraction of a fraction.

Little flows in and less flows out.

How to find the blue thread?

How to link to my ancestors,
find my bearings in an over-vast world?

Surely not with rageful, fearful eyes
or hands that beat and plead.

Time for the creative way,
and answers in simple places.

Each piercing the callus until
it falls of its own weight
and I am revealed and revealing.

Music

Music lays tracks softly in my brain.
And when it sounds again
 on a near or distant day,
 traces reawaken
 to tone and color,
 beat and measure,
I enter the work
 as it entered me
 becoming strings, winds and tympani,
 humming, vibrating,
 anticipating each note,
 each mood.
And, for a time,
 from first chord to coda,
 I am played by Vivaldi, Corelli,
 Bach or Beethoven,
 by phantom hands
 that span space-time
 and shape me
 to their vision.

“Long before I hefted words into verse, I hauled 50- to-75 pound shale slabs and stacked them into stanzas as walls and waterfalls. Here is poetry for the ages, a kinetic form at one with falling water and gravity. I turned those constructions loose. Now, 30 years later, they still hold the shape I gave them.”

INDEX

22 and Finding: a Birthday Poem for Stephanie
A Possibility of Missing no More
Approaching Wisdom
A Song for Small Hours
Blue Ridge Awakening
Both-And
Cats in Fog
Chaos Is as Chaos Does
Collapse and Its Blessing
Crockett's Cove, Vinylhaven, Maine 2007
Cutting Words
Dad's Greatest Gift
Dancing without Clothes
Dark Sight
Desert Baskets
Desert Sleep
Dragon Deeds
Drawn to Daven
Field Work
Freshness of Rain
Groundhog War
Guantanamo
How Many Forms Can a Guy Hold
How Sees the Angel of Death
Ice
Let's Hear it for Non-Lawns
Let us Walk the Sea
Likelihood of Dawn
Living for Lost

Longing for Desert
Love of Branching
Mathematics of the Heart
Michael Turns 60
Music of Days
One Way to Overcome Loss
Only the Same Once
Plasm
Possibility's Angel
Preacher
Prime Time
Rectum
Seeing my Mother after 18 Years
Seeking Breath: a Journal
So Dies a Piece of Heart
So Says a Solitary Voice
Sonoma Sea Cliffs: Sketches
Spore the World
Standing in Herself: For Ann Julia, April 2005
Swimming through Stone
Tether
The How of Longing
The Jesus Dog
The Poetic Field
Third Thing
To Lao Tzu
Two Prayers and a Coda
What Was and Will Be: For Raechel on Her 60th
Who Wrestles
Why Cows Return
Wisdom's Keys