

GAZING TO SEA

An Anthology of Short Poems

David Alexander Lillis



INTRODUCTION

I wrote this anthology of poems in 2018 and 2019. During those years, I found the desired excuse to try writing poetry of my own. Here, I must thank my friend, Peter Winsley, who encouraged me to write what you see here – regardless of their quality and whether or not you like them.

You may find the poems old-fashioned. If so, this is because I have always loved Shakespeare — particularly his sonnets. I am no Shakespeare, but because I have been reading him for over forty years, I naturally write in a similar style.

It was important to me to dedicate my poetry to my family — several are to my son David — and to my valued friends, particularly those who have been loyal and supportive during my illness.

My poems reflect what I want to say about the world, nature and our lives. In “To a Parent” you may find a clear reminiscence of a line or two from *King Lear*:

... that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is
To have a thankless child!

(Act 1, Scene 4)

Here we have not a thankless child, but instead, a thankful child!

In “On Reaching a Good Age” you may find allusions to William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”:

Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.

And in “A Last Reflection” you may recall the first four lines of William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

One poem, “Who is that Man?”, is intended to be humorous. I also felt compelled to write a poem for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart because his music has given me immense pleasure over many years. For me he is, along with Beethoven, the Shakespeare of music.

I do hope that you like one or two of my poems, but if you do not respond to them you will only have wasted a little time to read them. I also heartily recommend that you read Shakespeare’s sonnets, but be warned that you may need to read them several times to appreciate their beauty and insight in full.

Happy reading!

David Alexander Lillis
10 February 2020

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POEMS

SEPTEMBER to DECEMBER 2018



To My Child

for David

I know that I must take my leave,
e'er you, my child, attain your best.
This world shall grant my one reprieve,
from cold and heat I take my rest.
Then you, so youthful now, must steadfast be,
when you and yours I neither guide nor see,
and seize your fortunes and your joy,
for triumph you must all your strength employ.
Promise that your truthful soul do never hide,
and give your kindness and your love at every turn.
Let honour and your thought decide,
your fate, and not the gods above.
And now my heart, so filled with wonder,
at this brief moment, rich in light,
knows time shall render it asunder,
and make the summer's day an endless winter night.
Then my soul, at first transfixed with sadness,
dreams of your happy hours and turns to gladness.

To a Friend

for Peter

If gemstone ornament be fair,
then fair you are not.
Silent eloquence, your silver hair,
your distant youth now quite forgot,
and age has taken that which once was yours.

If kings wore precious stones,
then sure you are no king.
In gilded tombs now lie their bones,
and of their deeds young children sing,
but none may sing of you in times to come.

If youth be beautiful of face,
when many lines are furrowed in your brow,
your youthful hours are of another place
and time; you bend to worldly matters now.

And yet, inestimably more than gold,
that you still give your kindness, as of old:
a loyal friend as long as we do live.

Our Richest Treasure

for Jeremy

So do our days of toil and nights supine
each follow, one the other.

First child, then parent; parent, child in endless line,
carefree infant, then doting father, loving mother.

Hopeful spring, blue-sky'd summer, red autumn, icy winter
in grand procession; and then once more,
and then again, in myriad succession.

In this brief hour, and all in love with this green earth,
warmed by yellow-fingered fire, enthralled by countless stars,
cheered by gentle music, books of worth and arts,
again we mourn the year's demise and welcome new year's birth.

But our sweet hour, so precious and so brief,
a play that's rich beyond our mankind's measure,
proceeds to end, stolen by time's thief.

A trifle, yet our richest treasure.



The Blue Ocean

for Rose Clarke-Davidson

From lofty height, the surging ocean,
white-topped and boiling in the whistling air,
there, a sandy beach and drowning meadows,
behind, the tree-boughs sway in dank emotion,
at torrent rain cascading through the shadows.
Now it seems this world is ours to keep;
the cliff-tops, skies, the starry heaven's glow,
all creatures, all the waters deep,
the silent lakes, the flowing crystal streams,
the distant mountain's gleaming snow.
Far-off, a lonely seabird struggles through the wind,
protesting, shrill, but strong of wing;
a faded childhood image, called to mind.
So will this present picture vanish
as the winter-flowering heather; gone in spring.

For Mozart

dedicated to Su-Wuen

Nor fortune, power nor conquest your intent,
not born to wealth or highest rank were you.
In music, lovely to behold, were your days spent;
richness of another kind, your gift to ages,
transfixing, elegant, so beautiful, so true.

A boy? Such pretty sounds flowed from your hands!
And then, at height, wrought gems
as timeless as the desert sands,
and precious as the brightest pearl.
A deepest sadness, yet such joy that gives a new delight.

Perfect harmonies that touch the soul so near,
adamantine symphonies of sound,
a brilliant treasure, inestimably dear,
an early promise kept,
a gift of love to all the world around.

Gone, when still in sight of youth,
while music, long within you, left unfinished.
What melodies of purest form and poetry and truth,
nor sparkling ruby, nor emerald nor finest sapphire could compare,
to be unheard forever, and leave us twice diminished?

Why Show Us Kindness?

for Laurie

Why do you show us kindness,
long a stranger and we knew you not?
In rising age, brought low with malady,
a pale expression is our present lot;
your fellowship, our spirit's remedy.
Why should you treat us as a friend,
Though never have we asked your care,
nor favour, nor any gentle deed —
your patience, seeming without end —
nor tender word, nor ever sought your prayer?
Yet, how you reach to us and touch our soul.
Again, in thought, you plead our health,
that we shall once again be whole.
Compassion is your cherished wealth!

To a Parent

for Anton and Steven

To see a laughing child at carefree play,
and watch as he grows tall and strong;
to hear young girl her first words say,
expressing glee and happiness in song.
Loving parent! These are the hours most bright,
more full of joy than you again will know.
A time of tenderness and true delight;
the worst, when she is struck with illness low.

Sometimes reprove, but do so lightly
so as to guide, but not to punish.
Her inner soul will shine most brightly
when you give praise, but not admonish.
Give young child the best of days,
long-remembered summers and winters mild,
then thou may know how dearer than the finest gold it is
to have a thankful child.



On Youth

for David

First crawling, walking, running,
so infant moves to childhood, then to youth.
First seeks mother's comfort, careless play,
and then pursues a conquest of his world,
at times so bashful, oftentimes uncouth.
Impetuous boy, so close to prime of age,
manhood, your desired prize?
Your present days have writ another page,
accounting of your callow games,
a page that you must soon revise.
Walk tall, but not too proud,
give trust, nor give too much,
speak, but not too loud,
gift mercy with your touch.
Guard 'gainst those who trade in lies,
your darker thoughts subdue,
but let your kindest words reprise,
know not all are untrue.
These are wise counsels as your times shall show.
Heed them well when you your greater age shall know.

Acceptance

When at close of life well spent,
walk softly to that place —
a room that has awaited you through all your days —
and on that final journey give your heart's consent.
Go not in fear, foreboding or dismay, but shroud yourself in grace.

Those petty wrongs done you are now forgiven.
Dwell not on trifling things, events of little moment;
defeats, unfulfilled ambitions, childhood dreams,
e'en triumphs for which you all your life have striven,
for these remembrances only bitter, rueful thoughts foment.

This hour, deliberate on all that matter,
on they who shared your best and happiest days;
those who saw your faults; loved you despite them,
whose words intended truth and not to flatter,
and meaning kindness, but not your faults to praise.

Know, too, that you were full of imperfection,
sometimes unfair in word, at other times in error.
Forgive yourself; sum up your life in clear reflection,
walk forward, strong, with quiet acceptance,
nor hold this room for you a place of terror.

Step within, for time has taken all his rent,
and as you go, remember well your dignity to keep;
no angry words, protesting or recrimination,
proceed with no regret,
and through the open door you'll find eternal sleep.

Who is That Man?

for Zlatko

Who is he,
who looks at me?
I ought to recognise him.
I see him there,
he sees me here;
who is that man within?

I point my right hand,
he points too,
I stretch my left,
he does his due.
I poke my tongue,
his tongue is sprung,
But who? I have no clue!

I saw him then,
he saw me too;
I peep again,
he peeps anew.
I can't evade detection!
Who can he be,
who looks like me?
Of course! He's my reflection!

POEMS

MARCH to DECEMBER 2019

A Swan

for Diana

Silently she glides on mirror-water,
lake sedges, clad in gems of morning dew,
reed-grasses, bowing in half-light as if in homage,
mist shrouding distant trees; mute watchers of all that live.

Serenity, still air and drifting wisps of steam, half-lit;
all that is tender, kind and loving this green world.
Still she glides, elegant, in grace and brilliant white.

Alights a song-bird, black in hue, the softest sound
of beating wings. Tranquilly he fashions silver rings
that wander to the shore and then are gone.
Still she glides, indifferent and aloof; dignity of royal kind.

Far off the grey cloud shines its early welcome
to unrisen sun. Still she glides, enchantress,
unhurried in her loveliness,
and the mist becomes the gentlest rain.



Small Pebble

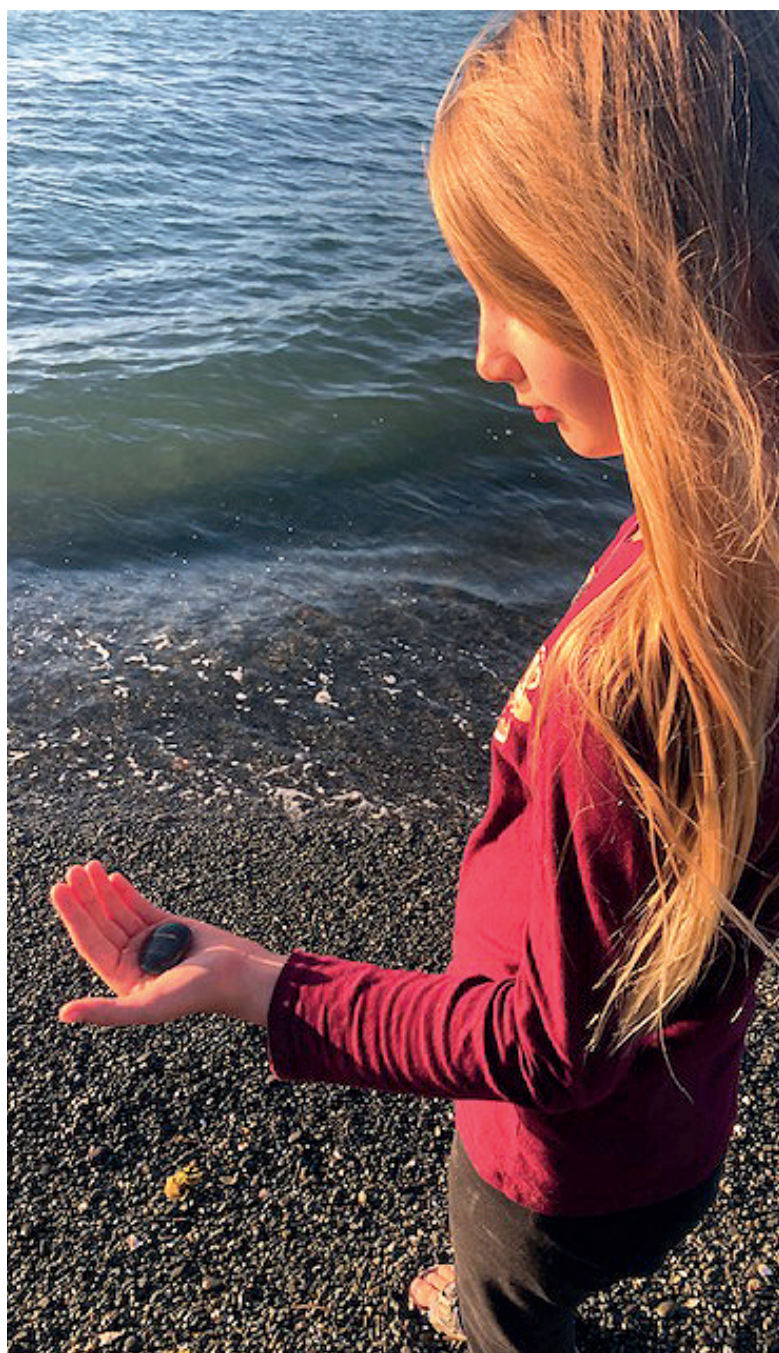
for the O'Neills

Small pebble, grey and shining,
she picked you from the tide
one sunlit morning, surf chafing softly on the shore.
How smooth you seem in young girl's hand!

What story can you share?
What histories can you tell?
Your birth and how you came to be?

What countless ages have you lain in deepest ocean?
What myriad of waves have crashed about you,
tossed you in surge and shaped your form?

Long your wait for her to find you,
and, finding you,
she held you in her hand
for one brief moment,
and touched the ages;
and gently cast you back to sea.



Evening

for Radha

Wooded hills proclaiming grey and purple hues.
A sinking sun, the warm and joyful earth becoming cold.
Morning's emerald grasses clad in countless blues,
embracing darkness, a ritual of old.
Daylight's playful breezes, now more gentle,
silent zephyrs that trifled with forgotten leaves, now stilled.
Unseen heralds, announcing evening's mantle.
Once brilliant rays grown tired and cheerless,
the green world's living sounds fulfilled.
Brilliant topaz points, sky's tiny harbingers of night;
now all is covered in sleep's cloak.
The rushing streams, the swaying trees
and boughs are bathed no more in light.
Becomes a land of shadows;
a silent world of dreams.

On the Death of a Friend

for Telu and Rajan

Our friend; long will we mourn this loss.
Still young, but gentle, kind.
Eternity of blissful sleep,
your living years are at an end.

Why life of worth,
so full of promise,
from hour of birth,
is took from one deserving so much more?

Each night,
you visit us in thought;
your truthful self, the one who gave.
Though now no more in light,
those good times that you brought,
will be with us again.



The Cooling Rain

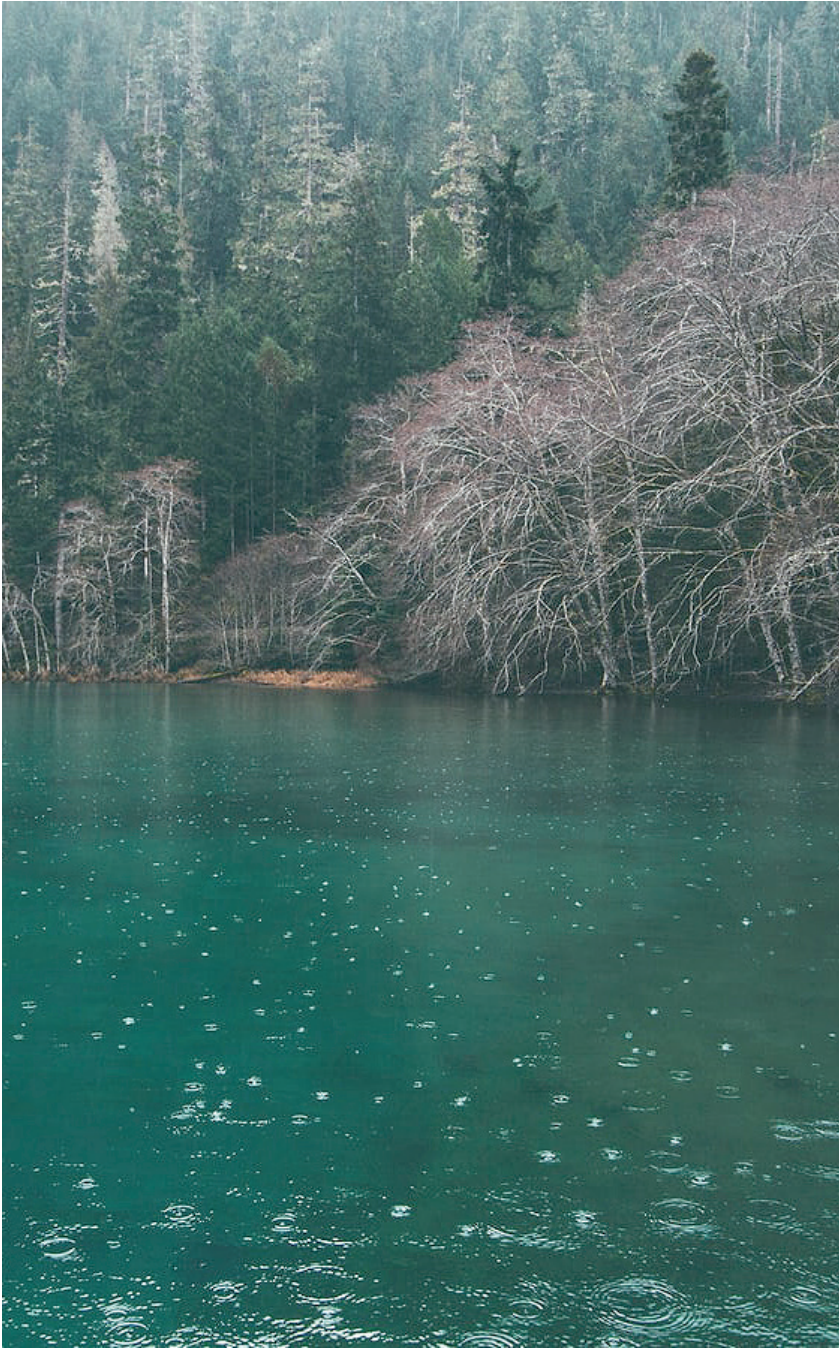
for Bill

Sunburned months of torrid heat that wilts
all that lives; a cracked and lifeless meadow.
Yet, untold drops begin their fall from newly sombre sky,
liquid hope to all the world below.
Cooling, lustrous, granting life.
Softly they drift from high.

Afar, a thousand shadowy vapours shot with rays,
translucent swords that cut the skies.
Here, giant bows that touch the pastures twice,
one red, one blue, all colours radiant;
heaven's dazzling crescent crown,
that rules for one brief moment.

Barren lands with grasses, countless blossoms,
revived and breathe of air once more.
Legions of tiny blades anointed, so encrusted.
Withered bush and foliage before,
with shining pearls of dew adorned.
Tiny orbs that give a fresh delight.

Vanished birds return to play in rain-filled pond,
shrunken wildflowers, parched forests,
the rocky hills beyond,
long bare but now ablaze;
the sights and sounds of this green earth.
Renewal all around.



A Child's Fantasy

for David

He took me by the hand
and led me to a place;
old walnut tree at bottom of our garden.
"This is where they live," he said.
"And here is where they talk to me."

"This is their land."
A smile on his little face.
"The biggest tree. The tallest in our field.
This is where they sleep and live their hours.
And so they come each day for me to see."

"They show when I do ask them,
but you'll never see a trace.
To this tree at the back of our big meadow,
they come in robes of green and gold and red;
the fairies that come here to be with me."



My Home

for Nuala

For lengthy time I stayed
amid the noise and clamour
of strange and unknown places.
A horde of sights and sounds become familiar,
far distant villages and green spaces.
New cities, sounds and unfamiliar customs;
exotic dress and curious talk and song;
a wealth of memories and old excitements
of realms within I lived so long.

But then, so many years in foreign lands,
they formed a part of me, but never mine.
For all the while I yearned for home.





Morning Sonnet

for Mum

On freezing night that nature schemes to go,
when birds and creatures then amid their slumbers,
First points, then beams, and so her orange glow,
thus all wild things awake in countless numbers.
All living souls in nightly livery of black,
dressing in her luxuriant treasure,
in brighter garb that daylight gave them back,
in morning fresh they find renewed pleasure.
Slowly she lifts; at first a glowing edge, then half,
and then her burning sphere in radiant whole;
a thousand joyful rays that warm on her behalf,
restoring gladness that the dark had stole.
Now all that is, is with her gift resplendent,
life-giving cheer and hope transcendent.

Innocence

for David

Such innocence enchanting in your infant face!
and with what charm your gleeful laugh beguiles;
and gentle actions that bespeak an early grace,
such glee as brings to me a thousand smiles.
A hope; when you yourself are blessed with child,
when fond parent you in time become,
your offspring, too, endowed with innocence so mild,
then you will to his joyful looks succumb.
You'll see in him those things I saw in you,
so many jokes and jests as yet unknown,
a soul compassionate and true,
of higher worth than any precious stone.
If you, with loving kindness, in your child sow love,
then tender father he in turn may prove.





To a Widow

Your once-pretty shape, so elegant and proud,
a rarest flower, of voice affectionate and low.
You wore your elegance by days as though a shroud,
more full of loveliness than any man of birth or rank could know.
In graceful manner were you once configured,
in sparkling dress you shone both gossamer and fair.
In forming you the gods conspired, at once delivered.
Was utter flawlessness too great a cross to bear?
And then, from age to age was beauty's legacy defiled,
of youth remaining but a faded view,
your present countenance with young girl never reconciled,
and death will have its victory, not your halcyon years renew.
And yet your body's weakness you defy,
still treating with the world as if young soul,
and taking conquering years as but a shameful lie,
though each encroaching season took its toll.
And thus advancing clock will not your form deform,
and time will not your pretty face deface.

Who Makes Us Laugh

for Matthew

Who are they who would make us laugh,
and bring some momentary respite from our laboured day?
Our cares and troubles and our trite distractions cut by half,
dispelling darker spirits that on our natures prey.
Our passing hours not always rife with grief,
yet often so; the gods dispense harsh penalty.
Thus, happy times are frequent taken by some thief,
our careless minutes filled too-oft with penury.
Then you who give us cause for cheer,
and, doing so, who make us quite forget our pain
so that we cast aside our source of fear,
become a source of mirth to us and forge us whole again.
So, make us laugh each day and never cease,
and we will love you for your gift of peace.

A Land Long-promised

for Elozor and Anna

A land, once harsh, of dust and stone,
of parched and unforgiving sand and near bereft of hope,
but now resplendent, rich with harvests newly grown,
and wet with sunlit waters streaming from afar.
The hard earth tilled and giving life,
the desert blooms abundant; flower, richest fruit, and grains.
Once burning landscapes now displaying
matchless greens and colours rife.
Thus it was foretold in books of ancient times.

Proud people, their quiet Sabbath,
and days of deep atonement.
One nation, strong in covenant and law,
a teeming city, set between Judean hills and azure seas,
to all the world a granite monument,
and sparkling rivers, rocky crags and valleys raw.
A towering wall and pointed star,
royal symbols of its people and their toil;
remembrances of those, an age enslaved,
who, led through a great journey,
endured trials unendurable and lasting pain,
but found the places of their history.
A land long-promised, now their own again.

Gazing to Sea

for Anna

Silently she gazed to sea,
a cold wind pulling at her locks of hair,
on sands replete and dark from recent days of rain,
with polished stones and shells
adorned and clothed in ocean weed,
so wrested savagely from nature's deep domain.

As evening closes near and daylight fades,
as day-by-day the heaving currents change their dress,
sometimes blue and sparkling, sometimes sombre greys,
unheeding of her secret hopes and youthful dreams confessed,
attentive not to her, but summoned only by the winds.

Long hours she looks into the watery distance,
to see as far as human eyes can see;
But gods set limits, framed for our existence,
thus we can view no further than the world's horizons,
and from this finite vision they will never set us free.

How long have your tides dashed and foamed upon this shore,
your freezing gusts and salty sprays played out their timeless game?
For what protracted age to come will you still beckon to her kind,
long after she has left this world, to never be again,
while caring not of her, nor even of her name?



On Reaching a Good Age

for John

With clarity of years he sees it was ambition and lofty aims,
not fame or wealth as such, but seeming excellent;
faults that oft made him to finer things seem negligent,
but for such failings he feels naught but mild contrition;
he knows that those were merely flaws of youth.

A constant reaching for those non-existent stars
that never were, and never meant to be;
our good-self with our bad-self often spars;
At end, enduring truth the inner battle wins,
and always so, and so he now can see.

The young man's fancy for respect of others,
those players, and a painted stage that took the actor's love;
where vanity and longing thus conspired as wicked brothers,
to wrongly set a play and unreal shows,
above authentic things that they were emblems of.

And summing up? What were the great achievements?
Enduring bitter fortune, yet somehow walking tall,
when underneath the soul was mortal wounded;
The man inside had taken hurtful fall.
Then, offering respect to all, e'en to those who offered none,
remaining steadfast at their taunts and unkind words,
refusing to avenge or deal in insults,
never letting goodness or the truth be done.

A third as father to a growing child,
when infant and throughout his tender years;
Quick to praise and giving censure mild,
all times a guide and counsellor to him so young.

Those emblems masquerading as the things that mattered,
those victories, long receded, near forgot,
those words that spoke not truth but only flattered,
those disappointments, times when injured to the core,
are, mirror-like, now seen in quiet thought,
just part of one small story; nothing more.

A Great History

for Linda and Mike

Despite flame and thunder; and despite the force of crashing storms,
a lonely sphere; no sound of breathing yet.

But there a tiny shape is stirring,

spawned in primal seas in times remote;

At first minute, and barely life at all, but living.

And then a panoply of forms so small; ethereal and yet unnoticed,

construed of shattered meteors and fabrics of celestial things,

rended elements of broken rock and stone,

mixed in raging floods and pitched in heaving seas,

and fashioned from the dust of stars unknown.

Uncounted change upon uncounted change,

unnumbered evolutions in unbroken line,

transforming one kind to a different kind,

a drift from one small place to places everywhere,

increasing seamlessly in scope and pattern and design.

As season gathers upon season,

and centuries, in one expanding order, run their course,

and so those mighty armies swarm and crawl and glide among the trees;

Earth's revolving figure, now clothed in garb of brilliant greens,

in skies and ancient grounds and distant seas.

Another aeon, then more aeons, one-by-one,
this giant age gives way to that, and many diverse forms,
so many throngs of different frame and shape,
attending heat and cold and light and shade;
Some striking forth and some retreating from the dark,
all gifted with the gift of birth,
all struggling, and at end submitting to the throw of fate,
and, dying, yielding back their substance to the Earth.

So many intervals of range beyond imagination,
and centuries where legions vanish and fresh armies take their place;
Through spells of freezing ice and scorching desert,
unnumbered realms of vast rebirth and those of desolation,
so many gone; of them remaining not one trace.
So it has been; so it will pass for ages still to come,
no gods to blame, but capricious and irrevocable fact.
No spirits to evoke for world's creation,
a tapestry of truth and not an act.
Life lives for life and not for mankind's fascination.

They Who Tend the Sick

for Daril

In them great kindness is so often found!
To those frail and ailing, and to those infirm,
with charming gentleness they treat the other.
With human touch they tend to fever and disease and wound,
a wealth of caring through their daylight hours confirmed.
Attending through the night to her in need, in hopes to heal her pain;
ministering softly to he who hurts with sore infection;
So thoughtful, gracious and so utterly humane,
as care for those unfortunate with such affection.
And still they show their ever-loving heart,
sometimes acting both as confidant and last confessor,
for they at end, and shortly to depart;
Serving as nurse and healer and physician,
to gift God's mercy is their lifelong mission.



A Timeless Loyalty

for Lalo and John

At tender age we played in fields and grounds,
at sport and jests befitting restive boys.
In running games and uttering joyful sounds,
such youthful gladness, as only happy thought employs.
For longest while embarked on separate ways,
they, on their own chosen paths themselves conveyed,
while I in my pursuits I spent my days.
Thus, each other near forgot and concord near unmade.
By chance, in later years to meet again,
our early consonance at once restored, and so
increasing seasons could not our fellowship condemn,
nor end the harmony that once we shared.
A loyal friendship, when at first created,
despite time's wrongs can never be defeated.

Those Who Face Adversity

Consumed with fair concerns; our toil, our sleep, our child,
from dawn to dawn we live our transitory lives.

For each and every one, our fate the same;

For all, mortality and silence at the end arrives.

But some are visited with sharp misfortune
and their waking hours defiled.

To lose an infant, sister or a brother,

face harshest injury or lasting illness,

or their unborn extinguished when birth not yet begun,

to suffer one unkind irony of fate or other;

their struggle, to endure with sorrow, suffering and hurt,

that which is callous, unbearable and cannot be undone.

Their lifelong burdens, Herculean and immense,

their battle unrelenting and bitter beyond cavil.

For them a jest must seem a mere pretense,

their goal remote, their path too far to travel.

For what result and to what destination,

with never hope of victory, nor true serenity maintained,

nor release, nor chance of any consolation?

But cheerful disposition and happy countenance,

although an act, must ever be sustained.

And yet despite the sadness, unremitting, always near,
such sorrow as can make each hour a trial,
and often makes the dead of night a thing of fear,
proceed. Stand tall and wear a smile
though soul inside may weep, but rarely laugh,
step forward for your father, and your mother and for those who love you.
If not for you, then walk on their behalf.

A Last Reflection

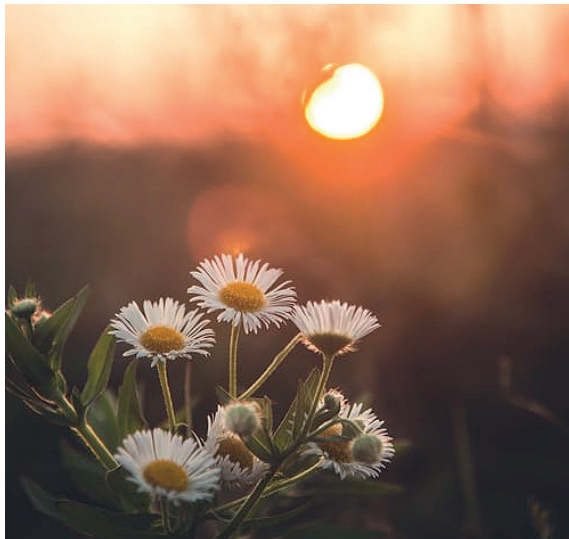
for Dad

As life's twilight fades and infinite darkness reaches forth,
a thousand days of youth become more distant.
As evening sun sinks slowly and is lost behind the hills,
tranquil, and now greater wisdom.
As memories grow pale and lose their shine,
that trite pursuit of dreams expired so long,
to close of day the soul must now resign;
Serene, now that the noise of youth is gone.
So much is clearer and their essence now discerned,
heedless for so long but now behold
the world that's captured in a grain of sand!
Intrigues of no import that took our power,
those many things that went unnoticed;
See! Heaven is expressed in wild flower!

As though in looking glass, a polished mirror,
that slightest chance, conception, then of birth,
gifts that all this time we took for granted,
and placed below those plays of lesser worth;
The care of parent, early innocence,
then growing to maturity in strength;
and with what joy appears a child,
to claim our love and our affection,
a time that seemed too short a length.

Then, increasing age with which contend,
more days of sickness than of health,
when youthful body lost its raw perfection,
and hurt in losing family and friend.

Gaze into infinity that rests in palm of hand
and see eternity enclosed in an hour;
grasp all nature's truth and sense its trials of great demand,
its secrets only now you come to know.
Accept, in retrospection, that long, eventful journey,
now leave the world with grace; called to go.



Tall Tree

for Paul

Tall tree, silent keeper of the forest,
attired in shaking leaves, all numberless and bright.
Through centuries, obdurate guardian of the woods,
as blazing sun and each new moon attest,
you greeted every dawn and coming night.

In summer warmth you shroud yourself in verdant hue,
your limbs that sway serenely with the breezes mild.
In frosty months you clad yourself in panoplies of red anew,
as only autumn such displays endows.
At other times your furrowed form shows bare and wild;
and spring, when birds sleep nightly in your boughs.

And still you stand; unyielding, proud,
and offer quiet defiance to the world
just as you did an age ago;
as then, unbowed,
still welcoming the sun and close of day.

On Music

for Arthur and Dulcie

Who first sang those cheerful songs that touch the heart,
remembrances of happy days long past?
And who first penned those symphonies
embracing love's refined art; an endless wealth
of melodies of old, construed an age ago,
but heard once more, evoking memories untold?

Oft of texture solemn and contemplative,
or intoxicating as the scent of summer flower;
sometimes warm, embracing thoughts and dreams reflective,
other times of liveliness and vivid brilliance,
and works of measure slow and yet of subtle power.

Of what exquisite substance is this music made?
How can it weave such crafts to touch our souls?
How can sounds convey at once both light and shade?
In distant times did we first sing and dance our harmony and tune,
sharing our days and nights together in familial company,
beneath both yellow sun and silver light of moon.

