

**On the Eve of Success:  
An Octogenarian Views the World**

**Light Verse and Other Poems**

**by Gus Speth**

## The Gazette

We old people think we have  
earned the right to be heard!  
To have a respectful audience!  
The young editors think  
we had our chance and muffed it.

My friend, also eighty, well, he  
thinks that that is ageism.  
He has written some letters  
to the names on the masthead,  
thus showing his age for sure.

So the battle is joined between  
the forces of old age wisdom  
and youth's fresh perspective.  
The scene's set for compromise,  
but no one's in a mood for that!

It's not really a fair fight.  
Those whippersnappers  
have seized the high ground—  
the jobs once ours now held  
by ever younger kids.

My friend and I decided to  
have some drinks instead.  
And at some point that evening  
We rambled onto the idea of  
*The Geezer Gazette*.

We'd gather in the has beens—  
old guys and gals still with fire.  
We dreamed of working again  
with writers who'd earned their spurs,  
who'd started out covering sports.

We played with some slogans:  
"The Wisdom of the Aged"  
"ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS BIG PRINT."  
"Wisdom! Experience! ...Wisdom!"  
(or did I say that?)

The Gazette would have a special Department of Endless Edits, staffed by the most crotchety for submissions from those under 50. Youngsters would start as cub reporters assigned to cover peach pageants and parades.

The evening ended, a short drive home lost in my memories of waiting for the morning papers, sure to find there my latest Op Ed filled with optimism and the rambunctiousness of youth.

## Bread and Roses

When the big sea has stopped rising  
and the maps we're through revising  
and I can think of storms as friends,  
I'll go down to the beach again.

I'll stand still there in that bright surf  
and sing a song to this dear Earth.  
I'll sing climate change towards its end.  
I'll sing tears for where we have been.

I'll sing to things that we have learned—  
the fossils we should not have burned  
releasing the power of former suns,  
bringing losses that cannot be undone.

Sad losses the children will inherit.  
Species gone without much credit,  
thanks to the piles of money earned  
and all the corners left unturned.

I'll sing to anger rising still.  
Our leaders let firms do their will.  
The people did assert control  
but not before the barons stole.

Our job is now to make the best,  
finding purpose in what is left.  
It is a joy to live to fight  
and on that beach to fly two kites.

## Waiting Room

I sat by an old man in the hospital,  
and he looked over and said,  
you don't want to talk to me.  
I asked why and he said he was sad  
and hurting, and short with people.  
So, I apologize in advance, he offered.  
No need to apologize, I said.  
Your hurt is not physical, is it?  
Very slowly his words came out,  
Lord knows it is not. If only.  
If only these docs could fix it.  
Talk to me if you like, I said.  
I am just a cipher, here to listen.  
And so he began.

I have this dream that I am in class  
and some dummy is up there erasing  
all the good work on the blackboard.  
It is all being lost. Hard learned lessons.  
Worse, the loss is being applauded  
by my classmates, all my buddies.  
I have played football with them,  
gone with them to the movies,  
but now they are ignoring my shouts.  
They are cheering the dummy on.

Just then the nurse came out.  
She smiled at us waiting there.  
Mr. Speth, you're next, she said.  
My new and troubled friend  
stood and followed her inside.  
He looked bad, worn down  
and as he walked past me  
I touched his arm and said,  
I hope you find a new dream.

## We Awoke Together

She dreamed she wore a dress.  
I asked if she were sure.  
“Yes,” she said, “a dress no less,  
the picture of demure.”

“Were you a young girl,  
or dreaming what’s to be?”  
“I wore earrings of pearl.  
The 50s I’d say,” said she.

The past unfurls,  
good memories rush in:  
Such a beautiful girl,  
now and way back then.

It was in 1958  
when we first fell in love.  
Behind the high school gate,  
first kisses from above.

And kisses ever since,  
in love through many times.  
I was not so very dense  
I missed the many rhymes.

Her life has been a wonder,  
a joy that spread to me.  
Decades now to ponder  
how blessed my life can be.

“Come beside me, dear one,”  
I ask of her just then.  
“Kiss me in this morning sun.  
Let’s once again begin.”

## Sarah's Farewell

Now comes New Winter's Day,  
the shortest of the year.  
Not much time to say  
last goodbye to one held dear.

The path to Sarah's house  
is filled now with snow.  
A good one to bitch and grouse,  
she said it's time for me to go.

And so she just stopped eating  
and convened a celebration.  
She stood at the door a-greeting  
the whole damn congregation.

All her friends came that day.  
Their feelings were complex.  
Some felt nothing but dismay.  
Some danced the ice-cold deck.

Calmly and peacefully one day  
with people who loved her dearly,  
she silently slipped away her way.  
Sarah knew her mind so clearly.

It is easy to miss someone  
who loved my cooking so.  
On this day of little sun  
I feel an afterglow.

We thought she was full gone  
but I found a message in her desk:  
"Miss me but do not mourn.  
I lived well and better than the rest."

## What He Could Have Done

He could have pitched a tent in Lafayette Square  
and fasted until action was taken on climate change.  
He thought about it many times, imagined reporters  
seeking his views as he sat outside his little tent.

Yet even his fantasy moved to the  
possibility of fasting away instead in a  
Hay-Adams room overlooking the park.  
No reason not to be comfortable, and besides  
he would get more reporters that way.  
Along with water, he thought:  
should I take a vitamin pill every day?

Amid the great suffering of the world,  
he had lived a life of worldly comfort.  
He did a bit of time in jail for protesting  
the end of the world as we know it.

Not risking everything is a strategy  
that ends with grandkids deprived.  
He knows that now, deeply knows  
this is no time for self-deception.  
But will he act on his conviction?



## 80 and You

I am entering old age today.  
I know you think it was earlier,  
back when you gave away my golf clubs  
and borrowed a walker for me.  
Well, in any case I am 80 today.  
It is surely a milestone, but  
marking what I am not certain.  
Do I now become a Wise Old Man?  
or a wizened old curmudgeon?  
At least this: a smoke signal announcing to all  
the Dark Knight has arrived on a nearby hill.

I have lived through a third of America.  
A mere three spans of 80  
takes us back to the Founding.  
I remember vividly  
everything from Truman forward,  
or has it been backwards?  
A kaleidoscope of joy and tragedy,  
but far too much of it tragedy.

After a half century of  
working hard for good causes,  
I wonder with what result.  
I think the answer is that  
I've mostly been along for the ride,  
a pimple on the ass of Progress.  
Perhaps I have succeeded at trying.  
That's not enough, but it is something.

When asked the source of happiness  
and urged to state the matter simply,  
the psychologist replied, "Other people."  
I can vouch for that. I celebrate  
my many friends and comrades. Still,  
one other person has been central to me  
over this long journey of a happy life.  
From high school to this memorable day,  
despite the golf clubs, the missing chain saw,  
that person is the wonderful you.

## Our Jack

Through Jack's old brain  
the ideas fly,  
hardly stopping  
to say goodbye.

He has to talk  
to a big group.  
He wrote his text.  
It follows soup.

He wonders did  
he brush his teeth.  
His teeth feel Yes,  
to his relief.

He did his tie.  
His shirt was white.  
Ready to go!  
All seemed alright.

But things came loose.  
Jack was midway,  
his pages were  
in disarray.

He had no choice.  
Keep on reading!  
No one noticed.  
Fears receding .

It was over  
in the middle,  
and no one cared,  
not one piddle.

The crowd it cheered.  
They loved old Jack.  
He was their man  
with no going back.

## These Legs

These legs don't like stairs anymore  
or steep slopes or rocks or roots.  
But I will accept this and be thankful.  
Once they could jump to touch the rim  
and pull out down the line to trap block  
and kneel at the altar near forever  
a good acolyte assisting at Communion  
and carry two children up Jack Mountain  
and kick the mile-long swim needed to be lifeguard.  
Now their gift is the stiff walk of an old man  
and a shuffling and out-of-balance gait.  
But how can I blame them?  
They screeed straight-down rocky slopes.  
They suffered sprains and scrapes and dog bites  
and even being ripped open by cleats.  
They stood there for countless hours  
at soccer games, receptions, and speeches  
and had no real complaint to offer.  
On a special day in 1965 they did their job:  
despite a case of nerves and trembling,  
they faked a steady walk down the aisle.  
The doctor said bodies are made to move.  
Me and these old legs will keep on walking.

## Boiled Down

Listening to the TV this morning  
I heard a commentator say  
that those of us in our 80s are  
“boiled down to the essence.”  
Although some essence has  
boiled away and not down,  
I can live with that.  
I have been asked, politely,  
“Are you Gus?”  
and have been heard to reply,  
“I am what is left of him.”  
So I ask myself what is the  
essential me that remains.  
I’d better ask Cece. She’ll know.

## A Prayer

Can I banish despair with hope,  
if hope is paired with action?  
Can I find a heaven for dogs,  
just for them and those who love them?  
Can I understand quantum mechanics,  
at least a smidgen please?  
Can I write enough to clear my name,  
purging my mistakes and errors?  
Can I stay both alert and anguished  
until I have done all I can?  
Can I finally admit there are angels,  
since I have now seen some at work?  
Can I cry in front of other people,  
and not just when alone?  
Can I have some hugs again,  
free of the damn virus?  
Can I find some untapped strength,  
and lighten burdens with it?

## Getting Up There

Events swirl by in baffling profusion.  
Nothing is as clear as this confusion.  
So much comes by us fast;  
not much of that will last.

Old brains try hard to comprehend.  
Muddled messages to maybe send.  
There are things we struggle to say.  
The words just get in the damn way.

Explanations fail right and left.  
Are we the proper objects of our jest?  
I swim in a river called the Edisto.  
I think it means "I just don't know."

Some drift into deep delusion.  
Some merely want seclusion.  
We struggle now in this twilight,  
hoping someone will hold us tight.

## Independence Day

If I could be what I'm clearly not,  
I would lay my old hands upon the world,  
call down a blessing of peace and freedom  
from hunger, pain, illiteracy and oppression.  
I would appoint an ambassador  
to every living species and grant them  
plenipotentiary powers of protection,  
just as I would grant such powers to all  
mothers for their children and charges.  
I would bring hosannas to Pope Francis,  
Thomas Berry and Reverend Barber,  
and to 21 kids who sued for climate  
against government by failure.  
I would call upon the Devil,  
for who would know better,  
to disclose every rancid scheme  
and deplorable machination  
of the rich and powerful, including  
those hiding under corporate shells.  
I would pardon all those unjustly  
imprisoned or prosecuted. And  
I would forgive all those gullible  
and duped or simply uninformed,  
not requiring their repentance but  
merely a promise to use good sense—  
while we all remember the truth  
self-evident at the Founding  
that we are all created equal.

## Moving Through Our Lives

Here's what has kept me going,  
and going and going  
through these many years.  
Maybe you too.

Have you, like me, loved  
to learn new things?  
The endless search to understand!  
Bruner was 95 when asked  
why he read long biographies.  
"To improve my mind," he said.

What about making things?  
People love to build, to create.  
The Navajo sand painting blows away.  
It is a beautiful thing.  
My poems will blow away too.

"Variety is the spice of life" —  
one of the smartest things ever said.  
People will do anything to  
avoid boredom and find excitement.  
Trust me on that.

Then there are good causes,  
they keep us going too.  
Mostly they will fail, but remember  
what Camus said of Sisyphus:  
"The struggle itself towards the heights  
is enough to fill a man's heart.  
One must imagine Sisyphus happy."  
Wow!

What's the most important thing of all?  
That's a big question. We may differ.  
I think it's companionship. What's better!  
On the pillow in my wife's chair, it says  
"Happiness is being married to your best friend."



I'm carrying on here  
too long without getting  
down to some serious stuff:  
the grandkids and family,  
the dogs and cats and random pets,  
the joking and the poking,  
the cooking and the eating,  
all the sublime messes we create!

Then finally, are we the same  
in knowing, deep in our bones,  
that we are close kin to wild things,  
and moved by that knowing?  
I am refreshed when I am  
ambling in life's intricate web,  
pausing in the forest with the dogs,  
standing with awe and reverence  
in that cathedral of viridescence,  
with hope for a better day.  
Yes, hope. That too.

## Reverie

Dangling emotions, residue of dreams,  
orphaned feeling now attached to nothing.  
They linger longer as the years pile up,  
while memories rush about, fresh as life.  
He studies grains of sugar sparkling in the spoon,  
all destined to dissolve in coffee he drinks too often.  
He recalls the many friends he has had and lost  
through decades of changing jobs and distant locations.  
They were almost all good people, honorable and  
doing hard work to make the world a bit better.  
A wave of gratitude and affection warms him.  
He thinks of the blessing and joy they were to him—  
how they were the bright water in which he swam.  
It has been so terribly long.  
Faces he once knew now drift in front of him.  
He would like to know what became of them  
and hopes they moved happily into their futures.  
He hopes too that they remembered him fondly,  
and he knows that is all he can ever ask.

## The Man with a Farm

An old man lives up a hillside  
on a rundown farmstead  
not close to the center of town.  
His unpainted house needs repair;  
rusting machinery is scattered about.  
He stays in one small room downstairs.  
Folks bring to him baskets of food  
at Christmas and at Thanksgiving,  
but he is easy to forget—  
alone, a distance from neighbors.  
He has no kin; he has no dog.  
He can move only with difficulty.  
Trash piles up in the room.  
The end of his belt hangs over  
a foot below his now-thin waist.  
He forgets about zipping his pants.

Do we know what keeps him going?  
Does he think about his mother?  
Does he carry memories of the farm  
as it once was with milking cows  
and his wife and son helping him  
and he is there on the tractor  
tedding the hay loudly singing church songs.  
Does he love the lilacs now flourishing  
in the rich soil around the falling barn?

As he struggles to make another day,  
does he think this is just the way?  
Some say that may be best for him.  
Yet he may wish a better end.  
He may like to see his land alive again,  
long for someone to help him in his tub.  
He may think there should be friends.

## Please Don't Have My Funeral

Please don't have my funeral.  
But if you must, leave me out of it.  
I cannot bear even the thought.  
Pew on pew only sparsely filled.  
The minister at a loss officiating  
for one so fallen from the faith.  
My poor acquaintances  
dragooned to speak,  
struggling for a few nice words.  
My last request songs totally  
mismatched to the occasion.  
People mulling about discussing  
almost anything but me and  
ready to get home for the ballgame.

I would have stayed alive  
had I thought of all this!

Perhaps in lieu of flowers  
and in lieu of anything else,  
my friends, those remaining,  
could gather and share thoughts  
of the dumbest things I'd said.  
That would be fitting  
as well as revealing and fun and  
there is no shortage of material.

## Old Growth and the Flicker

He went into the woods that day  
to reflect on the life he'd lived,  
and account for it the best he could.  
Well along the path was a bench.  
He put it there when he was stronger.  
He now rarely passed up a bench, or a toilet.  
He sat, intending to consider what became  
of the youngster raised in the Deep South  
in an era of the Massive Resistance, and  
what became of the causes he pursued.

There were trees there as ancient as he.  
Sunlight blinked through the chartreuse.  
Spring pollen set his eyes to watering, and  
the green shapes enveloping him blurred.  
Still, he could hear a Flicker banging its head  
and could see its white rump jumping around.  
Its dream was to find a worm burrowed  
deep in a dead tree then decaying away,  
or was the dream simply to be heard?  
He knew Flickers and knew it could be either.  
Keep banging, he whispered, you will be heard.

The thought of worms made him think of  
catalpa worms, his favorite for fishing bream.  
His dad taught him to jigger fish with them.  
He smiled when he recalled that his dad  
called them Catawba worms. And why not.  
This was the land of the Catawba and Eutaw.  
Important tribes, they should not be forgotten.

He scratched an itch and wondered if the bench  
would be a good place to pick up some chiggers.  
From his experience it certainly could be.  
The tiny red devils knew where to burrow into  
the human anatomy, finding a tender warm spot,  
but he knew of a remedy from his youth:  
a dab of fingernail polish, clear preferred.  
He had used his sister's polish but  
could not remember if it actually worked.  
Like a lot of solutions, he reckoned.

He realized that dusk had come already  
and he had been reminiscing once again,  
not thinking on his career as he intended.  
Perhaps he could come back and try again.  
Perhaps he would concentrate harder then,  
with the woods quieted, the pollen gone.  
Or maybe he knew enough answers already,  
and his heart was not really in the project.  
He stood up, stiffly, bracing himself on the bench  
and began slowly down the path out of the woods.  
As he went, he looked up hoping to see the Flicker.  
He wished it well with its project.

## In Good Hands

Recalling now a dream of mine  
as the surgeon was removing  
generous portions of my spine.  
A powerful Vermont woodsman  
in a wool and worn plaid shirt  
and holding a sharp chainsaw,  
someone I knew rather well  
but could not exactly tell,  
mounted my back gracefully,  
knees on my shoulder blades,  
and started sawing at my spine,  
removing triangles perfectly  
holding a smile the whole time.

## What Do You Want to Be?

This tale of a young man's fancy  
begins in a small Southern town.  
It ends in south Chicago,  
an early aspiration in tatters.

He wanted to go into politics  
thought it would be interesting  
and keep his growing ego happy.  
He thought he might go far.

His first job, in high school,  
tacking posters on poles.  
He can't remember for whom.  
His work lined the highways.

Then, in college, a summer job  
working for his DC congressman.  
Assigned to write right-wing speeches,  
it should have cured him.

In 1968 he became Gene McCarthy's  
campaign coordinator for his state.  
At the infamous 1968 Chicago convention,  
he secured but one vote for Clean Gene.

It's been said Chicago was a gas.  
He was tear gassed there, protesting.  
With no pass, Mayor Daley's thugs  
hustled him off the convention floor.

He realized he wasn't in touch—  
he and his base drifting apart.  
The thought of chasing that base  
cured him of politics for good.

Signs can appear telling us which  
dreams to hold to and which to let go.  
He is glad he saw that sign back then.  
But he still wants to be President.



## As Soon as I Get Well

When I get well,  
I'm going to be insufferable!  
When my legs work again,  
"let's scramble up that hill"  
will be heard once more,  
as my kids roll their eyes.  
When my endurance returns,  
I will challenge Cas to a fast 10K.  
When I have found my balance,  
I will take on Jim down the  
Youghiogheny in rubber duckies,  
and dare Char to join me  
skreeing down a rocky slope.  
When my libido returns,  
well, that will be interesting.  
When I am at full strength again,  
I'm pushing this walker to Goodwill  
and organizing some touch football.  
I don't think I was made to sit here  
in the recliner in front of the TV  
looking at Wheel of Fortune and  
dying with each awful bit of news.  
So get ready world!  
I expect to be back any day now.

## New Morning

The new day's here and I'm ready  
for anything it might bring.  
Pills in the drawer, eyebrows trimmed,  
I'm ready to dethrone the king.

But feet unsteady, I stumble around.  
Poet Thomas says I must rage, rage.  
Did you notice, dear Dylan, how  
I'm entering my anecdotage?

Is the long travail nearly over,  
the seamless hours of striving?  
I doubt it, but an easy thought  
for a new day in the morning.

## Reboot

I wish I could plug me in  
and get me fully charged.  
There is memory I need to keep,  
and messages I need to send.

Old models need special care.  
The interface still works,  
but user-friendly means  
something rather different—

a slower response time  
and more time sleeping  
are not the all of it.  
Getting logged in  
is a special problem.

The faces our cameras see  
and zoom around the world  
are not the old familiar ones,  
but new ones weak-eyed and worn  
from searching, staring, scrolling.

I fear the dreaded crash,  
a loss of precious information,  
perhaps unrecoverable for all time.  
One crash too many and  
there is nothing left to upload.

## Passing Days

A hundred Black Skimmers swirl above the inlet.  
First signs of a lovely day.

We walked holding hands on the beach this morning.  
She gave me a surprise kiss.

If only dogs knew their birthdays,  
there would be so many more parties.

The Year of the Rabbit begins today.  
I will hop to, for there is much still to do.

That day I turned 82 I applied for the sales job  
at Bits of Lace.

Remote from remotes, no devices except my own.  
A lovely day in the past.

I said, please bare with me,  
and she did.

We say today is the day,  
but there is always mañana.

## Things Are Closer Than They Appear

She said one day she was ready to go.  
Go to where, I try not to think I know.  
She had bought us a cemetery plot  
on a hillside spot that she liked a lot.  
It is lovely there, covered now in snow.

I have to think further on this matter.  
At first my thoughts made me sadder.  
Are things really coming to an end  
for me and for my sweet best friend?  
Are we soon to climb Jacob's Ladder?

Of course, she meant she was prepared  
for the ending that no one's spared.  
Her words had shattered my easy day,  
raising new things for me to weigh.  
She had told me because she cared.

So, problems wait around the door,  
ones we can no longer ignore.  
But we will go on undeterred  
by a future inevitably blurred.  
There is so much left to explore.

## The Walk to the Mailbox

He was bored with the walk to the mailbox.  
It was a half mile down the old dirt road  
across the field, over the hills and through the woods  
to where the town road ended at the neighbor's farm.  
Trudge, trudge, once again now almost every day for 15 years.  
But it had to be done. Otherwise, the box would fill up,  
mostly with catalogues. They were the sheerest junk,  
except for the keeper from Victoria's Secret.

High summer and he noticed that the goldenrod was out.  
The rain had been incessant; the field had never been so lush.  
Queen Anne's Lace floated like little clouds above the grasses.  
He could not get the silly dogs to stop eating half-ripe berries.  
He shouted obscenities at them, to no avail, and plodded on.  
It made him mad that he had seen no Monarchs this year,  
maybe one, despite the most luxuriant milkweed.  
He read about a tribe of Monarchs in South Carolina.  
They stayed put, refusing to migrate,  
like those Canada Geese in New Jersey.  
Given what was going on, not a bad idea. Stay put.

In the woods, the maple and ash and moosewood  
dripped the easy morning rain on him.  
In his memory, they had never stayed so green so late.  
The ash leaves come late and go early.  
He wondered what the ash borers would do to his trees.  
He saw a row of tiny red mushrooms  
marching across a water-soaked log, and over in the woods  
he could see a patch of yellow chanterelles.  
He should gather them—  
if his legs worked still and if they weren't up the bank.  
He finally reached the mailbox, looked around at the farm.  
It always seemed the same.  
The three miniature cows looked just like cows, only pint sized.  
They were damn pretty. Dusty the donkey was there as usual.

Try as folks might there was simply no way  
to reduce the cry of a donkey to letters. A “bray”? Ha!  
Dusty’s was remarkable, a thing of beauty heard for a mile.  
The chickens came out of the barn. The flock seemed bigger.  
He’d soon get a dozen of their fine products from the farmer.  
He wondered if he should buy some pullets.  
Maybe it was time to have laying hens again.  
Weirdly, one sounded like a rooster.  
Maybe it was. Not a bad life, roostering.  
He noticed that the spring lambs, a white and two blacks,  
had grown to look like their moms, about the same size.  
The dogs taunted them, as they always did, but  
they just kept nibbling the abundant greens, oblivious.  
He wondered what the farmer had planned for them.

There wasn’t much to the mail.  
He recalled the cartoon of a Vermont geezer  
who’d run a shunt from the mail slot in his door  
straight to his pot-bellied stove.  
He thought, I am the mailman, slow but sure,  
and if I take enough steps, I will be home eventually.  
Moseying on, he would see the same things, mostly.  
He tried to reassure himself that the little eejits  
that had found him were gnats, not blackflies.  
The burdock now looked like little purple thistle flowers.  
He knew that one day in the fall they would  
cover the dogs with abundant sticker seeds.  
In the field again, he paused to look south,  
over the nearby hills to the magnificent Ascutney  
outlined faintly there, a darker shade of blue.

He thought that if he had to walk up and down hills  
for a mile every day, it might as well be here.  
Not a bad spot. He turned back to the road  
and was surprised he was almost home.

## Giving Out

It is strange what is happening to me.  
As I am finishing up here on Earth,  
I find that I want to share pieces  
of me, until there is nothing left.  
I won't be happy until I am all gone.

Here, take my library, good books  
collected over a lifetime of reading.  
And these paintings, I will write your  
name on the back of the ones you want.  
This house is willed to you, if you  
promise to care for the dogs.  
Do you need someone to review your draft?  
Or some advice or a contact or reference?  
Or someone to show up at your event? Gladly,  
I give you a piece of my time remaining.

Most important of what I have to give,  
I think, are the things I have written, and  
the ideas that reappear there stubbornly.  
Giving them up is too easy since  
they were always made to share  
and they are never gone away.  
Some gift! Given but not.  
It is embarrassing to share them  
with friends who have not asked.  
An old man clinging to relevance,  
or a kid who has seen a bit of light?  
I am hardly the best to judge.



## A Daughter's Question

A half century ago my wife and I walked up  
Jack Mountain into an unexplored meadow.  
I held my little girl's hand in mine,  
we carried our young sons on our backs.  
It was summer, our sweatbands were  
drenched, and we were exhausted. Still,

the scene ahead as we entered the meadow  
startled us: everywhere white daisies  
and Queen Anne's Lace, black-eyed Susans,  
yellow yarrow, pink aster, purple thistle,  
orange hawkweed and early goldenrod.  
Our young daughter looked up at us and asked—

"Are we in Heaven?"

Just yesterday I was walking an old  
logging road that runs uphill through  
some green shade-dappled saplings  
and opens out to a big meadow on top.  
As I approached the meadow on the ridge,  
all I could see ahead was the late day sun  
sitting, pausing on the crest of the hill  
and pouring a blinding gold over the horizon.  
I just stood there in the saffron glow.  
Two dark silhouettes were on the ridge top.  
It took a second but then I recognized  
my dogs standing there and waiting for me.

## The Bright Room

Fill this room with music now  
while my spirits are high.  
Fill it with grandkids shouting  
and with two yellow dogs  
squabbling and rolling  
across the bare wood floor  
and a plate of cheese crackers  
with a pecan half sitting on top.

Fill it too with memories of  
a warm Christmas in Carolina  
so long ago there were still nineteen  
of us crowded around the table there.  
Dad was not long gone but  
Mom was beaming, the proud  
brood mother with her unruly flock.  
God knows we were a family.

There are rooms in this big house  
now deserted, dark and cold.  
In one there is an old upright piano  
and a stiff satin sofa with purple pillows  
and eyelet drapes over the windows  
and hundreds of National Geographics  
piled over in the corner, waiting.  
There is no need to go out there.  
This bright room is plenty big for us.

## Those of a Certain Age

Will you please run ahead and see  
what's around the corner for me?  
I think I know what's in my book,  
but I need you to take a look.

There is an end for me out there.  
A peaceful one you see, my dear?  
Or will there be a drug-soaked pain,  
and you wishing me gone in vain?

I hope it's sudden, in my sleep,  
with no more promises for me to keep.  
I don't know how brave I would be  
facing out to that endless sea.

I'll remember what our child said  
about the truth of being dead.  
She said it is okay to mourn  
but death is like before you're born.

## A Long Journey

The last time he put on shoes  
he wore a hospital gown.  
He took the hall elevator down  
and walked out to the street  
into a bright early fall sun.  
He got some stale cashews  
at the Dollar Tree, and  
he ate them as he went  
across a bridge of sighs.  
On the other side, he found  
a familiar mossy street  
with its canopy of big live oaks  
more ancient even than he.  
Shuffling along the shade  
he passed the skating rink,  
the town baseball field,  
his dad's old repair shop.  
It was a journey, but then  
at the county fairgrounds he  
saw the Ferris wheel turning.  
He went right to the booth  
where his high school class was  
selling Earl Dukes barbeque  
to fairgoers enjoying themselves.  
She was working at the booth  
and she smiled, and he sat there  
at the counter a very long time.

## A Place of Little Pretense

This small beach house was built in 1951,  
just across the dunes from the big breakers.  
Facing the full Atlantic through a few palmettos,  
it has survived the ferocity of many encounters,  
including the direct hit of the big storm Hugo.  
It has survived thousands of children  
tracking in tons of sand in wet bathing suits.  
It has been the enduring strong cauldron  
for explosions of laughter and love and anger.  
Its tiny kitchen has seen the endless shucking  
of local oysters and the frying of many flounder.

How many books have been read here?  
How much coffee spilled into the rugs?  
How many exhibitions of grandkids' art?  
How many hugs?  
How many castles washed away by the waves?  
How many games of Monopoly and cards?  
How many kids bodysurfed to dad's legs?  
How many carbs?  
How many shark teeth found near the surf?  
How many dogs slept in the chairs?  
How many bare feet warmed by the sand?  
How many beers?

The signs of age are all around:  
tiny worn sinks in upstairs bedrooms,  
a bottom floor flat on the ground,  
a very small toilet in the bathroom,  
the walls and ceiling a simple bare pine,  
the medicine cabinet with its slit in the back,  
the razor blades there to oblivion assigned.

This house is a modest place on the beach,  
yet pilgrims trek here each summer.  
It's a state of mind they hope to reach,  
to see again their families and each other,  
to watch birds and catch some fish,  
to worship the tanning sun,  
and the boys look at girls, and wish.

## Out of Place

Seen from the deck of this  
place of little pretense,  
the Atlantic today lies flat and leaden,  
shrouded in low, lifeless clouds.  
I look out from a beachfront bungalow  
built in 1951 when I was nine.  
It is out of place now,  
and we are its final renters.  
It cannot match its neighbors,  
the cementitious mega-mansions  
that up the strand and down  
bestride the narrow dunes  
crushing the sand crabs  
and the small pleasures of everyday life  
at a beach once arrogantly shabby.  
There are now swimming pools  
to my left and also to my right.  
Is it just my age pining for the times  
we brought our children to this place  
and ran along the warm sand path  
through the dunes to the beach?  
Folly our dog is scared. And why not?  
She sees the empty rooms,  
furniture gone to Goodwill,  
everything we own boxed and bagged  
and ready to move on  
before the wrecking ball.  
It is coming tomorrow.  
I am going peacefully,  
but I am scared too.

## Friendship

She was an old dog,  
hard of seeing, hearing,  
and an awful winter:  
snow rain melt freeze,  
snow rain melt freeze—  
everything slick with ice.  
The old man let her out  
to do her business.  
He saw her standing  
at the edge of the yard,  
the big hill dropping  
fast down to the woods,  
a steep sledding slope  
for the grandkids.

A glance later she was gone.  
One step too far, with  
ancient limbs and no traction,  
she had slid away.

He dressed hurriedly  
and spotted her trapped  
in a jumble of bramble  
down at the bottom,  
occasionally struggling  
but with no effect.  
The old man's back was afflicted,  
painful and giving out.  
Still he headed down,  
stumbling to the bottom.

The dog seemed glad  
to have him by her side.  
He was glad to be there too.  
He lifted her big Lab body  
and started up the hill.  
When the pain was too great,  
he paused, let it subside,  
remembered she had been  
an acrobat at Frisbee, had  
loved to play with the ducks.

He thought: two elder residents  
of town in trouble and now  
struggling together to get  
up a hill covered with ice.  
What could be better?

He lifted her one last time  
as they approached the stone steps  
to the house, and it was too much.  
His feet slipped out from under him,  
the dog let loose as he reached for the ice.  
His head landed inches from the steps.  
He rolled over, looked up, and grinned  
as she stood licking his face.



### Three Old Guys, Me, and Matilda

On hot days an old man named Joe  
would head to the beach for the show.  
The bikinis were getting quite meager  
and he would dream of being still eager.  
On his trip home he was simply aglow.

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There was a retired gent named Strong  
who for decades chanted the right song.  
Then the space aliens finally came!  
But instead of casting blame,  
he just asked, "what took you so long?"

\*\*\*

There once was a man called Ray  
who asked God what bills he should pay.  
He found it was a great relief  
to have such deep belief.  
He was happy to his very last day.

\*\*\*

I am thinking it's past time for bed,  
but bed is what I now dread.  
It's something I wish I'd forgot:  
that I have so many trips to the pot.  
But I can find nothing in its stead.

\*\*\*

There was a woman from Perth  
who had been waltzing almost since birth.  
One exciting night found Matilda  
dancing arm in arm with a lovely Sarah.  
Together they floated far above earth.

## A Balanced Life

The soul is more important than the back

A child rushes towards you  
Little arms outstretched  
Pick up the child

The sun graces the morning beach  
It goes for miles  
Walk the beach

The dogs insist on Frisbee  
The motion's like a hula hoop  
Throw it hard

The exercises prescribed  
Awake real pain  
Do them . . . sometimes

Your partner's car arrives  
With bags of groceries  
Head for the bathroom

## The Last Monarch

The monarch drifted to the grass,  
the maples glowed bright red.  
Fall has now yes come to pass,  
nature putting herself to bed.

The season of beautiful endings,  
life giving up another round.  
At first it seemed heart rending.  
The fields turned a rusty brown.

Life giving up another round,  
the monarch drifted to the grass.  
The fields turned a rusty brown.  
Fall has now yes come to pass.

The maples glowed bright red.  
Dying away precedes new birth,  
nature putting herself to bed.  
My footprint too upon this earth.

Dying away precedes new birth,  
at first it seemed heart rending.  
My footprint too upon this earth.  
This season of beautiful endings.

## The Islanders

They settled on an island  
far off the coast of Maine.  
They came for the clean air  
and for the bracing cold,  
the breakers on the rocks,  
the innocence of birds.

They often came in pairs,  
their children gone away.  
Some settled by themselves,  
their partners then also gone.  
They reached out to each other.  
And it was enough.

They shared one great thing:  
In a hundred different ways  
they had fought a good fight.  
They had seen the world's beauty  
but struggled with its horrors.  
And they were chastened.

They celebrated the animals and the plants  
and so also St. Francis and Pope Francis,  
and were found often in quiet reflection.  
They lived there with laughter and song.  
They flew flags of rainbow and black  
and, yes, of red, white, and blue.

## The Tar Snakes Painter

The truck slows down.  
He hops off the back,  
magic wand in his hand,  
the road begs for black.  
They try to define who  
is an essential worker.  
So easily they might miss  
the tar snakes painter.  
He paints in vacant spaces,  
hot tar seeps and seeks to hold.  
It fills and does the binding.  
The painter heals the road.

Who among us knows  
what this artist knows  
of what the day requires,  
where the real work goes?  
Work that has benefit,  
work that lasts a while,  
work that can be fun,  
and brings a little smile.  
I look at all I've done  
and wonder what will last.  
Long as a mended road,  
or lost back in the past?

## Old Sam's Story

Did you know Molly?  
It was new summer's day,  
bright and fresh that morning,  
and she was in the garden  
with her favorite flowers budding.  
How she loved her roses,  
almost as much as I loved her.  
Now this longest day returns,  
and she is gone.

The sunset brings shadows  
to untended blooms.  
Bluebirds pause and float  
from post to ground.

Everybody knew Molly!  
And they loved her too.  
She was a woman in full,  
if I may say that.  
She would look you in the eye  
and you were in that moment  
everything to her.  
Her daddy once said of her,  
"Lord, Molly, you can charm  
the lard out of a biscuit."  
She charmed me every day.  
And on this endless day,  
she is gone.

Itching is between  
the hurt and its healing,  
and I am itching all over.  
The loss of her surrounds me.  
I am covered by memories  
of her silver hair on my shoulder.  
On this day she would have loved,  
she is gone.

## Be, Attitudes

Blessed are the peacemakers  
for they shall always find work.

Blessed are the patient  
for their odds are better.

Blessed are they who pursue righteousness  
for their way is uncrowded.

Blessed are the gardeners  
for they shall discover many things.

Blessed are the pioneers  
for they know the path is made by walking.

Blessed are the incorrigibles  
for all they need is attention.

Blessed are the wrinkled faces  
for they have seen life and smiled.

Blessed are they with oceans and starry skies  
for they shall know infinity.

Blessed are they who cry in the night  
for they are ready for the morning.

## The Red Wolf Cries

He saw it coming,  
saw the wreckage coming,  
wreckage driven ever on  
and on by the warming,  
the rising and the changing.  
Saw it early, decades ago,  
and he cried out,  
thinking they would listen.  
He saw then that it was  
the heart that would decide.  
He cried to a big world  
from a small pulpit.

Young then and hopeful,  
hopeful that words would matter,  
words could reach the heart.  
And so he wrote, invoking  
the whole life community  
that evolved here with us,  
life we did not create and  
over which we are not lord.

Years later, as an old man,  
he challenged his few readers  
to imagine Earth without us.  
When asked why he would  
even think such a thing, he said,  
consider the wreckage  
gathering at your feet.  
Does it not break your heart?

Now pause, he said, be still,  
and contemplate such a world:  
oceans so fish-filled there appear  
to be paths across the water,  
flocks of passenger pigeons that  
cast large shadows on the landscape,  
great herds of ungulates  
grazing across cool savannahs,  
an Earth thriving with diversity.  
But without us.



It's a test, he said, of our  
environmental imagination.  
If we can imagine such a world  
with feelings of awe and reverence,  
taking joy in its existence  
even though we are no part of it,  
nature for nature's sake,  
then we are ready  
to answer a question.  
What is a species worth?  
Perhaps just a small part  
of nature's tapestry?

It depends on what is  
vital and alive to you,  
what your imagination sees.  
Place yourself, the old man urged,  
not as superior to nature  
but as evolution's child,  
close kin to wild things,  
part of nature's flourishing,  
threads in the tapestry.  
Then you will know the answer.  
The heart will decide.

## The Poet, Tiring

Running from the world with a laptop  
beating keys to keep time  
imagining someone will be reading  
the words he hopes will rhyme.

Possible poems,  
poem snippets  
proto-poems  
pop  
into a tired brain.  
Should he jot them down  
with his old ambition?  
Or lie down until they  
pass on into the land  
of last night's dreams,  
faded away, irretrievable?

## The Hardest Thing

Love was on display yesterday  
when the family was forced  
to put down the giant Seamus.  
His tail wagging at the end  
plainly saying thank you  
for the games and the food  
and hugs and the warm house  
and the other dogs chased  
around in endless circles.  
And the thanks was returned,  
the last strokes on his cheek.

Dogs find us to teach us about love  
and leave us to teach about loss.  
It is a love we hope to be worthy of  
but one that comes with a cost.

## Adagio

The sun that day burst bright  
orange through the trees  
and settled on Lee's sleepy face.  
Emily was gone already,  
away to fix breakfast for Maud,  
98 and bright as that sun.

The dogs waited, restless for him.  
They loved and teased in equal dose.  
His pup took off with his old socks.  
Lee had some coffee and corn flakes  
with blueberries from lord knows where.  
They ate the ones he somehow dropped.

The yard, now green, was full of Robins.  
Bluebirds had claimed their little homes.  
Maybe they were born there last year.  
He sat on the front porch and read  
the Times online, and did Wordle.  
Something in the paper made  
him realize he still liked Ike.

There were a ton of new emails.  
He did his day's inbox triage,  
checked on the war in brave Ukraine.  
A doe with fawns suddenly appeared.  
Just as quickly, nothing was there.  
So quietly the dogs missed them.

He saw the swing in the basswood.  
The grandkids loved that swing.  
They no longer needed pushes.  
He filled the bird feeders full up.  
They were back—blue, yellow, black.  
He'd learned much just watching them.  
Lee was content, but then, then he  
had the thought he'd had before—  
about magic in what is commonplace,  
about the ordinary grace of everyday.

## Hopium

It takes a lot of hopium  
to get me through the day.  
There is always more hopium,  
and I will take it any way.

I can grow my own hopium.  
My mind's a fertile field.  
The less I know, the more I grow.  
You cannot beat that deal.

I got a bumper crop last year  
when I turned off the news.  
Being hopeful was easy when  
I took a long news snooze.

There are worse addictions;  
hopium just affects the mind.  
Yet in terms of climate worries,  
it leaves them far behind.

Dreamy hope, comforting hope,  
whenever needed it's there.  
There's always more hopium  
when I'm in my easy chair.

Hope without costs,  
hope without consequence,  
hopium's a dope's dope  
in a cauldron of innocence.

## Small Waves Putter About

The tide is out and the small waves putter about.  
The beach stretches away as long as life.  
Fragments of great shells gather in random piles.  
Gray ocean, gray sky, shades of gray today.

The beach stretches away as long as life.  
A dot of red in the sand, a child's lost shoe.  
Gray ocean, gray sky, shades of gray today.  
Is this the way, in all these shades of gray?

A dot of red in the sand, a child's lost shoe.  
There was a child once with a bright blue bucket.  
Is this the way, in all these shades of gray?  
Was he the child and the sand flakes of gold?

There was a child once with a bright blue bucket.  
He fell in love on a blanket on a shimmering beach.  
Was he the child and the sand flakes of gold?  
She had a dark complexion and glowed in the sun.

He fell in love on a blanket on a shimmering beach.  
She had a dark complexion and glowed in the sun.  
The tide was out and the small swells pattered about.  
Fragments of great shells were glistening in the sand.

