

Week One: Hope

To Know the Dark

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

How to Be a Poet

(To remind myself)

i

Make a place to sit down.

Sit down. Be quiet.

You must depend upon
affection, reading, knowledge,
skill -- more of each
than you have -- inspiration,
work, growing older, patience,
for patience joins time
to eternity. Any readers
who like your poems,
doubt their judgment.

ii

Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.

Shun electric wire.

Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensioned life;
stay away from screens.

Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.

iii

Accept what comes from silence.

Make the best you can of it.

Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.

The Silence

Though the air is full of singing
my head is loud
with the labor of words.

Though the season is rich
with fruit, my tongue
hungers for the sweet of speech.

Though the beech is golden
I cannot stand beside it
mute, but must say

"It is golden," while the leaves
stir and fall with a sound
that is not a name.

It is in the silence
that my hope is, and my aim.
A song whose lines

I cannot make or sing
sounds men's silence
like a root. Let me say

and not mourn: the world
lives in the death of speech
and sings there.

"2007, VI" ["It is hard to have hope"]

It is hard to have hope. It is harder as you grow old,
for hope must not depend on feeling good
and there is the dream of loneliness at absolute midnight.
You also have withdrawn belief in the present reality
of the future, which surely will surprise us,
and hope is harder when it cannot come by prediction
any more than by wishing. But stop dithering.
The young ask the old to hope. What will you tell them?
Tell them at least what you say to yourself.
Because we have not made our lives to fit
our places, the forests are ruined, the fields eroded,

the streams polluted, the mountains overturned. Hope
then to belong to your place by your own knowledge
of what it is that no other place is, and by
your caring for it as you care for no other place, this
place that you belong to though it is not yours,
for it was from the beginning and will be to the end.
Belong to your place by knowledge of the others who are
your neighbors in it: the old man, sick and poor,
who comes like a heron to fish in the creek,
and the fish in the creek, and the heron who manlike
fishes for the fish in the creek, and the birds who sing
in the trees in the silence of the fisherman
and the heron, and the trees that keep the land
they stand upon as we too must keep it, or die.
This knowledge cannot be taken from you by power
or by wealth. It will stop your ears to the powerful
when they ask for your faith, and to the wealthy
when they ask for your land and your work.
Answer with knowledge of the others who are here
and how to be here with them. By this knowledge
make the sense you need to make. By it stand
in the dignity of good sense, whatever may follow.
Speak to your fellow humans as your place
has taught you to speak, as it has spoken to you.
Speak its dialect as your old compatriots spoke it
before they had heard a radio. Speak
publicly what cannot be taught or learned in public.
Listen privately, silently to the voices that rise up
from the pages of books and from your own heart.
Be still and listen to the voices that belong
to the streambanks and the trees and the open fields.
There are songs and sayings that belong to this place,
by which it speaks for itself and no other.
Found your hope, then, on the ground under your feet.
Your hope of Heaven, let it rest on the ground
underfoot. Be it lighted by the light that falls
freely upon it after the darkness of the nights
and the darkness of our ignorance and madness.
Let it be lighted also by the light that is within you,
which is the light of imagination. By it you see
the likeness of people in other places to yourself
in your place. It lights invariably the need for care

toward other people, other creatures, in other places
as you would ask them for care toward your place and you.
No place at last is better than the world. The world
is no better than its places. Its places at last
are no better than their people while their people
continue in them. When the people make
dark the light within them, the world darkens.
from *This Day: New & Collected Sabbath Poems* (Counterpoint, 2013).

WEEK TWO: PEACE

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

from *The Peace of Wild Things And Other Poems* (Penguin, 2018)

The Slip

The river takes the land, and leaves nothing.
Where the great slip gave way in the bank
and an acre disappeared, all human plans
dissolve. An awful clarification occurs
where a place was. Its memory breaks
from what is known now, begins to drift.
Where cattle grazed and trees stood, emptiness
widens the air for birdflight, wind, and rain.
As before the beginning, nothing is there.
Human wrong is in the cause, human
ruins in the effect- but no matter;
all will be lost, no matter the reason.
Nothing, having arrived, will stay.
The earth, even, is like a flower, so soon
passeth it away. And yet this nothing

is the seed of all- the clear eye
of Heaven, where all the worlds appear.
Where the imperfect has departed, the perfect
begins its struggle to return. The good gift
begins again its descent. The maker moves
in the unmade, stirring the water until
it clouds, dark beneath the surface,
stirring and darkening the soul until pain
perceives new possibility. There is nothing
to do but learn and wait, return to work
on what remains. Seed will sprout in the scar.
Though death is in the healing, it will heal.

TO A SIBERIAN WOODSMAN

(after looking at some pictures in a magazine)

1.

You lean at ease in your warm house at night after supper,
listening to your daughter play the accordion. You smile
with the pleasure of a man confident in his hands, resting
after a day of long labor in the forest, the cry of the saw
in your head, and the vision of coming home to rest.
Your daughter's face is clear in the joy of hearing
her own music. Her fingers live on the keys
like people familiar with the land they were born in.

You sit at the dinner table late into the night with your son,
tying the bright flies that will lead you along the forest streams.
Over you, as your hands work, is the dream of still pools.
Over you is the dream
of your silence while the east brightens, birds waking close by
you in the trees.

2.

I have thought of you stepping out of your doorway at dawn,
your son in your tracks.
You go in under the overarching green branches of the forest
whose ways, strange to me, are well known to you as the sound
of your own voice
or the silence that lies around you now that you have ceased to speak,
and soon the voice of the stream rises ahead of you,
and you take the path beside it.

I have thought of the sun breaking pale through the mists over you
as you come to the pool where you will fish, and of the mist drifting
over the water, and of the cast fly resting light on the face of the pool.

3.

And I am here in Kentucky in the place I have made myself
in the world. I sit on my porch above the river that flows muddy
and slow along the feet of the trees. I hear the voices of the wren
and the yellow-throated warbler whose songs pass near the windows
and over the roof. In my house my daughter learns the womanhood
of her mother. My son is at play, pretending to be
the man he believes I am. I am the outbreathing of this ground.
My words are its words as the wren's song is its song.

4.

Who has invented our enmity? Who has prescribed us
hatred of each other? Who has armed us against each other
with the death of the world? Who has appointed me such anger
that I should desire the burning of your house or the
destruction of your children?
Who has appointed such anger to you? Who has set loose the thought
that we should oppose each other with the ruin of forests and
rivers, and the silence of the birds?
Who has said to us that the voices of my land shall be strange
to you, and the voices of your land strange to me?

Who has imagined that I would destroy myself in order to destroy you,
or that I could improve myself by destroying you? Who has imagined
that your death could be negligible to me now that I have seen
these pictures of your face?
Who has imagined that I would not speak familiarly with you,
or laugh with you, or visit in your house and go to work with
you in the forest?
And now one of the ideas of my place will be that you would
gladly talk and visit and work with me.

5.

I sit in the shade of the trees of the land I was born in.
As they are native I am native, and I hold to this place as
carefully as they hold to it.
I do not see the national flag flying from the staff of the sycamore,

or any decree of the government written on the leaves of the walnut,
nor has the elm bowed before any monuments or sworn the oath of allegiance.
They have not declared to whom they stand in welcome.

6.

In the thought of you I imagine myself free of the weapons and
the official hates that I have borne on my back like a hump,
and in the thought of myself I imagine you free of weapons and
official hates,
so that if we should meet we would not go by each other
looking at the ground like slaves sullen under their burdens,
but would stand clear in the gaze of each other.

7.

There is no government so worthy as your son who fishes with
you in silence besides the forest pool.
There is no national glory so comely as your daughter whose
hands have learned a music and go their own way on the keys.
There is no national glory so comely as my daughter who
dances and sings and is the brightness of my house.
There is no government so worthy as my son who laughs, as he
comes up the path from the river in the evening, for joy.

WEEK THREE: JOY

Sabbath Poem: "1986, I"

Slowly, slowly, they return
To the small woodland let alone:
Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in air
Tier after tier a timbered choir,
Stout beams upholding weightless grace
Of song, a blessing on this place.

They stand in waiting all around,
Uprisings of their native ground,
Downcomings of the distant light;
They are the advent they await.

Receiving sun and giving shade,
Their life's a benefaction made,
And is a benediction said
Over the living and the dead.

In fall their brightened leaves, released,
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased
To walk on radiance, amazed.
O light come down to earth, be praised!

Before Dark

From the porch at dusk I watched
a kingfisher wild in flight
he could only have made for joy.

He came down the river, splashing
against the water's dimming face
like a skipped rock, passing

on down out of sight. And still
I could hear the splashes
farther and farther away

as it grew darker. He came back
the same way, dusky as his shadow,
sudden beyond the willows.

The splashes went on out of hearing.
It was dark then. Somewhere
the night had accommodated him

—at the place he was headed for
or where, led by his delight,
he came.

The Hidden Singer

The gods are less for their love of praise.
Above and below them all is a spirit that needs nothing
but its own wholeness, its health and ours.
It has made all things by dividing itself.
It will be whole again.
To its joy we come together —

the seer and the seen, the eater and the eaten,
the lover and the loved.
In our joining it knows itself. It is with us then,
not as the gods whose names crest in unearthly fire,
but as a little bird hidden in the leaves
who sings quietly and waits, and sings.

Why

Why all the embarrassment
about being happy?
Sometimes I'm as happy
as a sleeping dog,
and for the same reasons,
and for others.

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest

that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion — put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is highest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

WEEK FOUR: LOVE

A Young Man Leaving Home

I know I am getting old and I say so,
but I don't think of myself as an old man.
I think of myself as a young man
with unforeseen debilities. Time is neither
young nor old, but simply new, always

counting, the only apocalypse. And the clouds
—no mere measure or geometry, no cubism,
can account for clouds or, satisfactorily, for bodies.
There is no science for this, or art either.
Even the old body is new—who has known it
before?—and no sooner new than gone, to be
replaced by a body yet older and again new.
The clouds are rarely absent from our sky
over this humid valley, and there is a sycamore
that I watch as, growing on the riverbank,
it forecloses the horizon, like the years
of an old man. And you, who are as old
almost as I am, I love as I loved you
young, except that, old, I am astonished
at such a possibility, and am duly grateful.

Do Not Be Ashamed

You will be walking some night
in the comfortable dark of your yard
and suddenly a great light will shine
round about you, and behind you
will be a wall you never saw before.
It will be clear to you suddenly
that you were about to escape,
and that you are guilty: you misread
the complex instructions, you are not
a member, you lost your card
or never had one. And you will know
that they have been there all along,
their eyes on your letters and books,
their hands in your pockets,
their ears wired to your bed.
Though you have done nothing shameful,
they will want you to be ashamed.
They will want you to kneel and weep
and say you should have been like them.
And once you say you are ashamed,
reading the page they hold out to you,
then such light as you have made
in your history will leave you.
They will no longer need to pursue you.

You will pursue them, begging forgiveness.
They will not forgive you.
There is no power against them.
It is only candor that is aloof from them,
only an inward clarity, unashamed,
that they cannot reach. Be ready.
When their light has picked you out
and their questions are asked, say to them:
"I am not ashamed." A sure horizon
will come around you. The heron will begin
his evening flight from the hilltop.

The incarnate Word is with us,
is still speaking, is present
always, yet leaves no sign
but everything that is.

The Mad Farmer's Love Song

Sometimes, Maria whispers a story to the donkeys. And I see them listening.
"O when the world's at peace
and every man is free
then will I go down unto my love.
O and I may go down
several times before that."

To Tanya at Christmas

Forgive me, my delight, / that grief and loneliness / have kept me. Though I come / to you in
darkness, you are / companion of the light / that rises on all I know.

In the long night of the year / and of the spirit, God's birth / is met with simple noise. / Deaf
and blind in division, / I reach, and do not find. / You show the gentler way: / We come to
good by love; / our words must be made flesh.

And flesh must be made word / at last, our lives rise / in speech to our children's tongues. /
They will tell how we once stood / together here, two trees / whose lives in annual sheddings /
made their way into this ground, / whose bodies turned to earth / and song. This song will tell
/ how old love sweetens the fields.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Remembering That It Happened Once

Remembering that it happened once,
We cannot turn away the thought,
As we go out, cold, to our barns
Toward the long night's end, that we
Ourselves are living in the world
It happened in when it first happened,
That we ourselves, opening a stall
(A latch thrown open countless times
Before), might find them breathing there,
Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,
The mother kneeling over Him,
The husband standing in belief
He scarcely can believe, in light
That lights them from no source we see,
An April morning's light, the air
Around them joyful as a choir.
We stand with one hand on the door,
Looking into another world
That is this world, the pale daylight
Coming just as before, our chores
To do, the cattle all awake,
Our own frozen breath hanging
In front of us; and we are here
As we have never been before,
Sighted as not before, our place
Holy, although we knew it not.

The Birth (Near Port William)

They were into the lambing, up late.
Talking and smoking around their lantern,
they squatted in the barn door, left open
so the quiet of the winter night
diminished what they said. The chill
had begun to sink into their clothes.
Now and then they raised their hands
to breathe on them. The youngest one
yawned and shivered.

“Damn,” he said,
“I’d like to be asleep. I’d like to be
curled up in a warm nest like an old
groundhog, and sleep till spring.”

“When I was your age, Billy, it wasn’t
sleep I thought about,” Uncle Stanley said.
“Last few years here I’ve took to sleeping.”

And Raymond said: “To sleep till spring
you’d have to have a trust in things
the way animals do. Been a long time,
I reckon, since people felt safe enough
to sleep more than a night. You might
wake up someplace you didn’t go to sleep at.”

They hushed awhile, as if to let the dark
brood on what they had said. Behind them
a sheep stirred in the bedding and coughed.
It was getting close to midnight.
Later they would move back along the row
of penned ewes, making sure the newborn
lambs were well dried, and had sucked,
and then they would go home cold to bed.
The barn stood between the ridgetop
and the woods along the bluff. Below
was the valley floor and the river
they could not see. They could hear
the wind dragging its underside
through the bare branches of the woods.
And suddenly the wind began to carry
a low singing. They looked across
the lantern at each other’s eyes
and saw they all had heard. They stood,
their huge shadows rising up around them.
The night had changed. They were already
on their way — dry leaves underfoot
and mud under the leaves — to another barn
on down along the woods’ edge,
an old stripping room, where by the light
of the open stove door they saw the man,

and then the woman and the child
lying on a bed of straw on the dirt floor.

“Well, look a there,” the old man said.
“First time this ever happened here.”

And Billy, looking, and looking away,
said: “Howdy. Howdy. Bad night.”

And Raymond said: “There’s a first
time, they say, for everything.”

And that,
he thought, was as reassuring as anything
was likely to be, and as he needed it to be.
They did what they could. Not much.
They brought a piece of rug and some sacks
to ease the hard bed a little, and one
wedged three dollar bills into a crack
in the wall in a noticeable place.
And they stayed on, looking, looking away,
until finally the man said they were well
enough off, and should be left alone.
They went back to their sheep. For a while
longer they squatted by their lantern
and talked, tired, wanting sleep, yet stirred
by wonder — old Stanley too, though he would not
say so.

“Don’t make no difference,” he said
“They’ll have ’em anywhere. Looks like a man
would have a right to be born in bed, if not
die there, but he don’t.”

“But you heard
that singing in the wind,” Billy said.
“What about that?”

“Ghosts. They do that way.”

“Not that way.”

“Scared him, it did.”

The old man laughed. “We’ll have to hold his damn hand for him, and lead him home.”

“It don’t even bother you,” Billy said.

“You go right on just the same. But you heard.”

“Now that I’m old I sleep in the dark.

That ain’t what I used to do in it. I heard something.”

“You heard a good deal more than you’ll understand,” Raymond said, “or him or me either.”

They looked at him.

He had, they knew, a talent for unreasonable belief. He could believe in tomorrow before it became today — a human enough failing, and they were tolerant.

He said:

“It’s the old ground trying it again.

Solstice, seeding and birth — it never gets enough. It wants the birth of a man to bring together sky and earth, like a stalk of corn. It’s not death that makes the dead rise out of the ground, but something alive straining up, rooted in darkness, like a vine.

That’s what you heard. If you’re in the right mind when it happens, it can come on you strong; you might hear music passing on the wind, or see a light where there wasn’t one before.”

“Well, how do you know if it amounts to anything?”

“You don’t. It usually don’t. It would take a long long time to ever know.”

But that night
and other nights afterwards, up late,
there was a feeling in them — familiar
to them, but always startling in its strength —

like the thought, on a winter night,
of the lambing ewes dry-bedded and fed,
and the thought of the wild creatures warm
asleep in their nests, deep underground.