

Theodore Salisbury – Zoomuse – poems, November 2020

To My Children, Singly (1990s)

My child, for you the worst is over.  
What for me happened yesterday  
For you was a lifetime ago.  
And what happened for me in daylight  
Happened to you in darkness.

Now you must step from my shadow  
And seek your light alone, as I seek mine,  
For your life and mine have almost unraveled.

God save us from my ancient folly.

The Remembrance of Things Past (1964)

A photograph can be  
Means to a dead end,  
More perilous if carelessly posed.

An enigmatic look of life remains  
In the faded paper's silver grains,  
Which do not kill, you think,  
But just suspend—

As if quicksilver motion,  
Frozen once,  
Could be thawed now  
By the warmth of your desire.

The Flowers, Do They Not Speak? (2002)

Each delicate flower,  
Sucking sustenance in its hour  
From earth, sun, air, pleads  
With radiant hue:  
"Choose me! Choose me!  
Come bee, come breeze,  
Choose me!" So say you,  
Say I, say we.

Proclamation

(two solstices of thanksgiving) (early 1990s, 2020)

In midst of winter,  
Safe in my windowless cell  
Where I worked my trade of wooden words,

A sudden odor of lilacs. Spring  
Breaks from the bud of my soul;  
Around me sunlight streams, water flows.

Wind-buffed I strode along the spine of the world,  
Treading rocks and spars and pine needles.  
A cleft concealed summer blooms of ceanothus.

I stopped; stooped to sniff:  
Welling o'er the wide rolling hillscape I smell  
A small boy's joyous spring of lilac and crocus.

Are these crooked crusted oaks  
The oaks of Iowa when I am six  
Or California when I grew twelve?

In each epoch, things in their summery voices  
Whispered. But I, stepping tight, almost on tiptoe,

Listening just with smell and sight, feeling  
With the knife point of my tethered joy,  
Heard them no more than  
Breath of my own sorrow--

Until now: When their voices return  
In consolation long awaited. Now--  
So much feeling  
Cannot be contained--  
I sob for sorrow assuaged, abated;  
Quiver, amazed by gratitude.

Glimmering I dance among brightening spires,  
Stride abroad the shining rim, the glittering rime  
And green rind of this great grim world,  
Through hours and yet years.

And all returns, all is justified:  
In that still moment my still sleeping life  
Woke and went forth. Everything  
I'd given up or wished for  
Is mine.

November Twenty Six Nineteen Hundred Eighty Nine  
(1989)  
(a less kindly companion piece to Wendell Berry's  
"November Twenty Six Nineteen Hundred Sixty Three")

Dim lustrous vaults of sky admit  
Late slanting rays of autumn light;  
Far black clouds are struck and briefly lit  
As if the dawn's remembered by the night.  
Darkest where most bright, like pearl edged with flint,  
This day-end sky recalls lost moments warm and bright;  
Vast, somber, visionary, chill, it hints  
At winter, and a spring. Day's end is hope  
Deferred, hope now glimpsed

Through the wrong end of a telescope.

This twilight calls to mine my knight  
Whose bones in homaged sepulcher have lain  
Twenty-six years under an eternal flame.  
So long, consoled but little by its fitful light,  
Through the nation's bitter autumn, I've been bothered  
By a thought: does the dark'ning pall  
Of his pyre, and his brother's,  
Like the Gracchi's, foreshadow a Republic's fall?

The demon-carried bullet that splashed his brain  
On a bright November Dallas street  
Loosed on the world a bloody rain.  
Those who loved the Republic knew defeat;  
Those who felt no worth remained  
In what they'd casually betrayed,  
Or seen betrayed, in small bands hunkered,  
Hid in basements, penthouses, and bunkers  
From swirling winds, and giving birth  
To monsters, plotted fires to burn the earth.

From the crimson wreath  
That ringed his head,  
By a fiery geometry  
Straight lines led  
To casual pillages,  
To torching of villages,  
To Weatherman plots,  
To the fires of Watts.

My someday-son, my almost-father,  
My ever-unageing elder brother  
Whom I watched with love and awe,  
Were you a hero with tragic flaw?  
Or slain by the worst in our society  
Because you championed what's best?  
Or were you both? Let History judge.

Either way, I raged, and cried  
For you, and us, and now, clear-eyed,  
Mourn you still. God give you rest.

### Lightening (1970s)

When a boy I wept  
Inside where no one saw.  
When a man I wept  
First for sorrow, then for joy.  
Then I laughed, for God let go  
Much that I had kept.

### Homage to Britten (1980s)

Did you wait so once,  
A quiet calm creeping down the nerves,  
As I wait before the storm of music soon to break?

And how did you know--how create  
With voices, brass, timpani, and strings—  
The rattle, the shrill whistle of the shells,  
The boom, the shaking of the ground;  
How make me quake, shiver,  
Sweat, and want to vomit  
At the horror of the Somme? Were you there?

Or now: how can you  
With mere sound  
Open such a pit, and plunge me  
Here where heart stops  
And feeling opens  
In awful knowledge  
To let grief in?

Did you sink or fall once,  
Hollowed, helpless  
Into such a pit?  
You must, O you must! As I did too—  
So long ago  
I didn't remember  
Till now.

Haiku (no. 4) (1964/2011)

Glint of bird wing; hedge  
Catching summer noon. Look!  
The very light's alive!

For My Father-in-law, Karsten Simonsson, 1923-1983  
(1984/2020)

Do we leave only artifacts?  
Did your words congeal  
Even as you wrote? Do mine?  
Or is it that I can't make  
The effort of spirit it would take  
To call you back?

I would not call you back--I only wish  
To feel your presence one more time.  
You've gone too far away;  
Your words on paper aren't alive  
As your voice once was.  
Is it your fault, or mine?

Oh! but you played Bach  
On the organ at our wedding!

Only music, most time-bound of arts,  
Reanimated by musicians, transcends time  
And speaks to me of you  
As if no time is ever lost.

Return (1980s)

That I could rest in your calm gaze as loud  
As the breathing stillness of yellow noon  
Find my home there  
Find a soft welcoming

That your gaze could fill me  
Like a warm liquid that spreads  
To where the fluted poplars sway  
In sinuous unhurried celebration,  
To the furrowed fallow fields beyond,  
Whose turned clods gleam,  
Whose stubble of yellow straw  
Glitters faintly in the melting day

Grasping the Rope (1980s)

Balanced on the point of love  
Between regret and hope,  
I've ceased to look above;  
Now I only grope

(Surprised to learn I'm blind)  
For promised markers--which yield,  
Dissolving in the wind, or mind,  
Like smoke over a battlefield.

That my gaze could fill you equally  
That I could know myself known in you  
And you yourself in me

We two, we  
Who might have formed a multitude

Bloom outward, turn gently away,  
Look longward toward a perfect blue.

But the once-fertile, once-fallow  
Field between us  
Is not lost to our graze.

Fall (1970s)

My life turns, and turns  
Through days past counting:  
Piled thick like fallen leaves  
I thought I'd burned.  
Yet still they fall, still burn  
In memory;  
Yet

Still live.

I am still a boy -- walking patiently to school,  
Sad without knowing it,  
Fearful of bullies and loud noises --  
Who sat and sipped hot soup in the school yard  
On aching cold autumn afternoons  
When smells of dead leaves and early frost  
Rode the sharp air, and sunshine  
Pierced my feelings as the clouds.

The leaves have turned, have fallen.  
They burn.  
It is winter. Snow begins to fall,  
To damp the burning leaves,  
And I am lost

In wonder.

And now the wind burns  
In memory  
As I slip through silent, blind flakes,  
Sledding down steep snow-swept streets  
To lose myself in the darkness  
That looms between lamp posts.

But I feel my blood coursing,  
Answering the rough, exultant wind.  
And I am alive  
And this aliveness

Compensates.

*end*