The Mockingbird's River Song
Poems, Songs and Stories
1946-2010

Richard D. Alexander
THE MOCKINGBIRD’S RIVER SONG

POEMS, ESSAYS, SONGS, AND STORIES

1946-2011
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* * *

Richard D. Alexander

Photographs by Lynn and Ciara Lesko, Holly Swain Ewald, Susan Alexander, Nancy Alexander, Megan Kanta Young, Mark O’Brien, and Mary Jane West-Eberhard

Drawings and wood carvings by the author
FOR LORRIE
To a Life Mate

should we be primitives you and I
could lie together naked between bearskins

staring at the night-time sky
listening to the forest

and dreaming sweet sadnesses
about all that must have gone before us

and all that must come after.
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I

PONDERING POETRY AND VERSE

1
A Good Poem

is first cousin to the song, a rhythmic,
patterned, short-short story, sequencing
splendidly and sometimes quirkily
designed features of language, generating
multiple messages via metaphorical
surprises and unexpected connections,
juxtaposing startling revelations of novel
meanings potentially bewitching, even baffling
befuddling, and sometimes seeming irreversibly
incomprehensible, yet finally combining
and cooperating to inspire the
still unwary audiences

virtues that in concert command the poem
to linger, testing and enriching the imaginations
of all lucky enough to encounter it.

* * *

Robert Frost famously said that writing poetry
with neither rhyme nor meter
is like playing tennis without a net.

Someone else scoffed that poetry nowadays
is any writing in which the printed lines
fail to reach the usual page margins.

Some might consider that definition
potentially at risk, as a result of
recent narrowing of the page width
in Poetry Magazine. . .

Sometimes
perhaps
even the court
has been removed
by Frost himself.

And why not!?
Poem: A composition, whether in verse or prose, having beauty of thought or language.

Verse: Poetry in general, especially when light or trivial or merely metered and rhymed, but without much serious content or artistic merit.

Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language

* * *

Music for the Soul

Artists help us generate enthusiastic dreams, enriching all our fantasies, enhancing all our schemes.

The poem and the painting are music for the soul, set moods and dreams a-gleaming, refresh us, and console.
Mockingbird Songs 1

Note: The eight pages with mockingbird song notes were delivered as a continuous, unbroken sequence of 96 songs sung several decades ago by a single male at midnight on top of an electric company pole north of Atlanta, Georgia. The sounds are portrayed here by a series of songs on audiospectrographs. They show pitch changes as up and down (doubled heights of sounds represent overtones), rates of singing horizontally across the song, and intensity of the sounds by darkness of marks. Experts with audiospectrographs can imitate the sounds closely, and often can sing songs or series of notes portrayed on audiospectrographs accurately, sometimes at their usual rates of speed. Pages with the mockingbird's sequence of songs are 4, 14, 44, 72, 224, 232, 262 and 300. For songs and dances of mockingbirds, see p. 202 and the back cover.
MOVING SOFTLY THROUGH THE VILLAGE
Moving Softly through the Village

at dusk, gaze swiveling slowly, unwillingly, 
witnessing the confidence of youth thronging 
laughingly between Dave’s Party Store 
and Susan’s Bridgewater Bank Tavern

lives still on the rise, no apprehensions of lessening 
strength, balance, stamina, acuity of mind, or of aging, 
death, or finiteness of anything at all; no premonitions 
of the loneliness of such as philosophers and farmers

or of the folk once within the reassuring solidarity 
of the surrounds of intimate social groups, but gradually, 
at first imperceptibly, separating, one by one, diverging 
quietly toward their obligatory, solitary, and final 
contentments.
A Part of the Hunting

when that first someone
became human
some way

it must have been the same
as times when I awoke
a country child
and lay

in body mind and spirit nude
devoid of inhibitions cares
or knowledge of finiteness
and looked upon
the day.
And the Dreamingest of Times

something of no importance wakened him

he slipped from beneath the covers
guiding nine-year old limbs into

blue denim overalls crouched
loyally all night beside the bed
drawing a suspender across one shoulder
covering enough of naked body

barefooting softly past the attic door
down the narrow painted stairway

out on to the planks of the back porch
smooth-worn and cool against the
toughness of his toes  he

paused and as the dog rose

stretched and turned to follow

he looked toward the woods

left the sleeping house behind

stepped off the porch into

forever.
The Rabbit's Heart

There was a winter afternoon when the sky hung over the whole farm like a leaden curtain. At five the boy went as usual for the milk cows, making long scuffs with the fat toes of his overshoes in the wetness of a light fall of new snow that lay unmarred across the barn lot. When he unlatched the wooden gate beside the cow barn, the dog Tippie dashed through the narrow opening, her coat bright and dry from hours spent curled in a nest somewhere under the Old House. A moment later she caught scent of a young rabbit perched immobile in the snow, and in a flash the two were caught up in a furious zigzagging chase before the boy's appreciative gaze. Frantically the rabbit doubled and redoubled upon short twisting dashes while the dog ploughed the wet snow in a frenzied effort to keep the advantage surprise had given it.

Part of a yip escaped the dog's teeth now and then as it seemed to hurl its body sideways to change direction in the new snow. The boy smiled faintly at the excitement and waited. The rabbit would escape, he knew. They always did, and the futile efforts of the dog were the source of an amused tolerance on his part.

In a flash of snow and scuffle the dog suddenly overtook and seized the rabbit, and, more startled even than the boy, flung it quickly from one violent shake that left gray fur wafting in the winter air and clinging to the dog's teeth. There was redness in the new snow, and the rabbit had become, in one instant, an inert lump of gray. The boy walked close to stare a moment, incredulous at the glazing open eyes, and the dog crept forward too, uncertain now, to give a tentative sniff. She withdrew when the boy turned away, bending her eyes up as if to catch his mood.

As the boy left, there was in his path, suddenly, a tiny red object that moved, and he knelt, puzzled. After a moment he knew it was the rabbit's heart, flung clear, and now lying alone, beating steadily against the coldness of the snow. While he watched, the heart faltered and stopped.

Afterward he followed the rabbit's tracks backward, down the long lot until they disappeared through the fence and over the slope into tufts of heavy dry grass that poked above the snow beneath the oak trees behind the corn crib.

As they moved silently out into the stubble field toward the distant, watching cattle, the dog stopped once and stared backward along their tracks for a moment, its nose high and horizontal, then turned and trotted after the boy.
A Common Sort of Man I know

Who had been some places, on a whim,
Turned his Chevrolet into a gravel track at dusk,
Climbed the side of a Utah mountain,

Crawled out near the top with a cold wind in his face,
The far high roar of spruce trees rushing in his ears,
A great rock rearing its silhouette into clouds above his head,
And with his eyes tipped skyward, in a glorious anguish of Loneliness, cried out suddenly, "My God! Eternity!"

His voice left on the wind, and, startled again,
He surprised himself, whispering softly to no one
Through lips compressed against the scudding clouds.
The Old Man beside Me on the Bus in Montreal

hunched his overcoat against the winter’s chill, saying McGill was a good university until they ruined it.

You know, like the American universities those long hairs – the hippies – they bombed that computer center, didn’t they?

Students are all right. I can take students defining Puritanism through blonde mustaches in paperback bookstores open late, maybe no one else.

Not angry old men with stained trousers and stale tobacco breath.

Not stern women with drooping pouted cheeks, and face lines where they ought not to be.

Not graying people surreptitious about reading articles titled, “Sex Foreplay.”

Not men and women who don’t even want to know if what they’ve been thinking is all right;

or if there’s some other way someone else had a reason for thinking better.

Not those particular paired ones who together have consigned their lives to petty politics and the determination of the restaurant with the most interesting salads.

Old men spraddle their thighs against you on buses and sit contentedly.

My leg goes tight and seeks excuses for withdrawing.

Where will the lines form in the students’ faces? How does a man’s leg become unfeeling? When does he stop noticing the stains?
Today, An Old Lady

moved
distantly in the pasture,
slowly, quaintly, antiquely,
across the winding greenness of the creek bottom,
appearing and disappearing among the dotting hawthorns,
orange-crimson for the coming autumn,
green-speckled yellow from the leaf miners.

My eyes, from the apple-smelling crest of the sledding hill,
captured the sweep of slopes rolling in enough directions
for the savoring of a hunter of two million years, stroked
their way solidly across the harmony of those joining valleys
with an arrogance of familiarity in their stare,
telescoping that little old lady until the
dark kerchief and poke of grayed hair,
stoop of shoulders under soft-hanging sweater,
old vein-muscled sturdiness of white calves,
and pan beneath her elbow with its
barely visible mound of puffballs,
were part of my hunter’s knowing gaze.

I savored the measure of those two million years
of history and turned away, straight-backed,
nostrils dilating to the tang of hickory leaves.

I permitted her to continue this thing
no person should live in circumstances
forbidding.
Something about an Old Man

sleeping

where all the busy highways meet
at five o’clock as I walked by
enroute to home and family a neat
bundle of rags beside that bush thought I
but too arranged somehow and so my
professorial eye was drawn aside
reluctant still to break my stride
I peered behind the row of hedge where
rise of slope concealed the sleeping spot
from even those who used the muddy lot

and who, indeed I wondered could have guessed
at vagrants napping there with such success

long months ago it was I saw that little man
and paddled on with softened slap of shoe
as not to wake him there but still
his image disconcerts my brain why now
a simple tramp -- no -- vagabond’s the name
because his cares could be contained
within that threadbare satchel placed
beneath his head, while mine were
scattering here and there
and burgeoning.
Mockingbird Songs 2

11. 

12. 

13. 

14. 

15. 

16. 

17. 

18. 

19. 

20. 

21. 

22.
III

WINTER: A POINT OF VIEW
Winter: A Point of View

Winter, my friend, is not the shuffleboard championship or a ride around the park on an over-sized three-wheeled cycle.

It’s not a half-mute, out-of-season mockingbird limping through the sallow climes of a southern swampland.

Winter is a blazing fire of apple logs after a day of flashing skates or swooping skis or searching out the tracks of backland denizens.

Winter is the soaring flight of a gyrfalcon, hungry over the crisscrossed memories of countless furry invisibles blurring in a frozen marsh land.

Winter is a boiling flair of snow flung two houses high down a slope of thick bluegrass half-covered in old drifts, dotted with mounds of bright fieldstone, and hiding a thousand black crickets in their burrows.
Tiny Moth

Can you see in the shade of the window that tiny moth? When I flick the screen beneath her, she flutters off. Alighting below, she finds another perch to keep.

And there she’ll sit, resting, almost perhaps, asleep. Tonight she’ll likely fly toward some light, and if she doesn’t strike it in her spiraling flight

or get swallowed up by a swooping bat, she’ll be here tomorrow, resting, or somewhere else, perhaps nesting, carefully attaching precious eggs.

What a simple life she leads!

* But could it be 
  that someone thinks the same of me? *

So someone said I’m cousin to an ape? Me, a human, who thinks and talks and all of that? Cousin to a sober, staring, virtually non-linguistic beast?

Surely the link between us must be a long one.

* But could it ever, ever be 
  that someone thinks the same of me? *
Life Effort

dogs
crossing streets
as if they had some place to go

people
hurrying
as if time were short

people
crossing streets,
as if they had some place to go

dogs
hurrying
as if time were short
On a May Day

to watch a fat buckskin mare
romping the fence with her foal,

admire a jumbled wall of field stone
or a curing stack of sweet-smelling
black walnut planks fresh from Schaible’s mill;

to appreciate the rumble of a 1933 International Harvester
F-30, fresh-painted in blazing red, and newly decaled,

or the steam of a mug of hot soup at mid-day
on a May day with the grass suddenly green

while carrying along a tightness in the chest
and a reflectiveness over the memory

of the look of one’s own eyes in the mirror,
tempts a man to imagine himself

beyond such earthly things.

But he is not.
About the Social Contract

Am I an outlaw, you ask? Am I?

Tell me which rules of this desperately social beast whose genes I share must be forgotten, ignored, or despised for me to qualify.

Tell me the shape of the particular horrors I personally must plunge into a man’s eye,

how I must shave my ideas or my hair to stay out of that No-Baboon’s Land,

and why.

Explain to me the times when my personal conscience cannot fly in the face of the social ones of this time or that, concerning who must die,

and in what order. Tell me whom I may or may not love,

and why.

Say how much of me will be permitted to identify with the unusual dreams of one whose eye may seem to see it all differently. Apply your (or is it “our”? ) laws, and I will give you my reply.

And why.

Or have I?
Something Almost

What was it? That flash!
The something that for the smallest fraction of a second
caught and clung in my mind’s eye when I
was reading of fundamental particles
and life, and all that fantastically organized
and imperfectly understood hierarchical complexity
that makes up the as yet known physical universe?

It had to do with seeing it all as
not a part of me, nor I a part of it,
with origins and times and immortality,
and infiniteness of something that
existed – and just was – and is,
and is not me, and not not me . . .

But then I lost it,
and I don’t think it’s coming back.
Motivation

In the beginning it was, “Why?” curious, incredulous, or snickering. And the answer came, quick and confident, amid a swelling flood of pride.

And later there were no whys, but respect, envy, association coveted. Or perhaps the why was lost in a sea of shame and smug, knowing nods – no whys because they know now.

They know now! And so it is I who wonders, and the question bores, insistent, and will not likely be answered.

Are the understanding and culture of all of ourselves no more than feeble, stumbling fingers that rip and tear in fruitless efforts to unravel the complex fabric of cause and effect, the too-intricately woven threads of truth?
The Meaning of a Man

Surely humans all are lucky to be living in this time,
Surely never were there beings who could live a life so fine.
But with three hundred million crowding all of just our land,
We may wonder what we’ve learned about the meaning of a man.

We can all attend the schools these days until we’re old and gray,
Gather elegant degrees and clever thoughts to while away,
Consider all the universe except the one within,
And wonder why we’ve never learned the meaning of a man.

Across the lives of unknown throngs, from caves to caviars,
Stone axes, bows, and arrows, city streets slam-jammed with cars,
We’ve practiced ways to slaughter men that stand our hair on end.
Is this what we have learned about the meaning of a man?

More than seven billion people now are packed around the globe,
With folks of different nations ever at each other’s throats:
We identify our enemies and kill them if we can,
Is this all we have learned about the meaning of a man?

If some of us grow up and everything is on our side,
We’re never hungry, never cold, and always satisfied;
If we share the world of riches and lead a life that’s grand,
Perhaps we’re not the kind to ask the meaning of a man.

But for anyone who wrestles with the riddles people pose,
There’s a thought I’ll freely offer, and here’s the way it goes:
Start by finding someone singing, just as boldly as he can,
The song he sings may be about the meaning of a man

Or a woman. . .

The above verse was put together 60 years ago, adjusted across the decades. As the youngster who constructed it, I had absorbed the idea that only the most important of questions should be considered in a poem, because only then could the poem be important. No one would be surprised to learn
that I got this idea from the poems I was charged to memorize and contemplate in my school. Nor that most of those poems were written by men, and a good many chosen for the grandiosity of their topics. It would not be surprising if the aspiring poet that I was then thought (briefly) that only men had the responsibility to search for the answers to sumptuous questions like the one I tried so long ago to deal with in this verse.

After all, women in the United States -- poets or otherwise -- were not being allowed (by men. . .) to vote -- *not allowed to vote!* -- until three decades before the poem was written. . 

* * *

“You sing until the song is singin’ you
And that’s what you’re *supposed* to do!”

Overheard in a radio sermon
by an unidentified, eloquent
African-American Preacher in
Ann Arbor, Michigan,
1962
Injustice

and the continuing weight of conscience

I, for one, cannot deny having used,
if only long ago, and senselessly cued,
places of origin, shapes of eyes, colors of skin,
to set myself apart from other men

those whose greatest breaches with me
were fashioned through a history
of bullying and slavery and penury

that in some cruder, crueler times
were started by those self-same signs.
Okefenokee

death is a bare grey trunk
flaring above the dense green tangle
stark against the storm-darkened sky
its branches thinly strung with Spanish moss
and perched upon by silent hunching vultures
black and motionless

death is many things
and yet but one
and of little consequence
he can't keep a space empty
and no one thinks he'll get much when he gets me

extcept

possibly

me? !

* * *

Endowed to glimpse the frailty
of life’s brief scaffold in eternity
small comfort can be gained
supposing all one’s kind to leave
scarce a broader glint.
IV

SOFT MORNING FOGS AND IMPOSSIBLE INCLINES
Last Night Autumn Became Winter

all the

scarlet leaves are lying in yellow heaps
soft morning fogs that drifted across the
marsh have turned into white thin blankets
over red osiers tamaracks water willows
and the horses refused to cross the creek
even for grain.
On a Serengeti Plain of granite
one meter square on a steep landslide
in the rain forest of a Colombian mountainside
at Anchicayá I watched a herd of fifty-five
pigly mole crickets grazing in a field of lichens,
adults and young, wandering, courting, fighting,
the largest three millimeters in length.

Two great yellow ants and one brown crossed
the plain, only casually noticing the grazers.
Among them, however, hunted steadily and fiercely
a tiger of a strong red, black, and white assassin bug,
youthful but towering enormously over the prey, and
deadly efficient, he stalked repeatedly the tiny slender beasts,
squatting to tense his somewhat larger hind legs
as if to leap, then striding jerkily, wasp-like, in
all his motions, whether boastfully to call attention
to his hunting prowess or in a blind mimic deterring
some others larger and bent on his destruction
no casual observer could have told.

Swiftly flexing black appendages
he moved from prey to jittery prey, murderous
beak tucked along his breast in readiness,
diverting repeatedly to trail momentarily
a tantalizingly close grazer that each time
ran just fast enough, then when the great
carnivore struck with savage lightning
speed, sprang into the muggy sunlit air
and streaked away on purple wings.

Eleven times the stalker struck in vain,
pause sometimes to reconnoiter,
flex his muscles, wait, or turn a new
direction, as if hopefully or in some kind of
arthropodan impatience. All across the
plain he ranged, empty-beaked,
spined forelegs seizing air, snapping on nothing, black antennae, too, flicking wasp-like, irritably.

Across a rounded bluff of flecked stone, two of the mouse-gray bodies played together, responsive, warm in the morning sun, peppered antennae flashing together advancing, retreating as one in a courtship my eyes were straining to detail. The beast paused below the cliff, seeming to sense existence of the pair, and angled up the slope in parallel as if to pass, but wheeled at the last moment to seize with horrid viciousness, I think, one of the temporarily oblivious amantes, the other disappearing in a whirl of unfolding purple fans. The monster stood motionless long minutes now, its precisely appropriate bluntly sharpened beak turning on its joints to pierce deeply into the rapidly going lifeless body, still undecided whether to be contemplating loving or the mortality of this massive irrevocability of torture. In fact

I could not observe exactly this last event and only reconstruct it from the realities of my (I thought to say, larger) human experience. Afterward I watched the predator disappear beneath a leather-brown curling leaf, to belch and digest the liquid feast, I supposed, leaving me to wonder, in the mist and muddiness of this impossible incline, if that grizzled old negro along the road had really meant to sell me something from the beauty of the straight-legged hija who had flashed brown eyes and white teeth at me while he talked his offer, and turned away to flip with playing fingertips her slightly crinkled skirt above smooth thighs and smile across the blackness of her shoulder.
To a Fly, Probing

I permit you
to crawl upon my
face
Fly
even though I
am not
dead
or dying
yet.

Your sputtering
buzz and probing
cannot
alarm
me.

Observing
your gray
striped
back,

I offer no apology
for the brevity
and meanness
of your
existence.

I did not
create you.
I am not
responsible.

Your protoplasm
had its chance
the same
as mine.
Why
do you seek
my skin
buzzing
probing?

Is it the taint of old
perspiration
or
just
anything
that speaks
to you
of flesh
Fly?

Transient creature
perhaps you seek
to draw from me
some essence of the
immortality

we humans
construe
that we
have glimpsed.

Go instead and ease
the pressure
in your
arthropodan
loins

together with some
female fly
for that is all
you need
Fly
  What more
  will be
  left
  of me  what

ripple
  in this
  old
  planet

turning on
  and on
  when I
  am gone?

If only I could ease my
  human stress as smoothly
  even that
  particular
  stress

But go now
  your cousin
  probes another
  spot on

me

  and his
  buzz is
  vulgar.
Love Poem to a Former Employee

Today there is a restlessness in my 40-year-old frame
Daring me to deny this deadly routine
Telling me where I must sit at half past nine
With whom I must coffee at ten

That I must lunch precisely at noon
And meet at three with six whose acceptance
Of what my gut is rejecting will show
In all their moods and mouthing of trivia.

But where to turn if I should, for merely a moment?
It is not male companionship I am needing now,
Not even wife, dear and comforting as ever she will be.
Some gay, laughing, young female
Might melt the memoried bitterness away,
Putting in its place a share of novel freshness.

But she was married yesterday
And though she came first and sat by me
The smiles of hers that count
Are not any longer mine.
Message to Naomi

I wonder if the lady is aware
That what we’re having is a torrid love affair.
Oh, not one of those lie-in-bed-together kinds,
But more, I’d say, a meeting of the minds.
It’s not that I’ve forgotten she’s a woman,
Nor, on the other hand, she that I’m a man.
Nor is it that, should we some day come clean,
Her man and my woman wouldn’t turn a little green.
Where this affair may lead, I cannot say;
I only hope it never goes away.
Poem for Lorrie

Concerning that one
who has paired her lifetime with mine,
shared all the measuring and treasuring,
64 years of friendship, 61 years of spouseship,
more than a half century of parenthood,
22 years of grandparenthood, and
that one year of great-grandparenthood. . .

. . . so far

What can I say to you, dear wife
when you are merely all of life,
the one to make a partner sing
the cliche, you’re my everything?

Who pleased my thoughts through all the days
ensuing from the fortuned gaze
that found you, slender girl who stood
outside the gaily dancing crowd.

Gaze that gave our seeking souls
a birthing timelessness of roles,
reciprocating endlessly
the love of our eternity.

Who knew the kindred-tending harmony
of pathways that our love would see
through years as parents, then as grands
how could we know, first joining hands?

No crash of intervening chance,
no crush of willful circumstance,
no momentary lapse or theft
could strike our covenant bereft.

So, dearest life mate, tell me, pray,
how could I love you more today?
V

THE MADDING CROWD
Of Routes and Ways

I am not designed for turnpikes where the only events that matter are beginning and end, and the in-between is just time and idle chatter.

When the ribbon of highway is endless, with a faultlessly manicured berm, then I long for the brush-filled byway and occasional dangerous turn.

I am not concerned that each way-stop as neat as the last one should be but rather that my course be charted as to vary unendingly.

I am not designed for turnpikes for I must cherish the dream that my pathways will lead me to see things that no one before me has seen.
People! People!

People, people, everywhere,
and not a break in sight,
they copulate and propagate,
congest with all their might.

Across the planet many starve
but too few grasp the lesson;
to our festering egos fewer humans
is an abominable suggestion.

We’re everything that matters here,
all else worldly is merely tools
for us to tweak and twist at will
while we multiply like fools.

It’s quantity, more quantity,
not quality we strive for.
More macadam! More concrete!
That’s what we’re all alive for.

But those submerged in dark despair
can take this consolation:
the trend can only go so far
in a single
generation . . .
Today and Tomorrow

Go ahead, Suburbia! Reach out your ivory-studded fangs. Mash off the last tender living shreds of ancient landscape until the bone is dissected of all its power to grow again.

Scrape and rape and waste the changing face of grandeur. Mock and gouge across her breasts your black and concrete fingernails.

Copulate and propagate and thicken till your guts squeeze up and retch at every sight and sound and thought and act, monotonies of all our teeming viscous brood.

And down inside the horrid growing clots of loneliness someday implore in that old quiet desperation deliver deliver deliver deliver us from this monstrous monstrous mess.
Where Cities Grow

There was a night I watched the sun go down, red in gray-smoked skies over the dull concrete and rusting steel of massive shapes left by humans glomming together on soiled streets by cluttered steps.

* * *

Where cities grow, places where people are not become fields of weeds and offal, swamps of snakes, mosquitoes, and poison plants,

through not merely the fouling of humans, as only humans can foul, but as a special kind of ignorance borne of degeneracy, in its turn the child, too, of too many.

And, through success, we are left to become, in the whole time of the Earth, simultaneously the most crowded and the loneliest of all beasts.

* * *

I walked in the City the sky was blood-red the sidewalks were crowded but the City was dead.

In the People a sameness no fellowship bred I walked in the City but the City was dead.
A Place to Know

Live in the city, if you please
with all the modern howl,
social solace of the teeming throngs,

stereophonic seances, soft carpets
inadequately dulling
the clamor of traffic;

Friday night in the subdivision,
Saturday night at the television,
Sunday night and the indecision.

I wouldn’t, if you must know,
trade that great horned owl
hothing softly, timorously

outside my window just now
for all of the comfortable, carefree,
urbanized dwellings of anywhere.
For life to be worthy

is to know

great tasks of which one urgently wishes to be capable but cannot yet know if he is capable.
Mockingbird Songs 3

23.

24.

25.

26.

27.

28.

29.

30.

31.

32.

33.

34.

35.
VI

BAD MAN BALLADS
When the warden at San Quentin opened bids for disposal of the body of William E. Cook on Friday, December 12, 1952, Gene Boydstun, mortician from Comanche, Oklahoma, was the only bidder. Thirteen thousand people filed past a $395 coffin to see the body of the man who lived by the creed, “I hate their guts – everybody!” In Atwood, Illinois, Robert Mosser spent a third lonely Christmas since the murder of his twin brother, Carl, his wife, and their three children. In Seattle, Washington, the friends of Robert Dewey mourned, and in Lone Elm, Missouri, in a cemetery called Peace, curly-haired, scowling, bad-eyed Billy Cook passed into eternity as lonely in death as in the twenty-three savage years of his life.

Come along with me, good friends, and take a look
Through the pages of misfortune’s lonely book
To the sad life of a lad Dame Fate forsook
Let me tell to you the tale of Billy Cook.

Chorus

Three and twenty years the brief but savage span
Of this poor lad who never knew how love began
With the words “Hard Luck” tattooed across his hands
The most feared and hated killer in our land.

Born into a family steeped in poverty
In a mining town, old Joplin, Missouri
When his mother died, Bill’s age was three times three
In a cave they dwelt in dreadful misery.

There his heartless father left them without care
Nor protection from the damp and freezing air
Someone found the children cold and hungry there
And to the poorhouse they were taken with a prayer.

Offered up then for adoption very soon
They were taken by the neighbors one by one
All but Billy then found laughter, frolic, fun
This poor lad was left to suffer all alone.
“He’s deformed,” they said, and coldly passed him by
“Anyone can see he’s got the Devil’s eye!”
For no matter how he’d sob nor how he’d try
It would never close though deep in sleep he’d lie.

It was at the tender age of three and ten
Billy’s troubled, lonely life of crime began
When he broke Missouri law and robbed a man
To reform school he was sent, then to the pen.

After nine long years paroled at twenty-two
Billy drifted west as rage within him grew
Fighting back the only bitter way he knew
Met Robert Dewey there and robbed and killed him too.

The vacation of the Mossers bore no scar
Till in flight wild Billy fought and gained their car
‘Neath the desert’s blazing sun and lonely star
In their horrid chilling fear they drove him far.

Then beneath his bitter gun they cried and fell
By such gruesome deeds no human tongue can tell
To the Devil Billy there himself did sell
And consigned whatever soul he had to Hell.

Two more men he caught and forced to aid his flight
And they dared not risk his anger in their fright
“He must sleep!” They thought, “We’ll get his gun at night!”
But they never failed to see his bad eye’s light.

This deed began the end of Billy’s spree
He was captured and returned for all to see
The judge in Oklahoma heard his plea
And gave him life for his insanity.

But the death of Robert Dewey to satisfy
The stern court in California bade him die
In the gas chamber he was strapped despite his cry
And in death they finally closed his crooked eye.
Chorus

Three and twenty years the brief but savage span
Of this poor lad who never knew how love began
With the words “Hard Luck” tattooed across his hands
The most feared and hated killer in our land.

The Mossers were acquaintances of my family. I wrote the verse soon after Billy Cook was executed. Surely it is a classic case of the creation and fate of an outlaw. Billy Cook took the Mosser family to an abandoned well and shot them, one by one, dropping all their bodies into the well.

The Ballad of Billy Cook

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{C} & \quad \text{F} & \quad \text{G7} \\
\text{Come a-long with me good friends and take a look Through the pages of mis-fortune's lone-ly book To the sad life of a lad Dame Fate for-sook. Let me tell} \\
\text{to you the tale of Bill-y Cook.}
\end{align*}
\]
Billy E. Hardesty

This story is about a young man who lived on the east side of Ypsilanti, Michigan, and some of the deeds for which he was arrested in the autumn of 1978. The song was written while Billy Hardesty was sitting in jail waiting for his trial, but the anticipated aspects of his performance and its consequences turned out to be accurate. In 1981, he was found guilty but mentally ill and was sentenced to five life terms for murders, and separate terms of 150-300 and 100-200 years for two attempted murders connected to his shooting spree. He began serving his sentence at the Riverside Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan.

Billy E. Hardesty
Went lookin’ for his destiny
Out behind Abigail’s Dirty Shame Bar.

He left three dyin’ bodies
Schofield’s, Wood’s, and Curry’s
Out behind the Dirty Shame Bar.

Chorus

Hardesty was his name
Ain’t that a dirty shame
Billy, Billy E. Hardesty.

He killed his Mom and Poppa too
Shot their poor old bodies through
Crazy old Billy E. Hardesty.

Bloody murder was his mood
A bloody vulture was tattooed
On the arm of bloody Billy Hardesty.

Chorus

Hardesty was his name
Ain’t that a dirty shame
Billy, Billy E. Hardesty.
Billy’s deeds are done and past
Billy’s fate is sealed at last
Billy ain’t a-goin’ to be goin’ too far.

He’s sittin’ in jail with nothin’ to do
Just talkin’ to his old tattoo
About his Mom and Poppa
And the Dirty Shame Bar.

Chorus

Hardesty was his name
Ain’t that a dirty shame
Billy, Billy E. Hardesty.

The bodies of Billy’s mother and father were found in their house after the other killings. Billy’s father’s body had been stuffed into the freezer.
AND SOME OF THE GOOD GUYS

Auction Sales, Commonsense Conversations,
Fragrant Wisps of Slow-Rising Pipe Smoke,
The Shape of a Home-Made Fiddle
Heroes are Works of Art

Inspirations decorating the walls of minds, invitations to previously impossible reaches, barely glimpsed peaks of uniqueness, standouts in endless seas of possibilities.

Heroes stretch the imagination, promising itineraries of unfolding expansion; they proffer guides to the triumphs of synthesis, declare the meaning of life.

Heroes model reality and security, sanction scenarios, activate and reactivate those billions of our cortical neurons said to be of hundreds of kinds, enabling their million billions of connections comprising the most elaborately complex and precious machinery conceivable anywhere any time yet.

* * *

Heroes are for all times, all ages they help us to know what we hadn’t even known we wanted to know, to facilitate all that we discover can be discovered, all that can be absorbed into ourselves.
Folk Song

I know an old man on High Street, has a cluttered little friendly shop on the third floor. Worn, bare boards, but when you hit the first one, you’re apt to hear a fiddle tune rising up the stairs, and you can’t turn back until you’ve found it.

You might hear gentle, reminiscent plucking of deft, quick fingers on a five-string banjo, old Dan Tucker or Sourwood Mountain on a softly strummed guitar, and a clear humming along – oh, you can barely hear it, you must hear it! A faint, insistent memory taunts, slumbering so long and deep you thought it had been lost until now.

Lordy, those songs, those melodies, the words I hear along, my father in the cow barn, my mother by the stove, singing, humming, whistling, those songs, the same, Grandma’s merry voice, a dozen more I know, and some, from where? From where?

There’s a big new store down the street three doors no stairs to climb, no dusty, worn-out stairs, bright, wide windows gleaming grandiose, long glass-topped cases, courteous, cold, too high for leaning. They hang their fine guitars behind glass doors, don’t touch; they don’t deal in five-string banjos.

I pass on by and climb the stairs, and feel a joyous surge. Faster I go until at the very top I fairly run. The little door stands open, dusty sunlight falls across the wooden floor, a tiny, shrunken figure moves behind a finger-marked, glass-topped counter,
its wooden frame worn smooth from leaning, and frosty bright blue eyes peer twinkling over the gold-rimmed bifocals perched halfway up a high sharp nose. A tuft of white pokes out beside each ear. He grins at me although he knows I never buy a thing, and anticipated delight floods through and over me like the dusty rays that fill the little odd-shaped room.

If, when I am full of joyous things like this old friend -- to be so full is by itself a pleasant enough thought, but if ever I am -- when I have seen as much, learned as much, felt the kinds of pleasures he must have known a thousand times to be so joyously full now – if only I can overflow so merrily.

It’s a dream to be savored.
A Funny Little Man I Knew

Death is an unhappy happening
coming after decay

as it sometimes does
or suddenly.

A funny little man I knew, with bifocals,
bright blue eyes and silver hair

could play the mandolin.
My God, but he could play

with fingers that for more than 60 years
had memorized their lightning way

across the frets and up and down
the fingerboard, and then one day

he died.
Aubrey Hart: Museum Shop Man

I saw you, Aubrey Hart
in the shape of a homemade fiddle
and the smile of a poet.

I heard you in the tick-tock of a grandfather clock
and the ring of a banjo.

I sense your soul in the souls of the kids
who never stop dreaming their dreams.

I feel your touch in the touches of fingers
of satisfied makers of things.

Aubrey, your crooked grin and your company
are mine on the autumn days when I take honey
from my bees and like them for it.

I still see your bowed legs and squat frame
in the hallway now and then.

I listen for the lop-sided thump of your limp,
remembering it cannot pass my door without exchange.

I blink to realize that some day
memory of your genius
might be discoverable only inside
of me.
One by One

Souls march or fritter
their paths across the
landscapes of history’s
mysteries.

But which
are doing which?

And when should
anyone care?
Noble Porter Heath II

Noble Porter Heath II was a tall skinny Illinois dairy farmer. Some of his relatives and neighbors thought he was better termed a tinkerer. The telephone company hired him when they discovered he could fix anything they broke. Once he repaired a grain binder when he happened upon his son-in-law, standing out in his oats field, helpless, because he lacked what he thought were the necessary materials for the job. Afterward, the son-in-law referred to Noble Porter Heath II as The Baling Wire Mechanic.

When asked why he talked to himself so much, Noble Porter Heath II replied, with a gentle smile, that he liked to talk to a good man and liked to hear a good man talk.

As an old man Noble spent some of his time outside each day, sitting on the steps of the back porch, maybe thinking about the details of how that bright-grained hard yellow pine wood had been used in building the elegant old farm house. He liked to talk about the special kinds of wood in that house, and the special ways some parts of the house had been constructed. It was the house that replaced the family’s previous home, built in 1880, five years after Noble's birth, and burned in 1895.

Noble knew many of the new house’s details, but he was a young man, forced to leave college at 18, and operate the farm after his father died in 1893. After the new house was completed in 1895, he continued to live in it for the rest of his 93 years (excepting 1929-1941 -- see below). He lived through the death of his mother, the rearing of three children and nine grandchildren, and a succession of deaths that took his three wives, three sisters and two of their husbands, his first two grandchildren, both of his sons, his only daughter-in-law, and the first of his sons-in-law. Noble’s first wife lost her first child at birth and died when her second was five years old. His second wife also died early, leaving Noble with an infant son and a two-year old daughter. His sister, Lillian, and her husband, took him and his two young children into their home until Noble remarried, eleven years later.

That last year Noble lay on a narrow bed in the middle of the big living room, more and more thinking and speaking about the things he had come to know across his life rather than about those he might not have quite figured out yet. But he asked his grandson, departing with his family for a far-off continent, to explain exactly where they were going, how long they would stay, what they would be doing, and (one sensed, most importantly) who was paying for it.

It was the same grandson, the entomologist, whom he had once asked why the flies in his barn had become immune to that new insecticide the Reader's Digest had proclaimed would soon put an end to all the insect pests that plague humanity. The grandson explained that a few of the flies were
probably more immune than others from the start, and maybe in different ways. Any reasons for immunity would spread and consolidate as a result of only the flies least susceptible being able to stay alive and reproduce, until all the flies remaining were the immune kind. He said it was an example of differential reproduction, more often called natural selection.

Noble Porter Heath II did not entirely release the entomologist grandson. He asked his advice on how he could kill the flies in his barn now that they had become immune to the insecticide. The grandson said he might start by getting two boards, placing a fly on one of them, and then slamming the two boards together, hard. Grandfather and grandson laughed a while. Then they talked briefly about the importance of moving cow manure away from the barn because it was the main habitat for the larvae of the flies.

The grandson answered his grandfather's questions about the trip by saying that he and his family were going to Australia, they would be gone 15 months, he would be trying to learn everything about the crickets of Australia, and the trip was being paid for by the University of Michigan, the National Science Foundation, and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. Noble Porter Heath thought about this strangeness for a moment, staring down the length of his narrow bed and smoothing the blanket gently with his long fingers. Then, without looking up, he said softly, "That's a long way to travel on a cricket."

The entomologist grandson was just then remembering that, many years before, Noble Porter Heath II had stopped at his family's farm to leave an old fenderless bicycle he had bought at a farm auction. He said it was a Christmas gift for the grandson. It was May then, not December, but the grandson hadn't cared about that at all. The old bicycle became the favorite of all his personal possessions until he finally smashed both wheels taking a jump he made on a cow path down the steep hill behind the barn, using for the jump an ancient child's farm wagon that, through wear and tear, had become only a flat wooden bed with two back wheels.

Two years after coming back from Australia, the grandson was on a stage in Washington D. C., wearing an unfamiliar rented tuxedo. Because of his uneasiness in this strange situation he was also wearing his comfortable, olive-green Sears and Roebuck work shoes. At the last moment he swallowed the five-stick wad of Juicy Fruit gum he had nervously been chewing, and repeated his grandfather's words in the little speech he suddenly found himself required to make after the National Academy of Sciences presented him with a gold medal for his work on cricket speciation and life cycles. He finished by saying that if his grandfather could have been there that evening he might have said the same thing about traveling on a cricket that he had
said three years before. There was a large audience of Academy members in
the auditorium out in front of the stage because, of course, it was their an-
nual meeting. They laughed at the story about his grandfather and the
 cricket, and perhaps clapped unusually enthusiastically. Afterward, down on
the floor in front of the stage, some of the Academy members crowded
around the grandson and asked a little anxiously if the grandfather was still
alive. Up close the grandson realized they were mostly older than he ex-
pected, and he understood, of course, that this was because it's not easy to
get into the Academy. Daunted for a moment, he stared into their expectant
faces, and then explained quietly that his grandfather was no longer alive. He
was remembering that when he was taking his leave to travel around the
globe the last thing the old man had told him was that his own world was
going smaller all the time. He had held out both arms, sideways to the
edges of his bed, saying, "This is how big it is now."

A long time afterward the grandson realized that sizes of personal
worlds must be measured in the mind’s eye, or maybe from inside the core
of the soul. Except for directions of change, comparisons of sizes of per-
sonal worlds would not be easy.

Noble Porter Heath II died during the year the grandson and his family
were in Australia, and only a little while after his harried daughter had fi-
nally realized sadly that she could no longer do for him all the things his
condition required. She arranged for him to be moved to the local hospital
until space in a nursing home became available. When he told his other
daughter he didn’t understand why he was in the hospital, she explained why
he would be not going back to the big old house of his life. From that time
on, she said, he would be able to live in a place better equipped to care for
him. A few days before this was to happen, he died.

He just died at that particular time.
He was Lorrie’s Grandfather, not mine, but I fished all afternoon in Salt Creek with him once, and together we brush-painted two great old Hinsdale houses in five days.

He mixed the paint and told me stories, like one about how, as a kid, he got a job painting after the boss called down a challenge from the top of the ladder, “Bring me up a brushful!” Sam said he did it without spilling a drop.

I marveled at how he could squat all day on those skinny legs, peering steadily at his bobber from under a long-brimmed cap.

I laughed at his clowning, and the way he exclaimed to his son, “By Gawd, Chollie!” in his strong New England accent.

Lorrie described how in the morning he might suddenly do an exuberant little tap dance on the kitchen linoleum, singing, “Combed my hair with the arm of a chair!”

I knew about him playing a shin-kicking game under the kitchen table with his granddaughter, how once he kicked her mother’s leg hard instead. I heard described the redness of his face at her scream.

I wondered about the time he wakened in the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital to the singing of the church choir and told Lorrie’s mother he thought he had died and gone to Heaven.

After he was gone I saw the old monster cypress near its own death in a dried-up swamp in Arkansas, no water around it anywhere.

I put the water back and added a flat-bottomed boat.

I thought the tree might feel better too

if I made it into a place for Sam.
Sometimes Professor Norman Hartweg sat alone in the darkness of his office, staring out the window against which he was silhouetted with his pipe and slow-rising clouds of fragrant smoke.

Other times he gave advice to young professors, “Take out the italics!” or twinkled his eyes over circles of coffee cups and retold stories only his grocer seemed to remember, for him alone, and which we always fell quiet to hear.

Do not speak to me yet about replacement.
Charles: Professor of Frogs’ Lives

Charles Walker died alone
as he lived,
polite, small, quiet,
holding secrets,

writing precisely, impeccably,
in the Herpetology Division’s
Great Book of Accessions, he and it
nestling together in the familiar cranny
among the black-shining counter tops
of the splendid old Commons Room,
Charles sometimes merely listening,
assuaging his loneliness,
concealing his reluctance
to participate.

At the party for the one
chosen to take Kybe’s place,
Charles and I sat together.
I commented into the conversation
just once.

In a flash he turned his
unjoyous, inebriated
countenance directly
to mine, too close,
saying level-eyed, carefully,
and as usual with stern accuracy,

“Why are you so intense?

There is no issue!”
Hibbie: Fossil Man

Claude Hibbard died one day, came to work at 7:30 as usual and fell over dead.

Died in the harness, Charles said.

Hibbie

who took kids to Kansas and dug up fossils and considered with them things like whether turtles had to wear snowshoes to avoid the glaciers and leave their remains where they did.

Hibbie

who knew the shark’s tooth Jim found in a pile of rubbly stone in Emory Mulholland’s hawthorn-filled pasture was a new species for the state of Michigan.

Hibbie

Enthusiastic, earnest, folksy Hibbie,

famous to farmers all over the Great Plains as Doctor Claude W. Hibbard, The Paleontology Professor from Michigan.

Strange that no one exists now to care about his personal record that no student ever field-tripped with him twice and failed later to obtain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Paleontology.
Except, Hibbie worried to me not so very long ago, while standing in my office door, our mutual friend, Bob, who had somehow disappeared from Academia. But, unknown to Hibbie and me, Bob had only taken some time to serve in the United States Navy.

A while after that final morning, Bob returned, and kept intact the educational record of the late Professor Claude W. Hibbard.
Fred Parker’s Auction Sale

A hundred cars were hunched along Fred Parker’s road when I arrived. Squatted fatly like rows of hungry bugs glistening over June grass, they were waiting in a heavy silence, prepared to accept their loads and scatter, dispersing what was left of old Fred’s excuses for having existed.

Early summer sunlight poured a fuzzy warmth across the pavement, clicks of urgent footsteps merging where a muted hum arose: the lookers moving in questing streams among and through rows and heaps of goods beside the long frame house, with just a touch of homemade, shaded by a pair of antique walnut trees and shielded from the winding road by cedars growing scraggly from being too old and too close together.

The Angus bull across the roadway tore sod and bellowed flatly with his tongue beside his teeth, snorting and lunging forward to his knees to drive the redness of his unsheathed shaft in desperate fury through rising bursts of silt flung wildly from his hooves one two three times,

Like the last futile gasps that ripped across Old Fred’s lungs while he labored through the final weeks on a cherry bedstead now standing in the sun, flat up against the south outside wall in the middle of Mrs. Parker’s newly trampled bed of purple iris.
The tall farmer in new bib overalls
and two days’ growth of grizzled beard
bid for Fred’s walnut mantel clock
against the oldish youngish city woman
with a too-sharp face and too-thin lips
standing beside her oldish youngish husband.

At forty dollars she was impatient,
at fifty disgusted, at sixty grim,
seventy angry, eighty furious
but silent. The farmer took away the prize,
cradling it in his great old arms and
walking stubbornly past the sea of eyes
and all the lifted eyebrows, saying
loudly enough to his silent wife who
stood with glistening, downcast gaze
beside the Ford, “I come here
to get Fred’s clock. And I got it.”

He leveled it on the back seat of
the Ford and just before closing
and locking the door he touched
the pendulum into motion again,
set his jaw, raised his head, and
moved back into the chuckling crowd where
the auctioneer was calling over
strange personal embarrassing objects,

feather in his smallish gray felt hat
arrogantly crimson, Kentucky accent rising,
exhorting, cajoling, teasing over
a dog collar, a piece of embroidery,
kitchen utensils, black book.
A hush then, as jokes rose and fell, words leaping now softly, inadvertently, and briefly apologetic from his lips: a family album, a woman’s voice near me saying in brief dismay she’d not like her family’s album joked over in front of all those people like that.

Gripping my sale-purchased, Fred-crafted walnut stool I followed trampled grass back into the bright hot sunshine, stopped suddenly, thinking to hurl it far out over the fence and down into the ragged gully of the apple orchard; almost forgot to gulp against the choking acid of the sick that in the brightness of the sunshine was strangely no longer hidden deep inside me.
Emory Mulholland, Township Supervisor

So long your name is carved in stone
on the township hall and fire station,
and still there were dreams in your
dour old skull waiting to break out and
make a place in the Michigan sun.

But this was the year the voters threw you out, Emory,
too decrepit to do the job in these modern times,
said the hurry-worry ones. Old Emory
won’t yield to progress, won’t push for
city sewage lines and water so that
houses can be built closer together
and industry can move into the township.
Emory wants to keep the population down,
fancy that, won’t go for government subsidies
peddled by the developers.

Remember the embarrassment of ancient Emory
standing before his constituency in the town hall
describing how he planned to ask the state to
turn that neglected parcel of land at the junction
into a little park where a man could just pause
and dangle his feet in the coolness of the brook
beneath those great old sugar maples, and maybe
rest his soul a bit. Now who’d want to do that?
Surely that brook is polluted anyway.

Such outmoded thinking must have been all
the voters needed as proof that the old man
was senile. They ousted him at long last and
put in a younger fellow pledging to bring it all:
industry, housing development companies,
other progress to the township.

It was too much for old Emory
when the voters turned him down;
with stubborn tears in his dour old eyes
he resigned before the end of his term.

Lost his second wife
and then his life.
Mockingbird Songs 4

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Lenawee County

For the last 36 years I have been looking at a sign some fellow painted on his barn along M-52, and thinking that it ought to be a line in a country music song. It’s still there, and it says, “Jesus is Lord over Lenawee County.”

In the spring of 1997, a man who lived in Milan, Michigan, died, and his wife wrote for his obituary in the *Ann Arbor News* that he had liked country music and that he had once written a song about Lenawee County (pronounced “Lenaway”). That little story set me off, and in June, when I started out on a field trip to study periodical cicadas in Illinois with my post-doctoral associate, Dr. Andrew F. Richards, I told him that while we were on the trip I was going to write a fictional song about that sign.

I explained to Andy that I realized the only words that rhymed with county were mountie and bounty, and this would make it a special challenge. I noted that there are several ways around such a difficulty, and I might just try them all. One is to use the line ending in county in such a way that it doesn’t call for a rhyme. Another is to repeat the difficult line twice, to rhyme with its self; or to hit upon two rhymes within a line. Another is to create false rhymes (which I usually strive to avoid). Still another is to create approximate rhymes, as by juxtaposing two words such as “amount, he . . .” Finally, I said, one could create so many rhymes in the rest of the verses that the absence of a rhyme for “county” wouldn’t even be noticed.

I think I did just about all of those things while constructing this song. By the time I got back from the trip the story was finished. Poor Andy had to listen to me, day after day, trying to make those rhymes work while we also listened for the songs of the peculiar 17-year cicadas and recorded the precise locations of the populations of their three strangely different species.

After getting home I spent a week or so on the finer points of the song, and worked out some guitar licks to use when I sang it to my own tune. I haven’t changed it since. The italicized lines in parentheses were written to be spoken.
I was lookin’ for fun in southeast Michigan
With no better to do I took M-52
And I see this big sign at the next county line
Saying, “Jesus is Lord over Lenawee County.”

(Jesus is Lord over Lenawee County?)

As I was drivin’ on through I thought it’s got to be true
At least for the folks who appreciate jokes
If he’s lord over one he’s over every old county
So what could be so special in Lenawee County?

(Is there something I should know about Lenawee County?)

(I wonder who can tell me the truth about Lenawee County?)

Well, I stopped in a bar and I got in a war,
With a guy with a girl with a sweet little curl
Then I see this big lawman dressed up like a mountie
I said, “Jesus, please be the Lord over Lenawee County!”

(Sweet Jesus! Be Lord over Lenawee County!)

When he pulled at his hat brim I started lookin’ at him
He said, “You can’t just come in here and party and sin
Revel and rob and run with your bounty
‘Cause Jesus is Lord over Lenawee County.”

I said: Uh-Oh! Uh-Oh! Uh-Oh!

Sure enough, he threw me in the jail without any bail
And he banged at my head until I thought I was dead
I said, “Who gives you the right to just knock me around?”
(Oh! -- I’m beginnin’ to get it! Unh-Hunh!)
He said, “Jesus is Lord over Lenawee County!”

(Jesus is Lord over Lenawee County? Oh, yeah! Unh-hunh!)
The fine was three hundred, and the judge fairly thundered
I sure heard him say it and I sure couldn’t pay it
I said, “By whose say-so do you set that amount?” He
Said, “Son – Jesus is the Lord over Lenawee County!”
(Oh! I think I understand about Lenawee County!)

(I know what’s special in Lenawee County!)

(If you just let me go I can deal with it!)

My mate in the cell that I got to know well
Was a harmless old duck who was down on his luck
I think the sheriff didn’t want him in Lenawee County
He said he’d like to go along if I was leavin’ the county.

(He said he’d like to go along if I was leavin’ the county!)

(He said, “If you perchance should happen to be contemplating the possibil-
ity of departing from this general vicinity for the purpose of traveling in
some entirely different region, and by any remote circumstance could iden-
tify a modest space tucked away somewhere in a back corner of your vehicle
within which I might ensconce my poor beleaguered body, I can assure you
most heartily and sincerely that your kindness would never be eradicated
from the tabernacle of my memory!”)

(He said he’d like to go along if I was leavin’ the county.)

When we got out of jail I was hot for the trail
I drove around till I found that girl with the curl
Then we picked that old hick up, and I kicked that old pickup
Right away from the lawman dressed up like a mountie
Thought he was the Lord over Lenawee County.

(We headed straight north!)

Well, I guess that old sign on the north county line
Is what some people say when they want their own way
But I spoke to sweet Jesus while leavin’ the county
I said, “Please be the Lord over Lenawee County!”
“You can have the say in Lenawee County.”

“You can hold sway in Lenawee County.”

“You’re welcome to stay in Lenawee County.”

“Cause I’ll be far away from Lenawee County.”

The last thing I saw, as I was leavin’ the county
Was, “Jesus is Lord over Lenawee County.”

(But it was difficult indeed to read at that speed!)

---

**Lenawee County**

I was lookin’ for fun in Southeast Michigan with no better to do

I took M’ Fifty-two And I see this big sign on the next county line

say-in Jesus is Lord over Len-a-wee County
The Car and the Payment Book

She’s workin’ out and slimmin’ down, dressin’ up to go downtown,
Likes her job and her new boss, somebody’s gain, somebody’s loss.
After almost fourteen years, lots of sweat and lots of tears
She finally said, “I need some space; I’ve got to live some other place!”
He gave her one long baleful look, said, “Take the car and the payment book.”

“I know the kids and I can make it, so I reckon you can take it,
But it’s all that I’ll be givin’ for these fourteen years of livin’.
It may be better in the end; just give my best to your new friend,
And take the car and the payment book.”

While she prettied up her face, she said, “I hate this crummy place.
My new apartment’s just a breeze, I’m free to do just what I please.”
He said, “You never liked the twins, claimed you’d not carry them again,
You’ve never helped them with their homework,
You said kids should do their own work.”

He said, “I can clean and cook, just take the car and payment book.
I know the kids and I will make it, so I reckon you can take it,
But it’s all that I’ll be givin’ for these fourteen years of livin’.
It may be better in the end; just give my best to your new friend,
And take the car and the payment book.”

She said, “Don’t think you’ll start a fight, for once you sure got something right.
You know exactly what I mean, an’ it ain’t cookin’, it ain’t cleanin’,
Keep your takin’ and your givin’, and your fourteen years of livin’,
Because I’ve got things to do, and they sure don’t include you.

He said, “Just grab your things and go, I’ve heard all I need to know.
The kids and I’ll be hurtin’, but we’ll make it that’s for certain.
It may be better in the end, just give my best to your new friend,
And take the car and the payment book.”

No more screamin’, no more swearin’, no more family love and sharin’,
If it’s what you’ve got to do, we’ll try to wish the best for you.
She said, “The things I plan to do, they surely do not include you;
I’ll be movin’ out today, and that is all I’ve got to say.”
She’s workin’ out and slimmin’ down, dressin’ up to go downtown, Likes her job and her new boss: somebody’s gain, somebody’s loss. She said, “I’ve got things to do, and they sure don’t include you, I am movin’ out today, and that is all I’ve got to say.”

And he said, “Go.”

“Just go.”

“And take the car and the payment book.”

The Car and the Payment Book

C
She’s workin’ out and slimmin’ down, dressin’ up to go downtown.
G7
Likes her job and her new boss, somebody’s gain, somebody’s loss.
C
After almost fourteen years, lots of sweat and lots of tears.
G7
She finally said, I need some space; I’ve got to live
some other place. He gave her one long baleful
look, just take the car and the payment book.
All I’m Tryin’ to Do is Change Your Mind

You have told your friends and neighbors that I’m tryin’ to steal you blind,
You said I’m only happy when I’ve got you in a bind,
You have made them all believe that I am evil and unkind,
Now all I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.

    Change your mind, change your mind
    All I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.
    You’ve got everyone believin’ that I’m evil and unkind,
    But all I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.

I have always told the truth, my dear, I’ve never lied to you,
But you’ve got me so confused that I just don’t know what to do,
You told me you’d be true if I would just be true to you,
Then someone changed your mind and made me blue.

    Change your mind, change your mind
    All I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.
    You’ve got everyone believin’ that I’m evil and unkind,
    But all I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.

You said you’d always love me as we gaily wined and dined,
But you left me all alone so you could party while I pined,
Why not love me one more time and let your worries all unwind?
Because all I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.

    Change your mind, change your mind
    All I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.
    You’ve got everyone believin’ that I’m evil and unkind,
    But all I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.

I wish I could convince you that other someone’s not the one
I wish I could convince you that the romance is not gone,
Someone changed your mind and I would like to do that too,
I would like to save us both from feelin’ blue.

    Change your mind, change your mind
    All I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.
    You’ve got everyone believin’ that I’m evil and unkind,
    But all I’m tryin’ to do is change your mind.
All I'm Tryin' to do is Change Your Mind

You have told your friends and neighbors that I'm tryin' to steal you blind.

You said, I'm only happy when I've got you in a bind.

You made them all believe that I am evil and unkind.

Now all I'm tryin' to do is change your mind. Change your mind Change your mind

All I'm tryin' to do is change your mind. You've got them all believing that I'm evil and unkind. But all

I'm tryin' to do is change your mind.
In 1959, Tom Moore and I worked for two weeks on the biology of the 13-year cicadas near a little town in the Ozark Mountains. The two prominent families in the town were the Ponders and the Pulliams, and we stayed in a motel run by a gentleman named Ponder Pulliam. We were told by Ponder’s son that Ponder had a brother named Daily. We liked those people, and their unusual names as well. We made some brief searches, but failed to find a Pulliam named Hourly, Weekly, or Monthly.

It’s an understatement to say that we were intrigued by the many things we saw and heard around that town. We encountered a number of remarkable people, and we heard about many more – partly from two red-headed girls who worked in the little restaurant where we sometimes ate. They were from California, their father having brought the family to this town not long after he retired from the Navy. Like us they were still observing the local scene as outsiders.

One Saturday night we left the restaurant just before 11 p.m., and noticed that on the nearby hill there was a tavern called the Bamboo Club. We supposed it was run by a Korean War veteran, and we also suspected he was doing well, for the place was noisy and filled with people. We went over to have a beer, and we stayed until the place closed. I wrote the following song about what seemed to us to be happening during that hour. My descriptions may sometimes seem unusual, but I haven’t changed or exaggerated anything, least of all my feelings about what I saw and heard there. However, it was obvious that the surroundings were sufficiently different from my own personal life experiences as to startle me. I wish I could have spent more time and learned more about those incredibly diverse and fascinating citizens of the Ozarks.

I mingled with the mob on an ochre-gullied knob  
In a dingy Ozark tavern in Missouri  
Where they reveled in the gloom of a saggy-ceilinged room  
And the dancers swung and shook and stomped like fury.

In the darkness like a fool I went stumbling for a stool  
While the howling traffic kept the barkeep busy  
And a Miller High Life sign gave the puddled bar its shine  
As the smell of sweat and liquor made me dizzy.
The barkeep tossed a wink as I paid him for the drink
And I’d have bet he’d never seen a fatter day
It was a drink that cost me dearly, for the sign above said clearly
“Premium beers are ten cents more on Saturday.”

With a hand across my face, for I was feeling out of place
I sneaked a nervous glance along the bar
And an armless hunchback sat there and slowly lapped his beer
With a tongue of likes I’d never seen before.

He looked up with a grin and the beer ran down his chin
But, unperturbed, he ducked his head for more
And I felt a little queasy as I turned my stool easy
Just to see what other sights the dark room bore.

An albino caught my eye as he tipped his bottle high
With a felt hat worn to hide his snowy crest
With the sweat and tinted light, all his skin gleamed pinkish-white
And he towered giant-like above the rest.

I wondered as I stared if the light of day he dared
Or solely was a creature of the night
But I quickly dropped my gaze when he glowered through the haze
With fierce red eyes that caught the eerie light.

The pink man seemed unique as a type of local freak
Still that armless hunchback had him beat a mile
Not to mention shifting stares and some scattered I-don't-cares,
From those who lolled along the walls with vacant smiles..

It appeared that striking creatures were among the local features
And the thought of further mutants made me wonder
If the creed of every man might be to cuddle with his clan
And to never split its relatives asunder.

But I started from my musings and the family tree perusings
As the fiddle once again began to scream
And gaudy skirts unfurled as the dancers madly whirled
To the wild infectious ring of Devil’s Dream.
The fiddler’s face was pointed, and his fingers double-jointed
But the frenzy in his tiny eyes was chilling
Could this pallid music-maker be the local undertaker
Well, I wondered as the pace became more killing.

Across the sagging floor there pranced what I’d not seen before
And a slightly potted hillman scrutinized
As the broadly beamed exterior of her unrestrained posterior
Practiced crazy zigs and zags before his eyes.

I watched her try to steer on a pathway not too clear
Though the object of her trip was plain to see
T’was a line that kept on growing where a yellow light was showing
Through a hole where the door knob used to be.

The cardboard wall was broken, making privacy a token
In the brightly lighted cubicle beside
And the waiting females giggled as they pushed and craned and wiggled
As each one sought to view the scene inside.

Their antics seemed absurd until I saw the crooked word
That above the door revealed the station’s function
“Mens,” the sign proclaimed, and I guess it rightly named
All those who could perform without compunction.

I’d drained my bottle dry, so I caught the barkeep’s eye
And he gladly reached and set for me another
I guzzled at it quick because the smoke was getting thick
And the atmosphere was near to make me smother.

I turned back to the floor, just to watch the sights some more
But it seemed that something new was in the air
I was puzzled for a time, and then a chill crept up my spine
For the crowd was turned and staring toward the bar.

The clock was close to twelve as they talked among themselves
And it looked like they were after me, all right
I guessed that they were bound just to run me out of town
But, at least, I thought, they’ll know they’ve had a fight.
Then for the bar they came, and I stood up tense and game
But they never seemed to notice me at all
They just shouldered right on by, giving loud and lusty cries
As their money on the bar began to fall.

I watched with jaw ajar as the six-packs hit the bar
And each man grabbed a female at the door
With joyful raucous yells they scattered then pell-mell
And starters whined and motors began to roar.

They tore off through the hills and the place was dark and still
And a cloud of dust the only sign remained
The fiddler packed his case and abruptly left the place
And one lone drunk his bottle sat and drained.

I must have looked appalled at the wonder of it all
As I turned and asked the barkeep, “What’s the hurry?”
For he grinned and cocked his eye, and he winked at me so sly,
“Well, you can’t sell beer on Sundays in Missouri!”

Saturday Night in an Ozark Tavern

I mingled with the mob on an och-re gul-led knob In a
din - gy ozark tav - ern in Mis - sour - i Where they reveled
in the gloom of a sag - gy ceil-inged room And the dan - cers
swung and shook and stomped like fur - y.
Arnie Beckett

This verse, which came out fitting the tune of *The Little Red Caboose Behind the Train*, was inspired by two events. The first was the late Jack Cady’s wonderful 1965 story, *The Burning*, which was awarded an *Atlantic* “First.” Cady was a man of many experiences, who called himself a “truck gypsy.” The second event was my own experience of returning from Mexico and, at three in the morning, coming upon a just-wrecked trailer truck on a superhighway south of St. Louis, Missouri. The driver was trapped inside. Aside from a woman with a baby, who flagged us down, Bob Vinopal and I, returning from a field trip to Mexico, were first on the scene. Bob had a tenderness about blood and accidents and would not go near the truck. The woman with the baby took the driver’s companion to the hospital. As we understood it, he had been flung from the sleeping compartment out through the windshield and on to the berm in only his under-shorts.

I spent 45 minutes inside the cab, under the upside-down mangled wreckage of the truck, trying to comfort the trapped driver, and digging his arm free. Conscious, and in considerable pain, he was pinned between a part of the cab door and the ground, and his arm was twisted beneath a slab of glass with part of the weight of the truck upon it. Outside the wreckage a mass of humanity gathered and discussed the seriousness of the situation, unanimously agreeing that none of them would even consider entering the wreckage or touching the trapped driver. I was carefully digging the driver’s arm free, while lying in the darkness a few feet from the legs and feet of the gawkers, visible under a part of the truck door, and watching them snuffing out their cigarettes in the diesel fuel that was draining down across the cab and flowing away in the grass because the tanks were perched on top of the inverted wreckage.

When the man was finally freed I was embarrassed to discover myself showing inane concern as he was carried to the ambulance. Without my knowing it the stress of the situation had almost destroyed my ability to think clearly. I think this made me appreciate the incredible incident the hero of the *Atlantic* story had gone through. My song is made to be about a time before Route 23 was straightened and some of its slopes reduced in steepness.

Arnie Beckett was a truckin’ man, he drove a big old diesel van; For nineteen years he kept those eighteen wheels against the road; Whether rain or sleet or snow he was always on the go, And a better man you'd never find on any kind of load.
Chorus

Poor Arnie met his fate, he was shaggin' Wakefield freight,  
Listenin' to his good old diesel roar.  
With that big wheel in his hand he went to the Promised Land,  
Arnie Beckett he won't never ride old 23 no more.

Headed north on 23 toward the state of Tennessee,  
On a winter's night old Arn had taken Pete MacKenzie's run;  
It was all that I could do just to keep his rig in view;  
Track a jammer like old Arn, and you will get some travelin' done.

When I topped that long old hill forty miles above Asheville,  
Old Arnie's rig was streakin' toward the valley down below.  
And the sight gave me a chill because on that distant hill,  
A little car pulled out to pass without the room to go.

Old Arn could see it too, and he knew what he must do.  
I held my breath and prayed as he went roarin' off that turn,  
But the gully there was deep and the mountainside was steep,  
He rolled her and I heard the crash and saw her start to burn.

Arnie's rig was all aflame, and I could hear him call my name;  
He told me that his legs were trapped, and the heat too much to stand.  
His face was framed with fire, and he was trapped inside that pyre,  
Starin' through the windshield with that big wheel in his hand.

I could see old Arn was dyin', I could hear his rig a-fryin',  
They say I moved like lightning to my rig and back again.  
He was staring straight ahead but I heard every word he said;  
The message that he gave me still is printed on my brain.

Well, that little car kept goin' and old Arnie's fire kept growin';  
Someone called the sheriff as a crowd was gatherin’ around.  
The people all stood silently, and when the sheriff came by me,  
The tears were streaming down my face, the gun was in my hand.

They questioned me a while, then they put me in this cell.  
The sheriff shook his head and said, "What kind of man are you?"  
Well, that bullet stopped the pain and I would do the same again.  
Like old Arn I guess I'll be the kind who does what he must do.
Arnie Beckett

Arnie Beckett was a truckin' man, he drove
a high old diesel van. For nineteen years he kept
those eighteen wheels against the road. Whether rain or sleet or snow
he was always on the go. And a better man you'd never find on any kind of load. Poor
Arnie met his fate he was shaggin' Wakefield freight.

Listenin' to his good old diesel roar. With that big wheel in his hand
he went to the promised land. Arnie Beckett

he won't never ride old twenty-three no more
Grandpa's Radio

When Amelia came home she thought she'd been to Oklahoma,
Thought she'd been most everywhere with that trailer load of mares,

She was sleepy in the kitchen, with her mama doin' dishes,
While the radio was playin', to her mama she was sayin',

"Mama, did you know that Grandpa's radio
   In his pickup truck plays only just
   Country and western music?"

"Grandpa told me it was true, there was nothing he could do,
He said, 'Here's the situation,' and he played me every station."

"Mama, did you know that Grandpa's radio
   In his pickup truck plays only just
   Country and western music?"

Grandpa drivin' through the nights, Grandpa checkin' trailer lights,
Keeps that old white pickup gunnin' and those racin' horses runnin'.

To those Oklahoma sales he goes, with spaces in the rig he tows,
He takes all that he requires to do whatever he desires to do.

"Mama, did you know that Grandpa's radio
   In his pickup truck plays only just
   Country and western music?"

Grandpa drives to OKC, sometimes he stops around Shawnee,
If there's a sale and Grandpa knows where, he'll be on the road that goes there.

Grandma, she goes too, she knows exactly what to do,
She can find her way around in any Oklahoma town.

"And, Grandma, she must know that Grandpa's radio
   In his pickup truck plays only just
   Country and western music."
She was sleepy in the kitchen, with her mama doin' dishes,  
While the radio was playin', to her mama she was sayin',

"Mama, did you know that Grandpa's radio  
In his pickup truck plays only just  
Country and western music?"
I made up this verse while driving alone to Pennsylvania and back in the fall of 1972. At Harper’s Ferry I picked up my Australian postdoctoral associate, Dr. Jasper Loftus-Hills, who had driven down from Cornell University to join me in a continuing study of the Appalachian zone of hybridization between two katydid populations (see p.200). I had located the zone in 1954, and traced most of it in 1959, with my first graduate student, Kenneth Shaw. We wanted to see if it had moved or changed. Amazingly, it hadn’t. But the long drive to and from our rendezvous gave me the lonesomes. Freeway driving is a curious thing. It can sometimes make you feel extremely isolated, and it can also give you great relief from the invading clutter of people and the lack of privacy we are forced to endure most of the time. As I have already suggested, I am not surprised that people often say, “Oh, I wrote that song while driving on the Freeway.” It strikes me that one of the most important reasons why it will be difficult to get people to give up their automobiles is that wonderful privacy they control completely when they are driving their personal vehicles all alone. Across the last 25 years of my teaching I worked up some of my best lectures during the 25-minute drive to the University of Michigan from our Freedom Township farm. In this case, though, I really didn’t want to be alone, and this verse expresses that feeling.

I filled her up at the corner station
Checked the oil and the water too
Tire pressure all around
I’m getting’ those Freeway Blues.

Put water in the windshield washer
A little in the battery too
I put her on the ramp and I pointed her south
And, Lord, I got the Freeway Blues.

Chorus

The Freeway Blues will get you
If you keep on drivin’ through
When that little white line begins to blow your mind
Then you know you’ve got the Freeway Blues.
The sun’s shinin’ in my window  
The whole wide sky is blue  
I got country music on the radio  
But I’m getting’ those Freeway Blues.

When there’s five hundred miles to travel  
Before your day is through  
And you know there’s not a friend until the other end  
Well, you’re bound to get the Freeway Blues.

Those big green signs keep flashin’ by  
Tellin’ me what to do  
People all around me but they don’t see me  
I’m gettin’ those Freeway Blues.

Two heads close together  
In a pickup truck painted blue  
And, me, I’m just a-sittin’ here by myself  
And, Lord, I got the Freeway Blues.

Hamburger, fries, and coffee  
A stool at the counter will do  
Yes, maam, I’ll have another cup  
If it’ll keep away the Freeway Blues.

What’s that you said, young lady  
You’re travelin’ my way too?  
Well, if you’re lookin’ for a ride, just hop inside  
And you can help me fight the Freeway Blues.

Chorus

The Freeway Blues will get you  
If you keep on drivin’ through  
When that little white line begins to blow your mind  
Then you know you’ve got the Freeway Blues.
The Freeway Blues

I filled her up at the corner station checked the oil and the water too...

Ti-re pres- sure all a-round I’m get-tin those Free-way Blues. Put wa-ter in the wind-shield wa-shers a lit-tle in the bat-ter-ies too. I put her on the ramp and I pointed her south and,

Lord, I got the Free-way Blues. The Free-way Blues will get you if you keep on drivin’ through. When that lit-tle white line be-gins to blow your mind then you know you’ve got the Free-way Blu-es.
Good Man Blues

What makes a good man sing when his ears ain’t hearin’ no song?
How can a good man love when his lovin’ woman ain’t near?
Why should a good man talk when there ain’t nobody to hear?
Why should a good man sing when there ain’t no songs in his soul?
What can a good man say when his head ain’t ready to roll?

How can a good man love when his soul’s been livin’ alone?
When he knows in his soul that his soul ain’t goin’ to be known?
WARM OPENINGS IN THE DYING BELLIES
Tropical Trucks

mufflerless, creep in single files
across the brown breast of Mexico
rising tense and proudly gentle
in the sun between her oceans.

Bunched on mountainsides they
howl and grind along highways
winding, hidden in green, then
flaring to straighten on flatlands
like sympathetic rivers. They
blare through dun-colored
villages crouching, invisible
against the desert soil. They

rumble past midnight dances of
mahogany-glinting faces by lantern
light in wooded mountains, pairs
of sober, barefoot men with
buttoned holsters, naked
children splashing, thick-bodied
women scrubbing on rocks threadbare
cloth, spreading bright colors
across bushes and boulders.

Welded-pipe frames across
headlights, decorated
maize-yellow, cornflower blue,
orange, red, purple, and green
together, bloody families of donkeys
into raw mounds of crimson and gray,
and snarling rows of dogs arrive to
worry warm-smelling openings
in the dying bellies.
Prairie Lookout

Across the vast black spread of bottomland
A keen eye swept the moonlight
From towering crest of bluff
Centered in the fine dry grass
A purple flower nodded darkly near
Soft quick chirps of crickets came
From every clump of red-brown stems.

Above the shining limestone cliffs
The hawk-nosed silhouette
Hung motionless in the breeze
Paint and feather gleamed a moment,
Slipping down into rippling waves of grass
Bathed in the summer moonlight
Circled by the shadowy rustling oaks.
Fort Knox: 1952

Something was wrong with the bare rolling hills;
Something out of place with the tank roads and target ranges.

I could see the hills, the tank tracks, and a training round
Now and then half-buried in the clay, scattered cartridges,
And the tracks of many feet and many wheels.
But something more was in the mangled slopes,
Something still written in the yellow clay laid bare
By the grinding of wheels and the pounding of feet.

A square of rotting logs halfway up the slope
With slab steps in front and the blossoms of a
Pear tree nearby, a tiny cemetery
half-hidden on the hill, its nameless graves marked
With irregular slabs of rough stone tucked into bluegrass
Speckled with violets and spring beauties,
A woodchuck hole beneath a black cherry tree.

A lean-to barn rotting in the shade of black locust trees
With stalls for a mule and a cow showing
Because the door lay half buried in the mud,
A tree line running across a three-cornered patch of thin bluegrass
Scattered with pasture daisies and clumps of poverty grass,
Crumbling black rails half-hidden in the brush there,
A rutted road along the creek,
Its furrows gutted by rivulets of water,
Half-filled by fine sand and straggling wild pepper
Sides overgrown with dogwood and sumac.

Standing beside the cherry tree on the hill in the cemetery,
I heard the popping of guns, rumbling of tanks and trucks.
I listened to a man saying, “The government only took this over
Ten years ago, you know.”

I tried to remember what they were like,
With their tobacco patches on the hillside,
Their rail fences, mules, and three-cornered pastures,
Their log shacks, square dances, and play parties.
I thought about the complacent ones living on the other end
Of the power lines that run across the shaved crest of the hill,
Those who collect now for their eight hours of time each day.
I guessed I might have liked those others better.
Bivouac: 1951

Men living in holes on a hill
The hill riddled with their dugouts
Each of a size and shape and padded
To suit the fancy of its occupant
Who crouches in it by day
Peering warily, always watchful
Against the enemy who lives alike
On the opposite hill, creeping forth
Under cover of darkness to eat
And to seek out and destroy.

In and out of this earthen home
His weapons are always with him.
In this sanctuary he is safe
He digs and carves and scrapes it
To keep out the wind and rain and cold
And afford him observation and safety
From those who seek to tear and blast him from it
And places in front of it his mazes of barbed wire.

The fox and wolf live in earthen holes and prowl by night
Others of the animal kingdom, “below” us
Seek sanctuaries in galleries in the soil
Or behind brambles and briars
Venturing forth by night and sleeping by day.
But these creatures know no better
Neither do they seek first to destroy their own kind.

The two-legged mammal, practicing grimly in this place,
Is a fresh one, yet to stand the grueling tests of time.
The Military Trainee’s Lament

I made up this silly little song with Noel Behn, who was my friend and the leader of my squad of trainees in the First Platoon of Charlie Company, 53rd Regiment of the 101st Airborne. I used to haul him with me on my rare weekend trips to see Lorrie in Hinsdale, Illinois. My 1942 Chevrolet sedan would do 87 miles an hour in 1951, and I kept it as near that mark as I could all the way up Route One north through nearly the entire state of Illinois. When we reached Hinsdale, Noel would call his father, a food broker for the Army, who would pick him up in a black Cadillac and head for Evanston. Sometimes, when I was rushing to spend the most possible time with Lorrie, or to get back afterward, Noel would seem to be scared to death at my speed. His despairing way to scare me into slowing down was to try to convince me that I was either going to be involved in a police chase or else tear up my car on the breaks and ripples in the pavement. But I was never arrested, and I only had one accident. It was while I was taking the trip alone, and it was a dilly. As I swerved to pass an old car, creeping along at dusk, it suddenly swung left in front of me toward a hidden dirt track, or lane, into the woods that I did not at first even see. I simultaneously braked and careened to the right and struck a huge, jutting concrete bridge abutment with a terrible crash. The car bounced and scraped crazily on down the length of the bridge and eventually came to a shaking halt minus one right fender and with the other one hanging by a slender strip of metal. I tore the second fender off by bending it up and down a few times and then threw it into the ditch.

Meantime a fellow came racing up in his car exclaiming that he had been asleep a half mile down the road and had fallen completely off his couch when I hit the bridge. His first words were a breathless, “How many were killed?!”

I drove on, trembling a little, completely forgetting that I had only one tail light and one headlight. When a state highway patrolman stopped me in a little town a few miles up the road, he asked me how long my car had been that way. I asked, “What way?” He stared at me a moment, curiously, until I remembered and explained. He looked at my uniform thoughtfully, and finally said, “Just go on. You’ve had enough trouble tonight.”

When I picked up Lorrie at the train in Champaign to go to my folks’ house, I walked her to the good side of the car first and told her I had a surprise for her. Then I showed her the naked mud-filled under parts of the side of the car that now had no fenders. She was properly appalled.

On the way back to Camp Breckinridge the fuel filter clogged completely from the soil that had dropped into the gas tank because the top of the neck of it had been broken off in the wreck. I had stuffed the opening of the broken neck shut with an old handkerchief. Noel hadn’t ridden up with
me, but he was riding with me on the way back. I had to stop and clean out
the fuel filter two or three times, and we barely made it back in time to avoid
being AWOL.

I sing this song in a minor key to the tune of *The Ballad of Henry Green*.

In the middle of Kentucky
Camp Breckinridge is the spot
Where we are doomed to spend our time
In the land that God forgot,

Down with the snakes and lizards
Where a man gets mighty blue
At least a thousand miles away
From everyone and you.

We sweat and slave and shiver and freeze
It’s more than a man can stand.
Oh, no, we are not convicts
Just defenders of our land.

We’re soldiers of our country
Earning our monthly pay,
Guarding folks with millions
For two and a half a day.

We’re living with our memories
And longing to see our gals
Hoping they won’t marry
Some old guy or a 4-F pal.

Nobody knows we’re down here
Nobody gives a damn
At home we are forgotten
We belong to Uncle Sam.

When we get up to Heaven
We’ll hear St. Peter tell
“Let in those guys from Breckinridge
They’ve had their stint in hell!”
Noel Behn went on to write *The Kremlin Letter* and six other books. Two of his books were made into movies, one directed by John Huston and one starring Peter Falk and Peter Boyle. He acted in two of Woody Allen’s movies: *Another Woman* and *Stardust Memories*. He also wrote six scripts for *Homicide: Life on the Streets*. One of his scripts, *A Many Splendored Thing*, was nominated for the 1994 Writer’s Guild Award for Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series. Because I hadn’t seen him since 1952, I was startled when his obituary appeared in the *Ann Arbor News* of July 31, 1998. He had died of a heart attack at age 70.
Cadence Calls

These cadence calls come from my basic training days at Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, in the fall of 1951 and the winter of 1952. I was in one of the last outfits to have 16 weeks of infantry basic training during the Korean War; shortly afterward the Army dropped it to 8 weeks. I expected to go to Korea as an infantry rifleman, and I carried feelings of dread and as well anticipation of the challenge of this terrible unknown. The feelings of dread came not so much from hearing almost continually of cadre from our company, and others, who were regularly dying in Korea, or from hearing about the spookiness of Chinese soldiers continuing to pour themselves at the American lines, flowing over the stacks of bodies of their own fellows, until the Americans ran out of ammunition or time or whatever. Rather it was my realization that in battle an individual soldier would never know what was really happening, therefore would have no way of contributing significantly or intelligently to his own fate. To a certain extent, of course, that outcome was exactly what military training was all about – not the confusion, as such, but the message that as individuals we did not really count. Only the entire functional units mattered. The confusion was incidental, driving home to us all the underlying horrors of the necessary and inevitable methods of fighting wars.

Almost every night I had nightmares over the anticipation of that kind of battlefield chaos. Included were scenarios in which my rifle would not work, I was out of ammunition, or I had neglected or forgotten something crucial. I took all the admonitions of my company cadre seriously, and believed completely in the additional possibilities of dying from frostbite or foot rot or failure to be properly conditioned physically or properly prepared mentally. I knew our training in hand-to-hand combat was woefully inadequate, and I doubted that I could take apart, repair, and re-assemble my M-1 in total darkness, as I knew I might have to. I wondered how long I could stay awake if sleep was life-threatening, and how long I could run or fight at top intensity without becoming exhausted and vulnerable.

For me the last parts of basic training were marked by a recurring dire despair. My orders to go to Korea as an infantry rifleman were indeed cut, and I was carrying them. It looked as though the die had been cast. Then, almost unbelievably, we heard that the fighting had stopped. Suddenly and miraculously we were on hold. I ended up shipping to Fort Knox as an entomologist to deal with an apparently large population of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, feared capable of carrying the Korean malaria returning soldiers were introducing into the U.S. For me the threat was over.

What follows here are the cadence calls we used over and over as we marched and double-timed over a good deal of the training grounds of
Camp Breckinridge. Almost two years after I had marched to them I sat among hundreds of soldiers, many of them battle-hardened, sitting on a grassy bank, waiting to be discharged, angry, apprehensive, relieved, worried, weary.

As we sat there, jaded and testy from two years of what to some of us had eventually seemed mostly hurry-up-and-wait, the men near me began out-talking each other about what they would do before they would “re-up.” A man next to me swore that he would pimp for his sister before signing up again.

Along the highway as we left the camp were strewn dozens of the heavy drab brown woolen overcoats we received for supposed duty in the Reserve. We called them horse blankets. Next to the horrible woolen underwear we were forced to wear in winter, those great, prickly, old weighty overcoats precisely symbolized the bad aspects of the Army to more than one soldier. We were convinced they were being parceled out to us, not because of likely service in the Reserve, but just to get rid of them.

We were all lucky, as we passed down that highway, but we were still apprehensive. I am sure I speak for many men when I say that the apprehension didn’t go away for a long time.

Later, at Fort Knox, I acquired a close friend from the Ozark Mountains named John T. Moore. He went from corporal to sergeant while I knew him. He had served in World War II, and he told me he had been trained for the Medical Service Corps, in which both he and I were serving at the time. He said the only weapon he had fired in his basic training was the carbine. When his ship was arriving somewhere near an island in the Pacific war zone at midnight, he and his fellow Medical Service technicians were suddenly handed M-1 rifles and hurried to small boats that took them into the darkness of the beach of a remote island. He said they encountered a wall of enemy fire as they were continually admonished to race forward to get off the beach. The night was pitch-black, and men were dying all around him. He started blindly firing into the darkness, and after eight rounds the emptied clip flew off his rifle. Not knowing what had happened, he began to scream for someone to come and fix his broken weapon. Some time during the night the top of his ear was shot off. His description of what happened that night was a perfect example of the kind of horror and pandemonium I had expected to encounter during combat in Korea. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why I sometimes come close to weeping when I sing these simple verses.
Raise your head and raise it high
Charlie Company’s passin’ by.
Charlie Company, haven’t you heard?
Company C of the Fifty-Third.

Shiny boots and shiny brass
Charlie Company’s got the class.
Charlie Company’s on the ball
They don’t need no Hadacol.

Ain’t no use in goin’ home
Jodie’s* got your gal and gone.
Ain’t no use in feelin’ blue
Jodie’s got your sister too.

I don’t know but I’ve been tole
Jodie’s wearin’ my one-button roll.
I don’t know but it’s been said
Jodie’s sleepin’ in my bed.

G. I. brush and G. I comb
Gee, I wish I’d stayed at home.
G. I. beans and G. I gravy
Gee, I wish I’d joined the Navy.

Ain’t no use in goin’ back
Jodie’s got your Cadillac.
You used to work for Ma and Pa
Now you drill for Cavanaugh.

Ain’t no use in lookin’ down
Ain’t no discharge on the ground.
Ain’t no use goin’ over the hill
If the M. P.’s don’t get you, Jodie will.

Left my gal away out West
Thought this Army life was best.
Now she’s someone else’s wife
I’ll be drillin’ the rest o’ my life.

Left my wife in Tennessee
Said she would be true to me.
Now I wonder who the heck’s
Helpin’ her spend my allotment checks.

I got a gal up on the hill
She won’t do it but her sister will.
I met a WAC and she was willin’
Now I’m takin’ penicillin.

We know now it won’t be long
Three more weeks and we’ll be gone.
We don’t know but the Lieutenant said
We’ll be fightin’ Chinese Reds.

I don’t know but I believe
I’ll be home for Christmas Eve.
When I get my three-day pass
I’m gonna kick old Jodie’s ass.

If old Jodie’s five foot three
Jodie’s ass belongs to me.
If old Jodie’s six feet tall
Ain’t a-gonna bother him at all.
(or: I’m gonna yell for [Sergeant] Cavanaugh)

If I die in a combat zone
Box me up and ship me home.
Tell my Mother that I cried
Take me home before I die.

Dig my grave both wide and deep
Tombstones at my head and feet.
On my breast just let it say
I died fightin’ for the U.S.A.
If I die on a Russian front
Bury me with a Russian cunt
Eeny meeny miney mo
Let’s go back and count some more.

-Choruses and answers-

Sound off! Sound off!
Sound off! Sound off!
One, two, three, four!
One-two ---- three-four!
Cadence count! Once more!
Sound off! Take it on down!
One, two, three, four
One-two ---- three-four!

Y’left, y’right, y’left
Y’left, y’right, y’left
Y’right!
Y’right!
Y’right!

Sound off!
One, two, three, four
One-two ---- three-four!
Y’hadda good home and y’left!
Yer right!
Jodie was there when y’left!
Yer right!
Yer sister was there when y’left!
Yer right!
Yer brother was there when y’left!
Yer right!
Yer father was there when y’left!
Yer right!
Yer mother was there when y’left!
Yer right!
Yer baby was there when y’left!
*Yer right!*
Ya wouldn’t go back if ya could!
*Yer wrong!*

-Onesy, twosy, threesy, foursy*

Let’s go back and count some moresy.
Sound off, etc.

* * *

*Jodie = Civilian*
After Chickamauga

At midnight, the call of a Chuck-Will’s-Widow
Across the cypress swamp
Gleaming stark in full moonlight
Rimmed by red clay washouts
Touched by a moment of breeze.

A rustle of oak leaves there
Blue-clothed figure stumbling
Fell upon a log half out of black water
Kneeling, cupped his hands
Drank and retched.

Then came the soft command and click
He jerked around and dove toward the shadows
Caught the blast in mid-air, sobbed and fell
Lay a moment, still
Jerked again.

A struck match lit the crumpled mass
Torn and crudely bandaged leg
Sassafras cane, “Mother of Christ!”
And white-faced shadow rimmed in gray
Turned away.
I could not have known that Whip-Poor-Will and Chuck-Will’s-Widow Yankee and Rebel relatives among nightjars would be together at Shiloh, calling in furious antiphony past midnight when I stopped to listen and think among the shadows of great oaks bathed in summer moonlight, and to read and remember from inscribed plaques on pedestals. On the knoll before me the 107th Illinois Infantry, on April 7, 1862, faced the Confederate Cavalry and . . . BALLLOOOOM!

Across the woodland to my right a great clap and rumbling roll that left hair on the nape of my terrified neck erect for moments until I heard the jet’s departing whine.

But nightjars, thought I, climbing back into the Chevrolet, so easy to imitate. How many innocent feathered tops-of-posts were blasted into eternity across those few fateful days?
Of Bliss and Ignorance

You say to me, this man was sad
Unhappy, lonely, depressed, this Lincoln?
His life a kind you’d not have led
With cares of sorts you’d rather shun.

But what if there are rare rewards
And towering peaks of ecstasy,
Too subtle for untroubled hordes,
Too fine for likes of you and me?

Ignorance is bliss, you shrug,
But bliss is not the wallowing
Of fat pigs in cool mud,
Except for fat pigs, my friend.
Tribute

In 1946, the centenarian is looked upon with awe
For we’re struck to see a human so defying nature’s law.

And we envy him a little for all the things he’s seen,
Though his body may be crooked and his face all drawn and seamed.

We’re bound to ask some questions of such folks before they’re gone,
For we’d like to gain a little of the insights that they’ve known.

We might hesitate a bit, because we think they won’t talk much,
And it seems unkind to waste their time with trivia and such.

So we’ll ponder it a while, and when we get done thinkin’,
We’ll all step up and ask the same, “Did you know Abe Lincoln?”
Freedom Township

Freedom Township, Lorrie’s and my home territory for 36 years, is perhaps the most rural of the townships of Washtenaw County, Michigan. The main paved road, Pleasant Lake Road, crosses it east-west. Fletcher Road extends north from Pleasant Lake Road to Scio Church Road, in Lima Township, and Schneider Road runs from Pleasant Lake Road south two miles, reaching into Bridgewater Township, where it connects to Austin Road. All other roads within the township are unpaved. There is no incorporated town or village in the township, only the small settlement around Pleasant Lake that long ago was called Fredonia. This little cluster of mostly mobile homes and cottages was once the place where many local farmers expected to retire on properties they had purchased earlier with that goal in mind. In those times there were a little over 700 registered voters, among them more than 500 landowners. Since then the number of voters has more than doubled.

For a good part of its history, Freedom Township was a community of mostly German farmers, who owned their farms because their fathers owned them before, and because many were disinclined to borrow money or purchase anything on the installment plan. Anyone living in the township finds himself surrounded by names like Bihlmeyer, Burmeister, Blumenauer, Bristle, Egler, Haab, Haeussler, Heimerdinger, Hinderer, Mann, Schaible, and Weidmeyer. The roads crisscrossing the township bear names like Alber, Bemis, Ernst, Koebbe, Schneider, Steinbach. Even today, at a Farm Bureau meeting or an auction, one is impressed by the prevalence of relict lisps and accents, and the long-drawled vowels of spoken German, issuing from the mouths of buxom blonde women and angular-jawed men with faces red from the wind's rawness.

The 1873 History of Washtenaw County states that Freedom Township was settled by Americans, but has since become populated almost entirely by Germans. Someone, somewhere, wrote that only Germans and those of German extraction “have been able to survive” in the township.

Down the road from our little farm is a small cemetery with an old brick house nearby. It’s a little less than a half mile from the cemetery of the Bethel United Church of Christ, with our farm midway between the two. In the 1870’s there was a thriving church at each location, one Protestant, the other Catholic. The Catholic Church disappeared long ago. Its rectory has for some time been the summer home, and later the residence of a lady from Ann Arbor. Otherwise, only the cemetery and a low foundation remain, sealed off like benign tumors by an iron picket fence, and largely ignored by those who nowadays speed up and down the Bethel Church Road. Perhaps it is only another abandoned church and a rarely visited cemetery. But one
cannot fail to notice that the names on the headstones are for the most part no longer represented in the vicinity, unlike those on headstones of similar vintage in the Bethel Church cemetery. How did it sound, I wondered, and what did it symbolize, for the souls who worked the fields and tended the livestock on neighboring farms a hundred years ago, to hear the different bells of those two churches tolling from two directions, perhaps alternately, perhaps sometimes together, possibly competing? What were the detailed happenings that, in their accumulation, resulted in the change?

This book includes all of the verses from Freedom Township that I have written so far. Not all are in this section of the book. Because not all are songs, I have just called them Freedom Township Tales. Excepting the humorous verses, which have their own meanings, I carry a special affection for every Freedom Township person I have known or imagined, and about whom I have written here. Thirty-six years is the longest that Lorrie and I have lived anywhere, causing Freedom Township and all its people to seem like kin to us.
The Ghost of the Old German Horse Farmer

There’s a ghost upstairs in my hallway, 
I can tell by his footsteps at night, 
They squeak and they creak, oh, so softly, 
As he tip-toes the fringes of light.

I lie still in my bed and I wonder, 
If the sound will soon enter my room, 
My eyes on the black of the doorway, 
Seeking vainly to peer through the gloom.

He’s that old German farmer who lived here, 
I can sense this from deep in my soul, 
A sinewy old man just working the land 
That he treasured as surely as gold.

The first time I heard him was after the day 
When I rescued that tool from the woods, 
The skeleton of an ancient clod-buster, 
That I thought to rebuild when I could.

The hulk of a rusted iron monster, 
Four horses he’d have needed to pull it, 
With oak logs spitted on twin axle rods 
To crush the stern clay of this township.

I learned of this old German farmer 
When I repaired the South Pasture fence, 
For he’d placed a line post two feet to the west 
Of where I knew it should stand.

So I dug in the proper location, 
Two feet down I went like a mole, 
Till I struck an immovable surface of rock 
And was forced to abandon the hole.

I stood there a while in the spring air, 
Contemplating the lesson I’d learned, 
And that farmer who’d already been there, 
And who the same scoops of soil had once turned.
Deep under the dirt of that fence row
On an unseen surface of granite,
The marks of our jobbers are mingled
Like some mystical joint kind of writ.

I’ve noticed the placement of boulders
That he dragged from the fields with his teams,
His notes about prices on granary walls,
And the beauty of his oaken barn beams.

I’ve wondered if sometimes he rested
And listened to the bird songs I’ve heard,
As he hitched up his team in the sunshine
To prepare yet another seed bed.

There’s a concrete tank in a shop on the hill
That never freezes, half under the ground,
By buried pipes hooked to the barns and windmill
Storing water for when the wind’s down.

Clay tiles he buried with a shovel,
Hillside pond down to marsh, then uphill,
Drain the field when the spring rain comes rushing
And causes the siphon to fill.

I’d like to have known this old farmer,
I share gladly this farmstead with him,
I’m obliged for the good things he left me,
His successor, admirer, and friend.

I don’t mind that his ghost walks my hallway,
I even relish the sound;
On evenings when I’m feeling lonesome,
I’m glad he’s still poking around.

* * *

When an old farmer passes
A treasure trove is lost.
Miss Rubena’s Wings


Blumenauer, Rubena M. [pronounced “Rubeena”]
Manchester, MI

Age 82, passed away on February 27, 1996. Rubena was born on April 2, 1913, the daughter of Adolph and Lena (Glatz) Blumenauer. Rubena was a life long resident of Freedom Township and was a member of the Washtenaw County Farm Bureau. She was a life member of Bethel United Church of Christ. She is survived by several cousins and friends. Rubena was preceded in death by her parents and one brother, Paul. Rubena’s family will receive callers from 7-9 p.m. on Wednesday at the JENTER-BRAUN FUNERAL HOME. Funeral services will be on Thursday, February 29, 1996, at 1 p.m. from Bethel United Church of Christ with Rev. Richard E. Hardy officiating. Interment will be in Bethel Church Cemetery. Memorials may be made to Bethel United Church of Christ Building Fund.

Today they auctioned off Rubena’s things,
Her treasures and her dreams, her wings.
Her wings – Miss Rubena’s wings.

That oaken rocking chair with arms worn bare --
Who can say where this gentle lady’s spirit might have soared
While she was sitting there, just sitting there?

She might have been thinking life had not been fair
To leave her that lopsided face to bear,
And the heaviness, strange heaviness, of the farm,
And brother Paul, almost too faithful, too faithful, after all.

The piano provided for Rubena canceled her expectation
Of continuing to high school, perhaps saving her from humiliation;
And Adolph needed her on the farm, and to help with Paul there,
And her mother too -- so often sadly quiet in her own chair.

Rubena’s piano waits on the front porch now for the auctioneer,
And all the music that grand and gracious lady learned to play,
Is in its proper packets now for selling, and all those many quilts,
Hand-made; dishes, doilies, her favorite kitchen knife,
All the parts of Miss Rubena Blumenauer’s life.
Mary Burmeister came beside me, shook her head, “They must have kept just everything!” she said. But there was much more at their other sale, I replied, a year ago, when Paul passed on, you know (Poor Paul, with his young toothy grin and his old purply blind eyes) And she exclaimed again, “They had another sale?”

But all of this was more than merely Paul and Rubena, It was everything from the time when that name Was first placed on the barn, the big red barn, And Mr. and Mrs. Adolph Blumenauer lived here then.

Rubena’s box of Indian relics sits upon my desk, Marked with her words, “Arrowheads and other stones,” And the little green car with which Paul must have played The best part of a century ago But Rubena’s things will scatter today.

The farm their German folks taught her and Paul to keep So well it kept them lonely there together all their lives, Exactly like their cousins half a mile along the road, Edward Glatz – Eddie – and his sister Amanda. Their farm has become one of those bed and breakfast places. Then came the real estate sign in Rubena’s front yard, telling us That old Mr. and Mrs. Blumenauer’s dreams, too, are finally dust.

Rubena and Paul stayed the stay as best they could But they had to lose, had to lose, had to lose. The honeybees are gone from their chimney, The little lake across the road from which they brought me, Gratefully, a bucketful of bluegills, will belong to someone else, Not a Blumenauer or a Glatz, but maybe, heaven forbid, an Irishman? Or perhaps, in Walter Koelz’s words, “only an Englishman.”

What about the place from which these people came, Those ancient German folk who lived across the times When their Landchens made up little warring kingdoms? Or when the Mongols came on their agile ponies and Defeated them, used their women, and left scornfully? How did Blumenauers and Glatzes endure during such days?
Did they cling so hard to farms?
Were there sad, lopsided faces like Rubena’s?
And folks who lurked away from sight of roads
With baggy necks like Eddie’s?

Did they sit by pianos, then, to play exquisitely?
And give lessons to neighbors’ eager children,
As Rubena did, while thinking all the while,
Perhaps, of Mozart or Beethoven?
Or Sunday morning services in Martin Luther’s name?
Or maybe some imaginary love, love, lover?

Did they drop back in smooth worn rocking chairs and just rock silently?
Or lie on brass beds in darkened rooms upstairs on winter nights quietly
Beneath heavy covers, alone alone -- lonely lonely lonely,
Wondering?
Doc Eames: An Old-Time Vet

Henry P. Eames was the last of the old-time veterinarians in Manchester, Michigan. He was a special personality in a special era. His memory persists as a pleasant and positive influence on the people whose lives he touched. And he touched a lot of lives.

One time I told Doc a sad story about a young vet I knew who accidentally poisoned a sick calf on his first call in his own home community where he had returned to practice. He had included strychnine in a drench he administered to the calf, and later found from his textbook that while that works on older cattle it's deadly to young calves. When it happened he was so distraught from the effect of his mistake on the calf, and on its owner, and so upset by thinking about the inevitability of embarrassing publicity, that he did not reveal his error to the owner, swearing painfully to me that he would make it up to her later. He did that, and eventually he made the whole thing public. He was a close friend of mine. I not only was on that first call with him, I was also there when he described every aspect of the unfortunate event to a group of his neighbors.

When I related this story to Doc Eames, he looked at me for a while and then said, "Let me tell you something I did when I first arrived in Manchester!" It seems a young farmer encountered him on the main street of the village and asked if he could bring his dog over to have it fixed. Doc said, sure, come ahead, and in a few days the fellow drove in with all his kids and the dog in the back of his pickup truck. He brought the dog inside, and Doc was surprised to see that it was a fine-looking animal, and a young one too. But he decided he shouldn't start his life as a vet by questioning the decisions of his customers. So he merely asked the farmer if he was sure about doing this. Getting an affirmative answer he sighed, took the leash, and put the dog up on the table. He paused to tell the man he didn't have to stay and watch, but the fellow said he would actually like to. A little taken aback by this, Doc reluctantly went ahead. He gave the dog the necessary shots, and it closed its eyes and quietly died. The fellow seemed startled, and finally said in a puzzled voice, "What have you done to my dog?" It was Doc's turn to be upset. He replied that he had "fixed" it, saying in alarm, "That's what you wanted, isn't it?" Then and there Doc, who was from Missouri, learned to his sorrow that, in Michigan, "fixing" an animal has only to do with its future reproduction, not its future life or absence thereof.

Doc said that, like my vet friend, he was not only devastated by his terrible mistake but completely humiliated. He felt sure the young farmer would tell everyone in Manchester, and that rather than starting his career with some positive publicity he would be the laughing stock of the community. Sure enough, he said, the next time he saw the owner of the deceased dog the man yelled at him from across the street and came directly over. Doc winced as the man clapped his arm on his back and told everyone within
hearing how Doc had "fixed" his dog. But, Doc said, to his surprise and
gratitude the fellow told the story in a way that was sympathetic to Doc
rather than a nasty reflection on his ineptitude. When Doc finished telling
me this story, he shook his head in remembered pain and embarrassment,
remarked on the perils of beginning a veterinarian's kind of life, and said I
should understand that he worked extremely hard to find a new puppy for
that family very, very quickly.

One year Lorrie and I were raising and feeding a large Holstein steer.
Somehow he became bloated. Even though I grew up on an Illinois livestock
farm, together we had zero experience with bloat in cattle. But we dug out
our home veterinary book and were soon out in the steer's box stall trying to
insert a garden hose down its throat so that we could pour all the Wesson Oil
we had down it. That friendly 1200-pound steer and I went around and
around the box stall locked together like Siamese twins, the steer trying to
get loose and me trying to stay on my feet, keep my arm around its neck, and
shove the hose down its throat with my free arm. The struggle and the noise
were unbelievable -- me trying to stay against the steer, both of us slamming
into the wall and the hay bunk and every other solid structure, Lorrie watch-
ing and yelling advice -- to me, I think, but maybe to the steer as well. After
an exhausting half hour or so of pandemonium, the hose and I managed to
prevail, and some of the Wesson Oil went down the steer. Nothing hap-
pended right away, and I removed the emptied hose. Disappointed, and still
scared, we hurried to the house and called Doc. He listened to our frantic
plea and replied regretfully that he simply could not come. It seems he had
been kicked by a horse that day and was under strong medication for the
pain. He said he was virtually immobile and couldn't even think of coming.
He also said we were doing the right thing. But he reminded me that if it
didn't work we would have to vent the steer by cutting a hole in its side right
into the rumen or stomach responsible for the bloating. This was a horrible
prospect that I had read about as a 4-H kid and confidently expected would
never become a reality in my own life. Doc explained in great detail where
and how to cut the hole, expressed his regrets again, and hung up. We went
back to the struggle, fought the hose down again, and continued pouring
various recommended liquids into the steer. At some point the steer began
letting out great stinking belches and I removed the hose again. This time
the steer kept right on blasting out enormous quantities of unbelievably foul-
smelling air. The belly started to recede. Lorrie and I cheered because we
knew we had won. As soon as the steer's belly had returned to a semblance
of normality, we dragged wearily into the house, cleaned up, and went to
bed. Next morning the telephone rang painfully early. I answered it grog-
gily. It was Doc. He literally yelled into the phone, "Dick, did you cut that
I said no, we hadn't had to do it because the hose worked.
"Oh," said Doc in a normal tone of voice and obviously relieved, "I'm glad! I
told you the wrong place to cut!" Then he explained that all he could figure
was that he had been on so much medicine the night before that he had
somehow gotten confused and directed us to the wrong side of the steer!
That unnecessary, straightforward admission was the act of an old-time vet.

Once when I was on a working trip, one of our mares required Doc's
attention. This was the only time any such thing had happened without me
there. Doc came out and treated the mare, told Lorrie what to watch for, and
what to do and when, and went on to see other patients. The next morning
early, Lorrie was surprised to see his car drive into the barn lot. She went out
and said, "I didn't know you were coming back this morning!" "Well," said
Doc a bit sheepishly, "I didn't either. I was pretty sure the mare would be all
right. But I wasn't so sure you would be!" Of course he was exactly right.
Lorrie appreciated his reassuring presence beyond her ability to explain.
That too was the act of an old-time vet.

One afternoon I was working near my barn and suddenly became aware
of a long, terrible, keening horse sound of a sort I had never heard before. I
rushed toward it and discovered a young gelding holding his hind foot shak-
ily off the ground while a huge amount of blood was spurting from it rhyth-
mically. I grabbed a cloth and wrapped it tightly, trying to reduce the bleed-
ing. But in the process I found to my dismay that the foot just hung loosely
and flopped. I figured correctly that not only an artery but a large tendon had
been cut, and I later discovered that the horse had done the damage by kick-
ing a downturned sharp piece of tin roofing that someone before me had
placed over the big concrete water tank and had apparently trimmed off by
bending it back and forth until it broke. I was in despair, but I called Doc.
While he was looking at the foot I said I supposed we would have to put the
gelding down. But Doc just went ahead treating and rebandaging the foot.
Then he said, "Why don't we just wait and see. Whatever tendons remain
could just thicken up to the point where the horse is better than you might
have expected." As usual, he was right. The foot healed without further at-
tention. The gelding always had a little limp but eventually it wasn't appar-
ent except when he trotted. I expected to keep him as a horse for beginners
to ride, but a neighbor family that knew all about the accident and Doc's ver-
dict liked him so much that they kept insisting that I price him. When I fi-
nally did they took him, and 37 years later they still have him. Doc's experi-
ence and good sense paid off for the horse and everyone else involved.

Doc even treated me one time. One summer morning I was in the
kitchen, changing the bandage on a thumb I had caught in the table saw ear-
lier in the week, when Doc drove in to do some work on my horses. The
thumb looked awful. It had swollen immensely, and the sausage-like por-
tions that the unfortunate physician had tried to stitch together had swollen
outward and split such that the entire wound looked as though it had never
been sewed together at all. I shoved the old bandage back down over the thumb and went outside to help Doc. He had brought with him a brand-new graduate of his alma mater, Michigan State University. The new vet was a tall young lady with a confident expression on her face. On the way out to deal with the horses, Doc saw the bandage and asked me what I had done to my thumb. I explained, pulling the bandage off to show exactly what I was talking about. Doc looked at the wound in alarm and said, "Good grief, Dick, you're not going to lose that thumb, are you!" I shrank from the suggestion, quickly slid the bandage back on, and said, "Don't even mention it!"

We finished the horses, and Doc returned to his car and started putting away his gear with the new young vet at his side. I was standing back, just looking on. Suddenly Doc straightened up out of the back seat of the car, stared at me a moment, and said, "Hey! I know exactly what you need for that thumb!" Somewhat taken aback, I murmured uncertainly, "You -- do?!!" He said emphatically, "Yes, I do!" And he named to the lady vet some medicine I had never heard of. She stared at him in horror, her mouth open and visions of lawsuits dancing all over her expression. But he stuck his face right at her and insisted, "That would work, wouldn't it?" She reddened and turned away, saying something soft and vague under her breath. Doc wasn't having that. He scurried around in front of her and stepped right up to her face again, saying from a few inches away, "That would work, wouldn't it?" She tried to turn away again. Her face was crimson. She stammered and twitched, and finally muttered something like, "Yes -- maybe -- I suppose."

Satisfied, Doc whirled in my direction, "Have you got a clean jar?" I said I thought I could find one, and he said, "Bring it!" I did, and Doc reached down into the darkness of the back seat of his sedan and with his left hand dipped something messy out of a large container. Coming back out he grabbed the jar from me and rubbed his hand across its top edge, leaving a large and nasty smear of some kind of yellow, greasy stuff dangling inside the top edge of the jar. Handing the jar back to me he said earnestly, "Keep a lot of that all over your thumb and it'll be well before you know it." I thanked him and stared at the ugly mess in the jar as they drove away. I went into the kitchen and stared at it some more. How could I find out about this stuff? I sure couldn't ask my physician. Did I dare use it, even if Doc said I should? Eventually I held the jar up to my nose and sniffed. Something familiar went gliding up my nostrils, and I paused in amazement. I was alone, but I said out loud, "Hey! I know what this is!" And I did. It was Bag Balm, the same wondrous ointment I had used on the udders of the cows I milked by hand growing up in Illinois 75 years before and hadn't encountered since. I took off my bandage straight-away and smeared that wonderful stuff all over my throbbing thumb. In seconds the thumb started losing its painfulness. I kept the stuff on it until the swelling went down and that big cleft wound began to disappear. Then I made a mistake. I went on
another trip, and, thinking my wound was healed, I left the ugly jar of bag balm at home. The thumb swelled up and the torn place "burst" again. I could scarcely wait to bathe it once more in that marvelous soothing Bag Balm. I did that, and the thumb got well, just as Doc said it would.

I told Lorrie about all of this as soon as I could, of course, and swore her to secrecy, explaining that in this litigious age, someone might take umbrage at learning that Doc was not restricting his doctoring to the four-legged kind of mammal. She understood. So she told only one friend, the widow of one of my colleagues at the University of Michigan. Unfortunately, this widow's daughter had married a local farmer. The widow only told the daughter, the daughter only told the farmer-husband, and the farmer-husband only told one other farmer. Inevitably, and fairly soon, I started hearing farmers and their wives saying to me behind sly smiles, "Hey, Dick! I hear Doc Eames is treating humans now! You know anything about that?" When I related this story to Doc's wife, Jean, shortly after his death, she laughed and told me about a fisherman who rang their doorbell one cold rainy Sunday morning with a fishhook stuck right through the lower part of his nose. She said that as he stood there in the door the little bit of fishing line still stuck on the hook swung out and back in with every breath he took. Doc fixed him up too.

He was an old-time vet, that's all. Regardless of the wonderful things modern vets might be able to accomplish with the newest advances in technology, you'd best not count on them coming through in the particular ways Doc did in these stories. There won't be any more like Henry P. Eames. And that's just the way it is.
If you've got a little time
Let me tell a little rhyme
All about me and Slim
And the time me and him
Was gettin' tired of the grind
So we set out to find
Us a little euphoria
And we picked Peoria.

(Tom said Old Slim he was all
Of five foot nineteen inches tall
And when he turned himself
Sideways he made himself
Resemble a thin piece of paper
But he was good for any caper.)

Well, we drove into town
And we cruised all around
Then Slim parked his car
By a curious bar
It was a strange-lookin' spot
But the music sounded hot
It was some of that kind
With a bump and a grind
Shiny wooden floors
And two sets of doors.

We were achin' to get in an'
Get started with the sinnin'
But we couldn't do nothin'
Till the man pushed the button.

There was good-lookin' girls
All over that place
With paint and powder
On every face.

They showed us where to sit
And they let us sit a bit
And the drinks were real bad
But the cheapest that they had
And we was lookin' all around us
When these two chicks found us
And they asked with a smile
Could they sit for a while
And did we-all think
We could buy 'em each a drink?

Well, I said, "Great!"
But Slim said, "Wait!
Just one minute, I'm not agin it
But what was you thinkin'"
That you might be drinkin'?
And they both said, "Doubles!"
And Slim said "No,
Thanks, because I believe
That we're gonna have to go."
He looked over at me and said "Man alive!
Would you believe ten seventy-five
Apiece?"

Well, the chicks huffed off
And the waiter teed off
Said, "You want another drink?"
Said Slim, "Let us think
And when we get through
Don't call us, 'cause we'll call you!"

We sipped for a while
Just a-fillin' our eyes
And then these three
Big dudes came by
Sayin', "Would y'all like to leave us?"
And Slim said, "No, 'cause we're not through!"
And they said, "You know, we could assist you!"
Slim said we could do without
And we got up and we strolled out.

Well, we had to pass by
This gal and a guy
And I saw a gleam
In Old Slim's eye
And he snatched her drink
Said, "Whaddya think?"
And he held it up to see
And he winked back at me
Then he put it to his lip
And he took a little sip
Said, "Ginger ale!"
And the guy turned pale
Then he reached for Old Slim
And me and Old Slim
Was a-runnin' and a-hopin'
But the door wasn’t open
And the doorman wasn’t helpin’

Slim hit him in the gut, and
I hit the button, and
We both hit the street
And three pairs of feet
Fell right in behind
And it crossed my mind
That we wouldn't get away
Then I heard Slim say
"When I give the sound
Just turn yourself around
And catch him with your knuckles
Where the belt buckle buckles!"

Then he said, "All right!"
And with all my might
I poked that gent
And down he went
And Slim got the other
And the remaining brother
Turned right quickly around
And headed back to town.

Well, just about then
The noise began and
There was black and whites
And red and blue lights
And me and Slim didn't dally
We turned down the alley
They wasn't funnin'
So we took off runnin'.

Then Slim started slowin'
Says, "Where we goin'?"
*We parked our car
Right in front of that bar!"

Well, we ran through the alley
Strolled up to the car
And the car wasn't locked
The cops were thicker’n sin
But we just climbed in
And Slim drove her out of there
But they didn't seem to care.

Having seen the big city
We returned to Ypsilanti!
It Was Not a Pretty Sight

The songs that follow were written about events also described to me by my good neighbor, Tom Pyle. The little Polish fellow was Tom's friend at work. The fellow with the car to sell was Tom himself, and so was the fellow arrested for possession of a gun in a bar; both stories are true as told. The other stories are based on real events, but the details are not necessarily precisely correct. I sing these songs to a tune that came out somewhat similar to the melody in Tom T. Hall's wonderful story, *Two Weeks in a Country Jail.*

There's a little Polish fellow at the factory where I work
He's a good beer-drinkin' buddy, but he's got this funny quirk
When he ever tells a story, if it's wrong or if it's right
He always ends by saying, "It was not a pretty sight!"

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
He always ends by saying, "It was not a pretty sight!"

He told about this guy he knew who said that he would bet
The woman that he could not win was not invented yet.
He said he always wowed them with his devastating charms,
And before the night was over they'd be lying in his arms.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight.
Such macho braggadocio was not a pretty sight.

They were sitting in a downtown bar, sipping lager beer
When my friend said, "Well, I think I see the lady coming here."
She walked into the bar and took a table all alone.
My friend said you could see that she was muscle to the bone.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight.
The way that fellow looked at her was not a pretty sight.
The waitress came and took her order for a double scotch.
My friend's friend said, "Just lay your money down and watch!"

He walked up to her table with a smile upon his lips,
And sat down close beside her with a hand across her hips.
It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight.
The way he snuggled up to her was not a pretty sight.
He got a quick reaction of a sort he did not seek.  
He felt that lady's elbow as it jabbed across his cheek.  
She came up from that table like a panther from its lair.  
With two hands on his buckle she removed him from his chair.  

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight.  
The way she jerked him to his feet was not a pretty sight.  
She grabbed him by the collar and she groined him with her knee,  
"On weekends I'm the bouncer but I'll do this job for free."

Just before she threw him out the door she gave a grin,  
And told him it was better not to show his face again.  
It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight.  
The way she tossed him out that door was not a pretty sight.  

* * *

My neighbor the mechanic had a souped-up car to sell  
He put it in the papers and he advertised it well  
A fellow came to see it on a Sunday morning late  
My neighbor had been drinking, but he said he'd demonstrate.  

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight  
The way he staggered to that car was not a pretty sight.  

He took her down the road into the old church parking lot  
Spun her in the gravel, he was really getting hot  
He brought her down that rural road one hundred miles per  
Scattering dogs, cats, and chickens, leaving feathers, blood, and fur.  

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight  
The neighbors all agreed that it was not a pretty sight.  

He tried to slide a right hand turn and hit a concrete wall  
Everyone came running but he wasn't hurt at all  
He broke that car in half and left it hanging on the wall  
And the fellow said he guessed he didn't want it after all.  

* * *
My neighbor used to drink and have a little too much fun
One evening in a bar a fellow saw he had a gun
My neighbor, who collected them, said this one it was tops,
But the barkeep saw him show it, and he went and called the cops.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
The way that barkeep looked at him was not a pretty sight.

My friend just then decided to depart the neighborhood
But his buddy with the car was not prepared to leave for good
He said, "Just climb into the back seat and duck down out of sight.
The cops will never find you, and I'll be along, all right."

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
A grown man hiding in a car is not a pretty sight.

The cops were not exactly dumb, they searched the parking lot
They found my neighbor hiding there, and roughly dragged him out
They slapped the handcuffs on him and then threw him in the back.
When he asked if he could just explain they gave his head a crack.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
Believe me when I tell you, it was not a pretty sight.

One cuff was snapped across my neighbor's fancy wrist watch band
He said it hurt and stopped the circulation in his hand
The cops replied that his complaints were making them both sick
One reached around and popped him with the end of his nightstick.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
That bump upon my neighbor's head was not a pretty sight.

My neighbor is part Cherokee and built just like a steer
Those officers they did not grasp his temperament, I fear
They drove down to the jailhouse, and they jerked him through the door
If they did it once again they'd do it differently, I'm sure.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
The look upon my neighbor's face was not a pretty sight.
They passed the sergeant at the desk and headed down the stair
That is when they found themselves both flying through the air
The sergeant at the desk leaped up to aid them in their fight
Right quickly he discovered that he'd booked the selfsame flight.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
The way those cops went down the stairs was not a pretty sight.

They dragged him to the basement just to slam him in the hole
One had planned to kick him in, but he telegraphed his goal
My neighbor quickly stepped aside and kicked him in instead
He slid across the jail cell floor and cracked his lovin' head.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
The way my neighbor slicked that cop was not a pretty sight.

Somehow the whole thing ended with my neighbor going free
And he decided that the local bars were not the place to be
One cop said, "If you plan to do that trick again, just send a note to me,
And I'll make sure I'm off that night, and that's a guarantee.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
What my neighbor did while drinking, it was not a pretty sight.

* * *

My little Polish buddy used to brag about his wife
He said pleasing her was all that he would ever seek in life
He said she loved him dearly and he'd tell about her charms
All day at work he'd think about the next time in her arms.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
The way he'd roll his eyes and swoon was not a pretty sight.

One morning he decided that he simply could not wait
He jumped into his car and roared out through the factory gate
He never even told the boss why he was feeling blue
That longing for his darling wife had put him in a stew.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
To see a grown man lose his cool was not a pretty sight.
He turned into his driveway, took the front steps with a bound Tip-toed toward the bedroom when he heard a tiny sound He thought he would surprise her, but she surprised him too Some other guy was doing just what he'd come home to do.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight The way that fellow jumped and ran was not a pretty sight.

Next day when the word had passed, the men all gathered round To hear the gory details of the sordid mess he'd found Did the fellow ever find his clothes, and did they have a fight? He just shook his head and muttered, "It was not a pretty sight!"

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight Never mind about the details, it was not a pretty sight.

* * *

The guy who runs the power tools beside me on the shift Acts as though he knows it all and keeps the crew all miffed He puts the safety shields away where they cannot be found He says that they're just Mickey Mouse and hard to work around.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight To watch him working those machines was not a pretty sight.

When first I knew this fellow all his fingers numbered ten But now he has to use his toes or count his thumbs again Pointing with precision is no longer his best suit And typing with his pinkie has become his main pursuit.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight Believe me when I tell you, it was not a pretty sight.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight Believe me when I tell you, it was not a pretty sight.

* * *
This fellow wasn't wrapped too tight.

He wasn't playing with a full deck.

He didn't have both oars in the water.

It was not a pretty sight, not a pretty sight
You're free to use this ending, it was not a pretty sight.
The Ballad of Bill Suiter

Bill Suiter is a name difficult for me to remember
Even when he was lying in the woods just up my road
His eyes popped out by a bulldozer tread
That caught him across the bridge of his nose,
There in the dark shadows of Freedom Township.

He might have been mildly surprised, this Suiter
At two ambulances, three wreckers, and one tractor
Arriving to compete for the privilege of lifting that
Second-hand yellow machine off his sad face and dealing

With his poor mangled body. The neighbors were surprised
And I, too, at the traffic on our little dirt road.
So I followed one of those wreckers, walked
Down that muddy track into the woods,

Stood in the gloom of Saturday evening
With the skinny crowns of the partly logged-off forest
Towering eerily into the night sky above the flashlights
And the voices and the white, solemn, scared faces.

I heard the young fellow who had hooked the chain on the log
That flipped the bulldozer when it backed down the slope
Telling his friends about it quietly, sadly, puzzlingly.
I watched them winch the killer machine creakily upright.

I saw that no one quickly volunteered to drag those
Tragic remains free, but Leonard finally did it.
Well, I thought, it's his woods.
I left and went home to change my clothes,

Already late for some kind of business somewhere.
I forgot Bill Suiter's name along the way.
I was only able to tell my wife,
It's a name too difficult for me to remember.
Walter Bihlmeyer

Walter Bihlmeyer had a red face
An apprehensive countenance
Leaned on his cane and stuttered
As he walked around his barns.

His wife was a tall seventy-ish German girl
Who smiled and winked a lot, sold eggs
Said what she thought and spent much of her life
Doing housework for a professor in town.

Walter’s sister, who lived with Walter and Esther
And, it is said, never spent a night alone
Looked like someone else.
Walter and Esther had no children.

After thirty years of hanging, unused, in his barn
The great tall collars and bridles of Walter's work horses,
Sold at his auction sale,
Hang now in my barn.

The Esthers Bihlmeyer – there were
Two of them, you know
Esther on the Hill and Roy's Esther
Like the two Jake Clines in my

Growing-up township in Illinois.
The Jakes were distinguished
As Black and White
So my grandfather said.

No one told me why Esther on the Hill
Wasn't Walter's Esther, as she was,
Maybe because that friendly smiling man
Was instead Esther's Walter.

Roy's was the one with the flirty giggle
Passed on to her son John,
But in a less fetching version.
Esther and Roy's Jimmy died in Vietnam.
They took a pencil and paper to Washington,  
Traced his name off the war memorial;  
Roy called it "Jimmy's monument"  
And lost a tear when he said it.

Esther on the Hill had a good grin  
But no giggle. She'd look for you  
At the Farm Bureau meeting and say  
Something definite for the moment  
Like, "Well - - start talking!"

Once in a blizzard our daughters rode their  
Horses up to Esther's on the Hill  
To purchase some eggs for baking cookies,  
And she was so surprised to see them  
She gave them the eggs free.

Walter and Freda are dead now  
For a while Esther on The Hill was in a home. . .  
With no hill. At least she could not any more hear  
The bulldozers backing up toward her house  
From Leonard’s gravel pit farm.

Roy's Esther had a stroke  
Could not speak again forever  
But still giggled, or so I heard.

It’s sad she'll never again be out  
When I ride by on my horse,  
To giggle again and say it's a pretty one.
When Eddie Died

Old Tom went by to tell Amanda
If she needed anything she could call on him.

Before that, Old Tom was visited by Eddie
Sometimes on Saturday mornings after a rain, quietly,
The great skin bags of Eddie's affliction bouncing gently,
Hiding his neck as he slowly walked the barn lot,
Erasing strangely the face-shape,
Drawing the startled and covert stares
Of those determined to keep their distance
On the township roads: just about everyone
But Old Tom, watching the world with his deep eyes,
Blunt in words and thoughts, the Cherokee in him
Showing in straight tallness, skin-redness,
Gentleness toward helpless kinds of life,
Stubborn loneness, and narrowing of eyes
At every sign of authority.

Tom often talked to Eddie, sometimes helped out,
And Eddie returned each time to Amanda's affection,
Brother and sister in the great square clapboard house
Of their parents and their childhood, and before that
The community dance hall at Freedom Lake, all of
The grand upstairs still a single room. Leaning
On my gate, his somber eyes on a distant field,
Tom spoke grimly of some he said he’d heard, had whispered
That the thirty years could have been as man and wife.
More, he claimed bitterly, than Eddie's neck growths,
That empty rumor “may have kept the Christians away.”

Gentle Amanda, left alone,
Old kind face collapsed,
Eyes sweeping aimlessly,
Told the house and barn and sky
And Tom, that she was hurting so
She couldn't know

of any other need.
Two and a Half Per Cent

So that’s the raise for this year,
With apologies for its relationship
To the inflation rate.

Oh, well, what the hell,
It’s better than some poor devil,
Still an assistant professor,
Getting two and a half per cent
Of a whole lot less,
Or maybe two, and still
With kids to feed.
How can that be that fair?

But, then, I am surely worth more too.
These promises of upward mobility
Are obviously insufficient, and not
The key, I’d say, to understanding
Keynesian economics and the expanding
Of stratified society and concern for
Registering increases in the GNP,
Plus the fact that forty-seven people
Were stabbed or shot in NYC
While I was there for five days
At the meetings of the American Psychological Association,
Participated in by ten thousand or so souls
Spending at least $500 each around the Waldorf Astoria
And afraid to walk outside at night.

Well, again, why not take the big risks
For the big promises? I’d do it
If I were poor in that clanless
Stratified horror of a place.

No one cares about being on the bottom
If he knows it’s temporary.
But few can tolerate it
If they think it’s permanent.
And, worse, more so for them than for the rest.

I’d be an outlaw there, sure as hell,
Lacking my two and a half per cent.
But, then, again, I am surely worth more,
So why not get on something like Red Fred
And dash into the local repositories one by one,
And snatch away their funds?

Three local kids did it, without masks,
Just walked into the Bridgewater Bank
And took it all and drove off
Like the modern James boys.

But they had no hideout, and, of course,
Almost every soul in there knew
Each of them quite well, and so
They were simply arrested forthwith.

But on Red Fred?
At least I would be doing it with style.
Dash, maybe.
Think of the headlines!

Cowboy professor on tall sorrel gelding
Holds up local bank
Escapes with thousands
Says society owes it to him
Because he is a slapdash genius

Perfectly willing all his life
To give out free advice
To anyone who asked
And even some who didn’t.

If things didn’t go right, I suppose,
The headlines might be saying: Aging
Professor falls on his butt . . .

But I’ll not court such thoughts,
At least not for a few decades or so.

Maybe not ever.
XI

VERSES JUST FOR FUN
The Blonde in the Lavender Buick

I wrote this piece of American graffiti about an event that made me smile one day in 1951.

Saturday noon, I was drivin’ through town
Easin’ along in the traffic, I was homeward bound
And takin’ it slow when something shot around
It was a Blonde in a Lavender Buick.

She whisked around like a purple streak
And passed two more with a narrow squeak
I could see their heads turn and the cuss in their eyes
And the double-takes and the looks of surprise
At The Blonde in the Lavender Buick.

She herded that Buick with professional abandon
Left all the rest of us like we were standin’
Seems to me that it came right then to my mind
That the traffic was speeding up a little behind
The Blonde in the Lavender Buick.

She tried to beat the red light, but didn’t quite
The cars jammed close when she stopped at the light
And I was all set to pull up on the right
And squeeze alongside that wonderful sight
The Blonde in the Lavender Buick,

When a flash of blue smoke and a rattle went by
And a middle-aged guy with a gleam in his eye
And a nervous glance in his rear view mirror
Wheeled his battered old Chevrolet nearer
To The Blonde in the Lavender Buick.

Everyone was maneuvering to get just a peep
A kid roared by in a blue-painted Jeep
And cut in too close, it seemed to me
As he craned his neck for a better look-see
At The Blonde in the Lavender Buick.
They sped away quick at the turn of the light
And motors were gunning to left and to right
And, still, when that Buick sped out of my sight
Old guy and middle-aged and teen-aged sprite
Were chasing close after with all of their might
The Blonde in the Lavender Buick.

Who, me? Well, I have to admit
I shoved the old foot pedal down just a bit
And cut a few sashays I wouldn’t’ve otherwise
To get a few looks that I couldn’t’ve otherwise
At The Blonde in the Lavender Buick.
The Clarksburg Cat

One time when the kids were little and we were on our way to Florida, we spent the night with our old friends, the Stinson family, in Clarksburg, Ohio. Clarksburg is a tiny hamlet, and Dusty Stinson was the local veterinarian. When he was in vet school and I in graduate school our families lived in neighboring apartments in the GI Village at the Ohio State University.

While he worked that evening Dusty told me a story about an event that had just occurred there. It was almost too funny to be true. The mayor’s cat had been shot by an irate neighbor, and Dusty had treated it. Emotions had run high, and there were a few unusual complications. As we drove along the next day I started humming a little tune under my breath and began to make Dusty’s story into a song. Lorrie wrote down the words as I thought them up, and it was all done by the time we got to Florida.

A year or so later I sang the song for Dusty and his family at their home. Dusty liked it so much that after we had returned to Michigan he phoned me one night to ask if I would send a tape of the song so that he could play it at an upcoming party in Clarksburg. I didn’t get to it right away, and he phoned me again to insist. So I sent the tape to him.

The next time we went to Clarksburg we discovered that I had become a celebrity. Every kid in Clarksburg had learned the song, and the tape was so nearly worn out that they had re-recorded it. The Stinsons all called me “Acky” because their kids had given me a name before they could pronounce “Alex,” but Dusty started introducing me around Clarksburg as “The Clarksburg Cat.” Everyone seemed to know what he meant.

My stories to my friends and students made Dusty famous too, in a different set of circles. Several years after I wrote The Clarksburg Cat, I was driving with a carful of graduate students and my daughters, Nancy and Susan, to study 17-year cicadas. As we crossed through Dusty’s part of southern Ohio on a small country blacktop road, I began to tell the students some stories about Dusty, my unusual macho veterinarian friend who worked in this general area. As the stories wore on, Nancy, sitting next to me, abruptly nudged me and in a soft voice asked if a white Chevrolet van parked off the road near a creek might not be Dusty’s. Astonished, I slowed and saw that, sure enough, Dusty and his son, Drake, were there with an old farmer in bib overalls. Dusty was descenting a skunk on an old flat rack wagon that had been pulled into a pasture near the creek for just that purpose.

Without saying anything I turned the car into the pasture, drove up near the van and parked. Nancy and I got out, and the students, somewhat perplexed, unloaded behind us. As Dusty looked up, I yelled, “What in hell are
you doing?” He yelled right back at me as if he’d been expecting us all along, and without taking a breath started giving us a narrated course in skunk de-scenting. Drake was videotaping the surgery, and while Dusty worked he informed all of us that he also had a film of himself castrating a horse and if we had time we could stop at his house and view it. He turned toward the old farmer standing nearby, apparently the owner of the skunk, and told him loudly that I was the fellow who wrote The Clarksburg Cat.

Shortly afterward the old farmer sidled up close to me, with obvious respect, and, to my pleasure, said The Clarksburg Cat was the best song he had ever heard. He dipped his head admiringly and added, “It’s better than any song I’ve heard on the radio!”

By this time my students were truly astonished. When we got back in the car to drive on, everything was quiet for a while, then one student acknowledged that he had been sure I was exaggerating my stories about Dusty. Now, he said, he knew that I was not. The rest exclaimed in agreement. Everybody laughed for a long time as we went on our way.

The only thing that is not precisely accurate in the verse is that Dusty charged the mayor $44 rather than $40. But he told me he was going to charge $40, so he made that change after the song was completed.

By a tricky twist of fate as I was travelin’ down the road
It fell my lot to hear of a peculiar episode
So wrassle down your girdles, girls, and hang on to your hats
And I’ll tell you all the story of the Clarksburg Cat.

The Clarksburg Cat was scarcely anything to catch your eye
Till the Mayor’s nearest neighbor up and shot him on the fly
It was rumored this old tom cat liked his pullets young and fat
And forgot to heed the warning when he heard ‘em holler “Scat!”

The Clarksburg vet was readying to treat somebody’s sow
Or perhaps he’d just returned from cleaning Alice Martin’s cow
At any rate he’d surely donned his Frank Buck Hat
When the Mayor’s daughter entered with the Clarksburg Cat.

That youthful DVM became a hero then and there
For he patched that wayward feline with the most exacting care
Still old Tom’s woes hadn’t ended with the bullet’s painful zip
For he lost a bit of scrotum when the scalpel slipped.

Now the Mayor’s comely daughter still was shedding bitter tears
And our trusty DVM could see his duty plain and clear
I would guess he sent her homeward with a reassuring pat
And instructions for the nursing of the Clarksburg Cat.

In court the mayor fined his neighbor fifty-seven fifty
For discharging firearms within the limits of the city
Little did he know the vet’s bill would be forty dollars flat
Just for patching up the innards of the Clarksburg Cat.

The mayor and his tom cat to this day are still alive
I am told the Mayor’s kittens rarely number under five
And although the town is over-run with pussies thin and fat
There’s none can hold a candle to the Clarksburg Cat.

The mayor and his tomeat to this day are still alive
I understand the Mayor’s kittens rarely number under five
And although the town is over-run with pussies thin and fat
There’s none can hold a candle to the Clarksburg Cat.
The Ballad of New York City’s Finest

*You Load Three Thousand Tons, and What Do You Get?*

This song was written from the newspaper and television news accounts of the 1987 event that it chronicles with fair accuracy. I sing it to a modification of the tune to *The Doom of Floyd Collins*.

If you’ll linger for a moment, there’s a story I will tell
It’s a sad one that I fear will tear your heartstrings all to hell
It’s about the old Big Apple, and her plan to donate, free
Three thousand tons of garbage to the world and you and me.

It was New York City’s finest, and they loaded it with pride
That tugboat captain towed his barge out on the evening tide
Right past the Harbor Lady, with her nostrils in the sky
And there’s some that say they quivered as it slowly passed her by.

The captain, filled with presence, headed down that Jersey shore
Some North Carolina bureaucrats would take his load, they swore.
But, alas, for that good captain, and he never did know why
Those tar heels gave a sniff and said, “Just take it right on by!”

Now truly filled with sadness, and followed by his reek
The captain towed the ripening load with teardrops on his cheek
On down beyond Miami and around old Florida’s tip
For they told him that New Orleans said it might be worth the trip.

But those Cajuns looked it over, after three weeks in the sun
And they shook their heads and pointed, and said, “Please just take it on!”
So he headed down toward Mexico, with the smell behind his boat
And his tears were flowing freely now, with the garbage still afloat.

The Mexicans did not want it, they said in *Español*
From helicopters armed with guns, and it seared his very soul
The captain was offended, t’was a matter now of pride
He would not beg, he would not plead, t’would not be dignified.
In sorrow then he swung around, and out to sea he stared
Wondering if down in Belize there’d be someone who cared.
His radio he silenced, he sailed on in mental strife
Determined that he’d guard his precious cargo with his life.

The rich and pungent odor rose into the stratosphere
In Paris and Dakota it was measured late last year
It was in the conversation of some astronauts topside
And in India they thought another sacred cow had died.

It was noted on the evening news the last time that I heard
That lonely tug was sailing still in vain around the world
The planets keep on spinning, and the captain of that scow
Still tied securely to his load is sailing somewhere now.

It was New York City’s finest, and they loaded it with care
But many an innocent upchuck while inhaling nearby air
And little did they realize the trouble that would pop
As they tried to rid their city of three thousand tons of slop.

The Ballad of New York City’s Finest

If you’ll linger for a moment there’s a story I will tell. It’s a sad one that I fear will tear your heartstrings all to Hell. It’s a bout the old Big Apple and her plan to donate free three thousand tons of garbage to the world and you and me.
Nevada

One of my Army buddies at Fort Knox was a crusty half-Cherokee rodeo rider from Nevada named Bill Parker. Bill wasn’t a very big fellow, and not much about him stood out. The way he talked, though, made a lot of people think he was a braggart. I remember once, when I hardly knew him, we were all sitting around talking about how we’d like a big, juicy steak. Bill said mildly that he liked his steaks red, just dropped into a hot skillet, flipped quickly, and removed. He said he liked the blood only a little coagulated. Not long afterward I had a chance to test him on that. Lorrie and I had invited Bill and his little medical service unit of five or six soldiers over for a steak supper. I broiled all the steaks but Bill’s. I treated that one about as he had suggested, except that I couldn’t resist leaving it in just a wee bit longer than he had indicated. When he had finished sopping up the blood with a piece of bread he told me it was decent, but I had left it in the skillet just a little too long.

Bill came up with other surprises. We all guffawed when he said one night that he had been the World Champion Bull Rider for 1951. Without speaking further he stood up and went in, opened up his foot locker, and pulled out the big silver buckle that said it was true. He also claimed to have worked for both Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. Much to the amusement of everyone around him, he referred to them as Roy and Gene. Some time after that, when Gene Autry happened to appear in Louisville, one of the men told Bill he’d seen it in the newspaper and added with a sly little grin that if Bill wanted to go and visit with his old friend he’d be glad to ride along to Louisville with him. Bill appeared to be delighted, and off they went. When they got to Louisville and saw Autry through the crowd Bill stood up tall, cupped his hands, and yelled out, “Hey! Gene!” Autry wheeled around and bello­wed back, “Hey, Bill! How the hell are you!” They went off with their arms on each other’s shoulders.

Bill also told wild stories about the fist fights he had been in, and for a long time no one believed those either. Then one night he got drunk and was arrested and charged with assault and battery. He asked one of the guys in his outfit to go to court with him. This fellow reported back that when the judge saw three battered and bloody faces lined up in front of him he asked which were the victims and which the attackers. When he was informed that all three were victims and Bill, who had not a mark on him, was the defendant, he looked at Bill’s modest frame and the three over-sized rednecks he had taken on and said mildly, “Case dismissed.” Bill got so angry at the delay in his promotion from private E-2 to Private First Class that he said if they ever did try to make him a PFC he would reject it. No one thought he actually would do that, but he did. He walked into the captain’s office, saluted, and told the captain he didn’t want the promotion, and the Army could
take it and shove it. Then he saluted again and walked out. Once a rodeo visited a town near the post. Bill went over there and entered every event for three nights in a row, winning every one except the saddle bronc riding, which he lost once because the cinch broke. The rodeo left two days early, with all its contract riders. Another time he heard about a rodeo where they were offering $1000 to anyone who could ride a certain Brahma bull for ten seconds. Bill went over to sign up, but they recognized him and said it was just for amateurs. A couple of nights later Bill came back drunk, and when no one volunteered to ride the bull he said he’d do it for nothing. He did, and the fellows with him said he stayed on long past the whistle and got off at his leisure.

Bill liked horses, and he liked liquor. He had some Cherokee relatives farther down in Kentucky, and they used to send him moonshine in clear glass gallon jugs. Sometimes on a Saturday we would all go down to the officers’ stable on Fort Knox and spend the entire afternoon. There was an old guitar down there, and sometimes I’d strum it and sing cowboy songs, and we’d all drink Bill’s Cherokee moonshine and tell stories. Bill liked my songs, and one day he declared that he was going to buy a bar in Reno, and when he did he’d hire me as entertainer. He also said that his biggest ambition in life was to become the governor of Nevada. By that time he had me convinced, and I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he made it.

He wasn’t a very big feller, around 150, I’d guess
And he stood about five-nine, or maybe a little less
He wasn’t the kind to draw your notice in a crowd
Outside of the fact that his talkin’ was a little loud.
Matter of fact it was his braggin’ that brought him to my note
Fer it don’t take very much of that to get my goat.

He said he come from Reno, and was part Cherokee
And there wasn’t any call to doubt him there, as far as I could see.
He claimed to be a rodeo rider, and he sure looked like the type
That I’d seen with two-bit outfits follerin’ carnivals and the like.
But about ten tall tales later I was getting’ my belly full
When he claimed to be the world’s champion at ridin’ rodeo bulls.

We all gave him the hee-haw on that, and it must have made him sore
Because he clammed up for a while and didn’t say no more
We thought we had him figgered for a loudmouth and that’s all
Makin’ all sorts of fancy claims about things we couldn’t call
Little things or big, nothin’ seemed to phase him
He’d light in and stretch the truth, time and time again.
One of the boys was tellin’ about a fist fight he had won
And Nevada began to reminisce about a bigger and better one
The other feller whipped two guys, so Nevada said he’d cleaned up three
And on and on it went until it was commencin’ to gall me.
The boys were discussin’ beefsteak, and Nevada said he liked his raw
Then he claimed he was goin’ to be governor, and that was the last straw.

A boy there named Kentucky said he thought he’d heard enough
He stood up kind of slow-like and said, “Nevada, I’m callin’ your bluff!
Get up and make a fist, boy, fer I’m about to treat you rough!”
Well, none of us liked Kentucky too much, ‘cause he was a loudmouth too
But we all figured that Nevada had bit off more than he could chew.

Nevada stood up slow-like too, and looked at the crowd around him
And Kentucky let loose a roundhouse that really should’ve downed him.
Should’ve, that is, but Nevada picked it off real neat
And his left to Kentucky’s chin raised him clean off his feet.

We all watched Kentucky go down, but it happened so bloomin’ quick
That none of us noticed he was comin’ down on a sharp-cut stick
That stick run right into Kentucky, and the blood was gushing out quick
And I knew he was a goner when his legs began to kick.
I just stood there, kind of numb, like everyone else, a-getting’ sick
Until the silence was broken by a switchblade click.

The blade was bein’ pointed, and holdin’ it was Johnny McCutcheon
And he started for Nevada before any of us could touch him.
Kentucky had been his friend, and there was hate in Johnny’s eye.
As he started movin’ forward, he said, “Nevada, you’re about to die!”

Then he leaped right at Nevada, and the blade flashed an arc
But exactly like Kentucky’s fist, it just plain missed its mark
I heard a little thin crack, and the knife sailed out at an angle
And McCutcheon let out a scream and his arm was all a-dangle.

I guess we all just stood a while, struck dumb with numb surprise
But Nevada dropped down by Kentucky, with tears in both his eyes.
“Why did you do that, Kentucky?” He cried,
“I wasn’t tryin’ to start no fight with you guys!
I was just tellin’ the truth, like you, and no lies!”
The Farmer and the Weatherman

The weatherman comes on each night and makes me apoplectic,
If he has to say it looks like rain he gets apologetic,
“Sorry, folks, there may be storms, things may be getting wet!
We’re watching this front carefully, on that, folks, you can bet!
But maybe, if we’re lucky, all the rains will pass us by,
And you good folks with picnics planned can stay all nice and dry!”

I wonder if this fellow knows where all good things come from?
You know, stuff like food and drink, and even oxygen.
Do you suppose he knows that trees need rain to reverse polluting
Of all the CO2 and crud we humans keep producing?
I wonder if he knows that for a farmer to succeed
He has to have a little rain on which his crops can feed?

I stroll across my dry cracked fields of hay and corn and wheat,
And pray for just a little rain to keep me on my feet.
I pump more water for my stock and watch the well go dry;
Sometimes the only moisture’s in the corner of my eye.
And then I hear the weatherman say, “Folks, the news is grim!
There’s another front I see, the chance of missing rain is slim!”

I’m flipping through my channels striving desperately to find
A weatherman who understands, who has a broadened mind,
Who knows that everyone would die without a little rain,
If I find one I will never touch that channel switch again!
Lawn Pride

This verse is a perversion of the song that formed the background of the television series called *Rawhide*. It “honors” the millions of Americans who each year outdo the farmers in re-fertilizing, de-pestifying, and proudly mowing, mowing, mowing increasingly large areas of their sometimes mystifyingly spacious lawns. And then there are those who drag out their oversized mufferless lawn mowers and roar them along the border between their lawn and that of their nearest neighbor, who is having a family reunion get-together at picnic tables a few yards away.

Mowin’, mowin’, mowin’,
Mowin’, mowin’, mowin’,
Mowin’, mowin’, mowin’,
Keep mowin’, mowin’, mowin’, Lawn Pride!

Keep mowin’, mowin’, mowin’,
Keep them mowers mowin’, Lawn Pride!
Even if the grass ain’t growin’
Just keep them mowers mowin’,

Mowin’, mowin’, mowin’,
Keep them mowers mowin’,
Through rain and wind and weather,
Hell bent for leather,

Wishin’ my beer was by my side
All the things I’m missin’,
Good TV, beer, and pissin’

Are waiting at the end of my Ride.
Mow ‘em down, rake ‘em up,
Rake ‘em up, mow ‘em down,
Mow ‘em down, rake ‘em up, Lawn Pride!
Keep mowin’, mowin’, mowin’,
The neighbor’s grass is growin’
Keep them mowers mowin’, Lawn Pride!
Don’t try to understand ‘em
If you see ‘em mowin’ random
Soon they’ll be drinkin’ high and wide
My heart’s calculatin’,
My TV will be waitin’,
Waitin’ at the end of my Ride.

Never mind the neighbor’s party
He might think that he’s a smarty.
He’s bound to hear me mowin’ high and wide
When I mow on Sunday early
It drives that neighbor squirrelly
And always it works just like a charm.

I’ve cleared so much for mowin’
I just have to keep on goin’
It’s beginnin’ to look like it’s a farm.
You can make ‘em all go squirrelly
If you start in mowin’ early
You can send that Sunday party all inside.

Just keep on calculatin’
Your TV will be waitin’
Waitin’ at the end of your Ride.

Mow ‘em down, hit ‘em up,
Hit ‘em up, mow ‘em down,
Mow ‘em down, hit ‘em up, Lawn Pride!
Keep mowin’, mowin’, mowin’,
Mowin’, mowin’, mowin’, Lawn Pride!
Just-So Story Revisited

The world of worldly scientists agrees
That the giraffe’s neck grew just to reach to the trees
But I’d like to argue another way around
That it lengthened to continue to reach to the ground.

With a giraffe’s neck I am sure I would feed
On lofty foods whatever I’d need
At the very top if I could chew it
But that doesn’t mean I evolved to do it.

The horse’s neck is longish too
And what has it evolved to do?
The legs are clearly long for speed
And the neck’s as long as just their need.

Deer and goats eat tree leaves too
But legs to run and climb will do
To reach up high they rear and bound
Their necks, of course, just reach the ground.

The other argument to check
Requires the front end serve the neck
It may be good for reach-and-steppin’
But also it’s a splendid weapon.

Name any other beast you like
Can kill a lion with a single strike
But, strike or not, foremost and first
It had to reach to slake its thirst.

The giraffe’s long neck, then, I suggest
Derives from evolving mighty forelegs and chest
It’s not necessarily the other way ‘round
The neck may be long just to reach the ground.

Reckon?
Exploring the Universe

Twelve good scientists could not agree
What the most urgent question might possibly be,
And nine of them smiled secretly,
And went away confidently,
Each to his own private laboratory.

The three that were left argued on valiantly,
Ultimately agreed on the most urgently
Pertinent question, smiled secretly,
And went away confidently,
Each to his own private laboratory.
The Doctoral Student’s Candidacy Examination

The molecular biologist said she wanted to know exactly what he was going to do.

The systematist said, “Please specify the precise techniques you plan to employ.”

The mathematical botanist’s predilections: “Present a neat and well-defined hypothesis with neat and well-defined predictions and neat and well-defined tests leading to neat and well-defined conclusions.”

The field biologist had his own special quirk: he said the fellow should simply marshal his very best common sense, and then get the hell out there in the field and simply go to work.

There’s only one rule in science, mate, And that one is simple: “Just get it straight!”
The State of the Botanist

Telling It Like It is

Move to Florida, the Mildew State
Get the Tropical Torpor and vegetate
Live without winter, spring, or the fall
Where the mycelial funginess creeps over all.

Dwell among oldsters who can’t stomach change
No chills, no thrills, no home on the range
Go where even the day lengths are static
If your mind’s too fragile to grasp the dramatic.

Join the decrepit and the gone-to-bleep
Line up early for the chow that’s cheap
Surrounded by weeds from everywhere
Bask in the dishwater Crackers call air.

Move to Florida, stroll through the woods.
Look for the birds, look out for the hoods.
Move to Florida, decay with impunity,
Expire in a New Jersey retirement community.
The Billboard Bandits

Around 1970 the state of Michigan had some difficulty with the federal government and the aesthetically-minded public because it allowed businesses to place billboards closer than the law allowed to its interstate highways. Even though countless billboards were put up in strictly illegal locations, somehow the Michigan Legislature just couldn’t get off the pot and put teeth into the state law so as to get them removed. Indeed, they never did get around to it until the feds threatened loss of funds and some other dire things that I can’t remember. A good deal of outrage was expressed in the newspapers around Ann Arbor, which was a hotbed of dissidence anyhow in those years, and the suspicion was widespread that the state legislature was simply too sympathetic to the money-makers.

At some point in the hue and cry, the reasons for which may not be sketched out with great accuracy above, billboards mysteriously began to come down in the middle of the night. Somebody (or somebodies) with chain saws were taking things into their own hands. Just about everyone cheered the acts, and the feeling developed that they must all be the work of some people-loving, corruption-hating hero. The State Police, on the other hand, didn’t think much of the act and tried valiantly to apprehend the culprit. That made him (them?) even more heroic to the folks with strong opinions, including a lot of kids of high school age. The people responsible for the illegal signs, incredibly, put their signs right back up, some using steel posts or protective bands of steel. The whole thing became a particularly intense issue because teenagers were just about then deciding that the establishment was rotten through and through, and feeling unusually alienated. It was still the Nixon-Vietnam time, and everyone with an open mind needed a Robin Hood. The issue was trivial, but perhaps that made it all the more significant as a symbol of rebellion. Our daughter, Nancy, who was a faintly rebellious high-schooler then, kept us posted on the likely identities of the most recent billboard-downers, and in the middle of all the nonsense I wrote two verses. I had to call them II and III because, just before I finished the first one, some kid at Huron High School beat me to it. And he called his verse exactly what I was going to call mine: The Ballad of the Billboard Bandit. I always wondered if he got the title from Nancy because I revealed the title a while before I wrote the verse.
Ballad of the Billboard Bandit II

In the Great Lakes State when the hour is late
And the clouds are dense by the Freeway fence
A shadow moves and a headlight proves
That the man we’ve got is a man that’s hot
He knows the law and it sticks in his craw
And you’ve got to hand it to The Billboard Bandit.

Chorus
Late in the night, hear the chain saw bite
As a twelve-foot Bill Knapp takes the big rap
Swing of an axe and another sign cracks
It’s a Stuckey’s now must bite the night dust
Well, he strikes for the right and he takes his flight
And you’ve got to hand it to The Billboard Bandit.

Times are sad when the law’s so bad.
That an illegal sign can stand so fine
If the day should arrive while you’re still alive.

This version came along about a year later:

Driving west of town where the signs had come down
Until I-94 was nearly clear once more
I rubbed my eyes and blinked in surprise
To my astonishment, back up they went!

Who’s policing the state when these folks operate?
It’s broad daylight when they’re taking their flight
And they’re pressing their luck in a clearly marked truck!
The law is plain: Don’t build or maintain
So it seems a bit weird that no one’s interfered!
After all, what is the role of the Highway Patrol?

Some say the cops all let ‘em be,
for all of the rest of us to see,
And they just keep looking all around
for the clever guy who takes ‘em down!
A Note to Mitch

Sitting in the Divisional Board Meeting of the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, listening to your inarticulate professor buddy, defend the Interdepartmental Neuroscience Program using “lay” for “lie” and pronouncing “magnanimous” “magnaminous” and such intellectual things,

I had the distinct feeling I was participating in a meeting of the tribal elders, seeing all those pipe-smoking procrastinators, who measure accomplishment in time spent meeting and come prepared to use the entire afternoon whether or not there is something to talk about, as naked painted Aboriginals plotting how to keep something from the younger fellows. And, you know, reflection convinces me it’s so. When one operates on the hypothesis that every organism “ought to be” (i.e., in terms of its evolutionary history “is”) doing at any particular time the precise thing that, considering its entire repertoire of activities and the entire range of its environmental situations as related to environments past, is maximally reproductive (sensu latu), it gives one pause. After reviewing the physical features, mental attributes, and peculiarities of character of each individual at some (distressing) length and realizing at frequent intervals how much I would rather be engaged in telling some lovely lady that being with her is like writing a provocative poem, I told the chairman I had business elsewhere (I did), and I left. Maybe in twenty years but not yet am I a tribal elder.
The Tree Swing

Is a dark, reassuring friend
Holding in permanent, secret dusk
For my repose the great rough board
Where I shall always perch, my fingers
Gripping familiar woven strength of
Taut hemp close by my two sides
To rise out smoothly, departing
From the sloping black mulch floor
Of the somber leaf-lined cavity
Carved out for this arc. My feet will grope
Together silently through space to caress
Lightly the bordering leaf-tips, pulling
At the empty air, and then draw backward
With the sweep. Or I will lean dangerously
To zoom the substrate dizzily near beneath
My gaze, the press of blood inside my heart;
And high above the road cut I can cast
My imperious gaze on all who pass
Before they see me there.
The Pocket Pebble

Insert it gently into a pocket where
Your fingers can secretly find it there,
A source of wonder as long as you care
And when you’ve absorbed its tiny perfection
Enter it carefully for future protection
Into your precious pebble collection.

Fine pocket stones await everywhere
Shy little pebbles that nestle and stare
From glacial gravel or rocky stream,
At prospective owners who shuffle and dream
Of discovering something not ever seen
Not ever glimpsed on a beach or a strand
Never admired by a caressing hand
Nor explored by a mind that searching sings
Of the endless charms of wee little things.

Sometimes it is shape and sometimes size
That catches the notice and pleasures the eyes
Sometimes a surface made rough or smooth
A polished stripe or a patterned groove
Sparkling streaks of black-white space
In the form of a frog or an ancient face,
An imbedded fragment of fossilized lace
The egg of a bird, its songs long sung,
Or maybe some de-scented dinosaur dung.
A Haircut Poem: 1950

Heads swiveling sharply
   Or already turned,
Girls, passing on city streets,
   Stare into barbershops,
With eyes not quite expressionless.
The Changing of the Seasons

In winter there is slight enjoyment
In living west of my employment
To face the sun both to and from
Is best described as sheer annoyment.

Come spring, though, my reward’s apparent
For then my roving eye, and errant,
Views female form both night and morn
Through summer garmentry transparent.
The Magpie Goose: A Difficult Rhyme

It came to my attention recently
That an Australian biologist named Frith, not Firth,
Whose place of business, unfortunately,
Was Canberra rather than Perth,
Had discovered in his studies of bird lives
That the males of *Anseranus semipalmatus* (not –*ata*)
Live happily with two permanent wives,
Which after all mightn’t be such a bad wayta.

I like poetry that explains itself

-- almost . . .
ANIMALS AND PLANTS

Crickets, Crows, Cockroaches, Trees, Mites, Ladybugs, Forked Fungus Beetles, Big Bluestem. . .
Of Ladybugs and Their Betters

Several years ago Bowie Hannah, audacious painter, writer, global thinker, and widow of the late great Harold (Hank) Hannah of Sangamon Township (Piatt County, Illinois), the University of Illinois (Dean), and the 101st Airborne in World War II (Colonel), wrote to ask me about, “The Ladybug.” She wondered: (1) is it really a bug, (2) are there males, (3) why are they in her house, (4) are they dirty, (5) do they eat anything she would not like them to eat, (6) how do they survive through the winter, (7) why do they emerge “too early” inside the house, and (8) do they cause hexes? With this poem I answered in the return mail. The beetle causing the main fuss is the Asian Ladybird Beetle, unusually abundant because it was recently introduced into this country (sans enemies) to consume alfalfa aphids.

Not quite ubiquitous and not right iniquitous
Not a bug do she be, but a beetle, don’t you see?
Not inevitably a she, standardly equitable is the he.
So, the nomen notwithstanding, dual sex has kept its standing.
Plainly do they have both sexes, and they plainly don’t cause hexes.

They’re just helpful and they’re friendly, rather harmless, rather cleanly,
In your house for just one reason, to withstand the winter season.
Spring compels them, so they come from the hibernaculum.
Proximate cause? Well, that’s not sure; if I must say, then temperature,
For in the spring it’s surely warmer, even under roof or dormer,

Where the darkness so prevails that every vision surely fails,
Then length of day, although reliable, is not available hence not liable.
Nevertheless, one must remember, it takes more than mere December
To meet the letters of the laws that govern insect diapause.

Celebrating winter warming does not lead to summer swarming,
And where the winters they are fickle, obligateness reigns as stickler.
Bottom line, without excuses: I don’t know what this bug uses,
Just that diverse combinations save the temperate insect nations.

So such beetles they are nice, so much better than are lice.
But I weary, saying, “Ma’am,” in the bathroom each a.m.,
As the little spotted lady slips across the sink and vanity.
Hence I’ve searched the whole wide earth for a pet of grander worth.
And I’m pleased here to announce, it’s a fellow with a bounce,
The princeliest of them all, and right heavenly his call,
A song miraculously rare, not a peer, not anywhere.
S’t’truth, he’s unbeatable thus far – there!
The cricket chirping on the hearth – e’er!

* * *

Much later Bowie asked, “Do these lady bugs bite?”
And I had to tell her that they do.
“But the bite is so mild, t’wouldn’t damage a child,
And it won’t discombobulate you.”

“And only those sweet little Asian ones do
-- bite, that is!”
The Ballad of the Forked Fungus Beetle

One of my doctoral students, Ann Pace, spent parts of two summers studying the behavior of *Bolitotherus cornutus*, known as “The Forked Fungus Beetle” because of two large horns on its anterior dorsal surface. She became fascinated with its apparently territorial behavior, and on one night her concentration earned her (I feel sure) the dubious distinction of being the only person in the world to have her bicycle stolen just as she was completing observations on a 45-minute fungus beetle fight. The other graduate students naturally teased her because of her enthusiasm for this droll project, and during the teasing some of the following lines were more or less spoken. For example, Bob Vinopal one day chuckled out the last two lines of the first verse. I mostly put the rest of them together.

Putones, incidentally, were dreamed up by the British spider expert, Theodore Savory, who reasoned that arthropods probably have something like thought, but, since all of their complicated behavior evolved independently of that of the vertebrates, it obviously wouldn’t do to call them thoughts. Hence, the invention of putones.

Robert Ardrey’s 1966 book, *The Territorial Imperative*, came out about the time Ann’s study was being completed, and the reference to early sin comes from Loren Eiseley’s review of the book. Eiseley said that Ardrey is a Neo-Calvinist who would have original sin written into man’s genes. Someone noted that he probably got the idea from the British geneticist Bateson’s remark that somewhere in the battle trenches during World War I a soldier commented in his presence that, “This genetics is just scientific Calvinism!”

Should anyone want to sing this verse it goes peculiarly well to the tune of *Ghost Riders in the Sky!*

A bold *Bolitotherus* on
A fattening fungus sat
And there was Territorial Imperative
Written all over this beetle cat.

With compound eyes he scrutinized
Intruders with disdain
And murderous purple putones flashed
Across his beetle brain.
For several months he sat alone
Upon his fungus pad
No coy female or reckless male
To challenge what he had.

And all the while he stood the trial
This beetle wild and free,
Patrolled his shelf and groomed himself
And waited patiently.

With measured Pace* he kept his place
Though bachelorhood seemed imminent;
No craze to mate or copulate
Could swerve him from his fine intent.

There were days he drove away
Strange males, both fat and lean,
Like early sin the will to win
Seemed written in his genes.

First June slipped by, and then July,
The days began to shorten;
Till autumn came, and still his game
Was fight ‘em, never court ‘em.

Years more he fought and all for naught,
And no evidence of fears,
His chitinous exoskeleton
Was scarred with scrapes and tears.

Then when it seemed an empty dream
To him Dame Fate had handed,
A young female with wings still pale
Upon his fungus landed.

T’was several days before his ways
Gave him a chance to greet her,
For in his rounds about the grounds
He simply did not meet her.
Then near sunset one night they met
And still he did not court her,
But fumed and fussed, believing her just
A male whose horns were shorter.

Of course, you say, but some fine day
When tempers had subsided,
Surely this pair would be cuddling there
In connubial bliss united.

Alas, if we stayed through all the days
Of cloudy skies and blue
Sad to discover, for this beetle lover
The story was simply not true.

For, uncommonly fond of his property bonds
He chose to remain aloof
And by those ties was sterilized
An evolutionary goof!

*I suppose I didn’t really need the pun!
Concerning the M Word

This we have learned from the Darwinist race
Mites have evolved at a frightening pace.

Acari are flourishing everywhere;
Unlike their insect cousins they’re
Auspiciously finding even the sea
A deliciously kosher place to be
From shallow shores and offshore benches
Right to the depths of the deepest trenches.

There are long and skinny mites living on hair
Dining on sebaceous things, and there
Are myobiids that pierce the skin
To suck indescribable liquid things.

Even on insectivores in Madagascar
Rodent glycyphagids are.

Acarologist blokes feel strangely good
To find everything one normally would
Expect on a rat
And in its scat.

And a good Rattus may
Carry eighteen species
Any fine day.

Sub-Saharan Africa is one place where
You’ll nearly always find a pair
Of derived glycyphagids on every rat
You look at.

One ardent acarologist lacking in fear
Of far-out faunas considered it queer
That among mitey islands there was only one
On which every single rat had none.
And a mite that tours on flies
I tell you no lies
Can never take rides
On dung beetles’ hides.

And here’s another curious thing:
Detritivores that confidently can
Do absolutely everything
No other lowly arachnid can.

In the British Museum there
Are many pickled primates
With their children and their mates
And you can always see them there
With Acari clinging to their hair.

A laelapid mite on a lemur
Who’d evolved to grasp hairs with his femur
With intent to confuse
Some cladistical views
Devolved through a ride on a steamer.

Whatever’s devolved, it’s clearly the case
That mites have evolved at a frightening pace.

*Notes from a lecture to the Biology Faculty by Dr. Barry OConnor, Curator of Acarina at the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology.*
Freshman’s Interlude with Coelenterata

Behind us sprawl the lowly Protozoa,
But, lo! Before prance princely Metazoa!
So, get thee behind me, trichocysts
   It’s onward to nematocysts!
   And statocysts.

All hail to Hydrozoa!
To hell with Sporozoa!
(Until the next exam)
   Excelsior!
   And Obelia

Whether to be monoecious or to be dioecious
   Is a suitable sort of question
   For a jellyfish.

There’s fashion in being frenetic
   Over the metagenetic
   Or a polymorph.

To comprehend the gonangia of Gonionemus
The hydrathecae of hydranths,
Or the manubria of medusae,
Now these are tangibles to seek!

And, proteus, old top, you know one cannot stop
To ponder amoeboïd motions
When the mysteries of hydroid emotions
   Are beckoning.

   By all reckoning,
   We should reach the flatworms next week.

This verse was written more than 50 years ago, because I became impatient upon realizing how many new and difficult terms my beginning zoology students were required to learn, just so we could struggle through this one small section of the course. I decided I would create a verse that included every formidable term in the section, so they could memorize the verse, and never find themselves unable to remember some particular term.
Bark Cricket Biology

A Pteroplistinae peered out from his tiny
Tunnel in a tree that was dying,
He reversed his pose and with one of his toes
Sent his most recent feculum flying.

The trill of his call mingled with all
Of the sounds of the Malaysian jungle,
Unlike Pteroplistus his females are flightless
But they find him with never a bungle.

This little insect verse is true and correct. The Pteroplistinae are among the smallest, rarest, most narrowly distributed, and least well known of some 18 cricket subfamilies, most of which are widely distributed. The feculum-kicking behavior may be unique to this tiny, special subfamily, as is tunneling in dead logs and dead standing trees. Dan Otte and I have seen these activities in both Australia and Malaysia. Aggregating under bark, while by no means unique to this subfamily, is especially characteristic of these little crickets. Unlike most other crickets that do it, the Pteroplistinae we have seen in the field do not seem to aggregate anywhere else. These crickets also inject their eggs into wood that is partly rotted, hence easily penetrated with the ovipositor. In the place where we found the particular (new) species discussed in the above verse, in the steep slopes 30-40 miles northeast of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, there are almost 200 species of insects singing at the same time in the same places (meaning along a transect of a mile or so). That is several times as many as anywhere else I have listened (ca. 22 countries on six continents, and more than 20 islands). Dan has also found unusually large numbers in some parts of tropical America where he has been and I have not. But I am guessing that, in the end, no place will have more species than tropical Asia because it is not only diverse and hospitable, as with all warm tropical regions with considerable rainfall, but older as a likely home for crickets.
The Professor and the Cockroach

As a graduate student in entomology, I was impressed with the antiquity of two things: cockroaches and professors. I have never quite gotten over the statement by the Harvard entomologist, Frank Carpenter, that the only difference between cockroaches fossilized hundreds of millions of years ago in the Pennsylvanian and those alive today are their patterns of wing venation. Bill Butts, a fellow graduate student at Ohio State, was an inveterate writer of doggerel, and his work inspired me to construct this verse. I worked a while longer than is justified by the final product. Nevertheless, it was essentially completed in the middle 1950’s, before Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring*, appeared, before anyone else seemed to be much worried about radiation, and before I had acquired the title of even assistant professor (1959).

On a humid summer evening, in the not too distant past
In a modest cluttered office, an old professor sat
Third floor, forty steps, in an ivy-covered hall
Grading papers – not unusual, not unusual at all.

His eyes were wrapped in squint lines from peering close too long
His hair was gray and shaggy and his tie clasp fastened wrong
His back was just a little bent from many years of strain
And now and then he reached to rub a varicosing vein.

He frowned and shook his head now, and made a crimson mark
Then with a sigh he lit his pipe and stared out at the dark
Where nocturnal campus revelry was dwindling to a standstill
With here and there the shadow of a couple holding hands still.

Sitting there in silence he began to reminisce
On all the pleasant evenings he had worked alone like this
In solitude and quiet, with a chance to rest and gaze
And ponder the accomplishments of many busy days.

He remembered youthful vigor and his optimistic zeal
In tackling sundry problems, imaginary and real
The endless files of students who maybe once or twice
Had listened to his lectures and heeded his advice.
There were brilliant ones and hopeless ones, and many he’d forgot
But, all in all, he reckoned, they’d composed a worthy lot
Man had made some noble strides since first the race began
And the old prof warmed in realizing he had had a hand.

Eventually he sighed and knocked the ashes from his pipe
Put down the polished bowl with a final loving swipe
And back into the desk lamp’s yellow glow
The ancient shaggy head to its task again bent low.

For hours more he graded, praising, chiding, criticizing all
Till the street lights blinking silent and the cricket’s waning call
Seemed to drift, his sole companions, on some private little cloud.
Then a rustling sound came briefly, in the stillness seeming loud.

Instantly the old prof paused, with pencil poised to mark
While his narrowed eyes impatiently went searching through the dark
And he gave a snort of triumph when he finally spied the two
Familiar brown threads probing round his inkwell into view.

“That blasted roach has plagued me long enough!” He softly swore
“It’s time for Homo sapiens to even up the score!”
His groping fingers searched the desk and found a ruler there
And high above the roach’s head he raised it in the air.

His grizzled jaw was set now, and his eyes were bright with fervor
As the slender threads came reaching round the inkwell feeling further
Quick steps, then unmoving, poised on six brown slender toes
“What’s amiss here?” Seemed to say the sudden pose.

For a moment the old prof waited, grim and wary
Then he caught his breath and scowled as his long-time adversary
Sent the slender brown threads waving in the air
(“The uncanny creature knows my hand is there!”)

(“I suppose it’s now or never!”). With a sudden slamming crash
Expectantly he reached across to scrape the greasy smash
Up and on to slip of paper with intent to throw it out
But, seeing nothing there, surprised, he glanced about.
Then frantically he searched, moving everything to see
Scattering papers, pencils, all, but fruitlessly
“You wretched beast! You win again!” He stormed in black despair
“Why have I failed for six months now to catch you unaware?!”

For a moment he slumped, panting, in the old brown swivel chair
Running trembling fingers through his damp, disheveled hair
“A curse upon you, blasted roach!” He finally growled in rage
“It’ll take me more than half an hour to locate every page!”

Then a Voice as thin as tissue said, *Why make it such an issue?*
*And don’t blame me for your mess, sir; I should think a full professor*
*Could wage a war with more finesse, more success*
*And considerably less mess!*

Startled, the professor paused, his hand behind his ear
“What’s that?” He cried, “I thought I heard – is anybody here?”
*Indeed, to stay,* The Voice replied, *My educated dunce!*
*And rest assured I’ll be around for longer than six months!*

*The fact that I escape you is really not so strange*
*For the years of you and yours are few, my friend*
*While my reflexes were perfected in the Pennsylvanian*
*My relatives and I have dodged the blows*
*Of countless foes more horrible than those*

*Who seek today our destiny to name*
*Those Paleozoic times were not so tame*
*And there were days when roaches on the run*
*Could scarcely pause to stuff their craws*
*With dinosaur dung.*

*All you naked biped scholars, with your intellects and dollars*
*And your stale caffeine and nicotine*
*And daily baths to keep you clean*
*You think you’re better than all of us*
*Well, you’re nothing but a good soft touch*
*For my dozens and dozens of versatile cousins.*
My German uncle makes his home inside your kitchen wall
While my Oriental relatives run up and down the hall
And last but certainly not least of all
Who courts with great alacrity upon your spouse’s vanity?
Why Pedro, with the light brown bands!

It’s logical, you see, The Voice began
But, “Wait!” Cried the Professor, “Reflexes I’ll admit
You have, but logic, not a bit!”
Suit yourself, The Voice replied, You’re the one who’s bothered by it.

I’m hardly the kind for inflated pretensions
But if you think that yours are such prime comprehensions
How is it, with all of your flashy inventions
You’ve failed in the fine art of cockroach prevention?

You consider me a disgusting beast
And squander millions, at the least
On frantic efforts to destroy me
So puny that they scarce annoy me.

Chlordane, Lindane, you employ them
We ancient roaches just enjoy them
And continue our gay nocturnal roams
Through all your very finest homes.

Should you ever reflect, you would know it’s insane
To suppose the sheer weight of a specialized brain
Could effect some escape from the common pains
That upon such as our lowly lives still entrain.

Why, your brief success can scarce approach
The pride of any well-bred roach.
I’ll go so far to state, my friend
Your very will to comprehend
May well defeat you in the end.

A case in point is this radiation
You dibble and dabble with childish elation
And tremble the while in anticipation
Of effects upon subsequent generations.
We roaches don’t fear it, we’ve evolved long enough
To develop a tolerance for the unworldly stuff
A hundred times your human dose is scarce enough
To rid this old earth of the likes of us.

Old-timers, such as we are, consider it great sport
To observe the petty strivings of those whose time is short
To watch the mighty come and go is just another lark
Tyrannosaurus and his ilk left scarcely any mark.

So build your bombs and blast away
And when you reach that fateful day
When final creeping shadows come
And tender human feelings numb
Remember this as you succumb:

Across your rotting corpse will run
Parades of roaches, one by one
Your cadaver will likely tickle my tongue
At least as much as dinosaur dung!

With that, the Voice abruptly stopped
And the room seemed filled with the clock’s tick-tock
And nothing moved for a long, long time
And the campus clock began to chime.

The Professor sat in silence, but his noble jaw was slack
And a cold and clammy finger seemed to slither down his back
“Great God!” He muttered, “I’m in need of a nip!
I believe that my mind is beginning to slip!

If it weren’t for the mess in this room and all
I would doubt that I’d seen any cockroach at all!”
He grabbed up his papers from off the floor
Wiped his damp forehead and reached for the door.

But had he glanced back as he left in his fright
He’d have witnessed the peculiarly unnerving sight
Of careful cleaning and elaborate preening
Of long brown threads in the pale moonlight.
The Strange Case of the Entomologist’s Heart. II.

One of my favorite people of all time, and possibly the greatest intellect among my close friends, was also my boss for the first twelve years of my professional career. He was Theodore H. Hubbell, Director of the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology from 1953 until 1969, when he retired at 71 after an extraordinary additional year at the unanimous request of his staff. When I wrote this story and verse, it was nine years later, and he was already at work when I arrived every day. He lived another dozen or so years, and was my favorite company at coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon.

Hubbell’s life work was the systematics of the orthopterous insect family Gryllacrididae. I have worked on the related families, Gryllidae and Tettigoniidae. Gryllidae are crickets and Tettigoniidae are katydids, and each of these two families is almost certainly monophyletic, or derived from a single common ancestor as every group should be, or least from the point of view of a taxonomic purist. The Gryllacrididae, on the other hand, have always been difficult to characterize, and as the years passed Hubb became increasingly convinced that the group was polyphyletic, or an “artificial” assemblage of unrelated species. It began to appear that continued work on their history and classification would show that some had evolved out of the cricket line; others out of the katydid line, but separately. Hubb was more than a little dismayed by this turn of events. Moreover, the Gryllacrididae had never had a universal common or colloquial name, though some were called “cave crickets” or “camel crickets,” and in New Zealand some were called “wetas.” Just as the group’s common names were derived from the crickets and katydids, it now seemed that their very identity as a single group was to be submerged in a parallel fashion.

At some point in the middle of all this, my old doctoral advisor, Donald J. Borror, was completing a revision of his introductory entomology text and asked me to rewrite his key to the Orthoptera. I had trouble keying the Gryllacrididae out at one spot and went to Hubb for help. I asked him what characteristics distinguished the Gryllacrididae from the other Orthoptera. He pondered a while, started to answer two or three times, and finally said glumly, “There aren’t any.” I teased him about this, linking it with the absence of a bona fide common name for the group. When the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* asked me to revise their discussions of “cricket,” originally authored by Hubb many years before, I included the note that such animals as “camel crickets” and “cave crickets” are not really crickets. Hubb accepted this with a wry grin, and he seemed actually to enjoy my teasing, even promoting it by expressing exaggerated dismay over the sad state of gryllacridid taxonomy. But on the day that I suggested the hybrid common
name “krikidid” for the Gryllacrididae (half cricket, half katydid), he visibly blanched.

Years before all this, Hubb had called my attention to the amusing verse by Ogden Nash about a fellow who loved fireflies and got in trouble with his girlfriend over it. It was titled “The strange case of the entomologist’s heart.” I wrote this verse in 1968, when Hubb expressed his last dismays about splitting up the Gryllacrididae, just before leaving on a trip around the world with his wife, Grace.

I once observed an entomologist named Theodore Huntington Hubbell, Who developed a peculiar kind of double trouble. It seems that he had been working for forty years more or less On the study of a bizarre kind of orthopterous Insect family known as the Gryllacrididae.

And while the closest relatives of this unusual family, Comprising the Gryllidae and the Tettigoniidae, Had acquired the eminently pleasing, ever so reasonable, And universally acceptable colloquial Names of crickets and katydids, respectively, Poor Hubbell had to be oppressed by having heeded the call To investigate the one family lacking in any common name at all. He flinched when a minor colleague scarcely more than a wise kid Snickeringly suggested the horrendous hybridization of “Krikidid!” Mostly because he was afraid it might stick, And it did.

The upshot was that Hubbell investigated even more frantically his pet Group, as if sheer weight and sophistication of phyletic effort might yet Overcome the blister and the blight of that nauseous label. But he proved unable and the whole thing was turning out to be bad news.

Then the most unkind cut of all came to his wealth and his weal, On a day when his intensified studies began to reveal, To his considerable horror, that krikidids actually have nothing in common With one another, and the group as a whole is little more Than a biological myth. So he collected his wife and went on a world tour.
The Nozzlehead Journeyman*

In the early 1960’s Jim Lloyd and Glen Morris were two young fellows getting their Ph.D. degrees at Cornell University. Jim had obtained his M.Sc. from Michigan and began there, in my class in insect behavior, the research on fireflies that he continued for his doctorate and the rest of his life. While at Cornell he started to play the five-string banjo. Glen was working on his degree under the supervision of an economic entomologist, but he was doing a problem on the acoustical behavior of meadow grasshoppers. When he finished it he sent me a copy of his dissertation that said inside – obviously heart-warming to me – that I was the “real chairman” of his doctoral committee.

Glen played the guitar and sang, doing both very well indeed. Every few months the two of them would journey to Ann Arbor, where the three of us would sit up, sometimes all night, drinking beer, playing music, and telling jokes. We were all entomologists, but none of us was particularly sympathetic to what was going on in the economic side of that science. Sometimes we would knot up in laughter telling one another tales about what we gleefully regarded as the seamier side of pest control research. One night we started a song to the tune of Sweet Betsy from Pike. What follows is the result. I think I added a few of the verses a long time later.

Come, all you young buggers, and sit on my knee
I’ll tell you a story that Rachel told me
Of Carson-o-genics and other strange drugs
And the plot to eradicate all the world’s bugs.

Chorus

What the hell’s all the fuss?
Wouldn’t they, wouldn’t they like to spray us?

About nineteen hundred and thirty-five
There came an old Deutchmann more dead than alive
With a large chlorine molecule clutched to his breast
“Ich komme mit hilfen fumigaten der pests.”

Vot der hell’s mit den fuss?
Wouldn’t he, wouldn’t he like to spray us!
They killed all the cooties in Old Napoli*
Wiped out the crotch crickets and chuckled with glee
Then Dow and Chemagro, they joined in the spree
Dichloro, diphenyl, di-diddle-dee-dee.

What the hell’s all the fuss?
Wouldn’t they, wouldn’t they like to spray us?

The Digest for Readers encouraged a cheer
There soon will not be any bugs around here
We’ll slaughter them all with that great DDT
Dichloro, diphenyl, di-diddle-dee-dee.

What the hell’s all the fuss?
The residue’s soon gonna pacify us.

With all the new products for combating pests
Each chemical company competes with the rest
Don’t sit back and watch, boy, get in there and kill
If the bugs don’t bring ruin, the chemicals will.

What the hell’s all the fuss?
The residue’s soon gonna pacify us.

Experiment stations are going great guns
If you study a bug there, I’ll tell you this once
You’d better decide that it’s costing millyuns
Or some other bloke will, and get all of the funds.

What the hell’s all the fuss?
The residue’s soon gonna pacify us.

When they banned DDT for its deadly effects
On the eggshells of birds and on everyone’s sex
It was mailed to the Third World for lucrative fees
And they mailed it right back in our coffees and teas.

What the hell’s all the fuss?
The residue’s already pacified us.
(Spoken rapidly)

I got a dieldrin-bidrin brownoff in randomized complete blocks replicated fifteen times with forty degrees of freedom; I’m takin’ atropine tablets as an organophosphate antidote up at Silo Tech doing LD50’s working on my degree of Doctor of Foolosophy . . .

Each month Dow sends me my fellowship check
I run LD50’s at Silo State Tech
Soon I’ll be getting my advanced degree
They call it the Doctor of Foolosophy.

What the hell’s all the fuss?
The residue’s already pacified us.

* * *

This verse was written, shortly after Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* was published, by three young entomologists who had watched graduate students happily obtaining Ph.D. degrees in entomology for testing chemicals on fellowships from the companies making the chemicals; who had read in the *Readers’ Digest* in the 1940’s how DDT was going to eradicate all of the insect pests of the world; who had watched chemical pesticides literally destroy (temporarily, as it turned out) almost the entire science of biological control in the United States; who had heard their professors tell which insecticides to use on insects they had just described to their classes as not economically important; and who had heard the members of their own society vote almost unanimously at a national meeting, several hundred strong, to censure a journal, its editors, an author, and the society represented, for the stated reason that the author’s article had appeared to cast aspersions on the profession of economic entomology.

* * *

*The first successful use of DDT indeed was the control of head lice in the Army, in Italy, during World War II.*
Come all you young buggers and sit on my knee. I'll tell you a story that Rach-él told me. Of Carson-o-
gen-ics and o-ther strange drugs and the plot to e-radi-cate all the world's bugs. What the he'll's all the fuss. Would 'nt they would 'nt they like to spray us.
Today an old man came by,
younger he was, I think, than I,
announcing he would like to buy
some trees, the tallest and the best
of those to be found in my forest.

“This is your wood lot, is it not?” he said.
And he looked at me, as he tipped his head
sideways. And I nodded, saying, “Sir,
I have no wish to sell my trees.
and if you please I like them all,
standing tall, and just the way they are.

He said he only wanted a few of the
biggest and best because they are the
most valuable, and an old tree in a
wood lot, he said, needs removing
so the younger ones can grow.
And I said no, all trees are majesties
to me, and grand, more valuable even
when they die and fall, than if sawed
into boards, or represented only by clever
paintings on someone else’s wall somewhere.

But he continued, repeating once more,
The same words, that woods need pruning, for
The old trees must be removed. And I replied,
only if you choose to use them as a cash crop.

My trees, I said, are crops of happiness
laced with paths visited and tramped by
local folks, trails for horseback riding,
trees admired delightedly over and over
by parents, children, grandparents,
grandchildren, friends, in daylight or dark,
far more beautiful than a made-up park:
red, black, and white oaks, shagbark
and pignut hickories, soft and hard maples,
white ash and black walnut, that cluster of precious
basswoods in the corner by the cow pasture gate;
the grandest of all the trees, harboring in their knottting hollowed trunks, red, gray, brown, and flying squirrels, families of possums and raccoons, chipmunks, voles, white-footed mice, red and gray foxes, lurking coyotes, wild turkeys, black and turkey vultures, that faithful red-tailed hawk, a pair of great-horned owls, corroborees of crows, the one and only beautifully singing wood thrush, and those white-tails, does, bucks, and fawns; the silent and splendid redbuds and dogwoods, sassafras, spring beauties, jack-in-the-pulpits, may apples; all those wildflowers thriving on the forest floor, blossoming enthusiastically in all directions.

I said I like to stop inside my woods, stand quietly, lean back, and stare upward into the crowns of those oldest, tallest, most dignified of all my trees, marveling at their unique and stupendous long-lived beauty.

Imagine, I said, that trees had never happened. Wouldn’t we then be distraught and lonely, feel strangely cheated? How could we live such noble lives as these we are living now, without the trees, without the lovely, ancient, nobility of trees? I told him I sometimes use the wood from trees to carve and shape and design, to marvel at the smooth and figured beauty of the grain. But I take such wood mostly from narrow roadside berms, and only when it has necessarily been removed by others.

The man, now somehow seeming older, sighed and said, “I see these many walking sticks you’ve carved here, on this porch. How much do they cost?” I replied that I had never sold one, though I had passed some on to special friends. He asked how many were there now, and I said more than a hundred on the porch, but I am not prepared to sell any of them yet.

I didn’t tell him about those inside the house, the outrageous grooved wild black cherry knee,
the toothy rattlesnake, the dragon and *Pterosaurus*;
nor that I was hoping to sculpt all of those
more than a hundred on the porch.

Eventually he said, “Well, anyway, not yet do I require
a walking stick.” And I replied, one does not have to
require a walking stick to carry one, to relish one,
to appreciate, enjoy, and eventually treasure one, as
when walking in the woods. Drawing out my oldest
and favorite cane I showed him how it fits into my
hand and explained how once I had lost it for a year.
Then, one quiet day in late summer, following an unusual
severity of winter and the explosiveness of spring,
there it was again, waiting comfortably, leaning
against the willing ironwood tree where I had placed it.
Unknowingly alone and untended, its surface had been
checked with gentle rows of weathered tiny crevices
that make it seem to me all the more precious,
all the more my own special companion.

I told the old man about all of that.
He sighed, shook my hand again,
passed to me a business card
from inside his shirt pocket,
and went away silently.
I constructed this verse after completing the plant ecology course of John N. Wolfe, lawyer, botanist, poet, and mesmerizing lecturer. He had taken us in buses on all-day field trips every Saturday during the fall, explaining to us the how and why and when of the history of Ohio vegetation, and recounting the saga of the huge pro-glacial lake that came to be called Lake Tight (after a certain scientist with that name). The lake had formed when the advance of the glaciers backed up the great Teays River that originally flowed northward out of the Appalachians, beginning at the site of the unincorporated community of Teays, West Virginia, and curving gently north and then west across the middle of what was not yet Ohio, Indiana, and central Illinois. The Teays may have been the largest river system ever on the North American continent. On its way west, the drainage created an underwater gravel bed some eight miles wide in the area all around my family’s farm in Piatt County, Illinois, and the Teays eventually flowed southward in what came to be known as the Mississippi River drainage. Until I took John Wolfe’s course in 1953, I hadn’t known the reason why the wells in our part of Illinois were so reliable, and the water so clear and satisfying, from just about the same depth across entire communities.

In southern Ohio, Lake Tight was created by monster glaciers sliding and smashing down from the North, blocking the Teays River, the lake then emptying, and creating a great river as it finally was diverted westward. Nowadays that part of the massive diversion flows to the Mississippi River along what became the southern border of Ohio. As a result, of course, it was eventually named the Ohio River.

Recently, in Illinois, considerable attention has been paid to the water supply deriving from the subterranean gravel beds left from the Teays River. In Illinois this underground water supply apparently was initially called the Mahomet River and the Mahomet Aquifer, after the submerged river near the town of Mahomet. More recently it has been referred to as the Teays-Mahomet Aquifer and the Teays-Mahomet Bedrock Valley (Wilton Newton Melhorn and Jon Paul Kempton, 1991, *Geological Society of America Special Paper 258*): “The bedrock valley forms the western part of the Teays-Mahomet Bedrock Valley System that extends into Illinois from Indiana,” approximately at the level of Danville, Illinois.

John Wolfe was an intellectual giant of a man and an incredibly fine teacher. I accidentally spent a couple of nights with him beside pleasant campfires in Dr. Edward S. Thomas’s Neotoma Valley, a deep hollow in Hocking County, Ohio. I was searching for new species of crickets, and
using Neotoma (named after the pack rat, whose now extinct remains were discovered in Dr. Thomas’s valley) as a place to camp out for the night. Dr. Wolfe was merely seeking peaceful rest in the woods near the cabin of his friend, Dr. Thomas, who owned the valley.

Dr. Thomas, part-Cherokee lawyer turned natural history curator, weekly columnist for the Columbus Dispatch across more than 50 years, and a relative of the great western novelist, Zane Grey, also became my friend, mentor, and fellow biologist. We went on lengthy overnight field trips together, and one summer the three curators of insects and Dr. Theodore H. Hubbell, Director of the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, invited Dr. Thomas to Michigan to be a visiting summer curator. There he and I completed two articles about unusual and new species of meadow grasshoppers and ground crickets, one of the latter living in the extensive Specht Marsh in eastern Ohio. Because of its beautiful song, we named that ground cricket, Nemobius melodius.

Drs. Wolfe and Thomas were among the most inspiring of my friends and mentors while I was a graduate student, and later when I was a postdoctoral associate working on a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Among the many profound messages Dr. John Wolfe delivered, he reminded us students that the prairie grass, Andropogon gerardi -- more often called Big Bluestem -- had more of its bulk invested in subterranean roots than in its above-ground clumps, explaining in part the astonishingly deep black soil that long after the retreat of the glaciers made the midwestern prairies of the United States its “bread basket.” This wonderful prairie grass was also called Elephant Grass because it was said to be so tall that a man on horseback could not see over it. Professor Wolfe proved its height and the extraordinary bulk of its roots to his students by keeping in the biology auditorium a celluloid tower too tall to place upright in any other room, with the parts of Big Bluestem, roots and all, standing right in front of us whenever we assembled for a lecture in that very special place.

Some time after I became interested in how humans have evolved, I began to think of that incredibly tall and graceful preserved clump of Big Bluestem, with its immensity of subterranean parts, as a parallel to the human organism. I thought of the huge underground portions of the plant, living in the deep darkness of the midnight black prairie soils – created by those massive deep roots -- a metaphor, perhaps, for the incredibly complex and still largely unknown and poorly understood basis for the parts and processes of our own beings, most of that basis still living somewhere in a darkness beyond the limits of human consciousness. It is my belief that efforts to achieve world-wide cooperativeness among the multi-billion members of
our own species – especially to diminish or erase the continuing specter of wars that murder millions and cripple many times millions – are unlikely to be achieved without intense investigation and profound understanding of our evolutionary background. We tend to consider our history without realizing and recognizing the limits of the consciousness that is simultaneously a blessing and, by its narrowness, the source of multiple distorted views as a consequence of how the differential reproduction of the evolutionary process has worked. The parts of our behavior that are muted with respect to consciousness seem strangely to shield and deceive us about the massive presence of our own “underground” roots, and to blind us to features that seek to bind us distastefully to the maximizing of genetic reproduction.

This verse about Big Bluestem was written more than 50 years ago.

In an untended graveyard in central Illinois,
I saw three proud stems waving in the breeze of Indian Summer,
Their stately, blue-streaked sides rising dauntless
To graceful forks that towered disdainfully
Above vulgar, crowding neighbors
Graceless bastard weeds
And Johnny-Come-Latelys to the Illinois prairie.

Big Bluestem! The ghosts of multi-billion ancestors
Blur across the boundless prairie countenance,
A vast rippling carpet, shimmering and unmarred,
Patterned by wind waves, and the darkening sweep
Of clouds across the sun, woven with the
Silent strength of penetrating roots.

Big Bluestem! These three, fragile survivors of a monarch species
That ruled this landscape with a dominance
Annihilatory to every intruder
From the oak’s persistent propagules
To the most insidious creeping weed.
And could they know their noble pedigree
These towering kings could wave no more proudly
Than I see them waving now.
When the piling vicious ice moved back,
And floods receded,
When searing southwest winds sucked dry
The roots of tender plants,
Big Bluestem took their place,
Basked in the yellow sun and scattering rain,
Covered this barren, gravelly prairie peninsula
With the soft dark crown of fertility it wears today.

Then came betrayal, the inevitable monster,
The creeping change of climate,
The deadly scythe and slicing plow,
And the seeds of *Andropogon gerardi* fell
And died in a hostile world.

These three remain, struggling,
Clinging on a fragile, tiny island,
A double cemetery now – pioneer and prairie grass
Fading here together.
Three trembling stems brush each other gently
In the breeze that was silenced with
The passing of their greatness.

And even these are doomed,
No plea can save them now,
The vision they bring to an awestruck boy
Who completes, by fingerling their graceful culms,
The picture painted by his grandfather’s eyes and words,
Is too intangible for short-sighted men.
These three will die unnoticed
When grandfather’s grave is dug,
And posterity must get its thrill
From the tasteless depths of a history book.
There is a poignant irony about John Wolfe's desire to convey to students the significance of the massive hidden root system of *Andropogon gerardii*. Some time after Professor Wolfe left the Ohio State University, those responsible for his precious clump of Big Bluestem may have had a problem. Although a clump of Big Bluestem can be seen in OSU's newly refurbished museums building, all that is saved in the classroom’s exhibit case is the snipped-off, above-ground portion of John Wolfe's carefully preserved bottom-to-top illustration of that wonderful, royal, once complete prairie grass. In the exhibit case, Big Bluestem is mounted next to two shorter prairie grass species, also with absent root systems.

This “tree” cricket sings on Big Bluestem, but here it is singing on ragweed, another of its frequent host plants.
My Blue-Speckled Hound

I put together this simple little song after finishing my first children’s book, *The Red Fox and Johnny Valentine’s Blue-Speckled Hound*. At the first Ann Arbor Book Day, I sang the song to a small audience with my arthritis and my ancient, left-handed five-string banjo, accompanied by the illustrator of the book, John Megahan, on his fiddle. The narrative in the last two repetitive verses are partly from the description by Billy E. Frye, Biology Professor, Dean, Vice President, and Provost of the University of Michigan, and subsequently Chancellor of Emory University, of his own fox-hunting experiences as a child, with his father and others in the southern Appalachian Mountains.

My blue-speckled hound’ll chase the foxes all around,  
Chase a fox the night along and keep on singin’ me his song.

I could hear Speck a-bellerin’ in the bottom cornfield;  
He was followin’ that fox across the bottom cornfield.

The fox he was a-streakin’ just as fast as he could fly;  
Old Speck was right behind him, you could hear his cry.

The fox crossed the river on a sycamore log,  
And crossin’ right behind him was my blue speckled dog.

That fox he’s a sneaky chicken thief, all right,  
He sneaks around my chicken house every night.

He’d better be careful where he chooses to roam,  
Or my blue-speckled hound will be a-trailin’ him home.

I could hear the hounds a-closin’ on the fox’s tail,  
Then he climbed Ol’ Sutter’s cliff and tricked ‘em off his trail.

The fox has beat the hounds again and taken to his den,  
So gather up your hounds, we’ll catch him out some time again.

That old fox he’s so clever that I love him like a friend,  
When the moon is comin’ full he’ll give the hounds a run again.
Take me out one more time when the nights are clear,
To the mountains where the sounds’ll carry far and near,

Where the crackles of the fire and the murmurs of the men,
And the music of the hounds can lift my soul up once again:

Yes, the crackles of the fire and the murmurs of the men,
And the music of the hounds out on the fox’s trail again.

My Blue Speckled Hound

My blue speckled hound’ll chase the foxes all around
Chase a fox the night along and keep on sing-in me his song.
True Katydids (see opposite page) live in trees. They cannot fly, but they can spread their curved forewings and “parachute” gently outward and downward. Females of True Katydids seek the singing males as mates. Unlike most birds and mammals, insects do not indulge in melodies -- only rhythms. Each species has a unique sound within its geographic range and its season of singing. The map shows the approximate geographic ranges of True Katydids living across Eastern United States, and audiospectrographs of their two loud, harsh but distinct song phrases. The Midwesterners sing phrases with 2-3 slowly delivered pulses, as if saying either “katy---did” or “ka---ty---did.” The Southeasterners sing phrases with 4-8 pulses delivered rapidly, as if saying “ka-ti-she-did-she-did” or “kati-did-she-did.” The curving, dark, and variably wide diagonal pattern dividing the ranges of these two kinds of katydids derives from some 30 years of detailed tracing of the extremely diverse zone of hybridization between the two katydid populations. The varying widths of the dark zone reflect differing amounts of hybridization (hence, intergrading songs) between the two forms. In the narrowest parts of the zone there is no hybridization. A railroad, highway, river, or treeless region can divide the two forms; rarely, males with the two different songs even sing in the same tree, thus behaving like members of distinct species. The map shows that the formation and interactions of species can be formidable topics. The three main aspects of evolution are speciation, phylogenies, and adaptation (References: R. D. Alexander 1967: Singing Insects: Four Case Histories in the Study of Animal Species. Rand McNally Pattern of Life Series; and 1968: Arthropods, pp. 167-216. In: Animal Communication. T. A. Sebeok (ed), Indiana Univ. Press, First Edition).
XIII

MOCKINGBIRDS, KATYDIDS, CROWS, AND THE ARTS
The Songs and Dances of Mockingbirds

The Northern Mockingbird that lives across most of the United States often seems to sing most of the day, and sometimes most of the night as well. Each song is a repetition of 2-6 identical phrases, usually 3-5. One of the Northern Mockingbird’s relatives, the Gray Catbird, tends to sing each phrase only once, with other strange or unusual sounds woven in, some sounding like cat noises. Another relative, the Brown Thrasher, usually sings each phrase 2-3 times. To my ears, the Northern Mockingbird’s song is clearer and more beautiful than those of his two cousins that are widespread in the United States. Some of the phrases in his songs seem beautifully or humorously complex (see pp. 4, 14, 44, 72, 224, 232, 262 and 300).

Mockingbirds often sing for long periods without repeating the same song. After repeating one song, or set of phrases, the mockingbird introduces another phrase and then repeats that phrase, thereby completing his next song. Careful listening reveals that the phrases in the songs that follow each other are sometimes related, or similar. The mockingbird seems to be reminded of part of a phrase used in his last song, and that partial unit of the last song occasionally becomes the introductory phrase of his next song.

In this sense the mocking bird’s songs can be said to overlap in sequence, usually by a single phrase. Such partial repetition is for me reminiscent of an artistic or poetic expression. It is a small surprise, but it pleases me, and often makes me laugh out loud. I think I laugh because to me the mockingbird causes himself to appear as an intrepid character who loves jokes and innovations, as if he were now and then remembering a previous theme, and saying to himself, “Hey! I wonder if part of that phrase would work in my next song! I think I’ll give it a try!” Without much doubt, the humor is all on the part of the human listener, but it is likely that no one yet knows how to test a question regarding changes in the mental state of a mockingbird. But I am willing to bet that something like sheer pleasure crosses the mind of a mockingbird every time he makes a successful new connection between one phrase and another.

Occasionally, a mockingbird produces what appears to be a long song but is actually a coupling of two or more songs. Such coupled songs seem to me to be repeated unpredictably in the long series of songs mockingbirds often sing. Incidentally, it is easier to understand the special quirks of mockingbird songs if they can be recorded and played back at half or one-fourth speed. Mockingbirds sing a little too fast for humans to hear every part of their songs at normal speed. I laugh more when I am playing a mockingbird tape at slow speed, mostly because I hear more. I should say that I have not heard or sampled the songs of enough mockingbirds to speak about more

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than a few individual birds, mainly in Georgia, Michigan, Illinois, California, and a few other locations. The mockingbird probably makes up his extensive repertoire of songs in part by learning phrases or songs from other bird species that frequently sing in his vicinity. It seems likely that he learns some of his phrases from other mockingbirds that have previously learned them from other bird species. He may also learn phrases from his own father, who is likely to do some singing near his juvenile offspring.

One of my former students at the University of Michigan is Dr. Richard D. Howard, a longtime Biology Professor at Purdue University. From his Master's Degree studies of mockingbirds at the University of Texas, and with the considerable caution that is appropriate to a scientist, Dr. Howard agrees with me that mockingbirds might sing more different songs if they have traveled a good deal, listened and learned for more years, and also find rich, safe territories for themselves. Whenever unusually large numbers of different kinds of birds are singing in such territories, mockingbirds may incidentally have opportunities to add to their song repertoires. This almost has to be true, since it is obvious that mockingbirds learn at least some of their songs. To me, such hypotheses seem to mesh with the ways that evolved learning capacities -- including directions of learning -- have led (or keep leading) to further extensions of new and appropriately channeled learning abilities.

Perhaps those male mockingbirds that become the better singers also become more capable of defending their territories. It is reasonable to expect that the more songs a mockingbird hears in learning situations, the more songs he will likely sing later. It would also seem that the more songs a mockingbird sings, the greater the effect the songs have on both male and female mockingbirds. If these things do not happen, we are necessarily at a loss to explain changes leading to expensive and complex melodies produced in appropriate situations and at appropriate times.

Perhaps, then, it is the oldest and somehow wisest mockingbirds that sometimes seem to sing forever without repeating a song. They are the ones, perhaps, that have proved their health, vigor, canniness, and longevity, partly by the macho-ism of generating and performing a large repertoire of songs. If the special songs of mockingbirds -- or of any other birds -- did not generate advantages such as those just described, we would surely have to identify other advantages of singing, or else expect that calorically expensive and precise songs either could never have evolved or would be tending now to lose their precision and beauty because they have somehow lost their usefulness.

It is not trivial that Northern Mockingbird acoustical repertoires also include brief, harsh calls, one of which is regarded as an "aggressive" call (cf. Sibley 2000:411, and p. 204 of this essay).
For several decades prior to becoming serious about studying human traits, I was primarily a biologist learning about species and how they form and interact. My former student and close friend, Daniel Otte, and I traveled in the United States, Australia, and many Pacific islands. We studied the species-specific songs of insects, trying to find and compare all the species of singing insects in many different areas, and arranging them according to their probable historical relationships. I set out to learn as much as possible about their lives and behavior, their habitats and geography, and their interactions with one another. In many places I also found myself enjoying listening to mockingbirds. Insect sounds are not melodious, but they are complex in temporal patterns, rhythms, and changes in qualities of their sounds other than melodies.

Eventually I began to follow and record the names of rivers and creeks, because my students and I were using mapped waterways to trace micro-geographic changes in the songs of insect species. A special example of such tracing involves an eastern North American katydid species that during my childhood sang every late summer night in the pear trees outside the upstairs window of my bedroom on our farm in central Illinois. A male of this large katydid, called the True Katydid (see drawing on p. 201), typically repeats his calls for most of the night, except for those intervals when a female approaches and mates with him. The variants of this katydid sing across nearly all of eastern United States.

True Katydids probably acquired their name because they are the only species in their family that, in the northeastern states, produces a three-syllable song that sounds like “Ka-ty-did!” Occasionally the sound is just, “Ka-ty,” and in some populations it is just, “Kate!” In the southeastern states, the song is longer, and about twice as fast, sounding like, “Ka-ty-she-did-she-did!” As with most animals that are prominent singers, True Katydids also have a repertoire of several sounds. When individuals are closely spaced they sing in chorus, alternating their songs for hours. Large choruses appear to be synchronized because when some katydids alternate with others, some singers will automatically be synchronized with others. One hypothesis is that females hearing the synchronized chorus from a distance can more easily recognize the combined calls of their own species and then find individual males after traveling into the chorus. Very long “aggressive” sequences of pulses, or syllables, are made if rivals begin to sing too close to one another. True Katydid males also make loud and erratic successions of “squawky” pulsed rasping sounds when they are attacked or held forcibly. Female True Katydids use an apparently independently evolved mechanism to make similar “protest” sounds that are not as loud as those of the males.
Thus, even insects have calls that are not entirely restricted to sexual selection. Females of many katydid species make soft courtship sounds during approaches between males and females, although I am not aware that anyone has ever observed this kind of acoustical interaction in True Katydid. The species called the True Katydid also has easily detectable patterns in its songs that vary geographically where, in 1959, two main populations that we discovered were living near one another and making the different calls described above. Some of the populations in the area between the two large populations produce distinctive songs that are intermediate in chirp lengths and rates of pulse production, compared to the songs of the katydids living in either direction (see p. 200). These intermediate songs also change gradually across the areas where they occur, suggesting that the two parent populations did some hybridizing a long time ago. It is likely that these two populations came back together as the deciduous forests, in which the katydids live, expanded back into the periglacial forests that extended ahead of the glaciers and then came back together as the glaciers retreated. These changes caused the two separated populations to mingle again, across the tops of the Appalachian Mountains. The coming and going of peri-glacial climates in the higher altitudes of Appalachia seem in this way to have generated the very long and astonishingly variable zone of hybridization of the True Katydid. That zone of intermediate songs extends from New York and New Jersey southwest to the Susquehanna River in east-central Pennsylvania, then down the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf Coast in Florida’s Panhandle (see p. 200). It seems clear that the glacially separated populations of True Katydids that later hybridized were not apart long enough to lose their ability to re-merge (Alexander 1968).

Back to Mockingbirds

While a mockingbird is singing, at intervals he leaps from his perch and flies more or less straight up into the air, performs a little “dance” in mid-air, and then swoops back down to the perch and continues singing (see the front and back covers). This attention-causing aerial performance might be regarded as a part of the mockingbird’s song because such bravado almost certainly catches females’ attention and increases the likelihood of them coming to the male mockingbird’s territory or remaining in it. Perhaps it also furnishes to both females and strange males additional information, suggesting that the singer is robust, and acrobatic enough to defend the area where he is singing – to make it a safe and resource-rich location for building a nest, laying eggs, and fledging offspring -- and to identify the male as a capable husband and parent.

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In any case, the mockingbird’s quick, audacious, vertical flights caused me to wonder if, in the course of his displays that surely function in the context of sexual selection, he is also demonstrating, both structurally and functionally, a parallel to what we humans might consider to be artistic dancing. But we will surely have to learn a great deal more about our own music and artistic dancing before becoming confident about the extent to which the mockingbird’s song and dance flourishes are structurally similar or different from some of our own music and dances, and also about how they compare with our art in regard to their functions or significance to the mockingbirds.

Every mockingbird sings his own set of songs (see back cover) in his own way. From time to time he changes the songs around, perhaps to fulfill some kind of enthusiasm, or enjoyment of useful novelty and complexity in his singing. The reader might similarly wish to alter or improve my version of what I am calling (below) the Mockingbird’s River Song, so that it seems more artistic, or causes people to be impressed, or causes them to smile and laugh a little more often than before hearing it.

In arranging the poems in this book, I thought about the slight overlaps between successive songs in the mockingbird’s singing progression that sometimes cause phrases to overlap in successive songs. But mimicking such sequences of mockingbird song patterns across the entire sequence of my poems in this book is surely impossible because, unlike the mockingbird’s song sequences, verses generated by humans often represent topics so divergent that they are difficult to connect in a logical way. To reduce this difficulty I separated the different sequences of poems in this book into major themes. Some of the sequences are somewhat related, in the sense of “starting over,” topically, perhaps to reflect a mockingbird-like series of overlapping themes. As the reader will recognize, it hasn’t always worked. But to me it is a tribute to the mockingbird if any readers have perceived even slight parallels in the streams of thoughts I have set down from listening to the mockingbird, and from trying to put some of my personal reflections about the arts, and life, into all the verses in this book.

* * *

My students and I have repeatedly traced where hybrid katydid songs change and what the changes indicate (Alexander 1968). In one field study of the True Katydid’s, my student, David Marshall, now a postdoctoral investigator at the University of Connecticut, and I were as usual keeping records of exactly where we went as we crossed katydid territories, and what was happening to the songs in different places. This effort caused me to
practice pronouncing river and creek names out loud while writing them down as we encountered them. Gradually, I became entranced with the river and creek names, just as I had with the mockingbirds’ songs. Eventually I put together a set of verses that I have somewhat playfully called The Mockingbird’s River Song.

The song I constructed is for the enjoyment of people, of course, but in a way it parallels the songs of the mockingbird. It is composed of mostly Native American names of more than 100 rivers and creeks that run all over North America. I tried to mimic the artistry of the mockingbird by arranging in sequence, or as rhymes, river names that sound alike. I fitted the resulting “river song” to the wonderful old American fiddle and dance tune, *Turkey in the Straw*. I liked entertaining the fanciful idea that the mockingbird might approve (for a history of *Turkey in the Straw*, see Alan Lomax’s 1960 book, *Folk Songs of North America*).

I have deliberately tried to succeed in analyzing the arts in evolutionary terms by becoming an intellectual hybrid, alternating between science and the arts (especially poetry), so that I might discover how to use the former to solve the problems of understanding the latter. The sufficiently patient reader can judge my successes and failures.

Perhaps for now we can only savor the questions that lie before us as we move further into the quest for a general explanation of the arts, including poetry, and the songs of mockingbirds and katydids, all as examples of Darwin’s “complex organs.”

*If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed, which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.*

-- Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, 1859, p. 189.

Despite many efforts to prove it wrong, Darwin’s magnificent challenge has not broken down yet, or been falsified, across the past 151 years. In this challenge, Darwin placed his entire theory, accounting for all known living creatures, in jeopardy, and won. He didn’t know about genes, so he posited “numerous, successive, slight modifications.” He couldn’t have gotten much closer to the concept of genes. Ironically, a packaged copy of Gregor Mendel’s paper on peas was found on Darwin’s desk after his death, still unopened. Mendel referred to “factors” that were also references to something like genes. But Darwin didn’t know it, and the term, gene, did not become available until around the turn of the 20th century.
There are rhythms in the rivers that are running through the land,
And I like to hear them sung because they sound so grand;
So I put the names together and I'll sing them all for you,
And if you listen to me carefully then you can sing them too.

There's the Appalachiaca and the Little Salkahatchie,
Tallapoosa, Tallahala, Mississippi, Loosahatchee,
Shenandoah, Rappahannock, Pascagoula, Tennessee,
Yockanookany, Kentucky, and the Great Pee Dee.

Hocking and Licking,
Kanawha, Mohican,
Colorado, Altemaha, Black Warrior, Chattahoochie,
Cattarangua, Connewango, and the Tombigbee.

Homochitto, Kennebago, Chickahominy, Aspetuck,
Monongahela, Cuyahoga, Susquehanna, Muscattuck,
Chowan, Navajo, Tchefuncte and Ocmulgee, Noxabee,
Tassajara, Taquahmenon, Manistique, and Manistee.

Escambia, Chenango,
Tuckahoe, Kaibito,
Muskingum, Muskegon, Wappinger, and Skunk,
Manalipan, Mullica, Chateaugay, and Shawangunk.

Alabama, Allegheny, Kiamichi, Hiawasee,
Chattanooga, Okobojo, Hochodkee, and Suwanee,
Willacoochee, Keya Paha, Kennebec and Ochikonee,
Cichaloonee, Juniata, Delaware, and Departee.

Washita, Wisconsin,
Chicago, Cheyenne,
Chickahominy, Chickasawee, Chickasawhatchie, Oswegatchie,
Alapaha, Spoon, Amite, Tensaw and Pamunkee,

Chocatasawhatchie and Saltilla, Dugdemona, Chippewa,
Pearl, Sangamon, Potaka, and Catawba, Arkansas,
Delaware, Ohio, Oregon, and Guyandotte,
Ontonagon, Menominee, and Wyandotte.
Oswego, Wyoming,
Buckatunna, Buckhannon,
Yalobusha, Youghioheny, Mattaponi, Muckalee,
Piscataqua, Atchefalaya, Illinois, and Missouri.

*Shave and a haircut: two bits!*

**The Mockingbird's River Song**

There are rhythms in the rivers that are running through the land And I like to hear them sung because they sound so grand. So I put the names together and I'll sing them all for you. If you listen to them carefully then you can sing them too.

Chorus:

Hocking and Licking Kanawha, Mohican, Colorado, Altemaha, Black Warrior, Chattahoochie Catawampus, Connewango, and the Tombigbee
Practitioners of the arts possess sets of basic skills that they use in relation to the social scene: observation, perception, appreciation, imagination, prognostication, translation, and communication. They depict the social scene through faithful representations mixed with manipulation, exaggeration, and the parading of novelty and incongruity -- all of which require extraordinary ability to understand the social scene in the first place. They use visual portrayals in art, dance, and drama. They use language in all forms, from oral narration and music to the literature of poetry and fiction. They use metaphor in every sense of the concept, and the race to catch up with all of the ways they do so will never be finished. They use humor, and to those who are sufficiently attentive they demonstrate its deadly seriousness. They combine most or all of these media, as we all know, sometimes in stunning performances that create novel comparisons and portray relationships that enlighten, explain, and expand the social world as in no other way.

Audiences of the arts are accepting particular versions of the social scene, often from others whom they may perceive to have better skills and ideas, broader experiences, or at least temporarily special imagination. To accomplish this effectively they must recognize relevant talents and abilities in others. Basic to that task are universal and unique features of the human brain: social capacities that include a fertile imagination and all the talents necessary to use it. These traits are the same as those employed by the artists themselves, leading us to wonder if they derive from a single machinery, even if not always comparably.

The result of all this is that, at best, the arts are a glorious form of interpretive gossip and speculation, multi-faceted, multi-layered, and altogether still complex beyond anyone’s comprehension. People in the arts are by definition the best storytellers among us. What they tell us is never superfluous, impractical, or trivial unless we, the audiences, allow it to be. We gain mightily from knowing how and when to listen, to whom to listen, and what to do with the experience afterward. For the arts are theater, and theater in all of its guises represents the richest, most condensed, and most widely understood of all cultural contributions to our patterns of social scenario building through consciousness, imagination, and foresight. These scenarios, which we build, review, and revise continually almost every moment of our lives, are obligate passports to social success, and perhaps the central evolved function of the human social brain. We use them to anticipate and manipulate the future -- the ever more distant future in ever greater detail.

When the anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins, argued that modern hunter-gatherers are models of the original affluent societies because of the surprisingly small amounts of time spent hunting and gathering, he underplayed at
least two things. First, time not occupied with securing food and shelter can only be occupied otherwise, and no matter how ridiculous or repugnant it may sometimes seem to us, in terms of the persistence of life this can be done effectively only by engaging in activities that ultimately contribute to success in trans-generational passing of genes via reproduction. Second, sitting around being social is not necessarily trivial or non-reproductive. Sahlins’s comments, however, emphasize that the rise of art in its various expressions need not be restricted to recent societies demonstrating leisure time and affluence in some narrow modern sense.

Even if few could say it as well as Doris Lessing (1992, p. 35), artists, including poets, are the people who understand that “[myth] does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truths.”
Phantasm

Soft staccato lisps of a bush katydid
Rising through cool mists of dusk
In a leftover lonely glacial spruce bog
High in the Appalachian Mountains

Quick insistent chirpings of brown field crickets
Across the moonlit landscape
Of a tiny hill prairie overlooking
Endless Mississippi River bottomlands

Eerily whining buzz of a great green
Grasshopper wafting on the wind
From far across the night-shrouded dunes
Alongside the lake named Michigan

Silvery tinkle of a miniature yellow cricket
Hidden in sun-speckled undergrowth
Of shadowy swamps across
The Everglades of Florida

Crashing synchrony of numberless cicadas
Chorusing deafeningly in the warm brightness
Of a June afternoon in open oak forests
Across the southeastern hills of Ohio

Lazy deep chirruping of a solitary beach cricket
Rising ghost-like in crashes of surf
Along a desolate rocky stretch
Of Atlantic coast at midnight

In such atmospheres I have imagined
I am the only human on earth, alone
A thousand centuries ago.
Crows in Ann Arbor

On Friday, November 27,  
At 5:23, high up in the heaven,  
A corroboree of crows comes cawing,  
Swirling and whirling down,  
Cruising and congregating,  
Two hundred strong, to meet and greet  
At the corner of Hill and South State Street.

WHY!!

Why?

Why. . .

I suppose that no one knows,  
Except for crows.

Crows, they say,  
Are smart that way.

* * *

The editor didn’t cotton to my verse, gave it a rejection,  
Noting that I hadn’t answered my own question.

And this, he suggested, made the poem all together  
Too brief. He seemed to consider it a “small” poem.

Colleague from a familiar department, he claimed  
he had hoped someday to publish something  
of mine – something, perhaps  
simple and true,

an essay or two,  
perhaps a review.

But, alas, he said, not this  
not this – this not-enough verse.
Something, I guess, somewhat less demanding.

He gave me, with compassion I am sure, something to do, A verse I might read by a well-known poet who

seemed to think the reason for corroborees was something he knew.

At least he used a particular word for the flocking of that smaller black bird, the European starling. The word was “migration,” which he evidently considered an explanation.

He didn’t say why he considered this true, only implying it had something to do with philosophy, and people dying, but not much about crows, or starlings either.

* * *

Is it the case that we should never admit not knowing precisely why a crow is going here or there, or doing this or that, say, in a corroboree? Or that we should never agree that what a crow knows is simply not available, or else is necessarily trivial? The original brief version of my poem about Ann Arbor crows just might be acknowledgment of how little the poet (and the biologist within him) knows. But what is the glory of thinking it’s not proper to leave an unknown hanging out there, or proper, for that matter, to insist on an explanation as ridiculously irrelevant as the philosophical views of humans, or of people dying? Not crows dying, but people. The poet may be trying but the crows don’t seem to be complaining about it. The ignorance is not trivial, not resolved by creating a human story to pontificate when it’s birds not people the poet is seeing without understanding. There is, after all, virtue in acknowledging a truly persistent absence of answers.
And asking crows (or starlings) what no one knows surely is no easy breeze, especially not when it’s about corroborees. After all, we’ve never even tried to speak crow-ese except for a few forgotten biology doctoral theses. Nor is it likely we could teach crow sages to explain to us in one of our languages, in the way that we, considered to be the genius linguists of the universe, have tried teaching apes some twists on human languages, rather than us learning theirs.

It takes real expertise to query chimpanzees about rampages, or crows about corroborees.

And we’ve scant reason to believe a bird could respond to the “why” word either knowingly or by accident, comprehending even one subtle variant of that complex little three-letter term. We might startle them by asking, “Please, why not migrate without corroborees?” “And why corroborees without migrating?” “And why, after all, in each particular not-so-fascinating time and place?”

At least we have no cause for believing that crows have evolved to deny their reasons, though it’s certain that if they were to ask each of us the why of our own gatherings, we’d surely fuss, proffering, at best, poor and incomplete explanations, and, at worst, false and deceptive recitations,
all of these from our own curious species
that invented the concept of corroborees

and that bewitching “Why?” Anthropologists may try,
but they know little more about the massive

imponderable billabong gatherings
of Aboriginals in Australia’s northern deserts

corroboree, corrobori, from native korobra, dance. 1. a dance festival held
at night by Australian aborigines to celebrate tribal victories and similar
events. 2. in Australia, (a) a large or noisy festivity; (b) an uproar, tumult –
Webster’s New Universal Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged,
1976.

“Large or noisy festivity” and “uproar” and “tumult” are likely to be
correct because these features of Aboriginal corroborees, as with crows cor-
roborees, can be observed directly and repeatedly, thus also confirmed. But
the source of the assertion “to celebrate tribal victories and similar events”
is at least doubtful, and almost certainly without adequate evidence –
whether from Aboriginals or visiting anthropologists. Likewise, the vague
phrase, “and similar events,” casts doubt on the entire implication of ade-
quate definition, especially with respect to meaning or function – again, as
with crows in Ann Arbor – and, oh, so many others that we would like to
understand much better (such as the mockingbird discussed on p. 202ff).

Of course, for animals that cannot talk to us,
and for those who might tell us lies,
we try to discover the whys

by examining their entire beings scientifically.
The language of the search is that of biology:
bio- and -ology as the study of life and not the

curious cover-up definitions tossed about
by philosophers and editors, poets, medical
and social scientists, and a few others:
something indefinite about genes and physiology,
and maybe altered habitat and geography;

innatness, instinctiveness, hard-wiredness,
genetic determination, and all such,
fostering dichotomies that allow users to reject the parts of us that they believe do not reflect our nobler traits; nevertheless it is all biology, learning, sociality, and culture as well as all the rest, conscious or not, and we need to understand this to guess wisely about the likes of corroborees. Hard-wired means only that we do not yet understand the responsible ontogeny, the how and why of it being epigenetic.

There’s not much surprising about our ignorance Of development, surely, by far the most complex process in the entire living universe, and not traced out completely for even the simplest trait of the simplest organism. Maybe some day in the distant future we’ll comprehend the completed spans of our lives, beginning-to-end.

It’s a complication that we are the only species that deceives ourselves as well as others. We can't ask and expect to learn from self-deceivers and deliberate deceivers the meaning of something as profound as corroborees. That’s why we’ll likely just continue, for the time being, to view crows primarily as troublesome, like that poet’s starlings on the Fisk campus, poisoned and leaving their splatters and rotting bodies where some can be convinced it matters, at least those possessing sufficient sensitivity (or levity) or maybe anger for some because their foot coverings become stained from abundances of bird droppings.

We’ll keep working on ways to destroy crows too, that’s a certainty, or move them to somewhere else, seek ways to break up those campus corroborees. We’ll keep on talking about gatherings of crows in ways, I suppose, that satisfy us about ourselves.
instead. Not ways to exalt them, not ways of exalting crows themselves, not ways of comprehending the delicate mysteries of crows and their corroborees. In the end we tangle our queries, returning ourselves to human worries:

the finiteness of personal existences, the haunted wanderings of souls, in pretenses or hopes that crows, too, and starlings

and perhaps everyone else, might care about such if only they could listen, even if they, like most of us, would never accept some prosaic answer from Darwin’s differential reproduction as making sense of the mortality that follows from senescence. And we’ll keep on pretending that for ourselves, for our sociality too. It must be something else, not some version, some expression of natural or even sexual or social selection, saying instead, “Hah! Reproduction!? Not me! And nothing, really, to do with corroboree!” We may like thinking that crows’ corroborees have subsided rather than expanded, from ancient traits into vestiges from former migrations. That’s something we think we know about, and therefore can be convinced about, that something residing inside crows that could explain such apparent anomalies. Or maybe crow corroborees, as some declare about vulture roosts, are information centers concerning such as sex or food, or migratory routes or something else not yet brought forth.

Perhaps it’s just find the fattest or the sexiest ones out there, and the most enthusiastic colleagues, and chase after them tomorrow to see where they go and what they do.
But why, again, should corroborees happen only here? Or there, and not elsewhere? Or why not find a dead deer, skip the corroboree all together, and remain quietly near?

Oh, yes, deer! They also appear in herds of hundreds right around here where those crows corroboree. Are they too accused of migrating, or is it merely that farmers like the fellow across from the Bridgewater Bank Tavern leave shelled corn scattered across the splattered cornfields? Hungry deer, after all, appreciate shelled corn.

But we seek too often easy, careless answers that seem to resolve whatever we wish them to, and something pleasantly far from uglinesses such as the relentless reproduction of those selfish genes, at least, in our contented minds, in the ways ego-driven individuals are sure to indulge.

No Hamiltonian selfish herd of crows, this, we like to declare safely -- instead, something nice for the whole group is what a corroboree ought to be, rewarding everyone, possibly, but along with the opportunity, chancing some down-home, good-feeling status-enhancing. Like the mere joys of migrating, as if that too has nothing to do with reproducing; harmless generalizations we self-deluders erect that keep us uninformed but self-assured for now. All of us poets, whether merely aspiring or otherwise, must settle for wrong, deceptive, or incomplete answers for crows and starlings and editors and Aboriginals And deer alike, and return uncertainly to our crossword puzzles.
Evolutionary selection does not flinch from deleting or gently diminishing our memories of the persistence of differential reproduction, making it even more difficult for would-be analyzers of ornithic performances, held in abeyance for all these centuries, leaving us to philosophize about our human selves instead.

For all we know, crows could be busily changing themselves, Converging on the bilateral kin groups that have enabled us, alone so far, to make our cooperatives large enough and our lifetimes long enough to manufacture wars. Perhaps, too, they are noisily shifting toward the monogamous biparental families, like some of our own, and right under our noses, with systems comprising large groups of diverse relatives distinguished individually, as perhaps in all sedentary or flocking-together human primitives -- and in no one else at all.

Crows may have learned with us to behave as if knowing reproduction is not mere counting of babies born, but as well helping all relatives close enough to favor genes common to kindreds.

And knowing in crow sentience that their life lengths are extending -- even doubling -- as in our own case when monogamy and concealed ovulation gave us the wisdom to tend kin preferentially in their expanding groups; and evolving abilities to learn about kin, thereby generating reproductive abilities later in life by helping and saving those late-acting genes.

For some time our best will be to keep on transforming every unanswered crow question into something we like better than the flickering untruths, and curious claims to have addressed it.

Surely we'll repeatedly neglect the troublesome abundance of those wonderfully complicated big black birds, the mysteries of their noisy activities, the magnificence of their corroborees.

We'll repeatedly forget about all of those things that no one knows -- except for crows.
[YEARS LATER] “CROW MANAGEMENT EFFORTS CONTINUE –”

“The crows have returned! For the past several years, an increasing crow population has congregated on central campus during the late fall and winter months. The birds usually roost overnight in the treetops, then scatter shortly after daybreak. Population counts have been taken around campus and as many as 1100 individual birds have been observed at one time. The entire flock is estimated in excess of 8,000 crows.

“The noise they create, the droppings they leave and the potential for health concerns present significant disturbances to the University community. As a result, the staff in Pest Management has initiated its practices of recent years to attempt to disrupt the flock with mechanical devices so the crows will congregate ‘elsewhere’.

“Pyrotechnic flock disruption is an approved method of the Department of Natural Resources. The pyrotechnics emit loud, siren-like noises and bright lights. It does not cause mortality, only relocation of the target population.

“Please alert your colleagues that they may see and/or hear the pyrotechnic devices used in the early morning or late afternoon hours, particularly in the central campus area. If you are uncertain whether a suspicious noise is related to this effort, don’t hesitate to contact the Department of Public Safety at 763-1131 (or 911 from a campus phone). Questions about the flock disruption effort can be sent to Dale Hodgson, pest management specialist, at daleh@umich.edu.”

“Diane Brown
Senior Information Coordinator
Facilities and Operations
University of Michigan
734/936-2323 (or) 734/936-2661 (fax)”
Nothing’s resolved, that’s certain and sure
But it’s plainly no puny poem any more.

* * *

_A Final Note:_ Whoever came up with the inglorious term, “murder,” to describe a flock of crows should be caused to suffer an especially miserable fate. Surely he or she had no knowledge whatever of the beautiful and appropriate Australian Aboriginal term, “corroboree.” We should all pledge to change the ugly label of “a murder of crows” to the delightfully alliterative appellation, “a corroboree of crows!” The crows of the world are too handsome, too vocal, and too socially mysterious to be so crudely belittled.
Mockingbird Songs 5

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62.
or the reverse.

Try falsifying this: Humor mocks reality, social and moral reality, the kind of reality which, in the absence of a
of a supernatural, necessarily has
human architectures. Humor
causes human institutions to be modified, improved or destroyed, individuals to be informed, sometimes mortified, also sometimes destroyed, via toying with incongruities and the ridiculous, exposing failures to comprehend such boundaries, functioning on
the author’s side to elevate status.
The jocular gossip
of a good-natured,
story-telling humor session makes everyone (?) feel better and laugh together, forming, stabilizing,
and reinforcing coalitions, necessarily
likely to be
at least somewhat exclusive,
everyone involved
seeking thereby to be
gainers not losers.
But contemplate falsifying this claim:
No instance of humor has ever been relished universally: always, someone is the goat.
Reverse Reciprocity

One day at the urinal
He chanced to drop a dollar bill.

It wafted down, he sees it yet,
Lying where the floor is wet,

One end doubtful, the other dry,
At first he thought he'd pass it by.

But then some lowly cunning won,
He folded it and passed it on.

And now a doubt forever lingers
For every dollar bill he fingers.

I first recited this poem to the late William D. Hamilton, author of the concept of inclusive fitness, and the biologist who received the most accolades for his analyses of the complexities of kin helping. Bill Hamilton was a gentle man, so soft-spoken that audiences to his lectures often did not hear enough to understand what he was saying. On occasion Bill would become so engrossed in his own slides that he would stop talking and stare at them in admiration, and maybe puzzlement, for long minutes while the audience sat in stunned silence, turning their heads, rolling their eyes, and lifting their eyebrows. Once, while lecturing in a large auditorium, he told a joke that not even someone in the front row could possibly have heard. Nevertheless, the audience eventually began to chuckle as, facing them, he continued shaking with silent laughter, his hand over his mouth, never looking up, and never managing to utter anything more than a tiny rhythmic wheeze.

Although the poem is about social reciprocity, not kin helping, I thought Bill might appreciate it. So I recited it for him one day, along with two graduate students who had joined us for lunch. With my first words, Bill began to laugh, almost silently but with uncharacteristic intensity, ducking his head and trying to hold his hand in front of his reddened face. For a long while after I had finished the poem, he remained unable to compose himself; and so did the two startled graduate students.
Perhaps deep-thinking biologists have something in common. There is a story about Sir Ronald A. Fisher lecturing to a room full of students. He was said to be using a portable blackboard, with writing surfaces on both sides. Fisher had exceedingly poor eyesight, and he was keeping his face very close to the blackboard as he filled it with mathematical equations, continually mumbling more or less incoherently to the hapless students behind him, who could neither see nor hear what he was accomplishing. At some point, I was told, Sir Ronald had no space left, and he paused for a moment. Then he walked around to the other side of the blackboard and continued.

Whadddyathink?
Humor and the Arts: Hypothesis

Science and the arts identify
and characterize realities
use existing realities to create
and change appropriate future realities;
they expand the imaginations that
form up the plans of human life,
the planning of the consciously
future-seeking species.

Science and the arts call up and judge
the array of alternative possibilities,
the options that led us to conjure up free will,
allowed us to know we are able
to exercise choices among options
personally perceived via foresight
in our minds, our imaginations,
our far-sighted consciousness.

Poetry and story-telling and all of literature
do it with words,
with eyes that read into the mind,
ears that listen into the
memories of the mind.

Painting, drawing, dancing,
and all such are doing it with scenes,
eyes that visualize,
sculptures adding touches,
fingers that caress into the
memories of the mind.

Music, arising from the lilt of voices
at first merely calling out or speaking
in increasingly delicious rhythmically and
melodiously patterned tones revealing élan,
capability, confidence, honesty, thus
desirability, generating and solidifying memories
across all the ancient days of no histories but oral,
through evocations of pleasure in comfortable repetitions
becoming its own embodiment of delight.

Humor is an art, as we know
using all of the other arts
changing realities in all of the ways
of all of the others we name as arts;

changing realities by mocking them,
deriding and teasing the participants
in human-based realities, and all those
that might become human-based, all those
potentially changeable social-political realities.

Laughter says, “We get it.”
And sometimes we do.
And sometimes we change it
after the laughter, or perhaps
after reflecting on the laughter.

* * *

Humor that mocks the world
of social and political realities
may some day save the world.
Who Laughs

Who laughs last laughs best (an old saying – who said it first?). He laughs because he wins. He knows he wins because he was “ahead” when all of the joking was finished. There is an implication that it began with one fellow laughing at another (or a whole group laughing at that first victim), and then the would-be victim turned the tables by returning a more effectively sarcastic jibe at the original humorist. His joke might then turn the tables on the entire audience because they had originally laughed at him. They’ll probably abandon the first joker and laugh at the second fellow’s joke in an effort to regain status.

Who laughs last thinks slowly (a recent bumper sticker in Ann Arbor). This is a double joke – first on the fellow and the idea that who laughs last laughs best. The second joke is aimed to be on the victim, who took too long to get the joke. So he may lose prestige because he can be considered too slow (or too dense) to grasp the joke that others understood quickly. If his late laughter causes everyone else to laugh after he does, he loses even more status.

Who laughs too soon may be judged a buffoon (a novel rhyme?). The joke is on him if it becomes apparent that he was trying to demonstrate his superior knowledge by beating all of them to the punch. Instead, he laughed before it was possible to understand the joke, demonstrating that his intent was to make himself look erudite. He’s the fellow at the musical who, in his desire to show his complete understanding of the complicated composition he is hearing, begins to clap before the music has actually stopped, or even approached its end. Or maybe the music became so soft that he thought it was ending and wanted to make it appear that he was the first to recognize the ending. He finishes, being forced to sit with a red face while the orchestra continues.

Experiencing each of these alternatives fosters understanding that humor can explain things in unusually meaningful ways because it exposes incongruities and gaffes, shifting statuses upward not merely for the humorist, and for those who laugh appropriately and show pleasure, but for those who perceive how the mockery of humor can bring to light institutions, people, and performances that can be ridiculed (victimized) as wanting in one or another feature.

Humor is a special way of utilizing the basic nature of sociality to engage the kinds of competitiveness and striving that characterize human sociality from the global level to petty interfamilial rivalries.

Sometimes humor is more effective than straightforward criticism. Incongruity can be identified or manufactured for mocking. The success-
ful humorist elevates himself in status by lowering the status of someone else, present or absent; maybe striving to lower the status of everyone else, through mocking. The audience to a successful humorist recoups some of its loss of status, by learning ways to do what the clever humorist does, and also salvages status by laughing at the humorist’s humor at exactly the right times and with the appropriate enthusiasm. It can happen even if the humorist is taunting part or all of the audience at the time. Laughter can re-organize the status of members of a collective in a given place or situation. Audiences gain from rewarding good humorists because humorists explain things people need to know about, and they can do it in ways that cause it all to be remembered – for later use. People gain by attending the performances of successful humorists because such humorists can put unfortunate circumstances, or people, in a perspective that interprets them and can enable the audience to correct a bad situation scorned and flaunted by the humorist. The bad situation may be local, nation-wide, or world-wide; it may be social, economic, political, moral or scientific; and so may the effect of the humor.
A hydrogen bomb is an example of mankind’s enormous capacity for friendly cooperation. Its construction requires an intricate network of human teams, all working with single-minded devotion toward a common goal. Let us pause and savor the glow of self-congratulation we deserve for belonging to such an intelligent and sociable species.


Yesterday’s newspaper mentioned mass graves just discovered where the other side was doing its thing not so long ago.

The next page bore a photograph of an old Afghan man, arms outstretched, eyes imploring: eighteen, he said, were sleeping together in his house, all of his family, when our side dropped those bombs aimed at enemies departed weeks before. Two, the old man said, sobbing, had emerged from the rubble, two: he and his small daughter, all that remained.

Today’s newspaper indicated that overall our side is proud and happy because its bombs have been 70% accurate.
During the transfer to their new hive I tried to grant each worker honeybee the chance for a normal, natural lifetime,

tried to prevent accidental deaths, tolerating the willing martyrs angrily buzzing near me, knowing I was the intruder.

Some were inevitably caught or squeezed, smashed by my awkwardness. I swatted one down from the red spot it left on my neck.

A few dozen workers rattled lifeless in the shipping box: three were flattened forever on the rim of their new home; others crawled with terminal feebleness on the ground below.

One, Deena noticed, as we were leaving, struggled in an old spider web by the fence. But I knew we had done well by usual standards,

that this nation of honey bees would survive to serve my own extended family, that, despite the inadvertent deaths of dozens,

and the deliberate crushing of those few seeking vainly to protect the rest, this group, this propagule, this new multi-level organism would survive.

So it is as well with each representative of that curious phenomenon we call the individual. For every one is a nation of thousands of genes,

Lilliputian units seen only as selfish by many, yet cooperating far beyond human understanding in the sending into the world of their half hives

Of sperm and eggs, requiring their combining to create million- billion- trillion-celled individuals, the multiple offspring of the nations of genes.
Accidents and martyrdoms span their generations,
yielding losses between generations, more than in
just the geography and timing of our own quick wars,

which we in our pride see as peculiarly human,
noble triumphs of we over they, good over evil,
scarcely realizing that all levels and kinds of life
are equally banal.

* * *

Thirty thousand genes, three pounds of bees, each dispersing
like the forces of multi-million-member nations that can
take away 16 of 18, shattering an old man’s family

by accident, while boasting of accuracy
on targets, chosen deliberately,
but too late.

Accuracy is time too, not merely geography.
What kind of accuracy is it to hit an intended but innocent target,
while claiming it is not intended that innocents be targeted?

* * *

Already scout bees from a distant hive, having located
the temporary sugar water feeder, battle guard bees
at the hive entrance, return to tell, with their dances,

hive mates how to join them in the robberies.
I close down the hive entry to nearly the width of a single bee,
like the gate to Machu Pichu,

said to be only slightly wider than the essential llama,
giving the little new nation, the little new family,
its chance.

* * *

Nations of genes, tens of thousands;
nations of bees, hundreds of thousands;
nations of earth people, tens, hundreds and thousands of millions,

two of them more than a billion now, duking it out
against Darwin’s hostile forces of nature, scrambling
for the same inevitably limited first-rate resources, 
confronting the rest of our own kind, the ones whose groups 
seem to stand most directly in our (and we in their) way 
in the endless ubiquitous balance-of-power races.

Every level of life may be doing it, but surely 
only we have pride and sympathy and empathy, all three. 
But to what end – what end, precisely?

Do these, these three, make anything really different? 
Or are they merely features we have evolved to approve, 
to see, comfortingly, as high-minded, as wellsprings of dignity 
rather than overblown components of our own special brand of jingoism, 
our peculiarly human way of wreaking the same old, same old havocs, 
historical relicts from still another among the countless strategies 
derived from all the dreary competitions, omnipresent 
because they are descended from the ancient and seemingly 
only ways to persist in a strangling universe?

We who alone among all kinds hold our own kind to be 
the most hostile of all hostile forces, to be the evil ones we 
seek always to out-compete, sporadically to destroy, 

have indeed destroyed, devastatingly and deliberately, 
at least 50 million in half a hundred mass murders 
in the immediately previous time, now labeled The Killing Century.

Some say several times 50 million, and even they 
leave aside the immeasurable accompanying 
suffering, pain, and misery, without death.

More may have died too soon unnecessarily 
during those ten tragic decades than existed 
across all but a few hundredths of the span of 
human social and evolutionary history,

every portion of it planned, conscious, willful, 
and the new century is promising to outstrip the old.

Which, after all, of the cooperative emotions is quickest, 
most definite, achieves greatest intensity of focus?
Not love of spouse or offspring, or even of self, for we willingly give up any of these in defense of homeland, and the collective of countrymen.

Can it, then, be patriotism -- all of the others honed, compromised, subordinated, in service of this singular, ultimately focal sentiment, judged all-important?

Patriotism preserves the miniature packs of tens of thousands of genes all around us because they, unlike our own inevitable generational recombinings, clone themselves, and will indeed thereby be saved, perpetuated toward at least the possibility of immortality, whenever that cooperative emotion becomes most passionate, becomes the reigning power over obligate interdependence, over the indivisibility of the coin that parades the cooperative partners, amity and enmity, we and they, love and hate.

If so, not many want to hear about it.

*I don’t like your unpleasant insinuations! My son is a hero, that’s all!*

Do we people-individuals unwittingly seek, by hallowing our best cooperativeness under the emblem of patriotism, to match, somewhere, in some distant future, the fabulous unity of development achieved by the collective of those selfishly cooperative genes that for all their single-product molecular simplicity have gained a oneness orders of magnitude more impenetrable than any other collaboration known so far in the so far known universe?

We, as with all products of genomic histories, products and exploiters of the genes’ collective cooperation, generate and preside over unnumbered internal and external environments during our 100-year lifetimes,
endless variations that alone enable each on-and-off gene to influence
the action of every other on-and-off gene in our multi-thousand-gene genome.
Are we people-individuals, by our particular brand of patriotism,
simplifying our patriotic contributions, approaching another on-or-off,
yes-or-no, paralleling the simplicity of the gene-individuals
in the limited but pervasive nature – the wholeness and ultimacy –
of their contributions to their genomic groupings?

Does not the ultimate complexity of life arise out of the genes’
performances across those sequences of multi-trillion events
making up the lifetimes of their groups, which are us?

Are not those groups, the troops, the battalions, the armies
that in the wars of genes, in those endless arrays of environments,
shape the sequential performances of our lifetimes as individuals?

If so, some of us have lagged behind the willing suicidists
among genes and honeybees, and now, perhaps,
behind many others of our own kind.

And is not all of this true because, like soldiers on battlefields,
genes have gained so much by their kind of group-living that,
once they have passed through the only occasionally non-random
shuffles of meiosis and again joined a finite lifetime
of their own budding multi-thousand-member nation,
they are evolved so as to become virtually incapable
of bettering their individual situations by changing genomes?

Is it not the result that all their interests within the genome
necessarily have become so nearly identical as to disallow
net-cost altruism in service to the whole?

Do we people-individuals, unlike those almost completely
cooperating genes, polish our self-interests behind endlessly
pious but false claims of net-cost altruism because we,
unlike genes, remain capable of changing groups more often

and unexpectedly? Because our patriotism, unlike that of genes in genomes,
comes and goes; and so, competition within our groups goes and comes?
Because sexual recombination of genes during formation of genomes
continually spawns genomic uniqueness, thus individual differences, differences of interest among our perhaps forever imperfectly cooperating genomes of sociality? Evangelism – recruitment – alliances, have never been the solution to the we-they terror, rather, morphing into forces that magnify group sizes and complexities of organization, creating the fewer but larger terrors wielded now by more powerful, more ingenious nations, but not ceasing to create and damn those who remain as “others.”

* * *

Has love, then, the within-group shaper, Become driver of the between-group hate?

Have we always required enemies to generate the fullest sweetness of friendship?

Are we even now requiring such friendship to generate the essential enemy?

If so, not many want to hear about it.

_I don’t like your nasty biology!
My son was a hero, that’s all!_

We brag at home sometimes, as if against ourselves, but perhaps to benefit ourselves in what is called the face of adversity, or of crushing loss, seeking to maintain the _status quo._

* * *

The little girl said she and her father cry now, most of every night, in the deep, lonely chill, the darkness of Afghanistan's bitter winter.

I can understand.
I too am a father.
My children once were small.
My grandchildren remain vulnerable. And all of that will continue on.

Does not everyone know some things about cold nights and lonely nights?

Does not deliberate call for a special kind of responsibility?

* * *

God bless . . .

America?

Why not every person, everywhere, equally?

Why not, no exceptions?

* * *

It’s your turn now: Explain this thing to me.

Exactly, please, if you can.

All I crave to comprehend just now, deeply and desperately, is:

Why not?

* * *
Response to Self:

Is it not because our definition of “others” specifies that we do not know enough about them, either singly or in groups?

Enough to understand how much and in how many ways they may either help or hurt us?

Compared to better-known friends and families, and all those we are confident are committed to well-understood local moral and ethical propositions?

Compared to all those who generate the comfort zones into which we are able to retreat thankfully from the continuing horrors of otherness?

Is it because the competitions of those defined as “others” may not follow the rules we have judged, and accepted as fair and proper in the transactions of our own small collectives?

Is not the answer somehow to change everything globally, to speak globally, to think globally, rather than regionally, nationally, religiously, or in any other way incompletely?

Evangelism, after all, cannot succeed, for its failures inevitably create lengthening trails of we-they distinctions, the joiners and the non-joiners.

Ironically, across the landscape of ever-extending, ever-more-precise social and moral communications,

the amity-enmity problem has come to be exacerbated by merest unevenness, merest ripplings.

Still, in the ultimate of all ironies and all paradoxes, increasingly intimate knowledge and trust,

increasing fellowship and comfort within local groups, within the collectives of evolved-to-be-learned human heritages,

aggravate our evolved-to-be-learned uncertainties, suspicions, our conscious and unconscious intents, about all the rest, about our evolved-to-be-learned xenophobias.
“Kindness and generosity arise spontaneously when the otherness of others goes away.”


Indeed, but when barriers between nations erected as guards against competitive losses become increasingly stern, then all that transpires causes otherness to return.

How, then, shall we solve the looming global problems, particularly the most important, the varying and unpredictably expensive ones?

Those generated by grim-jawed endlessly and excessively competitive long-evolved human-group actions that are everywhere?

The ones that all of us will know beforehand may sometimes cost us more or gain us less than some or any of the rest?

How, then?

Pray, tell!

I say:

Pray!

Tell!
XVI

PEOPLE AND THEIR LIFETIMES
Pleiotropies*

Evolution has designed our minds as future-seeking tools, incidentally beguiling us as existential fools.

For the mind that sees the future knows the future’s not all bright, begins to manufacture exits from its self-concluding plight.

Unaware of driving forces from selection to the genes and developmental courses that have constituted means,

the mind builds straying pictures that conceive itself as boss, independent of the features that control its life and loss,

promotes phantasmagoria with attitude and stance correlating with embellishment from pride and ignorance.

The mind can preen and posture, grant itself the final say, claim the future, but the physical can dash it all away.

*When this poem was written, it was generally believed that each gene has one function and other effects are incidental, and most often deleterious to the organism. So much future reproduction is at stake early in life that expensive suppressing of deleterious effects can be useful. Later in life expensive counteractions of deleterious effects do not give net positive effects, which explains aging, advancing senescence, and finite lifetimes. Now the scene is more complicated because it has become clear that one gene can contribute to a hundred or more trait expressions. Fifty years ago Theodosius Dobzhansky said, “Heredity is particulate but development is unitary.”
What molecular geneticists must do is learn so much about development that it can be seen as particulate. But development has not been traced completely for even the simplest trait in the simplest organism. We are a long way from understanding ourselves, and useful behavioral study is concentrated at the opposite end of the ladder that extends from reductionism to wholeness.
For Most

Knowledge of the happening we have given the name of mortality remains mercifully hidden. Nothing remotely as definite resides more faithfully outside the consciousness that we nevertheless acknowledge we must some day relinquish.
If Not in Years, Then How

might we set out anew to measure all of the almost-everythings we’ve been calling lifetimes?

Or does it really matter?

Do the ones who ponder stars or consider trips to Mars – and all that space-time of the universe, the task of comprehending relativity – better know the worth of life or suffer somewhat less of strife?

Or does only “social” matter and the meaning of some genre that’s extracted from whatever might remind us of forever?

Is it that we comprehend or just don’t contemplate the end? Is there meaning that’s the measure of our time and idle chatter?

Or is it just the now of loving? Maybe that, the mereness of loving, those instants in succession when we realize affection.

But do meaningfuls accumulate, or only opposites of loss take place?

And what might anything become Should we choose to name it wisdom? How shall we recognize the trace of what we seek to cultivate? Must we toy with all those siren-ate promises of futures we deceive ourselves completely to believe?
Is it what we really do with all existing options, or just how we choose to use the ones we choose? Is it how we feel each moment, or is the final one the only one to count? Or is no answer to be taken seriously?

Should we read again Bill Cullen Bryant’s suggestion that we wrap ourselves in draperies of couch and lie down to pleasant dreams?

Is there reason for expecting either smile or frown when our trophies all at last we must lay down?

Is it possible that life, except for genes, is truly naught but empty dreams? Or is that solely for the errant souls that slumber?

Can we live by Longfellow’s word that the grave does not become the goal of the soul, identify some counter proposition to that dusty destination?

Should we think of what we’ll wish for at the point of our demise and then strive to make it ours for every moment of our lives?

Need we bring ourselves to pain so as never to complain of anxiety at all? Could it possibly be better
not to live a life of too intense attachment so that what we’ll lose will not encourage us to grieve and seek prolonging of that eve?

Or is this instead the most profound of perversions? And, if such, as well a clue, for the mental life of being is the future always seeing it is difficult to bask upon the past. Can we realize fulfillment at each moment of our living till we abandon the delusion that would bare its dread conclusion?

To purposely ignore it functions merely near the end, indulging in increasing retrospect, though not too strongly or too soon. If we succeed in self-deceit, then life beyond our death can lie before us in predictions of the lives of those we love. Is bringing these together, then, the key, cultivating retrospection pleasantly, the harmony of sociality, basking in the happiness of friends destined to continue past our ends?

Or is it just to seek the game’s best prize So skillfully in ways sensed to be timely, changing only that which surely seems most wise, attenuating all in one ascendant final glory?
famous evolutionist,
equally famous human geneticist,
suggested, during his own aging, that
death-awareness of the I-can-discuss-it
kind -- the limits-of-consciousness kind --
is maladaptive, an incidental and
deleterious consequence of having
a mind that can discuss itself,
recognizing the impossible incline

as a pernicious and emotional pleiotropy,
inevitably, like a cancer, temporary,
because of being down-selected,
but also deadly to us brain-rich mortals.

It would seem that Dobzhansky was correct,
understanding all too completely.

But we can dream ahead to better times,
knowing poetry will keep on changing things.
About Going All Alone

*The inevitable termination of the lifetime spousal and parental bond*

When age, affliction, or circumstance makes death seem strangely close at hand, a certain loneliness becomes over-riding.

We are not lonely because we must go imminently, rather because we must go separately, no matter, whatever, when the moment looms:

"You got to walk that lonesome valley,
You got to go there by yourself;
Ain't nobody here can go there for you,
You got to go there by yourself."

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Even We Two, Life Mate

will have to walk that lonesome valley. Even we two, I suppose, will be required each to travel there alone, in some future time, experiencing some un-anticipatable bereftness.

Until then we are only called upon to see companions through it, insure we will never be lonely till we’re required to do it.
We’ll Be Reminded

of happenings we anticipate
in which we cannot participate,
and we cannot resist remembering
that we will be alone in this,
among all those we know.

So they cannot care as much as we.

At least not yet.

It doesn’t seem to matter
that their turns are coming too.
The Ones Who Continue

to dream expect to be a part
of children growing up,
of savoring comfort and pain,
the sociality of love,
of meeting all those challenges of life,
that we would like to go on and on
because, of course, they
are, somehow, everything.
Can it be that, to the only being capable of perceiving either the meaning of a life or its evolved function, the two have begun to merge, sliding together, as the nature of each acquires a faltering focus in the still clouded vision of the consciousness that is like no other?

Can it be that this same consciousness, while becoming knowing, has evolved unknowingly toward fulfillment of such an explicitness as this particular merging?

Such an experience as contemplating, summing up, interpreting the stacked multitudes of devices proximate to, yet leading to, its own self?

Interpreting, finally, self as the singular achievement of those ultimately cooperative tens of thousands of human genes?

Genes as mere molecules, simple, non-conscious, thoughtless, yet incomparably synthesizing in the organizing of their own immeasurable successions of unrestrictedly mutualistic acts -- the syntheses that lead to multi-billion repetitions of the trillion-celled, sentient, but unfortunately finite self of ourselves?

Sentience that -- despite its uniqueness, despite underlying billions of interconnections of merely its cortical neurons -- can never be continuous, never directly cumulative, rather only indirectly, therefore imperfectly, through at first orally and now, as well,
literarily transferable fragments,
the cumulative learning of learning
that we have come to call culture?

Sentience invariably beginning over and over
then, too soon, blinking out, over and over?

And, still, the marvel that such temporary consciousness
should have gained as a mere pleiotropy those
particular consequences we had already allotted to it
by our strangely unenlightened definitions of its name.
Creating the Treasures of Your Truths and Mine

Science begins with ideas from observations: builds scenarios that thrive on journalistic directness. Its novelties are newly known theories and facts, the best of them robust, unalterable, crammed with promises of broad significance for everyone, said to be valuable because of objectivity.

Art begins with ideas from observations: builds scenarios that thrive on metaphor and mystery. Its novelties are sublime and outrageous: take-it-or-leave-it, the best of them boundlessly interpretable, accepted as subjective, crammed with promises of personal meanings for everyone, said to be valuable because of subjectivity.

Science – formal and informal -- establishes the successions and progressions of realities on which the continued elaboration of both science and the arts depend.

The mental capacities and tendencies that facilitate the practice of art, and render it joyous, facilitate science as well, and render it also joyous.

Realities deriving from use of the imagination in either science or the arts -- or merely life -- may seem personal to the scientist or the artist at every stage.

Realities derived from use of the imagination in the arts are saved or accepted by personal choice from the beginning, can be rejected at will, and also personally.
Realities deriving from use of the imagination in science sometimes seem alien, especially to the populace on which they are necessarily imposed, rather than merely invited or sought.

Science and the arts together enrich the imagination, imagination drives discovery, discovery builds knowledge, knowledge enriches lives.

Art and science each offer novel truths, foster enthusiastic or fearful incredulity over the richest of their contents:

one discovered via repeatable hence verifiable procedures, a tearing down to rebuild further, on more solid ground, the other on faith via trust in unrevealed procedures, trust imposed or accepted as a result of differentials in the strength of human authority;

sets of truths valued either similarly by all because they apply to interests common to all, or offering diverse usefulnesses, enhancing separately the unique interests of individuals.

Science progresses with great difficulty toward explanations of such as meanings, emotions, likes and dislikes -- so far has tended to resolve problems largely at physical or physiological levels, through procedures thriving on reduction and dissection, to levels conducive to analysis, followed by slow reconstruction toward admired and desired wholes.
Art exposes and creates novelty in personal and emotional propositions, often at their own level, seeking insights more through sense-expanding meanings than through sense-extending technologies.

The novelties of science and the arts contribute to all our prospects, adjusting physical and social possibilities, extending personal and social meanings.
Science discovers and documents reality, at its best enthusiastically, imaginatively, meticulously, and necessarily dispassionately.

Music, Art, and Literature elaborate on reality, at their best enthusiastically, imaginatively, elegantly, and necessarily passionately.

Politics, Law, and Morality stabilize reality, at their best, wisely and justly.

Humor mocks reality, at its best, constructively.

Realities can be physical, string, particle, or wave to a universe or biological I (animal and plant) or biological II (human, and a special sociality).

Human social realities can be completely accurate, because complete agreement is the only criterion. And they can be contrary to physical realities, deliberately, even, yet serve the believers better than other realities, but only sometimes, and that sometimes is when cooperation, joining to achieve a common goal, is required to be all that is important.

Animal and plant realities can be affected by humans, subordinated or not to social realities.

Human realities regarding self have so far been subordinated to human social realities; we have not been willing yet to know everything about ourselves,
not the things we are evolved to suppress,
or those that seem to make us unhappy;
not the self-deception we use to further our own
desires and goals, and that generates social reputations
but only temporarily and shakily accurate versions.

Art, Music, Literature,
Politics, Law, Morality,
and Humor, too, are restricted
to the human social kind of reality.

Mocking individual realities can
save the humorist too,
but only when it works
for him in the eyes of others.

Failing that,
the effort buries him.

But a humor that mocks
social and political realities
may also save the world.
Mockingbird Songs 7

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THE PRESSING HAND OF RELIGION
Religion: An Evolved Adaptation?

And what if it is?!

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I. Introduction

The science of biology and the nature and significance of religion may not seem to be closely connected. Many people consider them opposites, either entirely separate or adversarial to one another. I believe instead that the relationships of these two important topics need to be compared in detail if there is any significant likelihood that humans can (1) moderate their hyper-competitiveness and hyper-patriotism, their theatrical attraction to violence, murder, and destruction, and the world’s continuing scourge of deadly conflicts; (2) increase justice, fairness, and civility; and (3) adjust human life toward immensely broader interpersonal interactions and, eventually, the elusive and distant goal of global harmony. I will consider here the relationship of religion and evolution, and its consequences in modern human life. I will try to discuss how evolution has been responsible for religion, how and why religion became an adaptive aspect of the process of evolution, why religion generated its special features, and how religion has influenced the structure of humanity. But, above all, I will emphasize the nature and effects of organic evolution because I am convinced that a detailed and accurate knowledge of how we humans have come about is important to our future, even though, unfortunately, evolution has never been widely accepted as the central aspect of human understanding. Despite its neglect by humans in general, organic evolution indisputably continues as the universal process underlying the existence, nature, and patterning of all forms, constituents, and divisions of life, including religion and all other human social endeavors.

IIa-c. Background of the Evolutionary Process: Phylogeny, Speciation, and Adaptation. Early knowledge of evolution was based on infrequent discoveries of rare fragments of fossils.

Across the past several centuries, thousands of paleontologists, archaeologists, geologists, and biological and social scientists have examined enormous numbers of ancient fossils. More recently biologists have expanded understanding of the sciences of species formation and interaction, and, still later, clarified the nature of adaptive structures and functions. These are the three main aspects of organic evolution, in the order of their early attention from scientists: phylogeny, biology of species, and adaptation. Adaptation, the central theme, is the result of the cumulative effects of differential reproduction, or natural selection.

Attention to evolution, and the nature of organisms, began with studies of fossils and relicts of long-ago forms of life, including ancestral- or proto-humans and their relatives. Provided with such findings, scientists have, across the centuries, sought to connect the fragmentary and diverse fossil
discoveries with one another, in efforts to unite all organisms genetically via completed family trees (phylogenies). In general, however, fossil remains of living creatures have, understandably, been frustratingly inadequate for efforts to realize the goal of demonstrating structural or genetic connections among all existing examples of life. One result was that for a time cautious biologists sometimes referred to evolution simply as “change over time.” More recently, students of adaptation, molecular biologists, and other scientists have combined to identify new ways to determine relationships among fossils. Biologists continue finding and characterizing in ever-greater detail the millions of living species of plants and animals, and their interactions, and the processes by which species form. The study and recognition of species and their historical relationships continue to support phylogenetic connections among living organisms and to expand the understanding of speciation and adaptation in today’s living creatures.

The evidence is overwhelming that, across billions of years, the evolutionary process has continuously molded and changed the lives of all organisms, eventually producing the human species, now comprising a global population of more than seven billion people. The traits and tendencies of humans and their forerunners have been shaped extensively during perhaps a million-year history of physical and mental changes. Although humans all across the globe have presumably sought to understand themselves more deeply -- individually, emotionally, and socially -- there are obvious reasons why we are far from that goal. One such reason is that the adaptive consequences of Darwin’s (1859) remarkable theory of organic evolution did not become broadly and firmly understood until centuries after the establishment of the tenets of religion, and decades after adequate attention from not only anthropology, medicine, and philosophy, but as well the still incomplete disciplines examining behavior in the biological and social sciences (e.g., Fisher 1930, Williams 1966).

IIb-e. Ontogeny, Speciation, and Adaptation: Describing the details of Evolution and Life Histories as results of Modern Biology

As with most organisms, each human begins when maternal egg and paternal sperm join, forming the single-cell beginning of the fertilized egg (termed the zygote). In all humans, the zygote includes some 25,000 genes located on the thread-like chromosomes in the nucleus of the zygote. In appropriate environments zygotes transform themselves via cell division, cell growth, movement, and cell differentiation, building the early stages of the new organisms. Growing and developing embryonic organisms become increasingly recognizable as juveniles, and later as full-fledged adults that in most cases (excepting in non-sexual parthenogenetic and clonal forms) produce their own sperm and eggs, yielding the zygotes that will form the next
generation. Inside the cells of every organism, the genes, organized in the unique assemblage known as the genome, play their diverse roles in the different body parts and across the lifetimes of organisms. Genes are necessarily influenced constantly by myriads of unique local environments; otherwise, genes could not be multiplying and interacting with the trillions of specialized body cells and lifelong variable units, and serving the functions of organisms. All aspects of all life forms are necessarily influenced by constantly changing environmental features that are variously external and internal, and range from seemingly tiny and subtle modifications to massive and dramatic ones.

Across the entire life cycle, the above biological processes operate in similar fashions in most species, including humans. In the examples used here, I begin at the level of genes, leaving analyses of the subcomponents of DNA molecules to the expertise of physicists, chemists, molecular biologists, and nanotechnologists. Some initial considerations of the features of humans include: (1) how do activities and traits of humans go beyond those of other organisms, or generate unique features (said differently, how did humans acquire whatever transcendent sensibilities they possess now); (2) how do humans, the organisms responsible for religion, function within the world of millions of species of living creatures; and (3) what effects do persisting and expanding religions have on humans and the world of life in general? (Alexander 1967-2008)

**IIIa-e. How does Natural Selection Work? Persistence as Selfishness; Selfishness and Selflessness: Can Evolved Selflessness succeed in humans or other organisms?**

In 1966, George Williams enabled biologists and others to grasp the nature of evolution by natural selection in such a way as to cause, for the first time, a wide-spread, indisputable understanding of how organisms evolve; basically, he explained how and why natural selection is primarily focused at the level of individual organisms and their genes, rather than viewing adaptive change by measuring group or population averages (see also, Alexander 1988). Nevertheless, 45 years after publication of Williams’s book, and 152 years after Darwin, we continue to seek more satisfactory explanations of our own behaviors in evolutionary terms.

Behavior is generally more difficult to understand than other kinds of trait expressions, partly because so many different genetic and anatomical contributions are typically combined to produce the smoothly joined and generally inseparable components of even relatively simple behaviors; this is the reason, I suggest, that Theodosius Dobzhansky, in 1961, remarked that, “Heredity is particulate but development is unitary.”

Behaviors are also our most precious trait expressions because they acti-
ivate their extraordinary consequences instantly from the very edges of our beings. Reductionistic studies, such as of gene functions, are clearly revealing and essential. But behavior is simultaneously both typically far from reductionist investigations, and most directly representative of the largest repertoires of human activities and the most rapid and critical life decisions. Compared to most morphological and physiological processes and events, behavior amounts to an “invisible shield” -- a composite of multiple, still inadequately explained features perched in continual preparedness yet virtually imperceptible on the relevant peaks of action points, ready to demonstrate the suddenness and appropriateness of its continual program of rapidly changing social or life-and-death trait expressions. The serious study of behavioral repertoires is a crucial aspect of analyzing flexible life functions, and for that reason, understanding of the entirety of behavior will surely be surprisingly incomplete and imperfect far into the future. It is not trivial that behavior, more than any other set of traits, has surely been handicapped with regard to knowledge of evolution in examining and understanding everyday life.

* * *

The next section of this essay begins the incorporation and explanation of a series of concepts, old and new, that have been employed in efforts to explain human behavioral repertoires.

* * *

Selfishness and Selflessness are among the most broadly influential of human behavioral trait expressions. Selfishness can be defined as “the exclusive consideration by a person of his [or her] own interest or happiness.” and selflessness as “having no regard for one’s self or one’s own interests... the opposite of selfishness” (Webster’s Unabridged New Universal Dictionary: 1977). These dictionary definitions and their consequences assist in explaining human social behavior in more complicated ways than might be anticipated. Selfishness is a simple theme because it tends itself (although frequently putting forth seemingly selfless but consciously selfish overtures). Actual selflessness is more difficult because it can be endlessly threaded into the countless and multi-directional streams of human sociality.

Trait expressions can be accidental or incidental, or they can be evolved -- the latter meaning that natural selection has shaped and maintained them (from accidental or incidental novel beginnings). Accidental or incidental changes rarely become positive trait expressions, thus causing the organism to be less likely to survive and produce offspring, and reducing transgenerational persistence by the genes of the organism. Genes that are easily
understood functionally because they produce negative rather than positive trait expressions are also doomed by the generally slow, inevitable processing of natural selection. Organisms, of course, do not persist across multiple generations; only genes and other components that modify trait expressions and survive in the stages of sperm, eggs, and zygotes do so.

Behaviors that come about accidentally or incidentally may or may not benefit the organism. If a behavior yields insufficient benefits to the organism, only detriments (expenses that do not contribute positively to the organism), then organisms as a whole, hence their genes, will be less likely to survive across generations.

Evolved trait expressions come about, or increase, when the effects of Darwin’s hostile forces of nature (predators, parasites, diseases, food shortages, climate, and weather) -- via natural selection -- enable them to succeed. The greater the abundance and harmony of evolved trait expressions, the greater is the likelihood that the organism will survive, and produce offspring that survive.

Selfishness, at first glance, seems necessarily self-serving for all life at all levels, because all that natural selection (the cause of differential reproduction, and the basis for continuation of all life units) can accomplish, as the vehicle of adaptation, is differential reproduction of the genes and their associated structures in the zygote. Beginning with genes and genomes, and in humans extending as well into diverse family structures and extensive kin groups, and up to the largest nations or alliances of nations, the only way that selfish components of life can better themselves is to multiply faster and survive longer than their counterparts by persisting across generations.

These reflections have caused some people to believe that only selfishness evolves among living creatures, especially among humans. Several prominent people (e.g., Richard Dawkins 1976 [1984] and George C. Williams (1993) have considered this view, as with the following opinion from Thomas H. Huxley (1894):

*Let us understand, once and for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.*

Selflessness, the second general kind of behavioral act in terms of positive or negative social effects, is, as noted earlier, essentially opposite to selfishness. Whatever selfless behavior does, by itself alone (i.e., without return benefits), causes some of the selfless person’s calories to use some of its fitness to benefit another individual (or individuals), because some calories are being donated to the person(s) those calories assist. Without some kind of compensating forces, selflessness must continually decrease the organism’s likelihood of maximizing reproductive success.
Selfish acts are not likely to generate cooperative tendencies that can help the selfish person increase his or her likelihood of extending reproductive capabilities across generations. Helping selfish people is likely to decrease the fitness (probability of reproductive success) of the helpers because helping selfish individuals is likely to impose selflessness on the part of a helper. Cooperation as selflessness is unlikely to benefit the cooperator if the helped individual behaves selfishly.

Selfless acts are not likely to be rewarded, or compensated, by assistance given to truly selfish individuals. But selfless acts that come about accidentally or incidentally can also be detrimental to the receiving or “helped” individual. We will need to ask whether selflessness can evolve, and if so, how.

Genes and gene groups that are consistently surviving across generations are by definition successful. Genes that continue to fail trans-generationally eventually disappear, sometimes along with parts or entireties of genomes that fail because of dependence on failing genes. For genes and their combinations, success or “winning” is little more than continuing to exist, via changes with positive effects, generation after generation, which is all that natural selection can accomplish.

Unsuccessful genes may persist temporarily if their negative effects are nullified by incidental appearances of novel modifying genes that (at least temporarily) cancel or mask the deleterious effects of the unsuccessful gene, which nevertheless is doomed to disappear, to be replaced eventually by successfully functioning mutants at the same locus (assuming no significant changes in organismal function, as when environments change).

Complicated human behavioral topics are among the most difficult ones to interpret. Several concepts require understanding for the topic of selflessness. Thus, social investment refers to any personally expensive act (including selflessness) that, with or without conscious intent or knowledge, may yield no positive returns to affected individuals, such as a selfless, useless, or reproductively negative act. But social investment may also initiate or precipitate return beneficence in the form of direct and indirect social reciprocity.

An example of direct reciprocity is “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.” Another is “Turn-about is fair play.” Indirect reciprocity occurs when a needy person is assisted without return (that is, direct) compensation from the helped individual. But others may observe a helper’s behavior and in turn help the helper, or they may mimic the helper by helping others, and those others may be among the ones who assist the original selfless helper. Such interactions potentially generate complex and widespread flows of beneficence that can be broadly rewarding because of numerous small and large benefits returned from many individuals (cf. Trivers 1971, Alexander 1979, 1987). Such indirect reciprocity -- the interplay of selflessness as social investment and return beneficence from diverse per-
sons (see below) -- surely represents the most widespread, complex, and difficult interacting networks of human behavior, the interactions of everyday social behaviors.

What has been termed selflessness -- and what may be thought of as evolved selflessness (meaning adaptive selflessness shaped by consistent natural selection in the form of return beneficence) -- can cause what appears to be net-cost altruism to become social investment, with or without conscious awareness of the selfless or socially investing person. Without compensating return benefits, what we humans have learned to label as selflessness cannot, it seems, exist for long, if it is consistently exposed to negative consequences of continuing differential reproduction, or natural selection. Enhancing the reputation of a socially investing individual can itself be a significant return of beneficence (Trivers 1971; Alexander 1979, 1987; Milinski et al 2002).

But we are faced with a startling and at first seemingly unlikely claim. Contrary to what might be thought of as common sense, neither evolved selflessness nor incidental or accidental selflessness can persist indefinitely without return beneficence. Selflessness alone, except in kin relationships, seems not to contribute to the persistence of its own genetic elements. But return beneficence that, for example, transfers more beneficence than the cost of the original selflessness, converts that selflessness to a positive gain, essentially turning the completed exchange into a selfish transaction. This transaction provides “the other side of the coin” that includes both evolved selfishness and evolved selflessness in human sociality. These transactions can be difficult to identify because they can occur with or without conscious knowledge of likely or potential results.

**IIIc-e. Cooperation and Selflessness: Does Cooperation result in Net-Cost Altruism or is it always evolved (or adaptive) Social Investment, with expectations (not necessarily consciously) of social returns (financial, reputational, cooperativeness, good will, or otherwise)?**

To continue testing the puzzles of selflessness, we can consider the genes that come together, creating genomes that guide development of individual organisms. We can use this instance of cooperativeness to elaborate the selfishness-selflessness puzzle. As noted earlier, dictionary definitions of cooperation refer to groups of individuals combining to solve common problems. Some dictionaries suggest further that it is typical, when such a common problem has been solved, that the benefits of cooperation are shared equally among those who have combined to solve the problem. A simple example might be a group of people paddling in a canoe that has accidentally headed toward a deadly waterfall, certain to drown everyone if the canoe cannot be directed away from the waterfall. The situation is judged to
be sufficiently dire that the canoe can be steered to a safe shore only if every canoeist paddles as hard as is humanly possible. If that outcome is realized, everyone in the canoe gains. No one loses. It is also an illustration that even unexpectedly casual groups occasionally accomplish what individuals can't.

Cooperativeness, unfortunately, has been misinterpreted by some investigators as being selfless, or as reducing fitness, and is typically described as altruistic. Such investigators have used the ambiguous term “altruism” to explain what is happening during cooperation, although they often place the word in quotes as if its meaning is doubtful, as it necessarily is, in the absence of explanation. In certain uses, “altruism” (or selflessness) makes it appear that at least someone lost -- that someone in the group failed to experience a net gain by being saved, as from a canoe near a waterfall; thus someone might be labeled selfless, meaning helping others without gain, or suffering actual net loss of some kind as a result of the helping of others. Those who think of cooperation as “altruistic,” hence selfless, can reduce confusion by being attentive to the unambiguous term, net-cost altruism. This approach reminds us that net-cost altruism effectively becomes social investment if an observer of selflessness provides return beneficence to the selfless individual. Positive gains, and a return to net selfishness, can be provided to the cooperator, via indirect social reciprocity, deliberately or not. But in this case perhaps none of the canoeists has demonstrated selflessness because she or he has actually wished deliberately and fervently to be doing something quite different -- something perhaps as peculiar or unusual as committing suicide by exiting the canoe and drowning. But if, instead, the resigned and fervent suicidist continues to paddle, because of feeling responsible to help rescue all the others, she or he is continuing a kind of selflessness distinct from committing suicide; such an action may cause generation of her or his own brand of selfishness (via return beneficence), resulting from the responses of all of the unwitting witnesses and their communicants.

We can make the canoe illustration slightly more complex. Suppose there were some people in the canoe who had no means of paddling; they might be passengers without any capability of helping with the saving of the canoe and themselves. Surely, one might think, those who actually saved the canoe and its inhabitants, because they were able to paddle well enough, were in some degree selfless in a net-cost sense because they saved canoe inhabitants that could not help and could not save themselves. It might seem, at first, that the successful paddlers “gave,” yet “received little or nothing” for their thoughtful and benevolent behavior. This interpretation is wrong, however, because the paddlers did help themselves. They too had no choice but to paddle as hard as they could, thereby saving themselves, and incidentally, also saving the incapable passengers. Moreover, if people learn that some individuals paddled as hard as possible while others simply could
not paddle at all, when the canoe was finally made safe there would likely be
approving exclamations about heroism, directed at the successful paddlers,
whose energetic paddling may have saved friends or relatives of the observ-
ers. This attitude could be appropriate if a chance for the deadweight pas-
sengers in the canoe to be drowned was acknowledged when the canoeists
began their trip. To consider another (appalling) extreme, if the deadweight
passengers had, say, deliberately (but secretly) been pushed out of the canoe
to drown so that the other canoeists could survive, there would likely be no
congratulations or sympathy for any potential or supposed heroes; there
would be no impression of selflessness, rather, the opposite.

But, otherwise, rewards for heroic paddling to save a canoe load, with
some passengers lacking paddles, cannot be regarded as trivial, because the
seeming selflessness toward the paddle-less passengers is likely to cause
congratulations, leading to positive effects on the reputations of the success-
ful paddlers. Such responses can result in long-lasting and significant bene-
fits.

Congratulatory rewards are likely to magnify and spread the heroism,
not only securing benefits for the supposed heroes, but as well helping those
who reward the heroes sufficiently that the rewarders themselves receive
benefits from still others observing the entire sequence (e.g., improved reput-
tations leading to good will, gifts, money, or jobs -- sometimes extending to
relatives or friends of the hero). Such sequences of return beneficence (as
indirect reciprocity) can continue and be magnified, not merely across the
lifetimes of heroes, but also across generations, providing benefits to others
much later, involving families of heroes, or even their distant descendants.
Heroic acts can also inspire others to be heroic, not necessarily as selfless-
ness or net-cost altruism. And heroic acts can be exaggerated artificially to
create suggestions of appropriate models of heroism that could eventually
aid the individuals or groups doing the exaggerating. Such tendencies can
be used (consciously or not) to magnify the significance of selflessness. But
there obviously can be other rewards for heroism that are not based on exag-
geration or sham, and that yield multiple or extreme positive effects from the
behavior of potential heroes. The question is whether or not those involved
in complex and protracted reciprocal interactions are selfless, and not neces-
sarily whether they are consciously aware or unaware as social investors.

These examples indicate that heroism and beneficence can lead to re-
wards which more than compensate for what at first was necessarily termed
selflessness because no return beneficence had become evident. We might
ask whether, if such rewards never occurred, or were too minor to yield truly
worthwhile returns to the presumed hero, people would continue indefinitely
to demonstrate heroism and beneficence, and also to speak positively about
selflessness. Again, the answer does not necessarily hinge on attitudes or
conclusions expressed either consciously or unconsciously by the involved
individuals.

It seems fairly obvious that all genes providing net positive effects on the genome behave in ways that we have to call selfish (or fortunate!), and that, like the canoeists, genes are not showing selflessness when they succeed by enabling their entire genome to succeed. Instead, everything that works positively for a gene located in a genome -- and for that matter everything that works positively for the genome as a whole -- appears to be a matter of either accident or selfishness, not net selflessness. It would appear that the same is true for individual humans, including those that paddle their canoes energetically to save themselves.

We can learn more about selfishness by re-examining the genes and their tight clustering in forming, maintaining, and keeping intact the genomes that produce, organize, and operate the organism (Leigh 1977, 1983; Alexander 1979, 1987). Genes tend to survive across generations only if they contribute positively to their genomes. As already noted, the gene that fails to maximize the opportunities for positive effects limits the success of its genome, or individual, and will eventually be replaced by a more effective allele. The only measurement of success for a gene is the extent to which it propagates in viable genomes across generations.

Surely, we will gain new insights by comparing the behavior of individual humans, as they organize in groups, with the functioning of groups of genes, organized into genomes, that give rise to individual organisms. There are lessons from not only the behavior of individual humans but as well from the groups of genes, or genomes, that give rise to individual organisms. The questions that arise are: (1) do humans living in groups behave selfishly or selflessly when their effects extend the future of the genomes (in the individual organisms) by improving the success of the group as it is compared to other competitive groups, and (2) how did the concept of selflessness arise in humans, and how do humans regard it, or use it as positive with or without conscious understanding, and also use it to their advantage? Even in such cases we have to take into account larger groups encompassing the smaller ones.

Finally, we can expect vague and brief occurrences of incidental or accidental selflessness, for example, as results of people mistakenly accepting erroneous claims that they (or others) were heroic, or as results of deliberate and conscious suggestions supposedly either (a) actually leading to measurable rewards or (b) only seeming to lead to measurable rewards. Such discoveries do not refer to evolved selflessness, either because such examples are accidental and temporary, or because we can demonstrate that they have been erroneously or fraudulently paraded or accepted as heroism. But we must raise the question whether or not humans can imagine or deliberately "think" their way into generating heroism, using methods that actually do introduce selflessness into human populations. For example, humans might
deliberately generate firm and lasting resolve to engage in selflessness, even in the face of opposites (selfishness) as evolved effects, and perhaps bring about consequences positively affecting global harmony. It would seem obvious that if we accept that evolved selfishness has mostly or always been “the rule,” we will have to be quite serious to generate anything widespread that is directly and unchangeably opposite to ultimate selfishness.

Indirect reciprocity almost certainly has become far more significant (and complex) in human social life than the consequences of straightforwardly selfish acts. It seems likely that humans exceed all other organisms in partnering social investments and return beneficence. Kinship interactions and religion are formidable examples. The interplay of indirect reciprocity may possibly be expanded into a uniquely prevalent, though still ineptly explored network of social competence that can become a major vehicle in seeking global harmony.

IIIId-e. Religion, Net-Cost Altruism, and Social Investment: Helpfulness within one’s social group, without return benefits from group members, is not necessarily a demonstration of net-cost altruism, or of adaptive (or evolved) selflessness.

Humans, like genes, tend to live in groups. Both religious and non-religious people are examples, including kin groups and other diverse assemblages. Today’s human populations live in or associate with many different, changing, and often overlapping social groups.

Religions are particular forms of closely-knit social groups that typically have generated claims of beneficence derived from supernatural beings, including the concept of God, everlasting life, and adherence to moral rules promoted or presented by authority figures. Religions have been remarkably successful in competition with non-religious people, expanding more or less around the world, an evident consequence of success in persistence, propitious acceptance of religious icons, effective moral doctrines, and use of human imagination.

Religious groups tend to become either unified or competitive with other religious groups in ways that also become more severely distinct as the moral doctrines of geographically or otherwise separated religious groups diverge. The competitions thereby established suggest that the groups either survive, or, when in sufficient jeopardy, may eventually join other groups, creating larger, more powerful groups. These tendencies and abilities are not restricted to religious groups, partly because of the multiple levels of modern governments, and political and social patterns, and partly because hyper-competitiveness and hyper-patriotism also support tendencies to join conflicts with or without contributions from religious people. Various sizes and compositions of competitive groups demonstrate abilities to join one
another in carrying out serious conflicts, including warfare and genocides. Massive wars, after all, can only be fought if large groups, or alliances, find the reasons and means to bring their original smaller groups together and compete as larger units.

There seem to be two alternatives to explain the nature of religion and its many and special ceremonies and beliefs. One alternative is that most or all religious ceremonies and beliefs are accurate and factual, and do indeed depend on the pre-existence of a supernatural God, everlasting life, and other special features, including the value of adhering to moral rules imposed by accepted authority figures. The second alternative is that religious ceremonies and beliefs have instead been generated gradually and cumulatively, by expansions of human imagination and foresight, and may sometimes be regarded by some as more or less metaphorical, and useful and effective as such. Either alternative may have been generated by people (not necessarily religious) who had begun to live in organized groups because of the importance of relative invulnerability from aggressive or resource-competitive individuals, or “outside” groups of humans. It is entirely possible that today’s various claims of religious significance generated, survived, and persisted -- indeed, thrived -- because they enabled the people living and functioning, at first in small groups, and gradually becoming formally religious, to succeed in the closely-knit social environments created by adding and enhancing changes religious in nature.

The second of the above alternatives reflects the extensive variation in the world’s religions and their ceremonies and beliefs. Such variations are surely the result of different religious groups either discovering or secondarily generating variations in ceremonies and beliefs. The question then becomes how much of common elements in different religions can be judged to be pre-existing and consistent results of supernatural figures, religious ceremonies, and beliefs, and how much are instead consequences of human thinking and planning.

Regardless of which of the two alternatives is more likely, or more acceptable to different groups of people, the overall result can be similar. As customs and beliefs become well understood, and are accepted as useful and important, their effect on congeniality and cooperativeness within nascent religious groups could easily become centrally defensive and profitable bulwarks in a world of aggressive social groups. The obvious success of religions around the modern world thus supports either of the two above alternatives. The widespread unity of some aspects of some religions indicate that small groups split off, giving rise to the current situation. The second alternative to the origins of religion can be taken seriously because of the curious fact that the structures of religious groups initially seem to counter the negative aspects of the evolutionary process discussed earlier. Religious people functioning within compact and often defensive groups may take up stances
that cause them to perform in ways virtually opposite to the selfishness that is reflected by natural selection and differential reproduction. Religious people can claim, with some justification, that they are prepared to help their fellow group members -- in effect, that their behavior is networked by return beneficence (not necessarily consciously) to yield the profits of social investment; they behave as if they are selfless, at least not selfish in the way that evolution causes them to behave. This proposition, however, is not entirely justified because closely-knit social groups may have gained (e.g., expanding by spreading, and increasing success in reproduction) because their group sizes and strong unity enabled them increasingly to defend themselves from competitive groups, or to overpower (or absorb) such groups more often or more effectively. This outcome would return an aura of selflessness to examples of selfishness, or profitable social investments, explained earlier in the canoe heading for a waterfall.

The kind of “selfishness” being assumed can also be described as large or small cooperative groups that (1) are specific about the acceptability of the nature and limits of the group and (2) operate more or less via indirect reciprocity, or the interplay of social investment and return beneficence. These features carry both positive and negative aspects. Thus, behavior within the religious group can be virtually a model that can expand to approach global harmony, or it can be a sufficiently closed group as to be unwilling to accept additional members from the outside of the society or interact with outsiders in ways that can eventually profit both groups.

It is not easy to distinguish the two alternatives for the origin of religion. In some senses it probably does not matter. When religious or other group-living people become less aggressive and more congenial with “outsiders,” they move into a position to claim that they have become more selfless and less selfish. Of course it is also possible for people who claim to be religious, or indeed are religious, to use the strength of their groups in ways that result in cryptic selfishnesses as surely as in closely-knit secular groups.

It is worthwhile to point out that merely as a result of a virtually universal network of indirect reciprocity the compositions of religious groups can mimic anticipated or hopeful forms of global harmony. This is so because tightly-knit social groups function largely on social investment continually repaid by return beneficence. This is a pattern that should influence anyone considering approaches to global harmony.

Perhaps religious groups, as with countless social groups, gradually acquired the special values of maximizing within-group cooperation and fellowship via extreme authoritarianism and rigid rules regarding moral behavior -- that is, rules supporting extreme cooperativeness and social unity. Such a hypothesis could explain the eventual nature of religion, including claims of heavenly spirits, supernatural saviors, messiahs, heaven, prophesy, and everlasting life. An extensive, detailed body of strong beliefs and his-
tory combined with strong traditions of orthodoxy would surely serve the interests of those striving to use group unity and cohesion to compete, because they would encourage the group to perform as one.

The greater the unity of social groups, such as religious groups, the more likely those groups would have increased their power competitively by either seeking to defeat other groups or by recruiting them to avoid vulnerability from still other more dangerous groups. It seems obvious that humans have had sufficient imagination to generate, indemnify, and continue to accumulate the dramatic aspects of the practices that we accept as religious.

IIIc-f: Social Reciprocity, Nepotism, and Closely-Knit Social Groups: Do individuals in such groups, regardless of group sizes, parallel the cooperative clustering of genes in the genome that Leigh (1977, 1983) termed the “parliament of the genes?”

It is startling to realize how parallel are the most important details of (a) how humans living in closely-knit social groups behave among their associates, and (b) how genes behave in genomes. Thousands of biologists have meticulously described the interactions of organisms during the events described earlier that take place during the origins and continuations of the lifetimes of organisms. The question that has to arise for people who reject the process of evolution -- or who assume that, whatever evolution does, it has nothing to do with humans and their behavior -- is this: How do we explain the similarity of the functioning of all organisms, including humans, from genes to genomes, from individuals to social groups, from smaller social groups to larger ones, and (for humans) onward to nations and alliances of nations -- and the overall prominence of competition with all of its effects and consequences such as deception, fabrication, subterfuge, and injustice?

Whenever we think of humans living in closely-knit social groups, we know that the people involved will show behavior within their group that will be thought of as “selflessness.” As already suggested, people who live in tightly-knit social groups seem to behave deliberately with net-cost altruism -- at least toward members of their own groups. Anyone who lives in religious groups is likely to believe that his or her group is in fact made up of “good” people -- meaning people who have acquired reputations of being kind and thoughtful, and altruistic or selfless, or who at least seem convinced that they have; and who have accepted the tenets of their religion. This is not necessarily selflessness; it can also be the canoe-waterfall kind of cooperation, or social investment.

But close kinship is often involved in such social groups. Helping kin is not selfless if the benefits preferentially serve the genes of kin or kin helpers, or social reciprocators; the return beneficence can be (but need not be) solely in terms of shared genes saved to persist across generations. Should we not
think the same of genes that cluster together in creating the genome, thereby supporting not only their genomes but also the organismal lifetimes that emerge from the genome? Yet the genes doing that save themselves from disappearance because they display the features that cause them to support the genome in its ability to produce offspring. The genes are thus being selfish in the sense that they are behaving so as to enable their genome -- and thereby themselves (and their copies) -- to survive. Simply possessing features that contribute positively to the genome is not a selfless act. Individuals with such features are behaving like the cooperative canoeists in the example described earlier.

If people who live in groups behave selflessly toward members of their own groups and close genetic relatives, but not toward anyone else, then they suggest a close parallel between genes and genomes. If such is the extent of seemingly selfless behavior, we have a right to believe that the individual that behaves selflessly toward the members of its group is actually serving its own interests, which hinge on the survival of the group, just as the individual genes comprising a genome are able to survive only because the genome as a whole avoids Darwin’s Hostile Forces.

Recapping, these thoughts indicate that social investment, beginning as selflessness, can become “selfish” via return beneficence in the form of multiple selfless acts toward originally selfless individuals, in ways that actually culminate in equivalents of selfish behavior, or perhaps said more accurately, that culminate, at least sometimes, in equivalents of balanced indirect reciprocity and local social harmony. Whether or not, in such a situation social investors are conscious of such possibilities, either from the beginning or subsequently, or take up their selfless acts of return beneficence deliberately, can be irrelevant to the question of group harmony. The outcome of such interactions determines whether or not acts of selflessness are compensated by acts of return beneficence, from many different directions and by many different individuals. Observations of socializing humans are obvious evidence that such interactions may be going on continually. Return beneficence can convert human behavior to selfishness (or profit), at least in terms of trans-generational genetic persistence, and must often contribute significantly to group harmony.

IVd. Manipulation of Consciousness by Natural Selection: Does it prevent humans from understanding themselves and their proclivities for war, genocide, and many other kinds of mayhem? Particularly because of the surprising neglect of natural selection’s muting and manipulation of evolved consciousness, details of the how and why of associated changes in Pleasure and Pain need serious consideration.

The manipulations of consciousness that virtually block human self-
understanding, presumably consequences of natural selection, leave us with an astonishing prevalence of horrific attitudes and behaviors that, sadly, to many or most people seem either not to exist, or are only moderately and temporarily noticeable. Team competitions, warfare, genocides, and Beilby Porteus’s one-murder at a time “villains” (see below), are among the many human conditions that natural selection has apparently modified by manipulating consciousness, such that we often respond almost carelessly and forget quickly when confronted by dramatic and sometimes radical or even heinous actions of members of our own species. We seem to live in bubbles of consciousness alongside non-conscious and distortedly conscious strivings, and quick forgetting, the latter effects products of what Williams (1993) called the “Wicked Witch” of “Mother Nature’s” selfishness of evolution’s differential reproduction.

How many people have at any time been aware of the numbers of people believed to have been killed deliberately during the wars of, say, the twentieth century, and the many times greater physical, mental, and emotional consequences of surviving but being injured and incapacitated participants in those same wars? When we happen to be among those who gain awareness of such dire events, how long do such realizations remain in our consciousness?

Three possible examples of muted or manipulated consciousness can be cited: (1) rapid disappearance of memories, as with knowledge of warfare and genocides; (2) concealment of ovulation (apparently completely unknown in early Australian Aborigines and probably some or all other non-technological people, therefore with no conscious knowledge of ovulation, though women in modern societies are able to identify ovulations using modern scientific knowledge and technology); and (3) absent or tenuously conscious awareness of the significance of maximizing reproductive success.

An important and fascinating example of muted (or suppressed) consciousness is that the persistence of reproductive success, by individuals and species alike, is the beginning and end-all of the success of all life forms. If we apply ourselves to considering this fact, we may seem to be casual, or even puzzled, about why we should pay attention to the question. I suspect that few people consciously think of their lives as calling for maximum success in reproduction, and it is likely that, sometimes without even knowing or thinking about it, they would lose socially by parading such an attitude. Anyone who in today’s world accepts that “winners” among parents should be striving to produce and rear the largest possible number of successful offspring is unlikely to flaunt the effort, or the achievement, although occasional crank celebrities, philanderers, or careless, reckless, or thoughtless individuals may have done so. Curiously, the largest number of descendants -- of all kinds and at all levels -- is somewhat more likely to cause unchecked pride, as is the existence of successive strong generations of a fam-
ily. For example, five-generation photographs are sometimes viewed in local newspapers, with admiration and warmth. It is as if, in today’s world, even if spawning more than a few offspring is seen as potentially greedy or selfish, proudly surveying several generations of descendants can be viewed positively -- perhaps suggesting quality in the persistence of the local population, or appropriate sources of military or other propitious features in the group, including expanses of kin and perhaps especially distantly related potential quality mates for one’s own descendants.

A particular form of evolved biological “selflessness” across parents’ and helpers’ lifetimes involves (1) parental genes being passed to descendants and non-descendant genetic relatives, and (2) behavioral and other support from parents and helpers for known descendant and non-descendant relatives. This description of serving the interests of genetic relatives does not bring to mind the earlier described view of selflessness. Nor is it even close to the dictionary definition of selflessness.

Nevertheless, parents and other relatives have unknowingly evolved to submit themselves to shortened lifetimes and lowered vigor and capacity via senescence, and via voluntary or accidental assistance to genetic relatives (Williams and Williams 1957, Alexander 1987). This seeming selflessness, however, applies to the helping acts of the parents or other assisting relatives -- help that passes on to the continuing generations that use the genes of the relatives organizing the next generation. Parental and other kin-related adults pass, to their offspring and other relatives, genes necessary to continue their genetic lines, and these transactions tend to multiply the currencies represented by offspring and other descendants. The only excuse, then, for referring to selflessness is that parents have evolved to multiply their pay-offs in numbers and qualities of descendants and other relatives. Because of consistent and often multiplicative returns, however, this process is best viewed as beneficence returned via genetic success in the next generation.

Aid to genetically close relatives cannot easily be regarded as selfless, because the relatives are carrying many of the same genes as the supposed selfless heroes. Thus, in terms of survival of their own features, those who help relatives are selfish in the sense that, in different ways, they are contributing directly -- and mainly -- to their own genetic success (Hamilton 1964; Alexander 1979). Helping relatives is not even indirect, because selfishness is transmitted via offspring essentially as it leads to other genetic relatives. Co-parents (spouses), even though not genetically related to one another, are like genetic relatives in at least three ways: (1) creating offspring parented by efforts of both spouses, (2) helping with care of offspring, and (3) helping other genetic relatives -- including helping one another because each may sometimes be required to do all of the other’s parental or kin actions. Again, the return-to-selfishness payback (return beneficence in social investment) derives from efforts resulting in multiplication of genes and offspring.
Non-offspring-bearing forms (castes) in so-called eusocial colonies -- e.g., ants, wasps, bees, termites, naked mole rats (Alexander, Noonan, and Crespi 1991) -- are similarly not being selfless when they use their lives (as functionally sterile workers or soldiers) to assist and save genetic relatives, mates, or reliably reciprocating associates. More specifically, individuals are selfless only in the sense that, as with parents, they “give up” their own genes to save copies of those same genes in their genetic offspring and other relatives, and by this they serve their own personal interests via their genetic relatives. These actions account for the finiteness of lifetimes, senescence, and the eventual deaths of organisms (Williams and Williams 1957; Alexander 1987). All genetically related organisms, and all of the parts of such organisms, are thus evolved to be selfish in the sense that they function in serving the survival and reproductive capability of their own genes, in related organisms (singly or in cooperative groups), and by indefinitely extending the existences of their component parts across generations -- e.g., genes and various gene groupings, including chromosomes -- and taking into account the overlapping futures of their genetic relatives and descendants. How can this be anything other than selfishness?

Perhaps ironically, the most frequent and obvious examples of muted consciousness involve tendencies for people to engage in what they regard as selflessness, and to feel confident that such acts can indeed be selfless. Seemingly selfless acts, however, are always subject to being recognized, with the consequence that the recipient of the selfless act, any mere observer of the act, and the originally observed “selfless” person might all tend to be revealed, such that, as noted earlier, return beneficence from one or another source can turn the original selfless act into a (not necessarily conscious) net positive return to the originally “selfless” person. Both the tendency to behave selflessly, and tendencies for the originally selfless person to believe that only selflessness was involved, may cause the original act to represent social investment. Part of the reason for supposed selfless acts may (consciously or not) be that overcompensation of return beneficence may frequently return a profit to the original selfless actor. The interesting question is whether such a pattern of behaviors, including the themes of return beneficence and social investment, can be the background for an enormous, complex, and widespread amount of adaptive selflessness.

Indirect reciprocity can take extremely complicated turns. In many species, human and non-human, selfishness of individuals is packaged functionally in cooperative groupings: genomes as combinations of genes; families as combinations of individuals; extended kin groups comprising sets of families of genetic relatives; small and large mixed groups of kin and social reciprocators; and, in humans, establishment of tightly-knit social groups such as religions, nations, and alliances of nations. Such highly cooperative but limited groupings tend to compete with other similar groups. They also may
cooperate with other groups, and compete with still larger groups.

From this beginning, we need to understand more about how the same effects occur at the levels of genome, organism, and progressively higher levels of ecological and social organization. To do this, we must consider how the above comments about selflessness can be accurate. One question is whether the seemingly “special” traits and tendencies of humans -- features we see as unique to our species and sometimes describe as intelligent, imaginative, predictive, insightful, and spiritual (traits that tend not to be easily understood or analyzed thoroughly) -- have been able somehow to go beyond the usual functioning of genes and genomes, and demand explanations distinct from what we may think of as the basic components of human life. We need to know whether, without return beneficence, examples of selflessness (not mere cooperativeness: see below) are always accidental, incidental, and temporary, or can possibly be modified functionally (adaptively) to persist, when it seems that functional modifications eliminate the condition of evolved selflessness. Again, we have to wonder how selflessness became a prominent and everyday concept, acceptable to all of us.

As already noted, serving the interests of members of one’s social group, and seeming from this to be selfless, is not selfless (1) when individuals are serving their own genes via genetic relatives, and (2) when they are serving group members as part of saving the group, therefore saving themselves as well, from enemies of various sorts, including (in humans) groups or members of their own species. If there were no enemies (i.e., unlimited resources and none of Darwin’s Hostile Forces of Nature), then natural selection would surely diminish the tendency for group members to be “good” toward others -- indeed, diminish tendencies to join groups other than relatives. We might also wonder if hyper-competitiveness, genocide, warfare, murder, bullying, injustice, and other serious, violent, and continuing human confrontations and altercations have made us especially cognizant of the reverse concept of selflessness. But selflessness is not quite so easily understood.

When people are being social, a great deal more is going on in indirect reciprocity than I have mentioned so far. The socializing of humans is almost certainly the most important and difficult problem we have to understand among the topics of this essay. We must find a way to explain what widespread and complex mixes of people interacting socially might actually be accomplishing, with respect to selfishness and selflessness, and how greetings and other brief or not so brief interactions flow, how seriously they seem to be affecting one another, which labeled concepts are involved and what they are doing, and what it all means for everything we might wish to comprehend and summarize. It would surely help if we could find ways to construct explanatory diagrams showing real numbers and kinds of routes between and among groups of interacting people, in which there are surely innumerable -- both expensive and inexpensive, important and probably
complex -- connections and mixes of greetings, conversations, helping behavior, and other responses that carry with them at least some of the ways that expressions of apparent selflessness have to be judged in efforts to become socially more complete, accurate, and useful. The flows of social positives and negatives are probably far too complex to analyze or diagram completely. In any case, we surely must wish to learn how to view and understand the impact of possible selflessness -- whether accidental, incidental, or evolved -- repeating its perhaps brief lifetimes up and down, here and there, in the maelstrom of increasingly extensive and complex groupings of human social activities.

We also must keep in mind that the constantly changing process that creates, maintains, and furthers the nature of all life, is differential reproduction. This is a fact, not a supposition or guess. Its patterns are evident and universal across all life; they are easily observed and have been verified in many thousands of animal and plant species. But when social investment is supported by return beneficence, the reciprocating combination can convert selflessness to selfishness, distress to success, without supporting the laments of such as Thomas Huxley and George Williams.

**IVa-c. What are the consequences of humans apparently having become their own Principal Hostile Force of Nature?**

Unlike members of other species, humans living in groups are extraordinarily -- probably uniquely -- competitive within their own species. Wars, genocides, murder, bullying, injustice, dishonesty, deceit, fraud -- all such results of hyper-competitive, hyper-patriotic behavior -- are prevalent in humans. Following, in some respects, Sir Arthur Keith (1949) and Robert S. Bigelow (1969), I have proposed that modern humans have, for better or for worse, taken other humans, especially in groups, as their most important hostile forces of nature. Part of my argument began with the possibility that only this feature can explain why the expensive human brain has evolved -- or persistently increased in size and complexity -- so far beyond the brain sizes of its closest primate relatives (cf. Alexander 1968, 1979, 1987, 1990, 2008). If this intriguing situation turns out to be correct, then we can see another way that humans living in groups can be behaving selfishly when they save or help members of their own groups but not those in other groups. When we realize that as many as 160 million people may have been killed in wars and genocides during the 20th century, the emergence of ever-larger human groups as more effective units of competition and selection than individual humans, or small family groups, becomes much more devastating than we might have anticipated (e.g., Ember and Ember 1990, Scaruffi 2006, Goldhagen 2009). If we turn away and accept the manner in which differential reproduction functions -- and if selflessness, social investment, return
beneficence, and direct and indirect reciprocity do not function so as to build social harmony — we will be yielding to the relentless slow changes of natural selection, and failing in the effort to enhance the possibility of roles for effective selflessness in our societies.

**IVb-c. Team Competition in Sports; Team Play as Practice -- but for what?**

If humans have become their own principal hostile force of nature, we can easily understand how humans have also become the only species that competes in team sports -- in groups that win or lose as groups (Alexander 1979b, 1987, 2008). Team sports, as well as theater and literature, are forms of play. Most biologists regard play as having evolved as practice -- practice for something other than play -- instead, for the “real thing,” which in this case virtually has to be competition and conflict, perhaps warfare, between human groups.

Teams competing in sports are exhorted to think only of the team, not of themselves as individuals. That is precisely what takes place in the military, in which individuals are dramatically -- and necessarily, especially when war is imminent or current -- subordinated to the service of their functional units and trained to perform as members of closely-knit, single-purpose groups (see pp. 103-104).

We can consider whether it is possible for team sports to be widespread and intense, and yet not remain true to their apparent original purpose. The question is how to generate such considerations in the interest of promoting social harmony. Games and other activities, including both individual and team sports, may have replaced and reduced the incidence of serious, intense, and negative forms of competition; but hateful conflict, too-frequent killings, and other negative encounters -- more often by over-zealous fans than by team members, and equally avid appetites for increasingly horrendous cinema, radio, and literature -- have given little evidence of waning or disappearance from competitive sports, or from theater in all of its variations.

**IVa. The Group-Living Ratchet: Amalgamation of tightly-knit social groups has increased repeatedly, producing larger hostile groups**

The extensive and complex organization of human social, political, religious, and military groups must have begun with progressive expansions of sociality from nuclear families through extended families and larger kin groups, to subsequently incorporate additional networks of socially reciprocal partners and mutualists, and eventually armies, nations, and alliances of nations devoted to the prosecution of direct wars, genocides, and other forms
of drastic competition. Among the incredible complexities of modern human activities there are almost too many patterns of overlapping organizations to be comprehended. Communications technology, other diverse, ubiquitous, and powerful forms of technology, large and small weaponry, and endless items of use in all aspects of human productivity and competition, are consequences of the rise of complexity in modern human social life.

V. Progress toward Global Harmony?

Try to imagine the complexity of seven billion individuals, divided among nations and other forms and sizes of groups, all assiduously pursuing the endless variety and complexity of their separate and collective interests, and simultaneously trying to think about achieving the goal of global harmony. Try to imagine the problem of causing all of them -- seven billion separately, or in their various collectives and groupings -- to remove any conflicts of interest among them -- or even just to lessen the worst consequences of such conflicts.

* * *

Moral and ethical problems and questions exist solely because of conflicts of interest; moral systems exist because confluences of interest at lower levels of social organization are used to deal with conflicts of interest at higher levels.

To analyze conflicts and confluences of interest -- therefore, morality and moral systems -- a theory of interests is required.

A theory of interests is a theory of lifetimes -- how they are patterned and what they are designed (by evolution) to accomplish.

--Alexander 1987:33

In some sense, conflicts and confluences of interest are the warp and woof of the fabric of society. Those who agree cooperate; those who disagree conflict or compete; and those who cooperate also use their enhanced ability from cooperation to compete with those with whom they have conflicts of interest. Conflicts and confluences of interest are reflected at every level in society from the most closely related and intimately associated individuals to globally distant nations with populations of hundreds [or thousands] of millions.

--Alexander 1987:34
What is implied is that the world is filled with people who are following their own interests. I suggest that this is true, and that they do it individually, and, when their interests overlap or coincide, they do it collectively in groups and coalitions of every imaginable size, shape, and description. They do it in families and clans and neighborhoods, and in unions, guilds, syndicates, cooperatives, corporations, tribes, municipalities, partnerships, [religious congregations], nations, and even coalitions of nations. That people are in general following what they perceive to be their own interests is, I believe, the most general principle of human behavior.

--Alexander 1987:34

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of conflicts of interest. One has only to read a newspaper or a news magazine, or listen to his [or her] associates discussing what they regard as the significant issues of the day, to realize that nearly all that is newsworthy involves conflicts of interest. However massive may be the areas of thought and action on which all people everywhere may truly agree, it is their areas of disagreement and contention which remain as the cutting edge of strife, risk, and danger to individuals and societies the world over. It is conflicts of interests that people write about, worry over, and ponder most intensely, that fill the literature and all forms of the condensed versions of life that in the broad sense can be called "theater." It is how we deal with conflicts of interest, selfishness, and hyper-competitiveness that will determine the fate of the world and the future of humanity.

-- Alexander 1987:77-78

Try it again: Imagine the complexity of those seven billion individuals, divided among nations and all other forms and sizes of groups, and all assiduously following the variety and complexity of their endless interests; and try simultaneously to serve all of your own interests while you continue thinking about trying to contribute to the goal of global harmony.

* * *

In humans, reproductive-opportunity-leveling occurs via the establishment and enforcement of the rules, compromises, and contrasts of moral, ethical and legal systems. Unlike the only other sexually reproducing, nonclonal groups to spawn group sizes in the millions (eusocial insects that produce sterile workers and soldiers), in humans the tendency has been for all individuals to be directly reproductive, with the opportunities of doing so in the largest groups leveled by socially imposed monogamy, suffrage, welfare,
graduated taxes and other trends toward justice as impartiality. . . . The function or raison d’être of moral systems is evidently that they provide the unity required to enable the group to compete successfully with other human groups. Only in humans is the major hostile force of life composed of other groups in the same species.

--Alexander 1987:142

* * *

To a large extent, partial solutions to the problem of global harmony depend today on the governed units termed nations. Organized religions can also exercise potent influences in the machineries of nations. Something similar can be said of science, because scientists -- including engineers -- generate and perfect the instruments of war. As loyal citizens of their nations, and sometimes as staunch members of religious or other authoritarian groups, scientists can be influential seekers of rewards for the creation of increasingly horrific weapons of war.

How can we increase the informing of our populations with regard to willingly competitive and potentially destructive groups in ways that will diminish or terminate devastating conflicts? How do we escape the hyper-competitiveness that we all too often praise, beginning with strong advice to even our young children, as the only effective route to lifetimes of accomplishment? How do we disentangle ourselves from the pernicious influence of diversely and competitively sacrosanct hyper-patriotism? How do we free ourselves from the view that our readiness for deadly confrontations outweighs the priceless value of our military men and women as we hurry to proclaim and cling at all cost to the sacredness of our essential motherlands? How can we negotiate and modify governments (and ourselves) to seek successfully the means to settle conflicts with minimal acrimony and absence of force? How, indeed, do we escape from what Abraham Lincoln called, “That attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood”? Or from Beilby Porteus’s long ago quip that, “One murder makes a villain, millions a hero!”? (This claim, of course, is at least partly because the “one” person murdered is likely to be part of “our group,” while the “millions” slaughtered in wars and genocides are necessarily less familiar, thus more likely to be accepted as potential enemies, or unimportant.)

Several decades ago I found myself thinking that, in spite of the unique complexity of our brains and our behavior, we humans don’t really know who we are or how we came to be as we are. It is clear that we have not evolved to wield all of our prodigious mental capabilities freely and effectively. Nor do we seem continually tuned to understand our willingness to engage in serious conflicts that destroy large numbers of our own people. If
we don’t know who we really are, or how to deal with sometimes galling human extremes, any efforts to approach global harmony are likely to fail. We cannot allow the questions that damp or conceal our conscious knowledge to pass fleetingly and unmanaged across our minds. This is why I believe that the most important change that can contribute to global harmony is for humanity in general to learn to know itself better, individually and collectively, as products of our personal and collective backgrounds, derived from the unambiguous, unchanging, never-ending process of organic evolution. We need to investigate and lay open our capacity for understanding the ways natural selection has manipulated the patterns of our consciousness, canceled our wayward memories in directions favoring reproductive success, and prevented, modified, and all too often warped our potential for the warmth of truly widespread friendliness, empathy, and cooperativeness.

It is not an accident that several of the best-known scientists and thinkers in the history of the world have understood that evolution has been responsible for the worst of humanity’s activities. One such distinguished student of evolutionary adaptation was the late George C. Williams (1993). Williams titled his invited chapter, “Mother Nature is a Wicked Old Witch.” He understood that the process of evolution is based on selfishness and can follow a course that mainly generates power and increases access to resources. Humanity, it would seem, if it is to move toward global harmony, must modify its fate by understanding humans deeply, and by building strong desires and capabilities to focus on the positive aspects of humanity, reducing the extreme negatives deriving from hyper-competitiveness and hyper-patriotism, and turning the future of humanity in new directions concentrated on extensive webs of social investment and return beneficence -- in other words, on indirect reciprocity. To accomplish this, we must understand ourselves thoroughly, so that we can use that knowledge to serve our own interests.

What else can we do to change ourselves -- on a global scale -- to reduce our ever-ready tendencies to compete at nasty levels, to commit murder even in the face of lifetimes in prison or a death sentence, and to wage wars? We surely cannot lose by striving mightily toward congeniality and negotiation rather than hyper-competitiveness and conflict, and by seeking reduction of aggression, using all reasonable means.

These and other suggestions may have positive possibilities. But it does not seem likely that efforts at such changes will quickly capture our imaginations or yield compelling or worldwide outcomes. It is as if everyone believes that she or he is already working as hard toward such outcomes as is reasonable or possible. If that is so, it will not do to expect that the efforts that have been tried so far can solve the problem. Thus, large numbers of small local groups, socially close-knit and catering to authoritative moral pronouncements, are unlikely to cause the necessary changes. Such efforts are not likely to solve the problems because humans have been doing these
sorts of things more or less in vain for thousands of years. Perhaps we can gain by more effectively identifying global questions, or knowledge, that will influence a higher proportion of the global population.

The greatest difficulty in seeking global harmony may derive from human groups targeting one another. Humans alone -- among all of the world’s species -- plot, plan, and organize massive conflicts to defeat or displace similarly organized and cooperative members of their own species. Can we learn to use the current consciousness of our human background to adjust team efforts of all kinds so that honesty, fairness, and negotiation increase and lead us toward global harmony? Can we work profitably against the existing minimizing, reversing, and distorting of conscious knowledge generated by natural selection? Surely such efforts would contribute positively toward global harmony.

The curious prevalence of wars between conspecific human groups may have been encouraged by the isolation of human populations that, through extensive migrations during past millennia, became separated geographically but did not become so different genetically as to prevent increasingly extensive hybridization after re-establishment of population mixtures. At least among the distinctive populations forming most recently, the isolation did not persist long enough to give rise to different species, but former human populations persisted in separation long enough to accumulate differences in the diverging populations that resulted -- for example in appearance, stature, language, and cultural patterns such as monogamy and polygyny (for a somewhat similar example in much simpler and different hybridizing species, see pp. 200-201, 205-206). At least during early amalgamations of distinctive populations, such differences almost certainly caused humanity to generate less opportunity and motivation to combine the diversities of our single species peacefully into mixed populations cooperative against the array of non-human enemies. Presumably, in some earlier stages of evolution, humans were still focused almost entirely on non-human enemies. At some point, early humans were surely also less likely, or less well equipped, to treat other humans as primary enemies. However, as human population sizes increased, and ecological dominance became a more promising possibility, competition among humans for resources would have become more concentrated and begun to generate small closely-knit kin and social groups developing their own rules and desires to contest against one another.

Whatever the detailed reasons and timing for the incredible tendencies and devices that spawn war in modern humans, our current condition has obviously generated, elaborated, and persisted in supporting massive and horrific within-species, large-group conflicts, along with serial and copycat murders, bullying, and other destructions of humans at many levels and in different numbers.

We are not gentle people. It will surely take all the capabilities that hu-
manity can muster to accept and comprehend the unpleasant side of our collective nature, and to minimize or reverse the unfortunate effects of human history that primed us and set us up indefinitely to continue threatening extremes of within-species competitiveness and violence at virtually every level of human existence. The world’s options almost certainly call for peaceful, casual, and deliberate amalgamations of historically tiny, introverted, and tightly-knit social groups, and, perhaps, subdividing huge nations because they seem unable to refrain from becoming armed beyond sensibility. Peace may be the goal, but its means and maintenance will require novel levels of statesmanship and, somehow, continuing and novel floods of good will.

Question: Why should we not encourage the diverse people around the earth to be freely inter-mixed, and ready to strive to make all nations democratic -- the latter meaning to “drive home” the values of elections at suitable intervals, personal and confidential voting, two or more voting political parties, and parliamentary rules and courts that consistently make democratic institutions work for all people? How can we eliminate the indefinitely continuing dictatorships that begin to treat resources as the property of the government and as a result take up war with their own people?

It would be wonderful if all of humanity could become sufficiently knowledgeable about themselves -- positive and negative -- to begin to absorb the activities and attitudes of people living in tightly-knit social groups, whether religious or not, discovering ways to transform broadly and definitely the cooperative behavior of the individuals familiar within such groups, along with acceptance of social investment and the response of return beneficence on a world-wide basis. To the extent that these changes can take place, we might find ourselves comprehending how building real selflessness and socially positive behavior can turn us toward a sociality reflecting global peace and harmony.

VI. Conclusions

The base of selfish actions deriving from natural selection is the easiest part of understanding human behavior. Success is derived via the reliable trans-generational passage of viable combinations of the approximately 25,000 genes making up the human genome. Reduced success, or complete failure, can occur when any part of the sequence fails. Major jeopardies derive from countless rapid and dramatic changes in environments, and the continual testing of novel patterns across lifetimes. Conscious awareness of the events underlying direct selfishness can evolve to be accurate, mislead-
ing, minimal, or essentially absent.

Selflessness is different, and considerably more complex. Acts of selflessness behave oppositely to selfishness, expending calories and reducing genetic success. But they can also be seen as social investments, when they are modified by flows of return beneficence in the form of rewards from selfless acts by others. Most or perhaps all individuals produce both selfish and selfless acts, both consciously and non-consciously, complicating the interplay of multiple acts of social investment and return beneficence.

Return beneficence can result in most or all of an entire collective eventually generating a net positive or “selfish” result because the selfless acts of individuals returning beneficence can be increasingly valuable, yet decreasingly expensive compared to the original selfless acts. Reputation is an appropriate example because contributing to another person’s reputation is likely to be an inexpensive act, while the result can become quite valuable to the recipient.

Helping someone can strengthen an entire group. Multiple helping can feasibly enable everyone in the group to gain. Having a leader or a small group in charge, as with a moral authority in a religious or quasi-religious group, can contribute significantly to the likelihood of a group maximizing return beneficence within the group, more or less at the expense of alternatives such as spreading maximal beneficence within a broader or more all-encompassing population. The requirement of selfishness in such groups can become so multiply reciprocal that everyone tends to be better off than others in neighboring groups. If everyone in a group happens to so maximize return beneficence, the resulting actions can resemble direct reciprocity, causing universal benefit within the group.

It is easy to understand that close genetic kin can perform selfless acts that in appropriate combinations aid genetic relatives sufficiently to restore initially selfless individuals or groups to overall success in evolutionary selfishness. Even when kin are not involved, economical choices of selfless acts can compensate individual selflessness via direct or indirect return beneficence. The resulting spread of reciprocating selfless social interactions expands from kin groups to cooperative groups that mimic kin groups, also to groups primarily formed in defense against competing social groups. Humans have ample opportunity to capitalize on stable extensions of multiple cooperative confluences of interest.

Many different levels and expressions of consciousness can be involved in human selflessness, and in compensating indirectly reciprocal interactions. The resulting social connections can create expanding networks of reciprocating selflessness nourished by return beneficence. Examining the complex interplay of social investment and return beneficence in religious and other tightly-knit social groups is potentially a useful approach to understanding how humans can work toward global harmony.
The basic question in the above essay about religion and evolution was raised more than a third of a century ago by a brilliant and unusual man named George Price. Price became concerned with this question: “If natural selection favors the genes of the most prolific individuals, how can we explain the evolution of altruistic behavior, which benefits the survival and reproduction of others?” Price published his key papers in 1970 and 1972, and died in 1975. He produced an equation that defined “a relationship between the expected change in a trait, the average fitness, and the covariance of fitness and the trait” (Price 1995, Hayes 2011). In 1995 and 1997, Professor Steven A. Frank -- an undergraduate student in my course on human behavior and evolution in 1978 -- published analyses of Price’s equation. Price (1995) is from a manuscript Steve Frank found in William D. Hamilton’s papers, and had published for Price after the deaths of both Price and Bill Hamilton. During my struggle to develop the current essay I was not aware that Price had raised the explicit question discussed by Frank (2010a) and Harmon (2010). For a somewhat different approach, also aiming to generate a more harmonious society, see Hardin (1968) and Frank (2010b). Hardin’s essay focused on population growth, limitations on resources, and the associated extreme competitiveness of modern humans (see also, Milinski et al, 2002, on indirect social reciprocity).

Again, the satirical words of Beilby Porteus (1731–1809), Bishop of London: “Kill a man, and you are an assassin. Kill millions of men, and you are a conqueror. Kill everyone, and you are a god.”

It is a little embarrassing that, after 45 years of research and study, the best advice I can give to people is to be a little kinder to each other.

-- Aldous Huxley

Thank you, Aldous Huxley, for graciously placing yourself in the group that, so far as I can tell, includes myself, meaning one who has remained abjectly unable, across even more years than you describe for yourself, to solve the special social problems we all are likely to continue sharing -- and bearing -- across future successions of lifetimes.

-- RDA
Acknowledgments

I greatly appreciate the four former students who assisted me in constructing the above essay: Drs. Ann E. Pace, Steven A. Frank, Wendy Orent, and Alex Mintzer.

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I've been cautioned by some that my essay's too dense
That even confident claims are capricious pretense
But I pray there'll be striving to garner a glimmer
From those who opine that it's best judged a primer.

***

*It is surely time for the adaptive structures of religion and science to begin adjusting, finally, into the long-needed partnerships that can hone their respective capabilities with the joined skills and emotionalism of the tangled and still impotent searches that someday will nurse the gathering fragments of the potential for global social harmony.*
God, Most Recently

To every reason for cooperating uninhibitedly, praise the power of the Lord, our useful and admirable metaphorical Spirit Father Figure.

Yet be conservative about passing the ammunition, brother: genocide, though not our stated aim, has too long been a claim to fame.

With and despite God’s existence and help, unfortunately, we remain personally and collectively engaged in changing the measurements of the lifetimes and comforts of our fellow beings in the species that alone among the known apes of history have gained the capability of traveling and living globally but so far have been unable to cooperate globally about anything at all -- excepting, perhaps, the worthiness, indeed, the seemingly shared necessity of strong patriotism, patriotism that continues to evolve and use its skills and unwavering determination to destroy every opposed and opposing side.

Asking for God’s help as our collective guiding spirit of cooperativeness, we may convince ourselves that we persist only toward honorable outcomes.

Sadly, it appears that we may not for some time find ways to desist from continuing efforts to adjust the lifetimes of our fellow humans so frequently in the wrong direction.
A Prayer for Global Harmony and a Kindred of the World

1. Dear God -- *Allah, Yahweh, Adonai, Buddha, Brahma, Creator, Holy Spirit, Almighty, Jehovah, Lord, King of Kings, The Man Upstairs* -- any and all other inspired appellations that promote the shared dispositions we assume have made and kept us human: the universal essence hovering always over the minds, intentions, and moral contemplations of our global population; the spirit that has come to represent for each and all of us the ultimate possibility of social harmony and unity. We yearn for enhancement of the collective version of cooperativeness, empathy, and goodness resonating within the minds of all humans, as we strive together to emphasize and magnify the benevolent qualities of all humanity at all levels of social interaction.

2. We have come to realize that the socially positive passions pervade all of humanity and generate the most profound and rewarding of all proximate indicators and guides of ultimate functions – including all pleasures, inner warmths, and satisfaction, together with the ethical, honest, decent, conscientious trustworthiness of our moral imperatives. But we also know that these passions have been honed across both evolutionary and religious history as to benefit different kindreds, clans, tribes, and nations separately. We understand that the extent to which, and the manner in which, we employ them, even now, reflect our history of conflicts of interest, both between groups and among individuals, including smaller groups embedded within larger groups; and we know that all of these can reveal backgrounds of unnecessarily adversarial attitudes toward others.

3. We seek, therefore, to prevent ourselves from restricting too severely the socially positive passions to our own families, clans, local kindreds, tribes, nations, or alliances of nations; from using those passions within our groups to designate as hostile forces other groups of our own species anywhere across the world; from continuing to retain negative effects within our own groups after we have resisted or defeated forces whose aggressiveness we felt we were unable to prevent or remove without the grief of a temporarily ardent and implacable patriotism; from ignoring histories and circumstances that threaten to convince us that only we are right, only our causes just; from continuing our pervasive and unfortunate inclinations to divide the world into we-s and they-s. We know we need constant effort and assistance because we recognize that, not merely we, but all of us everywhere, must counteract tendencies to do these very things – tendencies arising from our history of both individual-against-individual and group-against-group, too-intense, too-severe competition, a source, perhaps, for our anciently generated ideas about “original sin.”
4. As everyone’s universally shared spirit of benevolence we need to display the greatest possible humanity in all our dealings with others, and to strive mightily and continually to resolve peacefully all our human differences, real and perceived, at any and every level. We must seek ways to spread among all people, without prejudice, both the material benefits and the good feelings that arise from expressions of the socially positive passions.

5. We must struggle to turn our competitiveness into continuing flows of social reciprocity, and massive mutualisms from which every participant has a fair chance to realize gain from social investment, and willingness to share inevitable and inescapable losses, accompanied by the gratifying surge of anticipated proximate pleasures, evolved because they inform us of future positive outcomes.

6. We must, indeed, learn to enjoy extending all such good feelings reasonably to any and all living creatures that might have sensory capabilities appropriate to them.

7. We must reveal to ourselves our greatest potentials by blessing all conscious and caring beings:

8. Everywhere

9. Equally

10. Amen.
Blessings

For the truly impatient, there will always be the following simple, universal, and meaningful message:

God bless everyone, everywhere, equally.

Amen.

It is a message almost opposite to the apparent intentions of the minister in my childhood church who, each Sunday morning, reliably completed the prayer at the end of his sermon with the following words:

*God bless everyone in this congregation
And all those who are too ill to attend.*

*Amen.*

Even as a very young boy I considered his prayer to be immoderately restrictive. And I never ceased hoping -- though, as it turned out, inevitably in vain -- that he would just once finish with a gentle warming smile.

Decades later, a lady from a different part of the country informed me -- sternly, I believe -- that this preacher’s prayer is also used in her church, and as well in the local Lion’s Club.

And I was too slow to ask, “Why?”

During the brief silence between us, she arose abruptly, saying as she left,

“Why should we bless all those people?!”

Again, I was too slow to stammer out an answer, such as these questioning suggestions:

“Perhaps to foster and expand kindness, cooperativeness, friendship, and unrestricted harmony? Perhaps to reduce or prevent meanness, loneliness, sadness, desolation, fear, and the horrors of violence and war? After all, if blessings work for small local groups, why shouldn’t we strive to make them work for everyone, everywhere, equally?”

*Why not?!*
During all of my early life before going off to college in 1946, I attended the little country Methodist Church in the unincorporated “ghost-town” of Centerville (also known as “Lickskillet”) in Sangamon Township, Piatt County, Illinois. The women from that church adopted a continuing social group, formally named *The Women’s Society of Christian Service*, but also referred to by the men, via affectionate teasing (I then believed), as “The Ladies’ Aid.” This second name I have found to be used repeatedly; it is the one also mentioned in the Canadian story of *Ann of Green Gables*.

I never forgot the song those ladies sang at the beginnings of their programs -- and sometimes at the ends as well. The part I cannot forget is as follows:

The more we get together, together, together,
The more we get together, the happier we’ll be.
For your friends are my friends,
And my friends are your friends,
The more we get together, the happier we’ll be.

I have learned that this song, which seems to be known at least over most of the USA and Canada, was created by a witty and intelligent Illinois songwriter named Jim Rule. The song appears in Rule’s book, *Too Much Fun All In One*. 
How many new songs do you suppose that lone mockingbird could have sung if he hadn't run out of tape?
AND THEN, ALWAYS THEN, THERE IS FOREVER
There are reproductive trade-offs at the level organismal
Because death is always certain even if just accidental.

Perhaps

It’s not mortality *per se*
that preys upon our common senses
but the special human way
that we construct its consequences.

Even when life’s vagaries
propel us temporarily
too close in death too early
the stark inevitability
of personal mortality
retreats so as to barely
invade our sensibility.

For doesn’t merely
loving living if we never
know regret
mean life’s forever?

How could eternity
for any human ever be
any more of it than
years and thoughts of it
can be cram-slam-jammed into a lifetime
tended and mended
classily --

maybe ended
sassily.
Epitaph

Who gains the privilege to pass,
With mind still undiminished,
Submits to this sad epitaph,
Alas! I was not finished.
But surely we’ll continue to expect that poetry will keep on changing things.
References


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