

# 34 Poems

by James Collector

A decade since I self-published 24 poems at age 24 in Words, Stars, Fruit, I offer a second booklet of 34 new poems, presented here on my 34<sup>th</sup> birthday.

San Francisco, 2020

## Table of Contents

Pocketful of Dirt

A Brief History of My Life Choices

Wild Without Memory

Passing Bonsai Firs

Where the Stream was

Bright Ghetto Morning

This House

The Work

Am Fire

Diamondfruit

Basketweavers

Above Bighorn Plateau

In That Loathsome Place

Nine Lonelinesses

Not in New York

Lamplighters

For the Dishwashers

One Night During The Pandemic

Escape from Bali

Wayan

This Door to Remain Open

No Me, No More

Fool Man (Lyrics)

All the Stars at Once

October Will Return

The Ancient in Modern Life

The Zoo

Before You

The Shadow and the Flame

Killing Time In Independence

A John Muir Trail Poem

Jasper and Sage

Incommunicado

Untitled

## Pocketful of Dirt

I heard that a prisoner  
dug out of the cell with a spoon,  
over many years, carried dirt  
pocketful after pocketful,  
telling no one, tunneling  
toward freedom.

I do not doubt it,  
and what I admire  
is not the shovel-work  
with an ordinary spoon,  
so much as the secrecy,  
the daily deceptions,  
all those pocketfuls of dirt required.

I am also digging my own tunnel  
and my willpower increases  
with every day that I keep  
my efforts to myself.

No one can diminish my joy,  
which like a pocketful of dirt  
I carry in secret.

## A Brief History of My Life Choices

When I was a boy with a piano  
where the sun shone through the skylight,  
I chose to practice tai kwon do instead  
because I wanted to fight.

I did fight a few times in high school  
where I was promoted to advanced English,  
but I chose to spend those years throwing baseballs  
because I wanted to earn a scholarship.

I did not earn a scholarship.  
So I chose to study journalism at a state university  
because I wanted to be a Great Writer.

Great Writers don't sell out for corporate media  
so I chose not to pursue a meager career as a reporter,  
and found a job waiting tables to save money  
because I wanted to travel the world.

I went to South America and came back enchanted  
with permaculture and electronic music,  
then moved to San Francisco to find an artistic community.

In the city, I wrote short stories and produced music  
but it was not so easy to make new friends  
because I chose to work all my weekend nights  
bartending to pay rent, to be nobody.

I was drinking too much and going nowhere  
so I applied to grad school to study sustainability  
because all my artistic ambitions seemed pointless  
if the world collapsed in an environmental crisis.

In grad school, I insisted on studying ecovillages.  
Convinced that compromise would waste my tuition,  
I chose a solitary path which academia rewarded  
yet helped me very little in the job market after graduating.

I loathed spending my days entering data into spreadsheets  
that only confirmed what we all know: plant trees.  
So, I moved to the country to write a novel  
because I believe that stories, not data, ultimately persuade us.

While finishing my novel, I helped pot growers

and made enough cash to return to San Francisco  
where I chose to work as a permaculture landscaper  
with dirt under my fingernails and a clear conscience.

The low-paying work was symbolic, full of small victories,  
while climate change wrought havoc and my savings dwindled.  
So, I surrendered my idealism and found a higher paying job  
as an unpublished novelist building fancy backyards for rich folks.

Planting ornamental grasses for eight hours in the sun,  
I now have plenty of time to review my life choices.  
The feeling that life isn't going as planned  
may only be a delusion of control.

When you go your own way,  
following your heart, your intuition, your dreams  
your choices may seem wrong  
until they don't.

## Wild Without Memory

I can't remember how I used to live.  
I can't remember who I wanted to be.  
What did I hear when I listened?  
What did I say when I spoke?  
Who was that in those photos?  
I can't remember me.  
But the land does.  
The forest remembers  
how I ran, jumped,  
the sounds I made in my sleep.  
The sky recollects me,  
sharp as a shiny tooth,  
my familiar smile,  
a life-thing, wild without memory.

The water remembers nothing,  
not the shape of its cascades,  
not the warmth of the whale spout.  
The water envisions its fall,  
goes where it wants,  
and it wants to go down,  
needs not remember how,  
invents nothing en route,  
yet arrives everywhere new,  
gets into everything  
soaks and dissipates,  
carried away by heat  
brought down by gravity,  
sucked up by the trunks of trees,  
drunk with thirst  
and cried from innocent eyes,  
wild without memory.

Passing bonsai firs

older than this nation  
I go quietly  
the eternal visitor  
humbled by this land  
and when I drink  
the lake passes through me  
and when I breathe  
the mountain air fills me  
and when I sit still  
I belong here  
if only for a day  
in my blessed life  
I go barefoot  
so there can be  
a brush of grass  
across my foot

Where the stream was

A straight ditch of steep cement walls  
now runs along the tracks  
and passes below interstate 880  
through a barren lot.  
Three abandoned trucks  
sit, stripped, on cinderblocks there  
where the stream was  
where last month houseless folks lived  
among handmade homes  
tents and music and dogs  
until the bulldozers came.

Bright Ghetto Morning

Captured like a childhood  
snapshot by the fast  
aperture of my train window,  
that little boy did not  
see me.  
I saw him.  
I saw him day dreaming  
there in his window,  
crossed arms on the sill of  
his house by the tracks,  
day dreaming with  
wide wondering eyes,  
day dreaming with  
his honest face  
there in his window,  
this morning  
and I hope you can too.

## This House

This house is very large  
but not so old,  
and now it is falling apart  
even as we scramble  
to build and repair,  
to buttress and protect,  
retrofit and re-roof,  
for the falling  
would be unspeakable—  
unimaginable almost  
except by those  
who never lived inside,  
who watched from without  
as the house was built  
over everything that was here.

And now after all the work,  
all the stress of keeping up,  
I can't find it in myself  
to care if the house falls down.

I will let it fall.

Why waste my life, saving  
what does not serve me?

Why sleep under that roof,  
when there are stars out here?

Why live between those walls  
when we can be outside together?



## The Work

We were sitting on the living room floor  
talking about the Work.  
Why do we sign up for the karmic Work of activism?  
one of my friends asked.  
Because I can't not, said another friend.  
Because it's between me and Spirit, I said.

And maybe that's my ego speaking, I said.  
Maybe the world is supposed to be imperfect,  
to crush us until there's nothing left but  
love and surrender,  
to destroy everything we build  
so others can build something,  
to annihilate us in order to polish our souls  
how black holes obliterate planets,  
pulverize moons to less than dust  
—because the Work is death and rebirth  
not the illusions in between.

Then I was done speaking and we were  
still on the living room floor  
and I hadn't changed anything with my words,  
not oppression, injustice, nothing.  
And now, as I write this, I wonder  
if I'm so wise or just flailing,  
if my intellectual song is  
a song of the lost,  
the wind in hollow places,  
the nonsense of water over stone,  
that I never knew what life wanted from me  
and I missed you so much that I wished  
to be crushed to less than dust  
until there's nothing left of this heartbreak but  
love and surrender.

am fire

as in heat  
as in fusing hourglass grains before they fall  
with willpower burning a sustained white flame  
each smithereen of sanity threatens to slip  
into obsidian eons  
within the vein between the pressures of then & then

am fire not of flesh, pure impalpable  
rapturous wave chilling flash sweats  
carried by the trajectory of temperature  
as in thaw and singe and sear  
as in potential in the atom at the speartip  
drillbit heart spinning seismic aftermath  
while the shivering world watches  
i share with licking tongues the signal flare  
speaking in simple sparks  
striking iron and relishing in its ring  
because you have always been  
and always will burning  
as in heat  
are fires

## Diamondfruit

It's all about the leave,  
the wind through the narrow mountain pass,  
the sound of the blackbird and just after:  
on Sunday night the nine-to-fivers toss and turn  
under charcoal skies  
afraid to make a noise  
while the homeless pace mad euphoric and filthy  
buddhas looking at you funny  
calling you out on your silliness  
twinkle-eyed smirking king of fools  
who know any twig's a wand, any rock's an altar;  
the moment a milestone, the present moment a millstone.  
the Will a pestle  
grinding Time to diamond dust,  
diamond seeds to plant in the fertile present,  
growing into diamond blossoms  
blooming into diamondfruit,  
ever ripe.

## Basketweavers

Shh, I'll talk,  
you listen  
as I weave a little ripple  
through your glistening web  
share my vision  
in a Rorschach ink blot  
I saw the symmetry  
of fork-tongued slingshots  
cocked back and aimed  
up a four-story bean stalk  
Titan on top  
tap dancing on the trapdoor  
skylight locked  
feel the force  
calling forth rain  
when it drops  
as tears from a Cyclops  
fertilize crops  
but of course  
we tend give names to our gods  
and therefore anthropomorphize awe

we think we own the land  
but the land owns us  
calls us home  
and turns our bones into dust  
who can one trust but their mother  
we have none other

so we weave ourselves baskets  
we weave ourselves baskets  
we take from the land  
until the land takes us back  
we weave ourselves baskets  
we weave ourselves baskets  
we take from the land  
until the land takes us back

### Above Bighorn Plateau

Near a place called Tawny Point,  
there is a lake in the wide saddle of two bald mountains.  
Around the lake, a meadow of alpine grass, soft and dense,  
and around the grass, only pale crushed stone  
where the dead trunks of ancient bristlecones stand  
like great wooden dragon tails, gnarled and sunbleached.  
And around these skeletons of trees, a view:  
mountain after mountain, serrated ridges, dabs of glaciers.  
At sunset two ravens comb the grasses.  
They say the lake is filled with forgotten dreams.  
Drink the water and you will remember nothing upon awakening.  
But I have drunk the water and I will tell you a secret.  
The lake is full of dreams that cannot ever be forgotten.  
The sound of water lapping against a grassy bank,  
the music of whispers through a meadow,  
the last breath of a bristlecone,  
the promise all ravens keep.

### In that Loathsome Place

[he moved about vast concrete wastes, parking lots harshly lit by lamps on plain poles between miles of wire fences, airport complexes designed for utility alone, and lonely there he utilized the industrial emptiness to peer within, into the green landscapes of his imagination where vines crept serpentine over the rectilinear hangers, where wildflowers covered the concrete, where shooting stars crashed smoking into the huge neon logos, and strange furry insects scurried along the crumbling interstate.

but no.

that was escapism. he ceased fantasy and looked at what is, disregarding moral sentiment. he stared at the bleak spread of metal and glass and concrete. he stared at it and felt the dull ache of unsavory truth, the tedium, the claustrophobia, the longing, the loveless husk of free trade. this was real and he was real within it with only the thought of his impermanence to comfort him in that loathsome place.]

## Nine Lonelinesses

1.

My loneliness is a warehouse full of empty furniture into which are tucked the countless discarded objects of as many houses now vacant: tinkling metals, chalices, and rusted chandeliers; old pipes, specialized wrenches, and cobwebbed chests; dusty lamps and bits of string; miscellaneous beads, musty jackets with disproportionate short sleeves, cracked records, and half-filled sketch books; chipped oil paintings, tragic mannequins, endless doors leaning against endless window panes; filthy stuffed animals, wobbly chairs, dented pots, fractured mirrors, light bulbs, wires, hinges, saws, table legs, coat racks, speakers, books. Etc., such are the contents of my loneliness.

2.

My loneliness is an ambient track played on late night AM radio as the car catches all green lights down the deserted streets.

3.

My loneliness does not look out the window. It looks at the window, at the reflection of inside the bus. All the seated strangers, the incognito and the inconspicuous, the kings and fools, gals and ghouls. All the social rules in place, the space a subtle centrifuge. A fugue could be playing underneath the beeps and clicks of signals, the irksome intricacies of transportation in the vast city that grows. A mess of comings and goings. My loneliness is the one hunched over a notebook, scrawling in illegible handwriting god knows what. My loneliness, inside the bus, reflected on the window is a word without a rhyme.

4.

My loneliness sits in the empty courtyard and stares at its pen, stares at its pen and wonders at its power. What empires my loneliness could build in an hour. . .

5.

My loneliness is a massive crane built by somewhat less massive cranes, which were built by larger cranes, which were built by cranes previously built by small cranes built by the hands of many men. As such the construction of my loneliness was possible by way of a cooperative and protracted effort. In this lineage, my loneliness is obliged to aid the construction of a much greater, much more massive loneliness.

6.

My loneliness is surrounded by particles. Shimmering, buzzing, incessant, tingling, intelligent, particles. It impossible calculate their density. Thicker than fog, water, ice, stone, they kindly hold and cruelly replace. My loneliness won't know it's place until all the particles have found peace in the interchangeable chaos. They will fill the night and empty the emptiness. They will counteract the void. The particles will inundate the vast wastes between the infinite fluff from which my loneliness cannot be apart. It cannot be disconnected. It is surrounded, hugged, drowned, insulated, beheld.

7.

My loneliness is concupiscent. It acts only for selfish love, for sinful lust, for the heart, the body, the little god with wings and arrows. My loneliness loves the flesh, the breasts, the feel of smooth, angular bodies, the sight of neck muscles, taut skin stretched over the pelvic bones, wet labia, and hard penises purple with blood and pleasure. My loneliness aches to have lonely experiences, to picnic in the park, to tire its body to pure bliss by climbing mountains, to be tossed in surf, to thirst for a single bead of water, to see sunrise with red-rimmed eyes, to eat cold oranges, to masturbate. "Sin," my loneliness says aloud, "You are love with consequence, material, delirious love, and I am concupiscent unto you, sin. I love you. I love to love you. I love to sin."

8.

Picking red plums in the backyard, my loneliness steps barefoot through the dry matted grass, crushing fallen plums to warm pulp between its toes.

9.

If my loneliness turns its frown upside down by flipping its letter 'n,' it becomes my loveliness.



Not in New York

In New York, people are here to be in New York  
to be wearing and making and thinking and saying  
drinking and praying and drinking and drinking  
in New York the artists are New York Artists  
in the subway in the smell of hot creosote  
a thousand perfumes in one can of sardines  
the cool people like fucking cool like yeah  
Either humble tough broken or soft spoken  
and when they break  
the cement apart to open the tunneled body  
it's called daylighting yes day lighting  
the bare earth hidden a hundred years  
and somebody has died in every room  
and some bodies made love this afternoon  
but not just any love

Lamplighters

a short story concept

Fighting an endless prestige battle  
Lighting as many fancy lamps as possible  
until they finally create:

a city without darkness

burning itself broke  
to out-do, one-up, overshadow  
burn brighter than  
the competition, other lamplighters, ambitious  
white teeth, bright bulbs, often bald  
entrepreneurs lighting the brightest lamps  
to attract the most elite celebrities  
moths to a flame, famous moths  
darting around public spheres  
in dazzling dresses  
drinking 'lampaid' a glowing liquid

the delicious satire of shiny things

pretty lights ad absurdum

artificial suns running on revenue

And of course our dark young protagonist  
squinting into the glare  
wearing a blindfold

restoring the sacred penumbra

This is for the dishwashers

Without you, the restaurants would not run.  
I said, without you, the restaurants would not run.  
First to arrive and last to leave,  
to do so much more than clean the plates,  
elbow deep in the murky swill.  
You were smiling as you joked,  
a gold tooth behind stacked bowls,  
and one of them broke.  
Because you ran them through the wash  
the way the city runs us too.  
And its no surprise one splits,  
so if you're feeling pissed off,  
or defeated, at the end of your wits,  
I won't hold it against you if you quit.  
Just walk off.  
Go ahead and go.  
Nobody does this job forever unless they want to  
and right now, dear dishwasher, it all depends on you.  
Without you, the restaurants would not run.

## One night during the pandemic

A woman sat on the street, laughing  
outside the 24-hour Starbucks.  
I could hear her from my window  
half a block away, cackling to herself  
about god only knows what, maybe  
an inside joke about living outside,  
homeless in San Francisco,  
watching people sip cappuccinos.

That night, there were more fireworks,  
explosions in the distance, deep enough  
to feel through my bedroom wall.  
Every time a report sounded, she would laugh:

Boom  
[laughter]  
Boom BOOM  
[laughter]

And on and on in a rhythm I couldn't ignore,  
sitting by the window, writing this.

Suddenly, I remembered the words of a preacher  
I heard blasted from the stereo of a van  
on that same street last week.  
The preacher's exalted voice said,  
he who laughs last  
has the best laugh of all.

By 11 PM, I'm wondering,  
as she erupts in another spasm of hilarity,  
will her laugh be last, America?

Boom  
[laughter]  
Boom BOOM  
[more laughter]

The joke is on us.

## Escape from Bali

My boss...his eccentricities branch in odd directions... At first, working as his personal assistant in Tokyo, he was normal, but once we got to Bali where I am sort of 'trapped' here, he started treating me like he owned me. For days I have been wrestling with thoughts like, "You got yourself into this, now see it through. Conquer your pride and submit to this man's wishes. It's only 40 days. It will be worth the money." Fact is, it's not worth the money. He can pay me to handle his correspondences, but he cannot pay me enough to tape Playboy pictures to hotel rooms with band-aids and bring him a handful of sleeping pills while he soaks in the bathtub wearing sunglasses at 2am. And that calm, even voice and diabolical laugh....this is a nightmare. Please help me escape. I found a flight from Bali to Denver for \$987. I still have \$160 in cash and some money on my credit card. If you lend me another \$1500 I will have the option to get home before something else happens. It's 3am here now...

## Wayan

The blind masseuse had the hands of a healer.  
Wordlessly, he found my pain.  
I winced under the pressure of those strong fingers,  
sighed as he wrung the toxins from taut tendons,  
and practically purred as he rubbed the tension from my neck.  
Wayan could see without sight.  
As he worked, I wondered  
who, if anyone, had ever massaged him.  
When he had finished, I asked.  
Surprise passed over the blind man's face.  
Massaged me? No.  
Wayan, in all his giving,  
had never received a massage.  
So, I took his dark hands in mine,  
admired the soft skin, the scars,  
the deep lines in his pale palm.  
I began with the pinky,  
moved to the knuckles,  
and lingered on the well-developed thumb muscle.  
To touch a blind man's hand,  
to wonder how my touch felt,  
filled me with unspeakable reverence,  
as if I were privileged with an opportunity  
to warm the sun,  
refresh the rain,  
shade the trees, and serenade the birds.  
With closed eyes,  
I massaged the hands of the blind masseuse.

### This Door to Remain Open

This door to remain open  
has no handle, no frame.  
It hinges on you and you alone.  
Your choice, your position,  
either inside or outside,  
will decide how closed you become.

This door to remain open  
cannot be locked, nor propped.  
To remain open, one must pass through  
willingly, consciously, repeatedly.  
For the doors to remain closed are myriad.

This door to remain open  
is sometimes so very small  
that you must squeeze through  
before your head grows too big  
and too close to everything.

This door to remain open  
leads to a wide open place,  
wider and brighter than a meadow,  
full of song and wind and pollen.  
It is the place where you came from  
on your way home.

No me, no more

I be bereft of Self

All that's left is the essence of someone else  
whose face faded out of focus  
from flying so fast that he forgot who he was,  
who was wearing that Mask:

Not fake, just ephemeral:

the wake of a vessel erased when lakes settle  
after moments have passed  
in a feeling, a feeling  
seems so fleeting  
like a dream  
like a dragonfly seen in the evening.

Crystalline flicker swift mental metamorphosis;  
born to this: boy meet mirror, steer a course through it.

Weaving a basket

as if weaving through a crowd  
of identities I've shed to figure myself out.

Not figuratively. Literally, release like a cloud  
all these parodies of clarity that weigh the spirit down.

Here and Now:

The onlywhere I want to be, honestly  
I'm anyone who's here to help  
here to be bereft of Self.

So I give with grace what time will take.

*What time will take*, I give with grace  
more than a face  
until there's no me, no more.



Fool Man (lyrics)

When I was a young man  
and I had a sun tan  
well, I was a fool man  
to think I was cool man

Wearing my black jeans  
high on a blue dream  
I ate mostly black beans  
they canned in a factory

I had a girlfriend  
she was a sure ten  
I said when the world ends  
lets drink an old fashioned

I worked in a beer bar  
it smelled like a weird fart  
people would drink hard  
and turn into sweethearts

the city was fast paced  
a lot like a rat race  
and I was in last place  
cuz cheese ain't what I chased

I still had a fresh face  
I slept in on weekdays  
had breakfast in cafes  
and went through a beach phase

my life was a cliché  
writer and DJ  
bohemian cheapskate  
with dreams that I'd reach fame

I was a young man  
just having fun man  
but I was a fool man  
to think I was cool.

## All the Stars at Once

persimmons, pickled herring, and speckled cocks, the microcosm under the stump, a montage of faces, a rainbow rug unraveled, the potpourri of leaves floating on the koi pond, dark water cresting white by moonlight, arroyos leading into the pit of a pupil, the singular glimmer of all the stars at once, silence ringing, ghosts of emotions caressing our necks, tea tonight from another continent yesterday, the dragons children draw, translations of hope, a skyline serrated, the monopoly of the sea, love between elements, a dialogue of light, the way we are right only to feel wrong later when vindicated, fools in denial, the architecture of a riverbed, the endless dawn sweeping horizons, an old clock, expressions of ducks, two squirrels spiraling the oak, the taste of pennies, the word home, the home of words, secret herbs, forgotten nations, ant technology, bottle rocket factories, elephant mantras, verdigris, sea glass, worm dreams, distorted maps, necessary evils, unnecessary kindnesses, a stranger's toes, a baby's pause, corn, gourds, gunpowder, rare earths, commonwealths, scorpions, mint ice cream, spores, nameless species, unheard musics, soggy books, heavy lids, persimmons

### October will return

Never forget October will return  
with fat orange pumpkins round  
as the red maple is sharp  
floating on the pond  
in the season's first brisk morning  
a time for walks and so much  
dark wine in the remembering of summer  
clear slanted afternoon light catching  
a barren bough, a carpet of leaves  
the geese passing, frost on the vines  
along the footpath, a way well worn  
or some snaking ditch road  
a forgotten place out there  
to remind oneself of loss again.

### The Ancient in Modern Life

Doing dishes, oblivious,  
I worship water,  
warm and flowing  
over my hands.  
In my kitchen sink  
I wash the plates  
while I am washed  
by ancient water,  
wet with memory.

## The Zoo

Climb into that headspace,  
that attic or hidden room,  
treehouse or turret,  
tent or van or fort,  
some secret, quiet place  
where you at first don't feel at home but  
slowly you come to belong,  
to inhabit and readily know  
the imaginary details of  
a world,  
a window into a way of life  
no one but you has ever experienced.  
You can make it exactly as you want.  
No one else is there yet.  
Only you can see it and describe it  
and that is your gift, my friend.  
I want you to know what is inside your heart.  
Stop holding out.  
Let the animal out  
and don't be surprised to hear it howl.  
Who you are is who you liberate  
from the zoo of your own spiritual oppression.  
Rewild yourself.

Before you

dust was  
ancient as light  
cast about.  
within me  
the ellipsis share  
an anchor  
in the pitch and roll,  
the winding sines,  
the fracture of stone  
sound of water  
rushing through again  
this riverbed of unremembering  
meandering through ever  
unremembering meanders.

## The Shadow and the Flame

When a man walks alone  
through the mountains for weeks,  
hardly speaking to anyone,  
the preoccupations of his mind  
become familiar to him.  
His fears and worries flit like gnats  
around the steady flame of his passion  
which burns brighter with each day alone.  
He sees no shadow but his own  
and so his shadow too becomes familiar.  
Every waver of that flame within him  
has its correlation there.  
When a fear or worry flies into the flame,  
his shadow dances.  
Without distractions, he soon recognizes that  
to try to still the shadow is to confuse it with the flame.  
For, indeed, he must steady his flame  
if he is to illuminate anything greater than gnats.

## Killing Time in Independence

The leaves come rattling down the empty streets  
past boarded-up buildings, gas stations, the Post Office.  
'Loitering forbidden by law' reads a sign outside a shuttered café.  
Two Mexican boys walk past, kicking rocks towards the courthouse.  
I'm staying across the street at a motel run by a Punjabi woman.  
She took one look at me, 10 days out in the mountains,  
and gave me a blue towel and an apple.  
Hadn't seen my reflection in twice that long.  
No wonder the sheriff slowed down passing me.  
I walked to the museum, though the neighborhood is also one.  
On the way, a white husky watched me from a shady yard  
and a big black mutt barked at me from a dusty lot  
with a highway patrol SUV parked out front.  
The museum was deserted but open.  
Five minutes of looking at exquisite Paiute and Shoshone basketry  
and the power went out, the artifacts somehow more real in the dark.  
Outside, the trash cans blew over in a gust.  
Above the nearest house, you could see smoke  
far up on the eastern faces of the Sierra near Taboose pass.  
The white smoke rose into an armada of lenticular clouds  
while the town droned on, humming with an eerie roar from 395  
The guy I hitched into town with said the population was 1,100 when he grew up.  
Less than 500 now. Grapes rotting on the vine.  
Saddle store closing down. Wrangler won't sell 20 pairs to the little guys anymore.  
I'm leaving at first light tomorrow. Back up Kearsarge.

## A John Muir Trail Poem

Live your life as if it were impossible to fail,  
said a warrior-poet on the John Muir Trail.  
I'm a meal for mosquitos, an ape without a tail,  
a real spicy Cheeto in the belly of a whale.  
Going over hill and dale,  
up the switchbacks and through the shale.  
Pelted by the hail to the pass, where the clouds part the veil,  
and the peak shines clean as a fresh white sail.

It's mostly humpin' and a-schepplin'.  
With this big old pack, I'm either dumb or intrepid.  
Didn't bring a weapon; there's no half-steppin',  
it's a long way to Whitney and my dignity I'm reppin'.

Zig-zag, wag-bag, thru-hiker stew:  
sometimes what I'm cooking tastes like an old boot.  
Isn't that the truth? I ain't never lie.  
I'm a stinky bandicoot with a twinkle in my eye.

Old John Muir must have got real lonely.  
Lying on his blanket thinking, "No one's here to hold me.  
My biscuits got moldy, socks all holey,  
what I wouldn't do for a bowl of guacamole."

But Muir never quit and I won't neither,  
even when I've got the shits or a mighty high fever.  
See, I'm a believer that the mountains are the medicine.  
They open up and let us in and never let us go again.

—Because the story has no end.  
This 'pale blue dot,' well, it's home to all my friends.  
Every soul that's ever been up in the high Sierra  
where the tribes lived for eras  
hears their prayers in the wind.

This land belongs to them. Go ask Alice.  
The New Americans must restore the sacred balance.  
It's our generation's challenge—what could be more valid?  
You can't eat cash, you need salad.

What's the eagle got in its talons?  
The snake of transformation, the winding path of patience.  
Every place I put my boot is in the footsteps of the ancients.  
Before these maps were made,



these peaks and passes all had names  
in other languages with sacred connotations.

So, what are we out here chasing?  
Some sort of lost relation?  
A connection severed within the walls of civilization  
where overpopulation and phony innovations  
have us duped into living so complacent.  
We traded strength & wisdom for safety & information.  
Indeed, it was a mis-education.

But it's not too late to change,  
no matter what age,  
the trail is less professor than a sage  
who shows you you're the architect of your own cage.  
Back at home, you couldn't see. You had to get away.  
Up where blue jays fill the bristlecones with praise,  
every lake is like a mirror for your smiling weathered face.

And if that's not the case, then you must be here to race.  
I've seen folks clocking mileage like their boss will dock their pay.  
But I'm not here to judge with my toe jam thick as fudge  
and these three liters of water heavy as an old grudge.  
You got to let it go, travel light, and keep laughing.  
Think of all the poor suckers down there stuck in traffic.  
It's a privilege just to be here.  
So, thank you John Muir.  
So far it's been worth every drop of blood, sweat, and tears.

Jasper and Sage

The cottonwood that grows  
by the confluence  
has no name.

Beneath its whispering candelabra  
a bear shits in the dry bark  
and rolls in the sand.

No man goes here.  
There is no fire pit,  
no trash.

That bear shit is not wasted.  
It carries seeds here,  
makes soil.

Nature is unforgiving.  
But oh my goodness  
she is giving too.

Trust her and your place.  
You are not outside of things.

You are not outside of things.

You are the upwelling  
of river water against the bank,  
the moonlight,  
a searchlight between clouds  
scudding the night sky,  
a widening ring arising  
on the glassy water,  
a quiet watching of things.

Your thoughts are flowing  
effortless along the curvature  
of stone and truth,  
of time and wind,  
ideas of cottonwoods,  
imprints of deer hooves,  
the willow thicket alight,  
jasper and sage,  
heartbreak and echoed voices  
alone again in love.

## Incomunicado

Incomunicado, I get carried away.  
That's how much depends upon a red wheelbarrow.  
Keep the secret from yourself. Staring in space  
until all the broad horizons make your head feel narrow.  
A bird is a symbol but a word will never fly.  
Absurd to resemble the whole world in an open eye.  
But maybe, just maybe, it fits. Crazy, isn't it?  
So down to earth, feet first. Well-rounded how the bell sounds.  
When clouds disperse, speak the verse. Melt mountains, leave them spellbound.  
I seek a certain kind of stillness that fulfills me with a gentle glow.  
Fresh fallen snow. All crystals balls  
show puzzles solved in my essential soul.  
Until peace is lost into what seems a chaos.  
A scatterbrain, a swarm of bees, a galaxy a ways off.  
That slow spiral. As above so below.  
So I smile, knowing Now in the meanwhile.  
The truth is, when I loosen my grip, I commit  
to the lucid dream and I can do flips.  
But there's risks and my scars are proof of this.  
I exist under the stars' influences. It's a trip.  
To inhabit a host body. Enjoy the ride, stay smooth when the road's rocky.  
Travel far and wide. Remember death. Fear won't stop me. I'm on the path.  
There's so much to see, so much fruit to taste.  
So many friends to make, so little time to waste.  
I'm overjoyed, overawed, overwhelmed, wide awake.  
In the midst of this.  
Temple Earth was never better. Even now she's a fountain  
springing forth from the rubble, bringing gifts we receive.  
Dusk shadows in the desert. Cloud forests in the mountains.  
Waterfalls in the jungle. Misty cliffs by the sea.  
It's no wonder I wanderlust.  
One with the wind, I get carried away.  
Bright white kite through the gloom with a candleheart.  
Kindled within. See it flare on my face.  
When the light reveals the rain's spherical shape.  
When poet's feel what hand's can't create.  
So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow.  
When words are the wheels and meaning has weight.

## Untitled

breaking a silence overdrawn  
the voice inside muttering suddenly raised in song  
to say what I was born to say  
a truth formed by slow whittling  
away of the bark, my conditioning  
honest with myself so we might be with ours  
that I am seeking certainty until the instant I have it  
only to feel uncertain how to keep it  
how I love what I have that leaves and returns  
she moon to my daily uplifted squint  
waxing as I come back into my love  
falling for it all again  
the hopeless fool hopelessly hopeful  
blowing off the dust from this typewriter  
my longwinded caterwaul  
my shorthanded catapult  
my frequency finding itself entraining  
others who are kin to this family of alchemists  
for we are something greater than our lives  
we are the recipients of a gifted generation  
a poetry exceptional in that we listen as much as we write  
for what is felled in the timber of verse makes no sound unheard  
steadfast pillars of the outdoor temple  
know only rhyme in the night  
we bright eyed and shy  
devouring our sister's mystic channel  
to hear the divine in a hello  
the infinite in goodbye  
casting all our shadows upon the same timeless face  
from a single light the glare slices  
as fish dart upstream seeking what we all know  
source