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Whole sun on a sheet of snow  
set down quick last night

gesso'd ground ready to be inscribed

but nobody paints anymore.  
Painting is miniature, painting  
is too much like remembering.

5 February 2002

## SHELL GAME

A poem is a seashell — complex as nautilus, simple as clam.

A poem is a seashell wondering how it got so far from the ocean. Its animal is dead. The reader has to carry it.

Further and further into the desert.

Something lives there, always. Always over the horizon. The next line, the next.

You can live there when you get there. White-painted rooms, shadowy trees, water. If you get there.

Wendeltrap. Winding stairs. That kind of shell. Yeats's castle. A blue shell bleaching in the practical sun.

A seashell is not a poem, though, don't get me wrong, kid. A shell's a shell, for better, for worse.

A shell's handwriting.

It's like an Elizabethan courtier's official hand. But to love's moonlight he writes new-fangled sonnets by the light of a stinky tallow candle, and differently he scrawls, as if the letters he formed had no need of form, and all the form was waiting in the finished poem he dimly sees quivering in the corners of the room.

Ink, such dark technology.

He saves his best penmanship for writing to some girl, a letter appointing rendezvous tonight.

Clock tower; if balked, goose pond. Midnight, or soon after.

What is his natural hand? Will he use it to touch her? Or himself if she fails to come.

The greasy hot shiny engines of my childhood, locomotives, showed their moving parts. Pistons and rods, reciprocals. Now trains, if the train ever gets here, are as sexless as refrigerators. All their work is inside, nary a glimpse of powerful transmission, garter belt, skin.

Things have lost their skin. So many things.

Skin is movement.

A poem is all skin.

A poem is skin, skin waiting for a body. Yours.

This ghastly image (but only if an image), not kosher, means even so to be appealing.

Like that gorgeous nurse in Radiation.

A shell is something left, something we somehow learn to value, pocket, appropriate, forget.

He notices that *forge* is most of forget. Forgetting must be imposture. We forget nothing. It all goes inward, always and always inward, over the desert, that desert again, we only pretend we don't remember, the remembering is always on the move, nomad wise-men, changing and reshaping what they recall.

They call and call again. The poem forgets nothing, forges everything.

A shell is something left behind.

If quotation is the life of poetry, then poetry is dead, every poem stillborn. Because we preen to be original, we howl boldly what we suppose was never spoken before.

How lucky we are to be wrong.

How fortunate our failure is, that we never succeed in saying the thing we have to say. If we once did say it all, silence (not applause) would be the natural consequence of our success. Everlasting silence.

We feed each other on shadows, shape echoes to be our love songs, somehow content ourselves with images.

Fools giving other fools shells, sticky with the spittle of the former, held to the ears of the latter, lips, kissed. Lipped. Lodged in the mouth. Impossible to swallow. Impossible to forget.

That's what I've been after. In a good poem you can taste the sweet mouth, the spit, of all the good readers before you. Not the writer. The writer's mouth is busy nuzzling your secret skin.

Well, all this shell and skin stuff doesn't leave much scope for the mind now, does it?

Mind is the skin of the world.

A poem is just one synapse out of the vigintillion synapses arc'd in the body of the world, this brief universe.

But a synapse somebody made. And makes again, now.

It is now. And even, for a moment, as you read, it is you.

It is waiting to decode you, unclothe you. Disclose you.

It changes you only by shining your kindly face into its hard mirror.

It shows you as much of your mind as you can see this moment, this day, this body, this place.

The poem can be mush about You and Me and how we feel and all, and it's still hard glass.

A poem is always hard.

Harder the better.

A soft mirror will betray you every time.

5 February 2002

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out of the lean midnight  
snow I breathe morning  
stands up one clump of  
very green grass chives  
everything happens at  
    once I love you.

5 February 2002

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As if we had finished the foundation  
and the coarse plywood floor  
we move in  
under the star roof

who am I  
when the crows call  
behind the moon  
another moon

color of wind  
dream factory  
you see it with me  
not yet broken house.

6 February 2002

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Sloping towards dark of the moon  
a windowshade in the sky

of course everything is really there  
we see reflections of down here

the oldest algebra  
yields  $x$  for every answer

nobody knows. After a day  
of sun the fence is full of light.

7 February 2002

FROM THE *DIVAN OF IMPOSSIBLE SOLUTIONS*

To know nothing of what passes behind you  
Is not to be committed to the future but  
Exiled for ever from the present.

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Discipline? Go to the hours'  
Teacher, go to what  
Runs out of room, what never looks back.

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I can enjoy someone whose only  
Talk is me, me, me.  
It gets harder when it's *moi, moi, moi*.

7 February 2002

## MONSTROSITIES OF NEUROSCIENCE

1.

we  
work different up in there  
where another poet is always reading  
her strange world into our hands

I mean the papers are full of us  
and the oddity of great nature  
is to make us look and smell so  
much alike but think so different

different different biography  
is all about dumb surprise  
he really is different from me

yet we all feel the same beside you in the dark.

2.

People who believe in chemical modification of behavior used to be called hippies and freaks. Now they are called neuroscientists, and work on Government grants. Sometimes it's embarrassing to live across the boundary of two ages, or just live too long.

3.

Not many thoughts this morning that I want to think.  
Everything back in the drawer! Let this day have its chance,  
not spotted with Nachtsreste. There, I've said it in a language  
that is a clue to what I'm trying to dispel. Disperse. Go  
back to Dreamland and find another sucker,  
I have an appointment with the sun, later my barber  
the blue wind, my cobbler the soft unfrozen lawn.  
They make me forget the dismal you-niverse I fled in dream.

8 February 2002

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Eventually  
get tired of  
what's just right

semaphores  
of reason flailing  
from sinking ships

then the wet clothes  
arrogant springtimes  
that prove nothing

the dance.  
You read about it  
before you could read.

9 February 2002

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laced hips

tight toccata  
of touching you

sonata form:  
“gentle, hard, then gentle”

to trust  
the whole rhythm of you  
into my hands

tenderness of our trust

toccata  
is touching

fast or slow  
to move in trust

to be so with another as to trust  
attack of gentleness

9 February 2002

## RULES OF THE GAME

I am ready to write you now

aspect ratio blue moon

three Jew-baiters prancing on the stage

is a sort of constellation  
in the saddest sky

society

the Dead Bunny  
the Shy Man in Love

Hold my hat  
while I make love

I'll hold my tongue  
until you tell

Around the dining table  
the general's guests  
articulate the Hegelian  
dispensation.

Night comes  
and all the owls

severely challenged by quicker moving shadows  
in an old mansion

dirty gym floor wood  
dirty music drown my book

it's kind of sad we are  
so much who we are

a broken radio  
persuades him  
he has gone beyond music.

9 February 2002  
(from late January notations)

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Soon it will be Valentines again

your brash astuteness  
keeps sentimentality at bay

poems are the opposite of haiku  
and never tell us what the season is

or what the dawn is doing with her grief  
out there

beyond the reach of her damp hands.

9 February 2002  
from late January notations

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If I were as long as this  
I'd be a word in your mouth.

9 II 02

## CELAN

You could call it sentimentality. The everlasting pronoun family, the Edenic couple, *ich* and *du*, whose antics form, deep, deep, the structure of feeling in his poems. And on this never-failingly effective armature we all know, he can weave, or more often just hang, the gauntest abstract ditherings of thing and thing, and glue little words together to sheen or shadow those unrelenting simplicities we encode in everyday practice.

9 February 2002

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Window  
sun screen  
bird

only  
the other direction  
up. Up.

9 II 02

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“If everybody orders by net and phone and mail  
why is it so crowded in the mall?”

No one is buying.

They are not people. Or they are deciding

Almost to be here and now, it is paseo, every

Hour is sunset, every day is Saturday.

They have money and are afraid not to spend it.

We live in a schoolroom the teacher ran away from long ago.

Our bodies move to cry their woe —

We seem to shop to seem to have somewhere to go.

9 February 2002

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And what have you waiting for me,  
Scar? I mean sky, the cut above  
from which we bleed. I mean believe.  
Is today one more gaudy festival of fate  
where all loves shift and sputter out  
and new desires percolate the heart  
that poor old hero. Is it time for drugs?  
I don't understand what happened  
the other night and don't have time  
to write the novel that would work it out.  
But it was quiet and gentle and terrible  
and something died. Or do I mean  
an empty glass will never fill itself?  
Was I awake or a rose? And maybe  
nothing ever is the same and I just noticed  
the poor excuse for silence our words shape.

9 February 2002

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Terrain takes us, a mortal sin  
is gone by the grace of morning,  
isn't it enough I sit by the open window  
hearing the confession of the world?

I still think that's what father was up to  
those thirty years of natural leaf Zen  
smoking by the curtained window  
but does any father know how to forgive

isn't that the one skill the function ruins  
so that even God's son has to die to work  
a savage reconciliation with on high  
where Beethoven tells us a dear father

has to dwell. Schiller's easy certainties  
the music has to hammer hard and harder  
to make it seem a faith and hope a  
moment even plausible. How loud

the orchestra of doubt. Wakes me  
from the dream where things make sense  
and century follows century to some end  
like freight cars on the move to Buffalo.

10 February 2002