Gaelics, and advisers, and ripe pears —
the war is everywhere

to have a fondness is to have a weakness
a man alone is alone with his demons

the fiends who write the books he writes
postcards from Venice the letters the angels

the man who waits is too busy to break
my wife my wife “my wing my wing”

or does the sky do your breathing for you
birds?
    From beneath a mild rock
steps some animal form cautiously

a sweater or a shower, who knows,
I saw her walking up the driveway

all we ever see is light.
What it lets. A flare in going

or someone taps — fingertip soft —
on some door — is it me?

1 February 1995
Organize as else — a stick lying on the lawn
one more miracle of where they come,

the *from* of things — not just the particular,
the dowdy instances of a Venetian no

but the sheer access of success, the sweet
slippery feel of (as it might be) your skin

under the vaseline of such dramatic sunlight
as a window in winter — bad for the hands,

cuticles, canticles — that Gill cathedral
spotted, with measled brick, alarmed

so near to Victoria, flight to the continent
(St Crikey-on-the-Strand) just back from Pigalle

to witness the amendment of our state —
memory chatter, *bandar log*, the blether

(Carlyle rarely delicate) pastis in a thick glass
the sacrilege of personal preference

(le vice anglais) come back to vineyard
(spores of American must) oil cloth kitchen table

sticky under elbows as we lean o’ nights
waiting our share of the wireless (Rilke

insinuating from galactic closenesses) (news
is really out of hand) the Russians

are at it yet again — no peace
with that master — a bag of suet hangs from the sun
itself a branch of an ill-known tree, and round its root
the horses of blue expedients champ their breakfast.

2 February 1995
I have learned nothing and remember nothing
everything has come and nothing stayed

I am the Wild Boy of Annandale the same
inside as out same end as beginning not bothered by years

I notice none I am the moon remarkable
for coming back no fuller than before

Watch the pagans eat their antique wheat
I am all nylon mesh and broken glass

I touch you and people run away from me
so they can remember me in peace

a city a bunch of haggling mountaineers I am
busy to sell you this magic carpet my skin

on which you sit so comfortable
I can almost believe your body is my mind

I am tired of writing you the plastic buttons
in the windows on the Rue du Temple wink
troll eyes in broken daylight I am a bridge
a broken radiator I am sleek with escapes

frameworks no language owns me I give
myself to them all I know nothing

fish trapped beneath clear ice ill-formed
letters a swirl of light you hear me
the one that’s really me is changeless
watch out that makes me almost you

that might be my leg in your trousers my tongue
presses the back of your teeth I am churches

made of brownstone and wax
I am tired of having to tell you who I am

don’t you know by now haven’t you learned anything too?

3 February 1995
The things I want of you
are wobbly things

meek as tissue
stuck to an underlip

woods and muds
and touch you

you crouch to answer
all that upward

the contradiction
is built right in

the hollow bone.

3 February 1995
COLTSFOOT VARIATIONS 3

In the senate-house of course
the old men remember their skins

heartbeats Oldsmobiles fried
calzones September sweat-stains
beneath the purple of her satin blouse

it is a flower it is a flower
punch in your PIN number
the high redundancy of dance
leap up and fall again
land on the stricken glassy
face of our friend Mars

you plunge
into the night of feeling
everything touches you.

3 February 1995
How could it be wrong?
The measurement
is white — duck in snowstorm
only the language has color —

from China we learned
the veins of stone
are actual — alabaster —
avenues, the boats

are genuine, are feminine,
we wake wet from our dreams,
the jungle. Oh if there
were highways in the air,

to walk orderly in emptiness!

4 February 1995
Gay people — their bodies are louder than the weather, they dress for love in any season. The reason is the feel of it, the world against their skin, from which identity arises, the doom of touch.

Auden wore no underwear — what have we to learn from that, while the wind blows so hard and the night is so late? A pleasure beyond persons to which only persons lead. A conviction to be fearless in pursuit of your own feelings. The senses are made with that in view, ‘these foolish’ (because general) ‘things’ that are all that we can ever do.

4 February 1995
Giving birth to the mind it said
(which mind?) (the mind successively, progressively, itself)
(the mind until you get to mine) (how much help
is talking here) and the woods (which woods?)
are ready for your cry.

The finches wait
till the sun is decently over the hill
before attacking their seeds. And when they do,
some mourning doves come in to browse
on what they spill. Till then they repose
on snowy branches, plump
inconspicuous. They are ground foragers,
the dependencies. And the crows
are the most patient of all,
wait till the mind has migrated away
then feed on what is left.

It is hard to think about birds
without their smooth but broken flight
getting into the rhythm of our breathing.
Swoop or fall, a breath of me becomes them.

5 February 1995
THE INVITATION

Sit down and be no one.
I know your faces,
they are mostly mine
except for a couple—
that wife-eyed vague one
when you look like France
seen from the chalk at Dover,
or the intelligent squint
when you seem to ask
yourself (only yourself)
if you’ve fulfilled this
situation, is this planet
your actual home. Otherwise
you’re me. Except the nose
is smaller, the eyes
look over my shoulder.
They see
everything that isn’t me.

5 February 1995
A LETTER TO MARCUS AURELIUS FROM AN EMPTY WORLD

1.

Just look at this thing like wire, a tree
strung between aluminum and cumulus
as if there were anybody there

Do you believe the vacancy of things,
did you plunder those semitic caravans of thought
that used to lurch across our common desert
to find the old man, sheik or rabbi, who can tell
by name, murmuring of ain and ain soph sometimes
and sometimes the no-limit light

which spreads all round us, in us — is us, even,
as we sputter our easy verses and our sympathies
violet and saxifrage and musk, knowing all the time

that nothing forms the interior of things,
the wiry intestines of our actual forms
are just a convoluted emptiness, a focused void?

2.

For all my thick desirings, I have a rather
aristocratic sense of what I do— the words
that speak me do not need much hearing,

I listen hard, and maybe no one else does need to.
And there’s nobody again. It’s not possible
that this tree exists just for itself,

it’s for all of us, everyone tall and everyone hard
and all the soft enduring earth it stems from
and all the blue invaded air it occupies

as we are penetrated by each one of us.  
Who is this solemn nobody inside me now, 
talking to the lively aftermath of you?

3.

Maybe some of this makes song to you.  
And maybe a bird’s a camera that holds us 
tidy in our places, I endure

as something some bird saw, a shadow 
slower than his own, a dark hand scattering seed.  
I want to coax you to be a limb of me,

a me before my time, and full of almost truth 
I can go to work on with knife and alphabet 
to turn spectacular.  Always and always

to praise the one that came before me 
but talk in a louder voice than he, 
the kind of marriage where you shout I do, I do

every day of your life and the woods are empty.  
But everything is full of emptiness— 
that’s what the rabbi’s smile implied.

5 February 1995
FLYING OVER IONIA

All that worry waits for me
(personless pronouns, the fun house, a fan
whirring in an empty room)

because I have seen the Greek islands
sprawl in the sundrench of my drowse
I know the fragility of place

looked down and tried to wake, this
is the birthplace of how I mean,
but the sea was blue, the sun

dissolved all the coasts in its one glare,
and all I had was a film of feeling
that blurred my seeing, down there

is sex and war and modern art
and god knows what they listen to
the personless torments of sincerity

and no boat coming, and all at once
I guessed (breadless, sudden, salt)
a shore beyond this shifting.

6 February 1995
A C A M E R A

I wanted this to be here, ready for you to read it, a line following a line. Find a part of the sky no bird has ever entered. A village ignorant of fire.

How long it took to learn the delicate camera of the body, aim, focus, time, expose, develop, touch—years and years before the first tentative snapshot’s done and then forever after that face’s power — that there are faces, that you can see them, that they mean inside you and go on speaking — we live in each other —

and the one we’ve seen never leaves us lonely. I wanted this to be here for you when you woke, like a rose — none too fresh — on your part of the table where one splash of sunlight sneaks through the drapes. It’s not the sort of thing we usually talk about (roses, instrument) but we are finally faces. You become what I mean when I am seeing. Speaking. A day is like a camera too, the dark body first, then open something and take in. I think that’s why I want this to lie before you at breakfast, sticky with apple juice, so you can take it in and me along with it when you come down, as part of the innocent morning, the table, the door.

6 February 1995
IN MEMORY OF JAMES MERRILL

Held at the mercy of the drummer
the ordinary skin begins to gasp
until the room is panting with their hips,
bones, tossed hair, scarves, lapels.

Made thirty years ago, a masterpiece
of lyrical ennui, the irony of effort,
the song of doors. Tati’s Play Time,
Paris, without the city. Children

of the Paradise without the nuisances of plot.
In color. We see the colors of time,
in fact, like the spectacular sunrise
color of buses and exhausted makeup

and a man like every other man
disappears — somehow — on a not very
busy street, among all his sauntering kindred,
vivid, interesting, tiresome, adorable,

lost. Watching the slow semantic
antics of each gesture they make, these sad
lost lovely Frenchmen, I think from time to time
of John’s phonecall this afternoon.

He said: James Merrill died today. (Pause.)
But he died suddenly. Could it be he hardly
noticed it? Long tracking shot. You look away
for a minute and the man in the raincoat is gone.

7 February 1995
I LIVED WHERE THE B14 ENDED AND YOU
CAUGHT THE B13 DOWN TO THE SEA

Salt water and dark birds and says it, says it —
fearful of those tyrants he invented
Touch and Tell and Go To Hell.
Here by the beach the mystery’s disemboweled—
the hidden skin becomes the public flag.
Why I am not a socialist, he thinks.
Only the private has “what I call” value.
This quoting is like thinking, but is not thinking,
an idea not yet entirely his own.
He grew. Desirous of ceremonial, he enriched
each street with carnelian shadows he called women
and a despair that was just his own. Summer shade
was best, they could all be waiting for him there,
welcoming and quick like busses, open, open
the valves of such vehicles and hurry inside them,
they alone have the property to bring him where he needs.
Nothing changes. The streets are all enmeshed
in the tacky energies of his desires. Everything is more.
The touch was that way. Years later he could still feel
the rivet-lumpy glossy painted columns of the subway
press against him cool in all those empty nights.

8 February 1995
It is something to talk about these things,
her alabaster shadow in running water,
shimmering pebbles under shallow Delaware

or a bread box standing open in the wind,
dry crust and old cookies, a hard baguette
shoved in on the bias to make it fit

there are no natural vacancies any more.
I like the kind that has a sheet of wood
on the inner surface of the dropfront,

for slicing bread. I like the kind of bread
I carried up the nameless road to La Borne
waving wild to keep the horseflies off

till the farmer trotted his brown mares
down into poplars by the river and no more.
Anything you do every day, day after day,
even if only for a month or two, becomes
an everlasting part of you—
I love the quick habits that we form

but wish they could dispel as quickly
so I could see nothing in the hurry
of the river but water, water, water.

8 February 1995