

1

What does it take you asked to communicate  
and what I wonder will it take to make you  
if not convinced at least consider me  
not just another scribbler contending with couplets  
for the honor of being as you say  
hung on the wall more editorials  
on the limits of your love or consigned  
to flame with all the other basket cases  
who believed their immortal lines  
captured your likeness or your heart.

Though I'm not much good at small talk  
there's something to be said for plain English  
just telling the stories our bodies know by heart  
without ringing up all those mythic figures  
or intimating that we're reincarnations  
metempsychosing each other as it were  
(there's Molly asking *who's he when he's home?*)  
but what else can I possibly say to bring you  
out of that solitude of untold years  
so deep even tears can't find you?

2

If we leave the small laughter of stars  
(the moans of Venus in her glorious transit  
Pegasus with his wings and over-sized head  
even that shameless Irishman O'Ryan

his whatchamacallit dangling in plain sight  
Serious his blue-eyed hound at heel)  
and leave those good knights and ladies lying  
in bed awake on either side of the sword

would I then dwell in your topographies—  
the satin highlands of your shoulders and breasts  
the tattooed silk of your fragrant lowlands  
a garden spirit in gardens of delight,

explore there with you what makes us unique—  
selfish genes and accidents of birth,  
the myths we make of our given and place names  
the celibacies we celebrate alone,

recall together with you how simply a child

is disciplined by merely threatening  
to withhold love, how that child finds vengeance  
by weeping, how silence becomes in your hands

a weapon, how a girl can't be free  
from her father's ban on promiscuity  
until she gives him her virginity  
one way or another, or remind you

how at night softly as ectoplasm  
the corporate freighters slip into harbor  
between the battleships anchored out in the fog  
blanketing National City?

3

And what we have in common this time:  
conceived and born in the belly of the beast  
the middle of that American Century  
when the oily art of public relations  
after forty years of field trials  
run on its propaganda prototypes  
was being perfected in the marketplace,  
while reason (already on the shit list  
for being the engine of bureaucracy  
factory efficiency bourgeois  
boredom and millions ruthlessly slaughtered  
defending the principle of the bottom line)  
was reaffirming her bad name whoring  
for war selling a bill of goods for God  
country and hi-tech salvation made possible  
through by-product spinoffs of the killing

The first kids in kindergarten after  
plutonium poisoned everything forever  
reared on games and stories of violence  
competition short-term goals for success  
knowing already in elementary school  
it would fall to us to protect the country  
from the enemy invasion when it came  
while liberal guilt sucked the braintrust  
back to the arms of the center (born again  
to original sin, Freud this time not Marx)  
asking themselves after signing the oath  
how to save democracy from the people  
as our mothers rehearsed us on what not

to say in public or private how not to be common  
how not to be ourselves how to pass

Puberty at the height of togetherness hype  
for nuclear family values replete  
with metaphysical overtones: do not  
bend fold staple or mutilate  
do not talk politics sex or religion  
do not ever say what's most on your mind  
especially not while people are eating:  
uniformity called unity  
conformity a patriotic duty  
to counter the rising rate of suburban divorce  
the rising red star circling the earth  
the rising hemlines on unwed mothers-to-be

The first wave of rock and roll teenagers  
bodies coming of age with one-track minds  
only too willing to lose our heads to the beat  
pushing sax and electric guitars to the edge,  
a little ashamed our fathers were working class  
in the land of opportunity  
but street-smart before we were old enough to drive  
picking up from forty-five per minute  
revolutions of radio rhythm and blues  
whatever wisdoms we thought we might need to know  
while starting to understand the score to feel  
the switches in scale tempo key and timbre,  
the nervous response to high fidelity  
becoming a metaphor of our longing

Matriculated when the older guys  
in class were there on the G.I. Bill  
back from their slog in the latest Big Muddy  
unimpressed by the beatnik dress and diction  
we wanted taken for an existentialist  
attitude, using words like *being*  
*essence nothingness* and *existence*  
as if we knew what we were talking about,  
judging everyone not least ourselves  
by turtleneck condemned-to-freedom standards,  
Miles Monk Bird Coltrane Diz  
the inclement weather we lived and loved in,  
but all of us more or less true believers  
conventionally nonconventional

harnessed to the horses of instruction  
carrying simple notions of correspondence  
all the way down from physics to physics ed  
past the liberal and performing arts  
by way of transcendental social science  
philosophy departments offering lectures  
in neoscholastic terminologies  
never quite coming to grips with the incoherence  
between feeling and intelligence  
the blinding prescribed by specialization  
the meaninglessness of life inscribed by death

Detached from time and committed relationship  
by bursts of impulse-image technology  
enrapturing our single separate persons  
listening to the heart's syllables  
the snake beginning to uncoil there,  
starting that early to read between the lies  
bear the costs of conscience and not let  
government of by and for the smug  
goad us into the market they said would provide  
the goods that God being dead no longer can:  
the pre-fab post-electric-shock  
thorazine Milton meltdown kingdom come  
ordained by the Human Resource Placement Office

4

Never adjusting well to nice clean  
white normality assembly-line  
morality clocking in day after day  
doing whatever it takes however demeaning  
however out of synch with quality time

to keep the paychecks coming bust ass  
our whole lives but never get ahead  
then if we're lucky a timepiece of all things  
a handshake and a few years off  
for good behavior before we cash out

Never willing to identify  
with occupation or preoccupation  
never willing to be white collar coolies  
expending ourselves in frigid cubicles  
processing endless streams of wasted trees

facing our own planned obsolescence  
programmed into the cult of the future tense  
meant to compensate for the disappointment  
being hard-wired for instant gratification  
under such circumstances is bound to produce

Never very good at faking it  
in bed or anywhere else wanting to touch  
and be touched to the quick now and now  
but never able to hold a job or lover  
long enough never time enough

to think it through get it down notes  
scribbled in traffic phrases recollected  
at quarter rest stops in between  
trying to make ends meet without too much  
friction free fall blowback or slip up

A line here and there while loved ones sleep  
moments stolen to try to catch in words  
without the self-delusions id and will  
the falsities ego and reason are prone to  
the prize always almost just out of reach

rushes of insight sensation meaning and feeling  
flashes of preternatural clarity  
blue ice rumbling down glacial slopes  
intricacies of insect wings in moonlight  
intimations of continuity

luminous patterns in the DNA  
traced like breadcrumbs to the last sign  
of that mind before the one that comes back  
remembering itself as it might have been  
as if we could let go without losing it

so what we get more often than not is pretty  
episodic homiletic or worse  
merely arch when wit was what we intended  
lyrical if we're unusually lucky  
epic only by leaps of imagination

5

Dispersed like mendicants of an earlier age  
dispelled by a new economic order

schooling ourselves to make do with precious little  
learning to live well beneath our means  
dancing like Sufis with hunger as our food

Called in times disgraced by scarcity models  
in a land flowing with milk and honey  
to semi-voluntary poverty  
sense of community and self-restraint  
crucial in building our common wealth

Making an art of saying No to ourselves  
trying to find what we could do without  
learning the hard way that the man of good will  
may not be the righteous man let alone  
the one the coins say will cross the Great Water

Living in vehicles instead of houses  
feet on the ground but engines still running  
our children raised between here and there  
with fathers who don't share their last names  
as if our domestic angels had all been killed

Weaving back and forth across the line  
that separates independence from exile  
knowing we can always be found guilty  
of something, wanting that pig in our heads gone  
while innocent eyes in our lights escape unharmed

Roadtesting totems and rules of thumb  
giving eternal truths the acid test  
turning the mind/body split inside out  
seeing if possible not the other but both  
in order to protect ourselves from belief

On backroads in beat-up old cars through strange states  
on the lookout for what can be taken  
for granted what must be assumed to be real  
crisscrossing the continent for peace  
freedom love whatever we called it

Our dream of America the Beautiful  
before her abduction by parties in uniform  
her addiction to hardcore kinks  
love's body before the sound bites  
trade marks and corporate designs

6

The wars we've lived and are living through:  
the Holocaust and other thermal devices  
the parallel lines where that buck didn't stop  
the madness of Mutual Assured Destruction  
the ethnic cleansings and subtler genocides  
the villages they had to destroy to save them  
the humanitarian aid for slaughter  
the tac squads and death squads and torture schools  
the thousands disappeared into mass graves

Under the desks in class under the table  
at work under God by executive order  
all those sweaty palms and sticky fingers:  
the Declaration of Human Rights never  
ratified by the U.S. Congress  
the global ban of patents on life forms  
never ratified by the U.S. Congress  
the Genocide Treaty ratified but only  
after amendments twenty years later  
guaranteed the stars and stripes would never  
have to face charges in the World Court

Hardly a breather between the Cold War  
and Culture Wars when Uncle Strangelove  
wasn't bombing someone or paying someone  
to do the dirty work: the White House  
a wing of the Pentagon the Pentagon  
a five-star property of Wall St.  
conspicuous destruction the most efficient  
means of keeping the wheels of production turning  
while necktied ministers of the state religion  
in collusion with millionaires on the Hill  
unbuckle the regulatory restraints  
put on the financial Frankensteins  
who caused the Crash and Great Depression  
so the cycles of scams and bailouts  
can roll again every ten years or so  
from Vietnam to Afghanistan—junk  
bonds high risk real estate  
high tech start up dot coms  
layoffs bankruptcies foreclosures  
each bubble bigger than the last one  
more taxpayer money in corporate hands

more people fleeced and lives ruined

The war on poverty sold out for napalm  
the peace dividend invested in teargas  
to keep the heads bowed down in the Middle East  
southeast Asia Central America Watts  
Harlem Detroit Newark South Chicago  
to put the red flag down for the long count  
to keep the meter running to give the sick  
economy a shot in the arm to pay  
for the glitz and greed and disbelief  
suspended under a B-grade father figure  
asleep at the wheel dreaming Buck Rogers plots  
updated with 007 props  
building the biggest national debt yet,  
the shadow economy of violence  
(military spending domestic crime  
a shoot-em-up entertainment culture)  
that dwarfs the GNP, the great  
communicator of hogwash succeeded  
after a sordid comedy of errors  
in the cockpit of the free world  
by a dynasty afflicted with  
congenital free speech dysfunction,  
signaling in winks and code words  
to the lay order who voted them in  
while putting the country even deeper in hock

The gulf where our bombs and radioactive bullets  
were no smarter than us: the cities burned  
the millions raped and maimed the brainless babies  
stillborn in border-town free trade strips  
the free-fire zones the *jefes* swear contain  
no people only terrorists,  
lend me your ears more than a figure of speech:  
death as method extinction as tactic love  
of order gone ballistic, desire itself  
a debt owed to the government, the young  
sent off to combat, marriage, prostitution  
by men with bleary eyes over bird-beak smiles  
our lives eaten up with fear and hate commands  
of the national insecurity state  
increasingly controlled by and for  
minorities of fundamentalist bigots

The myth of imminent military invasion  
by a hideous malevolent alien  
cooked up by a bloated arms industry  
grown out of all proportion since Yalta  
*(Of course the people don't want war said Goering  
but get enough to believe the threat is real. . . .)*  
propaganda more subtle now than ever  
a politics of fear turning the country  
into the spitting image of the state  
they said had to be eradicated,  
hard to find anyone who doesn't believe  
under the spell of news spasms timed  
to create moods of widespread consensus  
prolonged by rituals of grief and vengeance  
there really is one crisis after another  
that only generals and admirals  
and neocons on their payrolls know how to manage,  
keeping the permanent war economy state  
on the brink of utter catastrophe  
while upping the output of nonrenewables  
squandered in perennial destruction

Billions spent on better mousetraps  
billions to field-test the latest spear  
twenty-five million US citizens  
active or formerly active military  
millions more paramilitary  
thousands in office good for nothing  
but to rise on occasion, light up  
the little screen and big board, toot  
their horns take a stand for the right make us  
feel again the old glory the passionate  
story of market truths and consumer goods  
without doing squat to better the common lot

The checks and balances without which  
democratic liberty can't work  
skewed by the weight of big money,  
elections bought by fortunes spent on ads,  
sell-outs on both sides of the aisle  
voting for corporate deregulation  
bigstick diplomacy consumerism  
dumbing us down with cut-rate classrooms  
miracles of science passion-play sports  
sex and infotainment until it's hard

to find anyone but wackos and wingnuts  
keeping even one eye on Uncle Sugar  
dismembering the Bill of Rights  
with his *Secret Government* joy stick

Our schools an anti-intellectual joke  
designed to keep kids off the street  
off balance locked down in narrow courses  
funneling into the divide-and-conquer  
grid of pigeonhole career tracks  
leading not to what used to be called education  
certainly not to creative liberation  
the integration of body mind and spirit  
but to time clock and credit card  
rituals of cutthroat competition  
desires conformed to market values  
belief to the myth of unending consumption  
in order to justify subsidies for research  
into novel ways of subverting nature

Our bodies turning on themselves unable  
in the blood soup of renegade chemicals  
electromagnetic mishmash and mutated genes  
to tell disease from health, good cells from bad  
our moral fiber twisted into legal  
briefs religious tracts and arms brochures  
our sacred desires spun into market demands  
our future condemned by nuclear winter or aberrant  
planet wobble to hells of fire and ice—  
a global greenhouse filled with off-gases  
or a global deep freeze from a few  
degrees drop in the average annual mean

Our inner cities a national disgrace  
clogged with human waste and misery  
occupied by armies of sadist police  
our mentally ill and chronically poor turned out  
with runaway kids and shellshocked vets  
begging for food and shelter so we can play  
Great White Father to captive markets,  
brokering nations into client states  
under threat of hostile takeover  
forced by the terms of economic war  
to privatize their countries' public resources,  
put their people in permanent debt to the banks

turn their subsistence farms into factories  
for chemical agribusiness export crops  
until they raise so little food for themselves  
they have to import high-priced staples from us,  
precluded from even beginning to think in terms  
of economic independence or freedom  
to use their resources for their own needs  
let alone global equity

Our prisons hotbeds of patriotism and rape  
growing faster than the cells on a President's nose:  
the highest hard time rate in the First World  
millions of young men of all colors  
locked up in privatized cages (more blacks  
than the South had slaves), disenfranchised  
so come election day the law-abiding  
who put them away in the first place can count  
on that many votes against them not cast—  
three percent of the US population  
twelve percent of black men in their twenties  
under some form of criminal supervision  
the only crime of most besides being poor  
non-white or both, believing the killing should stop  
this leaf makes better smoke than that  
privacy is a basic human right  
equal opportunity is a scam  
freedom without equality a lie

7

From shower scenes to the silence of the lamb  
(*A large OJ and two sliced throats, please*)  
murder as the American artform

schoolyard massacres by unshaved boys  
our homegrown version of suicide bombers  
hip to how it will play on the world news

pure killing machines as video idols  
pumped-up automatons of all genders  
fetishes made of selected body parts

zapping zillions of unAmerican creeps  
(*blood the food of those gone mad* said Olson)  
death devolved to a special effect, a thrill,

something that happens to the not-Us  
the images on screen and paper bleeding  
virtual blood while real people die

*in extremis*: not only our mercenary  
armies in the cradle of civilization  
as we know it the land of money and oil

not only our neighborhood killing fields  
city streets bloody with hate and rage  
frustration and grief taken out on each other

but in apartment complexes, rented  
rooms, cubbyholes, bodies falling  
apart inside, consciousness going to pieces

more of us than we like to admit ending up  
cold poor tired hungry alone  
desexed by the young forever machine

experience dismissed opinions ignored  
or ridiculed their very existence despised  
for the common fate it makes so obvious:

withered stars of an obscene ritual  
reduced to believing their past present and future  
equally absurd non-concepts

our fathers asking forgiveness with their last breath  
our mothers fragile, hair blue and skin gray  
almost all of us in isolation

the opposite of love: so drugged out  
there is no choice but to do what the good nurse  
makes you do to quiet the family members

so mortified at the inconvenient fact  
they foreclose on our rights to dignity  
during our north by northwest passage

