

# **The Fields Have Edges, But the Roads Keep Going: 10,000 Things, Assorted Worlds, and Me**

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On the farm where I grew up – four miles southwest of Flanagan, Illinois – both space and time were large. The vast prairie was marked and bounded by the grid of roads and ditches, the fields that were ours and those that weren't, but the sky was unbroken and undivided except by the clouds, which were entirely out of our control. Some maples and elms and a row of catalpas had been planted around the farmstead, where the house and barn and sheds for chickens and machines huddled. The farm work was noble and instructive in its way, but tedious. Plowing even forty acres with a three-bottom plow is slow work, and the tractor saved time only at the expense of its brutal roar. There was little to see but cornstalks on one hand and black dirt on the other, little to do but keep the wheel in the furrow and make the turns at the ends. "Life, friends, is boring," John Berryman admitted in "Dream Song 14" (Berryman 99) – but his examples are not drawn from farm life, and I'll bet he never filled fifty flats with eggs in a smelly cage

house after a full day of school, a two-hour football practice, and forty minutes on the bus home.

What could occupy a boy's head during those times? Sometimes I'd sing to myself, "Blowin' in the Wind" or "Puff the Magic Dragon" in my younger days, a little later more dangerous songs, like the whole of "Not to Touch the Earth" by the Doors, whose stagy and symbolic lyrics I had studied till I knew them by heart: "Some outlaws live by the side of the lake / the minister's daughter's in love with the snake / who lives in a well by the side of the road / wake up girl, we're almost home!" I had no idea, really, what Jim Morrison was up to, but there was an obscure thrill in running such words through my head as I picked up eggs, three in each hand, and settled them into the cardboard flats as fast as I could handle them.

The church leaders would not have approved of such music, of course, but already, at least in such things, my peers and I were beyond their command. We were banging out "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love" on our cheap guitars on Sunday nights at the Waldo Mennonite Church. My older cousins and contacts – male and female both – were going off to schools like Goshen and Bluffton and Illinois State, coming back with tales of freedom and adventure and travel to even more exotic locations – always with service to the Lord as the motive, of course. Somehow our parents had accepted that we would go off to get schooled, and (as it turned out) only a few of us would come back. The war was on, and as far as I was concerned going CO or resisting the system entirely were the only plausible options, but college first seemed reasonable too. I never even considered staying on the farm.

I arrived at Goshen in the fall of 1970 with some clothes, a terrible guitar, and a cheap record player and a treasured small hoard of records, Crosby Stills and Nash and Bob Dylan and Neil Young. I left my letter jacket at home, and for the first time since junior high I was freed from the practices, games, and relentless adult structure of organized sports. Sometimes I frittered away that loose hour or two between the end of classes and dinner, but often enough I picked up the guitar and felt my way through some songs, or found a new friend or two to hang out with. Eventually I began to explore the woods near the college, to wander in search of solitude and beauty and whatever stray words might come to me as I sat on a log and tried to listen and look in new ways, to make new things out of words.

I was learning faster than I knew in those days, almost despite myself, instinctively resistant to the lingering rigidity of the Bender legacy at Goshen, yet also stimulated by the learning,

conviction, and eloquence of my teachers and the books they pressed upon us. I was stirred in other ways by rock and roll, by folk music and blues, by the fading afterglow of sixties idealism, and by heady and earthy conversations with my friends. There was space and time to contend with all this, baffling and contradictory and compelling as it was. Years later I wrote this poem about those days.

Autobiography with *Blonde on Blonde*

The ragman drew circles on everything, but St. John dragged his feet through them all, saying *In the beginning was the Word!*

until time shuddered like a bus with bad brakes and my dad rubbed his face and sat down at the kitchen table, his farmer tan

glowing. It had been a windy day, and the brutal stench of Hillman's hogs wafted through the screens. I whacked Kathy

on the back of the head just to hear her howl. It worked. Then they drove me off to college, where I learned

that the not-yet has already happened, if you squint at it just right. *I am, I said*, said Neil Diamond, and we had

to agree with that. Then the president explained that those unwilling to kill for peace might once have been good people,

but godless communist drugs had made them into trolls and orcs. We knew he was an idiot—we were elves and hobbits—

and decided to set off for Mordor to destroy the Ring right after dinner. But somebody put on *Blonde on Blonde* again,

and it was just like the night to play tricks, and we could hardly root out the fascist pigs while Louise and her lover were so entwined.

We walked down beside the dam instead, tried to lose ourselves in the scant woods. I never got to Memphis or to Mobile.

The hard rain was already falling, but the sun still shone like glory some of those afternoons, with classes over and the long night ahead

and water roaring down the spillway like the great I AM. (Gundy, *Somewhere* 10)

When I was assigned *The Politics of Jesus* for a religion class, my main reaction was that I agreed but it was old news – of course

Jesus was political. I'd learned that from Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger and Joan Baez.

In my first year at Goshen I was lured by an unrequited infatuation into writing some earnest, awkward lines in a notebook, and some of them became something like poems. In my second year, along with my semi-successful efforts to be a hippy and a rebel, I began seriously thinking I might try to become a poet. I had a great teacher in Nick Lindsay, but there were only a few recent poets in my American Lit anthology, and casting about for more I went into the Harold and Wilma Good Library – new and stylish then – one day. Somewhere in the shelves I spotted a title: *Naked Poetry*. How could I resist? *Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, the subtitle further declared. The names of the poets scrawled below the title were mostly new to me – only Robert Lowell was in the American Lit anthology – but I checked it out, and ended up browsing for days, dazzled and entranced.

I found a whole set of writers in those pages that still matter to me, that I returned to as old friends and mentors in writing this essay. Even more important than the individual voices and poems was the sense of finding a new community, one in which love for the music of words and language seemed to fit seamlessly with rage and resistance for the many things wrong with the world. There was the reckless sarcasm of Robert Bly regarding the conservative New Critics: “In the very next generation after Eliot and Pound, American poetry voluntarily turned itself in. Tate and Ransom went through town after town asking, ‘Does anyone know of a good jail near here?’” (162). In a milder voice, William Stafford also claimed freedom from received forms: “Relying on forms or rules is always possible,” he said, but “ever-new confrontation [with the language] is essential for writing, even for effective writing in the strictest of forms” (83).

These refusals to be bound by received wisdom still resonate, don't they? Of course no one seeking to write real poems can just ignore what's been done and said – at least the best of it, whatever exactly that means. But what true writer can exist without this trust that the language and the world still will yield up new things to those who enter into them with curiosity, respect, and a certain recklessness? To put the question on another level, one that mattered to me then and still does: can anyone really follow Jesus without trusting that revelation is ongoing and that new truths and wonders still wait to be revealed?

Bly and Stafford, and many others among the “naked poets,” were also serious critics of both the Vietnam War and American mass culture – more passionately and eloquently so than most

Mennonites. Bly's surreal laments from that era, including these lines from "Those Being Eaten by America," are still haunting:

That is why these poems are so sad  
The long dead running over the fields

The mass sinking down  
The light in children's faces fading at six or seven

The world will soon break up into small colonies of the saved (Bly 157)

Now I'd already learned a human geography in which "small colonies of the saved" (us) were surrounded by the millions of godless heathens and false believers who made up "the world." Even in Flanagan, Illinois it was not easy to think of the non-Mennonites as an undifferentiated host of the abominable, especially when I had seriously dated one who was clearly a better person than me. But Bly's apocalyptic, prophetic vision – fueled, I would learn later, by growing up in Minnesota as what he called "a Lutheran boy-god" – struck me as far more eloquent and stirring than most of the stodgy preachers at Waldo Mennonite Church.

William Stafford's later "Oregon Message" speaks of hiding in plain sight, of staying in touch with the kindred folk scattered everywhere. "From our snug place we shout /religiously for attention," he writes, not to be seen but to hide from "the hovering hawk of the state":

This message we smuggle out in  
its plain cover, to be opened  
quietly: Friends everywhere—  
we are alive! Those moon rockets  
have missed millions of secret  
places! Best wishes.

Burn this. (60)

There were many more entrancing discoveries within the covers of *Naked Poetry*. Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" was another revelation: a poet could be gay, and celebrate wild sex, marijuana, all sorts of transgressions, in a poem that still claimed a deep moral core and lamented "the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" (Ginsberg 189). And James Wright, whose "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" remains a brilliant, concise, and moving indictment of the tragic beauty and misery of the small-town Midwest. From the high school football stadium, its

speaker thinks of working men “dreaming of heroes” and “ashamed to go home,” along with women “dying for love.” The last lines make a turn that is startling but convincing for anyone like me, who grew up first watching and then playing in such games, as my father did before me:

Therefore,  
 Their sons grow suicidally beautiful  
 At the beginning of October,  
 And gallop terribly against each other’s bodies. (280-1)

And there was the native Ohio poet Kenneth Patchen, brilliant and under-appreciated then and now, writer of tender love poems and extravagant, beautiful, reckless poems about poverty and violence. Consider these lines from the book-length *Journal of Albion Moonlight*, excerpted in *Naked Poetry*:

So it is the duty of the artist to discourage all traces of shame  
 To extend all boundaries  
 To fog them in right over the plate  
 To kill only what is ridiculous . . .  
 To bear no cross  
 To take part in no crucifixion  
 To tinkle a warning when mankind strays . . . (66)

This goes on for another fifty lines or sixty lines, defying convention and common sense with every line. The Patchen section in *Naked Poetry* ends with three brief passages set in separate columns; the middle one, even after all that had come before, blew me further into whatever wild new imaginative space it created: “Night / that / great / black / she-dog / squatting / up there / above us / with / all / her / white / tits / showing” (68).

And there was W. S. Merwin, whose entrancing, often unpunctuated poems were full of ecological as well as military protest, and whose visionary prose statement called for poems so full of “unduplicatable resonance” that they would “be like an echo except that is repeating no sound” (271). And Denise Levertov, born into a mingled family of Christian and Jewish mystics, a British import who would, much later, offer a memorable keynote address at the 1996 Goshen Mennonite/s Writing conference. She also wrote memorable anti-war poems, along with small marvels like “Song for Ishtar,” in which the poet says proudly “The moon is a sow . . . / and I a pig and a poet”: “In the black of desire / we rock and grunt, grunt and / shine” (Levertov 135).

This seemed to be a tribe that shared my pacifism *and* my yearning for transgression and freshness and novelty, for saying forbidden words right out loud, for a frank sensuality *and* an approach to both language and things of the spirit that was strong, deep, earthy, and dark when it was right to be dark. O brave new world. So, yes, this was a version – far less dramatic than some, to be sure – of the “dislocation” described in the call for papers that sparked this essay. It was disorientating but also exhilarating for me, the opening of new spaces, interior and exterior, of new worlds somehow inside *and* outside the old one.

Skip ahead forty-some years, and various complications, and here I am. I’ve never managed to shake the sense that the world is mostly full of people who don’t get it, some of them just asleep, some troubled in small and large ways, and some actively hostile to everything I hold dear. And I’ve also never lost my awareness of and gratitude for the smaller, select group of those who *do* get it, many more truly and fully than me. But the boundaries that define these groups for me have shifted fairly radically from those I’d been taught. As I found friends and contacts in the literary and peace communities, some with Mennonite connections but most of them not, I discovered that many of those folk, some of them not religious at all, some Catholic or Protestant or whatever else, were at least as committed to peaceful living, loving kindness, and giving of themselves for the sake of others as the Mennonites I knew. Go figure.

I had lots more to learn of course. I needed a much more deep and extensive education in the poetry and literature of the wide world, and in life, endeavors without end or bottom which continue to this day. I needed to learn about the many layers and ramifications of the accident of my birth and its associated layers of history, struggle, and privilege – but a thorough discussion of those complexities will have to wait for another occasion. Very briefly, I can’t help but see now what I hardly noticed at the time: that Levertov and Sylvia Plath were the only women in *Naked Poetry*, and people of color were entirely absent. *The New Naked Poetry*, published in 1976, added Etheridge Knight, Adrienne Rich, and Muriel Rukeyser, but any contemporary anthology with so many white guys and so little diversity would be pilloried, if not impossible to publish. Berg and Mezey were part of their day, though; the American Lit anthology for my college American Lit. survey course had only one black author (Langston Hughes) and the only women were Emily Dickinson, Katherine Anne Porter, and Eudora Welty. The current “shorter” Norton anthology I now use is four times as long and far more diverse, which is excellent,

although semesters are still the same length, and this creates difficulties.

In the dorms at Goshen I lived among and made friends with some African Americans and international students, but my first real immersion in a culture that was neither white nor American came in my junior year, when I spent a semester in Kingston, Jamaica on a study-service program. Riding a jam-packed bus on a sweaty afternoon with forty or fifty Jamaicans, none of them nearly as white as me, was a learning experience of another, equally valuable sort, tempered just enough by the college's structures and guidance to be only moderately and instructively traumatic. I also spent a lot of time with another Goshen student, a fetching blonde woman from British Columbia, who has now been my wife for over forty years.

So all this meant that leaving my prairie village, and eventually finding my way to a slightly larger Midwestern village with a college in it, was a relatively soft and mild process. Certainly I faced fewer and less intense traumas than the ones I learned about from those majestic and compelling voices I eventually heard coming down from the Canadian prairies, several hundred miles north of my home ground. It often seemed hard enough at the time, though it's hard to say exactly why: our phlegmatic Swiss peasant stock? the lack of the general, horrific trauma of the Break Event? the gradual transition from Amish to Mennonite and the acculturation that came with it? the availability of a college like Goshen, a kind of way station between the farm and the big wild world I would later encounter in graduate school? Whatever the reasons, it was also true that while my tribe was surely conservative, its patriarchs were mainly not cruel nor entirely rigid, and my own parents were and are gentle, patient with my youthful indiscretions, and not given to raising their voices. It was possible to leave without burning bridges, to come back for Christmas, exchange hugs and gifts, even if my brothers and I had to take some grief for wearing our hair long and growing out our young beards.

Even so, of course my personal tradition is not without its complications. Living with some degree of awareness and integrity in the material world in these days – in any days, I suppose – is no simple matter. Like everyone, I am entangled with this world, gorgeous and terrifying as it is, and often I've found the things of this world finding their way into poems that also become entangled with earlier poems and poets and with my daily life, contacts and conversations, in ways too complex and multivalent to be even gestured toward in anything but poetry.

The Song of the Weed Witch

*No ideas but . . .*

- William Carlos Williams

I could walk up or down the creek, but I stop. So little time.  
Here's the strainer someone left on the rocks, the air  
so damp it's one degree from fog. Here's the weed

rooted somehow in the mossy boulder, almost ready to seed.  
Despite much instruction, I've never mastered the simple  
clear explanation. I've never figured out how to put ideas

in things. In this simple, indescribably deep forest,  
I remember last night when we were suddenly talking  
about what might survive our bodies, and my new friend said,

*I could go to church if I didn't have to believe all that stuff,*  
and I said I knew what she meant. But the beer was gone,  
and we were tired. I got in the car, and the singer sang

*Three crosses in a copse of trees, a long way from Calvary,*  
and I found my room, slept, woke into another  
irrevocable and precious day and put not one idea

into a thing. I spoke mostly to the one inside who listens darkly  
to my obnoxious supplementary monologues, the one  
who says very little beyond *walk, then* and *sit here*

and *listen* and *wait*. There are many things--the mossy boulder,  
a dead leaf sprawled on it, some wispy grass, lichens,  
a foot-tall weed, almost ready to seed-- and not an idea

in the whole passel. Where the creek turns, a mist rose or lowered  
or gathered. The whole forest spun without moving  
and hummed without noise, simple and clear and enormous.

All these adjectives must die, I know, and be flung  
on a heap like the honeysuckle that the weed witch is clearing  
to let the natives flourish--skunk cabbage, spicebush,

jack-in-the-pulpit. I am a native but not exactly at home,  
so I listened to the nearby water and the distant water,  
and a drop fell on my shoulder like a reason to turn. (Gundy, *Spoken*  
56-7)

The past is stubbornly persistent as well. Last fall I got an email  
from Bluffton library archivist Carrie Philips, who had been

sorting through some old books and come across a copy of Daniel Kauffman's *Manual of Bible Doctrines*, published by the Mennonite Publishing Co. in Elkhart, Indiana in 1898. On the inside cover is my great-grandfather's name in his dignified cursive: Rev. Geo. I. Gundy, Washington, Ill. He likely got the book sometime between 1914 and 1925, when he was pastor of the Congerville Mennonite Church fourteen miles from the family place where he was still farming near Washington for his living. (The commute got easier when he managed to buy a car.) He later moved to the village of Meadows and began running the Old People's Home there (yes, that was its actual name) with his wife Clara, as well as pastoring the Mennonite church. George's youngest son Don attended Bluffton College years later, along with several of my uncles and (much later) four of my siblings. Now I've taught there for over thirty years.

Kauffman's book, quite influential among American Mennonites in its day, has a lengthy subtitle: *Setting Forth the General Principles of the Plan of Salvation, Explaining the Symbolical Meaning and Practical Use of the Ordinances Instituted by Christ and His Apostles, and Pointing out Specifically some of the Restrictions which the New Testament Scriptures Enjoin upon Believers*. It's addressed to Christians in general, but one of Kauffman's purposes was clearly to provide instruction on sound doctrine and practice for the largely uneducated Mennonite preachers of his day. It's a firm book on just about every point it makes, though modern Mennonites like most of us have fallen away from many of its ordinances. I doubt that Brother Kauffman would approve of my lifestyle or my theology – and I'm quite sure neither he nor my great-grandpa George, also a man of firm convictions, ever imagined that a Bluffton professor and member in good standing of the First Mennonite Church of Bluffton would write a poem like this one. But there you go.

#### The Smaller Mysteries on a Winter Sunday Morning

*I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" (1849)

*"Grand stand plays" are an abomination. Let the Gospel be presented in a plain, straightforward, and spirited manner.*

- Daniel Kauffman, *Manual of Bible Doctrines* (1898)

Some people I've known for thirty years still seem like strangers.

Some people I've just met seem clear and close.

R. told me he's started putting a little dark sugar in his stir-fries, the day after mine turned out edible but a little drab.

*When people become converted, said Daniel Kauffman, their nature assumes a child-like simplicity.*

The student's father across the table yesterday, grease in the creases of his fingers and nails, too far away for me to ask what he does without sounding like a condescending fool.

The other father muttered to his son all through lunch, passing on things he'd gathered like a proud successful spy.

No M. in the choir today—she's off tending to her mother, who seems increasingly freed from this particular space and time.

G. sits downstairs now, with his mother who calls 8 times a day, out of cookies or wondering where Darwin's been for so long.

H. is in hospice. J. is returning to PA without her husband and is grateful for our support.

I don't believe I've ever spoken to her.

The sermon title is "The Space Between Us." I'm in the balcony, not to close to anyone, though we're all in the same room.

*The metaphor of society as a body was not favored by those eager to change the current order, the pastor says.*

I think I'd rather be an eyeball than a toenail, a finger than a heel.

*We don't have to become one big eye, the pastor says. Communion is the resetting of the bones of the body of Christ.*

O Emerson, where art thou? There's nothing transparent about me. *The most grievous [mistake] has been to mistake intelligence for spiritual power, wrote Daniel K.*

I have my great-grandpa George's copy of his book.

He was a Mennonite preacher in the day when they didn't get paid, which Daniel K. says is as it should be. Maybe an offering once or twice a year.

His copy is little marked, but in the part on "Secret Societies" George underlined *Christ Himself testified, "In secret have I said nothing."*

My copy of Emerson is thatched with pencil lines. Transparent eyeballs, currents of the Universal Being. In the woods there is perpetual youth. *There is a crack in everything God has made.*

What does a person do, in times like these? We Americans certainly know the oscillations of feeling involved with living in a large, powerful nation-state, one whose leaders are not reliably aligned with the values of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount, or even the broader humanistic values of justice and equality they (sometimes) pay lip service to. After eight less terrible years of the Obama administration, well, you know what happened last November.

The old quietism and separation seem too little for someone like me, engaged and immersed in The World as I am, and yet I still spend most of my days just living my life: teaching, eating and sleeping, riding my bike and passing my precious time clicking on web sites that make me marginally more informed, outraged to a greater or lesser degree every day, but with very little sense of how to make anything change. I've marched a couple more times, but really I hate marching. I should write, I know—and sometimes I do—but what needs to change is so obvious and has been objected to so many times that to write something that will actually influence anything seems hopeless.

Last spring, the big Associated Writers and Writing Programs conference was in Washington, D.C. The writers, as you might expect, were abuzz with indignation and righteous wrath. I went to a session where Kim Stafford, son of the aforementioned William Stafford, an acquaintance and ally for years and a fine writer and long-time peace worker himself, read from a group of poems he'd written since the election. The poems were full of grief and worry, yet Kim is still trying, as did his father, to find places of connection, to resist without anger or even rhetorical violence. I got the last copy of the little book he'd brought along after the session, and we talked for a while, then had lunch with several others.

A little later I was heading back to my hotel, thinking of a nap, when I saw a line of people with signs on the other side of the street, marching toward the Capitol. I hesitated, then saw Kim with the group, holding a hand-lettered sign of his own that (I discovered) said "Spend kind words—Coins of happiness." I crossed the street and joined him, and we walked along with the rest. The crowd was tiny compared to the massive Women's March a few weeks earlier, but it was easier walking this way, though we

did inconvenience a couple of drivers when we couldn't quite all get across the street before the light changed. Adjusting for dress styles and the cell phones we were all using to take pictures, it could almost have been one of those Vietnam protests I was just a little too young to join.

These seemed like they should be my people, though the young woman carrying a sign that said "You're not good enough to have a c\*nt" and some of the more aggressive chants set me back a little. Kim felt the same way, and after talking a little about how the peace-church pacifists must have felt the same way fifty years ago, so we mainly passed on the chants and walked along under the gray skies, happy enough to be part of the witness whether or not we were entirely at ease. We told a few jokes, remembered some common friends, chatting with some of those around us. Why should it have been otherwise, I ask myself now.

In half an hour we got to the park, and people began making speeches about the disasters of this administration and the need to resist. They were fine enough, but nobody was there to hear the eloquence and anger and carefully developed objections except us, who already pretty much agreed, and a few media people who seemed under-impressed. Kim had me take a picture of him holding his sign, and loaned it to me so I could pose with it myself. Soon he said needed to go, and I drifted off myself a few minutes later, and tramped back across the park and down the famous streets to the hotel, alone.

Some days I don't even want to think about "my tradition," that weird unruly pile of the mundane, the nostalgic, the embarrassing, the horrifying, and the dismayingly beautiful. Other days, I know that there's no escaping it, only contending with it, contesting it with others, learning, sifting, sorting as best we can. So I find myself trying to weave new things out of the remnants and wreckage and salvage of the old, out of these ominous unsettled times, out of the ten thousand things and the scandalous, tenuous glints of grace and mercy that somehow persist. I gaze at them uncertainly, try to listen, take a tentative sniff or two, run my hand along a gentle curve of something that may exist only in my unruly mind, trusting that the spark of God is somehow present, as the enigmatic and uncertified Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas promised that if we lift up the stone, if we break the stick, we will find him there.

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