

THE HEART'S UNREASON



poems
1969-1975

by Robert A. Seeley

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desktop resources

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FOREWORD

Poetry is a habit that is easy to form and hard to break. I began to write the poems in this book as an exercise in creating traditional feet, lines, stanzas, and rhyme-schemes. I ended by living to make rhythms, to find rhymes, and to load each ten-word line with a weight of ideas which, ultimately, it could not bear. In the end, the struggle defeated me, and I gave it up.

What defeated me was the problem of human violence. I needed to understand it, and poetry helped me merely to confront it, to cry out against it, or to find refuge from it. I reached the end of what poetry could do, at least in my hands, in the summer of 1975, when I wrote an unrhymed sonnet about dog fighting after reading a feature article in the New York Times. The poem ended:

...the sun
Glared pitiless above me at the street
And cast the bloody shadow of a brute.

Clearly, in my own mind at least, I had reached a dead end. So I gave up poetry, spent ten years searching for understanding of my own species, and turned to the short essay as my primary form.

I am still searching, but in the meantime, the poems here have their own interest and a beauty that, after so much time, surprises me. Many of them arise from a vision of a dying civilization and the sadness that always accompanies transition. Our civilization—the “dying light” of one poem—still lives, but no one living in 1975 could have predicted the shape it now takes. Nor is the survival of our species and many others assured.

The Vietnam War, although it was at the center of my life and that of most Americans from 1969-1975, hardly makes an appearance in these poems. That is intentional. These poems were a refuge from the war. I had not been in combat, so I could not hope to write authentically about it, nor did I need to. I needed a quiet place to go after working in the peace movement all day, which was what I was doing at the time.

Here is that quiet place. That it could not provide refuge from all evil does not make it less valuable. I share it now in the hope that others may find it useful.

—Robert A. Seeley

“AS TINY SEA-BIRDS”

As tiny sea-birds running from the sound
The tide full-throated shouts before its break
Seek sanctuary lest the wave should take
Them unawares and pull them to be drowned:
So men, when nations break, seek higher ground
In tried and ancient ways; of customs make
Life jackets lest they flounder in the wake
And wash of history's unending round.

What foolishness is this? No bird would dive
For shelter in the wave; no bird so blind
But sees the water's beckoning for cheat.
Yet, reason notwithstanding, men still thrive
On dreams of old salvation, and so bind,
By self-made chains, themselves to self-defeat.

“THE SEEING FAILS”

“In the prison of his days,
Teach the free man how to praise.”
—Auden

The seeing fails, though sun transforms the haze
To liquid silver flecked with colored beads;
The hearing, though the golden song that breeds
Among the leaves fills all the forest ways.
Things that we love will come to desert days,
And wilted stubble springs from rooted seeds.
When all our gardens grow to rusted weeds,
What will there be to see, to hear, to praise?

The seeing fails, imprisoned in the light,
And hearing fades, a captive of the sound.
The song remains, the dream, the memory,
To break the amber hold of sound and sight.
Singing to stem the world’s decaying round,
We learn to laugh and praise before we die.

CHALLENGE

Dead in the summer, there are days
The asphalt floats in curling haze;
Chess-pieces sweat from games half-played
Near flowers wilting in the shade.

At lunchtime, still, the sidewalks fill,
And people test the summer's will.
Standing in sun, they sweat, complain,
And wish for snow—or even rain.

And I too stand and wish for snow,
Though there are cooler spots to go.
It is the human heart's unreason
To dare the brunt of every season.

CITY STORM

The wind was breaking branches from
St. Vitus' dancing trees and blowing
Whorls of dust and trash. Like some
Great ceiling held by columns glowing
Down their edges, clouds had made
The street a dome with brownstone sides.
The shoppers, feeling sudden shade,
Scurried to awnings, looked for taxi rides,
And felt the heavy air for wet.
Time held a moment: past congealed
To air and future time, pre-set,
Held back. The present stood revealed
As on slow-motion film. Then rain
That started time away again
And played at folk-dance on the street.

DELANCEY STREET AT NOON

The houses here are half in shadow now
And seem but half in time. The empty street
Holds family secrets quietly below
Brick faces, and the city's in retreat.

Great windows whisper tales of carriages,
Cigar and brandy haunted evenings,
Debuts, and long convenient marriages,
And dining tables laid with crystal things.

I'd like to stay. I'd like to watch the sun
Flash blackly from the rails. I'd like to hear
Old whisperings of peace. But I must run:
I've urgent business in another year.

DRIVING HOME, DECEMBER 31, 1972

What light is this, like rosé wine
Before a thousand candles' flames,
That marinates both house and pine?
It is the end of this year's games.

Old years die hard. The winter days,
Too short of sun, give them no time
For burial in proper ways;
And though our ceremonies mime

The death of years, and life's new birth,
We wish in secret for the year
That ends now to return to earth.
"Reprint the time!" our silent cheer;

"And let us now amend our book;
Correct the proof; make errors clear."
But no: this dying light that took
The day will also take the year.

**DUCKS ON THE WISSAHICKON IN WINTER: VALLEY
GREEN**

The gray sky lays its back upon
Uplifted trees, like hands of bone
 That seem to pray for spring.
Green pines remind of life now gone
 Beyond remembering.

The rain last night has thickened, browned
The stream, as silence thickens sound
 Of water, duck, and voice.
We speak; our words fall to the ground.
 We whisper, not by choice.

Look at these ducks—see how the force
Of water makes them bend their course
 To reach the other side;
While that one makes it his resource
 For one great long free ride.

I wonder if they see the sky
Or ponder trees that yearly die
 Or hear their voices fall;
Or measure all their swimmings by
 Stern destinies that call.

I doubt they act so knowingly
Or have such problems: unlike me
 They simply follow rules.
I wonder which of us might be
 The greater of two fools.

EVENING BLUES FOR SOLO GUITAR

When darkness walks like silent things of night,
And the city puts on hesitant finery,
And clouds on the horizon wear overcoats of pink,
I speak to you with strings of steel.

Now the day-dead rise from rooms that know no light.
Now footsteps echo in the great halls of streets
And blind fish cavort in neon-lit caves.
And I speak to you, ringing, twisting strings of steel.

Sometimes words fail.
Sometimes my fingers would be bloody stumps and
these strings would not speak.
Sometimes I could beat them, stubborn mutes.
But now they speak for you.

Listen: I shall tell you what no one knows,
Twisting the truth out of a flatted fifth.
Listen: I have rags for you,
Blues from the old home for you.

Listen and laugh as the old blues laugh;
Dance as the old rags dance.
Another day and cataracts of silence may engulf us.
But now listen: I speak to you with strings of steel.

GULLS

Gulls that pinion in the sky
On the hinges of the wind,
Is it by a Hand you fly,
Or by wisdom of your kind?

You were never made for earth—
Round, fat, stubby, stumbling birds;
But the wings you have by birth,
You must learn, as we learn words.

Wings that grope and halt at first
Need a Hand sustaining flight;
Learning, you will rise and burst
Free to soar in vaults of light.

Flight's a miracle that grows
Till the Hand can leave you there:
Free, with wings, and wit that knows
The secret pathways of the air.

EVENING ENCOUNTER

We pruned the garden half the day,
Straightened the pathways, turned the soil,
 And made the hedges trim.
As evening shadows came to stay,
We put our supper on to broil
 And ate in the growing dim.

Then from a bush, a cardinal
Came hopping down the fence and stopped
 As if to watch us eat—
Just like a velvet Christmas ball
A thoughtful nature made and dropped
 To make our yard complete.

He jerked his head from side to side
As though inspecting what we'd done
 To see we'd got it right;
We watched him back; but though we tried
To keep quite still, he'd flapped and gone
 Before we'd finished quite.

I'd guess he knew the statues there
Were humans and would often make
 Great sadness with a touch;
And though he liked the garden air,
He'd learnt it would be his mistake
 To trust us overmuch.

FOUNDLING CAT

That Saturday, the first in fall,
Had just enough of shade and sun.
We honored August's funeral
With a picnic by the Cresheim's run.

The woods were quiet passing through,
But for the stream, the trees, and birds.
Then strange! I heard a kitten mew,
Calling to someone, but lacking the words.

I turned and fought the underbrush
To find where that small voice might be
That cried such fright above the hush;
But it stopped as I went down to see.

We took our picnic down the stream.
Returning, I'd forgot that cry,
Or thought it but a morning dream:
You hadn't heard it; only I.

We scrambled through a leafy fall
Of branches brought by thunderstorm;
Then out she jumped, a frantic ball
Of gurgling, purring, rubbing warm.

She was a tiny, mottled cat,
A tortoiseshell in brown and black,
All ribs and bones where should be fat,
Begging us not to throw her back.

Her fur had traces left of gloss,
That made us think she'd had a home,
But gone before they'd seen their loss,
Or she, how far away she'd come.

A smallish house cat in the wood
Might last a week at most, or two;
She'd starve, or sickness fill her blood.
Perhaps she cried because she knew.

Perhaps she never thought of dying,
But only knew the place was strange,
Not home, and that it set her crying
At something awful in the change.

We picked her up and stroked her, took
Her back with us and brushed her fur,
Gave ears and paws a closer look
And fed her and smiled when she would purr.

We keep a place for waifs and strays.
It's nothing grand or glorious;
It's just—we've had our homeless days,
And lost ones found are much like us.

MEDITATION FROM THE STEPS OF THE PHILADELPHIA
ART MUSEUM

Here on this rock, the breeze is cool.
The city spreads below
Like foxfire hanging in a misty pool.
Great spotlights throw
Long shadows on the temple walls
Behind us. (Let us say
It is a temple—for today—
Although we hear quite different calls
From those that called the Greeks.)
Here, where the air glows clean and fresh,
We may forget, for now, the city speaks
In curses as in whispers, and that flesh
Moults from the bones of cities and the strongest falls.

So Socrates may once have stood
Upon the temple hill
That overlooked his world, and found it good
To look upon the houses spread
Before him and to think that still
The city would outstay him, though he died.
He loved a world too quickly dead.
The stones below him lied
In saying all was Greek and Greek would stay.
Two thousand years have melted quite away

All but names and memories
And copied temples where I feel an older breeze.

If, when the lights below grow dim,
They say of me, as I of him,
He loved a world that shortly died,
Let them not mock.

If, when our history's great clock
Runs out, and ages melt the rock
Where now I stand, I shall have tried
To save its light,

Let them not laugh because I fell.

That is the common case.

If any live then, let them tell
That I preserved this brilliant city night:
For saving one small part of dying light
Is no disgrace.

KING LEAR'S GHOST AT DOVER

They say that shades of madness lie
Upon these phantom sheets of stone;
These dead white cliffs that watched him die
Know all of truth, but speak of none.

What final hemlock draught of truth
Brought peace to maddened Lear?
So young for age; so old for youth;
Who must become as deaf to hear.

These cliffs where now his spirit clings
Stand mute and will not testify;
Nor dare men make Lear's reasonings,
Lest reason break down reason's lie.

Where all are paranoid men,
Then where does madness thrive?
Sane men to Tom O'Bedlam's den
Will take themselves, and so survive.

LISA HAPPY

She lies upon the rug and percolates.
With paws rolled neatly underneath, she waits
And smiles. What secret meditations lie
Behind her half-closed eyes? Mere human, I
Have asked, but she ignored me. She will love
Her humans (if, of course, they truly prove
That they reserve their warmest place for her);
Inspect the house; reward them with a purr;
And roll up in a ball beside their feet.
But if they cross-examine, she'll retreat
And close her eyes and think of cattish things.
Then suddenly up like a lamb she springs
On some important business down the hall.
(It's classified: no humans know at all.)

LULLABY FOR A CAT

Sleep, little one, and let the night
Go thrashing on, a world away.
Headlights that spike your kind with fright,
Black tires that hunt for smaller prey
 May not come here.

Be still. The shadow-things that creep;
Long fangs that cut; dark human forms
That kidnap, and the deadly sleep
That needles bring; black thunderstorms
 May not come here.

There will be places you may go
Where you will need a sleep that faces
All your darkness down. I know,
For I have walked in shadowed places
 Far, far from here.

Then sleep, though nights of growling dark
Lie but a window-thickness near.
Fangs of the night may leave no mark
On us, and we may smile at fear
 While we are here.

AN OLD MAN'S TRAVELOGUE

Here there were gardens once. Don't laugh:
I saw them grow.
Who would have thought that garden soil
Could harden so?

Here there were hillside once, where grass
Grew green and fat.
Who would have thought those ancient hills
Could fall so flat?

Here there were woods and streams. I grew
A maple there.
Who would have thought that forest paths
Could grow so bare?

That was a decade back. We've grown
To quite a town.
Who would have thought what Time would scythe
So quickly down.

LUNCHTIME DREAMS

The young boys walk in wide-tied carbon sets.
Perfectly mustached, double-breasted wide
Lapels, in twos and threes, they go to lunch
On beef and ale and dreams of office girls
Perfect in pantyhose and platform shoes.

The young girls walk by twos, with sculpted hair,
Lipstick that glows, and flush-red-painted skin.
They laugh and every moment stop to glance
At young boys watching, dreaming dreams of girls
Perfect in pantyhose and platform shoes.

One-thirty on a sunny day they come,
The young boys dreaming as the young girls glance,
The young girls laughing, dreaming dreams of boys
Perfectly mustached, double-breasted wide
Lapels, wide ties, who dream of office girls
Perfect in pantyhose and platform shoes.

Dream on; you need not watch me standing here.
Be boys: for soon enough you will be men.
Be girls: you will be women in awhile.
Be straight and young and perfect in your suits
And pantyhose and platform shoes. Dream long,
Strong lunchtime dreams. Your Two O'Clock will
come.

MANNIKINS IN NAN DUSKIN'S WINDOW

Golden lady in the window,
 With your eyes of sunken pearl,
Ever waking, ever sleeping,
 Ever woman, ever girl,
You are calm amid the dusty
 City winds that creep and curl;
Silent sister, calmly spinning
 Threads of time without a burl.

Lovely lady at the window,
 Infant once and growing old,
You are lithe, but you are forty:
 Do you wish your limbs were gold?
For the wind that swirls around you
 Is a strange wind and a cold:
Do you fear that it is taking
 Ends of threads you cannot hold?

Silent lady at the window,
Do you wish for once to know
Ages free of joyous comings
And the hell of joys that go?
In the land of golden ladies,
Dusty winds will never blow,
But the wine is colored water,
And the flowers never grow.

**MEETING AN OLD FRIEND
ON THE WISSAHICKON**

The winter having doffed its chill
And cast away its fogs, we walked
Down secret pathways (for so still
They seemed), through trees and mud that balked
Our passage like a spider's glue.
We walked past bridges broken by
The flood last spring, past rocks that grew
To half a house but did not try
To reach full height (or so we said
For theory, lacking history
Or art to explain). Past new-laid
Horse-tracks, up hills where tree by tree
We pulled ourselves, then scrambling down
We jumped from rock to rock to try
The stream for path; but, overgrown,
It blocked us. Leaving it,
We went where wiser walkers stayed.
Some vague and yet familiar fit
Of recognition came and played
A memory game. I let it sink
Beneath my mind. Then passing round
A well-known bend, we reached the brink
Of Devil's pool.

The silent sound

Of water deep enough to dive
From that log bridge that swung above
The water, fifteen feet, seemed live
With no surprise that slept, to move
Upon our coming; yet some voice
Now called behind me that I should
Recall. I, baffled, had no choice,
Returned his greeting, though I would
As well have watched the water flow
In silence. Yet I'd known him once,
Though you had not, and known his slow
Profundities; and for the nonce,
Once recognized, we'd need no word
For comradeship once held. Nor did
We speak of present, how absurd
This meeting on this bridge so hid
From city noise. No questions asked:
The understanding was complete.
Mundane small talk might well have masked
The moment's strength and might defeat
The purpose that had brought us here.
The moment broke, and making last
Goodbyes, we traced our steps to near
And homely things. Quite what had passed
We could not say, but walked the way
We came, not speaking; and so home,
To eat, and in the waning day,
Reflect on miracles that come.

ODE ON 30TH STREET STATION

The station bears a silence old
And big with sound
 That shimmers round
And ricochets from chandeliers of gold
But melts to tremblings as it comes to birth.
 The hourly stutterings of earth
 From trains that pass
 Grow thin and die
Like slogans written on the sky.
Above, a clock with dusty glass
 Keeps changeless time where eyes
 Lose track of thread suspending
 Great burnished lamps, whose ending
Is lost in dark and starless vaulted skies.

 Small travelers below
Huddle on benches, pace the marble floor,
 Or seek to stem the vertigo
 Of palaces in shops that line
 The edges of the station. More
From awe than hunger they will go
To eat, but, finishing, decline
 Returning where
Their voices lose all throat in air
Reverberant with silences.

The newsstand keepers bless
 Their tiny roofs within the center
 Of this strange temple place
 Where gods of empty space
Draw penance from the travelers who enter.

 Not space alone, but echoings
 Of memory
 Live in these vaulted darkenings.
These miniature travelers might be
The same who passed a hundred years ago
 And waited for the trains below.
 The echoes of their discontents
Reach down from this dark ceiling and harass
 Unwary visitors who pass:
 For men make monuments
 To set in stone their transciencies,
 Then, awe-struck, seek for leas
Far from the noise of time and memories.

THOUGHTS ON LISTENING TO JOHN COLTRANE'S

Ascension

The words await voice,
And being spoken
Die
Like ashes dropped from cigarettes.

Ten men are screaming—
Whose inferno is this?
At this moment a Vietnamese dies—
Whose definition of hell includes this?

Who will hear the words that these men speak?

* * *

*Having bargained our lives,
Will we end with fingers
That do not close?
Seeking only to be men
We learn too soon
No man is only this.
To be what we are
Is to be more than we can.*

* * *

On this night
There are ten men
Learning to speak together.
Waiting at the door
Until they finish,
I am speechless—
What can I say to them?

Ten men beside me
Flicker with the candles
On my table:
Flicker and pass away
After the burning.

Out of so much pain
Can come peace.

ORCHESTRATIONS WALKING
ON DELANCEY STREET

As the spring segues to summer, I have heard
Above the gentle sanding of my feet,
The wash of leaves upon Delancey Street.
From far beyond the houses, thin and blurred,
Comes an undertone of drumming—long, absurd
Protestings from a thousand motors gnashing;
Gruff buses, and police with sirens flashing—
And over all a single, singing bird.

If I could hold a day for fifty years,
It would be such as this; if I could be
One person at one moment, I would stay
Between the spring and summer, ever free
Of any thought of any other day
When music dies, and nothing sings or hears.

PARADOXES OF TIME

These present moments, future time, and past
Are warp and woof in one eternal cloth.
Eternal instants flow from then to now;
Past's present now, and future holds them both.

PECKING ORDER

Three squirrels jumped upon our kitchen roof.
They sent a roiling pigeon-cloud before them,
Then calmly sat and ate their lunch as proof
Of rank to silly birds who might ignore them.

The sparrows and the pigeons watched them eat
From perches distanced as befit their station.
Each squirrel at choice nuts in choicest seat,
Unzipping neatly his accustomed ration.

The squirrels done, the pigeons next came down
To scrounge as best they could in what was left.
The sparrows got to pick from what had blown
Away, but they were elsewhere quite bereft.

Not quite what we intended: we had set
The birdseed on the roof to feed the sparrows.
But squirrels get their choice, and pigeons get
Next call; and choice for sparrows rather narrows.

SONNET FROM EXILE

No tears. That would be foolish. I am free
Of all my country's legacies of gore;
Of stinking cities and the silent war
In subway cars at three a.m. For me
No plastic chicken stands or fantasy
Of sanitary underarms. No more:
I left them long ago, and, leaving, bore
No tears. That would be foolish. I am free.

But it is Christmas, and where once I'd go
The old roads home, I cannot now. Above,
A sky that is not mine drips alien rain
On streets whose roots were never mine to know.
These happiest times, how foolishly I love
A piece of earth I shall not see again.

TIGGER AT THE WINDOW

The gentle days of early June,
When windows bring in garden smells,
Seem to my cat a special boon
Reserved for cats on windowsills.

He sits beside the open screen
And lifts his nose to smell the air;
His whiskers twitching, slit eyes keen,
He thinks each bird and fly quite rare.

I think he knows I'd like to see
What, being human, I cannot;
He often looks around at me
To share some miracle he's got.

He knows as well that life's no garden
(For cats have clocks), and well he knows
June ends, and summer heat will harden;
Then winter comes, and windows close.

But now he'll watch the yard, and I
Watch him and try to see as well
The marvels that, though June will die,
Live now upon my windowsill.

WINTER SONG

I would gladly rise and go:
The street is white; the icy bushes fling
Forth crystal rainbows. I could walk below
And praise each tiny thing.

Moments will shatter all too fast,
And millions murdered never will revive;
And shall I come to tell myself at last
I never was alive?

I shall rise and go to see
The snowfall, and to hear the ice's crack
A moment; but I shall not soon be free
Of griefs to call me back.

WINTER SONNET (ODD)

Let us walk these splendid fields
Where tawny winter licks its paws
And sleeps; and let us pick such straws
And leaves as we may find for shields
To keep the time at bay.
Dried leaves make pale remembrance
Of spring, but better sidelong glance
Than none.

Can winter stay
When every other season dies?
The headlong round of time goes on,
Regardless of our preference
For good or the insanities
We choose: both pass and soon are gone,
And life is not in past but future tense.

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD RECRUITER

He wears the olive livery of Death.
Her honors on his chest are polished brass.
Three stripes upon his sleeve make out his rank,
Death's careful notches: one for when she killed
The simple-minded scruple that she found
That balked at hunting men. The second shows
The record of her ambush on his brain.
The third makes out the history of when
She made a frontal charge against the ends
Of perfect-pitched and pianistic nerves
Vibrating sympathetically with pain.
Oh, he has memories—Hamburger Hill
And several more-obscure My Lais he'd seen—
But what the hell? The Glories of the Chase,
World travel, the Defense of Liberty,
And bargain tape recorders in Hong Kong—
What drawbacks could compete with all these goods.

He works, a simple harvester of men;
Checks in at nine o'clock and out at five;
Makes proper churchly worship; joins the clubs
He has to join for standing in this town;
And wears the olive livery of Death,
Displays her honors on his polished chest,
And hopes by industry to earn a fourth
Of Death's most honored notches on his sleeve.

WRITTEN ON THE ROCKS
AT VINAL HAVEN, ME.

Old ocean waits.
We do not know her yet.
Touching an arm, a tail, a leg, we fret
In furious, mobius-like debates
As ocean waits.

Old ocean speaks
As to herself alone,
Slapping and rubbing a voice from the stone;
For who can translate what she seeks
When ocean speaks?

Old ocean waits,
Who births and bosoms ages.
She outlives deaths. What need for her of rages
At poisons her creature creates?
Old ocean waits.

Old ocean speaks
Long tales we do not hear,
With endings beyond that unimagined year
Our wavelet reaches rock and breaks.
Old ocean speaks.

Old ocean waits.
We do not know her yet.
Touching an arm, a tail, a leg, we fret
In furious, mobius-like debates
As ocean waits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert A. Seeley is owner of Desktop Resources, a publications and Macintosh consulting firm in Philadelphia. From 1968 to 1994 he worked with the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCO) as draft counselor, publications editor, and executive director. He is author of *The Handbook of Non-Violence* (Lawrence Hill, 1986); *Choosing Peace: A Handbook on War, Peace, and Your Conscience* (CCCO, 1994); and the 13th Edition of the *Handbook for Conscientious Objectors* (CCCO, 1981).