

## Section 1

### *Winds and Waters*

If the assumptions of the poems of this first section were to make an argument, they would contend that we are in being. And we, at least we who walk and canoe outdoors, experience our place and self in action through and by nature.

For me nature has many tongues. Its surfaces—in life, motion, and movement, light, touch, shape, and all their categories—sing out in chorus. They calm and soothe. They excite attraction and love, and place reproduction at the center of life. But they also chorus, beyond our range, long orders, transformations, stunning metamorphoses, and bursts of violence, and they are filled with instant and prolonged death.

Nature's surfaces parade forth in things found and objects made, wild and domesticated animals, and fellow humans, familiar and defiantly strange. Nature can be celebrated but not enumerated or explained as harvests and feasts of manifestations and epiphanies. These surfaces testify to form; they display shape, color, grain, and development. They put us before juxtapositions and configurations and place us in common contexts and before striking coincidences.

At the same time, water and air, feather and fin, express form, harmony, evolved and creative unity, they conceal war and conflicts as observed by early cosmologists. According to editor Reginald Allen's introduction to *Greek Philosophy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1991), the oldest of recorded Greek cosmologists, Thales, contended that earth rests on unbounded water and it rocks as primordial waters wave. Affirming an unquenchable rivalry of such opposites as hot and cold, wet and dry, another Greek cosmologist, Anaximander, defines a pervasive and everlasting war. Mirroring Aeschylus's tragedies, the everlasting war of opposites accounts for the back and forth victories in the cycles of night and day, the rotation of the seasons, and even the human movement of Hubris and Nemesis. Like water sloshing from side to side in a boat, an out of balance mind and life capsizes by fate's necessary retribution.

Quantities and equations, the slosh of things, can be calculated. But signs and symbols, words and meaning cannot. Names name and words, when crafted, touch, join, and rise up from that totality which mind cannot totalize.

## Section 2

### *Fields and Courses*

In play and action we give ourselves a second nature and place in being. In rivalry, which curves outward toward the other and inward toward the self, we define life, existence, and being. We compass distances and meet the borders of body and mind, the unknown and mortality.

Golf and golf courses supplied me with a first education, a boy's education in aim, flight, and grace. And thwarted desire taught what will and discipline could not achieve. On a bike in midlife, while still in the loosening tutelage of golf and history, I learned, mainly as a solitary rider, about wheels and roads, circles and shadows, movements and forms, and the grind of haulage and transport.

Disabled running a high school track or sledding a slope in a nearby river valley park, or dancing on imagined floors, taught me how I perceive and judge the world by movement and forces. So in closing poems of this section I write of Venetian youth, cheered on by the old, heading to sea on a raft of mermaids; of witnessing death in boxing arenas; and of a motel parade of mounted pike displaying sharp teeth, much like darts in a British pub or eight ball in a Midwestern beer garden, as another form of competition, sociability, and drinking, trying to establish both a social niche and a definable target in being.

## Section 3

### *Prepositions and Propositions*

The poem here hinge on surfaces and juxtapositions. With a continued preoccupation with mortality, their subjects move from buffalo falling off a cliff to African street vendors in Paris selling plastic planes, from young boys swimming through a curtain of frog eggs on the Clinton River in southern Michigan to young men escaping to sea on old men's dreams. They form reflections on gulping carp in the central pond of Oxford's Trinity College punctuating a course on China, a periodic chart hung in a local college hall, and blanket-to-blanket preachments of the end of the world at the conclusion of a fireworks display on the Fourth. There are also the clashing sounds of arena ice-hockey, which absorb the attention of my Greek mythology professor, and simply "Soft Days," in which juxtaposition and discrepancies do not prevail.

In *Surfaces: A History*, I defined my interest in juxtaposition. I set out the notion that humans are a complex set of surfaces in a world of infinite surfaces.

To offer a resume, which I hope will be more insightful than digressive, we locate ourselves in being by skin, face, and coverings and exteriors of all sorts. Surfaces place us in life. Reciprocally with them we live out our days—practice crafts, initiate our science, and form the words, the symbols, the metaphors, and the very language by which we know, represent, and express ourselves.

The wrappings of earth and water, materials and objects, animals and humans, surfaces are the faces, shapes, forms, touch, and colors of things and the sources of names. They are Pentecostal: in the formal language of the court, they were those most evident things that spoke irrefutably for themselves—*res ipsa loquitur*. The world reaches, penetrates, comprehends, and encloses us. It comes— face, hands, and gestures — with repetition, predictability, familiarity, and yet also with flood, earthquake, famine, and revolution. To focus for a moment on but a single thing, I see that great whirl of white thorns, so common to the countryside of Sicily, so evocative of the crown of the crucified Christ.

So we belong to a heterogeneous world—one of ones, wholes, composites, and fragments. We meet it in singularity and in contexts, in striking juxtapositions and surprising configurations. Time dials changes of arrangements and orders. Mutations, alterations, and greater changes

portend metamorphoses, while surprise, accident, coincidence, and miracle render possibilities beyond law and logic. So the poet names and flies metaphors to sharpen our “prepositions and propositions.”

## Section 4

### *Around the Brim*

This section is principally about war and dramatic public occurrences. Since Homeric times, war and stories about it have rallied armies, navies, and whole peoples. They summon, define, and discard generations. They define locations and geographies. They create the most striking, brutal, and memorable juxtapositions of humans, animals, and machines—all things. Each distinct configuration is revelatory, defining conditions, actions, potentials, and results of what went before and comes after. War reveals conflicting elements in man and society, and death and mortality shine through it. War makes the poet a dramatic cosmologist, who plumbs the ontology of men and societies in conflict.

The war poems here resonate with “A Buddy Afloat,” which concludes Section 7 and the volume. The poems, which came during my frequent trips to Europe, join themes of water, family, war, and memory. They go from Homeric storytelling to pledging allegiance to English liberty at Portsmouth. They include two poems on the First World War—one on the all-consuming front and the Battle of the Somme, followed by a poem in the form of a narrative offered by a dead soldier’s helmet plucked from the sands of Normandy. To the meditations on war I add poems about the exploding spaceship Columbia, the pretenses of a politician, and the imagined antics of a teacher.

## Section 5

### *Family*

In largest measure, these poems about family profess gratitude and place memory in the service of wish and prayer. Their starting point is lives that I hold unique by experience and heart, and God's promise.

These poems are not exhaustive in number or insight. They simply arose out of a catching event—whose juxtapositions or configurations put a hook in memory or else came forth in the course of writing on family or some other subject.

I start here with short poems—vignettes— about my wife and children. Then I advance to the longest and most intense poems, which are about my parents and grandparents and even one great grandfather. (The poem "A Buddy Afloat," found in Section 7, is about my Uncle Bill.)

In a complementary mode, I dedicate a poem to a brother who out of the blue vanished down a sinkhole in Florida; another to a step grandfather, who betrayed my grandmother, father, and family; and a third to failed and broken Detroit, where much of my family lived and prospered for three generations from the end of the First World War. This poem focuses on Mount Olivet, on the east side, which contains 350,000 or so Catholic ethnics and forms a stable island of life encircled by a sinking city. In "A Grandfather's Testament," and other poems I try to build an arc that will sail my children and grandchildren toward that greater shore.

Poems convey thanks to a family that nurtured me with food, words, emotions, gestures, manners, stories, deeds, and even comic antics (especially those of my maternal grandfather). As they created their own live and gave from them, I became and am. I can't separate my memory or self from them. They formed the ship—and the first waters—on which I floated in this world of things, others, and expressions. Integrating them in all their differences (starting with my prudent father, the model of any Greek or Roman, and my vivacious mother, and on to my four grandparents—three so close in flesh and one only known in imagination) provided me with the store of discipline and energy. Only son and child of an only son, I cannot imagine forgetting them. I feel as dutiful as a keeper of the graves and supplier of the memories of the hearth. My fidelity leaves me ever baffled as to whether I enter heaven with or without a reunion of the family whose memory nurtures and whom I nurture.

## Section 6

### *Neighbors and Colleagues*

In this section, I express gratitude and reverence for neighbors and colleagues. Many of these elegies and eulogies belong to the 1970s and 1980s, when we first arrived and took root in southwest Minnesota and the small, new, regional college, Southwest Minnesota State. The first subjects are neighbors in the small village of Cottonwood and colleagues with whom I helped create the curriculum, union, and college in nearby Marshall. Together neighbors and colleagues, as well as students, shaped it into this place we came to call home.

There is not room to provide a history to each of these poems. Let us say that, like mushrooms, they just sprang up—or that they echoed a repeating phrase and tried to give form to a juxtaposition that I couldn't stop chewing on. Surely some were momentum from the impulse to pay tribute. In any case, inclusion or exclusion does not express a hierarchy of affection and respect. I must admit, however, that several of the poems explored and defined my pity for those whose lives ended in suicide. Each life here—counterpoised and juxtaposed—drew for and around me a circle of possibilities and limits.

Those lives, these poems, taught me about friendship, integrity, and devotion. Some made me painfully aware of the intruding presence of sharp-edged doubt, of consuming depression, and of the allure of suicide. They were in flesh, spirit, and action a life's "prepositions and propositions." None undid my belief that stand my ground, hold my buoyancy, and yet fly by grace of love and the wings of light and hope.

## Section 7

### *The Treading Kick of Hope*

In the spirit of the introductory poem "Ballast Master," I directly take up the themes of gravity and buoyancy, memory and hope. Remember

that this is Section 7 and that the number seven is the Biblical equivalent of the Greek ten, a number of a new order of multiplying magnitude. (Incidentally, seventy translates the Latin word *septuaginta*, LXX, the Latin title for the Hebrew Bible. Making reference to the legendary seventy Jewish scholars who translated the seventy holy books into Greek the near the end of the second century B. C., the Septuagint was the church's first Bible.)

In addition, I am a septuagenarian—and therefore deserving of forgiveness seven times seven! Indeed, I wrote this preface as I celebrated my seventy-fifth birthday and expect to bump my head up against the clouds. Like the Ballast Master, I am preoccupied with what I must and can discard and what I can carry forward and beyond. As my wife, a retired public health nurse, seeks to lighten her load in her seventh decade, she prepares (at least warms up) to exit the house where she did forty years of homemaking. She has reached the age at which western Minnesotans' constant chore of summer and fall watering of plants, shrubs, and especially young trees acquired in the spring becomes burdensome.

Even beyond asking what I leave behind, I focus on what might preserve it in memory. The loss of St. Peter's grave and the very stones that preserved Confucius' teaching suggest the futility of preserving. All ballast—stone or slave—must be discarded at the next port for refreshed loading. All I am, all I love, must perish in the forthcoming battle of the elements that is grace's metamorphosis.

Yet hope: hope and light are the lifting winds that belong to the paradoxical—born, crucified, and resurrected—Christ. He is a singular preposition and unique proposition. He is the great reaching and carrying metaphor. He puzzles and consoles—and is grace, light and hope.