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Family Reunion
Reflections Carved
in Sand and Stone

by Robert G. Toomey

Selected and edited by Jane G. Cooper,
Robert Toomey Jr., and Daniel Toomey

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Dedicated to the Memory of Robert G. Toomey

A friend who retired after nearly forty years on the Memorial Library staff told me that the library had become a more helpful and friendly place to work during my tenure as director. “But, Ken,” he said, “we really had more memorable ‘characters’ in the old days.”

I knew he was right. The research library of bygone days featured more possibilities for eccentric splendor for those who could fill a specialized niche in cataloging, language expertise, or subject knowledge. A really big library like Memorial provided the kind of shelter and isolation that nurtured truly strange and wonderful characters.

Bob Toomey was a character in the best sense. Like a good actor he had several personas, and all of them felt authentic. He had great timing and delivered his lines like a pro. He could tell a joke, but he was funniest when he was just free-associating ideas as they came to mind. Whenever I gave a presentation at a library staff meeting, Bob was nearly always the first person to ask a question—and it somehow had surreal relevance to the occasion. I still miss him.

We remember his genuine friendliness. Like the grandfather in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Manners,” Bob spoke to everyone he met. He cultivated a style of kindness that wasn’t always grinning at you—he reserved his smile for the right moment in the scene. On the day he collapsed in the library he was bringing in bakery goods to share at a party. When he died he was perfectly in character.

Ken Frazier, Director
General Library System

MANNERS

—Elizabeth Bishop

My grandfather said to me
as we sat on the wagon seat,
“Be sure to remember to always
speak to everyone you meet.”

We met a stranger on foot.
My grandfather’s whip tapped his hat.
“Good day, sir. Good day. A fine day.”
And I said it and bowed where I sat.
Then we overtook a boy we knew
with his big pet crow on his shoulder.
“Always offer everyone a ride;
don’t forget that when you get older,”

my grandfather said. So Willy
climbed up with us, but the crow
gave a “Caw!” and flew off. I was worried.
How would he know where to go?

But he flew a little way at a time
from fence post to fence post, ahead;
and when Willy whistled he answered.
“A fine bird,” my grandfather said,

“and he’s well brought up. See, he answers
nicely when he’s spoken to.
Man or beast, that’s good manners.
Be sure that you both always do.”

When automobiles went by,
the dust hid the people’s faces,
but we shouted “Good day! Good day!
Fine day!” at the top of our voices.

When we came to Hustler Hill,
he said that the mare was tired,
so we all got down and walked,
as our good manners required.

Preface

The poems included in this selection were chosen to represent what we regard as the best work of Robert Toomey (1928–2005) and his range of thought and feeling over a fifty-year period of writing poetry.

We assembled about 150 poems, and from that number each of us separately selected 40 to 50 poems we liked and thought most representative of his work. Then we compared our selections; those that at least two of us agreed on would go into the book. There were others that we included—or excluded—after further discussion. There is a gap in the 1970s and 1980s; no poems appear from that time because we have not found many poems from that period.

We arranged the poems thematically and then chronologically, starting with poems about youth and family; progressing to music, work, philosophical and/or humorous observations on the human condition; and ending with contemplations on the end of life and the meaning of family and relationships. We attempted to date each poem, but many dates can only be a best guess; those dates are noted in brackets.

During the editing process, we tried to remain true to Bob's words as he wrote them, although some minor punctuation, spelling, and line-spacing changes occurred in the editing process. All revised poems are the author's revisions. A few poems have footnotes to explain the meaning of a particular word, a name, or the occasion of a poem.

Jane G. Cooper
Robert Toomey Jr.
Daniel Toomey

September 2006
Madison, Wisconsin

Acknowledgments

Jane G. Cooper:

I would like to thank the following people for their help and support: Aaron Smeaton, my son, for reading and commenting on all the poems and for caring about Bob; David Henige, bibliographer at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Memorial Library, for his advice, comments, and astute suggestions concerning the manuscript; Will and Mae Gamble of New York City, who knew Bob in the “old days,” and especially Will for his insightful editorial comments and suggestions; and Amy Hendrickson of Brookline, Mass., for her advice and encouragement. Thanks also to my brother, Neil Cooper of Chicago, and my friends and many co-workers who encouraged us on this project.

I want especially to acknowledge the man who wrote these wonderful poems and filled my life with love, joy, and humor for eighteen years. Reading his poems for this collection gave voice again to his kindness, thoughtfulness, quick wit, and intelligence. His major focus in life and work was an interest and belief in what he called “the human element.”

Robert Toomey Jr.:

I wish to acknowledge the author, my father. Posthumously, he continues to teach me through his written poems, handwritten revisions, and experimentation with word choices in drafts—most of which I’ve just recently read for the first time. I wish I could acknowledge him in person. He was a great father and teacher, and a true gentleman.

Daniel Toomey:

I would like to acknowledge my father for teaching us the true meaning of lifelong learning, and the joy and wonder we can find in literature and music. I will always remember his quest for truth and his loving manner.

Introduction

At a poetry reading in Avol's, a Madison bookstore, on May 5, 2005, Robert G. Toomey read his poem "So Help Me Sylvia Plath, Billy Collins and Joyce Carol Oates!" The poem—which he was editing up until the moment he stood up to read it—was well received by the audience but it also stirred much discussion. In it he lamented, humorously, the lot of the poet encountering the lures and snares of the poetry contest.

Toomey was reacting to an *Isthmus* article which alleged that some poetry contests were scams. In truth he was disturbed by this accusation, but he also could not help but see the humor in it as he described the poor poet scrambling to come up with a verse or two to enter a contest ("They'd give up everything—even their jobs / Their all, even money, for a verse") only to be betrayed by the very people who claim to support poets while all along the "fix is in." Toomey felt elated at stirring the pot. He didn't solve the contest controversy but it was a satisfying reading for him. Unfortunately, it was the last reading he would ever participate in; he died later that month.

Toomey's sense of humor and of the absurd was a major part of his character and is reflected in several of his poems. Other poems reveal other aspects of his character as well—among them his deep interest in moral questions, how one conducts one's life as a moral person, concern for human relationships, a curiosity about what makes people do what they do, a revulsion against war, and a desire for peace.

The highest forms of human expression for Toomey were music and poetry. He loved words, wordplay, and expressing ideas in different forms. His poems often express his deepest questions about life's purpose and his observations of people and everyday life. He was always a questioner and on the side of "the human element" as he termed it. He had a philosophical bent and considered himself an Aristotelian. One of the great contemporary influences in his life was the writing of Thomas Merton, the Catholic mystic and thinker. Later in life he found solace in the work of Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and spiritual guide.

Toomey wrote his dissertation on Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. During the period when Toomey was educated, the "modernists" like T.S. Eliot were emphasized in English departments. Many of the poets he read came out of the post-World War II era, poets like Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Donald Hall. Among some of the current poets he liked were Billy Collins and Timothy Steele.

Influences on Toomey's life included his Irish-Catholic upbringing in northern Ohio, family legends, a Jesuit education at the high school and college levels, the tragic early deaths of several family members (particularly his father, wife, and son), a lifelong love of jazz music (he also played piano himself), studies in medieval literature and philosophy, and a half-century of involvement in higher education—including a close association with the University of Wisconsin–Madison during much of his life.

While Toomey's poems flow freely and address a wide variety of topics, at their core there is strong form, reflecting the poet's respect for the word and for poetry as craft. Much like his beloved jazz, there is creative improvisation, but when you dig deeper there is a discipline of form and meter—pulse, rhythm—a framework, upon which the expression is built. The author was constantly counting meter in his poems as he wrote and revised and revised again. Neither good poetry nor good jazz is a casual accident.

Three poems celebrate jazz, the musical form beloved by Toomey. He considered music and poetry to be almost the same thing, and he wrote in a jazz rhythm in some poems. "To Jan" evokes what it is like to listen to a jazz performance. The listener can shut out the outside world:

Unbothered by the din from the room
Where drinks were served at the bar to men
Too young to die or live alone
Without a song sung with passion

By a singer whose voice soared
Above the noise and clamor that roared
Outside the lobby and the desk
Where guests were ushered in and out

The first poem in this selection of thirty, "Ode to St. Patrick," sets the tone for many of his themes to come. This was written in the 1960s and revised in 2005. It sets a tone of regret about what's past and done or not done.

My song was of waste,
A past of nothing to show
For all that effort I spent
On things done in haste.
Not knowing what others know.

Despite regrets, Toomey had a passion for life, for living in the moment, as he writes in “The Facts of Life,” another early poem.

The world a moment is, and we as prophets
Prophesy: Perhaps the time is now

“A Meditation after Marcus Aurelius” offers a philosophical meditation on death, life and the solace in the everyday, in the person you love and who loves you.

Things stay put and where
You left them the night before, forgetting;
But beauty too remains, just
As it should and as it’s always been.

In “Answering Mr. Crane,” Toomey reflected on war and the fall into barbarism by those who govern and purport to be civilized, but use fear to do horrendous acts. He says it all with this—

My reply is this: war’s insane.

We close our doors and hide from war.
We think we can ignore it. But why? What for?
We’re waiting for the promised tomorrow
Meanwhile profiting from others’ sorrow.

The last three poems in this collection bring the reader back to the personal: the inevitability of death, remembrances of those who died, and the comfort of family.

Toomey used to quote Paul Valéry, the French poet and critic, who said, “A poem is never finished, only abandoned.” Toomey’s poem, “Final Rites,” was dedicated to his brother, William, who predeceased the author by only six weeks. Ironically, it reflects the influence of Valéry’s own “Le Cimetière Marin” (“The Graveyard by the Sea”), which Toomey said he considered one of the three greatest poems of the twentieth century. (The others were Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” and Yvor Winters’ “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.”)

In “Final Rites,” Toomey recalls his youth in the context of mortality:

. . . near noon when bells
Used to ring the angelus but now are silent.
Even St. Augustine is gone from where he sleeps.

The final poem, "Family Reunion," is based on a gathering of a family long separated. The poet wrote this after his return to his birthplace in Ohio for a large family reunion almost a year to the day before his death.

Now that the family has come together in a lasting bond, the author concludes nostalgically with a note of satisfaction and hope for the future:

We drank the breeze and tasted the water,
Marking its slow decline: our own
Reflections carved in sand and stone.

Toomey's poems speak for him, almost as if this were a poetic autobiography. He started life as we all do with great hope for his future and like most of us he suffered setbacks and losses but also enjoyed happiness and triumphs, too. What sustained him was a strong moral compass, a sense of humor, generosity toward strangers as well as those who loved him, a passion for poetry and music, and an enduring interest in people.

Jane G. Cooper
Robert Toomey Jr.
Daniel Toomey

ODE TO ST. PATRICK

We sang lustily,
Deep into night;
Of marriage and forgiveness,
He sang of ultimates,
Of time and eternity.

My song was of waste,
A past of nothing to show
For all that effort I spent
On things done in haste.
Not knowing what others know.

I counted up my gains
In fits of purity
And drunkenness. I prayed
All day to my Saint;
Renounced the world, then stayed.

I praised his courage, drunk
On wine and water offered
Up where cries are heard
And Everyman a monk
His own sickness cured.

We sat on a stone, made strong
By drink and poverty,
Vowing just to be
And nothing more. The song
Grew softer after that.

Everywhere we looked
There were stars in an empty sky,
And a lake where no lake was.

[1960s, original]
2005, revision

THE FACTS OF LIFE

I shall go off to California or China,
Perhaps dream of girls I never loved;
And of Mom, and other figures.

This disarray of time is madness too.
The world a moment is, and we as prophets
Prophesy: Perhaps the time is now.

[1950s]

A SECULAR EPITAPH

He romped through life
Happy all the time.
Never worried.
He liked fast cars,
Read poetry in the classroom,
Even smiled at strangers.
Had little trouble making friends
Was always on time for an appointment
Worked hard for a living.
But yesterday was buried with all the rest.

1956

POETRY READING

*“Thus verse deserves a Temple to be heard,
As God a rude camel rides in silence.” Author unknown*

I.

Intention garbles action, movement, verse.
After hearing reading—intent on lines
(Remember?) I saw imaginary fire.
Poets galloped down the golden street
(Two lines kept straight as two feet);
In golden light and shining, shimmering.
People stared blind. . . They walked away!

II.

The wind blows corruption from the mind.
Nothing to drink; no desire even.
Suddenly: “Coffee,” you soon said.
We cornered silence in a Chinese booth,
And caught, unprepared, the timely throat.

III.

And, caught up later, miles away,
I thought of oriental youth
And gripped the wheel as dawn broke in rain,
The distance of the road ahead. The pain!
(Our friends were killed here on this very spot.)
I fell asleep as “There was life for one day,”
You sighed. . . The car might have crashed!

I woke in time for bed. You said no more.
The rest is death.

[1960s]

FOR MY FIRST-BORN

Bitter the night, and cold.
The time denies me sleep.
Announced, you enter. Bold
Occasion calls. I weep.

I see myself again,
Hardened by fact;
Made strong, too frightened to act.
And yet you remain.

You look like myself come again.
My grief narrows at your fate.
But now, as when God
Awaits the Child in pain,
You are you impossibly
And eyes nearly closed
Become eternity, the actual.

1962

THEORY OF RELATIVITY

The word like a flower
Leaps still within the compass of time upward,
Or like a flame, or fire,
Consumes itself from first to last in brightness.

Through an atmosphere it passes
Blind with self-inflicted wings of steel
That glitter in the sun,
Droning its way stubbornly to freedom,

While on the ground weeps one
Whose tears glisten equally in the sun.

(originally published in the *National Poetry Anthology*, 1960,
National Poetry Association, Los Angeles)

AUTUMNAL

The plain, seeded fields of Fall
Express a solitude,
Enact a gesture, drama-filled
Of gracious quietude.

Hasten to the church today
With the multitude.
Horse and rider, bales of hay
Are moving with the Rood.

[1950s]

(Rood is Old English for crucifix)

THOUGHTS ON SEEING A PHOTO OF A CIVIL WAR SOLDIER (JULY 4TH)

I traced the somber movements up the line:
Frail creatures, both young and old,
Fresh from school and held, frightened, bold.
Mere children, they could have been mine.

July 4, 1998

ADJUSTING THE TEMPERATURE

for Dan

The season's stillness settles down
In grass heavy with age and frost
That covers frozen ground as stones do
In water. The landscape, undone, demands
Of spring its own awakening.

For the moment, then, in spite of snow
And winter's detritus, I'll stay inside
In musty rooms now occupied
By cats that linger in their sleep,
Dreaming 'til nightfall wakens them.

I mark, unheard, their measured breathing,
And suffer, impatient, their small demands
To feed and tend to them as you would
A child in extremes of heat or cold,
Regardless of weather or time of year.

February 12, 2004

(Detritus is the Latin word for "lessening,"
and also has a connotation to "waste.")

JAZZ: A HISTORY

When jazz rose up from out of the Congo
Vachel Lindsay played drums
In a quasi-military marching band.

No universities were in evidence back then
Nor courses that reproduced the masters
And their music, in person “live and in color.”

Just jazz, and a whole lot of singing
And dancing with (or without) wine
And/or women. No Salvation. No Army.

A sluggish business it soon became
With hangers-on who stole from you
And gin mills and noisy crowds

Who drank and whored and played around
Got drugged up, and then died
Unheard, unheralded, broke.

[1990s, original]
July 1999, revision

(Vachel Lindsay, 1879–1931, was a poet from
Springfield, Illinois, known as the Prairie Troubador.
He was also an early advocate of “jazz poetry.”)

AT THE JAZZ EXCHANGE

The nighttown city's slums
Were wakened by the noise:

Piano, bass, drums
And sax were rambling through changes,

Harmonious wailing, a child's
Delight. How High the Moon

Was next, disguised as
Another tune by Bird.

Same chords and all, with "moon"
Both chorus comped and subject.

Bass, drums, sax,
Piano improvised

How High the Moon was next
In another key

And faster; then came
Blue Moon, Old Devil Moon,

It Must Have Been Moonglow, Shine
On Harvest Moon, Full Moon

And Empty Arms. The End.
Warm wintry night

Stopped cold, then lumbered home
To glowing slumbered sleep.

[Mid- to late 1990s]

TO JAN

Piano played past midnight
I heard from where I sat
The keys were black and white;
Then slow-sounding chords past midnight.

It never entered my mind to ask
What song it was he played, the changes
Arriving like some dark and distant
Past event remembered now.

The night wore on and he played
With sure abandon and control
A concentrated soul composed
Of craft, created, improvised.

We paid attention to the songs
We might have overlooked if sung
Some other time when we were young
And unrefined, but now defined.

Sounds floated in the air long after
They were heard, much like a chapter
In a book you can't forget, ever
And we listened as never before

Unbothered by the din from the room
Where drinks were served at the bar to men
Too young to die or live alone
Without a song sung with passion

By a singer whose voice soared
Above the noise and clamor that roared
Outside the lobby and the desk
Where guests were ushered in and out

To spend the night in rooms that looked
Alike, the building open to the sea
And mixed with the music being sung
And played, the tables like counterpoint.

2004

(The subject of the title of this poem is Jan Wheaton, a Madison jazz singer.)

THE LIBRARY AT MIDTERM

All knowledge in one location: Piled
Up, collected, catalogued, filed.

The shelves lie empty, unused, old
Abandoned years ago. In cold

December, students roam the stacks
As in a daze, transfixed by facts

Pictured on a screen, the shelves
Reflect their still divided selves

That like machines, they want to keep
Reliable, useful, and cheap.

The books, unread, gather dust.
They make up stories. They must.

[late 1990s, original]

[2000s, revision]

LOOKING FOR MR. D.

(A Moral Fable)

I.

The search began at the Library
Where I looked both high and low—
All nine floors, plus Basement.
No luck there. I searched Reference.
No luck there either. Called College.
Ditto there. Phoned Steenbock. He
Was out, said the answering machine.
“Gone to the farm to visit relatives,”
I was told by the New Information Desk Technician.

II.

My real intelligence told me otherwise.
After all, how do you expect
To keep them in town after they’ve seen
The improvements? Already at the post-
Exasperation level, I tried
To call Mr. D. himself, when I found he was dead.
So I left a message. Said I’d call him back.
Totally despondent, I took to my bed.

III.

And fell into a deep sleep
(Perchance to dream) during which
Mr. D. appeared alive and kicking.
He spoke: “If you really think about it
It will happen.” “Where?” I asked.
Responded he: “Iowa.”
“Iowa?” I thought: I’ve been there; believe
Me, folks, nothing is happening
In Iowa. End of search.

[1994]

(Mr. D. refers to W. Edwards Deming, 1900–1993,
the father of total quality management, or TQM.)

THE ANTI-LUDDITE

(A Postmodern Version)

The price was right,
So I wrote a Program on the spot.

It was so cost-effective
That in the Process
I rendered myself Obsolete.

1995

WHO NEEDS FRIENDS?

(A Dog's Worst Enemy)

The blind man being led by a dog
Was speaking harshly to it. I
Admonished him. After all,

It was the dog that did his seeing
For him. We argued back and forth
And I decided we'd never see eye

To eye, however much we might
Agree on other things like war
And peace, the weather, violence

And living in the city. The dog
Just stood there, as if to say:
"These two just don't get it, do they?"

[1990s, original]
March 18, 2005, revision

MACWORLD

The place was silent, and even those
Who knew each other weren't talking much,
Nor did they say a word about
How the burgers—unbuttered, greasy—

Were fried to a flavorless, flat
Conclusion—the buns burned telling
A similar story; and where even lovers
Were strangers discussing condiments:

Ketchup, mustard sauce, onions,
Mayonnaise that together
Comprised a juicy, yummy foodstuff
That looked to me more like leather.

It was then I found myself looking
Into the eyes of a nun who watched
Me from a discreet distance across
The metallic environment. Her gaze

Burned my conscience, and I reached
For the Roloids: waste not, want not,
I knew her thoughts and felt obliged
To eat the whole thing and not

Wish for more, just like in hell
Where it's packaged and wrapped in plastic
Plates. Waste not, want not, says
The wise man, but I didn't wait around.

[1990s]

RECOVERING ELEVATORHOLIC

The monster, mobile, soft, inviting,
Beckoned to me to “Come to me, all you tired,
Old and weak senior citizens.”
I’d do it but it’s Monday

And I’m tired from a weekend of just sitting
And rocking, not doing anything especially...
Neither ramp, nor road, nor disabled park
Will lure me back. I’ll climb, if need be,

To the abyss: Three floors, that’s all.
But nooo, I’ll test my mortal mettle. A child
Could do it, it’s not like this is Mount Everest.
I could stop at every landing that beckons me to rest

And take one step at a time. I could break
A board bare-handed I feel so strong today.
But the button beckons me: Just push and wallah you’re there already...
Fastest elevator in the West will take you.

But why not slow and stop; look at books
Along the way. It’s Monday, after all,
The first day of the rest of the week.
I’ll be heroic, embrace change, unStoic.

And just “do it,” and repeat, go down again
An extra flight, enjoy the sights along the way:
Theaters, buildings, towers, yon distant capitol,
The Street, the stores, apartments, windows and much more.

[Late 1990s]

(The usage of the word unStoic is a reference
to Stoicism, the Hellenistic-era philosophy.)

NRA REDIVIVUS

“From my cold dead hands,” roared
The ancient warrior as
He slid from the bar stool
While hoisting his musket and downing a pint
Of Guinness brewed just for him.

He quoted Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy,
And *Beowulf*—in reverse order;
Confusing chronology, names
And dates, he recovered just in time
To recite from heart the Gettysburg

Address, Washington’s Farewell Speech
To the Troops at Valley Forge,
Martin Luther King’s I Have
A Dream peroration and more
Before they closed and he hit floor.

2003, original

2004, revision

(*Redivivus* is Latin for renewed, renovated, reborn.)

SO HELP ME SYLVIA PLATH, BILLY COLLINS AND JOYCE CAROL OATES!

The poor saps! The poets already scorned by their neighbors,
And nearest next-of-kin and our nation of auctioneers,
No-goodniks and ne-er do-wells, or bets or bests
Are even now being victimized by their own kind—
Fooled, fleeced, flummoxed, undone by the very ones
You'd think would have pity at least
If not compassion for their suffering brothers and sisters
Who sweat and slave, bodies aching, minds run dry,
For hours and days, over a blank cold page
In their desperate daily quest
And epic efforts for an inspiration, a fix
To sustain them during their dark cold nights
Sleepless in Madison and/or Milwaukee,
Sweating, cursing, boo-hooing
They'd give up everything—even their jobs—
Their all, even money, for a verse
Be it a simple lyric with riming quatrains,
Or something, anything, free, unmetred, unrimed
Or even doggerel occasioned by a fancy flight
To the moon on gossamer wings (rimes with "things")

To be betrayed by their friends, the very ones
Who promote these charades
At the Iowa and Milwaukee creative writing establishments—
Schools that grant degrees, certificates, and sometimes
Even help you get a paying job repeating
What you've learned and passing it on by promises
Of prizes and other tokens of success.
The laurel leaf, a lure dangled under your nose
Now gone bad and discarded, once spurred
By money and promises of the fame game
Accompanied by publication in the journals
And so much more.

I fell for it hook line and sinker (I have the rejection slips to prove it)
And finally phony, that bitter pill foisted on you
Together with the funny money.
You thought it was true and on the up and up,
But the joke was on you
And you got it up the old wazoo.

April/May 2005

(Reaction to "Poetry Scam: Something Rotten in the World of Poetry,"
article by Renata Dumitrascu published in *Isthmus*, April 15, 2005,
about the alleged "fix-is-in" nature of some poetry contests.)

NO ONE SLEPT THAT NITE

No one slept that nite
The children wept when told
Their parent died that day.

I thought: "Stiff upper lip,"
"Take it on the chin"
"Shout above the din."

I did none of this, of course.
Bombs fell with blinding consistency.
And falling, day and nite blinded me.

Fire destroyed the church,
The blaze was deafening
The city half-destroyed

By forces from hell, sleepless.
Workers, unemployed
Children—hungry, starved

Waiting for a parent
To come and save them from death
And the body of this world.

March 23, 2005

A MEDITATION AFTER MARCUS AURELIUS

I.

The facts are inescapable but few:

Clear, simple: death is a fact.

Plato's universe is a hypothesis.

Everything else, including mathematics, is mere theory.

Take Russell's Principia, e.g.

Or the Physics of Aristotle.

II.

They all agree: life's unreal,

A conscious dream of another life

And of eternity. But life is death.

III.

When silence deafens me

I ponder brightness and expect—

Demand, even—a better bargain

Than this "roll of the dice" as it's called.

Gambling even on Sundays, bingo

Parlors in or out of church:

It doesn't matter anymore.

God, it seems, is everywhere

These days especially, both

Within and without, minus

Announcements in the bulletin.

All that I sense is another day

Departing without a sound except

For never-ending meditations

And loving you who mend the parts

That are broken: sew socks, launder

Clothes and dry them in the sun.
Wash dishes that are never done
And merge with the present once again
Made whole, and still nothing's solved.

Things stay put and where
You left them the night before, forgetting;
But beauty too remains, just
As it should and as it's always been.

[1990s]

THE THOUGHT ALONE WAS SWEET

The thought alone was sweet—we seldom
Spoke about it when at home
Eternity without an ending
Was something to contemplate during
Idle moments when not at school
Or work; when serving or being served.

The fence has since collapsed; the wood
Is worn and rotted where insects crawl
And store their treasures. Our hideouts too
Are gone—now underground, unseen.
Life is quiet now, unburdened
By progress and all that it requires.

I measure days in terms of death
With time the servant of my will
Even as my movements slow
To nothing and the absolute
Convictions I counted on when young
To protect me from a world of evil.

Now war itself is far removed
In lands that need not bother us
Nor wake us from our slumbers, deep
In sleep and worlds away from death
And dying, good and evil, God
and Satan. Meanwhile, time still vexes
Us, perplexes us, still cowed
By its presence; still grasping repeatedly
For a life that continues to elude.

December 2004

I PRAY FOR A HIGHER LIFE

“He jests at scars that never felt a wound”
—Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

I pray for a higher life
Much longer than my father’s,

Moreso even than the Lover
Worships Love itself

And the pleasure in her lover’s arms
That stands up to Death

Where place doesn’t really matter.
Such worship is a waste of time.

“Relax,” said the doctor. We’re all
Mortal; besides, my poems are worse

Than yours. So not to worry, get
Some rest. Too much daylight’s bad

For the heart. But while you’re here, would you mind
Taking a look at something I just wrote?

[2004]

ENVOI

The sky was scraping clouds, and the earth
Expanded outwards. I headed for
The exits where there were none except
For smoke and fire, infernal heat

Bearing in on me, crushed
And broken. Bodies fell from the sky!
Like birds hunted down, they seemed
To float and sank in the billowed air

That carried them to their common doom,
Ill-fated, unplanned, the earth their grave.
I watched in horror beyond the site
Bereft of speech. My grief grew

In the wind that wafted acrid smoke
That burst from the building miles away
Beyond the river and farther west,
Observing in helpless disbelief.

September 12, 2001

AFTER DISASTER

The barges carried bodies
On the morning after the day before
To the opposite shore, the sky rained more rubble
On pavements, and streets were white with heat.

The city's center, reduced to nothingness
And dusty debris, is now no more
Than fate and circumstance decreed
And commerce rendered powerless.

No longer bound by rules or human life,
By kindness, love or empathy within
Their hearts unmoved by stony silence
Are covered now by dust and despair.

That good and evil will both prevail—
Cold comfort for the fallen and bereft!—
And that buildings, bridges, cities, towers
Are being built anew gives hope for life.

Renewed and better if not now
Then in some future still unknown
When friends and enemies will embrace
Eschewing death, confirming life.

[2004]

ANSWERING MR. CRANE

My reply is this: War's insane
Not kind or gentle; bitter pain
And death destroyed a generation
Of young and frightened men. A nation
Now filled with fear can't free
Itself from the prison it's in nor see
Another way to settle scores
With rivals than destroying doors,
Windows, floors, houses, cities
Entire countrysides. It pities
Nothing, nor expects division
To be its fated lot. Derision
Is its lingua franca, fear
Its message to one and all who hear

From their households, struggling today
In abandoned caves and empty kitchens
Where broken glass and dirty trays
Are filled with rotten food at night
Where residents are sickened at the sight
Of something foreign, a source of fright.

We close our doors and hide from war.
We think we can ignore it. But why? What for?
We're waiting for the promised tomorrow
Meanwhile profiting from others' sorrow.
Like Pilate, wash our hands
Declaring the enemy at fault
Who like us fears us even more
Than we fear them; they too lock their door
Against the unknown terror.

Today, though, we will proceed
To get what we didn't ever need.
And now reading must suffice.
The papers and the news are not involved.
Cessation of the pain is not solved.
War is war, pain is pain.
The sun shines, and rain rains.

[2003, original]

2004, revision

("Mr. Crane" refers to Stephen Crane, the 19th-century author
who wrote the novel *The Red Badge of Courage* and the poem "War Is Kind.")

PYRE

for Michael

“Old age should burn and rave at close of day.” —Dylan Thomas

Here now lies no one
Who once was my son
Who is no more
But will always be.

Oh stranger, linger not!
Pass by this door.
You too will see.

All too soon
Death will show its face.
In its vast embrace
I, as yet unwilling, will soon lie.

And you, who willed my life,
Do now rejoin me,
Having married twice,
Forever dead.

[1992, original]

June 2001, revision

FINAL RITES

for William Toomey, 1926–2005

Buried on a hill that overlooks a city where angels tread
And where once he walked and rode,
Now lost in the morning mist that grows
Near where the ocean ceases and begins (and ends),
Descending to the eternal sea.

Buried on a hill somewhere near
An ocean that borders a city west from where
We stand and utter one last prayer beneath a sky
Remembered now, where I sit now
And meditate on our brother lost

And of what it means, if anything. The day
Was silent, sunny; near noon when bells
Used to ring the angelus but now are silent.
Even St. Augustine is gone from where he sleeps
Eternally now and forever. Though once in time

When young and far away, ten thousand days
From here in this busy city where giants roam
Restless and young, their hopes unrealized,
A thousand miles away from the vast unceasing sea,
Our lives invaded 'til claimed by eternal sleep.

And grants repose and eternal rest. Amen
Advances and recedes, whose ceaseless movements
Determine us in all directions
Lapping the shores, the city's face forever fixed
And where nature grounds existence, finds its meanings.

From day to day when every moment our deaths are known
To be uncertain; where or when unknown, and only now
But all too soon our promises unkept, the words unspoken
That we promised then to say, but saved for another day
Too late to speak to one whose mystery was kept intact.

Beloved brother, eternally unknown, pray for me
Now and in the hour of my, our death. Amen.

[April 2005, original]
May 2005, partial revision

FAMILY REUNION

“Bequeath us to no earthly shore” —Hart Crane

Dissatisfied by separations,
Long absences unexplained,
We gathered remnants of what remained.

We passed the day together with divers
Entertainments, (the lake nearby)
Where cars collected, and their drivers.

We drank the breeze and tasted the water,
Marking its slow decline: our own
Reflections carved in sand and stone.

June 2004



Robert G. Toomey was born in 1928 and grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended a Catholic high school and (after a stint in the U.S. Army) received bachelor's and master's degrees in English from John Carroll University, a Jesuit college in Cleveland. He was a graduate student on scholarship at Oxford University in England and also completed Ph.D. coursework at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Among his professors at UW–Madison were Helen C. White and Julius Weinberg.

Toomey was the father of three sons. He taught college English at UW–Madison; UW–Whitewater; St. Ambrose University (Iowa); St. John Fisher University (New York); and Providence College (Rhode Island). He retired from the University of Wisconsin Memorial Library in December 2001, and devoted his waking hours to music, reading, and writing.

Robert G. Toomey died in 2005, in Madison, Wisconsin, at the age of 76. He was preceded in death by his wife Nada and son Michael. He is survived by sons Robert and Daniel, and partner, Jane Cooper.



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