we inhale, exhale, inhale,
encompassed, encompassed.

What One Receives from Living Close to a Lake

That it is wide,
and still—yet subtly
stirring; wide and
level, reflecting the intangible sky's
vaster breadth in its own
fresh, cold, serene
surface we can
touch, enter, taste.
That it is wide
and uninterrupted save by
here a sail, there
a constellation of waterfowl—
a meadow of water
you could say,
a clearing amid the entangled
forest of forms and voices,
anxious intentions, urgent
memories: a deep, clear
breath to fill
the soul, an internal
gesture, arms
flung wide to echo
that mute
generous outstretching
we call *lake*.

The Beginning of Wisdom

Proverbs 9:10

You have brought me so far.

•

I know so much. Names, verbs, images. My mind
overflows, a drawer that can't close.

•

Unscathed among the tortured. Ignorant parchment
uninscribed, light strokes only, where a scribe
tried out a pen.

•

I am so small, a speck of dust
moving across the huge world. The world
a speck of dust in the universe.

•

Are you holding
the universe? You hold
onto my smallness. How do you grasp it,
how does it not
slip away?

•

I know so little.

•

You have brought me so far.

Poetics of Faith

'Straight to the point'
can ricochet,
unconvincing.
Circumlocution, analogy,
parable's ambiguities, provide
context, stepping-stones.

Most of the time. And then

the lightning power
amidst these indirections,
of plain

unheralded miracle!
For example,
as if forgetting
to prepare them, He simply
walks on water
toward them, casually—
and impetuous Peter, empowered,
jumps from the boat and rushes
on wave-tip to meet Him—
a few steps, anyway—
(till it occurs to him,
'I can't, this is preposterous'
and Jesus has to grab him,
tumble his weight
back over the gunwale).
Sustaining those light and swift
steps was more than Peter
could manage. Still,
years later,
his toes and insteps, just before sleep,
would remember their passage.

Conversion of Brother Lawrence

'Let us enter into
ourselves, Time
presses.'
Brother Lawrence
1611–1691

1

What leafless tree plunging
into what pent sky was it
convinced you Spring, bound to return
in all its unlikelihood, was a word
of God, a Divine message?
Custom, natural reason, are everyone's assurance;
we take the daylight for granted, the moon,
the measured tides. A particular tree, though,
one day in your eighteenth winter,
said more, an oracle. Clumsy footman,
apt to drop the ornate objects handed to you,
cursed and cuffed by butlers and grooms,
your inner life unsuspected,
you heard, that day, a more-than-green
voice from the stripped branches.
Wooden lace, a celestial geometry, uttered
more than familiar rhythms of growth.
It said *By the Grace of God.*
Midsummer rustled around you that wintry moment.
Was it elm, ash, poplar, a fruit-tree, your rooted
twig-winged angel of annunciation?

2

Out from the chateau park it sent you
(by some back lane, no doubt,
not through the wide gates of curled iron),
by ways untold, by soldier's marches, to the obscure
clatter and heat of a monastery kitchen,
a broom's rhythmic whisper for music,
your torment the drudgery of household ledgers. Destiny
without visible glory. 'Time pressed.' Among pots and pans,
heart-still through the bustle of chores,
your labors, hard as the pain in your lame leg,
grew slowly easier over the years, the years
when, though your soul felt darkened, heavy, worthless,
yet God, you discovered, never abandoned you but walked
at your side keeping pace as comrades had
on the long hard roads of war. You entered then
the unending 'silent secret conversation',
the life of steadfast attention.
Not work transformed you; work, even drudgery,
was transformed: that discourse
pierced through its monotones, infused them
with streams of sparkling color.
What needed doing, you did; journeyed if need be
on rocking boats, lame though you were,
to the vineyard country to purchase the year's wine
for a hundred Brothers, laughably rolling yourself
over the deck-stacked barrels when you couldn't

and the road's long slope hums down to the shaded hollow,
a rushing scale, his wheels are spinning, his hat takes wing,
faster, faster, the brakes are asleep or deaf,
he is flying through green and violet
to the unseen wall, the silence.

Wavering

Flickering curtain, scintillations, junebugs,
rain of fireflies low in the rippling fog,
motes abundant, random, pinpoints of intelligence
floating like bright snow . . .
A world, the world, where *live shell*
can explode on impact or, curled elaborate bone,
be an architecture, domicile
of wincing leisurely flesh.
The attention
sets out toward a cell, its hermit,
the rapt years all one day,
telling and telling beads and vision—
toward a river forever
sweeping worn stones without impatience,
holding its gesture, palm upraised—
but at once wavers: the shimmering curtain, wet strands
of hair, sound of the thick reeds jostled by what they hide,
life on the move, a caravan of event. Water an intermittent gleaming,
pools, marshes, a different river.

VII

Caedmon

All others talked as if
talk were a dance.
Clodhopper I, with clumsy feet
would break the gliding ring.
Early I learned to
hunch myself
close by the door:
then when the talk began
I'd wipe my
mouth and wend
unnoticed back to the barn
to be with the warm beasts,
dumb among body sounds
of the simple ones.
I'd see by a twist
of lit rush the motes
of gold moving
from shadow to shadow
slow in the wake
of deep untroubled sighs.
The cows
munched or stirred or were still. I
was at home and lonely,
both in good measure. Until
the sudden angel affrighted me—light effacing
my feeble beam,
a forest of torches, feathers of flame, sparks upflying:
but the cows as before
were calm, and nothing was burning,
nothing but I, as that hand of fire
touched my lips and scorched my tongue
and pulled my voice
into the ring of the dance.

The Servant-Girl at Emmaus (A Painting by Velázquez)

She listens, listens, holding
her breath. Surely that voice
is his—the one
who had looked at her, once, across the crowd,
as no one ever had looked?
Had seen her? Had spoken as if to her?

Surely those hands were his,
taking the platter of bread from hers just now?
Hands he'd laid on the dying and made them well?

*

There were other churches from which the population had withdrawn, Celtic foundations down lanes that one entered with a lifting of the spirit, because there were no posts, no telegraph wires. Is God worshipped only in cathedrals, where blood drips from regimental standards as from the crucified body of love. Is there a need for a revised liturgy, for bathetic renderings of the scriptures? The Cross always is avant-garde.

*

The church is small.
The walls inside
white. On the altar
a cross, with behind it
its shadow and behind
that the shadow of its shadow.

The world outside
knows nothing of this
nor cares. The two shadows
are because of the shining
of two candles: as many
the lights, so many
the shadows. So we learn
something of the nature
of God, the endlessness
of whose recessions
are brought up short by
the contemporaneity of the Cross.

The Answer

Not darkness but twilight
in which even the best
of minds must make its way
now. And slowly the questions
occur, vague but formidable
for all that. We pass our hands
over their surface like blind
men, feeling for the mechanism
that will swing them aside. They
yield, but only to re-form
as new problems; and one
does not even do that
but towers immovable
before us.
Is there no way
other than thought of answering
its challenge? There is an anticipation
of it to the point of
dying. There have been times
when, after long on my knees
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled
from my mind, and I have looked
in and seen the old questions lie
folded and in a place
by themselves, like the piled
graveclothes of love's risen body.