Astronomy is for the soul—
the truth about what
and who we are
and will be.

The universe grinding blithely away
and we, reflective grist, stellar pollen
cooling down enough to finally shine—
a caucus of dust and acids blown
over the warped table of space,
arriving on the shirttails of comets to lap down
on tundra, settle on palmetto leaves,
blinking above an isthmus white with sand. . . .

And so unconsciously we take our breath
into orbit about the solar apparatus
of the heart—
star with its own fusion and collapse—each measure and molecule
voluble but
unaccountable in a code
comprising even the weightless freight
of thought
as we stand out each night exhaling
dim clouds from the ghosted
wing-span of our lungs. . . .

We have built machines
that can see light burning
from the lost beginning—
faint quasars, a print-out just coming
through the hazed background buzz
after fifteen billion years.

From our vantage point in the outer precincts,
we tune in radio from the first
broadcast, big downbeat still on every network
and starry frequency
as we go for a spin through the galactic plasma,
the boulevards,
oxbows and sluice gates of time. . . .

*  
Telescopes are time machines,
lanes for recovered light
up to speed, pulling down the crystal spheres
and broken symmetries,
exposing our surroundings,
our irrepressible, elemental histories
we continue
to negotiate as if the wheel were firmly in our hands.

*  
Space itself is slipping away,
expanding,
but into what?
Aristarchus of Samos,
against Ptolemy and the popular astrophysics,
deduced that earth was a planet,
that stars were very far away indeed!
A little over 2,000 years,
and his information was confirmed.

Still, there is the black frame of space,
stars untrue
in our parallax view—their bent scintillations so many
curve balls breaking
over the outside corner of the plate.
And so our doubt about everything
published above us in the dark,
and then the blank and sweeping margins
of the east each dawn
after we’ve again tried to decipher the shorthand
in the night.

Sitting up at dawn, starlings appear across the lawn
like black holes
in the mist-bright sheen.

Birds congregate, begin a capella—
cavatinas and recitatives— without the least introspection,
time management
or stress . . . neither do they sew.

A steady disregard of the attrition of air,
the ambiguous blue going of the world—
something like a rose-colored nebula
boiling in their breasts, moving them
to praise to matter the implications,
the copyright of the cold.

*

The lawn sprinklers whirl out their silver
and unerring loops . . . gravity keeping us
here—the weak force and the strong,
the invisible and the dissembled something
in the unified field
even as light is fused and driven through
charged tines of air,
torching the tree, black Y against
the mustard sky, wringing out the horizon,
an ash of arms extending, funnel cloud
taking farm house and Ford Galaxy sedan
up the violet ascension of the sky,
against gravity and half the Midwest
on the TV A.M. News, particles accelerated,
snowy dots of channels flipped through.

Out the window, the glitter
in the night river washed away, discord of black
sand rolling over some last bright bones,
wing bones, let's say, holding it all up
about us as we reel outward,
carrying our blue and parochial atmosphere
with us, our little argument advanced
against all the blind stuff of space,
the dark matter now 95% of everything,
denser than anthracite with time,
dead energy so massed it will never shine
nor harbor one mote of mica,
one iced diamond-fleck not inked and unknowable.

Only the fingerprints,
the gravitational arcs hold
the pearl-like and whirling Milky Way in thrall,
keep the arms swirled,
brilliantly together, rotating in sync with
the yolky center, edges bright
with the hum and singing of atoms swimming
outward, burning away
somewhere nothing ends.
I've always liked the story of Bertrand Russell giving a public lecture on astronomy, and a woman standing up afterwards to say it was all rubbish, that the earth was really flat and supported on the back of a giant tortoise! And when Russell asked just what the turtle was standing on, the woman was ready and replied, “Why, it's turtles all the way down.”

Doesn't it add up this flawlessly while we take our short swim off these rocks—stunned in the immediate and febrile good will of the light as it replays every summer traveling home from the shore, green sea still sparkling in our veins, horizon's blue frame holding, crepuscular, one star only burning there and inside of us in continuous disputation of the dark.

And again this evening I'm watching a feckless delegation of clouds depart for home or perhaps the rain-emptied coast of Dieppe, I'm brooding on immortality where white sandwich wrappers lifted above those chalk-dull cliffs, where seagulls argued low along a flinty sea blown back along the quai as if there were another element to the light that we, stalled there and as simple as those wind-thinned trees, were letting slip away.

A circus had cleared off overnight, and papers scuttled on the long green field, a red-and-yellow poster waving from a bench, were little to say time and space had been put to use there and then, and in that way—unremarkable now and shuffling off with the salt shifting of the air.

A wafer of sun cut across the clouds' grey scroll, the black edges of night bleeding in until bright specks floated up on the blank plate of space with all our unsupported paradigms for science and for art—the dark ocean
spattered with refracted light like the grainy surface of the soul—both perhaps expanding, still being etched with the lost music of the spheres—while we were only at sea again in our heart, pointing out first-hand the old shapes and overlappings, the sure and selfsame stars.
Because out of nowhere one day
the grace disappeared
from my body, rarely to be seen
again except in that unconscious
wrist-snap of a racket head as it kicks out
the side–ways arc of an American twist,
I went out for my birthday and, instead
of a Cos d’Estournel ’82, bought
two Day-Glo green-and-yellow parakeets,
some seed, cuttle bone, and cage,
along with a flagon of something
truly unremarkable from Czechoslovakia.

We carried them finger to cage,
these frank dispositions, attended
as an inflated chatter proclaimed
their vibrant devotion to the air.
We spoke to them much as if they were
autistic children, capable somehow
of one spectacular, clear feat—as if,
being simple, they were simply loved—
as if, perhaps, they might take the place
of children, had one wanted children. . . .

* 

And this year, players in the Series
looked younger than ever before, all of them—
even stodgy catchers who hadn’t shaved.
And never have I been so attentive to weather—
where the jet stream might drag down the clouds,
road ice, airport delays as if there were something
to be done. I especially enjoy the channel that shows
temperatures in Barcelona or in Rome
superimposed on postcard vistas
so starched with sunlight that when
I close my eyes I’m walking the Ramblas
or the Corso, or off praising one tree or another
in the Jardin des Plantes. Or I see the supple lace
of jacarandas, the deep-iris sky over Montecito—
my legs were somehow then attached
to the tireless direction of the breeze,
as unconcerned as the itinerant clouds.

Now I notice most my friends
have rowing machines or stationary bikes,
and I have bought a fancy one on time,
the kind with a dashboard of lights and beeps
like a starship, one with a computer read-out
for hills, levels, duration, intensity, RPMs.
It’s called a Life Cycle, and not a minute goes by
that the irony is lost on me. It’s the kind
I used to warm up on in the mirrored gym
before running or workouts on the weight machines—
but lately I walk by refusing
to even glance at it, hamstrung
by a flagging affinity for pain.

Nonetheless, I have not taken to
wearing a cardigan or bow tie,
nor have I insisted students
call me Dr. or Professor, this or that. . . .
Because next year, when I get my grant,
I’m heading for the coast and home—
going to buy one of those old big boards and,
without one thought for carcinoma,
stay all day long in the surf, nose-riding,
shooting the curl on shoulder-high sets
like nobody’s business. And on Fridays
I’m going to hit an Italian restaurant
I know and eat rigatoni like Tony Quinn
in that old Fellini film, drink a few
water glasses of red wine with friends
and walk out late into starlight, into the blue
and immutable sea sounds of the past.
And nowadays, more and more in dreams
I’m flying—just taking off from the sidewalk
mid-conversation, pushing the air back like water
with my hands, the way I remember learning
to dog paddle in the Pacific, bobbing then
above the azure levels in the world.
It’s simple, something I always knew,
but something larger, more elementary
than all the images of parochial school,
something hidden like the white and floating
hearts of saints, something I had just forgotten
all this time—a little transcendental muscle gone soft
but coming back, some instant weight-loss plan.
I rise then effortlessly above the cypress
and eucalyptus trees, and there I am, suddenly
once more gliding over that sea cliff and the coast
for as long as I can remember...