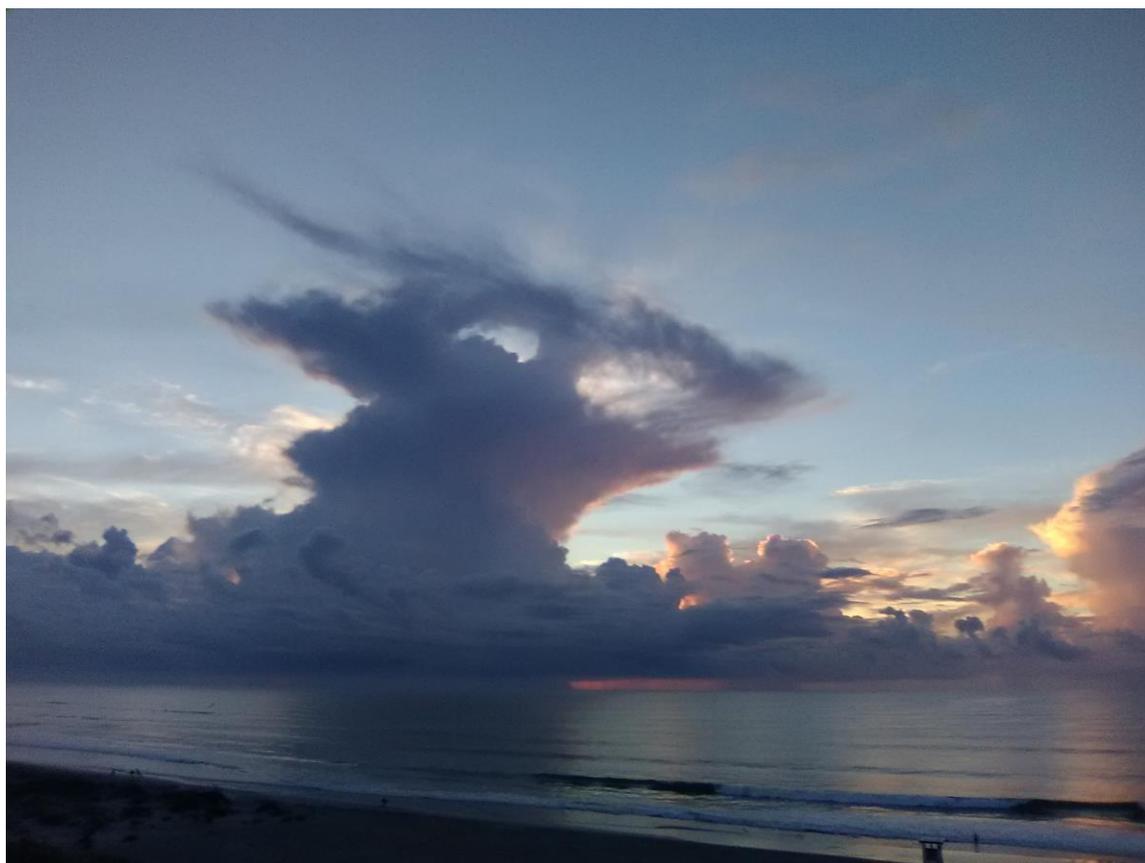


SEASONS

BY

PETER CARRINGTON VENABLE



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The Poem River – The Christian Communicator, March 2015
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AUTHOR

Peter has written free and metric verse poetry for over fifty years. He is a retired addiction and mental health counselor. He volunteers at a local prison camp, jail, church food pantry, and leads vesper services at a rest home. He sings in a choir and in the Mozart’s Club’s annual Messiah.

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Is there any poet—past or present—who has not composed from the inspiration of nature? Sheer wonder and such a challenge to replicate incredible natural beauty into words acting as icons!

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1. SPRING

Straw Man

Early morning. Gardenia fragrance rises
the way steam drifts around pond lilies

and billows through the bedroom window,
waking sleepy eyes and misting cheeks.

Through the blinds, light blazes bars on the wall.

Poems are words formed of straw,
feed to chew over and over, cud for the soul

while dreams of alfalfa and clover fields
bloom in green seas

always beyond.

always beyond our straw.

The Poem River

is a stream where you wet bare eyes,
wade deeper, float into its channel
over submerged meanings, swirl around enigmas,

plunge over falls into the deepest pool,
then pour over currents to its last drop.

Drenched, we leave the bank, soon forgotten,
dry as bleached driftwood on black-rock coasts.

We will never forget being wet

and plunge anew.

5 a.m.

From the deck

I sense a million tiny eyes probing mine
behind silhouettes of trees and shrubs.

The dank air whirls with spirals of light
and a crescent moon blushes
under dawn's pink ruffles.

It Happens to Everyone

by a stone fence or under a hedge
our sticky fingers hunt four-leaf clovers
or poke twigs at squiggles under rocks

when a stream of yellow blurs
startles our designs streaking
in and out of a magic hole

what are these yellow-black flyers
darting in and out luring us closer and closer

and of course one of us tosses
a half-eaten apple it plops over the hole
the yellow current hovers and swells
before our astonished eyes

when a distant shriek
then the booming of giant steps

breaks our spell and we're snatched
into the air and zoom away like a rocket
escaping an exploding planet

we never saw the billowing
yellow cloud again that summer

but as we tramped in red and orange leaves
we often stopped and stared
at that empty hole wondering

when the striped darts
would again
arise.

Early April

My soles pound the cinder path
and batter the metal bridge over the creek.
Wet rust reeks on my palms from a chin-up bar.
Sweat stings my eyes.

Spring bursts into pandemonium of Being:

waves of antennae track pheromone beacons
chloroplasts stream in leafy currents
honeysuckle vapor fogs the path under the canopy
joggers and walkers in iridescent skins orbit the elliptical track

and it ravishes us this morning.

Lux Aeterna

—Ln. light eternal

That night, freezing rain
 crushed slick boughs.
 Evergreens bowed in

glazed sanctuaries.
 A long, thin branch
 fractured at its base,

hung upside down by
 woody fibers—
 its upended crown

rocked from icy breaths.
 It swayed, storm or shine,
 cleaved to mother tree.

. . .

Birdsong crescendos.
 Crows caterwaul at
 a distant pine. Lime

cascades everywhere.
 Wisteria purples
 shrubbery with grape shapes.

The branch rises—
 green blades crescenting
 towards sunny beams.

At 3:16

The bright places are haunts of darkness
however high the climb.

The north face cracks from water,
wind blasts wherever it wills,
wherever it comes from and
wherever it goes. Lichen grows
on our flesh with each climb

as our lives cling between above and below,
horizon and summit, crack after crack.

Who can see the kingdom of sky,
with afterbirth crusting the eyes?

Faith is gripping the cracks of our lives.

Mountain Echo

Drive into blue-ridged mountains
on a looping, two-lane road.
Observe the crag face,
the hawk soaring.

I hike through grasses and briars
until I lean over precipice.
Survey the vast blueness in crystal air.
As feet touch the jagged rim,
track pebbles vanishing down
rugged cliff walls to the remote gorge.
A stream glitters as a mica snake.

Jutting ledges and pitched clefts
threaten to greet brain and bone.
I spread my arms into wings,
and shout from the bottom of my throat

“There is no God!”

And who echoes from distant crags,
the ragged forest, the massive granite,
the hawk’s talons uncoiled for the strike?

Fissure

Every autumn grandpa hunted bobwhite.
At dinner, he always warned “Bite slowly”
but at 9 years old, holster
and cap gun strapped to my hip,
chipmunk-cheeked with mashed potatoes and biscuits,
gravy odor filling my nose, I chomped into the spicy meat

in rapture—eyes closed—

I bit on a birdshot, chipping
and cracking an incisor down the middle.
My tongue found it, spit it out
on Great-grandma’s Royal Albert china plate.
It rolled up the edge and back to rest by a pea.
Gramps shook his head.

I let out a cry a neighbor declared
she heard half a mile away.

Fifty years later
my tongue still probes its worn cleft,
that metallic aftertaste
tainting every buttered biscuit,

birdshot embedded in every bite.

Predator

I named a plastic black rat trap Pac-Man.
It brandishes saw-toothed jaws.
Baited with crunchy peanut butter,
It waits by birdseed sprinkled on deck handrails.

Squirrel flits his tail,
hops up the stairs to Pac-Man
sniffing, sniffing...

Squirrel creeps to cavernous chops,
twitching whiskers,
stretching, stretching

his nose—a whisker away—
swoons over peanut butter delicacy.

Squirrel pulls out his gray head
and what happens next, I'll never know:

three times last week Pac-Man sprung
at the bottom of the stairs, saw teeth locked

and Squirrel watches me from a branch
chewing sunflower seeds and
fluffing his tail.

Parable Of The Vines

Backyard sector clear-cut, stumps ground to sawdust.
Ruddy-clay surface hard as stone, crisscrossed
with Wisteria roots—looks like Europa.

I raise and strike a pickaxe to wrench them up—
damn roots penetrate to magma crust. Swinging,
grunting, prying, cursing . . . inch by inch
until unearthed lengths look like intestines
on gory flesh. Sweatband, shirt,
shorts drenched. Mosquitoes sting
until my legs are hives in a bee farm.
Yellow jackets hover malevolently.
A Pekingese yaps nonstop.
Crows leer and caw from pine tops.
The brick-red plot seems an autopsy.

Days later, Wisteria shoots erupt, swigging sunshine.
Leafy metastasis. Pickaxing, levering, gouging up
small parts, a foot or so long—
each bloody thing still rooted.

Something is rooted
in my subterranean soul.
Cannot pickaxe it, uproot it.
Quit looking down.
Start looking up.

2. SUMMER

Oak Island Pier

Fishing rods are sea urchin spikes
 jutting and waiting for strikes
 that never jolt this moment.
 One stingray hooked.

Fishermen swap fishy stories,
 baiting hooks, casting into the swells.
 Tawny-brown birds—darker wings and tails—
 hop on fish-scaly railings, fuss in jeebs and chirps.

A splinter from a bench catches
 my little toe, fishhook-deep,
 but undeterred I step to the end.
 Dig it out later.

No king mackerels nibble.

An old couple ebbs by a scaling sink.
 Those birds, black reptile eyes piercing,

stalk on the railing.

Under a rim-frayed cap he looks up.

*Bait snatchers. That's what we call 'em—bout
 steal shrimp off the hook before it hits the water.*

At dusk from my balcony,
 my binoculars show the next tide
 arriving with poles, bait buckets, coolers,
 holstered fish knives, windbreakers, smokes,

the new moon unblinking.

Ghost Crabs

Ghost crabs have
burned-matchstick periscopes.
They flaunt ivory claws,
strut by neighboring bluffs,
duel over property lines.

I think of my sheetrock burrow,
my sandcastle tucked in suburb strands.

One king crab fashions the highest tower,
perches, taunts rivals—
until a draining ice chest
erodes his palace into a wet lump.

Sand gnats attack in bloodlust fury.
Cursing, I rise; the crabs dart into their dens.

Over sandy rims they peer at the ghost man,
scurrying up warping steps
and fading between bungalows
into a dark hollow surrounded
by mounds of sand.

Wrightsville Beach

The ocean's horizon—straight as a razor's slit
along a medal ruler—is punctured by a regatta
of sailboat masts along its edge.

A white pigeon bobs over sandy swells,
head in Ping-Pong cadence.
Its red-rimmed eye is keen
for a chip or thundering foot.

A toddler, astonished
at this bouncing shape, pauses:

Pigeon and child eye
plug in visual current
until the child, squealing,
lurches closer—

feathers explode and it
disappears under
a shady bungalow roost.

Late August

Clouds promenade
on a blue-thread horizon
as green waves stroke
bone-bleached sand.

A tidal pool is a child's ocean
as she plows a toy boat across,
beaches it upright on her shore
and ponders the V groove in the sand.

An old man kneads copper oil
into knotted cypress knees
impaling the baking air.
The South Wind blows memories

And tumbles Styrofoam cups.
He pauses, and
studies pale moons rising
under each furrowed fingernail.

Moonberry Delight

You stand unsuited—
chocolate dipped from solar vats
under moonlight frosting,
breasts and thighs are decorated—
two vanilla stripes (cherry topped).

Snowy teeth
flurry inside
a pink cone.

Pneumatology

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

—John 3:8.

July evening, Trade Street concert. Heat glows from bricks,
sidewalks. A band sprays sweat and folk jazz
on a reclining crowd sipping wine
as a couple pushes their boy, then dad locks brakes
on his wheelchair, a few yards from us.

The boy's legs are drumsticks, mouth an open bass drum.
His head is strapped, askew, upwards,
his eyes twilight blue, staring

until his trach tube plugs with mucus.
He jerks, chokes, carotid artery convulses.
Mom rises, strokes his brow, cradles a white towel,
until his brain stem expels a clot
and his face whitens again. She folds the towel,

rubs his hair through the set.
Dad rises, stoops on the other side
of the wheelchair, dabs his son's forehead, drains his trach.

At the band's break, we leave wondering
where they come from and where they go.

Trilogy

Blobs of rain
pound inlet
oyster grass

Pads of light
dab sand with
swabs of steam

Pelicans
veer between
troughs of waves

. .

Mist rises
in spires
from a pond

Dragonflies
search over
lily pads

Mosquitos
cloud above
my canoe

. .

Sickle moon
reaps fields of
cotton clouds

Breath of night
mountain mist
wets my cheeks

Galactic
pinwheels spin
in black skies

Magnolia Nights

Sweat oozes down my chest,
fills my navel,

trickles down hairy calves
into steamy sheets as I read
against a soggy pillow.

Mist chokes the air.
Cicadas whirl. I can hardly bear
this sagging ceiling, dripping overhead.

Outside is the wild—
humidity drains on beaded grass,
teams of mosquitos' roar,
trees are dark sentinels in misty yards.
A blackbird sprays its song on the screen.

Listen:

You can hear sweat seeping
on a glass of iced tea,
through dank walls, puddled floors,
pouring on slippery skin.

Night wrings dark drops,
drowns bed light in this muggy room.

Only a cool breeze can sop
sweat of this draining night.

Spooning

Spooning submerged granola
under strawberry yogurt
in a wine glass is like—nothing!
Any simile profanes.

Spooning granola
under strawberry yogurt
is pure metaphor—transporting me,
spoonful after spoonful

as I shut my eyelids

munching, slurping, tasting, swallowing

until I scrape up the last crunch

and lick

the last

pink

drop.

Grace

At night I recline in this screened back porch,
three moths thump against the grid.

After weeks of baked dust,
moisture touches my cheek
and curls a paperback on the chair.

Distant rumblings never arrive.
A spittle of rain brushes by.

Off with the light.
The porch is dark as metro soot.
Drenched with pitch,
these eyes—insatiable jewels—are blind

in a pavilion of silence.

The Hour Before

at Blackwater Baptist Cemetery
behind the loose-shingled steeple,
a massive cedar shades
lichen-capped tombstones
bent askew by centuries
of blistering heat and pitiless ice
as I wait beneath, bough-shaded,

for the service under a blue tent
some seventy feet away, where her body
rests in its wooden cocoon.

Dragonflies surf heatwaves
as sweat soaks my collar and tie.

Odd
how spacetime curves into that
black hole singularity
under the coffin,

and how the vision of her smiling face—
beatific—beams through tears to come.

Like Wind

I came like water, and like wind I go.

—*Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, stanza 112

Taut as ripe pears we were, bright fruit
 in moonlight on the porch lounger.
 Smooth as grape skin, fingertips
 began their descent from surface to depth
 and then strawberry tips kissing, licking.

. . .

Past ripe. Gravity is adamant.
 On my hands, brown spots between blue tributaries
 seem as speckled Salmon, swimming toward their source
 as too, we must. One more waterfall ahead.

I sweep cobwebs from the lounger legs
 and dust from the arms.

One evening in summer moonlight
 shadows fill in wrinkles. We drink
 coconut milk and as the tide crests—
 we drown under waves and gasp for air.

I lay my head
 on your swelling
 and sinking chest.

Like wind we go.

3. AUTUMN

Daybreak

Dawn's eye
peeks over
briny waters.

Lightning chisels
channels through
waterfalls of rain.

Towering
black water crests,
pummel shores

and gusts carry
soaring leaves over
salt-crusted grass.

On the Deck

Our work crew unpacked a rip saw,
reciprocating saw, table saw, saw horses, levels, drills,
hammers, wood screws, shank nails, lag bolts and deck lumber

as Bessie, seventy-something, greeted us on her splintery deck.
Avoiding wobbly handrails, she stepped over a missing plank,
hair silver-streaked in the October sun. Yellow jackets
hovered lazily about, tempered this cool morning.

Wielding sledge hammers, pry bars, and back leverage,
we grunted loose and tossed warped steps,
nailed stringers, screwed joists underneath. Spiders
and crickets peered at these Leviathan invaders
sawing and nailing sawing and screwing, resawing
and refitting

as sawdust drifted over her lawn. A splinter
pierced my palm from a weatherworn beam.

New steps, planks and railings made a woody resurrection.
When done, Bessie grabbed the railing, studied new planks,
Rubbed her slipper on a step, looked around.
My my... my my... my soul...

Sawdust footprints followed ahead.

Sipping Applewhite Spirits

31°

In the pines this evening
breath hovers in misty apparition.
A lone stone chimney—a farmer's obelisk—
stands where planks and beams
passed through termite guts centuries ago.

Stars pin-hole the dark attic;
their cold light chills my face

as Pisces drifts in its celestial sea,
its scales hundreds of light years' old
fluttering to earth.

Am I gazing up? Or down
into the bottomless abyss,
where gravity glues my boots with pinesap
to this pine straw ceiling?

Sandy

Two bodies shiver inside a bathroom
as the bungalow quivers, shifts.

Pressing together, storm surges drenches
the shorelines, brackish crests
blast and batter,
darkness clamps tight
as mussel halves, until a salty blade
pries open the basement
filling the corridor

and the bungalow floats away.

At 70

Seasons blink on the screened
back porch, potted plants venting
green pyroclastic flow; jays squawking
at each other across the birdbath

until first frost crusts the deck
and hones blades of grass.

At 70 a soul projects memories
on mind or porch screen—that time where
kissing and kissing burst magma
through pours and fingertips,
bodies screams for eruption
behind a dune that July night.

Mouthwatering even at 70.

On My 71st

I bob on the S-shaped metal chair
in my screened-in back porch shrine.
Sip peach apricot black tea,
inhale rose hip, orange peel, peach
aromas as bee's honey soaks
my taste buds into euphoria.

A Tufted Titmouse squabbles at a Wren
drinking from a stainless-steel bowl.
They eye each other then
suddenly streak toward trees
as a large ebony shape lands
by the bowl, beak clamping on

a hamburger bun absurdly white
against purple-sheened feathers.
It scans 360, drops it in the water,
pecks over and over
until saturated, plops
the mushy bun on the deck

and savors morsel by morsel
like bread dipped in a chalice.
Preening, stretching wings, the Corvus
lifts toward the canopy and vanishes.
I raise my teacup in toast,
sip honey at the bottom of the cup.

Apparition

on
a window
at night.
A stormy
black out.
Dark drops
thinning
fog settling

A candle
flickers,
a phantom
glazes on
glass.

Snuffing the wick,
is the window
of darkness
opening or
closing?

4. WINTER

Cawcophony

Caws grate on January calm.
Through skeletal branches, fingery twigs,
a huddled shape roosts.

Crows hover above, squawk from neighboring limbs.
It gazes, ear tufts silhouetting grey skies.
The black murder thickens, circles, croaks
over the bleak sycamore.

A cat stalks from the deck
and crows turn towards it.
The owl bursts through a woody portal,

feathers spiraling toward wet pine straw. Geese
honk, skim over treetops. The cat

races under the deck.

One by one crows rise and plunge
in winter mist. One remains, ruffles feathers,
preens, and glares at the empty perch.

2°

In this dark living room:

Powdery snow
blasts against the picture window
and drifts on the sill. Wind pierces
between the pane's molecular crevasses,
nicking my cheeks.

Touching the pane,
it crystallizes my fingertips,
stiffens my arm, frosts my hairs,
hardens arteries into blue ice.

As fingers fuse to the window,
my body freezes solid

and my last thought shatters

into hexagonal jags

that blend into white pitch.

“The Reality of the Unseen”

—A chapter title in James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*

Six inches last night. Junipers, shagged with snow, bow

as next door I shovel an elderly couple’s driveway.
Against the whiteness, black asphalt is a desecration.

In the distance, a wind chime pierces the mute cold.
Its character is its destiny, too.

A blue shadow appears unseen behind a house
until the sun peers through clouds.

A Cardinal hops towards a Juniper.
her tracks are twin stick men, raising arms
in exaltation as they multiply behind her.

The Unseen abounds over and under drifts,
peeks through a porch screen slash.

Unseen but visible

Stilling

Snow anemones sag to crystalline lawns,
windy gusts clearing their branches.

A Cardinal seems a cherry on a frosty limb,
fluffing at a female peeking
from a juniper bough.

As I stare through the picture window,
the snowy frame presses my retina
and when eyes close

the white rectangle lingers
and fades into inner pitch.

Thoughts swell, burst into
a polar-capped squirrel's nest,
a snow crystal fused on glass...

barely breathing... silent... still...

until the Unseen fills all.

Night Walk

Feel this hush fall:

snowy drapes hang on window sills

wires sags under icy rinds

full moon sheds needles
into powdery cushions.

As cold prickles your toes,
discover the mute snowman.

This glittery sentry
gazes at you with button eyes
under frosty eyebrows.

Take gloves off and wave—
when fingertips chill,
touch your raw cheeks

and rejoice at being alive.

Glazed

Glistening in headlights,
icy trees are deep-sea hydras.
Our house fills with chilly pitch. In candlelight
my breath billows against a bureau
as I rummage for sweatpants and wool socks.

In the den, we burrow under sleeping bags.
The fireplace stretches its red-coal throat
wide as a Roc hatchling.

I doze, and dream a spark lands on the rug
when upstairs a pipe seizes—clangs from Cold's bludgeon.

Awake, shuddering,

I hold my breath and listen for spurting water

but only flickers of flame

echo from dark corners.

7°

Warm this polar night—as he treks across
this black-pebbled beach, boots crunching,
salt spray crusting his eyebrows.
Surf ebbs at low tide. On rippled sand
terns squabble over a frozen fish head.

He enters the massive ribcage, stripped bone-bare
by bears, foxes, ravens and gulls. x
Jawbones seem to point as they jut forward.

Starlight-splashed ribs arch around him
and above, a majestic spine

his fingers cannot reach. Between bones
the Zodiac showers into his brown eyes,
beads on his fur parka. A blast of wind

shoves him against a rib—he grasps,
steadies, gazes to the faint horizon,
to the Great Bear

and beyond the darkness
tomorrow will bring.

Railroad Crossing

Tunneling under spruce branches,
we laid model train tracks in an oval around the base,
mirror ornaments reflecting our designs.

Around and around the Lionel freight engine,
coal car, cattle car, flat car with toy trucks, tank car,
and caboose rumbled over carpet plains as Boo Boo
shivered on the couch, ears twitching, head askew.

At a county crossing—no lights no gate,
tracks emerged from its vanishing point
on a curve and John thrilled to park in the middle,
church key on the dash, Corvair belching blue plumes,
then ignition off, radio blasting until we heard
the distant whistle. He winked in the rear-view mirror,
the black leviathan storming closer and closer,
tracks quaking, he'd twist the key,
clamp the steering wheel knob and
spin tires inches from the twilight zone.

The last day I remember,
near zero and dropping, snow hard as ice,
the crossing crusted with frozen slush,
sand, oily grit, salt, flattened cans,

radio broken, heater baking, a crow
cawing on top of the icicled crossing sign,

the locomotive thundered around the curve.
John as usual flipped the bone,
winked, turned the key

and wincing is all I remember.

Asleep

A Cardinal is mystified, perched on a stainless-steel dog dish
as it gazes into frozen water—at that fluffy red reflection

miming every move.

By the wooden fence a frozen feathered shape is
irrelevant at 19° as wind pounds a fence.
Overhead, Canadian geese lance through gray skies.

I jog, wearing a ski mask and surgical mask,
through swirls of snow into upper Bethabara,
its ancient Moravian cemetery checkered
by gravestones protruding from snow.

I pause, panting, at one on the furthestmost corner.

Brushing snowdust, I see the name eroded, only

1741– 1794.

Sleeping.

Consider

From millions of degrees in suns' cores
to -453° in deepest pitch,

narrow is the thermal zone
where life ranges in frenzy,
devouring and breeding.

At noon a mutt pants in an SUV,
windows cracked, until her dazed eyes
sing closed under an inferno of asphalt waves.

At night a hiker on her autumn quest,
three days from that logging road,
hunkers under a ledge. A blizzard
blasts her tent away like a severed spinnaker.
The last Sterno can flickers out. Her body heat sinks
in whispers, eyes glaze to ghostly sheen.

Consider how life stretches and snaps
between a few degrees.

And It Was Night

In this bleak mid-winter
come with me into the cave
crunching down a pebbled path,
steadying candles, stony plaque thickening,
mildew filling our noses and settling
over the barren bed

where we sit on damp boulders,
drip wax at our feet,
then trace flickering faces on granite walls.

We nod, blow them out;
red wicks dim and disappear

and we behold darkness, so pure—
no shade, no shadow, no sound, no breath
nothing here, nothing not here—

but this dark blood filling our ventricles.

This Old House

Glance through your attic windows
to distant steps three stories below.

Realize your residence
is a furnace of passion and pain—
condemned to sagging eaves,
arthritic joists, buckling loins
and clogging pipes

no matter how much you shingle
or scrape and paint the facade.

The attic will drift with dust
and vents will cease their breath.
The bulldozer's blade
will push your rubble into a pit.

Again, gaze to the steps below:
You are only a tenant
leasing this old house of squeaking
soles and shriveling ducts

and then, your dwelling
with its leaky roof and drafty jams
will never matter as it once did.

Open the gable window,
crouch on the sill.

At windpuff, dive and bob
on currents of light.