



**where the  
growth begins**

**scott simpson**

# **Where the Growth Begins**

**Poems selected from Scott Simpson's 1990-2010 notebooks  
and expressed as**

## **Americana / Roots Music**

# Poems/Tracks

## Table of Contents

|                                               |           |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|
| .....                                         | 1         |
| <b>A Few Words About the Poems/Songs.....</b> | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Artifacts .....</b>                        | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Juniper .....</b>                          | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Cellophane .....</b>                       | <b>10</b> |
| <b>The Cold Stone Barn .....</b>              | <b>13</b> |
| <b>I Can't Sleep .....</b>                    | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Wodwo .....</b>                            | <b>15</b> |
| <b>My Thumb.....</b>                          | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Behind the Eyes.....</b>                   | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Elemental .....</b>                        | <b>18</b> |
| <b>45 b-side .....</b>                        | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Amerigo .....</b>                          | <b>20</b> |
| <b>Holding to the Bone.....</b>               | <b>21</b> |
| <b>South of Town .....</b>                    | <b>22</b> |
| <b>A Quiet Place with Strangers.....</b>      | <b>23</b> |

## ***A Few Words About the Poems/Songs***

### **“Artifacts” (poem / track #1)**

Setting the stage for the entire album (and providing the album title) is “Artifacts”. This poem digs into the idea of soil as the source and fertile origin of all our stories, rememberings, discoveries and growth. As a child, I recall hours of digging in dirt, pulling out treasures, immersed in the scent of late spring lilacs and longing to be an archeologist. We are rooted in the planet that grew us. To forget this is to forget ourselves.

### **“Juniper” (poem / track #2)**

In the town where I grew up was a park. This park had slides and swings and teeter-totters... but it had something even better. East Hill Park in York, Nebraska had three or four large, round, ancient juniper bushes. Each had a different interior structure, and each made a unique and compelling “fort” for any child brave enough to crawl in. I remember spending what seemed like hours inside my favorite one, with only the crickets, peering out to watch and listen to whatever interesting things were going on or being discussed in my little town. I was an unseen watcher, the fly on the wall, until I crawled out when it was time to head home.

### **“Cellophane” (poem / track #3)**

(TRIGGER WARNING & PARENTAL GUIDANCE— SENSITIVE CONTENT)

When I was 8 or 9, and in 4th grade, Barb, another 4th grader in my class, slipped me a note that quoted a popular Beatles song. It said, “I want to hold your hand at recess. Scott” And then it had 2 check boxes labeled “Yes” and “No”. I felt strange about it, but also oddly compelled and so I marked “Yes”. Later, the following summer, I was on a trip to California with my family, and we stopped to get some supplies at a Kmart in Salt Lake City. I did what I always did back home when we went shopping and said, “I’m going to the toy section” as I took off where I figured it would be. My parents probably said something like, “30 minutes!” In the aisle with the trains, I was exploring what I might want that coming Christmas, a cool Chattanooga train engine in a blue and white box that had already been opened once. A sexual predator was there too. He’d already bumped into me once in an odd way that hadn’t even made me think twice. I was wholly unaware of this sort of thing. “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” was on the store radio, connecting these two experiences for me— Barb and this man—in a way that made them both feel somehow messed up. Thankfully, I jerked my arm away and escaped to find my mom and dad... but it was 20 minutes down the highway before I was even able to tell them about the man in the train aisle, long after he’d already gone on about his business. The experience turned my small, safe world inside out and upside down. I never saw a stranger— or myself— the same ever again.

### **“The Cold Stone Barn” (poem / track 4)**

I remember visiting my grandfather’s old barn at the family homestead in Arkansas. It wasn’t the “stone barn” in this poem, but was a lovely, messy and haunting place that had stood for a

very long time... long beyond its actual use as a barn. Old barns seem always to have one foot in the world of man-made things and one stepping further back into nature. I've seen old houses and old cabins doing the same... it's like a magic trick that takes a century to complete transforming from planned structure to organic sprawl. When I've been in places like that, it feels like if I'm quiet enough and still enough, I just might be able to observe the way that trick is done... and be a part of it.

#### **"I Can't Sleep" (poem / track 5)**

This is the one poem/song that did not come from my early notebooks, but rather, was written just a few days ago. I've not been sleeping well. I wake in the middle of the night, toss and turn for a bit, run down a checklist in my head of things coming up tomorrow, snuggle one of my big furry dogs and fall back into a restless sleep. I'm certain much of it is our current political and social dividedness. Too much hatefulness. There is much that needs to be buried, but knowing what, when, how and having the will, the shovel and the gloves to do it is the key. I'm certain if we manage to get it done something beautiful will grow... and we'll all sleep better.

#### **"Wodwo" (poem / track #6)**

In 1988 I first read Ted Hughes' Wodwo. At the time, it struck me as a very mystical, earthy tale of a creature being born out of bog and root and soil into the world... struggling not only to understand the world, but more importantly, to know itself.

Then, I got busy and forgot about it. Apparently, it had impacted me at a very visceral level. I had written my own Wodwo poem and forgotten about it completely until almost ten years later when I found this strange and wondrous poem in one of my old journals—in my own handwriting—and had no memory of writing it at all. I read it as one would read a poem by any poet, and yet, somehow, I knew it was mine.

I immediately looked up the title and reread the Hughes poem. I had a vague feeling of having been prompted by Hughes' poem to write my own, but still had no memory of writing it.

"Wodwo," as it turns out, is the mythical "wild man of the woods," a sort of secret identity I've embraced as my own ever since. It felt as if I'd been given the gift of writing my own "poem of myself," and then been given the gift of it feeling as though I hadn't written it at all, had simply received it.

A poem taken in; a poem penned and lost; a stranger received at the door who turns out to be the returning prodigal; a triple gift.

#### **"My Thumb" (poem / track #7)**

I have a scar on my thumb. It looks like a little mouth. This poem came as a meditation on what we are able to do because of our development of "opposable" thumbs. We swing hammers, pick up wheelbarrows. Mine wraps around a guitar neck, allows me to grip a pen, hits the space bar. My little mouth sings, speaks and tells it like it is. Thank-you thumb.

#### **"Elemental" (poem/track #8)**



The natural world is our home of birth. Its patterns are our patterns, its structures are the structures that shape our bodies, our instincts and our urges without our conscious awareness. When I fail most extravagantly, is with other human beings. Relational patterns are fraught with ego, driven by relational traumas we've inherited, propelled by desperate reactions sparked by our little amygdalas— well-suited for emergency use to escape predators, but clumsy in social and relational settings.

Research has shown us that “forest-bathing” walking a meadow, or observing the flow of a river can reset our scattered patterns of interaction, calm anxiety, soothe that amygdala into letting the seat of empathy, connection and reason back into the driver's seat.

After a walk in the hills, I return home, more myself... my better self. The self who brings the calm patterns of the elements we're made of to the ones I love.

#### **“Behind the Eyes” (poem/track #9)**

I don't recall who showed me the photo, but I do know so many people who have gone through the tragedy of losing a child. I know that we as human beings need an image to freeze, to hold on to, to embellish with time once our lost loved one has made the journey out of the ongoing story of our lives. In that way, the photo we cling to becomes much like that ancient, gold covered, hand-painted sarcophagus that held the child Pharaoh, Tutankhamen. It's the image we choose to see— the one that we associate with all the memories of the past, the one we continue to decorate and venerate. It's not what's behind the lid, behind the image, behind those eyes. No, what's behind is that very hard reality that still, for years upon years, seems so unreal.

#### **“45 B-Side” (poem / track #10)**

I had a tight childhood friend group. Some are still very close, a few I've lost touch with. One has died. Just before I turned 45, one of my good friends was turning 45. We'd stayed in touch, but mostly just through Facebook and email. A couple of the many things we have in common is an interest in making music, and old, odd or homemade instruments. I went to his page on his birthday to see what he'd been up to. He'd done a series of videos in which he was playing a harmonium and sending his rich baritone voice out across the internet. I imagined the monitors, mice and speakers across America clicking through his performances, a man in Chicago, hitting, perhaps, the half-way point in his (and my own) life, and entering the “b-side” of that record... and I wrote him this birthday poem.

#### **“Amerigo” (poem / track #11)**

My early adult life took a smooth and reasonable trajectory:

Age 22: Bachelor's degree, married, first high school teaching position

Age 24: First child

Age 28: Master's degree, second child, first college teaching position

Age 33: PhD, second college teaching position, Assistant Professor

My friend Mark (from “45 B-Side”) was on what seemed to me to be a much more adventurous and uncharted journey of exploration. I liked the stability and predictability of my voyage, but also admired and was a bit jealous of his adventures. My own adventures—where my growth really started in earnest—initiated at age 36 when the smooth sailing of my life ended with the (unfair, in my opinion) denial of promotion and tenure.

As part of my pursuit of publication to be tenured (as a writing professor with a PhD in poetry writing) I had been submitting and publishing as many poems as possible. That included this poem about my friend, about the adventure and exploration of his journey, about the “uncharted” nature of it (from my point of view) about my admiration, and of course, my concern that he not be “lost” somehow on this grand exploration. This poem was nominated for a prestigious Pushcart Prize in poetry in 2000. I didn’t win the prize, I was denied tenure, my real adventures began... I lost jobs, moved 5 times, lost friends, was branded a heretic...and yet, neither my friend Mark nor I have “gone down in waters black as India ink”. Watching him chart some of these waters ahead of me has always been a help.

### **“Holding to the Bone” (poem/track #12)**

Written in my mid 20s, as I was still grappling with my own transition from kid to husband/father/teacher/adult, this poem feels even more urgent now. We seem to be living in a society addicted to harshness. We exalt those who are forceful, we think more violence, more weaponry, stricter, sharper reactions will protect us because we are afraid— more afraid than ever— of each other. Things that rise only from gentleness, quietness, sensitivity... things like poetry, music, altruistic service, attention to the marginalized... are either very rare or are being mutated into marketable commodities designed as virtue signals.

Yeah, I know, THIS is a harsh preview of a harsh poem made into a harsh song complaining about harshness. Ironic and a bit hypocritical? Maybe. But if I gently whispered to the world, “You know, the meek will inherit the earth...” would anyone hear it? Would anyone take it to heart?

Have we yet?

### **“South of Town” (open/track #13)**

Why do we step off and measure, set up boundaries and borders, build fences, walls, dividers? Robert Frost once quoted a neighbor who stubbornly held to his father’s saying, “Good fences make good neighbors...”

Maybe a better question would be, “Why do we cut ourselves off from so much richness, wildness, openness? Hemming ourselves in makes for a darker, more fearful and threatening “otherness” that stretches globally across the planet that birthed us. It diminishes us. It makes us strangers to our true selves.

### **“A Quiet Place With Strangers” (poem/track #14)**

I facilitate retreats and experiences for educators, clergy, inmates, communities, and a variety of individuals using the Circle of Trust, developed by Parker Palmer and the Center for Courage

& Renewal. Our goal is to open a space in which trust can be built, the soul can show up, and human beings can support one another in the difficult work of listening, reflecting and respecting the voices of others and our own inner voice.

One of our most intense and wonderful processes is an ancient practice of Quakers: the Clearness Committee. An individual gets the better part of two hours as the focus person with a committee of 5 or 6 individuals. Often, these individuals aren't "friends". They aren't family members or close colleagues. Friends, family and colleagues are people we talk with often, people we even seek advice from.

The committee members are simply fellow human beings who have agreed to operate by a particular set of guidelines ("touchstones") not to fix, solve, advise, counsel, or diagnose the focus person, but to support them with deep listening and open, honest questions. The focus person gets a safe and supportive place to hear their own inner teacher/self/conscience/wisdom and reflect. It's a powerful and potentially very healing process. I've been on dozens of committees and have been a focus person three times. In a way, the clearness committee is a concentrated version of what healthy human engagement can be. Free of manipulation, ego, unwanted advice, competitive storytelling, impulsive outbursts, protective disengagement.

It's also a reminder that we are all human beings, capable of empathy and respect, able to support one another— not because we owe it, we earned it or we'll rise because of it— but because that's what human beings do for one another.

I wrote "A Quiet Place With Strangers" after one of my earliest experiences as a Clearness Committee member.

# Artifacts

I'm burying my head deep  
into a distant May

a stretch from this late January  
where an unseasonable warmth  
has reawakened  
these lilacs beneath my skin

(they sprawl varicose-like  
patterning purple clusters  
across the outsides of my forearms  
around the backs  
of my shoulders)

Come close  
you'll smell it on my breath.  
The dark soil radiant but cool  
just three handfuls down:  
water from an early spring melt  
miles of prairie grass and mountain away  
filtering deep to the snaking roots

The china-doll's broken foot  
spent shell casings  
and chimney stones  
marked by old fires  
have torn my nails  
lifting the protective layer  
to wedge the nutrients  
deep into my fingers  
where the growth begins



# Juniper

It has eyes  
blue beads dusted  
with chalk, blind  
upon each limb

he picks them  
rubs them open  
between his thumb  
and palm  
deep in the sticky belly  
of gnarled branches

no wind  
no sound  
but the cricket's chirp  
and that, only after  
he sits  
still enough  
long enough  
to become  
juniper

If you stand  
at twilight  
near the edge  
of the park  
you may see  
a round juniper  
giving birth  
to a small boy

the boy, some say  
with eyes  
in back of his head



# Cellophane

I'm opening the blue box  
already torn at the edge

it's alright to open  
boxes in the store  
if they're already torn—  
like this blue  
and white box

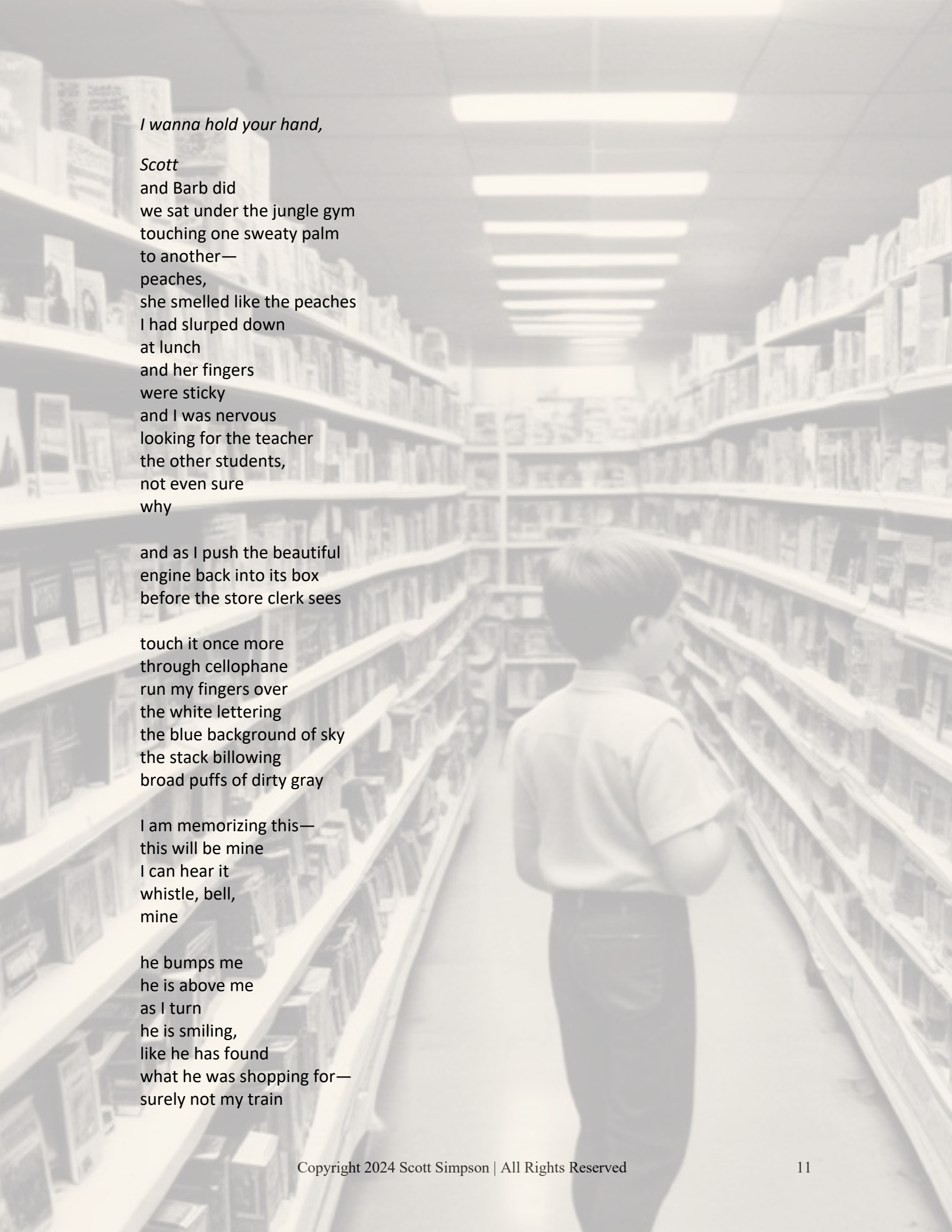
*Chattanooga*  
across the top  
it's cellophane  
rattling as I slip  
open the end to slide  
the inner box  
only part way out  
enough to touch  
the engine

this is what I have dreamed  
under my fingers  
every detail  
nuggets of coal  
in the box  
the brass rails  
the silver wheels

I can tell it's heavy  
without lifting it  
from the blue box  
with the white letters

the store radio  
is familiar  
with a song I've heard  
a million times  
*I wanna hold your hand*  
*I wanna hold your hand*



A young boy with short brown hair, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and dark pants, stands in a library aisle. He is looking at a book on a shelf. The aisle is lined with tall bookshelves filled with books. The ceiling has several long, rectangular light fixtures. The overall tone is soft and nostalgic.

*I wanna hold your hand,*

*Scott*

and Barb did  
we sat under the jungle gym  
touching one sweaty palm  
to another—  
peaches,  
she smelled like the peaches  
I had slurped down  
at lunch  
and her fingers  
were sticky  
and I was nervous  
looking for the teacher  
the other students,  
not even sure  
why

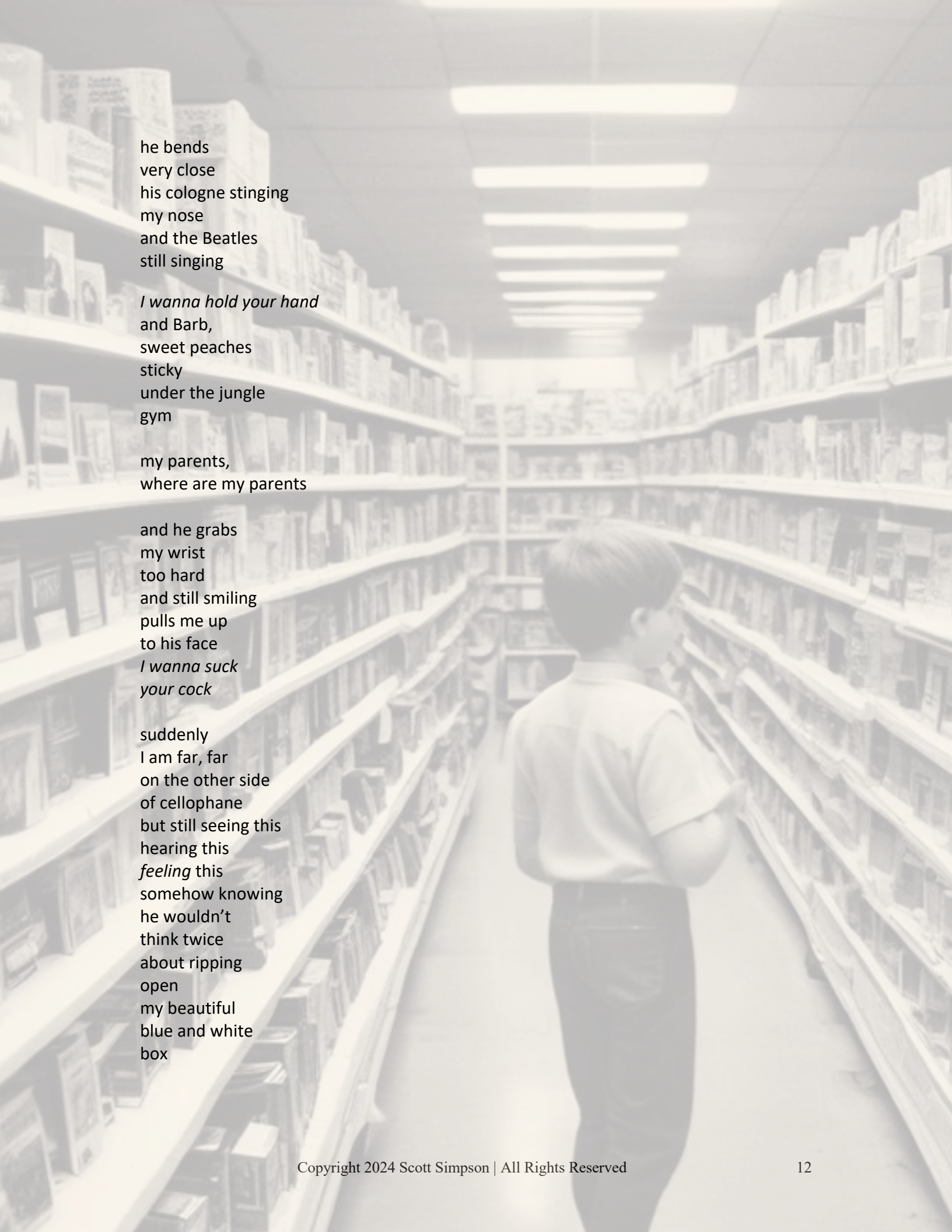
and as I push the beautiful  
engine back into its box  
before the store clerk sees

touch it once more  
through cellophane  
run my fingers over  
the white lettering  
the blue background of sky  
the stack billowing  
broad puffs of dirty gray

I am memorizing this—  
this will be mine  
I can hear it  
whistle, bell,  
mine

he bumps me  
he is above me  
as I turn  
he is smiling,  
like he has found  
what he was shopping for—  
surely not my train



A young boy with short brown hair, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, stands in a library aisle. He is looking at a book on a shelf. The aisle is lined with tall bookshelves filled with books, and the ceiling has several long fluorescent lights.

he bends  
very close  
his cologne stinging  
my nose  
and the Beatles  
still singing

*I wanna hold your hand*  
and Barb,  
sweet peaches  
sticky  
under the jungle  
gym

my parents,  
where are my parents

and he grabs  
my wrist  
too hard  
and still smiling  
pulls me up  
to his face  
*I wanna suck  
your cock*

suddenly  
I am far, far  
on the other side  
of cellophane  
but still seeing this  
hearing this  
*feeling* this  
somehow knowing  
he wouldn't  
think twice  
about ripping  
open  
my beautiful  
blue and white  
box

# The Cold Stone Barn

smells of wet soil  
and old manure

the mice have burrowed  
through the brown-gold hay

the dead cat is missing  
an eye

from 40-foot rafters  
a rope swings its  
rusty pulley

sun fingers oil cans  
through gaps in the roof

the mare stamps once  
lifts her long head  
over the gate

in the buzzing of flies  
the taste of hay  
in my teeth  
I watched the rope twist  
hour upon hour



# I Can't Sleep

I can't sleep, but I can't stay awake  
I can't sleep, but I can't stay awake  
Talk to me, talk to me  
And listen, for Heaven's sake  
I can't sleep but I can't stay awake

I can't love, but I cannot hate  
I can't love you, but I cannot hate  
Walk with me, walk with me  
Perhaps we'll stumble upon the remains  
Of fate  
I can't love, but I cannot hate

We are gloves opening the garden gate  
We are hands within these gloves  
Finishing the work of this day  
Rest with me, rest with me  
And all that grows in soil will be remade  
Hands in gloves are digging  
Lovely graves  
Digging lovely graves  
Digging lovely graves  
Sleep, and grow and love and shade me  
As I bury hate  
Bury hate

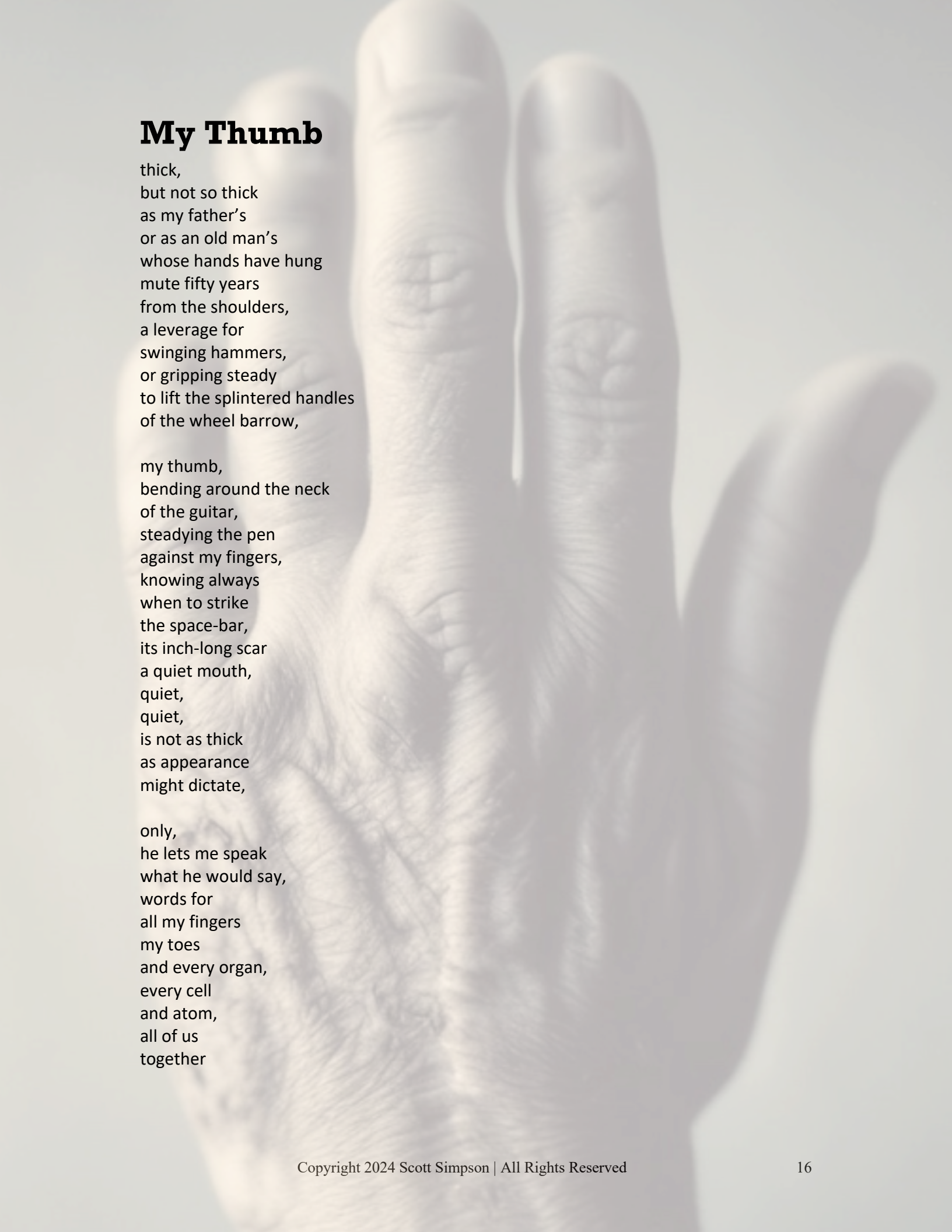
No more hate

# Wodwo

I see him there,  
Swaying his stark legs  
And somehow not quite me  
In that dark glass I always look through...

And he smiles  
With some kind of recognition.





# My Thumb

thick,  
but not so thick  
as my father's  
or as an old man's  
whose hands have hung  
mute fifty years  
from the shoulders,  
a leverage for  
swinging hammers,  
or gripping steady  
to lift the splintered handles  
of the wheel barrow,

my thumb,  
bending around the neck  
of the guitar,  
steadying the pen  
against my fingers,  
knowing always  
when to strike  
the space-bar,  
its inch-long scar  
a quiet mouth,  
quiet,  
quiet,  
is not as thick  
as appearance  
might dictate,

only,  
he lets me speak  
what he would say,  
words for  
all my fingers  
my toes  
and every organ,  
every cell  
and atom,  
all of us  
together



# Behind the Eyes

*from a photo*

The boy with  
his perfect eyes,  
deep pools of color,  
in this posed moment  
is the shining  
sarcophagus  
they will place  
the body  
within

We will not watch  
as flesh shrivels  
beneath linen wrappings  
they have  
already removed  
spleen, lungs, liver  
heart

Anytime, night  
or day  
this picture is available  
for your viewing  
only do not look  
behind the eyes

# Elemental

Something in dirt,  
wind,  
damp grasses swaying  
at my calves  
pulls me in,  
and I want  
to bare my skin  
like a  
torch  
at every vista,  
a living conflagration

above,  
among,  
open,  
a part,  
driving coldness  
from the autumn  
air

and though, I swear  
your hair's  
the same blonde  
as the grass,

would swear  
that something  
fertile's waiting  
to take root,

winter's settled in---  
new snow  
making ashes  
of our fire

and I search the hills  
to bring home  
some alchemy  
to regain  
what has become inert  
between us.



# 45 b-side

for Mark

you are there  
on your harm-  
onium

windy city blowing your  
45 hotter, 'stead of out

pulling out the stops  
for an audience  
of monitors  
and mice,

you count the days  
till this year's  
*auld lang syne...*

times gone by  
time's gone,  
bye



# Amerigo

I know exactly  
where he is tonight  
by candlelight  
in a small apartment  
in Lincoln, NE  
the hot needle  
in his hand  
injecting the ink  
into his skin

he maps his  
body, an explorer  
of sorts  
a cartographer  
a Columbus  
a Vespucci

I fear  
he may be lost  
at sea

I will show you  
in my glove box atlas  
where I last saw him,  
where you might  
find him  
if he has not yet  
gone down

but beware:  
he is charting  
unmarked waters, black  
as India ink



# Holding to the Bone

They say, "The flesh is weak,  
but the spirit is willing."  
The bone is immovable.

When the talk turns frigid  
and brittle,  
I break off my words,  
indigestibly able  
to lacerate the throat and stomach  
when swallowed whole.

This affair with anger  
pains the softer parts of me,  
the smooth, fleshy underside  
that flinches beneath the knife.  
So I hold to the bone.

The marrow is a bitter meal,  
crystalline between my teeth;  
the shaft is steel...  
white with severity of purpose:

REMAIN CONSTANT, STEADFAST, HABITUAL.  
(habit, you see, is the bone of  
perseverance...  
that is why we speak of "breaking" habits)

The tender are always the first to go---  
we roll them into tiny compliances,  
bricks to prop the infrastructure.  
They have not yet become addicted  
to the pain of  
standing erect.  
Homo Sapien,  
top-heavy with your sapience,  
crumpling with curvature-of-the-perseverance,  
your fractured habits are  
healing crooked.  
I can hear them grinding beneath  
the pale skin of your progress,  
and I know...  
I should have been born invertebrate



ENRE © 2024

## South of Town

horses are running  
with a wildness wider  
than the rancher's fences

beneath the  
their flanks  
weeds are swaying tall  
as my own forgetfulness

unmarked roads  
overgrown with saplings  
are exactly  
where we left them  
thirty years ago

everything has become  
something  
we never could have guessed

we looked down  
stepped off  
marked and measured

we hemmed in  
only ourselves





# A Quiet Place with Strangers

It takes a quiet place  
to unstop the ears of the soul;  
so much self-protection  
in the blaring societies we've made  
isn't easily undone;

it sometimes takes  
the gentle hands of strangers,  
warm water, a bulb-syringe,  
to free the plugs.

And as things wash down the sides  
of our heads,  
past our temples and over our cheeks  
we begin again to hear  
the music we'd almost forgotten:

lullabies... hummingbird wings...  
crickets under the porch...

After the coma  
we come  
back again  
to life  
knowing intimately  
the harmonics of silence  
in the presence of strangers,  
their hearts beating wordlessly

counter-rhythmic,  
embellishing, finally reviving  
our own.

There are no strangers.

