Living My Life As an Artist,
an Autobiography:
True Stories of Art, Love,
Family & the Creative Process
Told in Poetic Form

Rick Doble

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INTRODUCTION

About My Auto-Biographical Poems

The man who writes about himself and his own time
is the only man who writes about all people and all time.
~ George Bernard Shaw ~

Know Thyself
Inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, Greece

The past isn't dead. It isn't even past.
~ William Faulkner ~

To be a poet is a condition rather than a profession.
~ Robert Graves ~

It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book.
~ Friedrich Nietzsche ~

About a six weeks before my scheduled hip replacement operation, I wrote a full first draft of
an autobiography in prose, based on notes that I had been taking for the past year. There's
nothing like a major operation to make you aware of your mortality. :)

But immediately after the operation, I started hearing poetry in my head - in fact, in the
recovery room one hour later. Then out of the blue I saw an article about Peter Makuck's
poetry. His collected poems, Long Lens, is essentially an autobiography but not in
chronological order. His work is precise and yet easy to read - to me a modern day
Wordsworth. After finishing his book, I began to hear my own autobiography as poems, and
these works came quickly because I, in a sense, had already done the ground work with my
prose first draft. Over the next five weeks while I was in rehab at Snug Harbor Post Operative
Care in Sea Level, North Carolina - with not much else to do - I was able to enter the 'zone'
where poetry seemed to spring naturally in my mind.

I often hear words in my head - and when I hear these almost audible sounds (a muse?,
another voice?), I have learned to pay close attention. Most of the time what I hear is a
heightened clear prose but sometimes I hear poetry - and when I do, the work that results is
poetry.

Poetry is very personal to me. Some people think of it as a separate art form - and because of
that, it is often seen as academic or difficult. Yet to me it is quite different. Poetry is a voice, a
way of speaking, perhaps an ancient or forgotten way, more like song - hence the term lyric poetry. To me it is simply just another way of writing - but one which certain ideas demand, just as other ideas demand prose or the essay form. Unlike any other form, for example, poetry has the ability to move in and out of time - to speak of the moment and the infinite in one breath. Poetry demands images and transcendental thoughts combined with dense wording and tight control - so every word, comma, space is exactly where it should be.

The stories in these poems that follow are true. They are all based on real events at specific times in my life and presented in chronological order. Over ten were written during the last fifteen years - the others were written primarily while I was in rehab in 2010.

**Why write an autobiography?**

I had begun to think of an autobiography because I had just finished my book *Experimental Digital Photography* (Lark Books/Sterling Publishing, New York/London, 2010). With its completion I had achieved a life long goal. Since childhood I had wanted to discover and explore new modes of expression, to develop my art around those discoveries and then to write a definitive book. Now having accomplished that, I decided to look back at the path my life had taken. I wanted to understand the twists and turns that had enabled me to arrive at my desired destination which for decades had appeared impossible.
the day my father left
was the beginning of my memory

before that only faint pictures
Santa Fe
a rattle snake they had to kill

after that
the world sharply etched
my brain now jelled
so even with a child's mind
I had clear snapshots:

Daddy in a heavy overcoat
carrying plaid bags to our black car
coming back into the house

Mommy at the doorway
them yelling
me running, pulling on his hem
my eyes blurred
the hard thump
as he dropped the bags
hugging me
promising to come back

then me standing on the sidewalk
the old DeSoto
starting up
the smell of exhaust
leaving me
leaving me
its rough gears
as it climbed the road
in late afternoon
in yellow light
smaller
smaller
over the top of the hill
gone
gone

I felt a knife in my stomach
and a taste like metal
on my tongue

it was almost like the pain of birth
Teddy Bears in the Air
Age 5, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 1949

Genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will... 
with the analytical [adult] mind that enables it 
to bring order into the sum of experience, involuntarily amassed. 
~ Charles Baudelaire ~

When 
adults asked me 
I told them about an airplane 
that was always in the air 
and never came down 
it was a hospital plane 
with Teddy Bear doctors and panda nurses; 
people who needed to leave the Earth 
could be lifted up 
and given comfort

When 
my grandfather’s nurse 
took me for a walk 
I told her I wanted to marry her 
and live together in one of 
those small stone towers 
that was part of the wall 
of granddad’s gated community

When 
the hot dog man 
who had a cart 
on the pathway back to our house 
took a disliking, 
he yelled he was going to cook me 
like a wiener and eat me for dinner - 
so I ran home

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
scared I'd be caught
like Hansel and Gretel

When
at Christmas I went to see Santa,
he jumped out of a plane
and parachuted down
to the shopping center -
only he got tangled in
telephone wires
and I had to go before
they cut him down

Then
when I was 13
I saw a photograph
in an old *Life* magazine
of that same Santa dangling in the air,
as firemen on long ladders
worked to get him
back on the ground
Heading North
Age 7, Florida to Connecticut, 1951
a five day road trip, long before the interstate highways
- a prose poem -

Always
the windows in motion
like sitting close to the big screen
at a picture show -
now full of blue sky
now dark with trees, shadows and leaves
blurry, then sharp
sudden shafts of sunlight through the limbs
and hanging strands of Spanish moss -
his plastic seat hot with the sun,
blinding

The back seat was his world for the week which seemed like all he had known. They'd left Florida and weren't going back. They were headed for Sharon, Connecticut, where he'd been born but couldn't remember.

Now was the back seat and the windows, each one different: backwards the town they had just left: receding, smaller, the road tapering away; the front blurry, cars rushing toward them, yellow dots on the road zipping under the hood, dash, dash, dash; and the side windows with their crazy geometry: picket fences, plowed fields, moving like a marching band clip, clip, clip, making swirling patterns and triangular mazes.

And when he had gotten used to the seat swaying, the constant blur, the movement from and towards, chickens and laundry running before them like waves from the bow of a ship; when this seemed normal, then they would slow down, coming into a town; and the windows would slow, and the fences would slow; and it was no longer blurry and bouncy but instead he could smell the town, the newly plowed fields, the old black men ambling in the heat, people on porches rocking and fanning themselves. At the stop light he leaned out the window and heard a woman singing in the distance, a screen door slamming, people calling to each other, people he could almost touch while the car was still, waiting for the light to change - like tasting a cold bottle of Coke his mother never let him drink, on a hot day.

Then the jangling ring of his car pulling into a station, the hard clanging tools falling on garage cement, the sweet smell of gas, the man wiping the windows to remove the smashed bugs, the bird dodo, the thin film of oil from trucks after a light rain. And stretching, getting use to
standing because now he was more familiar with motion than his feet touching the ground. And when he could feel the mud squishing between his toes, the sharp gravel on the pavement, then they got back into the car, which slowly climbed up its gears until they were rushing again and the world was washing over their windows like a hurricane in Florida. And the car became the place he was, and the places they passed through like water or air, and he wasn't sure if the world was moving or the car was moving - at least that's the game he played with himself on the third day.

When the light turned gold and the low sun made the plowed fields look like black grooves etched into the earth, they stopped at small houses with bright red and blue flashing signs. The cabins were full of walls of knotty pine, like a large play house that he and his mother had to themselves. The man they shared the drive with stayed in the cabin next to theirs. The man cooked sweet fried chicken which the boy had never eaten, and he wanted to stay in this part of the world between Ft. Lauderdale and Sharon where the moss hung like Christmas icicles, and the black people sang songs in the evenings, and women laughed on their porches. When he went to sleep, he could feel the car moving under the springs of the bed.

But the next morning they were back in motion and soon the days of movement were over and he had returned to the place where he'd been born and never felt at home. The trip was over, a memory like Ft. Lauderdale, like a dream six months later in the snows of the Connecticut winter.
Skating On the Water
Age 11, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1956
a rainy day in summer

Rainy days were microscope days
when I glimpsed another kind
of gravity

sitting at my 'lab'
part real, part imagination
I was looking into secret worlds
for answers

a fly wing
sugar crystals
a half-tone photograph
an onion skin
my toe nail...

each of these magnified
revealed a different nature

during sunny days
I studied other worlds

lying on our small dock
I spent hours
watching the magic bugs
who skated on the pond's surface
without getting wet

and since the age of seven
I had set out in our row boat
each summer going a bit further
until I had explored
the coastline
from the mill at one end

to the falls at the other

so on this wet afternoon

when I looked out

from this windowed room

I knew

each fallen tree where the turtles hid

each sandy spot where fish laid their eggs

each clump of cattails

where startled black birds flew out

now like building a sand castle

and imagining a kingdom

I held up a slide

and thought of Louis Pasteur in the movie -

I could see my room of glass

full of experiments

cluttered with test tubes, flasks and Bunsen burners

then suddenly miles off

I heard the moan of fog horns

at the entrance to the Canal

I looked up to see clouds of mist

painting the houses across the pond

in dark grey

before they disappeared

turning to my microscope

I sliced a fragment

from our weeping willow tree

whose branches dripped into the pond

under the lens the cross section of

wood cells glowed transparently

like paper lanterns
that we lit every Fourth of July

and I knew
I had found my bearings
My older brother had crossed a line 
although it would take years to unravel

seeing him above me, 
hovering on the pond’s surface 
was like looking through a window 
in heavy rain

his strong arm held the top of my head 
under the water 
my hands flailed 
unable to loosen his grip

then his blurred face moved a bit 
and the sun behind him scattered light 
into knives of broken rays

he pushed me deeper 
below the water into eel grass 
where snapping turtles lived in the mud 
and where there was a darkness 
we all feared at the edge 
of the sandy swimming area

seconds went by 
then more 
then still more

I could not breathe

finally he let go 
and I bobbed
breaking from the water
into air

he taunted me when I surfaced
“Can't take a joke,
still a baby with a child's easy hurt.”

coughing and crying
my tears mixed with the drops
that fell from my face
I knew this 'horse play'
had gone too far -
after that I kept my distance

yet it would take another twenty years
before the final bond was broken
That winter was worse than most
I held a new emptiness that was
more than my usual pain:
the pain of a divorced family

On Sharon Mountain
the snow fell on top of snow
shaping drifting hills
into the cow pastures
and across the neighbors' yards

On the first day of snow,
early in the morning,
even asleep,
I knew it had fallen
because it was snow quiet
before the plows had cleared a path
and I dreaded the day of ice and wind

Yet from the second story window
I saw its unbroken beauty
it's whiteness cut through the black trees in the forest -
a view that was blocked by leaves the rest of the year -
and over fences, driveways
roads, stone walls -
it erased the boundaries
that normally divided my world

And with this winter starkness
my new pain returned

In December my mother had broken up with a man
I had hoped she'd marry,
a New York actor

He and I had become close friends
we had wandered the streets of the city together
and stayed up late watching his old movies;
ocasionally he was in a soap opera
that my mother had watched excitedly
on a neighbor's TV -
but now I was prohibited from seeing him

In January
the snow fell like a wall
as though it were the emptiness itself
and in the mornings I cried
and could not get up

Then like a gift
I became sick with an ear infection
and stayed home, away from school, for a week -
I was glad to be alone with my grief

In February
the snow was like a comfortable room
and I looked forward to the feelings of loss
I walked around on the mountain
and marveled at the frozen falls -
layers of ice formed from moving water
that had become locked in place
although the stream
still ran underneath

In March
my mother borrowed a small TV
with rabbit ears -
I said my illness had returned
so I could leave school early
In the afternoons I had the house to myself and because the mountain was so high I could get live dramas from New York during the golden age of television - the reception at best full of large flecks of static yet I hoped for a glimpse of Donald

Although I never saw him, the screen had become a window one that took me away

And as the snow melted the sharp stabbing began to dull - so I learned to add this new emptiness to my already existing hurt

And by spring the pain felt familiar
Bruce and I were thirteen
we were intellectuals
we hated football
we read Dostoevsky
and we never watched Gun Smoke on TV

But on Saturdays
at our secret place
we constructed a western bar
from piles of trash
dumped years ago in the woods

Carefully we built it board by board
rows of old bottles
empty picture frames hanging on imaginary walls
a complete room laid out
with poker tables
and dressing rooms for the B girls
shelves lined with liquor bottles
behind the bar
where rowdy ranch hands stood one leg up
pounding their fists demanding whiskey

When it was exact
when we could walk through it
and imagine the cow pokes
in every corner of the room
we were ready

We stood outside for a moment
like roughnecks who had been ordered to leave town
then we burst through the swinging doors
with heavy sticks
and wasted the gamblers who fell
onto their cards and poker chips
along with cattlemen who turned to defend themselves
but collapsed in our spray of gun fire

Next came the bar itself
bottles carefully placed in a row
were cleared with one swing of the wrecking stick

The rotten wood of the bar broke
like a chair across a cowboy's back
the saloon girls' cosmetic jars and perfumes
went down as they crashed against a stack of bricks

In just minutes an afternoon's work was trash again

Tired and excited
we leaned our sticks against a tree
where we could find them next time
and we swaggered triumphantly out from the woods

We ruled
The Silent Guns
Age 6 - 56, the decades 1950-2000

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?...
   No prayers nor bells...save the choirs,
   The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells
~ Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" ~
(killed November 4, 1918 during fighting in northern France)

In 1918
on the eleventh hour
of the eleventh day
of the eleventh month

the guns stopped firing

a soldier said
the silence was deafening
he was not being poetic

later my father came home to a normal world
that could no longer return to normal for him

caught between bouncing grenades
rolling down concrete steps
caught between the split second
that it took for his lieutenant
to toss them back
as they flashed and filled the air
with smoke and shards -
my father had been captured

at home, his capture remained
he had trouble holding a job, a marriage
finishing what he started

in New York

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
surrounded by rush hour crowds
he heard the scream
of an express subway
and dove down onto the platform
thinking that the screeching rails
were incoming shells

his family called him the 'artful dodger'
behind his back

he would have been better off
if he had lost an arm or a leg
but with no scars
it was left to me

like the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*
he recited his story over and over
and I learned it word for word
as I grew up

too young I could only sense
the wrongs that had been done to him
ones that he, himself, did not understand

so the shadow of that war
also marked me
with nightmares of mud, poison gas,
and corpses in no man's land

as I looked for answers
far into my adult years
HIGH SCHOOL: AGE 14-17

My Education Was Interfering With My Learning
Age 14-17, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire, 1958-1962

The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education.
~ Albert Einstein ~

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.
~ Pablo Picasso ~

At 10 pm my lights out
I listened for the heavy footed master
who stopped and checked each door
for cracks of light
as he descended the circular stairwell

I knew the sound
when he hit the bottom
- a faint echo up the well -
letting me know that danger had passed

but to be sure
I pushed clothes against the cracks
pressed the blind flat right up to the window
then covered my desk lamp
with a heavy flannel shirt

at last
my light back on
the time was mine
and for stolen hours
I could see things my way

from a hidden back-part of my desk drawer
I pulled out an illegal immersion heater
to boil water for tea,
scooped loose Earl Grey into a small pot
then slowly drank while savoring
Pepperidge Farm cookies
that reminded me of my mother's afternoon snacks

condemned to four years
to my father's alma mater
I thought I had no choice but to survive -
but this world was not my world
and their gods not my gods
surrounded by rules of grammar and logic
I craved a different realm:
sensual, emotional, wordless
and where I escaped to
was my father's love
of classical music -
memories of evenings
with ginger ale and ginger snaps
as we listened to symphonies

so at midnight I played Sibelius,
Beethoven, Brahms, Bach and Bartok
on my ear phones -
with no teacher to tell me
how to hear what I was hearing

alone I learned
to grasp directly what they were saying -
it was just between the composer and me

and sometimes after an hour
with a piece I knew note for note
I was moved to ‘air conduct’ -
a secret I shared with no one

then
about one or two, my freedom spent
I tore down my world
and fell to bed
- homework undone -
knowing that at seven
I would rise again
to shake off my lack of sleep
and chalk up another day
The Bells

The bells were our prison
deep, penetrating
they rang to the furthest edges
of the campus
and spoke of obligations and lost time

The bells rang early for breakfast
then in a series for chapel -
lunch was announced by the bells
and sports and afternoon classes
and dinner, check-in and lights-out
and the same bells counted out the hours
all during the night

The bells seemed alive
like a stern parent
always chiding us to hurry
to do our homework
to not let the moment slip by

Each of us found a way of escaping -
mine was to stay up late
when the hourly ringing
did not have the same sting
as it did during the day

Students passed along stories of others
who were locked in a struggle with time
like the guy who once a month
threw his clock so hard against the wall
that it exploded into springs and gears
When vacations began
we worked quickly to eradicate
the imprint of the bells -
within minutes of arriving in Boston
we bribed winos
to buy us pints of whiskey
so we could let the alcohol wash away
our memories of routine -
only a few hours from school
now safely on a train to New York
we were quite drunk
and the sound of the bells
had lost their meaning

Yet back at school, week after week,
we wondered if we could survive;
we whispered among ourselves that
some of us might not make it
and then all of a sudden
one of us fell

Toward the end of my second year
my good friend John
was no longer in school
no one would tell us what had happened
his room was cleaned out
he no longer appeared on lists
in classes he had attended
no teacher ever mentioned his name

The whispers among us
went on for days
but soon even they died down
yet I knew more than most -

On a warm spring day
I had gone to visit him
I looked in through his cracked door
"Oh, it's you Doble," he said
He was standing in his underwear
holding a BB pistol

Unable to move for a moment,
I watched him take careful aim
at an object on his desk -
methodically, BB after BB,
he shot away the crystal,
the hands
and then the face
of his electric alarm clock
since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;
wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world
~ e.e. cummings ~

Manliness is not all swagger and mountain climbing. Its also tenderness.
Robert Anderson, “Tea and Sympathy” [about Phillips Exeter Academy]

Hazers are themselves victims, wounded souls who are acting out their own unfinished business.
Jayson Gaddis, “Men and Hazing”

Standing up to pain
became a badge
boys don't cry
take it like a man
be tough
is that all you got?
give me more

as a male it was your fate
to suck it up
never let it get to you
as said in Tea and Sympathy
to be a "regular guy"

and not just physical pain
but also emotional
such as humiliation by a teacher

only there was more to it
we thought we were just hiding our feelings
instead we were learning not to feel
like all boys I paid lip service

to this show of manliness

later I realized it was like playing

5 notes in a 12 note octave

we were denied the full range,

confined to the sounds those few notes could play

as the depth of emotional chords and complexity

were not available

we were allowed to yell at sports

or to be angry - perhaps the easiest emotions -

but sorrow or joy, hurt and affection

were off limits

and then I saw the results:

teachers whose dead-end lives

meant they took their anger out

on boys they were mentoring,

their cruelty masked as a rite of passage

a Latin teacher was noted

for taking a chalk board eraser

and slamming it against the back of a student

when he did not give a correct answer

or took too long;

often the instructor picked on the same boys

who emerged from class

with their coats covered in white

- like a mark of shame -

and the boys had to pretend to not be bothered

by my senior year I had found the truth:

what they wanted

was a kind of spiritual death,

it meant that my life would be one of shadows

where emotions became so disguised
I could never reach them

so I let some of my classmates think less of me
because as an aspiring artist I knew that
what I felt was at the heart of who I was

"No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader,"
Robert Frost told us
when I had heard him speak at Exeter,
revered like a saint,
that was all the permission I needed
That Sunday the minister
unleashed unknown forces
forces that still affect me today

at the church service
required by the school
the man I knew well as a teacher
usually talked in the abstract
about choices and decisions
but in this sermon
he told a personal story

he was in his twenties and
thinking about getting married
as so many of his friends were doing
so he made a mental list of the women he knew
of the qualities he wanted
and began to look around -
when out of nowhere
he met a woman unlike any he had ever known
who soon became his wife

it was like a revelation
it was his metaphor for life
and for faith

you work hard at finding an answer
then - if you are receptive -
the answer may appear
at unexpected times
in unexpected ways
more being moved than moving
more being given than taking
more accepting than demanding

it opened a new pathway
where ideas and feelings
could come to me
like a voice in the wilderness
The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.

~ Friedrich Nietzsche ~

I liked girls, I liked them a lot

oddly this was seen as less than masculine
boys weren't supposed to like girls they were supposed to get what they could first base, second base they were supposed to score and tell their friends

but I didn't really like sports so these metaphors weren't my cup of tea -
what I did with a girl was our business not theirs

avoiding ridicule, I kept my ideas to myself and instead I figured out how to see a girl thirty miles away in Andover - many Sundays in the spring

being a senior I knew the ropes and used every trick all of it with the school's permission: I got some day trips to count as weekends so I could skip church and take the early train
or when I had used up those slots
I went directly after services to the station
and came back before check-in

but that was only part of the gauntlet -
at her school even holding hands was forbidden
and students could not sit together on a couch
yet we were allowed to take long walks on school grounds
where the touch of her hand felt even sweeter

at prom weekend I brought her to the dance
gloating a bit (I have to admit)
since my classmates were stunned
that she was more than just a date

at dawn
hours before her bus
was to take her back
we took a blanket
to the river bank
where time stopped and
our schools were memories

we kissed so long and hard
that before I went to sleep
that night
I felt the press
of her hips and arms
as they surrounded me,
along with the smell
of dirt next to the water
and the taste of her lips

and I felt her tongue
still moving
inside my mouth
COLLEGE: AGE 18-21

In My Mind I'm Gone to Carolina
Age 17-18, Exeter, NH / Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1962
poem title from a line in the James Taylor song, "Carolina In My Mind" - Taylor is from Chapel Hill, NC

Esse Quam Videri
To Be, Rather Than To Seem
Motto: State of North Carolina

During my senior year at Exeter
forces had been gathering
that would change my life
yet on the surface there was
nothing dramatic,
more like a slight shift
in the prevailing wind

the year before I had seen the film
Suddenly Last Summer
by southern writer Tennessee Williams
and it spoke to me directly
with stark poetry and ritual -
evoking feelings almost forbidden in the north

at school I was assigned Look Homeward Angel
about North Carolina and Chapel Hill -
a book overflowing with emotion -
and I read it in a day

then on a windy night
I walked into town

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
across icy sidewalks and blue snow
to escape for an hour at a local diner -
as I approached
yellow light filled the windows
 glazed with condensation

opening the door
I was hit by a hot draft
and a loud jukebox -
Ray Charles was singing *Georgia on My Mind*;
for a moment I was carried back
to the south I remembered as a child -
Spanish moss on the coast and red clay in the hills
"as sweet and clear
as moonlight through the pines"

when it came time to apply to college
all of us, of course, wanted to go to
a brand-name Ivy League school
but that year, Plan B was
the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

in late spring UNC
was where I was headed

on my third day at the campus
a number of wandering freshmen
invited me to sit with them
under a large oak in the arboretum

circling and leaning up against the trunk
we must have looked like a Bruegel painting
as we passed beers one to another
around the tree
and then each took his time
telling how he
ended up in Chapel Hill
I heard stories of tobacco farms
and grandsons following in their family’s footsteps
and wondered what they would think of
my quite different tale -
but they all listened and laughed and enjoyed it

and although I had never been there before
I knew I was finally home
And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows...
~ Jack Kerouac, "On the Road" ~

In May after Saturday morning classes we hit the road, the beach only five hours away by thumb (give or take) and the trip as much a part of the time off as the dunes and the waves years before I had learned about the craft by reading On The Road; with no car and an urge to go thumbing had become a way of life each ride an adventure each trip an epic each sunset a drama
taking the local roads meant a better chance as the cars weren't rushing by - then dressing up a bit, combing my hair, putting on a smile and standing at a place where cars slowed or stopped - were all part of the stock and trade

so on this beach journey I went from Apex, to Fuquay-Varina, Angier, Dunn, Warsaw, Rose Hill,
Wallace, Burgaw
and Castle Hayne

when I got to the shore
I was to meet friends
near an inlet
but because they had not shown yet
I waded to the island across

then suddenly out of the sky
like a large gull
a small plane glided down
onto hard shells at low tide;
the pilot and his girl friend descended,
built a fire and we talked about travel

the sun having set
I walked out into the ocean
on long sandbars
each step outlined
by sea-like fireflies,
that burst into light before fading

right at full darkness my friends
arrived, shouting across the inlet -
we walked back to Johnny Mercer's pier
where we each ate a hot dog,
a pickled egg and a cold one
- all we could afford

that night we slept behind the dunes
until the sun woke us
when we rode the waves
until the shadows told us
it was time to go

set to thumb our way back
Duke students just leaving
offered us a bus ride to Durham
but we had to run to catch
the empty seats

back in my room
that night
I lay in bed
sunburned and hot

I could still feel
the whine of traffic
as I stood on a bridge
and the rush of wind
as semis passed me by

and I could still feel
the ocean swells
rocking me to sleep
Sky Diving in the River
Age 18, Haw River, Chatham County, North Carolina, 1963

Dropping into the water was foolish
no - just plain stupid -
but on a dare by upperclassmen
I had hung on a metal bar
next to a partly-open
sluice gate at the Haw river
and let myself drop into the pressure
that shot me a fifty yards
into the middle of the stream

not that it wasn't fun
it was sensational
surrounded by churning currents was
like being hurled into space
like free falling
like sky diving in water

for an afternoon we did this
over and over
never really thinking about
the dangers

fortunately none of us
banged against a rock
or was pulled back
toward the gate
into the turbulence

yet we did not get away
scott free
a classmate climbed a tree
in his bathing suit
only to find out later
that the vine growing around it
was poison ivy
"Henry, what are you doing in there?"
[Ralph Waldo Emerson asked of Thoreau in jail]
"Waldo, the question is what are you doing out there?"
~ Henry David Thoreau ~
(replying about his actions, the first case of civil disobedience)

My head was on the floor
next to the back seat
my toes almost to the roof
and the two policemen in the front
were not happy

but the sit-in at Brady's Barbecue
had gone off without a hitch

relaxed like jelly,
it had taken two cops to carry me
out of the restaurant booth
and then chuck me in the back
along with others,
until the squad car was full

now screaming up the steep hill
siren wailing, lights flashing
we were headed to the station
for photos, fingerprints,
and a night in the county jail

in the morning we'd get a breakfast
of thick fried baloney covered in flour gravy
white rice crusted with melted sugar
and coffee with chicory
before we were bailed out
in the afternoon

non-violence had to be learned

instead of hitting back
we went limp;
and like military training
it became natural

it did not matter
if we were marching and being spat on
or sitting-in and being arrested
we did the same thing
nothing
the burden of actions, the moral choices
were on those who opposed us

upstairs above the funeral home -
before we went out onto the streets -
a preacher raised our spirits:
"Don't let them get to you
you are better than they are;
when they curse and throw rocks
look straight ahead"

however, we lost in Chapel Hill
and many of the leaders were given
long prison terms

yet nine months later
the Civil Rights Act became law

and on that day
I went to Brady's Restaurant
with my black friends
and we ate barbecue
First Nakedness
Age 19, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1964

Naked you are as simple as a hand.
~ Pablo Neruda ~

After months of holding you
I thought I knew your body
but it was always wrapped in cloth

Now, the first time naked
I saw you unbroken
without dungarees cutting your waist
or the blue-red peasant flower patterns of your blouse
hiding the simple roundness of your breasts

Your skin shown like a light
and my breath really did stop
when I saw you
no longer divided -
my eyes running freely
from your head to your knees
your body now continuous

Later when I continued inside of you
I fantasized about always
being connected
like the Greek myth of a third type of being
a man and woman permanently joined
whose unity was so powerful,
the gods became jealous -
so they were split apart by Zeus
and left to wander the Earth
looking for the other

I tasted you for the first time
that hot afternoon
and you tasted like the sea -
our sweat was like oil
as I slide across your chest,
your wet hair stuck to your nipples
your eyes screamed in silence

and your heart beat was so loud
I thought it was my own
Flipping Coins With Bruce
Age 20, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964

It is by chance that we met, by choice that we became friends.
~ Quote from Unknown Author ~

It was the summer of serendipity -
after a chance meeting
Bruce and I became fast friends;
above the noise of the city
we spent evenings on his roof-top porch
listening to the lush sitar solos of Ravi Shankar
and the complex keyboard of Beethoven sonatas

occasionally we descended down to
the cacophony of the streets
to Elsie's Diner
with the best jukebox in town;
between bites of Reubens we listened
to Martha and the Vandellas -
"Heat Wave," Bruce said
"is as tight as any tune by Mozart"

on a trip to New York we scoured the town
for a color organ
a jukebox that displayed dark violet for the low notes
and yellows for the high ones
- state of the art for its time;
it took four hours but
we at last landed our prize
at a small bar in the Village
the only place with such a one
in Manhattan

both interested in John Cage, chance
and things that came out of the blue
we drove one night to an intersection
and began a coin flip game:
tails, left; heads, right
and when three roads converged,
we flipped twice

all went well until we got caught in a circle
that looped and would not let us go -
determined to play by the rules
we kept flipping until
finally we were released

and chance put us back on the main road
Great Rehearsals
Age 20/23, 1964 & 1967
Tanglewood Music Festival, Lenox, Massachusetts
& Sharon Playhouse (summer stock), Sharon, Connecticut

The sculptor's hand can...free the figures slumbering in the stone.
~ Michelangelo ~

The rehearsal is where it all happens for an actor.
~ Wayne Rogers ~

At the Paris Opera I saw the ballet
of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring
and on Broadway,
West Side Story and Tennessee Williams

yet my favorite performances
were rough and incomplete
allowing me
to see inner workings
to see more than polish
to see the gears
that normally are hidden

under the soft morning light
of the Tanglewood tent
I watched and listened
to Pierre Monteux
rehearse Brahms 4th
working his way through a forest of sound

sitting close
and knowing the music well
I could see sweat on the faces
as the conductor let
the orchestra play for only minutes
before stopping

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and clearing the path ahead
by shaping the color and tone
of each instrument
merging feelings and sensations
in delicate slow motion

at the Sharon Playhouse
I sat in the front row
as my adult friend Atwood
directed a rehearsal of
Albee's *A Delicate Balance*
scaling it in space and time

set in a living room
he moved actors, props and lighting
forward and back -
the arch of the entire work
clearly in mind
with his particular interpretation
of this complex work

for five hours
he carved twenty minutes of the play
constructing dialogues and monologues,
comings and goings
rage and quiet
while an invisible metronome kept time
and while the meaning emerged line by line

like watching a sculptor
pull a figure from stone

I knew I had glimpsed the core:
two master craftsmen
giving birth
Seeing Stars
Age 7-14, Sandwich, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1951-1958
& Age 20, Sandwich, Cape Cod Massachusetts, 1965

The underlying sense of form in my work has been the system of the Universe, or part thereof.
~ Alexander Calder ~

In my room
when I lay in bed
I looked up and saw stars

my small room had once been a closet,
but was the right size for a seven year old;
my father had covered the angled back wall
with paper that looked like the night sky -
white constellations against dark blue
that ran up and across the ceiling

it was like being outside while being inside
like the planetarium in New York
or like camping or walking on a beach at midnight
like standing in new snow in a dark field
with no moon

* * * * *

when I was twenty I went back
to my Dad's house for the winter
and stayed there by myself -
it was a test
if I had the time
could I devote myself to making art?

at the end of three months
I had written five short stories
and a novella I did not like
but the point was, I had worked
and, to my surprise,
I had also experimented and constructed
about ten mobiles
of white tissue paper stretched across
angular balsa wood frames
translucent
some always turning
no matter how faint the air

just before I was to leave
I hung them in my childhood room -
some with candles
some with bright metal strips that caught the light
plus a few late ones made with
red Madras tissue -
together they turned
under the star wallpaper

when I had carefully placed each piece
I moved a chair to the middle
and sat surrounded
by what I had made

and then I knew
I could spend a lifetime
creating
Leaving

Age 21, Deia, Majorca, Spain, 1965

Intuition is the supra-logic that cuts out all the routine processes of thought and leaps straight from the problem to the answer.

~ Robert Graves ~
(who lived in Deia, Majorca from the 1920s until his death in 1985)

On the island of Majorca I became the target of my college roommate's mother - too young to understand her illness. I only knew that she was picking on me so I bought the cheapest boat ticket to the mainland which meant sleeping on the deck overnight at the ferry's bow.

I watched it back away from the city of Palma into the Mediterranean no ripples on the water long sharp lights mirrored in the twilight.

I hated leaving and my stomach pulled tight; as the city grew smaller I felt a rope inside me stretch to the point of breaking.

then like a gift the line snapped and I was filled with a different deeper sadness: she was only the first of many I would have to leave.

it was a warning that prepared me.
I looked up
as the darkness fell from blue to black -
and saw a silhouette
of the island's mountains
cut out flat against the sky

and I was reminded of Odysseus
who some believe
had landed here
when he was lost
only to find his way back

back to Penelope
and to his home
Having nowhere to sleep
we ended up underneath
an overturned fisherman's boat
on some beach in northern Italy
cold and tired we fit together
in our clothes
and although we kissed
it was really our exhaustion
that held us
it was two days later
in Naples that the trouble started
when we took our clothes off
and something between us was gone
not lovers and no longer friends
you were clinging to me
and mocking me at the same time
and I could not desert you
later when you followed me to Paris
then ran off to London
with the only set of keys to a borrowed apartment
I wished we'd never met
and yet that first two days together
hitchhiking through the south of France
I still remember moment by moment:
the one armed driver
who passed cars while lighting a cigarette,
the Germans who almost totaled their car,
the hot sand and blue of the Mediterranean at Cannes,
the man who delighted in driving us slowly
through Monaco at sunset

and then the morning
after we slept on the beach
when the fishermen were angry at first
that we had used their boat for shelter
but delighted when we showed them
how to body surf
so they fed us breakfast
of espresso and sweet Italian pastries

I have savored this for 40 years
and that was worth all of your turmoil
1ST MARRIAGE: AGE 22-32

Drawing Calligraphy in the Sand
Age 22, Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, 1967
calligraphy based on the late works of Paul Klee

A drawing is simply a line going for a walk.
~ Paul Klee ~

I had learned not care
about what others thought
not even what I thought myself
when the pen in my hand meandered
across pieces of paper
drawing line after line

after months a kind of alphabet
or hieroglyphics
had evolved --
yet it was more drawing than writing
and interlocking,
each 'letter' part of the next

by that time
the characters had become automatic
like speaking in tongues
like a language that my heart knew
but my brain could not decipher

buying reams of blank paper
I often stopped after only a stroke or two

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while other sheets were more complex
"What do these mean?"
a friend asked
"I don't know," I said

then on a weekend
at the beach
the shore empty late at night,
I drew in the canvas of the sand

like a calligraphy brush
that can draw thick or thin
I straightened my fingers
to plow wide grooves
and then turned my palm sideways
to carve sharp and narrow -
after minutes I used my feet as well

the work went
for ten yards
etched around seashells
outlining driftwood
and across the side of a dune

when the tide came in
it erased most of my script
but left an edge
above the high water mark

later on Sunday
a breeze blew
and my writing merged with
the wind ripples in the sand
Action Painting
Age 22-24, Durham County, North Carolina, 1966-1968

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear
to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act.
~ Harold Rosenberg ~

In painting, the primary agency of physical motion...is the line...as stroke or figure (in the sense of 'figure skating'). In its passage on the canvas each such line can establish the actual movement of the artist's body as an esthetic statement.
~ Hans Hofmann ~

After my mobiles
and before my photography
was Jackson Pollock

the painter
with a picture in his mind
standing still
in front of his canvas
was gone

instead was the moment
the act of creation itself

and years later
somewhat crude
a bit rough
that moment
would still be there
in its stark freshness

it was more than just an idea
or a look
it was the doorway
to expression

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I took this very personally
as I wanted to work in a visual style
that let me move freely
but I knew my drawing skills were nil

yet I did understand composition
arrangement, shapes and figure-ground
so I decided to create work
from the point of abstraction
with paint flowing as the moment demanded

in 1967 in New York
the Museum of Modern Art
held a Pollock retrospective -
I drove from Durham over a weekend
then a month later I did it again

like a worshiper in a temple
I roamed the rooms
surrounded by his large paintings
that swallowed viewers
in their forest and tangle
of lines

and everywhere was the sense of movement
of the moment that paint hit the canvas
everywhere that sense of now

later, as a photographer,
none of this was lost -
with candid work
I was like a dancer
always looking for the angle
or moving with the subject
and the moment that I clicked the shutter
was the moment captured
Art Of The Ordinary
Age 22, Durham County, North Carolina, 1967
(I arrived at this idea at age 22, but the poem is written from my perspective at age 66.)

The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.
~ Marcel Proust ~

Paint what you really see, not what you think you ought to see; not the object isolated as in a test tube, but the object enveloped in sunlight and atmosphere, with the blue dome of Heaven reflected in the shadows.
~ Claude Monet ~

What I see is ordinary

my wife two rooms away
swishing a string near the cat
so it jumps in the air
as the light
from the glass door behind
outlines them in silhouette

on the side of the road
I see weeds in bloom
I see the redness
of broomsedge in mist
rain on my windshield

when I drive over a bridge
soft twilight fades
from gold to blue
white houses taking on
the color of the light

I am tired of
the exotic, the elite
the hard to understand -
art should be immediate
simple and direct

a heightened moment
snatched from
the play of light
the play of movement
the play of work

nothing unusual
except to show
how extraordinary
it is to live from day to day
The sensation was hard to explain:

I'm not visual that I had been told
I pushed the door shut,
squeezing scenes I had seen
all my life:
from the car’s rear window at age 5
the snow on the mountain
the civil rights marches
the smiles of my friends
the nakedness of girlfriends -
I had to push the closet door hard
to get it to close

years later when I picked up a camera
I was only going to take a few abstract photos
just for fun
instead the closet door popped open
and a thousand memories feel at my feet

then a few months later
in a darkroom I saw my memories
or whatever they were -
maybe dreams I had made real
maybe quiet moments I wanted to freeze -
become black and white in the developer,
while the pictures -
like a pieces of paper
in the pond where I grew up -
floated gently in the tray

c whereas that first night after printing
I floated in my bed -
the scenes emerging
like ghosts from a forest

and then there were
those architectural pictures
a few years later,
my first foray into color:
the abandoned Holly Springs high school
with peeling paint
doors ajar
sun splintering through a rounded window
echoes of students running in the hall

in the ground glass of an old
Rollei twin lens reflex
I saw my past
about lost time, lost love
lost desires
at boarding school

later a painter told me
she had come to my photo exhibit
but had to leave -
the sadness of those
empty hallways
moving her to tears

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Happily Ever After
Age 24, Durham County, North Carolina, 1968

Every composer is allowed
his romantic moment
and this is mine

at the age of 24
like a prince in a fairy tale
I had overcome all odds
and won the princess

one Saturday morning
after making love
I lay in bed and felt
my wife's body wrapped around me
as I heard hard rain
hitting the roof
of our small cabin
in the Durham woods

the downpour
was comforting
like a symbol for my life -
I had weathered the storm

it was as though I had been thrown overboard
and landed in a strange place
that felt more like home than home

I had left my warring family,
established myself
in a new southern state,
found an audience for my stories
so hated in the north,
graduated from college
with an honors in writing,
and embarked on photography
to complement my written work -
an art form I had only discovered
after years of searching

and not only that
I had my first job that paid the bills

and of course,
no story would be complete
without the damaged princess
whom I rescued and saved

I had married a woman
whose beauty made people stop
when she entered the room
but whose shyness
and deep hurt
of things she could never speak of
meant that as a prince
I would have to bring her back to life

it was a fairy tale ending
and being young,
I did believe in such things

but like all such stories
there were hidden monsters
lurking in the woods

and this fabled ending
was just the beginning
I did not expect this
to love so deeply
to be so alone

she wants to know where I've been
and I've come from my nine hour job
as a conscientious objector*
taking care of babies with diarrhea
then mopping the floors after closing
a job I must do for another year
"I'm worried that you don't love me," she asks
as I fall into our couch

"Tell me what's wrong?" she wants to know
"I'm tired," I say, "And I have another cold I got from the kids."
"No, it's more than that, you just won't tell me.
Is it someone else? I just need to know."
"There is no one."
"But do you really love me?"
"Yes, I really love you."
"I mean really?"
"Yes."
"I mean really, really?"
"Yes"
"Really and truly?"
"Yes, I really and truly love you"
and I change the subject
I get her to talk about herself
problems with teachers
problems with her boss at her part time job
problems with other students at college
problems with her family
problems with her father
then we go to bed
we make love
afterward she cries into her pillow
and I hold her

six hours later
I wake and it starts again

*In 1967 I could have gotten an automatic deferment from the draft by going to graduate school. I decided, instead, to face my draft board directly and apply for conscientious objector status. I was told that "hell would freeze over before it was granted" but when I made a personal appearance supported by letters from ten ministers, that I knew from the civil rights movement, my status was granted.
Hard and soft are so close, that it would be hard to distinguish
liquid and solid, marble and water. Which one is running?...
They are like the lover who in vain tries to hide his tears from his beloved...
~ Ibn Zamrak, Islamic poet ~
(from a poem about The Court of the Lions,
carved on the Fountain of Lions basin at the Alhambra)

the Alhambra carved out space
from a mountain top
and like a sculpture retained
a sense of shaping the sky

the normal boundaries
of finite and infinite merged
so one led
to another and back again
saying the same thing
over and over
each ceiling
each courtyard
each garden
each iron gate
each set of tiles
with a different sensation
but the same feel
close up
far away
hallways that reached to the vanishing point
it was almost as though you could touch the air
Skinny Dipping At Love Valley
Age 26, Love Valley, North Carolina, 1970

The local mountain men stood
stiff as trees
nakedness filling their eyes -
from across the lake they zoomed in
on young women shedding their clothes
their hard breasts breaking the water
while young men dove and cannon balled
around them

it was the 60's,
well really 1970
and I had missed Woodstock -
my wife said it would be too crowded

so second best
was Love Valley
founded by a man
who built a town based on Hollywood westerns
with a saloon, hitching post and general store
who believed in love
and opened his gates to a hundred thousand people
that settled on his hills
and listened

three days of music ended with
the yet to be known Allman Brothers
who played for hours until
hippies started throwing mud

angry the Brothers left the stage
but came back after twenty minutes of
pleading applause -
now warmed up
their guitars spread from the valley floor
until the sun set

that night I drove the sharp mountain roads
but was stopped by police
who checked everyone leaving;
finding nothing, we drove on

and then I knew
I had had the full 60's experience
Words from On High
Age 26, Apex, North Carolina, 1970

What that man creates by means of reason will pale before the art of inspired beings.
~ Plato ~

When I'm painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It's only after a get acquainted period that I see what I've been about. I've no fears about making changes for the painting has a life of its own.
~ Jackson Pollock ~

It was what an artist hopes for
a direct line
like a voice speaking to me
and I rushed to my typewriter
to transcribe it

word after word
I was hearing the story for the first time

it began:

SISTER:
He remained in the shrouded room.
Rags and dirty plates lay like shells across his bedside table.
From time to time we rolled him over and washed his bed pan out.
The blind covered window webbed the room in silhouettes.
He took a long time to die.*

I typed as fast as I could
hoping to keep up with the dictation
in my head

and wondered how it would end

I have not had such a complete transmission since
but often my poems start with a line
that comes to me
then having broken the ice
bits of phrases often follow

now forty years later
I see my work
my inspiration and my muse
a bit differently
at one end of the spectrum is dictation
and at the other
the critical craft of writing

words often arrive like a voice
but I am not afraid to change them
after they appear on the screen
or cross out a sentence
or rethink an idea

I aim for
a gentle consciousness
one that has more to do with concentration
than a clear sense of direction
one that is about a give and take
of listening and shaping -
because often when I write
I may not know where a poem or an essay is going
so in a sense I both follow and lead

*See the Epilogue for the full story that I heard.
When I was six
my father put me and my older brother
on a train at New York --
a train that went up and down
the east coast
and was known as the Silver Star

he gave the porter five dollars
to keep an eye on us
and sent us on our way
to Florida where my mother lived

with no adult supervision
we ran down the isles
from the lounge car at the end
to the dining car in the middle

when we stopped to catch our breath
I looked out the windows
which was like a movie
where I saw glimpses of stories
edges of people lives
as we sped through backyards
of laundry and fences

ever since that trip
trains have held a magic
and the sound of their whistle

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
can start me dreaming

nine months later
my mother drove north
from Florida by car;
it took five days
which let me see
in slow motion
what had passed by so quickly by train:
plowed fields
tobacco barns
farm wives pulling
buckets of water from a well
rusting Model Ts
chickens and dogs running
with children

* * * * *
later in my teens I took the Silver Star
a dozen times
to see my father in Florida

as the sun began to fade
the homes of the mid-Atlantic
began to appear
and when the train crawled through a town
or into a station
I could see, even in the darkness,
those backyards
I had loved as a child

during the night I found myself
reading short books of psychology
Civilization and Its Discontents
by Freud
The Undiscovered Self
by Jung
at dawn after crossing the Florida line
I stood between the cars
and inhaled the sudden
humid air
the scent of palm trees
and Spanish moss hanging on the trees

* * * * *
years later
I rented an antebellum farm house
in Apex, North Carolina
about 30 miles
from my graduate school

I had lived there two years
when I saw a train rushing through
on tracks that ran close to my house

as I waited at the railroad crossing
the Silver Star flew by me
“Well I'll be damned” I thought
"my backyard
has become part of the passengers' scenery."
The heavy set black teen blocking the door announced,
"My name is Concrete and I'm taking over this place."

he'd been watching too much gangsta TV

I walked up to him til I was eye to eye with a young man five inches taller and seventy pounds heavier
"Get the hell out."

but then I stepped back and unexpectedly smiled "But if you want to learn photography, Come in and I'll show you."

Concrete was caught off balance - I walked away and turned to see him following me so I guided him into the darkroom

pushing the black curtain aside I brought him under the yellow lights as a teen blew up a negative - the bright reversed image glowing under the enlarger
"This is where we develop film and make the prints."

back outside I showed him the cameras, cheap copies of an early 35mm now made in Russia. "Here take it." I handed him one along with a film cartridge - suddenly all thumbs he looked helpless.

"You'll get the hang of it," I said as I deliberately showed off and effortlessly opened the back, snapped in the cartridge, pulled out some film and skillfully threaded it onto the take-up spool - Concrete watched me closely.

"We don't push people here - you'll learn in your own good time."
"But what do I take pictures of?"
"What do you like?"
"Karate."
"Photograph karate."

after he left I was not sure I'd see that particular camera again but later that year when our workshop held a group exhibit his kick boxing shots were part of the show.
Tears
Age 22-32, Durham/Apex, North Carolina, 1966-1976

At first your tears
were like a doorway
that led me to you
a way to comfort you
something that drew us together

then your tears became an enclosure
that surrounded us
because when you did not want
me to understand
your tears stopped us
and I held you in silence

toward the end
your tears were a wall
I wanted to reach you
but your weeping blocked my way

finally they were like the weather
they came so often and so full
I thought of them like rain
knowing that within an hour or a day
they would be gone

so before we parted
your tears meant nothing at all
Persona

No! I'm not like you. I don't feel like you.
I'm Sister Alma, I'm just here to help you.
I'm not Elisabet Vogler. You are Elisabet Vogler. (Spoken by Sister Alma)
~ Ingmar Bergman, Persona~
Persona was one of my ex-wife's favorite films

She was two people
neither one complete
the first a needy child
the second an angry teen
they were like characters in a movie script
where the author didn't provide
a background or a past -
something was missing

after we divorced I realized
she had been a chameleon
who took on my personality
creating the impression of harmony
and intense devotion

later she shed that skin
and the trouble started -
as she turned her former likes into hates

for years I lived with two people:
one who clung and feared that I would abandon her
and as she said 'leave her in the gutter'
another who hated that her last name was mine
and ridiculed my work

six years before it ended,

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography  Page 84
I had two dreams about her

in the first
I was holding a child, my baby -
I felt her arms and legs
and that she was heavy
under the layers of blankets,
but her face was hidden -
so I pulled back a cover to see her
but instead there was another cover
and then another and still another
until finally, like a Stephen King tale,
all the layers were pushed aside
but underneath
there was nothing, nothing at all

in my second dream,
I was driving with her up a mountain
as the turns became sharper and narrower;
at the peak
I looked down and saw
I had driven up a cone -
so I could not go forward
or turn around,
and backing up would end
with us falling over the side

for years I ignored these warnings

then slowly, carefully,
I created distance between us
until we separated
and she learned to live on her own

then at last, I ended it

relieved but shattered

Rick Doble, *Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography*
that our love
had been an illusion
A Ghost
Age 32, Apex, North Carolina, 1977
after my divorce

I have been back to our home
many times in my dreams

I drive down the long gravel road
with red clay rising behind me
to our front yard
but no dogs run out to greet me
which is strange

I walk in our door
into the living room
I can smell a large pot of lentils -
a dish we learned to make in Spain
with rosemary, onions and tomatoes -
on the wood cooking stove
that is putting out a soft heat

and the yellow muslin curtains
you dyed and sewed
blow in the drafts
of this antebellum farm house

I am just about to throw my coat
on my grandmother's velvet couch
when I notice things
are slightly ajar -
I see new furniture and pictures
have been added

in my home where I felt most comfortable
I become afraid
I am out of place
then I remember
we have broken up
and you are living with someone else

I hear a car
and know I am an intruder
I hide behind the wall paper
as others walk past me

then I slip out the door
and fly above the road
as the house sinks into darkness
and the one light upstairs -
the one we always left on
when we were away -
throws a shaft through the windows
onto the field below

I have this dream
for many years
and like the ghost
that locals say haunted the house
I have to keep returning
looking for what we lost
The Earth Moved
Age 33, Durham, North Carolina, 1977

The night I met the love of my life,
my second wife,
the earth really did move
as the Jack Tar Hotel in Durham
fell into a pile of rubble

just before I went out
I did two things I never do
I looked in the mirror,
and made a clown face
like Harpo Marx
while waving my open palms on each side
and then saying out loud
"I wonder who I will meet tonight"

an hour later I was at a party
talking to a woman who was new in town,
who crafted her own jewelry designs
and in the next hour,
I knew that I would marry her

when we were the last to leave the party
I convinced her to come with me to Durham
to see the dynamiting demolition
of the Jack Tar
a local landmark
that was to be taken down
at six that morning

having time to spare
we went to my house
for some coffee
but then fell asleep
on the couch

in my dreams
the moon was being pulled into a different orbit
and I thought I felt the earth shake
knowing my life would never be the same
that something had ended
that something was beginning

of course we overslept
but having missed the destruction
we circled the downtown;
where the fifty-year-old skyscraper had stood
was now blue sky,
empty like a scar

we drove to a local truck stop
where they served the best breakfast;
over scrambled eggs and coffee
I told her about my vision
of art, dreams and history
of Jungian ideas
and photographs I wanted to take

having studied art
she understood the impulse
and listened,
a smile growing on her face
instead of the puzzled look
I usually got

* * * * *

about a year later
somewhere in the Florida Keys
we launched
our $29.95 inflatable boat
into a hidden cove
where clear water
showed large boulders
scattered on the bottom
and the white coral floor
pulled the blue of the sky
into the sea

near sunset
floating in this garden of rock
we watched the sky and sea merge
with a shade of turquoise
I have never seen before or since --
where in twilight
we could not tell the sky from the water
and we seemed to float into the air

I had at a last found a woman
who had the right balance
passionate and sensible
creative and practical
with the best laugh
and who looked different
from any other girlfriend
but with a unique beauty
that never faded

we would help each other
both of us could be trusted
and we would be loyal and faithful
but not tied down

I had finally washed ashore
on the right island
Lost in the Fog
Age 34, Castle Hayne, North Carolina, 1978

Sailing into the marshes
in January on a warm clear day
was a southerner's dream

my best friend, Tom, and I
had just finished working
on our boat
that was calling to us
to put it in the water

the old heavy catamaran
we had bought for a song
and modified
sailed quite well in
a good breeze

that afternoon we cut through
the maze of marshes
right up to Rich Inlet
making it look easy

on the beach
we broke out sandwiches
and beers
with no other boats
taking advantage of the sun

we had been there many times before
and did not worry about the gray pall
that often comes in winter at the end of the day
- it was nice to be outside in January

finally back in the boat

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
with a few too many
under our belts
we aimed for home

yet all at once, like a curtain,
fog shrouded the marshes
and the wind softened
to a changed direction

undaunted Tom took the helm
tacking more than ten times
to bring it to the point
where we guessed
we had a clear passage home

but just when he had
a straight shot
he faltered
and I lunged to grab the ropes

more by feel than sight
I sailed as the fog surrounded us
with the slight wind finally
letting us go in one direction
- if I was right
this route would take us to the dock
with no turns or detours

as the daylight faded
a web of mist enclosed us in dampness
and we glided in slow motion
along the edges
of gray-green marsh grass

just at sunset we did land
and climbed ashore
loaded the boat on the trailer
and went back to Tom’s house
to drink a few more beers
never giving it another thought

and it was only years later
that I wondered:
what would have happened
if we had been forced
to spend the night
in an open boat
with nothing but flannel shirts?
Southport Blues
Age 34, Southport, North Carolina, 1979
the death of my mother

The motivation of the vindictive parent is to exact revenge against the other parent...
~ Allan Schwartz, Ph.D. ~

When my mother died, I was angry
no - I was furious
and because I felt something
I did not want to feel
I was plunged into the same turmoil
that had been the trademark of her life

hating shows of emotion
she would not let me cry when she was dying;
after her funeral I still could not
as though my tears were now stuck in my throat

Australian with British grandparents
and having lived in London
she was known for her charming demeanor
her distinct accent and her poise

always restless,
she moved every couple of years
just to move
and when she wasn't moving
she rearranged the furniture -
growing up I hated this instability

I knew it was
hidden anger with a polite face
a rage underneath that leaked out
in unexpected ways
for thirty years she had taken my father to court
over the remains of an eight year marriage
cases she never won
- caught in the middle, I refused to take sides
but it meant that my world was to be colored
well into my thirties
it meant that I could not stay at my father's house
as a teenager, the only stable home I had known
it meant that the sheriff showed up one morning
and took possession of my father's car

by moving to North Carolina
I got away from it all
but then she followed me
and bought a house in Southport
promising not to be a bother

yet when she asked me
to testify against my father
and I refused
she stopped talking to me
for a year
so her turmoil pursued me

after she died I had panic attacks
I actually believed the sky was falling
fortunately
like catching an illness,
I was able to fight it off,
a year later I was back to normal
although still wrestling with the guilt

slowly as time passed
I was able to untangle
some of the ropes
she had tied me with
almost a religion with her
she believed in telling the truth,
in keeping promises
which was the basis of her law suits -
yet after she died
I caught her in a lie
and it was then that the wall
she had built around me
began to fade
decades later I was watching Dr. Phil
"Never use your children
like pawns in a marriage dispute,"
he told a parent
"They will hate you
and with good reason."
finally,
finally I was free
free at last
Riding At the Bottom of the Lake
Age 36, Jordan Dam, North Carolina, 1980

Jordan Dam was completed but the lake was not filled for several years due to a law suit.

On my 15-year-old Honda Dream
I revved the bike's engine and sped 10 miles
down the bottom of this lake
yet to be filled -
along an overgrown paved road
that lead to leveled towns
and dug up graves

These fall afternoons
I brushed aside flowering yellow bushes
reaching across the highway
and rode over tar
broken by shallow streams

From my college study of years before
I knew turns
that lead to abandoned towns:
Bear Creek, Seaforth and Farrington

With practice I learned to see
where stores, mills and houses had stood -
often an outline of trees
that enclosed invisible buildings -
or a driveway that ended at a ripped out foundation

It was like the joy of listening to a sad song
I was remembering what I had lost:
my mother who had died,
and my home in the country
taken for another lake project
where I had lived with my first wife
before our divorce
I had the valley to myself -
startled quail flew ahead of the bike
cool air with pollen hit my face
and I imagined the lake with water
covering me to the red clay hills
boats skimming the surface

After an hour,
I leaned my bike next to
an old oak
and walked the grounds
of scattered bricks
sensing the layout
of a moved farm house
of the well and barns;
then I reclined on my seat
imagining
the rough truck engine,
the clucking hens,
the smell of tobacco curing

But when the sun's shadows
began to climb the banks
I knew I had stayed too long;
with painted lines no longer
there to guide me
I fled following my dim headlights
looking for the first new bridge
that crossed the imagined lake

Gunning my small motorcycle like a dirt bike
I climbed a steep hill up to a guard rail
and followed along until I found a break
onto newly paved highway

Below me the lake faded into blackness
and an hour later I was back
back to my new house in the city
back to my new girl friend -
and I was home
The story goes like this:
thousands of years ago
in the desert
a camel driver
noticed a picture
of his pack animal
upside down in the dark
at the back of his tent

like Newton's apple,
this opened the world of light
for an Arab scientist named Alhazen

in 1980 at the museum in Durham
I taught children to see
what Alhazen saw:
oatmeal boxes turned into cameras
with a tiny hole drilled with a needle,
like the slit on the other side of the tent
that had projected the camel's image

and the kids 'got it'
in ways that an adult with
a Nikon and a bunch of lenses
never would

but also in the room where we worked,
were sharp three-foot color photographs
of Jupiter mounted on the wall -
sent back, bit by bit,
across millions of miles
by a space probe
this part the kids did not get
as these were some of the first
digital photographs -
the computer pixel replacing
the silver grain of film

I cannot say exactly what I understood then
but I knew it was important
and that it would be at least a generation
before I could hold a digital camera in my hands

yet seeing the very beginning of optics
crafted by the hands of children
next to the greatest
photographic achievement
was like a personal sign -
I knew my own vision required more
than film and darkrooms
even though I had spent a decade with both

listening to the kids giggling
as they exposed their film
and watching them develop their negatives
followed by prints,
I sensed that I might just
live long enough
to get the tools I needed

to record my own insights
about space and time and light
Sundays were for stopping

Janet and I launched
our K-mart inflatable
just above West Point Mill
then floated upstream -
me gently rowing
barely having to put oar to water
as the river ran almost still

within minutes
the traffic faded
and the sounds of the forest
full of birds
opened to us
in the high hills

taking our time to go a mile
we crossed shallow slow rapids
before the river spread wide
to almost pond size

there cold water fell down rocks
rounded and shaped
by the flow of the stream,
pooling in this local swimming spot
where we often found friends
lounging and diving

Rick Doble, *Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography*
on the pebble covered bank
we ate lunch
then climbed to the
sculpted stones
hot with the sun
and sat in the falls
before swimming

hours later when
long tree shadows
fell across the water
we headed back
letting the boat
find its way home

we drifted
with the downstream current
and the darkening hills
as the sounds of traffic became louder

drifting
to the edge of the old mill
where the dam still held the water

and
where our car was parked
When I showed up at his door
I was just a young white guy
with a camera on assignment

I had never met a man with such poise
who offered me tea
and then a tour of his orchid garden
before we got down to business
and I took his portrait
for the Duke magazine

today I think about what I did not know then
- how he had volunteered in World War II
but was told he was the wrong color
- how he, more than anyone, had researched
and defined the history of the black struggle

and I think about what I had not told him
how I had marched and sang and learned non-violence
how I had been jailed
in that same struggle

yet, oddly, those words were not needed between us
it was as if we both understood
and instead I walked through his greenhouse
while his wife silently watered the plants
while he told me about his passion
and I smelled his orchids
Meta-Tools
Age 39, Durham, North Carolina, 1983

Meta- (from the Greek...), is a prefix... meaning transcending, or going above and beyond.
~ PC Magazine ~

For words are to thought what tools are to work; the product depends largely on the growth of the tools.
~ Will Durant, "History of Civilization: Part 1" ~

You might find it odd
to read a poem about computers:
bits, bytes, and Boolean
but I will do just that

all at once in ’83
cheap computers were everywhere
and everywhere I went
some kid had tweaked the thing
so it repeated his name
"Chris Jordan was here Chris Jordan was here Chris Jordan was here..."
graffiti and
the urge to declare existence
now entering the electronic age

and I thought
"Well, if a kid can do that..."
so I set about figuring it out
watching youngsters in the stores
punch in text commands in BASIC
as the early computers required

after a couple of weeks I typed in:
10 print "Rick did it 
20 goto 10
run
and like fireworks
"Rick did it Rick did it Rick did it Rick did it"
filled the screen
side to side and top to bottom
scrolling endlessly
until the store pulled the plug

that night I could not sleep
my dream world pixelated
broken into computer bits -
the digital world was calling

in spite of what my friends said -
that computers were just a passing fad -
I took a sharp right turn
artistically
and went from cameras and f/stops
to RAM and ROM

I cannot tell you
what I understood at the time
but it was something about
a digital common denominator
of the future
about power tools for the mind
Coming Home
Age 39, East Durham, North Carolina, 1983

My step-mother had a stroke
and my almost ninety year old father
needed to be taken care of

while my step-brother dealt with my step-mother,
I flew to Florida to get my Dad
and take him back
to Durham where I lived -
with no idea of what I would do
once he arrived

I was living in a cheap house
everyone told me not to buy
because it was in a changing
black/white neighborhood
(even the African-American bank
would not give me a loan)

but I had not been concerned
having been in the civil rights movement
and after I bought the house
I became good friends
with a black woman, Lil, next door
who ran a home for single men

after our flight
sitting in the airport,
I realized that Lil
might have a vacant room
and by chance she did

we decided to try it for a couple of days,
and then, when my Dad liked it,  
he stayed  

looking out from my office  
I could see his window  
and be in his room in less than a minute  

always close  
our relationship entered a new phase -  
I gained more respect for him  
as he adapted easily to his changed situation  
and made several close friends  
in the home  

a year and a half later he died  
yet I had the satisfaction of knowing  
that I had done right by him  
and that the choices I had made  
allowed this time for us  

it was a metaphor for my life:  
be responsible for the people you care about  
follow your instincts  
treat everyone with respect  
spend as little money as possible  
and things have a way of working out
THE DEATH OF MY FATHER:

AGE 40 - 42

16 HAIKU POEMS

The Death of My Father
Age 40, Sandwich/Boston, Massachusetts & Oxford, North Carolina, 1985

my father's funeral-
old friends call me
by my childhood name

night snow
behind his house,
we walked on the pond
ashes still wet

at Durgin-Park *
I eat the same
halibut, cornbread
as my fathers

at Oxford
the orphanage playground
we talked
of having a child
* Durgin-Park restaurant was founded in 1742 in Boston. My father, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers probably ate the same meal I ate on that trip back to the Northeast.

**Down East, North Carolina**

*Age 41, Williston/Beaufort, North Carolina, 1985*

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**--A Weekend Away--**

in clear September light  
fish darting inside a wave  
cresting, breaking

now I'm used to seeing  
wild horses across Taylor's Creek  
on Carrot Island

salty from our swim  
I fire charcoal with paper, wood  
you say I taste like smoke

power out  
so dark  
no one moves  
frogs scream

under the moon  
shrimp boats, yucca blooms -  
the surf's dark glittering edge

---

**--Returning to Durham--**

the tiger kitten  
in Wendy's parking lot -  
dragging a burger

above the traffic jam

Rick Doble, *Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography*  
Page 112
a hawk
circling

back in the city
I've lost track
of the moon

**Love's Labors**
*Age 42, Williston/Down East, North Carolina, 1985*

the darkness between us
rising falling
where do I end, you begin?

past the point of no return
I am flying
inside of you

after I yell, silence
the soft call
of owls

now apart
sudden sleep
thunder approaching
MOVING TO NC COAST: AGE 43-53

Serendipity East
Age 43, Williston, North Carolina, 1987

One is too taken up with all that one sees and hears in Paris... and what I do here [in this remote area] will at least have the merit of being...the expression of what I, and only I, have felt.
~ Claude Monet ~

Recovering from a cold and with a small inheritance from my mother I was sitting in bed calling different real estate agents to find a cheap - and I mean really cheap - house on the coast where we could stay during the warm weather

I was looking for a place in a rural and remote part of North Carolina because it reminded me of Cape Cod where I had grown up as a child having traveled the area I knew that there were old houses in need of repair

after an hour I got one agent on the phone

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
who stopped trying to sell me
something three times my price
yet soon the conversation was going nowhere

I had a large map laid out on the bed,
frustrated I randomly slapped my hand down
so it fell on a body of water
"Look don't you have some old fixer-upper on..."
(I hesitated as I leaned over
to read the name)
"on Jarrett Bay...for $10,000."

I thought the phone had gone dead
but then
"How did you know that? - yes, $10,800 to be exact
but it's been on the market for almost a year
and no one wants it"

the next weekend we drove down to look
three months later we closed the deal

at first we used it
only as a summer place
we stayed in July and August
while I taught kids photography
at the aquarium

* * * * *

after seven years, in 1987,
we made the full switch from Durham
fixing up the house as needed

when we made the move
it seemed like a crazy idea
we were leaving a small city -
where it was hard enough
to get recognition as an artist
yet by the time we moved in the mid-80s
I had worked with computers
and sent files over the phone lines
so I knew that a worldwide audience
could be reached from anywhere

thirty years later
this is where we live
and it is from here
that I have written my books
and established
an international presence
Poetry in Motion
Age 43-51, Williston, North Carolina, 1987-1995
about photographer Eadweard Muybridge and his study of "Human Locomotion"

"One thing was very clear from Muybridge’s pictures:
No painter had ever gotten the position of a horse’s legs correctly.
In fact, many contemporary painters disputed his findings...
as it meant that their paintings were all incorrect."
~ equineink.wordpress.com ~

It was simple
take photographs of a man walking
of a woman holding a scarf
coming down the stairs
to see how the human body
actually moved

in a famous bet
Muybridge had already proved
that the eye had been fooled
for centuries
as all four horses hooves
did leave the ground
at one point during a gallop

then like a strong microscope
he turned high speed photography
on the ordinary,
taking sequences of motion:
a woman
with a broom in hand
with a bucket
a man
with a baseball bat
with a hammer and anvil
nude people
clothed people
for the first time we could see
reality frozen at 1/1000 of a second
and go beyond what the naked eye
could perceive

fascinated
I looked at his tens of thousands
of shots
thinking of the body shapes
like abstract imagery -
not realizing that
I had been pulled back
into figurative art
as I played with his public domain work
using early computer imaging

only years later with a digital camera
did I reap the benefits;
because of his study
I now understood human movement:

in candid situations I could take
a picture over 8 seconds
that recorded continuous movement
not broken into sharp frames
but one photo
blurred with the passage of time

an impression of the moment
the simple continuity
of everyday
comings and goings
The Beach Hut
komponierhauschen: German word for a composer's hut

Authors have called it a writer's hut
musicians a composer's hut
I called it
my trailer at the beach;
I paid $800 for it plus
$100 a month lot rent
to be close to the ocean
and alone with my writing

over thirty years old
with thin but real wood veneer
the trailer measured 8'X30'
and was almost small enough
that I could touch all
four walls and the ceiling
when standing in the middle of a room;
I found myself walking sideways
after a day
through the narrow hall

just a minute from the beach
the ocean's sound was often amplified:
sometimes just the continuous slap
of one long wave hitting the shore,
other times loud with white caps,
yet often so still
I could hear gulls
fighting for a fish

by 1987 I had become comfortable with
word processing
and wanted to try my hand at
working without interruption
no door bells, no phones ringing

at my writer's hut
I developed a working pattern:
I walked around the trailer park
down to the sound on the far side
then up to the beach
letting ideas flow

back at the trailer
I unloaded them
randomly into software

concentration when undisturbed
takes on a life of its own -
between the blank page
and the finished work
is note taking:

the inspired idea
that often appears ridiculous,
random thoughts
flying off into unrelated tangents,
all can lead to a logical outcome
a process that does not appear logical at all

it's like a cat who looks aside
and seems to be distracted
but never lets the mouse out of its reach

like children running cars over
imaginary hills and traffic
who forget for a minute, run away
and then come back more involved than before

with word processing

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
at last
I had the tool I had been looking for
it let me shape, carve and mold words like paint
it let me play with my thoughts
like a child in the sand

Rick Doble, *Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography*
PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER:

AGE 54-66

Real Time
Age 54, Morehead City, North Carolina, 1998
on my early digital camera crude pixels changed back and forth
as the sky faded and as I framed the scene for my next shot on the LCD screen

I often think the night is more alive and more richly coloured than the day.
~ Vincent van Gogh ~

On the edge of darkness
I have seen the twilight sky
do it's digital dance
in real time -
pixels pulsing from
cerulean blue to black
on my LCD screen -
van Gogh's deepest colors
outside his cafe in the evening
or his starry starry night
Painting With Light

Age 56, Morehead City/Beaufort/Down East, North Carolina, 2000
experimenting with slow shutter speed digital photography

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.
~ Albert Einstein ~

in 2000 I crossed an invisible threshold
one that other photographers could have crossed
but had not

deliberately, I bought a digital camera
that would expose for seconds
and not fractions

I had guessed that there was a world
unseen and that the new technology
with its instant feedback
could give me the tool I needed

later I would understand
that my life had been leading to this point:

a notebook about Einstein and space-time
written at age thirteen
and my decade long detour into computers
plus my study of Muybridge's figures in motion
meant that I was up to speed
with the new photographic medium
still in its infancy

not understanding the dimensions
of this world at first
it took a while to get my bearings

I did it step by step:
first mounting a tripod
on the large hump inside my van
next to the dash
so that my camera peered
through the windshield
into the dark vanishing point
of the highway

for 8 seconds
points of light stretched across time
until the shutter closed -
now strung with bright yellow dashes
from blinking warning lights,
now streaked blood red, top to bottom,
with brake and stop lights
as I slowed into stalled traffic

prowling the highways
I cruised the dark back streets and brightly lit bridges
and coasted through the city's main drag,
all the while keeping my eye peeled
for flashing lights
neon and areas of glass
shiny metal that added reflections

I did this
on clear nights or
when a low cloud cover lit the sky
I did this in hard rain, drizzle and mist -
the wetness acting like a mirror and a lens

after months
I pulled the camera off the tripod
and shot handheld -
the wavy lines more interesting
than the straightness
imposed by the tripod

soon I parked
and panned in rhythm
to cars creeping through downtown
or tourists ambling along the waterfront

then against the darkness
I took 8 second shots of my wife
from the passenger side
as she drove her car
lights streaming behind her
and later musicians on stages
their movement painted
against the blank canvas
of the night

and somewhere along the way
I began to 'get it'

what I was doing was expressive
- as I had hoped -
but more than that
these shots were glimpses
of movement through time

where the passing moment
was now smeared across the frame
That night
you came out of the sea -
no longer wounded
you danced on the picnic table
in front of Ziggy's beach front bar
your wet white blouse
clinging to your small body -
hopping up and down
you sang,
"I'm tough; I'm tough."

I had heard
about your accident
the rollover,
the ambulance -
and then your absence
from the coffee shop -
our conversations unspoken

by chance
I was in bare feet,
feeling the summer sand,
looking out at the white waves breaking
when you and your friends
came from the darkness
into the soft light of the boardwalk

we looked at each other -
your clothes glistening with water
your hair damp like a newborns -
and then you danced
in this unlikely moment
I had been allowed
to see your rebirth -
and like Venus from the foam,
you took my breath away
At the age of 18
my girl friend had dumped me -
but only six weeks earlier
in our long distance relationship
we had planned to be together
for the summer

she could never tell me why
except that she still liked me
but needed to be alone

the weekend she told me
I took her to some of my favorite places
hoping to remind her how well we got along;
even sitting on the grass divider
of the Mid-Cape Highway at midnight
watching the cars crest a hill
(their lights in the full darkness
breaking over the top
like waves breaking over a sandbar )
did not change her mind

the next day after she left
I woke up shaking

yet at the end of the summer
she called in tears
"What was I thinking?" she asked
but it was too late
our moment had passed

decades later I was on the phone with her
as she had kept calling me
wanting to stay in touch
finally I asked what she had never explained
"Why did you dump me?"

there was silence on the phone
"I dumped you?" she said
"I thought you dumped me."

"No it was you
quite definitely,
I spent a weekend trying to change your mind
but you would not budge and
then you left and went to Boston"

"Oh," she murmured
"I did not remember that"

* * * *

my mother did not know the reason
nor my wife
nor I
nor even my brother
who hit me over and over
as I stood there

he grabbed my t-shirt
pulling it til it ripped
"You're an animal," he said

but I did not hit back -
because of my training in non-violence
and because I wanted my mother
to recognize the depth
of his illness

his anger played out
I left
waking up the next day
to bruises and stiffness
and after that
any pretense
of being able to get along with him
was gone

yet my mother
as she often did
never pressed him for an answer
and simply let the matter drop
I was forced to follow
her lead

a decade later
after my mother had died
we were taking on the phone
about some lingering estate matters;
I asked my brother why he had hit me
and never apologized

there was an abrupt silence
"I don't remember hitting you," he said

"Ma was there, my wife was there
and no one understood the reason."

"I'm not saying you're wrong
I just don't remember it."

and I never spoke to him again
Black and White
Age 63, Craven Community College, Havelock, North Carolina, 2007
teaching English expository writing

I ask the black freshman I teach
about discrimination

he does not understand

I am just about to tell him
about the long marches
about the time I spent in jail
about a world with two water fountains
and backdoor entrances
and other things much worse...
but I stop - in mid-sentence

he does not know, I think to myself
yet as a teacher
I want him to know about history
but I stop -

he does not know

and this once
I do not want him to know
because maybe he can grow
without the dark shadow

maybe he can keep his innocence
Scared of Heights
Age 64, Williston, North Carolina, 2008

At Florida springs,
floating in shallows
I was suddenly above
a fifty foot drop -
I caught my breath
even as I was holding my breath,
hovering in fresh water
clear as air
over the darkness
of a deep underwater cave

years later I would dream
of hanging above a river
at the tip of a crane
when my life choices had
put me out on a limb

like a roughneck steeplejack
walking the bare girders
of a high-rise under construction
I had a skeleton vision:
that digital photography could be like painting:
personal, subjective, expressive

yet my work had been met with ridicule
my essays dismissed as odd
and my vision seen as too heady

I had risked everything
to piece together the two elements
of my divorced family
my father a painter

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
my mother a photographer

if I could merge them,
I could be whole

now in my dream
at the top of a suspension bridge
I was in the wind
at the end of a crane's arm
with only slippery painted metal
to hold on to

yet there was a stillness
a simple beauty
as the threads of fate
were in control

always scared of heights
instead I felt a sudden freedom

que sera sera
Seeing the Light
Age 63-65, Williston, North Carolina, 2008-2010

A photograph is made by recording an object in space (via the lens) over time (via the shutter speed)...a recording of space/time.
~ Rick Doble, "Experimental Digital Photography" ~

at the age of seven
I wrote a book
about going to the moon

I ruled the pages,
wrote the text
drew a picture or two
and bound it
between two pieces of cardboard
and then with my mother's help
stitched along the fold

I still have this in my library

about sixty years later
following a hunch
I was on the phone
to the photo editor of Lark Books
hoping she might be interested
in some of my skills
having already written two books
on digital photography

"Well what book would you like to write?"
she asked
it was the question I had never dared hope for
the culmination of all my efforts -
a book on the new capabilities
of digital photography
merged with an artistic vision

not only that
I could use my writing skills
my teaching skills
my how-to skills
my understanding of the tradition of western art
all rolled together
into one book
that would lay out
a new world of imagery

but I also knew that the volume I envisioned
would probably not be the one published
- that rarely happens -
yet anything close would be a gift

a year and a half later
I held it in my hands
- you'd have to be a book lover
to understand -
like holding a new baby
the book was finished
and was even better than I had imagined

there are times when the threads
of one's life long efforts
do come together
to weave a fabric
you had in mind
Operation
Age 65, Carteret Hospital, Morehead City, North Carolina, 2010
this poem came to me right after surgery for a full hip replacement
and was the one that began this autobiographical series of poems
see the introduction for more about this

You won't remember the recovery room
they never do
the nurse tells me
you think you will but you won't

ceiling tiles
square white lights
swirling playing cards
searching for a hat
shuffle above me
as I lie flat
and roll into the nurse's care

it's like a dream, I say
I had a dream, she says
I know about dreams, I kept a dream journal, there is no logic, I say
I'm falling, what does it mean, she says
you feel you're losing control, I say
I'm not flying, I'm falling, she says
we're all in recovery, I say

then I crawl into a warm place
above the bed and below the ceiling
where the tiled lights stop moving
and I hover
Not far from Limbo and the River Styx
my feet are propped
in my motorized lounge chair

I am a shadow of myself

"You are young," my doctor tells me,
"only 66
- the bone will grow
and wrap itself
around the spike of metal
pounded and glued into your leg -
it will feel natural in a few months."

Cradled in my wheelchair
I test the hallways -
dark labyrinths
where the elderly roll by
in slow motion

We are letting nature take its course

The faint legato Muzak of
_Somewhere Over the Rainbow_
follows us

We are all waiting

Like ghosts or angels, dozens of women
appear and disappear -
temperature, pills, shots, blood pressure, food -
many forget to wear name tags
so I learn to know them by their clothing
fish, birds, tigers, giraffes

On my large TV
film noir shadows
crawl across the criminals
black and white cowboys ride off

I fall asleep when the flow of female voices
outside my door quiets -
in my dreams I see Achilles
he walks on the river
and beckons

I wake to the metal clang of carts
and the dark mother of pearl sky
that leaks into my room in the morning

Here darkness and light almost merge

And then I remember what
Achilles told me,
"You still have work to do."

With his assurance my bones relax
- I will find my place back in the world outside -
so for now I decide to cat nap

Until the muffled bell rings
and I wheel my way to breakfast
The Picture Not Taken
Age 65, Snug Harbor, Sealevel, North Carolina, 2010

A deep-sea fish has probably no means of apprehending the existence of water; it is too uniformly immersed in it...
~ Sir Oliver Lodge, British scientist ~

what does a fish know about water?
I doubt it understands being wet

living in time
what do we know about the moment?

being immersed
we swim because that is what we do

when I look up from my book
I see the shadow of a colonial lamp
projected flat against brick
by the sudden afternoon sun
breaking through the window

I want to reach for my camera
and fix it out of time

instead
over the next half hour
I watch
a slow motion collision:
the wall and window shadows crash
with the lengthening shadow of the lamp

as a photographer
I know something about time
and most of life is lived outside the lens
today I chose to save this drama
in my fragile memory

and do not allow
the split second it would take
for it to lodge inside my camera
Firebird
Age 65, Snug Harbor, Sealevel, North Carolina, 2010

Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom.
If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn.
They teach you there's a boundary line to music.
But, man, there's no boundary line to art.
~ Charlie Parker ~

In Eastwood's movie
Charlie Parker listened to
The Rite of Spring

“How can he hear all those sounds?”
he said before he got into a car
and drove to Stravinsky's home

late and unannounced
at Igor's gate
a drunken Bird could not explain
and Stravinsky walked away

we can only guess
what kind of music
they might have made

* * * * *
when I read your poems
memories overflow
like a forgotten photo album
or my father's
Victorian paper weight
that scattered light
to paintings, books
unpredictable
when the sun hit it
like when
a bunch of us kids
measured and cut a board
then snuck down in our boats at night
to place it in the groove
at the top of the old mill spillway -
it fit perfectly
and added twelve inches
to Shawme pond
where we swam everyday

a memory that had been lost
until I read your poems

now I know
you have not met me
but unlike Bird
I will, at least,
tell you who I am
and who knows...
All endeavor calls for the ability to tramp the last mile,  
shape the last plan, endure the last hours toil.  
The fight to the finish spirit is the one... characteristic we must posses  
if we are to face the future as finishers.  
~ Henry David Thoreau ~

In 2009  
I Googled myself -  
my work had been quoted six times  
at a contemporary art conference  
in Milan Italy

those essays about digital art  
and the modern art of the 20th Century,  
that no one had taken seriously,  
were getting a major play in Europe  
by professors who took it a step further

fast forward:  
nine months later  
my photos and writings  
were shown again in Milan  
at the following conference  
but this time  
next to Italian Futurist paintings -  
a movement that began exactly 100 years before -  
by artists who wanted to make visible  
imagery of motion in ways similar to mine

it was enough to take myself seriously  
(but hopefully not too seriously)

so as I end this series of poems  
I have so much more to do;
the work is not finished until
I have gotten out the word
and it will not be done
unless I do

arriving at this point
has been a life long effort -
and I would love to rest at the age of 66 -
yet no one knows how long they have

as Thoreau pointed out
the world belongs to the finishers
who, although exhausted,
nevertheless go on
EPILOGUE

Back to the Future

Countdown for blastoff... X minus five, four, three, two, X minus one... Fire!
These are stories of the future; adventures in which you'll live in a million could-be years
on a thousand may-be worlds.
~ Opening narration, “X Minus One” ~
a sci-fi radio program from 1955 -1958 that I listened to every week from age 11-14

Do I wish things had been different?
do I wish I had not lived
in the wake of turmoil
that seemed to follow my life?

yes

my wish list:
an older brother not mentally ill
a mother less vindictive
a father not wounded
a love with less tears, fewer shadows
and of course
recognition for my art
so I didn't have to struggle to pay the bills

yet
I have written the book I was born to write
explored a new art form I had a part in discovering
married the love of my life

change one thing in your past
and you may be changing

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
a lot of other things as well

I am reminded of the
\textit{X Minus One} radio story
in which a time-traveling tourist
goes back a hundred million years
to a Jurassic Park kind of place
and is given one instruction
"Stay on the special walkway. 
Don't touch anything.
Just look."

enthralled by the prehistoric plants
he walks along until -
without thinking -
he grabs a leaf
puts it in his pocket
and then forgets about it

coming back to his own time, however,
he gets confused -
some streets have different names
a building is gone and instead
a new skyscraper is on the horizon

when he drives home
his ranch style house
is turned at an angle

and his wife and children
don't recognize him
PS: Stories Not Told

Cross-section is the intersection of a 3-dimensional body with a plane.
~ Wikipedia ~

Stain is the name of the game.
~ Dr. Jacob Hanker, research micro-biologist, UNC-Chapel Hill ~
I worked with Dr. Hanker in 1980; he stained blood cells
to reveal aspects that could not be seen under normal microscopic conditions

I could have told
a hundred more stories
but in this case
more would be less

those I have told
are the highs and lows,
the outline
of my life & my emotions,
any more would
blur the clarity of
what I have sketched

stories such as:

when
my father remarried
and his new wife turned out
to be an alcoholic
who hit his hand with the sharp point
of a high heeled shoe
sending him to the emergency room

or when
I bought old Dodge Darts
that I learned to fix and cannibalize
so I could afford to go to graduate school -
which spawned my other career as a frugal guru
leading to 3 books plus
national TV and radio interviews

or when
my careless first wife
left candles burning
where they could easily catch fire
so I woke up choking with smoke

or when a close friend
committed suicide
and my other close friend
became an alcoholic

or when
I exposed myself to a wide range of art:

-- from a Rubinstein Chopin concert
to Jimi Hendrix playing the Star Spangled banner
-- from a Flamenco concert in Spain
with the Gypsies in third balcony seats
to a night of rave at Ziggy's By The Sea in NC

and I've walked inside
the curved Gaudi buildings in Barcelona
- where there are no right angles -
and through Coral Castle in Florida
where a Latvian man cut and moved
ton slabs of coral by himself

and I've seen a retrospective of Calder’s mobiles
floating in the Guggenheim museum
as though Frank Lloyd Wright's space
was built to show them -
along with James Hampton's
naive masterpiece, The Throne,
made of light bulbs
and aluminum foil
peeled from gum wrappers

and quietly
in rain-like mist
I've wandered the Lake District
thinking of Wordsworth,
then later looked out to sea
from a high room
in Key West
where Hemingway wrote
*A Farewell To Arms*

yet I believe the stories
that I did chose to detail
are like staining organic matter
to reveal the structure of my path

I think of them
as two dimensional cross-sections
of my three dimensional life
as crystals
or crystallizations
that refract and also reflect
my feelings at that point
Quotes: Looking Back

An American Indian "observes the landmarks to his rear which makes it easy for him to return. A white man usually fails to do this and therefore often gets lost."

Orientation: Some Reasons Why Indians Never Get Lost

~ Fred Meagher, "Straight Arrow, Injun-uity Manual" ~
published by Nabisco Shredded Wheat, 1951

I have owned this manual since I was eight years old

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.
~ Soren Kierkegaard ~

It is a mistake to think that the past is dead. Nothing that has ever happened is quite without influence at this moment. The present is merely the past rolled up and concentrated in this second of time. You, too, are your past; often your face is your autobiography.
~ Will Durant ~

The present moment is simply the leading edge of the past, a wave that is forever breaking.
~ Rick Doble ~

The Wind

Age 8, Town Hill School, Lakeville, Connecticut, 1953
my first poem written in third grade

When the wind whistles through the trees with ease it blows about the little leaves

Sometimes the leaves do fall but in autumn most of all

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
Why 2 Art Forms?

Painting is no problem. The problem is what to do when you're not painting.
~ Jackson Pollock ~

1 + 1 = 3  This is not bad math.

With two art forms, writing and photography, I have two separate skills and also the interaction of the two (making a third) -- such as the way an idea in one will lead to work in the other. For example, I often think in pictures of a scene I am trying to describe in a poem or I think about how to verbalize a visual concept in photography.

My physical therapist, during rehab for my hip surgery, told me it was like exercising two different parts of my brain (like muscles for thought) rather than only strengthening one set of muscles. In physical therapy, working muscles in different ways leads to greater strength. In my case one art informs the other.

From the age of eight, I have been a writer. By the age of twelve, I had written pieces in a number of different forms: poetry, plays, essays, short stories, reporting, how-tos and also worked as a co-editor for the school magazine.

At the age of 20, I also began a quest to learn a visual art form. After years of searching I discovered photography which I picked up quickly because of my experience as a youngster with microscopes and telescopes.

For me these two art forms, writing and photography, compliment each other. I also believe that no matter how talented we are, each of us only has so many creative ideas -- that we can only go to the well so many times before running out of water. So it often works best to not force creativity but instead to let one art form lie fallow, so that the well can replenish itself.

Rick Doble, *Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography*
Hearing Dictation

Poetry often comes to me in the form of hearing words in my mind. The following is what I heard the first time 'dictation' came into my head; it was like an independent voice that I was listening to. The words here are almost exactly what I transcribed at that moment. See my poem entitled "Words From On High" for an explanation.

A Poem in Two Voices, 1970

SISTER:
He remained in the shrouded room. Rags and dirty plates lay like shells across his bedside table. From time to time we rolled him over and washed his bed pan out. The blind covered window webbed the room in silhouettes.
He took a long time to die.
Afternoons of summer rain came upon the house.
At times his arms would tense, the sheets would bunch between his fingers, and I would loosen his grip and straighten out the sheets. But he never answered.
Mother asked him. She motioned to the grave in the fields but he turned his face to the wall. Finally she kissed him and left.
We waited through the hot summer nights, the waves of his fever. As he shivered, we wrung out the old clothes and placed boiled ones on his forehead. He would watch us...Then we waited, playing cards...

MAN:
I've seen the tree outside my window and the monument beyond, in the fields by the pump house.
Now I watch the leaves swish their dress over the yellow blinds. The wall paper is tearing. Repeated and repeated across the room is a black design of a dark carriage rolling behind bushes and a rider on his horse, who blows a trumpet. Shadows hide and reveal the carriages, rider, bushes that never move but run over my room.
I had a dream...of a black sea lapping at my window. I saw it covering the glass. I wanted to feel the water but I could not move. Slowly darkness covered my bed like wild vines. It carried me out beyond the shadows of my window, the sunlight on the trees, and bore me to the end of the horizon where I became a wave of night.

Rick Doble, Living My Life As an Artist, an Autobiography
The bed pan is full again. I wish they would empty it and bring me clean sheets...But I won't call them. They'll come. They think I should join the grave in the fields, but I'll not die for a while. Together we lie in this light...

It has rained for the last week. But a break in the clouds, a sudden muted light will fill the room. Then I can see...cracks in the floor...threads of dust...the path worn around the bed and bureau...the old copper in the grandfather clock...plaster breaking through the carriage and rider on the walls.

A flush of clouds again will smother the room. Then I'll mingle my fingers with the sheets and look to the flaps of shadows on the blind.

And for the last week pain has come in spurts. It presses on the small of my back. I turn to miss it but it comes again. I can feel the waves rush on.

SISTER:
The rain falls for the second week. How soon will he fill his grave..? We have carried him for months. He had left us for good. When he returned several months later, he said nothing.

He stayed in his old room. On the bureau he set out some stones he had gathered since he left.

Although he came to dinner, he talked to no one...One day in June when he did not down to eat, we found him feverish. A grayness had taken over his eyes. So still the form lay and let us undress him. Yet he did not die. For two months he lay in the heat, unmoving.

One night I could not rest. I walked down the hallways to free myself from sleeplessness.

As I came to his door, I saw it was open. I stood before it feeling moved to go in, but afraid.

Then slowly, as if being taken, I slipped between the opening and went in.

Threads of light filtered in from the living room. The outline of his back was to me. He was asleep; I stood observing his body. How his breathing hesitated through his empty frame.

Now I hear the heavy ticking of the grandfather clock that fills the room with moments, spaces between each tick, shadows that appear and flutter away.

I look to the mirror above the bureau where a strange light not coming from the living room, but seeming to come from behind the glass, is pulling me toward it.

Two diamond points pierce my eyes. I turn. He sleeps with his eyes open. I see through the web of darkness.

I ran out the room, banged against the bed...the hallway, out the front door. Then gathering breath, I walked outside. I lay under a tree to quiet the light that had entered and moved within me.

MAN:
My bed seemed comfortable tonight. It never has before. Something large and empty surrounds, hovers beyond my room. The clock ticks.

I think I went to sleep and dreamed the bed was a shell that grew around me. I awoke watching the filmy light change like clouds across the mirror.

A large form emerged in my room, stood silent for moments, walked to the mirror, then turned
toward me.  
_Suddenly it leaves. Ticking fills the room. I can hear the beating of the drum...a closing and opening like bellows outside the room; the walls seem to move like flaps and the breathing comes close, spilling through the cracks, over-coming my heart, the room; I am taken across the light._

**SISTER:**

Over the fields the sun rose. The monument cast its shadow; I saw it crawl though the grass. Light filled the leaves above in the tree that I lay against.

I felt something heavy passing. My stomach calmed. A seed had come to rest. I lay terrified between the tree roots, and I slept.

When I awoke I returned to the house. Mother said that he had died. Something was gone from her eyes and a grayness had come to fill it.

All day the family moved in pantomime. While his grave was dug...his body prepared...we dressed.

In the late afternoon, we carried his coffin, so light now, to lie next to the monument. Behind the coffin, mother led, covered in a black veil, her robes fluffing in the hot breeze.

We buried him.

We returned to the house.

We stayed in the living room as the sun went down. Mother looked out the window at the two graves beyond.

We waited as twilight filled the room.

No one got up to turn on the lights. A blanket of night covered the graves and filled the house.

We waited.
Appendix

Rick Doble’s website
www.RickDoble.net

Rick Doble’s experimental digital photography
www.RickDoble.net/paintingwithlight

Rick Doble’s detailed autobiography
www.RickDoble.net/lifestory

Rick Doble’s essays about contemporary art
www.RickDoble.net/essaymenu.html

Rick Doble’s frugal living site
www.Savvy-Discounts.com

Rick Doble’s email address
rick_doble@yahoo.com

Rick Doble’s relationship site
www.abusivelove.com