

Classic Poetry Series

William De Witt Snodgrass
- poems -

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William De Witt Snodgrass(January 5, 1926 – January 13, 2009)

William De Witt Snodgrass was an American poet who also wrote under the pseudonym S. S. Gardons. He won the 1960 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

Life

W. D. Snodgrass was born on January 5, 1926 in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania; the family lived in Wilksburg, but drove to Beaver Falls for his birth since his grandfather was a doctor in the town. Eventually the family moved to Beaver Falls and Snodgrass graduated from the local high school in 1943. He then attended Geneva College until 1944 and had an offer from the Juilliard School for admission because of his musical abilities on the timpani, but he was drafted into the United States Navy before he could accept. After demobilization in 1946, Snodgrass transferred to the University of Iowa and enrolled in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, originally intending to become a playwright but eventually joining the poetry workshop which was attracting as teachers some of the finest poetic talents of the day, among them John Berryman, Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1949, a Master of Arts degree in 1951, and a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1953.

Snodgrass was known to friends throughout his life as "De", pronounced "dee", but only published using his initials. He had a long and distinguished academic career, having taught at Cornell (1955-7), Rochester (1957-8), Wayne State (1959-68), Syracuse (1968-1977), Old Dominion (1978-9), and the University of Delaware. He retired from teaching in 1994 to devote himself full-time to his writing. This included autobiographical sketches, essays, and the critical verse 'deconstructions' of De/Construct. He died in his home in Madison County, New York, aged 83, following a four-month battle with lung cancer, and was survived by his fourth wife, writer Kathleen Snodgrass.

Snodgrass had married his first wife, Lila Jean Hank, in 1946, by whom he had a daughter, Cynthia Jean. Their marriage ended in divorce in 1953 and it was the separation from his daughter as a result that became the subject of his first collection, *Heart's Needle*. The following year Snodgrass married his second wife, Janice Marie Ferguson Wilson. Together they have a son, Russell Bruce, and a stepdaughter, Kathy Ann Wilson. Divorcing again in 1966, he married his third wife, Camille Rykowski in 1967 but this ended in 1978. His fourth marriage to Kathleen Ann Brown was in 1985.

Literary Career

Snodgrass's first poems appeared in 1951, and throughout the 1950s he published in some of the most prestigious magazines: *Botteghe Oscure*, *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review* and *The Hudson Review*. However, in 1957, five sections from a sequence entitled 'Heart's Needle' were included in Hall, Pack and Simpson's anthology, *New Poets of England and America*, and these were to mark a turning-point. When Lowell had been shown early versions of these poems, in 1953, he had disliked them, but now he was full of admiration.

By the time *Heart's Needle* was published, in 1959, Snodgrass had already won *The Hudson Review* Fellowship in Poetry and an Ingram Merrill Foundation Poetry Prize. However, his first book brought him more: a citation from the Poetry Society of America, a grant from the National Institute of Arts, and, most important of all, 1960's Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. It is often said that *Heart's Needle* inaugurated confessional poetry. Snodgrass disliked the term. Still, it should be pointed out that the genre he was reviving here seemed revolutionary to most of his contemporaries, reared as they had been on the anti-expressionistic principles of the New Critics. Snodgrass's confessional work was to have a profound effect on many of his contemporaries, amongst them, most importantly, Robert Lowell.

Being tagged with this label affected his work and its reception and forced him into small-press publication for many years. Two new themes (eventually) restored his reputation, although at the time they first began to appear there was a perception by some that Snodgrass had 'wrecked his career'. One was *The Führer Bunker* cycle of poems, monologues by Hitler and his circle in the closing days of the Third Reich, a 'poem in progress' that began to appear from 1977 onwards and was finally completed in 1995. An adaptation of these for the stage was performed in the 1980s. The other theme was the series written in response to DeLoss McGraw's surrealist paintings, which eventually grew into a partnership. In these poems, often uproariously rhymed, Snodgrass stood his former confessional style on its head at the same time as satirising contemporary attitudes.

A Locked House

As we drove back, crossing the hill,
The house still
Hidden in the trees, I always thought—
A fool's fear—that it might have caught
Fire, someone could have broken in.
As if things must have been
Too good here. Still, we always found
It locked tight, safe and sound.

I mentioned that, once, as a joke;
No doubt we spoke
Of the absurdity
To fear some dour god's jealousy
Of our good fortune. From the farm
Next door, our neighbors saw no harm
Came to the things we cared for here.
What did we have to fear?

Maybe I should have thought: all
Such things rot, fall—
Barns, houses, furniture.
We two are stronger than we were
Apart; we've grown
Together. Everything we own
Can burn; we know what counts—some such
Idea. We said as much.

We'd watched friends driven to betray;
Felt that love drained away
Some self they need.
We'd said love, like a growth, can feed
On hate we turn in and disguise;
We warned ourselves. That you might despise
Me—hate all we both loved best—
None of us ever guessed.

The house still stands, locked, as it stood
Untouched a good
Two years after you went.

Some things passed in the settlement;
Some things slipped away. Enough's left
That I come back sometimes. The theft
And vandalism were our own.
Maybe we should have known.

William De Witt Snodgrass

After Experience Taught Me ...

After experience taught me that all the ordinary
Surroundings of social life are futile and vain;

I'm going to show you something very
Ugly: someday, it might save your life.

Seeing that none of the things I feared contain
In themselves anything either good or bad

What if you get caught without a knife;
Nothing—even a loop of piano wire;

Excepting only in the effect they had
Upon my mind, I resolved to inquire

Take the first two fingers of this hand;
Fork them out—kind of a "V for Victory"—

Whether there might be something whose discovery
Would grant me supreme, unending happiness.

And jam them into the eyes of your enemy.
You have to do this hard. Very hard. Then press

No virtue can be thought to have priority
Over this endeavor to preserve one's being.

Both fingers down around the cheekbone
And setting your foot high into the chest

No man can desire to act rightly, to be blessed,
To live rightly, without simultaneously

You must call up every strength you own
And you can rip off the whole facial mask.

Wishing to be, to act, to live. He must ask
First, in other words, to actually exist.

And you, whiner, who wastes your time
Dawdling over the remorseless earth,
What evil, what unspeakable crime
Have you made your life worth?

William De Witt Snodgrass

April Inventory

The green catalpa tree has turned
All white; the cherry blooms once more.
In one whole year I haven't learned
A blessed thing they pay you for.
The blossoms snow down in my hair;
The trees and I will soon be bare.

The trees have more than I to spare.
The sleek, expensive girls I teach,
Younger and pinker every year,
Bloom gradually out of reach.
The pear tree lets its petals drop
Like dandruff on a tabletop.

The girls have grown so young by now
I have to nudge myself to stare.
This year they smile and mind me how
My teeth are falling with my hair.
In thirty years I may not get
Younger, shrewder, or out of debt.

The tenth time, just a year ago,
I made myself a little list
Of all the things I'd ought to know,
Then told my parents, analyst,
And everyone who's trusted me
I'd be substantial, presently.

I haven't read one book about
A book or memorized one plot.
Or found a mind I did not doubt.
I learned one then forgot.
And one by one the solid scholars
Get the degrees, the jobs, the dollars.

And smile above their starchy collars.
I taught my classes Whitehead's notions;
One lovely girl, a song of Mahler's.
Lacking a source-book or promotions,

I showed one child the colors of
A luna moth and how to love.

I taught myself to name my name,
To bark back, loosen love and crying;
To ease my woman so she came,
To ease an old man who was dying.
I have not learned how often I
Can win, can love, but choose to die.

I have not learned there is a lie
Love shall be blonder, slimmer, younger;
That my equivocating eye
Loves only by my body's hunger;
That I have forces true to feel,
Or that the lovely world is real.

While scholars speak authority
And wear their ulcers on their sleeves,
My eyes in spectacles shall see
These trees procure and spend their leaves.
There is a value underneath
The gold and silver in my teeth.

Though trees turn bare and girls turn wives,
We shall afford our costly seasons;
There is a gentleness survives
That will outspoke and has its reasons.
There is a loveliness exists,
Preserves us, not for specialists.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Heart's Needle

1

Child of my winter, born
When the new fallen soldiers froze
In Asia's steep ravines and fouled the snows,
When I was torn

By love I could not still,
By fear that silenced my cramped mind
To that cold war where, lost, I could not find
My peace in my will,

All those days we could keep
Your mind a landscape of new snow
Where the chilled tenant-farmer finds, below,
His fields asleep

In their smooth covering, white
As quilts to warm the resting bed
Of birth or pain, spotless as paper spread
For me to write,

And thinks: Here lies my land
Unmarked by agony, the lean foot
Of the weasel tracking, the thick trapper's boot;
And I have planned

My chances to restrain
The torments of demented summer or
Increase the deepening harvest here before
It snows again.

2

Late April and you are three; today
We dug your garden in the yard.
To curb the damage of your play,
Strange dogs at night and the moles tunneling,
Four slender sticks of lath stand guard
Uplifting their thin string.

So you were the first to tramp it down.
And after the earth was sifted close
You brought your watering can to drown
All earth and us. But these mixed seeds are pressed
With light loam in their steadfast rows.
Child, we've done our best.

Someone will have to weed and spread
The young sprouts. Sprinkle them in the hour
When shadow falls across their bed.
You should try to look at them every day
Because when they come to full flower
I will be away.

3

The child between them on the street
Comes to a puddle, lifts his feet
And hangs on their hands. They start
At the Jive weight and lurch together,
Recoil to swing him through the weather,
Stiffen and pull apart.

We read of cold war soldiers that
Never gained ground, gave none, but sat
Tight in their chill trenches.
Pain seeps up from some cavity
Through the ranked teeth in sympathy;
The whole jaw grinds and clenches

Till something somewhere has to give.
It's better the poor soldiers live
In someone else's hands
Than drop where helpless powers fall
On crops and barns, on towns where all
Will burn. And no man stands.

For good, they sever and divide
Their won and lost land. On each side
Prisoners are returned
Excepting a few unknown names.
The peasant plods back and reclaims
His fields that strangers burned

And nobody seems very pleased.
It's best. Still, what must not be seized
Clenches the empty fist.
I tugged your hand, once, when I hated
Things less: a mere game dislocated
The radius of your wrist.

Love's wishbone, child, although I've gone
As men must and let you be drawn
Off to appease another,
It may help that a Chinese play
Or Solomon himself might say
I am your real mother.

4

No one can tell you why
the season will not wait;
the night I told you I
must leave, you wept a fearful rate
to stay up late.

Now that it's turning Fan,
we go to take our walk
among municipal
flowers, to steal one off its stalk,
to try and talk.

We huff like windy giants
scattering with our breath
gray-headed dandelions;
Spring is the cold wind's aftermath.
The poet saith.

But the asters, too, are gray,
ghost-gray. Last night's cold
is sending on their way
petunias and dwarf marigold,
hunched sick and old.

Like nerves caught in a graph,
the morning-glory vines

frost has erased by half
still scrawl across their rigid twines.
Like broken lines

of verses I can't make.
In its unraveling loom
we find a flower to take,
with some late buds that might still bloom,
back to your room.

Night comes and the stiff dew.
I'm told a friend's child cried
because a cricket, who
had minstrelled every night outside
her window, died.

5
Winter again and it is snowing;
Although you are still three,
You are already growing
Strange to me.

You chatter about new playmates, sing
Strange songs; you do not know
Hey ding-a-ding-a-ding
Or where I go

Or when I sang for bedtime, Fox
Went out on a chilly night,
Before I went for walks
And did not write;

You never mind the squalls and storms
That are renewed long since;
Outside, the thick snow swarms
Into my prints

And swirls out by warehouses, sealed,
Dark cowbarns, huddled, still,
Beyond to the blank field,
The fox's hill

Where he backtracks and sees the paw,
Gnawed off, he cannot feel;
Conceded to the jaw
Of toothed, blue steel.

6

Easter has come around
again; the river is rising
over the thawed ground
and the banksides. When you come you bring
an egg dyed lavender.
We shout along our bank to hear
our voices returning from the hills to meet us.
We need the landscape to repeat us.

You Jived on this bank first.
While nine months filled your term, we knew
how your lungs, immersed
in the womb, miraculously grew
their useless folds till
the fierce, cold air rushed in to fill
them out like bushes thick with leaves. You took your hour,
caught breath, and cried with your full lung power.

Over the stagnant bight
we see the hungry bank swallow
flaunting his free flight
still; we sink in mud to follow
the killdeer from the grass
that hides her nest. That March there was
rain; the rivers rose; you could hear killdeers flying
all night over the mudflats crying.

You bring back how the red-
winged blackbird shrieked, slapping frail wings,
diving at my head—
I saw where her tough nest, cradled, swings
in tall reeds that must sway
with the winds blowing every way.
If you recall much, you recall this place. You still
live nearby—on the opposite hill.

After the sharp windstorm
of July Fourth, all that summer
through the gentle, warm
afternoons, we heard great chain saws chirr
like iron locusts. Crews
of roughneck boys swarmed to cut loose
branches wrenched in the shattering wind, to hack free
all the torn limbs that could sap the tree.

In the debris lay
starlings, dead. Near the park's birdrun
we surprised one day
a proud, tan-spatted, buff-brown pigeon.
In my hands she flapped so
fearfully that I let her go.
Her keeper came. And we helped snarl her in a net.
You bring things I'd as soon forget.

You raise into my head
a Fall night that I came once more
to sit on your bed;
sweat beads stood out on your arms and fore-
head and you wheezed for breath,
for help, like some child caught beneath
its comfortable wooly blankets, drowning there.
Your lungs caught and would not take the air.

Of all things, only we
have power to choose that we should die;
nothing else is free
in this world to refuse it. Yet I,
who say this, could not raise
myself from bed how many days
to the thieving world. Child, I have another wife,
another child. We try to choose our life.

7

Here in the scuffled dust
is our ground of play.
I lift you on your swing and must
shove you away,
see you return again,

drive you off again, then

stand quiet till you come.
You, though you climb
higher, farther from me, longer,
will fall back to me stronger.
Bad penny, pendulum,
you keep my constant time

to bob in blue July
where fat goldfinches fly
over the glittering, fecund
reach of our growing lands.
Once more now, this second,
I hold you in my hands.

8
I thumped on you the best I could
which was no use;
you would not tolerate your food
until the sweet, fresh milk was soured
with lemon juice.

That puffed you up like a fine yeast.
The first June in your yard
like some squat Nero at a feast
you sat and chewed on white, sweet clover.
That is over.

When you were old enough to walk
we went to feed
the rabbits in the park milkweed;
saw the paired monkeys, under lock,
consume each other's salt.

Going home we watched the slow
stars follow us down Heaven's vault.
You said, let's catch one that comes low,
pull off its skin
and cook it for our dinner.

As absentee bread-winner,

I seldom got you such cuisine;
we ate in local restaurants
or bought what lunches we could pack
in a brown sack

with stale, dry bread to toss for ducks
on the green-scummed lagoons,
crackers for porcupine and fox,
life-savers for the footpad coons
to scour and rinse,

snatch after in their muddy pail
and stare into their paws.
When I moved next door to the jail
I learned to fry
omelettes and griddle cakes so I

could set you supper at my table.
As I built back from helplessness,
when I grew able,
the only possible answer was
you had to come here less.

This Hallowe'en you come one week.
You masquerade
as a vermilion, sleek,
fat, crosseyed fox in the parade
or, where grim jackolanterns leer,

go with your bag from door to door
foraging for treats. How queer:
when you take off your mask
my neighbors must forget and ask
whose child you are.

Of course you lose your appetite,
whine and won't touch your plate;
as local law
I set your place on an orange crate
in your own room for days. At night

you lie asleep there on the bed

and grate your jaw.
Assuredly your father's crimes
are visited
on you. You visit me sometimes.

The time's up. Now our pumpkin sees
me bringing your suitcase.
He holds his grin;
the forehead shrivels, sinking in.
You break this year's first crust of snow

off the runningboard to eat.
We manage, though for days
I crave sweets when you leave and know
they rot my teeth. Indeed our sweet
foods leave us cavities.

9
I get numb and go in
though the dry ground will not hold
the few dry swirls of snow
and it must not be very cold.
A friend asks how you've been
and I don't know

or see much right to ask.
Or what use it could be to know.
In three months since you came
the leaves have fallen and the snow;
your pictures pinned above my desk
seem much the same.

Somehow I come to find
myself upstairs in the third floor
museum's halls,
walking to kill my time once more
among the enduring and resigned
stuffed animals,

where, through a century's
caprice, displacement and
known treachery between

its wars, they hear some old command
and in their peaceable kingdoms freeze
to this still scene,

Nature Morte. Here
by the door, its guardian,
the patchwork dodo stands
where you and your stepsister ran
laughing and pointing. Here, last year,
you pulled my hands

and had your first, worst quarrel,
so toys were put up on your shelves.
Here in the first glass cage
the little bobcats arch themselves,
still practicing their snarl
of constant rage.

The bison, here, immense,
shoves at his calf, brow to brow,
and looks it in the eye
to see what is it thinking now.
I forced you to obedience;
I don't know why.

Still the lean lioness
beyond them, on her jutting ledge
of shale and desert shrub,
stands watching always at the edge,
stands hard and tanned and envious
above her cub;

with horns locked in tan heather,
two great Olympian Elk stand bound,
fixed in their lasting hate
till hunger brings them both to ground.
Whom equal weakness binds together
none shall separate.

Yet separate in the ocean
of broken ice, the white bear reels
beyond the leathery groups

of scattered, drab Arctic seals
arrested here in violent motion
like Napoleon's troops.

Our states have stood so long
At war, shaken with hate and dread,
they are paralyzed at bay;
once we were out of reach, we said,
we would grow reasonable and strong.
Some other day.

Like the cold men of Rome,
we have won costly fields to sow
in salt, our only seed.
Nothing but injury will grow.
I write you only the bitter poems
that you can't read.

Onan who would not breed
a child to take his brother's bread
and be his brother's birth,
rose up and left his lawful bed,
went out and spilled his seed
in the cold earth.

I stand by the unborn,
by putty-colored children curled
in jars of alcohol,
that waken to no other world,
unchanging, where no eye shall mourn.
I see the caul

that wrapped a kitten, dead.
I see the branching, doubled throat
of a two-headed foal;
I see the hydrocephalic goat;
here is the curled and swollen head,
there, the burst skull;

skin of a limbless calf;
a horse's foetus, mummified;
mounted and joined forever,

the Siamese twin dogs that ride
belly to belly, half and half,
that none shall sever.

I walk among the growths,
by gangrenous tissue, goiter, cysts,
by fistulas and cancers,
where the malignancy man loathes
is held suspended and persists.
And I don't know the answers.

The window's turning white.
The world moves like a diseased heart
packed with ice and snow.
Three months now we have been apart
less than a mile. I cannot fight
or let you go.

10

The vicious winter finally yields
the green winter wheat;
the farmer, tired in the tired fields
he dare not leave will eat.

Once more the runs come fresh; prevailing
piglets, stout as jugs,
harry their old sow to the railing
to ease her swollen dugs

and game colts trail the herded mares
that circle the pasture courses;
our seasons bring us back once more
like merry-go-round horses.

With crocus mouths, perennial hungers,
into the park Spring comes;
we roast hot dogs on old coat hangers
and feed the swan bread crumbs,

pay our respects to the peacocks, rabbits,
and leathery Canada goose
who took, last Fall, our tame white habits

and now will not turn loose.

In full regalia, the pheasant cocks
march past their dubious hens;
the porcupine and the lean, red fox
trot around bachelor pens

and the miniature painted train
wails on its oval track:
you said, I'm going to Pennsylvania!
and waved. And you've come back.

If I loved you, they said, I'd leave
and find my own affairs.
Well, once again this April, we've
come around to the bears;

punished and cared for, behind bars,
the coons on bread and water
stretch thin black fingers after ours.
And you are still my daughter.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Magda Goebbels (30 April 1945)

(After Dr. Haase gave them shots of morphine, Magda gave each child an ampule of potassium cyanide from a spoon.)

This is the needle that we give
Soldiers and children when they live
Near the front in primitive
 Conditions or real dangers;
This is the spoon we use to feed
Men trapped in trouble or in need,
When weakness or bad luck might lead
 Them to the hands of strangers.

This is the room where you can sleep
Your sleep out, curled up under deep
Layers of covering that will keep
 You safe till all harm's past.
This is the bed where you can rest
In perfect silence, undistressed
By noise or nightmares, as my breast
 Once held you soft but fast.

This is the Doctor who has brought
Your needle with your special shot
To quiet you; you won't get caught
 Off guard or unprepared.
I am your nurse who'll comfort you;
I nursed you, fed you till you grew
Too big to feed; now you're all through
 Fretting or feeling scared.

This is the glass tube that contains
Calm that will spread down through your veins
To free you finally from all pains
 Of going on in error.
This tiny pinprick sets the germ
Inside you that fills out its term
Till you can feel yourself grow firm
 Against all doubt, all terror.

Into this spoon I break the pill
That stiffens the unsteady will
And hardens you against the chill

Voice of a world of lies.

This amber medicine implants
Steadfastness in your blood; this grants
Immunity from greed and chance,
And from all compromise.

This is the serum that can cure
Weak hearts; these pure, clear drops insure
You'll face what comes and can endure

The test; you'll never falter.

This is the potion that preserves
You in a faith that never swerves;
This sets the pattern of your nerves
Too firm for you to alter.

I set this spoon between your tight
Teeth, as I gave you your first bite;
This satisfies your appetite

For other nourishment.

Take this on your tongue; this do
Remembering your mother who
So loved her Leader she stayed true
When all the others went,

When every friend proved false, in the
Delirium of treachery

On every hand, when even He

Had turned His face aside.

He shut himself in with His whore;
Then, though I screamed outside His door,
Said He'd not see me anymore.

They both took cyanide.

Open wide, now, little bird;
I who sang you your first word
Soothe away every sound you've heard
Except your Leader's voice.

Close your eyes, now; take your death.
Once we slapped you to take breath.

Vengeance is mine, the Lord God saith
And cancels each last choice.

Once, my first words marked out your mind;
Just as our Leader's phrases bind
All hearts to Him, building a blind
Loyalty through the nation,
We shape you into a pure form.
Trapped, our best soldiers tricked the storm,
The Reds: those last hours, they felt warm
Who stood fast to their station.

You needn't fear what your life meant;
You won't curse how your hours were spent;
You'll grow like your own monument
To all things sure and good,
Fixed like a frieze in high relief
Of granite figures that our Chief
Accepts into His true belief,
His true blood-brotherhood.

You'll never bite the hand that fed you,
Won't turn away from those that bred you,
Comforted your nights and led you
Into the thought of virtue;
You won't be turned from your own bed;
Won't turn into that thing you dread;
No new betrayal lies ahead;
Now no one else can hurt you.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Matisse: 'The Red Studio'

There is no one here.
But the objects: they are real. It is not
As if he had stepped out or moved away;
There is no other room and no
Returning. Your foot or finger would pass
Through, as into unreflecting water
Red with clay, or into fire.
Still, the objects: they are real. It is
As if he had stood
Still in the bare center of this floor,
His mind turned in in concentrated fury,
Till he sank
Like a great beast sinking into sands
Slowly, and did not look up.
His own room drank him.
What else could generate this
Terra cotta raging through the floor and walls,
Through chests, chairs, the table and the clock,
Till all environments of living are
Transformed to energy-
Crude, definitive and gay.
And so gave birth to objects that are real.
How slowly they took shape, his children, here, Grew solid and remain:
The crayons; these statues; the clear brandy bowl;
The ashtray where a girl sleeps, curling among flowers;
This flask of tall glass, green, where a vine begins
Whose bines circle the other girl brown as a cypress knee.
Then, pictures, emerging on the walls:
Bathers; a landscape; a still life with a vase;
To the left, a golden blonde, lain in magentas with flowers scattering like stars;
Opposite, top right, these terra cotta women, living, in their world of living's
colors;
Between, but yearning toward them, the sailor on his red cafe chair, dark blue,
self-absorbed.
These stay, exact,
Within the belly of these walls that burn,
That must hum like the domed electric web
Within which, at the carnival, small cars bump and turn,
Toward which, for strength, they reach their iron hands:

Like the heavens' walls of flame that the old magi could see;
Or those ethereal clouds of energy
From which all constellations form,
Within whose love they turn.
They stand here real and ultimate.
But there is no one here.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Mementos, 1

Sorting out letters and piles of my old
Canceled checks, old clippings, and yellow note cards
That meant something once, I happened to find
Your picture. That picture. I stopped there cold,
Like a man raking piles of dead leaves in his yard
Who has turned up a severed hand.

Still, that first second, I was glad: you stand
Just as you stood—shy, delicate, slender,
In that long gown of green lace netting and daisies
That you wore to our first dance. The sight of you stunned
Us all. Well, our needs were different, then,
And our ideals came easy.

Then through the war and those two long years
Overseas, the Japanese dead in their shacks
Among dishes, dolls, and lost shoes; I carried
This glimpse of you, there, to choke down my fear,
Prove it had been, that it might come back.
That was before we got married.

—Before we drained out one another's force
With lies, self-denial, unspoken regret
And the sick eyes that blame; before the divorce
And the treachery. Say it: before we met. Still,
I put back your picture. Someday, in due course,
I will find that it's still there.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Monet: "les Nymphéas"

The eyelids glowing, some chill morning.
O world half-known through opening, twilit lids
 Before the vague face clenches into light;
O universal waters like a cloud,
 Like those first clouds of half-created matter;
O all things rising, rising like the fumes
 From waters falling, O forever falling;
Infinite, the skeletal shells that fall, relinquished,
 The snowsoft sift of the diatoms, like selves
Downdrifting age upon age through milky oceans;
 O slow downdrifting of the atoms;
O island nebulae and O the nebulous islands
 Wandering these mists like falsefires, which are true,
Bobbing like milkweed, like warm lanterns bobbing
 Through the snowfilled windless air, blinking and passing
As we pass into the memory of women
 Who are passing. Within those depths
What ravening? What devouring rage?
 How shall our living know its ends of yielding?
These things have taken me as the mouth an orange—
 That acrid sweet juice entering every cell;
And I am shared out. I become these things:
 These lilies, if these things are water lilies
Which are dancers growing dim across no floor;
 These mayflies; whirled dust orbiting in the sun;
This blossoming diffused as rushlights; galactic vapors;
 Fluorescence into which we pass and penetrate;
O soft as the thighs of women;
 O radiance, into which I go on dying ...

William De Witt Snodgrass

Nightwatchman's Song

After Heinrich I. F. Biber

I

What's unseen may not exist—
Or so those secret powers insist
 That prowl past nightfall,
Enabled by the brain's blacklist
 To fester out of sight,

So we streak from bad to worse,
Through an expanding universe
 And see no evil.
On my rounds like a night nurse
 Or sentry on qui vive,

I make, through murkier hours, my way
Where the sun patrolled all day
 Toward stone-blind midnight
To poke this flickering flashlamp's ray
 At what's hushed up and hidden.

Lacking all leave or protocol,
Things, one by one, hear my footfall,
 Blank out their faces,
Dodge between trees, find cracks in walls
 Or lock down offices.

Still, though scuttling forces flee
Just as far stars recede from me
 To outmost boundaries,
I stalk through ruins and debris,
 Graveyard and underground.

Led by their helmetlantern's light
Miners inch through anthracite;
 I'm the unblinking mole
That sniffs out what gets lost or might
 Slip down the world's black hole.

II

(ending his rounds, the watchman, somewhat tipsy, returns)

What's obscene?—just our obsessed,
Incessant itch and interest
 In things found frightful:
In bestial tortures, rape, incest;
 In ripe forbidden fruit

Dangling, lush, just out of reach;
Dim cellars nailed up under each
 Towering success,
The loser's envy that will teach
 A fierce vindictiveness,

The victors' high court that insures
Pardon for winners and procures
 Little that's needed
But all we lust for. What endures?—
 Exponential greed

And trash containers overflowing
With shredded memos, records showing
 What, who, when, why
'Til there's no sure way of knowing
 What's clear to every eye:

The heart's delight in hatred, runny
As the gold drip from combs of honey;
 The rectal intercourse
Of power politics and money
 That slimes both goal and source.

What's obscured?—what's abscessed.
After inspection, I'd suggest
 It's time we got our head
Rewired. I plan to just get pissed,
 Shitfaced and brain-dead.

Pacemaker

I

'One Snodgrass, two Snodgrass, three Snodgrass, four . . .
I took my own rollcall when I counted seconds;
'One two three, Two two three, Three . . .,' the drum score
Showed only long rests to the tympani's entrance.

'Oh-oh-oh leff; leff; leff-toh-righ-toh-leff,'
The sergeant cadenced us footsore recruits;
The heart, poor drummer, gone lame, deaf,
Then AWOL, gets frogmarched to the noose.

II

Old coots, at the Veterans', might catch breath
If their cheeks got slapped by a nurse's aide,
Then come back to life; just so, at their birth,
Young rumps had been tendered warm accolades.

The kick-ass rude attitude, smart-assed insult,
The acid-fueled book review just might shock
Us back to the brawl like smelling salts,
Might sting the lulled heart up off its blocks.

III

I thought I'd always favor rubato
Or syncopation, scorning fixed rhythms;
Thought my old heartthrobs could stand up to stress;
Believed one's bloodpump should skip a few beats
If it fell into company with sleek young women;
Believed my own bruit could beat with the best.

Wrong again, Snodgrass! This new gold gadget,
Snug as the watch on my wife's warm wrist,
Drives my pulsetempo near twice its old pace—
Go, nonstop startwatch! Go, clockwork rabbit,
Keeping this lame old dog synchronized,
Steady, sparked up, still in the race.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring (1 April 1945)

(Göring, head of the Luftwaffe, once bragged that if one German city were bombed, they could call him "Meier." At his Karinhall estate, he questions himself and his disgrace.)

And why, Herr Reichsmarschall, is Italy
Just like schnitzel? If they're beaten
Either one will just get bigger.
Neither cuts too firm a figure.
Still, all this humble pie you've eaten
Lately, fills you out quite prettily.

Why then, Herr Göring, how can we
Tell you and Italy apart?
Italy always wins through losing;
I, just the opposite, by using
High skills and cunning learned the art
Of flat pratfalls through victory.

You've led our Flying Circus; how
Could our war ace turn to a clown?
Both pad out over-extended fronts;
Both keep alive doing slick stunts
And, even so, both get shot down.
But only one's called "Meier" now.

Pray, could an old, soft football be
Much like a man in deep disgrace?
They don't kick back; don't even dare
Look up—the British own the air!
Then, stick a needle in someplace;
Pump yourself full of vacancy.

Tell us, dear Minister for Air,
Are warriors, then, like a bad smell?
Neither stays inside its borders;
Either's bound to follow ordures;
They both expand and play the swell
Though something's getting spoiled somewhere.

Then answer one more question, which is
Are politicians like whipped cream?
They both inflate themselves with gas;
Also they both puff up your ass
Till you're exposed like some bad dream
Where you've grown too big for your britches.

Herr President, can't we tell apart
An artful statesman and an ass?
Fat chance! One spouts out high ideals;
One makes low rumblings after meals.
But that's the threat of leaking gas
Which all men fear! No; that's a fart.

Last, could you give one simple rule
To tell a medal from a turd?
No. They both come from those above you
Conveying their opinion of you.
Right! Here's your new medal, conferred
For vast achievements: April Fool!

William De Witt Snodgrass

Sitting Outside

These lawn chairs and the chaise lounge
of bulky redwood were purchased for my father
twenty years ago, then plumped down in the yard
where he seldom went when he could still work
and never had stayed long. His left arm
in a sling, then lopped off, he smoked there or slept
while the weather lasted, watched what cars passed,
read stock reports, counted pills,
then dozed again. I didn't go there
in those last weeks, sick of the delusions
they still maintained, their talk of plans
for some boat tour or a trip to the Bahamas
once he'd recovered. Under our willows,
this old set's done well: we've sat with company,
read or taken notes—although the arm rests
get dry and splintery or wheels drop off
so the whole frame's weakened if it's hauled
across rough ground. Of course the trees,
too, may not last: leaves storm down,
branches crack off, the riddled bark
separates, then gets shed. I have a son, myself,
with things to be looked after. I sometimes think
since I've retired, sitting in the shade here
and feeling the winds shift, I must have been filled
with a child dread you could catch somebody's dying
if you got too close. And you can't be too sure.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Song

Observe the cautious toadstools
still on the lawn today
though they grow over-evening;
sun shrinks them away.
Pale and proper and rootless,
they righteously extort
their living from the living.
I have been their sort.

See by our blocked foundation
the cold, archaic clay,
stiff and clinging and sterile
as children mold at play
or as the Lord God fashioned
before He breathed it breath.
The earth we dig and carry
for flowers, is strong in death.

Woman, we are the rich
soil, friable and humble,
where all our murders rot,
where our old deaths crumble
and fortify my reach
far from you, wide and free,
though I have set my root
in you and am your tree.

William De Witt Snodgrass

The Campus On The Hill

Up the reputable walks of old established trees
They stalk, children of the nouveaux riches; chimes
Of the tall Clock Tower drench their heads in blessing:
"I don't wanna play at your house;
I don't like you any more."
My house stands opposite, on the other hill,
Among meadows, with the orchard fences down and falling;
Deer come almost to the door.
You cannot see it, even in this clearest morning.
White birds hang in the air between
Over the garbage landfill and those homes thereto adjacent,
Hovering slowly, turning, settling down
Like the flakes sifting imperceptibly onto the little town
In a waterball of glass.
And yet, this morning, beyond this quiet scene,
The floating birds, the backyards of the poor,
Beyond the shopping plaza, the dead canal, the hillside lying tilted in the air,

Tomorrow has broken out today:
Riot in Algeria, in Cyprus, in Alabama;
Aged in wrong, the empires are declining,
And China gathers, soundlessly, like evidence.
What shall I say to the young on such a morning?—
Mind is the one salvation?—also grammar?—
No; my little ones lean not toward revolt. They
Are the Whites, the vaguely furiously driven, who resist
Their souls with such passivity
As would make Quakers swear. All day, dear Lord, all day
They wear their godhead lightly.
They look out from their hill and say,
To themselves, "We have nowhere to go but down;
The great destination is to stay."
Surely the nations will be reasonable;
They look at the world—don't they?—the world's way?
The clock just now has nothing more to say.

William De Witt Snodgrass

The Poet Ridiculed By Hysterical Academics

Is it, then, your opinion

Women are putty in your hands?

Is this the face to launch upon

A thousand one night stands?

First, please, would you be so kind

As to define your contribution

To modern verse, the Western mind

And human institutions?

Where, where is the long, flowing hair,

The velvet suit, the broad bow tie;

Where is the other-worldly air,

Where the abstracted eye?

Describe the influence on your verse

Of Oscar Mudwarp's mighty line,

The theories of Susan Schmersch

Or the spondee's decline.

You've labored to present us with

This mouse-sized volume; shall this equal

The epic glories of Joe Smith?

He's just brought out a sequel.

Where are the beard, the bongo drums,

Tattered T-shirt and grubby sandals,

As who, released from Iowa, comes

To tell of wondrous scandals?

Have you subversive, out of date,

Or controversial ideas?

And can you really pull your weight

Among such minds as these?

Ah, what avails the tenure race,

Ah, what the Ph.D.,

When all departments have a place

For nincompoops like thee?

William De Witt Snodgrass

Vuillard: "the Mother And Sister Of The Artist"

(Instructions for the Visit)

Admire, when you come here, the glimmering hair
Of the girl; praise her pale
Complexion. Think well of her dress
Though that is somewhat out of fashion.
Don't try to take her hand, but smile for
Her hesitant gentleness.
Say the old woman is looking strong
Today; such hardiness. Remark,
Perhaps, how she has dressed herself black
Like a priest, and wears that sufficient air
That does become the righteous.
As you approach, she will push back
Her chair, shove away her plate
And wait,
Sitting squat and direct, before
The red mahogany chest
Massive as some great
Safe; will wait,
By the table and her greasy plate,
The bone half-chewed, her wine half-drained;
She will wait. And fix her steady
Eyes on you—the straight stare
Of an old politician.
Try once to meet her eyes. But fail.
Let your sight
Drift—yet never as if hunting for
The keys (you keep imagining) hung
By her belt. (They are not there.)
Watch, perhaps, that massive chest—the way
It tries to lean
Forward, toward her, till it seems to rest
Its whole household's weight
Of linens and clothing and provisions
All on her stiff back.
It might be strapped there like the monstrous pack
Of some enchanted pedlar. Dense, self-contained,
Like mercury in a ball,

She can support this without strain,
Yet she grows smaller, wrinkling
Like a potato, parched as dung;
It cramps her like a fist.
Ask no one why the chest
Has no knobs. Betray
No least suspicion
The necessities within
Could vanish at her
Will. Try not to think
That as she feeds, gains
Specific gravity,
She shrinks, light-
less as the world's
Hard core
And the per-
spective drains
In her.
Finally, above all,
You must not ever see,
Or let slip one hint you can see,
On the other side, the girl's
Cuffs, like cordovan restraints;
Forget her bony, tentative wrist,
The half-fed, worrying eyes, and how
She backs out, bows, and tries to bow
Out of the scene, grows too ethereal
To make a shape inside her dress
And the dress itself is beginning already
To sublime itself away like a vapor
That merges into the empty twinkling
Of the air and of the bright wallpaper.

William De Witt Snodgrass

Who Steals My Good Name

For the person who obtained my debit card number and spent \$11,000 in five days

My pale stepdaughter, just off the school bus,
Scowled, 'Well, that's the last time I say my name's
Snodgrass!' Just so, may that anonymous
Mexican male who prodigally claims

My clan lines, identity and the sixteen
Digits that unlock my bank account,
Think twice. That less than proper name's been
Taken by three ex-wives, each for an amount

Past all you've squandered, each more than pleased
To change it back. That surname you affect
May have more consequence than getting teased
By dumb kids or tracked down by bank detectives.

Don't underrate its history: one of ours played
Piano on his prison's weekly broadcast;
One got rich on a scammed quiz show; one made
A bungle costing the World Series. My own past

Could subject you to guilt by association:
If you write anything more than false checks,
Abandon all hope of large press publication
Or prizes—critics shun the name like sex

Without a condom. Whoever steals my purse
Helps chain me to my writing desk again
For fun and profit. So take thanks with my curse:
May your pen name help send you to your pen.

William De Witt Snodgrass