

# Cracks of Consciousness



Wesley Britton

Selections from  
*Cracks of Consciousness*

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(Revised, 2018)

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Introduction

Thanks to my very good Massachusetts friend, Kevin Bochynski, I self-published an anthology of my verse, *Cracks of Consciousness*, back in Texas in 1995. What an incredible experience that was, that day of holding those treasured "Don't Panic Press" pages in my hands for the first time.

All of that verse had been published in a variety of periodicals and journals, and some seemed favorites among my Texas friends. Looking back, I remember my three most astute editors and I invoke the names of their memorable magazines here--Café Belles Artes, Lynx Eye, and Talus and Scree. Other poems appeared first in *ILLYA'S HONEY*, *WordSalad*, *KENSHO*, *EXPERIODICIST*, *Poetic Harvest*, and *FICTION ON-LINE*.

With equal fondness, I must thank a few other shapers of *Cracks*: Barbara Schmidt, Leona Welch, and Cliff and Brenda Roberts. (Cliff did the cover art.)

Over 20 years later, I decided to resurrect and revise all my poems that I could find. Many I have lost somewhere in time. I recall some of the stories and will revisit them soon.

In this collection, at the suggestion of Lisa Frankford O'Day, I've added brief explanatory notes so readers can hear some of the inspirations and backgrounds for these poems. I've also organized them into what I hope are logical categories.

So I hope you enjoy the humor, character sketches, meditations, and narratives updated for your reading pleasure. Expect a cornucopia of surprises.

Wes Britton  
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## THE VEIL

The Veil”” was inspired when Lakota-Sioux Shaman Manyfingers Hofstettler assigned me the task of writing a poem about “the joys of blindness.” What an unusual writing prompt! The result was easily my best received poem ever.

When the blindness came, so did the veil  
& few look in &  
those that do  
I cannot tell for certain  
what I am perceiving. Not light, not dark,  
not the common colors shared by most.

I see no body language so speak it poorly.  
I see neither smile nor frown so ignore both.  
Cannot tell friend from stranger, so the veil  
swells like a smoke or fog  
around me in protection, confusion,  
aloneness while

interdependency grows thick and wide,  
regulated by the whims and schedules of others,  
living around the cracks of others' good will,  
hearing more intentions and promises than fulfillment  
or commitment or truth  
and grasp the limitations after  
the embers of rage finally subside.

And accept the moment, what is,  
what can be patiently done.

ah, patience against my worse nature,  
the energy that must be curbed,  
finally accepting calm Now after the  
Disappointment Series and feel the  
Yin of happy quiet aloneness without  
the being with anyone not just to be alone

the Yang of the female other who  
may be illusion, fantasy, nightmare  
while I casually, cautiously, distantly  
touch others veiled not to be hurt  
veiled to expect assault

veiled to be comfortable within  
and always aware of the separateness  
that lives against my belief in  
interconnections

expecting more than is offered  
expecting more than can be given  
so I create little footnotes in books  
and minds and groups and drums and  
the image of the invisible man walking  
thru the town that did not see him before  
and is not looking for him now  
as I await the next step  
whether shin-cracking or  
softer, whether pain or the touch  
of my dogs & toys

so I have not answered your question. You wonder what are  
The joys of blindness?

Well, the joy of music, but I had that before.  
The joy of touch, but that has a powerful yang.  
The joy of surprising connections, the nuggets  
amongst the dross,  
and the surprise of occasionally remembering a color,  
a face, place, a possible poem  
but mostly I find the happiness in thinking of Buddha,  
of little accomplishments, small adventures, never minding  
the great promise of youth  
and knowing how much I've improved--hell,  
I've had so far to go--and how different  
I do things now so I must call the happiness  
acceptance, letting go of illusions  
becoming aware of illusions  
de-emphasizing illusions  
putting illusions into perspective  
knowing my past is my own illusion  
shared delusionally with others  
whose place in the Now is never certain

and uncertainty has its place, especially in  
a cocky man  
who came to belief and conviction very slowly,  
from the Bible to the nothing to the nothing with  
meaning  
who expects all to be transitory

as is All  
and to cease craving, the source  
of suffering, and emphasize service and  
gifts, even gifts not wanted or expected,  
and see what seeds grow.

Part 1: Family

THROUGH GRANDMOTHER'S EYES

“Through Grandmother’s Eyes” was inspired by the transcendental moment described in the final lines. This was my Father’s favorite poem.

(Music of train blowing in night)

Through Grandmother's eyes were family  
of Kentucky country roads  
laned by wooden post fences needing  
occasional repair when her cows escaped.  
One woman & three children could chase them home.  
She was a toymaker while  
granddad worked for short line railroad.

Through my mother's eyes were children  
family worth driving halfway cross country to see  
buying Christmas toys at Corvettes in September  
lay-away, paid for before Christmas.

Through father's eyes were family  
the brother he found dead  
his son he found dead  
with other brother, sat in grandmother's  
house waiting for her to slip away  
in the quiet far away from trains they loved.

An iron spike rests  
on the mantle, uprooted  
from the tracks. The train does  
not notice but sings in the night  
like songs of whales.

The last time I saw Grandmother we stepped off her porch  
& I saw us through her eyes  
as we left for the last time.  
I was behind her eyes one moment

& all she saw was us.

## HOW WHISKEY SAVED TENNESSEE

(adapted from a story by O.L. Britton)

One of my 1998 poems, "How Whiskey Saved Tennessee," was based on "It Happened in Tennessee," a humorous tall tale first published by my grandfather, Olney Loren Britton, in the QA&P EMPLOYEE MAGAZINE, date unknown. It was then reprinted in pamphlet form by the Tennessee Railroad, but no known copies exist. Fortunately, it was collected in the SCOTT COUNTY HISTORY which my uncle Charles sent me after he discovered it while doing research on our family tree.

Growing up in the mountains around Whitley City, Kentucky, "Pop" Britton "knew well the people described in his funny tale in which he had fun with religion, superstition, encroaching technology, and the lore of backwoodsmen. Being a railroad man all his life--which was quite a catch for hill country girls in the post-World War I days when few folks had regular salaries--Grandad infused a love of trains into his four sons.

AS you might imagine,  
it could only happen in Tennessee.  
Well, maybe in Kentucky,  
but the way I heard it

when the Tennessee Railroad completed its lines  
and operated regular schedules  
from Oneida to Fork Mountain through Whitney and Knox,  
old settlers of the true American type  
weren't sure what to make of it.

In those days, muskets and hog rifles got their meat.  
Hollows and coves were alive with squirrel,  
the ridges flew plenty of turkey and grouse,  
and creeks and rivers had enough fish  
for all Jesus's loaves at the Olive Mount.

No store-bought clothes for women and girls,  
never seen no corset, powder, nor paint.  
Tanned and fit from working the fields,  
they walked miles to mountain meetins in the trees  
sitting for hours on backless split logs  
while one wangdangdoodle preacher after another  
wore themselves out.

Those up in society never missed  
one bean stringing, shelling, corn huskin log rolling bout.  
Most grown men and women never seen train nor town,  
but were happy enough in the plentiful world.

Still, everything went along fine with the Railroad  
even if these mountain folks did not take to them  
like other people  
until one engineer,  
out of his own pocket,  
bought a wild cat whistle  
for his engine. Without advance notice  
to folks down the tracks,

he proceeded to blow it  
for every flagman, crossing, and station house.  
In between times he played Yankey Doodle,  
Ho How I love Jesus, Coming Round the Mountain  
and other hymns

causing more excitement than folks ever heard.  
It was a most peculiar whistle  
echoing up and down them hollows.  
No body could spot  
which way it blew from and

those near the track were convinced  
it was the trumpet for the end of the world.

All Christians prayed and confessed their mean doings,  
moonshine stills were chopped to dust,  
chewing tobacco throwed away,  
every drop of corn liquor poured  
on the unsuspecting land.

Further down, they said, it was a vicious panther  
howling like Satan or Dan Webster or worse.  
Folks dropped their work and double quick

got home and bore up doors and winders,  
feeling sure the Lord's trombone  
was only out in the woods a piece,

the second coming coming to Tennessee.

Chickens ran and hid under floors,  
squaking one fit after another nearly  
drowning out braying dogs running in  
and hiding under beds.

Some horses dropped dead on trembling hoofs,  
others darted to barns  
pawing and snorting  
for their masters to close the door  
behind them.

In less time that train would have run the same space,  
cows, yearlings, and razor backs shot  
from the woods from every direction as if looking  
for Noah to save them again.

Folks living in close soon learned what it was  
and sent off an opinionated petition.  
They went back to their ordinary meanness,  
but folks cross the river kept hearing the hollowing,  
even more afraid of the uncommon panther.

Every male available took out his hog rifle  
and women and children hid inside while

chickens stopped laying.  
Hogs, cows, horses kept close to their barns  
getting thinner and more nervous  
as the crops fell to weeds.

This whistle of perdition would've starved the whole territory  
if the boys closer to the tracks  
hadn't poured out their liquor.  
Having got over their excitement early,  
they started craving corn,  
regretted their reforms,  
and glared at their sawdusted stills.

So, at sunup, a bunch of them gets their jugs,  
takes their hollowed out log canoes, and crosses the river.

They climbed the hill and by noon made it up top,  
imparting the news while filling their jugs.

The engineer removed that wild cat whistle,  
and folks returned to work in normal ways.  
But old timers never forgot  
and said it was the only time in history  
whiskey saved the lives of both man and beast  
on so large a scale. At least

in Tennessee.



## THE UNFORTUNATE FUNERAL

This poem came to me when I imagined what an aunt of mine might have been thinking at the funeral of her ex-husband. I was a tad upset the photos described here were taken—I knew Uncle George would have rolled over in his fresh grave if he could.

In the quiet breeze through her hair  
the thin wife stood over her husband's grave  
framed by her girls & the camera box  
aimed square on her  
peculiar moment in the sun  
fifteen years after  
the battle of divorce  
sent their children  
spiraling into disconnected paths.

& she tried not to look  
into the open hole  
or into the camera's eye  
knowing she didn't belong there  
knowing how he would cringe  
knowing she stood there passively  
for the camera shot  
by his survivors  
in the green field  
below the canopy

& she thought of the other men,  
man after man after him  
Well, Charlie worked out o.k.  
sitting at home waiting for her  
dinner.

& the cameras did their work  
like the smiles of her  
black and white wedding  
not a pretty day like this  
not a colorful day like this  
with all the flowers.  
Weren't there flowers at the wedding?  
She couldn't remember.  
There must have been flowers.

But the pictures of gray

were what held her memory.

## WHERE IS OUR SISTER?

The Mother described here is the same aunt who featured in “The Unfortunate Funeral.”  
My cousin Tommy told me this story in a Dallas bar.

"Where is our sister?" they asked,  
the three girls and Tommy  
circling about their sitting mother  
not looking like their mother anymore  
not like the sardonic girl in Betty Grable hair  
of the black & white wedding photo  
but more a mini-skirted girl  
out of time.

"Where is our sister?"  
When she didn't answer,  
Denise slapped her  
& slapped her again.

"Where is our sister?" they  
asked again in chorus.

"At the hospital." Tommy  
& Denise drove there  
looking for the infant whose mother  
walked out after delivery  
without a name.

Denise raised the baby as her own  
her mother never acknowledging her

Tommy's in-laws took the retarded girl in  
until a jealous girl killed her  
one boyfriend.

& in her adult turmoil  
her mother, two blocks away,  
never came to see her but sat with  
her bare-chested new husband  
drinking coffee & talking  
about his rights.

## DAVID

Another true story composed after my brother committed suicide on his birthday.

My brother wrote occasional poems  
emotional and ethereal

He wrote about marijuana & his little visions  
his wife used them in court to  
show him a bad father.

He wasn't. The only poetry reading he ever had  
was by the prosecuting attorney

he had to defend his poems by saying they  
were old, out of date, not him anymore.

But they were.

For his funeral, he asked for Beethoven's Ninth  
but organist only played five bars  
in barrage of church organ music no one should love.

His friends, the Bahai came by with guitars  
Dave would have loved that and joined in.  
but Dad chased them away--not Baptists from good homes.

If Dave would've known he'd been this cheated  
He wouldn't have killed himself.

Part 2: Funny Stories

THE CONDOM STORM OF '72

Another true story from my misbegotten youth. One of the poems that works very well at poetry readings.

Well, Paul broke into the rubber machines last night  
looking for quarters but failed and  
showed up at our poker game dumping  
a foot-high pile of  
individually shrink-wrapped little boxes  
of rubbers of all sizes 'n colors  
on my single bed

'n we drunken boys blew up our balloons and  
tossed them out the boarding house window  
'n we must of made a major dent in that pile  
cause the next morning I set out  
to walk my hangover to the breakfast deli

but stopped on a dime seeing  
cars the sticky balloons on  
'n windows 'n parking meters  
'n grass, the sidewalk, 'n poles  
'n the street.

'n my landlady's front porch  
where she stood with arms folded  
'n tapping foot 'n  
wishing to laugh admonition—

"I know who's behind this one, Britton."

'n I walked into the deli where the condom storm  
replaced all other news 'n I stayed mute not wanting  
to let on we hadn't planned the whole thing  
to start with.

You should have seen it,  
it was a wonderful sight.

More colorful than Christmas  
bathed in prophylactic lights.

## BIRDS IN THE ATTIC

Believe it or not, a true story from the days when I worked at a sleazy downtown hotel in Harrisburg. At one time, I planned to write a collection of stories based on characters there. A few more of these stories are in this collection. Some lost yarns I will rewrite someday.

By the way, the old hotel only used three floors  
rising on the basement tombs,  
fourth shut down for decades.

A floor of ghost town rooms  
cobwebbed, bare furniture.  
Trevor's kingdom, where he  
contemplated his crow's feet prematurely  
etched in prison  
with the only key to the  
forgotten elevator button,  
he had one room full of his maintenance tools  
Another room was his  
marijuana farm.

No one knew where it was.  
No one knew it was there.

He sold pot in the Waters hotel  
confident a room by room search  
wouldn't reveal  
the thriving, sun-nourished vegetables  
of calm and patience in the bare wood halls.

But

One day Trevor discovered his vault  
full of pigeons  
wall to wall high pigeons  
eating pot, little  
baggies poked full of beak holes  
pot dust on everything.

He dived in to chase them out  
stuttering with anger  
but they were stoned  
& flew into walls

other rooms  
& out broken windows.

The pot was gone.  
Damn pigeons.

## NORMAL INTELLIGENCE

Seems I've lived an interesting life. This true story happened when I went to grad school in Denton, Texas. Those who participated love telling this story to this day. Just ask Angie Thompson.

The blind man stood by the pool gate  
in the dark after hours  
tapping the red point  
while the cop berated his friends  
for sneaking into the pool in the dark  
to flirt and swim

and the cop kept pointing to  
the sign of rules

"Anyone with normal intelligence," he said  
"could read this sign."

& the blind man tapped and said  
"They're getting out,  
no big deal."

But the red-faced cop insisted,  
pointing again at the sign

"Anyone with normal intelligence  
could read this sign."

But the man with the cane  
clearly wasn't looking at the sign  
so the cop raised his voice again

"I keep telling you,  
anyone with normal intelligence  
can read this sign."

He waited for an answer.  
And the blind man tapped  
and the cop tapped  
until his partner whispered  
into his ear  
what the white cane meant

while the friends walked out  
laughing  
& the cop yelled at their backs  
"If I see you drunks driving, I'll take you in!"

& the blind man thought  
"Anyone with normal intelligence  
would know  
I'm not driving anywhere."

## HEADACHE

I have no idea where this ditty came from. Not a true story.

"I have a headache," she said,  
her face turned away on the pillow.

"I think," he said  
"Slow hand loving on your favorite places  
would cure your headache & make you  
feel wonderful."

"I have a headache," she said,  
"Please don't touch me."

He nodded & went to the bathroom  
& left the seat up.

## EMILY THE COW (A True Story)

I heard this story from my Massachusetts friend, Kevin Bochynski. Some time after I wrote and published it—I forget where—Kevin took me to the Peace Abbey where I met Emily. In her barn, I learned my poem had been hung on the wall outside her stall. Not a standard “publication,” but I was delighted.

Knowing her fate,  
She cleared the stable fence  
& at the rate of her gait,  
was clearly in no mood for predestination.

For forty days & forty nights  
She lived with the deer in the woods  
but when they found her it took little fight  
to recapture the little cow that could.

Two hundred pounds were lost from her girth,  
now unfit for the butcher's kill.  
They determined one dollar was all she was worth

so the Peace Temple bought her  
to graze on their grounds  
surrounded by vegetarians. Some time later,

## FRECKLES

I took this story from the Mahabharata in order to make the point in the last sentences.

In Indian scripture  
the holy king  
came to heaven  
his mother & four brothers dead  
because they were not holy  
enough in their earthly bodies

but he stood with his dog  
whom the gatekeepers  
refused to admit  
arguing with the holy king  
who said he would wait  
with his dog  
who offered nothing  
but protection & devotion

so they let the dog in  
who proved to be a god himself

so, dad, the dog stays in the house  
despite the hair &  
the occasional accident.

## BREVITY

They asked the English teacher  
To describe his writing style.

“Succinct.”

### Part 3: Fascinating Characters

#### MAGGIE'S SHOEBOX DOWRY

Of all the girlfriends in my life, I realize only a very, very few I truly loved. Before her death about 40 years ago, Margie Linden was certainly one.

I wrote a poetry sequence fictionalizing Margie into Maggie, me into Richard. This very true story is the only pone left—until I recreate the tales.

"Please marry me," I asked  
sitting on our bed side,  
she, older, looked evenly back  
thru blue eyes framed in Dutch-blond hair,  
her lost childhood Wisconsin health  
beneath the surface of her thirty-three years  
shone momentarily thru.

Her lean lines were hid in slacks,  
her metal pacemaker two inches below  
her perfect breast hooked to broken bits and animal parts  
she called her heart.

She sighed at her architect of dreams  
& body gifts, nearly too many  
but she loved him for  
seeing loving that way.

She pushed my voice back into my mouth &  
walked to her dresser &  
walked back with a long, colorful shoebox.

"Here is my dowry."

I opened the flowing red & black box of bills  
medical bills, some ten years old.

"My heart debt," she said, "Doctors,  
techs, tests, labs, surgeons, radiologists,  
therapy & I will still die  
before you. Count on it."

(Her nightly nightmares, long, fish-eyed white porcelain

corridors of white masked never-never land surgeon's  
knives. Who killed the unicorn?)

"Couldn't pay this in a lifetime" I said

"No. I wouldn't leave you with this . So I won't marry you.  
which means I love you."

## 2ND DANSWER'S AFTERHOURS SONG

This character sketch is pure imagination crafted for the unfinished poetry cycle based on the sleazy Warner Hotel in Harrisburg. In the bar, topless go-go dancers from Pittsburgh rotated each week. I forget the other "Danswer's" stories. For now. Stay tuned.

Seeing herself look down  
from the thin stage,  
a corridor of light & heat  
like astral death  
knowing they love the dancer,  
not the dance

the source of her anger, she said  
was that her only power is  
her legs, lathed long by a gifted artisan  
best when clear-white in red heels  
best on stage, one leg long and glistening  
one leg bent in motion,

better when sitting not dancing  
bent, crossed one over the other,  
perfectly arranged, sculpted high knee  
doubling the power with feet pointed  
demurely down or angled to heaven in red heels.

Sitting in the booth with red taxi driver  
he stroked circles in her palm  
talking softly of tracing her thighs  
with gentle tips

leaning towards her, talking  
of focusing on her, beaming on her,  
playing with her sensitive ears,  
the irresistible neglected nerves  
she physically melting asks him to  
speak of something else.

He pulls back & says, "I must get control of  
myself" & she  
takes him home up  
the thin elevator  
in her third-floor room he does as  
he promised, playing with her until she  
says no more, but he says yes.

Her face half drains, blanches white  
half flushes with brilliant blood red  
like her stage heels  
the yin & yang of flesh  
& comes again  
& then he is gone  
& she rages in the dark alone  
unfocused anger,  
wanting her power back  
& the tenuous, useless power  
of saying what her daddy called  
the world's ugliest word

No.

THEY WOULD HAVE STONED ME IN THE OLD DAYS

I have no memory of what inspired this tale. It's not a true story, far as I know.

Thin in the frame of the hallway door,  
fingers interwoven in the last uncertainty,  
she mimed her mother's baby rime--

"Here is the church," her hands pointed to her belly.  
"Here is the steeple," her forefingers  
joined in prayer.  
"Open the doors," her fingers spread wide,  
"And here are all the people!"

Now, in a quiet breath,  
tightly grasping cold hands  
she at last erased all the little portraits  
of polished pews,  
the choir's hymn-like dirges, Mrs. Buffington's potluck dinners.  
And the foolish boys and their vows.  
And all the notes that lined up like rows on the hymnal page,  
marched out in  
that inevitable organ.

All these years now  
all lost their invisible tug.

She drew the living room to her  
and her folks in the furniture as  
they cheered Brother Jimmy's pulpit TV.

She thought of the cells in her belly  
and how daddy would beat her if he knew.  
And how the little church wouldn't be the same  
and the old living room  
wouldn't be as open anymore.

Not to her.

If only if only if only--  
if only these men--  
if only these men--

So she turned to find her first disguise  
praying that nobody sees her.  
The doors to her back, she finally cried  
because not one finger in that church  
could now be trusted.

## ROSA PARKS AT THE AIRPORT

Another true story, pretty self-explanatory.

"I stepped back into the closet," the woman said,  
"Too much room, not comfortable."

& the Traveler's Aide sat me by her in the waiting chair  
& I asked what all the commotion was about.

"Rosa Parks is coming through," the aide said beaming.  
"Do you know who she is?"

"Sure. The lady who refused to give up  
her bus seat for a white man, helped spark  
the civil rights movement."

"Yea," he said, surprised, walking away,  
thrilled to the bone.  
& young blacks gather by the departure gate making plans.

"On behalf of all black citizens," one girl rehearses.

"No," her companion said, "on behalf of the  
entire human race."

We all wait, the blind man by the lesbian  
across from the young blacks.  
Then Rosa Parks is whisked through on her wheelchair  
accompanied by her small entourage  
not stopping for any of us.

## FUZZ

Another true story, this one set in the development I grew up in. The last line was a tag on I added to button up the tale.

"You know in the sixties  
in my home township,  
we had one cop, one constable for our whole county.  
Judge Beamer. Old guy, daughter in my class.  
I leaned over her huddled against the school hall wall  
in fallout drills  
as we practiced for Russian invasion.  
Called him once on a dog bite.

"Then, we got to junior high and they hired  
police chief & built a cop station  
by the Skat Oil gas station  
& then hired two cops  
& put in two traffic lights  
& a new gas station opened up across  
the highway & people  
started dying  
crossing the highway.

"Chief was divorced, left his second wife down the street.  
Step & step family new center of township  
Like Stephens' jar in Tennessee.  
He's gone, a series of fuzz come through now  
Like football players in helmets  
whose faces you never see or know or forget.  
Wish I'd married Judge Beamer's daughter."

## WHY FRANKLIN SWORE OFF SEX

I don't remember the origin of this imaginary yarn. I do remember one Beta reader saying she liked everything in the poem. Except the last line.

"I don't care for sex anymore,"  
he said, a wide curl of smoke  
flowing up his face.

"How can you say that?" she said  
startled straight.

"For a woman to say yes," he replied,  
blowing more smoke in the space between,

"The stars have to be out  
& in the right position,  
the dishes in the sink,  
the kids in bed,  
the bills paid,  
the cable off.

The weather can't be too cold or hot.  
Every subject talked out,  
agreeing with her every opinion,  
afraid to nudge her away with just the wrong wiff,  
& maybe then she'll consent to the big favor,  
if you don't touch her too soon or too late  
or at the wrong place,  
& have to assure and reassure her of your  
meaning & feeling & devotion  
& hope  
the mood  
is full."

He blew more smoke in the space and looked at her.

"I'm too tired anticipating you," he blew  
a perfect ring,  
"to leap through your hoops."

#### Part 4: Meditations

##### WALDEN

This ditty was inspired when I visited Walden Pond and other literary sites one trip with buddy Kevin Bochynski.

an ordinary pond, a lake  
sanctified by words  
skimmed across the water  
girded by  
walking, the feet another sense  
a cornucopia of earth and man.

Henry's words across the water  
breathing, nature is not a dead language.  
Speak words  
aloud, breathe life anew--  
the higher you fly, the higher you soar  
the less company.

Leave  
civilized man toiling  
for what he cannot keep.

Henry Looks down  
seeing stones under trees

for Kerouac, human radio tuned to India,  
his grave a landfill of offered  
bottles and packs and poems  
books on the stones  
going and coming.

Stones in Henry's cairn  
free tokens returned from earth and man  
brought to holy waters  
while Whitman's home drowns in  
crack houses miles from sleep,  
miles from Vedas, a broken  
connection, like the striptease  
bar where Joyce flowed Ulysses.

Words and a place  
breathe from the other.



## RED LETTERS

Don't recall when I wrote this one, but I remember several preachers asking permission to use it in their sermons.

You want to talk about Christ?

Alright.

If you will do this.

Get thee a New Testament,  
red letter edition, forget the black words  
& with a pen of any color  
scratch out the commandments you haven't followed,  
the words you question or interpret in self-justification,  
with honesty cut  
the things you will not do.

I want to see what's left.

I'm especially interested in what you do  
about feeding the poor, visiting prisons,  
giving up your worldly goods—

He commands this

Four Times in those red letters.

Can you name four sacrifices?

for it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom  
than  
those you condemn with your votes  
as prayers without works are dead  
like warfare prayers  
like opposing health care for all  
like discussion groups about hunger  
or whining about rendering unto Caesar  
or damning welfare mothers you ask to suffer  
without medicine, clothes, juice for the babies  
you insist be born in neglected mangers  
creating nativities of despair  
In The Name of the Deficit God.

Christ, get off the protest lines & go in buses to  
adoption centers, do your work there.

& gays--the old testament sin (as is males sitting where

women have menstruated, when it was legal to stone your son  
for disobedience), like the world's oldest sin--and somehow  
I recall your Christ preached Buddha compassion,  
Mary was not boycotted --  
you don't behave with his class.

Might he say  
Cease demonizing those you persecute with the same  
mouths you pray with &  
Open your hearts to the many ways to worship  
or be as Muslims chanting Jihad--Holy War?  
Holy War--I have heard your trumpets for years.  
Will ye not instead breathe  
love compassion trust sympathy  
maybe a little simple neighborliness?  
which is what I thought the Red Letters said.

if you will not do these things ordained  
by Hymns Most High  
Shut Up.  
& stop being surprised when  
we don't take you seriously  
or worse  
With Fear.

