

WALKING THE BOUNDARIES

I

This is the season of the scent
of cool, smooth stones and warm quick flowers;
fog takes color to a higher power.
As spring moves North, it's time I went
to walk the boundaries and find the markers.
Underfoot the land holds harder;
I can shoulder tools and all
and not bog down on the long haul.
I'll paint the gates eat up with salt,
though all my labor lacks the power
to change what's lost if only by default.
Still, this coating colors and conserves what's ours.

Now a frog plucks an untuned string;
listen for the tree speech shouted down
by history. And consider the artful things:
estranging fences of the mind, the battlement's frown.

II

But boundlessness is nothingness;
it is death, the loss of self,
identity, and meaning and a wealth
of borders we recross and bless.
They mark off safety from uncertainty,
and sameness from what hope there be,
the past from future, freedom and
confinement, ends, beginnings, lands
of What-There-Is and How-It-Is.
There must be a place from which we turn
and we must know just where that haven is,
some native country of those who died and the way we were.

I wonder what the landscape of the soul
might look like. Certain painters have invented

horrors, attics littered with broken toys
once dear to someone. May mine seem this home of my contentment.

III

Auden knew about walls, wrote "All
is silence on the other side of the wall."
Traffic, even rioting can go on,
but we hear silence. Imagine a swan,
a lake, another garden and another.
That's what walls do: invent the other.
Learning uproots us from our gardens,
and advancement often comes
as exile. Some decide who we
had better (or else!) pretend to be
or lock us out for who we really are;
a culture like an aggressive growth chokes what was ours.

Or layer enclosures one above another
by some hierarchy, those above
believed too easily, and yet those others
lower martyred as outsiders, but nobody loved.

IV

The sourpuss pose of teenaged Marines
stares back at us in any box
we're bunched in: subways, busses; it is seen
in elevators, places where looks
are barricades and we pull in our feelers.
Going *en huit clos* stops wheeler-
dealers, captured in a frame
as still life. Don't you like your name?
If not, you're not the only one
who hides because he cannot run.
Bounded like a chessboard, games we play
say, "I am safe and sane like you, not stowaway."

So join the club; a membership includes
scapegoats to order when too much goes wrong.
The better climbers reach the top as Judas

sheep, survival threatened such that self is the toll.

V

At the station, once I saw
two young Muslim sisters, heads
heavily swaddled. Below, the elder yawed
about in skin-tight silks and suedes.
The younger, innocent, was still cut off
at the neck by a shirt that read, "Soccer is life."
Or the fault expands between
nations or men. Both swimming teams
would bless themselves and kiss their medals
when we were in school; one always lost.

To fight for one's city was held just
by the ancients; but loyalty will lose her virtue peddled
as the property of state. Still free
from nationhood, all Europe once was bright,
traversed by flowages of boundless peoples
til a darkness brought the wrong of being always right.

VI

I think that places have a temper
very much as people do.
One burns witches, but we find another
trusts our choice of what to brew.
A place that always draws us has a face,
and it is ours. The rich mark their space
with KEEP OUT signs reading, "Touch-me-not;
you don't belong here; I belong
to nowhere, with nothing that can move
you but the power to deny."

When I was young in Beantown, the old black guy
across the way raised up a glory of roses, proved
from sooty soil within the chainlink fence
of his landlord. He gave tours to passers-by;
"This is Lincoln, this is Peace." He's died,

his garden under the parkway. What he gave, we possess.

VII

Once as I rode North through the mess
of shapeless suburbs, I glimpsed a man
engaged in sweeping all around the plan
of his place as if by touching to impress
the order he had made there. When I call
to mind his cottage, snugged in shawl
of shade, its black box glossy by
the fast road's filthy squall, think why
we make these tidy plots that nap
by highways. They put us on the map.

Or, dispossessed of any self-made lien,
we choose instead to enter on an antique scene
set for further acts of history.
What's harder is to dodge the high-rise den
in hive aswarm with little lives. Through treed
estate or storied part of city, a trust descends.

VIII

In the cabin I loved best,
there were no finished walls and ceilings.
Useful beams and pipes turned to the guest
a rugged, much-loved face's healing
look. A mother raccoon and her numerous brood
tumbled from cupboards when I moved
into her home. The light tubes sang
when the gale called out to them,
and always, salt on everything.
Oh, where did nature's and our world
begin and end? Surely, not with a wall.

And what of that island place whose ample tides can bring
a deeper understanding of transition?
We, remote as continents, discuss
how much gets left behind by repetition –

on the edge, where only birds cry to us.

IX

What courage is needed to take one's life
and give it up to some specialty—
like trying on a coffin just for size?
If managed humbly, wittingly,
we must be grateful; thank you, Mr. Roget!
But Arendt's system mapped all ways
through every country of conception.
Sympathy was an exception,
hence forbidden - where only it
would do. The limits worth their keep
are there to be transcended; poetry
that breaks the language barrier says more than it meant.

Yeats' dancer dances, sheepgut undergoes
unchanged that change to music contemplated
with passion by the Bard, the new estate
springing from another look at what we know.