

Alan Lew

a sampler

FROM THE AIR

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I did one funeral
Then another an hour later.
The people were arriving
For the second
Before the first was over.

There was a high, cold wind.
No one wanted to tarry. A young boy
Kept stepping on the graves.

I wondered why the wind was so high,
What the meaning of it was.
Then, while we were praying,
Our skull caps, our words,
Our clothing, even our bodies,
Were all swept upwards
Torn away from our idea
Of what they were,
Our hats deprived of even
The comfortable assumption
They should
Rest on our heads.

Afterwards, I myself
Hurried off to the airport
And into the sky.

*

Remember to secure
your own mask
before helping others.

*

You will love
God with every
feeling, every impulse,
every breath, in
the rising up
and the falling
away, let every
breath praise God,
let the fear
of failure praise
God, let the
conviction that you
don't deserve respect
praise God, let
the mind wandering
when you begin
to feel the
full power of
being alive praise
God, let every
breath praise God,
every rise, every
fall, becoming each
impulse completely without
letting it become
who you are.
Become who you
are. You are
very far beyond
the rise and
fall. Praise God,
not letting any
of it stick,
not the praise
nor even God.

*

One last brilliant golden outburst by
the sun before it sets in
the crown of the sky; one
last searing red stripe across the

horizon while the plane revolves on
its axis in slow motion, tilting
its passengers half way upside down,
all of this unseen by those
bound by the world below who
can't even conceive of such golds
and such reds, much less of
the notion that an embodied life
could be turned in a moment.

*

The river flows from the mountain
to the sea where it joins
all the rivers and the waters
which have rained down from the
sky and the waters which were
already there before creation, all of
it rising and falling in billows
and waves as it always has.
Sometimes the river flows in rapids
and sometimes in trickling streams so
faint they barely sustain the flow
and we worry about this, forgetting
that the most significant movement is
not from the mountain to the
sea, but from one bank of
the river to the other, the
journey Siddhartha made at the end
of his days after life had
disabused him of every ambition except
to ferry his fellow creatures back
and forth across the river, seeing
in this finally an instance of
the greater crossing, or Jacob who
suddenly awoke, left his entire household
on one side of the Yabok
and then crossed to the other
to confront his own darkness at
last, emerging wounded but convinced he
had seen the face of God. I
awoke one morning with a foretaste
of this other bank; Exultation, as
the world slipped away behind me,
a terrifying cartoon spilling harmlessly back

into the bottle of ink it
had inhabited before it was imagined.

*

A rooster crossed
the river, crossed
the river, yes!
and let out
a mighty crow,
having no idea
how he'd gotten
there or why
he had come.

*

Right field at
Pac Bell Park
on the bay,
a high brick
wall, people packed
on top of
it in orderly
rows, only the
abrupt horizon behind
them, a pale
blue nothing—where
they are actually
going! even though
they've turned their
backs on it
and are facing
the field, mesmerized
by the game
being played there.

*

This is it. You can almost
hold it in your hands, the
irredeemable, unsupportable pain others only speak
of as a theological proposition. The
diminishing child who you can't help,
the mother sinking slowly into inaccessibility,
the house you grew up in
suddenly sold out from under you
leaving you adrift in space. Making
the best of it you could
say this drift is the truth;
your mother never really gave you
anything anyway and your hopes for
your son were just foolish projections,
but why bother to make the
best of it when this is
it? Hold it in your hands
while you can, precious treasure which
will never come your way again.

*

I finally realized why we love
Willie Mays so much, why we
won't even consider the possibility that
anyone could have been his equal
on the baseball field. It is
because when he made that impossible
catch in the 1954 World Series,
when he ran after that ball
Vic Wertz hit high and long
into the deepest center-field there ever
was, when he ran, back turned
to home, his herky-jerky grace, his
exuberance turned to a laser point,
his cap bouncing and finally falling
off his head altogether, his flannel
uniform flapping all around him as
if it were trying to keep
from being left behind—he looked

as if he were running right
out of his body as
we had always longed to do.

*

The urge for justice and justification,
to fix what we can't fix,
to right what we can't right,
arises incessantly and rages on. No
sense in trying to stop it.
No need to climb inside and
try to make it better. We
can't. better just to watch it
rise up from our bodily symmetry,
out of our two ears, approximately
equal in size and in shape,
one on each side of the
head, and the same with our
toes and our knees; our shoulder-
blades and our breasts. Better just
to watch the urge for justice
rise up out of our biology,
and then float away as the
breath floats away, like the body,
a thing of beauty which doesn't last.

*

Standing on a treadmill for my
stress test, I looked over at
the sonogram monitor and saw my
own heart beating. Its chambers looked
like animated clay figures, two gumbies,
dimly seen in a darkness, convulsing
violently, bending at the waist, a
hole opening wide in each of
their chests and then closing again

with every beat of my heart.
These gestures were desperate, the kind
one summons to meet the final
catastrophe, the expenditure of one's last desperate jot. Was this going on
beneath my ribs all the time
or was I suddenly dying; was
my vital muscle about to explode?
Perfectly normal, the cardiologist said, ripping
the electrodes off my chest and
then hurrying out of the room.

8

At Yosemite, I saw what
Shunryo Susuki had seen;
a waterfall like life and death.
A singular flow at first,
but then each particle of water
becoming disparate
as it went off the cliff-edge,
falling alone, separate, discrete,
but forming patterns
with the other drops of water,
protean patterns, misty, mysterious,
each of them
distinct, but all of them
shaped by the urgency of the fall,
arrows in the
shifting, ghostly
forms pointing down
to the bottom of the cliff
where they all became
one mighty flow again,
their disparate lives
now over; a flow of
deceptive strength. There were
signs all around:
"These currents are
quite strong. They could
easily carry you away.
Exercise extreme
caution." Walking down

from the falls, I saw
a mixed multitude coming towards me
having just disembarked
from a bus. Japanese, Pakistanis,
Palestinians, all of them
looking right past me,
above and beyond me,
their faces fixed in awe
as if they had suddenly grasped some immense secret, some
heretofore unimagined intelligence
as to who they were and
where they were going.

Later, we read that the
Indian name for Yosemite
was Ahwanee, or
the gaping mouth.

*

Sunday afternoon at Folsom Prison,
stacks and stacks of men
in cages, two to a cell,
lying on their bunk beds
wearing white underwear, their
cells so small only one
of them can stand at
a time, an exposed, metal
toilet in the middle of
the floor, and a color
TV lit and flickering at
the foot of each bed,
this one tuned to a
basketball game, this one, to
an info-mercial advertising exercise
machines and this one to
golf; someone kneeling intently to
line up a putt on
a long green; someone else
striding briskly up the fairway.

*

Everything depends on
where one puts
the mind or
on being awake
enough to remember
to put it
somewhere. Pain is
merely what the
things we don't
like feel like
when we aren't
feeling them. Fixing
them flush, letting
them fill the
full sphere of
awareness, we stop
disliking them; we
see them for
the luminous centers
of sensation they
are. This is
the rule; nothing
felt squarely hurts.

*

After twenty minutes of Yoga, forty-five
minutes of meditation, forty minutes of
prayer, a half-hour of exercise and
a half-hour bath, I felt
pretty good for a few minutes.

Even now, more than
 twenty years later,
 I run into people
 who say they were there
 and I'm surprised. I don't
 remember them being there. I
 don't remember what the rabbi said.
 I don't remember the toasts,
 or if there were any toasts.
 I don't remember the gifts.

What I remember is the rain,
 the angels crying tears of joy,
 the rain falling in great silver sheets,
 and the house full of
 everyone we knew,
 and the fire going
 and the dog asleep
 in front of the fire,
 and our four closest friends
 on tip toes to hold up the chuppah
 as if straining to hold up
 the four corners of the world,

And the rabbi,
 intoning the ancient spells
 for opening the gates to eternity,
 and you, of course,
 strong and upright,
 clear and fair before the everlasting fire,
 standing in a shell of light
 while the silver sheets of rain
 stormed down all around us.

*

I am driving. The Band is
 playing "Unfaithful Servant" and "Rag Momma
 Rag." The homeless woman on the
 parkway divider is begging for money.

The traffic is flowing. The fog
on the Golden Gateway is lifting.
Two women, one of them blonde,
are walking across the Golden Gate
Bridge. You are riding shotgun, turquoise
scarf, turquoise eyes, eternal smile.
Nothing has ever changed. Nothing is
changing. Everything is also changing.

*

How strangely, how serenely the puffs
of white cloud hang between heaven
and earth, casting their ink blot
shadows onto an innocent world.

*

From the Air

7

Now I remember
the light which holds everything up
like a curtain hung across the void
or a map we pull down
but then come to believe in,
the small, colored countries
become real places to us
which we then inhabit,
each with its own light,
its source; its distinctiveness,
its own map pulled down
over its particular void.

*

In the first picture, I am
forty-seven. Except for a touch
of silver at the tip of
my brow, my hair is still
black. I am fit and thin.
In the second picture, taken ten
years later, there is silver all
over my hair, and my body
has sagged some. The bones have
sagged; the skin seems to rest
more loosely on them. In between
the two pictures, invisible in the eddying
ether; a snapshot of Death, caught
unawares on his way to a feast.

From the Air

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Don't burn this body.
Let it melt slowly down
The way my life went.

Perhaps I should have burned
But having lacked the courage
Let the earth take me
On its own terms,
In its own time.

Waiting to burn
But never burning
I acquired patience without
Even meaning to.

Now cover me over.
Let the dirt be my blanket.
Let the earth take
As long as it wants to reclaim me.
Let its long, slow cool kiss consume me,

A fire itself
When seen from a great distance
Its duration reduced to a
Fiery moment by eternity.

ALAN LEW

• November 10, 1943-January 16, 2009 •

Alan Lew was born in Staten Island, New York and grew up in Usonia, a commune founded by Frank Lloyd Wright in Westchester County, New York. He is remembered for his work as a social activist, advocating for the homeless and poor, and leading protests at San Quentin against the death penalty. He studied Zen for ten years before attending the Jewish Theological Seminary and being ordained as a rabbi in 1988. For fourteen years he served as rabbi of Congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco and founded, with former Zen Center Abbot and poet Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Makor Or, now a program of the San Francisco Jewish Community Center. Alan Lew was the author of three published books: *One God Clapping: The Spiritual Path of a Zen Rabbi* (with his wife, the novelist Sherril Jaffe); *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*; and *Be Still and Get Going: A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life*. His life's work, a sui generis family chronicle inspired by the Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff, *The Life That Ran Through Me*, is now being edited by his widow. Alan Lew received an MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1970, and continued to write poetry throughout his life. Most often, he wrote poetry on airplanes, keeping them together under a working title "From the Air."