

John Updike

COLLECTED
POEMS
1953-1993



Alfred A. Knopf New York

1993

flower into landscapes:
meadows sprinkled with baby's breath,
hoarse twiggy woods, birds dipping, a multitude
of skies containing clouds, plowed earth stinking
of its upturned humus, and small farms each
with a silver silo.

Décor

Brown dominates this bar
where men come to age:
the waiters Negro,
the whiskey unwatered,
the overheard voices from Texas,
the cigars and varnished wood.

Brown, the implication is,
is a shade of the soul,
the color of a man:
well-tanned and stained
to the innermost vein
as if life is a long curing.

Poem for a Far Land

Russia, most feminine of lands,
Breeder of stupid masculinity,
Only Jesus understands
Your interminable virginity.

Raped, and raped, and raped again,
You rise snow-white, the utter same,

With tender birches and ox-eyed men
Willing to perish for your name.

Though astronauts distress the sky
That mothers your low, sad villages,
Your vastness yearns in sympathy
Between what was and that which is.

Late January

The elms' silhouettes
again relent,
leafless but furred

with the promise of leaves,
dull red in a sky dull yellow
with the threat of snow.

That blur, verging on growth:
Time's sharp edge is slitting
another envelope.

Dog's Death (1969)

She must have been kicked unseen or brushed by a car.
Too young to know much, she was beginning to learn
To use the newspapers spread on the kitchen floor
And to win, wetting there, the words, "Good dog! Good dog!"

We thought her shy malaise was a shot reaction.
The autopsy disclosed a rupture in her liver.
As we teased her with play, blood was filling her skin
And her heart was learning to lie down forever.

Monday morning, as the children were noisily fed
And sent to school, she crawled beneath the youngest's bed.
We found her twisted and limp but still alive.
In the car to the vet's, on my lap, she tried

To bite my hand and died. I stroked her warm fur
And my wife called in a voice imperious with tears.
Though surrounded by love that would have upheld her,
Nevertheless she sank and, stiffening, disappeared.

Back home, we found that in the night her frame,
Drawing near to dissolution, had endured the shame
Of diarrhoea and had dragged across the floor
To a newspaper carelessly left there. *Good dog.*

Home Movies

How the children have changed! Rapt, we stare
At flickering lost Edens where
Pale infants, squinting, seem to hark
To their older selves laughing in the dark.

And then, by the trellis of some old spring—
The seasons are unaltering—
We gather, smoother and less bald,
Innocently clowning, having been called

To pose by the off-screen cameraman.
How strangely silently time ran!
We cannot climb back, nor can our friends,
To that calm light. The brief film ends.

Antigua

The wind, transparent, cannot displace
The vertical search of sun for skin.
The colonel's fine-veined florid face
Has bloomed though sheltered deep within
His shining hat's mauve shade. His eyes
Glare bluer than the coral-bleached
Soft sea that feebly nags the beach
And hones its scimitar with sighs.

His wife, in modest half-undress,
Swings thighs pinched red between the sea
And sky, and smiles, serenely free
Of subcutaneous distress.
Above, sere cliffs attend their hike,
And colored scraps give tattered hints
Of native life, and, higher, like
A flaw in glass, an airplane glints.

Amoeba

Mindless, meaning no harm,
it ingested me.
It moved on silent pseudopods
to where I was born, inert, and I
was inside.

Digestive acids burned my skin.
Enzymes nuzzled knees and eyes.
My ego like a conjugated verb
retained its root, a narrow fear
of being qualified;