

Poetry Series

Robert Charles Howard
- poems -

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Robert Charles Howard(26 DEC 1943)

I try to keep the rust away by being an active composer and have been the conductor of the Belleville Philharmonic Orchestra in Belleville IL since 1995 and of the Belleville Philharmonic Chorale since 2001.

I have recently published a book of poems called Unity Tree which is available from . I am a member of the League of American Orchestras and the Colorado Poetry Center.

I was recently commissioned to compose a cantata called Wilderness Reflections for the centennial of Rocky Mountain National Park by the Oratorio Society of Estes Park that was premiered in June 2015.

My compositions have been performed by many professional, community, college and high school ensembles in Missouri, Illinois and other parts of the country. Six of the vocal texts are poems by Wendell berry and I wrote three of the vocal texts.

I composed a Christmas cantata entitled, Radiance of the Light that was premiered by the Belleville Philharmonic Chorale and Orchestra in December,2007 and my Piano Sonata was premiered by Michael McElvain in April,2008. A video of my piano sonata can be viewed at YouTube:

First movement

Second movement

Third movement

Here is a link to a Belleville Philharmonic Chorale and Orchestra performance of a new choral work by Charles DuMontier called Into this World:

Meditation for oboe d'amore, harp and strings was premiered in Loja, Ecuador by John Walker, soloist with the Orquesta Sinfonica de Loja on Friday, June 20th, 2008 with Winfried Mitterer, conducting.

Poetry and story writing are a relatively new activities for me. Many of the poems posted relate directly to musical compositions. Two of the poems posted on this site, Eagles on the Mississippi and Ice Storm 2006 have been published by Straight Up Magazine. Five poems are included in the Oh What a Tangled Web edited by Elysabeth Falsund and Richard Brotbeck.

For a general listing of my activities, please visit my web site at:

I reside in Belleville IL with my wife Robin and our Golden Retriever and Sheltymix, Hannah.

*more Gnu Ones

After a grueling but fulfilling spring I'm back trying to smith a few words.

Should I send out messages to all of you with the new titles saying <BLINK>
Read ME, Read ME, Read ME NOW</BLINK> Nah! If you read them fine, if not
'live long and prosper' anyway.

Here's the new stuff:

Terror in her Eyes (capture of Sacagawea)
A Many Splintered Thing
Autumn Breezes (Senyru)

13 Mountain Epigrams
Welcome to My Casino
Frodo and David
Diplomacy
Home from the Sea
Independence Day
Summer Day on the Current
A Podium Credo

So.....

What's gnu with you?

Robert Charles Howard

13 Ways Of Looking At The Mountains

<I>homage to Wallace Stevens</I>

I - My Focus pistoned up the rise
and all at once, the Rockies -
silhouettes against the western skies.

II - On the road to Boulder
a pleated ridge crawls north
like a blue whale bound for the open sea.

III - The intoxicating verdure of Appalachia
never fails to induce
a certain mellowing of the spirit.

IV - You 'conquered' my North Face, did you,
Why, I should freeze your arrogant ass
like a holiday lamb culled for the sacrifice.

V- Lewis and Clark looked west
stunned by the Bitterroots' frigid expanse.
Farewell <I>Northwest Passage! </I>

VI - Pueblos stranded on Enchanted Mesa
their rock stairs crumbled to the valley floor.
Should they dive to their death or starve?

VII -<I>Touristas</I> at Big Bend Park
wonder at its pastel window.
it's romantic haze a toxic gift
from stacks across the Rio Grande.

VIII - The humble old Ozark mountains
dwarfed by the youthful Rockies.
Listen up, youngsters, your time will come!

IX - We de-bussed to seize the dolomites
with our hyper-kinetic shutters.
I paused for a draught of Italian air,
and felt the whack of an impish snowball.

X - Before Oregon's crater had its lake,
the mountain scorched the village below.
Today azure waters preach only serenity.

XI – Look east from Shissler peak
to the golden meadow
where the elk herd calmly grazes.

XII – Do mists veil the Blue Ridge Mountains
or are there really no mountains at all -
only clouds decked out in mountain attire?

XIII – It's said that peaks taller than Everest
soar up from the ocean floor.
So let's go scale the sunken heights!
They say the water winds are fair today.

</I>May 28, 2010 – Boulder Colorado</I>

Robert Charles Howard

A Many Splintered Thing

LOVE is:

a dopamine trip
Paris in the spring
a really low tennis score.

LOVE is:

erotic
platonic
gin and tonic.

LOVE is:

requited
unrequited
or a little of both.

LOVE is:

a baby's smile
a ruined Huggie
graduation day.

LOVE is:

brotherly
otherly
smotherly.

LOVE is:

the real deal
a raw deal
sweet and sorrow.

Whatever LOVE is(n't) ,
without it - no us!

<i>August, 2010</I>

Robert Charles Howard

A Podium Credo

I'd never mark my stamp on you
even if I thought I could
and with lessons drawn
from father's "tool and die, "
I know I'll never try.

That stamping press he used
left only negative impressions,
crushed in carbide steel,
to mark the owner's brand.

No, I'll have none of that
I need your free undented souls
To sing both "I" and "we"
in mystic synchronicity:
drawing life from the speckled pages.

But like my father at his lathe,
I'll ply my studied craft
and bid you do the same with yours
so that you and I
can find our truth among the spots
and, with mysterious synchronicity,
breathe radiant, illimitable life
into the freckled, speckled pages.

<I>June, 2009</I>

Robert Charles Howard

A Salmon Returns

Well, I'm home again at last -
back from the salted sea
and after all that heavy finning,
I'm hot for a special date
with that little babe in pink
with spots in all the right places.

Ah, here comes the little lady now,
but what about our kids?
It'll all be upstream for them -
DNA bound for brine and kelp -
just so much water over the

<I>damned if you do and
damned if you don't.</I>

<I>Bon voyage</I>, little ones!
Watch out for Ursa's paws
and Emeril's lemon glaze.
Swim your bursting hearts
to the shore where seagulls swoop
and guide you out to sea
to dance the waves
with orcas, sharks and dolphins.

And what about me, you ask?
Oh, I'll be staying home
to face that little destiny thing -
a curtain call at my original stream.

But squander no tears for my mortality
it's only what was meant to be.

Robert Charles Howard

A Time For Flying

Flight came so easily
when I was a boy of seven.

I'd hover over sidewalks, cars and lawns
gliding on a sea of azure air
above my friends at play
and Mom and Pop talking on the porch.

I'd circle over McKinley School (my school)
where the recess bell is ringing
and the creek by the edge of the woods
where I found the railroad flare
(my creek, my woods) .

Flight came ever so easily
when I was seven (or was it eight?)
when the sky was autumn blue
and the world below was kind and true.

But in time, science grounded me,
said it was just a dream.
After all a boy can't just up
and repeal the law of gravity, can he?

Why yes, of course he can:
it comes so easy
when you're seven or eight
and the skies are right for flying.

Robert Charles Howard

Affirmation

A stranger ventured
across the universal chasm
setting lips and tongue
to calculated motion.

Ordered sound waves
shook my auric drums
and journeyed to my soul

and from my reservoir
of social response,
my pliant mouth described a curve.

Three puffs of air,
pulsed and filtered
by cords - tongue - lips,
responded to her thoughtful stimulus,

"Thank you, dear."

<I>December, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

After Rain

The sun inches skyward
in the quiet after-rain
of a gentle pre-dawn shower.

The rich sweet essence
of moistened earth
suffuses the air with promise.

Towering oaks and sugar maples
oscillate in the breeze -
their capricious rushing sounds
playing pristine counterpoint
with the jaunty chants
of robins, cardinals and chickadees.

Spring is pacing in the wings
awaiting her cue from the wheel of time.
and all creation waits in concord.

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Robert Charles Howard

Alone

How could I ever understand
what it is you choose
to call existence
and how could I ever
tell you what it means to me?

A solitary dot stained
on the canvas
of the expanding universe,
I sense a primal shiver
whenever, 'stranger'
cries out from a page
or whispers in the aether.

<I>February, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Alpenglow

Dusk descends across the west
as our yellow dwarf star
surrenders its daily reign -
washing the horizon
in a diadem of refracted light.

The prismatic clouds blaze
like a wondrous skycap
brushed by an impressionist deity
conjoining the passing day
with the emergent shades of night.

The first stars have arrived
to escort the silver moon
through its nocturnal journey.

The season of sleep is upon us.
A few tilts of the hour glass
will transport our circling furnace
just below the eastern peaks-
a harbinger of the coming day.

Dawn and dusk
framed in luminous Alpenglow.

Robert Charles Howard

Anatomy Of Arrogance

A shivering ball of fear
wrapped in a crust of pride
too thick for sharpest arrows
huddles alone but well protected.

Grown to (wo) man,
that shivering ball,
aglow with haughty lustre,
plies the difficult art
of strutting from a seated position -
hoping beyond all fearing
that none will ever come to know
the terror behind the mask.

<I> December, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

As Plain As The Nose

A nose is such a ruddy hoot -
sloping south between the eyes
with tubes flared out
like a hungry Hoover
sucking in fuel
for the old bio-furnace.

Ah, the multi-faceted proboscus!
You can turn yours up,
look down it on a twit,
blow it out
or stick it in where no one wants.

And we can thank our noses
when we linger for a spell
to savor a fragrant rose
or flee the traces of a polecat's rage.

Yet, for me, the finest part of having one
is cutting loose a mega-sneeze -
that blows off like Vesuvius -
while everyone tenders blessings!

Yes indeed,
of all the things a nose can do,
nothing beats it when it sneezes.

<I>December, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Aufersteh'N

<I>In memoriam, professor Earl Henry</I>

Through shuttered eyes, I see you still -
dressed out in earthen tones
and hear echoes of your steady voice -
lightly tinged with music of the west.

Like redbud harbingers
of Spring's regeneration,
emerging flowers of friendship
had just begun to touch the light.

Ascending the triple flight
in Webster's old tudor music house,
I'd stop to visit for a spell
drawn to the peaceful aerie
deftly masquerading as your office.

We'd speak of hope for students shared
or ponder an obscurity of theory
or stand before a video screen -
savoring Abbado's alchemy
bonded to Mahler's <I>Resurrection.</I>

I will miss you, new friend.
rest well - knowing
the gardens you have planted
remain to catch the morning sun.

<I>July, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

August Breezes

Golden prairie fields
caressed by August breezes
softly call your name.

<I>July, 2010</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Autumn Finale

Spare no lament for the maple leaves
that, defying their impending fall,
play blazing gold and scarlet concerts
bright as Christmas brass in marble halls.

How bold their radiant finales resound
deaf to the sweated ones below
sweeping death away
with their treble scraping rakes -
raising smoldering pyres of the fallen.

Steamy plumes from cocoa mugs
blend with burning oak and maple wisps.
The rakers chant their own sweet airs,
"The colors surprised this year,
didn't think we'd had the rain."

So spare no lament for the maple leaves
who with jubilant anthems
raised beneath the harvest moon
herald their fall with rainbow alleluias.

Robert Charles Howard

Beware Bold Maverick Calf

Have pity on the maverick calf
who flees his mother's milk
and shuns the circle of his herd -
drifting on through sage and hills -
stumbling and bleating in the heat.

Take care, courageous little bull:
the good old western law is still in force!
Watch your back and front and sides
for any rancher with a rope and iron
can claim and brand you for his own.

Ssssssss.

<I>September, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Black Diamonds

Farmers flocked to Blossburg's mines
willing their abandoned plows
to perpetual dust and rain.

Burrowing into the Tioga hills,
with Keagle picks and sledges,
they filled their trams with rough cut coal.

Black diamonds - carved for waiting boilers
of New England mills and trains
and Pennsylvania's winter stoves.

Brothers, Frank and Asher swung their picks,
in tunnels deep beneath the hills
and brushed away the clouds of soot.

Their coughs at first seemed harmless,
as from nagging colds or flus -
but deepened as their lungs turned black.

Pain and choking drove them to their beds
where no medic's art could aid them.
Then the coroner came to seal their eyes.

A stonecutter's chisel marks their brevity
on a marble graveyard obelisk
that pays no homage to their sacrifice.

Robert Charles Howard

Canticle Of Hope

The whole earth resounds
With the exuberant songs
of nature's majestic harmony.

And sways to the steady pulse
of all that breathes
And roams the land
That swims the streams
Or soars the azure skies,
Of every seedling, bud and flower
Of every fledgling, foal and chrysalis,
Every child's first breath and step.
All are singers in the chorus.

Listen to the tranquil strains
Of rivulets braiding into rivers,
to the soft crackle of a ponderosa cone
that stirs and break the soil,
And of each new moon and star-jewelled sky
Ringing out in resplendent counterpoint.

Meditating atop a ridge
Along the Great Divide
Or lingering by the ocean's edge,
We lift our eyes to the celestial dome
And attune our aspirations
To the harmony of all creation.

Robert Charles Howard

Captain Toro

The power scythe roared and quivered;
Had he chops, he would have licked them -
So rabid was he to taste the fray.

Verdure clad stalks by the thousands
Eschewed all feint of
Futile resistance -
Falling like spineless wimps
Before the carbon breathed Leviathon's
Cyclonic advance.

Pausing only to quaff
A long draft of energy potion,
Toro relentlessly carved a swath
Across the battle ground -
Vorpally snicker-snacking his way
Toward the mission's
inexorable termination.

A single command
Brought the roaring vortex to a halt.
Victorious, sans medals or ceremony,
Captain Toro was debriefed
And escorted back
To his lonely barracks
To sleep, perchance to dream
Of past and future triumphs
In the jungle wilds at the confluence
Of Prairie and Missouri Avenues.

Robert Charles Howard

Carved Granite

The Brick Church Road leads to Friedens
where yesterday and today
wooden carts and steel wagons,
powered by equine legs or fiery pistons,
ferry their most solemn cargo.

After the preacher's comfort tonings
of walks through the shadowy valley
and eyes lifted to the hills,
After fresh sod flourishes
over the sealed earth,
the carved stones whisper,

"Remember our bearings and sirings,
the banners we carried,
our triumphs and stumblings.
Sound the words and tunes of our jubilant songs!
Never forget that we are you."

<I> April, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Cathedrals Of Bling

The Gods are money sound these days.
and priests have marketing degrees -
The faithful, called to worship
by giant plasma screens,
flock to shopping cathedrals -
seeking salvation through merchandising.

At the Church of Holy Consumption
all denominations are welcome -
hundreds, twenties, tens.
All the hymns are sung by Muzak,
The readings daily specials.

A sister offers a spray of holy essence
(The bottle's 40 bucks an ounce) .
Leave your offerings at the till -
major credit cards accepted.

As the worship service's end
sign the dollar across your chest
while a celebrant's talking head
coos soothing benedictions,
"Go in Peace, my child. You're worth it."

<I> January, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Christmas Future

A toy locomotive
fresh red paint
on it's wooden boiler
waits on time for completion.

Black and white tints
stands ready in jars
for the peeling
of masking tape.
and a grandmother's
meticulous brushing.

The little train
In brightest color array
will match another
quilted on a toddler's comforter.

Nathanael, know that you are richly loved
by the tender body and soul
that once enclosed your mother.

Robert Charles Howard

Christmas Present

A snow blower at maximum throttle
has no cyclonic edge
on a happy quintet of grandkids
assaulting a stack of presents.

Cameras snap and flash to preserve
the blizzard of paper and bows
heaped like snow drifts on the floor
and each new treasure's explored
even while paper continues to fly.

Little Grace repeatedly extracts and installs
a pair of pink shoes on her cabbage patch doll
that for the season is named Gabrielle.

Stephen buzzes the room with a bright wooden plane.
and Nathanael has formed a permanent bond
with his new red and black locomotive.

Michael, who serves as patron saint
to his kid baby sister Grace,
allows her to crawl in giggling beside him
to share in the warmth of his quilt.

Tyler sits curled with a Karate book
with earnest plans to master each move.
(So if you're planning to mess with Tyler,
get it done before he turns twelve) .

Then Stephen hands over his red recorder
requesting a song, "mucus grandpa."
I pipe out a chorus of "Deck the Halls"
and follow with "Jingle Bells."

Then the dinner call sounds and we
pile our plates with beef and potatoes
and no one seems to mind at all
that Nathanael has brought
his beloved new train

to keep by his side at the table.

<I> Christmas day, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Chrysalis

I doubt the humble caterpillar
has any premonition
of the glory that awaits
on her impending coronation day.

Newly hatched, she meanders
over leaves and stalks, binging on the crawl,
in quest of the perfect hanging leaf.

Then suddenly metamorphosis
and silk is everywhere
wrapping her up like Nefertiti -
her insides churned into enzyme soup
a new essence in the making.

Shaking, writhing, a bold new self
is emerging deep within -
an orange and black-winged butterfly
waiting for that liberating hour
to shed her crumbling shell
and beat the air with new- found wings.

Robert Charles Howard

Citizen Barack Obama

As the Metrolink Eastbound
hissed to a stop at Belleville Station,
we carried our hopes
across the threshold.

Like a river gathering streams
for its seaward journey,
each stop brought more heartland souls
bound for the Gateway Arch.

The doors parted at Laclede's Landing
and we poured onto the Arch grounds.
Car after bus after train came and
filled the greens to overflowing.

As noon approached, a human sea
stretched from the Arch
to the old courthouse steps
where the gavel had once fallen
on Dred Scott's sacred liberty.

Then a slender Afro-American
stepped up to the mike
and 100,000 heartbeats were fused as one
by his calm and confident voice

By the shore of the Mississippi,
hope shined like the sun at its zenith
promising renaissance to all
who would be touched by its rays.

<I>October 18, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Civilian Soldiers Of The C.C.C.

<I>for the dedicated workers of Civilian Conservation Corps, Co.696. </I>

Near the southern coast of old Pangeia
you'll find a park called Giant City
where narrow "streets" were carved
through sandstone bluffs
by centuries of H2O and gravity.

As we set out on the trail,
morning sunglow danced between
the maples, ferns and cottonwoods
and warmed the path with pied illumination.

Leaving boot prints on the staircase
laid there slab by slab by
"Poverty Warriors of the C.C.C., "
our thoughts were drawn to silent homage.

They'd come to Illinois at Roosevelt's call
with willing arms and empty pockets
and soon the hills and valleys rang
with anthems sung by chisel, hammer and forge.

Transcending loss with fortitude
they left legacies of bridges, roads and lodges –
pleasing to the eye
and sturdy as the hands that formed them.

We paused beside a pressed sand tower
to admire a courageous chestnut oak
with roots bare-knuckled to the sandstone wall
and thought how like those civil soldiers,
that old oak claimed its share of soil
and would not let it go!

<I>October 23, 2008 at Giant City Lodge</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Cloudburst

Delusions of immortality
vanish in a heartbeat
as earth's colossal magnets
clutch jagged fire ribbons -
flashing and ripping the midnight sky.

Driving torrents whistle
and lash against the glass.
A blinding bolt of fire
Shatters an old rock maple -
quaking our shelter to its footings.

Cosmic strobe lit concussions
stutter across the nightscape.
Thunderclaps pummel the air
like a feral timpanist gone mad.

The frenzied cacophony
at last relents -
rumbles in the distance
and the storm lumbers on
like a barbarian horde
off to sack another village.

July, 2007

Robert Charles Howard

Combo

In a combo, no one's supposed
to hog the lead on every tune.

So let's all pitch in on the head,
take a chorus now and then
and try to keep up with the changes.

<I>September, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Contentment

Once again our cat Zoe
has sprawled his persona
across the morning paper.
Being a large and hirsute beast,
His news coverage is absolute.
(and being a magnanimous feline soul,
Zoe often covers the bills as well) .

He looks so soft and quiet lying there,
but just try to sneak a jug of milk
from fridge to counter
without saucering a portion
for his *Royal Grayness* and you will
quickly learn who put the "me" in "Meow."

So there he lies with his motor running
draped over the morning Sudoku,
chin extended to maximize delectation
of his servant's compliant stroking.

Ah Zoe, such trust and tranquility -
how perfectly soothing,
how irresistibly contagious!
The harmony of the universe
clad in a mantel of gray and white.

May, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Covered Bridges

A bridge is a curious thing to cover.

 mile after mile of naked road -

 then a wooden box over stream or ravine.

Why not cover the road instead

 leaving the bridge unclothed?

 But where's the romance in that, you say?

Well, perhaps it was made for Currier and Ives

 or to embellish the music

 of iron shod hooves on oaken planks.

Or maybe it was built as a kiosk

 for fading feed and carnival posters

 and jackknife glyphs of amorous initials.

No, all our covered bridges, real or imagined,

 guide our passage over deadly waters -

 holding us fast on the road

 and safe from drowning.

March, 2007

Robert Charles Howard

Death By Fire

Seth awoke in a terror sweat
engulfed by flames
licking at his bed.
His cries of final anguish
piercing the midnight silence.

His shaking three year old frame,
would not, could not
assimilate the coos and solace
from deluded parents -
speaking rubbish of nightmares
while the whole universe
blazed with terminal fire.

A yard or so across the room,
illuminated by a night light's slender beams,
a child's Hot Wheel raceway,
decaled with crimson - yellow flames
benignly rested on a table.

May, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Deluge

Rain clouds hover in the night
veiling the crystal moon -
spraying steady showers
on the hills and plains below.

The Missouri stirs from slumber
spreading claws of water up its banks
as rain sheets, lashed to horizontal
saturate the fields and valleys.

Illumined by the misted moon
The river's shoreline grows
by inches through the night -
stealing into ever higher ground.

Daybreak finds new ponds conjoined
and spilled across low lying roads
and TV teasers sound their alarms.
'Stay tuned, tape at 10: 00.'

Downpours to the west and north
saturate Mississippi valleys and
Saint Louis flood gates rumble closed.
Farmers abandon all hope for harvest.

Our screens chant nightmare litanies
of sandbag crews and second floor rescues,
crumbling levies and sunken vehicles -
a twisting farmhouse claimed for driftwood.

The clouds' reservoirs at last are spent,
the inland sea recedes to lakes
and our weary cousins stumble home
as the Mississippi quietly relearns it banks.

<I>March, 2008</I>

<I>This poem is a recollection of the great flood of 1993 but as it was written
the rivers around St. Louis passed over flood stage and the city flood gates were

closed. While protecting the city, the gates and levees ship the problem downstream where it intensifies the plight of small towns that are now under water. Continued rain in the Missouri and Mississippi watersheds could cause the current flood to rival that of 1993.</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Dolphin Ballet

A graceful water weaving dolphin
swirls wakes of gentle waves -
a white, silver blue phantom
shimmering in the noonday sun.

Gliding over the surface,
she dances an aquatic ballet
of corkscrew pirouettes
and majestic somersaults.

Then vanishes beneath the spray
to churns her engine upward -
soaring through the flaming hoop
to the oohs and applause
of a throng of short-sleeved hominids
bleached beyond the rails.

Plunging into quiet depths,
she lingers for a moment
perhaps to recall the fresh sea air
and the borderless waters
in the golden days before the ships came.

January, 2007

Published in Oh, What a Tangled Web -edited Faslund and Euwait

Robert Charles Howard

Eagles On The Mississippi

Majestic eagles ride on thermals high
above the river's wooded shore:
white hooded monarchs of the sky.

Keen eyes survey the waters as they fly
in quest of prey to ingest or store.
Majestic eagles ride on thermals high.

Above the bluffs, their shadows multiply
as each December dawn brings more
white hooded monarchs to the sky.

At winter's end they'll homeward fly
to fish the river's northern corridor.
Majestic eagles ride on thermals high.

The eagle's noble span and piercing cry
are immortalized in native lore.
White hooded monarchs rule the sky!

Since on spirit wings I must rely
I dream aloft where eagles soar
and glide with them on thermals high:
white hooded monarchs of the sky.

Robert Charles Howard

Elements Of Antiquity

1. Earth (Pangaea)

Pangaea heaved and shifted
beneath the fire-storm sky.
Colliding plates and spewing mountains
shook, roared and thundered
under the brutal chaos
of torrential cataclysms.

In time she yielded her ire
to millennia of pacific rains -
her severed crust
set adrift across the oceans
like gigantic earthen rafts.

Jungles sprang up and terrible lizards
came, grazed and left their bones.
Forests, grains and multifarious beasts
grew and perished in accord
with their past and future destinies.

So here we are - earthbound,
tossed from our mothers' wombs -
fated to live and breed
by the grace of miracles
far beyond our ken.

Beloved mother Gaia,
from whose dust we are raised,
nurture and sustain us
and sing us to our mortal sleep.

2. Air

Air - earth's miracle brew of
oxygen, nitrogen and all the rest
meted out in perfect harmony.

Air - silent and still on a moonlit night -

driver of sheeted rain on window panes -
and winds that shake the trembling aspens.

Air - author of land and ocean squalls -
bringer of that ominous pallor
that presages a tornado's furor

Air - invisible aerial highway
for majestic eagles and turbo-jets -
medium of rhetoric and symphonies.

Air - window to the cosmos
and our fragile life-giving broth -
unwitting conveyer of toxic alchemy.

Keep watch my sisters and brothers:
the air we breathe is what we make it
or rather what we let it be.

3. Water

Water like a capricious deity
wanders through time and topography -
cherished and cursed for
what it gives and what it takes away.

Gentle rains and strident gales
sculpt rivers and streams
through forests and plains
bound for union with the open sea.

Diurnal tides ebb and wane
at the whim of the charismatic moon.
Ice mountains advance and retreat
leaving rock-strewn moraines in their wake.

Turbulent currents
plummeting over cataracts,
spray pastel prisms
across the misted valleys.

Beneath our all too fragile skins,

secret sanguine rivers navigate
our veins and arteries
bathing organs, limbs and sensors
with curative balm and sustenance.

Wellspring of all elements,
fill our daily ladles
and grant us the will and empathy
to bequeath the same to our progeny.

4. Fire

Two hundred million years ago
our Paleolithic cousins
seized branches from a burning forest
and stepped into a bold new world.

By the glow of fire-lit caves,
and the scent of searing venison,
they gathered wits and tools
to craft shelters and weaponry.

Their children's children would design
forges and furnaces, factories
and build engines that run on fire.

But their anxious siblings in despair
snatched lightning from the sky
and twisted by fits of anger pride
made also muskets, missiles, bombs
and nuclear Armageddons.

Loki, god of nobler flames
open our blood-stained eyes
and show us the means
to stay our arson lust and
abide by the light of reason.

Revised and integrated version, December,2015

Robert Charles Howard

Emergence

Before first life -
a sea of primal broth.

Before the child
a seeded egg shook and split.

Before men spoke -
only utterance and signs.

Before bridled fire -
a raw and frigid world.

Before awareness
subsistence sufficed.

With reflection
came experience recalled.

Myriad thresholds
reached and transcended.

How strange
that we move our pens to essence.

Stranger still
that we are here at all.

<I>June, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

En Passant

The 64 squares on a chessboard
match the tally of my years –
some passed in red,
others in black -
another day, another game.

Mostly I prefer to play
the knight with angled junkets
cutting a dashing profile
like the head of his noble steed
(though many moves, alas,
resemble another part of the horse) .

Of course it is rather grand
to be monarch for a day
calling the shots
from a gilded throne
in a rustic medieval castle

but a mere half turn of the wheel
busts me down to humble pawn -
moving one square at a time -
rendering to Caesar his due.

Chess may not be my game of choice
but there isn't any other
and on the whole it's not so bad
save for that infernal timer!

<I>January, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Eternal Dust

Cradling a handful of Illinois dust,
dry residue of sycamore, deer
and ancient Mississippians,
I splay my fingers like an eagle's claw -
releasing it to the fickle breezes.

A sudden gust of wind
swirls up an ocher cloud -
a cyclonic dervish of sand and clay.

My hand, upraised for a shield
ever so briefly vanishes -
veiled by the impatient dust.

May, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Fellow Traveler

Overjoyed to catch a glimpse of you
across the crowded lobby,
my footfalls quickened -
eager to head you off
before you slipped from view.

The elevator chimed arrival.
and I tugged your sleeve
as you stepped inside
then blanched in disbelief
as you turned and we each met
the eyes of a total stranger.

I muttered most rueful apologies.
You smiled amused forgiveness.
The doors sealed between us
and the elevator lifted you
to a destiny beyond my choice to know.

<I>March 30, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Fragile Truce

Just as a surplus of war begs for armistice,
a season of peace seems to cause
a hostility vacuum that pleads to be filled
as surely as a hollow begs for a pond.

Perhaps there is a cosmic battle raging
between the oversouls of people
who would chisel a sculpture to grace
and those who would hack off its arms.

History's fools fire up their bully horns
shouting proud oratory to ignorance -
and lemmings goose step to the precipice -
doomed to plunge into a sea of misery.

Then there is quiet - guilty and reflective.
How could we let this happen
with so much gain and loss in the balance?

and the sculptors of civilization
find fresh marble to once again
carve reason from the ashes of pride.

But the oversoul of hate will brood and fester
as long as it's thought noble to kill for a cause.

© 2016 by Robert Charles Howard

Robert Charles Howard

Frodo And David

Elijah went up to the mountain
disguised as feisty Frodo
and met young David there
newly sprung from his
marble prison by
Michelangelo's eloquent chisel
and itching for a fight.

Lit by a single thunder bolt,
David's sling uncoiled
and taught Goliath mortality
while Frodo pitched Gollum
(and his 'precious')
into Mordor's fiery lake.

Challenge my word if you must
but that's just the way it was;
looks do not deceive
(or so it's often written) .

So grant our youths
a brief respite, friends,
to reclaim their virtuous breath,
then follow their tracks
to the valleys and shires
where evil ones fear to tread.

<I>The resemblance of the actor, Elijah Wood to Michelangelo's David is uncanny.</I>

<I>September, 2009 </I>

Robert Charles Howard

Fugitive Visions

Life is a Cafeteria

Life is a cafeteria because
there are too many dishes
for one small tray
and you have to stand in line
when you're hungry.

Dashboard Humility

Turn the key.
No lecture
no homily,
just a single word:
'Airbag'

Anatomy of Arrogance

A shivering ball of fear,
wrapped in a crust of pride
too thick for sharpest arrows,
huddles alone but well protected.

Strutting from a seated position,
he/she hopes beyond all dread
that none will ever come to know
the terror behind the mask.

Modern Narcissis

Narcissus leaned forward
to better view his matchless beauty
and tumbled to watery doom.

Beloved America,
how far can we lean in self adoration
before our coasts tilt into the seas?

Combo

In a combo, no one's supposed
to hog the lead on every tune.
So let's all pitch in on the head,
take a chorus now and then
and try to keep up with the changes.

Eternal Dust

Cradling a handful of Illinois dust,
dry residue of sycamore, deer
and ancient Mississippians,
I splay my fingers like an eagle's claw -
and release it to the fickle breezes.

A sudden gust of wind
swirls up an ocher cloud -
a cyclonic dervish of sand and clay.
My hand, upraised for a shield
ever so briefly vanishes -
veiled by the impatient dust.

(To the reader: this a kind of suite of previously posted poems. I would be interested in whether you think the combination works) .

Robert Charles Howard

Galactic Blues

The Milky Way was really quite enough
to trim me down to size
but even so I thought it fine
to spread a quilt beneath the stars
and mark my spot
beside the universal edge.

But then those damned astronomers
had to mess the whole thing up
with stellar maps and Hubble pics
that proved beyond the pale
that those fuzzy little *nebulae*
are really other galaxies.

Hold enough, I say. That's most unfair!
Who needs another million Milky Ways?

Well, if that's the way it has to be,
then I'll just fold my blanket up
and go inside.
where I'm ever so much bigger!

August, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Garden Of Glass

A rainbow of serrated globes,
Friends to the water lilies,
Floats in a sculptured pool.

A surreal yellow glass Medusa
Woven through a white crescent trellis
Gleams in the midday sun.

Choirs of chrysanthemums
Sing with multicolored flora
Blown from molten soda, lime and sand.

Sheltered in a geodesic tropics
Orange herons stand on legs of glass
Amid living palms, bamboo and wild orchids.
Towering blue spires
Lift skyward out of the soil
While butterflies dance
In the misty veil of a waterfall.

Nature and the shimmering world within
Happily converge in the florid vision
Of an effervescent man with a patched eye -
A man called Chihuly.

Robert Charles Howard

Gathering Wood For The Hearth

It wasn't really John's saw
that carved the branch into fire logs -
its blade severing rings of time.
The saw was mine but just like his.

Resting for a spell I thought of John:
clearing his spread by the Williamson Road,
building fences, raising his barn,
or, like me, cutting wood for the hearth.

But perhaps I didn't "think" of John at all
since he lives in each cell that I am
He may have just stirred a little within
to recall pioneer paths we once had walked.

The long branch shortened
as John and I pistoned our arms
in unison across centuries
slicing through time and space -
stacking fuel to warm a cold winter's night.

Robert Charles Howard

Go Ahead, Be Nervous

Don't be nervous you say!
Sorry, can't be helped -
what with this neuron spider web
woven through my innards!

Synapses crackle and sizzle
all the livelong day
and night
though lame and loft-some thoughts -
logging in pain and pleasure,
steering my chassis
in and out of wisdom and folly.

Take it from command central
(my grapefruit sized
delirium of tissue and electrodes)
Of course I'm nervous,
you nit!
If I weren't, some medico
would call it and
send me off for disposal.

<I>May, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Golden Silence

As her aria gently cadenced,
the <I>diva's</I> breath and mouth were set
for her most luminescent high "C"
and not a sound came out.

Vocal thunder filled the opera hall
as the gathered <I>conoscenti</I>
shouted grateful approbations -
hurling roses at her feet.

Who can name the phantom proxy
that lent her its golden tone -
perhaps a migrant partial
from a flute or muted violin
or a floodlight's hum
or a random wisp of wind?

I wasn't there but in my rashness
think I know (though lack the proof) .
I say it was an impish sprite
from the realm where poems are born.

<I>June, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Grace The Magician

There were no rabbit hat extractions,
Floating pastel scarves,
Or fluttering dove wings
But it was magic nonetheless.

Circled in the warmth
Of comfort arms
Grace released her mouth
From her mother's breast
And broke her verbal silence,
"All done."

Of the 23,000 or more words
She will come to know,
None can now precede
"All done."

But how much more magic
Is yet to come?
Torrents of words
Will tumble out in nano-seconds
To bring the treasury of
Stored experience to her lips -
Questions and declarations
To shape and guide her universe.
Magic miracles
Born of Grace and Providence.

I hear your words dear child,
But beg to differ.
You have just begun.

Robert Charles Howard

Grand Prize, \$10,000! (Re-Post)

It sounds sooo enticing -
a poem by <I>moi</I>
gracing the elegant pages
of a treasure trove
of the nation's finest poesy
and a nifty ten grand to boot!

BE WARNED!

You can also submit
your lip smacking recipes
to a panel of sages
in tender flaky hopes of
gracing the civilized world
(wherever that is) .
with your culinary alchemy.

A cynical soul
once offered a formula for
"grandma's surprise cake, "
delicately spiced
with two cups of chili powder.

Her acceptance missal
soon sifted into the slot
along with a handy order form
for a \$50.00 book.

<I>November, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Growing Season

A giant pendulum in the cosmos swings
 and galactic pinwheels circle in the aether.
The vernal equinox brings fairer weather
 as gentle rains sire life's new springings.

Crocuses push the snow aside, a skylark sings
 of light and darkness held in equal measure.
Then pastel fingers on the boughs appear
 as flora bloom and fauna ply their matings.

The softened fields embrace the tillers' blades
 sowing seeds for the ever nourishing sun
to raise to golden fields of finest wheat.

The pendulum swings once more as summer fades.
 Our Earthly axis seeks a cool inflection
as farmers hail the harvest now complete.

<I>December, 2006 - revised July,2010</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Harper's Ferry

A bell tolled
through the fog at dusk
to summon passage
across the roiling waters.

Through the mist
a ferry appeared
but not the same as called -
afoul with death and sorrow.

With dread our forefathers
boarded ship and listened through
that storm filled crossing
to howling wind sung requiems
echoing from distant fields at
Manassus - Shiloh - Gettysburg.

When the gales had spent their fury
they disembarked in a new land
with both far less and more
than they left on the opposite shore.

March, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Hero Without A Badge

Richard strained his eyes
and watched his deliverer
merge into misty shadows.
Never would he know
whose strong arms had dragged him
from twisted metal and flames
that used to be his Ford.

At first screaming sirens
and glaring lights
the stranger had risen, smiled
and hastened up the hill.

Haloed in photo flashes
Richard shoved the mike aside.
The lady in a blazer asked again, who?
but Richard only shrugged.
Had he known he wouldn't have said.

<I>July, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

High Toned And Christian

This election year I'd to be like Wallace Steven's
High Toned Old Christian Woman
but I'm ever so confused.

How can I love my neighbor as myself and
bring myself to punch him in the face?
I'm willing to mash old folks under the wheels
by snatching up their meds,
by how can we afford all those buses?

The man from Galilee said not to judge
and to care for folks who need it
but he surely wasn't talking to you or me!

Really now!

The good book says, 'Blessed are the peace makers',
So I guess I'll put on a short-sleeved shirt,
head for the local gunnery
and buy me a Colt 45.

Oh dear, I sure hope that's enough
to make me a Christian conservative.
Tell me please,
am I missing anything?

Robert Charles Howard

Horizontal Transcendence

To better view the fairest stars of
Genesis, Keats or Kepler,
learned priests and lectors
of vertical transcendence
built towers over clouds
beyond the touch of worldly toil.

Standing below in soiled boots,
newer prophets citing
the universal brotherhood of
mitosis, chromosomes and DNA,
urge a new transcendence
spread on a horizontal plane
where bridges are preferred to ladders.

Muffled distant drums,
beating somber warnings
of poisoned waters and global heat,
summon us down
from our lofty towers of denial.

Murmuring rhythms of forests and streams
and all species of flora and fauna
line out the same life beats
as the engines in our chests.
The God without is the God within -
nested in our nuclei.

With global death within the grasp
of our reckless finger tips,
and bullet fever
infesting our earthly villages,
are we ready yet
to yield a measure of our trust
to the healing power
of horizontal transcendence?

Robert Charles Howard

Human Family Picnic

Imagine a Human Family picnic
where everyone shows:
from every sect and hue and nation
gathered at a common table.

The Almighty swoops down to bless us:
known to all from Torah, Q'uran and Gospels
and countless other books of wisdom -
known to our souls' aspirations.

After dessert, the Holy One
quakes the earth with his scepter
beside the sacrificial pyre,

"Brothers, sisters and cousins,
images of your creator,
every unholy war
desecrates the face of God
and there is no other kind.
Cast your savage pride to the flames
and live together in peace! "

Obediently, we toss our
pride onto the pyre
recoiling from its smoldering stench.
The Lion lies down to preen the Lamb's fleece
and Universal Love, released from her chains,
Walks free in every land.

<I>August, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

In Memoriam, Will Barber

How can it be that crusty old Will
has left the present tense?

But this like every other truth
requires no mark from us
and so we remember as we can.

Music coursed like rivers
through the arteries of his psyche
cleansing and enriching himself and us
with songs full graced and promised.

But like all of yesterday's tunes,
scribed in ancient scores,
we trace our fingers over the lyrics
and move our lips in time with
the pounding of his heart.

November, 2010

Here is a poem that Will wrote in honor of PH poet, Sandra Fowler:

A Hymn of Praise

The keys and staves demark strait paths
The restless note must travel on;
The note's the beast that carries
The burden of the sound.

Music evokes a sympathy
In willing heart, the symbol of
A presence, constantly descending,
White wings of endless love.

2006

To Sandra

In Praise Of Muscles

Make a muscle?
Nonsense!
Only God can make a muscle.
and you can mark me down as grateful
for the ones attached to me!

They're a curious bunch though:
I say push and they say pull,
I say lift and it's pull again
but let me pull one
and there's Hell to pay.

Of course we have steward's rights
to train and toughen them
to storm up a Chopin Etude
or guide a surgical knife
or we can bulk them up
posing profile to the mirror.
And yes we can fold them into a fist
or extend a welcoming hand
(the choice is with the steward) .

Thank you God for muscles
(dear angels of movement)
but please Sir, can I have some more?

May, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Independence Day

"It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more." John Adams – July 3,1776.

July 4, 2008

The town square fountain mirrors the morning sun.
Every day folk decked in national colors
arise for the passing flags.
Children pounce on clown tossed candy.

July 4,1776

*Patriot carriages converge on Philadelphia
where the Second Continental Congress
will tell an unsuspecting world
that a new nation has given birth to itself.*

Sousa cadences sound from a local band,
hooves of Girl Scout's horses strike the pavement
antique cars and firetrucks blast their horns
candidates weave the crowd, pressing the flesh.

*The middle ground has been soaked with patriot blood
and each new infamous decree from the British crown
tightens the noose around the colonial neck
so that revolution is now the only course left.*

Picnic jubilation reigned at Pat and Lee's farm -
horseshoes clanging and frisbees flying.
A pot luck feast with beans and franks
interrupts the whistling and popping of rockets.

*Dipping their pens they quill the parchment
knowing full well what dire costs await them -
and that arduous victory alone promises liberty
while defeat would spell certain death.*

We reach the lakeshore at dusk -
unfolding chairs - spreading out blankets -
strains of Americana drift over the lake.
Trial flares arch and pop in the sky
prelude to a pyro-technic symphony.

<I>At Yorktown General Cornwallis,
cornered by Washington's tattered men,
is forced to relinquish forever
all British claims to American soil.</I>

The grand finale blazes and ceases,
weary toddlers collapse in parental arms,
car doors slam and engines ignite
then headlight caravans, headed for home,
spiral off in every compass degree.

Wish yourself Happy Birthday, America
and endless happy returns
"from this Time forward forevermore! "

<I>July 4,2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

It's A Near Scandal!

It's a near scandal I say!
How could she do it
and where did she go
to get it done?

In a single passage
of the circling moon,
our own gentle daughter
has whisked off her toddlers
(so deeply adored)
and traded them in for bigger ones.

Robert Charles Howard

Jacob's Ladder

While Jacob slept on a pillow of stone,
He dreamed of a ladder rising up to heaven.
Upon its steps the angels of the Lord came down to earth.
Upon its steps the angels of the Lord went up to heaven.

Jacob slept on, Jacob dreamed on.
Jacob slept on a pillow of stone.

While Jacob dreamed
The Lord appeared to him saying,
"The land where you lie I will give to you.
Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.
All your children and their families
Shall be blessed upon this land."

Then Jacob awoke from his dream saying,
"Surely the Lord is in this place.
God will be with us to guide us and sustain us.

I will set up the rock from under my head
As a pillar and will anoint it with oil.
And upon this stone that I have set up
Shall be the house of the Lord.'

God is our rock and our foundation
Who from our ashes and our brokenness,
Restores us by the power of his love.
Here shall be the house of the Lord.

Robert Charles Howard

Jeff's Generator Shop

The urban cowboy swaggered in
sporting jeans and boots
and a quarter cigar.
Tipping his Sears-bought Stetson
he leaned his hulk against the counter.

"Say Jeff, old buddy.
You think you might know how
to fix this generator up?
I need it back by next Friday."

Jeff held his professional cool
knowing even a boorish customer
is first and always "the customer"
and restored the part as asked.

Autumn had turned the maples bright
when Jeff jumped then cringed
on hearing the pickup door slam.
"Oh God, here comes the Stetsoned legend.
What a way to wreck a Monday."

The cowboy walked up empty handed
and paused before he spoke.
"Say Jeff, me and some buddies
are fixing to go huntin' next weekend.
Sure like to have you join us."

Jeff's tower of disdain
collapsed like a castle of cards.
He declined with sincerest thanks
and for the first day in all life
regretted he'd never taken up hunting.

<I>September, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Jerry Singing At His Lathe

Slim and mustached
Jerry sang his heart out
In bib overalls at his lathe –
The Mario Lanza of Kent-Moore Tools.

Ribbons of curled metal gathered at his feet
As he cut hard steel into usable parts.
He glanced at the prints,
Reset the turret to take a second pass
And belted out another chorus.

Jerry retro-dreamed of New York,
Of lessons, certificates, Juilliard
And arias finished with outstretched arms –
Visions derailed but unforgotten.

Global madness sent him instead to France.
With a pack and an M1 in place of scores
Jerry helped set Paris free
Yet never set foot on its stages.

Kent-Moore paid him well
And masked by din of colliding metal
Jerry sang and sang and sang all day
For rivet guns and turret lathes.
His voice would melt your heart.

Robert Charles Howard

Johann Sebastian Bach

<I>Beethoven once said of the cantor of Leipzig
"Not a stream but an ocean."</I>

Sebastian Bach wove sonic tapestries
and scoffed at notions of genius
"Anyone who pays the price can do it."

Whether for Sunday's choir or organ
or for a palace fete of state,
The fountains of his bounteous spring
embellished every age and station.

Yet he could crack a joke or two
in a cantata to coffee's pleasures -
sipping from a sturdy cup
of nature's matchless brew.

Flutists, fiddlers, singers, organists,
children and masters alike,
have netted hearty sustenance
from the seas of his boundless vision.

But modesty forbade him boast
the importance of his station -
affixing to his noblest works,
a trio of humblest words,

<I>"Soli Deo Gloria."</I>

December, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

K. C. Snow Globe

The griffin outside my balcony
rumbled and shook
flipping Kansas City
upside down and back.

Giant flakes descended
like softest down -
coating the plaza below
with a mantel of frosted white.

Watch out; hold on tight -
The griffin squints again and
soon he'll tilt and overturn
the city's frosted dome -
releasing swirling blizzards
of giant fairy crystals.

<I>February, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Kayla

Light bulbs are redundant
When Kayla walks in -
bathing every person and surface
with the flood lamps of her smile.

She smiles when she dances
and smiles when she sings
while two grateful women
who precede her in lineage
draw their bows across the strings.

None would ever suspect
that this fountain of joy
had once wanly trembled
in the valley of shadows.

Yet no matter how vilely
leukemia fought and clawed
to claim her for its own
it never really stood a chance

for Kayla had steps to dance
and songs to sing
and millions of smiles to smile
and would not be denied.

February, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Khoral Kathy

<I>for my choral mentor, Kathryn Smith Bowers
in celebration of her 60th birthday</I>

Ah yes dearest Kathryn –
Like Dorothy sprung from Kansas soil
always a frequent flyer
even without a plane.

She has a simple plan
to seize the core of a song:
If you wish to tap the essence
of why a Hungarian sings
It's easy:
just pack your bags and go
to where his song was born.

What makes a motet Scandanavian
or Deutsch or Italiano?
Piece of cake:
just book your flight
to hear the music ring
in concert halls and cathedral naves
and survey the hills with a glass
of the local grape in hand.

And what makes a dapper engineer
suddenly find his heart
wedged high in his throat?
Nothing simpler:
just compose a Christmas hymn
with 'David' inscribed on its title page.

So now Kathy books flights for two
with a man who was born to fly
and returns to show young singers
how to soar to lands across the seas
even without a plane.

<I>February 1, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Lame Deer's Vision

High atop the mountain
A boy crouched alone in the vision pit – waiting.
Raising his red stone pipe to the four directions
He sent clouds of willow bark smoke
Skyward toward his ancestors.

Naked beneath his star blanket he wept a man's cry –
Crying for a vision to come
That his people may live!
Chanting with eyes fast shut he waited and prayed.

First came the cries of the wind,
Then the whisper of trees.
Birds swooped and circled about him.
He shook his rattle crying,
"Tunkashila, grandfather spirit, help me."

A voice spoke in the call of a bird,
"Your sacrifice will make you
Wikasa Wakan, medicine man.
We are the winged ones and we are your brothers."

In a swirling cloud his great grandfather came and spoke,
Blood dripping from the hole
Where a white soldier's bullet had found his chest,
"You will take my name, Tahka Ushte, Lame Deer."
The new man on the mountain rejoiced.

Quietly entering the vision pit,
Kind Old Chest placed a hand on Lame Deer's shoulder,
"Four days have passed, it is time."
And led Tahka Ushte down to the valley.

Robert Charles Howard

Leaves Of Gold

The artist leaned in slowly
to his daughter's sculpted visage,
placed a slender leaf of gold
across her ceramic brow
and gently pressed it with his brush.

But for all his art and craft he knew
no gilder's foil was half so dear
as the child with half-closed eyes –
with mother's tender brush
caressing strands of finest gold -
singing her to sleep.

<I>December, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Life Be Not Proud

When proud ones boast
Of all that is loftiest
In his faith,
In her flag,
In the hue of their skin
The Devil licks his chops
In lustful salivation.

When caring souls
Reach out to offer
A bowl of rice,
A healing dose,
An understanding ear,
An open heart
Satan clutches his dry throat
Gasping for air.

Robert Charles Howard

Life Is A Cafeteria

Life is a cafeteria because

there are too many dishes
for one small tray
and you have to stand in line
when you're hungry.

<I>March, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Like A Phoenix

Courageous Phoenix, what do you know
of your past and future conflagrations?
With wings afire, do you sense
the embers of your renascent soul?
Is your savage life-death vortex
as mysterious to you as it is to us?

Although I'll never fly on Phoenix wings,
or share your tortured falls and resurrections,
I feel I know you as a brother
for we all have Phoenix games to play
with each of our dividing and perishing cells
its own ancestor and descendant -
tomorrow's joys born of present sorrows.

Noble Phoenix, in our barren seasons
when scorched spirits tumble to the earth,
soar down from your blackened rock
and restore the feathers of our tattered wings.

Robert Charles Howard

Masked Man

A solitary figure
stealthily scales the creaky steps
on a frigid moonlit night -
dogs whining in unison
with the gusty whistling winds.

The man in a mask approaches the bed
with measured pace and
remorselessly steals between the sheets
coarsely snapping the switch.

Don't be alarmed dear reader, relax
it's just me and my trusty new CPAP
puffing air through my faulty tubes.

I speak to you fresh
from my recent excursion
to the world of the 'Medico Borgs' -
wires sprouting wildly out of my head
like a fibre lamp missing its colors.

Kristy held court at mission control
scanning the screens and graphs
like a savvy hawk peering over a field
assessing the speed of a squirrel.
But Kristy wasn't looking for supper
just to answer the question *<I>du jour</I>*,
"Does he or doesn't he? "

Does he or doesn't he what? you ask
Have Obstructive Sleep Apnea, that's what.
Kristy studied the charts and declared,
'Yes he certainly does! '

I'd had a scare or two in my time -
dozing to the shoulder in my ivory Dodge
and I remember Brenda all too well
who was shocked awake in her car one night
by an unforgiving tree.

She bravely fought for over a year.
I sang in the choir at her funeral.

 <I>BESIDES: </I>

I don't like having my energy tank
filled to a meager half full.

and I don't care much for falling asleep
on a friend's hospitality

CPAP could be seen as a pain in the...
but beats far more grievous procedures
like battling a stroke or diabetes
or months on a psychiatrist's couch
trying to atone a stranger's light snuffed
In a wreck I never saw coming.

So I ask not, on whom the mask fits.
It fits well enough on me.

So if you think the mask might fit on YOU
Don't hesitate friend, just do it!
Visit the land of the "Medico Borgs."
Resistance is totally futile!

<I>January, 2008</I>

<I>Studies have determined that 10% of adults have Sleep Apnea
or other significant sleep disorders which can make driving hazardous
and can lead to many other serious ailments. Sleep Centers located at
hospitals and clinics can test for and treat a large variety of sleep disorders.</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Mastodon Hunt

Spear shafts splintering beneath its collapsing hulk,
the mastodon crashed to the earth,
roared its final lament and fell silent.

Shouts echoed across the ravine.
Dark-haired Clovis hunters converged:
stripping the hide,
carving the flesh.

Others circling the carcass,
traced broken shafts to flint;
gathering them for tomorrow's hunt -
retrieving all save one.

A triumphal fire hissed and snapped,
hurling heat and smoke
high into the mid-day sky.

* * * * *

The archaeologist knelt to the ground.
Heart racing, he scraped dirt from flint,
brushed away millennia of dust
and raised the projectile to the sun shouting,
'Clovis point! '

'Clovis point' - a revelation in the dust:
found inches from the bones of its prey.
Khaki and blue jean clad hunters gathered quickly
to read the epic written in flint and bone:
mastodon and Clovis united by the point of a spear.

Robert Charles Howard

Medicine Wagon

I'd jump at the chance to ride shotgun
on Henry's medicine wagon
rolling from city to village
hawking 'Stickin' Salve' and 'Oil of Gladness'.

We'd ride into Elmira's County Fair
and set up over by the lake.
I'd fix Diamond a pail of oats
and pour her a bucket of water.
while great, great grandpa
dons his Union coat and cap
and arranges potions on the shelves.

Henry's voice would cut the air
like a megaphone
and people would gather close -
lured by an old soldier's
hypnotic banter of miracle cures -
and perilous Civil War battles.

Then he'd swear on his mother's Lumbago
that 'Stickin' Salve' works just as well
as the lead and powder
he'd fired at Cedar Mountain.

The folks would shake with mirth
each time the old man bellowed,
"I'm Henry Howard from Bunker Hill -
Never worked and never will."
Women would tug their husband's sleeves
and they'd bring me pennies and dimes.

After dusk we'd tally the coins
and latch down the wagon for the night.
At sunrise I'd wipe his brow -
to ease him gently back
from the thunder of enemy shells
still firing in his restless sleep.

We'd cook up some bacon and biscuits
then hitch old Diamond to the wagon
and head south through the rolling hills
along the Tioga valley.

We'd breathe in the fresh country air
and tip our hats to the farmers.

If Henry would come to tap my shoulder
some promising morning in spring
and whisper 'the wagon's hitched outside, '
I'd go in a Tioga minute.

<I> December, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Mini You

It's been something of a while
since I tumbled down
out of the warmth and darkness
into this bright uncertain space.

I see you coming toward me
and the strangest parts of me
start darting about in every direction
because I remember you.

Every time you come
something glad happens:
you hold me to your warmth,
you bring good food to my mouth
to ease the ache inside.
You make pretty sounds
that tell me I am safe -
that tell me I am not alone.

For reasons I cannot say
I know that I am you -
that you are me.

The beauty on your face
tells me you know it too
and like you, I smile.

© 2016 by Robert Charles Howard

Robert Charles Howard

Modern Narcissus

Narcissus leaned forward
to better view his matchless beauty
and tumbled to watery doom.

Beloved America,
how far can we lean in self adoration
before our coasts tilt into the seas?

July, 2006

Robert Charles Howard

Morning Paper

Turn the lock
take a short walk
pluck a blue plastic package
from the lawn.

Blue pink orange pastels
washing across the horizon.
an avian megachoir full voiced
in stereo, quadraphonic
centiphonic sound.

No need to rush.
Mr. Coffee's still ciphering
his caffeinated solution.

Linger a moment to audition
the morning senses giver's
daybreak concerto.

Linger a moment:
Taste the fresh morning air.

(April, 2007)

Robert Charles Howard

Musica Antigua - Musica Moderna

Prize of a difficult hunt
fresh meat seared in the fire pit:

The loin-clothed victor
severed pieces with his flint
to feed his mate and son
then idly stroked a hollow log
with his crimson tinted club.

He picked up the pace
when the child began
to laugh and whirl
about the flames -
his mother' contented smile
telling, that for a spell at least,
serenity ruled the glade.

II - Found Flutes

In a time too early for telling.
one of our kind unearthed
a dry hollow bone and blew.

Its tone was pleasant
but more was soon found
by scoring some holes in its side.

Though carbon dating may tell
to a millennium or so, when,
no one can ever say why.

III - To Build a Lyre

A Grecian soldier on a cyprus stump
cut holes in a bow too lax for arrows
and gently swept his weathered fingers
across the new strung cords
then composed a lyric to Pan's amors
and a second to brave Alexander.

The soldier, well pleased with
what he had made,
resolved to fashion a nobler frame
for its dulcet strings
and raised worthy songs
to Apollo and Terpsichore.

MODERNA

IV – The Music Press

In his modest shop in Venice
Ottaviano Petrucci turned the wheel
and pressed notes to paper
for music's first printed edition.

Squares and diamonds peppered the staves
and tunes of Obrecht and Josquin des Prez
soon graced the salons
of Europe's most elegant palaces.

V - Sonata Pian e Forte

From a desk at St. Mark's in Venice
Gabrieli pondered a question,
"How can an echo's diminishing sound
be shown in a musical score
so that one group of brass
can reflect the other
across the cathedral's nave? "

With two simple words he shifted forever
the course of music's stream.
For the leaders he marked down "forte, "
and for its echo elected "pian."

VI - The Master of Cremona

Stradivarius extracted a maple sheet
From his curing vat in Cremona
and hung it to dry with the others -

Then taking his carving knives
He sculpted a cello's scroll
while a golden sheened violin
awaited his finishing cloth.

His secrets expired
when his time was fulfilled
but his magic sings on forever.

VII - Theodore Boehm, designer - flutist

A gifted precious metal smith
desiring a more supple flute
applied all his art and skill
to its maze of rods and keys.

Each trial was scored
by his ears and fingers
until the door was unlatched.
to euphonious efficiency.
Clarinetists then coaxed him
to fashion their keys as well.

So behind every dixie licorice stick
or Debussy's pastel faun
stands a persistent man
with a silver flute and
a jeweler's patient hands.

Robert Charles Howard

My Father's Dance

The phone rang after 2: 00 am.
Taking the steps in pairs
my legs faltered at his door -
paralyzed by denial.

Forcing myself inside,
I saw father's lifeless frame,
wired to synthetic everything -
a cold white line
still against the black.

My aching soul
railed at that liar screen,
knowing his true lifeline
danced with passion -
precision cutting with his lathe,
strumming passing chords
on his Gibson Les Paul.

That morning I knocked a ball
through a neighbor's glass
I learned what honor meant.
With dad's steady hand
on my shoulder,
I stammered apologies
and learned to glaze a window.

We'd play catch after supper.
or down franks and pop
at Briggs where the Tigers played.
Detroit is flying high this year:
God, how I wish
I could give the old man a call.

<I> September, 2006 </I>

Robert Charles Howard

Needle In The Desert

<I>Meditation on Mark 10: 17 - 31</I>

He departed in sorrow.
Where had he failed?
He could have built Jesus
a mega-church,
the pride of all Judea,
in just exchange
for a ticket to paradise.

Instead the one who would
pay the price
for all of our heavenly rooms
had counselled him most strangely,

 <I>"Give all that you have to the poor
 then you will gain what you lack."</I>

The man rose from his knees -
dignity tossed to the winds.
He'd come in hope
of acquiring more
not squandering all he had gained.

He was last seen combing Judea
in search of a miniature camel
to thread through a jumbo sized needle.

<I>January, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Night At The Philharmonic - 1877

Snowfall gently covered Belleville
With a blanket of softest down –
Iridescent in the gaslight coronas.

The coachman pulled up reins at City Park Hall,
Took the ladies white - gloved hands
And eased them down the carriage steps.
Some ladies patted the horses
In thanksgiving for the lift.

Top hatted men offered arms to their wives,
And escorted them gingerly up the snowy stairs
Into the buzzing lobby.

Trays of wine glasses circled the room -
Their cargo diminishing at every stop.
Each cluster of raconteurs spoke of celebration
For the Philharmonic turned a decade old that week.

Programs in hand, people found their seats
While the musicians on stage
Practiced random mixtures of
Excerpts that would come to order soon.

Then by the light of gas chandeliers,
Julius Liese raised his arms and brought
Haydn's symphonic London to Illinois -
A citizen orchestra led by the local lumber czar.

After the final echoes melted into applause
And coats were lifted over shoulders,
It was time to return to the waiting carriages -
The snow still swirling in the gaslight's glow.

The clapping of hooves on cobblestone
Drifted into the passengers' ears
And co-mingled with the sounds of
Strings, drums and wind blown music
Still singing in their memories

And irradiating their souls,

<I>January, 2007

Inspired by an article by Carolyn Chapman and written in celebration of the Belleville Philharmonic Orchestra's 140th consecutive season. </I>

Robert Charles Howard

Nightfall

It's that time again.

The sun pales in the west.
What is there about the dusk
That lowers our songs to
We marvel at the fire in the western sky
Yet hear a soft chant of mourning in our souls.

Who can explain that primal veil of sadness?
Could it be the passing of revealing light
Or guilt over dreams left un-chased?
Perhaps we fear Apollo's chariot
Will be lost on the other side.

The sun will greet the new day
And bathe us in all cleansing light
Chance and skill again will dance for us
And what passes will mock our expectations.
What bold psychic can unlock the codes of chaos?

When in the sun's great circling the dusk returns
To shroud our hearts with curious regrets,
We will take solace in the setting sun
The night will sort the chaos out
And give us needed synthesis.

It's that time again.

Robert Charles Howard

Nude Seated By The Window

<I>after Untitled by Ruza Bagaric,1996</I>

The nude on canvas
sits by the window looking out,
bathed by the morning sun -
with all her youthful promise
forever preserved
in the luminous interplay of
of delicate <I>chiaroscuro.</I>

But I wonder if she'll catch a chill
sitting as she is without a stitch.

 <I>Could I fetch you a blanket, dear
 or a piping cup of Earl Grey tea? </I>

And just what brings me
to her sunlit room?
Am I her groom or lover,
a devoted patron of the arts
or just a passing stranger
come to borrow Ruza's eyes.

So there she sits
with her raven tresses
collected in a tidy bun.
I wonder what she sees out there.
I doubt I'll ever know.

<I>December, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Obama Takes The Oath

On an early November day
when the last oak leaves
clung to barren branches,
Americans from Maine to L.A.
set aside their labors
to ring the freedom bell -
one ballot at a time
and decreed the time had come.

And so on a frigid January day
an eloquent man with African DNA,
placed a hand on Lincoln's bible
and vowed allegiance to us all.

Now Barack Obama's family
resides in America's home -
wrought a few scant yesterdays past
by the arms and backs
of human chattel who
though severed from their sacred liberty
held fast to their singing souls.

So with hope - filled mending hearts,
we entrust our nation's wheel
to the steady hand
of a calm and pensive man
who, in his vision, would dare
to unite the heavens with the soil -
one aspiration at a time.

<I>January 20, 2009</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Ockham's Appliance

You can find Ockham's wisdom
displayed on the web
inscribed with ones and zeros.

So like everything else
in this time jostled world
Ockham's razor has gone electric.

<I>December, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Old Boethius

Boethius wrote his tripartite definition of music in a prison cell awaiting execution.

Musica Instrumentalis.

Supple tunes with dulcet harmonies,
metaphors of time and space
soothe, enliven and assure us all
with nascent thoughts of unity.
From somewhere in its tonal
weave
a soft voice
whispers, "There is more."

Music Humana

Bound within our pliant shells
with pumps and bones and sinews joined
chants an elemental litany, "You
are one,"
and from helices of
DNA
our throats and tongues are set in
motion
raising pleas to
heaven, "Tell us more!"

Musica Mundana

The skies are clear in interstellar space
with all in motion – all in place.
The celestial choirs with essence
energy,
tuned and voiced
to gravity's cosmic chords,
resound with anthems, ocean
deep,
'We are music of

the spheres from which all others spring.”

<I>December, 2007</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Piasa

Ouataga raised his arms to the sky
in offering for his people -
prepared to be ripped from life
by the claws and teeth of the Piasa

 <I>The monstrous bird with blood red eyes
 and bearded chin soared above the bluffs
 in search of a solitary brave
 to devour for his evening meal.</I>

Throughout the cycling of the whole moon
Ouataga had fasted and prayed
for a Piasa slaying plan.
The Great Spirit had come at last in a dream
and now the trap was set.

 <I>The great monster gliding on thermals,
 drifted over the rise,
 clouding the bluff bluff with his shadow
 fixed his crimson eyes on Ouataga
 standing alone in the clearing.

 His monster wings pummeled the air
 and he began his bestial swoop of death.</I>

Obeisant to their young chief's dream,
twenty braves concealed
in a circle of bush and trees,
sent their poison shafts flying
straight to the center of the glade.

 <I>The ravenous Piasa
 baring teeth and talons,
 never saw the rain of arrows
 rupture his skin - pouring venom
 into his murderous veins.</I>

Ouataga, untouched by talon or arrow,
smiled as the Piasa writhed

and fell dead as a stone at his feet.

Grateful tribesmen embraced their chief
who painted the monster's effigy
on a bluff by the Father of Waters
where every passing brave from that time forth
shot contemptuous arrows at its loathsome face.

<I> March, 2008 </I>

Robert Charles Howard

Psychic Fur Balls

Some days
I'm just poemed out.
Blank screen between the ears.

But then -
A tickle in the throat,
A few coughs
Followed by a whole lot of hacking
And out rolls a nice psychic fur ball.

Ah, that feels better!
I guess I'll post it.

Robert Charles Howard

Requiescat In Pacem

Decked out in chiffon and lace
young Ella, named after mom,
never felt so grown,
rushing to mother's call -
eager to pilot the stroller today.

The streets to market were vacant
save for a frail widow
guiding her walker to their right -
smiling at the girl in chiffon.

Without warning, shocks
seized the old woman's frame,
spreading her like a crucifix
beside the irrelevant walker.

She battled through glazing eyes,
clinging to the images of mother, stroller
and the girl in chiffon -
their cries a distant echo.

But their images presently faded
and old dear Ella returned to original dust.

"Requiescat in pacem."

July, 2006

Robert Charles Howard

Rockwoods Trail

Just to shake things up a tad,
we chose to hike the trail
from tail to head –
stepping ever back in time
and the kind old earth obliged
by spinning east to west.

So our speech was backwards too
but Robin (or was it niboR)
seemed to take in every word
and she was clear to me.

We saw moss and streams
retreat toward future time
and climbed and wound
between the oaks and glades -
never stealing a backward glance.

Poised atop the pinnacle ridge
we gazed at the wooden bridge below
spanning the gentle creek
beside the abandoned quarry.

On a whim we opted for the shorter route
and leaped down into the valley -
our legs back-pedaling like
Olympic hurdlers in reverse
when all went strangely wrong.

Leaves cycled gold and green and grey
a hundred times or more and
by the time we reached the valley floor
the wooden bridge was gone
and we soft landed in the brush.

A four ton boulder suddenly
gathered dust and stones,
launched itself from the valley floor
and in a thunder bolt of dynamite

fastened to the bluff above.

We crept behind a cottonwood
to escape the eyes of quarrymen
unloading limestone rocks
by the ton from tramway cars.

The moon slipped between earth and sun
and time paused briefly on its edge
then slowly turned to forward mode
and whirled like a centrifuge -
a century of seasons flashing by
like a motorized kaleidoscope.

The quarry work thinned and ceased
and the rails were struck and hauled away.
Oak twigs towered to maturity
then tumbled earthward and decayed.

A Ranger crew in jeans and khaki
came to plot and carve the trail
and we edged forward toward our exodus.

We surprised a doe with fawns,
sipping from a spring.
without screening us for guns
she urged them up the slope
where they vanished
into wooded sanctuary.

The trail meandered down the bluffs
where a clearing in the trees
revealed a road that led to other roads
that soon would carry us
across the Mississippi to our home.
Home - the epicenter of our
expanding and unfathomable universe.

<I>September, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Sacred Calderas

Above the caldera at Yellowstone,
a brittle soilrock crust
caps a lake of liquid fire
with only fumaroles of acrid steam
and spewing geysers
to slake its upward thrust.

False steps by men or creatures
breach that fragile mantle
plummeting errant ones to
scalding pain or death.

Within us all calderas also roil
brewed of failures, slights and fears -
dissolved in fiery pools
of self-consuming miseries.

Counter to that molten force
we form our culture crust
of forgiveness, love and justice.

With music, art and friendship,
we plant fragrant gardens in our souls
and load our trowels with psychic mortar
to seal the calderas of our discontents.

July, 2006

Robert Charles Howard

Sam's Watch (1915)

When the arc of the hands of his watch
Reached the top of the hour
Sam pushed the throttle forward.

Engine 138 thundered
Out of Blossburg station
Like an iron dragon
Breathing smoke and steam -
Whistle shrilling over the Tioga valley.

Powered by coal
The train carried coal
To the waiting city of Elmira
Where Sam would press his mother's hand -
Perhaps for the final time.

The wheels churning iron on iron
Across Pennsylvania farmlands,
Turned like other wheels before
Moving settlers west
To break its ready earth -
Wheels beneath his grandfather's oxcart
Turning toward Lycoming's verdant hills.

New wheels now carried America
To urban landscapes
Drawing us like electro-magnets
To streetlamps - factories - dry good stores -
New crops for a modern age.

Elmira's silhouette expanded on the horizon.
And Sam pulled the train in on time -
Brakes screeching through billowing steam.

His wife, Jenny and his sister's Sam
Came in a horseless carriage
With Zoe, Marie and Edward,
Children now grown at their sides.

They all gathered by Hannah's bed
Now approaching her final hours
Soft voices and fragile smiles
Cradled the truth beyond all telling:

Time, ever advancing
Like the hands of a fine old watch,
Holds us all in its circling sway

<I>August, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

San Damiano

San Damiano hovers on the majestic bluffs
overlooking the great bend of the Ohio
bound for its rendezvous with the Mississippi.

A soft haze filters the fading sun.
Budding tree limb fingers, eager for the Equinox,
are silhouetted against the rosy dusk light.

After the sun surrenders to the night,
cosmic diamonds salt the sky with effigies
of proud Orion and the two bears.
Venus and Jupiter seem close enough to touch.

Deep in the shadows atop the tranquil bluffs,
Saint Francis himself might be tarrying -
kindly urging us to concord and empathy.

Robert Charles Howard

Senza Fine (For Connie Francis)

for Connetta Rosa Maria Franconero

Dear sister, daughter, friend,
beloved global village singer
sing to us your Siren song turned good.

'Meine Liebe, ' 'mio caro, ' 'mon coeur'
do not despair the ashes -
the Phoenix will fly again.

Moonlight and star-shine
pale before the renaissant dawn
of covenants made and kept.
So let it always be, *"Senza Fine."*

December, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Singing Valentine

for Robin

I walk serenely
with my songbird at my side
singing all the day.

February, 2008

Robert Charles Howard

Songbird

Robin hums as she tends her garden
while birds perch all around
waiting for rustling seeds
to fill the slender columns.
Humming birds hover near
to sip sweet nectar mixed for them alone.

On concert nights her voice takes flight.
and fills the hall with her radiant soul.
On quiet mornings
graphite joins with paper
and a flower's form and meaning
are captured by her vision.

A friend fallen ill or suffering loss
receives her gift of comfort words
and a card or meal soon follow.

Grandchildren rush to greet her
and happily fill her arms.
at night they cloak themselves
In love quilts made by Grandma's hands.

If you want to learn how love abides
or long to know its fullness
follow my Robin for a day
Her gift is in the gifting.

<I>July, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Soul Flight

<I>in memoriam Woodrow (Woody) Rifenburgh</I>

The soft purr of a Piper Cub
drifted over Italy's southern hills.
Soul stirred by the landscape's song,
the young army pilot gently spoke.

"It's mighty peaceful up here."

Touching wheels to the tarmac,
Woody shed his flight suit
for an engineer's desk
and placed a viola beneath his chin.

For three score years
Woody molded horsehair and wire into string song
steadying the orchestra's midriff
with the vibrations of his spirit.

On Christmas Eve he played for the coming child,
fell stricken and flew his last flight
on instruments at Memorial.

Early New Year's morn one could almost hear
the faint soft purr of a Piper Cub
as it banked to the right around the moon
and merged with the waiting heavens.

Robert Charles Howard

Steamship, Put-In-Bay

<I>for my parents with love</I>

Such a grand and festive lady
that steamer to Put-in-Bay
escaping her dock
just after dawn
leaving Detroit's factory din
moored to the Michigan shore.

Sunbeams glanced off waves
in lake Erie's tranquility
bound for Sandusky
and Put-in-Bay Island.

Clattering silver and porcelain
veiled by sweeter sounds
of congenial banter and
ballads crooned by the shipboard band.
playing late beneath the stars
for 'swing' and 'jitterbug'
reeds and horns and ritual beats
blazed the air with frenzied jubilation.

Paired in the rhythm section,
Jim drove chords from strings and pick
while Janice matched beat for beat -
fingers flying over ivory and ebony
until Detroit lights shone ashore
on the port side bow
where the Put-in-Bay would
re-tether to its Motor City pier.

How their union sealed is forever's mystery.
Was it bonded
checking chords in a Gershwin tune
or on break over scotch at the bar
or with a sideward smile during "All of Me? "
No one knows but the moment came,
as sure as rain to Lake Erie,

when Janice knew that Jim would ask
and he knew she'd answer, 'Yes.'

<I>Thanksgiving day, 2008</I>
(also Dad's birthday)

Robert Charles Howard

Stylus, Radio And Broomstick

in memoriam Les Paul

You took us for a glorious ride -
beyond the lofty moon
and back to greet the rising sun.

How did you ever fathom
that a stylus, broomstick and radio
could sweep away our blues
or that you and your Mary
could clone into twenty four?

Wherever you are I hope you meet dad
who cherished your music so.
Your name was on his guitar
and your songs were etched on his soul.

August, 2009

Robert Charles Howard

Suburban Sunrise

A trail wends its way
Between the corn
and Metrolink rails
where songbird choirs
serenade our morning stroll.

The rising sun spreads
shafts of light
through prismatic clouds -
bathing the sky with
pink and lavender strata.

Beside the tracks
a cardboard sign
foretells the coming
of a new apartment hive:
"You could be home already"

Soon hammer strokes
will echo in the valley
like woodpeckers
feasting on bugs
in a sycamore snag -
and cornfields will morph
Into fescue moats
ringing identical rows
of vinyl-clad palaces.

Hovering over new tacked roofs,
the intrepid sun will
still cast halos
on our morning hikes -
while songbirds serenade
from wires and chimneys
beneath the pastel sky.

(October, 2007)

Sudoku Passion

<I>dedicated to the digit nine</I>

Sets of nine with missing parts -

 try and err and try once more.

 Ah, yet another piece falls in,

Rule some out and others in -

 a line fills up and then a box or two -

 jot some figures on the edge.

Time to turn the heavy logic on

 and QED another corner bites the dust

 just a few more slackards on the
loose.

Whoa, can that be victory I smell?

 Yes! and there it is - a perfect square-

 without a single quark of meaning.

 Eureka!

Yes! Eureka!

<I>June, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Summer Day On The Current River

<I>for Robin on our 22nd anniversary</I>

The placid Current River ever growing
 brightly shimmers in the mid-day sun,
its azure waters cool and southward flowing.

Buried caverns through the limestone bring
 fresh fountains pouring cold ablution
into the placid Current ever growing.

Around the bend another rushing spring
 bursts forth to lend aquatic motion
to the crystal water's southward flowing.

Cheerful floaters revel, tanned and smiling,
 celebrating pleasant summer fun
upon the tranquil waters ever growing.

Gentle breezes set the leaves to rustling
 while time stands still for everyone
along the peaceful river calmly flowing.

Shaded skies foretell the day's conclusion
 and a stellar fantasy has now begun
to dance above the moonlit river glowing:
 its azure waters cool and southward flowing.

<I>June 26, 2009</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Sunday Drive

The southern Missouri hills
roll along the interstate
where the Mastodon and Clovis used to roam.
Former green is current orange
but green will reign tomorrow.

The wheels on my ivory Stratus
spin like the hands
of a fossil fueled watch keeping time
over all that is or ever was -
shining and waning
through tinted windows
between the dawn and setting sun.

<I>January, 2009</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Terror In Her Eyes

Strolling up the Knife River trail
a dusty cloud swirled and fell
revealing earth lodges by the score
extending down to the shore.

Hidatsa women sang as they toiled,
shucking corn -
beading moccasins,
cleaning a buffalo hide.

Returning hunters
released their ropes
dropping two deer and an elk
to the earth by the hanging rack.

Triumphal shouts from down the bank
turned all heads to the shore
where a warrior band,
fresh from Shoshone fields,
tied up canoes and dragged
their captives up the rise.

A curious crowd circled at once
A quartet of squaws caught
and carried off two of the boys.

A Shoshone girl with terror struck eyes
cringed as a warrior raised his arm.
'No, tell me your Hidatsa name! '
Sobbing she succumbed through broken tears,
'My name is Sacagawea.'

I struggled to breach the walls of time
to meet death in her defense
but a new whirling cloud intervened.

As the dust fell away
all the lodges had vanished.
I knelt down to gently caress

a circular hollow
etched in the Dakota grass.

<I>August 6, 2010</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Thank You, Bones

Thank you, bones for all you allow,
ambling on as I am wont to do
toward duty, doom or affirmation -
jumping for joy or folding a caress.

Why, without you I'd be grounded -
unable to dance the steps
or whirl to the tunes of the spherical muses.

You never raise a fuss -
All snug and quiet inside -
obeying orders to advance or fade.
(but my, what a rattle you'd all make
If it weren't for all that juice and sinew!)

And thanks to you for subtle things
like marrowing out blood cells 24 - 7,
bending a cage for my heart
or forming a helmet for my brain.

Thanks to all 206 of you swell guys -
never angling for praise or acclaim.
I'd get you each a card.
but lack a place to send it.

Thanks bones!

<I>May, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

The Finest Dance

For Betty and Clarrie

Betty was in paradise -
a soft smile on her angel face
eyes closed - gently swaying
with every note and word,

"It's very clear, our love is here to stay, "

but why had she come today of all days
without her man to share the dance?

Then the usher parted the ballroom doors
and a humble and cheerful man slipped inside
barely noticing the familiar lyric,

"Not for a year, but ever and a day..."

Clarrie searched the room and found her
as he knew he would
then crossed to offer his hand
in invitation to the dance.
His bride rose in acceptance
and they glided across the floor
while saxes crooned over bass and brushes –
her head resting gently on his shoulder
where it will always remain.

*"The Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble,
 they're only made of clay..."*

The usher lingered for a moment
to celebrate the beauty of their song
then slipped away in a cloud
to return to his station
at the gateway to forever.

June, 2008

The Fly On Einstein's Wall

If I could be a fly on Einstein's wall
I'd buzz about from chair to curtain.
Watching him check out plans and gadgets
And scratch remarks on his papers
When the clock edged to noon his stomach would growl.
He'd stretch and fold up the prints and say,
"It's a relatively short walk to the café."

With Albert out I'd take the run of the place -
Practicing banks and dips and vertical lifts.
I'd munch on scraps of Brie and fowl
Left fused to the edge of his table.

When the key turned the tumblers
I'd buzz back to the wall and wait to learn
Whatever the young sage might chance to say.
He'd return to his desk to file his reports
And stack them neatly into a tray.

Without warning he'd rise straight out of his chair
Scattering papers across the floor.

"MASS AND ENERGY ARE ONE, " he'd shout, -
"CRUSHED TOGETHER BY TIME! "

I'd buzz and swoop and fly circles and loops
And taxi in on his collar.
I'd beat my wings to cool his brain.
But wait...Whose voice do I hear?
Oh, it's you gentle reader.

"Stop, hold it right there, damned pest!
It couldn't have happened that way!
Have you no shame or respect for God's truth? "

But I'd stare you down with my compound eye
And scornfully twitch my wings.
Consider this, troubled sir,
You're the one scolding a talking fly.

Robert Charles Howard

The Master Weaver

She wove a silken tapestry
in the calm still of a moonlit night
spinnerets spewing slender strands -
light as air but strong as Kevlar.

A silvery armature spanned the trail
clinging to trunks and branches.
Rappelling down from its pinnacle
she set spokes on her deadly wheel.

Spiraling in from the outermost ring
she knitted her way to its center
to await the tell-tale shudder
of a fly or moth flown into her snare.

She took no note of the hiker
standing alone on the trail -
transfixed by the dew laden spiral
shimmering in the rose-glow sun.

It mattered not to the spider
that a man would find her work pleasing
and it mattered not to the man
that the web was not woven for art.

August, 2006

Robert Charles Howard

The Mongoose

Of all the creatures on the loose
there's none to match the odd mongoose
with pointed snout and chops a lickin'
for a tasty meal of snake or chicken.

Oh, there's some who think him just a meercat
who'd snatch your omelette just like that
but when he's feeling really blue
he'll munch on a critic (maybe two) .

<I>February, 2009</I>

Robert Charles Howard

The Ph Factor

Is this poem safe to drink?
Unsure - need to run some tests:
Got to get the PH straightened out
Or perhaps an imaging scan is required.

Pour in a syllable of acid
Or take away two.
Hmm - better take another sample.
Oops, way too base!

A new title, perhaps? Say:
"Acidic and Alkaline Balance
On the See Saw of Life"
Yuck!

Hold on, don't go away,
I'll get right back to you!

Robert Charles Howard

The Yellow Scooter

Every child of nine knows
the universe is a jagged shape
edged by home and park
and school and market -
at least that's the way I knew it

and all the world's kids
went to Kinney school
and everyone's dad
worked at Lincoln Park Tool
while mother stayed at home.

So my world shook that evening
as I speared my peas
when father broke news
that we soon would move
to a distant galaxy
at least a dozen miles away -
entirely peopled by aliens.

Well it wasn't so bad after all -
my brother and little sister
were allowed to come with us
and we kept the same grandparents too.
New friends popped up everywhere
like rainbows of tulips in May.

The house was all fresh and new
but it had no lawn as yet,
so a rusty old dump truck rumbled up
and left us a mountain of soil.

Needing no invitation,
I grabbed a shovel and used it
moving and spreading
and didn't stop 'til dinner
then went back and shoveled 'til dark.

The pile was nearly flat

by afternoon next
when Dad came home
in his brand new fifty-three Ford
and steered it right up the driveway -
hitting the horn to call me over,
"Son I need your help."

Dropping my shovel
I sped to the open trunk
and stared in shocked disbelief.
In a squeal of ecstasy
known only to nine year old boys
I circled Dad's waist with my arms,
then gratefully unloaded
the best yellow scooter
of any boy's wildest imagining.

<I>September, 2008</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Transcendental Etude

Our footsteps echo through ancient halls,
 where here is
everywhere
 and every time is now.

Caesar's twin-edged conquests are our own
 as is Brutus's fickle
knife
 and Marc Anthony's cunning speech.

Plague steals across our Europe
 like a remorseless
highwayman -
 roses all ringed and falling down.

We wait in Wien's Kärntnertor theater
 for Schiller's
<I>An die Freude</I>
 to shine anew in Beethoven's score

and are ushered in at Menlo Park
 where Edison's
tungsten faintly glows.
 Tomorrow will bring sun to the night.

There's Jonas Salk at his microscope.
 One more test will
crack the code
 to banish the scourge of polio.

But nature's caprice strews logs on our roads.
 We are dashed by
a Tsunami's rage.
 Katrina's torrents have swallowed our homes.
□
Prides of warriors wade rivers of blood □
 and Darfur bullets
tear into our chests.
 <I>Nuclear Toys 'R Us</I> shelves are full.

We are the heirs of triumph and infamy.

 We hold the keys
to tomorrow.

 What have we done? What must we do?

<I> December, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

opulent villas with their spacious
 atria, we now
enter the market area where we
 shall see a display
of remarkable interest. During
 excavations, empty
spaces were discovered in
 the ash deposits.”

<I>The rising ash captured his left leg.
Benito inhaled the fiery air and thrust
Forward into a burst of falling soot.
But was unable to finish his stride.</I>

 “Archaeologists
poured plaster into the voids
 revealing the
outlined bodies of Pompeiins trapped
 in their final
moments. Take for example this man
 caught in mid-step
with no time to escape the life
 choking dust.”

<I>June, 2006</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Welcome To My Casino!

*'Give me your tired your poor
but not the bill.'*

Welcome to my Casino!

Step right up folks
and give that wheel a spin.
Aw, too bad, pilgrim! You lose:

your job
your home
your savings
the kids' college
your hope.

The wife is sick, you say?
Aw, that's so sad
but you know she can't play here,
House rule, number one:
No Sick Folks Allowed!

Now excuse me just a sec
while I turn my sign around.

This Casino Closed - to you.

March, 2010

Robert Charles Howard

Winter Solstice

In this frigid solstice season

frozen crystal refractors
sift down silently from above -
white to catch the fading rays
clear to seal and glaze the earth.

In this bitter solstice season

the solemn reaper roams abroad
to complete his brutal harvest -
guiding a hawk to an easy meal
silhouetted against a field of white.
or icing the path of an aging man
whose splintered bones will not rise
to greet the coming equinox.

In every frozen solstice season -

we gather as we must
huddled in fire-lit caves,
reveling at Saturnalia,
caroling out Christmas joy
or lighting Hanukkah lamps -
seizing hope for a barren world

in this festive solstice season.

<I>December 26, 2010</I>

Robert Charles Howard

Word Music

Poetic glyphs scratched on a page.
external and internal rhymes
and rhythms conjoined
like illuminated Gregorian pages -
stories intoned in syntax -
cradled in the world of sound.

A pianist's fingers sculpt
a solitary chord to banish the silence -
sound metaphors bloom like flora -
melodic alchemy brewing
a rich harmonic broth
where heart and hands
nourish and delight the palettes
of our several souls.

A singer inhales and
emits threads of spun gold
loomed into a magic carpet bound
for a sonic garden of Eden
where the music of words
unites with the grammar of sound.

Poetry and music:
enchanted spirit realms
that read as strange as they sound
and sound as strange as they are.

Robert Charles Howard

You Don'T Know Jack!

Call it spooky, call it grim -
I call it an act of calculated evil.

Cold hard steel carving
squares and triangles in my torso.

My eviscerated guts tossed in a boiling pot -
A candle shoved in my vacant belly.

O, how I rue the day I left
my peaceful patch beside the corn
to meet my savage and ignoble end
this frosty Halloween night.

Robert Charles Howard