

ALSO BY ROBERT HASS

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Human Wishes

Sun Under Wood

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TIME AND  
MATERIALS

POEMS

1997–2005

ROBERT HASS

CCCO

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## THE PROBLEM OF DESCRIBING TREES

The aspen glitters in the wind  
And that delights us.

The leaf flutters, turning,  
Because that motion in the heat of August  
Protects its cells from drying out. Likewise the leaf  
Of the cottonwood.

The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem  
And the tree danced. No.  
The tree capitalized.  
No. There are limits to saying,  
In language, what the tree did.

It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.

*Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.*

Mountains, sky,  
The aspen doing something in the wind.

## WINGED AND ACID DARK

A sentence with "dappled shadow" in it.  
Something not sayable  
spurting from the morning silence,  
secret as a thrush.

The other man, the officer, who brought onions  
and wine and sacks of flour,  
the major with the swollen knee,  
wanted intelligent conversation afterward.  
Having no choice, she provided that, too.

Potsdamerplatz, May 1945.

When the first one was through he pried her mouth open.  
Bashō told Rensetsu to avoid sensational materials.  
If the horror of the world were the truth of the world,  
he said, there would be no one to say it  
and no one to say it to.  
I think he recommended describing the slightly frenzied  
swarming of insects near a waterfall.

Pried her mouth open and spit in it.  
We pass these things on,  
probably, because we are what we can imagine.

Something not sayable in the morning silence.  
The mind hungering after likenesses. "Tender sky," etc.,  
curves the swallows trace in air.

And a rival mob—I know the grandson of the cigarette girl,  
Who became a screenwriter and was blackballed later  
Because she raised money for the Spanish Civil War.  
Or at least that's the story as I remember it, so that,  
When the gangster is clutching his wounded gut  
And delivering a last soundless quip and his scarf  
Is still looking like the linen in Heaven, I realize  
That it is for them a working day and that the dead  
Will rise uncorrupted and change into flannel slacks,  
Hawaiian shirts; the women will put on summer smocks  
Made from the material superior dish towels are made of  
Now, and they'll all drive up to Malibu for drinks.  
All the dead actors were pretty in their day. Why  
Am I watching this movie? you may ask. Well, my beloved,  
Down the hall, is probably laboring over a poem  
And is not to be disturbed. And look! I have rediscovered  
The sweetness and the immortality of art. The actress  
Wrote under a pseudonym, died, I think, of cancer of the lungs.  
So many of them did. Far better for me to be doing this  
(A last lurid patch of fog out of which the phrase "The End"  
Comes swimming; the music I can't hear surging now  
Like fate) than reading with actual attention my field guides  
Which inform me that the flower of the incense cedar  
I saw this morning by the creek is "unisexual, solitary, and terminal."

## EZRA POUND'S PROPOSITION

Beauty is sexual, and sexuality  
Is the fertility of the earth and the fertility  
Of the earth is economics. Though he is no recommendation  
For poets on the subject of finance,  
I thought of him in the thick heat  
Of the Bangkok night. Not more than fourteen, she saunters up to  
you  
Outside the Shangri-la Hotel  
And says, in plausible English,  
"How about a party, big guy?"

Here is more or less how it works:  
The World Bank arranges the credit and the dam  
Floods three hundred villages, and the villagers find their way  
To the city where their daughters melt into the teeming streets,  
And the dam's great turbines, beautifully tooled  
In Lund or Dresden or Detroit, financed  
By Lazard Frères in Paris or the Morgan Bank in New York,  
Enabled by judicious gifts from Bechtel of San Francisco  
Or Halliburton of Houston to the local political elite,  
Spun by the force of rushing water,  
Have become hives of shimmering silver  
And, down river, they throw that bluish throb of light  
Across her cheekbones and her lovely skin.

You can still hear them as the dark comes on:  
Undevelopedness's music, the tentative sounds  
The orchestra makes before the piece begins.

But still on his ancient ocean Vainomoinen  
Drifted, shaken in the sea's enormous pincers  
Or sprawled in the calm's still mirror where the birds

Are magnified. And from a waste seed, very far  
From land, at the sea's end, from the heave of waves,  
From banks of shrouded sea fogs, it shot up:

An enormous tree with scaly bark and leaves  
Utterly transparent, crystalline, and behind them  
The billowing sails of distant suns glided

Forward in a trance. And an eagle lifts into the air.

## STATE OF THE PLANET

*On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory*

I.

October on the planet at the century's end.  
Rain lashing the windshield. Through blurred glass  
Gusts of a Pacific storm rocking a huge, shank-needed  
Himalayan cedar. Under it a Japanese plum  
Throws off a vertical cascade of leaves the color  
Of skinned copper, if copper could be skinned.  
And under it, her gait as elegant and supple  
As the young of any of earth's species, a schoolgirl  
Negotiates a crosswalk in the wind, her hair flying,  
The red satchel on her quite straight back darkening  
Spotch by smoky crimson spotch as the rain pelts it.  
One of the six billion of her hungry and curious kind.  
Inside the backpack, dog-eared, full of illustrations,  
A book with a title like *Getting to Know Your Planet*.

The book will tell her that the earth this month  
Has yawed a little distance from the sun,  
And that the air, cooling, has begun to move,  
As sensitive to temperature as skin is  
To a lover's touch. It will also tell her that the air—  
It's likely to say "the troposphere"—has trapped  
Emissions from millions of cars, idling like mine  
As she crosses, and is making a greenhouse  
Of the atmosphere. The book will say that climate  
Is complicated, that we may be doing this,  
And if we are, it may explain that this  
Was something we've done quite accidentally,  
Which she can understand, not having meant  
That morning to have spilled the milk. She's  
One of those who's only hungry metaphorically.

2.

Poetry should be able to comprehend the earth,  
To set aside from time to time its natural idioms  
Of ardor and revulsion, and say, in a style as sober  
As the Latin of Lucretius, who reported to Venus  
On the state of things two thousand years ago—  
"It's your doing that under the wheeling constellations  
Of the sky," he wrote, "all nature teems with life—"  
Something of the earth beyond our human dramas.

Topsoil: going fast. Rivers: dammed and fouled.  
Cod: about fished out. Haddock: about fished out.  
Pacific salmon nosing against dams from Yokohama  
To Kamchatka to Seattle and Portland, flailing  
Up fish ladders, against turbines, in a rage to breed  
Much older than human beings and interdicted  
By the clever means that humans have devised  
To grow more corn and commandeer more lights.  
Most of the ancient groves are gone, sacred to Kuan Yin  
And Artemis, sacred to the gods and goddesses  
In every picture book the child is apt to read.

3.

Lucretius, we have grown so clever that mechanics  
In our art of natural philosophy can take the property  
Of luminescence from a jellyfish and put it in mice.  
In the dark the creatures give off greenish light.  
Their bodies must be very strange to them.  
An artist in Chicago—think of a great trading city  
In Dacia or Thracia—has asked to learn the method  
So he can sell people dogs that glow in the dark.

4.

The book will try to give the child the wonder  
Of how, in our time, we understand life came to be:  
Stuff flung off from the sun, the molten core  
Still pouring sometimes rivers of black basalt  
Across the earth from the old fountains of its origin.  
A hundred million years of clouds, sulfurous rain.  
The long cooling. There is no silence in the world  
Like the silence of rock from before life was.  
You come across it in a Mexican desert,

A palo verde tree nearby, moss-green. Some  
Insect-eating bird with wing feathers the color  
Of a morning sky perched on a limb of the tree.  
That blue, that green, the completely fierce  
Alertness of the bird that can't know the amazement  
Of its being there, a human mind that somewhat does,  
Regarding a black outcrop of rock in the desert  
Near a sea, charcoal-black and dense, wave-worn,  
And all one thing: there's no life in it at all.

It must be a gift of evolution that humans  
Can't sustain wonder. We'd never have gotten up  
From our knees if we could. But soon enough  
We'd have fashioned sexy little earrings from the feathers,  
Highlighted our cheekbones by rubbings from the rock,  
And made a spear from the sinewy wood of the tree.

5.

If she lived in Michigan or the Ukraine,  
She'd find, washed up on the beach in a storm like this  
Limestone fossils of Devonian coral. She could study  
The faint white markings: she might have to lick the stone  
To see them if the wind was drying the pale surface  
Even as she held it, to bring back the picture of what life  
Looked like forty millions years ago: a honeycomb with mouths.

6.

Cells that divided and reproduced. From where? Why?  
(In our century it was the fashion in philosophy  
Not to ask unanswerable questions. That was left  
To priests and poets, an attitude you'd probably  
Approve.) Then a bacterium grew green pigment.  
This was the essential miracle. It somehow unmated  
Carbon dioxide to eat the carbon and turn it  
Into sugar and spit out, hiss out the molecules  
Of oxygen the child on her way to school  
Is breathing, and so bred life. Something then  
Of DNA, the curled musical ladder of sugars, acids.  
From there to eyes, ears, wings, hands, tongues.  
Armadillos, piano tuners, gnats, sonnets,  
Military interrogation, the coho salmon, the Margaret Truman rose.

7.

The people who live in Tena, on the Napo River,  
Say that the black, viscid stuff the pools in the selva  
Is the blood of the rainbow boa curled in the earth's core.

The great trees in that forest house ten thousands of kinds  
Of beetle, reptiles no human eyes has ever seen changing  
Color on the hot, green, hardly changing leaves  
Whenever a faint breeze stirs them. In the understory  
Bromeliads and orchids whose flecked petals and womb-  
Or mouth-like flowers are the shapes of desire  
In human dreams. And butterflies, larger than her palm  
Held up to catch a ball or ward off fear. Along the river  
Wide-leaved banyans where flocks of raucous parrots,  
Fruit-eaters and seed-eaters, rise in startled flares  
Of red and yellow and bright green. It will seem to be poetry  
Forgetting its promise of sobriety to say the rosy shinings  
In the thick brown current are small dolphins rising  
To the surface where goutts of the oil that burns inside  
The engine of the car I'm driving oozes from the banks.

8.

The book will tell her that the gleaming appliance  
That kept her milk cold in the night required  
Chlorofluorocarbons—Lucretius, your master  
Epictetus was right about atoms in a general way.  
It turns out they are electricity having sex  
In an infinite variety of permutations, Plato's  
Yearning halves of a severed being multiplied  
In all the ways that all the shapes on earth  
Are multiple, complex; the philosopher  
Who said that the world was fire was also right—  
Chlorofluorocarbons react with ozone, the gas  
That makes air tingle on a sparkling day.  
Nor were you wrong to describe them as assemblies,  
As if evolution were a town meeting or a plebiscite.  
(Your theory of wind, and of gases, was also right

And there are more of them than you supposed.)  
Ozone, high in the air, makes a kind of filter  
Keeping out parts of sunlight damaging to skin.  
The device we use to keep our food as cool  
As if it sat in snow required this substance,  
And it reacts with ozone. Where oxygen breeds it  
From ultra-violet light, it burns a hole in the air.

9.

They drained the marshes around Rome. Your people,  
You know, were the ones who taught the world to love  
Vast fields of grain, the power and the order of the green,  
Then golden rows of it, spooled out almost endlessly.  
Your poets, those in the generation after you,  
Were the ones who praised the packed seed heads  
And the vineyards and the olive groves and called them  
"Smiling" fields. In the years since, we've gotten  
Even better at relentless simplification, but it's taken  
Until our time for it to crowd out, savagely, the rest  
Of life. No use to rail against our curiosity and greed.  
They keep us awake. And are, for all their fury  
And their urgency, compatible with intelligent restraint.  
In the old paintings of the Italian renaissance,  
—In the fresco painters who came after you  
(It was the time in which your poems were rediscovered—  
There was a period when you, and Venus, were lost;  
How could she be lost? you may well ask). Anyway  
In those years the painters made of our desire  
An allegory and a dance in the figure of three graces.  
The first, the woman coming toward you, is the appetite  
For life; the one who seems to turn away is chaste restraint,

And the one whom you've just glimpsed, her back to you,  
Is beauty. The dance resembles wheeling constellations.  
They made of it a figure for something elegant or lovely  
Forethought gives our species. One would like to think  
It makes a dance; that the black-and-white flash  
Of a flock of buntings in October wind, headed south  
Toward winter habitat, would find that the December fields  
Their kind has known and mated in for thirty centuries  
Or more, were still intact, that they will not go  
The way of the long-billed arctic curlews who flew  
From Newfoundland to Patagonia in every weather  
And are gone now from the kinds on earth. The last of them  
Seen by any human alit in a Texas marsh in 1964.

10.

What is to be done with our species? Because  
We know we're going to die, to be submitted  
To that tingling dance of atoms once again,  
It's easy for us to feel that our lives are a dream—  
As this is, in a way, a dream: the flailing rain,  
The birds, the soaked red backpack of the child,  
Her tendrils of wet hair, the windshield wipers,  
This voice trying to speak across the centuries  
Between us, even the long story of the earth,  
Boreal forests, mangrove swamps, Tiberian wheatfields  
In the summer heat on hillsides south of Rome—all of it  
A dream, and we alive somewhere, somehow outside it,  
Watching. People have been arguing for centuries  
About whether or not you thought of Venus as a metaphor.  
Because of the rational man they take you for.  
Also about why your poem ended with a plague,

The bodies heaped in the temple of the gods.  
To disappear. First one, then a few, then hundreds,  
Just stopping over here, to vanish in the marsh at dusk.  
So easy, in imagination, to tell the story backward,  
Because the earth needs a dream of restoration—  
She dances and the birds just keep arriving,  
Thousands of them, immense arctic flocks, her teeming life.

## POEM WITH A CUCUMBER IN IT

Sometimes from this hillside just after sunset  
The rim of the sky takes on a tinge  
Of the palest green, like the flesh of a cucumber  
When you peel it carefully.

\*

In Crete once, in the summer,  
When it was still hot at midnight,  
We sat in a taverna by the water  
Watching the squid boats rocking in the moonlight,  
Drinking retsina and eating salads  
Of cool, chopped cucumber and yogurt and a little dill.

\*

A hint of salt, something like starch, something  
Like an attar of grasses or green leaves  
On the tongue is the tongue  
And the cucumber  
Evolving toward each other.

\*

Since *cumbersome* is a word,  
*Cumber* must have been a word,  
Lost to us now, and even then,  
For a person feeling encumbered,  
It must have felt orderly and right-minded  
To stand at a sink and slice a cucumber.