

Poems by Eric Hoffman

These poems derive from a longer work, *The Transparent Eye*, which comprises two sections, *Emerson In Europe* and *Emerson In America* (these poems are from the former). These works are a poetic exploration of Emerson's life and philosophy during this period, and utilize as a foundation passages from Emerson's journals from 1833 and 1834.

24 November 1832.

Died my sister Margaret Tucker.

Farewell, dear girl.

We anchor upon a few.

Teach me to make trifles,

Trifles & work with consistency –

Pass on, pure Soul!

To the opening of heaven.

When we read we acquire
A crystallization of ourselves,
These books of science,
How the mind can achieve communion.

It is only the body, the blood –
A sentiment translated into symbol,
A symbol transmuted into sentiment.

Is this a new life? Or a new failure?

A prophet warms
Candles of ignorance.
Amongst his books
The dim light
Renders them illegible.

Dr. Johnson rightly defends
Conversation upon the weather.
With more reason we at sea
Beat that topic thin.
We are pensioners of the wind.

The weathercock is the wisest man.
If the wind should forget to blow,
We must eat our masts.
Now we all await a smoother sea
To stand at our toilette,

Pleased that there is a time
For all things under the moon,
So that no man need give
A dinner party in a brig's cabin
Nor shave himself by gulf lightening.

I am without skill
As much at sea as on land.
My ignorance astonishes me.

How little I comprehend this world,
Which seems to me a millstone.

Like this ship, I hope & drift,
Yet this ship will, God willing,
Reach shore, whereas
I am a shipwreck continually sinking,
Only to rise to the surface
& sink once again.

I know so little of history
Or of metaphysics
& must profess myself
The poorest of philosophers.

I am pale from all my idle hours
Spent staring at a book
From which it is impossible to learn –
Imagine if this captain had only
A text to tell him of the sea,
We'd never reach our destination.

The only benefit of my ignorance
Is the affection it affords me
Of the wise, who revel in displaying
Superior knowledge.

Another day as beautiful as ever
Shines on the monotonous sea,
& all the minstrelsy of nature rings,

A capricious shell, sometimes mute as wood,
A marine archetype
That murmurs only when there is already noise.

The water is warm to the hands,
& far below you see motes of light by day
& streams of fire by night.

The day is sad

The night is careful

The heart is leaded down

That exact justice is done

That the soul is immortal

That the best is true

That the mind discerns all

& seeks itself in all things

Well, blithe traveler, what cheer?
What have the sea & stars
& mounting winds
& discontented thoughts sung
In your attentive ears?

The slumbering old giant
Cannot bestir himself
To loom up for the past time
Of his upstart grandchildren
As they come now,

Shoal after shoal,
To salute their old progenitor,
The old Adam of all.
Sleep on, old sire,
There is muscle & nerve

& enterprise in us now,
Your poor spawn
Who have sucked the air
& ripened in the sunshine
Of the cold west,

To steer our ships
To your very ports & thrust
Our inquisitive American eyes
Into your towns & towers.
So be good now, old gentleman.

England, this Gibraltar of propriety,
A paradise of comfort and plenty,

Is, like Spencer's Bower of Bliss,
A false paradise, where art conquers nature,

Where an ash-colored sky
Confounds night and day,

And smoke and soot
Make all times and seasons one hue,

Discolors saliva, poisons the air,
Corrodes the monuments and buildings.

A terrible machine has possessed
These women and men

And hardly even thought is free.
All is false and forged –

A cold, barren, almost arctic isle
Made luxurious through artifice.

To the English, a gesture upsets,
As it is almost secret, a surprise,

A newness, a kind of traveler.
They wear faded wardrobes of the past,

They masquerade new lands
On marble floors, where nothing grows.

Man's elasticity and hope
Must remain on the Allegheny ranges

Or nowhere at all.
In America, nature lies sleeping,

Almost conscious, and so gives
A certain tristesse,

Like the swamp's rank vegetation,
Or forests steeped in dew and rain.

In the sea-wide sky-skirted prairie,
It lies, driven away

From the trim hedge-rows
Of this over-cultivated island

Where everyone is on good behavior
And must be dressed for dinner by six.