COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE BODY, AND ITS REPLY

I'm not old, but I know

a new joint will shift

into hurting gear every

winter — shoulder, knee, ankle —

will it be hip's turn next?

And when the acute pain

is done, traces, twinges return —

my body's private showing

of this feelie tape, newsreel

of my past and future

crimes against it.

I hate my body when it

fails me. I think

"This year I will run three

miles up Snyder Hill Rd. again"

and then a cartilage is torn

ignominiously, raking leaves,

a false mole hole step.

And every footfall thereafter

a pain-focus. Of course

I run on it, addict, and it

gets worse. "This year

I will ride again. Maybe

work up to polo." Under my

mind's touch the mare's flank

ripples with chestnut power,

but all I can do is to drink

in the stable smell.

I know I mistreat it.

I tear off toe nails when

I'm nervous, stopping

only at blood. Then I'm

impatient with their healing.

And don't stand me next

to the paté and shrimp

at receptions, because

I don't have your willpower

to move. I root there like

any pig. I eat and drink

in binges, sentenced to

measure out my fun by

the aftertaste of Rolaids

and the level of the antacid

bottle.

I am angry with my body.

Trivial pains, you say,

but I'm sure age has

more failures of marrow,

sphincter, artery to loose

than you or I wish,

clinically, to imagine.

So what does the defendant say to all that?

Bodies are bodies, an endless rhythm

of biochemical cycles nudged into

perfection, binding effortlessly

the vital component of the air

with the feed, the water, churning

them, chopping a bond here, never

too many, until the molecular

puzzle pieces are sufficiently

small, right to be built up by

noninfernal machinery, assembled

into the microscopic servants and

messengers of the organism — enzymes,

hormones, the stuff of genes, the machine

itself. Proteins — transparent as

in the marvelous eye lens, or red

as hemoglobin. In colors, shapes,

degrees of softness and hardness,

their small actions multiply

to extend the muscle, to give

the heart valve the motive

power to open as it must,

and, eventually, in coordination

to walk, stumble, and to recover

from that stumbling; to think,

ever so simply, to remember

poems and equations and Emil

Nolde's landscapes, the traces of love

and God, even to forget the body

that is around and with this brain...

So the body says: gurgle, thump-thump.

And when I think I am angry

with my body I mean: my mind

is angry with itself. Which

will not do. Only outsiders

can be blamed. We choose,

unfailingly, those

whom we love most.