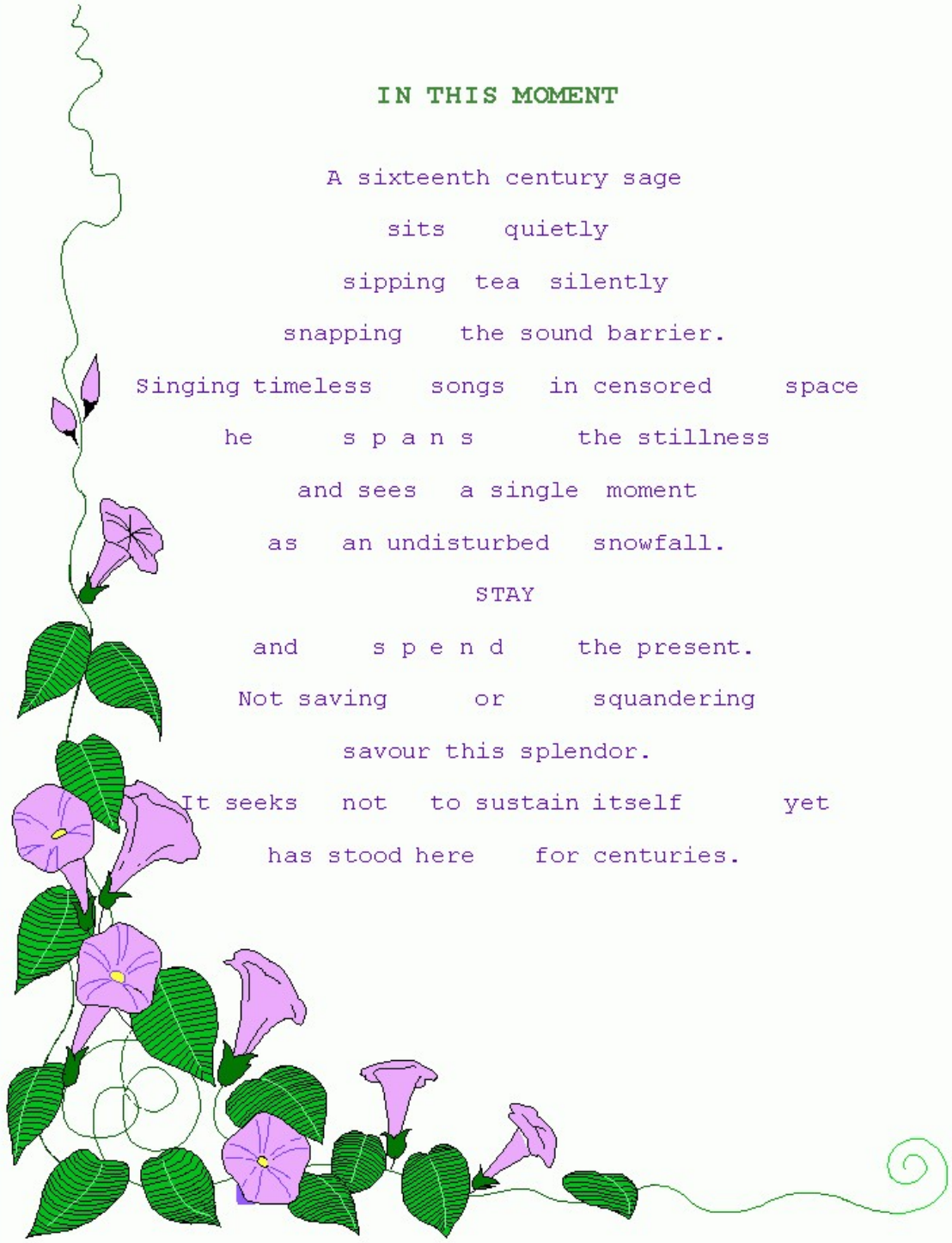
Perched on a Willow Branch

A Fleeting Glimpse of
A Single Moment in Flight

Poetic images ~~by~~ Through

G. Bruce Ketcham



IN THIS MOMENT

A sixteenth century sage

sits quietly

sipping tea silently

snapping the sound barrier.

Singing timeless songs in censored space

he s p a n s the stillness

and sees a single moment

as an undisturbed snowfall.

STAY

and s p e n d the present.

Not saving or squandering

savour this splendor.

It seeks not to sustain itself yet

has stood here for centuries.

A Haiku Cluster

The waterbeetle
Lighter than a baby's breath
Effortlessly dry.

Veins in a green leaf
Thrusting into infinite blue
Rooted in the earth.

All but one leaf gone
Tethered to a stubborn vine
Without regret, falls.

Holes where his heels show
Bone limbs fidget bare pockets
Near crowded cafe.

Stone orb swallowed whole
In the belly of the lake
Becomes a mountain.

Mist resting breathless
Needles spray a quiet slope
Touched, release a tear.

Geese in distant song
Lulled the dreaming fields to sleep
Light and night bear twins.

Rigel westward falls
Green shoots sprouting Deneb's Cross
Tame the Wolf with light.

The Genesis Of One

Does the Echo know its master's voice?
the snowflake know the womb?

As one and same
primordial whole, from it,
till it, the tomb reclaims
When parts pried loose
that fight and feign
exist in many names

Rescind the severed State
of Thee
to BE

All one and
wonder why the walls

decree

ought but
the whole of Thee in me

In one fine figure
full and framed by

NOTHING
be it, too, the same

Where "other" makes its
lover's leap
or laughs the lurid
lie

to sleep

Ontological Singularity

In the beginning "IS" was, and ever
shall be.

Thus, in the beginning, "IS."

"IS" gave birth to a restless child, "thought,"
and called it "I"

"I" gave birth to "other," leaving "IS" alone
to play.

And they multiplied ad infinitum, forgetting "IS"
to the present day.

We all remember Adam; and all remember Eve.

But who remembers whence it came . . . . . ?

"IS," ever before "I" was breeding "other's"
endless seeds.

Closer than the jugular
As present as the breath
Sooner than this fleeting thought
Whose traces linger yet.

As "IS," "I" as the "other."

THE HUNT OR THE WAR FRONT?

The trees are bare, an
early morning barren quiet,
but for occasional gunfire.
They're ferreting the fields with fixed gaze
  flaming for a fight.

Passion in pursuit of fresh paw prints
  leading to the lair; they'll
denigrate the den.

Rain gear, boots and comforts
  past cold tree bark
  forged by dedication . . .
  free from definitions
Fleece the dank forest.

I think they're volunteers . . . now;
  menacing mercenaries, drafted at an early age
  by the shadow of their father's flexed features, but
  serious as soldiers, hoping
  they'll make it out alive.
Mud-caked goose-steps backtrack
  with haunting patience
  as fight and flight fill the cold, damp dark
  with army spite.

Brawn and Grace . . . face to face
  where no friend ends the chase

ANIMA: Stillness like a sage's light
  suspended in the rifle's sight
  conquered by a blind-side snipe
  that squelched Her spineless, fearful
flight
  and splattered red on snowy white.

ANIMA: Strapped down tight in
  frozen fright
  on Her rolling steel tomb of diesel
might
  to tame the tempest autumn rite
  for one more night.

LATENT LIFE FORMS

The table's wobble and
broken chair backs
baffle the senses.

The faucet leaks.

A batch of donuts,
just dropped off,
in the owner's wake, lie
patiently on their sheets.

Stool tops stand ready for
a single front door greeting.

Frycakes harden if they wait too long.

Styro cups in three sizes,
tier-stacked like silos,
guard full coffee pots.

Ceiling fans idle in
stale air.

April's folding take-out boxes
just in case, but
things thin out from here.

She, tonight, announced evacuation plans, and
arctic air's seeping in
around the windows.

On formica white counters
newsprint smudges from
the house paper
speak of passed lives and
other issues that press on
like headlights
along the thoroughfare outside.

By daybreak
this place will be packed
with people
heading for work.

Lady From a Dream in Spring

What a difference a day makes young dimples in my cheeks

. . . this fool

Ten miles down the road but you can't meet me there, this

dumb toad sitting on a cold rock waiting . . .

. . . for spring.

Naive? Yes! But I love the warmth

even though it's just a promise.

Gentle came I here but in reckless dreams I rode

without enough fuel to get me home again

I don't mind walking and dealing with what's real.

Just killing time 'till Spring when dreams make way

for the real thing.

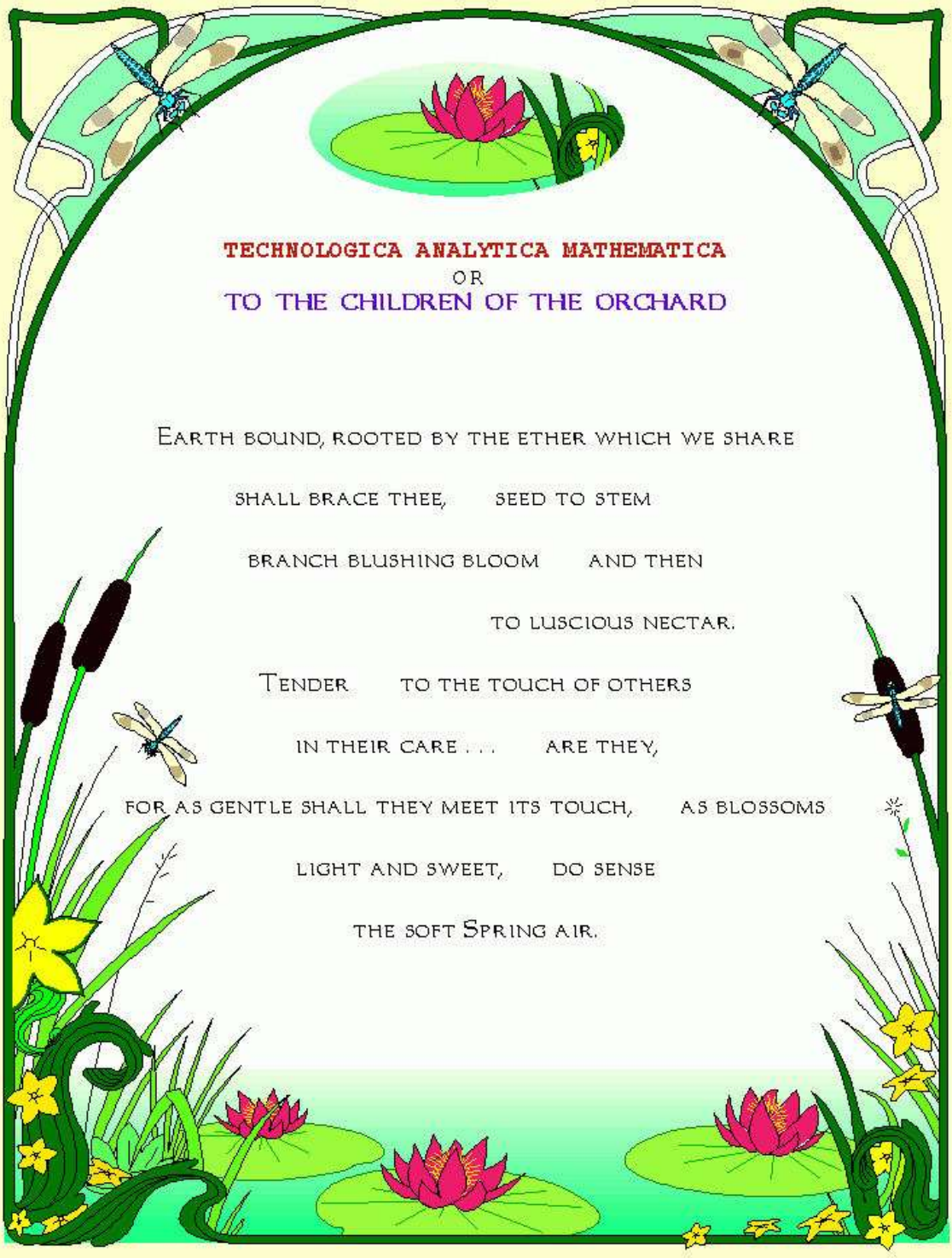
The sweet smell and gentle touch . . . soft, pastel breath

upon my cheek . . . warm, bright solar smile and I,

within her womb, resist expulsion.

Yet, a sober glance at her illusive grace,

tells me to let go.



TECHNOLOGICA ANALYTICA MATHEMATICA

OR

TO THE CHILDREN OF THE ORCHARD

EARTH BOUND, ROOTED BY THE ETHER WHICH WE SHARE

SHALL BRACE THEE, SEED TO STEM

BRANCH BLUSHING BLOOM AND THEN

TO LUSCIOUS NECTAR.

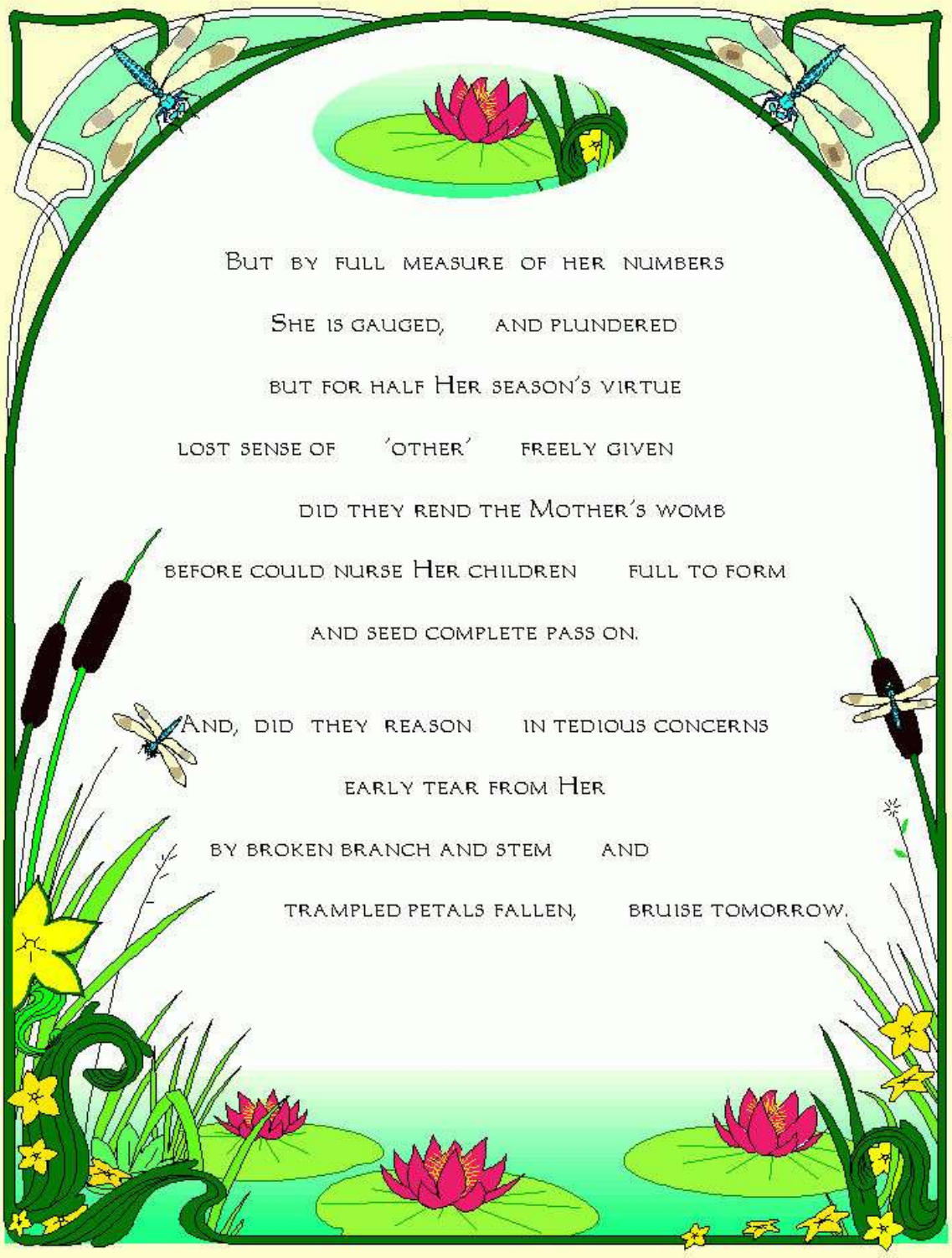
TENDER TO THE TOUCH OF OTHERS

IN THEIR CARE . . . ARE THEY,

FOR AS GENTLE SHALL THEY MEET ITS TOUCH, AS BLOSSOMS

LIGHT AND SWEET, DO SENSE

THE SOFT SPRING AIR.



But by full measure of her numbers

She is gauged, and plundered

but for half Her season's virtue

lost sense of 'other' freely given

did they rend the Mother's womb

before could nurse Her children full to form

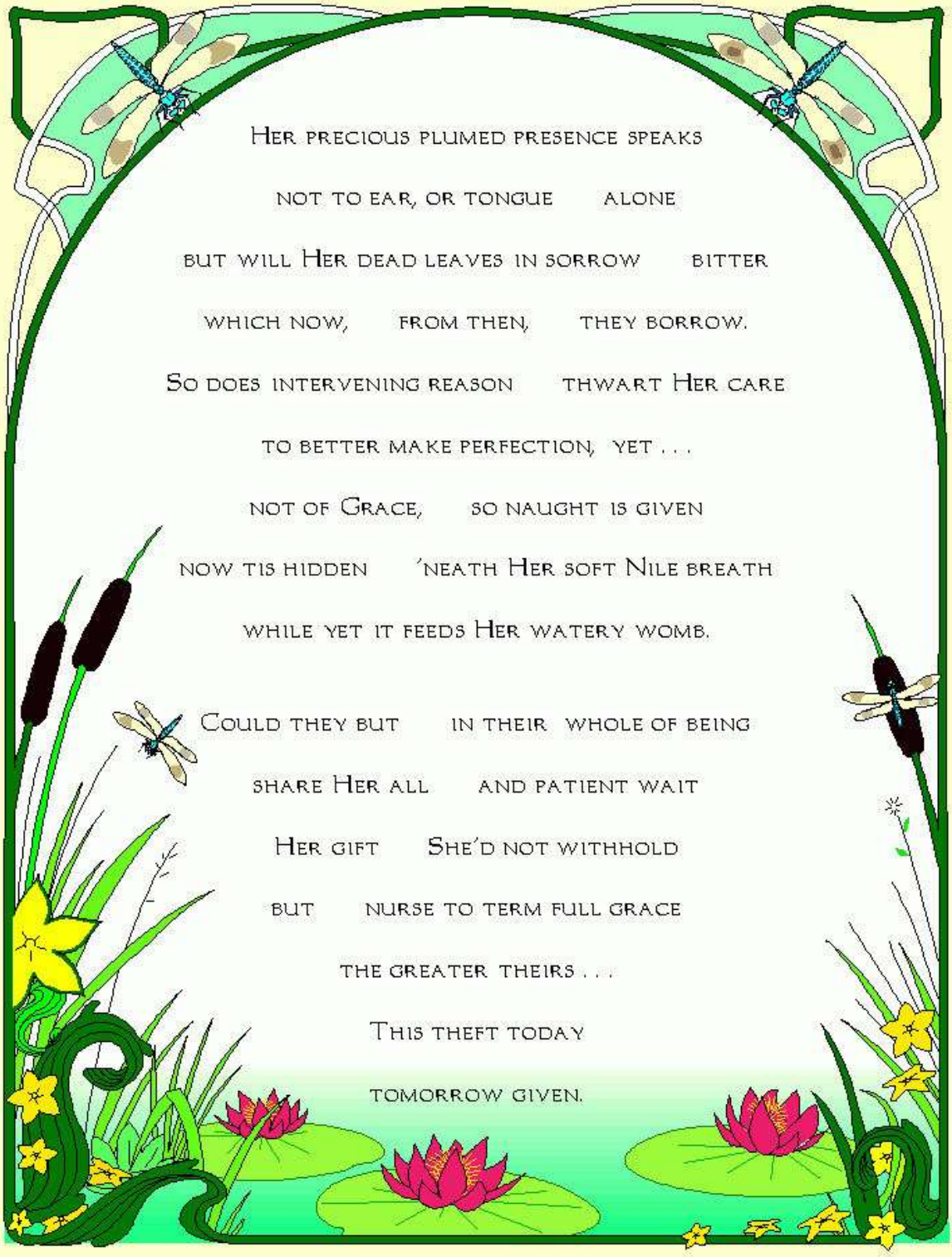
and seed complete pass on.

And, did they reason in tedious concerns

early tear from Her

by broken branch and stem and

trampled petals fallen, bruise tomorrow.



Her precious plumed presence speaks

not to ear, or tongue alone

but will Her dead leaves in sorrow bitter

which now, from then, they borrow.

So does intervening reason thwart Her care

to better make perfection, yet . . .

not of Grace, so naught is given

now tis hidden 'neath Her soft Nile breath

while yet it feeds Her watery womb.

Could they but in their whole of being

share Her all and patient wait

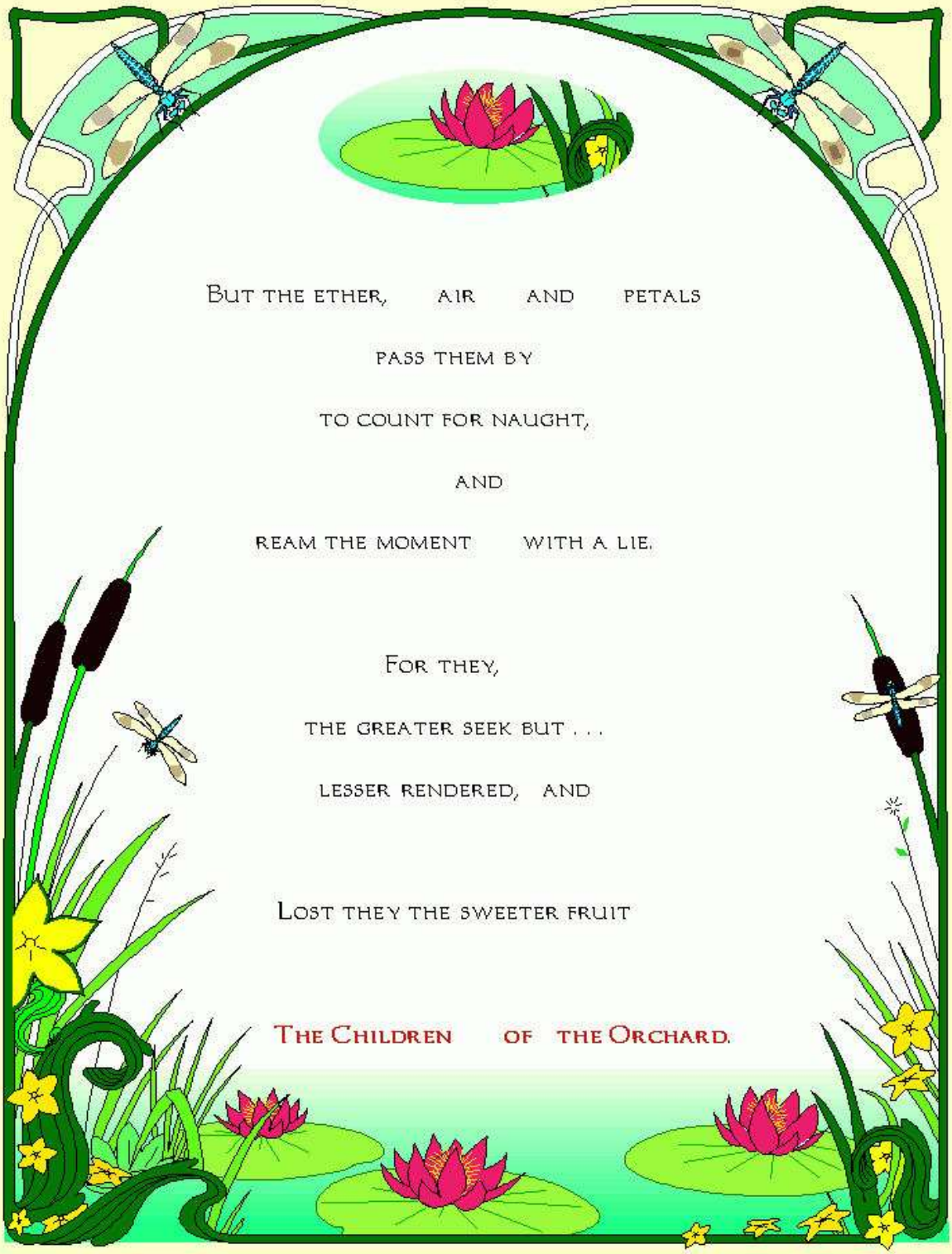
Her gift She'd not withhold

but nurse to term full grace

the greater theirs . . .

This theft today

tomorrow given.



But the ether, air and petals

pass them by

to count for naught,

and

ream the moment with a lie.

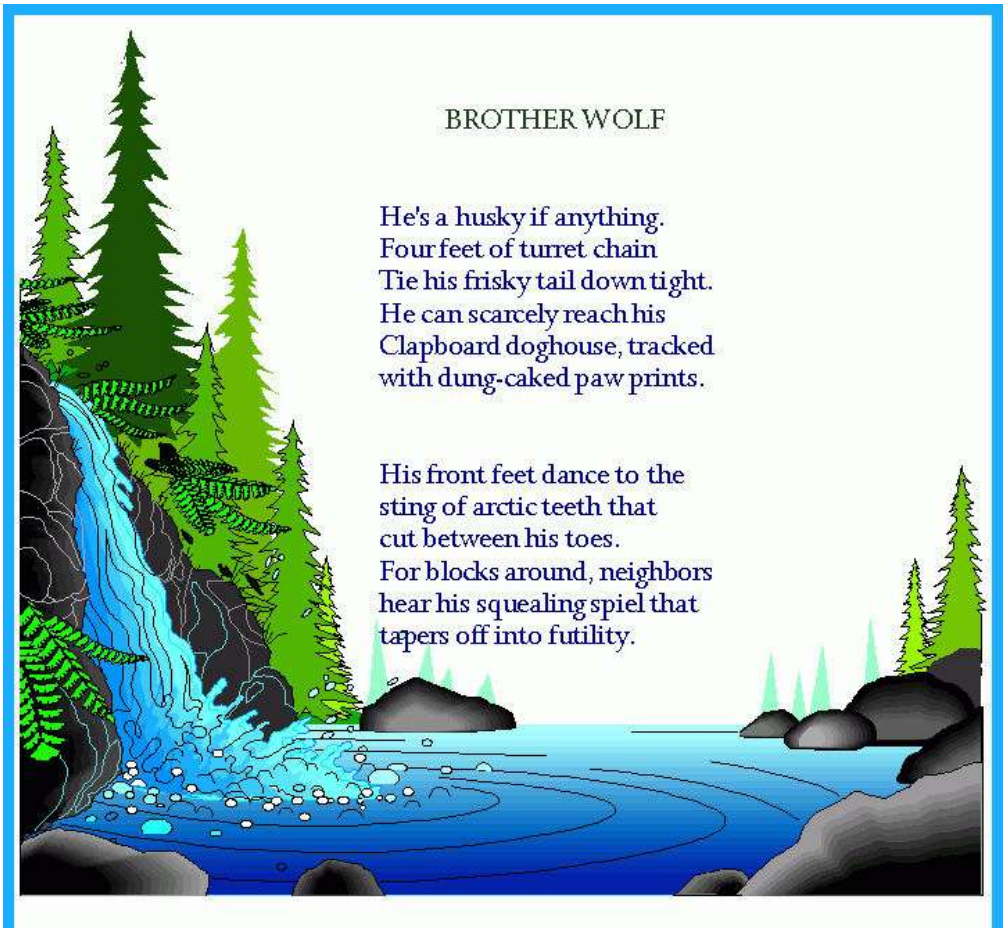
For they,

the greater seek but . . .

lesser rendered, and

Lost they the sweeter fruit

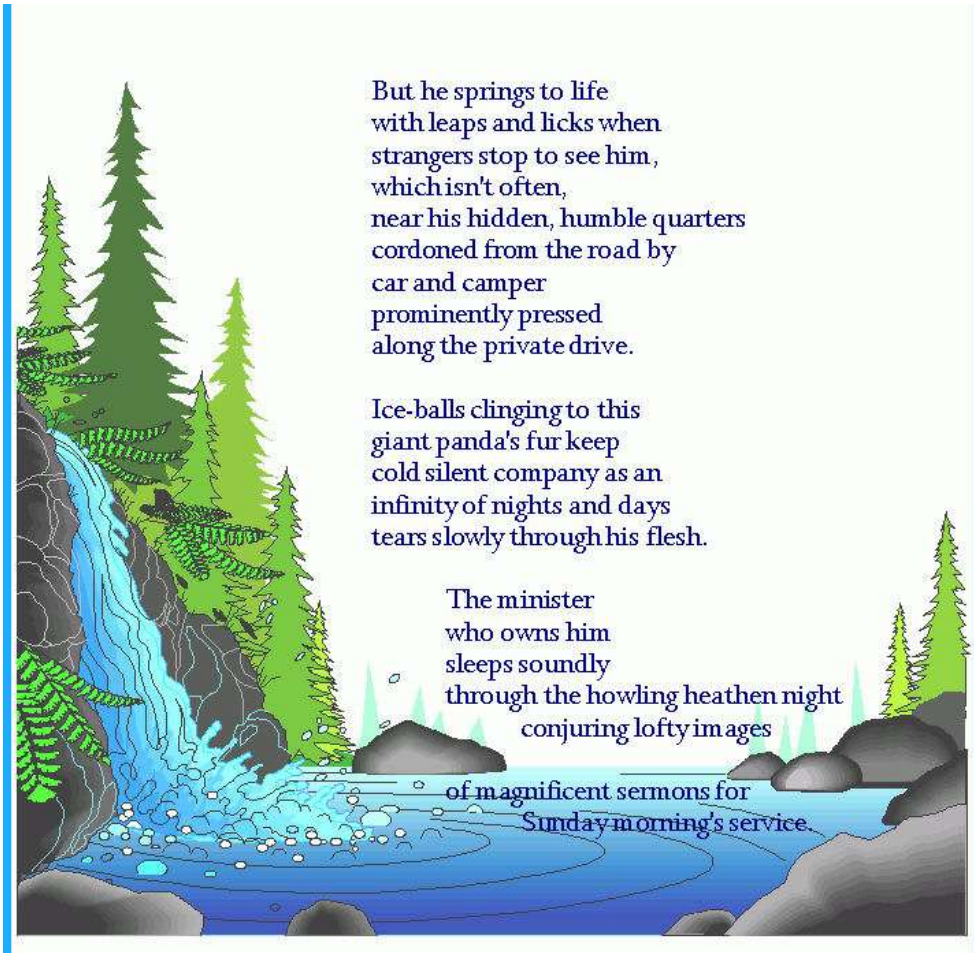
The Children of the Orchard.



BROTHER WOLF

He's a husky if anything.
Four feet of turret chain
Tie his frisky tail down tight.
He can scarcely reach his
Clapboard doghouse, tracked
with dung-caked paw prints.

His front feet dance to the
sting of arctic teeth that
cut between his toes.
For blocks around, neighbors
hear his squealing spiel that
tapers off into futility.

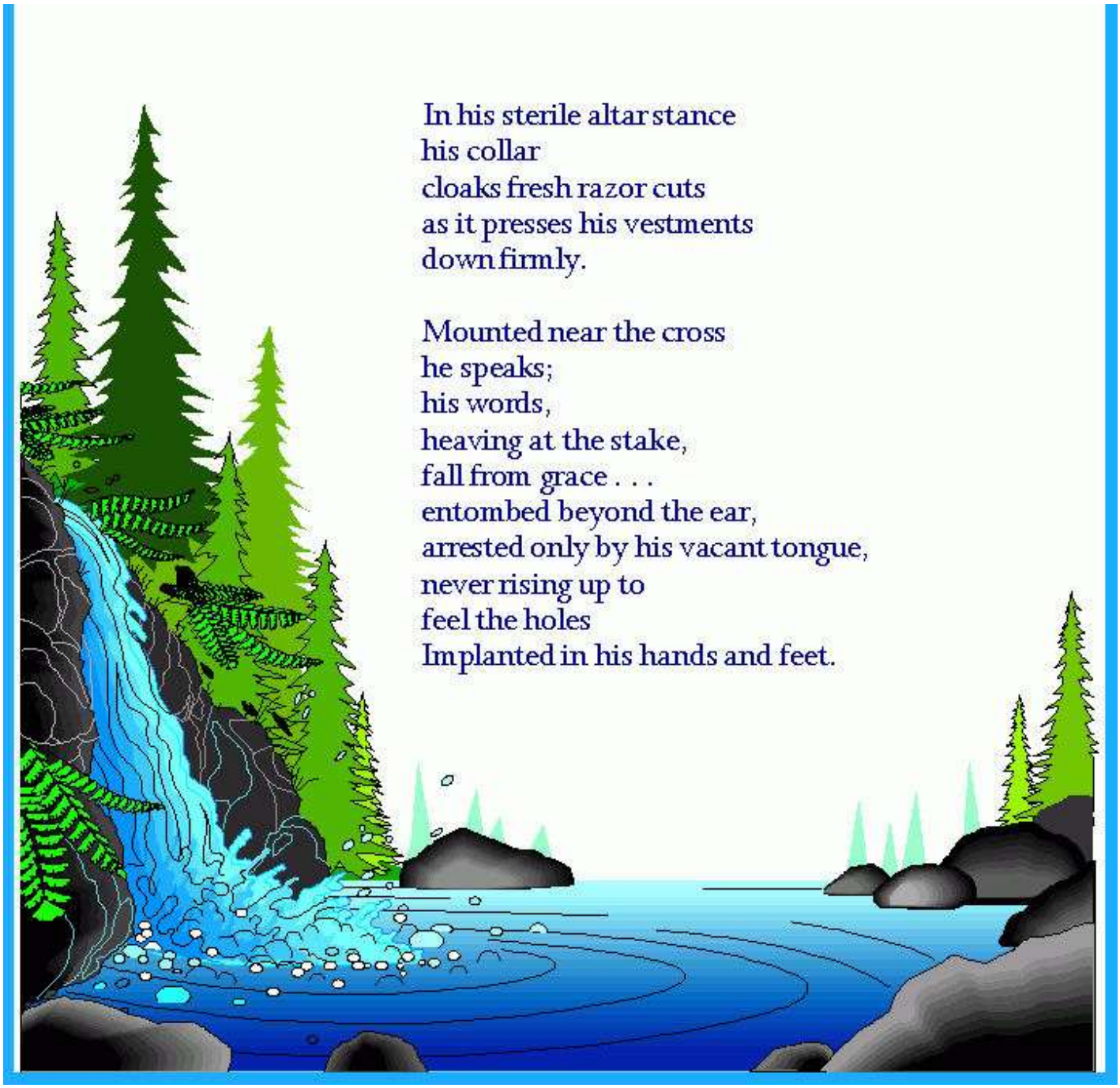


But he springs to life
with leaps and licks when
strangers stop to see him,
which isn't often,
near his hidden, humble quarters
cordoned from the road by
car and camper
prominently pressed
along the private drive.

Ice-balls clinging to this
giant panda's fur keep
cold silent company as an
infinity of nights and days
tears slowly through his flesh.

The minister
who owns him
sleeps soundly
through the howling heathen night
conjuring lofty images

of magnificent sermons for
Sunday morning's service.



In his sterile altar stance
his collar
cloaks fresh razor cuts
as it presses his vestments
down firmly.

Mounted near the cross
he speaks;
his words,
heaving at the stake,
fall from grace . . .
entombed beyond the ear,
arrested only by his vacant tongue,
never rising up to
feel the holes
Implanted in his hands and feet.

End of Poetry Collection

A Chance Encounter with a Tea Master

My first encounter with Buddhism came in 1971, at age 22, by way of a dating high school couple who worked for me. They had a book called "*Remember: Be Here Now*" by Baba Ram Dass (the former Dr. Richard Alpert — a cohort of Timothy Leary).

I kept pounding them with questions about Buddhism and they had a hard time explaining it, while I had a hard time metabolizing it. So finally — they handed me the book and said "*read it and see for yourself.*" Reading that book was my first Buddhist eureka 'ahaaa' moment — that Oxherding Picture of first discovering the ox.. Suddenly all sorts of things started to make sense, things that never made sense before — like biblical texts and the writings of saints and sages like Kahlil Gibran..

Now fast forward to July 1982, when I read in the Syracuse Herald-Journal that a Tea Ceremony was going to be performed at a month-long Buddhist event at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. En route I couldn't find the address and then I had a flat tire.. But I finally made it to the scene and saw most of the tea ceremony. It was like watching a ballet in super-slow-motion. I'd never seen anything so fluid and serene in my entire life. Everything was done in such a deliberate, serenely conscious manner. It seemed surreal — magical. Like Tai Chi in super slow motion.

After the ceremony, everyone congregated in the kitchen and foyer for tea and juice. Suddenly, I saw this guy about 10 feet from me who looked like a mixture of Al Pacino and Leonard Cohen. As soon as his conversation with someone else was finished, I scooted over to him and asked, "*Did anyone ever tell you you look like Leonard Cohen?*" He answered, "*Yea, my mother.*" Incredulous, I then asked, "*Are you serious?*" It really was Leonard Cohen — my favorite folk music artist.

I was so 'gaga' about meeting Leonard Cohen that he empathized with my predicament and he 'took me under his wing' for the rest of the afternoon — which felt like a scene out of 'Alice & Wonderland.' Here I was with Cohen, a Zen Master, a Tea Master — and there were Whirling Dervishes flying across a grassy knoll, dancing in the sunshine to the most beautiful music I've ever heard, by a wind & string orchestral ensemble playing music of the gods — while we feasted on vegan shish-kabobs & falafels. It was surreal beyond belief. I was high as a kite — like I was swept-up and riding on the wind. I kept pinching myself to see if it was real.

The tea ceremony was performed by Hisashi Yamada, a highly respected Tea Master at the Urasenke Chanoyu Center in the upper east-side of Manhattan. There they have the only authentic tea house in the U.S., transported from Japan and reassembled piece-by-piece inside this huge 3 or 4-story atrium, along with a beautiful, sprawling tea garden.

As the Cornell events were winding down, somehow, I was delegated the task of driving Hisashi Yamada to another location. I don't remember how this came about, nor do I remember where it was I was taking him. All I remember is that I felt profoundly honored that I was entrusted with this task.

As we drove, Hisashi Yamada began talking about becoming one with the task at hand, whatever that task may be. He said we should not try to distance ourselves from the task we're engaged in — but should become one with the task. When I heard this I indicated I understood and cited, as an example, the way I distanced myself from the task of cleaning the toilet. When he heard this he stressed, "*No, no - we must not distance ourselves from the task!*" Then I said, "Oh, I agree." Then he, again, exclaimed "*No, no - we must not distance ourselves from the task!*" Each and every time I tried to express agreement he would again exclaim "*No, no - we must not distance ourselves from the task!*" Then I finally realized what he was doing.

Hisashi Yamada was trying to push this message down, past the superficial linguistic level of verbal agreement — so it would "*penetrate to the marrow of my bones*" — as Shunryu Suzuki might have put it. And he was right. Because not long after, I found myself once again putting great distance between me and the task of cleaning the toilet. Hisashi Yamada knew me better than I did. My next encounter, my final encounter with him, would demonstrate just how much better he knew me.

Fast forward to the Summer of 2006. I was now an attorney for a law firm that had many cases in the five boroughs of New York City. Upon getting this assignment, one of the first things I did was make an appointment to see Hisashi Yamada at the Urasenke Chanoyu Center.

I should state at the outset that whenever I crossed the GW bridge into NYC I tended to become a little hyperactive-neurotic. The intensity of NYC itself, and its traffic '*seemed*' to require that level of neurotic inflection. So the contrast between this environment and that of the calm Chanoyu Center was extreme.

When I arrived there was an intercom system with a buzzer at the entrance. I pressed the buzzer and a woman's voice greeted me. I stated that I had an appointment to see Hisashi Yamada and she then unlocked the door and I entered.

As I entered the front vestibule — there was Hisashi Yamada sitting there at a desk serenely — just exactly as he was in 1987 when I brought my friend to meet him and see the tea house. It was as though he'd been sitting there for the past 20 years. Indeed — it was as though he'd been sitting there for eons, millennia — composed — serene — with Shunryu Suzuki's "Imperturbable Composure" filling all the space around him. It was enough to settle me down fairly quickly — from a 5,000 decibel neurosis to a one decibel serenity — in about 2 minutes flat.

After a few welcoming remarks, Hisashi Yamada directed his assistant, who always stood behind him and to his right, to show me the tea house and garden. This did not take long, about 6 or 8 minutes, then we returned to the front foyer where Hisashi Yamada was, once again, sitting composed and looking straight ahead.

I thanked him for taking the time to see me and show me the tea house — and then a scroll caught my eye on the wall in front of us. It had calligraphy running down the scroll. I admired it and asked him what the calligraphy meant. He answered bluntly, saying — "*Good Luck.*" He said nothing more.

I don't think my facial expression showed any disappointment.. But there was a pregnant pause of about 6-8 seconds and here is what was running through my head during that pause. I have always had an 'issue' — a problem — with this "Good Luck" idea.

Since I first discovered Buddhism I've had a special appreciation for oriental art — in particular Buddhist and Taoist art from Japan and China. And many of these art pieces had calligraphy written on them. I had a brown bamboo stalk, about 5 inches wide and 2½ feet long with calligraphy carved into it, running down the length of the halved stalk. And every time I asked the artisans or gift-shop clerks what their items' calligraphy meant they would always answer "Good Luck."

So I began to believe these artisans were just placating Americans, who have a reputation for being materialistic, acquisitive and greedy — one of the wealthiest countries in the World — "wishing" for even more.

I even reached a point where I thought artisans were blanketing their art pieces with this "Good Luck" calligraphy — just to sell more stuff to Americans.

The other problem I had with "Good Luck" is that it seemed so superstitious — like "*cross your fingers for good luck*" — or like blowing on the dice before rolling them across the craps table — or like the Wishing Well concept for using superstition to generate and collect coin donations from people wishing for good luck. So whenever I was told the calligraphy meant "Good Luck" — I was always disappointed — because I was hoping it had a deeper, more Zen-like meaning.

So here I am, in the presence of a Tea Master who I'm convinced has profound wisdom and insight — and he's saying the same thing I've been railing against for the past 40 + years. Nevertheless — I don't think my facial expression revealed any disappointment on my part.

At the end of this pregnant 6 or 8 second pause I turned to Hisashi Yamada and I said, "*My favorite calligraphy is the one in Shunryu Suzuki's book "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," — the calligraphy for "Beginner's Mind.*." No sooner did I get these words out of my mouth — when Hisashi Yamada immediately redirected my attention to his calligraphy scroll — saying "*Well, actually, each moment is fortuitous — each moment is Good Luck.*" The instant he said that — my head completely imploded.

In a blinding flash — 40 + years of erroneous assumptions were vaporized. In a blinding instant — I came to realize how latent erroneous assumptions — baggage in my head from the past — can lie beneath the surface of consciousness to distort, confuse and misdirect here-and-now perceptions.

Suddenly I realized — No artisan or gift shop clerk ever said that their calligraphy was projected into the future as a "wish." None of them ever said that their calligraphy meant "**Wishing you** good luck." They simply said it means "Good Luck." There never was any valid coherent reason for me to have 'added' the assumption that it was a wish projected onto future events and outcomes.

When Hisashi Yamada said "*Well, actually, each moment is fortuitous — each moment is Good Luck*" — I broke out into this deep guttural laughter from deep in the hara and I said "*That clarification makes all the difference in the World!*" I kept laughing and he sat there composed — a quiet serene gaze — and a subtle nod. I will never forget it.

The amazing part is — He wasn't just seeing where I was coming from and then meeting me there. He was actually getting there first — and then greeting me when I arrived.. That's what blew my mind. Somehow he knew, from the outset, that I had a problem with "Good Luck" — hence his deliberately blunt "Good Luck" answer

I had read about this kind of "ahaa" Zen eureka moment many times before in many Zen tales. But that vicarious experience is dwarfed by the actual in-person in-real-time personal experience. When it actually happened to me it was like a mammoth tsunami that, in a blinding instant, wiped-out all the clutter in my head leaving behind a clarity and serenity — as far as the eye can see.

A few days after this visit I did an Internet search of his name and I stumbled into an interview that he gave, where he was asked to talk about the close connection between the Tea Ceremony and Zen Buddhism. Hisashi Yamada proceeded to acknowledge and summarize that connection — but concluded his remarks by saying — "*Nevertheless, Zen is Zen and Tea is Tea.*" I launched into another deep guttural laugh — because that's exactly what a Zen Master would also say. It is these mind-boggling paradoxes that have always attracted me to Buddhism.

I have often pondered the irony of it all. On one hand, Hisashi Yamada says "*each moment is fortuitous — each moment is good luck.*" And on the other hand I think about how fortunate I was to read about the tea ceremony in the newspaper - How fortunate I was to be the one to drive Hisashi Yamada from the Cornell event - How fortunate I was to get three private audiences with this astounding Tea Master - and how fortunate I was to be awake enough to stay in the moment long enough to experience such wisdom from this radiant cosmic Tea Master.

As an expression of my profound gratitude I want to thank Hisashi Yamada and the Urasenke Chanoyu Center for sharing this precious wisdom with the World. And this sincere *'thank you'* would extend to Japan and its cultural program that brought the Urasenke Chanoyu Center and Hisashi Yamada to America.

G. Bruce Ketcham