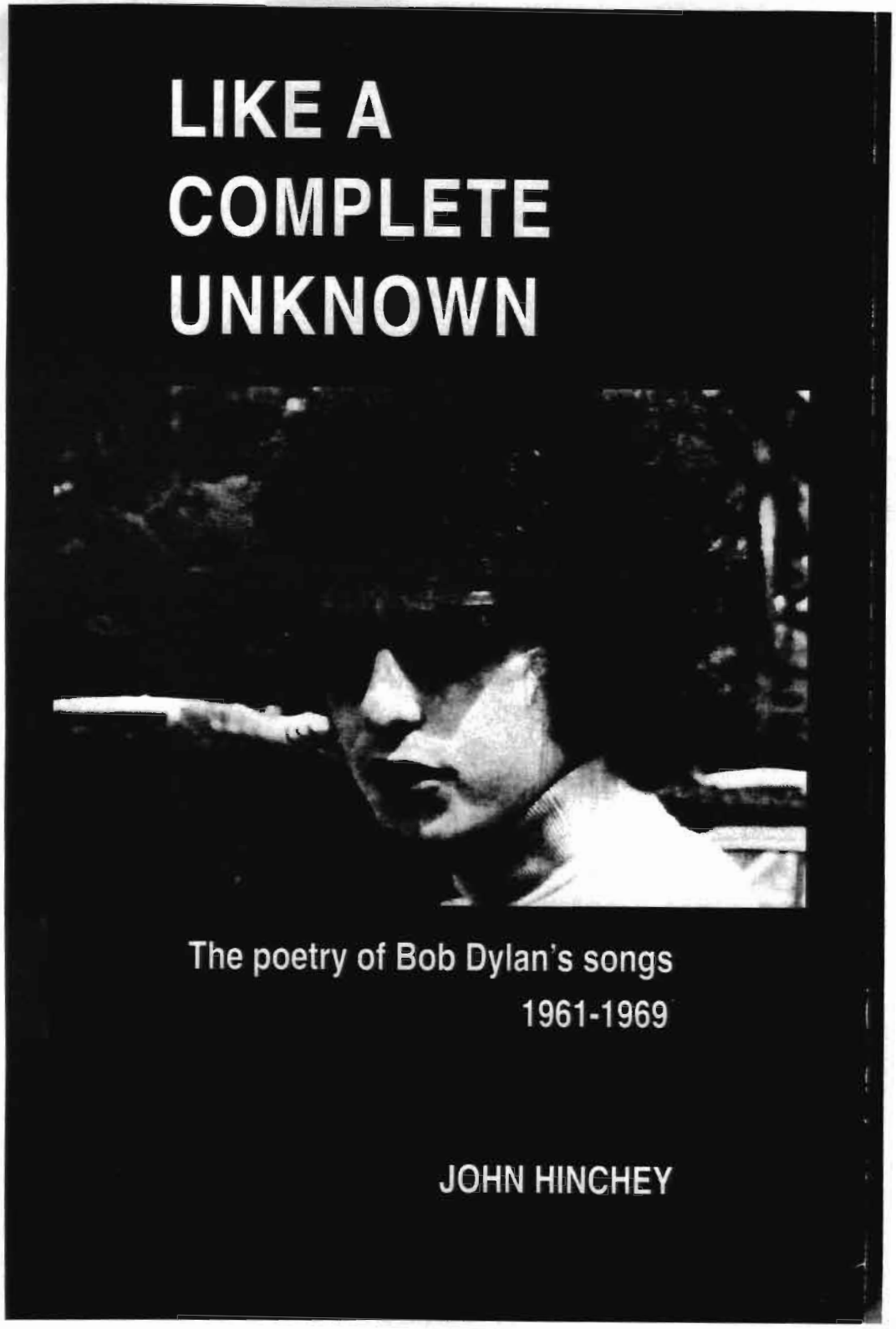

Introduction

Bob Dylan is a poet and, as the world will gradually come to recognize, a great one. I realize that for many people–including many Dylan fans–a book about the poetry of Dylan's songs is a book about something that doesn't exist, or is of no real consequence. My aim is to show otherwise.

Even I recognize that Dylan is not merely a poet and that making poetry may not even be what he is best at. He's a recording artist, live performer, songwriter, and poet. But I do not believe, as almost everyone else who concedes this much seems to, that Dylan's art can be discussed only as all of these things at once. Dylan makes record albums and performs live concerts, both of which are sometimes works of art in themselves. These recordings and concerts are in turn made up of discrete performances of individual songs, usually his own compositions, and each of these performances is also a work of art, to be judged as good, bad, or indifferent, each on its own merit. The songs he performs are also works of art of varying quality, and they all contain lyrics that may–and in the case of Dylan's own songs, almost always do–engage our attention as poems. Like every other dimension of Dylan's polymorphous creativity, these poems may be sublime or awful, or any number of other things in between.

There is nothing unprecedented in this. William Blake's "The Tyger," one of the greatest lyric poems in English, also happens to be a song, as well as merely an element in one of those engravings combining text and image that Blake called "illuminated printing."

Shakespeare's "Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies" is another great poem, also a song, that forms but a part of a larger work, in this case another poetic text, *The Tempest*, that is also a stage play, one that is regularly performed–splendidly, badly, decently, etc.–around the world. But when was the last time anyone seriously argued that "Full Fathom Five" is not a poem because its full meaning is inseparable from its rendition in a performance of *The Tempest*, or that "The Tyger" is not a poem because, well, unless you heard Blake sing it, especially that one summer morning when he suddenly broke into song while returning from London after the unfortunate incident with the vicar, you'll just never understand it?

Then there are the original troubadours. No one dismisses Arnaut Daniel–Dante's archetype of the vernacular poet–as "merely" a songwriter, though perhaps that is because his poems have survived only without their melodies; we have to read them, so no one can pretend they don't yield themselves to reading. Dylan is the archetype of the modern troubadour. More than anyone before or after him, he has doggedly tested and stretched the poetic limits of song.

Unlike the medieval troubadours, Dylan not only composes the poetry and the music of his songs but he also sings them; he is his own minstrel. And, yes, no one sings Dylan like Dylan; indeed, no one sings anything quite like Dylan. Taking hints mostly from earlier recordings of American vernacular music, he has absolutely redefined, for many of us, what it means to sing, so that it sometimes seems he has created an entirely new art form. But we shouldn't let the beguiling genius of his singing blind us to the strength that singing draws from the intrinsic poetry of what he is singing. (On the other hand, many of the people I know who regard Dylan as a superior poet also insist that he can't sing a lick. Go figure.) As a poet, at his best, he is arguably as good as Whitman and Dickinson, which, in the American tradition, is as good as it gets.

This is not a claim likely to meet with wide assent, perhaps even among likely readers of a book about Bob Dylan. This is one reason I have chosen to write about Dylan's poetry, which I view both as valuable in itself and as the matrix that energizes the musical compositions that, in turn, energize his powers as a singer. The poetry of his songs is the "substructure that holds it all together," as Dylan has called the lyrics of the songs on his 2001 CD "*Love and Theft*."* The poetry of Dylan's songs is a crucial, not just an incidental, element of their greatness.

II

From the beginning, there has been widespread resistance, both from the academy and from the streets, to the notion of taking Dylan seriously as a poet. A lot of this resistance arises from extraordinarily constricted notions about what poetry is (and has been). This is true both of the guardians of culture who insist that it act and look like the (often narrow) range of existing poetry they happen to be familiar with, and of those Dylan fans who seem to have been taught, in college or maybe even high school, that poetry is just a diabolically encrypted mode of (often banal) philosophizing. The former consider Dylan unworthy of the name of poet, and the latter insist it is unworthy of him. I don't see any point in attacking these views head on. My own way of exploring Dylan's poetry either credibly establishes a way of looking at poetry to which Dylan's work answers, or it does not. But, to indicate at least where I am coming from, I will say that to my understanding poetry is an art that uses words not just to explore but to create our fullest awareness–emotional, perceptual, and intellectual–of what, without poetry, we merely and blankly "know." Poetry–all poetry worthy of the name–provides us with answers, of varying degrees of persuasiveness and indispensability, to the question at the center of Dylan's most crucial song: "How does it feel?"

Not all song lyrics, I know, are poetry. Often the words–as opposed to their mere meanings–are just along for the ride. They possess little or none of the imagistic vitality, rhythmic verve, auditory resonance, ver-

* "The music here is an electronic grid, the lyrics being the substructure that holds it all together," Dylan told *USA Today* music writer Edna Gunderson. "Dylan's Melodies Always Are A-Changin'," section C, p. 1.

bal wit, or other textural and structural features necessary to elevate mere verse into poetry, so they can't serve as the "substructure" for their music. In most songs, the words are merely fitted piecemeal to the musical structure. And there are also songs–like, for instance, those of Cole Porter or Lennon & McCartney–whose lyrics could justifiably be called poetic but rarely are because their poetry is so lightweight. These songs are fun to recite–one good test for poetry–but they don't really compel our attention unless they are sung. They are not bad poems, just weak ones. Dylan is not the only modern songwriter I would go to the bother of treating as a poet–the likes of Chuck Berry, Tom Waits, and Joni Mitchell leap immediately to mind, and there are certainly others–but even in this comparatively rarefied company, Dylan laps the field. The difference is that Dylan's best lyrics are not just fun but thrilling to recite; they don't just compel our attention, they enlarge it and set it free.

Let me put it this way. I have no musical talent. Though my wife says I have a nice voice, my singing keeps babies awake. So, as much as I love "Things We Said Today," I need to hear (or remember hearing) the Beatles perform it to get anything out of it. But I can delight myself by reciting "Buckets of Rain"–in a tuneless whisper, attending only to the sound and kinesthesia of my own voice. It works like a charm. (It is a charm!) That's my test for poetry worthy of the name, and Dylan's songs afford me this kind of pleasure regularly enough that I have to refer to them as poetry.

Dylan himself, when asked, has been notoriously self-contradictory on this issue, sometimes embracing and more frequently disavowing the title of poet. But his disavowals are always qualified in ways that muddy the issue. Sometimes he seems simply shy of seeming to put himself on a pedestal, or wary of being measured against "poetic" standards irrelevant to his work. Usually, there's a sense he'll give whatever answer that will enable him to defy his questioner's expectations and elude the grasp of any definition of what it is he does. The Muhammad Ali of interviewees–"float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"–he's mainly keen not to allow himself to be boxed in. To my mind, the most illuminating statement Dylan has ever made about the mode of his lyrics was made in late February or early March, 1966, during an interview with Martin Bronstein for CBC radio:

> I found myself writing this song, this story, this long piece of vomit about twenty pages long, and out of it I took "Like a Rolling Stone." . . . I'd never written anything like that before, and it suddenly came to me that that was what I do, y'know. I mean, nobody has ever done that before. . . . I think "Like a Rolling Stone" is definitely the thing which I do, man. That's write songs. . . . After writing that, I wasn't interested in writing a novel, or a play. . . . I wanted to write songs, y'know, because it was just a *whole new category*. I mean, nobody's really written songs before. Really, I mean, people have in older days, but those were sonnets and soft troubadour-type things." [emphasis added]*

What Dylan is insisting is that the songs he writes don't behave like what we are used to thinking of as songs. They do things that songs hadn't previously done, or as Dylan acknowledges, haven't done in a long time. What's new about his songs, I would say, is that they behave like poems–that's why his discovery of this new sort of song enabled him to cease dabbling in conventional literary forms. So, yes, we could say that Dylan writes songs, not poems, but only if we remember–which we won't–that we are using the word "song" to address that undefined new thing Dylan is struggling to put his finger on in his response to Bronstein. But, if you like, you can treat my insistence on talking about the poetry of Dylan's songs as merely an expedient to draw attention to the features of that "whole new category" Dylan was certain he had invented, or reinvented.

The other major obstacle to taking Dylan seriously as a poet is based on the apparent notion that poetry is a textual art, one that lives in print, on the page. In one sense, this is sheer silliness. Certain not very interesting experiments in concrete poetry aside, poetry does not live on the page; what you see on the page is to poetry as a printed score is to music. Poetry lives on the breath and tongue and in the ear. True, the oral and aural dimensions of most printed poetry have grown increas-

* John Bauldie, *The Ghost of Electricity*, p. 23.

ingly attenuated over the past two or three centuries, so that it now lives largely, as it were, on the mind's breath and in the mind's ear. But even Wallace Stevens, that great ghostly talking head of American poetry whom Dylan himself cited as the sort of "great poet [who] is not necessarily a great singer,"* writes a poetry that is, in Stevens's phrase, "blooded by thought." And there is no blood, not even of thought, on the page. In addition, one should keep in mind a counter-tradition, in American poetry, that runs from Whitman through Pound and Williams to Ginsberg and then to Dylan. It is a tradition that, in various ways and with varying degrees and kinds of success, has been trying to get poetry to lift itself more vigorously up off the page than now customary and to re-ally itself with music and even with dance.

But in another sense, this charge–"Dylan's songs don't stand up on the page"–points to a real problem. I agree that what one reads in the two printed collections of Dylan's words, *Writings & Drawings* (1973) and *Lyrics: 1962-1985* (1986)–or in their online version at bobdylan.com–is rarely poetry. But that is because these texts provide only the words and not (or not in any complete or reliable form) the "words and the spaces between the words," which William Carlos Williams identified as the constituent elements of poetry. Whoever assembled these two collections left out and/or obscured many of the "spaces" crucial to the poetic structures Dylan composed. The reason the poems you see in *Lyrics* do not stand up on the page is that their backbones have been shattered.

The problem with existing printed texts is that the only organizing principle they seem to acknowledge is line divisions cued by the rhyme scheme–and when the rhyme scheme is at all complex, or incorporates unrhymed lines, even this simple-minded procedure can collapse into desperate guesswork. The result is often doggerel:

The sweet pretty things are in bed now of course
The city fathers they're trying to endorse
The reincarnation of Paul Revere's horse

* Hubert Saal, "Dylan Is Back," in McGregor, *A Retrospective*, p. 245.

But the town has no need to be nervous

No one discovering "Tombstone Blues" from the above is likely to suspect that its author is a poet. But this is not what Dylan sings. What he sings is more fairly represented as this:

The sweet pretty things are in
bed now of course
The city fathers they're
trying to endorse
The reincarnation of
Paul Revere's horse
But the town has no need to be
nervous

"Tombstone Blues," like almost all of Dylan's songs, is comprised of poetry whose verses are best represented as a series (usually in quatrains) of metrically equivalent half-line pairs, or of couplets that function like half-line pairs. Representing them this way does fair justice to the internal shapes of the lines, their clusterings of syllables and their caesuras, their sculpted intensities, and exposes the genuine kinship between the music of the verse and the actual music we hear in the performed song.

Consequently, the text I rely on for the songs I discuss in this book is necessarily my own. Unless otherwise specified, I've taken the words from the recorded performances on their original release (silently correcting vocal flubs), and I haven't paid much attention to Dylan's revisions of the words, either in live performance or in the printed collections cited above. But I've had to determine how to represent the "spaces between the words" for myself. In transcribing Dylan's poetry to the page, I have generally stuck with the prosody, as I hear it, of the original recorded version.

The question of what constitutes the division of poetry into lines or half-lines is a nice point, to say the least. My own working definition is that verse is divided into lines by some principle of recurrence (e.g., alliterative or accentual-syllabic patterns) that establishes the metrical

equivalence of one line with another, and that a line is subdivided into two (or more) parts by a break in (or breaking up of) the voice of a line for which the technical term is a caesura, which in Latin literally means a "cutting." Such a break is often but not always occasioned by the end of a sentence or another grammatical subdivision requiring punctuation.

The principle of recurrence that shapes Dylan's poetic line is a complex pattern comprising beats, accents, and rhyme–a cross pattern, as Dylan himself put it, of "rhyming and rhythm, what I call the mathematics of a song"* Look at almost any Dylan song, and you'll see that all the lines all contain the same number of beats and accents–or, if there is some variation from line to line, the same pattern of variation recurs from verse to verse. Occasionally, he'll even write a song in traditional English accentual-syllabic verse. But in most of his songs, the number of unstressed syllables and the placement of the accents change from line to line, yielding something that could easily be mistaken for free verse.

Dylan's use of the caesura is sometimes quite conventional, organized around major grammatical divisions, but like William Carlos Williams, he prefers to chase after the tonal surprises that can be released by severing a phrase from the syntactic train that hauled it into view. Thus:

The sweet pretty things are in
bed now of course

or this from "Visions of Johanna":

Ain't it just like the night to play
tricks when you're trying to be so quiet

or this from "Highlands":

She got a pretty face and long
white shiny legs

or this from "Sugar Baby":

* Bauldie, *The Ghost of Electricity*, p. 10.

You went years without me, might as well
keep goin' now

The caesura is properly part of the poetry of the lyric, while a mere holding (or rushing) of the breath is part of its performance. Thus, the opening couplet of the last verse of "All Along the Watchtower" normally goes like this:

All along the watchtower
princes kept the view
All the women came and went
barefoot servants too

Dylan might sing this evenly and straightforwardly, as if merely reciting, or he might stretch and squeeze the phrasing, with results like this:

All along the . . . watchtower
princes keptheview
All the women came and went
barefoot servants . . . too

These changes don't affect or alter the poetry; they belong not to what Dylan sings but to the way he sings it. The way he sings his songs is a matter that I largely ignore in this book. This is not to deny that this performative resource–among many others–can greatly enhance (or degrade) the expressive power of what he is singing. Indeed, these sorts of changes, which arise from the way Dylan is living inside his song as he sings it, can even make a great lyric sound idiotic or a lousy one seem sublime.

But sometimes Dylan does more than play with the poetic phrasing; sometimes he revises it, so that we get–as we do in my favorite performances of "All Along the Watchtower"–a new prosody:

All along
the watchtower
Princes
kept the view
All the women

came and went
Barefoot
servants too

The result is a significantly revised poetic "substructure" for the song, something new–here a pervasive, unsettlingly dainty feline stealth–for his voice to play with from night to night. And because they belong to the poetic structure of the songs, these prosodic changes–when they work–are usually maintained for the length of an entire tour, or even longer, while the merely performative variations are, however similar to something done before, unique, fingerprints that enable a listener to identify a particular performance.

But what one notices, over time, is that whatever prosodic revisions Dylan makes, the pattern of alternating half-line persists. It is a pattern that is at once a dialectic, a dialogue, and even a dancing (left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot) or a shadow boxing (left hand, right hand, left hand, right hand.) When Dylan sings, in "Angelina," "My right hand drawing back while my left hand advances," he is describing, among other things of course, his prosodic signature.

In any case, I think that I have succeeded in fashioning a viable printed form of Dylan's poetry to this extent: readers of this book, when encountering quoted verses, will not be moved–as they would often likely be when reading *Lyrics*–to dismiss it as nonpoetry on the face of it. Its vitality as verse does not depend on its strictly musical setting, and–to make a related but considerably lesser point–that vitality can be indicated on the page.

And no, it does not bother me at all that Dylan himself apparently cares not a fig for all this. Why should he? He's the poet, I'm the pedant.

V

The jump cut, in various forms and under various names, has long been a staple resource of the American poetic tradition, from Whitman's catalogues to Emily Dickinson's fracturing dashes to Pound's juxtapositions to William Carlos Williams's dislocating metrics to Wallace Stevens's appositional meditations to the telegraphic syntax of Allen Ginsberg and other Beats. What distinguishes Dylan's "chains of flashing images," as he once called them, is that they are generated primarily as images not of mind but of voice.

Let me explain what I mean by returning to the comparison between "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Mr. Tambourine Man." This is how Keats opens his poem:

My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

This is Dylan:

My weariness amazes me
I'm branded on my feet

Now, their lyrical panache notwithstanding, Dylan's lines, compared to Keats's, may seem hasty and superficial, a mere sketch of a state of consciousness he doesn't have the patience of mind to realize in its fullness. A lot of American poetry can seem this way, but the best of it finds compensation for what's lost in the nimble grace of its namings and in the

mental flashes that occur when we shoot the gaps between the lines, or, as in the line from "Mr. Tambourine Man" cited above, across the caesura that divides a line in half. The movement of mind this line traces is especially startling, even for Dylan, but even here it is secondary to the brightness of the flash engendered by the movement of voice. Dylan "amazes" himself with what he hears himself saying, and the second-half of this line registers his amazement, even as it intensifies it. "Branded on my feet" means "my feet are on fire," an image that is Dylan's characteristic emblem of the prophetic voice. But we don't initially hear it that way because of the syntax, which emphasizes the passivity and involuntariness of his experience: it sounds like he is saying something like "my feet are manacled." He is possessed, and uneasily so.

But none of this is likely to register if we, as listeners, merely think about what he is saying; we must imagine him saying it or, better, imagine speaking it ourselves. It is not fair to say that we can satisfactorily read Keats or even the sublimely disembodied Wallace Stevens by merely thinking our way through their poems, but their poems won't stop us from doing that if we so choose. Dylan's poems will. To "read" Dylan properly we must take our eyes up from the page and let his phrases, each in its turn, pour from our tongue, left, right, left, right. Or as Dylan himself long ago told us, we must "know [his] song well before [we] start singing" so that we may "tell it and think it and sing it and breathe it."

So, yes, Dylan is not a poet of the page, but not because his poems cannot be represented on the page. They just won't lie still there. And no, I don't think Dylan will ever be (literally) read much, as a poet. Who needs to? We have it all on record, to listen to. Indeed, I rarely consulted even my own printed renditions of the poetry of his songs in writing this book; I never wrote more than a sentence or two about any song I did not know by heart. But I did learn a lot more from reciting these poems to myself than I did from listening to Dylan's recordings, or even from recalling his performances to my mind's ear. When they come out of my tuneless mouth, there is, helpfully, nothing left of Dylan's songs

but their poetry. Dylan's performances contain so much more than mere poetry that I have a hard time wrapping my mind around them as performances, let alone as songs or the poems for which the songs find the music. In writing this book, Dylan's performances have served me mainly as a tuning fork–or lie detector–against which to test the persuasiveness of my readings of his poems. Otherwise, when listening to his recordings, I don't really think at all; I just let them take me wherever it is this time they are going to take me.

But, I can hear a voice or two object, why bother? We have, as you say, the records, and if you want to count the concert bootlegs, as we must, we even have multiple readings–for some songs well into the hundreds–for almost every notable song Dylan have ever written. What exactly are you trying to prove, Hinchey?

Good question. Why bother? A short answer is: because it's the truth. A less flippant short answer is that to look narrowly at the poetry of Dylan's songs, and to assess them as poetry, is to put yourself in a position to notice things you hadn't noticed before. One thing you notice is that the more vigorous the poetry out of which the song has been fashioned, the greater the potential of the song that can be fashioned from it, and of the potential of the performances that can be wrung from that song. I've heard performances of the early antiwar song "John Brown" that have almost taken my breath away. Almost. No matter how passionate and intelligent the attentiveness Dylan brings to its performance, he's still hindered by the fact that he's singing a so-so song erected upon a poem I could have written in high school. And believe me, that's weak.

And then there are the long answers, one version of which is this book. So read on.