

The Condensed Vapor of the Atmosphere,
Falling in Drops Large Enough to
Attain a Sensible Velocity

Donald Shephard

The wet winter kept
Him from his garden for a month
Until a plea from his son
Released him from stir-craziness.
He and his wife rose early
And drove Highway 20 for an hour
Through drenching skies
Until the temperature fell over the summit
And the clear droplets spread
And whitened into flakes of snow
That closed the road to Willits.
The Chantilly-laced trees,
Stunning in their bridal beauty,
Failed to distract them from
The dangerous driving.
There remained little to do
But follow the snowplow
Back to the mountain pass
And turn home.
"Hope the power stays on,"
She said.
"We'll ride out the storm
And visit Joel another day."
Once home, she called their son,
And the retired man retreated upstairs
To watch the weather spectacle.
His mood dampened
As he studied the drowning landscape.
A gray cloud fell across the Pacific coast
With veils of white driven
Aslant from south to north.

To his right, a flood-gorged stream,
Rusted with redwood bark,
Stained the ocean foam
Where it flowed into the bay.
To his left, twenty foot swells
Thundered into the cliffs
Thrashing sea-spray
Above the lighthouse
And the ocean tilted and sighed,
A fast-running crazy floor
Collapsing into hollows
And swelling into charging horses.
The shower-washed fields,
From ruined fence
To ruined fence,
Stood mud-puddled.
The lights went out
In the wind-scourged village
Leaving the world
In octopus-ink darkness
Till lightning flashed
Its futility
At the ocean swell.
Water,
Returning to its birthplace,
Pattered on the rithing sea.
The repetition of drops
Splattering the window
Hypnotized him
As he perched
In his cozy home
A birthing song
Ran in his mind;
A song that seemed
To come like a pale light
Behind a gray curtain of water.
The music as soft as

Whispered words of love,
Hummed in his head.
It told him of a river
Coursing green from its spring
In the highlands
To the sea far below.
The lyrics spoke of
The grace of sky-water
Condescending to the earth
Knowing that without it,
There could be no life;
Knowing, too,
That the river and the sea,
Live symbiotically.
He looked along the cliffs,
Past the lighthouse,
To a crumbling building
He knew in his sleep
As a ruddy, golden light
That now resembled
A bedraggled den.
Waterlogged and wind-unroofed
The building served its last use,
A landmark.
That's me, he thought,
No longer the master of
A thriving home
Filled with the energy of
Our three sons
And our own youth,
Now I'm a decrepit shell
Lazing in artificial warmth.
He looked again
To the lighthouse
Bedimmed by the mass of
Pelting, life-giving water
To the disheveled plants below.

The waves no longer visible,
Their roar lost
In the beat of the wind
The branches whipped erratically
While water-slicked Juncos
And Yellow-rumped Warblers
Flitted among them to
The shelter of the house
And back,
Repellant-feathered birds
In water-burdened air.
They rode the pine needles
Like jolly sailor boys up,
And up aloft.
And I'm the land-lubber
Lying down below,
Below, below,
He said to himself,
No longer weather-proof,
Cobbled by a storm.
Veils varnished the tree trunks
And polished the fence posts
Around the sodden fields
Where a flock of Wild Turkeys
Walked, their sexton coats
Held firm by their wings
Clutched unctuously behind them.
They circled the puddles
With pomp
Marred only by the limp
Of the trailing bird
Gimping through
An inch of water
Above the meadow.
And is that not me,
Frail and of
Numbered days,

Tagging along behind
The young and healthy?
He said aloud.
A shingle flapping
On a neighbor's roof,
Reminded him of
His boyhood milk tooth
That resisted its doom
When he wiggled it.
He looked at the Monterey pines
Twisting in a chance
To yank away from their anchor,
Mother Earth,
And remembered the severance of
His own and his sons'
Apron strings.
He listened as
Wind-agitated pellets of
Water machine-gunned the house.
Ripples descending the glass of
The south-facing window
Blurred the outside world
Like the cataracts
He awaited with horror.
As the lights came on again,
The north-facing pane
That remained clear,
Reflected his face,
Pale as a wedding cake.
But,
There is consolation in age,
He mused.
For my wife and I
Have survived many troubles,
And whatever inconvenience
This weather brings,
Will be but a variation on

A previous theme.
We will watch it
Through this northern window.
Whereas Joel is young
And unburnished by experience,
His is the southern exposure.
Lunch time, she called to him.
Coming, love.
He smiled and took a last look
At the wind-whipped gray
Blasting by his windows
And descended the stairs.
Pity we can't go
And sort out
Joel's financial mess today,
He told her.
I called him
And got a rain-check,
She said.
Ooh! he winced,
I don't like that word
...Rain.