

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.