

# HOW MUCH FOR THE EARTH? A SUITE OF POEMS: ABOUT TIME FOR CONSIDERING

*Emma Lou Thayne*

The peril of extinction brings us up against this reality,  
this simple basic fact: Before there can be good or evil,  
service or harm, lamenting or rejoicing, there must be life.\*

## ABOUT CONSIDERING

*Consider* is the word  
the bishops used last fall  
as counsel to their people concerning buildup  
for a war by holocaust. Consider.

A not-bad word, considering.  
It makes you grateful you exist and can —  
consider, that is.  
You pay attention, you notice.  
You want to be worthy of considering, consideration.

That's after all how you decide what hurts or makes you happy.  
In this of all matters, it matters.

Given the idea, it is not a question of either words  
or numbers, but something that will keep us humans  
in business, the considering to which God bows,  
to which theories of matter and mattering  
come second if at all.

Relativity. I understand that's where it started.  
Einstein and his "energy equals mass times the speed of light  
squared."

To consider must be relative as well.  
Relative to all I ever learned  
in coming to this moment when speed of light  
squares off against the speed of time.

And what I would consider  
in this late season is: to calculate whether we peacemakers  
shall inherit or destroy  
this blessed earth.

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\* Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*, Avon, N.Y., N.Y., 1982.

## CONSIDERATION I

In Biology I at East High  
I first learned: Matter can neither be created  
nor destroyed, only altered.

Mr. Garratt, all ravaged moustache and rimless glasses,  
moved with buffalo shoulders, walked formaldehyde  
among his vials and microscopes  
intent on frogs' vessels he could pluck with tweezers  
to twang across the cognizance of fifteen-year-olds  
tracing pulses for a grade  
in the science of life.

Once, standing behind his high green counter in B-14  
he lit a strip of litmus  
in the blue gas flame of a Bunsen burner,  
held its slim inches between his thumb and fingers,  
watched the flame lick blue and yellow  
till he had to drop it in a Petrie dish to finish.

From the fourth tier of pocked, armed desks,  
my engines running, I watched the paper burn,  
turn to ash, curl into itself  
first black then grey  
fine as the gossamer of remembering.

Not created. Not destroyed. Altered.

The arm of my desk like a Ouija board lifted  
my hand expecting answers.

But only now the questions:  
After the flames, where the turning  
one way or another? Where the Phoenix?  
The ascension?

Mr. Garratt, considering, I remember  
ashes. Out of which nothing pours, rises, touches  
freezes or floods.

Did what we learned mean anything?

## CONSIDERATION II

In Salt Lake City, the morning of August 6th, 1945, the intersection of First South and Main steamed under pedestrian traffic. Street cars clanked out passengers from their middles, took them up and in on flop-down steps in front. A few cars cruised the block for angled parking they would likely find in front of First Security, Montgomery Ward, ZCMI.

At 10 A.M. on August 6th, 1945, I was walking east, on break from my first full-time job, theoretically in advertising, actually spraying fourteen hundred and thirty-one colors on poster board at Bennett Glass and Paint. I walked past Dinwoodey's, through the aroma of coffee being ground at Cooks a block away, to the clock in front of Zion's Bank.

Four newsboys  
I could hear before I got there:  
"Big Bomb Dropped on Japs!" "Extra, Extra! War Over Soon!"  
"Extra, Extra! New Atom Bomb!" and "Extra, Extra Hiroshima Bombed!  
Spells Peace!"

On the slant newsstand the fat paper.  
Under the fat headlines, the fat mushroom cloud.  
In the head of a twenty-year-old the wedding  
of hope and destruction.

I was bound to believe.  
Too full of youth and desperation  
not to. At a corner, August shimmering hot and blue  
for Utah, the not inconsiderable considerations:

My brother Homer home from the catapult  
of his carrier in the Pacific. Guam  
and Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima back to maps  
and fiction  
with sun instead of Stan and Clint  
and Wilbur splashing on their shores.

Them back to filling tanks  
and buying steaks and saddle shoes and sugar,  
even nylon stockings for a girl —  
all without a coupon.

Susan's father, Margaret's husband,  
Grant, Parley, Jay — nobody else — ever!  
listed in the paper Missing, Wounded,  
Dead.

No more graveside flags and bugles.  
Stuart out of prison camp,  
back from the Philippines, home.

The bomb?  
Like the sacking of Troy, something to survive forever  
in remembering.

In that time so few things we needed to know. So  
if the bomb ignited Nagasaki too?

In our steady attention to ceremony,  
didn't Admiral Halsey and the Missouri  
plow into Tokyo Bay by the 14th?  
Didn't Hirohito and MacArthur sign us  
into peace for all time?

Didn't we sing "Happy Days are Here Again"?

Knowing what of gene mutations  
for thirty generations and radioactivity  
that could shift monsoons  
and cool the earth?

Didn't we go kissing and honking  
in a giddy, waving hail  
of filled up hallelujahs  
down Main from First South  
bumper to bumper all the way  
to Liberty Park?

Like after any war, the celebrants.

The only thing created:  
the power to destroy.

A finer ash  
than litmus, Mr. Garratt.  
A long long way past Troy.

## CONSIDERATION III

In the 60s my freshman English classes stayed  
 at maybe thirty. Names came easy — in college  
 only surnames plus Mr., Miss, now and then a Mrs.  
 Polite and dignified the distance between rollbook  
 and desks. But like most affected distances  
 yielding to insistent 60s leaping of the gaps.

In English 2 the research paper  
 written partly from a Source Book so I the teacher  
 could substantiate the footnotes,  
 interpret the interpretations, grade  
 considerations.

Mr. Kerowski, behind Miss Dodd, right hand rear  
 of Orson Spencer 118 at 7:45, wore bib overalls,  
 toyed at his temple with blond frizz backed into a pony tail.  
 His French blue eyes took on John Hersey's *Hiroshima*  
 like stil ponds with wooded edges,  
 reflecting, absorbing, giving back. Once he asked  
 in class, considering, "Mrs. Thayne, did you really see  
 the pictures then — the eyes?"

I knew he meant the unbelieving eyes  
 in that 60s source book.

And yes, I saw them  
 in the seeping faces  
 and tried then to remember if first  
 before or after Don next door came home,  
 his destroyer drydocked, and thirty-thousand like him  
 on the G. I. Bill come back to life in Utah  
 to sit in classrooms where Mr. Kerowski and inquisitor  
 Miss Dodd, brown eyed and abundant, now a quarter century  
 later sat, her asking, "So what would those few days  
 have meant? The war was over, American authorities — they  
 knew — not a week at most before surrender would have come —  
 and those people — hundreds of thousands  
 turned to pulp  
 in Hiroshima . . ."

All those quarters I told about December 7th —  
 what I remembered of the Day of Infamy  
 to justify, to justify: the flag, the Star Spangled Banner,  
 Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt  
 and us at seventeen packed into the Union Building Ballroom  
 listening to the declaration, wondering  
 what war was.

We who could not know that flame would  
 follow flame until the word for war was a word on fire,  
 in even our cloistered mountain deserts The Red Cross,  
 the USO, and men from Kearns in stiff boots  
 on their way overseas dancing meantime  
 on our floors and  
 in our dreams ashes to ashes  
 about to justify, to justify.

And Don and Scott and Rob and Homer —  
 of the thirty-thousand home, how many  
 would have died? I tried to keep on asking  
 and graded thirty, sixty, ninety research papers  
 some written so well I could tell  
 it happened again, again Hiroshima

that quarter and the next and next

not what the scientists and admirals and source book  
 brought to mind, but what my students saw,  
 what I remembered:

Torako Hironaka.

In her eyes a field of watermelons split,  
 a dead horse,  
 burned down power lines.  
 Her breasts torn,  
 Torako naked  
 walking in fragments of glass  
 crying "Aigo! Aigo!"

Her a vast sorrow  
 in the unforgettable fire  
 among other naked girls crying "Stupid America!"

My America.  
My land of liberty and noble intention.

To whom I sang, sing.

And me grading papers  
looking at myself  
and fire and ashes  
with eyes only starting to see.



## CONSIDERATION IV

In the 50s we had five daughters.  
They were one thing  
growing up and dating boys who in the 70s  
missed Viet Nam  
but went away to summer camp  
and made black jokes about the military.

But then they married. And I have seen  
five grandsons and two baby girls  
born in these eight years.

Each time it's gone like this —  
five months ago for Coulson Paul,  
six weeks ago for Michael Abraham —  
I in that delivery room in my greens  
official photographer.

I never saw my children born,  
but bringing in another generation  
I saw it all:

The mother, our daughter, pushing, obedient.

The doctor deft, all rubber hands and arms.

The father and I watching in rapture, terror, awe:

The coming!  
The breathless what is "it"?  
Mottled scalp. Bluish head.  
White face. Turkey neck. Chest  
more narrow than the head. Arms  
akimbo.  
Frog belly still connected.

A boy! A blazing genital boy.

Lifeless.

Smooth clay, lavender  
under cottage cheese netting.

The cord a milksnake  
snapped  
clamped.  
Syringe into mouth.  
All of him dangling from the big gloved hands  
re-arranging him.

Breahe, little boy! Breathe!

Then, the life!

His one-inch hand with bright pink nails  
opening. His lower lip curling.  
The tiny tongue pushing out.  
His head back — Waa!

The chest rising,  
knees coming up. Feet kicking. Arms  
flailing.

A sniff of oxygen from a miniature mask.

Into a blanket.  
Given to his father.  
Taken to his mother.  
Me forgetting to snap what I came for.

No. We all had what I came for:

The wanted baby. Alive and well.

No. More.  
The pure gift.  
Life.  
God's hand handing,  
the voice saying, "Let there be *life*." And  
"It is very good."

Still in my greens  
I went to make my call.  
The walls sang, the doors and staircases  
danced.

I tried to tell on the phone what had happened.  
It came out, "He's here. Seven ten. He's just fine.  
So is his mother."

But in my car, my compact Fiesta Plum  
I turned up E Street to high 11th Avenue.

I could see the mountains, the valley,  
the city spangling on a hot July night.  
On my stereo Anna Moffo sang the aria with flute  
from Lucia.

"Birds," I thought, "streams and wind songs in trees.

My whole life."

Not a specific held in my head.

Only a giant rising and flowing  
like the tears in that room,  
that delivery room.

Delivery? Deliverance? Delivered?

I had been part of what makes clouds or the smell of rain  
or the rhythm of sleeping and waking up. My skin  
was the skin of the sky,  
my traveling flight.  
My arrival as ongoing as prayer.

Going home I would never be the same. I had been  
home. Where else was there to go?

Now these weeks and months away from that astonishment  
I think of babies  
growing up to smile, touch,  
run and sing and cry.

And one day to see their own be born.

And of the tons of dust and debris fused with  
intensely radioactive fission products and sucked up  
into the mushroom cloud, the mixture to return to earth  
as radioactive fallout, most of it in the form of fine  
ash, the sky and the earth altered.

11th Avenue gone  
and no mountains  
no radiant city  
to exult with in the night.

Coulson Paul Rich or Michael Abraham Markosian  
or maybe even Katie Ann Kilgore  
ghosts?  
Mustered to contend with  
what is left by arsenals of armaments:  
Ashes?

And I say No. For them for me, for all of us  
with lots of places yet to go.

No. No thank you. No.

## CONSIDERATION V

Thinking of her white hair never put in a bob  
 and her fingers lumped around needles  
 I called my Aunt Edna to say, "I've tried to reach you  
 to come for Sunday dinner."

I could feel  
 her unhurrying smile up out of her hurrying.  
 She's eighty-three. "If you ever want to reach me,"  
 she said, "call before seven or after eleven. I'm  
 with the Happy-Go-Luckies."

I do now, knowing  
 she's off somewhere other hours with the band,  
 the big harmonica band of the 10th East Senior Citizens' Center.  
 Mostly they're booked weeks ahead, at Christmas time months.  
 "How many are you?" I ask.

"Oh, maybe sixty  
 when we're all together." I can feel her beam.

"Do you get any training to play?"

"Oh sure, our leader, Ab —  
 he's really something. He tells you where to find the hole  
 and then you just blow draw blow."

Blow draw blow? No valves? No mouth and tongue  
 and hands arranged for sharps or flats? The band I hear  
 is better than the old calliope at Liberty Park.  
 They can go wishful as a bow on a saw by a man in prison  
 or ragamuffin as a turkey trot on Halloween.  
 These old ones who have perfected their fears and celebrations.

They've had time. Like Aunt Edna gathering eggs,  
 throwing balls at Morgan County fairs, run off at seventeen  
 to marry, stand on cement floors to sell men's lapels,  
 this year's wide, next year's narrow in ZC's budget store,  
 ride the bus at eight and six without vexation  
 to fix the meals and bottle the fruit  
 and plant the chrysanthemums for five children  
 and a husband "predisposed to drink."

Until the children married,  
he died, and she retired at seventy  
to her unlonely music and the shawls  
crocheted for over sixty babies  
in a solitude cramming her lifetime together  
where a thousand hands could not accommodate  
her generous resolve to get on with life. She continues,  
Aunt Edna.

The continuers.

I used to have a string of them to play across by screen  
in the night when my own visions ran pale: Mother, Father,  
twelve uncles and my varigated aunts, even grandmas  
and their slow syllables on my unlighted spaces.

I could count on them to speak a language I never  
could not understand: To tell me how.

Now, them forced  
one at a time from the screen, only Aunt Edna remains  
to say, to show or tell me where she already is,  
has come from. And she, my only history now  
about to become another missing face.

I want her at my table.  
Through her I can walk past myself  
and remember what is yet to come. But at that table  
mostly I am older than the rest. The house has thickened.  
My husband and I, brothers, sisters, friends  
startle ourselves with lingering past the childhood  
that no longer includes us. We have grown huge with our following  
as our clusters of kin and contemporaries thin out  
till everywhere now is a dead and a living place.

We will find each other next in a dream,  
our boundaries having moved with us,  
no one left to look to but ourselves. So little time  
for the looking to each other.

In the quiet, in my clumps of thought  
I am joined now by your music, Aunt Edna.  
I lie in bed and spread the light of it  
with my fingers on the wall  
where the shapes slide and become a calligraphy,  
the signs of a language we speak only in shadows.

It says, Consider: Coming to know how to blowdrawblow  
is right. Knowing how  
before you die to grow so keenly old must be the answer:  
There in your late music.

Experts tell us that in the thermal pulse two miles across  
any human beings would be reduced to smoke and ashes.  
They would simply disappear. Babies, old folks,  
us in between the same.  
With no history left to rely on  
or music to pass along.

Or a word to say I loved you all . . .

But not enough  
to end the race to stockpile devastation  
before it ended us.

What fear compels us more than what we love?  
What does it matter what we know?  
Where might be the courage to blow draw blow?

## CONSIDERATION VI

The man at Dachau  
didn't know of course that I was watching him,  
me for my first time in Europe that August of 1982  
sprung giddy from the Jungfrau, Lake Geneva  
Eurail, *pension*, a bus of swaying shoulders  
through Munich to Dachau.

This we thought would be a place to look at fear  
and how to overcome it. But in the museum a single film  
had been enough for me: Ignited eyes, boned corpses.  
I chose to wait, solitary, on cement steps to an old entry  
while my family went to tour the ovens.  
Despairing in that stark enclosure, I thought,  
"Is this how we grope our way past the terrors,  
of this century? By coming to this place of gloom?  
Here where life is written off before it has begun?"

But thirty feet away a man my age stood in the vast  
square of gravel and took over my personal history.

He and I were alone in that place that is a place,  
me on my steps in my Levi skirt and running shoes,  
him in his light blue suit and shirt and tie,  
even his hair like women dipped in bluing,  
his DeGaulle profile an imprint  
on the rain-heavy sky. He leaned up from a strand  
of mahogany cane, alert  
as if in one of those childhood games  
played only after dark, everyone frightened  
of being found.

He stared across the desolate parade ground.  
His gaze, like memory pulled across a rasp, riveted  
on the blue plaster barracks and the one door, a blue door,  
as if it had scent and vibration across the distance  
to his face and was waving him back through history.



He watched the door, I watched him, both of us  
 at eye level with that dead and living picture:  
 Behind him an L of grass. Beyond it the black metal sculpture:  
 Bodies, fingers, knees — going up in smoke. Out of sight  
 a child wailing MaMaaaa. A far rim of trees, not one  
 old.

Their leaves of course contained in them instructions to fall.  
 They would whirl unamazed into the next season. Others would  
 be back green, new growth no more than  
 the changing of skins.

But the seasons that had turned that man and me  
 grey had not prepared us for letting go.  
 I felt what it was like to be part of a space not mine,  
 to shiver at wanting something to hold to  
 and having only shards even to grasp for. He became all I had,  
 the present, a presence: He will always be here.

He stares without motion, involved as a lover  
 awaiting a lover in a crowd. Like a camera his gaze inches  
 from end to end of the barracks, returns, returns  
 to the door. It is more than a memorial he is attending.  
 The building keeps everything; it remembers.  
 He listens to its voices with a look of such sadness  
 I want to touch it away. Who might have known I could be  
 so held by what passes between a stranger and the years,  
 him searching for a day and finding it?

From his blue door, what corpses thrown out,  
 limbs so smooth they might have been alive?  
 Civilian? Soldier? Captive? Was he one who with calipers  
 extracted teeth and ran? Where might those legs have been?  
 And how did they perform in Dachau?  
 It is happening again in the blue of his eyes  
 on that blue door.

Eyes still on the door, he turns, tries to vanish  
 as a person would having seen it all.  
 But his body speaks.  
 Its faithless legs become flippers.  
 They do not walk, they go toe first,  
 calf extended, toe, heel, hinges sprung  
 to flop ahead past the ballast of the flimsy cane,  
 toe after toe dragging in gravel,  
 a masterpiece of regret, holy and helpless.

Retreating, he halts at a three-inch step.  
He reaches hand to knee  
pulls each leg up, over.  
Eyes still on the door  
in a day that revolves too close around us both,  
he pulls himself erect. Contained, as if wound

he starts up again, loses his saving shape,  
plummets  
like a timber to the iron fence,  
his cane a small crash.

His hands, free and ready  
as if part of an act no one wanted to see,  
catch the skeleton that hauls itself together,  
straightens,  
and like a movie of destruction playing backwards  
flop flop flip flops,  
a blue stick figure off and gone from everything  
but the camera in my grey head.

It's five o'clock. The parade ground  
is almost empty. My family are still somewhere  
maybe underground, touring.

And if they were never to come back? Who would I be?  
I who thought I was the sort of girl to leave a page  
because one hand held another,  
or could skim or skip some altogether.

But not so. The six million  
talk to me without their crypts and ashes.

Like my man in blue they have teeth to brush  
and loves to find  
and blue doors needing to be looked into.

Now here they come, the alive ones,  
my four dears back from the furnaces  
walking from behind the sign MUSEUM.

Under it the large outstanding script  
in four languages: NEVER AGAIN.

Suppose the ovens were thermal nuclear?  
Out of them clouds of dust  
and mushroom clouds spreading over  
anywhere we were, coming together  
to form vast canopies, to turn day into night.  
Fires would spring up in Munich  
and Mt. Air Canyon —  
in every forest dry enough to burn,  
in the seeping rubbish of Salt Lake City  
and Sanpete County. And in San Francisco,  
Bangkok  
Florence  
Bombay  
Kiev  
and Chad, Nigeria.

The world would simply go from boom to fire to ash.

Evacuation? Shelters?

No way.  
No hole big enough  
to hide or bury  
all of us or nature in.

And no one left  
to consider: Even extermination  
was not extinction.

More than NEVER AGAIN —

NEVER!

Not even now the last consideration —  
the bleak obscenity  
of racing to out race each other  
to the end.

## CONSIDERING — THE END

So finally I consider only life: The holocaust ahead  
would leave no one behind  
to question how we happened not to happen  
in any moment but our tragic own.

I have only one voice, one language,  
one set of memories to look back on,  
a thousand impulses to look ahead  
if I will  
if there is time  
to consider:  
How much for the earth?  
what would I keep?

Blue mountains against a black sky,  
Smiles exchanged so well we do not know our ages or conditions.

Snow melted, leaves moving again,  
In a voice, rain finding its way to the stream.

Heat rising like wands from the desert,  
A could drink, the touch of hair enough all by itself.

First apricot pickle sharp, a phone ringing on time,  
Lights going on, wanting them off for the dark.

A song flooded with memory, smell of pinon in fire, onion in stew,  
A dancer watched like a child, a child in flight like a dancer.

Hot soup, hot bath, hot air to take to the canyon,  
Aging slowly from the bones outward, time to pick and choose.

A wooden spoon, the white whisper of a needle in cloth,  
Laughing like tossed water, skis on snow.

Smell of soap, hot animal. An apple, crisp. A ball hit,  
Tongue of a lover, dream of a dead mother stroking our cheek.

An idea, the Pieta, the Hand of God, a word, a prayer,  
The word, the earth far from without form and void.

The earth created and not destroyed. If altered,  
not back to darkness upon the face of the deep.

You, me, combinations of color and sound,  
The spirit of God moving upon the waters.

A child born, an aunt with reason to blow draw blow,  
A celebration for the end of war. A new generation inevitable.

The coming of sun because it is good.  
A world alive for a blue door to open onto.

A candle, a kiss, eyes meeting. Holding.  
Life — to consider.

Then no more considering, hypothesizing, tolerating.

No litmus-paper ending in a cosmic Petrie dish.

No more silence.

For the earth?

For the life in me, in you,  
I say Yes. Yes thank you, Yes.

In your breath fused with mine  
Even ashes stir and glow.

It's time. It's time we said together  
Yes to life. To ashes, simply No.

*EMMA LOU THAYNE, a poet living in Salt Lake City, recently returned from the Soviet Union where, among other poems, she read these. Originally written to accompany a performance of Bach music performed by David Freed, these poems were published in a limited edition, with permission, for Utahns United Against Nuclear War. They have since been translated into German and Russian.*