daodejing

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I AM a Daodejing junky. I have read every translation that I have managed to get my hands on. I buy new ones when they are published.

The following is my reading of the Daodejing. I have read the Daodejing as a spiritual practice every day for many years. For the past several years, I have done this reading with a word-processing file open, working on my own version. When I got the chance to read two more translations—this time in the matrix of creativity produced by watching two poets (also Daodejing junkies!) working on the Daodejing chapter by chapter with me—I was overjoyed.

In one way, the Daodejing is infuriating: the text merely turns the obvious on its head, claiming that the culturally conditioned response is wrong—is out of balance with the way of the universe. Also, the sayings often fall into the Golden Age Fallacy: that things were done correctly in the past, and if we’d just return to the Good Ol’ Days, all would be well.

Despite these faults, the Daodejing has great power. I suspect that this power (falling into my own Golden Age Fallacy, perhaps) stems from the fact that the text is an elegant summary of ancient, shamanistic, revelation...a worldwide phenomenon.

So much of earth-based spirituality has been edited out of Western philosophy and religion that the words of the Dao sound like divine revelation. Yet, at base, the wisdom of the Daodejing lies in its simple evocation of the ways of nature, of the creativity of the cosmos. Water runs downhill! Westerners are fascinated to hear something that sounds so simple, yet is so easily forgotten.

The most profound lesson of the Daodejing, however, is what it does not say. It does not claim that the universe has meaning or purpose. We learn how to find our own meaning and purpose by observing the universe, but that is merely human meaning and purpose. The Way goes on, heedless of the human quest for meaning.

We forget these simple and profound revelations to our peril.

David Breeden
Minneapolis, Minnesota
March 2014
MY PROCESS was initially reading the translation that Steve would post, which I would then copy into my hardcover journal whose sole purpose was a workbook for Daodejing. My approach was to place my self in the forefront of Steve’s translation with an amount of veneration, then, and this was always crucial, to find, and more appropriately discover, where the lyric core of the poem arose from. When I found that, then my own rendering flowed. However, it may have been one or two of the middle lines, perhaps an image at the end, and most usually, especially toward the conclusion of Daodejing, with the beginning lines, that I was able to locate the source of the flow of each particular verse.

My attempt was not only to render ‘our old teacher,’ Laozi, but to play off of Steve’s translation—much like how John Coltrane released the sweet torrent of sound from his saxophone in harmonizing with Johnny Hartman’s voice, and Johnny Hartman’s debonair baritone rising to meet that effusion of Coltrane’s grace notes—but also my purpose was to limn Steve’s meaning; to shadow a phrase, here and there; and to offer both clarity and a mirror to the perpetuity of the sage’s import and wisdom.

Steve’s invitation for me to participate in this interactive rendering of Dao, is a watershed event for me—one in which I have prepared for all of my writing life. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with both Steve Schroeder and David Breeden, who both provided the appropriate alchemy for my own lyrical contributions to the project. I first came across the Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English translation of Laozi when I was twenty, over forty years ago in New Haven, when I was also reading every Eastern classic I could assimilate, as well as practicing Zazen with a small group of people in the basement of Yale Divinity School Chapel. Although I augmented my reading of Steve’s translations with the Feng and English version, and often enough chose to strike a balance between the two to actually and effectively fashion a new rendering, I have also treasured Ursula K. LeGuin’s translation, as well as Stephen Mitchell’s, who, on occasion, as I recall, was one of the other participants in sitting meditation in the basement at the Divinity School Chapel, when he was grad student at Yale.

So, my being invited to render Laozi has been completing an enormous circle for me, as Joseph Campbell, whose voluminous works of comparative religion and mythology I have studied, might point out as being the hero’s journey. In that time it is not only
Campbell who I found both inspiration and guidance from, much after my discovery of Laozi, but also the psycho-spirituality of the modern mystic Carolyn Myss, and the high octane spirituality of The Guide Lectures, channeled by Eva Pierrakos, among many others, whose writing regarding higher consciousness have affected me, such as Pema Chodron, Katherine MacCoun, and Eckhart Tolle—all of whose insights, at least partially, I have integrated, and that have lent themselves to becoming some of the very philosophical underpinnings of my renderings of Daodejing.

It is with gratitude, and an active humility, that I thank everyone here that I have mentioned by name, including, of course, ‘our old teacher,’ and offer a deep appreciation for the verses themselves, as well as for Yinxì, the sentry at the western gate, who, apocryphally or not, stopped Laozi, and asked him to record his wisdom before moving on, into the frontier, beyond, which as a result was Daodejing—for it is as if I have come to meet them both, stepping out of the western frontier of the future, to greet them in the eternal now of the present, in which we all have come together, with our hands placed firmly palm to palm, bowing to one another, in unison, not to affect benefit for ourselves, but for the positive intent and good will of every reader.

Wally Swist
South Amherst, Massachusetts
March 2014
I FIRST encountered Laozi forty years ago in the beautiful translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. I was an undergraduate at Valparaiso University at the time, but I had the advantage of reading him out of class as a happy discovery – one of those chance encounters with a stranger that turns into a lifelong friendship. The Chinese calligraphy and photos that accompanied the translation made it a visually memorable experience, and the Colorado mountains placed the text in familiar territory – not quite home, but close.

The traditional story of how this text came to be didn’t much register at the time; but it has come to be more important to me as I have crossed more borders. As the story goes, the character who came to be known simply as “old teacher” had been an aparchtik in the imperial court but headed west when he grew sick of politics. When he arrived at the western frontier, a guard recognized him and demanded that he write down his teaching before he could pass. I’ve had enough border encounters to have a clear vision of an eighteen year old kid with a Kalashnikov demanding something in a place where there are not many common words – so it’s not hard for me to imagine the old teacher sampling and remixing freely if that’s what it would take to get him over.

That this wonderfully mystical text is so deeply rooted in a place of few words and intent on finding what it takes to be on one’s way has shaped my reading of mysticism since. It is about this, that, and the other, making our way, and it is a masterpiece of making do. That is exactly what I expect of a philosophy of language in a world such as ours where friends and strangers standing in the way often demand our full attention.

Still, we carry on.

This begins, I think, as a sort of parallel play...

I began by posting a rough translation of each verse as I read it, making my way with very limited Chinese, staying as close to what I thought the old master said as I thought I could in English.

And moves toward play in conversation...

After reading what Wally and David posted, I tried again, this time straying a bit further into poetry. And then I turned to a wider circle—conversations with Sou Vai Keng and Huichun Liang, discussion with students in the Asian Classics program at the Uni-
versity of Chicago Graham School, translations by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, Red Pine, Chad Hansen, and others—and tried again.

That third pass, often repeated again and again—a reading in English that takes the form of poetry in conversation with a circle of friends with what little we know of the old master in mind—is my contribution to the present work.

But what matters in all of this is the silence between lines, the kind of silence that is possible between friends. Just between you and me, between is where I would direct your attention in Laozi and in what follows.

Steven Schroeder
Chicago, Illinois
March 2014
Talking the talk is not walking the walk. Naming a name means another name. Name nothing, and the world begins. Naming is the mother of ten thousand things.

Desire nothing, see wonder. Desire more, see nothing but what you happen to see. One source, two names. Say wonder, say wonder, say wonder again. Open a door on wonder upon wonder.

Walking the way is not the true walk of the way. When we speak the name of the way, it is not the real name.

When everything began, it grew out of the name; and the name of the word is the mother of the ten thousand things.

When we desire nothing, we see what is; when we want more, we become blind. What transpires, transpires, as a spring—and the fountain runs, from the source.

However, there are two names for what is but one; the one that is whole—when these are found together, we enter a realm of mystery.

This mystery opens when we no longer see it as mystery—again, on its threshold, the door to self is no door at all.
Everyone knows beauty as beauty because there is something they despise.

The good is known as good because there is no good.

Having and not having give birth to each other.

Hard and easy change into each other.

Long and short shape each other.

High and low rest on each other.

Sound and voice blend.

Front and back follow each other.

The work of the sage is to do nothing, to go about teaching not talking.

Ten thousand things come and go. Give birth and there is nothing to rely on. Dwell on nothing and it will not pass away.

When we see beauty, we know of ugliness.

When we recognize the excellent, we know there is shoddy.

seen and unseen flow from each other.

The difficult and the easy go 'round and around.

Long and short; high and low;

before and after; noise and music—

each exists because of the other.

This is why those free of themselves act without expectations, teach without words.

In every action they act according to the will of the action.

They act without fuss, but act in power.

Those who boast that they know beauty spurn the beautiful, and make it repulsive. Those who claim to know the good, as good, breed arrogance. What is emerges from what is not; and although both are opposites, each depends on the other. What is difficult becomes easy, and what is simple never refrains from being hard. Length is measured as much by how long it is as by how often it comes up short.

What is elevated recedes; whoever is knocked down has reason enough to stand up again. The cellist releases the mystic voice of the cello through long practice. When she sleeps with her front to my back, I awaken to the warmth of her breasts pressing against me. The sage's advice is to not do anything, and echoes this by teaching without pedantry. The ten thousand things are both nascent and passing—all at once. We need to let go, if we want to become one with what is. Whatever it is that we seek, we must learn to let go of any notion of letting go, for us to be resilient enough to receive it.
Not thinking themselves worthy means people have nothing to fight about.

Not possessing expensive things means people have nothing to steal.

Not looking with desire means people’s hearts are not confused.

The wise rule by emptying hearts, stuffing bellies, weakening wills, strengthening bones.

The people neither know nor desire, and the wise don’t dare.

So that nothing will happen, have nothing to control.

Not believing that you are worthy gives no one a reason to fight about whether or not you are unworthy. Not possessing what is expensive offers reason not to steal. Not looking at what is desirous cinctures the heart.
The wise rule by emptying the hearts of the people and by filling their bellies; by subjugating their ambition and by making their bones strong. If people find themselves unaware, they instinctively desire knowledge. Those who are wise practice the art of wei wu wei—doing nothing about doing nothing.

So, when nothing is happening, everything is in order;

and there is nothing to resist—there is no need to exercise control.

Why promote the upper crust when it only leads to wrangling?

When fancy things are not prized, no one steals.

Desire for things leads to disorder.

Those free of themselves encourage peaceful minds out for only basic needs.

When grasping stops, the bones get strong.

Sages discourage contriving and desire, and when some contrive and desire, sages put a stop to it.

By embracing harmony, they create good order everywhere.
Dao is empty,  
used but not filled,  
an abyss like the ancestor  
of ten thousand things.

Bend the edge,  
untangle the knot,  
blend light with dust.

Clear as though present,  
I do not know whose child it is.

It is as though it was  
before the first emperor.

If dao is a vessel, it is empty;  
if it is used, it can never be filled.

If dao is an abyss, its ancestor  
is original emptiness.

If dao is a source, it is the spring  
of ten thousand things.

Blunt what is sharp;  
unravel what is snarled;

merge as dust motes  
infuse a column of sunlight;

make clear what is ever-present.  
If dao is a child, whose child is it?

Oh, it wanders endlessly,  
evén long before the forgotten

memories of the first emperor’s  
forefather—

always at home in the world,  
preceding earliest history.

The way of the creative universe  
is emptiness. It never fills up.

It is deep, the source of everything.  
It blunts edges, untangles knots;

it blends light and dark and  
brings all things into harmony.

The way goes on and on.  
I do not know whose child

it is; it just was, before  
the oldest of ancestors.
The world, heartless, uses the ten thousand things as straw dogs.

The sage, heartless, uses common people as straw dogs.

Is the space between heaven and earth not like a bellows?

Empty but unyielding, every motion makes more—but more talk makes poor, inferior to what is guarded inside.

Heaven and earth don’t give a damn.

The universe treats everything like so many straw dogs.

Just so the rulers of the earth treat others like so many straw dogs.

The space between sky and earth is empty, like a bellows, moving and moving—always out puffs more, more.

Take care of what is within yourself:

the outside will never stop moving and moving.

It is said disinterest kills passion and stifles love, and those who dwell in the world toss the ten thousand things as they would straw dogs into the gutter, after their purposes are finished. After the ceremony is over, even the sage has been seen throwing a straw dog among the real curs that prowl the cobbles of the street.

It is also said that the people choose to follow the sage in treating other people as straw dogs.

Is not the dynamic between heaven and earth much like a forge that is fanned by a bellows?

The answer is that maybe it is—and that its shape may change but what is formless doesn’t change at all. However, like spring mist, the more we pursue it, the farther it moves away; and the more we attempt to define it with words, the more undefinable it remains. We must learn to listen to true guidance, to what it is inside us that facilitates our locating the center, especially after we have found it—since it moves.
Valley spirit never dies.
We call it a mysterious woman.
This mysterious woman is a door we call
the world: like a silk veil, used but not used up.

What is eternal is valley spirit.
It is known as a mysterious woman—
descendant of the great mother.
Such a woman of mystery is a door—
a door that opens to the world,
to what is primal:
a silk veil flowing on and on—
diaphanous, barely visible.

Use it, and it will never fail you.
Allow yourself to use it, wisely.

Permit it to guide you.
It can never be used up.

The valley spirit never dies;
this is the dark mystery.

The gate of the dark is
the source of the world.

Delicate, hidden power
flowing on and on.
Heaven and earth endure.
Heaven and earth last forever.
They last because they are unborn.

So the sage pulls back and is ahead.
He is outside his life, but his life lives.
Seeking nothing, he gains much.

What perpetuates is heaven and earth.
Why do heaven and earth endure?

What is unborn instinctively knows the way,
as with the sage, the same is true—
in drawing into solitude, as the sage’s life deepens.

The aloneness is austere, living on the fringe,
but as the sage’s life opens, through practice,
the sage experiences the coalescence—
as all is one.

Only when we seek nothing do we have everything to gain, do we attain fulfillment—
as the draft that issues through a crack in the sage’s creaking door.

Earth and sky have existed a long time because they do not exist for themselves.

Learning from this, those free of themselves put themselves last, yet find themselves first—
those free of themselves forget themselves, yet find all is well.

Selflessness leads to understanding the self.
The highest good is like water. 
Water is good for ten thousand things. 

It does not fight. It makes its place 
in the place everyone despises. 
It is on the right track. 

Dwell on good earth, 
think deeply, 
act kindly, 
speak truly, 
govern justly, 
manage competently, 
move in good time. 
No fight, no blame. 

What is the highest good? 
The highest good is like water. 

Water nourishes the ten thousand things. 
It does not strive. 

It flows— 
in places most people find out of the way. 

It resembles the highest good— 
as does dao. 

To dwell, take ease when 
woodswalking the splendor of the land. 

To think, penetrate the heart’s lyre. 
To act, respond to others from within 
your own center, with love. 
To speak, be kind, enunciate distinctly. 

To influence, remember 
a container holding the shape of water. 

To succeed, when 
doing business, do so with integrity. 

To find your destiny, 
exercise presence moment to moment. 

Don’t fight— 
it’s no lie, there’s no one to blame. 

Learn from water. 
It benefits all as it seeks 
the lowest places 
without expectations. 

For a house, the question 
is location. For the mind, 
the question is depth. 

When it comes to giving, 
nature is the model; 
when it comes to speaking, 
it is care with words. 

Govern, it’s about order; 
in business, it’s about 
how to use time. 

The wise do not wrangle, 
nor do they judge.
Better to stop at full than to pour more. Sharper does not mean longer lasting. Fill a house with treasure, and no one can protect it.

No one can protect wealth and vanity from the blame that follows them. Retire when your work is done. This is heaven’s way.

Whether pouring water or wine, it is best to the fill glass but to stop short of the brim. Honing the knife’s edge beyond its capacity for sharpness dulls the blade. Accrue what is priceless, and you will never be able to hire enough guards to protect it. Acquire silver, inherit gold, or become court poet—however, you will never be able to exonerate yourself from the concatenation of calamities that will hound you like your own shadow. When the work is finished, know that it is time to put away the tools—know that this is not only the true way, but the way of heaven.

Fill a cup too full and it spills. Keep sharpening a point, and it becomes dull. A house filled treasure is not safe. When wealth and honors plant arrogance, the harvest is tragedy.

The way of the creative universe lies in doing the work, then knowing when to stop.
Seeking the dark soul,
embracing the one,
can you keep it
together?

Can you breathe soft as a baby?
Can you cleanse your dark vision,
be without blemish?

Loving your country,
can you govern the people
without being clever?

Can you be the woman at heaven’s gate?

Understanding all
four corners of the world,
can you be ignorant? Giving birth
to beings - giving birth but not possessing,
not controlling, not slaughtering.
We call this dark de.

Are you able to persevere through
the dark night and to become aware that what follows any
brightness of magnitude is always requisite to darkness;
are you able to keep what is one whole;

can you become a child again—
and to see with such clarity, that it is not so far removed
from having recently been in the bardo;
are you able to clean the corroded lens of your original
vision; can the stain be rinsed away;
are you able to love every man, and
in so doing, equitably rule your country, without artifice;
are you able to become like a woman empowered,

standing beside the gates of heaven, knowing
the winds of the four directions, and to be open to them;
is it possible for you to reclaim your innocence again,
and to honor the way, by doing nothing;

can you give birth to and nourish
whom you have given life to, without possessing them;
are you able to work, but to not take credit for what is
your own inimitably fine craftsmanship;

can you influence, with confidence, but not directly
command? All of this, as impossible as it sounds, is—
the meaning of de, it is what is known as mysterious,
is active virtue as favorable darkness.
Can body and mind embrace?
With attention to the breath,
we can become gentle.

With attention to thoughts,
we clear away flaws.

Loving people and leading
must be done without pride.

The sky’s gate opens and shuts
in birth and in death,
yin and yang changing,

and on. And on.

Those free of themselves
see in all directions; very
clearly they are wise.

The way of the creative universe
creates and nourishes. Yet it
does not demand or boast.

The way accomplishes everything,
yet makes no claims at all.

It rules over all
without controlling
anything.

This is the mystery
of the way.
Thirty spokes make a wheel, but nothing makes it work.

A pot is made of clay, but nothing makes it work.

Chisel a door in a room, and nothing makes it work.

Profit comes from what is there, but nothing makes it work.

The wheel’s hub contains thirty spokes; however, they all revolve around the empty space at the center.

Throw a pot of clay; shape it into an urn—what is useful is the emptiness to be filled within.

Cut a space in a room for a door; install jambs and screws to hang it—it is the emptiness created through which you will walk, as it swings open.

We benefit from what is inherent within.

We find what is useful from what is not.

No matter how many spokes a wheel may have, it is the hole at the center that makes it work.

Clay makes cups and bowls, yet it is the hollowness that makes them useful.

Walls make a room, yet the empty space between is where we live.

What is there is useful;

what is not there is useful too.
Five colors make the eye blind. Five tones make the ear deaf. Five flavors make the mouth numb. Racing and hunting make the mind mad. Hard to get things get in our way, so the sage follows the gut, not the eye, lets that go to get this.

What blinds the eye?—the five colors; and what about the ear, how are we made deaf?—the five tones; then what could dull our taste, the palate, our tongue?—nothing other than the five flavors; so, what makes our mind seethe with the carbides of madness—that makes it race, always the pedal to the floor, hurtling us through space, in our pursuit of those thoughts which turn on us?—isn’t this what hunts us down? Whatever we overvalue, anything we hold precious, leads us away from what is intrinsic, from the original source—but it is the sage who hears the voice within, and listens—to what?

To let go of all that—like the radiant, streaking the sky with a shower of Perseids—choose to get to this.

Too many colors confuse the sight; too many flavors numb the mouth; too much music deafens; a wild chase shakes the mind; precious objects rob the will.

So, those free of themselves satisfy the belly, not the eye. Ignoring one, the other proves easy.
Being lifted up and being put down are alarming.
Honor and great suffering are life.

Why say being lifted up
and being put down are alarming?
Being lifted up leads to being put down.

To need it is alarming.
To lose it is alarming.
So we say being lifted up
and being put down are alarming.

Why speak of honor and suffering as life?
There is suffering because I am alive.
if I were not alive would I suffer?

Devote your life to the whole world
as if the whole world lived in it.
Love the whole world for the sake of life,
and the whole world may be entrusted to you.
What do we fear more than anything else? Not so much our being raised up, in honor, as being put down, in humiliation. What are two truths in life—both high honor and deep suffering augment us, irrevocably.

So, why be so accepting of humiliation? Great honor leads us to the depths of suffering.

To covet great honor is abhorrent; to lose such honor is abominable.

This is what is known as acceptance of humiliation, with grace.

We suffer because we are alive; If we weren’t in our bodies, we wouldn’t suffer.

So, why should we talk with such abandon—honor being as flimsy as a placard—

for our suffering to reach such painful depths? With humility,

that accrued sweetness from the hive, give yourself up to all things in the world, as if your entire life depended on it. For the sake of your life,

love the world this way and everything in it. In this way, the world, in its splendor,

may be yours to inherit, as a bee works loose the pollen in every flower.

Fear disgrace; fear favor; consider honor and rejection equal in every way.

What does it mean to fear both favor and disgrace?

It means respect for both.

What does it mean to say “consider honor and rejection equal in every way”?

It means living contains both.

Those who lead others as they lead themselves and lead themselves with care can be trusted to lead.
Looking not seeing.
say formless.

Listening not hearing,
say faint.

Grasping not holding,
say subtle.

These three failed
ways to know
blend into one,
no light above,
no shadow below.

Unnameable thread
returns to nothing.
This is the form of no
form, the image of no image.

Meet it, see no beginning.
Follow it, see no end.

Grasp the ancient dao
for the sake of now.

To know the ancient beginning
is the discipline of dao.

We look, yet do not see,
and so we say the way
is hard to see.

We listen, yet do not hear,
and so we say
it is hard to hear.

We grasp at it, yet
do not hold it,
and so name it
“too hard to hold.”

Despite all these words,
All That Is is not named:

Its top is not shiny;
its bottom is not dark.

It’s always in action,
yet it never moves.

It is the form of the formless;
it is a sight of the invisible.

It is the vague,
undetermined.

We meet it coming
but do not see it;
we follow it going
but do not see it.

When we manage to
get hold of the way
of the creative universe—
doing things now
as they were done
before time began—
this is called
unleashing the way.
What are we looking at but not seeing—
because it is without form?
What are we listening to but not hearing—
because it is so faint it is not audible?

What is unable to be grasped if we try to hold it—
because its subtleties can’t be placed in the hand?
Since these three ways of knowing have failed,
they merge into one.

From above, there is no light;
from below, there is no shadow—
what is unnamable can’t be described,
even though it is joined by the common thread

of nothingness.
It is form without form;
it is an image that is imageless—
indecipherable and inscrutable fall short of what

is on the other side of the imagination.
If we could meet it, it would have no beginning.
If we could follow it, it would have no end.
If we were able to comprehend

how ancient dao is—
we would need to master being present, now.
However, in coming to know its ancient beginning
is the essential discipline of dao.
Ancient masters were subtle, mysterious, open, unfathomably deep because they were unfathomable.

We can only describe their appearance:

Careful as if crossing a bridge in winter, alert as one aware of danger, courteous as though they were guests giving way like ice melting, simple as a block of wood, open as a valley, murky as a mud puddle.

Who can wait for the mud to settle? Who can wait while it slowly clears? Who can be still until right action is born?

Those who follow this way and do not desire to be full.

Not seeking to be full, they can hide and become new

The masters of the way of the creative universe—back in the old days—knew the elusive mysteries. Still, they shuddered like someone crossing an icy stream;

they stayed awake at night, like people afraid of their neighbors;

They were serious, like those at a dinner with powerful people.

They were pliable, like melting ice; plain, like unworked wood; cloudy, like muddy water; empty, like a mountain gorge.

Muddy water left still a while will clear; things at rest may be moved again.

Those who practice this way of doing the way stay empty, looking worn and unfinished.
Ah, the ancient masters, they were subtle—
their knowledge was more of a mystery, and was as
deep as it was unfathomable.
Because their wisdom was so impenetrable,
we can only begin to intimate their appearance—
imAGcning them as standing amid river mists,
crossing the length of an ice-encrusted bridge in winter.

The ancient masters were as vigilant as anyone who
perceives imminent danger;
as courteous as a conscientious dinner guest;
as yielding as icicles melting from the roof
of a barn;
who offered such simple elegance as an uncut block of wood;
who were as manifest as clarity is diffused in
an open valley on a cloudless day;
who were as obscured as a mud puddle reflecting sky;
who had the patience for the mud to clear;
who were able to outlast the puddle’s murkiness to
become pellucid, again.
Who are those who are able to exercise stillness
until right action emerges to become no action at all?
Disciples of dao are all followers of its way.

They do not actively desire to be enlightened—
and since they do not seek enlightenment,
they sway as they walk while crossing the frozen bridge
over the gorge—

and as ice melts and refreezes—
they have no desire for change.