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Wisconsin Poetry

Transactions Vol. 79, No. 2—Special Issue
Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters

Transactions

Transactions is published annually by the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters and welcomes articles that explore features of the State of Wisconsin and its people. Manuscripts, queries, and other correspondence should be addressed to the editor.

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It seemed to be a relatively innocent bit of dreaming when our poetry editor, Bruce Taylor, suggested that the Wisconsin Academy and *Transactions* publish an anthology of Wisconsin poets. And when Patricia Duyfhuizen, our production editor, indicated that she would be willing to design and produce the volume, there still seemed little more to the discussion than an idea. The past two years have proven again that ideas and hard work can make good things happen. As editor of *Transactions* I am pleased to be associated with this anthology and to commend it to members of the Wisconsin Academy and to all people interested in poetry.

Those who made this book out of the thousands of poems submitted by hundreds of poets deserve the special thanks of those who love poetry. The work of Bruce Taylor, who selected the poems and wrote the introduction, is obvious. Patricia Duyfhuizen accepted the role of Managing Editor for this special edition and, in addition to designing the anthology, has brought order to the hundreds of activities relating to typesetting, proofreading, layout, printing, etc. The student interns, whose names appear on the copyright page, contributed much to these areas under her guidance.

Jan Kroll, who is a member of the Arts and Sciences staff at UWEC, has managed every piece of paper associated with the manuscript. Only those involved in publishing can understand what this has meant to the project. Finally, the publication would not have been possible without the financial support of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, the Kohler Foundation, Inc., Evjue Foundation, Inc., and the Wisconsin Arts Board.

I hope that each reader will see in this volume the joy that has gone into its making.

Carl N. Haywood

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The fun is over. As poetry editor of this collection, I find myself now burdened with the traditional obligations and prerogatives to make whatever conclusions I can about this collection as a whole.

My first conclusion is an obvious if not obligatory one: the poetry of Wisconsin is as diverse as the people and the landscapes of the state itself. Wisconsin poetry today does not lend itself to easy generalization, nor to the comfortable divisions of category. It is more than the alphabet that separates the largess of the poetry of Antler with which this book begins from the precision of J. D. Whitney whose poems conclude the collection. Few, except the most meaningless, generalizations could be drawn to reconcile the traditional lyricism one may encounter on any given page of this anthology from the prosey conversationalism or the wild language fugues one might find on any other.

Anthology, after all, from the Greek (*anthos*, flower + *legein*, to gather) means a gathering of flowers. The analogy is apt for any anthology, though particularly for this one, if we keep in mind that the gathering was done in meadow and field as much as in any carefully tended garden, as much along the medians of busy city streets and in the window-boxes and on window-sills high above reaching for the sun, as along the shady paths that circle a quiet country pond. Just as it is shortsighted and wrong to consider the garden as only its flowers, it is, as in any such collecting, such a gathering, not any individual flower that matters as much, if you will, as the seasons and soils of the bouquet itself.

Neither will the processes of classification and division provide much more than the most temporary of entrances into what is Wisconsin poetry today. Like any living art it shrugs off easily whatever labels we try to attach to it. It is a vibrant and varied body of literature. It represents not only the professor in Madison or Eau Claire, or the street entertainer in Milwaukee. It includes also the many fine poets writing in very individual styles and often in isolation in many smaller communities throughout the state.

Among Wisconsin poets are those of all ages, both sexes, and many different races. They write in all styles about a wide variety of subject matter from many different perspectives. Included among Wisconsin poets are winners of awards as prestigious as the Walt Whitman Award for Poetry, the Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Poetry from Stanford University, and the Hopwood Award from the University of Michigan as well as awards from the Associated Writing Programs, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Academy of American Poets, the Devine Fellowship Awards in Poetry, and others. Poems by Wisconsin poets appear in magazines, reviews, and anthologies of such national distribution and recognitions as *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *The Yale Review*, *The Paris Review*, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, and others. Individual volumes by Wisconsin poets

are published by presses as established as Wesleyan University Press, City Lights Press of San Francisco, Viking-Penguin of New York, Harcourt Brace, and others.

My second conclusion is no more startling than the first. Though Wisconsin poetry is much like the poetry of many similar states, particularly those of the upper mid-west, it is in some ways as different from many others, particularly the coastal and more urban, as one might initially expect. As many critics have pointed out, much of the poetry here in the upper mid-west is rooted in the land and buffeted by many weathers. Perhaps it is because even within our largest outposts we are never very far removed from open land or the point and counter-point of four distinct seasons. Spring, for example, traditionally heralded as thanksgiving for survival and a beginning of the new, seems even more so here to bear its burdens of the conditional joys. And the winters, long and brooding, seem always throughout this poetry to have just barely ended or just about to begin. There is more hunting and fishing, more planting and tending, or at least more poetry made of it all than one might find in other collections from other places. There is more sausage and beer than *sushi* and white wine.

Yet Wisconsin poetry today also shares much with all the other poetry that is being written at this time and place in our contemporary America. Here in the deep middle of this country we may often be insulated but are not immune from the incursions from the coasts of those same cultural and aesthetic forces that shape much of American poetry.

During the sixties and seventies there was nationally as well as in Wisconsin a renaissance in the writing and publication of poetry. Encouraged at first by such popularist literary movements as the Beats, and later spurred on by the energies associated with the Civil Rights and Women's movements, and finally, assisted by significant contributions by the National Endowment for the Arts, poets began to find and create outlets for their work which in turn encouraged more people to read poetry and more poetry to be written. As a result, however, most of the poetry during that period and since has been relegated to appearing in small University and independent publications, often of limited circulation and distribution. Although there have been a few anthologies published in this period that have attempted to collect and preserve some of this work, none, including this one, can completely capture either the scope or the energy of Wisconsin poetry today. Yet without such collections it is impossible for the less than fanatical reader to gain any significant access to Wisconsin poetry as a body of Literature.

Any anthology is only a list, one person's gathering, and as such contains within it another list, the poets and poems not chosen to be included, and the nearly endless possibilities of other bouquets and

arrangements. There are approximately 250 poems in this anthology which were selected from over 3000 submissions. Sixty-five poets are represented here from the more than 400 who responded to our request to submit. It is, perhaps, within this group that the evidence of the scope and energy I am speaking of truly lies.

I think of the youngest contributor, a six-year-old from Appleton, who seemed as proud of the fact that her poem was the first one she got to type and print on her mother's Macintosh as she was of the poem itself. I think also of the oldest contributor who at 89 had taken up poetry for "company" some five years previous when her husband died. I think particularly of the group of poems submitted in braille, one of which I have taped above the light switch on the wall of my study.

And yet a selection had to be made and this is it. I hope it is one that does some small justice to the vitality and variety of Wisconsin poetry today. I hope also that it is a beginning and not an end for the many readers to whom the pleasures of the art as it is practiced throughout the state await.

*Bruce Taylor
Eau Claire, Wisconsin
Spring, 1990*

Bubble-Boggled

Under the Locust Street Bridge at midnight
in the middle of the frozen Milwaukee River
alone with a bottle of wine,
the starry night sky twinkling on either side,
Getting on my knees, kneeling on the snow,
looking where the wind blew the snow away
exposing the ice like a window,
a window I can see through,
A black window I can look through
putting my face to its surface
to ogle and be boggled
by bubbles frozen
at different levels
in different shapes and sizes,
white in color,
suspended, motionless,
And thinking the moment these bubbles froze
wondering if anyone ever saw
the moment a bubble froze,
the moment an air globule
gurgling and burbling
on its upward rush
caught solid in icy hold.
What goes on in a frozen bubble?
Does a frozen bubble believe
it will still be a frozen bubble
after it melts?
Thought of when they melt,
rising at last, freed. . . .
Thought of people who drowned
whose last bubble breaths
froze midway,
frozen last words waiting for spring
and those who listen for them. . . .
Thought of bubbles lasting millions of years
in icecaps. . . .
Thought of bubbles trapped in lava,
dark airpockets in rock aeons. . . .

Thought of bubbles rising from canoe paddles
 unstuck from swamp muck. . . .
Bubbles in puddles created and destroyed
 by falling rain. . . .
Bubbles with rainbows quivering
 at the base of waterfalls. . . .
Hippopotamus fartbubbles big as hula hoops,
 frogfartbubbles small as a needle's eye. . . .
Thought of underwater spiders who struggle bubbles of air
 to their underwater webs to breathe from. . . .
Thought of bubbles of thought in cartoons. . . .
Thought of bubbles sparkling up bottles
 stared at by drunks for centuries. . . .
Thought of carpenter observing bubble in his level
 as he adjusts the angle of a beam. . . .
Thought of whales in love caressing each other
 with bubbles. . . .
Thought of girls bobbling their baubles
 goggled by bubble-blowing boys. . . .
Thought of babyblubbering hushed by motherbreast,
 bubble of milk on sleeping lips. . . .
Thought of Imagination Bubble-wand dipped in solution
 strewing bubble flotillas on the breeze,
 different sizes and shapes of poems
at different levels
 rising and frozen as they rise,
mind-bubbles caught for a moment
 observed suspended in time
floating, reflecting. . . .
Thought how I'm only a bubble
 rising from birth to death
 changing my shape
from child to man as I rise. . . .

Thought of the Earth as a bubble,
the Sun as a bubble,
the Galaxies bubbles
sparkling, flowing, bursting
on the black river of space,
on the black river of time. . . .
Thought of the sound of a bubble's pop. . . .
Thought how many bubbles there have been. . . .
Everpresent evanescent effervescence.
Mind-boggled by bubbles
I gaze with awe
through black window ice
Realizing bubbles frozen in ice
as if I never saw them before,
as if I never knew
they existed,
Bubbles frozen in ice,
How I bent to look at them,
How I crouched on my hands and knees
on the snow
And put my face to the ice
and peered down at them
motionless, suspended,
a long time
Milwaukee River New Year's Eve 1984.

Oh-Oh

Birds decide to give up their wings
because flying indulges in an ego trip.
Hermit crabs decide they have to pay rent
on their shells.
Snakes invent banks where they can invest
their sloughed-off skins.
Beavers vote to build highrise lodges
above their ponds.
Squirrels expect a minimum wage
for storing nuts in secret.
Earthworm expressways install periodic tollbooths
to help defray construction costs.
Lions build cages, lock themselves in
and charge admission to see them.
Butterflies get rich from fee to see
emergence from chrysalis.
Termite Thoreau goes to live by a dewdrop for awhile
before returning to the termite mound.
The turnip and parsnip form a partnership.
Celery wants a salary.
Cows demand humans make their own milk
from their own tits
and eat their own sawn muscles.
Trees agree to sprout money instead of leaves
as long as they can make newspapers out of human corpses
to print tree-news.
Dust motes go on strike
for safer floating conditions.
One raindrop says to another raindrop—
"I don't believe in clouds
or that we're falling."
Plankton plot how to conquer the Ocean.
Seahorses form cavalries and charge
to periwinkle bugle-calls.
Mayflies scheme to be more famous as poets
than other mayflies.
Mountains want to get away from it all too,
tired of carrying the world on their shoulders.

Roses make x-rated videos of rosebuds opening.
Sloths realize they better change their lazy ways
or else.

Spiders decide not to spin webs
unless they're displayed in art museums.

Crickets refuse to cricket
unless haikus take notice.

Whales grow back their arms and legs
so they can return to land and work
in our factories.

Flowers want to work in factories too.
They feel funny just sitting around
doing nothing but being beautiful
and smelling good.

Penguins decide to take off their tuxedos
and wear their bum-clothes for a change.

Can Vignettes

Blindman holding out empty can
hoping for sympathy hand-out.
Old bum aluminum can scavenger
ferreting can out of trashbin.
Predacious diving beetle clutching bubble of air
swimming to its home in the old can
at the bottom of the lake.
My mother with tinsnips cutting and curling
can lids into butterfly and flower shapes
painted with glue and sprinkled
with different color glitter or sequins
hung from Christmas tree as ornaments.
Survivors of plane crash in Andes
living for weeks off dead bodies,
waiting, hoping to be rescued,
finally the two strongest men
cross over mountain range
and descending rejoice to discover a can,
a sign people must be near,
and soon they reach people and are saved
and the rest are saved.
Workers with the can industry 20 years
get a silver pin of a tin can,
30 years a gold pin of a tin can,
40 years a ruby-studded gold pin of a tin can,
50 years a diamond-studded gold pin of a tin can.
Can of worms in fisherman's boat.
Can of beans 'round hobo campfire.
Can of sardines in grizzly belly.
Cans of "Pure Holy Land Air" selling for 50¢
in downtown Jerusalem.
Cans of tear gas. Cans of nuclear waste.
Cans used for target practice
full of bulletholes.
Andy Warhol soup can painting in Art Museum
worth more than all the poets in America
made on their poems put together.

Fifty-foot high Campbell soupcan
on tower on roof of Campbell Soup Factory
visible from Walt Whitman's bedroom window.
Thoreau wrote: "Explore your own higher latitudes
with shiploads of preserved meats to support you
if they be necessary
and pile the empty cans sky-high
for a sign. . . ."

On Learning on the Clearest Night
Only 6000 Stars Are Visible to
the Naked Eye

If seeing only 6000 stars with naked eye
 awestrucks us to topple
 in drunken ecstasy
Or piss looking up in devout praise of being,
What would happen if we could truly perceive,
 comprehend and experience
 the zillions
 of stars galaxies universes
 pastpresentfuture?

And if, as scientists agree, we only use
 10% of our brain's potential,
Then the astonishment we sense
 is only 10% of the astonishment
 we could sense,
And so it would seem that what seems
 like dots of light twinkling
 in pretty patterns
 moving across the black
 is really enough to shatter us
 like goblets when the soprano
 hits the highest note.

And if the 10% of the brainpower we do use
 is ignorant of 99.9% of the totality
 of the Universe,
 perhaps a li'l vino in our goblet
 aint a bad idea—
Perhaps a flask of wine
 in deep wilderness night
 is more powerful
 than the largest telescope.

Priests

Mother ran maiden training films before my swimmy
unborn gaze, "A dark hairy man comes up to you at a party
and offers you pizza and gin at his place,
what do you do, my little star?" Baby sister's
addled azure eye wanders, she loves pizza, Mother jumps in
"JESUS CHRIST of course you say no, NO NO NO,"
(never mind Molly Monkey and her yes yes yes,
better to die bloomless than unbloomered).

Still, by nineteen I'd seen *Manon*
and hoped to seduce priests.
I would murmur to them insinuatingly, and fling back
the black eclipse of a cloak to reveal
dazzling new planets, in a red satin gown.
My priest would rave his decades without avail,
black-eyed looks rough as dogs
would follow my high step into a coach.
(What would become of me? Would I end
old, ugly, bad and lost,
with Emmett Kelly whiteface and slutty spicurls? No;
sopranos die young, and die big,
of coloratura lung.)

Last night years later; lotus-colored smoke
wound up to party lights, and at midnight
a dark hairy man clapped a kiss on me.
He put his back into it, as though sinking postholes,
but I turned away with blue nun lips

when out of the tail of my eye
I saw a young priest standing in, no, by the fire
with the sexy corona of his hair
outlined in brands. I thought
oh man, oh man alive,
Eve reared rampant from her coma
and stumbling toward fire I was
as Jerry Lee Lewis says in the song

Breath-less-ahhh.

Crazy Arms: Earlene Remembers

Though I grew up to marry a snowman,
though I look like a glass of milk,

once I was the queen of consuming passions:
and in my mind distant hotbeds
buck and bloom with brown-bear hugs, pink
tulip skin, and the edible wild plants
of lips and ears. Oh, Dave may have been
just a big Vice Lord on the streets,
but he was Baby Child to me.
He would rub his harsh curls
against my neck, and tug with excellent teeth
at the peach chemise made for big tomatoes.
I breathed beastly suggestions
in his marvelously ready ear . . .
How happy I was, in his clutches!
Words failed us, we fell into broken English
and then to the searing nubs of vowels,
Ahh, ee, I, ohh, you.

A night lush with stars.
"Look at me, baby."
I kissed him so hard my nose bled,
and he said: "Welcome to rock and roll."

Racine 1950

Days we walked to Oscar's store. It was dark,
and crammed with food whose smells and names
my grandfather liked: blutwurst, clabber.
There were black boulders of loaves, and violet
twigs of deep sea fishes dried to lace.
Oscar gave me candy, or blackjack gum. We talked.

Across the street, "old fool Sorris's" bold young bride,
stripped to the sweetbreads, lay athwart a hammock
in her Sheena jungle clout and read comics, lips moving,
or stretched out her long legs water-colored and pink
and absently prodded the belly and saffron heart
of Riki, her yappy Peke.

Sorris would poke his angry spud of a face
around the screen door: just checking.
He and my grandfather, enemies from boyhood, hissed insults
and sneered behind smelly stogies: "Soreass!" jeered Grandpa,
and of the luxury dog Rikitiki, "Ratbait!"
Then we walked slowly home
and he told my mother I'd been good.
She hugged me, and I got to wear
her rose quartz star in my hair.

Spring days were plumed with pink lilac, but one midnight
black as hell I woke bolt upright and *knew*
I'd heard them: the robbers, who would
get me first. Hot tears, cold sweat.
Oh, I wept and prayed to Jesus and God
and to "GRANDMA! GRANDMA!", that blue-eyed
English angel. Grandpa heard me,
stumped up grumping: he'd like to see the bastards *try* it.
He showed me the shotgun, bayonet fixed,
the old Boche rifle with its single wolvis fang.
I sobbed with relief, then smiled,
then slept. Beneath lilac
robbers croaked, yards deep.

Watch Out

for that older
woman who once
rocked a cradle
with slippered foot
while humming a simple tune.

She's paid her dues
served her time
now she's ready to move.

An empty vessel waits
on shady shores.
In leaps our woman
with roar and shout.
The broom she holds
becomes an oar
for arms grown strong
from bearing heavy loads.

The water foams,
the water churns,
as she paddles her craft
upstream, forcing
water to give way.

She sings for joy,
rocking that boat.

Red Fingernails

You never said
that the lady who
puts words
into the mouth
has long red
fingernails
that reach down
to the heart,
works a silver needle
and long black thread,
mending torn
letters
that sometime say
love.

In Snow

You stand there in snow
the birds of summer
lost in your hair,
while the barbed wire
fence rusts in my hand
and the ditches turn ice.

Blue Roof

Dogs hang in trees
tonight,
cats spark from
chimneys,
cows float upon
the creamy waters
of last summer's creek,
red roosters rise
from the snowy fields . . .
I sit naked with you
on my blue roof,
gathering soft
black birds
between your legs,
licking the moon
out of your eyes.

The Geometry of Justice

Upon inspection, any geometric progression
seems simple enough: the rough nature
of concrete, of sidewalks, the function of curbs
and right angles, the meaning of bisections,

of intersections, of red brick, white
stucco, marble columns and gentle curves
of Romanesque arches, the walled river's
slow green flow, the flat gravestones

of the poor, slammed doors and sonic booms,
howling sirens and more sirens, the nightly news,
the father who butchers his only son, the pack
of children that torture an old woman's

black poodle. Pythagoras, Euclid, Descartes
were no fools: they've led us by the brute strength
of their brilliance to construct ourselves
in their honor. Geometry, like suffering,

is precise, discrete. Pythagoras
believed "All things are numbers." How well
we've followed him: a year or two for rape, five
to life for murder, nothing for the torture

of a dog. Justice, or just old-fashioned
revenge, must follow strict axioms, not dare
to vary from the architect's template: the man
strapped to the electric chair's rigid contour

jerks as the executioner delivers his jolt:
the body's resistance is in direct proportion
to the voltage applied—if not enough is used,
more juice must be added before trying again.

Chaos

This is the New Science
a Post-Modern Science
an Anti-Science
against Newton against Method
against the flawed Ideal

This is a science Heisenberg
(if he were here)
would love
a science of wayward atoms
unscheduled hurricanes
of volcanic eruptions
earthquakes
that never take place
when expected

This is a Quiet Science
ruled by the unseen
and unmeasurable
blessed by subversions
terrorists of order
infinite anti-patterns
the curl of
smoke
the unpredictable tangles
of capillaries and roots
and branches
of snowflakes

This is an Epileptic Science
a Spasmodic Science
easily bored
by continuity
and predictions
of ir
regular heartbeats

and unrecurrent
brainwaves
phenomena without repetition
absolute amnesia

This is Our New Science
Our Chaos
riddled by the irrational
but propelled forever

forward

by the same human questions:
like the meaning of death
like the nature of sexual attraction

Notes on *Walking Man I*

*I begin, but don't know
what the end will be.*

—Giacometti

Bent
backed
Giacometti walked
with a
limp
complexion
the color
of dust
O
his
elongated
bronzes
stretched
by pain
to
absurdity
Children
laugh
when they
pass
his
skeletal
remains
human
residue
wind-filed
cased
in lava

He
carved
es-
sence
craved
to reduce
sculpture
almost
to dust
pared
us
down
to our
bit-
ter
core

Kafka's Janitor

Did Kafka ever drop the draft
of a story into the trash at work?
Say he knew the janitor might see it—
a story about a janitor who sees the woman
who leaves the odor of lemons
in her office, and won't say she loves him
when he stands beside her desk
and tries to hand her roses.

One day he walks to her office
to spy on her. She is chewing out someone
on the phone. A vase of violets
sits to her right. She hangs up
as he pretends to read by the coat rack.
He imagined her blond, but her hair
is as black as a phone.

He turns and leaves. That night
he touches her chair, wipes lipstick
from the phone with his shirttail
and tucks it deep in his pants.
What can he do but inhale, close his eyes,
see her but never know her, never know
her body, just know
the lemony veil that haunts the room.

An Unprayed-for Song

*What was the greenhouse? It was a jungle,
and it was a paradise, it was order and
disorder: Was it an escape? No, for it
was a reality harsher than reality.*

—Theodore Roethke

Whipped for daydreaming he retreated
to his closet and became wedded
to the magnet of darkness, but always fought the pull
clear to his bones; always looked for a hair of light
in anything, especially behind the hot glass
where he watered flowers, and eyed steam gauges
with such intensity in winter,
he forgot his bruised buttocks.

Those fragile stems that bleed at a touch,
petals that wilt from a cough, listened to his rage,
didn't talk back, didn't tell dirty jokes
or doubt his stories from sleep about a child
who rode a swan toward a sundrenched horizon
and beyond to the stars.

He raked spilled manure and dead seeds for sparrows,
blackbirds, scarlet tanagers, blue jays.
From examining the wreckage of a blackbird his father shot,
he knew that deep in the craw is a bone the precise length
and sharpness of a needle, and the transparent skull
must vibrate to each song
like the skin of the thinnest drum.

His songs behind the double-glass of bone meal,
mist and prize roses weren't Dorsey, but for what blossoms
in the flesh, how to comprehend the fire
consuming his father's face in his sleep,
and why a milky ghost would curse,
wobbling at the top of a walnut tree.

After each whipping the scum and lime
of his childhood thickened for the unborn songs
that grew, nourished like those accusing
chrysanthemums. Within the loam and seed
of each song was the question of forgiveness.
If his words kissed the mouth of a bat,
it was his mother. If the ghost bluegill
floundered in the slaggy water, it was his father.

But the forgiveness always swam in the dark bones
beneath his songs of the flesh.
He painted his words on the glass helmet
of his soul. Drunk and enraged, he chided
the genius literati, broke an ottoman
across a table and pounded windows out with his fists.

He winked at virgins and virgin words.
Stretched under a pool table or rolling
in a meadow of violets, he was always trying
to measure the rhythms of the greenhouse,
but with so much darkness around he hid it in suitcases
or closets, the same way he packed it like dirt
in flower boxes. Crying in the closet,
he didn't know it might be

the poet's business to remember, God's to forgive.
When he left the shrinks a flower surfaced,
pressed like the star of a sand dollar
on the temporal bone, just under and behind the brain.
How little time he had to forgive himself
when those old faces were crying in his sleep,

crying for forgiveness. And a few were singing
from earthy closets, new songs he had prepared
in half-darkness. Perhaps one rose,
half finished in a dream, a sick old man
who like a child needs stories or songs,
and is already surrounded by funereal perfume.
Perhaps he was teasing words while he stroked
in a pool with a mouthful of vowels, then breaking them

toward order the way he broke girls or a class,
moving around them like a lawnmower sparking stones,
pointing out their ignorance, then asking their
forgiveness. He reached, but swallowed them all: the fish,
the unforgiving sun and all chances of songs
for anguish or joy in the chlorine coffin.

A Fairy Tale

Hyde Park

I never asked a glass,
who is the fairest, or sulked
over your skin, soft
as the inside of a lamb's ear,
hair the color of twilight.
Or cared when whistles
were for your legs
not mine.

Nor did I send you
into the forest with only
a slice of stale white bread
when your lashes grew thick,
cheekbones emerged,
and firm, high breasts.

But when the bobbies thought us
coeds, and picked us nosegays,
you scattered your blossoms
from Speakers Corner to Kensington
and teased, "Isn't it funny,
how you're losing your looks,
just when I'm coming into mine."

So I turn toward the Thames,
and let my flowers soak
full of ancient spells.
Tonight while you sleep,
I will steep a potion of petals,
and in it soak an apple red
as your cheek's blush.

Passage

In that noisy silence, we were
quiet, blue, mother and daughter
worn from birthing gone too long.
The world tilted

as we stepped out on the wire,
began to inch by inch ourselves
back to one another.
I leaned left as you swayed right.

The wire undulated
toward you.
You mimicked my dance
and balancing your weight with mine,

we took another step
forward for twelve years
until now we meet,
the trickiest part of all.

Catching Rabbits

Child in the southern summer
Stalking prey, I propped up the flap
Of the army knapsack with a crooked stick,
Tucked inside the carrot that Bugs Bunny waved
Under Doc's nose every Saturday, hid
Myself in the briarpatch brush, ready to jerk
The string that would topple the trap shut;
Waited all that day, and the next,
For cartoon rabbits to come to the bait,
While, under the porch, the cat stashed
His halfeaten carcasses and, each night,
Rabbits cropped the blackberry shoots; why

Is this still important, that vision
Of the soft creature I would catch, befriend,
Stroking away the fright? And the damp heat,
The loud scold of the mockingbird,
The scratching thorns? I wanted
The knowledge I don't have yet,
Of how our two real lives might intersect

As the long week, later, I tried to care
For the fierce marsh bird, wings full of lead,
That I found in the storm sewer and brought home
To the tub, feeding him the only food
I could imagine, night crawlers wriggling
Through my fingers and down his craw. He lay
In my arms, twisting his head, the day he was
Dying, and I walked him out to see the trees
And the sky. I don't know yet what marsh birds
Eat, or how to repair their thin-boned wings,
Or if I could have saved him with such tutelage;
Now it's the child who teaches me.

What Went Wrong

Was my grandfather drinking
And my grandmother nagging him
And letting her kids know
She'd leave him if she could

And my other grandma
Weeping that no one would help her
And my other grandpa
Traveling as much as he could

And your granddad dying
In the flu epidemic
Leaving your mom
Half-orphaned at twelve

And your other grandparents
Like my first, your dad
Raised to be good and sober
Who never spoke; my dad

Who walked out one day
On all of us, my mom
Who never said a word about it
Your mom, who never shut up

How you learned not to listen
How I learned not to talk

High School

What sticks in the mind
is the black slinky in physics
the twang of its wave
traveling the hall—still,
who could believe
water didn't travel,
watching the waves reach shore?

Or the formula for angular momentum,
forgotten, like the words
to the 45s we collected,
but its sense connected;

Or Mrs. McGhee in American history,
sitting on the table
chronicling the Civil War,
swinging her divorced legs
and letting us in on history's secret—
It's all in the pocketbook—
and now we believe her,

Though back then, spinning
slower and slower
to "Stardust Melody,"
feeling the wave's motion
traveling the body's wires,
we might have given her
an argument.

Going With

At ten, his hair slicked back
With styling mousse, Josh
Lets me know he thinks he's going
With a girl in his class, who called
A friend, who called to ask.

In front of the mirror the rest
Of the evening he tries on ties—
Fat ones, thin ones—his face
Alight, practicing for the first time
The complicated, conventional knot.

My Calendar

The day of longing, when light
loses itself among the serpentine vines and brambles,
reflecting

The day of the string quartet:
that music's with me yet,
pure as spring water;
I fish in it with my net of words

The day I lay in someone's arms,
listening to the clock tick—
outside, it was dusk;
down the hall, someone was cooking cabbage for supper

The day of death,
its breath soft as chinchilla against your skin

Always, I celebrate the day
of newness, clover and lilies,
when air smells sweet as talc,
the grass glows,
and shadow is rolled away like a stone from the door of a sepulcher

Natural Theology

You read it in the blue wind,
the blue water, the rock spill,
the blue hill

rising like a phoenix from ash. Some mind
makes itself known through the markings of light
on air; where earth rolls, right

comes after, our planet's bright spoor. . . . If you look, you'll find
truth etched on the tree trunk,
the shark's tooth, a shell, a hunk

of root and soil. Study from beginning to end.
Alpha and omega—these are the cirrus alphabet,
the Gnostics' cloudy "so—and yet."

If a tree falls in a forest, a scared hind
leaps, hearing branches break;
you crawl under the log and shake

honey out of a hollow, eggs from a nest, ants from the end
of a stick; resting, you read God's name on the back of a bass
in a blue pool; God grows everywhere, like grass.

My Marriage

(Genus: *Lepidodendron*)

It goes under like a spongy log,
soaking up silica.

I love these stony roots
planted in time, these stigmata,

this scaly graduate
of the school of hard knocks,

these leaf-scarred rocks
like little diamonds.

And the rings! . . . the rings
and cells that show forth

clearly, fixed and candid
as the star in the north.

Giant dragonflies, corals,
the tiny bug-eyed trilobite

grace this paleosite
with shell and wing, cool,

amberstruck exoskeleton,
nice flash of improbability

felled and stuck, past
petrified in present, free

from possibility's hard and arbitrary
demands. Once, seed ferns swooned,

languid as the currents in a lost lagoon,
while warm winds swarmed over the damp earth

like locusts, and rain was manna.
I hold that time still.

Divorce keeps it real and intact,
like a fossil.

The Rose

A botanical lecture

It's the cup of blood,
the dark drink lovers sip,
the secret food

It's the pulse and elation
of girls on their birthdays,
it's good-byes at the railroad station

It's the murmur of rain,
the blink of daylight
in a still garden, the clink
of crystal; later, the train

pulling out, the white cloth,
apples, pears, and champagne—
good-bye! good-bye!
We'll weep petals, and dry
our tears with thorns

A steep country springs up beyond
the window, with a sky like a pond,

a flood. It's a rush
of bright horror, a burning bush,
night's heart,
the living side of the holy rood

It's the whisper of grace in the martyrs' wood

The Doorway to Doom for Objects

*"For in whatever part you say the atoms
First begin to fail, this part will be
The doorway to Doom for objects . . ."*
—Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*

It opens in the heart,
Today and tomorrow.
First love must depart,
Then sorrow.

And then the rest of the world
Says thank you and good-bye,
Crossing the threshold
To die.

A whirlwind sucks all things
Like liquid through a straw.
The great door swings
Wide, the great maw

Swallows all energy
And soon nothing will stay.
Moral entropy
Cuts short the play

And ends the party too.
We go out to go in.
We go into
Nothing, or Sin.

Transformations

I

You cast me out
and up: I spin and drift,
slow as Argo in the southern skies.
Old-power, sweet-dream, only-one,
I remember your world—

Green and blue, continents
the color of shale, whole
seas gritty with salt, air
transparent as quartz!

I remember your hand on my back
like the shell on a snail,
and ground-shadows blown by a cloud-rack.

II

Look at this: The celestial equator
emits tropical light waves.
I burn and blink.

I compass your planet
like the sun in Ptolemy's time,
burning, blinking.

III

Heat is energy in transit
but it's a one-way street,
hot to cold, and I'll never get to meet
you coming. This, though I can say hello in Greek and Sanskrit!
You pass me by.
I'm as insignificant to you as the sky.

Be warned: An ice age is dawning.
Scintillating ice crystals are forming
secretly at the edges of things—of Vermont, Maine,
the Antarctic Ocean.
Heat is in motion.
I am becoming rain.

IV

Old ever-real, nothing's
true: Space flirts with time
and time cheats on you.
She says she's going shopping—
in that negligee? She leaves you in the lurch.

Only I remain, devious
as Democritus, assuming
atomic weight, spending
passion in the process.

I feel my way slowly, in the dark, underground,
and surface at your grave
like an artesian spring, and all the past is drowned.

At Night Your Mouth

At night your mouth moved over me
Like a fox over the earth, skimming
Light and low over the rising surfaces of my body,
Hugging the horizon against hunters;
Or like the other hunted, the one who runs
Back exposed like a billboard to the barbed wire and starved dogs,
The men in guard towers, danger sweeping the snow-patched yard
Every thirty seconds, the shirt you tore,
To make a tourniquet for your leg, fluttering like a signpost
Against the branch of a birch tree, saying THIS WAY:
You were looking for someplace to hide, to crawl into,
A place to lie down in and breathe
Or not-breathe until the dogs pulled the hunters past,
Fooled by water, wind, snow, or sheer luck,
And I folded myself around you like a hill and a valley,
And the stars in my hair shone only for you,
Combed into cold blue and deep red lights,
And the river ran warm as blood under its lid of ice,
And my throat was like an eel pulsing between your palms,
And the air in my blood was tropical, I caught my breath
And held it between my teeth for you
To eat like a root,
There were black grouse in the forest
And the moon on the snow was as gold as your skin
As I remember it shining on Nightingale Lane,
But the dogs' barking in the distance carried too clearly,
A man snapped, STAT!
And you trembled, troubled and impassioned,
You covered your eyes with your hand,
And I felt the shudder slam like the sea
Pummeled by God's fist,
Wind-bit waves sizzling against the fiery cliffs of Liepāja—
And you were the ship
The harbor dreams of, the brave husband

The bride awaits, the seed
For which the earth has prepared itself with minerals and salts,
And I folded myself around you like a windrow and a furrow,
And whispered, so no one, not dog or man or man-dog, would
 overhear: *Now*
Now now now
Escape into me.

Prayer for a Future Beyond Ideology and War

When the world dissolves in its own chemicals
And the people's bodies are as ghostly as the particles discovered by
 Josephson in 1962, which pass through walls like light through air,
And the people's buildings are born again as blueprints, and the print
 is invisible and the blue is the blue of the innocent, amnesiac sea,
And the hardwood trees, falling in forests everywhere, their fractured
 branches tangled like a woman's hair after love, make no sound not
 because they are not heard but because there is no longer anything
 for them to land on and thud against
(The pine trees like unplayed whole notes trapped in a barbed-wire
 stave)—

And even the stones have become as insubstantial as thought—

May there be new cities in the tolerant sky,
Held in place by their own gravity
(Or lack of it), places of peace where a man and a woman
Holding each other in the familiar bed of their long night
May see, through the window, as clear as light
The stubbornly loving shadow of a star that was once our sun.

Hating November

In the cold dark
I wait for a trace of light.
It's been like this for a month.
If I get up
I'll never find sleep
And what is more lovely
Than safe, half lit dreams?
It's too early to run.
The floor is cold.
Night lingers too long in the house.
I hate November, the way light
Takes so goddamn long.
I've eaten all the crisp apples I can stand.
It won't snow for another two weeks.

Outside, running by the river,
I frighten a grazing doe.
She leaps ahead of me.
I sprint.
This is all I want,
The first minutes of light,
Graceful flight,
The good beating of our hearts.
She turns into the brush.
I keep running.

Man Falls with Unfinished Story

This is the story of a man whose wife may die before he can finish his story. Long, long ago a man and a very nice woman decided to sun themselves on a perfect white sand beach. As far as happiness goes, they were the perfect mates. She was a bit obese, he was very chubby. One sunny day, the two thought it might be nice to go up the Blue Mountains, on a train, to see the rum distillery, way up on the very top, box lunch and all. The train stopped half way, so everyone could walk down to the jungle buried caves. He has a flash poor picture, in case you'd like to look. The train departed after an hour's wait. During that wait, the wife began to die, right there, half way up the Blue Mountains of Jamaica. She hugged herself all day, so she didn't see what all the tourists came to see. She spent all her time bent over. Inside her pain, she thought she better change the way she ate as she was very pudgy. At the hotel beach party, on their last night, with lots and lots of lobster, they did not have a very good time. She did not even dance. You can see this in the pictures. She looks puffy gray, he barely fits his forty-twos. They came home and very quickly she started on a weight loss diet.

He thought he'd feel better on a
diet, too. She lost pounds and pounds.
They both lost weight together.
They were the perfect love mates.
Well, she got nice and spooky.
Food was not the trouble, but her
Uncle's busy hands and somehow
lots and lots of sweets made life
all so much the better, when she
was only six. Now the cupboards
are quite empty. She looked wild
and starved. He's right out of Dachau.
She checked in and stayed awhile.
She took anti-this and anti-that.
Six months later, still very thin,
she took all her pretty babies but
they only made her light and airy.
Now she knows which ones will be
her masters. Things get worse
and worse. She gained it all right
back. Clothes don't fit her now.
That made her wild and fussy.
She liked the taste of yogurt,
ate carrot sticks for lunch.
He ate, but nothing ever happened.
That bothered her a lot, her weight.
Stay with me, dear, we're almost
to the end. He went away to write
a story about a wife who touched
his heart, quite deeply, who got
so scared, he thought, while he
was away, she might fly away, for good.

He never finished his loved one's
story. In his story, the man who
loves his wife so dearly slips
and falls and as he falls he wonders
why those damp, green caves make
him cry so much, and why he wishes
if only he could wish, he could go
back, stay inside those tourist
caves, happy he was, he thought,
on holiday, with his wife, waving,
from inside the train, waving words
I love you go have a good time.
He misses her so much, right now,
the man, that is, who falls, who
holds this flash poor picture.
Please look it over in your leisure.

Twentieth Anniversary Poem

My mother sprouts a single black hair
from her chin and the thought
of an old-woman beard sends her rummaging
through vanity drawers—tangles of
dental floss and hoarded bars
of hotel soap, clogged mascara and eyeshadow
raked by three successive daughters.
Residue of simple beauty in her hands,
but no tweezers. She gives up her search
and brings this wound, coarse and dark,
this imperfection she cannot conceal,
into the kitchen. My father
sets his brandy down, adjusts his slipped glasses
and tilts her face into the stove-top light.
He leans over her, examining
as he has probed an infinity of slivers;
needled and pushed wood out of fingertip skin.
And then he kisses her chin,
kisses with lips that have sucked
bee-stung arms and barefoot arches and spat
the poison away, lips which gnaw
meat from bare chicken bones passed
to his plate, lips that heal
with a breath of brandied balm.
When he finishes he smiles
and pulls the hair from his teeth.

Imagine This

My best friend swims deep and I stand
at the end of a pier; my hands
resting on my hip bones, I stare down
into the water. The white flash
of his body passes—or just a cloud
reflected in the murky green? The wind
blows off the lake, the waves wear
against the wooden legs, the ladder;
I cross my arms, tired of waiting, and
wonder how long he can hold his breath.
So I call, but the water eats my voice
and spits back foam; I begin again
and tell him all I'll do without him.
Strawberries will ripen soon and I'll wake
early and fill baskets at the pick-your-own-farm,
eating as I crawl through the rows,
the fattest berry held up for admiration
before I bite it clean from the stem.
Then I'll spend the day sweating
juice in the kitchen, three cups sugar
for every cup of berries hulled and sliced
to show the pale hollows. The jam jars
will rattle in boiling water to the hum
of a fan that can't give enough air.
Your skin is going to wrinkle down there
I tell him, but he will not break
the surface; I turn and walk to shore.
Listening for a splash and breath
I almost walk away. But I go back
to tell him the storm windows are down,
through screens the neighborhood listens
to its life: the rinse of dinner dishes
and the quiet of a crying child. I remember
love and sit down on the beaten boards,
dribble my toes in the water as I wait.

Scarp

She teaches geology; we visit a landslide
in her backyard. It's just a grassy slope
that falls away from her house, too steep
to be mowed. This is creep,
she explains, material moving
without a discrete failure surface.
She climbs down in skirt and glasses,
kicks at the earth-cracks under grass.
I'm still thinking failure—
slip-surface, surface of rupture,
there are many names for the plane
along which everything gives. Think of
a tablecloth pulled slowly across
polished wood, nothing to hold it down.
The salt and pepper shakers, candlesticks,
are caught in the flow; the movement tips them over.
This is just a little landslide,
no rock or rubble, only noticed by a woman
whose kitchen cabinets pull away from the wall.
She has watched cracks widen in her driveway,
now tells how soil-water freezes, expands,
lifts the dirt a little,
then drops it downhill in thaw.

Someone gave anatomy to landslides: head,
the part that everything falls from;
body, all the displaced rock and soil;
the toe reaches forward, spills on new ground.
I am not the first to turn this language
back on myself. My teacher struggles to climb up;
I almost reach for her hand. Then I think
she can do it for herself, this land is only slowly
slumping. Here is what causes the big ones:
liquefaction, when you are shaken so hard
the clay that holds you together
loses all strength, just dissolves.

The Music of the Spheres

The first thing I do when I wake up
is to fill the house with music
so empty, so silent it became over-
night, the dark peace, the sun's
rising, Mozart all one,
as in Dante's circle of luminaries,
loving and learning. Slowly
strings and keyboards drift down
the stairs into hallways and kitchen,
room by room, finally reaching
the basement where most silent
of all sit washer and dryer,
cans of paint staring at different
seasons of the year: Christmas,
Easter, Advent again, underneath,
and waiting for the music of time.

Even when I go out, I leave the radio
on, imagining my dog likes Beethoven,
that the Chinese porcelain figures
find composers who make them laugh,
that the books listen to Studs
Terkel. That the house is safer,
warmer, more like a home, when
filled with music. That maybe once
in awhile a melody floats up
the chimney and out into the air
where it becomes the sky and my
house and I, for a moment,
join our chorus to the spheres
that hold the universe together.

Lenten Walk

The brown oak leaves still on the trees
and the long prairie grass, like the combed hair
of a sleeping princess, wait between us and summer.
The air comes fanned over mounds of snow,
gusts of chill that greet the first
to open an ice house on an August day.

Not knowing what to expect, we dress for winter
hoping for spring: the sun is warm and we open
our coats. The baby son of last year (for whom I waited
every two steps) now circles me time and time,
grouting every single patch of leaves on the ground.
By the lake—Big Water, he shouts—
naming the place as ours. On the ordo, this day

Belongs to Herbert. Otherwise, the silent slipping
of February into March. And as we walk this late
February morning on the soft fields, nature herself
takes a risk, bringing June early.

And I think on young George Herbert, lying all night
on that cold floor in Bemerton, frightened
to death of the vows he would take on the morrow,
planting himself in silence, trusting to take hold.

And on the homecoming I think of the way any life
takes hold, the ways our lives have taken hold,
and on the way this little child of mine
can still ask to be carried, can still let me kiss him
and not wipe the kiss off his cheek.

The Plains

Solitude

Measured

By the sky.

Morning

The birds know

What it means

To live forever

Aaron's Ear

He wakes up near midnight, suddenly deaf he thinks,
Blood trickling into the marble cup of his outside ear,
And yelps so loud we wake up. "I'm *bleeding*," he cries,
A nine year old with finicky ears, eyes, and lungs,
Maddingly hospitable to asthma and pernicious viruses.

The emergency room says it's a punctured eardrum.
It'll heal with Amoxicillin. Still, we worry. No yelling,
We tell him. No loud tv, no headset earphones.
The next day I tutor a numb, nervous boy who's deaf,
Who watches my lips and lives at a remove.

A fever once gripped my ears, and now I hear underwater—
Sinking farther each year from the surface, sounds muffled down,
Speech and bird song and car horns slowly swimming silent.
I look stupidly at a clerk. "Sorry," I say.
Impatiently, she repeats herself. What she says doesn't matter.

What does? Surely not what Aaron doesn't hear,
Not the anger my student has never heard,
Not the fine articulations I miss in a room of gossips
Or from a bank clerk behind her cage: white noise
That drowns out a pure line of thought.

Yet you have to hear to know what not to hear,
Or you're always catching up, like a dubbed movie
When they say "I love you, I love you" but their mouths
Are chewing pasta. You're never at the moment but somewhere
In the narrow territory between *deaf* and *dead*:
A man dreaming that he wakes up in his own coffin, and then does.

The Rock

This is the story of a man striking an unexpected rock in a garden he has worked for years, whether the garden is real or not.

For a second he wants to look up to see his house is there, that he hasn't been plowing the neighbor's plot by mistake, but, certain this is no dream, he squats to extract the rock.

It won't budge. He shoves at it with his boot, but it won't be moved. He selects a lever and a concrete block from the shed. No matter how deep he probes there is more of the boulder.

Much later from a distance the gardener is seen with another man. They talk and gesture toward the ground. Each wears a straw hat. Both are leaning on shovels. Small mounds of clay contrast with the expanse of rich soil at their feet.

The next day the scene is so far away that the exhaust fumes from the backhoe are barely visible. There are more men now, standing in a great circle, staring down from the edge of the hole.

Nightfall. Everything is quiet. The yellow light from an aluminum awning upstairs cast on the green lawn like a single buttress remains on for an inordinately long time. At dawn a bulldozer arrives, fills the hole.

Again the scene is a close-up, the man is plowing around the rock that is the tip of an iceberg, the peak of an underground mountain, or the earth itself—whatever. Only one thing is certain to the man: The rock is not of this world.

Fast Approaching Forty

Even in perceptibly evaporating light, even as he beats these weeds for a baseball while friends wait for him to show with the poker chips, he is actually happy. How exact the thing is lost till the instant it's found, he remembers, still searching. Parting a giant thistle with his brand new glove, the only he's owned since Lord knows where he lost or who lifted the first, twenty-five years ago, despite his name burned on back with a magnifying glass—the pristine patience it took of a June morning, like one long summer as sweet as the clover blossom he'd pluck from behind the backstop to suck in the outfield—he knows without thought the distance between him and his death is infinitely divisible, having put it all behind him, his very birth someone else's version of yet another's suffering.

Yet time will not be the talk at the poker table. He will speak of box scores and things, that in a game called pass the shit, you never refuse an ace. He will not talk about the lost ball either, assuming even, fast approaching forty, he finds it. And certainly he will not talk about a receipt for the ball and gloves, how as it slipped from his fingers when he got out of the car and as it zig-zagged leaf-like to the concrete, he stopped to watch, yet did not stoop to where it lay, and still lies, but stood to marvel how, even while playing father to his sons, detachment to moments of his own making remains so massive, so finally incomplete.

A Life

With both hands a small boy holds a ball of string so big it doesn't occur to him there are two ends, so far from him is the center. It is only after the string is tied to the kite, the ball growing smaller—yet, with each glance, more vivid—that he can predict a beginning, the nothing the sphere is wound around.

So it is that somewhere between boy and man he is made to understand that the atom, too, is hollow, and therefore the universe. He comes to see that this is how his life will go, that the string unwinding so fast, which at the very last he was unable to hold, had nothing to do with a beginning or an end, but—like the making of the sphere—everything to do with both.

Canto 55

One of
the A source
said difficulties
with the steel casing
He takes pride were bolted
Susan Lucci found Curtis of
varying degrees "delicious" to
work with together. opposition of
fiction and reality is that it severely
and unnecessarily narrows artistic options
by enforcing the script. an all-too-predictable
dialectic. Reality is the existence horrible; it

drives us into satisfying in which he as
insisted of his Whoever ignores style. But there
are many others who feel differently. changing
worlds of our own making. But the at a the
first scene defective joint where two sections of
poet, with his the precision department,
it is our job to differentiate. prized the set is
and in part faculty of
self-consciousness, knows the external fuel tank
nearby. his the subtleties department the
thin wall of fictions that could quickly have
burned and improvising on through not to be
"true"; however unsatisfactory reality may be, as
at 5,800 degrees Fahrenheit; a Nor is at
least they ought to be, in it leak would have
become a that Tony Curtis And since writers
are, or has been late for. blow-torch a the first
scene on that reason. "Mafia Princess"
sane and mature individual of evil. (who will not

dwelling in fantasy) the the right-hand SRB might
have burned the movie is Some are almost
fair, some are bad, some are lethal. based)
through its The solid
fuel burns casing, perhaps poet is Moreover,
there are differences among states. and
fourth sections. forced the best seller on for
just which to "open
up" his of being very evil. the booster's third
fictions at a This The state is a
necessary evil simply because many individuals
are themselves very capable is
I beg to differ. not seal of evil is bound to
become a servant point between to reality
and to face the Investigators the burn-through
probably occurred
believed in being an instinctive actor (he hasn't
bothered to read that hard truth.

Canto 65

She sat in the sunlight
with eyes closed, where shadows
of cedars moved with the wind.

She saw radiant gold and sheets of red,
blood moving across the lids.
She saw darker shades
that were the sign of the wind.

She watched and knew the names
of the shades and their waving,
knew the names of many not sitting.
She asked that they might sit.

Thinking of them she let the names go.
Then she saw in all the brightness
still other light gather,
light forming a globe
that was yet sun, cedar, wind.
She knew it was light named by few.

Thinking of such names she let the globe go.
She saw radiant gold and sheets of red,
blood moving across the lids.
She saw darker shades, the cedars
moving in front of the sun,

that were the sign of the wind.
She thought of the few, and the many,
and was afraid
until she let names go and saw
in all the brightness light forming a globe
she did not name.

She held the globe without a name
and knew it held
breath, body, sun, cedar, wind,
the many and the few.
She let the globe go
thinking of what she knew.

Botanical Gardens

Beyond the steaming glass and massed
leaves, alone
in the sunken room, I am serene.
Orchids sway toward me out of Chinese vases
and here above the blue
seas of the carpet, I still sail
in your wake; I close my eyes and find
the whole garden floating up, an island
rising inside me.

Each time I find you, all the sorrows
rush out of me like rain
from wet pine. I feel huge
and light, like the elm balancing
on one leg, dancing
like Shiva—
all her great ecstatic arms wheeling and furling
in the air, obedient to each impulse,
at home with desire.

Of Bread

It doesn't matter that the house isn't locked.
Without you, it's empty as an oven
of its loaves

I want neither your ham nor your cheese
nor your oysters and white
wine

I want the yeast of you, making me rise
til I split, two halves
in your teeth

and the butter melting, the hot bran
your yam-yellow light spilling
your honey seeping all through the comb

Not this house with its darkening oak.
Not that table laid with its cold
plates.

It Was the Summer 12 Year Old Dark Haired Alyssa Danced in the Rain in a Blue Net Formal

It was the summer Little Russel picked up all those dirty words,
and no one could stop his 7 year old bad mouth
no matter what they did. A face like an angel,
then he'd open his mouth, "Hi, Mrs. Dickshiner,"
he'd say to me, just like that, over the fence
between our yards. The next summer I planted hollyhocks.
Let the bees inhibit him, I thought. But
that first summer, I was stopped short, un-pre-pared.

I know I heard a gun go off one night that summer,
and Barbara, Russel's mother, changed her hair
from banana popsicle yellow to black—in one afternoon.
It was not an event you could let go by without comment.
There were two robberies on our block that summer
and one divorce. The Robertsons bought a new blue Nova
and started parking it on their front lawn
like some oversized yard decoration.

The highlights at our State Fair that year were
a 1,150 lb. pig named Balls and
a 40,060 lb. touring cheddar cheese named The Belle
(20 feet long, 6 feet high and 6 feet wide.)
My daughter & Little Russel talked shy Sarah up the chestnut
tree, and she fell, wrists first. Both broke.
Someone (no one remembers who) rolled her
over. She lay there with her arms up, wrists broken
like one of those goats that faints when frightened
'til Jim found his car keys and rushed her
up the block to the hospital.

How all of us cascade young into nights
full of summer and music, children and gin.
Our yards growing us. Around us corn, beans
and apples, and all our coming deaths inside
and around us. And us running on adrenalin,
burglars of ourselves.

Death has this corduroy feel to it like autumn
like loans. My father died
that very brilliant October
that followed Dickshiner summer.
And my mother followed him. I became
the most agile of beings, double jointed
of home and heart. There are photos
where I grin out from a circus colored mouth
one child on my lap, one next to me.
The children are wearing sleeveless summer
dresses. I'm dressed like a homeless person,
a junkie, someone who wears it all at once.

Estabrook Park, 1986

A ceiling of dragonflies we stood under outlined
by glistening newly hatched mosquitoes.
Estabrook Pond to the left, four deer
in front of us. I was huge: nine
months pregnant covered in white Indian
cotton, holding the small hand of my
flowered eight year old daughter.

For twenty minutes, everytime I nodded the deer
with the rack would nod and allow me and my
daughter one step closer. It was a long game
of "Captain, May I?" with deer.
In the humming twilight the dragonflies
dived at the mosquitoes, the mosquitoes
thick in front of us, on and around us
looking like screens on the coming night.

I squeezed my daughter's hand for silence, awe
and control; we were swelling with bites: blood
spots on her cheeks, my ankles, our arms. Still
everytime I nodded, the deer nodded and we moved
a step closer. Four feet away from the deer,
and from the road yells "Jesus, look at that,"
"Come on." And two boys on silver
bicycles came bumping over the curb, up the grass
and towards us. In seconds, they covered the same
field it had taken us twenty minutes to cross.

Like a blanket folded back, the deer together
turned and disappeared into the thick July green.
Don't ever let anyone tell you
close doesn't count.
We might not always get what we want—
or, how we want, but
smelling, hearing the wild breath of it all
holding someone's hand, life knocking within
looking deep at twilight into the wild eyes of it all
and getting permission to approach
should keep us for a long time
out searching and remembering
as much of it as we're able to
like the rustling sound of deer
running away through thick July green.

Raspberries

The fathers told us
how sparrows
ate a fill of berries
beat wings dropped
seeds across river
and years of growing
parted by waters
grew into flaming briar

If we believe
what the fathers say
about seeds cleansed
in dark stomachs
and if we start out
heading due north
knifing our bodies
against the current
we will fill a bucket
by last light of today

if we believe
in the guts of words
roots contained in seed
then we will know
that the sparrow
is a bullet
in the heart
of the living dead

For Ireland at the Resurrection

In the pulpit of the field
the horses sleep on all fours.
The grass kisses its roots,
hurrying the arrival of miracles.
I am a druid who knows mad gods
meet gods and jostle in the dark.

I spread events related to stars
before our thankful bodies took us here.
Dream, or shadow, perhaps a film of air
coated the wombs of women, waiting,
hesitant, darning flesh, waiting
for love to irrigate the dark
furrows of their fields.

We yearn like young girls
to be taken off by strangers
who practice potions, spells,
and herbs, no less than eucharist.
I sleep in the belly of stone,
dance in light of your song.

Dance with your shadow, soon
your shadow dances with you—
water lapping a song
on the lips of the moon.
Come, make a wish.
Now blow out the stars.

Home Before Dark

You dropped in out of April rain
and when I asked you for touch
you said the white farmhouses
in Connecticut all have duckponds
You laughed until my mouth
sheltered yours against shadows

In the deep woods of my fear
a black door stands against a tree
and the door neither opens
nor ever closes on love
And then I felt your tongue
a bullet in the wound of words

Then I felt them slither again
knowing they swim down deep
the small fish not yet legal
in the pool of my stomach
nibbling the flesh-bitten walls
until all the bait vanished

I was waiting for them to break
into light and stroke me once
more upstream to be reborn
But your eyes reminded me
we are neighbors lamb and bull
Our houses will never sleep again

Then you winked and said again
the white farmhouses
in Connecticut all have duckponds
Those creatures are too white to fly
their souls too content to soar
their stomachs heavy with love-grain

I tell you need keeps me grounded
and I turn to stroke your whiteness
Promise to have you home before dark

Night Is an Old Lady

unlacing her corset, cropping
darkness from her thighs,
thick with deceit like blinders.
Behind the slaughter house for lambs,
beauty dressed-out in death's clothing.
All the rifles wear silencers
so death cannot be heard.

Suffering stalks
lithely as a greyhound.
The spiders are loose again,
tangle and sting.
Stomachs swell with prey.
Even the owls moan only one syllable—
nature's broken record in a wooden cage.

At daybreak, Night slowly
sucks darkness round her innards.
From out the birth-stench of animal,
a hundred white butterflies
float out the rent eye-sockets
of a gutted spring lamb.

They fan into daydreams—prayer
for mute creations of the womb,
before sky lowers on their thighs
to eat the flesh promise made.
Before fingers of darkness
stir us in a circle of lies.

Snow

The fields assume it is cotton
come to hush town gossip
The people are asleep who
talk all day of their stature
At night the deep snow listens
to its own slow tightening

A red pig burrows for cabbage
while a flaming black cat
leaves its sizzled imprint
like fossil trails in stone
All winter the ground groans
and turns on bald haunches

Far from here ancient birds
walk ocean bottoms roped
apart like mountain climbers
Some of these visions are private
and appear suddenly before us
stark as a public viewing

Pins on the clothes line
are the bleached bones of
winter wrens who refuse to fall

The Deep Witness

A man beats a woman because he sees her
Turn inward when he touches her.

He knows she is running across a black field
Toward a house he can never enter.

The front door is copper-cornered and moves
On hinges that creak like his mother's voice

Calling his shame down a well. At every
Window he sees his father's face, broad

As a pig's head, smiling and broad. And
Through the walls he hears bed springs jangle

And another man's name repeated
Until he is compelled to drag her into light

And weave a promise under her nose
With his fists, and pull her before the deep

Witness of the mirror to trace the marks
Of his fear and passion, confessing like Thomas

To Christ what he can't believe, even when
He probes the baffling wound.

Gnosis M

1.

The female won't nurse those that can't pass
her postpartum nuzzle. She counts nascent
eyes, legs,
& will not pop the birth bags of the odd ones
with her teeth.

Though for days the failures suck no milk—they're hardy:
the mother leaves them under a bush
but, screaming, with a voice half-human
they drag themselves along.

Follow blood scent to her hiding places
parading in their flesh her violated image.

2.

The dog with two bodies and one head, the
bull endowed with four thousand eyes and ears,
the poisonous gosling, the moon-calf, the Lamia,
rattle their night cries in the bushes at young women
sneaking to their lovers.

Whisper:

We are the dark ones waiting inside you
for the midnight probings of a man's wrong move
to unlock us. Our troops train in Limbo;
our mongoloid thinkers recall the glories
of Hyperboria, Atlantis, Lemuria, where we raised
back steles to the flippered goat who taught us
numbers and alphabets.

The Nazis knew us, the flayed Albigensians, the impaled
Bogomils, deciphered the code you women scream
as you push us into a midwife's pail.

We are syphilitic sons chained in cellar rooms,
the idiot kept caged for thirty years.
With cleft palates and scaley fists
we demand our birthrights:
the destruction of mirrors, the bed
you grope in, your name, your meat.

3.

Once
a kitten with six legs turned backwards
crawled up our steps, starving, screaming.
Mother drowned it
in a scrub bucket.
Twisting on the bottom underneath her broom
it roared for life. "Monster" she called it
from the other room
wrapped it in newspaper, and handed it to me.
"Don't open this up, son, give it to the hounds!"
I ran through the weeds with the small death
in my hand, knowing that something
loped behind me down that path, fanning
the hair on my neck with fetid breath.
I couldn't let it catch me or I'd grow sullen
and carry sweat-stained newspapers under my arm
forever
like the shell-shocked man in town.

Hounds stood upright at the ends
of their chains and howled at my pale
skin. I threw it in their jaws; the moon
rose at my right hand. I heard the dogs
gnash the death apart.

4.

We found a book hidden deep
under bras and panties,
the pictures of the flippered babies
and the hard words to sound out
made us watch mother as she fixed our meals:
her sad heavy face, her fat legs
dragging her bulk from sink to skillet.
What names did she keep from us, biting her lip,
and how many times had she creased those pages back
over her belly, and listened to us play?

5.

There, staring down from every wall
is their portrait, in our pulse
lies their potential. We lean against the
pillars of the summer house and hear their
roar in the forest, yet they come no farther
than the light's wan crescent, waiting for our invitation
to ring out from megaphones to millions of believers,
for frenetic mobs to goose step to the ululation
of our weird swearing of fealties.
Or in the silence of the bedroom
where brother and sister toil on against
the blood taint, they whisper of the old days
when the motile worm on father's thigh
peopled a fallen world, in God's despite.

Do not believe them!
shouts Mother. Stand vigilant
at the gates of birth
and remember:

6.

If it has too many or not enough
it is a monster and it must be killed.

Count the fingers and toes.
Count the eyes.
Number means much—
number the eyes.

If it walks funny;
If it writhes snake-like, roaring;
If it gives no reflection;

If its hunger is endless;
If it won't stop sucking and lie
Meekly down in straw or swaddling clothes;
If the mother rolls her eyes and whinnies in fear;
If it smells of death, or still wears
a rotting caul;

It will crowd us out.
It will follow us in dark places.
Kill it. Kill it.

1700 Miles to Elise

I did not always lean so forward to the page
to speak a word so far to find you
past my crowded eyes now emptied of your face
caught double in the iris and my heart.

I did not always have to find a key
unlocking my house door with you not there
to welcome in with at least a touch
of image in my eye more live than walls.

I did not always have to bear such silence
since before we met and merged and married
to unfold four more voices to embrace
within the ears' deaf-mute empty rooms.

I did not always only feel the head's weight
bearing down and table wood beneath my arms
and only non-committal clothes against my skin
and never anything but air against my face.

I did not always miss the climbing up
of children on my life with you alone,
yet now all hands would find a greeting there
for grip upon my hair, my hands, my heart.

I did not always have to arm myself
against a dearness that now threatens to dissolve
my form and words, so far away from being flesh.
I did not always hang or live on every word.

Like Land Used Up

Like a plain still holding meadow curves but brown
and seen from one personal place in the broad palm of it,
I am, with all blades stooped in a uniform lean,
like stalks crushed or blight bent wheat.
The heart went out of it, all at once, all over.
And, still, the still picture of it is *waiting*.
Waiting like a long dead tree still waits,
sign to a whole life spent learning to stand
in one place so deep it is hard to forget.

Once an apple orchard died without a sign
in middle season, two years and two bounty harvests
after one sharp freeze froze earth past the deepest roots,
killing all from the bottom up, but not before
two years' grace wore threat out in doubled seed
in earth that was always ready to wed.

No, not like land used up is my present plain.
It's more like dues for shallow root putting
in a too irrigated easy life—and as I say it, yes,
I am not in one place, yes, out there past target zero
there is a green that is mine, I can tell,
like newborn fingers starting to move before the eyes—
such, such a blue child I must have seemed,
but watched, watched, the fingers begin to move
all over, beyond the palms, like secrets beginning to tell.

Self-Portrait as Lucky Man

Because I pay my bills on time
and often smile when signing checks
my credit limit's been raised again.

I'm looking better and better
these days in the bathroom mirrors
of interstate highway rest stops—

my pallor and road-dazzled eyes
lend me the cool intelligence
of actors in foreign movies

where no one completes a sentence.
And though I cannot find a job
I'm the kind of man you would think

should have no trouble. Yesterday
my car stalled at a traffic light
in time to avoid being hit

by an escaping felon's truck.
Even when I lower my eyes
in pain or shyness I'm sure to glimpse

five-dollar bills in the gutter.
My wife is so kind I do not
deserve her, though she swears I do.

Dusk

It is the hour between dog and wolf
and the hour of liver spots enlarging
on the soft forearms of my grandmother.
At such times the cinderblocks shrink
into the vacant lot rubble.
It is the hour when the retired
consider part-time jobs.

At meals everywhere conversation lags,
the hour between mortar and brick,
between ice cube and tumbler.
In the backyards ropes hang still
from the stripped crotches of trees.
A bad time to encounter mirrors
or ease down into a scalding tub.

When my past comes to inhabit me
it is now the hour of sand,
climbing the stairs step by step
even as I sleep.
Hour of severed phones ringing
and my father who calls me
before him in his night chair.

A Sense of Scale

We played pig-face, my brother and I,
for soldiers on convoy down the Thruway,

whole truckfuls of baggy green men
fresh from high school, boots black as showroom tires.

Dad found it easy to pass a Jeep
in no hurry, so we mugged "Anchors Aweigh"

to see if those Army men would notice.
"Pipe down," called Dad, but then

Mom whistled "Bridge On The River Kwai,"
calling it by some other name,

and sang all the verses in a brassy voice
we'd never heard before. She was a sergeant

in the War, we told all our friends,
and Dad just a corporal—though he got

to fly to the Philippines while she typed memos
in Enid, Oklahoma. In browning snapshots

they ambled hand in hand on pass or furlough
until their olive drab marriage spliced

with someone's reconnaissance shots and tourist views:
calendar vista of Mt. Fuji through the trees;

a whorehouse in Manila maybe,
where dark skinned women without shirts

lounged among Dadless soldiers in smoky rooms;
one withered Filipino peasant with breasts sagging

to her waist—captioned "Old Saddlebags"
in a hand not my father's;

what we called "a jap" incinerated grinning
halfway out of a tank turret; another,

driftwood bones and scraps of flesh
sunk into sand on an unlabelled beach.

Stranger still, Dad himself, in a jungle
with a dozen buddies, stripped down

for volleyball or swimming, smiling at the future.
"It wasn't bad for us," he would say,

"we needed lights and running water
for the darkroom. We could cool down."

Still, he was so skinny and frail
we hooted all the louder at this Thruway's

crop of aimless privates, with their plugs and gum,
their sunday-driving nonchalance.

At the rest area, Dad and Mom got carried away
saluting each empty Jeep in the parking lot.

I did not think then of the final shots
in that album they never mentioned

but allowed us to find in our nosings—
aerial views, but low, of Hiroshima

not long after the blast. Acres of rubble,
just like our town dump, but with here and there

a chimney, phone pole, or charred tree trunk
to give us a sense of scale.

The Library of Home

Refreshing to hear a familiar name
has gone under in the old home town,
or perhaps a bar where I once drank beer
and argued a position I hated.
My savings bank gives me the time of day,
Too Late, and the temperature, Very Low.
I remember what I love and no more:
I love a small town just after midnight,
when all the stoplights begin blinking "go,"
and the lit and empty telephone booths
begin their secret ringing in the fog.
A man wants his boyhood to be simpler:
even the headline's lie of omission
should comfort: honor roll, marriage, and death.
A never finished highway occupies
dotted lines on the map, like the unlived life
of the prodigal son, who would not fulfill
the provincial brag. The evening paper
headlines instead, "Man Gets What He Deserves,"
topic of every graduation speech.
A house I once lived in, altered and wrong,
succumbs to this bodiless longing, these
swirls of an unrecorded fingerprint.
Any snapshots curl their wings like dead moths
and turn slowly to dust in these attics,
a strangely ominous fidelity.
Any brain is folded upon itself
many times, like the chalkiest roadmap
still refusing to go the wrong way.
For here is a town whose mayor is part-time,
whose children orbit with glad gravity,
whose downtown will never move to the malls.

And at the library it is business
as usual, Andrew Carnegie's strange gift
to the heartland. Though on the street out front
the rubber skid-patches are permanent,
as is the dusting of shattered bottles
over the sidewalk, and though the aisles
are crowded with cookbooks and mysteries,
everyone knows there is a private shelf
in the librarian's office. And there
are the books of which I have always heard,
books of travel, lust, and complication.

Mother Pills

Who couldn't sleep? A boy with diseases
lifted from *Reader's Digest*, a new one
each month: tuberculosis, leukemia,
fear of open places, dread of the new.

I pestered my mother who brought me pills
in the night, aspirin she called magic,
the very narcotic I pleaded for.
Some nights they were, and I drifted away.

Who cannot sleep? A man married to fear,
mothered now by long distance, each new list
of her ailments I tend and count like sheep.
Her comforting voice still rains on my roof.

Surely she cannot forget being kicked
from within, my pink-footed scrabbling
for release. That's why she takes each misstep
as aimed at her. That's why she swallows pills

to heal me of her memory. That's why
my fitful rolling in bed can wake her.
Yet regardless of my insomnia
her crippled hip will act up tonight.

In the years since I called her in the dark,
habits die hard. Visiting her these days,
I hear the all-hours radio complaining,
her murmurs to my father in a new voice.

I think of my gradeschool essay on her:
how much she loved horses, how she was tall,
how every night as she stood at the stove
she retold us what a bad cook she was.

I may also have drawn her long hair, eyes split
behind bifocal lenses, but what remains
is that sliver of light under my bedroom door,
the voice my voice could waken, sure as rain.

Ghetto Spring

An amoeba
of mosquitos cutting
across, or shooting
through a square
wire fence-hole, cats
like hungry babies
crying in the gangway, and wasps
landing to catch
their breath, their survival
guided by the sun, and
big, black ants peeling,
skinning the faces
of peonies or birds
fighting in the dirt
tracks carved by ice
from the past winter's slow, glacial
scrape across the alley,
and the cops asking if old
Mrs. Wilson made it
this winter; and bugs, asparagus
beetles, like german flags,
march over the graves
of perennial four o'clocks,
and dog feces scatter the land
like Monet's haystacks
after the leaving
of the long, winter snow.

Louanne and the Pack of Kents

I was thirteen when I had my first
butt. Robin, this milker, turned me on
to Kents. I'd lime her
barn for money and cigarettes,
then walk five miles
for a pack. Barefoot down
the cracked-up road, pressing tar
bubbles with my heels,
I'd pass this old Coldspot
freezer smoking fish out its sides,
and this horse, Patches, who hung
with the cows because he thought
he was a cow. Taking the bend
on HWY. J, then five steps up
to Braumshreiber's general store,
with its wooden floor and fake front
like a Hollywood movie,
I stood in the doorway, looking down.
The long aisle, to its meringue
ceiling and lobby lights, lit
a butcher's face, his waxy mustache
dulled by yellow haze, and white
apron bloody with guts
from Patsie Sheffen's old bull.
My front tooth missing, shorts
to my knees, and hair combed
flat against my face, I'd ask
for a pack of Kents. Louanne ran
the register. "Are you old enough?"
she'd say. Louanne was big. Breasts
to her waist, blonde hair
shorter than a fly's, and a sunburn
around her raveled elastic swimsuit.

She'd throw me a pack
and buy me a cone just so
it would look good. I'd sit where
the old-timers in clean
pressed bibs watched trains, eat
my cone, smoke a butt, and listen
for the old Chessie
to squeal through town, drowning out
the smell of cows.

A Woman by the Mississippi

Her expression is nothing
to look at. You would think
her occasional pats of the water,
the rippled buildings
reflecting, boats and people
thinning out with each wave
was a romantic thing,
but it isn't.

The Mississippi is like a fat slug.
Its surface images of thin,
rheumatic couples holding hands
edge the river, and break
the sand—slurry crabs hide
their faces, distorted,
tinged in the dirty light.

The river isn't beautiful today.
Its brown mouth spits-up
stones along the shore, the pitted ones
layered on layers
of smooth snail and crab shells.
And only the weepy tree at the river's back
waves over the water soft and green.

Trails

Early autumn. First frost.
A round moon leading on . . .
the deer leaps high as fir-limbs
propelled over wooden railings.

She bounds through dry corn-stalks
and leaves a strange excited trail,
where the shivering shapes of rabbits twitch
at a passing shadow.

Then seeing what nothing else must have noticed,
she streaks downhill toward the village
and plunges through a field of clear glass stars,
her nose bleeding for hours among the diamonds
and rubies.

Dawn comes. And the moon goes after
other darkness. Nothing is seen
except a scarecrow arriving in coat
and tie to open his jewelry store.

There are only nights, . . . and trails
filled with lighted notions.

In a Photograph by Froissart, 1856

First one drop against the cathedral spire,
then a slow stream down stained glass.
The Rhone and the Saone have been swelling for days.
And now the flood at Lyon.

Rows of tall trees wade like herons
in a vast canal.

The sun keeps its distance.
Nothing can promise the return of grass
and flowers.

From their high windows two faces gaze
at each other through opera-glasses,
as if at the beginning of a strange
new love affair.

It is obvious the water is still rising.
The gas lamps will not be on parade tonight.

Monsieur and Madame Bouvier,
deprived of their early morning walk,
comfort their whimpering poodle.
Monsieur stares at La Bourse de Lyon,
then at the main thoroughfare that once led
from Paris to Rome.
Money floats on the water, dragging
its dead gold feet.

By evening their minds have risen to fever crest.
Madame moves through the room with her slim taper
searching for a memory strong enough to buoy three
lives through the night.

As she lifts the lid from the teapot
tears slide down her silk handkerchief,
and her sobs suddenly snuff the nervous flicker,
the room in full darkness flooding
with the ghosts of roses that once flamed
the endless gardens along the Rue Bonaparte.

Fossils and Relics

My father keeps the interlocking histories
of rock and bone boxed up.
The labored cursive of the labels
is my own, as though I shared his need
for names more certain than embodiment.
Some things I learned:
400 million years ago
this *crinoid stem* was anchored
to the ocean floor. Water filled
and emptied it. Water was everything
until there was no water, and its keel
bears scars from breaking with its roots.
When I reach for it, I'm reaching
for the sense I lack, of passing
through one tart, deciduous world
into another.

Every spring we made our pilgrimage
on knee and knuckle
through inverted time: his term
for tailing heaps at Retsof Salt Mine.
What was deepest in the earth
came out on top. Where we pored
over stone. Where the tincture of his sweat
belied the lime's drab grey.
Where I squatted, aping gravity
and interest as he prized
a *paradoxides* from sleep,
its thorax tapering, its crescent eyes
almost reflecting sun. That's when
the coarse rock fled my feet
and I fell, hands plunged in the slope
like sea-anchors, away from him.

And after, he knelt with me
in the sharp-edged past,
his bloody handkerchief pressed
to my palms. The blind sun hovered
over his left shoulder. I still hear
his liquid voice invoking
sediments that love each tiny life
enough to risk protecting it,
to harden and endure millenia
of uplift and erosion.
I listened past him,
past my faulty hold on earth,
my messy blood.

Father, it's been years.
Your bones betray you
and you fall among the motley talus
of our dreams and dreads.
And I keep opening this box
of recalcitrant displacements,
deep embedded patterns bared
and catalogued, to touch
the wild unlikelyhood
that any life be saved.

Opening the Nest

In his hands the crowbar bullies
slat from joist; he weighs against
the old dock's split and splinter,
dragging out the rows of nails
that fall to rust. When, years ago,
my father struck those nails, his hands
decided on the careful spaces,
measured air and wood. I stood
too close and caught the hammer's backswing
on my leg. I fled indoors,
afraid of my own blood. Perhaps
I shouldn't stand so close today
to glimpse the underside, or watch
a young man straining, steel on wood,
to pry the boards apart.

* * *

Inside, a world of veiny rot and pockets
pinched by mandibles; a world we never saw.
I think back to the silver maple tree:
a carpenter ants' nest hollowed it out
when I was small. I heard the wind flute in
through cracks and knots, the music of no past
came twisting in my window, summer nights.
I rose, I listened, but I never looked
into that trunk to see what I see now:
a darker place, a bed of mold and eggs
as white as cuticles; the buried system
of the wood, the shells uncountable,
the one dense nerve composed of everything.

* * *

Deep in the borrowed board he spots her:
Queen, a knuckle long, a ventricle
for slave and lover. Kneeling down,
he lifts her with a stick. My voice
will make no difference, but I shout
until he flings her in the lake. There is no splash.
I take his hand and we stand, staring down
into a nausea of limbs and eggs.

"They find another Queen or die," he says.

Something is very wrong: I see the stick
float in, her bright black carapace,
a squirm and ripple. As he smiles, I know
his argument: that when a thing survives
it's meant to. But his crowbar fits my hands,
I bend and lift that stick onto the dock
and bring the metal down.

* * *

What is your body?
Trunk and limbs.
Why do you lie there?
It's neither lake nor land.
What holds the dock up?
Stakes and rusty nails.
Where do the ants live?
In the pores of wood.
What can you see in light?
The lenses of another's eyes.
What else can you see?
The inches underfoot.
Why did you shout?
The wood was damp and crowded.
Why did you strike her?
To see what was inside.
Did she fight?
Yes. She almost made it.
What are you then?
Human, pure.
Where will the ants go?
Somewhere else, another Queen.
Where will she come from?
Somewhere else, a different plank.

What happened in the silver maple?
Ants ate all the age rings,
left it hollow and the wind sang in
to fill the trunk with sound.
How did it sound?
Like music, lovely.
How did you feel?
Hollow. Full.

Esplanade

The avenue bordered green too long for him.
So once, when he was alone, climbing a willow
that hung somewhere in the curve of his mind,
where nothing yelled, and a river wound

around the land and itself,
leaving, unlike a snake,
live sloughs for all this thirsty world,
he paused. In his head, a fond but mute

applause for what struck there: one
sheet of blue that stitched his eye
to the furthest sigh his grandfather ever breathed;
one caterpillar, who in all its lumped fur

followed its own singleness beyond
what any mind could personify of
cramped and lumpish creeping;
his tongue rung by the trill of one bird

whose pleasure even fulfilled the sun.
And this, he never told or turned to words,
just let drift beyond the blocked concrete he walked,
which realtors, in turn, had sold and sold and sold.

Eve White and Her Third Husband

If breast-size were the measure of a woman
or church attendance, then the Good Lord would
have put a cow in Eden or a nun,
but when He thought it over as He did,
He knew that Adam was a lonesome man
and the new garden quite a place: thick woods
around and ferns and talking snakes; that nude
male needed something wild, but warm.
So he created Eve from a floating rib,
and here we are, always prone to tides
or moons or storms. Our hidden cargo rides
at rest only when it's moored to rock.
I've found that twice. Now, I hear the tick
of the clock in the hall at night, and on the roof
the weathervane squeaks and turns like a rusted jib.

Morning Song

I dip my coffee water now from the spring.
An earthworm crawls across its floor,
and I have two thick hinges made of brass
fastened above it to the weathered hardwood door.
The water seeps up through black leaves,
in a hole I helped time hack from the earth,
beneath a boulder dropped by the glacier's melt.
It is older than any ideograph of man
or the walking Chinese eye of their verb *to be*.
Who would believe me if I said
I have never been more happy with life?

Dawn at Drury Pond

A night of invading woods' ants,
and the deer mouse threshing in the trap,
until, white fur exposed, she twisted to her back,
caught in a forage for new food.

All early morning, rain filled the pines,
and now, in the first crack of light,
the mist scarfed among their greens burns off,
two loons rise from rush across the bay.

And day has come again out of the Grand Banks,
hauling its long furrow through the sky in a wake
that spreads out against balsam, fir, and mountain pine,
filling their darkness with sound

and a scintillence: each point kindled
by seafire in wave troughs,
then flung westward to the sand,
where every grain opened its eye and burned.

Autumn Song

Maybe the day is cold,
the light slant over the rill,
steep where the alder and the black willow wait
rooted in frost,
their leaves hanging like
the patterned sleeves of a gown
my grandmother wore at an end of the season ball:
splendid color,
spangles on the walls.
Turtles and frogs are going deeper;
my mind the same,
caught in this open wander,
tracking light,
its low angle,
the heart ripened like tart fruit
that fills to fall.

After Dusk,
Walking Toward Drury Pond

Moon, the clover lover, intercedes,
and ahead, a slant field shakes its pine,
salmon-shuddered, brook-climbed.

Wind finds a way through the timothy
where we climb through June toward home,
where high ridge turns to plunge,

and ends in pond,
where the last loon calls his passing
under the gray birch,
which, mirrored,
pulses there
like a silver vein of water.

Story

It was Tuesday, I think, about 8:30,
and she was about to make her way to the cellar,
through the piles of clothes to be washed on the stairs.
“Dirty clothes have no need to be hid,”
she always said, so hers were always there
for anyone to see. She had just come in
from the garden, where she went first each day
after breakfast chores were done, and just
as the sun was climbing above the ridge to the east
so it caught the dewy points and made them sparkle.
She had seen, that morning, a turnip or carrot, I think.
I can’t tell you what, for that would be
too much for what outsiders are privileged for.
I’m not complaining about that you understand,
for it might be more than I could take, knowing
which turnip held the dew in just
what way to change the day so and light her.
Well, there she was, up on a Tuesday morning,
her feet tracking the garden mud downstairs
past the week’s wash piled so anyone knew
what food the family ate and where they worked
or played; and there, right at the corner of the stairs,
where the window looked back like a photo that framed
what she’d seen,
she stood and screamed. Woke the whole
house up to whatever it was was lost
or hurt her most when she looked back for it.
I’ll say, the family got up fast that morning.
And when Herman came to her on her knees in a pile
of dirty clothes, he caught her to him tight
and rocked her head to his chest like she was a child
and he some older man who had caught a look
right into her head and had to stop there and hold her,
rocking, not so much for the child’s sake,
but for what he’d suddenly known of his own,
being human, and so, responsible.

Anyway, that's the story of how the Mitchells
used to live here once, and why Herman
quit his job at the mill and took their kids
from school, and how they sold the place and color
TV to us. I don't know where they are now.
Down south of here or west. No one knows
a thing for sure except those two,
or maybe me and you, or some
turnip or carrot-top covered with dew.

The Farm

Together they live,
on a strange farm,
more important (it's said)
than the six pigs,
the two cows,
or chickens
chickens
everywhere
like a multitude
of angel wings
like many
fast clouds

He tills the soil
with a plow
as rusty
as dried blood.
Drinks water
right there in the field
from an earthen jug
covered with
wet burlap.
At night
reads a Bible
of well worn cow hide

She cooks the beans
mixing them
with dreariness
of flat flat land
and a man
who loves only work
and God.
She feeds
the angel wings
she sees her husband
bloody
for meat
like an awful sunset
touching
the white white clouds

Maybe they are happy
maybe they live:
the people,
the dirty pigs,
the gregarious cows,
the multitude of wings.

Dying Like Keats

Like Keats, I am dying.
I am seeking the real
taste of the dark fall
melon before it closes—
squeezing me
with its musk life
to something
smaller
and blinder
than its own seed.

I am dying.
Like Keats,
each dark day
I seek bright night
when the strange bird
sings
who seems to live
forever.
Its song bleeds
gaudy, lovely scents
among dream flowers.

Each day
as you
walk,
shadowed from the shadows,
songless
as a broken melon,
darker than a hidden song,
do you
know you—
like Keats—
are dying too?

Rocky Island

Aurora, my daughter, a morning girl,
has chirped off early to our tent.
I sit on this bleached log,
a stony Lake Superior beach,
eyes following the channel north
between Rocky Island and South Twin,
north and north some more.

At some vague edge the sky and lake
should separate; tonight they don't.
Tonight they blend
into one horizonless blue-silver shaft
rising from beneath my knees,
as if I sat at the secret
infinitely penetrable heart of things.

Like slender wings, or the tree-lined lane
lost at its crossing of the greater road,
the dark tips of the two islands
seem barely there
to represent the granite shields,
the thrust and buck, of continents.

Then a meteor, the closest one has come to me,
intersects this climbing corridor
of dimming light, flares up
and is contained. Face burning
in the growing chill, I grin,
contained myself, another gap-toothed
seeing-is believing child.

Fellow Travelers

Out of low popple woods
a little fellow came,
August-ridden,
to lay his head
against our garbage can
and fall asleep;
he didn't even eat.
My mother, seeing him,
went bravely forth,
armed only with the pot
she beat, woke
the little fellow up
and moved him smartly out;
sometimes I think of this
when I can't sleep.

And later,
on a rising trail
through sterner country
where the real ones ruled,
we laughed, we swore,
and sang and yelled,
we moved them smartly out,
one summer's trail crew
coming through . . .
But we'd be quiet, as,
at a low spot in the trail,
we watched the water gather
in a track; the claws
at least
would not retract.

Yet there was another trail
that didn't climb or cross
—through open lodgepole,
a sunlit, easy walk.
And once, all by myself,
someone fell in behind me,
about my size but wider.
We were that way awhile,
easy going, going easy,
as if he were just out walking
his own pale ghost
on a long ghost leash.
Until, at some right point,
he veered to amble cross-country,
on the track of his nose
to where—I'm sure—
the keenest of the sweets
were hid.

As Above, So Below

Summer, this year, slow in coming,
didn't so much progress
as hold a convention in July.
July was it—summer's womb and grave
and meal and mouth, a tongue of sun
stuck halfway to September,
summer feeding on its future,
licking ripe the blackberries
above a berry backlog.

From the early, chilly side,
the great yellow mayfly hatches
we take for granted
last week of June
went off with the Fourth,
when the brown trout, those elegant assassins,
lost their European restraint,
swallowed, with those mayflies of an evening,
ten thousand years of discipline
in the arts of ambush and escape.

While I, wader-cased,
patience strained by a month's poor fishing,
to say nothing of a whole life hung
like a crumb on the lip
of a vast anticipation,
knelt in the pregnant dark,
casting a fly the size of a small bird,
and from behind one fallen elm,
killed eight in maybe forty minutes,
the river bank a factory floor
of mud-slip slither, thwack, and spasm.

So much for dry-fly decorum,
gone downstream, in suspension,
with the compost
of half a life's regrets.

Heavy soils, they used to hold
the tree of heaven up, until it fell,
became a bone, a bridge,
a roof of sorts across a mouth of water—
one fallen elm above the slurping trout,
white, wafer rings dissolving
on the thick, black tongue of river
that gorged my appetite.

Notes from the Search

I. Every Mother's Daughter

I am hunting for my mother.
The arrow is knocked,
the bowstring taut
by my ear, singing
a lullaby I never heard.

At Mercy Hospital
on Halloween
Houdini did not appear
again; the faithful
have gone to that room
for fifty years.

At Mercy Hospital
there is a room
where my mother lay
ten years after Houdini
died there. Perhaps
she cried. Perhaps she
was just glad it was over.

At Mercy Hospital
the records are sealed;
at the Wayne County Courthouse
the records are sealed;
in Lansing at the Capitol
the records are sealed
just as surely
as my mother will be
closed in her coffin
before I find her,
sealed and hidden
where I cannot
hunt her anymore.

II. What I Really Am

I am not really this tall.
I'm about two inches high right now.
From day to day it varies
depending on how I feel.
Sometimes I reach four or five feet.

My hair which sometimes feels
brown, sometimes red, occasionally
blond (when I'm feeling sexy)
comes from a close or distant
relative, depending on whether it is
Monday, Thursday, or Saturday.

My voice is the echo of evangelists,
hymnodists churning out saving grace
or comes from some strident aunt
or cousin, a termagant or hog
caller, a master sergeant at Parris Island.

My father, I think, was full of medals
which I'd have saved if I'd had them.
And I'd have saved the Nazi helmet he
might have brought back, or the Jap sword.
He'd probably never have taken a bribe
but was just not used to children.

Pictures hang on the bushes
along this path I walk,
pictures of my family.
Some have my eyes, another my mouth,
this one my daughter's dimple—

these strangers—I take them down,
books from infinite bookshelves.
My children and I read them
late into the season
as they fade steadily
from the unseasonable sun.

III. 8:40

After I've finished my tea
I eat silence surrounded by the smell
of bacon and suddenly I'm being born
beyond the window
from fallen crabapple blossoms.

I wake walking the edge
of a gorge filled
with orange and purple shadows
and the sound of slow water.
I am standing in May
washed by the rain.

But after I've finished my egg
I hear snow hit
the tin roof of the porch,
smell the snow filtering around
the door as I lie down
and make an angel in what has crept
onto the kitchen floor
under the laughter of my children
and the voice of my mother
who is calling me
home to bed.

IV. My Birthday

On this special occasion
my mother would have said,
"Slaughter the guinea pigs and rabbits."
My mother would be fierce,
not put off by slime,
blood, a few guts.

She would take the knife
and rip them down
from throat to tail,
peel the fur coat off and toss it
casually over her shoulder.

She would say
that her grandchildren
should go out and get a job,
pound the pavement;
she would say,
"Don't coddle them!"
and send them out
at twenty below
to sell the fur off their backs.
"See," she would say,
"it toughens them."
My mother would not give an inch
and they'd return home
singing—a birthday song
which she'd direct
by beating her baton
on their bare, cold backs.

On this special occasion
she'd cook the dinner
taking the birds from the cage,
the dog off the lawn,
tenderizing the meat overnight,
marinating it in hot blood,
chopping my iris for the salad
and garnishing it with
our leftover nailclippings
which we'd have saved for months.

I have started the fire.
My daughter, my son, and I
huddle around it until
my mother, their grandmother,
comes flinging the door open,
warming her hands,
and beginning to love us
one at a time.

Voices

At the edge of the swamp
she had neither house nor mother.
She kept her music in blue suitcases
and was always ready to go
but never played a note.
Her cello lacked an E string.
She sang frequently
on the dock that stretched
endlessly into the swamp,
heard two voices answer
her song with their song.

She was thirty
when she gave up winter and fall
and composed an oratorio
for A string and alto.
It was a celebration
but it escaped her.
She stepped into the muddy water
hoping to find
a road to the other side
where the voices had said
she belonged.

Hang-Gliding

The wing
of nylon, red,
is something

to try on.
Your heart flutters
as you dream.

More than the flag
of desire, more
than rippling in the wind,

you will fly
yourself, a kite
rising on the thinnest

cord. Always there
has been this itch
between the shoulder blades.

Feather by feather,
hunger grows.
In the singing

light, you
breathe and ride
the belly

pressing up
against you, only you
and that woman's voice,

the wind, whis-
pering "Higher,
go higher."

Night Fishing

This is your secret
place. Into water
going black

as an iris, you
spin a fine line.
It is weighted

with sinkers of lead.
It is baited
with your heart.

Where it kisses water,
dropping down
into deeper dark,

a ring of silver
opens like an eye.
The moon, that bobber,

rides the ripple,
settles down again.
Again the wet

black gives back
the stars. Diamonds
in a net. You are

fishing the sky.
One star cracks,
splinters

into chunks of fire
falling down the night.
Before the tug,

before the bubble moon
breaks into its dance,
you know what you have caught.

To Mrs. Lapitz, St. James Catholic Grade School

Since grade two you've stayed
with me like chalk dust,
like milk money left unpaid.
I scrubbed two sidewalk squares
with paper towels for you
and half the school's main stairs
because I spit. At recess you hid
behind the school and asked
the Sisters what my father did.
You made me cut and wear a tagboard
baby bib and set me in the hall
each day by the playground door
so every kid who'd come or go
to play could laugh at me.
And now I think I know
why you didn't spank that kid
who I said stole the extra milk,
why instead you made me sit
in the hall for one more day—
so I would learn not to snitch
but to pray.

Five Moments to Have Again

1.

He painted the whole garage: the support posts
window trim, the eaves, everything—almost.
He found a hornets' nest in a corner and,
trying to paint around it, he got too close.

2.

This girl at a party smiled and whispered, "Let's go."
Eyes closed, he watched her long red hair flow
to the floor, her soft neck open up to him.
He claimed he had an early test and had to go.

3.

In that high school prom picture, his wife stands
with her date. On her dress two green ferns fan
out to cup an almost open, single rose.
He never sees the petals through the boy's hands.

4.

As his mother died, he told her she wouldn't.
He spoke only of those errands she shouldn't
bother running, housework she need not do.
He almost told her other things, but couldn't.

5.

His son's football thumped on the roof as he wrote.
He almost put his pencil down, grabbed his coat
and went to roll in the leaves, but he sat all day
writing, connecting quote to stifling quote.

Thinking of You at the Dentist

(for A. L.)

When some crying kid kicks
 on the waiting room rug
 and rips up all the picture books
When the dentist pats me
 like a long-time pal
 and calls me by a different name
When he lifts his mask up
 sticks his latex hands
 in my mouth till I feel sick
When he scrapes my teeth clean
 with his metal pick
 and cuts my gum or hooks my lip
When his drill bit screeches
 grinding at my teeth
 and grabs and kicks at tiny nerves
When my cavity's chiseled
 to sandy bits of grit
When I finally rinse and spit
 I think of you

Lessons

(for Michelle and Adam)

You practiced once your strokes and dives,
my swimmers at the shallow end,
pushed out with schools of friends,
kicked and splashed back till you arrived.

Today you splashed less, swam more,
cut the water, kicked to ascend,
to breathe, crawl out and walk, and then
your bodies rippled off the board.

Closing Time

(after the Country Music Awards)

From my stool I saw all your friends leaving. Tough luck.
Since your pitcher's still full and the night's not young,
put a head on my beer, Babe. Put your tail in my truck.

I'm empty as a keg at sunrise since you snuck
off with Gus. But Gus, he just left. That song's been sung.
From my stool I saw all your friends leaving. Tough luck

him leaving you here like the foam in a glass, stuck
like a pretty young doe that's been gutted and hung.
Put a head on my beer, Babe. Put your tail in my truck.

If you'll be my sweet doe, Babe, I'll be your big buck.
I need you tonight like a salt lick needs a tongue.
From my stool I saw all your friends leaving. Tough luck

they don't want you tonight. But I do. I could pluck
music from you like a guitar that's just been strung.
Put a head on my beer, Babe. Put your tail in my truck.

You're stacked like fresh hay. You're the honey bee that sucks
crabapple trees in late May, and I've just been stung.
From my stool I saw all your friends leaving. What luck.
Put a head on my beer, Babe. Put your tail in my truck.

Shadowboxing

I shadowbox
in my kitchen
late at night.
I am a relentless
opponent. I throw
hard shots.
I drop men
with a single punch.
My nose was broken
twice
in Golden Gloves
boxing.
I am entitled
to these
thoughts.

In High School I Majored in Shop

They told us
assembly lines were
forever. That
assembly lines
never stopped.
They showed us
filmstrips about
happy couples
with children
and Dad coming home
with his lunch bucket
happy, greeting
his children on
bended knee,
setting his
lunch bucket
on the driveway pavement
of his new
ranch-style
home. This
was living,
they said.
And we
believed them.

Miss Rinehart's Paddle

The long hard rumor
had hit us years before
but there was nothing we could do
to fend sixth grade off.
One September morning
we filed into Miss Rinehart's room
to face the thick glasses,
heavy oxfords, spit curls.

The weapon occupied
her middle drawer
and was rarely used on girls,
though Betty Jo got five whacks
for her haphazard map of Brazil—
the Amazon all smeared and off-course,
Rio de Janeiro inland by inches.

I sat through six months
of imagined failures,
ended up a jittery stooge
with all "A"s, the best parts in plays

and only now wonder
about the other side of power.

Without You This Afternoon

Without you this afternoon, the thin drapes sweep
 through the south window,
Then laughing flee north again on their long tether.
I too step through the house happily back and forth
As though I might live here without you always,
Which I might not—my love, my purser.
But though it is true that when you are late returning,
When you have stalled in traffic and stayed away too
 long,
All wind will die here and all will droop,
And the creek stones so full of honey and promise at
 noon
Will blacken and cast long shadows to the shadowy bank,
Grieving us for this delicious afternoon . . .
Though it is true, I ask your forgiveness.
I ask with one magnanimous stroke of your lovely hand
 that you cancel this debt,
That you cancel and enter on behalf of this solitary
 afternoon
The balance so full for us all of wind and sun and
 creek rocks—
The balance so fantastic and free without you.

For David Kubach

I share with the citizens of this town
The same stale air.
Taking theirs conditioned,
I take mine straight.

There is not a soul in this arid place,
Not a single rise on the surface
Of this unbearable, fishless moon.

Somewhere there must be good country—
Somewhere some place to drink
And watch men dance.

There is a fantastic blonde at the next table
Dressed to the teeth,
Would eat me raw
If I would only smile.

I Sit With You

No wind over the eighty-eight acre face
Of Lake Nothing.
No moon in the leaf-stained water.
The pike who has hunted the ducklings
All summer in the shallows
Is hunted himself now
By the pressures of the winter thermocline.

The otters in their den,
The city people in their city,
The loons flown south,
I sit with you, my silent wife,
Until the wind stirs
And the ice forms
Between us and the lake.

Third Self

Fog settles on the night
Like sleep on a brilliant child.
Louise is warm at last.
Palmetto forgotten,
She sleeps in a field of red mallards
Springing always outward
Through lilypads, cattails,
Green poplin sky.
Melinda is praying, kneeling sideways,
Whispering into the maple sheets.
New child now,
The ghost of the Florida wife gone,
I lumber certainly to the dock
Past the second wife, the first child,
The latest dog
Out into the rain, the cold lake,
My third self.

East Meets West

If the damn rabbit
that's poking through

your gardens breaking
tomato plants and

chewing the leaves off
radishes at night is

faster than you, will
you ever catch him?

And if it's supposed to be
partly sunny and somewhere

in the 90's, should you
tell the kids to put the sprinkler on

the asparagus this afternoon?
The old man who lives

across the street, the one who
spends all day in his garden,

knows exactly when to water
and even when to put on fertilizer

just by looking at the
scribbles on his calendar.

He's up every day at dawn
checking the sky and

feeling the grass
for signs of life.

Last fall when you were
watching football he

was reading the almanac
and counting the *ember days*.

And in spring while you
were doing your best to

understand an article on crop placement
in *Urban Farming* he was planting with the

help of the moon.
And this morning

he cans pickles and you bite
into an English muffin

and wonder what he knows.
Yell over and ask him what

it all means and he'll
say something like *knowledge is*

only part of knowing and
send you over a jar of

his best dills.
The old fart. He knows

the enemy lives
in your hedge.

He knows, but doesn't
need a BB gun or

have to think what
gasoline could do

because he has *the earth*
on his side and a wooden

fence around his yard.

Leaving Budapest

This bottle, its blue glass
is a blue note sounded against
the window, and outside, snow
falls, great feathers. Were

my love here, walking below,
his shoulders would catch wings
of snow, and the sound of blue
would reach him, filling his steps
with shadow. Oh, Sorrow, who asked you

to live within these paper walls,
to make me imagine this bottle the shape
of want, blue of desire, thin song
of absence? Broken-winged bird,

who asked you to fall against my window
as if there were something more you
needed? And who, who has taught me
always to hear you?

The Woman in the Glass House Speaks

I know everything around me
can shatter in a high wind,
at the kiss of stone or
the highest note. What is
important here is to walk
gracefully, the imagined book
balanced on the head and
no hand, no heart, no thought

to swerve for. What is important
is to see through each wall
another wall after and then another
until I am outside myself like a bird
resting on a high glass sill—
who must know it is only air beneath:
the blur of blue and green
to fly or fall through,
weightless and singing.

Manual for the Deaf

In lesson 33 we learn
the world, which is a circle
made of both hands, and
we learn direction, *north*,
one hand rising straight
toward heaven. There is
debt here, too, but only
as much as one palm, open,
can hold.

Praise is here and *promise*,
that finger to the mouth
as if to tell a child
his sister sleeps
beyond an open door.

But the word that leaves us breathless
is faith: *faith*,
the palm that lies up, floating,
the palm that waits for the other
to fall to it and tighten as if
to press and save a wet leaf, mothwing,
heart made of paper.

Duck Hunting

The sky raises its black lid,
a wedge of thirty mallards
floats above cornstalks.
From my gun muzzle, color of rose.
Wings drumming the earth.

Flooded Timber

There's nothing but white of snow, ice,
then the black of water and bare trees.
The boom of Jack's gun echoes on the flats
and a mallard crashes through oak branches,
feathers shining like spilled jewels.

The Last Camp in America

The women sit about the fire.
One by one, men leave the light.
A man fades into the bog, leaving
a thin sound of birch leaves rattling.
Another turns himself into a silver hook
and sinks gleaming through a cedar lake.
Around the fire, the women speak
and tap spaces that once held children.
In the forest, a branch cracks,
a shape hurdles after something white.
These men have entered the shadows,
these men have returned to the darkness.

Year

It ends like it began,
rain over dry marsh
flight of birds.

Every Woman

i.

Her house is green. In the yard, a wishing
well slapped on top of cropped grass pumps nothing
but air. The Amway Lady opens the mint
green door. Smiling, she leads me inside for
skin consultation, color analysis.

Three wooden butterflies perch on the wall.
On the counter, the GUIDEPOST magazine
shows a woman in a blue leotard
posed atop her exercycle for this
month's cover. She prays and pedals, cleans and

cooks, sings in the choir; the Lord has blessed her
with a husband and three sons, each with his own
ten-speed. Nobody gets fat. The Amway
Lady, all day in her kitchen demon-
strating cosmetics in her huge pink blouse,

needs this inspiration. She seats me at
her table, a paper plate in front of me
dotted with facial cream, a plastic bag
taped at my side for the cottonballs I
discard. She talks about Every Woman.

Every Woman keeps a drawer full of
cosmetics she no longer uses—lip-
stick too orange, rouge too dark, eyeshadow
that smears, the fantastic bargain under
the fluorescent light of Osco turned

into trash in the morning light. Once a
year, when her husband kills deer in the north
woods, she cleans out her drawer. Only once
a week, she pampers herself with a cleansing
mask on Saturdays while Connie Francis

sings love. The Amway Lady is Every Woman. She protects her family from germs in tap water and six-year-old eggs that had been stored in special warehouses before appearing in the dairy boxes of

our supermarkets. Her boys play football and clarinet, cure their acne with Amway products. Every Woman, I want to say, but I'm not like that. What can I say? I'm just a kid turned a woman? I came only because it was free?

ii.

My dresser top holds two sets of eyeshadow, one mascara, one box of rouge, no lip-stick. All the cosmetics I own, they were purchased eight years ago from the girl who sold Avon on our campus. A huge girl,

she wore a black leotard all day after her morning exercise class. At lunch, at supper, in the cafeteria, boys going up for second helpings glanced sideways at her, much the same way in third grade

other boys poked elbows and snickered at one fat girl with breasts who huffed around the track in gym class. The Avon girl's room made me sneeze with scented candles, dusty potpourri. At night, her leotard was draped over a

chair like a punctured balloon. She served me strawberry tea and sold me cosmetics with names like soft velvet and dusky moonlight.

iii.

The eyeshadow I bought then, the Amway Lady says, is no good. Eye make-up not used in four months should be discarded. So many germs in our eyes, we can even infect ourselves. At her death my mother left her vanity drawer full of cosmetics that would not keep till I was a woman. We threw them out, my aunt and I. Dusty face powder my mother had spilled rose from the upturned drawer and stung our eyes with

her scent. Now the Amway Lady seats me before a larger mirror for color-analysis. She bends over me, drapes a gold cloth and a silver cloth from my shoulders. Her face close to mine, she looks into the mirror where our eyes meet. Her hair touches mine. I see her transformed, I forgive her her boys and wishing well and wooden butterflies. She is my wise old god-mother wishing me beautiful, her face bending over mine in thoughtfulness, her hand on my shoulder steady with hope. In

my mother's hinged three-way mirror, I could see myself multiplied countless, the world of infinity held within the small silver angle. Mornings, my mother sat in the center, lipstick between her fingers like a lit candle. Some nights she put on a pink cleansing mask and peeled it off in one piece while I made faces into the mirrors to make her laugh. I see her now peeling off a thin pink mask, her face beneath it glowing, made of light, laughing like light.

Lagoon

I shift to the right, the left, tip like an inflated knock out dummy. With my Frankenstein feet I place blade before blade and ride the silver train, my coat pocketing the wind. I skate past the dark ice which is supposed to mean something. I skate near a red mitten with nickels burned an inch into the ice. The weeping willows tap their feelers on the ice. Think of the fish tipping the discs of their eyes at the rumble of skaters. In October the water is a yellow plastic pool when the willows drop all their leaves. We pull crawfish from the slurry with broken chicken backs tied to kite string. The mystery holes claimed to contain deadly water snakes or aquatic rats are just dumb crab houses. The bluegills are so hungry they snap up when you gob on the water. Even now the water is alive while I stand in the middle of the pond. Pearls of fish and crab breaths dot the ice. Stay away from the orange flags where someone's dog fell in.

Jane Among the Ducks

At school I was a fool. Always in a corner
reading the wall's pimples like cool braille.
Always sitting under Miss Ehlert's desk
between her huge, swollen legs and strappy
shoes. I was stupid. When it came
time to read, everyone took turns.
Beautiful, smooth, the little story glittered
like a Christmas card—all perfect. Then
Sandy read. Everyone shifted in
their chairs, coughed, settled in for a rough
ride. The words twisted out. "The duck
sss. The ducks feel thers feel
in the way tour—waiter. Jane
swas it ant cricked, 'Oh,
No!' " Susan, with the perfect yellow hair
and beautiful, slanted, Siamese eyes glared
at me. Miss Ehlert said, "That will do!
Will Miss Susan Weedamont please read it?"
"The duck's feathers fell in the water.
Jane saw it and cried, 'Oh No!' "
"Thank you Susan. Now David." While
David, the boy who read like me, stumbled
through the ducks, I worked a finger up
my nose. Digging, all of a sudden wet—
blood ran into my sleeve. Red pancakes
dropped on "duck" and "No!" and "Jane" and "Oh."
"My God, you ruined a new book!"
My head was pushed back and paper towels
covered my face. "Oh yuck," said Susan.

From under the paper I saw her velvet skirt,
patent leather shoes and white lace anklets.
Her ankles came together and touched like Dorothy's
in the Wizard of Oz. My gray socks hung
over the backs of my unlaced shoes. I had
ratty witch-feet. "Time for music." I sing,

 "I'm a lizard teapot

 num num kraut.

 Here is my num-dule,

 here is a mouse.

 When I get all starred up

 hear me shout.

 Tip me clover and flour I shout."

I had a beautiful voice. Mrs. Colin
said, "Your voice is like birds flying south."

Hillside Fish Market

Last night the market burned. The windows black
and ugly hold no magic fish. I'd seen
a buffalo nudge the glass and turn her back
to me. Brown scales as big as quarters gleam
through water gold as pee. I watch him crack
the spines of fish. Like polished shoes the sheen
of heads surrounds the butcher's feet. She rolls
and air-pearls leave the tank like silver souls.

In August ponds are smooth as oil. A frog
is polished, emerald jade. Old mountains steam
in clouds. Still waters mirror heaven's fog
between the lily pads. A China dream
is cracked as backs of fish move quick and jog
through rubbery stems. The lilies tip their cream
and yellow flowers. Kim Lee's line goes tight
and slits the leaves; a nose is dragged to light.

The night the Hillside Market burned, I slept
and dreamed of fish. I watched them weave between
my frisky legs and nibble bubbles kept
in hairs. A tender fleshy mouth, a clean
and gentle "O" withdrew my pearls. I slept
while buildings burned. A blackened cough, a mean
and ugly vomit licked the fish. They died
in splintered glass with chair legs black and dried.

La Mer, La Mer

Two porpoises along a sea coast would laugh
at you, white Aphrodite up from pastures of holsteins
and me Neptune of prairie corn, blackbirds in my hair,

laugh at how each summer we meet in the bed of the lake,
our feet planted in sand
and embrace seas of earthy emotions we hardly understand.

Sometimes we gulp water, and a land breeze laughs through the trees.

When a herring gull drops out of the air,
surveys the lake close up, east then west,
and goes off after the taste of salt in his nostrils,
we look up, remember a small hill of sand
and climb down toward our pond, laughing to ourselves.

Soon we shiver away from each other;
the gull's raucous cries come back from nowhere.

This far inland it's hard to imagine the sea.

A Red Fox Again

Driving back after 10, we see a red fox
cross where County A curves and begins its climb.
Sitting next to me you suddenly enter the poem
as if you'd said I'm leaving you.

Smaller, less pure red than I remember
a fox, this one in the headlights has buff
on the back and tail; but the tail is huge,
bigger than the animal and, as they say, floating.

The other, seven years before, crossing on the curve
looked back at me over a shoulder like the friend whose funeral we missed.

I see all our lives together
strung in small beads of bright light. All these years
nothing else about the dull day but that fox coming across
looking at me like the sunset on the flagship going over the horizon.

Pinpoints of light splayed against our lives.
Harold shoots himself at seventy-six for guilt we never knew;
light plays the world for us like that,
holds up a square where the entering bullet burns and lets go.

The light burning and letting go,
our lives on the curve where the red fox
climbs or falls toward the dark valley of the Little Platte.

At Dusk the Picked-Over Garden Goes
Bright with Flowers

Everywhere I turn
marigolds leap in my hand,
my bunch by now so large
I can't hold it.

Falling flowers
trail me to the house;
and the breath of marigolds;
the salad hounded by odor of marigolds;
in the dying day,
the scent of marigolds in your hair.

Leland Stoney

That year we still bought
eggs from Leland Stoney,
the bachelor on Ridge
Road, who had stayed home
after the War,
for his mother's sake,
and got the Stoney Farm.

When he came with eggs,
we served his favorite
homemade cake,
chocolate fudge on white
china and coffee
black and boiling hot.
As he drank, he blew

close into his cup
the way Grandfather
did and a girl will
remember—simple
habits lifted to
ancient gestures by
thin, white china.

The Purple Lighter

Like a piece of candy
you might use to quiet a baby,
the violet lighter lies handy.
Flick it on, warm your hands,
think of times flames pleased:
gathering driftwood, beached,
bleached, brittle and light.
Stalks of reeds used to seed
the flames. Late night stories
staring at logs, throwing on
paper trash for a thrill.
The blue from milk cartons
like gas heater jets,
pretending their demise
was hotels crumbling
stilly in a news reel.

Halloween bonfires, the neighborhood
circling, baking potatoes on sticks
in the embers, eating them so hot
they stung. The candles in
restaurants flushing cheeks
as eyes met mine, even Xmas altars,
the arc of lights above
red and green, transcendant,
as the whole congregation
rose to sing.

From Photo of Coursing Water

Shine slides through moist fronds
revealing mud bottom.
The bank diagonals
into the rush
while further on, surface
glints like rhinestones,
hurrying as though they'd turn
to smoke.

I remember leaning over,
walking the flats,
peering down to see
were clam necks stretched,
would I get cut on a shell edge?

Soon sun that beat
on my back became
part of the dismissed landscape.
I lived with the minnows
in their darting medium,
their cool gills brushing mine.

Silver

What would we do
if you were dull.
What would I say
if you were empty?
Like ripples
on the lake,
the chandelier's light,
you are rich.
And this is only
one gleam in your eye.

Tunnel Vision

I.

First the light cracked
and black hairlines appeared.
Then tiny pores opened like peepholes,
for the night to peer in,
the winds of the void to blow through.
Crumbs of grey started to drown,
floating downward, out of sight,
islands sinking in a tide.
Colors slid into shafts of blindspots,
the memories of shapes sailed the seven
black seas.

II.

Her voice enters the room,
followed by her form and only last
her face, a flower, a small cloud
of smoke. I knew this face when it was
white, distinct, bordered by black hair.
Now the hair, too, has wilted,
turned grey.

III.

I wake to the sound of rain.
Scent of wet grass. It is
still night. The world is all right
at this hour. There is nothing
to look at. A bird begins to proclaim
his ownership of our tree. Over and
over. No dispute.
Soon dawn will invade my window,
crawl up to my door. Peace is
running out. Not peace: armistice.
I close my eyes, sink back into
my dream. My eyes are opened,
become as clear and sharp
as a bird's.

All Things Are Candles

The candle's dying makes the candle live,
as nothing is that is not by its ceasing
—not time, nor light, nor love.

All things are flames: some fiercely blazing
ecstatic stakes that are at once consumed,
some slower paraphrasings

of the same theme; but all alive, entombed
within their dying to their dying day
that started in a womb.

All things are candles, even stones—although
we burn too hot to fathom their cool rays.

Discussing Poetry

A poem is a dream seen in a mirror,
a lie so precisely distorted by error
that it reveals a truth. There is nothing obscurer
than "objective reality," nothing barer
of truth than "bare truth": only a conjurer's
touch can bring the mirage of the world nearer
to our minds' eyes, only dreams make us surer
of time's unsolved riddle behind the clock's clear hour.

Astigmatism

As far as
I can see
the white
blossoms
in the white
vase
bloom on no stems
suspended in
midair
like delicate white
insects
above a white
flower

Eating Nuts on a Snowy Evening

For me, eating nuts
is a small pleasure.

For the squirrels, it is
a matter of survival.

I know this. And yet
I keep eating nuts

watching the snow
through my window . . .

Explaining Blindness to a Child

—For Hans Magnus Enzensberger

It is like many nights
growing seamlessly into one,
it is like many flames
sliding into each other until
they're one big fire,
it is like colored wallpaper
being slowly covered by India ink,
it is like greasy soot blotting out
the sparkling new snow,
it is like a hundred black flies
devouring a white piece of cheese,
it is like a gleaming aluminum train
being swallowed by a hungry tunnel,
it is like bright birds in the zoo,
buntings, canaries, parrots
and snowy owls suddenly sprouting
black feathers and becoming ravens,
it is like the only TV in the world
losing its screen,
it is like the sun and the moon
and all the stars collapsing into
black holes in the sky . . .

The Tomb of the Unknown Poet

Why no Tomb of the Unknown Poet?
Wasn't he killed as sure as the Unknown
Soldier?
Didn't he die running wild after
the wildest beauty the same
as Wilfred Owen?
Didn't he step on the toes of landmine
minds?
Wasn't he mowed down by machine-guns
of mechanization?
Didn't he throw himself on the grenade
of scorn lobbed at Poetry?
Drape a green flag of living grass
over his casket.
Blow his taps on panpipes:
phoenix syrinx!
Unknown Poet launched into the Unknown
like a poem in a manila envelope
addressed to Immortality
Care of the worms who edit scrupulously
but send no rejection slips.

Kinnickinnic River Elegy

Behold the Kinnickinnic River K-Mart
sprung up along the Kinnickinnic River
I sprung up along in the post-war '40s.
Behold the Kinnickinnic River K-Mart
that killed the Kinnickinnic Riverbank wilderness
vestige I played in as a child and boy,
the field with creek cutting through it
across Chase Avenue from the field where
the carnival sprang up for a week each Spring.
Behold the Kinnickinnic River K-Mart
that along with the Freeway and Freeway Industrial Park
hogtied and crucified the little that was left of
the wilderness that was this place, the K-Mart
that paved the banks of the Kinnickinnic River
so it wouldn't flood the rec rooms of
the workingclass South Side and would more truly
resemble the open sewer it had become.
Behold the Kinnickinnic River K-Mart
I unthinkingly walked into this afternoon
(while my father waited for me in his car)
to buy myself blue flannel pajamas from China,
100% cotton for \$10.95, while mothers & fathers
half my age walk the aisles of merchandise
with little offshoots of themselves in tow,
loading them aboard the little endangered species
merry-go-round outside the K-Mart entrance.
Every item of merchandise inside that K-Mart,
including my pajamas from China, killed
the Kinnickinnic Riverbank ecosystem.
The whole planet fast turning into one vast K-Mart.

Souvenirs

This morning I found a white undershirt
that belonged to an old lover.
It is soft and worn thin with a slight
grease stain still on the left side
from the day he had to fix his bike,
the day he pulled the shirt over his head

and tossed it to me. It smelled
of his sweat and cologne and I slept in it
for weeks before it was thrown in the wash.
Now it clings to my breasts like old silk,
like the palms of my lover's hands when
they caressed me years ago. Once in awhile

I'll look down and everything I'm wearing
has belonged to someone else:
another husband's khaki shorts,
my mother's nightgown, my son's faded jeans;
it's almost as close as you can get,
like being inside their skin.

Every few years on the anniversary
of his arrest, the press reviews
a local graverobber's sordid tale;
how he'd unearth warm corpses
and take them home where he'd stitch
shirts and leggings, recycled

items of clothing from human skin.
I'd imagine him squeezing into women's bodies
and shuffling around his dim house
after dark, speaking in falsetto,
smiling as he sipped a cup of milky tea.
I saved all the newspaper clippings,

fascinated with the ghoulish details
just as I was intrigued with my baby teeth
I'd saved in a silver jewelry box:
nestled in the warm curl of my palm
they'd click together like ragged pearls
and I'd recall the trauma of pulling them;

each had its own tale, its own tenuous thread.
Mother threw the teeth out one day,
the clippings too, as though she could snug
the little teeth back in their bloody sockets,
pretend my smile was the same;
that nothing had changed.

Flag Day

I had the feeling I was in one of those
endless on-the-road films, heat like a furnace
on the Illinois prairie and our little red
car with no air conditioning, one-hundred-seven

degrees that day. Most of the way
too hot to talk and you had the runs
at Lincoln's tomb where we posed for dumb
tourist snapshots, stood as far away

as we could to make each other tiny,
got ice cream and milkshakes in one little town
and a beer at a dark and crummy fisherman's bar
in New Boston along the shore

of the Mississippi where I had to pee but
didn't know for sure which door, "Inboards"
or "Outboards," and pushed the wrong one
then blushed in the mirror after I got inside.

Coming into Oquawka we saw the sign:
Visit the Grave of Norma Jean (Elephant).
And on the granite monument by the watertower
we read about gaunt Possom Red Evans

and the circus' only elephant struck
by lightning there where she was buried,
Possum's pliers and the tent Norma'd raised
still undisturbed in the yellowed clipping

set in a frame with some old dried flowers.
Late afternoon we followed a truckload
of Iowa pigs so many miles that when
we pulled into Keokuk the ventilating

system of our Chevrolet was stinking, sour
with pig piss but the motel had a pool
and after the TV weatherchannel assured us
the windchill was only one-hundred-and-two

we floated there lukewarm and weary. I saw a man
watching me from the window frame of
in an old brick building across the street
four floors up, sleeveless undershirt

tattoo on his bicep. My God it was hot.
I set my Seven-up on the side of the pool
and swam around on my back a little while
longer just to give him something to look at.

Killing Frost

I awaken to gunshots in bleached dawn,
begin each new day on a note of death.
Duck season. Hunters hide in the marsh.
Saturday we canoed the Yahara, slipping between
painted decoys that bobbed on our ripples
and in the reeds men in camouflage cradled
guns and watched. I have felt these birds fly
across the ceiling of my study and when I look up
they have vanished. I can only see their shadows.

Tonight we shrugged further into our jackets
and went into the stillness to cover the tomatoes,
peppers, carry pots of geraniums inside.
The sky was deep and crystalline—no wind,
sharp stars. Red Mars stared out of the east
with its bold eye. We'll salvage what we can
from the threats we watch and wait for, things
lurking on the edges of my peripheral vision,
this feeling of unyielding change.

Tomorrow every blade of grass and fallen leaf
will be muted by a soft veil of icy white
gentling the damaged landscape. Even the raccoon
lying dead along the road will be frosted,
luminous. The cat stretches,
sighs, curls closer to my thigh. In this dark night
winter moves stealthily over the countryside,
a V of geese on its leading edge, pulling it
closer, over the Canadian border.

Finding an Abandoned Farm

I wish I could remember more of it
but when the first clouds approach on a clear sky
 I think of stones
some place where I can say anything
without the redoubtable apparatus of sky

or the harsh treatment of the trees
reminding me in my own voice that I am small
 and of little regard
I believe that light is like this too
yet desire ages differently

I am picking my way among a few nameless implements
 on an abandoned farm
layer upon layer of frost and metal dust and hay
 filtered in sunlight
and a few feathers
none of the elements is whole

but when I look up the beams are laid out evenly
and the universe is still swinging from the rafters
 of a hung barn
in the middle of daylight
I want to touch what I cannot see

The Language of Light Ambits

1

I go about it this way
I place both hands above the table and descend
awaiting only the crush of snow
I know will follow

fingers splayed like maps
my heart beating like a cup in the middle of my chest
I lower myself down onto the blank surface
like a new planet

I have been waiting for what seems like days
I look no worse for wear
in fact now the first streamers
are beginning to wave above me like banners

I thought I wanted to be whole
for a time I allowed my days
to become duplicates of my nights
but each moved through me like a separate thought

each made a particular sound
I thought I could hear
the horizon was already a mere pinpoint
I put out each star separately

2

I felt at once so quiet and replete
I could hear myself drop
the soft moon climbed into the sky
either waking or falling asleep

but it was only a liquid disc
floating off effortlessly
the grouse mice and deer slip quietly
into the new emptiness

what we come to inhabit
changes who we are
the first light fades into daylight
with almost no sound at all

3

as if each life was just such a series
a mellifluous bubble or arc
some new path upon which light appears
to travel and to know its way

yet tomorrow I will remember
all of this differently
clouds part and the light bends easily
sometimes poetry is the only solution
The world keeps coming apart
it's as natural and inevitable as dying
but by dying we often mean a new
beginning or belief

Prairie Fire

Kansas is so flat
she built a path
to climb, she waited

and she fell; but the fire
of her imagination
flickers in the attic,

leaves its singe
on the pasture grass,
drifts through the rafters.

It is the heart gone mad:
it has built a fortress
out of caring, stone

by stone. A woman lives
behind this door: her hair
holds you in each snarl,

she's knotted hope
into this shawl
that cannot warm her.

You will live in cities
with women who forget you.
With your name, she burns

the barn, straw by straw,
and counts the days you loved her.
She knows this fire will end.

She waits in the creek
with the stolen horses,
safe and blind.

Where the Sea Surrenders

The field wears the gold of autumn
as he offers her his hand. She is new

to love and hesitates, but the rush
in her veins signals that blue

internal landscape, a coastline
where the sea surrenders, night

after night, waves suspended
under a spell of moon. A woman now,

she will return the gold she hoarded
through those winter nights, ready

to touch him now, to accept the flush
of that red flower in his extended

hand, the heart dissolving finally,
that hour when the sea forgets itself,

and runs to tide, and turns to moan,
and spills its urgent message on the sand.

Private Song

The light issues
an invitation
and the moth
dissolves in fire;

the sea dreams
in her blue berth,
wave upon wave
of recollection;

and in the spring we forget
there is more than one way
to enter the kingdom,
more than one song,

and so a woman alone
takes to her bed
for consolation, and her hands
are her undoing,

until her window darkens
and that private song
begins: she calls
the stars to witness

and trips the switch
that lets her body fly,
wingless, into another
lonely night.

Dragon Poem

My daughter says, "Stop it Dragon"
as the creature breathes smoke,
hisses and growls, menacing
a frightened young girl on T.V.

I turn the channel—there was no dragon
in this children's tale when I read it—
As if there weren't enough things to be afraid of

I'm still afraid.
I can feel the change, the loss
of direction and control—
She wakes in the night, says, "Stop it!"

I can't stop it: overhead the dragon,
the child protector, carved
from teak, painted red and gold, its
wings tipped with flat-black green
moves imperceptively above her bed.

I say there are good dragons and
bad dragons—most of them are good,
A Zoroastrian or Manichaean division
that convinces me only of the neat
divisions we make of everything—
One of many lies I tell daily to get by.

The daily lie—what falsehood, what
idiot half-truth will I tell next
as I explain the world?
How can I say, "Stop it!" to the next lie
burning inside, breathing fire and smoke
searing all the years of this flesh?

Even in the year of the monkey,
it is the year
of the dragon.

44

The first time I saw Henry Aaron bat
He hit an easy pop up
And I sat back, dejected, impatient
Waiting for his next at bat.
It seemed forever—I was only eight,
Had time only for winning,
The grand moment, heroic gesture—

It was always the last of the ninth
2 out, behind by 3, the bases loaded
3 and 2 the count—seventh game of the World Series
And I had Henry Aaron's power;
I would foul off the next, a curve low and outside
Just nicking the corner, staying alive
As the world waited, balanced on the outcome
Of the next pitch.
Always it hung across the plate,
Belt high, as my wrists broke
And the hard crack of the ball
Resounding off that bat rose above the world
Beyond the deep left center of everything.

A thousand times, hit always to the same place
Deep in the stands, the place I watched
Waiting for Aaron's next turn at the plate.

And again he was out and again—
I could not understand
How anyone that good could fail;
I could not know the best fail most the time.

The next game went the same
Until the eighth and Aaron
Took a strike—a ball—
Then swung and missed—the next
Was low—count even,
The sign shook off and
Aaron guessed it right,
Picked up the rotation of the seams,
Knew it as his body sprung, forearms extended,
Wrists breaking unleashing the coiled
Power in his bat,
Cleats twisting into the dirt.

Trajectory of a bullet, sharp rise
Above the plane, the fall—
He noted where it hit
And rounded first, head down,
The noise we made like the voice of God
Thundering in the great man's ears.

I didn't want the cheers to stop,
The next batter to come up to the plate
Congratulating Henry with a slap
On his outstretched hand.
I wanted him to run the bases endlessly
Never reaching home
As I struck out, as I popped up
Going from game to game
Playing far into the night,
Far into the years.

Wild and Edible Plant Trilogy

1. Syrup Making Time

The Tree With Double-Winged Fruit

wakens
at the end of winter
and reaches out
with glossy, red brown fingers
that end
in slender buds.

It has a face
that is brown
and furrowed
so tapping the tree should be done
with tender respect.

Elderberry branches with punched out pith
make good spigots
and on a sunny day
after a cold night
sap runs
pure enough to drink
but best
for boiling into syrup.

40 gallons of sap
makes one gallon of syrup
worth the
wait
and work

of changing and lugging buckets
hours of sweating over boiling pans
and filtering out the bark and bugs.
Sweet Birch With Double-Toothed Leaves,

Walnut,
and sassy Hickories called
Shagbark,
Mokernut,

and Pecan
also run for syrup.
And each morning
the smell
of spicy Black Walnut leaves
with
the wintergreen taste
of chewed birch twigs
starts
a Bayou breakfast
during
syrup making time.

2. Berry Picking Time

Sweaty hands
pincer grasp
through green red stems and white flowers.
Bloodied by thorns
or swollen
with bites from deerflies and sucking mosquitos
the fingers
gently
lovingly
dislodge each blackberry
for route to the bucket.
A quick lick
of purple juiced fingers
and the hands return to picking.
The Common Blackberry bramble
stands
in the sunny summer old fields
somewhere between an open field
and a thicket
surrounded by Black Locust flower clusters
and Common Barberries
with their red tart berries just right for wild jelly.

Among them
are Smooth Sumac berries
covered with acid-filled hairs
which soak
to make a pink lemonadish drink
and wild strawberries
small, tight, seedy balls found in open fields
among the bull thistles and milkweed.
The hardest picking
is in the Bayou swamp
where you can find
Wild Raisin
with seed pulp like dates
and Red Chokeberries
that are chewy like apples and best in pies.
There, too
are the Common Spicebush berries
which make a good allspice substitute
and Pickerelweed's green berries
that are so tasty in cereal
or made into flour.

“Verde Que Te Quiero Verde”

after Lorca

green how much I want you green
green wind green branches
green rain sings in the leaves
out of green shadows trillium sails
the last bright flags of snow
willows bend bronze over hills humped fresh west of town
where fishermen lie on their bellies near springs
waiting for the rising gold-
green dawns of trout

under the moon a balloon of ice
in the black bed
twisting green mysteries of seeds

Fantasia for Rain and Guitar

there is not enough
time
the reasons for flamenco

someone's drums in your blood
her heels pound halls down your bones
she hauls the sinew of your spine
tighter into the darkness of her breasts
winds your hair vines round her wrist

she wants you to run with her
through the wet
night of leaves

Winter Blues #33

winds roar whirl-rattle
ice against glass and walls
smoke drowned
space
Chopin's
ringing
mad bells of the ballades

Easter Sunday

nothing no thing could be brighter
 than this April's
daffodils all of the sun's
trumpets ringing loud round the woods

The Handless Maiden

*Once there was a miller who wished
to marry his daughter to the Devil
in exchange for gold. When she
refused, her father cut off her
hands. . . .*

Suddenly the house had no doors.
I cried Daddy! Daddy! to stop him
but the pain came down
and my hands fell onto the floor
in front of me like kittens,
fingers curled around my thumbs,
hiding my thumbs.
I wanted to pick up my hands
in my teeth and carry them away
to a nest, but there wasn't time.

I ran and then I crawled,
turning back to lick up the blood trace
so he couldn't find my trail.
The forest closed behind me,
branches locked like arms guarding,
an insignia of sun on the pines.

That night I lay next to a fallen log
as though it were my mother.
My dream tasted of metal.
When I woke in the wet leaves
I knew it was not a dream.

All winter I listened to the snow
whisper of what must not be given away.
No! grew as round in my mouth as an apple.
My teeth broke the green skin
and I tasted the tart lesson:
I had held out my hands
when my father commanded me
although I saw his knife.

When the white trees blossomed like milk,
I felt the itch of new fingers
unfurling, crisp as crocuses,
from the buds of my wounds.

Jacob Wrestles with the Angel: an Update

He was sleeping in the desert
when the naked angel swooped into his dream
like an aerialist releasing her trapeze.

They knelt, shadow by shadow, on the sand.
His arm over her slim back,
he cried, "Begin!" because she seemed a kid,
and he tasted a quick take-down.

But she hurled him over her shoulder,
spread him out like a wolf pelt,
rose above him, a falcon
with her talons in his wrists.
Then she unfurled herself, as sweet and green
as the riverbed in his groin.

Seeking the beginning,
he battered into her
until he burst through angel into sky.
Without wind, without sound,
"as a cloud races through sapphire air,"
he raced toward the light.
All night he gazed into the sun.

At dawn the angel lolled on her back
while he bobbed overhead like a box kite,
a helium balloon,
a new flag dancing, clean as a flame.
She hauled him down like a jib.

"But who won?" he begged, as he cut
his bread for her and poured the goat milk.
She smiled, and suddenly
he woke alone in the desert of his bed.

The Wolf In My Mother

*("East German mother says goodbye to her daughter through
the embassy fence." AP photo, September, 1989)*

When I understood that I must leave my home
I called to the wolf in my mother
to guide me to the gate.

And her wolf trotted to me on long legs,
her eyes yellow, her guard hairs gray
on her golden underfur. She sniffed me head and tail,
then lifted her muzzle
and rubbed it along my cheek, across my mouth.
I tasted blood
and dark water of the den she'd come from.

Beneath some birches she trampled down the grass,
flattened a green we curled into, her beside me,
her head on my shoulder, her paw at my breast.
All night I heard the rhythm of dreams leaping
through her heart, felt her tremble
as her heart gave chase.

At first light I followed her again.
How thin her flanks were, how she limped
from old wounds, but still she loped ahead.
Often she gazed back, drawing me on,
showing me how I must chase without swerving.

The fence. The gate. Through the iron
we touched a last time, breath to breath.
Run! she told me,
Remember, your own wolf runs with you now!
So somehow I ran, hearing just behind me,
as I do tonight,
the whisper of her longer stride,
knowing her shadow trails mine.

The Legends

Old as the bark-bitten pattern
of stars and sun, they come after

the cricket moon when fires
gather in the longhouse trees

and skies darken with the thunder
of waterbirds. The old ones sit wrapped

in their skins of sun; the young
grow restless as chickarees, eyes

bright as spring foxes, waiting
for cold moons to flock where rivers

start when tales begin, told
long and over to the popping trees

and shedding moons. It was always so.
It will be so until our hands

no longer greet the day, until
fingers of light no longer weave in earth

her seasons.

Convocation

When rainlight puddled in the gullies,
we sloshed home Indian file from school
in raingear, grins, and milkhouse boots

for sneakers, sweatshirts, and a football,
then crossed the slough. Down by Manny Wanders'
place where drydocked launches lined

the shore, where wind and ponies tamed
the dunes, we played among the pines and sapling
ribs of wigwams until each pass

spiraled into shadow near the river.
While swift current scattered daylight's embers,
we limped home, dumping lumps

of wet sand from our shoes along
a road chilled by blackbird leaves whiffing
on the limbs of spectral trees.

In those Novembers traffic tuned
to a one-string guitar; the town was lit
by taverns and a phone booth, corner

lamps that pitched in the slightest wind,
and now and then by Northerns riffing down
the sky. Although we grew to other

towns and lights that crowded out
the stars, these dunes still hold our shadows
and the river brings us home.

Thistledown

For the first time after long heat,
the sun floats pale above the oak savanna,
its edges drawn. Now begins the movement
inward, withdrawing its flame from the high places
of summer and striving, to fully inhabit
its depths, its ring of steady warmth.

For it is the warmth, not the fire,
of long-lasting love which endures the burning-
off of years and bodies, stirred in us
now by that autumnal heartbeat. Two crows
fly together, their cries going out before them
to meet the darkening burr oaks on the hill.

Thistledown falls as if from open drawers, fold
upon fold of linens tumbled before the goldenrod.
On its own journey, the sower of thistles
travels with us, a homespun beauty finely feathered.
I lift one to the wind, coppery wings carry it
over fields toward the inward-circling sun.

Ode to Wooden Steps

For Pablo Neruda

We live
surrounded
by the benevolence
of wood.
How clearly
I see it
in the soaked grain
of these porch steps,
the black whorls
welcoming rain.
The ends
of the boards
are soft,
divided
where water
and age
knock.
It takes
a long time
to let them in,
it happens only
at wood's
pace.

The nature
of wood is
vertical,
which is why
we dance well
on a wooden
floor, from
its sheer
upright energy.

Wood splits
and bends,
slumps
as it chooses,
twists,
shrugs,
and develops
a deep
slouch,
in suffering
remains true.
In the tree
struck by lightning,
in the blue stump
glowing in a
swamp,
in the thin
cracks on the
200-year-old
fiddle,
the honesty of
wood is
visible,
written
in the swerve
of its grain.

The wind pushes
lightly.
A maple seed
whirls to rest
on the top
step,
its small
yellow brain
split open.

The black
wood waits for
the driving
of the wedge,
for the
raindrop that
dissolves
its heart.

Olivet

In fields given over to the gold of harvest,
how much returns to fill the empty places.
The barndoor of western Wisconsin
gives glimpses of the saved souls of wheat.

Saying yes to you in my heart, I took
the long way home at sunset,
pulled off the road at a junction called Olivet.
On clotheslines I saw the sad sheets

of the married, of the desire
not to travel on alone.
A house of dust, its beams on fire,
gathered itself around me.

A one-room schoolhouse overgrown with burdock
stood apart from the white houses.
Some abandonment in childhood must have
caused me to stand alone.

The dirt road loves the fields as they are.
That was the kind of love you gave me.
There are places I have driven by only once
and lived in the rest of my life.

Snow Flying

"Family is fate."—Michael Meade

1.

In moving air, the fates of snow
weave a vagueness over hills.
There is a snow that flies rather than falls,
as if the same few flurry endlessly
without touching ground. And if today
there is no new snow, then there's no stopping,
no getting rid of the snow that is here,
someone forgotten whose face we see clearly
at four o'clock in the morning.

2.

How low the sun through curtains
in January! I was born in this light
showing under the doorway of the year.
There is dark heat inside a family,
each household wrapped around its fire,
poorly vented, wasteful, throwing smoke
which blinds and chokes us as it warms us.
At dusk I find a pine cone and think
of my mother and father growing old.

3.

Night is coming. There is no alternative
in winter to the threadbare furs we spread
with others in the cave of the heart.
No alternative to placing the long-delayed call,
agreeing to accept the heat without light
of the father so difficult to uproot, who stands in
whatever light is left, as proud as a stump.
No choice but to let snow follow its necessity
over the earth, flying or falling.

Keeping the Star

Keep this star for when you lose the world,
when grief and desire become a blurred door
that floats away across a plain room
without books or kisses.
Look to what grows dark beyond the walls,
that in night which holds the blue sky
singing in its black embrace.
It's all spun around a necessary star,
star of prisons. Keep it:
It has the power to burst from dull thoughts,
breathe in airless colors,
and roll back the filth of your neglect.
Let it pour through the chimney hole
patched with tin! Unloved objects—
empty jars, faces in clippings,
balls of hair spurned by the brush—
all the children of failure
will step forward in its blinding wind,
sons and daughters of that before which
there is no trivial being.

The whistling swans recede—
their sheer whiteness gleaming
far down the spring sky

Snowing . . .
the dentist
polishes my teeth

Becoming dusk,—
the catfish on the stringer
swims up and down

It showered—
the desert toads are singing
for a single night

Petrified Blackberries

Along the margin of a sandy pond
parades a gray lizard, its tongue
exploring the deft breeze; its eyes,
sharp as arrows, penetrate the air.
The marsh grass catches on dry scales, and breaks.
No other sound except the splash of pond water,
the easing back from shore which leaves
salt crystals on the blackberry, brilliant
on the dark stalk, arresting a lizard's eye,
beckoning no one.

Curved, sprung, bowed
by the weight of birds, the stem snaps
and drops its fruit into the sediment.
Night after long night, a thousand unremarkable
nights, leading to a million nights
which cool a million hot days and send the wind
above the pond's face like a blessing,
the water pulses, drives silt and leaves,
the white bones of lizards
across the sand, beneath the waves, urgent
only in their number

Blackberries thicken
into a grove; birds, now hollow boned, gather,
drop seeds in the diminishing pond
until a first cold, perplexing and unknown,
drives them deep into the continent.
They learn the stars and fly.

A mining insect drowns in a tree vein,
becomes a talisman in amber.

Juice
of the blackberry bursts the tiny globes
of fruit; the sea wash of silica,
tinted purple, settles in the cells,
swells out the broken stem
and fixes in the delta sands.

On a stone wall lit by the accident
of fire, the hunter comprehends the antelope
rejoicing in its flight, in its dash
among the mountain's rock and trees.

In the seabed of the flat earth,
the epicontinental shelf rises, scatters
shells, broken, uninhabited along the shore;
storms, too, rise, ferreted for meaning
from ship decks and the gardens at court
where the orange trees are buffeted and overturned.

By the chance of stone, the ancient clusters,
the globes fastened to a petrified stem,
surface or submerge.

Or:

Place fresh blackberries in a jar,
cover with water, a tablespoon of brown sugar,
a squeezing of lime juice. Pour
paraffin until it oozes to the rim,
cover, set on a cool earthen floor.
Through the long drought, wait for winter
and the pleasure of blackberries in January.
Observe the red glow gathering in the south,
sweep the falling ash from the porch,
station your oldest child on the roof
like the watchman in Aeschylus
searching for Agamemnon's signal fire.
Listen to the distant crackling in the pine wood,
the directionless thunder announcing no rain,
the booming of thick wind, the silence of animals,
the rumors rising from the sere fields
where your brothers stagger through the dead corn.
When the flames appear at the pine tops,
rolling from one to another, seeming not to burn

but to dance in the singing trees,
take your children to the river, disbelieve
reports that flames have leapt the bay,
leapt twenty miles over water, engulfing
steamships, boiling the shallows, roaring
like Christ's sword. Cool your rosary
under water, your fingers under water,
your eyes, your burned forehead.
In the surprising cold of morning,
when the thunder subsides into the hissing
of embers, of horses' flesh, return.
Where the shed exploded and all the glass jars,
of an instant, vaporized like so much dust,
an ancient cluster, molten, inedible,
fastened to a rock stem, remains.

From Olaf, to Henrik in Rome

Henrik,

September, 1871

If you remember Olaf Pederson, one of us does.
If you trace these characters with your pen
And say, "This is Olaf's hand," you'll lie,
Dreaming in your sun-burnt Rome of days
We wrote together and later sold our works,
Page by page, to merchants for wrapping fish.

Olaf Pederson is a cooper, far north
In the wilderness where wolves surprise themselves
Coming, at the forest springs, upon a man;
Where cedar stand so thick
No underbrush obstructs the woodsman;
Where cities, grace, men of learning
Are a dim prospect in a darker mind.
Olaf Pederson, a cooper, sits before his fire
Forming iron hoops, perfect circles
Measured by a hand that moves in perfect circles.
Staves whine from a Belgian's lathe;
A Russian notches, planes and bends the wood.
In his dark recess, Olaf Pederson hammers
Circles, fits the wood, and clamps it tight.
Seven years he has sat before the fire, the gloom
Of the factory broken by the well of flames
Glinting off the anvil, dashing into the dark.
Hot enough for working steel into circles,
Bright enough, in that black hutch,
To make a twelve hour noon, the fire burns
Away the sun, is constant in my mind,
In the red glow that after seven years
Is all I see. Olaf Pederson, the blind cooper,
Once a worker of words,

Once an intimate with Oslo, Paris, London, Rome,
Now sits on a barrelhead, dictating
From the general store. It is Sunday
And, I understand from the proprietor's daughter,
The red is general in our sky, has sat
And lowered over us all this week and more.
In the evenings, when yet again the silent telegraph
Brings no word, I listen to the birds rise up
From the trees, crying in ever wider circles,
Climbing above those brittle pines
Which are the first to burn. Only those
Who lose their nests fail to return.
I listen, and I resolve to write to you.

Here, then, is a labor. I spell each Norwegian word;
My amanuensis, thirteen, puzzled by my eyes,
Distracted from my work by customers
In her father's shop, questions what I write,
Wishes to *know*, contents herself with my answers.
Like her, you will not comprehend America,
So I must tell you how we save ourselves.
The good women of our town, to soften their hard men
And turn their trolls from constant usefulness,
Establish, where they will, a wisp of culture.
The Drunkard's Fate played two nights
In Peshtigo. In disbelief, I went a second time
And heard a wife reclaim her husband's fortune
And his soul. It took but two dull Acts.
Last night I was prevailed upon, dressed out
In a cravat, and taken to the village church
Turned concert hall. There the Mozart Band, newly formed,
Brazened out the *Water Music*, a flood
Of babel which must have shocked our wolves.

But more! The trolls are sent to school
Like burghers' sons. An itinerant marm
Tutors them in "that science desirable
As a matter of Utility and Ornament." *Penmanship!*
She calls it, and the trolls line up, clutching
Charcoal, to learn this calligraphy of the wilderness,
This multiplier of the American word!
"I did no wrong," they learn to spell,
And carve this truth on every industry.
"I see no wrong," they say and write it out
Boldly in my hutch, in the smoldering forest,
In the steamship's wake, at Antietam.

Life in America pleads innocent. The woods
Plead innocent. The wall of flames surrounds us,
The old world blackens, the new burns clean.
I have no sight past Peshtigo. Send news! Send news.

Pederson

Pioneer

Say when schooners left St. Louis
they flew names like "Spirit's End"
and "Omega," promising towns the Good Book

would point. But say you walk months.
The oxen pull slow as their eyes, so slow you lose
aim of your life. Names gather in your lips

as questions. In photos you sprawl
part dust, part fear your eyes show
squinting where prairie grass swells,

and its pagan hymn might drag down
any child of Europe in the space
you blink. A wild itch

burns your blood. Butchery makes you moan
and touch the Bible in your coat, a growth
numb as whatever lump of foreign tongue

you forget. The Book catches flint or fang
someplace you don't expect, a spot so bleak
your fear leaves. Some littlist end of nowhere

you grow old watching. Pigs fill the streets.
Each day you pull on boots, you stamp life
further into dust.

Life Close to the Bone

Let me tell you we could like it here.
Throw the J.T.S. Brown in a glass,
watch the river slide forever, the amber river

home. I'll lighten this life of split pins,
leave it to me. As a window shade
I hang my shirt to name the sky "Team

muddy river of endless regret."
Watch the bricks collect a blood color
you can taste. Hear the river groan like a dog

curled into East Dubuque dust. Once the sun
drops its heavy afternoon hand
a boy looks his dad eye to eye. His muscle,

full of summer twitch, dances him
away. "You're never alone," bricks across town
chime in. They say "Brains

25¢" on the wall outside my room.
We should all be so lucky, hey? You pour.
Here's to "Main Street, Midwest."

Bride of the Prairie

The first week out you wrote, "Because
we imagine 'nothing'
only by too much effort, we must begin

to understand 'emptiness' as a dark
blossom, perhaps the one we feel
unfold in sleep." Later the dreams.

The shopkeeper's fangs grew
smiling from the back sides of water
glasses. You wrote about grass

thick as shrubs, stinking water that forked
your tongue, and the black arms snakes curl
up your legs. The day came you couldn't name eyes

squinting from your face. You watched wind
shred letters to floss, shouted names the rocks
blurred with their blank silence. You forgot

the feel of your nose. Your mind trapped darkness
like a bride, a tree flowering
in stars. Strange word, "bride,"

you heard Chandler speak
the one time you saw him. Returned
Forty-niner, he built the first cabin

in southern Kansas. "Why?"
you sneered to his useless face. A vow
you screamed all the way back.

Slicing the Dust Both Ways

Don't watch the blade you unfold cut
deeper than muscle. The rooster you tuck warm
under an arm is a child you shield from blood
bloomed by counting fingertips green
apple peel. Rub the neck's wiry curve.
Pat his head under one wing. Freeze him

to fluffy rock. When you feel the body settle,
drift to feathertips and let go;
when the feed barrel cover grows so warm
it raises wheat dough to second life—
plop the pillow there. Begin to breathe
your lungs full. Stay calm. Feel

his body as contour map. Slice the spot
his wishbone slopes below feather-roots
where streams crawl blue. If you hold still,
the blade glittering like gut plays you less
dizzy than numb. Blood always means
mistake. Hold your breath. Find the raisin-

pink nugget of rooster you pop by thumb-
nail. The new "capon" never blinks.
Don't watch his beaded eye hard as agate,
clear as cave water: the scaled legs
crawl fence like feathered snakes on trails
twisting and bumping along your sweaty spine.

Close the cut with thumbs of salve. The dog
cranks her snout by tail where rooster buds
fall to puff dust. A capon doubles
its weight or explodes in abscess; next week
you'll sit content, slice your Greening or Mac,
and mop the blade to silver light on pants.

Your bird uprights itself the way empty
pop bottles float, shakes off day-
dreams and cocks its slit-eyed head:
the glance aimed an ice age names you
its chill target. Your breath breaks only
once the capon wanders back to dust.

Touching The Inland Shore

Milwaukee to Bloomington.
You roll down the window at American Maize,
tell me breathe "the exact way
my old man smelled." I apologize,
stealing your father, but it's important

you'll see. You get mine at the far end
of crosscut saw. The give-and-take,
the push-and-pull through oak
or beech trunk between you
unresolved. You feel the drag and cry

only to the saw, the song it smells
in the tree that hides you. When the crown rips
its patch of sky to slug earth
your heart skips wet and newborn. Surprised
you've survived, you feel earth make way

as blades of tree trunk lumber
down the sky. The grandfathers cruised
this sea of swaying masts. You can still feel
humidity steep the inland shore and air ferment,
thick as blood. A soft groan

flows the dark holds and planking.
"Which father can tell more?"
you hear the night brood, and itch the trail
through each pore. Where your feet touch
the last father makes home.

Trickster

When the sun rises, he will be there
remaining after he is asked
to leave; he does not hear this
or this: "No, you can't"
"It has never been done"
he laughs and never sleeps
and asks with a voice
like a canyon
"Will you write poems about me?"

And then suddenly he is warm emerald water
a tide coming this close to your feet
and then skittering away
a champion of concealment
an illusion of the landscape
—it has never been easy for me
a whisper that drains like ground glass
from memory,
or like a child twisting gently
from your hand,
gone before you know it.

Mission at White Earth

1. While we walked around the cemetery
a crane flew over, a pterodactyl
against a sky filled with thunderheads
we read each marker, matched names
with names, until we come to "Tumahdee
infant daughter of" Pennyroyal
has grown thick around the gravesite
and Phillip gently pulls away
the blue medicine of our relatives
until a proper clearing is made
once again.
2. Back then, Uncle Himhim tells us,
the Jesuits had a mission
here at White Earth, translating
gospels into Chippewa, routing
the children of all the villages
into their schools. At Christmas,
the children brought home memorized
verses from catechism class
and shared sacks of peppermint sticks
and cinnamon buttons with the oldtimers
slow to learn the English, he says and laughs.
3. At the Cass County Museum,
Phillip asks the volunteer behind the desk
about the bandolier bag displayed with photos
of White Earth Anishinabeeg; I point to
the glass case that holds property
of our families but she only works on Thursdays
and does not know about ownership
Phillip writes down a description of the bag
in his journal and whispers "Let's get out of here." The volunteer
seems relieved to tabulate our visit
in the museum guest book.

4. Before we leave White Earth, we return
to mission school, still
the tallest building here. Over here,
my mother points, we would butcher chickens
with Father McHenry, over there, a huge garden
she looks at the school in silence, at the boarded
windows, at the grounds grown over with neglect
Driving past the cemetery, Phillip recalls
the found grave marker of Tumahdee, my mother's brother
and it is promised, upon return, we will plant flowers.

In September: Ode to Tomatoes

In September, the order of business
will always begin with tomatoes
the passionate fruit
of defiant grandmothers
of bachelor lords
in their kitchens of chaos
and of the occasional gardeners like myself
who can marvel the wonders of nature
while complaining of lower back pain.

Even then, the flaming Big Boys
and voluptuous Romas gather themselves
in dishpans, in aprons, yes, even at the doorstep
waiting for the enthusiasm of an early riser
to spill with poetic love
over a Mason or a Kerr of the stewed,
the brewed, the blended, the pureed:
this is destiny,
this immortality,
this is salsa
In the dead of winter!

Tomatoes suspended in jars,
smiling their fetal smiles
outshining the corn relish
and the bony heaps of mutant squash
23 PINTS OF TOMATO MARMALADE
CANNOT HELP BUT PERSIST WITH THE IDEA OF SPRING
amidst the basement darkness
and the stacks of dying Milwaukee Journals.

Yes, even though we walk through valleys
of shadowy Death,
we will always can tomatoes
we will ladle together
the green into red
secrets into sauce
we can because we can
and not because we must.

My Mother and I Had a Discussion One Day

and she said I was quite fortunate
to have two sons
and I said how is that? and she said
with daughters you worry for them
birth control, childrearing,
you worry for them, the threat of rape,
and then there is the wedding expense.
I looked into her tired eyes
and clouded face and saw
that she was quite serious.
Yes, but, I said,
boys eat more.

and she said why do they call it
women's music?
and I said because they sing it,
take from it, feel good and strong
when they walk away from it
while we sit here this is going on.
Are you telling me, my mother said
up until now, I have been listening
and no women have been singing?
and I said that is right
and she said that was ridiculous
and hummed a tune
of her own.

and she said why do you want to leave
this house, it is a fine house?
and I said I didn't think
there was much of a market
for a nosewiper, a kitchen keeper,
an under the bed sweeper
and she said my smart mouth
would get me in trouble one day
and I looked at her scarred knuckles
and quivering chin and realized
that I had spit in the face
of many women and I wept
with my mother.

Fever Dreams

Through the open window
the trilling of crickets
like tiny clocks mark time
breaking the silence in my room.
I am weakened by an illness
I don't try to understand
I wait for the signs
I have learned to look for.
In a masquerade of fever-soaked sheets
I can hear myself talking in sleep
while my bed rises like an elevator
or like a plane shifting and wheeling
with the jet stream in my room
past piggy banks and coat hooks.

If I pay attention I can read the wattage
on the light bulb hanging dormant
from the cobwebbed ceiling
the dolls in the closet
shiver at the spectacle:
the rising and falling at will
the calliope of colors
the sight of me bouncing off
the walls and ceiling
spitting and sparking like a
distempered farm cat.

But it causes me no great concern
the drowsy laughter aboard a bed gone afloat
I've pulled up anchor and set sail
on a voyage of the sublime
like a beery-eyed sailor I call out
to my consorts in crime
the timid dollies huddle
in the closet clinging
to the Buster Browns.

It takes some convincing
but I descend to the island of sleep
later, a falling star will skid
over the tops of trees
and I will hear it
the wind will twirl sleep
like a luscious summer fan
into my eyes
the half-dressed dollies of the closet
will close their porcelain eyes
their breath coming so evenly in the darkness.

Here in America

*(for Pompeyo Lugo Mendez while at
Lac Courte Oreilles, November 1985)*

Here in America, he will say,
where wheat falls endlessly
beneath the cutter's blade
where women in summer dresses
stir their rich espresso
write poetry and compare affairs,
you are not afraid of ignorance,

You are afraid to speak plainly
or to confront. In my country
young poets sing and have pistols
forced into their mouths
by the security forces. Those who live
bear a four-inch scar
so close to carotid
that any heart stops at the sight
of its fierceness.

When he says the word "political"
the sound is like the fast click
of stiletto heels on a city street.
He looks into his hands to find the words—
how can he show what he has seen?
It is a thin language, this English.

Like Neruda, he does not wish to please Them,
to sing their love songs, or to compose
clever lyrics about the homeland. He would
rather stumble forever in darkness
than pretend to marvel at the blaze
of burning buildings
or at the death of light itself.

While he sings of home, his eyes close
as if in a dream in in reverence—we cannot tell.
And when he plays his guitar at daybreak
he takes us to the place
where a mother is singing in Guarani
to her infant son Pompeyo
songs to awaken the Americans
from their long and murky slumber.

Father Lewis

Yesterday after chapel, Modestes
who sometimes wakes me by
singing the *Veni Creator Spiritus*
very loudly in his sleep
took me to the barnyard
for the blessing of the animals.
As this month's rectory second-servant,
I had to go to say my prayers
and then put out the soup

but first the shy calves in the calf pen,
then the indifferent sheep.
The chickens we could not catch
we blessed on the wing.
The rabbits stood still
for our censer and incense
but shivered when we dropped
the holy-water on them.

Even the devils, Modestes says,
deserve God, so we chased
a few apostate ducks through
the ragged fence he'll have me
mending the next day, or the next.

Middle-Aged Man, Sitting

for John Cheever

I never felt bad much until I was forty
and then guilt arrived one evening.
It was as old as you would expect,
with a bad cough, it sat
on the edge of the chair
with its face in its trembling hands
the way my father always sat.

The next year it was envy,
streaking in a classic black Porche
through another long weekend,
a sexual acrobat in sequined Danskins,
working high without a net.

I'd hate to think
this is what it means
to grow even a little old.
Tonight, on the back stoop,
after dinner with a warm beer in
one hand and the hose in the other,
watering what's left of the honeysuckle
and watching the swallows swoop
and dive beyond my neighbors roofs,

I imagine my regret tomorrow
going through the trash in the alley,
choosing what there is to choose
and keep from what I had thought
I was only throwing away but no,
I know now it is taken,
piece by dreaded piece.

“The Love a Stranger Might Construe”

Time was a son would pay a father's debts,
keep close to ease a father's dying,
have sons himself to teach and understand
how to let go without regret
of everyone we love, one at a time
or all at once, that mystery.

This is another time, so little mystery
I am a son who hasn't honored my debt
to your sacrifice, all your lost time.
I lived so you could start your dying
and here's the usual regret,
a lack of touch or talk enough to understand.

Your rage and absences I tried to understand,
your weakness seemed a mystery,
the early marriage and the late regret.
The job you hated but it paid the debts
paid weekly for your daily dying.
You spent yourself in time.

Early to an empty bed to rise on time
you woke to sunless rooms. I understand
the crush of sequence now, how months go dying
into years, the lack of mystery.
How the future's looming unengendered debts
infect the past with a cancerous regret.

The past is over. We go beyond regret
to put each other at ease. It's time
to honor you though honor pays no debts
as doesn't praise you wouldn't understand.
Why we did what we did remains a mystery
unsolved by either of our dyings.

I wasn't there to ease you in your dying.
We die alone and that we all regret,
pass from mystery unto mystery,
our clockwork hearts on borrowed time
live just long enough to understand
to whom we owe and why the heavy debt.

Debts we dread to owe the most, in time
get paid without regret. Sons grow to understand
the living in the dying, the father's mystery.

Notes from the Notebooks of Cabin #3

*"you are incarnate in
the world and we live
caught up in you."*

Teilhard de Chardin

*"The wicked are like the troubled sea
when it can not rest"*

Isaiah 57:20

*"one honeymoon day
one honeymoon night
nothing else to say
nothing else to write"*

Anonymous

Everyone mentions the *"waves,"* of course,
and the *"crying"* of the gulls
and the *"moon,"* through the one small window,
"full," "half," or otherwise
provocatively sickled against
a *"starry"* or *"starless"* sky,
or as Helen Rusted, of Fond du Lac, put it:

*"the thriving mysteries of life
unfolding in waves of time
spiriting through
the vast existence in space."*

Many honeymooned or re-honeymooned here,
most are thankful for the change
from whatever to whatever,
everyone goes on almost endlessly
about the peace and quiet.

*"we have been married four days
we love each other very much
didn't get seasick listening to the waves*

*through faith in the lord
we will be married forever."*

*"do we sound boring,
we don't think we are?"*

*They had "wieners and cheese for breakfast" or
"crackers and cheese for breakfast lunch and dinner"
or "champagne and meatballs by candlelight"
or "picked blueberries for pancakes
and raspberries in big dishes with cream."*

*"Had some nice fresh herring."
"hot cookies and milk just out of the cold."
"In this just right cabin,
the carefully watched toast made
on the top of the stove."*

*The lake was a lullaby, or not.
They loved or hated the bed
which was not "big enough for three"
according to "Don & the girls,"
which was "noisy but
sure held up," "Figgy and Ray,"
in which they slept, if at all,
like a "stone" a "cloud," a lot of "logs"
a "baby" or "the dead."*

*"We found #3 by pure luck
almost got rammed by a semi."*

*"The evening of the 19th my wife
got stomach flu
and I got the regular flu
the day after that day."*

*"fell off the cliff
and lost my shoe but
it could have been worse."*

*"We came here to be alone
married three years already with a little girl.
This Shawnee's handprint (slightly enlarged)
5 mos. old, 1st time anywhere."*

Mrs. Anthony Swanshera of St. Paul
will be back *"if I can talk my husband into it,"*
and Ginny, Eddie, Lionda, Edvart and Tottsie
are planning to return, in three years,
"God willing."

*"We came to find ourselves once more
to remember that what we need
we have already in each other."*

*"We used to come here as children
now we have children
and grandchildren of our own
and we are still coming."*

*"We are in our 70's
and it makes a good honeymoon spot."*

*"We loved each other tenderly
and our fondness increased
as we grew old."*

*"I sat on the rocks, smoking,
and her reading to me
in the pleasing wild."*

*"Cassie found the notebooks
and as she read
years and faces came alive."*

*"It has been good
watching this plan unfold,
creating wholeness
in our life."*

note: The quoted material was selected from a series of "guestbooks" dating back to 1937 found in a rental cabin in a small resort on the North Shore of Lake Superior in 1986. People were asked in the original notebook to write whatever they wanted, and provide another when the current one was full.

The Tenth Avenue Care Home

*If you're not ready for a nursing home,
live where you belong—in a beautiful
house in a pleasant neighborhood.*

—the Yellow Pages

We live in this house.
It fits right in.
Its windows face
the long afternoons.

It fits right in,
and no one would guess
the long afternoons
mean nothing to us

and no one would guess
that the other houses
mean nothing to us—
except for the little boys

that the other houses
gather home at dusk.
The little boys
think we're ghosts,

gathering at dusk
to frequent their dreams.
They think we're ghosts
when our night visits seem

too frequent. Their dreams
make them shudder—
our night visits seem
like shadows, wavering but persistent.

Make them shutter
their windows, face
their own shadows. Wavering but persistent,
we live in this house.

The Boy on the Plane

The boy on the plane is coming home
from his grandfather's funeral—his first
exposure to the way it's done, how we comb
and scrub and manicure and dress
the body, wiping away the evidence
of life's final squalor. He stares into his
lap, while a half-dream plays along his lips.

On either side of us, the clouds
are climbing into mounded, coalescing
heaps—how voluptuous they look, viewed from the side,
their secret folds and cumulations riding
on shafts of wild, sliding
air. Yawning enormously, the boy turns and smiles
with pleasure at the girl across the aisle.

I think about old men, and of the boy
beside me, how it's almost time
for him; and for the girl he will someday
press against in a cool, darkened room.
And the heaviness I've known
before, that profound wrenching I recognize
grinds forward, and settles into place.

“The Azaleas” or “Azaleas”

“When you go,” “If you go” begin two translations
of the great poem by Kim Sowol,
whose azaleas, which burn in version A,
are gathered twice on a green mountainside, or perhaps a hill.

Are the famous flowers in armfuls or in another
measure, unspecified?
Is she through with him, or just sick and tired
is what choice we’re left as the poet,
that lover who bids good-bye quietly
or without a word,
is left, we conclude, with emptiness.

Some evenings in her dim office we translated
the minor poets—Mi Kyung with dictionary,
her desk light a yellow island,
me with pacing coffee about to make
art out of the least utterance, out of
the brown creaking of her dusty chair.
Mostly her voice became soft
when she began to read
her finished drafts—title first,
inflection dropping in lyric pain—a cultural obsession—
followed by a dark pause for stillness:

“Spring Night”

“Paper Kite”

“To the Wind”

“Musky Scent”

“Rainy Day”

She was afraid, she said,

it would not sound the same or right in English

but it’s all I can know, the translations, and so today
I will not weep or show tears,
perish or die, but want
to scatter, strew azaleas in her path
before her light, soft, gentle, gentle step.

Two Calendars

On one kind the pictures change,
the past months tucked behind the future,
a fox in alders become two woodpeckers
on a bare branch, or in an old Korean scene
the pigtails of running boys
flying just as kite tails did
the month before. We can look back far
to see a dog and children on a winter lake
or ahead to see boys with tops
(one leans close on hands and knees
to hear its whirl). This spring month those children
might help in the fields; one rushes
a blossom to his mother and the neighbor,
busy pounding laundry on the bank of the stream
below the waterwheel flanked by cherry trees, newly bright.

On another kind of calendar
the months are torn away.
The picture stays the same, becomes only more worn
in its place on the kitchen wall.
A red tree is straining to match the sky, and a pheasant
stands on a single rock, almost green.

Seasonal Greeting

Now the pine boughs are bowed with the sad weight
of winter's children and the sun seems far
from our homes and lives. This
is the way we might begin a letter to
or from Korea, the writer's object
to see how new a way
he can describe the season—the weather
as he looks out a window or if it's dark
some internal weather
that might be good written down.
The sun lowers itself
out my window and I'm afraid
I haven't written a word—it's not
indecision wound down to silence,
just the enormity of things, the man
bagging at the grocery store whom I talk to
because he talks to me and I like it.
There's darkness and other than darkness;
gravity and the idea of light and air.
There's starting at the beginning of the story, in the middle
of the threat of the ongoing, that is,
a pine tree heavy with snow at the end
of a short day, when kids go home from school.

Once I Met B. B. King

Slouched in a chair, he struck me as
probably smaller than he used to be.
He didn't have that blue grimacing
smile of the album covers
—as if he enjoyed pain.
I like to remember instead, at 16,

rock and roll in garages, among
the trash cans and garden tools,
the neighbors gathering to listen
as pioneers might have gathered
to help build a barn—the tee-
shirt-faced kids, the young marrieds
with strollers. Years later the world

has grown comfortable on the edge of despair.
I return to the basements
to rehearse among the snow tires and
laundry tubs. Even today
among the scratchy off-season clothes,
the sensitive neighborhoods,
a little boy blocking the light
from the one basement window
bangs his plastic shovel against the glass.
His jacket and pants are forest green,
and because his mittens and cap
are red, he looks like some rare
flower growing through the frozen mud.

At the Lake: to a Brother Before Marriage

As she steps from the car I see her
as she is, the withered legs
of palsy, the stooped back—how she wants
no help around the mud and water
that have settled in the driveway—
the way she grasps your hand.

For a moment I watch my hands
stutter and shake, then look to hers
—the same—yet I look away
not to stare at the legs
which do not do what she wants
but tremble and waver like water.

We walk through the yard to the water
at an uneven pace. The sun is a hand
that smooths the lake and shore. The willows want
to grow together. The sapsucker waits for her
mate on the backhouse, then wings away.
You offer cheese and the chipmunk climbs your leg.

We settle into chairs with beers; the legs
bow some with our weight. Near the water
our women lie. We half-talk in the way
we did as roommates, our hands
turn circles, not saying what we want,
then you speak: "I'm myself with her,"

"I'm going to marry her,"
and then the plans, the money, how her legs
are getting stronger with work; you'll want
a family. Forgive me: I imagine whiskey and water,
you at bedtime, not wanting to go, the way
you must lie with her, how you place your hands.

She struggles to us and clasps your hands.
You rise, you lean against her.
She will not back away,
but braces lightly against the legs
of the largest willow. *What I want,*
this is what I want—you walk to the water.

Legs that walk at all can walk away.
With my voice of water, I say what I want:
brother, let your hands hold each step of her.

Casals

Though all men are brothers in the orchestra,
all men are not brothers in the world,
but this is not the fault of the orchestra.
Music is not tap water, not a bizarre costume.
Every second we live is agreement.
It hesitates only as we do; it says, *you are a simple man*.
But I am old now and this may be true only for me.
The sea rubs my cheek
like a book opened to the page of my birth.
The sea is a name: *Pau*, it says. *Pau*.
There have always been compensations.
I could sing in tune before I could talk. Do you
understand me?

Late one night Vichy France was a picture.
I walked with Gassol, the Catalan poet,
to the Abbey of Saint Michel de Cuxon.
In the sculptured darkness we rang the tower bell.
How easily the sound fell out over the valley,
diced through the narrow streets and sorrowful buildings,
rising as if from a wish: *Freedom and order. Freedom:
And order.*

Professor Rosenthal in the Park, 1983

As if in a painting by Chagall, the girl
leapt above the grass and kissed you. She
started when she saw you, sped past the morning
bag-ladies and unshaven benchmen taking
showers in the metropolitan lawn sprinklers,
past the little dogs and obedient
masters on urgent morning errands,
past the policeman on his metropolitan
brown horse surveying the dejeuner
sur l'herbe of hidden wine and whiskey,
past the businessmen stumbling in mid-stride
while adjusting their ties, and the juggler
lifting bowling pins out of his briefcase,
past black women rocking white
babies in strollers, past strollers
enjoying walks across Washington Square,
past the muscular jogger in his loincloth,
the plump joggers in their bunnysuits,
the gaunt joggers in t-shirts, headbands, and adidas
run down at the heels but patched with shoe goo,
past students clustered about you
talking of poetry, and rose with the flock
of pigeons. Carrying her bouquet upright
in one hand, her blond hair flying backward,
she lifted herself from the grass and settled
a kiss on your startled cheek. You
smiled as if every day in the park
you were surprised by kisses and the muse.

Onions

Onions the color of autumn beech
leaves rest on our table within easy reach,
smooth, shaped like hens'
eggs, except for two growing ends,
remnants of root and stalk.
You sit mute, while I talk,
both braiding ropes of onion, easy labor.
Their skins are glossy, texture of paper,
perhaps of beech leaves just beginning to dry.
"Almost finished," I
tell you, counting out loud to twenty-eight.
One feels good as a worrystone, a weight
for the palm, a fit size for hefting.
I watch your fingers deftly
braid and wonder how you now twist everything.
Dirt still clings
to some, stalks broken off, dried to a peak.
Left on the table, beak to beak,
they're small quails, resting on darkened under
bellies. What you refuse to say could rend
my heart. One on my palm, turned over,
shows root end
like a sunflower's center, brown-black,
then almond skin darkened to umber
and a break where paper folds back
outgrown like snakeskin,
then a smoothness ribbed in
pearl, then an emerging freshness, cream
striped in the faintest, mildest green.

Villanelle in the Sixth Year of Cross-Country Commuting

I've learned to leave. Now I don't even quiver,
for parting is a practice I pursue.
You live in Boston; I live in Black River.

We used to cry. I'd get cold hands and shiver
at flight time, when they called 542.
I've learned to leave; now I don't even quiver.

You're short on closet space. An Indian giver,
I pack up all I've brought except shampoo.
You live in Boston; I live in Black River.

We wave good-by. A taxi will deliver
my bags and me at Logan. You've things to do.
I've learned to leave now. I don't even quiver.

Take-off is smooth. The Charles is a sliver
of silver light. I read *Northwest Review*.
You live in Boston; I live in Black River.

"The lady's tough," I tell myself, "so give her
credit"—as if I'm split in three, not two.
I've learned to leave. Now I don't even quiver.
You live in Boston; I live in Black River.

Margaret

During this last terrible week
odd things happen. She can't hear
for three minutes while jogging, or speak.
She veers left into traffic and can't veer
back. Left and right, she can feel
cars passing, most drivers not slowing.
Meanwhile her vision, amazingly, blips
hard like film at the end of a reel.
She hangs on, afraid, as consciousness slips
away, eddies, pools at the point of going.

Two days later she is deep within
depression which drowns, is terrifying.
Nothing seems sweet as oblivion.
Mostly she is a fierce drive toward dying.
She recalls three lines from Keats—"In spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
from our dark spirits"—and hangs on, giving
herself flowers to remember how, always, petals
full of light make days worth living.
She tells herself it isn't her, but chemicals.

For several days, she's lost within a mind,
odd memories gone, fog licking
at edges of words. Like a blind
woman in new territory picking
her way, she stumbles in her individual
dark. She cannot name her street. Only
her fingers remember her phone number
to trace it on the dial. Residual
memories remain like spars of rotted lumber.
Never has she felt so lonely.

Always, she'd hoped the spirit floated free,
rising white, raucous, full
of strident life, lifting up entire from debris,
sturdy as a herring gull.
Once she'd watched an ailing
woman die, and felt the room fill up with grace.
Locked in her capsule now, communication
cut, all systems failing,
she feels herself compacted, a new sensation,
is forced still deeper into smaller space.

The Guest

If one day you are walking along
and suddenly decide to ring the bell
of a lower left flat near the center
of the city, and you do, and a woman
in a paisley housedress answers, asks
what you want and you can't think of
anything to say, just stand there
until finally she smiles, says you
must be Margie's friend and Margie
ain't home yet from whatchacallit,
beauty school, come inside and wait,
and you walk into a coffiny parlor,
nod at a chairbound old crone who
smells like wet carpets, sit paging
Life for May 7, 1963, and listening
to the paisley woman wondering from
the kitchen whether you've ate yet
and enjoy sauerkraut—and as you
say no you haven't and yes you do,
although you hate it, the door opens
and a girl in white with improbably-
colored hair, gum, and a rather nice
figure comes in, says hi and you say
hi and start to introduce yourself
when you hear the housedress coming,
ask instead to use the bathroom,
and follow the shrug and forefinger
into the dining room (nodding at
the paisley on the way), then duck
into the kitchen, out the back door,
and into the crowded kitchen across
the hall—whose door happens to be
open and where some sort of family
reunion or something is going on
and a female NCO-type is urging
everyone to come in and be seated,
and so you follow into the adjoining
room, are seated, and start helping

yourself from various bowls handed round, meanwhile making small talk with those on each side—a fat man with a cold and a woman who suspects her son has not married wisely—and joining in the general laughter at the jokes of a horny-looking man spilling food at the far end—which proves a mistake because as your head is back in mirth, a hard roll smotes you on the shoulder and you can't decide whether it was thrown by the small boy behind the peas or the thirtyish woman with slattern eyes who keeps looking over at you, and who either by design or accident slips into the chair on your right when dessert is over and everybody is herded into an ashtrayed parlor to watch slides of the host's recent trip to Columbus, Ohio: which slides go on and on until you begin losing interest and stick your hand up into the beam of light and start making shadow animal heads while everyone either laughs or whispers, "Ssshh" and the host says, "Okay, let's knock it off," but you don't and he says it a couple of more times and you hear even the horny-looking fellow and the small boy and the woman with slattern eyes join in with, "Hey, enough is enough" and so on, but you keep doing it until the host moves cursing to a wall and turns on the overhead light just as you softly click the front door shut and hurry across the hallway to knock upon its twin.

Green Tomatoes

Our eye pupils are always honest.
Death is the eye pupils
widening until that's all there is. Even the future,
even that young girl with the purple jersey
and a psychiatrist worried about tomorrow, even the eel
my son thought he saw in our lake,
will vanish like last week's
circumference of green tomatoes.
All this movement around me is a flow toward death.
Therefore, many feel
they must regard time like a trough.
But if death is an explosion of all our cells,
eh?, if death is an explosion outward
to join the cosmos like an idea
tentacles outward in all directions from its source
in a human brain, and a mouth moves,
a hand reaches out, cautiously,
or sailing like a fat gull,
like a porpoise, toward a breast or holster. . . .
Eh? If death is a shoehorn
and everything we don't know is the foot. . . .
Or a fulcrum—death is where we
finally balance history and birth.
I'm sitting in a drugstore
trying to write a revolutionary poem.
But old people keep getting older, rolled-up sleeves
keep passing nearby, keep fading
whether I can see it or not, keep straining
to weave air between their threads, to become dust.
And now that old woman with hair like a dead shirt
has said my name, has asked me
between its letters
if she is still alive. . . .

The Art of Poetry

You can say anything.
That a young Marine charging up a sand incline at Saipan
suddenly thought of mittens on a string.
That after hours in the museum
all is quiet: the Rubens at Trafalgar Square,
for example, stay well within their frames.
That the lake of the mind no longer at civil war
must be lovely and quiet, with delightful small fish
nibbling near the surface.
That Rasputin's toenails
must have been clipped by someone:
where are such traces now?
That the impossible sea
is heaving tonight at the flanks
of a ship with lights and music . . .
of many ships, carrying an unguessable number
of indiscretions, and not a few smokers
considering the jump.
That a flagpole doesn't care—
how silly to march past it on a fine Tuesday
in a small group dressed the same
and hitting the left feet at approximately the same instant.
That the air above your sleeping son's head
is as holy as rain.
That nothing is perfect: an unpleasant woman
said on television tonight I should think of my stink.
That the next person you turn to
may be the only one you'll ever have a chance
to love more than yourself.
That a statue is not a fiesta.
That the snow makes so little noise.
That a car goes by. Slows down, stops, backs up.
Pauses, the motor whirring—and drives off.
It is midnight and October in America.
The small towns are left to the leaves.

Isthmus

I have one way to imagine
the poverty in those countries:
A son goes off to join the rebels,
or is seen talking with a girl
whose brother is suspected of having
listened to some students who later
may have become rebels. . . . And the son
is killed—one evening cut in half,
and morning is three friends holding his mother
from two directions she must not go.
Three hungry women gripping the loud
grief and thin arms of their town
as a woman, of their country as hell-
wild and tear-pasted strands of hair
against cheeks and their bone. . . .
And gripping their neighbor, whose name
they know, whose son they had fed;
and the shack among the shacks
shrieks his name, and God's, as the town
murmurs their names. So the box
comes from two directions and the priest
takes a chance and comes, and it
goes into the ground, half her soul.
The son was sixteen and had
his picture taken once. This is where
the poverty moves in me; the children
of the rich are also portraits in frames
of starting school, of First Communion,
soccer teams, formal dances . . . slides
of grinning in opulent, bizarre lobbies
at Miami Beach, films of diving-board
antics at a U.S. fraternity, of grandchildren
refusing to smile, to stand still, in new
clothing—holding their Bibles. The parents
watch these with the glow from projector bulbs
on the soft, tiny hairs along faces—
to the tinkle of ice cubes and amusement
of friends. Around them the walls are higher

than last year, and they run the images
backward and *laugh* at the blue,
Caucasian blue-eyed water unsplashing
a grinning young, nose-holding man to a board.
In a shack a woman will stare at the new
glaze of distance that one afternoon
seems to cover the small picture she holds.
She is careful—but has she touched it
too often? Her son had it taken by a machine
in the capital city; he did that instead
of eating two meals. And now . . . has she
looked there too often? The face
is the same, but are faded tears pulling
her sight after them? She must put
it away, and she will, and knows
she will touch it again the next day.
One picture. Does the light make it dull?
Do her eyes? Does the blackness under
the dirt where she sits when the soldiers
come to search? She is careful—but the water
is scarce and she cannot clean
her hands every time and cannot not
touch the face each day. She touches
it. The air is mute. The camera
was in a booth whose flattened walls are now
part of a home for a dozen people.

The Makings of Happiness

*"If a man can't be happy on a little farm in Wisconsin,
then he doesn't have the makings of happiness in his soul."*

Until you have looked at something so long
it grows so familiar you can't see it—
the alp that all but disappears in dailiness;
the sea that common routine conceals;
the little farm in Wisconsin that seems
painted in oil on your long picture window,
its thick cow turned toward you, wryly
rolling its eyes, stymied by all this hoopla,
its stiff farmer, pinned to his blue ribbon,
pressed in his Sunday best, levitating,
its grinning photographer, tipping
what could be a black beret,
as if this were Marseilles or Paris
and not Hollandale, Wisconsin, 1922
the war to end all wars now over,
the barn more like a hearth than a barn,
a mother, who could be your mother,
in the door frame across the way,
bread in the oven and time on her hands,
the little girl, who could be a boy,
roped to her calf, which could be a dog,
waving to her cat, which could be a stoat,
apples in her cheeks and honey in her hair,
the church in the permanent center,
the townspeople happy as larks,
the scene flat and perspectiveless,
a child's colorful cut-out—
you'll not know the soul's work:
to keep the man floating, the girl
smiling, the calf changing, the cow rolling
its eyes, the blue Frenchman tipping
his hat at you who live so far off
in the vanishing point of the future.

The Fat of the Land

Gathered in the heavy heat of Indiana,
summer and 102°, we've come from
all over this great country,
one big happy family, back from
wherever we've spread ourselves too thin.
A cornucopia of cousins and uncles, grand-
parents and aunts, nieces and nephews, expanding.
All day we laze on the oily beach;
we eat all the smoke-filled evening:
shrimp dip and crackers,
Velveeta cheese and beer,
handfuls of junk food, vanishing.
We sit at card tables, examining
our pudgy hands, piling in
hot fudge and double chocolate
brownies, strawberry shortcake and cream,
as the lard-ball children
sluice from room to room.
O the loveliness of so much loved flesh,
the litany of split seams and puffed sleeves,
sack dresses and Sansabelt slacks,
dimpled knees and knuckles, the jiggle
of triple chins. O the gladness
that only a family understands,
our fat smiles dancing
as we play our cards right.
Our jovial conversation blooms and booms
in love's large company, as our sweet
words ripen and split their skins:
mulberry, fabulous, flotation,
phlegmatic, plumbaginous.
Let our large hearts attack us,
our blood run us off the scale.
We're huge and whole on this simmering night,
battered against the small skinny
futures that must befall all of us,
the gray thin days and the non-caloric dark..

The Art of Love

We get handwritten cards from the children:
Dear Parents, come visit our school—
our names painfully etched in crabbed script, the art
teacher's latest project. We say we would love
to come. We'll see Home Room, Art, and Music.
We promise to be there on time.

We've been talking a good deal these days about time.
About how when we were children
time was a kind of slow music,
a sure pulse of expectation, a school
in which, leisurely, we learned about love,
in which singing all day took no art.

The memory itself, we know, is all art.
It was never so happy as that at the time,
we remind ourselves, laughing, and love
wasn't easy, not even for children.
We remember those queasy afternoons after school:
the dark corridors of failure, of facing the music.

The first room we visit this time is Music.
An old upright piano, locked; art
work carved on the marred wooden school
desks; a metronome keeping the time
as we go through the motions of singing, the children
teaching us all of the songs that they love.

Valentines plaster the walls of the Art Room: Love
with its gaudy construction and fluff. No music
in these rough cuts and doilies the children
manufacture in the interests of "art."
It's getting late now, the time
moving faster, faster than it ever did in school.

But Home Room's the best thing in school,
they insist! We follow them out of love
through a motley of workbooks, torn papers, and time
tests, until memory turns up its old music
and everything blurs—Home Room, Music, and Art—
to the slow bobbing heads of the children.

And we know we would school ourselves in such music,
would cut out and paste up such love for all time,
would make a new start. Were we children. Had we the art.

Grandmother Grace

I didn't give her a good-bye kiss
as I went off in the bus for the last time,
away from her house in Williamsburg, Iowa,
away from her empty house with Jesus
on all of the walls, with clawfoot tub and sink,
with the angular rooms that trapped all my summers.

I remember going there every summer—
every day beginning with that lavender kiss,
that face sprayed and powdered at the upstairs sink,
then mornings of fragile teacups and old times,
afternoons of spit-moistened hankies and Jesus,
keeping me clean in Williamsburg, Iowa.

Cast off, abandoned in Williamsburg, Iowa,
I sat in that angular house with summer
dragging me onward, hearing how Jesus
loved Judas despite his last kiss,
how he turned his other cheek time after time,
how God wouldn't let the good person sink.

Months later, at Christmas, my heart would sink
when that flowery letter from Williamsburg, Iowa
arrived, insistent, always on time,
stiff and perfumed as summer.
She always sealed it with a kiss,
a taped-over dime, and the words of Jesus.

I could have done without the words of Jesus;
the dime was there to make the message sink
in, I thought; and the violet kiss,
quavering and frail, all the way from Williamsburg, Iowa,
sealed some agreement we had for the next summer
as certain and relentless as time.

I didn't know this would be the last time.
If I had, I might even have prayed to Jesus
to let me see her once again next summer.
But how could I know she would sink,
her feet fat boats of cancer, in Williamsburg, Iowa,
alone, forsaken, without my last kiss?

I was ten, Jesus, and the idea of a kiss
at that time made my young stomach sink.
Let it be summer. Let it be Williamsburg, Iowa.

Worried

This was in 1958. We were worried
about taking showers for the first time
with the other guys, and whether
we'd be laughed at; worried
about the old bus driver
who smoked large cigars
and kicked us in the pants
and out the door sometimes before
the bus had even stopped; worried
about the sad and queasy mysteries
of puberty.

Meanwhile, down in the subbasement,
the workmen, finishing off the shelter,
were drunk on our stocked beer;
far off in Russia the Commies
were smiling past their arms;
and down in Pruitt-Igoe
the quiet Negroes were rising, fighting
their own cold war.

Nervous in the suburbs, we worried
about Eisenhower, Elvis, the moon, rock and roll,
black slacks, penny loafers, and how to make
our short hair stand on end
as we named and named our enemies:
Khrushchev, Mel Oppenheim the Principal,
our fathers, authority and fear.

Until one day in '58 I remember
telling Nancy Farr I'd fuck her, long
before I knew or could. And then
she told my father. I remember
him wobbling, drunk on his cold
anger, his black stare, remember
him falling toward me, crutches flailing
in slow motion, two hundred pounds of dead
weight, slowly falling toward me
as I deftly stepped aside,
and didn't break
his fall.

Sestina for the House

October. They decide it is time to move.
The family has grown too large, the house
too small. The father smokes his pipe.
He says, I know that you all love
this house. He turns to his child
who is crying. She doesn't want to leave.

Outside in the large bright yard the leaves
are turning. They know it is time to move
down onto the ground where the child
will rake them together and make a house
for her dolls to play in. They love
the child. A small bird starts to pipe

his song to the leaves while the pipe
in the father's hand sputters. The father leaves
no doubt that he's made up his mind. He loves
his family; that's why they must move.
The child says, this is a wonderful house.
But nobody listens. She's only a child.

The father continues to talk. The child
cries, staring out at the Indian pipes
in her backyard, wondering if the birds of this house
will pack up their children, their nests, and leave
the old yard. Do birds ever move?
Do they know her sadness, her love?

Her father is smoking and talking of love.
Does he know what it's like being a child?
He knows she doesn't want to move.
She hates him sitting there smoking his pipe.
When has he ever been forced to leave
something he loved? He can't love this house.

The father sits by himself in the house
thinking how painful it is to love
a daughter, a house. He's watched her leave
saying she hates him. She's just a child
but it hurts nonetheless. Smoking his pipe
he wonders if he is wrong about the move.

Outside the bird pipes: Don't move. Don't move.
The bright leaves fall on the wonderful house.
And the child sits crying, learning about love.

Sinbad the Sailor

Sinbad is standing on top of his boat
while on top of his head grows a flower.
To his right, three comically menacing fish
glower in the failing, angular light
that grazes the tip of his spear.
Their jowls drip ketchup the color of blood.

I don't think it's meant to be real blood
any more than the pea pod boat's a real boat
or the pole vaulter's pole's a real spear.
And Sinbad himself is no more than a flower
aglow with the same inner light
that lights up and sequesters the fish.

Meanwhile, the piebald, impossible fish,
for all their grotesqueness, seem Sinbad's blood
relatives. On either side of the light,
on top of the water, on top of the boat,
foolish monsters and harlequin sailor flower
the same incongruous motley. And the spear

the color of Sinbad's pantaloons is the spear
that colors the blood of the fish.
On the edge of the scene, night's a blue flower.
In the middle, the land is dark as dried blood.
It seems like they're all in the same boat,
locked in this jest of geometric light.

What does it mean to see the world in this light?
To see monsters and heroes with spears
as alike? To see men in their boats
and immense, pantalooned fish
as the same flesh, the same blazoned blood?
What strange idea comes to flower?

In Los Alamos, the desert produces a flower
so bright its fiery petals can light
up a city, and slip into the blood
more surely than any broadsword or spear.
In that light who could tell a terrible fish
from a small faceless man in a boat?

Our heads grow such flowers! We brandish such spears!
Such fish monsters swim in our blood!
We will grow light and fall out of our planet, our boat!

Ground Zero

"I felt a great shriek in nature."

—Edvard Munch

He knew how everything, at extremes, is the same:
how heat freezes, joy pains;
how the most unbearable sound is silence;
how a scream turns even the firm world liquid,
a sea beyond human keening;
how the bell of the skull starts vibrating out
into the great heart of the sky;
how the dull hands are clapped
like dogs' ears to the head;
how we'd pull that head off, if only
the lake weren't its mouth,
the sky its skinned eyelids,
the night oozing in oily and woozy.

Why was it given him to hear this?
This scream of the possum-faced preener,
the simian seductress,
the sweetheart that turns all men green;
this scream of the papery matron
draped in a greatcoat of syphilis,
her raw hands mittened in flesh,
basting her naked child;
this scream of the white house drowning
in bloodfire, the gray face rolling off
of the terrified canvas,
the long tongue of the road
breaking up in intemperate paint;
this scream of lopped limbs and two-headed men
in all their ludicrous, formal dress,
as if no one must ever lose face,
as if no one were incomplete;
this scream of the murderer's
thick hands and wrists, as he twists
slightly sideways, and toward us.

Ground zero. Hairless and legless. The scream
of this whole goddamned universe squirms into us.
While somewhere above us,
safe on their bridge into space,
two blue friends walk off the deaf canvas,
as if at a certain distance,
as if in an obdurate silence,
as if toward some not unimaginable bright town.

In a Pig's Eye

I am a male chauvinist pig,
they say. Suddenly, I am
snuffling and grunting, my long tongue wallowing.
"Week-week! Week!" I say.
See? I don't take them seriously,
they say. No men take them
seriously. Suddenly I am
sober as stone. Deep wrinkles chiseled
in my brow. I could not crack
a joke if I wanted to and I don't.
See? I am impassive. I don't listen,
they say. Suddenly I sprout ears,
ears on my head, down my neck,
back, arms, and legs, until I am
all ears. See? I'm not serious,
they say. I am two-faced. Suddenly
while my one face nods its stone head
my other face snorts off toward the kitchen,
its snout full of aprons and babies.
See? I don't take them seriously,
they say. I keep sticking myself in
where I'm not wanted. I'm a real prick,
they say. Suddenly I am
blushing, filling with blood, until
I decide it's time to stand up for myself.
See? I'm about to spout off again.
I'm so predictable, they say.

X

My son only wants to type the x on the screen.
He holds his finger down:
xx.
I'm tired, overworked, and now angry with him.
"No," I say. "Either write something
or stop wasting my time."

He's disappointed. In time, he types,
"i ws lukng at the stars last niht."

I leave, return. He's gone back to
xx.
Perhaps it's something
that has to be said, something
he can never finish writing,
each x one time
when our paths crossed.

What thunder I roared tonight,
what a scene when he ate
without closing his mouth,
without eating over his plate!
He waves the tines of his fork
near his eyes and
interrupts when my wife or I talk!
Yesterday on his trike
he almost ran over
the two-year-old Sarah!

He's five. How many times
must I repeat myself?
Be kind! Be careful! Think!

In 5th grade Jon suggested
we slam the door on Annette,
who was to hold the door for us all,
as we walked past her into class.
The two boys in front of me did, and

the third time is automatic.
I didn't think she'd be hurt.
I didn't think.

Mrs. Muldrew, livid, singled me out,
made me look up at her, said
she expected more from me than that.

Seth's asleep. I'm walking
under stars. I stop and force myself
to look up.
I always thought I'd be
a stellar daddy.
Go on, stupid, I think to myself,
you know who you are, write your name,
write your name, stupid.

With the heel of my shoe
I make my x in the sandbox. I fill
the box with x after x for the many
times I have been cross with him here
on the playground.

It is so far from this sandbox to
the stars. The way they shine.

Clippings from *New Yorker* Ads:
December 2nd & 16th, 1985

In New York, the heavens aren't the only place that twinkle. Welcome to the new standard in paradise. It flourishes in spite of minimal fanfare and an advertising budget that wouldn't keep Colette in stickpins. It's a classic, durable as the films of Von Stroheim, the cut of a Poiret gown, the chic of a Sargent countess. In the twelfth month of the twelfth year a rare bird appears. How to buy a skirt. And suddenly the mind and the camera are one. That's why there's businessland. Estates are also purchased. My diamond has become as much a part of my style as my putter. There are things seemingly destined from their very beginnings to be instantly adopted by those of taste and discernment. They are truly works of art and will satisfy the connoisseur of fine things. Also available are exotic watchbands, made of chicken feet, elephant skin, etc. Give in to an overwhelming drive. Who'd blame you? I've worked hard to get where I am. And I like to wear things that remind me of my achievements. Taking pride in what you do makes a real difference in the way you do it. If you have been very good, treat yourself to a fur. This Christmas give from the heart. If possible, be there when your friend takes the first sip. Can a money clip be more valuable than the money it holds? Put your money in a safe place. Some circles shall remain exclusive. A little girl shouldn't have to beg for food. Pride. But Nita must. So many fine restaurants, you never have to eat at the same one twice. Her frail mother, who spends all day in the

marketplace peddling straw mats, can't sell enough to feed Nita and her two younger brothers. We're all over the map. I was looking for the perfect gift . . . you know, something that would express the things I knew about her life. I saw the Matisse and knew immediately. Just remember, before that little vein in your forehead begins to throb, give us a call. For \$18 a month through our sponsorship program, you can help a child like Nita. She'll believe you love her when you say it with gold. For a destitute child, your generosity can mean health, an education—even life itself. Scent matters. Let your *last-minute* gift recipients know they come *first*. Poetry of beauty and disgust. It's a word game. You find words that go up, down, around, and even backwards, and because there are more ways to make words, there are more ways to add up points. At the same time, by strategically taking letters away around your opponents, you can isolate them, and prevent them from scoring. It's a strategy game. Nothing celebrates life like art. For people who understand the subtle differences. Because if experience has taught *us* anything, it's that sometimes you have to go out of your way to give people what they need. The important thing is to meet the sales criteria of one particular client. Find the spirit you've been looking for. Discover what the privileged few have known for years. There is no longer a choice. This is your moment to be beautiful.

This Gift

Within me
wind skims the leaves of sagebrush
under a hot wide sky.
I am more than horse, rider,
hawk, earth and air.
What shapes me, shapes you.
I contain orenda
flaring everywhere you look.
The thick pulse of a spring night.
The quick kiss of a winter daybreak.
Within me
chimeras of smoke leap the ridges
of burning logs.

Within me
the hummingbird's blessing
and the grizzly's wisdom
take root and intertwine
in the cliffs of your spirit.
Such moments when beauty
has seized you, think of me.
I am a persona, the mask
beneath each mask,
the always arriving surf,
the shadow singing toward sunlight,
the stone blossoming in mid-air.
Within me
the full moon climbs the mountains
of your homeland.

for Ernie, Christmas, 1987

Continuance

Gather
an oak leaf skittering up the street
carrying its news crablike
on this February wind.

Promise
those culverts filling with snowmash
you won't forget the opals they leave
at your feet today.

Follow
a phoebe to her hazy treetop, where upside
down she sustains your broken soul
with her bell song.

Receive
this stone as kin, clasping it
in your palm, letting its rhythm quell
the persistent rush of your will.

Leaf, ice,
bird cry, stone, these cool textures
nibble your left thumb.

Rejoice
in this new sun, streaming in open windows.
The long sleepwalk of winter ends.

Sit down
simple in your skin, at home
on earth, woven into its beginning.

Beginning the Year at Rosebud, S.D.

No pavement chalks the plain with memories,
rows of curb crumbling to dirt each twilight.
Raw bones bend from an amber flood of gravel,
used clothing, whiskey. We walked, and a dead dog
seemed to leap from an iced shore, barks swelling her belly.
Three days I've waited, eyes frosted shut
to illusions of scrap and promising wind.

I'm untrapped here, in another place where the banister
interned my smile and glued my soul to the lion's mane,
walls nibble this new year. While cedar cradles
its medicine in ironing, I see my father's red eyes lock
thunder in the living room. Someone's brain cries in the basket,
watches steam and church bells fade. My empty hands ache
from stains and cigarette smoke. I am a renegade,
name frozen at birth, entrails layered with scorpions.

Hay fields have poisoned my ears by now.
The fourth day grows heavy and fat like an orchid.
A withered grandmother's face trickles wisdom
of buffalo wallows and graveyards marked
with clumps of sage. Here, stars are ringed
by bitter wind and silence. I know of a lodestone in the prairie,
where children are unconsolated by wishes,
where tears salt bread.

Midwinter Stars

The trees across the street have loved me
in your absence. The Pole star, caught by branches
of the front yard elm, blurs
when I look at it directly and passes
through midwinter slower than other stars.
Whenever you came by, the forest

filled with signs. A pocket in soft grass
meant resting deer. Hoofprints in the sand
lead through brush and fallen leaves
to even dimmer trails. I hated all my rooms.
The lonely light, absurd.
I warmed your shoulders one late November storm

and trees sang in minor chords.
Aware of dawn before it came, you woke,
smiled into clothes, juggled with coffee,
then drove away. I watched shadows turn
from indigo to grey.
Like other obsessions, this will change,

yet my arm was happy, numb
with all your weight. I learned the easy signs:
cloud cover, tracking snow.
I fell with every flake and wanted to drape
over trees, into city blocks, on those corners
where you bought beer, over cars and bridges

in that namesake of despair.
There are places I have never felt at ease,
where something taps against the glass,
the blackjack of a cop and bitter lives.
Who the hunter? Who the hunted? Who survives?
This cold circuit wobbles without rest.

I never could accept beginning or end.
You'll find on the other side of winter
crocus trembling in a bountiful dawn.
I plan to join the deer,
for in this dark, the trees bar my window
and not one shadow moves.

Lynn Point Trail

That rare day we played for real
and left traces of our walking sticks
in last year's leaves. Lynn Point Trail
hid us in rushing green, in the quick
dark of douglas fir where death conceals
itself in blazing moss.

Leading us in the journey,
our children stomp-danced until the ferns
bristled with the authority
of hooded cobras. When they turned
to us for answers, we began to see
fronds tremble with a delicate weight,

as if infinity had stirred the stem.
The scattered light peopled each ravine.
We longed for woods this deep, for this glen
where you knelt to photograph a gleam
inside a bridge of stone. Was it then
Missy wouldn't go on?

Our youngest girl wanted to believe
home could be this emerald grotto.
Nearby, we heard the breaking sigh of waves,
while, bickering in a bird's staccato,
she kept her gesture firm, though naive:
Here we belonged.

A cuckoo's call echoed in the sun.
I, too, wish we could have lived
near the tilted horizon,
close to the fluttering mat that weaves
dun fly and dune into one.

With songs for granite and bluer skies,
children gathered rain-eroded shells.
Let these rocks be eggs until the tides
scorch them, or until the heart reveals
at last the grace we lost.

In the Longhouse, Oneida Museum

House of five fires, you never raised me.
Those nights when the throat of the furnace
wheezed and rattled its regular death,
I wanted your wide door,

your mottled air of bark and working sunlight,
wanted your smokehole with its stars,
and your roof curving its singing mouth above me.
Here are the tiers once filled with sleepers,

and their low laughter measured harmony or strife.
Here I could wake amazed at winter,
my breath in the draft a chain of violets.
The house I left as a child now seems

a shell of sobs. Each year I dream it sinister
and dig in my heels to keep out the intruder
banging at the back door. My eyes burn
from cat urine under the basement stairs

and the hall reveals a nameless hunger,
as if without a history, I should always walk
the cluttered streets of this hapless continent.
Thinking it best I be wanderer,

I rode whatever river, ignoring every zigzag,
every spin. I've been a fragment, less than my name,
shaking in a solitary landscape,
like the last burnt leaf on an oak.

What autumn wind told me you'd be waiting?
House of five fires, they take you for a tomb,
but I know better. What desolation comes,
I'll hide your ridgepole in my spine

and melt into crow call, reminding my children
that spiders near your door
joined all the reddening blades of grass
without oil, hasp or uranium.

A Nation Wrapped in Stone

for Susan Iron Shell

When night shadows slipped across the plain, I saw a man
beside his horse, sleeping where neither man nor horse
had been. I've prayed
to a star that lied. The spirits near the ceiling of your room,
did they leave on horseback, turning dew into threads
by moonlight?
In wild stretch of days, you didn't fear ashes or weeping.
We, left behind, can't warm sunlight.
Isaac, you left with the wind.

The chokecherry grows slower. I held your trembling wife,
and windows trembled in our north room. The creek gnaws
remaining snow. Our blood runs pale.
You taught us to be kind to one another. Now we wake, questioning
our dreams. Nighthawks in warm fog. A nation wrapped in stone.
What do nurses
know of hay, of scents that float broken between canyons,
of strength in a worn face? You wept love, not death.
Around your bed, owls stood.

The north wind hunts us with music, enough pain
to set fires in ancient hills. West winds growl
around Parmelee.
The tanned, uneven banks will hold more frost. Unlike dust,
we cannot die from tears. You've settled
on a quiet prairie. Shrouded eyes
in thickets give a reason to contain
this heavy rind. We are left with grief, sinking boneward,
and time to watch rain soak the trees.

HERE

 he sd please
take it
 it
is heavy
heavy &
 I have
brought it
 all
the way here
here a
 muddled
happiness
for you
 always.
Whining
 she
whined yes I had
always meant
 not
to be
here.
 He
gave it to her &
she
 taking it
in her
 2 hands
took it.

NEW

drapes
she sd
drapes.

Nah
he sd I want
boat.

But
look
how the
couch
fades

she
sd if you still
love

me
drapes.

Yeah
he sd
things
do fade
he sd
boat.

YR MY IN-

she
sd security
blanket.
Come
he sd
off it.
You
mean out
she
sd from
under.
I'm
he
sd a comfort.
& I
she
sd just
have to drag
you
everywhere.

YOU KNOW

in
bed he sd
you look a lot
like
a large
fish.
Sure &
yr allure
she
sd is yr cute
little worm.
You think
he sd
yr
yr
husband's
keeper?
You
she
sd can
fish
or
cut bait.

ECSTASY

ain't
all it's
cracked
she
sd up to be.
Not
even a
near
he
sd miss?
Miles
she
sd to
go before I
sleep.
Let
he sd me
help.
Some
she sd
things
I
have to
do for my
self &
this
is one of them.

GOD

not
yr *green* she
sd shirt it
just
kills me. Some
he sd times a
man's gotta
do what a
man's
gotta do.
Well
just don't
wear it to
my
for
Christ
she sd
sake funeral.
Over
your
he sd
dead
body.

I CAN'T

she
sd believe
you
sd
that.
Me
he
sd neither
you
must've
thrown
yr voice.
Sure
she
sd watch
my lips.
I'm
he sd no
dummy.
Speak
for yr
she
sd
self.

OH YR

home
she
sd
safe.
Can't
he
sd win 'em
all.
Don't
you think I
wished
she
sd you
home in
one
piece?
At
he
sd the very
least.

Antler (b. 1946)

Author of *Factory* (City Lights) and *Last Words* (Ballantine), Antler lives in Milwaukee, but spends two months in the wilderness every year. Since 1984 he's made a Thoreauvian living reading his poems around America. Winner of awards from the Walt Whitman Association, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the New York Quarterly, the Milwaukee Artists Foundation, the Wisconsin Arts Board, and PEN American Center, he's been published in over two hundred literary magazines and twenty anthologies, the most recent of which include: *From the Tongue of the Crow*, *An Ear to the Ground*, *Erotic by Nature*, *Gay & Lesbian Poetry of Our Time*, *Heartpieces: Wisconsin Poets Against AIDS*, *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*, *Earth Prayers*, *Poems From the Earth*, *Working Classics*, *Piece by Piece You Deliver Yourself*, and *The Journey Home: The Literature of Wisconsin Through Four Centuries*.

Margaret Benbow (b. 1944)

Margaret Benbow, a life-long Wisconsin resident, has been awarded prizes in numerous national poetry contests. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry*, *Madison Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Antioch Review*, as well as in other literary journals. Her work has also appeared in an anthology of Wisconsin writers entitled *The Journey Home*. She has had two chapbooks published entitled *Poems by Margaret Benbow* (Quixote Press) and *Bride and Bear* (Quixote Press).

"I think a good poet 'works' all the time. You must learn to use your eyes as though you were deaf, to hear as though you were blind. Above all, do not be easily satisfied. The best poems are life forms, strong and breathing, and true to their own reality from head to foot. Never stop working on a poem until it is as good as you can make it."

Sally Benforado (b. 1924)

A native of central New York state, Sally Benforado moved to Wisconsin twenty-two years ago. A freelance writer and teacher, she works with UW-Madison Continuing Education and with Creative Arts/Over Sixty. She has had poems published in *Feminist Connection*, *Writing Women*, and *Madison Area Writers Anthology*. In 1987, she received an award from the Council of Wisconsin Writers for her collection of short fiction, *Bring Me a Story* (Florincanto Press).

"Although I'm a writer of prose, sometimes I have something to say that demands to be told as a poem."

Norbert Blei

Norbert Blei has received a Writer's Choice Award, Pushcart Press Award, Cliff Dweller's Award/Friends of Literature of Chicago, and a Council of Wisconsin Writers' Award. His poetry has appeared in *Spoon River Poetry*

Quarterly, *Kenyon Review*, *Wormwood Review*, and *Wisconsin Review*. Blei has two books of poetry in print, *The Watercolored Word* (Quixote Press) and *Paint Me A Picture/Make Me A Poem* (Spoon River Poetry Press).

"I don't care what anybody has to say about 'poetics.' If it feels like a poem, I join in."

Robert Brown (b. 1961)

Robert Brown has lived in Wisconsin for three years while completing his Ph.D. in English at UW-Milwaukee. He is co-editor of *The Cream City Review*, and his poetry has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Puerto del Sol*, the *Literary Review*, and *High Plains Literary Review*.

Charles Cantrell (b. 1945)

Charles Cantrell has won fellowships from the Ragdale Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Millay Colony, and has published 250 poems since 1970. He received first prize in 1989 for the Indiana Poetry and Fiction Awards from *Sycamore Review* at Purdue University. His work has appeared in *Northeast*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Poetry Now*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Confrontation*.

"If one replaces the word *delight* with *poetry*, the following quotation from Alan McGlashan's *The Savage and Beautiful Country* illuminates one aspect of poetry for me. 'Delight is a mystery. And the mystery is this: to plunge boldly into the brilliance and immediacy of living, at the same time as utterly surrendering to that which lies beyond space and time; to see life translucently. . .'"

Susan Faust Casper (b. 1948)

Currently at work on her Ph.D. at UW-Madison, Susan Faust Casper is a lecturer for the English department at UW-Stevens Point. Born in Kiel, Wisconsin, she has been published in the *Wisconsin Academy Review* and other journals.

Robin S. Chapman (b. 1942)

Robin S. Chapman has been published in *Poetry*, *Yankee*, *Nimrod*, *New Letters*, and *Northeast* and received a 1990 Wisconsin Arts Board Development Award in Poetry. She authored *Distance*, *Rate*, *Time* (Fireweed Press) and was the editor of the 1988 edition of the *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*. She teaches courses in children's language development at UW-Madison.

"Poetry is a way to say what is otherwise inexpressible; to put sound to image and emotion; to make something of inchoate feeling that can be held in the hand like a stone."

Kelly Cherry

Kelly Cherry, a professor of English at UW-Madison since 1977, is the author of three books of poetry, *Lovers and Agnostics* (Red Clay Books), *Natural Theology* (Louisiana State University Press), and *Relativity* (Louisiana State University Press), and five novels. Her first book of nonfiction is due out in spring of 1991. She has won the Best American Short Stories Award, three PEN Syndicated Fiction Awards, the Pushcart Prize, the first Fellowship of Southern Writers Poetry Award for a distinguished body of work, and several other awards and fellowship grants. Her work has appeared in a wide variety of magazines, including *The Atlantic*, *Georgia Review*, *Parnassus*, *Esquire*, and *Southern Review*.

"It's in poetry that thought and time most musically counterpoint each other, and I like a world in which the elements sing."

Dewitt Clinton (b. 1946)

Dewitt Clinton received his Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University. He is currently an Associate Professor at UW-Whitewater and is editor of *Salthouse* and the second edition of *Eleven Wisconsin Poets: A Whitewater Poetry Sampler*. Clinton has received a Wisconsin Arts Board Artist Grant, a MacDowell Colony Fellowship, and a University of Wisconsin System Teaching Fellowship. He has published poetry in the *Apalache Quarterly*, *The Kenyon Review*, and the *Wisconsin Review*.

Clinton says that lately he has been thinking about his poetry as "prayer." "What is prayer but meditation? Perhaps prayer is a metaphor for writing, or writing is an act of prayer." He finds some of the most peaceful yet imaginative moments when he composes, much like his father did when writing prayers and sermons.

Elizabeth Davey (b. 1964)

Elizabeth Davey grew up in Madison. She received her B.A. in English at Dartmouth College and is currently an English graduate student in the joint M.F.A./Ph.D. program at Cornell University. Davey has worked at the World Resources Institute in Washington D.C. and was also an assistant writer for *Ecoforum*, the journal of the Environmental Liaison Centre, Nairobi, Kenya. She has had poems published in the *Wisconsin Review* and in an anthology entitled *High Tide: A Gathering of Younger Poets* (Dolphin-Moon Press).

Travis Du Priest (b. 1944)

Travis Du Priest is a professor of English and chair of the English department at Carthage College in Racine, Wisconsin. He also writes for *The Living Church* magazine, published out of Milwaukee. His poetry has been published in, among others, *Contemporary Poetry*, *The Kentucky Review*, and *Colorado Review*.

According to Du Priest, poetry is "an engaging experience for both the writer and the reader." On a personal level, his poetry acts as "an intersection of inner and outer worlds of images and reality."

Roger Dutcher (b. 1952)

Roger Dutcher was born in Beloit, Wisconsin. His poetry has appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Amazing*, *Modern Haiku*, *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*, and *Northeast*. He is currently co-editor of *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry*.

Larry Edgerton

Larry Edgerton holds a Ph.D. in English and has had poetry, fiction, and nonfiction published in various journals and literary magazines. He has co-authored a feature film and is a writing instructor in a minority program at UW-Madison.

Karl Elder (b. 1948)

Born in Wisconsin, Elder has taught since 1979 at Lakeland College near Sheboygan, where more recently he was named Poet in Residence. Widely published in magazines, his books of poetry are *Phobophobia*, *The Celibate*, and *Can't Dance an' It's Too Wet to Plow*, all from Prickly Pear Press.

Elder believes that "the form through which the poem is made possible is the most economical and intense language that the poet's voice and tone will allow in order to preserve the oral quality of the poem and to facilitate the reader's perception."

Ron Ellis (b. 1933)

Ron Ellis is a professor of English, teaches writing and literature at UW-Whitewater, and edits the poetry journal *Windfall*. Ron has a special interest in "fusion poetry." His audio cassette album of performance poetry, *Open My Eyes*, was favorably reviewed in *The Village Voice*, and has been given airtime on National Public Radio, as well as on WNYC. A second album is forthcoming from Sow's Ear Press in England. His poems have appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *New Letters on the Air*, *Florida Review*, and *Cream City Review*. His collection entitled *The Blue Train* is just out from Woodhenge Press. The cantos printed here are from his major work in progress entitled *The Pratyeka Cantos*. Although the title of the work contains a term ("pratyeka," from Tibetan Buddhism) referring to spiritual individualism, the cantos are visionary, eclectic, utilizing imagery from many value systems in an attempt to reach a synthesis between the meditative, the intuitive, and the rational.

Jean Feraca (b. 1943)

Jean Feraca may be familiar to public radio listeners since she produces and hosts a daily call-in talk show that airs throughout Wisconsin on Wisconsin Public Radio. Feraca has taught creative writing and literature at Transylvania University and Michigan State University. She has had poetry published in

The Nation, *American Poetry Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and the *Iowa Review* as well as in *South From Rome: Il Mezzogiorno* (Larkspur Press). Feraca is the winner of the 1975 Discovery Award.

"I believe in the transformational power of language. Poetry is my Tao, my meditation."

Susan Firer (b. 1948)

Susan Firer, who teaches at UW-Milwaukee, has been awarded an Academy of American Poets prize and a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship. Her poetry has appeared in *The Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Hanging Loose*, and other magazines. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies, including *Milkweed Editions*, *This Sporting Life*, and *Changes in Weather: Midwest Women Poets*. Firer has one book in print, entitled *My Life With The Tsar and Other Poems* (New Rivers Press).

"I like a poem that can jump-start the mind, a poem that works like the paddles that shock a stopped heart back into beating. Mostly I love the excitement in the discovery of writing and reading poems that pay attention to our daily lives."

Doug Flaherty (b. 1939)

Doug Flaherty says that when he was eighteen and living in Massachusetts, he dared to laugh at a mail order catalogue from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, because he thought the name Oshkosh sounded humorous. He now teaches writing and literature at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and wonders who got the last laugh. His poetry has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The Quarterly Review of Literature*, and scores of journals. His books of poetry include *Near the Bone* (Pentagram Press), *Love-Tangle of Roots* (Ithaca House), and the newly published selected poems, *Good Thief Come Home* (Prickly Pear Press).

Flaherty says that "poetry is prayer on the highest level." With his poetry he searches for the "holy hush—that feeling created by the poems devised simply and cleanly from the physical experience of our lives. The holy hush is likewise that feeling of timeless awe one receives when the poem is written or read. There comes to me the perception that time has frozen and that I have shared a moment of awareness that others might have felt a thousand years ago."

Jesse Glass (b. 1954)

Born in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Jesse Glass now resides in Milwaukee, where he recently received a Ph.D. from UW-Milwaukee. He has published a collection of poetry entitled *Enoch* (White Ewe Press), and in 1981 and 1988 he received awards from the Academy of American Poetry. In 1988, Glass won first prize in the American Radio Theatre's National Competition. His radio drama "How to Shoe a Horse" was broadcast in 1990 on National Public Radio.

John Graber (b. 1946)

An English teacher and director of the gifted/talented education program at Pepin High School, John Graber lives in Stockholm, Wisconsin. He received an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Iowa. His poems have appeared in many magazines, including *American Review*, *Iowa Review*, *American Poetry Review*, and *Christian Century*.

"In Heaven we'll be able to say ten things at the same time and mean every word. Here, we have to make do with a poem, then ten, then a hundred poems over time, and maybe the angels can hear what it's like to be mortal and humans can hear what it's like to be who they are inside another speaker's voice, inside another's eyes."

David Graham (b. 1953)

An assistant professor at Ripon College, David Graham has had poems published in *Poetry*, *New England Review*, *American Scholar*, *Georgia Review*, and *Iowa Review*. He has written three books—*Magic Shows* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center), *Common Waters* (Flume Press), and *Second Wind* (Texas Tech University Press).

"The process of writing has always been for me an ineffable source of consolations, challenges, and rare glimpses of transcendence. It's a good banquet, even when you're not the guest of honor."

Aedan Alexander Hanley (b. 1961)

Aedan Alexander Hanley teaches English at the Milwaukee Area Technical College and is a current poetry editor for *The Cream City Review*. His poetry has been published in the *Iowa Review*, the *Florida Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, the *Black American Literature Forum*, and many other reviews and magazines. He is the recipient of a 1990 Wisconsin Arts Board Grant.

"Writers have to stop searching for a cure for that fictional disease called 'writers block,' stop praying at their desks for a muse to walk into their lives, and get down to the true art of writing. This, of course, requires that artists have the power to trust themselves enough to be creative on their own merits."

William Harrold (b. 1936)

A professor of English at UW-Milwaukee, William Harrold has been published in *Heartland II*, *Poets of the Midwest*, *Southern California Anthology*, *From the Tongue of the Crow*, *Paris Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Antioch Review*, and *Abraxas*. His two books are *Trails Filled with Lighted Notions* and *Beyond the Dream*. In 1989 he won the Ann Stanford Award.

Judith Harway (b. 1957)

Judith Harway, an assistant coordinator of composition at UW-Milwaukee, has taught writing at UW-Milwaukee, Alverno College, and the University of Winnipeg, and co-founded the Great Lakes Writers' Workshop at Alverno College and the Heartland Writers' Workshop at Mt. Mary College. She has received a Wisconsin Arts Board Grant, a MacDowell Colony Fellowship, and Woolaston Writing Scholarship to Columbia University. Her poetry has appeared in *The Cape Rock*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *The Cream City Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and many other literary journals.

"Once upon a time, I might have described my 'personal poetics' in terms of a need to find or fashion a grand order for the universe, but now the concerns of my usual day—the bumps and broken toys, the pride of a word pronounced for the first time, the interruptions and mountains of laundry—won't let me forget that life is, after all, made up of little things and those little things matter. Either we live and write from full lives, or we risk embracing the poetics of isolation, self-indulgence, and, ultimately, irrelevance."

John Judson (b. 1930)

John Judson is a professor of English at UW-La Crosse. Judson's poetry has appeared in publications from the *New York Times*, to *Happiness Holding Tank*. He has also published fourteen books of poetry and an autobiography. His poems have appeared in ten anthologies. Among the awards Judson has received are several Wisconsin Writer's Awards for best books, a Midwestern Book Award for *Ash Is The Candle Wick*, a Hart Crane Memorial Award for Contemporary Poetry, and an Earplay Award for Drama from National Public Radio.

Richard Kirkwood (b. 1931)

Richard Kirkwood's poetry has been published in *Wisconsin Dialogue*, *Upriver* 1–4, *Midwest* and *Colorado Quarterly*. He also has published three books of poetry: *Dying Like Keats* (Red Weather Press), *Green Leaves and Dry Leaves* (Young Publications), and *I Am A Year* (Greenwich Book Publishers).

"The most important thing about poetry is the creation of voices. After that, imagery is highly important—and sometimes form. I try hard to teach these beliefs to my students."

David Kubach (b. 1937)

David Kubach is a poet-in-residence for the Artist-in-Education programs of Wisconsin, South Dakota, and Oklahoma. *First Things* (Holmgangers Press), his first collection of poems, appeared in 1980. In addition, his work has appeared in many journals, including *Crazy Horse*, *Dacotah Territory*, *Iowa Review*, and *Wisconsin Academy Review*.

Kubach has spent much of his adult life near Lake Superior's south shore, and this experience informs his poetry. He says that early in his life he found himself uncertain about most things. "The world wasn't quite what I'd expected it to be. Writing became a way of starting over, of trying to get it right the second time around."

Peg Carlson Lauber (b. 1938)

Peg Carlson Lauber teaches creative writing and women's literature at UW-Eau Claire. She holds a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Michigan and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. Lauber has been awarded an American Academy of Poets Prize from the Iowa Writers Workshop and a Hopwood Award of Poetry from the University of Michigan. Her work has been published in, among others, *Abraxas*, *Creeping Bent*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Moving Out*, *Wind*, and *North American Review*. She has had a book of poetry published entitled *Locked in the Wayne County Courthouse* (Rhiannon Press) and has edited a poetry anthology entitled *A Change in Weather: Midwest Women Poets* (Rhiannon Press). She also serves as editor in the *Midwest Women Series* (Rhiannon Press).

"I enjoy the play with words and the music of poetry; I strive for the serious, emphatic experience under the play and the music. I enjoy the challenge of form, in particular, syllable stanzas with slant rhymes, and I try to freeze the important moments and feelings of my life in the poems, hoping that those feelings and moments will speak to others, that they will recognize their own similar emotions and experiences and find it an epiphany."

Carl Lindner (b. 1940)

Carl Lindner, Professor of English at UW-Parkside, has had published three books of poetry, entitled *Vampire* (Spoon River Poetry Press), *The Only Game* (Red Weather Press), *Shooting Baskets in a Dark Gymnasium* (Linwood Publishers), and *Angling into Light* (Linwood Publishers). His poetry has appeared in *Mississippi Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *Poets On*. Lindner was awarded a Wisconsin Arts Board Creative Writing Fellowship in 1981.

"Until recently, my work has resulted from my inability to completely repress the voice(s) of my unconscious. My hope now is to learn to cooperate with this mysterious quide and write the poems that reveal my authentic self."

Art Lyons (b. 1959)

Art Lyons is a program manager in the Academic Skills Center at UW-Eau Claire. His poems have appeared in *Upriver 4*.

"When I recall the poetry that seduced me to read more as an undergraduate, I recall Roethke's 'The Walking,' Plath's 'Daddy,' and Snodgrass's 'Heart's Needle.' I recall the rhythmic patterns falling regularly on subtly audible rhymes. I was taken by the net that Robert Frost felt was missing from 'free verse.' Getting the ball over feels good. This is my only poetic theory. Wimbledon pays, poetry doesn't. It better feel good."

Peter Martin (b. 1950)

Peter Martin describes himself as a Wisconsin Lifer. He is a graduate of UW-Oshkosh and lives in rural Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin, with his wife and three children. He is a social worker in a maximum security prison for men and also teaches creative writing in night school at Moraine Park Technical College in Fond du Lac. Martin was a winner in the Reeve Memorial Union Creative Writing Contest each year from 1975 to 1978 and also placed first and third in the 1987-88 story and poetry contest in *The Mind's Eye*. He has had poems published in *The Mind's Eye*, *Hemispheres*, *Muse*, and *New Blood*. He has also published a chapbook entitled *Licking My Wounds* (Paisano Press).

"My writing is mainly autobiographical. I specialize in the truth. I adhere to the belief that poetry began as a medium for the people and should be accessible to the people."

Jeri McCormick (b. 1934)

Jeri McCormick, a Wisconsin resident since 1970, received her M.S. at UW-Madison. She has had poems published in the *Wisconsin Academy Review*, *Country Poet*, *Poet Lore*, and *Poetry Out of Wisconsin V*. Her chapbook entitled *The Sun Rides in Your Ribcage* was published by Fireweed Press.

"I learn through many kinds of writing, but it is poetry that helps me know who I am and what the world is."

Lee Merrill (b. 1946)

Lee Merrill received his B.A. from Washington and Lee University and his M.A. from Indiana University. He has been a professor of English at Northland College since 1970 and lives in Washburn, Wisconsin. Merrill received a 1980 Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship and has had poetry published in *Poetry Now*, *Northeast*, and *Plainsong*.

Marc Mickelson (b. 1962)

Marc Mickelson is a native of Madison and a graduate of Edgewood College and George Mason University's M.F.A. program. He is just beginning the search for someone to publish his first book of poems, *Travel*.

Martha Mihalyi (b. 1953)

Martha Mihalyi received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University. Mihalyi has had two books of poetry published, *The Woman in the Glass House Speaks* (Stone and Water Press), and *Bloodflowers* (Red Weather Press). She has been awarded a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship, a Minnesota Loft Mentor Award, a Lake Superior Contemporary Writer's Award (twice), and a Devine Fellowship. Mihalyi's poetry has appeared in *Ohio Poets*, *Passages North*, the *Canadian Journal of the Arts*, the *Wisconsin English Journal*, and the *Madison Review*. She lectures frequently for conferences and universities throughout the Midwest and recently served as writer-in-residence at the Interlochen Arts Academy.

"Although my poems possess a simplicity of language that makes them immediately accessible on one level, the real work for me involves deeply layering the simple images to achieve further meaning and a clarity of sound that approaches song."

Stephen M. Miller

Stephen M. Miller received his formal education at the University of Iowa and is currently the Journals Manager at the University of Wisconsin Press. Miller received a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship Award in 1987. He has had poems published in *Rolling Stone*, *Marilyn*, *Abraxas*, and *Madrona*. He also has had published two books of poetry, *The Last Camp in America* (Midwestern Writers Publishing House) and *Backwaters* (Peridot Press).

Kyoko Mori (b. 1957)

Kyoko Mori received her Ph.D. in English/Creative Writing from UW-Milwaukee and is currently Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at St. Norbert College. She was featured in the *South Florida Poetry Review*, (Winter 1987) and in *Sing Heavenly Muse #15: Three Women Poets*. Her other publications include a book of short fiction, *The Ritual in Roses and Silk* (Morgan Press) and poems in *The Forbidden Stitch*, the *Denver Quarterly*, *Footwork*, the *Graham House Review*, and the *Madison Review*.

Sandra Nelson (b. 1951)

Sandra Nelson holds an M.F.A. in art (sculpture) and an M.A. in English (creative writing). She has been published in *Womensong: A Decade of Women's Poetry and Prose and Fiction/86*. Her many publications include *The North American Review*, *Iowa Review*, and *Black American Literature Forum*.

"Don't worry if your writing stinks. Either way, if you get pleasure from it, keep doing it for your health's sake. Me, with a cholesterol reading of 110, and blood pressure of 80/60, I've made myself so healthy I'm almost dead."

Gianfranco Pagnucci (b. 1940)

Gianfranco Pagnucci currently teaches English at UW-Platteville. His poetry has been published in *Mankato Review*, *Italian Times*, *Madison Review*, and *Bird Watcher's Digest*. His books include *Face the Poem* (Bur Oak Press), *New Roads Old Towns* (Roundtree Publications), and *Story-Start Animals* (Simon and Schuster). Pagnucci received the Edna Meudt Award in 1988 for first place in narrative poetry. He is presently a member of the editorial board for letters of the *Wisconsin Academy Review*.

"Mostly I write poetry, I think, because poetry is most about how the poet sees things and about how those things he sees relate to other things."

Angela Peckenpaugh (b. 1942)

Angela Peckenpaugh received her M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts in 1978 and currently teaches English at UW-Whitewater where she is an associate professor. Her reviews of poetry have appeared in *Wisconsin Academy Review*, *Women's Review of Books*, *Calyx*, *Cream City Review*, and *Small Press Review*. She has received a Wisconsin Arts Board Grant and honorable mentions from the Council of Wisconsin Writers. Peckenpaugh's poems have appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Sing Heavenly Muse*, *Southern Poetry Review*, as well as in several anthologies including *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple* (Papier Mache), *Eleven Wisconsin Poets* (Kendall Hunt), and *New Roads, Old Towns* (Roundtree). Her books include *Letters from Lee's Army*, (Morgan Press) and *A Book of Charms* (Barnwood). Peckenpaugh has been performing a series of poems about women artists called "Courage & Color, Creating Beyond Convention" at galleries and campuses around the state and in Illinois the last three years.

"The atmosphere of the women's movement in Milwaukee provided me with subjects and an audience. I have found in the mandala and in the Old Religion substitutes for the patriarchal religion I was given at birth. And I have created some narratives around role models which were supernatural and Celtic or feminist and creative."

Felix Pollak (1909–1987)

Felix Pollak, former curator of rare books for the Memorial Library at UW-Madison, held a M.A. from the University of Buffalo and a Dr. Jur. from the University of Vienna. He received the Poetry Award from the Council of Wisconsin Writers in 1973, 1978, 1982, and 1984, and the Borestone Mountain Poetry Award in 1965. Pollak's poetry has appeared in over one hundred little magazines, including *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Kayak*, *New Letters*, *Northwest Review*, *North American Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Pollak's poetry has also been published in numerous books, including *Castle and the Flaw* (Elizabeth Press), *Say When* (Juniper Press), *Ginkgo* (Elizabeth Press), *Subject to Change* (Juniper Press), *Tunnel Visions* (Spoon River Poetry Press), *Benefits of Doubt* (Spoon River Poetry Press), and *Von Nutzen Des Zweifels* (Fischer Verlag), a German translation.

Jeff Poniewaz (b. 1946)

Jeff Poniewaz received both his B.A. and M.A. in English at UW-Milwaukee and now teaches "Literature of Ecological Vision" via the off-campus program there. His eco-activism spans from urban greenspace struggles to the global rainforest crisis. Poniewaz has received a PEN "Discovery Award," a Wisconsin Arts Board Literary Arts Fellowship, and a Milwaukee Artists Foundation Project Grant. His poems have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies since he debuted in *Beloit Poetry Journal* and August Derleth's *New Poetry Out of Wisconsin* in the late 1960's. His book *Dolphin Leaping in the Milky Way* (Homeward Press), published in 1985, is in its third printing.

Poniewaz feels that poetry comes from what most fascinates the poet. "Poems are not just lace doilies of imagination. They are living, breathing energy fields emanated from brainwaves and heartbeats."

Sara Lindsay Rath (b. 1941)

Sara Lindsay Rath was born in Manawa, Wisconsin, but now lives in Boston, Massachusetts. She received her bachelor's degree in English from UW-Madison, and an M.F.A. in writing from Vermont College, Montpelier, Vermont. Rath is a free-lance writer who has taught writing workshops at UW-Madison and has written scripts for public television in Madison. She has published poetry in *Boston Review*, *Great River Review*, and *Abraxas*. Her books include *About Cows* (Northword), *Remembering the Wilderness* (Northword), and *Pioneer Photographer* (Tamarack Press). Rath won a MacDowell Fellowship in 1989 and a Ucross Foundation Fellowship in 1987. She is currently writing for Commonwealth Films, Boston, and is a reader for *Ploughshares*.

"I wrote my first poem when I was nine years old, signalling a creative need that has remained constant since then although the rest of my life has gone through many changes. My poems are narratives of family, old loves, memories, and regret. And there's a trace of the child I was between the lines, still asking why, and dreaming hopeful dreams."

Bruce Renner (b. 1944)

Bruce Renner, a teacher at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, and UW-Madison, holds a B.S. from UW-Milwaukee and an M.F.A. from Columbia University. Renner's poetry has appeared in such magazines as *Arts in Society*, *Choice*, *Clockwatch Review*, *The Cream City Review*, *Esquire*, and *Shenandoah*. Three books have been published by L'Epervier: *The Language of Light Ambits* (1988), *Song Made Out of Pale Smoke* (1982), and *Wakefulness* (1978).

"I have often been asked what my poetry is like, yet I never really know what to say, except that it is what I have done most consistently all my life, although I know even that fact is not particularly enlightening. W. H. Auden, an old teacher of mine, once said that after finishing a poem there is absolutely no assurance that another will follow. I know no more now than I knew after I finished my first poem."

Melanie Richards (b. 1951)

Melanie Richards was born in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, and has lived in Wisconsin for much of her life. Richards's poetry has been published in *Milkweed Chronicle*, *Aspen Anthology*, *Upriver 3*, *Wisconsin Review Anthology*, *Intro II* and elsewhere. She has won awards from the Academy of American Poets and has had a poem nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

"Much of my work is a manifestation of the 'secret life' which is always, in a sense, the life of the imagination."

Dale Ritterbusch (b. 1946)

Dale Ritterbusch currently teaches English at UW-Whitewater. He has had poems published in *Carrying the Darkness* (University of Texas Tech Press), *Eleven Wisconsin Poets* (Kendall Hunt), and *Northwords* (University of Maine Press).

"The compression of language, the intensification of experience are two qualities of poetry that I have always found intriguing. . . . Poetry, like painting, sculpture, dance, or music, has physical properties which the various senses and indeed the whole being responds to. . . . Poetry is not just the recreation of experience, but experience itself."

Suzanne L. Ryan (b. 1955)

Although she has lived all over the country, Suzanne Ryan, a practicing psychologist, was born in Sheboygan and currently lives in Green Bay. Ryan's play "A Grandmother's Stories Part II—Future" was performed by the Green Bay Baha'i'- Children's Theatre Group in 1988.

"This trilogy reflects my childhood on my family's homestead by Trader's Bayou, located near New London, Wisconsin."

Robert Schuler

Robert Schuler, Professor of English, UW-Stout, Menomonie, has contributed poems to several anthologies and to numerous journals, including *Tar River Poetry*, *Dacotah Territory*, *Caliban*, *Longhouse*, *Northeast*, and *Mississippi Valley Review*. Eight collections of his poems have been published, most significantly *Floating out of Stone* (Juniper Press) and *Music for Monet* (Spoon River Poetry Press). His *Selected and New Poems* was recently published by Spoon River Poetry Press.

Janet Shaw (b. 1937)

Janet Shaw has lived in Wisconsin for twelve years. She received her master's degree from Cleveland State University and is currently a lecturer at UW-Madison. Shaw's poetry has been published in *In the Middle: Women Poets of the Midwest*, *Bear Crossing: An Anthology of North American Poets*, and *Open*

Places: 15th Anniversary Issue. Her poems have also appeared in her books *Dowry* (University of Missouri Press) and *How to Walk on Water* (Cleveland State University Press). Shaw has also published a collection of short-stories, *Some of the Things I Did Not Do* (University of Illinois Press), a novel, *Taking Leave* (Viking Penguin), and six novels for children in The American Girls Collection for the Pleasant Company.

Mary Shumway (b. 1926)

Mary Shumway, an English professor at UW-Stevens Point, grew up in Wisconsin Dells. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Denver and has done postdoctoral studies at Princeton University. Shumway's poetry has appeared in *Northeast*, *Cimarron Review*, *Commonweal*, and *Wisconsin Academy Review*. Her books of poetry include *Headlands* (The Sono Nis Press) and *Practicing Vivaldi* (Juniper Press). She has won a Robert Frost Fellowship and two Academy of American Poets prizes.

Thomas R. Smith (b. 1948)

A native of Chippewa Falls, Thomas R. Smith lives with his wife in Minneapolis. In the early 1980's he directed Artspeople, a rural-based arts organization in western Wisconsin. He has published one full-length poetry collection, *Keeping the Star* (New Rivers Press). His poems and essays have appeared in *Yellow Silk*, *Abraxas*, *New Age Journal*, *Bloomsbury Review*, and *Editor's Choice II* (The Spirit That Moves Us Press), an anthology of the best of the American small press.

"I agree with the French poet Ponge's statement that artists 'have to open a workshop and take the world in for repairs.' Poetry, like everything else now, is broken and needs, perhaps more than ever before, those workers willing simply to retrieve its pieces from the postmodern rubble, wipe them clean, and assemble them back in working order."

Robert Spiess (b. 1921)

Robert Spiess's poems have appeared in such periodicals as *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Humanist*, and many haiku magazines. He is the editor of *Modern Haiku* magazine, now in its twenty-first year of publication, and is the author of five books of haiku and one of 338 concepts of haiku.

"Haiku poets ought to regard all aspects of creation as sacred and important, for each entity has an influence that, if we are openly aware, can be received by us."

Peter Stambler (b. 1944)

Currently Professor of Humanistic Studies at UW-Green Bay, Peter Stambler received his B.A. from Yale, his M.F.A from Carnegie-Mellon, and his Ph.D. from Syracuse. He was the Head of English at Hong Kong Baptist College

from 1987 to 1989 and returned to Hong Kong permanently in 1990. Stambler has received many awards and grants including three Council for Wisconsin Writers Best Book Awards, a Quarterly Review of Literature International Poetry Prize, and three Wisconsin Arts Board grants. He has had poems published in *Shenandoah*, *Willow Springs*, and the *Kansas Quarterly*. Stambler has had published three books: *Wilderness Fires* (Jump River Press), *Witnesses* (Jump River Press), and *Unsettled Accounts* (Quarterly Review of Literature). Stambler's poems are generally book-length poems or a series of closely related narrative poems.

"I'm interested in writing politically alert poems that do not lose the power of political declarative statement or the vital ambiguities of poetic language."

David Steingass

David Steingass is a poet, essayist, and fiction writer who lives in Madison, Wisconsin. His books include *Homesick for Foxblood*, *American Handbook* (Random House), and *Body Compass* (Stanton and Lee). His work is featured in *The Journey Home*, a historically inclusive anthology of Wisconsin writers, and in *Old Roads, New Towns*. Steingass is currently published in *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Mid-American Review*. He was the winner of the Paulette Chandler Award from the Wisconsin Writers Association in 1986. Discussion of Steingass' poetry is offered in Pinsky's book, *The Situation of Poetry*.

"I want a poem that stands on the rhythms of its lines and discovers itself as its images unfold."

Denise Sweet (b. 1952)

Denise Sweet received both her B.A. and her M.A. at UW-Eau Claire. She is an instructor of creative writing and poetry at UW-Green Bay. Her poetry has appeared in *Upriver* 2, 3 and 4, *Transactions*, *Northbound Magazine*, and *The Journal: News from Indian Country*.

Bruce Taylor (b. 1947)

Bruce Taylor received his M.F.A. from the University of Arkansas and is currently a professor of English at UW-Eau Claire. He is the editor of the *Upriver* series of Wisconsin poetry and prose as well as the poetry editor for *Transactions* of the Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters. Taylor has received a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship, a Kenneth Patchen Award for Poetry, and a Fulbright-Hayes Senior Lectureship to Koryo University in Seoul, South Korea. His poems have appeared in *The Nation*, *New York Quarterly*, and the *New Orleans Review*, and he has had two chapbooks published, entitled *Idle Trade: Early Poems* (Wolfsong Press) and *The Darling Poems* (Red Weather Press).

Marilyn Taylor (b. 1939)

Taylor, who has lived in Wisconsin for most of her life, is currently a teacher of creative writing and composition at UW-Milwaukee. She received a B.S. from UW-Madison in 1964, and spent a number of years in the advertising business. She entered UW-Milwaukee in 1984 where she earned an M.A. in English Language Studies. She will receive her doctorate in Creative Writing in 1991. Taylor has been awarded honorable mentions from both the Academy of American Poets and *Blue Unicorn* magazine's national competitions, and she is the 1990 recipient of the Tinsley Helton Dissertation Fellowship at UW-Milwaukee. Her poems have appeared in a number of literary journals, and her first collection, titled *The Accident of Light*, was recently published by Thorntree Press. Taylor has been poetry co-editor of *The Cream City Review* since 1987.

"I find that I'm writing more and more poems in free verse lately, without any direct reference to tradition. And yet I still draw heavily on my practical knowledge of porsody, since the construction of successful free verse demands a certain conscious systematizing of language. I feel that to ignore the 'craft' in favor of something more visceral usually results in abysmal poetry."

Richard Terrill (b. 1953)

Richard Terrill received his M.F.A. from the University of Arizona. He has been a lecturer and visiting professor at universities in Korea and the People's Republic of China. Terrill has won several awards for his writing, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for poetry, an Associated Writing Programs Award for his non-fiction book entitled *Saturday Night in Baoding: A China Memoir* (University of Arkansas Press), and a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship. He has had poems published in the *North American Review*, *Ironwood*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and the *Carolina Quarterly*. He also has had published a chapbook entitled *The Death of the Tenor Sax* (Red Weather Press).

Jean Tobin (b. 1942)

Born in Merrill, Wisconsin, Jean Tobin received her Ph.D. from UW-Madison. She currently teaches English at the Sheboygan County and Washington County University of Wisconsin campuses. Her poetry has been published in *Present Tense* and *Windfall* and in both the 1987 and the 1988 *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*.

Dennis Trudell (b. 1938)

An instructor of English at UW-Whitewater, Dennis Trudell has published several chapbooks, including *The Guest* (Fiddlehead Books), *Avenues* (Best Cellar Press), and *Imagining a Revolution: Poems About Central America* (Ojalá Press). He has won awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and

a Wisconsin Arts Board grant to publish *From the Botton: Writing From Waupun State Prison*. Trudell's poems have appeared in *Georgia Review*, *Triquarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, and several anthologies.

"I like poems of my own and others when they have some third dimension I think has more to do with love than Truth."

Ronald Wallace (b. 1945)

Ronald Wallace, Director of Creative Writing at UW-Madison, holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He has received two ACLS Fellowships and several Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowships. Wallace's poetry has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*. He has edited an anthology, *Vital Signs: Contemporary American Poetry from the University Presses* (University of Wisconsin Press). He has also had three books of poetry published, entitled *People and Dog in the Sun* (University of Pittsburgh Press), *Tunes for Bears to Dance to* (University of Pittsburgh Press), and *Plums, Stones, Kisses & Hooks* (University of Missouri Press), as well as four chapbooks of poetry and three critical books. In 1990 he was chosen as winner of the first Robert E. Gard Wisconsin Idea Foundation Award for Excellence.

Doyle Wesley Walls (b. 1954)

Doyle Wesley Walls, currently an assistant professor of English at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, lived in Wisconsin while he pursued his graduate studies at UW-Madison from 1981 to 1988. He received three nominations for a Pushcart prize in poetry and was also nominated by *Cimarron Review* for the G. E. Foundation Awards for Younger Writers. His poetry has been published in *New York Quarterly*, *Bits*, *The Wooster Review*, *Negative Capability*, and *Puerto del Sol*. Walls' poetry is forthcoming in two anthologies, *Wrestling with the Angel* and *Sweet Nothings: An Anthology of Rock and Roll in American Poetry*.

"My two poems in this anthology represent my work in that they combine the pleasure of playing with the language around me and reflection on experiences for which I feel great passion. One poem was the result of my having taken a pair of scissors to the language of advertising in a couple of magazines. In the other poem, I work toward sharpening my own sense of what it means to be a father. If someone finds in either one of these poems—or in any of my poems—sustenance, thoughtfulness, exhilaration, challenge, or delight, then I am pleased."

Roberta Hill Whiteman (b. 1947)

Currently at work on a Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of Minnesota, Roberta Hill Whiteman is an associate professor of English at UW-Eau Claire. She received a B.A. in Communication Action from UW-Green Bay and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Montana-

Missoula. Whiteman's poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including *Northeast Indian Quarterly*, *North American Review*, and *Amicus Journal*. Her collection of poetry, entitled *Star Quilt*, was published by Holy Cow! Press.

"When life and study confuse me, I return to poetry—to writing it and reading it. It always restores and refreshes me. Making a poem offers a way to love and speak to the world, with all its darkness and light. Swept in process, I turn images and sounds over and over and such turnings replace frustration and despair and self-doubt. For at that moment, only the poem matters. For me, poetry delights and discovers and makes me encounter those little deaths in life, which lead to growth and renewal."

J.D. Whitney (b. 1940)

J.D. Whitney lives in Wausau with his wife and children. He is a professor of English at UW-Marathon Center. His books include *sd* (Spoon River Poetry Press), *Word of Mouth* (Juniper Press), *Mother* (Red Weather Press), *Tongues* (Elizabeth Press), *Tracks* (Elizabeth Press), *The Nabisco Warehouse* (Elizabeth Press), and *Hello* (Artists' Workshop Press). His forthcoming book *& sd* is being published by The Clearing House.

"Titled *sd*, the sequence of poems now consists of 120 discrete and individually free-standing sections, imaginary exchanges in dialogue between a man and a woman who, through the years of their long marriage, have been thriving on the complex and often negative energies they seem to generate and pass, repeatedly, from one to another, back and forth. They don't stop. So the poems don't."

Acknowledgments

ANTLER: "Oh-Oh" appeared in *Midwest Headwaters Earth First! News* (1989). The poem also appeared in *Lomakatsi*, *Nightsun*, *Nexus*, *New York Quarterly*, *Sepia* (England), *Sheperd/Express*, *The Fifth Estate*, *Urbanus*, and *Stiletto*. "Can Vignettes" appeared in *Calapooya Collage* (1988) and also appeared in *Images*, *Stiletto*, *Half Dozen of the Other*, and *The Plough: North Coast Review*. "Bubble-Boggled" appeared in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* #53 (1989) and in *The Milwaukee Journal* (1988). "On Learning on the Clearest of Nights Only 6000 Stars Are Visible to the Naked Eye" appeared in *Spaceball Rocochet* (1990). Poems reprinted by permission of the author.

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