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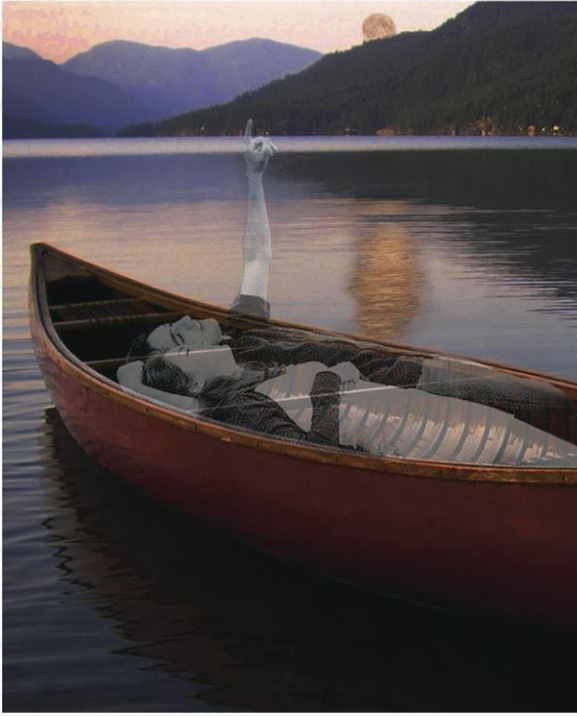
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# Alibi for Two

Poetry by  
Augustus Merrill



A Parallel Press Chapbook



A Parallel Press Chapbook



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Poems by  
Augustus Merrill

**Parallel Press**

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“I Sit With You” in *Seven Lake Superior Poets* (Bear Cult Press, 1979); “The Dock” in *Plainsongs*; “The Purser” in *Wisconsin Poetry Transactions* (1991); “How the Teal Got His Crescent” in *Plainsongs*; “Night Museum” in *The Great Lakes Review* (Spring 1985); “Bayfield County, 1969” in *Seven Lake Superior Poets* (1979); “One Day, Sometimes Two” in *Seven Lake Superior Poets* (1979); “Minerva, Radio” in *Steelhead* #7; “Deep, Deep Water” in *Seven Lake Superior Poets* (1979); “I Shot a Brown Rabbit Going White” in *Wisconsin Academy Review* (September 1979).

*For my wife, Melinda Rose Guerra Merrill*





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## **I Sit With You**

It was not a good place to quarrel. In a city or in a town there would be restraint, but there was no restraint there and the lake did not help. When it began to freeze their differences were magnified. The water creaked and groaned as though it were in its death throes. It pinged without mercy through the fragile house and the fragile marriage. When there was no more to say, a cruel silence would set in. Sometimes it would last almost until the lake thawed in spring.

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.

## The Dock

The dock was built with trepidation. Not by someone joyfully launching out from land, but by someone afraid of water, reluctant and trembling on the shore. It went out only a few feet into the lake and the ice had shoved up one side, tilting it almost out of use. Little was gained by going out on it, and the hazard was great. It was rotten, slippery and sloping. Nail heads protruded everywhere. But sometimes in the rain when the fog set in on the lake, it was a great comfort to go to the end and to think about going farther.

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 outwards

Through lily pads, 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.

## **Trimalchio**

The cold was a great blessing. A few degrees warmer and it would have soaked him and made his little journey difficult indeed. It came down in a fury, but once down it was as light and dry as the clouds it came from. It raced across the forest floor wild and happy. He made his way through it easily. Soon he would be with her safely inside, excited by the wild and happy storm.

Tonight I am Trimalchio the triple blessed.

For one, the new moon is laced

Across its white face

With the winter willows.

For two, the deep drifts are rolling

Wild with light

Pressing under the skirts of the shaggy spruce.

For oh most important, like three,

He is upright on bright legs

Striding to see his love.

Trimalchio the triple blessed,

His heart beats like a light drum.

## The Purser

From early morning through midday, almost until dark his confidence was at the full. The deep swamps and bogs and tangled forests gave him a great joy as though he could live there alone forever. But as the long black shadows of evening began to fall over this dark alien world his false courage failed him. A panic overtook him and he had to be careful not to turn an ankle or break a leg hurrying back home to the light and to the human company he so foolishly thought he could live without.

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.

And 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.

## The Dowry

It wasn't much of a dowry, but what she brought lasted them the remainder of their married life. It was a small wood-burning stove—a simple black steel box with a stair step top for cooking, two spin drafts for the fire, and little cast iron doors on which were stamped exuberant stars and the date of the nation's two hundredth birthday. All year long they sat by that stove drinking coffee in the morning and wine in the afternoon. It was a wonderful stove and a great place to be alone and in love in the woods.

This evening the furnace is a young man,  
Yellow birch flaming frost  
From the walls of my windy house.  
Melinda's dark hair flying over the fresh sheets  
Is a raven flying over this frozen lake  
In February the steep shadows of the summer cottages  
Pour out over the ice,  
Two snowshoe hare circle into the clear-cutting,  
The quarter-moon goes sailing through the cracking wood  
Fire and a raven inside me.  
You and the length of a late winter night.



## How the Teal Got His Crescent

No matter, love grows old and it is impossible not to form thoughts of one's early independence. The thoughts are untrue and yet they are there anyway. Among ornithologists a good way to start a fight is to speculate about the purpose of the coloration of birds. The blue-winged teal drake isn't so much more colorful than the hen, but on the side of his head is a distinctive white crescent that sets him apart. One evening the new moon burned its image there, reminding him of her and how much he had to lose.

Two teal are feeding off the feminine bank

Where the pickerel weed marks the margin of the August rice.

I know as little about her and her plain colors

As I know about my wife, my daughter,

Those women I've never known.

But him, how I know him

And how that crescent came on his face

The night he drifted out under a disappearing moon and thought

That he could do without her.

## The Unfinished Sauna

It was hard work building the little steam bath. His young wife had come with him to the middle of nowhere and he hoped the bath might make the long winters a little more bearable for her. There was no cedar around and they had no money to buy logs. Each day he would cross the frozen sphagnum bog and cut tamarack. One day while shaping the wood with an axe, a sliver of metal flew off and went into his arm. She cut it out of him and was very proud. "I saved you," she said. Later things fell apart and the bath was never completed. They sold the land and moved to town. The new owner from out of state tore it down in complete disgust. It seemed to him like a monument of incompetence.

To put a pause to a project,  
To leave idle and undone  
What others would rush to frame  
With a finishing touch—  
North facing shed left open  
With a blanket flying inward on the unhinged jamb  
Is a long habit acquired in a sense  
Of the deliciousness of the thing,  
The futility of the thing,  
The finality of the right line spoken  
Into the wrong production.  
I kiss you warmly now  
And coldly turn away,

A life's work, a life's questioning  
In the strangeness, the deliciousness,  
The finality, the futility  
Of framing the finishing touch.

## Night Museum

It was good to be out of the hospital. The restraints, the harsh drugs, the locked doors, the group therapy were a hell no one ever deserved. The night sky over Lake Nothing was clear. The two of them lay in the bottom of the canoe looking up at the constellations and holding hands. They covered themselves in an old green sleeping bag against the chill of the northern night. They said nothing as they held hands in the bottom of the boat. They were silent as they drifted across the soft calm waters of Lake Nothing and stared up at the undisturbed night sky.

Which are the real stars now

That the night is a schizoid fake?

Satellite, strobe lamp, the Air Force making movies?

That old night that drove so rapidly

Screeching up to our door like a good country doctor

Ought to be put in a museum now.

So many ill ones need it,

So many ill ones need to gaze

Out where parallel lines sometimes meet.

Let's put that old night in a museum now,

Let's let an old woman tend the gate.

She'll be a virgin and smell like violets.

In her keeping will be the ill ones,

In her keeping will be real stars.

## Poem for Steve Bornhoff

The governor's aide and a flotilla of dignitaries were seated on a dais full of microphones before a crowd that had gathered to save Lake Superior. The governor's aide was perfect—out of central casting or some marvelous nineteenth century Russian short story. He was enormous, as big as a barn and just as full of treasures. He could save the lake all by himself, but there were others there who wanted to save it too. He listened to them in profound boredom, rolled his eyes, and kept tilting his chair back until with a crash he slipped under the table and sledded off the dais. He flopped on his back like a giant tortoise in the nest of microphone cables and it was everything the flotilla could do to right him.

I saw the reeds shaking the entire expanse of the Dead Horse slough  
Off the Torch River on a Saturday in early November,  
And dunce that I am, I concluded  
The reeds must do this all week long.  
Sure enough, on Monday morning  
In the muddy ditch by the dairy farmer's house  
Where I had passed a hundred times before  
The reeds were still shaking and the tune had not changed.  
Now in the heavy stillness of late winter  
When stupidity weighs upon our stupid heads  
Like high pressure flattening out the plains of North Dakota  
We find it incumbent upon ourselves to grope into the snowy hollows  
Around the base of the spindly maples

For the work of the wind already rustling in the live-oaks  
Off the coast of Louisiana.

We feel into these hollows finding a light new intelligence  
That fans us back to the feet of our old teachers  
Where we kneel, then rise straight up into this world,  
This world so vibrant, so in charge of itself.

## **For Bill Heart and the Headwaters of the Bad River**

The crowd overflowed the auditorium and flooded out into the foyer. They were the old and the young. All had come with rage and pessimism. Their beloved little mountain range was about to be ripped up and hauled away to China. The spokesman for the company assured the crowd that everything possible would be done to protect the environment. The company would begin by tearing off the top of one mountain and digging a hole only a little more than half as deep as Lake Superior. There would be jobs and money for the local people, and when the mine played out there would be a beautiful lake with trout in it. When the meeting was over, the crowd spilled out into the winter night. They were up against it. It seemed to them then of little use even to look up to the stars.

Fields that won't fall,  
Metal minding its business  
Deep in the underground exchange,  
Rain returning the dish  
In which the nitrogen baked.  
Ours and the lives of our children without these.  
Ours the wheat collapsing in broad hectares,  
Bread that rots in the bin,  
The sky clutching vitriol like a cheap thug,  
And thoughts so thick they are hoisted on poles,  
Thinned and left to dry above the wet fallen fields.

## **Bayfield County, 1969**

Drive south from here any month of summer and you will meet Chicago driving north in Winnebagos and Buicks with citizen band radios. For about seventy five miles you are in the North Woods. Then around Park Falls these woods give way to farms and fields and houses. You have driven out of the refuge. It is America everywhere you look. Soon this little band of fir and spruce, pine and tamarack will be as much America as any place else. I am pleased to have lived here while it was not, while we were poor, while we were still a foreign country.

The harshness of my neighbor's voice

An age of scholars could not learn.

The splendor of my neighbor's fields

This age of merchants cannot sell.

All days now the fields are bought and sold.

In the Sunday supplements the journalists lament

The passing of the pioneer.

Not the red dog kicked along the gravel road,

Not the voices grown hard in the land.

I for one with the high grasses, the rusting fence

Hide in the wind.

We let these people pass.



## **The Wild Lilac**

Magnificent homes where no one lived dotted the hillside. The large and the small foliage had been cut away to give splendid views of the lake. Immaculate gardens were planted and tended by hired help from the neighboring town. For one month a year the owners would visit their vacation homes and give their gardens an occasional cursory glance. On some of the last undeveloped farmlands above the lake wild lilacs managed to hold on. Each spring while the owners of the large empty homes were away the last of the wild lilacs bloomed. The fragrance and blossom of a fallen generation's lost treasure held onto the hillside for a while longer. It was the part of the land that had not yet given way to larger dreams.

Someone planted it in the innocent years.

Hope then was a small thing,

Smaller than foreign travel and large automobiles and expensive shoes.

It was only the size of a tiny bud, the purple and perfume

That arrives if you are lucky enough to live into yet another spring.

Hope grew large as the years grew tarnished

And life became more assured.

The wild lilac grew immense.

It competed desperately each May with Hope

That had grown so large.

Today the hired workers have come

And with them the compact backhoe.

The desperate spring show of the wild lilac is over.

Small hope will disappear like summer rain.  
Things will be larger now and more compact,  
Taken in with only a casual glance and no disturbing fragrance.  
Hope will be abroad when spring arrives  
And the immense unruly wild lilac will be gone.

## Two Black Ducks

If I could write, there's a little story I would like to tell. Everyone can write. Everyone has a little story to tell. In the warmth and glow of the artificial fire, in the warmth and glow of juniper berries and long friendship he told and wrote his story. Everyone has a little story to tell. Everyone can write.

You don't know what has been given to you  
Until you know what is to be taken away.  
The light by Sturgeon Falls,  
The shadow on the pond,  
The marvelous shot,  
The glow of your pale thin skin making the retrieve  
In the dark cold waters of the beaver pond,  
The wine red flesh of the wariness  
And the sweet of the pale sweet pears,  
The flicker of kerosene in the dusty lamp,  
The flicker of alcohol along your long thin arms,  
The strong rays of the bright eternal sun  
Coming up in the morning  
Telling you that you are young.

## **The Explorer**

“Tomorrow I am going to.” And sometimes, “Next year I am going to.”  
How could they be so sure, he marveled. How could they be so sure? A  
set of stairs, a glaze of ice on the door stoop, a conspiracy in the blood.  
How could they be so sure?

Listening to the explorer’s tale,

The sea after the mountain spread its formidable grin.

“And next . . .” was the explorer’s refrain,

“And next . . .” the conquistador spoke on.

From side to side

The sea after the mountain spread its formidable grin

Between the ears of the earth.

## **One Day, Sometimes Two**

His parents had come to take a look at this cold distant place where their son had ended up. They had spent a small fortune on his education hoping that he would become well-connected, grow prosperous and live close by their comfortable sunny home. The place he chose was extremely disappointing. Their son was odd and different there and they hardly seemed to know him. He loved his new home and they hated it. He had lost them and they had lost him forever.

Foreigners come here one day, sometimes two.

It is my heart's desire to show them everything

In one day, sometimes two.

Running here, pointing there,

Always searching for hats and shoes and gloves,

I lose my mind.

I take them to witness the clear, speckled trout

That drift in the headwaters of Eighteen Mile Creek.

The trout are never there.

We go to be in awe of the floe ice

Smashed high against the red rocks of Madegan Beach.

The wind has taken the ice halfway to Canada.

Nothing is in its place.

The maps lie.

Familiar roads turn into lost lanes, strange looks.

When the foreigners leave, they think that I am mad.  
And it seems that I am,  
For as they go the ice comes back from Canada,  
The partridge begin to drum by the enormous spring holes,  
The trout swim out into the open unafraid.  
All this happens and I become consoled and grow less heartsick  
Until it hardly matters at all what I can show to anyone,  
Or even myself,  
In one day, sometimes two.

## **Minerva, Radio**

It was not a good idea to leave. There was everything at home and nothing there, but there should have been everything there too. There were the Mediterranean beaches and the bells of the Monte Carlo church. There were drugs and gambling and young people and rock and roll. But mostly there were nights alone listening to a beat up radio with the name and emblem of Minerva over the tuner. There was Roberta Flack's "All the Sad Young Men." In the morning there was Madame Cousin working in her garden. She always wanted to know how the night had gone.

Minerva, radio.

Fifty-two foreign countries

Playing on my patio.

Seven glowing tubes.

The only woman,

The loving done,

The listening begun,

They blow in like cold wind

From the Alps

In their duck-down sleeping bags.

Twenty-nine resistors,

So many, many ohms of no resistance

Sing your song, wish me well,

Minerva, radio.

## **Leave Your Bow Man Alone**

They had been married and divorced three times, and now they were trying to go down a little, rocky, northern river together. He screamed for her to paddle on the right. She paddled on the right. He screamed for her to paddle on the left. She paddled on the left. All the while she didn't say a word. Her thoughts flowed with the current as light and easily as a leaf. Three times is enough, she thought, three times is enough.

Leave your bow man alone;  
You are lucky to have him there,  
And if he is a she, leave her alone too—  
She has had enough of your bad advice already.  
Choose which side is dear  
Then change like the changing of the year  
Without premeditation, plan, or word.  
Leave your bow man alone.  
Steer when you are tired,  
Moving forward as you never would have done alone.  
If you must command,  
Command yourself to the passing world  
Remembering that you are heavy  
And that she is light  
And that the two of you are only being led along



Because the water has forgiven you both.

Leave your bow man alone.

Go to the shore in silence and tenderly touch the limbs

That have brought you home at last

Where there is no water

And no need for forgiveness.

## Deep, Deep Water

He was not a seeker. He was much too simple, and full of humor for such business, and was deeply suspicious of anything spiritual. When he was a boy his father loved flying and loved to tell him about it as they soared over the forests, highways, and agricultural lands of the Deep South. His father told him to always be looking down at the earth for a place to land. It seemed to him like good advice. He was always looking for a place to land.

Deep, deep water surrounds me—  
Water capable of feeding a fat man's cow,  
And from this wonderful water comes a chorus  
Of angry, neglected objects.  
Straining towards these objects,  
Leaning into this deep, deep water  
I see only my pale, pale face  
Though older men tell me there is more.  
They tell me the eyes I see  
Are not even eyes.  
These stand for the cold, jeweled stones  
That clink in the pockets of the long, green pike.  
They tell me the hair I see  
Is not even hair.  
This stands for the radiant weeds that wave  
From the bottom of the river bed.  
They tell me that I am not even I.

I stand for what happens underneath  
Just as the clouds stand  
For the breathing of the earth below.  
I hear all this amazed.  
Once more I face the deep, deep water.  
Once more I see only my pale, pale face.  
And then I know I have no home—  
Only this hungry voyage over deep, deep water  
Where old men wave from the heavily forested shores  
Of rocky, unbeachable islands.

## **I Shot a Brown Rabbit Going White**

It was a small wilderness, but a wilderness nonetheless. You had to walk for several hours in a pretty straight line to find your way out. In late fall it was full of snowshoe hares turning from brown to white before the first November snowstorm. You could go in and hunt them all day against the green background of the tamarack bog. When you were done, if you walked in that straight line you would be out in a matter of hours.

I shot a brown rabbit going white

In a green tamarack bog today,

Absolutely unfair.

Two times he bled:

Once where he dropped,

Twice where he lay dying,

Brown going white on the red mat of green

On the sponge of the forest floor.

Seeing the huge eye stare star-struck

Up through the tops of the tamaracks,

This body which needs no food inquired

In its customary haughty manner,

So now are you proud of yourself?

And this body which must eat shot back

That indeed it was proud, quite proud.

That day through these arguments raged,

Shooting some rabbits, leaving others go,

Wishing the entire length of the weary walk  
Simply to be left alone,  
Simply to be allowed to rise  
Quickly and smoothly  
Up through the tops of the tamaracks  
Over the red mat of green  
On the sponge of the forest floor.

## **At the Landing**

That year the lake did not make good ice. As it was forming, the wind came up and broke it apart and pushed it together again into a difficult jumble. We stumbled through it to get to the fish and stumbled back to the landing at dark. The men loading did not visit or exchange reports. They were cold and just wanted to go home.

A little round man in a long sleek Buick

Pulled up to the landing

To see how the boys had done.

It was bitter cold

And he only dropped his window

Half way down to talk.

He lived alone and his legs had failed him;

After sixty years he had given it up.

Sweet longing beamed from his tough Polish face

And the easy life he lived after death.

What he would not give to go again

Alive over the treacherous floes

To watch night descend over the landing

And over the town

Where he would someday go to live.

## **Like a Misty Vision**

The phone rang and he could not bring himself to answer it. He should have called. He should have been the one calling, but he could not bring himself to pick up the phone. He needed just a little more time to be at sea. He needed just a little more time before returning to all the troubles that awaited him on land.

Like a misty vision in the midnight breeze

A real and true sail arose in the moonlight.

It sailed towards him and gave him hope

That it would sail on by.

It gave him hope

That there would be no greeting,

No skiff lowered overboard,

No exchange of presents,

No news of home.

It gave him hope that it was alone

And that he was alone,

That they were both alone

On the vast and lonely sea.

## The Hand

He had stopped doing the things he loved. His wife worried about him and made him carry a satellite phone when he went off alone. The lake seemed more massive, the forest more of a maze, the rivers impossible to wade. His confidence and energy level had plummeted, and with it his joy. On Sunday afternoons he no longer went abroad delighting in the absence of people in the forest. He would find himself lying on the couch watching the Packers and enjoying it. He had become like everyone else.

It may be true, but I don't think so.

I don't think death's grip is cold and icy.

I think it is as soft and warm as the flannel sheets

That embrace you throughout the endless night.

It is as tender as television and an afternoon nap.

Death's grip is light and playful,

You could break it if you wished.

You could let go of it as easily

As you would let go of the hand of a frightened child

In a strange and enormous city.



## The Crossing Guards

They moved to town for the sake of the baby. It was just too hard living out like that. She was immediately relieved. The grocery store, the Laundromat, the city parks. It took him the remainder of his life to make the adjustment. As a very old man his greatest pleasure was to look out his narrow window at the young crossing guards directing traffic by the elementary school in the middle of the afternoon. If civilization were like this, he thought, he never would have gone to live in the woods.

Not a decade behind them

The young crossing guards stand duty at the stop.

Already they have assumed the serious and sober robes of responsibility.

In neon safety vests they arrive early at their stations

Dwarfed by the nine foot signs.

With miniature mirrored signs of their own they stop traffic

On the world's windswept open streets.

Obediently the traffic halts

As the guards conduct their small charges to safety.

No one, not even the most hardened criminal

Would disobey their small upraised hand.

Whatever the future brings, into this scene

Such authority and obedience will never be theirs again.

The power and satisfaction given over to them as children  
Will soon be replaced by defiance and disappointment at every turn.  
Before accelerating again  
We stop to admire the young guards and to admire ourselves  
Doing what we are supposed to do.



Augustus Lee Merrill is retired from a thirty-year career as professor of English literature at Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin. He has been involved in the conservation issues of the Lake Superior region as a member of the boards of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute and Voyageurs National Park. His writing has appeared in *College English*, *Poetry Now*, *The Wisconsin Academy Review*, and *Gray's Sporting Journal*. Lee lives with his wife Melinda in Washburn, Wisconsin.

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