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MASTODON, 80% COMPLETE: POEMS

by

Jonathan Johnson

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English

Western Michigan University
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MASTODON, 80% COMPLETE: POEMS

Jonathan Johnson, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 1997

Many of the poems in this collection are set in the vast woods and along the Lake Superior coastline of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Others take place in and around the poet's remote cabin in northern Idaho where the Selkirk, Bitterroot, and Cabinet mountain ranges converge. However, they all take as their definition of wilderness the complete external beyond the individual consciousness, including the body, other people, and the decaying cultural landscape, as well as vistas of yet unmolested nature. The poems chronicle an ongoing attempt to occupy the borderlands of faith between imaginative will and allegiance to the world, that is, between separation and participation.

Structurally, a number of the poems are compressed, brief lyrics that notice the moment as a point of entry in the flow of time. These poems attempt to expand into, rise from, and speak for a continuous life. There are several traditional narrative pieces in the collection, a few that are even written in prose form. Within the book's larger dialectic between event and articulation,

the modifying imagination acts subversively in such poems, under the manifest allegiance to story. The collection's most ambitious poems follow the path of thought concurrent with the course of sensation, torquing experience against imagination, memory, and emotion.

The desire to overcome (or at least comprehend) the isolating effects of imagination and autobiography expresses itself in the poems' gestures toward other people. Some poems are addressed directly to the reader or specific individuals and question, in their own ways, whether loss is the loneliest of human conditions or the basis for all human love. Other poems participate in community by speaking directly for that community, fluctuating between the first person singular and the first person plural as isolation is eclipsed by a pervasive sense of inclusion. What is common throughout the collection is a represented history of the poet's ongoing struggle to achieve connection with other people (and, for that matter, grizzlies, aspen trees, junked cars, snow, and mountains) while remaining the authentic, individual voice that speaks the poems.

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Jonathan Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

Where I live, decay and infestation follow creation before the paint dries. I haven't even finished my cabin--the floor is plywood, and insulation backing still shows between rafters and around windows--and already I hear carpenter ants chewing on the tamarack logs as I lie awake in the loft at night. In the morning I find tiny mouse turds on my sink and hear mice feet traveling their usual courses beneath the floor. Emerson said, "the path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them?" (459). Emerson, of course, had in mind a poet. But my cabin already has speakers. They say *build. Build and plan and stroke your calloused fingertips over your fresh work. We will take it all back.*

All over these north Idaho mountains, it's the same story. My neighbors' barns tilt and gray as the soft wood between lines of grain erodes. Weeds grow around abandoned cars that bake in the sun and smell of sour upholstery and oxidizing metal. Rain falls and nourishes the mold feeding on fresh cut hay.

If there is romance in this decay, think, it does not end where our bodies begin. The muscle walls of a

twelve-year-old boy's heart turn to silt. A cervix gives way and a baby is born tiny and bruised-swirled and dead. Our dairy-farming neighbor rises early and blasts shot through the tumor in his cortex. Eventually, infection finds all our wounds.

That human creation should fall and human will fail against the material conditions of years, or mere days, is appropriate, even necessary. Proximity to decay is, ultimately, the reason I live in the mountains. Here there is less pretence that our constructions and destructions can outlast us. Sure, we build cabins and barns, and we commit unpardonable aggression on the land, clear-cutting slopes of ancient forest and driving the last grizzlies into smaller patches of turf. But the mountains will win against human geography because we are playing the mountains' game. Like everyone else I work away, but sometimes I secretly root for the mountains.

Nevertheless, it is painful, the sounds of those tiny jaws chewing my wood. Worse yet is knowing that my body, the manifestation and agent of my will closest to me, has no unique self-sustaining power. I am twenty-nine. I lift a hammer and drive a nail. Everything works pretty well. For now. The grizzlies may be on the run, but they, and those ants in my walls have smaller, more adaptable cousins who will be coming for me sooner

or later. In his essay "The Nature of Art," Hayden Carruth recognizes that "the wilderness begins . . . at the edge of my consciousness, and extends to the edge of the universe, and it is filled with menace--that is with change, violent change, extremely violent change" (354).

Art, and most especially poetry (because it is the least material of the arts) is the only response to this violence I know. Poetry speaks for things, as Emerson knew it did, not because it shouts down the voices of decay that destroy things, but because it makes a chorus of those voices. Carruth says, "we write our poems out of terror. It isn't that we don't understand reality, we understand it only too well . . . fear is what invents us" (357). And before Carruth, Wallace Stevens in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," says, "It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressures of reality" (36).

Is poetry a kind of psychic life insurance policy then? a way to deny our ends? a "supreme fiction" as Stevens saw it, useful and necessary to our emotional survival in a world that sends its tiny and large jaws at us and in a contemporary culture that has largely abandoned its faith in permanence? Perhaps, but the question stated this way is merely psychological. Poetry

has, at its finest moments, a self-sustaining power beyond all other human endeavors, except perhaps love. Like the loving spirit that grows from loss in Keats' Vale of Soul making, poetry is fueled by decay. It participates in decay as well as creation, drawing energy from the cycle itself. Like the figure that leans over the cider press and haunts the landscape in Keats' "To Autumn," poetry is at home in a world that changes regardless of human will. At home in a way we never fully are.

If I could not write, and could be granted talent and skill in any art besides poetry, I would choose to be a landscape painter. I would paint the cedar-swamp wetlands of northern Michigan at dusk and the douglas fir, rock, and October-turned aspen sloping down to the banks of the Bull River over the Montana line a few miles east of this cabin. In landscape is certain resistance to imagination. Paul Klee felt landscape, the seen world of God's creation, ought to be no more of an oppressor to his own independent creation than another painter working in the same studio. But there is an allegiance, even in Klee's work, to the wilderness beyond the edge of the painter's own consciousness. In his creation there is representation. There is participation. As the theologian Paul Tillich recognized, there is no faith

without separation (both because faith would be inconceivable and unnecessary). Representative painting, like the poetic image, occurs on the borderlands of faith, between imaginative will and allegiance to the world, between what our senses "half create, / And what perceive" as Wordsworth so famously claims in "Tintern Abbey" (106-107).

In our poetry (as in our culture at large) we've got the separation end of the equation down. Our wills are muscular, like our hammer swinging arms. And, like a body-builder tensing his triceps in the mirror, our wills have become their own ends. This is true of Stevens, and true of our current poet Jorie Graham. In the ornate "Red Umbrella Aubade," from Graham's new collection *The Errancy*, the poet hears a pre-dawn cardinal-call, at first "bejangled clarity gripping firm." But the image is barely audible before Graham's regulatory intellect (the trappings of which she calls "the paraphernalia of my listening") starts to quarrel with perception. "I know I should listen hard, / but to penetrate what?" she asks, and the cardinal-calls continue to pass through her "like a bullet's path yet where nothing is crossed, / no garmenture ripped, no body entered . . ." (59, 60). In a display of cunning that is trademark Graham, her impulse toward separation and will (and the concurrent failure of

perception to penetrate) is the very subject of the poem, which is therefore moving and authentic. But where does such introspection get us? Are we to be left alone with our human will and what supreme fictions it creates?

For all his willfulness, Whitman was capable of a faith Graham knows she is not. To be large was not an isolating state, but meant to contain complexities for Whitman. In our own time Campbell McGrath at least strives for a kind of Whitmanian faith through participation, the elusive "moment when everything comes together, the revelation on the mountaintop, when the streams and rivers rush past, growing out of our bodies like hair" as he describes it in the poem "Dust" in his collection *Capitalism* (55). Wilderness is, for McGrath as it was for Whitman, the complete external--perpetually-decaying cultural landscapes as well as vistas of unmolested nature. The great western struggle between human will and opposing nature is, as he says in "Capitalist Poem #25," "a sort of dialectic" (35) across the territory of the country as well as in the poem. He writes, "The rivers that flowed out of our bodies solidify into crowds of people pushing past, commuters heading home It isn't Montana at all. It's New York City" (57). McGrath is compelled to travel, to complete and often contradictory experience, to the

violent changes of time and distance that press back his imagination, to the "Minutes, hours, miles, a childlike hunger for faith . . ." (57). It is a hunger that is most often unsatisfied, but that keeps his attention courageously, faithfully turned out at least as much as in.

The contest between separation and participation is the struggle between the fear of loving this decaying world and the fear of losing it. But the contest plays itself out not only in poetic attention, but in poetic strategy and structure as well. Writing about Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," arguably our most important poetic inheritance from the last two-hundred years, Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, notes the poem's "fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed" (643). The poem is, of course, a narrative in the strict sense of the word in that it represents the most powerful external force, time, with what Coleridge called "a faithful adherence to the truth of nature" (645). In describing the landscape the poem draws its structure from the passing of five years. But the poem draws its structure at least as much from the narrative of thought, a narrative that traces the "modifying powers of the imagination" (645).

The structure of Wordsworth's poem, like the structure of any well-balanced narrative poem, is much like the structure of a good walk. I move through time and space, and I see some white face heifers, a stand of birch, a pile of mossy rocks. When I start the walk I'm smugly thinking of the good exercise I'm getting. But the cows draw me out of myself, or I stumble on a branch, or hear the rattle of a woodpecker. I participate in my surroundings and my thoughts are subsequently pulled. New thoughts are triggered, which change my attention, which changes my experience, which triggers new thoughts. Simple, but there it is. Poetic form is an expression of time. The durations of lines, of sentences as opposed to lines, of stanzas and whole poems, the duration between repeated sounds in end and internal rhyme, the length of words, all of it represents the attempt to account for our motion through cognitive and sensory experience, the distances and proximity of time. Our form is our walking path, well-worn from other mornings, from years of other walkers, or a game trail stumbled across after aimless bushwhacking, or the turned-down tracks in tall alfalfa we leave crossing the open meadow.

Poems (like Graham's, McGrath's, and Wordsworth's) that openly and deliberately follow the path of thought concurrent with the course of sensation are the most

ambitious poems because they are the most inclusive of experience. They torque separation against participation and, at their best moments, are both supremely willful and filled with grace. In my own work, the forms of such poems are sometimes fragmented (as in "Centripetal") but are more often deliberately unifying. Line lengths are democratic in their relative uniformity. The poem unfolds with a minimum of interruptions in stanza patterns or without stanzas at all in many cases--as questions, emotions, dissociations and associations, and moments of clarity pass like car lots and corn fields and public beaches and rivers from one train window. The intrinsic and extrinsic allegiances of such poems are many. Consequently, such poems are large, though they are also eternally inadequate, or at least incomplete. For the terms of the partnership between self and world are never settled. We cannot will the Mastodon out of extinction, but she inhabits us. We can only almost know her.

I also occasionally write what I think of as straight (for lack of a better term) narrative poems, poems that I hope are in some ways like Raymond Carver's "Lemonade" or Robert Hass' "A Story About the Body." In the dialectic between event and articulation, the imagination acts subversively in such poems, under the

manifest allegiance to story. Poetic tension resides in the perpetual question of perspective. The poet shows through--in description, in tone, in selection and omission--but at least appears to refrain from riding rough-shod over event in the telling. The strategy is similar to that of telling a joke. It's counter-productive to comment on how funny it is and what it means. The trick is to have the listener think the joke is inherently funny, a case of some irony they themselves recognize as true of the world.

The downside of straight narrative is that it is often limited in the way a joke is. Hass' poem strains to get its final image of a bowlful of dead bees covered by rose petals at the every end, and even twists around its syntax so that the words "dead bees" concludes the sentence and poem. I worry that my own "Skinhead Execution of One of their Own" suffers from a similar fixation on the last words, as if they were the inevitable outcome of the event, the punch line.

I write compressed, brief lyrics once in a while. These are perhaps the most difficult to talk about, because they draw so much of their power from the implications, if not downright mystery. I do know that they struggle against elusiveness and strive to be like the best poems of James Wright and Jack Gilbert in which

the moment--the beautiful, transient, everything of the moment--seems to expand into, rise from, and speak for a continuous life. Here is Gilbert's "Highlights and Interstices":

We think of lifetimes as mostly the exceptional
and sorrows. Marriages we remember as the
children,
vacations, emergencies. The uncommon parts.
But the best is often when nothing is
happening.
The way a mother picks up the child almost
without
Noticing and carries her across Waller Street
while talking with the other woman. (65)

And Gilbert again, from the poem "Betrothed":

You hear yourself walking in the snow.
You hear the absence of the birds.
A stillness so complete, you hear
the whispering inside of you
When I hit the log
frozen in the woodpile to break it free,
it makes a sound of perfect inhumanity,
which goes pure all through the valley,
like a crow calling unexpectedly
at the darker end of twilight that awakens
me in the middle of a life. (29)

The power of Gilbert's short poems is that, for all their austerity, they do not seem dependent upon restraint. Quite the contrary. In these poems Gilbert notices the awakening moment, is attentive to it as a point of entry, perhaps the only point of entry, in the flow of time.

Thus far I have not said much about the role of "others" in poetry. The desire to rise above separation expresses itself not only in the poet's disposition toward the world of cabins, 7-11s, glacier lilies, and

Chevrolets, but in the poet's participation in human community. I love Richard Hugo's poetry, and his letter poems especially, for the way kinship with a stretch of road or bar or sawmill is fastened to specific relationships with people (in much the same way Wordsworth's encounter with the banks of the Wye is intertwined with his address to Dorothy in *Tintern Abbey*). The good direct address poem presupposes a level of intimacy that makes an end-run around the potentially isolating effects of confession in its approach to autobiography. Autobiography, far from being one more separating agent that must self-consciously or condescendingly be recounted, is (at least in part) mutual with the addressee.

The price of such *prima facie* intimacy in direct addresses is a certain exclusivity I've worried over in my own attempts at address poems. While I'm chumming around or grieving or yearning or reminiscing with someone on the page, where do I, we leave the reader? When does the potential separation of confession, I vs. You, simply become replaced by a new, Us vs. the Rest of You, separation? Perhaps one test of the success of such a poem is whether its spirit of inclusion is large enough that the reader feels not voyeuristic, but invited into (however subtly) and invested in the relationship. My

own poems of this type attempt to reach beyond the private relationship by committing themselves to other strategies besides the address, most often tracing the interplay between memory, emotion, and current experience. The address poems ask, in their own ways, is loss the loneliest of human conditions or is it a basis for love?

In her introductory remarks to *The Best American Poetry 1996*, which she guest edited, Adrienne Rich writes,

in this America where I'm writing now, suffering is diagnosed relentlessly as personal, individual, maybe familial, and at most to be 'shared' with a group specific to the suffering We lack a vocabulary for thinking about pain as communal and public . . . (23).

I confess that, despite my ambitions that they reach further, my own direct address poems would seem, as such, to fall into the category of suffering "to be 'shared' with a group specific to the suffering." In my apology for such poems (of which "Certain Knowledge" is perhaps the most relevant example), I would cite Keats who writes in his May 3, 1818 letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, "Until we are sick we understand not" (775).

I hope, however, that whatever sins of the ego I commit on other pages, I mediate with the poems "Renewal," "Call Before Digging," and "The Empire Builder," which strive to participate in human community

in a more general way, by speaking for that community. I use "we" as a voice in these poems (and here and there in many others) not simply as a linguistic device in a bid at enlarging them, though I hope it does. I use it because I hope it will provide the imaginative point of departure for accessing common emotion, emotion as common as the streets beneath our windows in a small midwestern city, as common as the water and sewer lines in the darkness ten feet below, as a hay truck out the windows of a westbound Amtrak. In her poem of this sort, "The Moose," Elizabeth Bishop's voice is the voice of the spokesperson, not so much for those on the bus, but for all of us who travel across and witness our landscapes together and overhear and observe one another, and who feel somehow at once alone and at home in each other's presence. My own poem "Renewal" actually shifts from the first person singular, as the speaker struggles with an artistic crisis of lethargy and separation, to the first person plural as the snow begins to form in his mind the basis for his connection to the world beneath his window, and all the people in the houses and cars and other high gable rooms around him subject to the same weather.

I have been speaking about poetry as if its creation were entirely deliberate. But, if what we seek in poetry is re-connection with one another, restoration of beauty,

and reparation of decay, what we are asking from poetry is grace. And grace requires us to be passive, supremely passive, and embrace the subjects of our hearts' affections when and where they find us. Our active, separating intellects will return soon enough. They always do.

As Carruth recognizes in "What Does Organic Mean?" "the way of the spiritual imagination . . . is a transaction among equals, or at least equivalents--poet and stone" (314). What we seek is nothing short of what philosopher Martin Buber called an "I-Thou" relationship with the entire world, in which we greet the mice in our cupboards, the grizzlies in our woods, and the mountains defining our horizons not as instruments of our art, inanimates for which we speak, but as co-participants in our art's creation. Emerson was wrong in "The Poet" when he said the path of things is silent. Sit in any cabin in any woods for an evening and you will know he was wrong, especially if it is late summer and the ants are chewing your walls, and the wind is pulling by in the aspen or oak above, and conversations of coyotes or geese find you from somewhere in the dark. The path of things is a chorus. Even so, the things of this world will suffer a speaker to go with them.

PART I
CALL BEFORE DIGGING

Renewal

This empty Monarch stove and rotting birch aren't much
excuse
for my stack of stinking beer bottles. But we do have
the snow,

the cars on snowpacked pavement, exhaust in subsequent
taillight,
and I want to crack open my fingers, hear nothing
of argument or image, as pure song spills out and fills
the room.
Maybe February enters this town with the clarity

of a child's hands, and the lighthouse stands to its
knees
in black waves, searching the last cloudbellies before
the horizon,

scanning as if some lover might be sailing Superior home
tonight,
after all these years. This much alone'd be a sight.

Still, a fine desolation refuses to mix our casualties
with the first blood of the Ironwood girl as she runs
from a barn into a field, twisted junk cars abandoned
like her father's lovers, in the wreckage of the corn.

And if we belong to the Midwest only as abstract
expressionists, it's all the same. We live here

with lake effect piling in our yards. The snow moves
through us
without lights and blasts between suspension wires at
night

above the Mackinac Bridge, sticking in hundred-foot-tall
strands.
And the band covers Pure Prairie League every Thursday,
nine to close.

Out at the empty county airport where all the flights are
cancelled
blue points strobe in time up the landing strip just in
case.

Up in this gable room, the greatest possible bravery
is a hairbrush of yellow spider-web at dawn.

We always toy with hopefulness, splatters
of yellow dot my dark wood floor like dandelions

above all the empty setting, the people living there
under a ceiling of expected snow. Without me,

they sleep. But a few old ones eye the night like
crushed food
they still can chew. And shove it in their mouths.

Lineage

In the woods, the afternoon of my conception, rain falls
 in a firepit
 that hasn't ringed a fire in weeks. Water brings back
 the ash smell.
 My mother and father park there, Site Eleven, and sit a
 minute in a white Chevy,
 a sixty-four or five, with three round tail lights on
 each side.
 What modest information we're given against the indignity
 of our private fictions.

They do have the keys to the cabin--a log cabin, painted
 Forest Service brown.
 It has a steep, metal roof to shed the heavy, Yosemite
 snow loads.
 They have come up from L.A., where she was orphaned only
 a few years before.
 Although I'd like to think I win in a fair fight, that I
 wait cheerfully at trail's predictable end,
 this weekend she has brought no contraceptives in
 defiance (She'll someday confess)

of the nuns who mostly raised her. Before he died, her
 own father made glass eyes
 at Warner Brothers. Mac cut the eyes for ants that
 toppled trailer houses
 and swam across the Ohio river, heading, in their
 radioactive appetite and enormity, East.
 I suppose greed plays its charismatic role in all great
 stories, assigning duties
 to cluttered truths not our own. Greed is sometimes
 careful, and diplomatic. Is supposition?

She visited her dad on location in Texas for *Giant* and
 met James Dean.
 James Dean told her he was going to crash through her
 father's saloon window that very afternoon.
 She could stay and watch. Mac and the other set men from
 Warner Brothers
 built fiberglass boat hulls in the garage. My mom
 remembers them,
 sleeves rolled, work swollen fists gripping beers by the
 neck.

I'm not about to say there was a conspiracy. I come away
 knowing only that,
 when his boat was finished, Mac took the family over to
 Catalina.

They all enjoyed the ride over, but on the return, Mac
and my mother's brother
dumped a bloody bucket of mackerel into the ocean and
shot at the sharks with rifles.
That was long before the day I was conceived. My mother
told these stories separately.

Harm

The girl's grandfather called his finger "the point,"
 and she would get it at night sometimes
 wiggling deep inside her until his breath
 evened off and he was done. The finger
 slid out like a bowel movement.

Also, once the grandfather called her in, rose
 from the kitchen table, robe falling open,
 and told her to suck on him. The girl remembered
 him smashing her hand on the table
 with a soup can last time she pulled away.

He'd only had to do that once.
 About the soup can she was certain,
 Chicken Noodle in cursive across
 the red and white Campbell's label, the O
 repeating like the Os that drifted

through Charlie Brown's window when Snoopy
 was in his wolf phase, howling
 at the moon. And the concentric circles
 on the back of her hand, like rings
 on a fresh cut stump in the front yard.

The story of the girl with the soup can.
 Safe at a spotlight in our hometown,
 my wife tells me. It is a case-study
 in her class, a case up for discussion.
 A story she, my wife, knows well.

She has perspective. She knows many cases, histories
 that have broken her against
 assumption. But looking into the cabin photo
 on the dash, I'm having a hell of a time just
 getting used to the new road we're told was cut

into our valley two-thousand miles away. Blond dirt
 turned up, shimmering, corkscrew culvert pipes.
 We've been assured we won't see it from our cabin.
 The road will become assumption,
 an idea like the cabin is still mostly idea,

logs up--windows cut, thistle
 and sawdust baking in the Idaho sun,
 aspen quaking in the wind, a red gas can.
 The road (*perhaps we'll just have to*
get used to the idea she says) leads up

to the hay field that's been cut to tens and put
 on the market, homes built to suit.
 The mountain is still the mountain
 speaking only to itself. She was there.
 Every round up we rolled each tamarack

back out of place. I shaved the notches,
 blue smoke blowing around my thighs,
 sawdust across my shirt, and we rolled
 it back, snug on the log below.
 Is this perspective, then, that warm place

we give ourselves to rebuild ourselves?
 At the next stoplight in our hometown
 I am imagining new families in those mountains,
 a family in a realtor's office,
 thumbing through photos of new listings.

The family wants their home built in a field,
 a meadow really, with a view
 of the Cabinet Mountains at dawn. My wife
 finishes the story. The kitchen incident
 was not originally called back

by Mmm Mmm Good ads or by the Warhol
 Soup Cans at the Centre Georges Pompidou.
 But in Paris the girl was twenty and brave,
 the soup cans external like exposed
 duct work, the stairways and girders

that wrap the Centre. In the gift shop
 she bought a postcard and sent it
 to the grandfather, now in New Mexico--
 the Warhol soups, on the back Ow Ow Ow Ow
 all the way down to his address.

The Quick Stop

NEW ERA in black, the yellow lift
unfolds itself, TREE SERVICE up
past thick limbs, into tangle
of twigs and velvet buds and powerline,

673-1441 up, finally, tattoo on biceps
flexing from the truck, the bucket
like a fist around the man
with the little chainsaw. None of this

(slow motion, sun in his sunglasses,
careful expression) makes any better
the slicing of limbs from
the walnut in my yard. Each limb

or piece of limb pounds where it lands,
chewing black dirt up
through thin, late-season snow,
THUD shuddering the house, the desk,

subdivisions of tree tumbling, end
over end in the air. He's fast.
Sawdust sprays across his chest
and falls around the bucket,

blade into another branch where it
branches off until he's out of sight,
above my window, sawdust falling
through sun just the same,

whine and shush of saw, THUD of more wood
on the ground. Hell. I'd been ten lines
into the bike shop on Magnetic
when this guy pulled up.

I didn't call him. I'm just the renter,
besides, the tree looked fine to me,
worldly even, plump as an aorta at the trunk,
the center of its own bright afternoon.

Still, it was also spring at the bike shop,
I've got that, April sun
baking the asphalt, last snow at the curb,
row of bicycles (a long, thin branch

drops past the window), my grey Vanagon
leaning on a jack (THUD and CRACK
blond splinters open on the ground),

Yellow Cat asleep on the window sill,

QUICK STOP in neon green curving
along the top of a bike wheel
on the glass above her.
If there had been a revolution,

this (THUD) would have been the place for it--
bumper stickers cover the propped open door,
BIKES NOT BOMBS, US GOV
SOFT ON FASCISM (THUD), ABANDON YOUR CAR,

NO BLOOD FOR OIL, PEACE, Red Hot
Chili Peppers on the CD,
stacks of Labatt's empties in (THUD) back
beneath a poster of the Taos Nude Classic,

START on the banner above a row
of bottoms and back tires.
Kurt leans over the bike stand,
breaking down the crank on a purple Nishiki,

black ponytail bisecting QUICK and STOP,
and BIKE and SHOP on the back of his shirt.
(THUD) Five years and he'll be
in Guatemalan highlands, his shovel

scraping bone, mortars thumping
a few valleys over, banana trees.
Hay problemas del mundo he'll write
after months of silence *God forgive us all*.

Soon we'll talk disease, consult our charts.
But what has to happen, what's inevitable
today, April 12, 1990, is no catastrophe,
just goods and services: a sub,

a #12, Tuna and Provolone, partial payment
for brake shoes on my van,
a wrench hung in its outline
in a row of wrenches. Quiet.

The tree truck is gone, the walnut slimmer,
ready for months of wind, the weight
of frozen rain. Ready,
above a pile of its own limbs.

Call Before Digging

We build up and across. Even our well-planted plans, our deepest downtown basements, Citgo tanks and 1910 water mains burrow ten feet, twelve at most, below ground. Last year's frost fingered its way as far down.

Iced dirt gripped our sewers and shoved our loose footings into the second week of June. Our history's heaviest griefs refuse to sink to warmer ground. Once buried they will begin to rise and rust open and spoil

like stacks of canned peaches and bomb-shelter stew. Mines fill with water. A crater opens under a bread truck. I could give you other examples, a whole shallow Atlantis or Pompeii, and we could mole

our way across town. But the real fault line toward which we're headed, the crux is, of course, in rows of fifty year vaults. Mallards cross the pond and swim into cat tails. In any woods tree roots radiate

and anchor out against windfall. Did it occur to Rumely in 1986 to wish to walk this lawn in our twilight? We live now. Do these flyover geese see house lights coming on in the valley?

The Arborist

I walk the cemetery with an arborist.
She knows trees, even the imported elms
and shrubs, but does not name them.

We come to the new grounds, treeless,
where a reflecting pond is lined
with white tile, blue webbed under water.

Sectioned by chrome and glass gates,
someone else's ashes dissolve in each grid.
The Arborist watches, and I walk

the steel walk over each little tub,
stopping only once in the middle to look up,
chlorine rising in the air between us.

It wasn't a date. On our second time
together, we stood in the throngs
alongside a stainless Amtrack,

waiting to reboard. The loudspeaker paged
a miss Darby someone. The Arborist said she
knew her. A boy on the train

had told the Arborist about his secret
crush on Darby. The Arborist said the boy
and Darby left with friends and returned

to their seat around two A.M., and she was
pleased because she saw them sitting there,
the boy nursing Darby in the dark for hours.

At that moment I wished to be the boy,
my fingers newly lost in the dark, straight hair
at the back of Darby's head, whoever she was.

Service

When the man walked in and said he had a tick, I thought he meant a twitch. He'd left his car running with the door open, like you'd do if your were planning to hold the place up, so I wasn't taking any chances.

"A tick?"

"Behind my ear." He turned the side of his head to me and pulled his long, black hair out of the way. "I was walking at the river and I could feel it."

"Well, it sure is a tick."

"Do you have tweezers? I heard you have to pull them out. That their pinchers can break off and travel though your blood."

"No. I don't have anything like that." I said. It was clearly paining him to leave it there and I wanted to be more helpful. "I got coffee."

"How about a salt shaker? Or a match?"

"Sorry."

He looked out the window at his car idling under the dusk and the bright *Denny's Standard* sign like he remembered something, all the while holding his hair back from the tick. He was very disciplined about not touching it, better about that than I would have been. A tick with its teeth in your scalp.

I thought he might give up on me, move on and try to get the tick out at some other gas station when he asked if I had pliers in the garage, "needle nose pliers. They might be delicate enough to get a handle on it."

"Yeah. Maybe." I went back into the shop bay for the pliers, but I could see the counter the whole time. I wasn't going to take my eyes off him. I've been had before.

"Could you get it?" He leaned his head way over the counter and spoke down into the glass. "I'm left handed."

I didn't want to. I thought he should do something like that alone at the mirror in the bathroom. But it was behind his right ear and he would probably just make a mess of it.

"If the tick gets loose and crawls up in my hair I'm back to square one."

"O.K." I said and grabbed the lamp off Denny's desk on my way back to the counter. "Let me plug this lamp in so I can see what I'm doing, so I can see the pinchers."

His scalp was warm and damp and as I bent into the work I could hear him breathing hard, frightened maybe. "I'll get it. Hang tight," I said like a surgeon might say, leaning over a cataract or a Caesarian baby.

Mastodon, 80% Complete
-for Herb Scott

I'll be damned. It's sunny in Kalamazoo
and sunny twenty miles from Kalamazoo. Sun shines
on a line of dusty pickups at the Allegan McDonald's
drive-through. I've got one last poem to write
in this booth over steam from a cinnamon roll
and coffee. I'm out here on the end of one orbit.
Clouds have broken up. Clouds are regathering, real
and just out of sight. You've taught me to be hopeful
here.

Cows stand in the full, slow creeks. My own pickup's
got to go in one more time, one more class. The odometer
will roll over a hundred-forty thousand tonight.
I'll pop off the cruise and coast that big Dodge V-8
up the Stadium Drive exit. Everywhere in America
exit signs are the same green in our headlights.
From your office you can see thunderheads west,
black rain off Lake Michigan. The fronts
always find us. Oklahoma, Iowa, Missouri, Kalamazoo.
California, Salt Lake City, Marquette, Fairbanks.
Off the riverboat in Lake Charles you wore your
denim jacket, the tallest man in the room. I was twelve,
maybe, but I remember the reading, those lonely groceries
of yours. I imagined produce trucks eastbound out of

Fresno
the day I was born. But I'm half gone already. Already,
the *Fairbanks Daily Miner* comes in the mail. I get

Sunday
the following Friday. Why at the close of four years
am I telling you this, Herb? This, the last class,
is a good time for confession, for obvious phrasing.
It's high time I gave you something lasting--
an iron plaque they could place at the base of this

Tower,
this homestead, or a foot strand of barbed-wire
for your desk so all the students after me will know
up front that you're a dangerous man. They'll
have to learn for themselves that you are a landscape,
an all-night blackjacker who buys them breakfast
with their own money. They won't be here long before
they hear the rumors. And they will want to call it
home.

They will drive out of town, into hawk fields,
and fall into the grass weeping. They will be incapable
of sufficient gratitude. So why do I want to tell you
about the Alaskan Mastodon in the Fairbanks want ads?
Appraised at \$ 428,000. Will sell for \$ 125,000.
You won't know how she got there and neither do I.

But we could say it was sunny, a hot spring day,
the glacier calving, heat in her fat under all that fur
and no wind, no sense of where true North might be.

On Belay

Seven men climb the summit ridge at dawn,
a minor constellation of black stars
rising, inertia, memory, restless
blue light that opens with my blue shirt on
your shoulders five years ago, Catfish Keith
on the stereo, bottle sliding down
the neck of his '39 National.
Off the summit before the sun-melt ice
and no more free from the end of my life,
I tie a figure-eight, tilting infinity of rope.
My breath frosts my beard. I plant my ice ax.
These are not my hands. Spindrift flares from the peak
in strands the shape of wind. In your bedroom,
back then, Catfish had a pepper in his shoe,
harmonica blowin' hard into cupped hands,
and in five more years, hermits that we are
with smoke trailing from our chimneys, we'll
be no older than these wavering lines.
We'll have seen what we've seen. And we'll have seen
what we made. Now, descending the sharp end,
I step over a crevasse. Cascade hills
speak to each other the steep language
of lightning, of is and seems, mountains of
barren grief above gravity's green pull.
You hung back, sick with altitude and nerves.
In the vestibule of my aphasia,
I imagine you kneel and stoke the stove
and steam our freeze-dried pasta. You are
down at Camp One. You are unharmed. You are
a silent empire of affection.
In your dreams, helicopters are flying
our bodies off the mountain, scissoring
between spires and into open sky.
I have no idea what you're doing.
"I don't like climbing," you said last night
and staggered out of the tent to throw up.
Mountains. White knuckles. Snowblasted granite.
Am I cheating if I show you pictures
from the summit? I come away slowly
from that version of awe, to you again
and the life of things. Three days you drive us
home in your Subaru, pouring gas on
all four, hellbent east. I pass out in back,
almost asleep in piles of down parkas
and sleeping bags and coils of rope. This
is where mistakes get made. You grip the wheel;
I sleep. We're riskers and we'll take the odds.

Spontaneous Combustion

Why praise a bright field between mountain shadow
and thunderhead, bales strewn like napping infantrymen,

three pickups in low gear and a rusted Farmall
weaving through mowed rows against predicted rain?

Deception, this false second spring hitched
to the end of summer, requires faith and the patronage

of hopeful acts. We'll see our re-strung fences
and whiskey lost to a larger misfortune that burns barns

and builds grief on the scorched foundations.
Of course it's going to rain. This is North Idaho.

This hay's been three weeks drying sharp
and brittle as bundled shards of glass,

drying bleached and renewed like the cedar shakes fired
in the Sandpoint Kiln and wrapped with steel bands

and loaded on a flatcar at the far end of the valley.
Hard weather's no matter to the Burlington Northern--

the slick rails, silver in diesel strobe light
and lightning, run their twin, steel risks

winding down Whitefish Pass. Point and counter point
of boxcar-gap-boxcar-gap screech, heavy and dismissive,

past the ungated, gravel crossings. Names of
freightyards,
Rapid City, Des Moines, L-Lot, Cheyenne, Steel Wing,

and the long, oily numbers. I suppose I'm free to junk
these years, sell the wash of erosion and recovery

to others who'd re-tin their roofs while the rafters rot,
whole-hearted replacements who'd see me forgotten

and the cattle fed this blue, unbending, jealous winter.
Rain falls at last, headlit and pale in the hayfield,

soaking our gloves and razor twine. I commit from habit,
measure endurance against bales I stack with men whose
names

I don't know, scratch farmers fanning out across pasture
and returning to pitch wet hay up to me, more food for
mold.

PART II
THE LAST GREAT FLOOD

The Last Great Flood

Two-thousand-feet of blue ice crumbled
 and slid into twenty-thousand-years ago,
 probably in the spring, in the warmth
 of an unnamed, sunny afternoon, or, perhaps,
 after a sustained, heavy rain, with ten times
 the current of all the rivers in the world.
 Spontaneous overflow with no people,
 with no hazy empathy. Snapping larch
 and drowning herons, sure, but no awe.
 No imagination. No Red Cross. No vanishing point.
 Just westbound water spilling over this valley,
 down over Westmond and Cocolalla Creeks, widening
 across Rathdrum Prairie, hellbent for the Pacific.
 Today is New Year's Day, 1997. The Ice Age
 is officially over. The last Mastodon wanders into
 her exile of broken stones and plaster-cast
 reconstruction.

So how can I call myself witness? I stand in the
 doorway.

Rain falls in pores on the skin of old snow.
 Rain holds its one note on the tin roof. What happens
 happens away from me. Sunday, I stood
 on the Bull River Road and looked up the east side
 of the narrow valley, into the tilting, sun-lit republic
 of granite and spruce and snowfield. It was still
 and warm where I stood beside the open car door,
 but up there wind was lifting long, slow flares of
 spindrift

from the summits. On Wednesday, I took the headphones
 the midwife handed me and heard my child's heart,
 not beats but swishes, quick, electronically amplified
 swishes, the first of billions I suppose.

In a few hours, I will be the evening's last check
 at the View Cafe on 95. There, pouring ketchup
 over my eggs and hash browns, I will remember
 hearing that swish from the far edge and beginning
 of the universe in the pulse of a Pulsar falling
 at last on radio telescopes, those giant, open palms,
 strung across the desert. I will write down
 "Electronically Amplified" and "Very Large Array"
 and slip the napkin in my breast pocket.
 I will remember and reconstruct Wednesday afternoon,
 how Amy turned her face toward me. The paper
 on the examination table must have crinkled
 but I couldn't hear it. I closed my eyes
 and could hear nothing past the headphones
 and that heart's echo that will outlast my own.

Unmarked Stop

(in Front of Westmond General Store, Westmond, Idaho)

I have a life. I stand abandoned,
the bus two miles downroad and upshifting,
by now, past acres of white cattle,
past an aluminum house trailer that
sends up woodsmoke like the last bubbles
from a sunken steamer. Forget the trailer,
with its hopeful, broken cedar-shake porch,
everyone else does. Forget the rim
of soft mountains. I admit the naked sound
of cracking gravel. I admit it is bright
here, and cold. The pine shadows reach across
the oily road...but what do I know of reaching?
I have never looked here from above,
from the few square fields of long cleared woods
on the mountain behind this little store. No,
I only look out, or up, afraid--despite
myself--to die. But fear or none,
it waits, clear as the constellation
of words it takes to say a *wall of birch*,
clear as the wall of birch itself.
A muddy Kenworth rolls by, overstacked
with mill logs. I can't hear any chain saw
in them, they're just dead. Even the few
small branches with tufts of fur left to whip
in the highway wind are dead.
And they'll be no less dead when I stop looking.
Once, pages of sunlight fell across bawling sheep
in the hollows of the Vandersloot barn,
and the sheer head rattled away,
nicking bloody an occasional teat or vulva
beneath a stack of bodiless fleeces
caked in gold lanolin, blood and shit.
End of the day, the door swung back,
they funneled out, heads straining above
a river of stubble and fuzz, these alluvial
sheep scattering in the last glow. Kicking,
and acting up a little when they knew
they were free. Unrepentant and pure,
they were already forgetting. I start over,
lift my bag to my back and walk, remembering
low clouds moving in these woods, the rain
off the mountain again and down my face, here
or somewhere else. Here, I could almost endure.

The Purpose of Fiction in Idaho

This is generous weather. Twenty miles back,
woodshavings curl on the cabin floor, unseasonal sun
clean through the chisel's amber handle.
Last night's coyotes are high on Butler by now.
Often we wait all day for alpine glow,
the sun's late slant down tamarack
in narrow canyon towns. We have wandered

as far as Clark Fork. Amy and I
drive through dusk up Fish Hatchery Road
where the stockpond lights glow in the wet air
like every hatchery I've seen, like
the hatchery in the corn fields
outside Kalamazoo where David stood, waist deep
in dying steelhead, out of his mind with panic,
their bodies like a river flowing around him.

There a woman walked in the grass before a rain
and a man, I imagine, said nothing to break her silence
or the hum of the tank heaters. I miss them.
We park at a wide place and hear Lightning Creek
flowing over stone toward Clark Fork, the river, the
town.

We have our prepositions and suppositions,
our altitude and chainsaw gas.
But, thinking about it just now, I'd say
we are lonely and unprepared.

The mountains cloud themselves and even dawn
does not burn off the silence.
We rarely speak the names of those we've left.
We fill our mouths with the Monarchs,
the Selkirks, and the Cabinet George.
It snows early up there, seven thousand feet
into the pink end of the day.
I crave this valley for the people
who loved us in that flat, midwestern city.

So what have we saved ourselves from?
What's the difference between mountains
and the new Blazers lined like snouts
for sale on Stadium Drive? Tonight,
there will be laughter in a rowhouse kitchen
in Kalamazoo, steam from open pots,
wine and onion skin on a cutting board.

Eclipse

I love to drive women's cars.
I honestly don't mean one
specific car, although the woman
is often a friend of my wife's
from work. She's often
in the human services field,
a social worker for the county,
or a speech therapist
at the General Hospital, in her twenties,
with her Masters Degree,
confident, getting used to
that adult feel of her first job,
on the phone in her
airy upstairs apartment, say,
ordering a burgundy sofa
from the *Spiegel Catalogue*.

But her car. It's wide
and low to the ground,
with a wishbone suspension,
somebody's *Unplugged* CD
clean and bright through new speakers.
It's fast and sure over wet pavement,
forest green and stealthy.
But not a Stealth. No,
something more like an Eclipse
or a Grand Am,
a *Consumer Reports* "smart buy,"
and she keeps it immaculate,
my wife's friend does.

The car's a reward for herself.
She can feel the pull
of that zippy turbo through
the soft leather steering wheel
when she turns out
from the parking garage
into afternoon traffic. And,
driving that clean,
neat, new car of her's, I am
genuinely happy for my wife's friend.

I am afraid now
of what you're thinking, that
you think you know
just what kind of guy I am,

and you don't much care for
what you think is my dubious
and transparent car/woman analogy.

But damn it, it's an act of trust.
This is a relatively expensive car
we're talking about,
her first big purchase,

and she's put the keys in *my* hand.
She is single and smarter
than the undergrad guy in the polo shirt
she's finally given up on. We're all
driving up the coast north of town--
my wife, the woman from work,
all of us heading up to hear a band.

They're both a little drunk already
so it's me at the wheel.

Or my wife and her friend
send me down to Safeway for
birthday candles and a video.
That's the sort of night I mean
when I tell you about
the new Firestones slashing wet pavement,
the stickshift dropping into fifth,
the glow of instrument light,
clean guitar music filling her car.

If you're still with me,
I think you know exactly how her car smells,
how you could ride in that smell
to every Safeway in the state
and back.

Formation

Oooo, Oo, Oooo, Do it! The polished granite floor
 smells of wax. Four rows of seven of us step a sock foot
 back, right Do the Hustle! forward, left, CLAP.

Doot do do doot do do do doot do and we're off,
 the auditorium roof high above us like overcast,
 the boiler room sending its tick through the radiator

where our wet gloves dry, late-winter's P.E. choreography
 spinning out with the scratchy 45 in pale arms,
 denim jumpers, Star Wars shirts and Toughskins.

I hold on as long as I can, the collar ruffle
 and blond curls at the back of Tammy Someone's neck,
 the smooth, hard floor under my socks, but it's already

moving away. That day has put on its hooded, yellow
 coat,
 is stomping the slush from its boots
 up the rubber-floored steps of the home-bound bus.

I can't even say if Star Wars was out yet that year.
 And what does it matter if twenty-years ago is gone?
 Our living multiplies our courage--and courage, need--

the known promise of those bodies. Or were those dancing
 bodies ever ours? Was happiness before happiness?
 Lunchtime. Tables are rolled in and unfolded in rows

that I, we relinquish and do not see.
 We press our shoulder blades against mattresses,
 unfold our naked feet and master our broad lives,

fictions crunching toast and the numbers.
 We are not now the hustlers we were then.
 We slide open the doors of our new minivans.

Renovation
-for my mother

I could retire on vegetables tomorrow,
meditate, live near the beach, walk
every afternoon, my blood pressure
dropping with my HDL. I'd look
across, at the San Fernandos on fire,
a speck of sun in my wine glass
of water, waves repeating, slosh
of blood keeping my stress managed,
my Nike walkers walking back
to my deck of potted plants, morning-
glory vines climbing the lattice,
passing the empty squares. But
I'm twenty-six and don't have the money
or disease to garden. You do.
Try as I might the story is yours.
I pull into the driveway of the barn
turned apartments that turns back
to an anchored barn, shipwrecked above
hills of washed up houses when I can't sleep
in the moonlit loft. The old rafters,
buried under rolls of pink insulation
and sheetrock, must still smell
of sour leather tack and hay.
And your attack? It's no blessing.
The annual scan reports no new damage,
all the chamber's clean and smooth, open
like this fourplex with its vaulted
ceilings and angular windows that let in
long trapezoids of daylight. You love
what's left, gently working that small
muscle over every park trail, digging
in potted dirt to sooth it. Ten hours
of good highway south of you, into the sun
when autumn comes, I run the road
every morning and sleep fine at night,
thinking infrequently of my own heart.
When the cold comes there, you bring in
the annuals, all fifty-some pots--petunias,
zinnias, carpet of snow alyssums, mixed pots
of pansies and moss rose in the living room,
and sit up with them all night, a crowd of you
keeping the frost watch till dawn.
If you could be sure they're poison free,
you'd eat them all to keep the flowers warm.

The Great Divide

The hospital has the highest windows.

From there it's apparent the town's packed in
behind ice blown down
from Thunder Bay, the lake's open,
indifferent water miles out, under
bands of cloud shadow,
snow unraveling the horizon's thread.

Or, the sky is clear and sunny, the horizon fixed.
Either way, your rotten toe will
have dropped in a pan. Snowplow blades
will drop and scrape the asphalt driveways,
amber lights flashing on old plow trucks
at five in the morning.

The vertical blinds will be closed

against the coming sunrise.
There's a set of circumstances,
usual, disembodied as the toe itself.
The problem is distance. You, the toe.
Me, you. Marquette, Idaho.
My ski tips rise to the powder surface,

like the snouts of hunting water snakes.
I cross the upper pasture at night,
green-black fir and bare larch
outlined in snow, snow on Butler Mountain, snow
lit from within. Helpless, I make myself sick
with the saving power of snow.

I want to look out your window.

Skinhead Execution of One of Their Own

Trent's already beaten to hell when they stop the Powerwagon on a two track road, the three boys in army coats drag him through a hundred yards into the cedar woods and drop him, face up, on the snow. One pulls a 38 from his pants, points it, elbow slightly bent--officer style, and pops one into Trent's forehead. That done, the three hike back to the warmth of the idling truck and drive off, the gravel under the Idaho snowpack crackling under their beefy tires. Trent is amazed. He's awake, he's going to make it. It starts to snow big, wet flakes that stick to the brown remains of ferns around him and above him. He rolls over, no problem there, that's one maneuver, there's a highway somewhere, and surgeons. He's seen Hollingsworth who shot his left jaw and cheek off with a 12 gauge while stepping through a barbed wire fence after a coyote. The old man looks rough but shows up at the Hoo Doo Valley Grange meetings, he gets around. Hey, maybe a helicopter to Spokane, down out of these fucking mountains. No doubt about it, this is trouble. Without warning he vomits. *Damn*, he says out loud *I wish that hadn't happened*. He sits in the snow, the woods aren't cold, the snow has stopped and the wind is moving through the tops of the trees, swaying them right down to the roots in the ground. Steam rises from the blood and bile in his lap. He sees that he's made quite a trail through the trees behind him, a remarkable trail in the snow. Down the hill, in front of him a wide field. A great landing spot for that helicopter that's what all that buried hay is good for. He imagines nurses. He has to pass a certain number of trees before he can reach the field, seventeen. There, seventeen trees. A goal of some sort, that's the thing. Beyond the field a mountain rises in the miles of trees that climb its back, like a million children, millions of dark children, climbing, with snow in their hair.

Unemployment

If I stepped from the mill I could tell you
where my hands had been all night by the leather
worked off the soft, white insides of my gloves
and into the creases of my fingers
like a balm, or a velvety acid
eating its gentle way toward my heart. I'd
pull four ton of freshcut cedar two-bys
off the green chain in a florescent shower
of snow, cedar smell rising into the gold
sparks of snow and forklift exhaust. But then,
the second night I'd be sore from the first.
I would notice less. I would be colder.
It's an old story, snowtires and whiskey, union
dues and diapers, money for who we love,
a story I'd rather tell, thanks anyway.
Forgive me, who I love, eight miles up-road
from the mill I step from a straight-razor-
sunlight into that low bar with the river
view, quick and silver, like ice down my throat.

Chore

Max bawls, wet chin out, head and neck leaning into it,
 steam
 from his lungs rising with hay dust above a fresh tossed
 flake.
 The valley turns to vapor. Low clouds move
 under high clouds. Clouds settle on the mountains
 beneath snowline. Even the tamarack have turned,
 thousands the color of ripe wheat.
 Rolling the bail twine and walking back toward the house
 I can still hear tires over washboard
 a mile down the county road, their downshift for the
 hairpin,
 Steve and Miah, father and adopted son, en route
 to Sandpoint to pay off another of Miah's bum checks.
 I'll have to tell them Max is taking the hay. Of them
 all,
 he was the one that worried us most. His mama short-horn
 was the first we found, dead like a toppled piano
 in the woods, sweet jackpine needles seeping turpentine
 into her bloated belly, blood from her nose and ass. By
 midnight
 our flashlights swept through downpour and saplings
 onto the silky roan of another stiff calf. Miah's
 flashlight arched
 WHY through dark rain and bounced in the grass
 DOES THIS FUCKING HAPPEN fingers of light fanning out
 where it stopped in the dark TO ME? FUCK ME! FUCKING
 SHIT!
 Could as easily been me, or even Steve that cut and
 skidded
 that jackpine into the pasture. But it was Miah. Always
 is.
 Steve and I draw our checks and wave our wives off to
 work.
 Miah has the tractor to drive the fence line, the wire
 stretcher,
 his pink tape deck and shoebox of gangsta rap tapes.
 Some nights he walks home from the Cork and Keg,
 three drunk miles of stars and wind scattering aspen
 leaves.
 He does not smile in the photograph. He works full-time
 at cool. He leaves his tools in the dirt.
 At eighteen he can sweep you in eight-ball.
 He wears white t-shirts and a narrow black belt and says
 he's Republican because the rest of us are reds.
 Just last month, he folded his arms and looked at the
 floor
 of the visiting room in the Bonner County Jail.

His green VW is on blocks behind the woodshed. He
wanders
the ranch with his new bow and a full quiver of arrows.
He is learning to read. His hair is red, but he dyes it
blond,
like Steve's. He sits up late in the dark house
watching Stallone and in the morning fries pork and eggs
while we eat Malt-O-Meal. He is the only one in my
family
to loose teeth over stolen property. He is growing
strong.
He leaps from the bushes and laughs when I scream.
He smokes leaning on the grey yard fence, one logging
boot
on the bottom rail. He cries out for his father's cattle
and sits on the ground with his sobbing face in his
hands.
I write this at the long dinner table, burning the old
barn,
tossing one mossy shake after another into the woodstove.
The house is quiet when he is gone and I am alone.

Sonnet in Green

I'd burn every poem to paint this sky,
pink clouds fingered over green, that chrome green
of not yet dusk, silhouette of century-
old Ponderosa, the needle clustered end
of each high limb, neon-red *open*, *Arby's*,
Motel 6, *Texaco* lit forty feet
above I-90. Then you'd see this sky.
Then I'd have it my way. Now, you retreat
into another green, your counter-top,
the shirt at the back of your closet. You
substitute mountains. You listen, but stop
to picture I-90 where it runs through
your town, and I pull into an almost
empty lot, decide *chrome* isn't right, but close.

Self Portrait With Cabin

I'm not much good at fires.
In fact, I'm a complete failure.
I've scoured the chimney down
to smooth steel, bagged the ashes
then built a beautiful coalbase
of Sunday inserts, dry bark
and cedar. Still, the stovepipe
thermometer sags miserably
limp below a hundred, smoke
rolling out the open door
as I toss in more wads and blow
on a few pathetic embers. To last
I'll need to invent a new tense,
progressive as optimism and snow,
meanings and motive like split
cordwood stacked in tight rows.
I'll need clarity, what's left after
the ax severs wood from wood.
Wrapped in my down bag I'm beaten
by this cabin, once cold, now cold
and filled with cold smoke.

Three Hours out of Fairbanks

To say "this isn't it"
 at the side of Parks Highway
where wet grass in permafrost falls
 away with only a few scrub spruce
to mark the edge
 of ten thousand miles,

to walk fifty feet toward
 that rolled back horizon
the open door bells calling, calling,
 the sky a landscape in grey,
to sit in unknown grass
 north of Denali,

north of the Yukon dall sheep
 tracking razor rock,
north of the black fox and roar
 of White River, far north, marshes
beyond larch, the flatland
 burnover at Whitehorse, and side roads,

to push a chipped windshield
 into the Al-Can's convergence,
its singularity, years pressed
 and spun out into highway,
the pickup sagging with
 the weight of apple-boxed interiors,

to slip into the big story, glacier melt
 where words just forming
cave in and crumble to soil
 in an un-named creek
that tightens its bend, the whole of sensation
 now soluble, pulled downstream

then falling as talcum silt,
 to kill yourself with distance,
to let distance kill you,
 to praise your killer
and pray to see Winter
 cruise over the polar cap,

to have come here
 is to have given yourself over
to your predator heart.
 Visible, an animal
standing on open ground,
 you are far from home.

Midnight Run

When the ice fell through, there was plenty of time, a solid chance to regain control. The dogs sank, dazed and silent. He knew it was neither act nor accident. The ice had no opinion, no targets. In fog they'd veered off course, away from the orange cones--the barks from other teams dissolving with the lights of town and solid crust, a record thaw flooding the race with slush and risk--and had fallen into open water where the lake rebuilds itself. What remains, once we survive our names, is guesswork and paranoia that ruins us for this world we've made. No one will use the washing machine tools in his truck. Everything else is dog related, even his five acres, littered with sleds and doghouses made from dryer shells. So it's come down to this. He's fallen through before, on the last leg of the Yukon Quest, slush up over the skids, soaking the team and his feet in river water cold enough to burn flesh... we have no way of knowing how cold. In the morning, the Coast Guard pilot will spot three huskies wandering the edgeless floes and pass the word to the rest of us who will perfect our impatient, vague despair. But now the private gesture. Tonight, all that remains is to unharness the lead and wheeldogs from the rest, a doomed gang chained to each other's drowning. Their grey eyes panic for surface light then fix to a man's headlamp still burning through the water all the way down.

Prime Realty

In the landscape of the last good novel you've read someone is erecting tall, steel framed buildings. Not here. Here, we build fiction from stars off the end of the dock, a belt of dark shore between constellation and reflection. The fire falls in on itself like a drunk into his own bed. Air ruffles my tent, wind over nylon woven tight and singular as sleep, landscape without names. In the morning workers return to lay foundation block for the latest lakefront house, their generator grunts to life a half-mile downshore from my camp, and a compressed-air gun spits the first two nails into a studframe. Carpenters race stonemasons. Every dawn they arrive in their trucks, four-by-fours throwing red mud from the unfinished road. Someone (the foreman maybe) uncaps a thermos, someone else unrolls blueprints across the hood. My tent hidden back in the cedars, they'll never see me, but we all steal glances across the surface mist. Trespassers, witnesses of others' prosperity, we'll all be run off soon.

We've seen too much already of this wilderness, the big timber, the nesting pair of eagles that fish this lake from three ridges east. Even the big pike snoozing on the bottom belongs to the latter day naturalists, their reward for years lost to expressways and wise investment. In the morning realignment of light on water, through wind-twisted limbs of shoreline white pine, comes the drone of an outbound bass boat. A resident himself and Bear Lake Association member, whoever he is goes light on the throttle, mindful of sleeping neighbors.

The Wisdom of Suely

Since we started the inside of the Aspen Way house, they've been calling me Insulation Man. Suely for short. I wear a red bandanna over my mouth, staple gun in one Handy Andy, utility knife in the other. I am fifteen. When we run to town in the pickup, I feel like a cowboy on the bench seat between them, their leathery elbows out the windows, the three of us singing *Cecilia* as we turn down Cedar Street, ladders on our ladder rack, sun off the Selkirks, off the dash. The guy working the lumber lot at Trader's knows Steve and Gary. He hands down another sheet of sheetrock and nods when Gary says *this here's Suely*. So what's true in Idaho? I'm no cowboy. Steve teaches third grade and pays Gary with his old Scout so Gary can find other work come fall. Gary doesn't drive the Scout home from the Cork and Keg bar. He walks. And he walks back mornings, turns the cold engine over in the empty, gravel lot. But we're getting into dangerous territory there. That's the story that ends with me a third-string forward for the Buccaneers and Gary dead on the side of the road. That's the story where Steve drives me down to catch the Amtrak and we sit in a Colt in the dark and he says something I don't now recall exactly, but that hints that Gary maybe wound up turning tricks for somebody in the Cork and Keg parking lot. In that story Steve thinks Gary may have wandered onto the Duford road, may have, at the last second, stepped into the headlights. But this is Vacation. Summer Vacation. Gary calls Steve Cotton Top. Steve calls Gary Gary. They both call me Suely. In this story we sing *Cecilia* crossing the bridge out of town. I want this story to end there, or maybe the next morning, over coffee and the truck box, the Selkirks ablaze with sunrise, a freshly loaded staple gun in my apron.

Working Without Brothers

There are bottles that stay green
even if they are buried in dirt,
even if my father drank the beer from them
twenty-seven years ago.

He has taught me,
walking in the park,
the differences between
many trees.
But he has not shot a pig in the head in my lifetime.

His flatbed Chevy,
that could be heard from the house
ten minutes before it came into the yard,
was never meant to be a metaphor for work.

He leaned on the fender,
the front tires sunken in mud to the rims,
and lit a cigarette,
and did not begin to plan.
He had three brothers.

Without brothers
I am unable to carry logs.

There is a water jug too,
that must be mentioned,
and the crosses at the tips of trees.

I have not come to recognize the grey wood.
And I am the last person to step into
this forest behind him.

The Empire Builder

From an opening chain saws describe, clearcut
to a line of pink tape on tamaracks
and silver-grey trunks of waxy aspen,
where a steady snowfall covers sawdust
and brush piles and a forgotten gas can,
and cold burrows like a marmot, deeper
while the ground is still soft; where mountains
give over their own dark shapes, easy as meaning
to a whitewash of flakes that seem to form
in mid-air and not move; past a closed, orange
gate at the top of a road, past the season's
last overloaded logging truck, winding
its low gears down the snow packed highway,
past the first porch lights of dawn in Libby,
the train slips through town like a wind.
There must still be silver underground,
a vein of soft metal missed and unmined
among the abandoned grid of tunnels,
if there was ever silver at all. But few
grind their dignity down on granite
in the Rockies anymore. History's moved
to the end of a block of sandblasted brick
facades and glazed wood benches, to the square,
squat First Interstate Bank with bronze windows,
time and temp in digital. Now, everyone
waits for the mail, ski racked Saabs at the curb.
Then the mills, slag piles and sawdust. The river
curves wide and quick over gravel bed behind
a pole barn Safeway. Then the margin, trailers
and barns, stacks of grey cordwood, engine blocks.
Seen through cold, dry glass, you'd never guess
what cabin or sagging cabin shell is worth telling,
where to stop regard and let snowdrift pasture
convey surface, the shape of assurance
a dark cluster of herefords following
a pickup where a man bends to cut bale twine
and hay spills over the tailgate.
We are late but making time. Most of us
sleep, easy, and anonymous across
ungated crossings, our destination
tags tucked in the chrome strip above our seats,
Troy, Sandpoint, Coeur d'Alene, Spokane,
passwords in black marker, all that we say.
What else could we say? What caricatures
could we offer each other against this
loneliness, these moments of landscape peeled
from circumstances already changing
behind us? We are landscapes, divine

and navigable as this narrow canyon.
The tracks run along the river then over,
whitewater and clatter of bridge timbers
beneath us, then behind the elementary,
past chimney smoke from the furnace, a wall
of windows, warm light of one room through
painted Christmas trees, the next class wishing us
Noel, each letter in its own square of glass.
The air in here smells of wet steel and tar.
Toward the front of the car, a young woman
in a T-shirt and sweatpants stands and gets
a walkman from a bag in the luggage rack.
She sits, pulls her long hair back into
a pony tail, pulls the pony tail
through an elastic, untangles the chord,
puts on the headphones and presses play.
She turns under a gray blanket; detail
and position shift. How can we know
this place just before day, the car warm
as the inside of our skulls? No community,
we wake meaningless and distant to the world
beyond the Continental Divide, passing
insubstantial as shadows or brief thoughts
over the Corpus Callosum. The day tells us
who we are. Inert moves us west
with the Kootenai, west toward all the absent
sockeyes, stranded out in the Pacific,
toward the solan with the grief and solace
of disregard rising in thousand foot
spires, west with the tectonic crush, fresh
cut wounds of erosion and jagged rip
of fault line, blue rock layers once
the ocean floor, west with that old story
of a few who ate their dead and lived to pass
into the west. The train bends with the river.
We can see ahead, the twin rails and jade
water nosing through mountains, the slate sky
and flurries settled into the canyon,
ice on the riverbank, power lines sagging
above a spillway and little power plant,
stacks of tires and a Pepsi machine
outside one last Amoco station
where the road turns away, up and over
the rise. We shoot out the far end of town.
The speed of an effortless downgrade sways us
back into sudden wilderness, the diesel's strobe
flashing white on snow loaded cedar limbs,
flashing on the weedstalks not yet buried.

Retirement

Batman is dark and was once from Manhattan.
He calls his seven sections of graze land
The Batman Ranch. Out past the fenceline,
Batman's Caddy blows smoke, slashes of rain
down the mirror when he turns onto 2,
headed for the River Bed, the Horse Thieves'
one-night-only return, and it occurs to
him that this night is exactly what he's
had in mind ever since the day he sold
off his shares--dusk, calves bawling, pint of Old
Crow in the glove box, NO FEAR in pink neon
on his tinted back window, needle down
around ninety. "Heaven," he says out loud,
"I'm an outlaw in heaven. A desert hound."

But his daughter won't see him. She'll cash
his checks but won't return his calls. He calls
her dorm sometimes, late at night from the porch,
smell of dung and sage, the beep . . . his voice stalls,
"when was the last time I saw your blue eyes?
Won't you fly out Sweetheart? Give a little hope?"
And, as he starts the climb up Hal's Pass,
into clouds, the last spring snow on the slopes,
Batman wonders, for the first time in his life,
if he has earned his daughter's contempt, if,
maybe, everyone ought to despise him,
not so much for leaving, but for those times
when he hated all of them, the city
above his cave, full of small fires and pity.

PART III
CENTRIPETAL

Certain Knowledge
-for John MacDevitt

The worried present I cannot see opens and rises with
steam
from the lidless cup of coffee in the coffee cup holder
of a dusty, Burlington green, crew cab Ford
at the curb beside the Sandpoint Cinema 4 across the
street.
To be honest, I surmise the coffee, the fictional steam.
The pickup, however, I see plain as plastic
IGA pennants lifting in the breeze then sagging
seasonless green, yellow, orange, blue, white strung
and repeating between light poles, also across the
street.
Is it recollection that breaks my false resistance on the
gray
concrete block wall of the Cinema 4, PARKING in red,
an arrow and HAROLD'S SUPPER FOODS LAUNDROMAT
HAIR HUT BAKERY in blue? Just what's going on?
Words is one answer. The shape of words in momentary sun
between cloud-shadow. Words are what we're left with
after
the melting sun. What's going on? Grief.
A green GEO on black ice, basketball turning in the air
over headrests, a new planet with its own dimples and
smell
arching away from four boys in sweats. Unutterable
grief.
What's going on also goes on at Edna and Buck's
six miles up Pack River Road. The payphone hangs
in its cold, stainless cradle. The last of the caribou
have been spotted crossing the clearing beyond
the round thermometer nailed to one of a cluster of
cedars
outside the long, high window behind the bar.
I would like to buy you a beer there someday.
We'd give up the afternoon, the drizzle. The caribou do.
I give up Shaun. Those boys are gone.
And, at sixteen hundred some miles from you,
even attention quivers, aims its false crescendo past
the Panhandle Milling Co. grain tower and into the
Selkirks,
the outlines of pines on the crest, becoming another
minor current
in the opening and closing of clouds beyond. Give up.
Today is another day the world will not be the same.
No matter what it offers, the world will never be as
good.
These will now be the streets and cedars and frozen sand

beaches of a world where your son is dead.
Damn it Mac, you've slipped beyond the horizon,
into regions beyond empathy or voice. Give up memory.
Give
up voice. Give. Give. Give. Grieve beyond
distraction.
You are my friend. So, where is my spite for the killing
weather?
for Big Lake mists that ice the Rock Cut Road?
How do I address a semi-grille that barrels toward town
like the knuckles of a fist or the bright face of the
girl
who kissed him, closer, almost there, always almost
there?

Advocate

1

With no right and nothing to claim, your front-yard
snowdrift
amber in my parking lights, I sit in my solid car.

I'm no match for motherly grief. I'd rather stay right
here.
Here's not so bad, empty street, dark windows, warm car.

The facts are the facts, hanging there. In November,
your son
abandons himself in his basement apartment.

By February we've had a hundred-sixty-five inches of
snow.

We've broken records. I remember warm clay dishes,
steam from your sink, years ago, sunlight on tile
and hardwood and ferns in the house.

I don't remember where you'd gone, only
that you'd gone with Travis and Emily, and told me

to play the stereo and have my girlfriend over for
dinner.

I keep at it, Hewitt Street, your clay dishes drying,
summer air

through open windows, my girlfriend's knock at the door,
and, later, beside your sofa, green light from your
stereo

fanning across her jeans. I would like to tell him these
things. But what does Travis have to do with this? This
is all me,

idle courage, idle of my engine in the dark. I'm alive
in your driveway, and you're in that house, a big woman,

big breasts and big glasses, freckles and spice of
sandalwood.

I can't speak to Travis on your behalf.

You can love your child. You can love your son, and you
can stop a friend walking in the park and tell your
friend

that your son's turning into quite a man *Trav's becoming*
quite a man you can say *come by for dinner come by*
breeze

off the lake, sun through trees, sunglasses, something
about a good influence *come by stop on by* this sweet old
world,

and still you wind up here, breakfast at The Sweetwater
Cafe,
soft laughter, swirl of muffin in left-over syrup *Travis*
loved Opus the penguin sweet old world, this sweet world.
World sweetening by the day, where you can walk cold
streets

calling to him, calling into light traffic at Third and
Ohio,
dryer steam rising above the King Koin Laundromat.

Five transparent bottles on my window sill against grey
sky--
one slender, lavender bottle, one slender, red bottle,
one short, square, green bottle (these three with corks),
and a matching pair of blue bottles (without corks).

Hanging outside, a bird feeder, nail rust down grey
woodgrain,
and windchimes. Four green, iron lawn chairs.

I would like to speak to Travis.
I would tell him what I have told you.

Centripetal
 -for Greg

Preacher, I can't claim exile, but here I am,
 walking some street beneath the mapmaker's high
 interstate
 in the city I've come to know. Like the Hebrews we have
 a little allegory to get us through the night, eh?
 We have a place (or language),
 common flint and file of the real thing.

*

Along the highway to St. Ignace I saw an armadillo,
 some lost pet, walking the gravel shoulder like a man
 with an appointment. The August heat peeling down
 the back of the lost armadillo might have made him think
 he'd soon find Texas. I didn't pull off, but aimed
 my Chevrolet safely into the other lane and passed.
 The sun still fell through pale spruce, and winter
 was miles and miles behind us both. The armadillo knew
 nothing, and certainly nothing of winter. He took the
 heat
 like the long, low hood of my Chevrolet. Later that year
 you left Nathaniel Creek down the same road, left
 the grass to grow sickly yellow in the shade
 of your stacked cordwood, left a few slim branches
 to snap in the wind, Preacher.

*

(I would say *left me* if I hadn't myself skipped town by
 then.)

*

Nine days before Christmas day, you stand
 in the rainy morning in Fountain Square, Cincinnati.
 On the next day, Saturday, the Klan will erect
 a large white cross. There will be much distress
 and effort to control the behavior of others.
 You moved south for the congregation, vault
 and glass in the campus chapel, a ministry
 office over a commons where students read
 the Tillich you assigned. Even so, I'd guess
 you'll die in that cabin. The woodstove will cool.
 The pipes will go unbled, choke with ice

like the arteries that feed your heart and bust
in December, flood water quietly freezing
your chair and feet to the maple floor.

*

(panic: the stagger of a hamshackled foal. Do I define
you?)

*

Are we both failures, then? credulous,
but getting smarter in the cities we've chosen?
I think the armadillo was indifferent.
Or, I think I did the armadillo
an injustice. The armadillo was just lost.
That much we have, that's biology.

*

Win my case

if you still can. Or at least assuage my guilt.

But guilty of what? The North is still the North.

I was never one for the confessional--give me
an off night in that blue Lutheran bar on Third Street.

Give me our county drawn along the black lake
quiet as a love song that lies to you for ten years,
spinning down and getting older. Acres and acres
of owls shriek up and down the banks of the creek,
replacing their drowsy bodies with vowels
while the creek replaces its cold, slick water with
water.

Your cabin wears its empty add-on rooms.

Instinct splits me down the grain. I won't lie to you;
there is no faith without participation
so I should have nothing to mourn.

*

Last trip up I thought I should let it rip,
pack the stove with birch and stoke the flames

'till they shoot from the pipe, (panic:
 an emissary close to home again with no news)
 skip across the cabin roof and down this valley,
 like conversation or thoughts in sheet lightning,
 small explosions along the tips of trees:
 my brand-new, third-class apocalypse
 loosed in a whistle of simmering pitch,
 your cabin burning at one end of an orbit,
 my cabin burning at the other end of an orbit,
 fire the curve of gravity, funnel we fall into.

*

Late alpine glow up a canyon of larch.

Trucks howling by out on the county road.

(The innate and essential qualities:)

Your children have come out in pajamas
 to watch the neighbor tag calves in the dust
 behind his barn. The yellow tag snaps on

the ear. The calf squirms and bawls every time.

The mamas stagger together (frame in
 abundance) and shriek in a separate pen.

*

My fingers have grown so cold I shove mortar
 down the cracks so I cannot see the light of soft skin
 that tries to rebuild me like blue ice rising
 from the bottom of a glacier. Right now,
 low animals are reclaiming the clearcut
 at the end of the road. Confused by the smells
 of chain saw gas and bar oil, they wander
 half out of their minds with memory.
*(But faith would cease to be faith
 without separation--the opposite element.)*

*

Downtown, in a dirty marble Public Library.

US Geological Survey map on the table. Grids--

(alone in the woods, I've seen the section
 corner mark--blue paint on trees) there now

the surface and roll of that land ruled in small squares

(seen from Hogsback Mountain at two a.m., no roads)
(town below, a palmful of amber lights).

What consoles you, Preacher, when the old fictions fail?

The lighthouse beam spun along the empty curve of
Superior.

Wind at the summit riffled the nylon dome of my tent.

On the shortwave, Radio Cuba was coming in clear.

Dawn on the snow. Snow on granite.
All that we've seen we've lost.

Respite

Waffle-head hammer in hand,
I finish the job my cat began,
smashing the little skull
like a walnut in the grass. Trust me,
it was a merciful act, the seam opening,
along the right lines,
blood and brains like snot
across my shirt and glasses.

And here, knowing best
you come through the door, thrust
a towel in my empty hand,
your eye never leaving that other
hand and the hammer, a newly grown
appendage hanging naked and steel bright.

Making Bail

In a war of words he's on harmonica, hands cupped
around some secret, four hours out of County Jail

in his stocking cap with hearts knitted around the brim,
flashlight necklace on and burning against his tan chest,
swaying

as he sways. Twenty-five and already accused by an
evolution
whose genes move in blind waters, and whose children live
as trembling machines, he leaves the bar with Jenny,
as we all do, Jenny with the stoned smile and sleepy
eyes.

Outside, our trees sprout through a thousand lawns.
The dirt has sent up souls who have no idea. The skin of
her hand

soft and lucid on his face, eyes shut, she leans into
him,
nourishment for his head full of Haldol and Miller Light.

The dogs are free on the streets of town so he drives
slow,
his Schwinn in the sagging trunk of Jenny's long,
hoodless Impala,

out to the rest stop above Lake Superior. Miles across
the bay, a truck's lights cross a slate of trees.

They could drive to Mexico, open it up and head south,
hot miles of road into low, wide headlights, everything
blurred

alive and obvious at eighty. "Just like that." He slaps
his knee, "that's how it's done." "There you go," she
coos.

She wants to bring him down, but she's too swacked
herself.

Back in town, in our houses, our wise and enormous

eighty-year-old frames, we hear second-hand voices.
The aurora, shadows of godlike indecision, crosses the
water

from Canada. Wolves scout, snouts to the snow, and call

through foothills of tamarack. In the quiet of the
engine ticking,

he says "you're most certainly a presence." He almost
tells her
about a Mayan village, children's shirts strung above his
hammock,

candlelight up through rafters, enormous shadows of
torsos
on palm thatch ceiling. He almost tells her how he first
felt

himself begin to erode when he heard the small daughter,
Inocenta,
humming just outside in a voice that moved down the
night's throat

and uncut hills of vine and birds, over the savanna
where they burn back the jungle, through acres of orange
grove

and out off the coast, blasting in that small space
between slick, lavender waves and the wind. But Jenny is
asleep.

Helena

The Ford flag in the wind over your parents' shoulders,
above that, sky of skyscrapers, like granite spires,
the Detroit Mountains. It'll snow soon on Willis.
Maybe it's snowed by now, snow on the windowsills
of the windowless Wayne County Schools Building,
snow melting down the glass of your father's third-floor
study,
snow falling at three A.M. on the uncut territory of
snow.
But in the picture at World Headquarters it's a sunny,
cold fall.
You turn your back to us but fix your creaturely eyes
back
over your shoulder, arms around your mother's neck,
the camera shudder a twig snap. When I see you
next, I'll tell you about baby sitting the porcupine.
Sitting slowly up on the ranch kitchen floor, it clutches
my finger
and takes the apple slice. We all want to love some
small thing--
Elmo, the curl of our own soft foot, late season
chickadees,
a red ball cap. And now, you. You're growing strong,
hard muscles lengthening by the day. Worlds rise around
you.
You'll run the streets barefoot with a black hound.
Next sheep we kill, I'll wring and scrape and tan the
skin
and nail it to the north side of the barn to dry.
I'll send it to you for New Year's Day.
Wear it so everyone there will know that you
are the wild daughter, come to claim your wilderness
city.

Three Locations
-for Peter

"People in Montana kick their dogs" she says
in the Safeway parking lot, her sober eyes turned toward
the Missoula hills, the mountains, the scattering
of dusk houselights on the far end of the valley.
The little colored stones glued to her dash don't make it
your car. They bring her luck, and that's all you
intended.

It's April, Pete, so why, pulling from the store
onto the empty four-lane, do you think of Detroit? The
melting
and remelting days of early winter there? Sitting next
to you,

she's defiant as fiction, magnificent and small,
like the overland echoes of whales four hundred miles
off,

like self-indulgence, like the story I know.
You'll both be back in Detroit before the mountain winter
you've waited for, the real snows that consummate.

Full of groceries and pulling up to the cabin
past the last birch, the Honda scrapes
its belly in gravel like a spawning trout. I've heard
sometimes they never find smokejumpers
who miss their targets in these mountains. The firewall
moves

over them, or they rot downwind on a cliff, or never rot
on glacial-lake bottoms, their stiffening harnesses
holding them

faithfully long after the Smokejumper's School runway
drifts over,

deserted for a season. I dream you're awake,
outside at the edge of her fear. Does she wake behind
you in that

blue dawn, the loft skylight glowing under an inch of
fresh powder?

I'm only asking questions, probably you can't answer.
Besides, you're lost to the rip of her sighs.

This might have been the wrong move.

Neither of us could ever leave a woman, not really.

In Seattle two years later at the end of pier thirty-
eight,

both of you watch float planes loose their last ripples
and fly stiffly north. You can't remember how ducks look
flying up from water. She says she can't either.

She loves Seattle--Detroit on the Ocean instead of a
river

with mountains and steelhead a half-hour away--
she'd deny you nothing, her strong, narrow shoulders

naked every night, in your shirt every morning, you begin
late reckoning toward the life of years.

Domestic

Up the snowpacked road, miles past blacktop
and the last electricity, we leave the car
and ski fresh tracks down a logging trail
abandoned under years of neglect and winter.
The wolves have made their comeback to this
country. They congregate in incognito dens.
In the quiet, when you've disappeared
over a ridge and beyond this stand
of snowloaded tamarack, the sun leans
through low limbs to have the last word,
and I stop and stand still. You are the only
thing moving in this valley. The forest
keeps us, two creatures scouting on instinct
the edgeless territory of home.

The View Cafe

Stream of rain off metal awning,
rain like sparks on the *Spokesman Review* box,
rivulets down the dirt lot.

A blue pickup crosses left.
A silver Honda crosses right.

Their mist trails swirl and cross.

A drop, clear a convex moment, falls
and the shrub branch recoils then bends again.

Hum of wet semi tires, then the semi,
amber running lights on.

The head waitress' husband is
six days into his suicide.

Everywhere, in here, prayers multiply like silverware
tossed in a plastic bin.

Through an opening in the jackpine across 95
there is a slate lake. *Henery's* in blue neon,
Draught in red neon, backwards on the glass
on the dusk above the water.

Past the lake, three ridges.
The first is evergreen peppered yellow
with tamarack,
the second a single,
more distant green, the third
a mere shade of the water of sky.

The smell of diesel, then tail lights flickering
through trees. I'm not especially handsome or
optimistic.

I'm just the man in the pickup behind the bus,
not even a regular on this road, so when the girl
in the last seat flips her notebook open, scrawls
a message, and holds it up to the back window,
I expect only *FUCK OFF*. Pulling closer I read *HI*.
Her slight, closed lips smile through the dirty
back window. Someone has cut her hair straight
at her shoulders. Freckles splash across her nose
and forehead. And I'm suddenly sorry I said
I'm not optimistic, sorry to have begun ungratefully.
After all, this is the road for starting over.
This is the world of cheap acres and possibility,
where high-school kids ride the North Bus
winding its low gears up the Yellow Dog Valley,
dust rising from the washboard, dust falling
like talcum on the spruce and birch in their wake,
dust falling sun-baked on my hood. So just what am I
doing here? What will I know when I know this?
The road is called the 510. No carved-oak cottage signs
up here, no neat, red, newspaper boxes hanging
from thin brass chains above buckets of snapdragons--
just mail boxes every few miles, leaning precariously
over the road. Every week or two I'm back,
dropping it into four-wheel where the pavement ends,
USGS map rolled on the dash, six-pack of RC
on the seat beside me. Once, dawn came down
like a lynx sniffing her way off the ridge,
sniffing cautiously, muscles tense, around the truck.
Lost on a logging spur, I'd parked in the middle
of a thousand-acre clearcut and fell asleep, blue-
green aurora burning above my windshield. This place,
hundreds of empty, scrub square miles, asks nothing.
The Pup Creek asks nothing and spills over granite,
if I abandon my life or not. The old, inevitable Pup.
Something about its storyline--lower elevations and
open, colder water, bronze water pushing into lake-blue.
The freckled kid presses her beautiful, forgiving
syllable to the glass. But why say *forgiving*?
She has concerns of her own, and you must suspect by now
that the aurora burns brighter somewhere else,
somewhere where the roads have woodsy names
and this poem might be read--say down around Shelter Bay
where bright new Jeeps tuck themselves into garages,
and the moose are more frequent, crossing lawns
below honey-brown log homes, heading down

to the Bog Preserve and virgin white pine.
But you must believe me when I tell you
that--charmed beyond the usual solitude--
I roll down the window and wave. *HI* her sign says.
HI as we ride, smiling, watching each other
through the glass and dusty air, into no other mountains
but these. *HI HI HI* shuddering and bouncing
with the yellow bus over washboard. There is a word
for what we have, and the word is optimism.

Be young. Have Fun.

Lord knows you've tried. You dance, for example,
 with the Clark Fork Methodists dancing *The Puse*
 and the *Nine Pin Square* and, when the sky clears
 and Ponderosa shed clouds up river
 gorge walls, a certain circle waltz on wet grass.
 Each hand of every woman and girl passes, small sun fish,
 dry earth, through yours. Then, like a white marble
 dropping on your roulette wheel number, the hand
 of the pretty girl falls in yours as the caller calls
waltz a while. She is maybe fifteen. The small of her
 back fits in your palm like a found lost life.
 Her braid sways from shoulder blade to shoulder blade.
 She smiles and forgives your half-step dawdle
 and you both look down at your feet and find the music.
 This is the version of dusk you hope will protect you.
 This, and the eagle out the Sandpoint Burger King window
 hours before, tilting with the music of cold June wind
 while below a Pepsi truck pulls its quick poem.
 Let's be honest. What I don't want to say is
 that the foot on my daughter flopped
 dead from her mother onto a hospital sheet months ago.
 If versions could save, they could have saved
 her single breath, the tiniest version of ambition, a
 reflex
 minutes after her birth and without sound.
 I remember moments of easy satisfaction, victory
 as if by design, victory with bluegrass music.
 Victory with corn on the cob. Victory with moonlight
 tilting over rimrock and across the canyon. I answer
 that
 frail happiness with an hour of Hannah, an imperfect fit
 in her mother's hands, the fine hair on her head
 swirled and flowing with infinitesimal, ocean-like
 currents, purple bruises, and arterioles deepening and
 cooling
 beneath. So let the bow drag the fiddle strings,
 let the Clark Fork girl dance away
 at the end of nine bars, and let victory
 come and go as easy. Driving the river road home,
 I saw dim lights through windows of an Amtrak,
 dim lights and no faces as the train was fast moving
 and was an eastbound train, while I was headed west.

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