

2000

## Between seasons

Victor A. Streeby  
*Iowa State University*

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**Between seasons**

by

**Victor Alan Streeby**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**Major: English (Creative Writing)**

**Major Professor: Neal Bowers**

**Iowa State University**

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Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Victor Alan Streeby

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor

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For the Major Program

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For the Graduate College

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**I. THE COURSE NATURE TAKES**

### On Paying Attention

My father asks me  
which way the wind  
is blowing from. The distance

runner must know the direction  
to face for the first ten miles  
so his return will have lift.

Hunter and hunted understand  
that the way the wind reveals  
or keeps hidden depends on position.

Sons standing at wrong angles  
behind their father's chainsaw  
catch flakes of wood in their eyes.

They roll them back,  
like swallowing a large pill;  
blink until the burning eases.

### What Is Misnamed Fate

The smokehouse is padlocked:  
The keys are kept in a locked drawer  
in an office desk in my father's locked room.

Inside, the smell of motor grease,  
oil, gasoline--The wooden floor is tarred  
from spills; from overflowing funnels.

Above, in the webbed rafters,  
abandoned hobbies spread their wings.  
Wasps have left their gray nests.

Lining the walls, in no order, are:  
Sledges and wedges, hammers,  
pails of nails, wrenches and screwdrivers,

buckets of bolts, metal parts of machines  
turning orange beneath green weeds--  
At home my father runs his own factory:

Half of his land is timber. In winter  
the cold iron stove needs feeding.  
Weekends he wakes directly to work.

Trees never enter the house whole--  
He recruits his wife and children.  
In the timber there are times

when living trees keep cut ones  
from falling all the way to the ground.  
Second cuttings first get cursed.

Added to failure is the threat of random  
disaster: Chainsaws gets caught.  
Trunks snap off at fatal angles.

All are told to stand back.  
The cutter, alone, will test his reflexes:  
He assesses. He relies on luck

as he makes up his mind to go  
headlong into that son of a bitch--

In His Likeness

My father creates his own images:  
He climbs the wooden ladder  
to the shed's rooftop,

pours unmeasured  
amounts of gasoline  
along the seams he feels

will best allow the two  
by fours to explode.  
He climbs back

down to the dirt floor  
to soak the beams;  
to weaken the foundations.

When fumes overwhelm the shed  
he lights a match to throw:  
The machine shed burns

black smoke straight up.  
My father runs away  
faster than he has in years--

**On Trustworthiness**

**With both hands wrapped  
around the steel wedge,  
skillfully placed along  
the vein which I feel**

**to be the log's Achilles' heel,  
I await the downward arc  
from my father's sledge.  
My eyes fix on one spot.**

**Worse is when I switch with him.**

## The Garden

With the tip  
of the index finger

a single seed is pressed  
a couple of inches

into the small mound  
of earth you have created

for it. Your palms converge.  
With your right hand,

the mound is smoothed; patted...  
You are instructed to,

ten inches or so  
down the row, repeat

the motions. Fatigue  
leads to boredom. Seeds

scatter in the clod-fight.  
Caught in the act, all

get verbally lashed;  
get reminded

of the task unfinished.  
The older sister leads

the brothers to crow  
slave songs.

In The Corn Crib

Across the dark  
that must be crossed  
by following the aim  
of the flashlight beam,

I follow close  
behind my father,  
shuffling my feet  
through the thick weeds.

He lifts the latch  
to the crib door;  
shines in the light:  
Rats scatter

from ears they're eating  
into hidden seams  
in the floor boards.  
Unused tools rust

in the back corners.  
Rat poison, like pink sand  
beneath the clear plastic  
casing, gets pitched

near their nests  
of chewed-through  
insulation. Once more  
the flashlight finds

the bald red cobs.  
My father lowers the latch.  
Back across the dark  
that must be crossed,

he aims the beam for home.

### The Nature of Harmony

Balanced on my elbows,  
my face centered over  
the well's open mouth,

I hear the wind  
carry the bitter voices  
to me, clouding the quiet

that has helped drown  
the noise of chaos  
familiar to my ears.

I could fall in, knowing always  
that the well would,  
as long as I wished,

allow me to follow  
the path I've worn  
from years of fleeing:

When inside the kitchen the pitch  
of the silence between words  
reaches an intensity

worse than screaming,  
I escape  
to my secret hiding:

I remove the cover  
my father warned me  
never to get near.

I listen into the well  
to silence so hard  
it echoes back up

from infinite bottom--

### Human Almanac

Winter comes; inches; until,  
the minutes turn  
into dreams--

Early, each morning,  
after his chores,  
a farmer passes  
the time, waiting, for

the time when  
his fields will be  
released. Thawing,  
inside wooden warmth,

he removes his boots.  
He sets them  
on an old newspaper  
he spreads out

below the heat  
register. As drops of snow  
patter, the pages  
begin graying. Yet,

this type of wet  
fails to stain  
the cold words  
which burn in him.

He loathes their apprehension  
of the value of soil.  
Each year leaves him  
with less. He reaches

the point where he feels  
he must force it  
from this frozen season.  
He prepares to bear his tasks:

He begins building a fire  
that will last until  
morning. He starts  
the basement stove  
with old newspapers.

Before feeding the wood  
into its mouth, he watches  
the words burn from brown to black  
to gray to white, peeling off  
in curls of ascending ashes.

Following them, upstairs,  
past the register's metal slits,  
he looks out at the white  
which has hardened

him. He dreams of  
the time when  
the warm wet earth  
will pull him feet-first  
into infinite fertility.

Long before  
these fleeting seasons,  
the ones he loves,  
come to pass,  
he bids them riddance.

Of a Definitive Nature

The cracked bark  
at the walnut's trunk  
swerves skyward.

Wet snow splits  
each limb down the middle,  
as if casting a shadow.

In black and white  
pictures, I see color:  
A decrepit shed slumps;

its logs sag in the middle.  
Its lone eye, in the loft, is out.  
The wind rips

through cracks in its beams.  
I am there, shivering  
between those splintered

walls, clutching, with red mittens,  
opposite ribs.

And when will it halt  
but when it halts,  
the bloodless wind?

### Bits and Pieces

The Sloppy Joes  
our mother made us  
years later she admitted  
were mostly tomato sauce  
and white bread. We learned

that Spam has a knockoff brand,  
sold at Fareway, named "Treet".  
My father works in a factory  
that, from highway 34, looks like  
a prison, with its metal tower  
and brick smokestack.

His lunch pail is black  
with silver metal buckles.  
His thermos is metallic,  
like a large caliber bullet.  
The thermos fits into the lunch pail  
like a cartridge in a rifle barrel.

### Hell's Half-Acre

Leaning into each hillside, my father  
 mows through the thicket,  
 back over last year's cutting.  
 Branches from thorn trees extend  
 head-high to rip into him.  
 He ducks them

as he attempts to manage  
 uncertain turns. His small, rusted tractor takes  
 on brush and red-tentacled brambles,  
 six feet at a time, splintering them  
 behind it in an exhale of dust  
 and sharp mulch. It takes two swaths

to clear enough land to haul  
 the trees he cuts down in the timber.  
 There, they are lugged up steep slopes,  
 where fallen leaves hide fertile soil  
 beneath them. His tractor slides  
 as the weight of each tree pulls him

downhill. Tipping as he slips,  
 he pipes up the throttle's pitch.  
 With the front wheels bucking,  
 my father kills the engine.  
 Dropping down onto all four wheels  
 he voices assessments of his

situation. Why his life  
 is meant for this. Why  
 this life is meant for him.  
 He has worked hard in the factory.  
 He has worked hard  
 out here, where his sixty-acre plot

of seemingly limitless freedom  
backfires. Tasks become grave  
struggles. To get by is to be able  
to alter--He repositions the hoist:  
The log chain's hook is unhooked,  
re-wrapped around the trunk,

where the slightest difference might make  
an angle which works; which digs in  
when studded back tires spin  
helplessly. He pops the clutch--  
the engine shakes to a halt.  
Echoes distance, thinning...

Darkness has filled the spaces  
between the trees. It is time  
to leave this for tomorrow.  
But my father pushes  
down on the clutch.  
The choked engine, after missing,

flutters, then pipes up, throttling...  
Worn-out when he reaches the trails  
leading him back to the yard  
near the farmhouse, he can hear  
the trees dragging behind him.  
Their leaves and branches

scratch into the stubble below.

### The Virtue Of Humility

The mid-afternoon sun bronzes  
field after field of October beans.  
Below, on both sides, yellow-dipped,  
the tips of ditch reeds make redder  
the sharp heart shapes of wild ivy leaves.

A killing frost is hours away.  
The farmers will mount their combines,  
and for days and nights will pluck their ripe fields  
until there is left only enough crop  
for the deer to pick through.

At dawn, and at dusk they will come: Silent,  
a doe on her small, heart-shaped hooves;  
a trotting buck snorts and throws his sturdy head  
to the wind for scents of gun powder, bottled sex,  
or the sickly-sweet smell of men sweating  
beneath their long underwear and coveralls.  
Some believe the deer can even smell coffee  
in the kidneys of the hunters...

In the winter, with the wind sand-  
blasting with ice dust the windows  
of his home, the farmer and his family  
work all day cutting and hauling wood.  
Only a call through the dark for supper  
brings a stoppage to the work.

Afterwards, on special occasions,  
copper wire is pitched into the fire  
in the fireplace. The blue-green flames flare,  
as the delighted eyes of the children stare,  
then fade as the father does, overwhelmed  
by the warmth of the wood heat.

### On Splinters

Ones in the palm  
 feel, at first, like bruises.  
 Ones in the fingers  
 more like cat scratches.

Metal shavings sting.  
 Glass shards burn sideways  
 as they penetrate the skin.  
 Wood splitting is common

where pressure is correctly  
 applied. The smooth surface,  
 as a grooved hand slides over  
 its edges, suddenly cuts a tooth--

A spider sometimes leaves  
 a part of its bite  
 buried inside the skin.  
 A needle christened with fire

will open up most,  
 but tweezers are needed  
 to pluck the sour wires.  
 After identifying the material

under a bright light,  
 finding out what kind  
 of splinter was in you,  
 fill the bleeding hole

left by your tools  
 with alcohol. Be satisfied  
 with a smooth appearance.  
 Know that another's hands

will hurt worse than your own.

### The Nature Of Courtship

The night moistens, low  
in the dark grass. The crickets  
have gone on for so long  
we will still hear them  
long after they have gone.

Across from us a cross is lit  
against the highest stone wall  
of the church, reminding the sinners  
that even as the sun falls  
into the earth their sins  
will not be committed unseen.

From the shadows above the cross  
hunting bats haphazardly dip  
for insects skimming off the surface  
of street lights. Your eyes shine  
with the fear of those insects.

### The Course Nature Takes

After harvest our old horse  
showed up less and less  
for bruised yellow apples  
and soft carrots.

Even after my father's long calls,  
with his hands cupped around his mouth,  
the skyward cries for "Ghimo"  
were unanswered.

It was not unlike her,  
in the summer months,  
to take half an hour to appear:

Slowly, climbing the last hill toward the barn,  
she would, with a whinny, emerge  
from the uncut pasture  
with her mane and coat gnarled  
with cockleburrs.

But as the last leaves were leaving the trees,  
there were only echoes of her name  
going out over the hills, landing  
where her matted ears must not have heard.

My brothers and I continued to try,  
for hours, for days...  
In the winter, while rabbit hunting, I  
discovered a curved lump pushing up  
the surface of the snow.

On her side, Ghimo was  
frozen to the hard ground.  
She was wrapped in barbed wire.  
As I brushed away the snow  
with my right hand,  
I saw the hoof of her front foot:

It had grown so long  
it had curled backward  
into a tight spiral.  
No one could have taken on that terrain  
so unprepared.

### What Practice Makes

Good eyesight is required  
to be good at killing.

A child, with a rifle,  
sets a metal can on top

of a wooden fence post,  
walks fifty long strides

back to put in his sights  
his right eye, cocks

the lever open and closed.  
The empty shell is released,

replaced with a live round:  
Between breaths, he squeezes

with his right index finger  
the trigger. He follows his shot

to the clean post, picks the can up  
from the ground to see the hole,

then repeats the steps  
until the can is all holes;

until it is one large hole.  
Seeing a bleeding animal

for the first time, suffering,  
the child can only stare

before helping it to its death.

The Hunter's Disposition

Whether or not the trees listen  
when my mind speaks to them,  
I follow it through the dark timber

in the hours before sunrise  
to try to find the right reason  
to choose one tree from the others:

for my stand; my seat; my cover;  
for my motionlessness; my silence; my loneliness;  
for my body's shiver; for my mind's numbness--

Which will reveal  
its deepest timber spirit?

Which will allow me  
to join with it mine?

The trees stay silent when asked  
which is meant to witness  
the death of their brethren:

Only the bitter wind answers.  
Only the bitter wind answers.

### The Reasons For Murder

We wait until after dark  
to cross the lot to the barn.  
To get the gate to open,  
we turn the bent nails straight up.

A flashlight beam leads us  
past rusted parts  
growing into the ground  
in each corner of the room.

Above, where the ceiling meets  
a doorless doorway,  
wasps huddle around their gray nest.  
The black bodies shine

through the stream of motes  
the light brings to life.  
The sparrows know we're here.  
We hear them in the other room,

fluttering to the highest rafters  
to hide from our sights.  
Into the tight spot  
between the beam and the tin roof,

one aims the light  
while another aims the air gun  
toward the feather that can't be tucked.  
They drop without wings

to the dirt floor. A speck of red  
flecks their chests. These massacres  
were supposed to serve two purposes:  
The car the tarp doesn't cover

will collect less bird shit, and  
the cats are always hungry.  
The car still sits there.

## Elegy for the Whitetail Deer

The sun still  
hours from splitting night  
into hundreds of shades  
of darker to lighter gray  
skies during its ascent  
toward the horizon, I head

out facing the Northwest wind  
to search for the place  
where I will bury myself  
in my surroundings so  
when the silence is broken  
that which enters is other than

the limbs of the red oak,  
the barbed wire fence.  
I immerse myself  
in yearling firs, dead leaves;  
my own solitude. The cold wind  
makes limbs shake. Muscles,

held still for hours,  
move on their own.  
Each minute another must  
be convinced to endure  
until darkness ends the hunt.  
With only enough light left

for the scope to show you  
in its crosshairs, I see you  
at full trot after catching my scent.  
I fire from my side of the fence line.  
I stay cold  
for six hundred more seconds.

The sun falls past purple,  
past the horizon; below  
the black fields. Unknown  
yards away, you may lie dying.  
My flashlight finds red spots  
in the snow. There are splendid needles

of hair caught in the twisted wire coils  
of the barbed wire fence.  
Larger patches of blood

lead to a steady stream.  
The light finds you on your side,  
taking your last few breaths.

I slit your belly straight  
down from your chest  
to your bowels, reach in  
with gloveless hands,  
and pull out your steaming guts.

I stay awhile inside your warmth.

Lost In Translation

Through the dark an owl  
hoots who

will soon leave the earth.  
I listen harder.

Is it my own death  
the owl means to reveal?

To earn its trust,  
to learn its tongue,

I admit to it human sins.  
The night keeps hidden,

in its tide of winds,  
the owl's death message.

The name it seeks to tell  
remains unknown.

## On Declaring War

### I

The weather never keeps  
its pact with the earth:  
It never uses manners  
to announce its arrival.

The weather would never admit  
to agreeing to making any pact  
that would make the act  
of killing a moral issue.

Though it is to blame for everything,  
knowing that it holds no emotions,  
the blame must shift to something; else  
to someone: Our fathers

wished that there were words  
that they could have said  
three hundred fifty eight days each year  
to keep the weather away.

### II

I remember my father telling me  
the story about one of his coworkers:  
The man had gone pheasant hunting.  
His twelve-year-old son decided

to play a joke on him: He crept up  
within forty yards of his father's stand,  
scratching along the ground  
as a pheasant, he knew, would.

In the dense brush,  
with the cold October rain  
falling, the boy, to his father,  
*was* a pheasant.

My father said he wonders  
how the man could show up every day  
to work after finding his arrow  
in his son's heart.

### III

It is human to blame the self;  
even for a thing such as the weather.

## Lesson

Walking into the timber, slowly,  
not thinking fast thoughts, I pause  
at the edge in the darkness  
to listen: A breeze blows

in a direction planned  
to keep mistakes silent;  
to make an easy scent  
more difficult to pick up.

The first step taken breaks  
the silence my mind has made  
louder. I stand still  
until I feel I am forgotten.

I am taught by the timber  
to be aware of myself as different  
before I can become the same  
as every other living thing:

I adopt cobwebs.  
I shuffle intermittently, imitating  
a waking ground squirrel  
scratching in the pre-dawn pitch,

letting its little nose  
find it a bite to eat  
before the sun brings sight  
to the red-tailed hawks.

When I move again, I move  
not unlike dead leaves,  
which the wind sends tumbling  
toward new positions in the world.

I accept temperatures  
below acceptable temperatures.  
I allow the coyote to surprise me.  
I allow the woodpecker to badger me

by knocking wood nonstop...  
I allow spirits and superstitions  
to be whispered in my mind's ear,  
which hears beyond what can be heard

in the farthest physical distances.  
Like the beasts, like the fallen leaves,  
I give myself away  
to become myself again.

II. BETWEEN SEASONS

**Between Seasons**

A flock of blackbirds  
from the west  
descends

across a cornfield. They land  
in a thinning peach tree.  
Its branches bend

under their number.  
The last few peaches fall  
into a ditch. Below the tree

sun-bruised fruit rots. Black  
bugs are busy in the brown meat.  
The birds pick through the ditch,  
disrupting the harmony

of the acreage. They twitch  
and poke, jeering the sun,  
the bugs; their present course.

With shrill calls  
several by several  
the flock takes off,

on its way  
to another farm, perhaps,  
a cherry tree, or

a boy home from school  
watching them disappear  
into the miles

and miles around them.

**Dandelion**

**The bud bursts  
at its green seams.**

**Yellow velvet spills  
from split lips.**

**The tongue unfurls;  
arches its back**

**for the sun to burn gold.  
Bumblebees busily visit**

**the middle. The fertile circle  
turns to milky wool,**

**followed by feathery silver  
which can be blown from its roots**

**by the wind from one mouth:  
Small parachutes balloon**

**and descend; land without sound  
where their season, this year, ends.**

**Bald, the weed's head  
leans into the hillside.**

March, Goodland, Minnesota

The snow up so many feet;  
white cliffs split with plow blades--

The banks invite you in  
with threads of silver; with sunlight

catching the tight hard edge  
of each frosted drop

of water. You think  
you are seeing things

too valuable to miss  
as you pass along. You think

the glitter in the corner of your eyes  
is trying to tell you your story.

If only you could look equally  
at the fibers in the cut of each bank,

at the sewn-in seams shining  
throughout those muffled drifts.

## The Story of Corn

Metal blades rake the earth:  
The disc harrow's furrows  
remain parallel through the curved  
and undulating fields.

Black soil parts  
like water behind boats.  
A mineral smell fills the air;  
the odor of worms.

Flints and arrowheads turn up  
after hundreds of thousands of moons.  
Flickers of wind  
rush into the ears

as if to tell the secret  
of hearing with other than human ears.  
Each seed that gets planted  
survives the growing seasons

only to turn golden  
before being violently plucked  
by early October combine blades.  
Beneath the stubble of broken stalks,

game birds and deer scratch  
through the deep snow,  
at dawn and at dusk,  
to feed on the scattered kernels.

Those not eaten return  
to grow as rogues between the rows  
of next season's soybeans.  
In July, when tassels shoot,

all which are other than the crop  
get pulled out by their roots.  
Only those that belong remain.

### In The Mulberry Tree

A grape-black fat mulberry hangs  
heavy from its stem.  
The sun turns up  
its yellow to white.

You cross without  
looking the gravel road  
and narrow stretch of ditch  
to where the barbed-wire fence

begins. The first leap  
and grab with hands and feet  
leaves you upside-down. Arched  
back, your eyes catch

on black-and-white cattle hair, caught  
in the tight, coiled clutch  
of a barb's rusted fist.  
Below, in the pasture, wide

piles of manure, hot with flies,  
get fresh again. Circular  
shadows stain what grass hasn't been  
eaten or trampled. With each climb,

dozens will shake loose.  
Berry juice will get tracked back  
inside on the bottoms of bare feet.  
As you rise your eyes meet

the bulbous, honeycombed fruit:  
the dark purple, purple-red,  
and before-ripe pink-and-white berries--  
They are the reason.

### Elementary

Between two two-humped  
fields of corn, or beans,  
depending on the year before;  
someone put a pond. There,

below the timber line, it is  
hidden from the gravel road  
passersby. Looking for it,  
they slow as they pass. On

an early summer day  
my grandfather showed us  
what to do when the water turns  
in slow circles.

He left us  
with some old poles,  
a tackle box, a jar of worms.  
His truck revved before leaving  
three brothers and a pond:

Our lure entered,  
splashing the bank  
beneath the cottonwood. It sat  
until we agreed  
some motion would help.

Something jumped it,  
bending the pole down  
toward the water. Our distance  
closed, slipping in places.  
The worn rod held.

We saw the fish,  
wet with sunlight.  
It curled its tail  
as we pulled it  
to the trampled, muddy bank  
where the cattails  
parted. We didn't  
know what to do

with it. We ran back home,  
found a tin basin, filled it  
with pond water, and dropped  
the fish in. We watched it  
circle its limitations. Figuring  
more grew beneath the cottonwood,  
in that spot we casted. Again,

the water gathered, exploding  
inches from the bank. This time  
the bass entered the hot air  
with the line hooked  
in its mouth. Identically,  
both fish were kept  
in the basin. They were

moving much less than before.  
They had to be skinned.  
We called my grandfather, but  
when he arrived  
the fish were floating  
at the top of the basin.

I remember him grinning  
as he turned them loose  
to the snapping turtles.

### At Evening's End

With the fireflies, I listen  
as the jackpines clack.  
The wind blew today, too,  
but I could see  
the branches collide, then separate--  
I knew when they were about to meet.

I did not, as I now do,  
need to determine size  
from the rustling in the underbrush  
off to my left. Squirrel and deer,  
hidden from the eye,  
scratch the timber floor  
with the same feet.

Only the length of the pauses  
finally defines one  
from the other. Other  
times, it is easy to tell  
what it is that approaches.  
On this occasion, for example,  
its colors, I'm sure, if I could see, would be  
black and white.

Ditch weed plus  
roadkill plus  
urine stings the air.

Wake (After reading Lao-Tsu, Spring '95)

Sitting, in a green  
and white-woven  
lawn chair, I

catch visitations lighting  
in the shadowed hedge,  
damp with nightsweat.

Little moons flash  
on, off...  
on, off...

*Knowing harmony is constancy.*  
*Knowing constancy is enlightenment.*  
In sympathy and envy, I

float in close  
to the hedge,  
catching them

when they light,  
missing them  
when they're gone.

### Prayerful Thinking

Tomorrow, I must  
check to see if  
the fruit still  
clings to our

many trees. Will  
tonight's stiff  
winds have torn the  
plums, with their little

leaves, from their stems? Does  
that perfect yellow  
apple still sit  
in its highest spot

where it deepens, sun-  
touched, till  
perfect picking time?  
What about

the peach tree, whose  
branches have already  
been halved  
by prior night strikes?

The worms will eat well.  
The robins, too.

**Piquant**

**Beneath a budding  
pine tree, green  
in early spring**

**a gooseberry bush  
grows to bear  
its little fruit:**

**Yellow-green globes  
with greener veins  
striping their skins.**

**Smoothe, yet taut  
to touch them;  
they urge pulling.**

**Rolling one between  
finger and thumb,  
feeling its delicacy,**

**it entices tasting.  
An earthen dryness  
as teeth pass**

**through the skin  
to sour pulp.  
So they waste**

**before they wither  
beneath a browning,  
open-coned pine.**

**Infested**

The walnut's limbs are thick  
with webbed cocoons.  
The larvae writhe by day,

wheeze by night. They  
kill the walnut, which kills  
the tomatoes, by hanging

their nests from its thinnest  
fingers. They multiply  
inside their cocoons,

spreading the surface  
area of their disease  
back up the limbs.

The rhythm of their deadly songs  
annoys until it lulls to sleep  
even the crickets.

At sunrise they die down  
to let the birds have their turn.

**Entrance**

Clearing a thick patch of ironweed  
hiding him, a farmer's son,  
with waist-level sweeps,  
struggles to hack

through the hard stalks.  
As he works  
he scrapes his bare arms  
against invisible fibers,

which stick despite the sweat  
dripping from his nose.  
He grunts as each blow  
from the blade's orange curve

thuds; catching half-way.  
An equal effort is required  
to take back the scythe:  
Swinging into them

his hips gather to burst.  
His torso twists  
left to right-handed.  
Pulling out, after

each aggress, he strains  
to get another chance  
to finish the job,  
to reach a place where

the wind can find him.  
His life, he learns,  
depends upon it.

### The Millionaire

Once, haying, a snake  
 came wrapped in bailing twine.  
 The hay rake blades the tractor drags  
 through mowed furrows  
 had split its middle.

The snake bale was grabbed  
 from the chute with gloved hands, dead-  
 lifted, swung around and walked back  
 to its place at the top of the rack,  
 where a knee is needed for momentum.

Hours later, unloading, in the windless rafters,  
 sunk into a made hole  
 in the tied-off walls of alfalfa,  
 the snake bale gets tucked  
 snake down for the seasons.

Mr. Matthews hollers  
 for me to stop for supper.  
 As his wife prepares he adds up  
 the hours times the hourly pay.  
 I take three dollars and fifty cents  
 of his fortune for every wagon load.

We eat. Isn't his wife a good cook.  
 (Respectful affirmative gesticulation.)  
 Isn't that hay green?  
 I pry my cramping right hand  
 open with my left beneath the table.

Mr. Matthews was always  
 extremely complimentary to his wife.  
 They had one child, a son,  
 who died asleep in his room.  
 His mother thought him safe  
 enough to leave him for awhile.

Decades of blame hovered above  
 the dinner table. She never ate with us.  
 They say Alzheimer's enabled him  
 to be able to forget  
 the day the neighbors found him kicking her.

**Primary**

**Dandelions droop  
in the end of summer sun.**

**At night, near the creek, deer  
stop to bed down**

**for the evening. The timber floor  
shows where their bodies were.**

**Flattened leaves warm up  
beneath beams of light**

**the treetops cut thinner.  
In the morning, red-**

**tailed hawks hunt. Supreme  
vision plus speed equals precision.**

**Blue blood bleeds red  
no matter which species**

**gets ripped into thin strips  
by their piercing yellow beaks.**

**Below the circling hawks,  
in the muddy creek beds,**

**tracks tell yesterday's story;  
some from days before.**

**The mystery is where they go  
from where they stop.**

### Drought

The creekbeds are cracked;  
diamond-shaped;  
the weave of snakeskin.

The lushly weeded ditches  
have withered. What remains  
is ravine. In the fields

corn stalks reveal  
their spidery roots  
above the dried clods.

The prayers, the dances,  
the ritual songs have failed.  
Curse words

push the slightest clouds  
further from the land. God  
dries our mouths out

with the wind from an invisible fire.

### In September

It rains, and the trees rain  
long after it stops raining.  
Sun and shadow are  
held, released...

The effect is  
the grass is lit  
through finger-width gaps  
in the tops of the maples.

In the dark yard are thin bars  
of yellow. The mid-morning sun  
gets blocked by a wind-blown cloud,  
which, within the next breath, moves

on to interrupt another patch of land,  
where rabbits nibble and bathe  
in the long, damp blades of grass.  
Their brown-eyed profile is alert:

When the wind surges  
and the tree branches tether,  
and the lawn ripples,  
an approach may arrive unheard.

In September it is time  
for half of God's kingdom  
to savor the sunlight from above,  
to hold onto it, to not let go...

The other half has already seen  
the rust appear among the green  
of falling leaves, which, as they land,  
begin to curl into little fists.

### Unforgiving

Fallen leaves hurry off,  
following, as if in a flock,  
the rush of those just before them,  
driven by a horizontal wind,  
in an order that is disorder,  
in every direction. The starlings,

like the leaves, cannot resist  
such a strong current.  
In their attempts at landing,  
they touch briefly, only  
to be plucked and quickly whisked up  
in great arcs as they again try,

without more than momentary  
success, to find themselves, in all the swirling,  
a place to rest. The grasses  
in the yards and fields ripple,  
like the riffling of pages let go  
with the edge of the thumb--

The smell of the earth reaches  
the living room through closed windows.

**Reminder**

As the jazz sax  
blows a low note,

the wind sends sideways  
the last of this year's leaves.

Even the fir with its thick green needles  
circles its arms and sways

to the tune of the piano,  
stops cold, joins in again

with the trumpets and cymbals.  
Whether a fever rushes through the trees,

or the thinnest reeds rest still:  
the wind's floor is the whole world.

### Daylight Saving Time

With less light we turn inward.

The sky of an Iowa winter  
holds yet erases  
patches of light gray; makes  
the walnut's leafless limbs black

The neighbor's shutter's slats  
will remain summer  
green all winter long.

The tops of pines,  
angling above rooftops,  
have their needles shaded  
by the bitter-bright sky.

The sun seems always  
to be setting. Along the tree line  
faint pink ribbons sink

down between darkening houses,  
where the wind gathers after splitting.  
Inside, we alter our clocks  
and consider what it means to sleep.

### Territorial Rights

A friend asks me how I know  
that red-tail hawks watch  
from the sides of main roads:

It's not that their white breasts,  
facing into the afternoon sun,  
are not easy to spot.

It's not that their circling  
nature, searching the fields,  
does not give them away.

Neither is it even that they lead  
the innocent to places  
safe from unlawful bullets.

It is just that I remember  
its piercing eyes  
staring across from the deer stand:

its feathers ruffling angrily,  
it took flight  
straight for me with talons outstretched.

Out of the deepest fear,  
I quickly shifted  
from morality to survival mentality.

There are other places  
where beasts hurt one another.

### Three Whitetail Deer

Three whitetail deer  
with thin lithe necks  
in fluid swoops look  
to find a fix

on my position. Sitting  
in one position  
I listen.  
I hold my breath--

The cold begins  
sinking in  
my limbs. My limbs  
my mind gives,

not giving in  
when the wind picks up,  
when it rushes its howl  
down the hillside,

rending treetops in relay  
passes. My rigid body,  
trembling, exhales--  
My teeth reveal me.

## For The Wounded

The falling snow  
adds to the burden  
of each step. Heavy  
flakes break wet

against my cheek.  
The inches now feet  
above the frozen ground,  
my movements are awkward:

With one foot deep  
in the hole made  
from the last step,  
the back foot lifts straight up

and out, waist-high, to follow  
through to the next unbroken  
surface. Carefully, I keep  
the gun barrel at level.

Behind me my tracks are  
disappearing. A rabbit flushes  
from its burrowed hiding.  
I push the safety button

from red to green. I focus  
my eyes forward, to something  
larger through the blizzard:  
Standing still, within feet, a deer

this weather couldn't warn:  
Staring into wild eyes,  
the fear reaches our chests.  
It makes the first move.

Nerves cause my aim to swerve.  
I hear what my missing means.

### On Migration

The Canada geese break  
their arrowhead pattern  
to stop to rest  
at our small pond.

I watch them  
from the perimeter  
of the field furthest from  
home, where there is enough distance

to suit me. I wonder  
if it is quiet yet  
back at the house.  
I wonder how the geese know

when it is safe to leave  
one home for another  
so far away. Their destinations  
and mine are different.

Neither of us can stay  
in our worlds between worlds.  
The pond water will soon part,  
and the grass beneath me

will spring back up again.

### At The Edge of the World

Entering into the timber  
 from the frosted field, I hear  
 the sound of the world disappearing  
 behind me. I hear the soundless world  
 of the timber around me: I realize I've become  
 a clumsy intruder: My most careful

movements make branches break  
 across the hush: I wait until  
 my mistakes are forgiven.  
 In the dark I arrive at my post,  
 one hundred fifty paces  
 from where the field ends:

A tree stump at the top of a long draw.  
 The sun won't be up for hours.  
 Anything moving is invisible  
 and nothing is moving: No squirrel  
 scratching in its nest of leaves;  
 no woodpecker peppering a dead white oak...

Still the deer sleep, huddled  
 low in their beds of tall grass:  
 They sleep with one ear to the air.  
 They need their sleep so they can keep running.  
 It is a test to be so cold for so long;  
 to not give in and go home to get warm.

The mind, occupied with nothing  
 but telling the limbs to continue to endure further,  
 sets new limits. But the wind ends the hunt  
 early; sends me home with nothing in hand  
 or tired mind. The killdeer jeer as I cross the world  
 of their nests in the field. The frost moistens

under an already round sun; above  
 the black mud that thaws beneath it.  
 Home is in sight on the horizon:  
 Smoke from the wood stove  
 blows from the chimney, allows  
 the wind to twist it into ribbons.

The world inside, two worlds away  
 from the timber, will be so warm  
 that soon I will need to leave again.