Cracking open the fields

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Cracking open the fields

by

Peggy Sue Alberhasky

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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For the Graduate College

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Iowa State University
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1984
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![Image of a table showing the contents of a book]

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Long Poem: Broken into Short Paragraphs
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This thesis has been accepted by the Department of English in lieu of the research thesis prescribed by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.
INTRODUCTION

The magical/mystic genesis of my poetry may be seen better if first my work is absorbed. My poems are not the type to be intellectualized but, like primitive art, their ideas are "felt" rather than rationalized. The psychoanalytic content or poetry of personal relationships contributes lyric energy to the work. The reader should be able to experience the "imagery," the "singing" of words but, also "feel" the ideas as they speak to the reader's subconscious. The poet may become an instrument of change because of the directness of communication the poetry makes. When the reader attempts to rationalize my poetry the subliminal content, by being pushed into a plane that it does not function on, becomes extremely difficult to understand.

"The skeleton of my trapdoor moves / like an old spider across / dusty floor boards." I view myself as a trapdoor-writer. Poetry writing is magical, more of a mystical experience than the monotony of human emotion. Magic comes from feelings and ideas deep inside me. The trapdoor enables me to release select emotions that I have decided are ready for the reader. On the other side, like a spider, I am able to catch and keep ideas and feelings that come near me. I can incubate these ideas warm and deep inside me, roll them over until I have made them ready. This verifies my belief that the writer is the most necessary component/ingredient in the creation of poetry because I do not feel that a muse comes and sprinkles flakes of inspiration, and then something beautiful happens on paper. For me as a writer there is more of a human control over creative power than a mystical energy. This
does not mean that the magical / mystical elements are not important. The magical / mystical parts are vital but it takes human emotion to bring the power "down to earth" and make the ideas and feelings accessible to everyone while at the same time allowing me to express my most private ideas into concrete universal meanings.

The use of abstraction in my poetry reveals the relationships between women and men, the family and its members, art and life, and finally reveals the writer acting as prophet. My first reaction is to slip into image and metaphor to describe the complexity of the issues I explore. I do this because I find it very difficult at times to put into words the exactness of my feelings and ideas. Poetry demands precision in all its descriptions and analyzations. Without the investment of well defined emotions and events the focus of the meaning of the poem may become trivialized.

I feel as a writer I have a responsibility to point out faults, flaws and the goodness in the life surrounding us. At times I feel I am some type of instrument with the power of change for good or bad. The power of the writing is there, and strong. Somehow we all are caught up by the change. Once the writer accepts that she is a part of the world, not a bystander, then many ideas begin to fall into place, and feelings of despair and frustration will be among the first emotions to be reckoned with.

The writer belongs to all areas of society, to those who are articulate and especially to those who are not. The following lines are from a poem concentrating on a family's interaction on the frightening feeling of growing old together. The speaker of the poem after
recounting much of the family's history comes to the conclusion: "The erosion that wipes the land / has become embedded firmly / on top of my family." The use of these lines is an example of the writer becoming an integral part of the family. The speaker of the poem is the writer/story-teller. This illustrates the blending of reader and writer.

Words, it seems, can no longer be used simply and naturally. At times we all seem to try to overcompensate for our lack of communication and end up saying bundles of words that hardly make any sense. Words seem to have become so inadequate that we are unable to express even our most simple and ordinary feelings reasonably. I fear at times because of this breakdown of word usage and understanding that poetry too may become an obsolete form of writing.

It may seem easier to view a writer in one dimension and produce a convenient label. It is not always necessary for the reader to know if the speaker of the poem is female or male. If the poem is sturdy enough, the reader will grasp the meaning whether or not the speaker can be given a gender. These next lines could be said by a woman or a man. I want to show that it is not necessary to view the writer through the attributes of female or male in order to enjoy the poetry: "I dream of zippers / and in my dreams I unzip / everything you have ever touched."

"The nights you could not sleep it off / I would stand and watch the cows / eat, sleep and listen to them moan." These lines seem fairly typical of writing describing lost love. Though these lines restrict themselves because of the approach, I do not feel that this is enough reason to discuss the poem only through gender. I want my
writing to transcend the limiting labels. I am asking the readers to
dissociate themselves from group belief and deal with my poetry with a
personal energy and allow for impulse to guide when doubt enters.

Women and men are compatible; though at times there seems to be
a strain for them to share their writing and ideas without stigmas
being attached. As writers we must put aside gender in order to do
quality work and keep the flow of writing and exchange moving in a
forward direction. In the poem "Buckling the Grave" it is through the
combined fighting forces of women and men that they are able to save
what is left of their own sources of humanity. The poem focuses on the
strength of the unity between the sexes to resist the invading force(s).
"The weapons are circles and the machines are vicious. / Men and women
swarm together in one hot bunch / and try to scatter the forming explo­
sive sounds." These lines attempt to draw the reader deep into the
poem through visual metaphor; metaphor that recreates war in simple
tones of circle and sound. But with the power of both men and women
there seems to be hope; hope that the state of well being will be
maintained for all.

I want as many preconceptions dissolved as possible about me, as
a woman writer, and poetry in general. I do not want criticism to be
based solely on which sex the writer is; rather I would like to see
criticism expand and explore the writer as an individual. At times
it is very easy for a reader to first categorize a work then explore
it. I am afraid that approaching a writer's work through gender only
is to believe in the same way that all girls should be pretty and all
boys strong. Mostly I do not want to see criticism as a limiting condition or labeling factor.

Many of my poems celebrate the sharing of men and women. I try to show the tenderness and difficulty in decision-making both go through in a working relationship. I am not trying to alienate men just as I am not trying to alienate any women. The poem "Never Give Away Your Name" is a plea for both sexes to band together. The women and men in this poem are required first to recognize themselves as individuals in society. The message is strong and simple: we must have faith in order to produce trust.

Today as a poet I feel I must speak more directly of my own personal experiences. I must be willing to merge the poem with the poet while at the same time not excluding the reader. The poet should begin by reinstating the importance of emotions. The problem in giving emotions importance and strength all their own is that it creates paradoxes. Sometimes these paradoxes are explained whether the writer is female or male. What I feel is most important about these paradoxes is that they create writer overlap. By this I mean that both men and women are writing on the same subject and not only influencing each other but giving each other new and fresh ideas. The following lines are an example of what I mean by gender overlap: "Ghost smoke seems to be the abundant / material for the houses full of families / and laughter. If I had to be house / I would be attached over a train / and use the track to tell time and make / distance." This poem was written after I had read books and interviews with American Indian
medicine men. I used the information from men to write a poem with a woman's point of view.

My vision of poetry does not involve female or male segments. It seems impossible to me to break myself down into two separate categories: woman and writer. I believe poetry should represent a realm of emotional truth and full consciousness. Poetry should express the complete experience of the individual with the surrounding world. When there is no emotional investment in the poetry by the writer or reader then this form of "reading and writing" is painless and bloodless. There are no stakes so there is nothing to lose and nothing to gain. Poetry is based on the intensity of emotion and once that is taken away then it becomes nothing but an empty egg shell.

In the poem "Country Woman" the framework is its physical setting but the writing extends itself into metaphor to better explain the internal symbolism. The poem focuses on the strength and timidness of farm people to bring alive the "old woman." The farm people give her power. Good and evil are approached as something as simple as the difference between black and white. The lines "The farm people say the country woman / can punch the earth cold" illustrate the fear and respect the farm people possess for the "old woman" while simultaneously showing their feelings of estrangement from their own land.

To achieve synthesis not only in the final stanza but throughout the poem is my goal. A cohesive statement that focuses on one single emotion is more accessible to the reader than a gallery of mediocrity based on all reservoirs of emotion. Poetry has to have endurance, experience and a strong grasp of all matters approached. This in one
small simple word means comprehension. That is why it is so important in the poem "Country Woman" to investigate, from all angles, the relationships among the farm people, the country woman and the land itself to understand fully the meaning of necessary attachment.

The continuing debate of what poetry means could be somewhat solved if we would consider poetry in more personal terms. We should think of poetry as something planted deep inside us similar to our soul. This would enable us to explain the abstractness of image and metaphor that poetry opens up for us. Reinforcing the individualism of life parallels the comprehension of poetry. Poetry in other words becomes the individual's philosophy of living. Not only do I find it extremely difficult to separate myself from writer to woman, I find it even more impossible to separate my art from my life. Poetry is the written painting: the canvas that does not limit itself to colors, textures and shapes but expands to nonvisual messages. Words may be abstract while at the same time being overly concrete. My poetry artwork does imitate my life. I believe any information received from within the creator should never be discredited. The writer's duty is to shuffle through all the feelings and develop the best and most cognizant plan to present the ideas to the reader. It is then the reader's duty to invest personal feelings to capture the intent of the message.
PART ONE
Waiting for Things That Hang Flat in the Sky

Heat breaks all skin
and sweat alone can not
smooth out
the splintered cracks.

I went to him
the night the city
became moist.

The pears he had just picked
were sitting alone
on the back porch,
I took two
and rubbed only one
on my shirt.

I saw him sitting alone
at his kitchen table,
the curve of his arm
holding his head,
felt like the shape
of the pear pressed
against my chest.

Instead of going inside
I waited until he saw me.
As I stood there
I saw the clouds move
to hang themselves
flat against the sky.
Is Enough Full Enough?

We laughed and laughed when you tried
to palm a horse off as a deer.

We held our sides and yelled
ENOUGH
ENOUGH...

We fell hard into the old man's garden.
He did not like us pushing his turnips
even further back into the soil.

He began yelling
ENOUGH
ENOUGH...

I sit by the window with the large shining piano
and look out on this small racketey town.
I train small fingers to be disciples.

None of us ever dare to say,
the words even though they have become
as pale as a split lantern
as tender as warm bamboo
and soft like polished small bones,
from a good meal.
Webs Inside a Home

All my edges have been removed.
Everything sharp and pointed
has been scrapped clean away.
There are no corners left
and the nails and hinges of my trap door
have unplanted themselves
and moved into the attic.
At dusk the curtain moves slightly
with the evening breeze
and I am able to see the bones.

The skeleton of my trap door moves
like an old spider across
dusty floor boards. The underboards
remember what it was like when someone
would be standing in the attic ready
to swing the broom at any small piece
of dust or rapidly scuttling insect.

I remember years ago a bat died in the attic.
There was one long white web covering the entire body;
I realized then that one spider with one lace web,
not even knowing I lived in the same house,
has more of an effect on me than knowing I only have
one single piece of bread left. So this is fear,
both white and soft like lace made by woman's hands.
Watching a Sunset
Through a Tractor-Tire

Somewhere deep in the field
three men stand with their backs
to the road where trucks are zooming by.

One is wearing blue overalls,
one has a red handkerchief dripping
from his back pocket
and the third man has a pointed hat
and shiny boots.

They all seem to be facing the same direction
and looking at the same thing.
The one with shiny boots turns fast
and walks toward the road
where a truck is waiting.

The other two do not move.
They do not turn around.
The truck squirts dirt and gravel
as it drives away with the man
who is wearing shiny boots.

The two men left in the field
slowly squat down on their heels
and finish watching the sunset,
while their tractor tire is being fixed
then hauled away.
Native Land

These hands, covered with cuts
coarsened but somehow still tender
curse and break the black soil.

Awkwardly silent and much ashamed
his hands dare to rest palms open,
and look almost harmfully at the land.
Sluggish horses plow the fields.

Bushels of homemade baskets
filled with corn, onions and beans
wait as crisp as papers
stuffed in a leather case.

He stands there waiting for her
and looks at his hands which carry
so many wrinkles that his palms
become a map of his soil.
The shape of the map is the same
as the shape of the lid of his father's coffin.

She impatiently taps the sagging wooden fence
and watches the cows eat wild garlic.
All the animals they own are lean and hungry
like wolves. The animals howl with a frenzy
when the grain is let out of its cage.

Both of them look and strain to smell
the nice smell of their land.
All the while knowing they are harnessed
by the horses and soil.
PART TWO
Pilgrim Boats

The first death was the death of your father.
I remember you standing against the refrigerator door shading your eyes from the morning sun.

I remember you when your grandmother died.
You stood again by the refrigerator door in the kitchen in the morning, this time not shading your eyes.

But you were staring at the clock above the sink. The clock had pictures of small boats instead of numbers.

You said to me that your grandmother used to wake you up in the middle of the night, just to ask what time it was.

You turned sideways to me and said, that one night while you and she were up and watching the sky your grandmother found a Pilgrim Boat.

You went and tried to touch the clock but it was too high on the wall.
You stood there with one arm raised and told me that you told her that night, there was no such thing as Pilgrim Boats, it was just gray and blue thunder and possibly just a rain cloud.

I walked over to you with a small stepladder and had you stand on it to reach the clock, and I asked you if you were sure she had not seen a boat float through the sky that one last time.
Country Woman

When the cows all lie down together in a group, in a circle, she says this means rain will come. She says these words were written down in her book, her book that holds all miracles.

The country woman also can tell what animal will be born next in the tall barns, what nest will have the next suffering and she knows which animal to fondle and which to say goodbye to.

She always knows. Swallowing stones in another way for her to tell the fortunes of the farmers livestock. She knows all the farming people believe in god and statues, just as they believe in melting ice.

The country woman will not answer the farm people's questions on weather. She will help them observe the land dry as paper, animal eyes the size of almonds and air from thirst as shy as birds without feathers. The farm people do not like her distance.

All the country land surrounding her has come to nothing. She says the cows do not lie down but follow each other in a straight line, blackness and deafness will come soon.

The farm people stay at least ten miles away from her, her house and tall barn. The telephone and electric lines have been cut by the farm people to cut her off from them and to keep the country woman dependent on the land.

The farm people say the country woman can punch the earth cold. She has power to stop and turn everything negative and on its backside. The farm people say she sits in her house and slices harness leather: thin like a razor's edge. The country woman's strips are lean, brown and stiff.

None of the farm people know why the country woman keeps making leather strips. They do know and steadily feel her body growing wider and bigger. They feel the heat of her growing heavier and heavier. There are no more raw edges left surrounding the land, and the barns have no corners.

The country woman watches the birds land and peck at the plastic flowers which cover graves. She slowly keeps rocking and smiles up where the would-be electric lines would cross the sky and then she stomps the land, like scolding a small child.
A Farm Couple

The gate is bolted tight
and the salt in the air
is as strong as rotten canned tomatoes
found exploded in the cellar.

She said to him that he whispers
and this implies that he must mistrust
her as he does the lame old dog
tied tight to the chain outside the house.

He says he is innocent of this accusation.
She continues to threaten to explode
all over their house if he does not change.
He smiles because he knows how important
it is for her to look so well preserved.
Two Thinking Fishermen

Across the lake to the left
two men sit and try to fish
by holding their poles
close to the water
but not in the liquid.

The row boat they came in
is completely empty
and the tackle boxes
are full of food and medicine.
They both sit on wool plaid blankets.

Once in a while one nudges
the other but ever so gently
because they are aware of the harmony
and they do not want to disturb the sound.
It does not matter to them the boat is not filled.

The two men are not only distant
from boats, bait and renewal
but they are in some way, by their wives,
distant relatives as well.

They watch the water float off with the breeze
and think of ways to carry pails of water
up from the lake without spilling a drop.

They talk of remembering when they both danced
in strong high winds and walked valleys
bare of trees.

The sky keeps itself high and to itself,
the two men sit close and bring their poles
in from the top of the water. The sky darkens
and their voices become crisp and clear
as the first thin layer of ice on puddles.

They realize at the same time without knowing
that both of them have as much splintered wood
as the paddle, the one paddle, of the row boat
they brought to this side of the lake. They nudge
each other once again, this time not so gently.
A Letter Is Like a Rope: Tight and Holding

His coat and other outside clothing is damp and very much dry-gray. An hour ago it was almost sunset and the evening is beginning to claim its moistness. His hat slouches deep on his head and his appearance is that of a mature cracked man. A lonely man with only worn places to keep visiting. His anchor has been buried and rusted itself away in the dripping liquid left quietly corroding on his coat sleeve. In his hand he carries a letter. Inside the soiled envelope is the letter and on the outside the original stamp still sticks itself tightly on the paper of the envelope. He read the letter only once. He holds the letter now as if it is a lost stone.

Daily routines and events are twisted into knots of twine. He no longer remembers to count the different distances he has allowed his feet to carry him. The man's hair is short, his beard long, his feet sleepy and his right knee weak. He limps when he walks. The inhabitants of this town he is now in are completely terrified of him and ask him pithy questions concerning his letter. He never answers. He walks straight, direct and with purpose to the local post office. He buys a new stamp just like the old one on the envelope. When he reaches the edge of town he buries the new stamp under a fresh pile of stones. Briskly he goes on.

In a kitchen in the middle of the town a young girl sits down in front of her burning stove and writes a letter. She only has one stamp. She is surrounded by fire and saucepans.
When Dull Leo Comes Home

My brother, dull Leo is coming home.
No, he is already home and lying
in the dead mowed grass. Leo always
was a little cracked. Just like the window
in the family truck. The window has been blocked
with a piece of cardboard ever since I can remember.

The cracked window breaks the monotony
of the driving and cuts the breezes
in unexpected places and pieces. The window
and dull Leo are two of the most important
and inescapable parts of my life now. I still
leave the doors to the truck both unlocked.

Behind the window is a part of life dull Leo
has seen that I have not. He went away for a while
and then came back. I have never left. Not once.
Family, home and the business have kept me here.
Distance, driving and roads all have the same direction.

My brother, dull Leo is now out of sight again.
He always goes just before it gets light out.
He left his jacket on the front seat of the truck.
I will remember him every time I try to look
through the fractured glass and cardboard.
PART THREE
Moo Cows and Mother

Late at night
just before dawn
I can remember
my mother coming in
and smelling like stale beer
to kiss and tuck me in.

She had forgotten.
Now when she is ready
to fall to the bed
or to the floor,
she comes in to me.

I let her come
because I know
she has nowhere else
to go but to my room.

Everytime she comes in
she finds a new shadow shape
for me on my wall.
Last night it was cattle perched
on a wooden woven fence.
She even mooed me the song
the cows sang as they
straddled the fence.

Tonight it is already light
and still she has not come.
It isn't that I am worried,
I can hear her singing
the words of the cow song.

The words are dim,
all I can hear are moans
or are they moos?
A thud. She must be down
on the floor.
I wonder when she looks up
to the ceiling in the kitchen
if she sees the cow shapes.
I watched as my mother drank
and misplaced clothing in a ritual,
which grew to her hitting the family members
which grew into her forgetting the flame
underneath the skillet on the stove,
which led into a fire that burnt down
our house.

II

Everyone's face and hands look much darker and longer.
My mother still drinks and misplaces clothing
but we do not have the same stove anymore.

III

My father walks around my mother
as if he is in the iron cage.
He never sleeps anymore because
he must keep constant watch over my mother.

IV

My father always looks now just like he has been
kicked by a strong heavy horse.

V

I watch both my mother and father
as they both hit the ground.
Nothing breaks in this new house
because nothing was brought from the old house
and nothing here has been given a solid place.

VI

But I did sneak out one item from the old house,
curtain rods. The twine that hangs from the top
of the rods keeps twisting itself into neatly shaped
nooses. I did not tell anyone that these rods hanging
in the living room are from the old house. I watch the twine,
my mother, father, and wonder which one will see the shape first.
Her Hand Looked So Small

I

Standing at this corner
watching the cars go by,
we saw a boat being lugged
by a rusted green truck
limp past us.

A

I remember being very young
and cold standing inside
a large, damp and unfamiliar
wooden garage. The smell was bad
and the paint was peeling off the walls.

A one

You and my mother
were trying to take a large wooden
red and white boat off some type of sled.
I was told to stand over to the side
where buckets of things that smelled
like dead mud worms were stacked.

B

I remember rubbing my hands together
and feeling how red and cold my fingers were.
I heard mother yell and then saw red trickle down
her hand.

B one

Then I saw her cry. Her hand had dipped back
between the wooden boat and the wooden garage wall.
Her hand looked so small.

II

I had seen you cry many times,
but I had never seen my mother cry.
I have held your hand and given you hugs.
I have never hugged or held her hand since
that day in the wooden garage with the wooden boat.
My Mother's Room and My Father's Ghost

My mother's kitchen has a different season from the rest of the house. But it has the same season year in and year out. The floor is damp, the air is hot and the counters always have drops of water, as if they had just been wiped off.

I do not believe that my mother ever left the kitchen. All the other rooms of the house have my father's touch. Cold, sharp and immediate.

There seems to be a great dark all around the inside of the house. My mother has gone away. My father never says a single word about my mother's disappearance. The kitchen has become off limits to the whole family.

My father hired an outsider to live in mother's kitchen.

The new woman walks bent over at the waist, even when she is not carrying anything in her arms. We decided we did not want his woman here, we want to give her back.

My father does not come to supper anymore. We do not care.

We hear some kind of swinging coming from my father's room but we are afraid to go down into the basement.

The new woman is not afraid and she goes down to where we all know our father's roots are spreading and dying.

She comes up to us at the dinner table carrying a rope. The rope has a long knot with flesh around the edges. The rooms of the house all become warm and without shadow.
A Family Made of Unlikely Ties

It's funny how when I look at my mother, and sometimes my father, how similar they look, even to the point that I know their blood must be the same.

Both of them are masters, people who can travel and always find their way out. When it comes to tucking away pain they are the best. The only sign, the only visible sign of pain they have is a large wad of juicy chew stuffed into their cheeks.

Raw and red, yes my mother and father both believe that if it starts out as raw and red then it must be good. Just like cows, cows are good, cows are fat, warm and follow well.

The furniture they left for me in their house seemed to be left for someone much bigger, or at least for someone with larger shoulders. While most of my relatives mourn in the rooms I feel like I am sitting in a room full of sad pieces of thread.

There were so many small stringy things left floating that I found myself threading and rethreading. I could not see to take my eyes away from the silver spittoon off to the side. I knew it was fake, something just for show, but for a small moment I thought I smelled something red and something raw.
My Family Grows Pain: Ghost Dirt

My family has pain just as bad
as some of the families have farm.

All my family has grown up
in the midwest. Corn, hogs,
and work days as long as they are not
do not mean a thing to them,
except that they know how to put
their pain in bushels.

No one in my family has ever
set one foot on a plowed field
that is not their own. They have never
milked a cow that they did not breed.
My family just happened to be born
in the midwest. It was not by choice.

Being born was rather a convenience.
They live on the land, not on top of the land.

Each year my family gets smaller.
Everyone goes home and the homes
even get smaller. My family grows
pain very well. On cool clear fall
mornings I see them all wiping the pain
from their dripping faces before they go
work the fields.

All that seems to be left of their bodies
is simply a cloud of ghost dirt and the smell of pain.

The erosion that wipes the land has become
embedded firmly on top of my family.
PART FOUR
Beginning a Family

If I were a house
I would not like straw,
If I were a house
I would not like brick,
I have never before
allowed my arm to be broken
but if I did I would not
want it in a structure
that would be long and lean.
I would want a large square room
wrapped all around me, and folded
in at the corners so that I could
tuck and carry myself away at will.

When the whole house shakes
I move too and I move fast;
still I do not like the things
houses stand for and are built from.

Ghost smoke seems to be the abundant
material for the houses full of families
and laughter. If I had to be a house
I would be attached over a train
and use the track to tell time and make
distance.

If I were a house
I would let my mail hang outside,
If I were a house
I would miss rubbing my hands together
to keep warm
because I would have to rely
on the people inside for heat.
Strapped by the Belt

Then, but not finally the rain falls. 
The liquid hits the ground like the sound 
of a person slapping insects dead on her arm.

We both watch him and stand almost on top 
of him, unaware that we are hampering him. 
You stop and pick your teeth with a rough piece 
of grass or weed and I bite my lips and press 
my shoulders deep into my chest.

I do not want him to grow up like you. 
Even now, as he smiles he is small 
and secretive just like you.

This shelter leaks. We all sit close. 
We both put him in the middle, not because 
we want to protect him or keep him warm 
or even make him feel safe. We want to put distance 
between us. Human distance. Distance grows in our family.

Our house is just a bit larger than this shelter. 
I try to imagine just me and my son alone. Here, 
in this shelter it is easy to think of alone.

I travel in my thoughts to our house. 
To our tables, chairs and books I make direct paths. 
All these things feel like tombstones.

The smallness of our house stretches around me. 
Then, with thunder everything switches itself back 
and I reach behind and touch your belt and feel safe.
Good Cow

The nights you could not sleep it off  
I would stand and watch the cows  
eat, sleep and listen to them moan.  
You made the same sounds but your noise  
seemed disgusting almost as if you were ranking  
your throat inside out and backwards.

Cows

I always stayed in the same room as you  
until I knew you were deep asleep,  
the kind of sleep that you didn't know  
or care what house you were bedded down in  
just as long as someone was there holding  
warmth for you when you were ready to use it.

Cows

This is my father's house, and I have decided  
this is the last time you will sleep it off---  
Just a moment ago you were still my husband  
breaking back into the house but not now, you come  
breaking into nothing but lost darkness. I hear cows,  
all this time I have stayed awake for you.

No more room left for me to stand in this room.  
I am heading out to the barn. I want to get into  
one of the stalls and pretend the bull is my father  
and talk to him gently. Plead with him as I brush him  
to forgive me for taking a weaker breed. I will tell him  
I know I am a good cow. I give sufficient milk.  
I hear him blowing across the trough.
Cattails

So the one day that you took me
for the drive out to the country,
to search for cattails
was supposed to be romantic
for me?

It was cold and rainy.
I already had a cold
and a pile of paperwork
falling off my desk,
I couldn't even see the top.

You suggested heavily,
that I get out of the truck
and go into the ditch
and pick as many cattails
as I wanted.

I was picking cattails.

Not because I wanted to
but because you had decided
that it was the task
that I had to do that day,
that minute for you.

I tried to only pick
the cattails that were already
half empty.

I stand staring in our hallway
at the glass jar, the large jelly-jar,
that holds the cattails straight.

The cattails are captive and tall,
I already know that.
I know because I am standing
on the forgotten fringes
of our human-made island.
The First Home

I try to sit comfortably
in the first house
we have bought together.
I find it hard to look
at the walls because they hold
so many pieces of the past family.

The members of the past family
come back and hammer pictures
into our walls and stick our clothing
out on the trees. Nothing seems to be able
to stop these survivors.

I feel my husband slowly growing bald.
My hands have become thin and bloodless,
almost as if they are preparing to die.
Still we try to share each other in this house.

The past family members have made a mask
that covers the whole inside of the house.
We must move from this house. But when I say this
my husband acts like I am only speaking of taking a trip
to the food store. He asks me to pick up fresh onions.

As I walk out of the house,
I hear him talking to the past family members
and he is telling them everything will be fine.
Even though I do not need one I grab my hat
because when I pull it way down the shadow
makes my face look like half a mask.
I say to him I will be right back.
Pulled Back, Pulled Out

Too warm in the kitchen
with the curtains not pulled back.

The cookbook has been pulled out
but not opened. She stands still
in front of the sink with the book
to the left on the counter next
to the box of knives.

She can not open the cookbook.
The outside of the book looks too much
like the journal she kept as a young girl.
One day her mother read the whole way through
her book. Since that day she has never been able
to open a book with yellow flowers on the cover.

Her husband gave her the cookbook on her birthday.
She has never opened the book because it reminds
her of her journal. Her husband walks into the kitchen.
Opens the refrigerator and pulls out a can of beer.
He picks up the cookbook and drops it flat on the floor.

She sees a small envelope sticking out from the pages.
Her husband picks up the card then quickly throws
it away in the trash can behind the stove.
She does not move. Her husband leaves and belches loud
in the next room. She searches through the trash
for the card. The woman's name on the card is not hers.

She picks up the cookbook and places it in her roasting pan.
She puts in carrots, onions, celery, water, salt and pepper.
Then she pops the tin pan in the oven and turns it on high.
She walks out of the kitchen to the backyard.

It is cool and she can see everything much better.
The curtains are pulled back and out of the way.
Tied Down

A

I am dead somewhere inside a tree.
Dead somewhere inside a tree in this room.
There always seems to be some kind
of snow in the air. The snow begins
here in this room.

I am attached to the thick of the trunk.
I am linked to roundness. Sitting in this room
I walk through fields with the photograph album
and become one all by myself again.

B

I spar with myself in the kitchen
because the utensils are familiar.

My belly aches from the all-day snowfall.
When I look out the window the energy
is strong, white and warm.

C

The kid is asleep somewhere inside me.
You are blind from drinking, as usual.
I never seem to leave this room anymore.
But you do often.

Every time you come back
you still are falling flat down
from somewhere else.
PART FIVE
Missing Lovers and Sidewalk Cracks

The clothing is zebra-striped and the windows face the street where the dogs gather with humans to keep the night and its hot summer dampness smooth company.

The restlessness that is rising is mysterious and thick, light bounces keenly in the horizon and then colors wait for full balance and focus sharp and frozen in the windows.

The woman is topless remembering the highway outside her first home and her first husband. She notices how rough, almost like wax milk cartons her breasts feel to her slight touch.

Down below her a man she used to know by touch stumbles, and slides into her bag of garbage. His boot makes a large deep incision. Along the tear comes a hard sound of clumsiness.

There is no use in trying to pull together the gap in the bag. He knows scotch tape will grow yellow and lose its grip.

She hears the noise and knows that she does not anymore own the pieces of routine in the bag. She does not even have a rubber band to tie around the neck of the bag.
Tinting the Puzzle

He says to me his day is breaking.
But it is more of the way he tells it,
the sealedness and the profanity he feels
toward the sun. His universe is invaded
and the invasion is of soldiers who appear
like workmen in overalls made of mountains.

The train is still waiting at the station,
his hands shake and the appetite of the steam
becomes the penance for the late spring.
We try to exchange definitions to get some true meaning
and not the usual limp illusions. But everything
keeps coming up.

We look to the front of the buildings,
but it is all a joke, the weather itself
is slumped behind us under a blotch of trees.
The moments that pass us become skittish
and our entire weight is balanced on the fresh
edge of a broken mirror.

One morning at breakfast I picked up a piece.
It is waiting for something to be born inside it.
In my and your best interest I decide to leave it in
a tint and prefer to finish my life and food
in a tint of floral retreat and not in postponed simplicity.
Water Will Always Stay

Once we used to describe ourselves as a low floating boat. Now leaning back with exhaustion we look over all the cuts on our arms, legs and belly. We both have been wronged and still all the years have not taken the time to remove the delicate box and chain that we put so quickly inside one another. The day we gave the gift we made a pact to always believe in islands, umbrella trees and intricate seeds we will never be able to taste.

The box and chain are so far inside me that I feel pain up to my elbows. This is especially tedious at night, when we bump innocently into one another trying to keep from touching the bed corners.

There is a terrible puzzle between us. Images of tombstones and beefsteak float through as swiftly as ocean water. I keep insisting to you that there is a carpenter out there waiting for us to begin to restore and even rebuild our boat.

Somehow the water will stay all around us and become as necessary as napkins. We will learn how to use the liquid as a lasting souvenir. So, the polluted leaves and trees will not end up as threatened pleasures and broken emigration laws.
Desert Water Line

If all of a sudden I did come to believe that there would be no tomorrow and waves in the ocean, that I have only seen once with you that strange time early spring with Indian art piled high in the back of the car, almost as if alone we were the carriers of all beadwork of all time.

Then and only then would the waves maybe begin to look like obedient but separate occurrences of dense useful functions. The days and mostly the wet mornings were always below us trying to catch us and force us to wait, to hang.

We watched the shadows of old men showing their thin sons how to successfully crack crab and lobster. Showing how to get to the deep meat. The skinny green and clinging seaweed was thrown aside so fast that it sounded sharp and brittle like a twig from a dying tree when it hits water. The old men said almost in unison to their lean sons that only particles of sand could snap, snap and snap louder than the stringy seaweed.

The tall sons did not hear the water sound. They only saw the stuff floating that smelled dead on top of the water where their fat fathers had thrown seaweed, scales, empty tin cans and dull knife blades.
All Darkness

I inherit many things but most of all darkness; you tell me it is the voice of my mother but I hear the difference, I know what it is like to keep dialing left to right and left to right.

The clothing I wear is dim and unmarked. While I walk I will not unleash anything, and since you believe I already look like someone else, does it matter what I answer you goes unheard? Your deafness is as clean as a surgeon's mask.

My only yielding is to balance, my own balance. The glare of the cutting edges of blades of our kitchen knives piles itself to the top of our walls and all light is pushed aside and out of the way.

The endless walking, endless rearrangement of our furniture does not produce the special language that carpenters have with their tools, tools that build and do work. We continue to wait and with this comes dimness.

The water becomes warmer and all our food preparations and the oil we use so generously quietly allows itself to become hot in the iron skillet. With the skill of our lying children we cover the utensil and wait for the drowning darkness to begin.
PART SIX
Long Poem: Broken into Short Paragraphs

Here we are, they are here and we all are talking, speaking, trying to sound and it is all about what looks right or wrong, what does good or evil sound similar to? And where are the pieces? The missings of the puzzle. We all become themselves. Satan is the dead small branch of the purple lilac but the poverty becomes purpose of the proportion. But there is conversing with the external worlds, the outside worlds, the areas around the throne. The throne is where Man is turning on his own back where perfection is nothing but a simple production. The existing realities only in the imaginations are designs of each side.

We have taken care to make ourselves worlds. Worlds of death and the incapability to make judgments or even attempt to govern ourselves, but we become the land of pretenders. The generation asserts and it tries very hard to cast off all those humans who are not better. Who hinder, who are bad men and who display and consist of only vile. But it does take all as individuals to make such artists as Raphael and Inness and not just manufacture sculptors. Things will have to do well and not dwell on the hungerings for bread.

The wine and life are two. These develop accordingly and the opposing truths will coincide. The opening will be cut and formed into and inside some part made into some extra area of a baptism. There will appear the wind and the light and the top soil. It will not let itself be left to only represent. This will take knaves, the lords will no longer eat all the supper. But it will always have the time and the material to continue.

Nothing is less even if someone is inside it. Standing by it or living in it or even believing in it---it becomes the society. The throwing off will keep occurring because it needs to, because we want it or it wants it. It will not allow itself to be embraced but it will beam for all those who know how to err. The design is that of nature and all mortal things wise. The arguments and the awful vivid thirsty insinuations will and must be the beginnings' foundations. But no one must kneel for pictures all the waking time.

The idea or presence of infants will not be seen but embalmed. The heads and insides of the babies will emanate from us all as youthful rolling and fleeing clouds. Fat clouds. Weak and wicked must be, but it will be made to receive such things as rainbows and the name of Mary, John and Elizabeth. The sense of eternity will be felt of submissive will. To reject will be demanded but to tolerate will be more meaningful and the beneathness will be separated and those willing will acquire seats.

There will be spots where graves must live. The offspring must live. But the things will calmly descend and all ages will stand
and face the circled life. There are the multitudes and the milky way will be the green in the fields. The people are solitary and steamed and streamed inside caverns. Stars are somewhere, such as Egypt, and reflected in the dragons and will always meet in friendship. The rulers, the nations and the family are purifying and protected by the diamondness of art and there is not need to look further into the heavens. Because the humble are shaped to fit and the first made descriptive here. The branches are pears and the fruit is particular about who it will help and who it will let help it keep up.
Buckling the Grave

I

The weapons are circles and the machines are vicious. Men and women swarm together in one hot bunch and try to scatter the forming explosive sounds.

The wheels of the machines are too small for the noise and the rumble of marching brings a heaviness to the furious flutterings of the parasol shaped swarm.

II

Tap bones tap, tap skeletons tap, the drums grow sharp. The interior of the circle grows warmer as the beats become louder. Voices speak only in one-dark-syllable words.

III

Still the swarming has not found any blank breakthrough; there does not seem to be any word for the life that will be left over. Still, the men and women do not stop, they keep shuffling.

IV

The air is attentive. The machines are nothing but crusts of things that will stay buried beneath desert hot sand. The forces have gathered and made rough sooty sleeves of their uniforms soft.

The shrivellings of time and the falling down of homelife has been bucked, bucked clean and bucked clear.

V

Marching, moving, and metal music / whistling has been captured and will be used only to replace and rescue the grave. The swarm is a double profession an instinctive whole.
Never Give Away Your Name

Someone is speaking; do not listen, do not tell your full name. This someone will begin talking to you by telling a good story. The story will be made of porcelain and healthy colors.

Your name will be called and you will want to go forward but do not go and answer. Stay away and think of things you did when you were a child.

The story will be familiar you will want to contribute but keep yourself silent. Take your turn and go down the hallway, allow yourself once again to become small, tiny and tireless.

Keep your full name to yourself, do not give your name to anyone else. When you give away your name all that is left is the final spitting and choking on language and words that do not and will not agree.
Weathered Sunworshipers: Remeeting an Old Sunbathing Friend

I

And then she said she let her dress fall off
to one side of her shoulder and then she said
she let herself touch a copy of herself in the mirror.

The sea was banging away just as it had been the afternoon
she watched herself in the mirror. She smiled as she pressed
one breast to another and noticed how much better she felt
when she touched them like light loaves of bread. She used
to help her mother knead bread dough every Sunday morning.

II

We were young and thin lying on the plaid blanket
belly down with our bathing suit tops all the way off
and trying to tell each other about touching fleshy
and puffy lips and breasts.

I listened to her as if my ears were ice-cream scoops
pulling every word in and shoving them solid inside me.

III

I notice now how many of our secrets have turned to paper
and turned to stumps. The collapse of our skin has made our exteriors
similar to cobwebs. When we greet each other it is with pale
arms about the neck.
Blue Line

I turn away from you
to the double window
and instead of seeing
a blue horizon
I see a pool of gray water
and a thin line of white trees
with thick wet moss.

You pull yourself toward
me and my half of the window
and then without asking,
close both the windows.

You seem not to notice
and punch your pillow
as if nothing, nothing
had just happened.

But it did.
Something did happen.

I dream of zippers
and in my dreams I unzip
everything you have ever touched.
I rip out old thread,
but I end up fixing the snags
and replacing the buttons.

I wake and see a small slice
of light trying to come in
through the closed window.
The reflection of the water
on the trees looks pencil thin blue.

I don't care any longer
you sleep without air
because I am sewn so deeply
into place that nothing, nothing
can pull me away.
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