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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2000
This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Victor Alan Streeby

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

______________________________
Major Professor

______________________________
For the Major Program

______________________________
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  
ever 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 cockleburs.

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,
asps 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 crosshares, 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,
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. The 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,
it's 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
tree, green
in early spring

gooseberry bush
grows to bear
its little fruit:

Yellow-green globes
with greener veins
striping their skins.

Smoother, 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 riffling 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,

rendering 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.