The velocity of dust

by

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Gary Joseph Whitehead

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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Was it good that we could not make you
whole or real enough, who have survived in the shadows
the light makes coming through the leaves,
even as finally lost one day or exiled, you
climbed the air, flying on faith, sunblind
against the future,

but never so far from your beginnings that it was in your nature
to abandon us, or break, without homesickness above the clouds?

-- Deborah Digges
Gulls
THE WAKE OF THE BOAT

for days after the boat capsized they came like terns
dressed in black and white to pay their respects
they came bearing hope with great amber baskets of fruit
in tanned summer hands and offerings and slow melodious songs
they came because they’d all crossed such a vast expanse
on overloaded boats and because one needed family
no matter what the cost they came the way José had
with a pair of good shoes and envelopes full of sorrow
they came until the house was full then they worked to pay the passage of
another another
child born they stitched away their fingerprints
in the red brick buildings soldered gleaming stones into
golden rings
precious in their many hands and when Bobby drowned
they came in the rain
and continued to come because of an overloaded fishing boat
and when they came they came in bands and
everyone knew they came with what they could
LINE DANCING

It's the lady with the meaty arms
back-stepping in line at the market

who hully-gullies me back: our mother
dressing us up in clip-on neckties

and hand-me-down suit jackets,
wiping off the day's dirt with a lick

of the kleenex tucked up her sleeve,
the pinchy ride in the station wagon

to St. Anthony's through back streets,
and the smell of chourico and peppers

when my brothers force me first
through the door. Olive-skinned girls

too tall despite flats, and their mothers
and grandmothers and aunts, and mine,

already dancing in line, elbows swinging
out of pastel dresses like thick, featherless wings,

and all of us boys, mute to the music,
sitting in cold, stoic folding chairs, ignoring

as best as we can our patent leather shoes
that slide along the floor without us.
FLYING KITES

~ for Michael

All afternoon we fight the pull of string,
resist the snap of twine, the losing flight.
We roam through the wide blue, shepherding
clouds, our necks aching from the persistent
upward tilt. Far off, the flap of small sails
full of wind. When my brother unravels slack
his kite dives after mine, a dogfight to sate
that other wrestling need waiting inside us
like the glint in a stray mongrel's eyes.
Swerving, our kites peck at one another,
in their tangle give up their separate shapes,
and fall at last like one broken bird — that
all our lives we walk toward, reeling string
till the mending and the next good breeze.
ICICLES

We used to pretend they were knives
days when the sun came out
bright as the light trapped inside them,
and that we were pirates in the Arctic,
all we knew of the geography of cold.
And once when the horseplay melted
into something else, the talk of one of us
moving away, we counted the drops
as they gathered at the tips and paused there,
as if in the change from one state to the next
the solid things we held could keep
from falling apart before our eyes.
SWIMMING TO THE FALMOUTH RAFT

I hold to the shaft of thick tawny rope
and kick my way out, surface from the blurry room
where minnows school like my mother's silver hair.

I swallow air in great penultimate gulps.
Between me and the buoyed raft where my brothers
stand waving, the chop is a race of white snakes
being born perpetually out of the shining, a chowder
I shimmy through, my skinny legs contracting
along the braid like a squid, my drowsy arms hauling,
hand over hand, as I have seen lobstermen do.
When I lose my hold and bilge my eyes, I am blind,
whelmed, tangled in wrack, pitched in the squall.

Any shout only lifts out of its effort into the skirl
of bathers as perfunctory as a gull. When I see again,
there is a dark hatch my legs work toward
as if in a dream, the irrevocable push to that place
where I learn how to swim, and a spent breath
I let out before I'm lifted into the many hands of light.
FEEDING TREES

—for Michael

No apparatus but a running hose
and the deep black suck of covetous thatch,
my brother works beneath the cool, slow gauze
of the tree's shade, snaking the bubbly gush

into its own wordless verbosity.
I know he thirsts with them in their reaching,
can nurse any sapling into a tree.
And if he forgives the sun its leaching,

it's because he waits too long for summer,
all the winter season chipping old paint
to pieces, grinding blades until they're sharp
as beaks. Now he compensates for truant

rain. The force-fed hose drains the pond of ducks.
But he must swell to watch the leaf stay green.
Middle brother, so used to being tugged,
it's a wonder he still has arms to swing.

He yanks the hose out like a big black root.
His reflection swirls down the gaping hole.
I wish that months from now I could visit,
see his thousands of hands begin to fall.
We're here three days and everything
but us is set in its ordered place,
so we refinish our kitchen table.

We remove the old layer of dark varnish
like seven years of getting sober,
like one year of being married.

The sanding nearly wears me out.
Somehow it's like we've done this before,
taken something old and made it young again.

Through the universe of floating dust
spinning in the open door of the garage
I watch you work the sandpaper in the nooks,

and I realize that we've always done this.
I imagine your hands moving over me
in the way you have of removing blemishes,

and I think of the scars you don't know about.
The dust, predictable in its velocity,
settles around us like November snow.

Wiping with tack cloth, I tell you about
another garage and the thought of running
the car with the door closed,

drunk and hiding, first snow of that year.
You dust me off with your baseball cap
and take me outside for some air.
In the ditch along our gravel road
we stoop in quiet like deer to eat them,
the wine of their juice on our hands
sweet as any guilt that afterwards
we'll hope to soap away, what the body pays
for its indulgences. Seeds in our teeth
like loose fillings, we fix our hold

to what the height of day belays to us,
a still but frantic buzz, like the whisper
in the corn that in our separate heads
must just be the sounding of an impossible
falling far from our hunger to live,
a dark stain leaping over fields
to the west of wherever we might be.
PICKING PEARS

for Elvira Fernandes

I stand on the top rung and the step ladder
shakes; above me the winter pears just out
of reach, clean and strung heavy along limbs
and swaying like my grandmother's aprons
hung on the line to dry. I drop one into
the bag she holds open below me. She grins,
and I'm drawn into the arms of her gaze --
down into handfuls of earth, seasons, the empty
cup of a lost daughter, a lost breast.
I'm stitched into miles of quilts, curtains,
tablecloths, hems of pants, skirts.
I'm held to her like a button on a shirt pocket,
and I smell soap, tomatoes, chicken soup,
Portuguese sweet bread, goat cheese, pears...
and I lower myself out and around the gnarl
of branch, down the ladder to take the full
bag of the fruit I love, warm from
the sun and spotted like her old hands.
SUMMER

One fourth of my life has been summer, short paroles from sentences diagrammed in chalk and opened books, time looked forward to and then spent mostly wondering what to do with it. The time of year that swings in my head like a screen door, summer's a thing I step out to when I sleep: a place of broad leafiness and birdsong, erased paths and roads of broken shells. It arcs and wheels in my head like herring gulls and bicycles, dizzy and hungry and joyous until I'm called from the dream by my young mother's voice. In the cool dark, I listen to the first excited rumblings, and wait in a fraction of eternity for a bell to ring, an open door to bring a warm slice of sky.
APRIL FOOL'S

I swing all morning
to the time of my life,
repairing neither porch
boards nor the sagging
eaves later somehow
than I would have thought,
finding myself propping instead,
one summer afternoon,
a plank against the pear tree
my grandfather planted.
And it's as though all along
his being gone has only been
some other procrastination
of mine when I rise
suddenly from the swing
and look in the window
for the bowl of fruit
beyond the dusty glass
that grafts my face to his.
MOWING

Grass rains into my shoes
as I push, and when I stop to empty them
the years fall out until my father is the man
behind the machine
and I'm the one sitting on the patio
watching him mow.

There is no way to know at six
the scowl of sweat distilled by unloved work,
or the liquor of the American dream
that seeps each night into the house,
or that above all else the fescue
of two dead grandfathers

will forever grow. Only sprinklers
in adjacent yards to complete the arc of time,
the summer of another year seemingly intent on giving up
to autumn, and in manicured plots
from coast to coast the mowing of grass
that forces its way up out of the ground.
Here in this hard place, my face to the gales
amid the crags the past sculpts,

I search the glacial slope for my father's
loping form and for the proud boulder dropped

like a briefcase on a kitchen floor.
What more is there at the end than the harsh

wind of words to recall the climb, the myth
a burden drives into bones as deeply as a life of work?

The falling and the gathering up, the falling
and the gathering up of hope and always

something farther beyond the topmost rock,
so that now I can see my indefatigable father,

a teacher, high above a sea of apathetic faces
with his tie loosened and his hair gone gray

fathering thoughts of letting the stone roll
from his tweed shoulders, and down on his knees

nearly relinquishing optimism the way these stunted
trees regaled by wind and thin air collect

themselves into themselves yet remain ever green
and alive even this high even this untouched.

I have known the withering and the giving in,
the withering and the giving in to weakness

always and the breath that comes easier after
rolling back down into valleys, and the fog a child

loses himself in purposely for the need to be unguarded.
What I grope through even now, blindly downward,

scrambling for the balding weight I carry for a time,
drop and let roll, carry for a time, drop and let roll.
TENANCY

Somehow always
   in late summer, here
      where the cats are buried

in my mother's backyard,
   the mint bows
      its long flowering heads

for what afternoon gathers up
   and slings across the yard --
      green prayers

that together with the wind
   bend earthward
      as if in offering

amid the day-long shake
   of the black locust,
      quiet percussion

recurrent in its leaving and
   sent purring from leaf to leaf
      into cool ground.
FALMOUTH

Weeks that summer we fled the house
on the island where our grandfather
was dying, and kept to the estuary,

netting blue claws in green currents
and digging for clams in the black mud.
Weeks that summer fled. The house,

when the tide turned and the riverbanks
bequeathed their small dull treasures,
was a dying place, so we kept the estuary

secret and gathered our fear like
netting blue claws in the green currents.
Weak, but fed on summer and the house

full of children, my grandfather came out
when the tide turned. Along riverbanks
where drying crabs crept up the estuary
to die in the sun, he sailed his catamaran,
gathering like our secret fears
that week of summer when he fled the house,
and his dying swept through us like the estuary.
KNOCKING OUT FROGS

-- for my brothers

All afternoon we circled
with our bandy sticks of willow,
thwacking bullfrogs in the narrow
grooves between their filmed
eyes. Mud-covered, sun-burned,
we heard our mother calling,
her aimless yoo-boos trawling
like loons across the still pond.

There were gadflies, sewing
needles stiching woodsmoke
in the air, and so a spell we wove
out of a deep green knowing,

a stunning trick made simply
out of sticks and their invisible
arcs onto the slippery lives we stilled
long enough to hold and verify.
THE WORLD FORGETTING BY THE WORLD FORGOT

In her neat house on the last street
with any dignity my grandmother must
sit in her mahogany rocker and count
the ticks of the grandfather clock,
little chips of the unremitting chisel
that whittles away a shape's significance.

Not a place of thought, but of solicitude,
walls and shelves burdened with tokens
and old photographs, a brooding space
where the spoken word is heard as seldom
as the phone rings and as often as the rain
brings back the voices of restless children.

Is it her sacrifice, then, to remain
the dividend, to mete out to those
who have a share in her what effete
faculties she clings to till the last
swing of the heavy pendulum? And who
holds stock in an old and broken woman?

Is she as ashamed as I am that we've
never known one another? I'm not sure
of her age, and I don't know her address,
but I'm certain that her backyard ivy grows
wild, that my father by now has forgiven her,
that once, simply a child, I could have loved her.
THE FALL

Again, leaves swirling, and I think of being eleven, raking
For the monsignor after school. A yard too big for one boy
And a cool day closing sooner than yesterday into the weeping
Oaks. Four Sisters disappear like a pair of Holsteins

Over the Bishop Avenue bridge. The last lay teacher grinds
His Volkswagen out of the vacant lot, and I'm left alone
To see the curtains of the church balcony window move,
Saint Margaret herself making sure I finish the job I've been given,

My penitence, I think, for swearing into my baseball glove
After dropping a high-fly during gym. And while the shadow
Of the steeple inchess across the grass, I rake at the vague sins
I know I've committed, and at the rash idea that even now

Sparks in my blistered hands. Pile after pile I set ablaze,
Fires that from the rectory window must have seemed
Like the night-watch of some banished tribe to those eyes,
Eyes I was somehow learning, even then, to see myself through.
FOLHOSINO

Huger clucks, thin chicken in summer dust
and in the village children lean like shadows,
waiting for someone. Happening upon this
as welcome as rain, the American goes

into the village. Children cling like shadows
at her knees, but she’s forgotten the words
for welcome, rain. Americano, she goes
back to her first home though the walk hurts

her knees. Somehow, she’s forgotten the words,
forgotten the black bell’s toll upon her tongue.
She walks back to her first home through dirt,
bones, sagging grapes, a childhood song

she’d forgotten, and the black bells toll upon her tongue.
A blind man offers a wicker jug of wine.
His bones sag like grapes. The children sing along
to a song on a radio station out of Lisbon.

The blind man proffers another jug of wine.
She knows she’ll think of this one year:
how a song on a radio station out of Lisbon
and village children taught her the words for

what she already knew. How one year,
waiting for someone, she happened upon this
village of children and learned the word for
hunger, thin chicken clucking summer dust.
MY MOTHER’S FINGERS

Wriggle into the earth, setting the roots
In place, one hand plowing the black soil
Back into the hole, patting it down.

Her sister has been gone three months
And she still fills the emptiness any way she can.
She plants a row of snapdragons and waters them,

Shows me the clematis climbing the fence,
The thyme I planted that has come back to life.
She digs another hole with the small shovel,

And I lower the square bundle of roots,
Imagine their dark, inevitable delving,
Their blind search for whatever feeds them.

When she talks about her, I see the memory
Of my aunt blossom in my mother’s face, open,
Close somewhere between her mouth and her eyes,

And I almost reach for it the way her own fingers do,
As if to capture the resemblance before it fades,
Before the body grows back into the soil.
DOUGHBOYS

First snow and so I remember it falling outside my Voa Voa’s window. Her kitchen heady with the vapor of hot, melted lard,

and Jesus watching us glumly from the wall, arms outstretched to his table of friends, and the whole scene canted above her plants --

a betrayal to her sense of a right house. Hands glossy with olive oil, she scoops out lumps of batter, stretches each eggy glob as if rubbing the folds from a napkin, drops dripping from her hand and fizzing in the pan like lit wicks. *Filhos* fried

and wet and piled on paper towels to drain and cool, and me sitting on a padded chair, feet thawing in a bucket of tepid water,

watching the brown doughboys steam beneath a window snowflakes kiss before they liquefy, and me swallowing the holy drops running down.
MORNING

All at once after the rain had ceased
and I'd made my way through the rocks
of sleep and emerged in the silver
light of our bed, I could see flashing
upon your still face the death I had run from,
only vast in its peace and not grim.
Though it rose and fell and where shadowed
seemed to recede from all I sought in it,
your face wore the perfect sleep perfectly,
as perhaps we go there without knowing
when the rain comes to us in the night
and veering from the storm's swift path
push ahead of ourselves and time
only to burrow in the earth because it is all
we know, and to emerge at last in faint light
as though to small fingers on the window
we only just remember having heard
all at once after the rain has ceased.
ROAD OF BROKEN SHELLS

Ever now, down a road of broken shells
somewhere between salt water estuaries
we walk, three brothers, amid the cries
of herring gulls and the rising swirls

of summer dust. I blaze with the truest
fire of pride at walking home at sunset
with a pair of blue crabs and a pair of sunburnt
brothers, and a road ahead beneath the crest

of a life not yet at war with itself.
I will never need to forgive you that,
and I will never understand just what
makes tides fall and rise within myself.

What anchors me, what laps at my mind's
hull now, is the same force that rocks
boats in harbor. There's a wind that talks
about unmoorings, a sloop that finds

itself adrift beneath a crowd of stars.
Somewhere I walk down a road of broken shells
to a shoreline, where I search distant swells
for lost vessels coming into harbors.
Swallows
WHO COOKS FOR YOU

All along the hills
bales have rolled to stillness,

and above the black bowls
of shadows swallows pivot

and wheel while one by one
white moths, evicted

from the stubble,
vanish into the purple wings

of evening. A hunger
to summer's ending,

driven by the dying light --
the creek curried by the low sun,

a lone boy hurrying home
from school, a barred owl

demanding from the dark
omniscient woods,

who cooks for you,
who cooks for you all?
STORM

All morning it has been raining,
the drainpipe clearing its throat,
water sobbing against the glass,
and at breakfast the shelter
of newspapers we erect between us
makes a silence of words.

I know how the rain can do this:
the light of the eyes gone gray,
anger rolled up into a tight fist,
and doubt seeping out as formless as a sigh.

When you roll off to work, I am left
with what the storm leaves in its wake:
the swallowing of breath
so that it doesn’t fog the window,
and outside in the wet grass
white mushrooms that rise up
quick and poisonous.
Everywhere I look – in yard and field,  
along fence line, in the crack of driveway  
and in thought’s black crook – weeds and vines  
climb away from shadows, the slow grope  
of all things that grow towards light.  
Each day’s Mass – small repetition of words  
first spoken in root, stem, and leaf – anything  
but penitent, the storm of autumn’s grief  
thundering distant as death, and thanks  
come in the proffered hands of blossoms.  
Everything forgiven, even the understanding  
that the same gift of sundering color  
will, in plainsong, move like swift bees  
from each to each in the dwindling sun.
JERSEY BLUES

All her life a picker in the barrens,
she's seen these high-bush blueberries
dress and undress some sixty times.
The white summer bells, breathless

on each tall branch as a carillon
without keys, tweaked by honeybees
into sweet meat and cobalt skin;
she's seen these high-bush blueberries

sixty times grow fat in the sun.
Fingers stained with the sorting,
she's watched her hands become her own,
the cobalt skin turn to sweet meat pie

over quick bones. Boxes heavy
as a head full of sleep, she loads
the summer harvest in a winter dream,
feels the blood come back to her hands.

In the fields the bushes are dead,
coated with ice. Blue sky shines
in their limbs like hands full of blood.
Wind groans like a truck through the pines.
TOTEM

My mother is the leaf I carried home for us; she has drifted down on invisible currents, will settle soon at my feet pale, fluidless. I have not lived long enough to bear witness to this autumn and what follows -- torrents shaken loose from the soul like a collie's bath. Death is the dog I never had -- yes, the one I heard so much about, wanted once after the scattering. I still see the geese sometimes heading south, one half of a cross, a broken religion I learned from my parents. There is a flapping in my head and tokens at my feet, leaves like pages and then this: the one I bring home and the summer in her face.
THE NIGHT BEFORE MARRIAGE

Tonight I have ridden out too far
to catch the sun falling into barns,

and the swallows follow me
like the dark for what I scare up.

No sidewalks here, no one to need them --
just the road and the margin

of crabgrass to frame the corn.
Sometimes I dream of this:

headlights panning over my machine,
the shadow pedalling ahead,

and I'm shorn from sleep to find
a flashlight beam dancing in the house.

You know you've gone too far
when what you scare up in your head

doesn't get swallowed, loops all night
at your ears like a whisper,

and you almost trust what's beside you
when morning finally comes

bright as a burning barn,
two shadows moving behind you.
THE MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY

-- for Mary

Always, it seemed,
in the corner of the yard
beneath the too-long limbs
of the diseased elm

when the leaves had burnt
almost to ash
in the pit,
the last of them breaking

on the chicken wire fence,
there had to come
trailing out of the north
like cocktail party laughter
the harried calls
of migrating geese.

A kind of swerving then,
the smoke only a smell in her feathered hair,
her two goats demanding food
with their pink shaking tongues,
the ash she shovelled onto the soil
blowing into her face,

she shrugged at the stout house,
and its empty stucco arches,
the life she chose
falling out and out of line,
a lone bird spent in the flyway.

Kicking the blade in the black earth,
she folded in the ash,
and then on her knees
tore at the last clumps of clover
for the goats,
handfuls of silence.
THE LANGUAGE OF ICE

Mid-winter the reservoir froze
and we lit a bonfire on the ice,
dragging the dead trees across
the singing solid water, glad
at there being no place left
we couldn't explore. We circled
the fire, bending as low as we could
under the bare arms of the trees,
doing the limbo on thin metal blades.

The sun cinched, evening crept in
like our father's distant whistle,
but we hoisted tires from the pile
on the point, and swung them
into showers of sparks. Ignorant
of the properties of time and fire,

ice and rubber, we gloated there
in the strange smoke, the colorful,
beautiful flames of our father's anger,

and nobody subtracted the inches
as they melted, or gauged the blaze
of our innocence, or thought to clock

that untimely passage when the ice
suddenly cried out for its sacrifice
and the dark swallowed our love.
September rains on the trailer's roof,
while inside at the table that folds
down into a bed the old couple leaf
through the Scrabble dictionary,
challenge anything obscure.

This is what they have labored so long for,
having paid the price to play the game:
here, amid a Cape Cod campground's low pines,
by lantern light, a togetherness once made
impossible by the industry of children.

Outside, the campfire sputters in the dark,
the storm moves on to other states. He pumps
the dimming lantern to brightness while she,
at a loss for words, scrolls a silent language.
MISCARRIAGE

All afternoon a storm gathers on the coast.  
In town the young couple have something planned:  
a small voice raveling its way around  
the clapboard house they both dream about.

The island is abundant with summer tourists,  
coffers of shopkeepers happy as the bells  
on their unlocked doors. With the first drops  
the umbrellas open, curved as bellies  
in a Lamaze class. The expectant mother  
watches the rain through the bay window,  
the fishermen on the dock packing up gear,  
not a fish to show for their labor.

While the sea outside rises, the sea inside  
feels a pull like the moon, or the heart,  
world's raging. The dock slips into the sea.  
Come morning, no sign of the storm but red tide.
WANTING CHILDREN

In the garden when Sharen tells me
she's thought of becoming pregnant,

I touch a poppy's round pod,
imagine its painless, elegant birth.

She is flushed from the heat,
but glad that we found this place,

with its English herb garden
where we stop and rub our fingers

on leaves, amazed to smell pineapple
and lemon, chocolate and mint.

Our hands fold in a melange of scents,
tarts that we stack atop one another.

Day lilies have opened their lips
as if we could feed them. The trees

are dangling fruit, the temptation
to forget about money, responsibility.

Otherwise I couldn't imagine fatherhood,
but here nothing seems impossible.

Even the soil has pushed out stones
and they wait in the sun to be lifted.
MIDWIFERY

How can things so small make such a sound:
wails that seam the clean house of the body
as if to fill with noise that silent eternity
out of which they are built? Once spawned,
how they live for thirst, loudly thirst for life!
Holding them, I go wet at the breast of old
age, rock them in the chair of my arm till a coat
of sleep hardens over them. Fleeting grief
to have to smile and give one over to the mother.
Tiny hands, impossibly wrinkled, waving goodbye.
And afterward, on the drive home down dark streets,
I hear the creaking in my head: a sound tethered
in amnion being cut away, the carpentry of my
children, my throat hammering with little feet.
Otherwise it would have been easy,
nothing to plant but bones,

nothing to wear but what wasn't shame.
What is so original about that?

We were always in the garden then,  
though we never knew it,
or that it would be, in the end, about space.  
Since the only anxiety gnawed below

the heart and above the sun and moon of sex,  
there could just be the one need

to lie in wait for the beast that was to come,  
to hide in the underbrush of centuries

and listen for the noisy approach  
of our garbed and savage offspring.
A GIFT HORSE

Hoisting the ropes of my legs
out of bed, the pulleys squeal
their complaints, and the light
comes in like an apron on a line.

The night has done its drying,
and the kiss I give my wife
is thirty year's-old, passionless,
as bland as bread without butter.

I donate the toast to the birds,
measure the tiny green swords
that will be my daffodils.
On the radio a forecast of snow.

The neighbor's car won't turn over,
the newspaper soaks on the stoop,
and I know that everything we work for
comes to whatever comes next,

on and on until we lie down
or until the flowers open up,
and that today even the sparrows
turn their beaks from what's given them.
Crows
DRIVING AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIA

Out between the swaying trees
    they have paved this late road,
   a nameless place
where nothing travels but the meadow moles,
blind and curious, who venture out of gulch and tall grass
lured by the smell of new tar.

What if there were no maps,
    no signs with their geometric shapes
and signifying colors?

I have not come this far with you
    only to find ourselves
stalled at a dead-end, lost.
I have learned the stars,
    I have burrowed through my thirty years of sleep
into the well of ancient days,
    climbed the rope of sight to the iris of light
and seen the old city,
    the one road that will take us out of here.

And as for the curious,
    who build in the blood a four-chambered house,
some tunnel to the god of their making
    that opens into the pavement's end --
they’ve driven their twenty miles to a prairie maddened by hindsight,
a place where everything that moves

    moves on all fours or on two wings,
    heads constantly turning, backs bent as cats,
and somewhere beneath the graying weeds --
undone field work to satiate their restless hands
until the dust of passing cars
    happens to cover them.
DUSK

Where the road winds
   out of light and into shadows
   of tall groves,

and behind you all your life
   burns and streams
   like afternoon sun,

and when you've come
   to understand that roads
   do end, and the last

voice living
   into dusk whispers
   cricket-like -- just

before it stops, and you pause
   there thinking how always
   you've turned toward

this end, and ending
   just between the road's disappearance
   and the grassy slope

into the dark pines --
   you look back once at where
   land and sky

converge, you turn and
   run almost, as if to trace
   the strange

pattern of steps
   back to that first wobbly stance --
   and even as you lose

that balance and your feet
   and hands forget everything
   they've known,

you breathe the dark of a dark
   longing as if having waited so long
   for nothing but this.
THIS PASTURE

I've been walking all my life
to get to this wire fence,
thirty years just to glimpse
a bobolink gathering leaf
to make a nest. A summer
of building, a season for
what the ground proffers
to the industrious. The mare
sweeps at flies, grazes.
I could tear down this fence
and follow the currents
of windblown grasses,
sail clear across this pasture.
Yes, there is a place
for every one of us,
a curving world without capture.
A CARTOGRAPHY OF THEN UNTIL EVER

The thinnest lines trace the slave-routes
of our once having been new to one another,
webs we cling to like famished old spiders.
The wider red lines are the wounds we've made;
I'm not certain where they lead, nor do I care.
There are blue highways too, frozen veins
we wear close to our skin for vanity's sake.
Unforgiven, these have to be the life lines.

Somewhere there are back roads that nobody
knows about -- unmarked ways to places vague,
undiscovered. Look, there are no symbols.
You'll know when you're lost there. Faith

will give way to dirt roads, forgotten woods,
and the map won't fold back the way it was.
THE LATE MOVIE

There is always that one head,
too big, too high in the chair
in front of you, cocking from side
to side every time you try
to look around it. No matter where
you move the black roundness

is there, blue light of the screen
shimmering like a halo behind it.
And it has the same dark contours

as all your family's heads,
same long neck, same erect spine,
same jawbones chewing on.

Eventually, the movie ends,
and the long list of credits rolls.
But until the lights come up,

you study that indiscriminate shape
as though it's your own head lolling there,
blacking out the part you want to see.
THE VIEW FROM UNDER THE STREET

--- for W.S. Merwin

When at last the last day comes
no one will recognize the light
as the milk trucks rumble off,
gears of their unwarmed engines
caterwauling the slip of clutch,
and a stray tom sniffing the air
atop a pile of mulch will turn
from the house finch who spills
her beak in the freely given seed
just as the still-dark horizon
blossoms white. In that moment,
every uncountable clock will unwind
in its own vapor, time will go
unmeasured, the seven continents
will heave their collective sigh,
and while the chanterelles rise up
as though in fields after spring rain
whatever lives beneath the streets
on at least one side of the meridian
will see shafts of light
pouring through sewer holes
like the coming of an impossible day.
THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE

Open your mouth and the white moths will fly inside, thick with decades of bloat and blind as the eyes their wings cannot see with. Envious of breath, they are the stillborn litter, blown on millennia of summers like passengers aboard rudderless boats. Feel them with the peninsula of your mute tongue, drag them up to your palette to make the sound that means no. Listen to them ply above canals of days, bartering for the wealth of generations, squandering all for the silence of the cocoon.

Let them sail in until they crowd your head with their greed for light, some of them drowning in the water you're made of, some of them escaping together with what you thought they might.
SOWING GOD'S ACRE

It is the time of day-long planting again
as it has always been after the thaw
ever since the constant roving paused,

and now the afternoon shoulders the sun
into the dim linear distance, weary enough
to let it fall. Still, the machines gaze on,

strew their tiny, dry seeds by the thousands.
Long shadows grope over black lines of earth
long-immured, blind seeding, labor against

a thing no strong love for a place can change.
Yet even the last pass along the west fence,
and the short road back, where one

after another tractors file in the evening dust
like a herd, the way is lit with the thought
of tomorrow and a furrowed sky predicting rain.
LAST SPRING

On the first warm day, we drove
till we were lost in the country.
Away from the cold, driving to live

for an afternoon with just ourselves,
we found a place to picnic by the sea.
The warm day, and first we drove

golf balls into the breeding waves,
then on a fire in the dunes made tea
to drive away our colds. To live

like that was something that we've
talked about all our lives: when finally
a warm day comes, first a drive

to someplace new, a cozy empty cove
to fan the flames. Finding in a day
away the old drive to live.

The hope a changing season saves
in us without swerving, it's why
on the first warm day, we'll drive
away the cold. Drive to live.
POTLUCK

There is always enough for everyone, and then some, dishes done a dozen ways and carried in like gold, and for every recipe, some history, some special spice that goes untold. A cup of conversation to every ounce of summer rain. The meringue of an umbrella opening. White croquettes of chipped balls like mushrooms risen in the grass. Afternoon, a dry surrender. Television.

Come dark, all gone home, your kids with flashlights prying nightcrawlers out of the wet lawn, and the talk inside dying to whispers as you dry the dishes, there’s her young face that returns to itself, the botched concoction when first you kissed it, lips that dip now at a familiar well while outside the spotlit trees drip like coins the wealth of a thing you’d almost forgotten you’d wished for.
All I know of what comes in earnest
after the first break when gutters
come back to life and the trees leak
amid the speech of birds come home
and a vision of what comes next comes
and comes to a point in the distance
is that here, guileless in the yard,
or coming as it did last year in woods
where the path comes to unexpected ends,
I've never come once out of dark months
my mouth so flooded, my hands so empty,
the place I live so mine with coming-to.
LYZARUS

The rivers rise and touch the living banks,  
the grackles garner berries from the bush. 
A stone is pushed by the hands of currents,  
and roots are sent to wander through the crush  
of ice and ages, to hold and give thanks  
again to the mountain and its torrents. 

Only those things that have suffered and died  
can know the light that comes after darkness  
as more than physical, a spectrum truth  
divides in the universe, nothing less  
than love itself. Even rivers that ride  
over ice, ever downward, have their faith. 

Life is a possum caught in headlight glare,  
and death is what we see by the roadside  
in the morning sun. What grows later out  
of the church of bones and spreads itself wide  
and deep is fed by the song that's sung there  
and the arms flung open to catch the light.
TABERNACLE

Waking alone to bells
and to the bed anchored in its room,
and outside the anguish of herring gulls
careening their hunger,
I am full of what has left me,
exuberance and something else -- the wreck

of the dream slipped back
into the folding kelp, the gulfweed
and bladderwrack, the shifting sands.

There was a car,
a husk of rust sunk in a field,
witch grass growing up through the floor,

and a church of bones,
possum or raccoon, not far from it,
just as empty, just as full with hunger.

Is this what steers
the spirit back, one prowling
given up for another? The body scuttled

for its own good?
This has to be what we're built for,
the eviction and what the tide must usher in.
CROWS

-- for Sean

Late September, and on the slow commute
snow is predicted on every channel,
and since all that he passes leans lifeless

with the dry speech of its making —
staggered arrows of soy beans cackling
in golden rows, fractured ailanthus

knocking hollow knees in a ditch,
and a barn's fluted gaps howling music —
he calls upon the living he remembers seeing

driving implements silent now for the respite
and deaf to the gray sky, which itself
flourishes, as from some sudden

resurrection of long-dead signals,
these black birds that fall from clouds
and caw like static on drifting waves of air.
METAMORPHOSIS

I never want to go back to that place
where the chrysalis falls free,
where addiction's silky robe unwinds
with the slow ambivalence of summer.
Another trip there and I might never leave.
Were I to flit there again among the twisting

grounds, I'd light on Screaming Rock
and listen for the silence of my first self,
and in the soft cocoon of what was lost
I'd prod the darkness for what rested there
and the truth it took to make it hatch.
I'd imagine an opening, a supple chute

like a mouth filled with sour grapes,
broken promises closing on the skin
of the ripened fruit. I'd feel the seed
of another life growing outside of me,
hanging from a tree in a distant meadow,
squeezing its way out, falling,

flying in the face of the world it denied.
Waiting for Crows in the Snow

For almost as long as the silence
that opens across this flat land
like the hand of a waving giant,

I have been carrying myself back
to the clearing where four roads
meet to look for the crows

I noticed when first I came here.
The black shapes lifting like ash
into evening, dark against dark,

were more than I had ever seen
in one place together, as though
they had come from some solitude

too wingless to bear, and banded
for the exchange of caws that might
break the deep quiet. So I find

myself returning here without hands,
accepting what depends on silence,
the multitudes that pile into one.
HARVEST

The cornstalks are learning to speak their dry language again, their tongues of husks gaming down deathbed rows for the crow's dark craving. Everywhere the ornament of vespers, crude figures of men roughly dressed, the spry play of children and their dusk of whispers.

There are wrinkles in the face of the moon, freckle light earlier now in the sky. Always after death comes birth, a good cry. What earth flourishes in the long fingers of its trees is a trick that ends too soon, the brilliance of its dying that lingers.

Once at the end I will chance to gather out of God's fire the heads of those I've filled with straw life and set to stand in the field of my tragic, idyllic memory. I will speak to the moon like a father, blazing at harvest in all my glory.
Far from home
    and in the middle of the middle of the country,
I am out walking
because there is no one else around,
miles out along the limits of New Providence,
    so silent it could be some other continent.

Late in the day,
late in the twentieth century,
and this horizon that rings in the earth
    is a cathedral of light
filtered through blue bays in the clouds.
Harrowed fields, voiceless

    and hardening,
    having learned all that is expected of them,
roll on for miles.
I follow their wire fences
    all the way to a guidepost for a town I do not know.
Look in every direction and there is a house,

    a barn, a foundation cemented
in the ground. A place so unlike my old Providence,
    though Roger Williams might have liked it here.
    A fine place to build a church.
    A fine place to find faith.
O Pastor, I call you out of history

    just to climb this hill with me.
    I need someone to talk to.
I need you to tell me that these two telephone poles
casting shadows on the road
    bear the weight of something more than symbolism,
and that I might call on the black wires

    that hang from them
should I need to, and send my voice
along their durable filaments,
    through every small town for two thousand years,
to whoever might be
at the other end, listening.
HARBOR

No one else becomes me but me because of you, how I even find myself here -- your doing. Something risen from the one I wasn't, going where I couldn't, I will never love something as new as another, never want for any small boat but the one your hands build around my confidence.

Frightening as the first kiss, this Providence we sail toward, but carry no torch; the way is lit with the sparks our eyes sometimes make when they meet, and the direction told by the compass one heart makes with the magnetism of another.

Stay with me, my north, my direction, my sweet. Tie to me fast with your fastest knot, for we voyage far on unforgiving water.