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"The Bridge from Bristol to Wales"

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"The Bridge from Bristol to Wales"

by

Kurt Alan Clopton

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

Department: English
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Iowa State University
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Travelers And Other Creatures
The Fox

You debate the skull,
missing part of the upper jaw,
your short finger tracing incisors, molars,
pointing out what's what,
considering size, shape, weight, location.
You shake bugs and dirt
loose from the holes,
dark cavities of past function.
You walk this path almost daily,
in the mornings with your wife
before going back to the studio
where you have been since before six,
carving in wax and clay,
molding your history into a vessel,
putting your brother and father
into the form of an ancient Chinese bronze,
discovering, as you go,
the tricks of the process,
the answers to what has been lost
or not documented.
As you brush the white skull with your hand,
I say little, maybe nod,
grunting, Ah, yes, I see, maybe.
I think I'm not a person
for this kind of detail.
Then you recognize the bullet hole.
How had it evaded you until now?
Definitely, most definitely, not a muskrat
or raccoon. Yes, a fox.
The hunt, the chase;
no wonder the upper jaw
is missing.
Cinco de Mayo

I arrived yesterday late at night in the wrap of fog and rain. The driving didn’t get difficult until the last hour, when the faint lines in the center became just one more dull shine on the wet road. Tonight the weather hasn’t changed much, but the party takes place anyway, and I think the chilled wet air is just another complaint that this holiday is being celebrated in the wrong place, on the wrong day and by the wrong people. Still, knowing few, I am here, on the periphery, outside of the circles, of the moment, participating out of place, like the celebration itself.

There are two ghosts here, at least I have seen two. One is a small black dog darting around legs and under tables, hard to keep focused in the firelight. Later, when the fireworks scream toward the sky and the thick hidden clouds I know are there, the dog is gone, scared away. The second apparition is a naked man, tall with dirt white ponytail hair and a beard. He emerges from the steam layer hovering above the hot tub and walks along the edge of our bobbing circle of light. I see him over someone’s shoulder, over the fire, walking haltingly, stiffly, as if wounded in the past, as if drunk on blowing smoke and cold wind, fading away at the edge of the woods.

This is my second night here, my traveling complete for now, surrounded by people I don’t know who will be my neighbors for awhile,
only for these short summer months,
people only to be forgotten or vaguely recalled,
or mistaken for another, like this gathering,
this Cinco de Mayo celebration
on the fifteenth of May.
Another For Grandpa

In the middle of this crowded party room, there is a dull shine coming off his bald head, but there is no sweat, and the smile he has set in place forces a squint from behind his glasses, narrowing bloodshot eyes that are so pink they blend with his skin. He wears a dark blue suit coat, casual, like a passenger on a ship, holding his glass ready, elbow bent and still like stone, anchoring the body as the other arm sweeps and turns in dancing gesticulation, his hand floating and cutting through air like a sail. I want to say his hand is large and calloused, with veins like gopher trails marking their way across bones and muscle, and knuckles bulging like burial mounds, sure signs of heavy labor earlier in life, but I realize I don't know what he has done with all his time, how he grew or where, what paths he took to school to whatever school, what diversions he found on the way home or games he played, even how he lived and slept or what clothes he wore. He weaves between the groups of talkers in twos, threes and fours, holding his clear plastic cup gently, as if it was a child's hand, making his way back to the bottles again.
The Car

He finds the car sitting
in a partially dilapidated
shed behind the house, the house
with its wood grain windows
which seem like dead eyes.
His grandmother isn't dead yet,
and that's why the house still sits unused,
as if moving in would be acknowledging
too much; it would be like stealing.
She's in a home, waiting to die,
and he waits too.

The car is a Ford,
but later he won't be able to recall
just what model; it will escape him,
something that at the time
seemed somehow important,
the reason for the walk around the yard,
as if it might be useful or valuable,
but he will forget it anyway.
He won't even be able to remember
if the tires still held air,
or if there was rust,
or even the color (light blue?).
He will recall sitting in the front seat,
the cool smoothness of the steering wheel,
the thick dust on the dashboard,
he will recall opening the glove compartment
and the trunk. In one of the two
he found something natural, but frightening,
but he can't remember where or what,
and he dreams about it at night
in the form of twisted clothing or blood,
or a nest of rats, and he sits up in bed,
knowing he is in his home,
and she is still holding on.
The Light Bulb Salesman

Mixed lighting, he says,
Let me tell ya, he says,
he is all elbows and knees
like a babe colt,
white hair thicker than you'd think for his age,
older than you'd think for his job,
but he still seems to have the jump.
Most would call him lively,
say he moves well.
At his age my grandfather
was being shaved by Grandma,
and changed and bathed,
sitting in the green chair,
with the fabric dimples which felt like braille.
I used to sit rubbing my hands back and forth
on the arms of the chair, trying to remember,
until they were slightly numb.

Mixed lighting, he says,
we make a tube that does both
those things in one, he says,
ninety percent of full sunlight,
and with that fact he moves away,
examines the lights on the far side of the room,
his dark pants pulled up high
over his white shirt,
making up two thirds of his body,
his torso tiny, arms ungainly,
glasses like my grandfather’s
except those were wire rims,
like in the photograph of him
standing in front of the garage door
wearing a tan or maybe orange shirt,
a dress shirt, button-up.
His lips are curved in a smile
and the sun glints off the skin
on top of his head,
ringed by the closely cropped white hair,
cut like a soldier.
Mixed lighting, he says,
the non interest in lighting possibilities
unnoticed, he explains his bulbs
to everyone in the room,
each in turn, hand on the top
of his stomach, just above the belt,
ninety percent of full sunlight,
he insists, ninety percent.
Grandfather

1
Your room number is 3028,
in the intensive care unit.
The walls between the rooms
and the hallway are glass,
I guess so it’s easy
for the doctors and nurses to watch.
I feel I am invading, looking into each room
(so many different faces with the same expression),
like looking through some kind of filter
showing only the most vulnerable moments.
No one is there when I get to your room
except a nurse who says everyone has left for lunch.
You are sleeping so I don’t go inside,
I just watch through the glass as the nurse speaks.
There is a hole in your stomach, leaking waste,
now an infection, they will have to operate again.

2
I don’t think about you often.
Your body sunken into the hospital bed
like a decaying log on a damp forest floor.
I work hard to remember you
in your overalls, sitting in your chair,
rocking slowly, listening to the television
and the squawking of the police band radio,
the coffee can of chew spit on the floor,
the candy beside you on the table
which you handed out slowly
to each of us as we strained to understand
your unintelligible, frustrated words.
Your face grew red,
and you contorted your body
as you yelled louder and louder,
still without meaning for us,
but your face, your eyes, were so adamant.
Then, as you lay in that hospital bed,
your wet eyes were large
and marble white,
surrounded by pasty skin,
and cut into pieces
by tiny rivers of red blood.
I could only touch your hand
and say simply 'Hello Grandpa,'
and avoid those eyes by looking at your hand,
your hand which felt like a piece of old metal
wrapped in loose, damp cloth.
David's Birthday

The music is dulled in this room, mixing with the slides and scrapes of shoes and naked feet on the glossed wooden floor, dancing quickly around the voices, the highs and lows, the laughs, the sip of drinks, gulps, the smell of marijuana from the courtyard, cigarettes in the doorway, chairs stacked against the far wall, tables too, audience to it all, and David dancing in the middle of the floor, a surreal shadow in the murky thickness of yellow light and slowly stirring smoke, a dancing skeleton with its black shadow sliding away, tugging on the thin angular arms and gaunt torso, the hidden face, the sweat weighted ends of his long hair sweeping slow arcs through the air, blinking in and out of the light, caught in an ethereal state, dancing.

He is gone now, fading away like your shadow when a cloud covers the sun, or maybe growing, spreading out over the thick grass and dandelions in a wave of dulled color, an echo of night pouring out over the ground, or perhaps seeping up from underneath, an animal sensitive to heat, a rising tide of haze and heavy darkness. In the middle of this dusk I see him, still turning, whirling, all arms and legs and long hair streaming out behind, dancing with these early comers, the airy shadows of building night, phantom brick by brick, wall of dancing ghosts.
River

1
There is a slow light rain falling, for once actually falling, actually raining. Despite the almost constant gray above, this actual shower is a rarity. Walking slowly, I slide a hand along the stones of the short walls, watching the squat homes behind, the small wooden gates, shining wet green or red, the tiny square patches of yard, and milk bottles waiting on the step to be taken inside, water clinging, rolling down the sides, small streams falling down the steps, the path, out the gate to the rippling street, glinting with light rise and fall of intent. I am a craft set in motion by these bends, this current in the road, falling witness to a river.

2
I give myself up again to the pull, spin, slow turning tumbling fall and deadened sound, the murky echoes that accompany the dizziness, almost dementia. The light sparks now and again from above like glowing ash in flight over a fire; a continuous blaze on the surface being slowly erased by dark blue shadowy green; the pull from below, underneath, a place of vast winds and
sudden storms,
the world along the bottom,
the slow turning world,
tumbling fall.

3
Floating blocks of ice move slowly past
like barges on the Mississippi
weighed heavy by cargoes of gravel or coal,
their weight pulling down toward the mud
toward the rock of dark bottom,
another wall of this cold vein,
this simple river,
trimmed with beached logs
and broken trees, traces of flood.
The bare dark branches
of trees in March bending out
over the water like hands
trying to rescue or slow
or perhaps just touch something
with the crooked fingers
so much sand has already slipped through.
Weight

Watching the father walking, he sings to himself. Ash hair, the weight of dust, edges and interiors the dark burn of carbon, sharp against the clean white of hospital sheets and walls, like the lines and numbers on the chart, the pulsing green lines on the monitors, the exposed interiors of lives, as if the skin was cut down the middle and splayed open. *She's just getting old,*' he says again, his hand making rough circles on his stubbled chin and neck. His simple explanation. He is bent forward, like a tree on some forgotten back acre too rocky for use, a willow; pale green branches pulled down toward the ground. Gravity is so unceasing, watching the father walking.
Rachel

Rachel died several years ago
and I live now, as permanently as I do anywhere,
in her tower, a thirty foot stone silo
high enough up for a view of the bay;
white caps on a windy morning,
dark blue vastness when still.

There is this talk of a ghost, inevitable I guess,
understandable. A wish. It would be a good place
for a haunting spirit to live, this secluded structure,
the acute rise and fall of it, the darkness
and the wind, the poplars bending in rows,
bowing, singing in choral lines,
the birch with white trunk and ominous black branches.
Yes, it would be a good place to haunt.

As I walk up the curving stairs, hand skimming
the stone wall, I listen for her, look for her. Rachel.
I have no picture of her in my mind, and constructing one
seems an impossibility, I don’t know where to begin.

I touch the old telephone, certainly it was here
when she was, I touch counters, windows, walls,
I read each title of each book on each shelf for the sixth time,
brush my hand across them, turn quickly back
to the room, to just what was there before.
The book I hold in my hand
has someone else’s name inside the cover,
though it could have been here when she was,
could have been hers, or her child’s,
or anyone’s. People have come and gone,
so much passing through, that she is a shadow,
eroded, a gnawed, pearl bleached bone, howling.
For Three Days

For three days
he works on the tree,
the maple, forty feet
from the empty house.
Six feet off the ground
the tree splits into a wide V,
arms spreading,
pushing out into the open.
It was dead now,
the massive branches
lighter than before in
both color and weight.
It had been dying
for three years
but he did nothing
to stop it, didn’t know
if there was anything
he could do, uncertain.
He saws through another
branch as big as his thigh.
All he has is a hand saw,
but the teeth are sharp,
the cuts fast—there is
the slow crack of weight
as the limb begins to fall,
quickening into a waterfall
like some kind of magnified
roll of dice, and then the quiet
plummet between the cut
and the earth, the void,
the place where only
gravity cradles it, one last
caress before it lands,
breaking into pieces, sections,
a dotted line from a geography map.
He thinks he hears someone
calling to him as the branch shatters
against the ground but there is no one.
Once again he thinks he should have done more, tried something, but the monstrous trunk beneath him is completely rotted out, barren.
The Farm

1
The farmhouse’s foundation is the next in line to be restored. The inside has been gutted already, the chalky plaster was ripped down, releasing drifting fronts of white dust and revealing once again the crooked, imperfect logs that brace the ceiling. The wood is dark and rough, with jagged, splintered edges, and most definitely cut long ago from the bluffs that surround the farm. The remains of the cracked walls were tossed in handfuls and shovelfuls through the open window, landing in a pile and producing another wave of white that billows outward and then is whipped away by the wind toward the pond where one solitary trout lives.

2
O.D. will stand shakily whenever the door is opened, unsteady on the weak, short legs that keep her fat torso off the ground. She hobbles toward you, her body jerking as if she had only three legs. She was found on the side of the road, seen dumped from a car in the distance. The vet said her body showed several litters, besides the bumps under her fur, like little hills, that were cancer. It won’t be long. O.D. stands simply for Old Dog.

3
He is making a waterfall by placing rocks in the stream. “Planting them,” he calls it. “A difficult process.” He has one real leg and not the strength he had had in a time when muscles did not ache in the morning, when getting up wasn’t something to be contemplated. “If they are not planted carefully, they will just fall away.” Someone had said he lost the leg after being run over by a train. I have never asked him to tell me the story, although I know the most minute mechanics of his prosthesis, and as I bend to lift the rock with him now, I can’t imagine the pain, only scarcely the train at a hundred and ten and two wet black rails.
Train
Train, Night

His face is red, not from too much sun or embarrassment, but more permanent as if he were exerting himself with every movement, every breath an effort, a pain. Sweat on his forehead glistens in the light coming in garish waves from the compartment ceiling, splashing like water on the old wooden benches and yellow or tan or white walls; glistens just below his white hair speckled with youthful black to a salt and pepper effect. His hands are large, with long fingers almost slender, and knuckles that bulge out like little white hills. They are wrapped around a bottle which he holds out, smiling. The bottle dips slightly, repetitiously. The liquid inside is clear, like gin or vodka perhaps, and the label is silver with black lettering in Spanish or possibly Italian. The bottle hovers there, bounces again. He dips his head two times quickly, a reassuring nod, as if to say ‘Go ahead...’ Then he says something in Italian, and despite their foreignness, the words make sense. ‘Why not?’ Then he is standing, waving the bottle at the bench, saying, “Move over,” in thick English. “Move over,” he says.
An Hour In Spain

At first
I had no idea why
we were stopping,
why the train slowed
to a crawl that left no doubt,
why there was no station,
no town, nothing at all
outside but flatness
for miles, like a desert,
leading to the mountains
too far away.

Now I think this
was a premonition.
You (your tight smile,
careless hair), you
wanted to walk outside
with the other passengers,
(Why am I so afraid
to leave this train?),
the passengers like
freckles on the desert face,
stop piano bending, examining,
dropping. A mechanical vision,
their movement, their stillness,
slow pounding repetition.

Outside, we walked among
the low, sparse bushes, touching
the bleached white shells
so mysteriously numerous,
learned the trip was delayed
because of the strike
(only an hour). The train
sits dormant on dark rails
raised several feet above
the desert, on a mound
running like an old wound across
the sand, and the mountains are
purple and gray like porcelain
masks next to the sky.
The hour is nearly up, 
and the passengers 
move closer to the train. 
I haven’t, I sit where I am, 
watching the others and you 
walking slowly back. 
Some of the people glow 
as if radiating leftover sun 
they have caught and kept for the day, 
but it must be returned before dark. 
Our hour is nearly up.
For Eight Days

For eight days we share the space outside our window with a pale yellow canary. It is dusty and worn like a symbol of the old west, and the high song I expected to welcome mornings (and knew would begin to hurt, to grate, eventually) disappears in the shuffles and bumps of movement in the hallway outside our door.

We pack ourselves into this one small room with space enough to just walk around the old bed, slide a hand along the wardrobe or the dresser we never use, and for eight days one steps around the other, speaks hesitantly, more politely than our time together would require, dresses facing the corner and with back raised like a shield against blows.

For those days we sleep with a soft blanketed valley between us, the canary’s song echoing softly through the room above the dull thumps from behind the door, sleeping in the bed which seems larger each night, pushing us toward the edges, to where we let go.
Almost Home

The train bucks, clatters
complaintively for a moment,
then settles back to a steady drone of friction.

She sits across
the compartment from him, reading.
He thinks she reads too quickly.

The compartment collapses
into darkness as the lights go out.
Quickly, they are back on.

She looks at him and smiles, lips together,
showing no teeth, showing nothing
he thinks, not her real smile.

Dusk outside, the landscape
has a fuzziness to it, the green is glowing
from the rain, leaking excess sun.

He touches her shoe, slides
his hand up, feels the tight muscle
of her calf. She doesn't look up.

Lights begin to appear outside, blinking
past the window with increasing frequency,
white blurs like scars. The trip is almost over.
Perth, Scotland

Matthew paces in front of me inside the small clear plastic cubicle which gives us nothing more than a break from the icy wind. Behind him I see the slightly blurred world, with its smudges and scratches; the overhang of metal that keeps the snow off the tracks of this station, the dark spots of travelers moving slowly, rocking, hugging themselves, the trees and houses out beyond, everything dark and held down with the weight of snow, except for the solid black lines that cut their way across the white and pass through this station like a piercing blade of steel. After several attempts to continue farther north we have given up; no more trains are going that way, only south, toward Glasgow and the dampness of England. The snow has stopped here but it is to the north that is important for us.

I remember the plow engines I saw sitting end to end on a side track as we passed through a town farther south, stacked there like weapons; like knives or guns under a glass counter, their potential for violence palpable. I imagine those plow engines roaring along the tracks, the gleaming metal wedge in front of them, some maniac black smile, the deafening scream of scraping metal, snow shooting off to the sides, high arcs in the air, a shower of wet light and pin pricks of cold, leaving behind the dark lines, scars, running parallel across the white surface of earth. Matthew, smacking his gloved hands together,
making an eerie muffled echo,
is telling me about his plans for the future,
for the next trip, when we can take
our disappointment and recycle it,
scrape it together in a muddy ball
and remold it, sculpt it. Avenge
this cold little room, our laughable protector,
and those black rails buried beneath
the heavy snow, and this time lost,
sliding away loose and falling.
Matthew is talking but I have trouble listening,
I can only think of that dark engine
cutting its way through white mountains,
smiling its maniac smile, slicing its way
through the center of my skull.
The Bridge From Bristol To Wales

The light rippling along the water’s surface
has to seem promising to someone below.
The prows of boats cutting through,
pale bottoms like sharks glowing underwater,
like predators circling, waiting.

It is the smudged glow of the yellow white globes
in the fog that makes me think of this
as we stand surrounded by them
on the bridge from Bristol to Wales.
Those clinging globes form a tightrope of light
stretched between two dark mountains,
mountains whose presence we must take on faith.
You are nervous, but with black nothing below,
how can you be afraid of heights?
So I hold your hand and look down and imagine
the bouncing, broken torment of river water below,
leading in one direction to the ocean,
and in the other fading into the swollen blur of Bristol,
and past that, the light of Bath;
a cumulus haze of green and gold powder
which marks a city at night.
And in that river is a string of boats,
decorated and lit like Christmas trees,
passing in parade through Bristol,
blinking red, golden, blue.

We step off the bridge, out of the tunnel of light,
back onto the earth and you take back your hand
as we walk on the hoof clacked cobblestone streets,
and I know I have placed importance on the shadows,
on the tricks of the eye, like your fear of falling,
without regard for the bridge below your feet,
now walking between menacing, dirt red windows of narrow houses,
like eyes watching as we step trepidly on the worn rock
white glow of roads and sharks.
Castle, Loch Carron, Scotland

Sputtering stone,
giant stalagmite of gray-black,
soft and worn
like melting ice
in the sun or dull knives,
its silhouette some shaking
seismograph line,
but fat and soft,
its image reflecting in the water,
which rubs easily
against the flat outcropping
where it stands.
The same space walked upon
or besieged in small wars
when this was an impenetrable fortress,
where sheep now shuffle up
and over through a break in the wall
to the grass inside;
the thick green earth
surrounding and scaling,
echoing off the settling walls,
battering the doors,
bouncing off the mountains,
laying siege to the castle again
and again.
Across The Aisle

She hands him
one thing at a time
across the table, her hand
a steadiness in front
of the blurred landscape
outside the window
as the train roars on
toward Exeter.
The bread, cheese,
a piece of apple,
crescent moon of dark red
and yellow white.
With each, he thanks her,
curls his hand around the item,
cradles it tenderly
as if it were fragile,
blessed, as if it were not
about to be eaten at all,
and he thanks her,
each time.
She only nods,
We are past that,
(I think she is saying,
hers aged gray eyes)
Past that.
Tarragona

The old man shakes the empty bottle
which we had been passing between us,
and then sets it aside on top of his bag,
a canvas lump the color of dirt
with two frayed straps.
He smiles, white teeth bright,
an island in his red face.
His smile is like my grandfather’s,
not huge or disarming,
not really physically similar at all,
but I’m still reminded of a picture
I kept pinned above the desk
in my dorm room after his death.
The two men have no commonality,
no real resemblance, no connection at all,
except for me and the bridge
I have created between them,
stretching from Iowa (in a photograph
or a grave), across the Atlantic
to this railcar compartment
running steadily through the night
toward Barcelona.

You sit beside me, far off next to the wall (maybe sleeping),
leaning heavily against your pack, at least eyes shut,
leaving me alone with the old man and his bottle.
He was here when we came in and instantly offered us a drink.
You refused and crawled into a shell against the wall,
while I reacted, and accepted. We trade blows in these small ways.
I talk to the old man in pieces, parts of English and Spanish,
I find out he is actually Italian, retired and vacationing he says slowly,
and he says his wife died a few months ago
but I don’t know what to say or how to say it, so I say nothing
and our conversation goes on, filled more with nodding heads and smiles
than the transfer of information, but my attention isn’t there anyway.
It is with you as you push your hair back and scratch at your arm,
maybe as your lips part and you exhale again,
ever once opening your eyes but never sleeping.

The steady knocking of the train
is unavoidable to me, becoming louder
and louder in my ears, drowning out
the old man's words echoing dully
in the car and pulling my attention away
from your sleeping form.
The repetitious clacking
has an imperative message I think,
though I do not speak its language.
It is saying something about us.
It is telling me something about us.

The white hair
on the old man's head
is wild and thin, a lively shock
to his sleepy face and slow-moving body,
but perhaps it gives him away
because now I see more acutely
the bright dark eyes behind the stale booze breath,
and I believe I'm being fooled
by his disheveled appearance,
the white tangled hair and the clumsy gestures,
maybe the way my grandfather's illness
could have fooled me
if it wasn't such a successful animal,
or the way his reticence kept me
at a distance all those young years,
keeping me unfamiliar, fooling me.
So many things missed,
did I know who I was saying goodbye to
when the illness finally won
that long slow fight?
The old man asks me to go with him,
the beverage car, he says, Vamos.
Looking at you, hunched against your bag,
I stand, know you think I won't go
because of these roles we've created
for each other, and I follow the old man,
stepping out into the corridor,
letting the door slide shut behind me.

Riders standing, bags at their feet,
in the spaces between cars,
lighting cigarettes and watching
Constant clacking, loud and explosive
as we step between cars,
rolling repetitively, all heads swaying
with the motion, in time,
back and forth, east and west.
black hair, dark eyes,
hanging outside windows escaping
stale air and cigarette smoke,
this yellow tunnel of light

The beverage car is half full, half full of men with wet smiles,
clouded eyes and beers in hand, mostly standing and swaying with the car.
The old man gives me a beer, holds up a hand to reject my money,
and leans against the bar, drinking and looking.
In this room of strangers I have come with a stranger and stand with him
and drink his beer as if we are long time companions,
and to my surprise I am comfortable, I feel inclined to linger, to smile,
to talk in this laborious mix of Spanish and English, to understand and to drink.

There was this woman, mi tia,
says the old man, married to a man when she was young,
her love, pero he died soon after.
Mi tia, she married again, pero with no love this time.
They were together a long time
until the man died, possible triente anos.
I do not think she was happy again until after he died.
She was okay when married, pero no contento.
I think about her now since my wife died.
We had a long time, pero we were happy, mi tia, she was not.
It would not be good to live that way,
especially not so long, not at all.
I do not think the man could have been happy also.
It is all lost time.

Three young men walk past me and into the car
which has been filling up slowly since we arrived.
There seems to be a sense of excitement in the group.
Everyone is standing, looking out the windows
and crowding down toward the other end of the car.
The old man watches them also, then turns to the bartender
and asks, What is the next stop?
Tarragona.
They still run at Tarragona?
Every night.
The old man pulls me toward the group, Come, he says,
At Tarragona they run through the station at night.
Through the station to the front where there is a statue
of the Virgin Mary. You kiss the statue and run back
before the train leaves. I did it when I was a boy.
I am too old now but you can run.
He pushes me to the back of the group.

I smell the sweat, the odors of those in front of me.
I feel the dampness on my back and forehead,
the pressure on my bladder, my cold hands.
There are more and more lights flashing by outside,
the train is slowing and the group is moving
forward as one large mass. Over other heads
I see men and boys jumping out from the train
and into the night, landing on the platform
on the run, stumbling, and running again.
Now I am falling like a grain of sand
toward the hourglass hole, with weak legs
and a tight vacant stomach, falling away
and out into the cool night and running.

There are flashes of faces and light,
blurs beside me and gone,
a vague idea of the concrete
and metal of the walls,
the people stopping and stepping back,
watching, some with smiles,
others in confusion.
Then I’m through the front doors
of the station and back out into the night
following the trail of runners,
some weird chain in the dark
leading to the stone image of Mary,
who is surrounded now by shadows
kissing her and turning away.
I hear the train whistle, signaling
its imminent departure,
and I am to the woman
and kissing the hand
at her side, still warm from the sun,
now pushing away
and running, still warm from the sun.
You are stepping into the blue green
of the Mediterranean, I'm watching
from the hot sand, this is just yesterday.
I set a hand on your back and kiss your cheek
which melts into the grass we lay on,
hundreds of feet above the water
and the Giant's rock seat,
this was many weeks ago.
The first day I really remember seeing you,
you are at your desk and I'm wasting film,
trying to finish the roll,
this is just an excuse to meet you, to talk,
but I will still take your picture now and later,
even once by candlelight, and fill a book with the blurs,
photographs of lovers and ghosts, and put it away
in a closet, keeping the doors closed.
It is time to be a memory. On the back
of the photographs it is written, it is time
to be a memory, and I'm still running,
warm from the kiss of the sun.
Through the station again,
I hear the whistle a second time,
the train is beginning to move
as I run out onto the platform.
The string of men leads to the car
where they are being pulled inside by others.
I see I will make it although that is no longer a fear.
I see the old man in a window,
framed like a photograph, and he is smiling.
I yell to him, goodbye,
goodbye.
And It Is A Mountain
Creatures Of Wood And Night

The fog is an animal tonight
with a heavy humid coat
of frayed white, creeping in
to the edge of the pines
just outside the light of the fire
burning in the pit you and I sit beside.
It curls up just beyond the mound,
which rises from a clover ocean
behind us like some aged sea monster,
and stretches itself out to wrap
around the house and its
glowing green porch lights.
It looks inside the windows
like a giant red fox
and our daughter comes to the door,
her quiet child voice,
Mommy? cutting through,
her fears the product of commercial animation,
making foxes creatures of human curiosity,
who peek in windows
and you go to her, disappearing inside,
the storm door banging behind.
Sitting next to the firepit,
I move the wood once again,
poking at the coals and red glow
with a worn branch,
setting on more maple twigs,
so intent on keeping the fire burning strong,
staring into the smoke,
watching flames sputteringly
burn away the dampness,
and carve creatures
out of wood and night.
The Window In This Old House

An explosion
is what it was.
Thin glass
everywhere like
morning wet grass
outside in the
sun, shining.
I touch my
arm gingerly, looking
closely, reflectively,
for those tiny
exposing
glints, flashes, sparkles,
minute, buried within
the hair, the soft
forest of my skin.
They don't seem
dangerous,
these clinging fragments
of crystal which
cut light into
pieces.
Photograph

A four by six piece of glossy, colored paper holds you.

You stand on the overgrown hillside, out of place,
a mixture of the orchestrated and the wild,
your smile made confused with sun squint eyes,
your long hair is caught motionless, leaping out into space,
wrapping itself indelicately around your face,
captured in the wool clutch of your sweater.

The sweater which we agree is so unbelievably not ugly
with its pattern of purple, white and so many others,
all hiding the dark blue of the shirt underneath.

The thin fabric like another layer of skin on your arms,
your breasts, the soft pale flesh of stomach,
ribs, spine and shoulders. All parts radiating warmth.

In the background there are mountains and water
like glass which would never be so perfect again
as the weather grew colder after this first day.

In that smooth surreal mirror the purple mountains
stand upside down, sitting on cloud and sky,
all still in place on the hurtling earth.

And the speck we think is a duck at first,
that is really a boat, and the hill above us
which we agree to climb in the morning

is really a mountain and much farther away
than it appears. An absurdity; this illusion of mass,
this deception of scale, what are the real weight of things?

That mountain reflected in the water behind you
will soon be broken into a million pieces
by the wind and white-capped waves,
And that tiny boat could hold ten of us
and that hill in the distance is much farther away
than it appears, much farther away and it is a mountain,

and this photograph in my hand, shining, is more too.
Independence Day

In this moment
we are isolated by night,
and remoteness,
and most simply moisture in the air;
thick, low clouds and fog and mist falling
like gold dust, hanging like cobwebs,
visible and glittering inside the cave
carved in the dark by the porch light.
We stand watching as our daughter
lights two sparklers from the candle I hold.
She dances in circles around us
waving her arms and drawing designs on air,
stickmen and houses, bright and waning,
wings and halo of an angel.
Then she runs with arms spread wide,
a sharp phosphorus cut through the yard,
and slowly disappears,
and eventually the burning
in our eyes fades.
The Perseid Shower

When it is dark here
I think I can hear the sound of oars rattling,
the deep toned thumps of heavy wood,
upright and slick, the sound of the water
being parted and pulled, leaving behind
long dark trails, signs of passing.

I lay in the dark on this beach
made of smooth white rocks watching the sky
for streaks of light, burning pieces of the universe,
listening to waves landing
and the cedar branches swaying in rhythms
like gods speaking, or traffic,
or film projectors in seventh grade, lead slapping,
the screen bright white, dust caught
caught in a tunnel of light.

When it is dark here
I think I can hear my voice as a child,
small compared to the sounds of the world,
too certain of nothing, like my turn at bat,
or kisses or enough light for one more inning,
and now laying on this beach watching stars burn,
I am plaintive and innocent, listening to the waves
in the dark under my ear.
The Distance To The Pioneer Store

John walks bent over at the shoulders as if shielding himself from invisible rain, the constant patter like bullets, continuously under fire in the time it takes to get to the Pioneer Store. His dirt dark hair is long and his beard sparse and rambling like a tangled rose bush revealing pocked and scarred cheeks. His shirt is a wet cloth clinging to bone. He has let himself go. As John goes by, one of the men says he knew him before, says he talked to him when he got back, that he doesn’t make much sense now. This walk of his is a daily thing, an event for him, all of his day. To get two large bottles of beer. He emerges from the old cave-like house with the money in his hand, small pieces of the check from the government, still being paid twenty years after the war, and I can see no bloody wounds, no scars, no phantom limbs.

Several days later I see John again. I am in the store picking slowly over the movie boxes I have looked at a hundred times, turning the six and a half foot stand around in circles, my eyes sweeping up and down the rows mechanically. John opens the door, which swings almost to the movie stand in this crowded, shoebox shaped store. Its shelves are overflowing and pressing inward, cradling the goods stacked high on the center counters. John moves around me, past me, and I move to the other side of the stand in order to watch him make his way to the refrigerated compartment in the back where the beer is kept. I take the movie I have in my hand and wander slowly toward the middle of the store where the cash register is, rubbing a finger along the edge of the counter, feigning interest in boxes of cookies and individually wrapped cupcakes, waiting for John. He steps up and places two bottles of beer on the counter and I strain slightly to see what kind, because it seems important. The man rings up the price and starts putting the bottles into a paper sack. John hands him some bills, not particularly worn or dirty, not special at all, and the man gives him change. Then John moves quietly around a woman holding two gallons of ice cream, down the aisle and out the door.

The house is set back off the road, hidden in cedars and birch, but you can see most of the front from the driveway. It’s not particularly big, and the yard, that which isn’t allowed to grow naturally below the trees, is small. I ride by here often because it happens to be on one of my favorite routes, but I admit I slow, almost crawl, when I go by, even sometimes loop back around, pretending to look at something in the road, or just off to the edge. Today I stop completely and just stare up at the house sitting in its shaded cave. It is in decent shape and the small yard is mowed, but I wonder if John is responsible for it. I wonder what he is doing inside right now, where he is walking, what he is touching, how hard he is trying to find what was here before he left. I think I am waiting for a discovery, I cannot just accept being lost, cut adrift and floating.
Tonight

Night
is thickened
by clouds overhead,
given away
by their occasional rumblings
like the vibrations
in the ceiling
when I was a child
and my father walked upstairs,
the sound of him—
I see his short thick body,
his face, can feel the soft skin
and scratching invisible stubble,
the thin hair, the skin below his eyes,
his rough worked hands
like leaves
blown across our yard,
deceptively massive,
warm and soft—
well below me,
miniature rivers
curling and twisting
through the rocks of the driveway,
rushing to the darkness below,
darkness above
and rumbling.
A Line Of Poplars

The walk in the morning is always the same,
I never stray from the faint path which winds wildly,
surely with some natural logic,
along the slope among the line of poplars.
The colors here are early Spring; muted,
a hint of the living, the faint green of buds,
of possibility; the yellow of smallest leaves,
the tan, almost colorless surface, of last summer's weeds
which bend to cover too slightly the path I follow
among the tangled green and brown waves of grass
rolling frozen in this field; the watered down blue of sky
reaching down to meet the darkness of the bay,
the one unreality, in a single cool line;
the thin red of new branches, like veins in arms, in leaves.
Eventually the colors will be striking, brutal,
on a certain day they will be impossibilities,
but now they are only hints, thoughts scattering
in the back of the mind, movement in the corner
of the eye.

There was a line of poplars next to my house
when I was a boy, a high blood green fence
separating yards, perfect
perhaps when I was born
but each year one or two would die
and gaps would be left when they were cut down
after standing ghostlike most of the summer,
a brown plank in a green wall.
I wondered what we had done wrong,
how we were poisoning the perfection
which arranged itself in this row next to our house.
Here, where I walk now, the poplars grow wildly,
sending their searching roots out
beneath the earth to emerge steps away, a cousin,
a child. I wonder how close they are.
I walk past the young ones, through the dried weeds
to one old poplar. I rest my hand on the trunk,
caress the bark, look for buds. There are none.
The branches thrust upward toward the sky
like arms pleading.
Tunnel

The engine rattles to a halt
and rain on top of the car
becomes the steady metal drone
of wind blown night. The headlights
tunnel forward across the grass,
past the stone tower house I’m staying in,
revealing the small evergreen,
the box elder and the worn gray birdhouse
atop the crooked pole
twenty feet from the tower door.
The rain in my headlights shines
in bright streaks and blurs more
and more with the birdhouse
and the box elder
as the windshield becomes flooded,
this tunnel in the night
now observed from underwater.
I wrap myself in the warmth of the seat,
touch the wheel and squeeze,
fold myself over, roll into a ball,
examine the backs of my legs,
the calves, the hollow behind the knees,
the hamstrings, I touch my heels,
my buttocks, the small of my back,
the base of my spine. I follow the shadows of ribs
with my fingers, the jutting of the shoulder blades,
smoothing over the skin,
feeling the edges of the scars.
I rub the back of my neck,
the base of my skull, I feel my breath leap
and a tingling shock wave spreads out,
down, and diminishes. I open the door,
an explosion of sound, rain, power.
I step out, stand, arms spread wide,
battered by rain, almost cold, almost clean.
Wrestling

This morning there were two spiders fighting on my window against a background of green, rolling countryside. They were both small, one half the size of the other, but the smaller one seemed more active, more vicious. He was on top, twisting his body around, spinning on his toes like a wrestler, maybe biting, and I thought he was pushing for victory, but perhaps perhaps he was just more desperate. The background of the fight is Wisconsin, spreading out toward Lake Michigan, although from where I stand it is hidden just beyond the horizon. I wonder how much the spiders can see; how much space there is and how small they are. Perhaps they believe they are fighting for it all.

The landscape behind the glass reminds me of Wales, the thick green hills, fat and wrinkled, rising up around you and me, obscuring, but not quite hiding us as we peek over the edges to the buildings below, searching. From this spot we can see for miles; the mountains to the west, muted gray, green and purple, the whitish blue of sky, and behind them the sea and Eire. The twin bluffs move away to the east, cradling the valley between them, its rocky waterfall, and winding, shining streams, stone fences and houses, long and squat, the dark green patchwork quilt floor dotted with dark cattle and white sheep. It is all blurring somewhat, becoming pale and uncertain with dusk. The size is overwhelming, seeing for such a distance is not something I grew up with and I feel small.
I think that is why we are so passionate, 
grappling like wrestlers, twisting and turning, 
fumbling clumsily through disheveled clothing. 
From behind, I press myself closer to you, 
reach my hand around and slip underneath your shirt 
to your breast and I lay there, 
shallow breaths racing with the quick pumping heart, 
wanting to do more.

I look back to the window for the spiders 
but the glass is clean. 
I search the sides and the sill, 
I examine minutely the exact place 
they had been fighting, 
looking for blood I think. I want something, 
some sign, of who won.