Small ecologies

Sean Brian Whalen

Iowa State University

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Small ecologies

by

Sean Brian Whalen

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Debra Marquart, Major Professor
James Pease
Zora Zimmerman

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Sean Brian Whalen

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
Dedication

The following people have my undying gratitude for their support and encouragement: my wife, Bonnie, who makes all things possible; Debra Marquart, for getting me started and seeing it through; David Inyang and Bill Diesslin for their dedication to education in the workplace; and of course my parents, Mike and Kathy Whalen, for everything else.
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Crow at Dawn

cocks a black pearl
to the impending light
folds his wings over a hole
in the canopy of trees
binds the fabric of his cloak
tighter to the earth
collects the glitter of stars
the barking of dogs
the crawling of grubs
the screams of doomed
fowl in his throat
whets his beak
along the scaled branch
until it is as sharp
as the wind on the edge
of his feathers
spreads the remnants
of his wings and drops
across the valley
disappearing
in the umbra
of rain
Night Moose
—*Dry Fork Ridge, Bighorn Mountains, Wyoming*

I’m camped under sky amidst patches of snow, fire dead, alone,
Clear moonless sky heavy on my chest. Autumnal Equinox.
The fiction of the Milky Way shimmers from horizon to horizon.

The stars are speeding away. Soon the Milky Way
Will be as scattered ash and we’ll spin slower,
Approach the edge, the waiting unknown, tip over

Into the thicker black outside the Universe. On the hillside below me
A cow moose lows in low tones. She holds a galaxy
and she is dizzy. A bull answers near by,

His throaty gronk like an iron bell struck deep underwater.
He rakes a pine with his antlers, stomps the ground, stops
Twenty feet from my bag. I am between him and his cow.

Stars frame his head. Antlers overflow with constellations.
He scatters them in the snow as he whips his head, hooves groove
The earth as he looks for the cow to mount, something to kill.

Deep pulses of sound roll from his chest. The siren cow moans.
To move now is to die. The earth slides a little further from the center.
Nearer the cow another bull bellows. My bull turns, slashes off

Through the trees. The sound of crashing planets echoes
Over the valley, fades into the dark timber. I build up the fire
With dry pine, stare into the flames, conjure questions for the dawn.
Chicken Time

*The Rock*

Prairie

Postville

Clermont

Onion

F’burg

Wapsi

Home.

*Everybody knows your name.*

You’re drunk
I’m ten
again.

The left lane
is your lane.

Driving too fast
to hear me
cry.

Chicken time.

The heavy
Magnum
tacklebox
slides with me
in the back
of the wagon,
leaves bruises
the color of worms
and lead.

You’re laughing too hard
to hear me.
My Father the Fireman

In the red glow we see him
run up the steps of our old family home.
Sparks fly from his boots as he kicks the door open,
rushes in and finds himself facing himself,
grinning, matches in one hand, drink
in the other, spinning like a dervish, adding fuel to fuel
and fire to fire, black lips open
in a glorious howl, crisp gums pulling from teeth.
In a flash they leap the break, clasp like lovers,
biting, and dance the dance of flames.
One cheats, gains advantage, holds the other’s toes
into the fire but neither uncles out
so the long, slow, burn continues.
Water sprayed by grim volunteers hits and steams
but falters, fathers. Faster grow the flames,
slower glow the embers. Pokers poke eyes,
brands brand flesh. So much fire rolls off their skins
that red rivers threaten to engulf those watching.

Amidst the smoke and char understanding grows.
The fire that can’t be killed with fire
might be killed with love. With a leap each grabs
each other—chest melts into chest,
heart melts into heart, spine melts into spine,
veins cut and join and cut
the flow of fuel.

When he emerges from the wreckage, alone,
skin peeling like the black husk of a walnut,
the heat holds us at bay. We hold out
our gauzed hands and feel him, crisp and crackling
and smooth, to see if what we wanted all our lives
is underneath: the iron trestle flaked with rust,
the prairie singed but growing. Finally our fingers
poke through the blackened shell and find our fireman,
crying, pink and solid as a child.
Nebraska Elemental

Having walked the land I understand.

This thin cloth of green stitched along the silver river
hides countless souls. Invisible on the ground.
But from the airplane the naked faces shimmer,

reflect the sun, lie in rows like ripples in the sand.
They have come to the Platte from the dry hinterlands
to drink. The shadow of the plane falls across their glimmer.

A few clamber up the dark shaft, enter the cabin, the cockpit,
sit on the wings. The air conditioning cools the smell
of muck and water. They ride quietly beside the man in the suit,

read a magazine or a Bible, drink the little bottles, always
first class, never coach. They drift away as we approach Denver,
fall from the plane like bits of sloughing skin.
Departure, Arrival

1. A man enters the Des Moines terminal carrying a coat, though it’s warm outside. He is departing. He knows where he is going it will be cold.

That is powerful knowledge.

2. Are those tied to the land telling those above a story? Language is written in the fields, as if one beyond us directed the cultivation. I read dancing men, pregnant women, glyphs speaking left to right, right to left. Pictures appear as the shadows lengthen. A tired head lies on a pillow of trees, body in the river, hand cupped around a silo. A child’s blocks stacked end to end to end create a circular landscape.

3. On the flight a fly flies forward, occasionally faster than the plane. For a while he flies backwards. He is over Cedar Rapids longer than the rest of us. And I want to move to the rear of the plane. But the moment passes, forgotten at the Mississippi.

4. I have nothing to say regarding Illinois.
5.
I wish I had a coat. I want
to make the woman at O'Hare wonder

*Where am I going?*

*Is it going to rain?*

*Is it going to be cold?*
First Bear Sighting in a Century
— Effigy Mounds National Monument

1.
He returns, sniffs the strange air
amidst the mounds in his likeness
on the Iowa bluffs above the Mississippi.
He walks skittish in his rolls of skin,
the ground familiar yet moving like a boat
under his pads, unfamiliar lights,
but ripe berries are ripe berries.
The River reminds him of fish,
the fish remind him of a cave
under a cliff. Today he has eaten a fawn,
tomorrow mushrooms. A hen turkey putts
in alarm. She remembers him, gives him
a wide berth. He is too slow for the poults,
and the fawns are hiding. But tomorrow
all he has to do is wait.

2.
The sun shines into the cave, brighter and less old.
Oaks have shrunk during the night.
Water chills and we shiver in our beds
though we don’t know why. A bear
ambles across our graves
and down a long ridge lined
with Hickories and Elms. He knows the smell
of fear in the leather of our boots.
Hand prints foul each tree where we fled,
the hot darkness breathing up our backs,
redolent of bark and grubs and meat.

There is something here unafraid of us,
and we are diminished; we look for rocks
to wield, sticks to clap together, pray for lightning
to give us fire. We stoop to pick up weapons
and are unable to straighten.
We communicate in grunts and squeals,
gesture uncomprehendingly at the sun,
gather in circles facing out,
sticks pointed at the inevitable wild.
Mr. Bowie says

the Spiders from Mars
might bridge the gap now
with the earth so close.
Soon they'll trundle the sphere
in their articulated legs,
encase the hard ball
in a soft silken case
like a razor blade
wrapped in cotton,
still sharp, still able
to deliver the same clean cut.

Mr. Bowie says the Harvestman
is the deadliest spider
but his fangs
are soft
and angled incorrectly
to puncture human skin.
He's constrained
to ineffectual stabbing motions,
and every minute Mars
and Earth draw closer,
bound by invisible
gossamer threads.
Burning Ants

Jay shoots down the steps, two-three at a time, a bolt of lightning in one hand, a Snickers in the other. He hands me the small half. The lightning is his grandmother’s magnifying glass. Come on, grinning white teeth, a sliver of eclipse, he punches me on the arm, my cousin showed me this last week at the lake.

Behind the garage we hold the sun in our hands, turn ants to black cinders, the face of G. I. Joe to goo. I shiver as his eyes grow wide and shapeless, his nose blends into his cheek, his cheek runs down his neck, his mouth yawns wider and wider until his head is just a dimpled pit between his shoulder blades. Joe takes it like a soldier.

Years later I will see ‘The Scream’ and wish I had known of it before we melted Joe. I would have had some precognition of the dream I had that night, not of Joe chasing me around the yard, but ants, ants with faces blackened and stretching, mouths like manholes, screaming and screaming.
July 4th, 1976

The guy from Milwaukee had a red bong filled with Mississippi River water. I took my first hit, a firecracker went off in my ear, I sucked up some bong water and nearly drowned. The walleyes were biting that day. We pulled a dozen of them on to the sand bar, golden sides like treasure in the sun. Tim poked a stick through the eyes of one, slit the belly with a long knife and placed it on a log in the fire. I watched the scales turn from golden to white to charcoal, absorbed the swampy smoke until my head crawled with leeches. We ate the fish with singed fingers, the blackened skin crinkling from the meat like aluminum foil, the white flesh abandoning the bones. Afterwards we threw the skeletons in the River where they twisted and dove out of sight. The crackle of the fire couldn’t drown the song of the deep water eddy-the devious gurgle near the rocks, the low moan about the middle of the channel, the pianissimo of the undertow. Lying on the damp sand I dreamt I swam, boneless fish rubbing my ankles, legs heavy with slime. Singing they peered at me with silvery moon eyes, cold pearl light streaming around me like a net, the song like water around my heart.
2 Quarters and the Aspect of Mars  
—*Colorado Springs, August 2003*

Telescopes in the window behind him point to heaven  
as he leans his head back against a Tejon Street optics shop  
in the last hours before the closest approach  
Mars will ever make to Earth in any of our lives.  
He scrapes his hat on the walk to jingle some coins.

From the look of it he doesn’t have enough for cigarettes.  
As tribute to the god of war  
I flip two quarters towards the cap.

Mars exerts its subtle pull against the Earth.

The quarters slow as they orbit each other, turn red  
and silver in the sun impaling itself on the Rockies,  
suspend, and we, me, the man, the earth  
wobbles on its axis.  
In that instant I know everything, see

in his eyes he knows everything.  
We orbit each other like two coins, red and blank,  
exchange in a glance seventy-five thousand years  
of history until the clink of the coins into the cap

rights the world and leaves nothing to remember,  
like a look or the passage of the body through space.
The Passage of South Dakota, and other stories

I-90 and Sioux Falls, things are serious now.
Thick filtered corn morning light. Cars becalm
on the highway. A semi pushes through a fold of land
like a trickle of sweat between tits. I avert my eyes
from the siren signs of South Dakota. 300 more miles
of Wall Drug billboards, shit. I’m embarrassed for a town
with such low self esteem it has to spread its name like V.D.
Cheers to the pain in my eyes. Ten hours and this still looks like Iowa,
like leaving your wife for a woman exactly the same age
and temperament when you really wanted the neighbor girl
you know you couldn’t have handled in the first place anyway.
What a bitch.

Mitchell and a tank of gas. Subway and a feeling
that the Subway girl will go with me
if I have the nerve to ask. She gives me extra meat,
no charge. Her nails are bitten to the quick inside the crinkly
plastic gloves, glazed with chipped faded polish
of an undetermined color. She treats my sandwich
like a dog she is tired of telling to sit.
She reaches into my jeans pocket with her eyes, lifts out
my keys, jangles them like a raw nerve across
the curve of brown uniform stained
with tuna salad and pieces of tomato,
drops them when she sees I’d only fail her miserably
before we get to Kennebec. She gives me extra stamps.

At the nape of the Missouri I forget her name,
leave it in the heat and shredded tire
on the East side of the divide. On three wheels
I try to force the car over the guardrail
but it hangs on the differential, no traction
from the denuded and befuddled rim.
Fuck Pukwana, there’s no going back.
I pay a trucker fifty bucks and he finishes the job,
drops the car into the Missouri,
drops me off in Belvidere for another twenty-five.

The sun has come to sterilize the earth with fire.
My shoes melt to the concrete.
I feel betrayed by so much yellow grass.
I would weep for corn. I would dance for pigs.
I would be a whore for water. I am on the brink
of the Badlands and I am not alive. I flag
the only vehicle I see, sag into the shotgun seat
and the run west into a failing sun. The pain
in my neck is Wall Drug whiplash.
I’m tired of following the trail of crumbs.
Who’s that nibbling at my house? The driver leaves me
at the entrance to the Wall Drug oven, a mouse nibbling
on the gingerbread guts scattered across the highway.

Walking to Wasta (Waste without the e)
there are no more Wall Drug signs.
To the north I watch for Buffalo,
To the south I watch for fires
started by clandestine Meth labs. I find
an empty can of starting fluid in the ditch,
throw it away when the State Patrol picks me up.
Free passage to Bangkok, or at least Rapid City.
We eat together at Bonanza.
The Statey refuses to let me pay his tab.
The waitress gives him his coffee free. She looks at me
like I’m a dog that refuses to sit. He slaps her big ass
on the way out the door, hits his lights and moves out
into traffic. I take his coffee cup to be refilled,
tip a penny and slap her big ass on the way out the door,
slip into the field across the road
as she goes for the manager. I am not fond
of Rapid City. Rapid City is not fond of me.
East is East and West is West and they meet right here,
one to one per capita country music radio saturation
and that rappin' punk city boy Kid Rock is number one
on the charts singin' *I wanna be a cowboy, baby.* Shit.

At the Texaco I catch a ride with an Indian headed to Spearfish.
I buy beer and gas and cigarettes.
He laughs at me as I drink,
singing along to the songs on the radio. He's talking
on the phone as I offer him a beer.
*No, thanks,* he says, *I have a client to defend later in the day.*
He leaves me in Spearfish with his card. I leave him
a beer and half the gas. I smell pine,

The air is cool.
My eyes and the sun lift about the time I hit Wyoming.
I plant my feet on either side of the border,
right foot East, left foot West.
I lift my right foot, look at the imprint
of my shoe in the dirt along the edge of the road.
No more transient a footstep ever existed, some factor
of the earth blurring it, smudging it, smoothing it
due to some faint internal vibration on the sub-atomic level,
the same vibration responsible for earthquakes,
vulcanoes, and post orgasmic tremors.
As the foot print fades I reach down and cup
a bit of South Dakota soil in my hand, let it filter
across the tops of my shoes, rub it into the nap of my jeans,
throw it west into the sagebrush colored sky.
Crow in Love

wishes
for the moon to rise
waits for the pearl light
waits for her to sample his flesh
imagines her sharp beak
puncturing the thin skin
devoid of feathers
like an apple in the hollow
of his wing

This is the place where arrows go

He stares fixated at the serrations
on her tongue  His tongue
feels wood smooth
oil soaked glass coated
split by mercuric words
She slivers a piece of meat
from his breast

reads him another poem
he doesn’t understand

Crow bends his head
across his back
pulls the finest feather
from his tail
holds it to the light from her eye
admires their twined reflection
in the slick sheen
bends it in his claw
so that they are ghosts
Crow in Love, continued

speared by the rachis
pinioned in the barbs
bound by the ink

The setting moon twists
the feather in his grip

floats her reflection
down the shaft
He watches her hang
on the tip
slide off like a drop of oil
spatter in the drift of feathers
below his feet
Waiting After Work for My Wife

the March air is cold between my teeth.
Flakes pile in my hand, geese beat north
against the snow. She fails to appear
on the latest gust. I know she makes me wait
to teach me patience. The sun shines

like a pretty girl from behind a building.
I hear the moaning of emerging buds,
grass pushes through the melting snow,
Tulips writhe in stop action fast motion, open, close.
Crabapples appear like new planets, new lives form
on the surface from the primordial winesap,
establish languages, cities, cultures, then decline.
At the bus stop

waiting children morph into old men in Nike tennis shoes,
dragging their old dog school books. They’ve forgotten
kite flying. They are heavy
with mortgages and god. Heat warps the pavement
around the bus. Papers with impossible dates scurry
past my feet. I know she makes me wait
to teach me.
Patience is the last leaf to fall, the last crow
to reach the roost. The sun rides in its solstice,
precisely East and West, arc supported
by a cottonwood.
I stretch in the grass near the parking lot,
layered with dust. A cold front paints itself in white
gauze across the sky. Geese I watched go north
a few lines ago now stream south. A snow flake falls
in my ungloved hand, lies intact for the time it takes
to watch it melt, turn to a river in the creases.
Flakes pile into the bin of my hand.
The November air is cold between my teeth.
Eidetic

I've drawn the short straw, it's my turn on the bridge.
Four laps around the block, a cigarette while idling
in the drive. Snow freezes into resolve on the sidewalk.
The moment for excuse is past.
A sharp knock. A forced smile at the clatter of the knob.
She peers through the storm
while the door opens, squints a powder blue gaze
in an ivory frame, pupil encircled by a link of safety chain.
Lilac flows from the breach. Clouds draw away
from her brow as nimble fingers draw the rattling bones
of dead bolts and hasps. In the blue velvet closeness
of the hall she grips my wrist in a hand that can still tat
but only softly, mostly by feel. An eternity of shuffling
brings us to the chairs that overlook the garden, buried
under white. As she sinks into the rocker
she names each blooming flower, rejoices at the bright
colors against the new green grass. Old eyes belie
the brown wisteria winding through the tattered rose trellis
and broken blank tomato cages. I look through the reflection
of her face in the glass, lines and wrinkles absorbed
by the smoothness of the pane, and for a brief rare instant see
a hummingbird suspended in a shaft of golden light,
iridescent purple darting among the reds. Her face shifts
and the image jumps, the hummingbird becomes one
determined leaf in a falling raft of snow.

*

For a time we speak of who and what or where so and so is
or died. I make strong tea with honey but the graham crackers
I'm afraid are stale. As we drink our tea the clock pants slowly,
as if the storm encasing the house is freezing time. It is
always now she asks if I would like to see the collection-
do you have time? I always do. I get the card table
from the hall, snap the legs in place like four clicks from an empty gun.
The box from under the bed is gray, the handles worn smooth
Eidetic, continued

and oily dark from handling. I pull off the top and place it on her lap. Smiling, she reaches in, cups a spidery hand around the first little treasure. As she weaves the eidetic tale and lifts it free I see a glow of blue. Again the hummingbird seems to flutter in the air. There is nothing in her hand, but her warbling voice tells how Uncle Roy found this poor cold bird after a sudden April blizzard and nursed it back to life. I can see the blue reflected in her eyes and almost-almost—feel the texture of the feathers in my hands. With a laugh she places it on the table and dips back in the box, reveals the empty hand full of treasure—a green emerald plucked from the crown of a visiting king, the silver bell from the collar of a cat that died when she was five, the twisted foul stub of chewed cigar Grandpa tasted on the day he died in the Argonne. Each memento brought to life by her voice fades as the story passes from item to item. Finally she recounts the last piece, so smiling and nodding I take my cue. As I start to rise to put away the things she stops me with a palm. Wait. I sit back. She slows her rocking, shifts in the chair, smoothes a finger across her left cheek, speaks so low I have to strain to hear. Gently she holds both hands up from the box, moving them in the light that falls across her crumpled lap. At first the palms are empty but then I see, forming in the glow, a doll. Its china face is white as milk, its face a web of lace. Blue eyes peer from behind curls peeking from under a bonnet, curls yellow as a dandelion and this time I'm sure the flash of sun across the garden is real, but it fades. A shadow of snow rattles hard against the patio door. A chill draft pushes my face from the window and I turn back and see her, still, holding the doll. The doll stares but she is gone, silent in the chair, the collection box spilled empty on the floor.
At 2 am

the brain’s a bottle of bad milk A clogged P trap
Soap scum long brown hairs
toothpaste spittle

Spinning words a mental New
Collegiate Dictionary barfing
a miserable mass

of verbs-action-tense-nouns A dozen squid
tumbling down a laundry chute
A word marked RED

One blue Like aspirin are white this means nothing.
Like a crow eating
a rabbit head first

No snakes eat things head first Another word
reptilian treacherous
apple zither

See, we started out heading down the drain
Now there’s snakes and stringed
instruments and I’m

thinking of Grandma hot tea with milk
and honey on homemade bread
she never let you eat

Without knowing it was baked at a terrible price
Some Kitchen in Kansas

She lifts her left hand from the water
inspects the puckered
knuckle
    of her ring finger

This is the third time today she’s done dishes

The skin reminds her of her nipples
the months of swelling
stretching
    like two live things

then the shriveling
after the baby
    went to the bottle

She traces a wet O
on the print fabric
of her shirt
    lingers

at the searching nipple
rising to the invisible mouth

She lowers her hand frosted with suds

The skin around the nails
is white
    torn and ragged

like she’s been washing clouds
clouds that are fraying
drifting away
    unraveling slowly
Driving home tonight I pass from star to star.
On the horizon the moon burns its own house
As my daughter chokes on a bit of plum.
A strange man plants himself beside my wife.

Cresting the rise I fear
I may be coming to an empty house,
Some tragedy occurring too late for me
to save anyone but myself.

A front door swinging on its hinges.
A note on the table, or no note.
A row of bagged bodies in the yard
Lit by flashing lights.

My father, the fireman, once told me about a fire.
There was a fish bowl on a table
In a room completely consumed in flame.
When they put out the fire one fish

Was floating, bloated and pale. The other
Swam contentedly around and around
In the steaming water. Only after
They took the bowl outside, cooled it

With water from the hose, it died.
Now a curve of highway hides my house
from me. I see the moon has risen
high enough to put itself out.
All A Levee Knows

Rain on the roof awakens me. I emerge to waves and waves, walk the bulk of the levee towering over the town. Tremendous blows ignite transformers, lighting the way for those doomed to the all-night struggle.

In mud a sandbag carried in tired arms feels suspiciously heavy, childsize but mercurial; it flows, kicks, flips. It would bite if it had teeth.

In the underwater light of dawn a house crumbles at the knees, sinks on itself as if head-shot. The crack of thunder electrifies the gangs of folk working steadily, twisting like a worm in water.

The sun burns the surface of the Mississippi orange. Dirty water creeps up from underneath. We hold our breath and wait for the levee to hold, or break.
One Good Crop

A gust of fresh south wind blows rain
in the window, raises her nipples
like two Swifts feeding
in the first dim cool light of evening.
She turns the pages of the paper.
Inside her an egg hangs ready, clear and round
and almost perfect, crouching in the jungle
of her fallopian tubes, pulsing with electric vibrations.
Her fingers are sweaty on the page, the ink blackens
her palms. She tingles at the rumble
of the approaching tractor in the yard, feels
the heavy vibration of the diesel up her thighs
and through the ache of her moistening. The clock
above the sink clicks in rhythm with the rain
dripping from the eves. She stands in the door
and watches him jump from the tractor, walk
long and slow through the puddles forming in the yard.
In the cooling kitchen she is humming like a combine,
wanting the scratch of stubble, the rattle and pump
of the thresher, the tight belts smelling of rosin
rolling and rolling the grain inside her. He comes
in like the rain through the door, spreading
the offering of soil across the floor, lifts her
to the table where she takes him like a field
takes a twelve row planter, sucking in the seed,
the fertilizer, the spray, the same
monthly ritual for three years,
dreaming always of just one good crop.
At the Des Moines Ordnance Plant
— 10 January, 1944

She works the cartridge line,
a golden island surrounded by golden birds.
Shell casings twinkle and ring
as box after box dumps on the open table.
These are fifty caliber shells, big around as a man’s thumb,
able to bring down enemy planes or cut a man in two.
She sifts through the pile, the metal cool on her hands,
thumbing the sharp rim where the bullet will seat,
the empty primer hole.
The air squats like a penny on her tongue.
Her ears ache with the singing of the brass.

The bullets must be perfect.

She runs her fingers over each one, eyes closed,
imagine the shell sliding into the chamber of the gun,
the WUMP of ignition, the spent cartridge, her spent cartridge,
ejecting, spinning through the air like a gyroscope,
falling to the sand or water or jungle mud, the smoke, the screams.
This she knows. She’s a sister of war, of wrecked bodies,
blood in the food, the moldy smell of rot.
She caresses the casings as if they were the damp brows
of her brothers, holds them like cold fingers, presses one,
then another to her lips.
Garbology

Find a big top loader near an apartment complex. Spend a day rooting. Bring a lunch. And cigarettes. You get used to the arm pit fungal jungle garden cellar bird nest drain trap swamp stump late night computer lab love canal aroma. Wear gloves and a hat. By noon you'll have accumulated quite a pile of treasure: clothes- slightly stained, lamps, toys, prostheses, mother boards and monitors, stacks and stacks of good quality porn. Note addresses, bank numbers, SSNs. Go to Jim's door wearing the shoes he threw out. Ask him for matching socks. Clip the Betty Crocker points and coupons. You can use them to buy cookbooks. Macramé a flower pot holder from used dialysis tubing. Build a small cooking fire from empty pizza boxes. Lie if you find a fetus. If you're lucky you'll find drugs or money or both. Refund cans are almost as good. Turning a profit is a bonus, look what you've learned.
The Disinfectant Girl

This he knows from watching: small ecologies thrive in the worlds beyond knowledge.

He waits in the chair by the window as she returns to sterilize the hidden realm; her arsenal—bleach and triclosan, Lysol and steam. He talks as she works, asks her again about California, the same way he might ask about the Andes or the Louvre. She tells him how warm it is there—not like here. The cold bothers her the way sunlight bothers mold. She grows but slowly.

For some reason chlorine makes him sneeze, rapid explosions like gun fire in old war movies. While she’s there the tissues drift about his feet. Outside the first apple blossoms float away.

“Warm today,” he says.

“Not enough,” she replies, sponge dripping, wiping tile.
Watching Television
— after Bly

The word for bird is Ca,
Claire, my daughter,
learning to speak.
I follow her pointing finger
past the starling, past the crow,
to the jet passing over Iowa.
There is deviation
in its flight path, a curve
taking it to Nebraska.
Television aerials bow
under the weight of crows,
dogs gather in the dusk,
faces peer down from the plane
at the grid of roads.
Above us a star shines steadily.
How have we flown this far
without arms? Firemen gather,
tally pairs of boots.
A starling is drawn
into the engine of the plane.
An arm is drawn from the kennel.
Claire points to a sparrow
with a crushed beak.
I have no word for her.
They are still removing bodies
from the rubble.
The Body Creates the Body

The girls carry the sandbox into the house. A beach on the dining room floor. Grains nestle in sweaty butt cracks. Socks the color of old hay.

Laughter pulls a warm breeze through the window. Water curls like a pup on the floor. Mica glitters in the crevices. The bathroom sink is full of grass.

Damp towels puddle in the doorway. Traces wet circles on the floor. The hardwood swells and closes the gaps. Between the boards lies body chaff.

Joists tell a story to the shoe. The shoe won’t listen she’s angry at the floor. In the recliner we read about canyons. Water wears the hardest rock like wheat.

Blue has given way to rain on the roof. Heads nod as I push off gently from the floor. How many drops to wet every seam? Water washes grit from every leaf,

Finds its way through the walls down cellar. Mice leave prints in the mud on the floor. Heads rest against my shirt pockets. The rain is good for the early corn.
The Birthing Stones

On the plains we are blessed
with children of our northern mother.
Incubated in surrogate
for millennia and delivered
here, there, rare gifts
for all their commonality.
Put your ear to the belly
of the thawing field,
hear the birthing moans.
Place your hands flat
on the earth, feel the swells
and contractions as each stone
grinds up the birth canal.
Walk over the furrowed rows.
See the cold blue heads
crowning, pushing free
from the placental soil, crying
as the first layers of skin
are washed away
by April rains.
Napkins

The slick edge of metal
cuts me to the bone,
opens my thumb
like a tomato soup can.
You grab my hand,
wrap your fingers tight
to quench the flow
and tie a tourniquet of hair.
When you are done
the stream is stopped,
the wound clean,
the pain lost to memory.

*

New Year’s Eve, you astride me,
we’re beating the dust motes
from the inherited couch.
As I cup a breast
in each hand
you tilt my chin
with your forehead,
cup my eyes
with your eyes,
drink me into your smile.
As I’m wrung you absorb
me, hold you,
hold me together,
us soaking into we.

*

Knee to knee,
our brown bag lunch
spread out, you fill me
with your day.
The Boss, the project due,
the baby kicking.
How you have to pee
so often, now.
While you talk
you pick apart
a chicken breast.
A dribble of grease
eases down your finger,
oozes towards your palm.
With a smile you wipe
your hand down
my pant leg.
I watch the streak
darken the blue cloth,
feel the warm slickness
on my skin, pressed
there by your touch.
The Intimacy of Scarf

The two men swaddled in down parkas are dark, not from here. Not that it matters, except in that they are not used to the cold that has settled in like a long train ride in another country. My joints ache with it as they stand face to face, mere inches apart, breathing the frost of each other, the older struggling to wind a scarf around the face of the younger, cut off the wind that started somewhere warm but ended here, stealing heat. His own dark head is bare. The cloth spills from his hands like black water, anointing the other’s head and neck. Sun streams from a rift in the clouds. As he finishes the older man bends and kisses the covered forehead. It’s as the wind amidst the snow. Blue amidst the gray. The way I kiss my girls before they go to sleep.
The Dance of the Ritual Scar

Today I wrote a poem,
new father to new daughter,
and having delivered it in class,
knees up, blood on the floor,
each peer sawing at the umbilical cord,
three women demand to see a picture
of my child.
I take her image from my bag,
place her gently into the web of hands
woven by her sisters
as they arrange themselves
into the triangle of power.
Concerned I lean into the synapse
to tell Emma be careful but the ground
moves like a snake
the undulations carry me away
until the drumbeat cat-wail
of their chanting grows distant and hard
to discern over the cracking
of branches against my back
as they push me to the fringe of primal woods—
away from the fire
away from the dance.
The glow rising from Emma’s picture
is like the last October moon,
lighting their faces orange and vitriolic.
Her essence curls from the paper
like new leaves winding up their forearms
nosing into arm pits across taut breasts
tasting painful nipples down smooth sides down
full hips angling up soft bellies and down
into the triangle tangle of hair sniffing
at the familiar forbidden sex
remembering their smell her smell her mother’s
smell twisting in the damp garden over the pudenda
down the rigorous slit sensing for the nick
The Dance of the Ritual Scar, continued

of scar from birth canal to perineum that stitches
each together
the permanent scar in all women
barren or full,
the scar on no man, the scar no man has,
the scar no man has seen, the scar
my daughter has and will have ritual or no,
the scar that separates her forever
from me and binds us closer
than any bond of men.
Lunching With Emma

Boxholm Elementary, Grades K, 1, 2, 5 and 6

Emma makes French fry fangs, wipes her nose down the sleeve of her shirt. Five, she loves dirt and worms, laughs when I burp. But she also loves dress-up and make-up.

The table of sixth grade girls is where she’s bound.
In a few years she’ll turn with a look and say, “Dad, will you please go sit over there?” And I will.
I’ll sit with a group of men who stare, confused at a gaggle of flowers who’ve found other light, or who think, maybe, they need no light.
Hugs will be pushed aside. Kisses on foreheads only, right below the receding hairline.

And we’ll give them money for clothes we hate. Hate ourselves for what we say. We’ve been subjected to women all of our lives but it’s no help. We’re secretly glad to see their mothers as confused.

Finally we’ll watch as they leave the table, disappear around the corner, walking hand in hand, purses swinging, heads back, laughing, filling, filling, full.
Planting Time

Emma is a pleasant weight on my chest.
Her hair is plums and horses.
She snores from the deep well
of the young, ill, and very tired.
The oldies radio station
helps us both to sleep.

It’s Spring. A tractor rumbles by in the night.
It’s forecast to rain an inch or two by dawn
and that will delay this cycle of disking, spraying, planting.
Fresh turned earth with its smell of worms invades
my dreams. Am I underground? Am I planting tomatoes?
The sun pushes aside the moon and I am
a black blue orange obelisk
in a black field, miles of west flung shadow.
The ground does the jitterbug. I’m thrown
in the air from furrow to furrow, dust
plants itself in my throat.
A six wheeled Godzilla advances,
living machines behind it, pulverizing
rocks, trees, houses, spraying burning liquid
in its wake. The creature stomps me deep into the earth.
In the silence after its passage water flows
in, on, under.

There is a time of quiet.
Mist becomes a droplet, droplets roll
into a rivulet, the rivulet sweeps into a river.
Darkness becomes a veil, then a thread.
I open my eyes to yellow light. Emma’s face appears.
She brushes dirt from my brow, offers me her hands.
I fold her to my chest. We stand, two knobby sticks
in a greening field. The burning liquid has turned to gold.
Corn, beans, alfalfa, wheat are writhing out of the ground,
sucking the sun from the sky, the rain from the soil.
The rush of the river diminishes
Plants leer from their awful height, bare gnashing teeth.
I pick Emma up, try to run but tangle in the choking roots.
Tendrils pierce my feet, my ankles, thread through my veins.
Leaves clog my throat as I tell Emma to run, run, but she hangs weightless in my arms.
She has become a corn shuck doll,
brown and withered, with inadequate red yarn for hair,
absurd green buttons for eyes.
My scream is taken by the plants,
dampened by a burgeoning silence.
Blood pounds in my ears

as I wake. Emma is crying in her sleep. Rain falls against the house.
The tractors are still. I carry the solid weight of child
up the stairs, lay her in a bed inherited, not made.
epidemiology

he watches the tractor rise and fall
hidden in the curves and swales of the field
    a distant marker buoy riding on the swells
or an island with the land
rising ever up to meet

it moves as if driven by the hand of god
a toy in a sandbox uniform and perfect
    in its pace    even rows
mechanical double-triple matched
the tank of chemicals following in its place

wind blows the spray drift flat along the earth
a movement of souls looking for an open door
dispersal occurs before the cloud
rises to the moon but the moon feels yellow
though surrounded by blue sky

on the highway the car floats past
the tractor forgotten by the man inside
    he coughs around the lump
growing in his throat
lights another cigarette and tries
Spring New Crop

A hot, dry April wind raises a cloak of dust beside the tractor, a gaggle of dirty old men tagging along, spitting advice over the stink of the diesel.
On they go about application rates, lime, soil pH, soil chemistry, soil, soil, soil.

Soul of the country is what they say through their black and white picket fence grins.
Their faces ride before me in the dust.
I can’t see my hand before my eyes.
At home someone is frying eggs.
There’s a little pepper, a little salt, a little soil sifting through the kitchen window.
Someone is drawing a bath. The water is brown and has sprouted a child.
Given Name

Crow accepts his name,
finds he cannot fly

Rearranges his primaries,
secondaries, looks for light
under his wings

Attempts a feeble flap
Drags his wings like corpses,
pulls the edges of his name tight
around him, grooves the earth

with a dip of his tail,
creates a fan of rising sun

Rays trail behind him
as if he were a cloud
or an obelisk of stone
Failed

It’s not important to know
it was a blue van
with black trim
at the stop sign
but that the plump girl
in the shotgun seat
was crying
and the man
gripping the wheel
with one big left hand
had the right poised
in its arc
like the head of a snake
white as her face
her mouth a smear
her eyes full
of fluttering birds
or that he lowered his arm
as we slowed to turn
and looked through us
with marbled eyes
daring us
until we passed,
our eyes averting
To The Boy, To James Lawson

To The Boy

It is said if you slit the tongue of a young crow
it can be taught to speak
Starving it or the occasional beating hastens the process
until a spit of meat and a raised hand
brings the words 'I love you, daddy' every time

To James Lawson

The Boy leaned from the window of the parked Ford
Stuck his burr head into the blast of white heat
As if to say Howdy but said Hey Nigger
So when Jim broke left across the sidewalk
His hot palm sliding like a whip down the pale
Cheek he grabbed those words and owned them
Took them home to the old plates and old table
His old Gram doing the dishes and threw them
Down like they were new books demanding to be read
But Gram turned and said there are no new books
Every word ever said has been written down
And all we can do is look for better ways to read them
So Jim read those damn words and listened
But all he could hear was a raspy caw
That hurt his ears dug way down in his throat
Made him spit bile until his tongue was a raw onion
In his mouth he was biting in two
Made him want to grab feathers in double fist fulls
Stuff them in his ears made him want to wring the necks
Of the crows perched on the wires laughing down
At him while he ran down the street with his books
Over his head like a hat streaked with droppings
Made him want to tear out the pages light a fire and burn
Them all to hell and maybe just maybe jump in himself
To pay for the way slapping that boy had made him feel
Free yet fettered like a crow on a string
Then he knew holding those words he held his own string
So when he read the words again with clear eyes the word *nigger*
Became the word *man* and the voices of the crows hushed
Blending into the soughing of the wind
Turning the pages of his open book
The Last Battle for Quarter-Section Run

My horse has fallen, killed by the reckless pace
of the pursuit. Jay and I ride bareback on his war pony—
a rattling rusting Huffy mountain bike.
Whooping through town Jay's black mane of hair whips my face.
My blond hair wags behind, twisting like a tail.
Blazing, we rip the heat, shirts shredded and tossed aside
like used bandages or waterskins shot full of holes.
Our hair is streaked with apple snot,
blood paints our cheeks, skin bruised black and blue,
the warrior's tattoo. Today we've lost, beat
we retreat to the cool water, jump, bike and bodies
airborne. Safe in the crick under the foot bridge,
our noses poking like frogs above the surface, we listen
as the soldiers tramp above our heads, sneakered feet
rumbling the boards like ghosts of Custer's men.
Apples pelt the stream on either side but we've fooled them.
Jay grins under the water, his teeth like voodoo,
his black eyes hate to run. We each lift an arm,
shoot our middle fingers in the air, explode from our lair
with the cries of slain brothers in our throats.
Apples become arrows, dirt clods lances.
We count coup. Dance naked on the scalps of the fallen.
To Steven Spielberg, Contemplating Destroying the Abandoned Bank in Pilot Mound, Iowa During the Filming of *Twister*

On the day you come to town we stand mesmerized, paunchy children gawping at our reflections in the smooth sides of the black stretch limo. We sigh collectively as the limo stops in front of the empty bank. Feet shuffle. A great wind blows as you step from the car. Our eyes burn from your tremendous light. We are very tired. We’ve been up all night preparing our virgins. Gone is the town’s supply of oil and honey, mace and balm. Two hundred scented bees wax candles burn up and down Pilot Street, one hundred ninety-nine for us, one special taper just for you, our blood mixed with the wax, Steve, guttering the flame. The smell of twenty cooking rams covers us like a pall. We cower behind our cars and curtains as you walk up the street. Your hands come up and form a square, pan left, pan right, appraise the angle, the light, *the scene.* The town swirls in the surface of your glasses, a vortex of bodies, dilapidated buildings, shingles, trees, cars sucked into the center, mixed, mingled, tossed up and out, driven through boards and block walls and mangled houses. If it be thy will we will cast our wounded selves into the street, scatter our children through fields of corn. Accept this offering. Touch us that we might see.
“What would you do with a brain if you had one?”
— Dorothy Gale, The Wizard of Oz

At first, swim only in circles
Cilia and flagellum, a small
percentage of proteins, a will,

the need of light, bending
towards, surrounding light
I can only imagine

arms, the wiggle of fingers, toes
in mud. A journey of inches
requires years, salt, ash, potassium,

Turgid waters warmed by balls
of plasma ejected from the sun.
Yet it is all there, born with knowledge

of the incantations, the undulations required
to direct the impulse of the void to be unvoid,
the glycol the fatty acid the architect

asleep in his chair dreaming of the arch
Someday I may create a rose the color

of the sky over the Big Horns etch
critical sequences in the cambium layer of a Sequoia leaf

a small bone like a tooth
for archeologists to ponder
But not today I am content
“What would you do with a brain if you had one?” continued

to swim, an elliptical orbit a major evolution
The genesis of a new sugar molecule
presents infinite possibilities.
Dog as First Stone

God I hate my neighbors—how they let their yard go.
Rank grass, trash filled stoop, dismembered refrigerator,
dog sleeping in the side yard, weeds
up to the rusted rocker panels of a hard top sedan.
Thistle, burdock, Creeping Charlie creeping, creeping.
Mowing I hit a patch of encroaching dandelions,
suns explode, spread little stars into the breeze.
I cut the mower and watch them slip away, try and count.
There’s no time. Next door
their dog is barking. I find him chained
to a stake, wound and wound in a circle of dirt,
his face tight against the ground, tongue peppered—
blackened with pieces of turds, bits of urine
clotted soil ground fine by the dragging chain.
His eye is partly bulged and he growls as I approach.
I am afraid of his teeth so I place yet another call to 911.
Animal Control slips a noose around his neck, stabs a needle
deep into the meat of his thigh. Asleep, he is a puppy,
scraggly and weedy, like grass in a sidewalk crack
near a burned out factory. The officer leaves
a note in the door. If unclaimed the dog will be dead
within ten days. It’s a waste of paper.
Tomorrow or the next day there will be another
staked in the yard, sniffing and wondering.
Einstein is wrong. The universe is closing on itself.
We look out and see galaxies falling away. We forget
the objects hurtling towards us; the moon, the sun,
the incredible pull of our own gravity, the connection
to the center and that the center moves.
We try to dodge but we cannot be missed.
After ten days I go to the shelter, bury the dog
in my back yard near a place of weeds, a place I never mow.
Scatology

1.
A turd marks the spot, *A rabbit died here!*
Gray cigar of fur rolled tight with a kink in the middle
where coyote’s sphincter pinched, maybe startled
by a distant bark, or a bright and brilliant
meteoric flash across the Milky Way.

2.
A family of raccoons has moved into the barn.
I see their tracks in the mud after any little rain.

Children or small bears might make such tracks,
but their sign is near the house or deeper in the woods.

The coons leave markers in the loft. Berries
in the scat, corn, bits of hair. I think granola,

pyramids, pungent offerings of rent, piled
always on the topmost step or highest bale of hay.

3.
In the yard the dog has shit out
the bleached skull of a mouse,
as if somebody lost a large pearl.

4.
Grandma calls them *mouse turd buns*, an old
Norwegian recipe. Sour dough and golden brown

in a bowl at every holiday, buttered tops
sprinkled with cardamon seeds, bread as white

as her table cloth becomes brown and red,
soaked with turkey gravy and cranberry sauce.
5.
Crows are smoke returning to the fire, yelling
stories we refuse to hear. They read our letters
in curbside garbage, listen at vent pipes.
They know what we eat, when we make love.
From their winter rookeries they write
our stories on the streets, on the windows
of cars, in calligraphy on the sidewalks.
Lives written in swirls of green, splotches
of white, digested remnants of raccoon.

6.
The deer gather in the cemetery, Monday night, Memorial Day.
They do not come to tend the dead. They honor
the greenery placed within the iron fence, water
in the hollows of the stones, lilies, mums, a giant hosta.
Remains of flowers dribble from their mouths,
small round pellets rain on the graves,
scatter equally near polished granite, worn sandstone, concrete urns.
A Field Previously Plowed

His face grays in the snowy last light of a February day. The corn is sold. Less a bushel than the cost to plant it. More a bushel than the cost to have never planted it. He takes her hand, leads her across the packed gravel lot through the long shadow of the elevator. They talk about the auction tomorrow, what the wedding plates might bring, what value lies in a table and chairs nearly half a century old. Dealers have been looking at the tractors. The boys have split the cows. Forty years ago she sat close to him in the cab of a different truck, watching it snow, going home. Tonight she sits beside him again, the snow covering all traces of harvest. She closes her eyes, remembers fields previously plowed, shoots of green rising like stubble from the face of the field.
The Stump

*That was the one bad spot on our place. It stuck out like an old scarred sore in the cleared space back of the barn- a big old stump, all jagged across the top, the legacy of some great tree that must have died long before we came into the valley and finally been snapped by a heavy windstorm. The huge old roots humping out in every direction, some as big as my waist, pushing out and twisting down into the ground like they would hold there to eternity and past.*

— *Shane*, Jack Schaefer

1. Oak

A tide of buffalo like black acorns covering the hills,  
a single Jay, blue sky alive high in my branches.  
Nameless turkeys. Who will call  
the buffalo buffalo? Coyote runs and sleeps  
in my shade. I make the earth turn, water seep.  
My rootlets pry at the mountain,  
the mountain feeds me, alone  
I give body to the wind.  
The young sun is my brother, the old winter moon  
my sister, I forget my lover, she is gone.  
Great things fall in the shadow of the mountain.

2. Roots

Cell and cell  
ladder auger  
sand clay rock water rock.  
Burrow to the core of the planet.  
Truth lies in nickel, iron, uranium.  
Tell it to the leaves leaves  
pass it to the breeze,  
winds give it to the sun  
like a book.
3. Eternity

The wind blows around the tractor, talks to dust in lieu of leaves. It whispers to the stump, snaps the peas from the vine, twists the plow. Muddy water swirls in the trough. The wind ruffles the apron of the nursing mother, leaves to tell the sun her tit is dry.

The baby passes in the night.

The man loads the truck in the lie of morning light, licks the grit from his teeth. He spits at the wind, lowers his eyes from the sun, turns the crank and drives from the yard, past the stump, across the dry bed of the Arkansas, the baby’s hand a sickly gray dangling from under the shawl. Going west, cell and cell, into the wind, west.
No Answer From the Trees

Tuesday rain glistens on the drying corn, leaves glue to my boots as I walk.
The pasture trees shimmer and blend into a waking dream, false tunnels and avenues open, close like softly drawn shades, heavy doors.
On the edge of the blackberry bramble a field sparrow shakes drops from his beak, eats a sluggish moth. His feathers shine like Locust beans. Deep within the tangle, slithering and invisible, he is dry, content, full of bird musings. I am bounded in leaves, a waterfall figure, a giant indigestible insect. Moths flutter on my tongue, I tear my hands dissecting brambles. I am refused his blackberry secrets.
Chainsaw Sculptor
   — for Mary Swander

The buzz of the chainsaw rips the air
with undulating cacophony,
but here there are no forests laid bare,
no trees topple with cracks and groans,
this chainsaw cuts up, not down.

The sculptor understands the faces
in the trees; Indians, bears, old men
and old women struggle to emerge.
Tip and bar bob and dip, nick bits
and chips of wood away,

never a blinding storm of dust,
the occasional flurry and step back to rest—
a slightly deeper cut around the eyes,
a zip to strengthen the line of the nose,
grazing the chain against the grain

creates the illusion the reality of hair.
Stretching behind the artist at work
rows of figures look to the sky,
some are fresh, amber in the sun,
some are gray, memories in the dusk.
November Elemental

Four farmers stand under failing stars at the corners
of their section: Robert, northwest; Earl, southwest;
Morris, northeast; Karl, southeast. They are silent

as a lack of wind, intent on the silence. At sun rise
they walk diagonally across the stubble fields—
the crunch of stems, the scuff of snow loud in the brittle air.

By force of will the ground turns beneath their feet.
Footsteps sew a seam in the snow. Breath rises, then sinks
along the ground. They are four old Norse gods sailing

slowly through the clouds, dragon boats sleeping in the barns.
They pace stride for stride, step and step, each
a distant blur to the other. They have kept long practice,

this steady tread over the earth, but like every year Robert
is first to reach the cross of fences at the center of the fields.
He weaves a little, out of breath, an apple red and bright

and out of place in his hand, a captured bit of early sun.
Karl is next with the knife, two paces off Robert, one ahead
of the others. Morris rests a whisky bottle on his hip.

Earl passes out the glasses. The earth spins around their gravity.
Fences stretch eternally left, right, there, back, tight and humming
a song of wire. The apple is quartered and placed in the cups.

The whiskey is poured. Robert spreads a right hand over the top
of the center post. Morris then Karl then Earl stack their hands atop his.
They drink. The sun continues to rise. Wind swirls in
from four directions. Snow falls into a silence as in the beginning.
An Afterword to *Small Ecologies*

*Small Ecologies* represents the first step in what I hope will be a lifetime process of growth and education in my writing. Comprised of poems written over the last seven years, this collection represents the current evolution and philosophy of my poetry.

When I started writing poetry again a few years ago, I demonstrated only the vaguest central grounding and thematic imagery. As I studied and began to improve my craft, I was able to develop and nurture my own concepts and philosophies. Poets such as Wendell Berry, Robert Bly, Li-Young Lee, and especially Robert Frost influenced me and help to focus my thoughts and emotions into words. Writers such as Berry, Masanobu Fukuoka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and many others broadened my literary sensibilities and challenged me to expand my perspective. These inputs, within the context of my inherent gravitation towards natural settings and a wry eye for human nature and human foibles, especially my own, formed the base around which I began to create my own writing style and philosophies.

The primary philosophical tenet in this collection is the interrelatedness of all aspects of life. Beyond the ecological “circle of life” cliché, there exist an infinite number of emotional, physical, psychological, theological, cosmological, and mathematical threads binding human and non-human awareness. In today’s society, the term “ecology” is usually limited to the natural world; the ecology of plants, the ecology of a swamp, etc. What we forget is the holism of nature (the concept of nature also being expanded to
include all of its meanings: essential character, instincts, the sum total of all things in space and time, etc.). Non-modern humans derived not only their physical state of being from their surroundings, but also the emotional and spiritual. The buffalo was deified not simply for the meat, shelter, and clothing it provided, but for the intangibles surrounding it: community, strength of courage, relationships developed during the hunt, danger. Both flesh and spirit were revered. That the sun was considered a god is perfectly logical when we consider to what extent it provides and influences life. We are just starting to re-acknowledge what pre-modern humans understood instinctively; sunlight not only gives life but also controls moods, emotions, breeding cycles, etc., processes people now attribute to a non-physical, abstract god or to the sterile science of biology. And as the sun is simply a minute part of the celestial ecology we must not consider it alone. We must consider the realm in which the sun exists, and the emotions that consideration of our tiny part in that realm engenders. Thus the ecology of this collection encompasses the microscopic synapses of the brain to the furthest reaches of the physical universe.

The grand ecology contains an infinite number of small ecologies.

The poems in *Small Ecologies* attempt to examine the various aspects of life within this expanded view of ecology: space, time, emotion. Ecology is bounded by the theoretical edges of the Universe, the physical boundaries of the quark, or emotional boundaries set by experience, fear, longing, etc. While natural concepts are present throughout this collection, the poems attempt to push the modern concept of ecology and encompass all possible nuances of the term. In a poem such as "First Bear Sighting in a Century," the
natural setting is apparent; the poem may easily be classified as a nature poem. I have attempted, however, to instill certain concepts beyond the norm, specifically those concepts related to human interaction with nature (fear), subsequently leading to emotional disturbance (fear, confusion, feelings of inadequacy.) A thoroughly urban poem such as “Garbology” also includes ecological principles. The ecology is in the dumpster, the true measure of human society. The narrator, as pseudo-anthropologist, provides a snapshot into a moment of human history. The imbedded humor imparts a feeling of camaraderie with the reader, establishing a connection in order to set up and enhance the emotional impact of the discovery of the fetus, driving home the point that we are truly a throw away society. The detached narrative provides a clinical framework for the poem, leaving the reader free to develop their own feelings.

The poems discussed above are two examples of spatially opposed works; one natural, one urban. One premise of my writing is that ecology is not limited to a spatial plane, but extends throughout the seen and unseen, the known and unknown. The ecology of the universe and the ecology of the mind exist, if not in harmony, at least dependent on each other. Metaphysical dynamics occur in the poems “Night Moose” and “Burning Ants.” “Night Moose” centers on cosmic interaction and the human/animal dynamic. As in “First Bear,” nature makes the narrator seem insignificant, but this insignificance is intensified by the narrators isolation and the oppressive expanse of the night sky. The moose becomes the physical manifestation of the universe. This feeling of insignificance
is also the central theme of “Burning Ants,” but is developed not from the cosmological perspective, but from the emotional perspective. “Night Moose” looks outward for answers, “Burning Ants” peers inwards. Each small revelation helps create a greater picture of the whole.

The themes and concepts I attempt to establish in my writings are influenced by the writers referred to at the beginning of this discussion, specifically Berry and Frost. Both poets create large dynamics in their poems. A specific Frost poem I find influential is “The Woodpile,” in which the author witnesses an abandoned woodpile rotting away in the woods. The language is simple and direct, the scene stark and focused on a narrow plane of perception. Revelation occurred when I understood Frost uses the woodpile to comment on the transitive and terminal nature of man; the work of the wood cutter coming to nothing through the erosion of time, and ultimately the inevitable death and decay of the woodcutter, the narrator, and the reader. “The Woodpile” is framed in a natural setting, but the impact is both visceral and philosophical.

Berry, even more so than Frost, tends towards poetry written about and towards the natural world. His ideas, however, like Frost’s, extend well beyond the boundaries of the physical world. These are just two examples of writers I admire and the depth of writing I am trying to emulate.

As I develop as a poet I expect to continue to push the boundaries of my experience and to tap into all aspects of the larger ecology as I perceive it, whether it’s a poem about agriculture, nature, society, my children, my wife, or any other myriad topic. Already I
have some discontent concerning portions of this collection. I look forward to the next phase of my maturation and the poems to be written in the future.
The author would like to thank the following publications in which some of these poems first appeared, sometimes as earlier versions:

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“Some Kitchen in Kansas” was inspired by a line from the story “Three Mile Limit” in *The Hunger Bone*, Debra Marquart, 2001