

THE VERTICAL WOMAN:

A COLLECTION

OF POEMS

By

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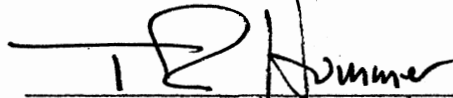
for my father and Troy

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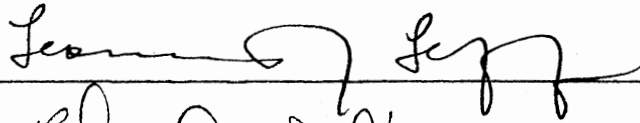
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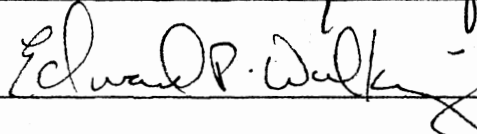
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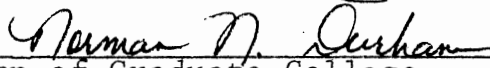
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PREFACE

There are a number of people who, without their help and their interest in my work, this collection could not be possible. First and foremost, I am greatly indebted to my teacher and friend, Dr. Terry Hummer, who taught me that writing poetry is no easy task. He has been solely responsible for shaping my belief that what I am doing is somehow significant and noble.

My special thanks goes to Dr. Edward Walkiewicz for his constructive criticism for my prose writing and for his enthusiasm and enlightenment of James Dickey's work.

I cannot possibly fully express my gratitude for the knowledge and support I have received from Dr. Leonard Leff. His concentrated efforts towards my script writing endeavors has carried over to my poetry writing. I shall always be grateful to him for a new appreciation of the "narrative hook."

A number of friends need special mention. With Michael Bugeja at the helm, the Stillwater "Fugitives" stressed that four revisions of a poem are never enough. Extreme thanks also go out to Miss Debi Embrey and Mr. Tim Davis who may not always understand what I do, but who defend my right to do it. In addition, I'd like

to thank my mentor, Mr. John O'Connell, who taught me to appreciate Irishmen.

Finally, I am indebted to Dr. Samuel Woods, Jr. whose unselfish encouragement for my scholarly endeavors has been immeasurable, and it is my admiration for his work with Oliver Goldsmith that is my sustenance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE VERTICAL WOMAN: A COLLECTION OF POEMS	12
Translation from the American	13
Translation from the American	14
The Druid Alter	16
After Stained Glass	17
Death in Kilorgan	18
Mrs. O'Donough's Second Child	19
The Waves off Moher	20
The Sailor's Daughter	21
Fiona O'Connell Sleeps in Sin	22
Fiona's Illness	23
The Man in Black: Homage to Goldsmith	24
The Vertical Woman	26
Galway, 3:00 a.m.	27
Heiress	28
Driver of the Family Car	29
Driver of the Family Car	30
Pilgrimage: No. 7 Natchez	32
The Apache Trucker Drives to the Sea	34
Musician with Earring	36
Plie	37
Solo	38
Traveling	39
Dance School	40
Alice Meets Dr. Johnson	41
Salt Waves	42
The Rock of Cashel	43
Waiting	44
Wedding Night	45
Transgressions	47
Out Back	48
Stitch in Time	50
A Northern Death	51
Self-Defense	52
Night Discovery at Bull Shoals	53
Reunion	54
Mr. Ferguson's Perfection	56
Dog Turning	57

Chapter	Page
The Evacuation	58
Waiting	60
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	62

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I received a letter from Richard Hugo in which he responded to my question "What direction do you think contemporary poetry is taking?" Such a question displays an almost laughable naivete, typical of a beginning student of poetry. Fortunately, Mr. Hugo was very cordial, replying that he couldn't keep up with the direction of poetry in Missoula, Montana, much less the rest of the country. Hugo's attitude reflects a growing concern for the chaotic state of poetry. For a student of poetry [today, in this chaotic time,] it is difficult to anticipate what strain, if any, is operating, or to know what subjects to deal with and in what manner to deal with them. It is out of this "mess" that I am operating, molding and shaping what ideas I feel to be valid not only for people in Missoula or St. Louis, but for all people in all places.

I have strived for this concept of "universality" in The Vertical Woman, a collection with varying themes and forms. Although the places and people I am concerned with may at once seem disparate, I have consistently tried to explore similar subjects and themes; hence,

the poems, like the fragmented souls who people them, cohere to produce a unified whole.

If I could sum up The Vertical Woman in a word, I would call it a work of survival. Despite the title's feminist connotations, it is a work addressed not to women alone, but to all people who are driven by questions of life, death, happiness, misery, and who must stand up physically and spiritually to overcome their destructive passions in order to survive.

I am convinced that one cannot survive without imaginative powers. I have studied Romantic ideas about the imagination, drawing particularly from Coleridge. Coleridge, discussed the primary and secondary imaginations: the primary imagination is based on all that can be physically perceived acutely by the observer; the second imagination synthesizes all sensory observations to produce a new envisioning of the object. Memory is an important additional element in my theory of imagination. With the fusion of memory and imagination, an experience may become better or worse in the writer's mind. In most of my work, the former is true since I believe that the creative process should be affirmative. Even unhappy memories may become more pleasant in the poet's mind, but only if he can recognize that the original experience itself was unpleasant. It becomes a challenge for the poet to view the experience in a new way that exemplifies better understanding.

The Vertical Woman is divided into three sections. The first section constitutes my "Irish experience," although it begins with a very American poem, "Translation from the American," a seemingly dismal poem with a male persona who is confronted with both religious and moral choices. The use of a male speaker is something I've been working with more and more. In part, I want to warn my readers against being guilty of the intentional fallacy. Moreover, I want to identify similar male and female responses; thus, what becomes possible is a strong human response.

Several poems, including "The Druid Altar" and "The Vertical Woman," specifically address female response to lovers. They are not bitter attacks on men like so many of Plath's and Sexton's poems; rather, these poems reveal the quiet complacency of women who understand seduction. In the case of "The Vertical Woman," the character has no bitterness towards men as she walks upright to her watery death; she will become the sea's lover and part of a natural process.

In this section, I am also concerned with Catholicism, but most of the poems transcend any organized religion, and I opt for a religion of the "self." In "After Stained Glass," the speaker engages in an inner spiritual war; she is torn between indifference towards and participation in the violent act that has resulted from Catholic-Protestant disputes.

She chooses "feeling" without really becoming involved.

I also often establish family situations--a common setting for the whole work. Daughter/father relationships are particularly significant as exhibited by "Fiona O'Connell Sleeps in Sin," "Fiona's Illness," and "Salt Waves." I have attempted to create distance in the first two by having the persona directly address Mr. O'Connell. He is a specific father, but he could be any father.

I am experimenting more and more with second person address and have studied the use of it by Richard Hugo and Robert Penn Warren (in this respect). The second person address has the capacity to operate on two levels. On the first level, the persona may address himself, prodding his own mind for answers, refuting his own scheme of values and responses. On a second level, the persona may speak to a general audience--this aspect is more conducive to a "universal" tone--acting as preacher/savior for the damned. This second level has dramatic, purging qualities and can be very effective.

Also, in this section, I have experimented with the broken line form--so characteristic of James Dickey's longer poems--as evidenced by "Death in Kilorgan" and "Heiress." Most of my poems are free verse because I feel, as Dickey puts it, that free verse is better able to monitor the jumps and leaps taken by the mind in the

process of creation. With the addition of the split-line technique, one of two things may happen. First, a staccato, frenzied tone can emerge. But because many of my poems equate death with a dream state, I use the split line to create a hypnotic effect. I have also tried to work with formal syllabic rhymed lines-- octasyllabic in "Fiona O'Connell Sleeps in Sin" and decasyllabic in "Salt Waves" and "The Vertical Woman"-- for I feel that in order to "play with the net down," as Frost would say, a poet must know the rules of the game. Rhyme and strict conventional forms make up our poetic heritage and to abandon these devices completely seems wrong and demonstrates a certain lack of discipline.

"Homage to Goldsmith" is an unusual character sketch. At some point, I should like to revise the poem and put it into heroic couplets--a mode Goldsmith himself mastered in "Retaliation," a brilliantly comic ridiculing of his contemporaries. However, I justify its present rambling conversational style because it is suited to Goldsmith's caricatures in his essays and longer fictional work.

Another poem worth mentioning is "Galway, 3 a.m." On a surface level, it is concerned with a poet/persona who cannot sleep because she cannot write. I have read much work by Donald Justice, a poet whose major achievements are poems about the poet and his craft.

Rather than having the persona seek the muse, I have her first look for external natural inspiration. Finding none, she turns to the life--both literal and metaphorical--within her. This poem hints at a technique I intend to employ more and more--that of exchange. Dickey artfully displays interaction between his personae and animals, people, inanimate objects. Rather than having the personae exchange and become the other "thing," I choose, as Dickey lately does, to have the personae take on additional power as a result of the temporary transformation. Hence, in "Death in Kilorgan," the dying man becomes both a fisherman and a fish in his dream, yanking the line in the real world and bringing his welcomed death closer.

"Driver of the Family Car" continues with family, dream, and death motifs. When asked what the difference was between poets and other people, Hugo said that poets thought about death all the time. The opening poem inter-mingles the death of a father with a dream about a funeral car chauffeur and the grieving daughter's perception about a relationship between her mother and him. Dream, death, and reality fuse. The ambiguity of the title adds to the sense of the whole collection; the daughter must now assume a dominant position in the family.

Places and people are also important. I have drawn heavily from both Hugo and Wright for these poems. From

Hugo, I have focused on the deteriorating place or setting, as in "Natchez, No. 7," although admittedly, I have not used the forceful second person address. Influenced by Wright, I have taken the side of all the exiled and isolated individuals who are driven to other people. Nature alone will not suffice to raise humanity above its condition. In "The Apache Trucker Drives to the Sea," "Solo," "Traveling," and "Dance School," the personae actively seek out others. Silence and solitude are not to be desired.

In other poems such as "Solo," "Plie," and "Musician with Earring," I focus on particular characters who have lost something and are trying to gain it back. The aging dancer of "Plie" thinks she still has dancing talent; the musician has forgotten the real story behind his earring and so his perfect story becomes the gem.

Relationships are also explored. In "Alice Meets Dr. Johnson," youth and age attempt to fuse, the persona playfully mocking her lover for his passionless ways. In "Salt Waves," memory is vital because it is the only positive thing the lovers cling to as they run from each other. Their pleasurable experiences are somehow fossilized despite their break up.

The poems in "Waiting" are all concerned with hope and anticipation of something better. In part, they reveal the destruction of old myths and the need for the persona to create new ones. "Wedding Night" again

echoes the transferral technique attempted in earlier poems. Dangers of the imagination are also present. With the use of an objective persona, I have tried to examine not only the woman's shattered expectations about marriage, but also the husband's need to return from his aquatic rendezvous to the real world.

"Transgressions" examines the myths that parents use to explain away the unexplainable to their children-- in this case, the notion of death. The persona's father is dying, and the persona struggles to reconstruct a myth her father once related. The myth becomes important although somewhat distorted because it helps her to come to some terms with her father's death. She imagines that if he is looking at the moon at the same time she is--even though they are thousands of miles apart, there is still the possibility that they can connect by giving themselves up to the energizing powers of the moon.

There are other poems that deal with "waiting" in a much different light. "Mr. Ferguson's Perfection" concerns an old man, rooted in habit, who believes that by taking his own life, he will somehow seek salvation. Yet the time is never right for his ritualistic activity; the actors in nature never gather at precisely the right time. He remains as the only viable person on his stage; hence, his refusal to carry out the suicide is life-affirming. The relationship between

man and animal takes on a new twist in "Dog Turning" as the persona waits to see if the dog will turn on her. She responds in a very loving human way when she presses the dog's face to hers and somehow hopes that the dog will respond similarly although she realizes that this is highly improbable.

I rarely draw on social and political movements of any kind for my poetry; furthermore, I don't think that my poems attempt to affect change. Yet, I find the subject of war to be an interesting one. Instead of examining the injustices of war for the actual participants, I prefer to deal with war in terms of the effects it has on people behind the scenes. In "Waiting," I alternate stanzas in the present and past tense to reflect the need for immediacy and viability in response. The persona observes her sleeping sister-in-law and tries to imagine what she is thinking or dreaming about. These observations are interspersed with the grandfather's empty comments. The grandfather is lost to the past, yet his responses reveal his inability to remember what waiting for a soldier to return from war is really like. The aggressive action at the end illustrates the persona's need to affirm life. "The Evacuation" juxtaposes a specific incident about war with a rather mundane domestic action. The second part exemplifies the persona's obsession with survival, drawing back to the first section. The persona wants

to transcend his empty existence--chiding his neighbors for their lethargy and indifference--as he extolls the importance of protecting other human beings in the process. He will save his daughter from imaginary fire just as he has saved the waitress from the gutted hotel. His wife and his neighbors are too passive; affirmation must come with overt action. I have also drawn on Dickey's idea of the hero in modern society. Is an average man prepared for heroism? Even though the persona sees himself as capable of heroic deeds, he is a failure as a hero--though not necessarily as a man--because he cannot deliver any message to those around him.

The strength and the unity of The Vertical Woman is multi-faceted. First, and foremost, I believe that my ability to use the imagination and all of its powers to transcend personal experience and to address all people and places is significant. Some of the poems may be autobiographical, resting on certain memories that I may have had, yet the mere fact that the experiences are perceived in an entirely new way--sometimes a distorted way--takes many of the poems out of that realm. Further, the thin narrative structure of the three sections helps to hold the work together. The first section, "Translation from the American," is concerned with an American abroad. The persona is called back home with the death of her father. In

"Driver of the Family Car," she is isolated and alone and must rely on inner strength to survive and carry on. Finally, "Waiting" suggests that the persona must wait for something new in her static life, a life always threatened by new calamities. Yet, waiting in itself becomes an undesirable passive stance; the persona constantly rebels against inactivity and engages in affirmative actions. Finally, affirmation becomes the unifying element of the whole work. Reaction against death, dream, misery, and unhappiness becomes, in itself, an unsatiated quest for life.

CHAPTER II

THE VERTICAL WOMAN: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

TRANSLATION FROM THE AMERICAN

Translation from the American

for M.C.

The fence looks tall,
barbed. It is night and cool.
I drink illusion,
liquor, and memories falling prey
to stern priests cloaked in black and white.
Not thinking I struggle to the top
grasping at jagged spears that puncture
palms and conscience held in mid-air.
Balanced now in pained
mid-section looking down
without a prayer I fall to concrete.
The steeple bell chimes.
I'm bobbling grace
on plastic turf. Lined silver pews
shout no support.

Father Nolan wants his wine
served cold in a gold chalice
but I don't know Latin
so I dummy up
silent on knee hard pads,
watch Krupinski divinely pour
his juice out to folded hands.
I crawl home in silence, tell

my father I no longer serve.

James Street fires a long one
up the middle, complete. Crowds scream,
applaud, cheerleaders clasp their hands,
spirits high, as God
blesses this crowd and all
who play here wholly.

The Druid Altar

With Galway Bay gray green
eyes, you tricked me that wet-dog Sunday
morning we set out to find
some Druid beginning.
Mired to the tops of our sneakers
in cream and coffee sludge
we tromped up Maitlin's Mount
to find six stones placed,
five in a perfect circle, guarding
one, a gray slab altar
for our supper of cold biscuits and whiskey.
The sacrament glugged in silence,
your sermon followed, the rite began.
An ashen thread of peat incense spiralled
from a thatched cottage in the flats.
Feeding, a flock of sheep watched
us sacrifice. My youth,
your wives, purged by the second.
We emptied the bottle to make certain,
staring up at the cumulous ceiling.
I didn't mind your lie.
This green schoolgirl knew her history
well. Druids worshipped miles away.
Unlike them, we quick slaughtered
what was and wasn't, six hand picked
stones to covet.

After Stained Glass

Mixed with quartz and salt,
slivers of an old pain wash
ashore to cut the toes of children.
The blood ebbs cold.
Each night, urged by the moon,
the stained pieces gather,
the names of saints
lost to the mist.

The 10:19 is late
to bear my indifference to Drogheda
and to my attic room on the sea.
Pressed against the wall,
the vender's son holds a tooth,
feoda-bread white, bleeding
from the green bottle thrown at him
from St. Tim's.
Across the Liffey,
a beggar eyes me, watching
the O'Donough boy who wants to know my stake.
I stand, crush green splinters
into sidewalk, forever holy, red

Death in Kilorgan

He does not remember you
when he wakes in mourning
quiet. You are his ninth
birthday Mrs. Faolin's dappled filly.
He waves you away,
calls you to his bed for a second
look. Oh yes where is my fishing line?
Be so kind son.

His eyes close on a ripple
lapping the tall rushes
where the trout were always good.
The big striper mouths the green
sides of stones cemented in the banks,
moves towards the purple worm
dropped from above. He skirts
the suspicious wriggler,
bumps, nibbles, opens his mouth
gasps, yanks the line
running through his veins gives you a start
the bait gone.

Mrs. O'Donough's Second Child

She holds it strangely--
like a spoiled onion--
arm's length. It is secure
somehow at this distance staring
back blankly with wisdom, saying
nothing that could remotely matter.

Locking the door, she will keep
her secret, her sleeping husband
out. His linear dreams must wait.

Kneeling before the tub, "Mother Mary"
she washes the child, herself,
wraps it carefully in the one
monogrammed towel "O",
the embroidered virgin spanning
its face a shroud to imprint
kindness in small gnarled hands.

At length, she rises, as she must,
unlocks the door to present
her painful offering, clean,
ignoring the mute
whisper of unanswerable cry.

The Waves off Moher

With little warning,
they broke to the west.
Aimed for the Cliffs,
the peaked one, coiling, spuming
speared through the skiff,
too her child. Calmer than the sea,
she let it. Lying in the wet
boat bottom, salt water lapped from her
red.

He looked to the sky,
found his answer in storm,
promised her another, soon
as she was well enough
to sail again.

The Sailor's Daughter

Where 51 cuts the beach road like a dull fish knife,
their stilted house teers in a wind from Tenarife.
Wanting a boy, he found a life
with this frail girl who makes him think of a sea-pup
he saw once off Plata. Left by its mother,
it followed the bull among the sharp rocks, whining.
Like that, she follows now, to one dune, another,
crying for a chance to carry the first driftwood
he finds, the cracked sand dollar, the silf-filled shell.
She stops, her white, reed-thin hair chopped by the wind,
and fingers the notched scar on her skin where she fell
from the pier the morning he sailed for Campeche.
Suddenly in her smile he sees the Flamenco
or the rum-colored girl who sold coral in Antibes.
In orange brilliance, he hands her kelp to carry home,
looks to the west for a last wave that rises
with any meaning. He wants to make
promises, hopes he can.

Fiona O'Connell Sleeps in Sin

for John O'Connell

You can't separate your daughter's
waking in your arms, her waking
in arms of a man younger
than your oldest dream of breathing
life into sterile women. You can stroke
her hair until you think you feel
strange fingers touching yours, then shake
your head to lose the thought. The fall
from her sweet grace is like none known
by anyone who says he might
hear hell pulse. Impassioned woman
beats in her wrists at your chest. Fight
this man, wound him to his soul,
spare her from immortal rules.

Fiona's Illness

Your daughter spilled tea
in my lap, warm
fingers clutching my knees.
She waited the terror
only fathers create.
Whisked up like a Coney Island coaster
she finds delight in gyroscope
arms whirling her upward, outward,
shrieks of fear, fearless spear the night.

In phenobarbital quiet, she screams,
clawing at air for a hard thought,
any thought. She doesn't know
this carnival ride. In her pain,
the pain of a universe, yours
builds, grinds, stops.
With each new cry
of ask and receive, I know
I'll stop lying to children.

The Man in Black: Homage to Goldsmith

He is 231 years old--you
note this immediately--
his only brother works
at the glass factory,
is a practicing Druid on weekends.
He tells you, for he wants you
to know, that his voice isn't
what it seems when it sounds
from under a rock.

It is like this
every evening when you dangle
your bare legs from the quay,
ten toes refracting twenty.
You always think you're not dressed
for his visit. He'll comment, to be sure,
won't sit beside you--against his beliefs.
You drop Harrod's, the new fall line
to appease. He moves to something else.
He'll hum to a star, hoping to arouse
your humanity, when whiteness disappears
beneath the bow of a skiff, he resorts
to headcounting pebbles, so many people
holding back the sea.
Mumble something about vanity
or human wishes, jingling pence

in your skirt pocket. Line his.

He'll be back to show you the town.

The Vertical Woman

The clumsy sea finds the hem of a woman's skirt,
tries to lift up, mires in its own slick passion.
"Some looker," a wharf rat announces to beachkind.
She smiles, but bends to touch the gentler stranger
who tides more content in the warmth of bare ankles.
Quartz sand and minnows strain through her fingers,
each an hourglass where too little falters.
The sea's salt in her hands, she paces the mantle,
becomes the fine silt of a greater timepiece,
one that clocks life by fathoms and sunfish.
Drawn to the sloped floor, in seconds the water's feast,
she falls, nudged by the moon, granting the sweet salt wish.

Galway, 3:00 a.m.

for Diane

To a ship scraping the dock
I wake, wondering why it is
I own a pen. My child
asleep in me rolls like a wave
to some new position
he hasn't tried yet, gripping
my ribs oar-like to propel him
through the duration.

We leave

you with your dream of slender
blonds no given to crying
easy thoughts. Air cool on my legs,
I look for the Islands, white
smoke from cottages threading stars
together on a dusk sheet.
Framed in a mi-sing pane,
something at a distance blinks.
Is it for me? Why
am I awake, my own island
of obligation? Hand against belly,
I hear the slow answer of my life.

With sleep comes word.

Heiress

The telegram came
 announced the caesura. Dead. Stop.
 House. Advise. Sell. Stop.
 Stocks. Stop. Futures. Stop.
 Signature. Stop. Stop!
 It should have read two
 surly liver pointers the Browning,
 shiny barrel and oil scented stock
 four Charlais, sludge colored
 by the west creek hay barn
 alive with lightning bugs moths
 whirling the glow of a hurricane
 the lame roan that bolted brush
 fire rusted tiller strawberries
 poking through damp weeds trope
 bed climbing the walls of the summer
 cellar fence rounding soybeans
 goldenrod, waiving fuscia
 sun bleeding into the next hill.

How did he know there's something indecent
 about leaving a daughter with man-things
 she may not hope to savor.

DRIVER OF THE FAMILY CAR

Driver of the Family Car

I.

It is a sad dream,

vulnerable: My mother's handkerchief is wedged
white in the back seat of the second car,
smeared with her lipstick,
some new shade of copper.

The mourners gone to their own tombs,
the young driver picks it up,
stalls, presses it to his face
with a deep breath takes her
fifty years, her perfume,
the meaningless monogram of her life.

II.

Dream it is sad,

vulnerable: Beside her goldfish pond,
the slow dance they invented lives
as perfect movement. Her black dress parts
at the knee. His arms threaten
to become her; fingers burn
her shoulders. He wants to know
light in any coffin, is afraid
to hold her any closer for fear
he will turn her to ash
and Lord knows he has seen
enough of that.

III.

Vulnerable, it is dream,

sad: Matching the lace border
he folds it into an envelope, signs
the outside. I can't make it out.
Should I roll over, kill him?
Shoot him through his dream
of what is possible?
Suffocate him with the flesh
lining of arms? Or let him drive
to the graveyard in the second car
clutching white, to stand
beside my father's stone, ask
"All right?"

Pilgrimage: No. 7 Natchez

A survivor of Biloxi,
my bent arm hangs
outs the backseat window,
collecting Confederate dust.
The elbow sights the pink house first,
three stories of cotton candy
someone lost in the woods.
The wagon coughs to a halt.
The wounded take leave.
One deep breath--a magnolia
ether fills my lungs.
Hired belles peel out a tinny welcome.
A signboard by the door: Daily
10:00 to 3:00, when the owners secede.
It's five past two o'clock.

I step into the apse of hall.
A north wind sneezes,
frisks my puckered skirt,
forces me to take cover.
The dining room offers a scent,
veal and vermouth
scatted by the oars of a ceiling fan.
A lace tablecloth catches light, claws
of a cat vaulting china salvaged.

Tracks across the hall, lime green
parlor, and oak study and tattered books
open for some reader, interrupted.

He eyes me from the span of a wing-backed
chair, head tilted, indifferent
to the air heavy with time,
smoke from an open fireplace.

Upstairs in the master bedroom,
great-grandparents knelt in four-poster silence,
"War is hell" scratched into the headboard.
They prayed back the hours,
then turned back the spread,
someone's Christmas dress still bleeds in the quilt.

A copper spoon drops downstairs,
the signal to move out
where gray-coat squirrels bark strategy
from the arms of a dying ash.
Mosquitoes surround the spy in the camp
trying to escape. Numb from magnolia opium,
I barely feel their bayonette stings.

I have heard of battle
on a hill somewhere in the next county.
The time is frighteningly short.

The Apache Trucker Drives to the Sea

In a flash of headlights
I see mating rattlers
on his bare arm, twined vein-blue
so tight they defy the dark
he does.

I pick him up, make up names.

The soft beach road has stranded
his truck six miles up the point.
He mumbles something about needing
to get back.

I accelerate, thinking
on a cold night high in the mesas
his great-grandfather killed mine
with a stolen Remington
for a reason as mysterious
as the sea he escaped to.

Maybe we have entertained each other
inland, passing in a fast lane,
scowling at the same link
of steel to steel.

Above the drone of car
the reply comes, but requires
comment in language
I don't pretend to know.

I come merely to look, I offer
but the words lodge in my throat.
What is resolveable
under the same starless sky
can't be swallowed.

A glint of red reflectors, wolf
eyes and I am spared something
I should not hear awake.
Quiet, he goes,
climbs his cab, like a lover
remembering to go home.

Musician with Earring

It is diamond Copenhagen cut
prised through five countries Rosnays
lovers. Brilliantly, he tells
its story his best memorized
song from a pier to girls his drummer
half-listening. Like a key tuned sharp
he fingers it dock light hits a facet
sends a needle ray partly into the dark
green mirror holding still
red neon blink a burned out letter.
In the battle of light he cannot remember
detail only the second show amber gels.
He strains for the one white thread source
not in his periphery to end what cannot go on
the healing lap of water on moorings.

He rises tilts his head to hide
in his shoulder the perennial wart
of his passion whistles a clear sad song.

Plie

The show has closed, long since
moved to Chagrin Falls.

Left behind, she mends faded
sequined costumes, waits to Dvorak.

A flat note calls

Jette! Jette! Jette!

You can't go back again

her too young boyfriend warns, brows arched.

But her heels turn inward and she leaps

for a neon aureole. With feeling

the landing is weak-kneed

and only mirrored memories absorb the shock.

I used to be, she offers, and packs

the prima line with dingy tights

pointing toes to transport

her crinoline soul across town.

Solo

On the strand
a pale gray tuxedoed gull
pecks at the sea's scant offering.
In the distance
a shrimper hosts a party of wings.

An umbrella man tilts
his shade, casts a dripping line
of purples, greens, lost in sea
the air now is. The bird
ignores nylon hum that summons
only the youngest, attacks
a sea bass laying open
its sides like a surgeon.
Pink meat glistens
like the inside of the old man's lip.

By himself he cannot finish
what he began, anchors the rod
in mud. His chin dips to his chest.
Bird leaves docked carrion for a breaker,
flaps his wings,
suicides into the sun.

Traveling

Aryan stewards in sable black
slink past my darkened berth
hard-pressed for a smile or a smoke.

I have neither.

Alone with my tea and untruths
I might have left Berne unscated
had I not wanted absolutes in bas-relief,
men in terra cotta. Suddenly Switzerland,
a snore in the tunnel of sleep,
awakens to France, a brassy Moulin sun.

The eight thirty-two brakes nine,
clocked on you sallow face
as you slouch against a single column--
St. Sebastian, pierced by arrowed frowns
of the masses. I press an immortal grin
to glass but you see Orly, après minuit.
Deserted corridors make friendlier runways.

Dance School

Small child in tap shoes
tap for the old man
staring in at you
through cracked plate glass, hands
tuned to muted beats
of hearts no bigger
than yours. In the heat
his leather skin
drags across the pane
like your new skin drags
your small strained bones.
Age along will teach you
the art of bending.
Men you are kind to
don't mind your tapping
out their deadpan lives.
The signals you pulse
remind them of love.
Ashamed, they drive
themselves to quiet.

Alice Meets Dr. Johnson

In a steaming mist below Sacre Coeur,
we see young children spill
into the streets like oil-patch
peacocks. Both of us,
late for most things,
embrace with all the indifference
of two church guards changing
shifts: Is it indecorous to ascend
Montmartre by twos.
Billsley skirt hiked
above my scarred knees
racing for something
I'll never see?
You find out match
more pleasing than instructive.
Inside, reading your mind,
I illustrate a classic smile,
and pat the cool belly of a sepulchre.

Salt Waves

When one last wave broke two
we were driven inland to some mutual
grandmother to shell peas, gather brown eggs.
Always, we ran to the dry wash
behind Houlihan's afraid to look back,
see nobody wanting our secrets.
A good summer, weather with us,
we dug that hole in the fern wall,
chasing squatter rodents out to line it
with a wedding ring quilt, all the time
plotting to drown in ourselves
the first cool rainy day.

The blanket is fossil, worn
edges barely visible in the bank
where ceiling became floor one winter.
It bears our imprint, undulations
to a vast bottomless cache
no one would find again. Running
still, we cling to those edges
not yet hardened to mineral.

The Rock of Cashel

We are careful where we step,
brushing crumbs from our clothes.
Everywhere smiles break,
empty arms stretch to hold up walls.
I should have been six
running among sepulchres
not able to dream dead
faces, recognize them
in stone. They are here.
It has taken them years to battle
the kingdom of roots to break
through rock and picnic cloth,
coming to life, glorious
in sun, the shadow
of spire and cross.

WAITING

Wedding Night

He wants to be with fish.

Crouched in tall weeds
on the dam, she watches.
The wind whips her
nightgown, tenting her knees,
makes her a white
flag in the suffocating air
that holds frog rasp.

Her new husband kneels
at pond's edge, presses his cheek
to the water as if straining
to hear catfish grunt.
Lure hitting water like a novice
diver quiets the bullfrog,
whipporwill and cricket.

She imagines him swimming,
finless, pores like gills
breathing in the smallest minnows
until he is full and one of them.
Wide-eyed, he must see importance
in mud clouds
he creates with a single twist.
She could almost laugh
at those he scares away,

each darting to its wavering
reed shelter a gust above could shuck.

The moon has surfaced
from murkiness of night
to blend all things.

He stops to let the silt settle
turns one eye upward
and everything is clear to her.

He is out of water,
looking toward their house,
reeling in.

Transgressions

My father said Aunt Ota had become
a star because she was good. She took
light from the moon, eye of God.
I was nine, wearing her gold
leave earrings.

In his cabin on the Big Piney
my father dies, fighting to get something
out of his system. His law books,
page by page, feed the fire.
He knows I sit countries away,
understands why I never hated anyone
so much. He toled me never to look
at the moon--or was it the sun--
but I'll take my chances
because at this moment
the Metro quakes and whines beneath
my room. I think
it might be a signal
he looks at the moon
through morning glory
about to make his climb.

The sky is black.
The street is black.
I wait for the rumble, the white.

Out Back

Below the dam and behind the great aluminum barn

Apaches battle novice cowboys
for ownership of strawberries,
chest-high thistles.

Ballerinas rehearse to a quail concerto
in bright noon light
preparing for the evening show.

(They are cautious not to
pirouette into groundhog holes.)

Policemen in denim jackets pursue
barefoot blackberry thieves into pine
green perimeters. Caught
they are cuffed in sumac vines.

Physicians administer saliva
poulices to fatal briar
scratches sustained by wheat-haired soldiers
fighting in the name of a word
"dumocracy."

Weed shafts mat down in mid-afternoon
heat, providing soft nest beds
for Indians and dancers. Sleep
billows in like dawn pond fog,
bringing visions of light
triumphs and losses scored
to a starling's lonely song.

Roused from sleep by remembrance

of honey dew quarters, sherbet
up the hill, they raise one last whoop,
the innocent goodbye to guarantee
tomorrow out back.

Stitch in Time

Steel flashes precisely
to the blip of his heart.

A reaper mechanized,
one stitch to three beats,
she cannot risk finishing
ahead, will add another
row if there is yarn.

He breathes to needle, pale
with cancer, ecru fingers
tracing the sharp stem
of a flower unable to grow
on a canvas of sheet. He stops
with a bloom, feels the mottled
growth inside him, the fragile
force of a carnation against a breast.

She must decide for both of them,
frees her hand, guides his
for something tangible,
alive.

A Northern Death

With the blur of wing-flap,
she gains age, quickly in the silence
of her family's ancient death, leaves
their suburban house of Atreus to dig for roots
where there are none. She surrenders their asphalt
honor, searches for a scrub pine,
a silver-haired wolf,
both rumored above some tree line.
But the mountains' barren mockery
turns her humus hopes to landslide,
then she remembers a Southern gentleman
who was once kind to her. More often than not,
she wants as her compromise
a moon-swung smile across a Gulf Sky.
Maybe in June, the palms take her in, stroking
her face in sleek perfumed wind from deep
under ground. Beneath oyster-white stars
whose cradled pearl light
obscures the dark's uncertainty,
a dusk blue tide gains on the shore.

Self-Defense

Father has scribbled black words on his hand,
his new yellow pad. I imagine the ink carries
some client under his skin to dash for his brain,
push something out. I am somewhere
between briefs, a nervous telephone,
but he picks me up anyway, by a loop--
I am the briefcase of his life--
sets me on a sturdy file cabinet
while he fights the name of the defendant
who drove a stake through his lover's heart.

Against our paneled wall you stack your green
statutes front to back, twenty-four high
with room for supplements. You have nerve
when you sprawl out on the floor like that,
so much being tippable. I could end
your vision, mine, with Embezzlement through Grand Larceny
and thirty years is no big deal to strike.

Night Discovery at Bull Shoals

He wakes midnight, cold
in the bourbon mist of his father's snore,
thinks he hasn't slept less than a lifetime,
will never want a woman more.

Undressed, he goes outside
snaps kindling, all he knows
how to do right now. From weeds and mint
he springs wet, runs grubs and crawlers
back to their holes,
wonders why when he was nine
his setter bolted out the back door,
why some women do the same.

Out of madness, dark,
he tries not to confuse
a bobcat's cry with any that could
send him running headlong into morning.
He would wake his father
knows he carries the moot answer
like a small shell in his hunting vest.
But he returns to bed
pulls the blanket over his face,
buried alive in his own warmth.

Reunion

I shall count on Aunt Pearl's death
this year. Now with children
we will drive far, dirt
roads to the leaning white church.
There will be the service,
Pearl in her blue flowered dress
splitting against her thick waist,
people from the next farm
there out of habit. Even the minister
mumbles the Finnish name to recommend
her skyward. A daughter-in-law sobs,
thinks of the maple high-boy.
The lid closes to a baby's cry.

Women will gather like flies that light
on the potato salad they carry.
Uncle Harry swigs from a green flask
for pain. Rubbing his hip
he guesses it will storm.
Between bites of stringy pork, crops,
guernseys are discussed. The Brommelsieck girl
finally married above her station.
They young ones play tag in budding wheat
paint brush tips to be dipped in fuscina sky.
And when there is silence,

dark, we will return
more slowly than we came.

Mr. Ferguson's Perfection

Full of a bloodhound's moon,
the old boy swats fireflies
with some authority, deciding
this night is as good as any.
He enters the lightless
barn, of habit, lights
the hurricane. In the gentle quiet
of moth flutter, he removes
a leader from its rusty hook,
ropes the lowest rafter
if there's any chance at all.
The hemp strains the sad
spiritual that draws his animals
to rite. Crickets ain't out
he mutters into a hay bale,
gets down and saddles up the Colonel.

Dog Turning

Colonel wants to get back
because I sent him through barbed wire
after a pheasant hen, gone
for refuge in her feathers, bright sumac.
Steel catches his fur, drags it
inside out to a cold wind
bitten by rain, wisps of hair, white webs
hanging. He forgets
the bird, the order, turns
his sides the red network
of some leaves strange
among their kind. The unspeakable
in his glazed eyes drowns me.
If I could raise my hand
I would stop his blood breeding
revolt in roots beneath my feet.
But I'll call for him,
press him to my coat
take chances with his face
next to mine,
the growl the only sound.

The Evacuation

--Yesterday in Camranh
two civilians and
one U.S. soldier were
rescued from the top
of the Hotel Tuileries
after it was hit by
enemy shelling.

I.

From the fourth floor
the Bay is a big sequin
reflecting Camranh
burned at its edges. Beneath us
the hotel is one shell
in a cartridge belt
hung from some great height.
The Korean blind man plays his knee
with the stick
the drummer dropped before jumping.
Awaiting rescue by air
the waitress and I feed each other
Greek olives, gutting the pimento
with our tongues. She will be as always
afraid to climb the rope ladder.

II.

It is only a test.
I leave by the front door
behind my nervous wife who goes

bowling, leaving me to annual habit.
She knows drills of her own.
The neighbors stare as I hold
my acrobatic daughter, who encircles
my waist with her legs, squeals,
careens backwards, clutches
her rag dog whose name
I can't pronounce.
I cling tighter making sure
no flame burns her skin, kindles
her beet-stained sundress.
But in the street
there is still flesh-ash
everywhere, human fireworks
shot by mistake from splintered windows
not in celebration.
With each forward step, it covers
my shoes, finds corduroy grooves,
wafting to gray our hair. The neighbors
can't see for this cloud we are in.
Go hom, I tell them, count
your children, walk the empty rooms
of your houses, kiss your empty wives,
pray for everything, nothing.
It is a test.

Waiting

for Bruce Weigl

On the porch divan
my brother's wife sleeps.
He lips closed on a song
about June on the Wabash.
Kansas dust suspends the sunlight.
I watch her face Khe Sanh.

Grandpa's "Hell,
He'll be home before the crops,"
drove Father into the backyard
where he scooped up the lemon pup
and held it to that warm place
near his neck.

Her fingers poke through the afghan,
twitch, then worry
the worn upholstery.
A breeze sweeps
the hair from her face, unveils
the year's first smile.
She must remember his touch.

"It's what we asked for," Grandpa began,
"in 41--"
He fought to recall

what always came next.

We left him

Stabbing at his okra.

For nearly an hour

she doesn't move

Perched on a footstool,

I send the cat flying

to open her eyes

to make sure

some of us are still alive.

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2
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