NIGHTCLERKING AT THE BARON'S HOTEL:

A COLLECTION OF POEMS WITH

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

When articulating his purpose in the "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads, William Wordsworth says he sought "to relate or describe" (115) everyday or common experiences among ordinary people, using the language of everyday speech.[1] He aimed at a truthful rendering of those experiences as well, saying that "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject" (118) so as to avoid a "falsehood of description" (118). First and foremost, Wordsworth emphasized the feeling within each poem, because "the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling" (116-17).

Lyrical Ballads is unique in its combination of poetic forms. Largely narrative, through the desire to relate an occasion or situation and through the desire to truthfully describe nature, the poems still adopt lyric qualities by emphasizing the feeling within each poem and the poet's own

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1. Only the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads is considered the original work on which Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge collaborated, with Wordsworth contributing nineteen poems and Coleridge four poems. Wordsworth added an additional sixteen of his own poems to the 1800 edition. He also included a Preface, which he continued to revise with each subsequent edition, not believing that the Preface had reached its completed form until 1845 (George xxxviii). All of my references to Lyrical Ballads pertain to the 1798 edition; my references to the "Preface" pertain to the 1800 edition.

perceptions or sensibilities. This combination of the narrative poem and the lyric poem appears in "Nightclerking at the Baron's Hotel."[1] No matter how oblique or how obvious, these poems in "Nightclerking" contain a retelling of some event or situation and aim to accurately describe experience. At the same time, these poems acquire a lyric quality through an emphasis on the feeling contained within each experience and by largely concerning themselves with my own perceptions.

Within the poems Wordsworth contributed to Lyrical Ballads, there are occasional references to the poet's own experiences, as in "Lines Written at a Small Distance From My House" and "Lines Written in Early Spring," two lyric poems written in first-person and using the present-tense verb form. A larger number of poems deal with other characters besides the poet, that is, people who the speaker met himself or heard about from others. More often, Wordworth's poems in Lyrical Ballads describe public rather than private experience.

My poems differ. Although a narrative poem typically addresses public experience,[2] the poems in "Nightclerking"

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1. Subsequent references to the title of this collection will be shortened to "Nightclerking."

2. See Albert B. Lord's entry "Narrative Poetry" (542-550), and James William Johnson's entry "Lyric" (460-470) in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.

contain a more personal subject matter, particularly my experiences as a man, as a father, and as a resident within a specific region. Through these kinds of experiences, "Nightclerking" contains two dominant themes--belonging and disconnectedness, both of which will be discussed in relation to the poems later in this critical introduction.

Not all critics agree about the poetic forms used in Wordsworth's collection of poems. Robert Mayo in "The Contemporaneity of the Lyrical Ballads" examines Wordsworth's collection against the backdrop of magazine verse in 1798 and argues that "the manner of the volume cannot be regarded as extraordinary" (506). A great deal of confusion about poetic forms existed then, he says, because "any narrative poem in stanzas, or any lyric which hoped to appeal to a large circle of readers, or any combination of both, was likely to be termed a ballad" (507). He adds that "the title of the Lyrical Ballads is ambiguous and confusing" (509), because only a few of the poems can be considered strict ballads. Also, Wordsworth's poetry followed the likes of other poets of his time in adapting the stanzaic patterns commonly associated with lyric poetry to create narrative poetry, which for Mayo is the closest thing to a lyrical ballad.

Geoffrey H. Hartman in The Unremarkable Wordsworth recognizes that a certain amount of confusion exists regarding the traditional poetic forms in use in 1798. "There is

a pleasure in not knowing, or not being able to discern, the traditional form" (31), he says. Hartman argues, however, that Wordsworth adapted the form of the nature-inscription, a combination of the elegy and "locodescriptive poetry" (39), a poetry of a specific place, to create the Romantic lyric poem. Wordsworth, Hartman says, made the nature-inscription "able to commemorate any feeling for nature or the spot that had aroused this feeling" (32), having "liberate[d] the genre from its dependent status of tourist guide and antiquarian signpost" (32). Wordsworth also added "natural detail" (40), something which Hartman finds "strangely absent" (40) in earlier examples of the nature-inscription. By "draw[ing] the landscape evocatively into the poetry" (40), Wordsworth transformed a poetry concerned with place into the Romantic lyric poem, Hartman says.

Mayo analyzes Lyrical Ballads as a whole, particularly the significance of the title, while Hartman focuses on particular poems and discovers the true accomplishment of Wordsworth's lyrics. Within Wordsworth's lyrics, that is, those poems in which he uses his first-person point-of-view and presents his own sensations and experiences, elements of the narrative poem appear as well. Wordsworth in the "Preface" says he sought "to relate or describe...incidents and situations from common life" (115). For us, today, a narrative often includes some degree of exposition, which forms an essential part of dramatic structure by introducing

and describing such things as the setting and/or the characters. Not all narratives contain exposition. But this description, whether as a part of exposition or appearing elsewhere in a narration, forms an element of narrative. By choosing to describe what he himself has seen, Wordsworth is including an element of narrative within his lyrics.

Other poets throughout literary history have included description in their poems, too, but Wordsworth deserves attention because of his aims in publishing Lyrical Ballads, particularly his desire to free the language used in poetry from such Neoclassic restrictions as an elevated diction and personification, his inclusion of "incidents and situations from common life" (115) as his subject matter, rather than the poetry of manners produced by Alexander Pope, for instance, and Wordsworth's conception of a poet as "a man speaking to men" (121), or to the average literate citizen. Through these changes in language, subject matter, and the poet's conception of himself and his audience, Wordsworth helped to create our understanding of modern poetry.

About twenty years ago, critics first began to notice that the free verse lyric poem includes elements of narrative. Stanley Plumly in "Chapter and Verse," a two-part essay which appeared in 1978, observes that free verse "emphasize[s] the vertical movement of the poem, a going down the page" (23), whereas formal poetry "emphasize[s] the linear, a going across the page" (23). This movement down

the page, he says, stresses "the body of the action" (23) within a poem, requiring that narrative, to some degree, be involved because of its ability to pull the reader through the poem not only in the initial reading but also in subsequent readings. By analyzing examples of contemporary free verse, Plumly observes that lyric poets seem to have reached "a fuller understanding of its dramatic, narrative potential" (28), so that the poet can now "plot the memory or the dream" (28), a term which Plumly italicizes to describe his belief that poets order events by "arrang[ing], narrat[ing], or dramatiz[ing] them" (27). The combination of free verse and storytelling has created now, Plumly says, "a kind of prose lyric: a form corrupt enough to speak flat out in sentences yet pure enough to sustain the intensity, if not the integrity, of the line" (28). As contemporary poetry concerns itself more with the "personal and the particular" (28), it will admit even more of the "strategies of fiction" (28), Plumly foresees.

Through the changes in the contemporary lyric poem, as poets enlarge the form, a greater emphasis on narrative has occurred because of its capacity to include and to make sense of a full range of perceptions and experiences. Tess Gallagher in "Again: Some Thoughts on the Narrative Impulse in Contemporary Poetry," an essay which appeared in 1984, six years after Plumly's, notes that "the narrative and lyric impulses in contemporary poetry have grown more and

more indistinguishable" (69). One reason for this melding, Gallagher says, is the "shift from teller to maker" (69), a situation which began occurring with Wordsworth.[1] Instead of telling a story about others, poets now, Gallagher argues, make themselves the center of their stories. In fact, "the poetic persona and the poet's own autobiography are more closely engaged than at any other time in poetic history" (71), allowing poets to create "instant history" (71).[2] Combined with this personal history, poets adopt "the convention of intimacy" (71), thus giving the allusion of secrets shared in confidence with the reader. Gallagher coins the term "lyric-narrative" to describe this combination of both lyric and narrative and to categorize the poetic form used so frequently by contemporary poets. This hybrid, she asserts, gains its capacity to convey emotion

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1. Some of Wordsworth's poems in Lyrical Ballads, such as "Simon Lee" and "We Are Seven" emphasize story, with the speaker appearing as himself only in the opening lines of the poem. The speaker's appearance is solely to introduce the story. Wordsworth, in this respect, parallels the epic convention employed by John Milton in Paradise Lost, in which the poet is absent from the poem except for his invocations to the muse in Books I, VII, and IX. Wordsworth moves away from this convention, first in "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," and later in The Prelude, as he becomes the subject of his poems.

2. David Perkins in A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After also observes that the subject of contemporary American poetry "is the emotions and experiences of the poet" (343), who "presents himself as living much as other Americans do--making love, raising children, drinking with friends, camping out, getting sick" (343).

and its figurative language, particularly imagery and metaphor, from the lyric. Taking its sense of scene and its structure from narrative, the lyric-narrative often avoids a linear movement by moving backwards and forwards in time, Gallagher says. The lyric-narrative, she concludes, has achieved a great deal of popular appeal "because of our attraction to realism and simple human interest" (80).

David Wojahn's "'The Language of My Former Heart': The Memory-Narrative in Recent American Poetry," published in 1988, four years after Gallagher's essay, and one of the most significant of recent critical discussions of form, observes that narrative has become the dominant form for many poets. Wojahn uses the term memory-narrativists to describe those poets who seek to explore memory through narrative. Just as Gallagher observes that poets increasingly center their poems on themselves, Wojahn says that "the process of creating a mythic self" (23) for many contemporary poets is one "of recording the poet's struggle to locate him/herself in time" (23). "It is a process," he adds, "that is backward-looking as well as forward-looking" (23), with the poet "seek[ing]--above all else--perspective, a knowledge of one's significance within the boundaries of time" (23). A memory-narrative poem, in fact, presents "time as circular, a process of recurrence" (24), thereby allowing the present to intermingle with not only the past but also the future. A lyric poem, in contrast, captures a

single moment and attempts to contain that discovery, realization, or moment of pleasure, for example, by placing it in present tense so that the reader shares the same experience.

Wojahn divides the memory-narrative poets into two groups, while acknowledging that the goals of these two groups is the same, that is, "to somehow make sense of their personal pasts" (25). One group he sees as romantic and Dionysian as they attempt to give past experience structure. Believing that "the past can be manipulated in order to allow the writer to transcend the past" (25), these poets do not feel it necessary to faithfully recreate past experience. Instead, they seek to understand how their past experiences shaped who they are now and examine "the intersections of past and present...through the use of surrealist juxtaposition and cinematic scene painting that moves from past to present and back again" (26). The other group of poets Wojahn sees as classical and Apollonian. Believing that the past cannot be transcended, this group of poets seeks to gain an understanding of themselves by examining past experience. "Because they can only be witnesses of the past," Wojahn says, "their method tends to be more presentational than that of the romantic group" (27), particularly in how they often recreate past experience and in how their poems contain fewer sudden shifts in time.

Neither group of poets, however, has an interest in looking nostalgically at the past. Wojahn says that "they

seek to investigate the meaning of the past and to ascribe to a self a place in it" (32). At the same time, the best of the memory-narrative poets include "the larger landscape of character and social events" (32) within their work, Wojahn adds.

Thirteen poems, roughly a third of the forty-eight poems included in "Nightclerking," can be classified as lyric poems, based on Wojahn's definition that a lyric poem captures a single moment in time.[1] Written entirely in present tense, these poems contain a discovery or realization and aim to give the reader either a similar kind of epiphany or an understanding of the speaker's experience. "The Morning of June 6," for example, emphasizes a specific occasion--a new father watching television while holding his sleeping infant son. This occasion acquires greater significance as the father--and speaker--imagines seeing his own father in newsreels of the Normandy invasion during the fiftieth anniversary of Operation Overlord and, in fact, seeks a kind of relationship with his distant father through film. In contrast to what he has known, the speaker pledges

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1. My usage here of the term lyric, in keeping with Wojahn's conception of the lyric poem, excludes those poems which contain past tense, no matter how small an amount. The strictly lyric poems in "Nightclerking" are "Sleep," "Day-care," "A Golden Shower," "At the Airport in Pratt, Kansas," "Christmas on the Interstate," "The Morning of June 6," "Baby Talk," "Incinerating the Night," "Serving Time in Wichita," "Coming into Money," "Nightfall at Boomer Lake," "A Model for Renoir," and "Asylum at the Tulsa Zoo."

to be a greater part of his own son's life, not only now but later when the son grows up and desires, for himself, a closeness between father and son, without the generational distance which often inhibits that kind of relationship. The speaker in the poem makes a realization regarding his relationships with his father and his son. Because of the poem's usage of present tense and its emphasis on a moment in time, the reader shares the experience and understands the speaker's feelings about father/son relationships.

"At the Airport in Pratt, Kansas" contains a discovery rather than a realization. Of the two people in the poem, one is native to that specific location. The visitor learns about this location as he is shown the feedlot adjoining the often unused airport. Imagining a connection with the Holocaust, the speaker parallels the shipment of cattle to the slaughterhouse with the events surrounding a roundup in a Polish ghetto, as the Nazis deported Jews to a death camp. The native, on the other hand, accepts this slaughter as ordinary, just as those people in Germany, for example, accepted the increasing amount of discrimination against Jews between 1933 and 1938,[1] and claimed not to know about

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1. These dates encompass the period between Adolf Hitler assuming the position of chancellor on January 30, 1933 and Kristalnacht, "the night of broken glass," on November 9, 1938, when Jewish shops and synagogues were destroyed to avenge the murder of Ernst vom Rath by a young Jewish man. This vengeance coincided with the celebrations planned for

the presence of such concentration camps as Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and Ravensbruck. This poem attempts to have the reader not only understand the speaker's feelings but also discover the similarities between the Holocaust and the treatment of cattle by humans.

These two lyrics, and the other ones in "Nightclerking," contain an element of narrative. Just as Wordsworth's lyric poems contain description, these poems of mine possess this almost basic characteristic of narrative as well. "The Morning of June 6" emphasizes the details surrounding the first few minutes of the Allied invasion at Normandy and the son's actions as he sleeps. These details allow the reader to visualize the occasion contained in the poem, and they work as exposition by illustrating the setting and the characters in the poem and by establishing a contrast between the barbarous action on television and the peaceful, domestic situation. "At the Airport in Pratt, Kansas" describes the setting in detail, particularly the revolving beacon and the lights surrounding the feedlot. A large amount of description in the poem goes toward what the speaker imagines about the shipment of cattle. Apart from providing background about the location, this description serves to establish contrast between what might be a place

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the fifteenth anniversary of the unsuccessful Nazi putsch in Munich in 1923 (Poliakov 16).

of romance, as a couple spend time together examining the night sky at a rural airport, and a place of horror.

These two representative lyrics emphasize a downward movement on the page, something which Plumly considers to a key characteristic of the free verse poem, through an arrangement of the events and the narrative action within each poem. "At the Airport in Pratt, Kansas" achieves this downward movement largely by its stanzaic pattern. Tercets create the dominant stanzaic pattern in the poem, occurring in four of the seven stanzas. The first two stanzas establish this pattern and reflect what this couple experiences together, that is, where their sensory perceptions agree. Although the reader expects a repetition of this pattern, a variation in the third stanza serves to show that the visitor perceives things differently, at least in part because of his colorblindness. A similar variation appears in the fifth and seventh stanzas, with this variation serving to show the difference in perception as well. This tension created by the variation in stanzaic pattern not only reflects the difference in perception but also moves the reader through the poem as a pattern of expectation is sometimes fulfilled, sometimes not, since the reader is most shocked when a sentence moves across the stanza break into a stanza which disrupts his/her expectations.

"The Morning of June 6" relies on both its stanzaic pattern and its treatment of subject to achieve its downward

movement on the page. The six-line stanzas provide regularity and satisfy the reader's expectations, once this pattern is established in the first stanza. This regularity takes the reader's eye from stanza to stanza. The third stanza is particularly crucial because it contains all three characters within the poem--the infant, the new father, and his father. Following the initial description of the invasion, something which establishes the setting, the enjambed final line in the second stanza provides a bridge for the reader, moving him/her to the third stanza. That inclusion of all three characters, in addition to the regularity of the stanzaic pattern, allows the reader to continue down the page to the fourth stanza, when another instance of enjambment occurs in line twenty-four, the final line of the fourth stanza, and brings the reader again to all three male characters in the final stanza.

These representative lyric poems in "Nightclerking" emphasize narrative action through the conscious manipulation of stanzaic patterns, whether through a pattern of regularity or irregularity. In fact, the action in these poems works in tandem with the stanzaic patterns to draw the reader through the poem. Although Plumly in his essay uses such rhetorical terms as voice and tone to articulate what he calls the "prose lyric" (28), I believe that poetry cannot be discussed without regard for its arrangement on the page. This arrangement is one way in which the poet

plots, to use Plumly's word, the events or action within a poem.

Wojahn, as I said, distinguishes a lyric from a narrative poem by its treatment of time, with a lyric emphasizing a moment frozen in time and a narrative poem moving backwards and forwards in time. It is not always possible to so easily isolate the two poetic forms, even now in contemporary poetry and poetics. Some of the poems in "Nightclerking," while combining both present and past tense, remain lyrics.[1] "October in Oklahoma," for example, largely emphasizes a particular moment, that is, the speaker and his son on the steps outside their house, where they use the wind to help create soap bubbles. During this activity, however, the speaker reflects on the difference between the present moment and the time a hundred years ago when a windharp might have signaled the southward movement of colder, autumnal air. This difference also causes the speaker to recall the traditional celebration of Halloween in Europe,[2] before he returns to the present, where he hears

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1. Those lyrics in "Nightclerking" which combine past and present tense are "October in Oklahoma," "Ten Minutes to Midnight," "Above Ground," "Twenty Years Ago Today," "Kneeling in Prayer," "In a Room," "Victor Alert," "Sitting Alone, Listening," "Union Pacific," "Postcoital in Northern Kansas," "Chasing the Blue Moon," "Spring at the Wichita Zoo," and "Eckankar."

2. See Sir James George Frazer's description of "The Hallowe'en Fires" in The Golden Bough, pages 732-737.

windchimes mark a change of season further north in the Great Plains but only the passage of slightly colder air in Oklahoma. "October in Oklahoma" remains a lyric poem because of its subjectivity, that is, its concern with the speaker's perceptions and associations. Elements of narrative, such as the description of actions in the present and past, appear, but the poem is more lyric than narrative because of this subjectivity and this concern with a particular moment.

"Ten Minutes to Midnight" combines past and present tense to establish contrast between the speaker's youth and his middle age. For the speaker, the threat of nuclear annihilation, when he was younger, allowed him to live irresponsibly and hedonistically. Now, when the threat of nuclear war no longer exists, the speaker must deal with the consequences of his actions, while he wishes that a nuclear war could eliminate the bad health and debt that he faces. This complaint acquires qualities of the lyric through its concern with the poet's personal past and present and its use of convention. A complaint, according to C. Hugh Holman, contains a poet articulating his state of unhappiness and its causes, before the poet offers a solution (115). Even though "Ten Minutes to Midnight" contains description of the speaker's past and present, the poem gives little emphasis to any one event or incident, an important element of a narrative poem. The poem instead glosses over incid-

ents, with the aim of creating a feeling of irresponsibility and dismay rather than relating in detail a particular event or events which affected the speaker. Also, the poem places greater emphasis on metaphor, a characteristic of a lyric poem, with the image of a wolf serving as the vehicle and nuclear annihilation as the tenor in this lyric poem.

Another problem in distinguishing between a lyric and a narrative poem in contemporary poetry is the melding of the two poetic forms, as Gallagher points out in her essay.[1] "All One Summer" is one example of a lyric-narrative. Organized as a reflection on past experience, the poem opens in present tense to establish a sense of contrast, before it switches to past tense at the close of the first stanza and maintains that use of past tense throughout the remainder of the poem. This relationship with time is an important distinction of the narrative, because past tense allows the poet to achieve emotional distance from an experience or event.[2] Instead of employing metaphor, a characteristic of a lyric,[3] the poem describes a sequence of events during a

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1. "Martin, South Dakota," "All One Summer," "Cabin Fever," "Nightclerking at the Baron's Hotel," "Outside Concordia, Kansas," and "A Burial Plot in Pratt" are the lyric-narratives in "Nightclerking."

2. Wojahn calls this emotional distance "the filtering process of memory" (30).

3. Gallagher considers metaphor as a characteristic of the lyric poem (80).

summer evening with my toddler at Boomer Lake. But not simply a narrative poem, which traditionally includes public rather than private experience, the poem includes elements of the lyric as well, particularly in its concern with the poet's own experience. This subjectivity emphasizes the poet witnessing his son's discoveries of nature. Such a simple kind of pleasure made the summer memorable for the poet and enjoyable for his son. The poem, in fact, contains a feeling of satisfaction and contentment, and this inclusion of feeling or emotion also serves to differentiate a lyric from a narrative poem.

"A Burial Plot in Pratt" is another example of a lyric-narrative. Like "All One Summer," "A Burial Plot in Pratt" emphasizes a single event, although my death and burial in this poem are imagined happenings. Throughout the poem, there is a sequence of events described, beginning with the death of the poet. This movement from one event to another creates a narrative. Not a public poem, "A Burial Plot in Pratt" deals with my personal experience. Similarly, the poem's use of figurative language gives it additional characteristics of a lyric. The opening stanza, for instance, compares the bumping of insects against a window to telegraphic messages from deceased relatives. Elsewhere in the poem, similes make unlikely comparisons, such as the chug of an oil well carried on the wind likened to a boat trying to dive through surf toward shore, or stones thrown by boys

compared to runes. Overall, the poem emphasizes the atmosphere of a small town in Kansas and the extreme heat of summer, both of which create a feeling of stillness and isolation and thereby heighten the funereal quality of the poem.

Many other poems in "Nightclerking" move away from lyric to become narratives of past experience. Rather than going backwards and forwards in time so as to gain an understanding of the self, these poems instead focus on experience in past tense, with the purpose of presenting that experience as honestly as possible.[1] "A Christmas in Hartford" exemplifies this kind of narrative poem. Confessional in subject, "A Christmas in Hartford" contrasts mentally ill patients at the Institute of Living with the life of someone who, while seemingly normal, seeks solace in marijuana and television and knows a life empty of material, physical, and emotional comfort. Describing two occasions in a twenty-four hour period, the poem presents that experience without metaphor or simile. Five-line stanzas draw the reader down the page and involve him/her in the action of the poem, which expresses feelings of loneliness and unhappiness within the narrative.

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1. The narratives in "Nightclerking" are "Breast Milk," "That First Taste," "The Homesteaders," "A Christmas in Hartford," "The Lutheran Rectory," "To Normandy via Jazz," "Home From the Peace Corps," "A Postcard From Northern Ireland," and "Memorial Day."

"Memorial Day" is a narrative of past experience as well. Not emphasizing the speaker of the poem, in contrast to "A Christmas in Hartford," "Memorial Day" describes an infestation of millers one Memorial Day weekend in Pratt, Kansas.[1] Also, in contrast to "A Christmas in Hartford," "Memorial Day" uses figurative language to enable the reader to understand the experience. The simile "millers burst out like confetti," for example, supplies an image so that the reader can visualize the number of millers taking flight when disturbed. Elsewhere, the comparison of the cat leaving carcasses on the rug to those buffalo hunters who littered the prairie with their prey serves to create meaning, by figuratively equating the millers to the spirits of dead animals. This metaphor acquires greater meaning in the final lines when the millers escape in Kansas City, having survived the trip across Kansas, to become "a dozen ghosts / haunting the air." Even with this figurative language, "Memorial Day" remains a narrative poem because of its description of an event one holiday weekend.[2] Similarly, because of the emphasis on the event rather than the speaker, the poem is more a narrative than a lyric-narrative.

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1. Millers belong to the family Noctuidae, which includes the moths of armyworms, a common pest for wheat farmers during particularly wet years.

2. Gallagher believes that "narratives...are devoted to rendering actual...happenings" (72).

Some narratives, such as those discussed above, describe past experience, with the aim of presenting it honestly and accurately. Other narratives, however, move both backwards and forwards in time. These memory-narratives, to use Wojahn's term, often attempt to make sense of experience and to understand how that experience shaped the poet's life.[1] One example of a memory-narrative in "Nightclerking" is "Rewriting the Past." While expressing my regret at not having served in Vietnam, the poem largely describes my experience as a son of a military officer and as an enlistee in the U. S. Air Force, who was discharged because of antiwar activities. As speaker, I try to explain the reasons for my regret and to imagine what I might have known if I had volunteered for Vietnam as a security policeman assigned to guard duty at an air base. Largely a memory, the poem makes some movement in time as it progresses from present to past tense and, again, from past tense to present. The poem also includes the subjunctive mood so as to show the speaker's wishes, if he had served in Vietnam. What the speaker learns in the poem is that the risk of death remained great in Vietnam and that, if he had survived his tour, he would have not have been the same person after

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1. The memory-narratives in "Nightclerking" are "Fear," "Rewriting the Past," "To My Lover of Twenty Years," "A Cold War," "Politics," "For My Son," and "86 Beechfield Street."

the experience. Having served might seem desirable and even romantic, because it would have allowed the speaker to experience combat, while remaining relatively safe on an air base, away from the horror of jungle warfare. Also, the speaker imagines that he would have enjoyed casual sexual relations with the native women. Most of all, the speaker would have remained with his friends, and he would have acquired a greater likeness to his father because of his combat experience. Wojahn would probably classify "Rewriting the Past" as both Dionysian and Apollonian. Not only a conscious attempt to transcend the past, a characteristic of a Dionysian memory-narrative, "Rewriting the Past" is also a vehicle for the speaker to learn more about himself by examining the choices made when younger.

Another Apollonian memory-narrative in which the speaker attempts to learn more about himself is "Politics." Contrasting past experience with more recent experience, "Politics" illustrates the generational conflict which divided families during the Vietnam war. This conflict seemed especially acute in military families, when the son was often encouraged to pursue a military career. Beginning as a memory, "Politics" opens with the experience of an antiwar march in London, before the poem shifts, in the third stanza, to my experience after high school, before I enlisted in the military. Moving forward in the fourth stanza, the poem describes the recent present, before it

closes with the subjunctive mood in the final stanza, as I articulate my wish for a closer relationship with my father. The conflict which once divided my family no longer exists, but we are now separate because of geography. Not an attempt to transcend the past, the poem instead seeks to understand the relationship between father and son amid the cultural milieu of several recent decades. None of those conflicts are worth a separation of family members from each other, the son learns.

Within these poems in "Nightclerking" two dominant themes emerge--disconnectedness and belonging. "Politics," for instance, reveals a theme of disconnectedness from family because of geographic rather than ideological boundaries. This kind of disconnection appears as well in "The Morning of June 6." The speaker in these two poems seeks a link, a connection with family. But this disconnectedness shows up as a contributing factor to the speaker's use of marijuana in "To My Lover of Twenty Years" and may even account for the speaker's irresponsibility in "Ten Minutes to Midnight."

In addition to the disconnectedness regarding family, and the accompanying sense of isolation which appears in such poems as "A Christmas in Hartford," the speaker in these poems experiences a sense of disconnectedness in the job market, which is exemplified by "Incinerating the Night," a lyric based on my experience as a janitor at St.

Joseph Hospital in Wichita in 1974. Because of his job burning trash, the speaker in "Incinerating the Night" feels separate from the other members of the hospital staff at night. "The nurses," he says, "look away as I pass." Other people, the doctors and the family members staying overnight, "turn from [him]" as well. A vicarious kind of pleasure appears in the final line, when the speaker imagines these people "com[ing] out to cars dusted with ash," the leftover product of his night burning their waste.

Just as the speaker in these poems feels disconnected from family and from a satisfying career, a similar feeling of disconnectedness appears regarding place. The speaker in "Politics" admits to spending his life "switching schools / and continents, none of them a home." A commingling of place, with one merging into another, because of the similarities in weather or the associations produced by sound, appears in some of these poems. "Sitting Alone, Listening," for example, illustrates a confusion produced by aural sensations. The speaker associates foghorns in San Francisco with the bellowing of cows, and this aural connection leads him to visualize trains "blow[ing] like whales" in Kansas. "To Normandy via Jazz" also contains a merging of one place into another. Jazz played by a blind musician in an urban environment causes the speaker to imagine a coastal town. This transformation first appears in the kind of birds overhead, with pigeons changing to seagulls, then the

speaker imagines himself sitting on a promenade by the sea. No one place remains constant for the speaker. He admits, in fact, to "carry[ing] every place inside of [him]" in "Nightfall at Boomer Lake."

This geographic disconnectedness has changed to a sense of belonging, however. A good number of these poems are set in the Great Plains, particularly Kansas and Oklahoma. Like those settlers in "The Homesteaders," who have made their home on the prairie, the speaker has created his own home, aided by his ties to in-laws in Kansas. A feeling of satisfaction and bonding with place occurs in "Postcoital in Northern Kansas." While living in cities, the speaker missed the night sky he had discovered for the first time in Kansas. Having returned to a small town in Kansas, the speaker feels "at home, at last," with "no needs / but for this place, this night." "A Burial Plot in Pratt" goes even further by expressing the speaker's desire to be buried in Kansas.

Related to this satisfaction regarding place, the speaker achieves a sense of belonging through family. Because of this connection with another person, the speaker at the close of "Twenty Years Ago Today" finds comfort in the home and in those sensuous pleasures created by the wind and the sun. Enjoyment in sensual pleasure, with sex as a kind of secular religion, is present in "Kneeling in Prayer." The speaker seeks a form of God in "Kneeling in

Prayer," someone who will help provide comfort, just as the pygmies in the Iture forest sing to the forest and believe that it is sleeping when bad luck befalls them.[1] Not able to find that kind of protector, the speaker seeks comfort in sex and procreation. In those poems which follow "Kneeling in Prayer," a sense of belonging occurs through the son as well. Spending time outside with the son replaces marijuana, the speaker says in "To My Lover of Twenty Years." Through the son, the speaker also achieves an understanding of nature, as shown in "Cabin Fever" and "October in Oklahoma." Family and geography actually work together in creating a feeling of belonging, because the speaker finds belonging with family first, before he finds it with geography afterwards.

Almost all of these poems in "Nightclerking" contain personal subject matter based on my experiences as a man, a father, and a resident of a specific region. In using what I know, I have sought to be honest to my experiences, just as Wordsworth hoped to avoid inaccurate description in his poems. Also, like Wordsworth, I create both lyric and narrative poems, with the two poetic forms sometimes intermingling. This introduction and the poems in "Nightclerking" show that Wordsworth's concern for poetic form, and his

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1. See Denise Lardner Carmody's The Oldest God: Archaic Religion Yesterday and Today.

desire to render everyday experience honestly, remain important for contemporary American poets.

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I

ABOVE GROUND

October in Oklahoma

I hold out my son's wand
in front of me, wait to catch
that next gust, wait for bubbles

to explode like a water balloon.
Some of them run low along
the ground, dodging the weeds

that need trimmed one last time
this season; others climb the air,
dancing over the neighbor's house.

My son, on the step below mine,
dips his wand in the saucer,
shakes off the droplets that land

in his hair, on his lips, that smear
the porch, my glasses. Sacks
deserted by bagworms roll across

the yard. Leaves dropped early
collect in the fence like messages
for those others to go down flaming.

A hundred years ago, a cold front
would have rushed past, its gusts
twisting the windharp hung in a tree,

giving voice to spirits warned
away by bonfires, to the dead warming
themselves in our houses, feeding

themselves against the coming cold.
Windchimes, for us, record the front
moving south, as though horses lug

it behind them, their bells ringing.
Snow piles along roads like straw
in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota.

Ten Minutes to Midnight

A wind strong enough to topple
buildings, to blow away everything
but our shadows, howls no longer.
That wolf stopped its puffing
at the door. I miss it.
Its pacing, its panting lulled

me to sleep. Its scent lingered
every morning, making it easier
to light up that first cigarette,
to put off quitting, to laugh
when tallying columns of figures--
fired from six jobs, stopped
showing up at another fifteen,
took acid and cocaine x number
of times. My laughing stopped.

I wheeze now. My doctor listens
to my lungs, the contrapuntal
melodies occurring in each breath.
Those paychecks a decade away,
from a job not yet found,
go for doctors, groceries, books.
Each night I cook a little more
of that five bedroom, two bath
house, with a two car garage,
on 3.5 acres near a town unknown
to me. My new Jeep Cherokee
draws 5.5% in my doctor's account.
My body swirls in a drain of debt.

Wolf, come take me now, please.
Blow my dust over the Rockies.
I think I hear the klaxon
at Malmstrom AFB sending crews
to their planes, explosions
starting their engines, as doors
blow open at silos scattered
a hundred miles across Montana.

Above Ground

Its hook released, a glider
loops its way back to the airport,
each circle growing wider.
Not hearing the plane floating
through air, my son totes
handfuls of sand to another spot
in the sandbox. Two months ago,
he hid from planes, standing

close to me or against the car
when we saw relatives in Wichita,
their house below the flightpath
of jets trailing, like a sign,
five minutes of space behind them.

My son stops and looks overhead
when a goose directs its flight
across the lake or small planes
growl like lions near the runway.
Before his nap, we park the car
at the airport. He walks along
the fence, looking through the links

at a Cessna climbing into the air
like an egret as the sun sets
behind it. Surprised by the blue
runway lights, the beacon revolving
behind him, he looks around him,

points at the moon, which lingers
like a plane whose light shows up
fifteen minutes before it lands.
He wants to know everything--
what moves across, what flies above
the dirt he brings inside with him.

Sleep

I store up my dreams, catch
snatches of them in the car
while driving 60 mph, nodding
awake before the car veers
to the left or leaves the road.

If I could warehouse dreams
lost nightly, a storage company
would charge me for crates
nailed shut and stacked as high
as the ceiling, the contents
wrapped in newspaper, padded
with straw, the outside stenciled
erotic, nonsensical, fear.

One university offers to take
my dreams, to store them in jars,
like fetal pigs, until students
in psychology dissect them, naming
the parts, charting their movement
from one cycle of sleep to another.
None of them would be restored,
once thoroughly examined. If dreams

collected in an aquifer like water,
until wells drilled one hundred
feet tap into them, my own well
needs to go deeper. My ground
lies exhausted; my topsoil drifts
overhead. Will my ground collapse,

will sinkholes open up, if I drill
even deeper? Will I ever get
back my dreams, even as I doze
at the wheel, my forehead bloodied,
my knees crushed against the dash?

Twenty Years Ago Today

The damp dark ground in my head
when I was twenty let the spores
I took into my mouth grow mushrooms
so fat that I opened up a roadside
stand, my sign reading, "fungi
for sale." After each harvest,

I opened up my head for the sun
to warm my soil, the hinge so stiff
I had to use all of my strength.
Earthworms went deeper. My eyes--
the pupils so large I could see
inside a cave, without a torch,

without radar pinging off the walls--
scared the tourists back into
their cars, engines already running.
I scared myself. I was afraid
of them, too. I only wanted
a gardener to come and turn over

my dirt with her spade. My sign,
up close, read, "gardener wanted."
And now when oak, maple, and spruce
trees fill my head, enough space
between them to keep the ground lit,
and when my gardener helps me grow

daffodils and tulips each spring,
peonies in the summer, I look
onto rooms in the afternoon, squares
of light on the floor, the curtains
blown back from the windows, the drone
of an airplane overhead, needing no more.

Kneeling in Prayer

after the Pygmies
of the Iture Forest

I dropped part of my car outside
Enid, Oklahoma, along U.S. 64,
almost two years ago. My mechanic

gives it, maybe, another year.
The rust crunches away at its body,
peeling off strips of paint
before it chews through the frame.
My bank account spits out mud

whenever I lift the handle and try
to fill the sink. The IRS offers
to garnish my wages, adding a sprig
of watercress with each check.
Such gestures won't pay my bills.
If I only knew what to awaken,

I would sing sweetly, like droplets
of rain, offering a song each morning,
afternoon, and evening. My only tree,
a twenty year old cottonwood, whose limbs
shaded my window, and whose seeds
floated past like moths, dirtying

the neighbor's yard, was cut down
last summer when she complained
to the town. Nothing else covers me
but the sky. My landlord releasing
the coolant from the air conditioner
lets its cancer spread to clouds
and gnaw holes over Antarctica.

Maybe I should lie down next to you,
placing my ear over your stomach,
to hear a forest waking in your body.
The hourly bells of academe drifting
over the town call us now into prayer.

Breast Milk

You have raised up your shirt
to unsnap the cup
and pull it above your breast.
You roll the thick nipple,
until a drop of milk snowcaps it,
then dribbles over your fingers
like a snowmelt. You cup your hand
under your breast, holding out
your nipple like the blossom
from a honeysuckle.
At last I awake with your
thin milk at the corner of my mouth.

You breast-fed each child
for a year. I wanted to watch you
during my visits to your home,
first in Concordia, then in Aurora
and Leonardville. You raised
your shirt just enough
for the baby to reach your nipple,
keeping my eyes away,
as when the nurses in surgery
pulled the curtain shut
after I stopped hauling away
used syringes and bottles of saline
to look at a woman's feet in stirrups.

The last time we were together
you exposed the fullness
and whiteness of your breast,
as your baby slurped its meal.
We had just finished lunch
at the kitchen table, the mid-afternoon
light filtering through the leaves
of the cottonwood in the yard.
Asking to borrow my shampoo,
you later called me to the bathroom door
as you sat in the tub, wanting me
to look through the space at the door,
but I kept looking away.

(stanza break)

My wife wakes from her dream.
She tells me that two men lying
at each side of her were sucking
on her breasts, becoming drunk
with lust. She rolls toward me,
takes my hand, and places it over one.

That First Taste

Her blouse open, my wife pumps
her breasts while she watches me
finish my breakfast. As a boy,

one summer afternoon in Istanbul,
after I followed a gypsy up
the stone path from the Bosphorus,

his brown bear on a leash
and trained to dance to the beat
of his stick tapping against the ground,

I found no one inside our house
but the ironing lady, her breasts
bare as she fed her baby in my bedroom.

I sat in front of her to watch.
Her baby asleep, she looked down
at me. Grimacing, she rubbed

her breasts and said they still hurt.
Only later, as clothes line dried
on the balcony, as a peddler selling

pretzels shouted their name over
and over from the street, as her smell
remained behind, did I regret not

helping her, not taking that taste.
Cupping a breast above my mouth,
my wife offers to sweeten my coffee,

before she refills a bottle stored
in the refrigerator. Remembering Reubens,
Pax squirting her milk down to Plutus,

I tease her about shooting the cats,
her milk arcing in the air like Juno's.
My wife wheels the baby downtown

(stanza break)

to the farmer's market, buying kiwi,
avocados, strawberries--new flavors
for his mouth, but he'll always remember

her flavor each time he licks honey
from his fingers, catches ice cream
dripping from a cone down onto his hand.

Daycare

Awakened from their nap,
the toddlers sit around a table,
waiting for cups of juice
and dry cereal. One boy drops

his stuffed lion, its fur worn
off in spots, its eyes missing,
stands in front of me, and says,
"Hold me." Another boy rests

his head on the table, stares
at the walls, the pictures
of Mickey, Minnie and Donald,
the zoo animals from seven
continents. My son refuses

to sleep. He pushes himself
down the slide. He enters
and leaves a child's car,
closing the door every time,
sometimes embarking on a trip

around the room. Outside
the door, I looked through
the window, studying everything
inside. My son refuses to smile

or wave goodbye when I stop
to see him again. He knows
I committed him. No escape
is possible, ever, his face says.

In a Room

I keep my curtains drawn.
My office window at home
looks onto only other houses,

the street between us swept clean
every Wednesday. Too much
happens at ground level: the kids

selling candy, or delivering newspapers,
shortcut through the yard, dogs,
like car alarms, warn them to move

away from a fence, teenagers speed
in cars shaped like a womb, their music
calming them with its heartbeat.

When I lived three stories
above the ground, I pulled back
the curtains. I welcomed sunlight

stretching across the rug like a cat.
At my desk, I sat too low to see
anything but clouds inching forward

like sloths. An air conditioner
at night fanned the room, its roar
drowning out dogs, music, thunder.

A Golden Shower

The evening lays
split open, twilight
on one side, night on the other,
after the cicadas sawed through
the hours. We wade across

the porch, the heat sloshing
against our bodies as though
we swim inside a womb. We drive
into the country, miles from

the nearest cluster of houses
to the north whose lights
pierce the sky like heat lightning.
Parked beside a field, we hear

the swish of cows, their dark
shapes moving toward the fence
to watch you mount your camera
on its tripod in the gravel road.
You leave the lens wide open

and pointed up, looking
for meteors to arc across
the sky. We wait to have
them appear on film, their bright
tails swimming across each print,
the pull inside exhausting them.

At the Airport in Pratt, Kansas

We are parked at the airport,
both doors open to the summer night.
A warm wind buffets the car.

We watch the red and white lights
revolving on top of the water tower.
A green light shows up, too,

you say, but my eyes cannot see
its color. No one flies overhead.
No one follows this beacon shooting
across fields like a searchlight.

You point out the light bulbs strung
along the edge of the feedlot, where cows
have been corralled since autumn.

I hear their cries. I imagine
they are now protesting a roundup,
their rumps shocked by prods
as they are crowded into cattle cars,
their feces dripping through the slats
onto the backs of cows below them.

You sit on the hood and stare overhead
at the stars, looking for Perseus.
Train cars returning from Wichita

haul cows to slaughter at sunrise.

Martin, South Dakota

More than a hundred miles
past the hundredth meridian,
I stop the car, climb out
into the West, and pump gas.
A thunderstorm, having crossed,
the Black Hills, and an hour away,
still, spreads over the prairie,
cloud tops higher than the Rockies.

Tractor trailers hauling combines
north for the wheat harvest,
before hail bounces off their cabs,
brake at the only stoplight

since Hyannis, almost a hundred
miles south. Riding in groups,
bags strapped to their handlebars
and behind their seats, bikers
in denim and black, the women
sitting behind them wearing less,
chug west to Sturgis. A tourist

with his family, I climbed back
into the car, my wife and son
asleep since Mission. Cold air
blown into the cabin replaced
the music on tapes left at home.
Bikers stopped for cigarettes
at Pine Ridge saw me go past.
We nodded at Mount Rushmore,
as I followed behind my toddler.

Not much different, we all crowd
into towns for a job. Like them,
I stop to poke around ghost towns,
find tin cans behind store fronts,

or park along the highway, the wind
in August relaying no sounds
across the prairie, when I sit up
at night with my son, see weather
fronts push autumn south through
the Dakotas on the television news.

Christmas on the Interstate

Awake at 2:00 a.m., we decide
to load the car and lure the cats
into their carrier. We leave

Kansas City before Santa lays
the train tracks running alongside
the couch, under the coffee table

in the houses we pass. The windows
flash out greetings, announcing
the size of the owner's income,

while the yard lights warn us
against knocking on anyone's door
unless we want shot. We reach Ottawa,

the only open spot for food
to thank a guest who slips inside.
We pass through Emporia, too late

for Santa's sleigh whisked through
the sky, the bells of his reindeer
loud enough to make anyone look

for a headlight at a train crossing.
You fall asleep, missing the sunrise
over the Flint Hills. You still sleep

as the car enters Wichita, its streets
open before me, welcoming me back
after ten years, but letting me pass

through without stopping, without
leaving the car stuffed with presents
we unwrap with your folks at breakfast.

The Morning of June 6

The first wave of troops at Omaha,
Utah, and Sword meet resistance
and get bogged down on the beach.
Landing craft drop their doors,
forcing the soldiers to wade
through water up to their necks.

Fifty years after the invasion,
CNN at 4:00 a.m. runs newsreels
before reporting live from Normandy.
My son, four weeks old, sleeps
in my arms, an ear resting against
my chest, a hand in mine. His lips

still suck at the bottle I took
from him. He laughs and sighs.
I try to see the faces of the sailors
steering the boats, their features
hidden by their helmets. My father,
I think, appears for a moment.

I look for him, too, in movies
of sailors waiting for the screws
of destroyers overhead, for mines
exploding above or against the hulls
of their boats. My father celebrates
the invasion by pruning his roses,

by watching the fireworks explode.
A voice on the phone, he gives me
his best wishes yearly at Christmas.
I want my son to know me, to see me
when he's tall, when he looks for me.
He'll not find my face in newsreels.

Baby Talk

With my right arm encircling
his waist, my son sits on the counter.

I write out my check for groceries
with my free hand. Seeing me sign
my name, he touches it and laughs.

He grabs my pen with his left hand,
adding straight and curved lines,
and circles over the check, showing

his approval. When he finds pens
at home, he tattoos those marks
over his body. More easily
than his mother, he reads my writing
aloud when he picks up grocery lists,

no matter at what angle he holds them.
Words lay in piles across the rug,
near the bookcase, after he tosses
each book behind him. Pleased
with his order, he sits among them

and reads each one aloud, opening
it to only one page and holding it
upside down. A linguist, he creates
his own language. The sounds run
together, like a field of corn,

as he reads a paragraph and goes on
to the next book. A book becomes
no longer than a grocery list reading

cereal, orange juice, cheese, bread.

All One Summer

As the autumn moon totters
over the water at Boomer Lake,
my son, lifted out of the swing,
sleeps in my arms. We saw the moons
of summer round to their fullest.

I sat on the bottom of the slide
at the playground. My son explored
sand--touching it, pouring it out
of his hand, watching it fall
when he threw it, tasting it.
We started our evening by sitting
him in the child seat of the swings.
He smiled widely as I pushed him,
his hair blown back by the breeze.

He chatted to himself. He sang.
He pointed and exclaimed at the tree
in front of him, its leaves and branches,
the colors of both, the birds
and their voices, the sky, the clouds,
the moon. He lifted his arms,
letting me know when he wanted out.

Buckled into the car seat, he nibbled
at a cracker, held it as he napped.
I circled the lake on our way home,
looking for dozens of geese nesting
on the eastern shore. The sign
at the high school, before posting
the dates of football games, read,
"Have a good summer." I did. We did.

The Homesteaders

September, 1869

Everyone posed outside the dugout.
The family's mule is unhitched,
its reins loose across the ground.
Holding out handfuls of prairie grass,

the photographer teased the mule
into the picture. The two boys
tethered the cow on the roof to keep
it in view all morning, its complaints

heard even as they broke off the ears
of corn mother wanted. The father
rests from his plowing, his coat
draped across his lap. His oldest son,

pants tucked into the boots bought
last October, after helping a neighbor
cut hay and build ricks, fetched two
watermelons to welcome the man.

The daughter, her hair cut short,
her white dress unsplattered
by mud, her bare feet clean, still,
drew the photographer's eye to her.

Almost cutting out the mother,
he centered the daughter in the plate
shipped back East to his editor.
His language foreign, the photographer

got back a smile as he handed her
the first slice of watermelon, its juice
dripping between his fingers, leaving
droplets in the dirt beside her bare feet.

II

SERVING TIME IN WICHITA

Fear

Not all my childhood fears passed.
I duck my head when stepping
into dark basements, no matter
how much space exists, and hold out
my hand against whatever crouches
beside the washer or water heater.

Spirits wait for my soul to rise
into the room or above the house
as my body sleeps, filling that space
or slicing the cord connecting
it to spirit. Certain someone
threatens me, I wake up screaming.

I fear what is inside and outside.
Singing along to "Sympathy for
the Devil" in the car could invite
him into my life. Someone unseen
once moved near my desk, offering
to help me get an armful of money
if I signed over my soul in return.

I fear most what I cannot see.
Unwilling to let mountains cut off,
block the lights twenty miles away
in all directions, I measure my position
with a sextant, using the stars
in an autumn night over Kansas
and Oklahoma. I need that space.

I once walked through four dark miles
at midnight. I had ridden the train
back to Lakenheath from Cambridge,
where my grandfather pulled pills
off the mantle to thank what let him
keep up with a lifetime of smoking.

No one passed me on the road after I
left the station. Yellow streetlights
stretched the length of the village,

(no stanza break)

until hedges bordering the road,
windbreaks for fields of sugar beets,
formed a tunnel, their limbs touching
like a bat linking together its wings.

I feared what waited behind the hedge
or moved when I moved, its steps
matching mine. Cat's eyes
in the road waited to reflect light,
the beasts too leery to rub themselves
against me or meow for attention.
Trees stood like people found frozen
in movement, arms stretched above them,
monuments to the dead at Pompeii.
An hour long, the tunnel ended,

the hedge giving way to fields edging
up to the flightline, where mounds
resembling dug-outs housed nuclear
bombs for battlefields on the Continent.
Quonset huts held conventional arms--
bombs and rounds for the 50mm cannon
on F100s running up their engines.

Rewriting the Past

Vietnam, my wife says, would have
made me a different man if I had gone.
I would have come back with a dufflebag
of silences slung over my shoulder,
my souvenirs too private to show her,
even after moths left behind holes
of that first night on the perimeter
or in a guard tower at Cam Ranh Bay.

I was trained for war as a child,
given toy soldiers and taken to movies.
July afternoons in the yard I reenacted
the liberation of France, the taking
of Porkchop Hill in Korea. My father
told a story of spending the first
night of the invasion at Omaha Beach
with the dead all around him,
before he fell into silence.
He gave me the oath when I enlisted
and asked me not to disappoint him.
Assigned first to Montana, I guarded

tankers on alert. Eager to tell
the stories that we heard nightly
about mamasan selling her mouth
in the shower, papasan selling sticks
of marijuana carted from Thailand,
and the gooks who lobbed mortar
shells from the jungle, creating action
on the flightline, my friends volunteered.
Not convinced, no matter how alluring
the account, but still more afraid,
I asked for England. I spent a year
guarding nuclear bombs against the fog

that crossed the perimeter and crawled
below the fence, waiting for me
to look away as I drew pipefuls
of hashish into my lungs. I handed
out leaflets and marched in London

(no stanza break)

against the war. I took a discharge
offered, with benefits, two years early.
It took only weeks to regret my choices.
I missed my nights on post, my friends.
No one else I knew had stayed home.
Even now at times, twenty some years
later, when I count up the time
spent inside, stoned, jobless, alone,
with no ribbons but national defense
stored away with my night stick, I wish
I had joined my friends from high school,
my friends from Montana in AZR training
at Lackland. Like Azrael, the angel
of death, I could have learned
to separate a soul from its body
with a knife, a bazooka, a mortar,
before boarding a plane for Da Nang.

I could have spent a year releasing
my nineteen year old lust. I could have
peered through a night scope and aimed
my M60 machine gun at the shapes
firing mortar shells onto the flightline,
watching them fall like silhouettes.
I could have created my own silences
for the last night of stuffing
my dufflebag, before adding
my souvenirs to the stack of bodybags
flown back to the world.

Victor Alert: Post Sixteen

Each night storms build in the west,
rising skyward like planes whose flares
burst open and rain onto the ground,
as bombs explode and scatter sound.

Each night I waited to hear the windows
rattle around me. No one slipped
past the barbed wire and two rows
of fence at that end of the flightline.
My radio intercepted the static crackling
along a signal from the Continent.
I clicked it off and burned the hashish
brought to work. Hiding its glow
from post fifteen, I kneeled on the floor,
sometimes rising to look around me,
like an animal ready to stop its feeding.

From my guardhouse, I stared ahead
at three planes sheeted with light,
each one clasping a bomb to its belly,
when clouds overhead began their barrage,
cratering the tarmac like a moon.

Cabin Fever

All one winter, I slept
until dark and went outside
only to check the mail or walk
to the store, the snow crunching
below my feet. By then I had
stopped missing my nights guarding

planes on alert, where I saw lights
blur as fog rolled across the flightline.
I once slept in a nuclear weapons
storage area, the grassy slope
of one mound pillowing my body,
as the mist, offering its blessing,

sprinkled my face. Not a camper,
or a hunter, I spent no other time
out-of-doors afterwards. I stacked
books around my desk to make mountains.
My ash snowcapped them year around.
With my son now, who points at the sky

and says, "moon," I try to identify
the water birds at the lake, confusing
herons with ibises and sandhill cranes.
The plumber tells me a sycamore grows
in my yard. Its leaves get scattered
over the lawn like toys. My son used

to swing, to pile sand around him
until 9:00 p.m. At the lake on Sunday,
he collected twigs, arranged them
in a circle as he placed them upright
in the sand, marking where we spent
summer evenings and fall afternoons.
Sunset at 5:38 shadowed his creation.

To My Lover of Twenty Years

Before I gave up cigarettes
and alcohol, I smoked marijuana,
sometimes as hashish. I introduced
myself to other drugs--cocaine,
and those named acid and speed--
but I struck up, and maintained,
a daily friendship with the one
which damaged my body the least.
It welcomed me, hugging me close
when I stayed alone on holidays--
my family thousands of miles away,
when I remained alone, without a car,
a job, or money for anything else.

On Fridays, as an undergraduate
at my third college in four years,
after we agreed to only a weekend
rendezvous, I bolted the door
and drew the curtains. I waited
until evening to smoke marijuana
in front of the television, relaxing
with an old friend who had known
me for ten years. On Saturdays,
at the kitchen table, after studying
until late, I sifted out the seeds,
loaded my pipe, and as I thumbed
through poems, I listened to jazz--
Urszula Dudziak scatting, her voice
soloing like a squiggling saxophone.

The police never rammed open my door.
A friend got nabbed rolling joints
in my high school dorm. I slipped out.
I emptied my pockets--a pipe, pot,
hashish from Morocco, my birthplace--
along the path to Lakenheath village,
a field emptied of sugar beets
on one side, the approach lights
for jets returning from gunnery practice
at the Wash on the other side.

(stanza break)

I had sold all fifty hits of blotter
acid mailed to me from the States
when the police, six months too late,
came to search my barracks room.
That day I had helped a friend score
an ounce of hashish in Cambridge,
in the market next to Christ College,
breaking off a piece as payment.
It was gone before I saw the police
outside my door. I joined an ex-con

on a trip to Hays another time.
He had burgled a pharmacy in a town
too small to hire its own police.
He entered through the roof, filled
a bag with pills. A doctor's son
identified each bottle. His friends
would buy everything, he said,
and sell me a quarter pound of pot.
We followed section roads west
for twenty miles, looking behind us
for headlights, as wheat fields
covered with snow greened alongside
the road. We stayed up all night.
The ex-con, his second night awake,
ran his car into the courthouse,
when he thought the police sat
behind his seat. He yelled from jail
one afternoon, when I skipped classes
at the junior college, and asked me
to buy him cigarettes. I was lucky.

Two friends saw the weather change
at Lansing, caught glimpses of Missouri
from their cells, the 70's recorded
on their walls. I might have lost
my passport, a chance to see the folks.
One friend supplied me for four years.
He left the country to stay stoned
in Africa, courtesy of the Peace Corps.

(no stanza break)

Returning via Amsterdam, he collapsed
in a bar, rewarding himself a farewell
with hashish flown in from Afghanistan.

I shook out my last baggie, scooped up
enough for one bowlful six years ago.
No one I know smokes marijuana now.
Not alone with time enough to sit
stoned at my desk, I replace pot
with other things, afternoons spent
at the lake with my son, time alone
when he sleeps, a book taken to bed,
an hour writing. I haven't yet thrown
away my paraphernalia--forceps named
straight Kellys, a pipe whose bowl
is burned away on one side, resembling
the dome of Mount St. Helens.
I miss its company, still, sometimes.

A Christmas in Hartford

I worked proofing church bulletins
two nights a week. I started
my holiday at midnight, two days
before Christmas, when I climbed
the stairs to my bare second floor

apartment. I looked across
the brick wall at the dark windows
of the Institute of Living,
the only light entering the lounge
from the nurse's station, before I closed

my blinds and switched on my light.
I sat in the wooden rocker, my one
good chair lent to me by my sister,
set up my nine-inch black and white TV
on the table given to me by a woman

unwilling to leave her house
in the country, where we had stayed
together for four days, taking baths
and leaving our footprints in the snow,
while her husband celebrated Christmas

in Maine that year with his mistress.
I separated out the seeds, stuffed
my pipe with pot, celebrated the holiday
until 5:30, when the trucks delivering
milk, ham, and vegetables arrived

at the loading dock. Getting up
at 2:30, two hours before sunset, I sat
in the chair, drank coffee, watched
the traffic on Washington, the cars
stopping at Quiktrip, and saw a woman

getting out of a black station wagon
turn to glance up at me,
before I looked across the brick wall
at the windows of the insane, who stared
back at me and thought I was so lucky.

Incinerating the Night

At twilight, in the basement,
across the hall from Central Service,
I shut the double doors behind me,
open the outside door to invite
inside a breeze tattered by moths.

I lift out the ashes and place them
in a barrel, trying not to inhale
the dust through my mask as it rises
into the air. I twist on the flame
and begin throwing in empty boxes,

watching them melt like model planes,
before I add plastic bags of trash.
I make enough heat for an aerosol can
to explode like a flare shot indoors.

I push in boxes bursting with glass
and others with no sound from the Lab,
leaving them to burn as I stuff
my cart with trash from the floors,
where the nurses look away as I pass.

I stoke the fire. I shove in boxes
of grey paper sheets wrapped around
the day's afterbirth from obstetrics.
I scrape out the chute, using
a claw to bring out load after load.

I climb into it to get its corners,
dodging the roaches beside and above me.
I burn all the trash tossed my way
by the people who turn from me,
who come out to cars dusted with ash.

Serving Time in Wichita

Two doors from the morgue,
I start by wheeling in another cart
from outside in the corridor. I stand
before it and work my way through bag
after bag of laundry, tossing behind me

into one basket the sponges soaked with
the blood of a woman in labor. I remove
the clamps left clipped onto the cover
after her skin was sewn together, wad up
the clotted sheets and throw them into

the next basket. I come to diapers,
carry them carefully to the end basket,
as though I pick up the sheepskins
that padded the bed of a man who lost
control of his body, before security moved
him onto their cart and pushed him down

the hall. I sort through everything
forced down the chute and loaded onto
my cart, throwing out the shoe covers
and facemasks, but pocketing the bills
and coins left in the doctors' scrubs.
Emptying the next bag, I look around

and hide the clamps that I'll clean
before leaving. Then I'll clip them
onto the joint that I light in the bath,
stretched out until the water turns cold,
and burn their ends, inhaling the smoke,
as I wait for a woman to enter my rooms.

The Lutheran Rectory

Interrupted by my brother-in-law,
who came to the door and asked her
to move her car, we dressed and drove
into Hartford, where she took me

to the party at the rectory and told me
that we had been promised a spare room.
I waited for her to tire and everyone else
to leave, then followed her up the stairs.

She padded the wooden floor with blankets
and flipped off the light. I watched
her stand naked at the window and pull
open the curtains. She let the figures
in the stained glass window of the church
next door watch over us. The next morning,

as the sunlight rose off the snow and lit
the room, she knelt over me as in prayer,
blessing me with her body, and then gathered
her clothes and dressed in the bathroom,

leaving me alone and naked with the figures
in the stained glass window. She let me
off at the school a block from my sister's,
before waving and driving down the hill
to her husband and house in the country.

To Normandy via Jazz

As I drank coffee at the Red Moon,
a waiter unfurled the striped awning
over the terrace, where a blind girl

kneeled beside its case and lifted out
her sax. She held it in her arms
like a snake brought from its basket.

She stroked its sides and blew notes
like a gypsy commanding a brown bear
to dance. Rising into the air,

pigeons grew meshed in her music,
reappeared as gulls sailing toward land.
From under an awning on a promenade,

I watched a fisherman painting
large dark eyes onto his boat's bow
for scudding through clouds at dusk.

As gulls grew veiled in their flight,
I turned and heard his horn mimic
a mist that slipped past the seawall.

A Cold War

Women wave goodbye to soldiers
shipped to the front. The train
gets switched to a siding running
through my four-year-old world
when my father comes home. He nabs
the messages a submarine radios
to Vladivostok, filtering out
the static from five megaton bombs
exploding a hemisphere away
from us on Adak, an island flung
into the Bering Sea like scraps.

At dinner, I rub my head, find
my food covered with hair.
"Don't touch your head again
when we're eating," my mother says,
serving me leftovers meant for dad.
My pillow collects my hair,
even my eyebrows and eyelashes.

In slides brought out
when my sister says, "Let's look
at Adak," I sit sucking my thumb,
looking out from below the desk
in our living room of government
issued furniture, my hair in thin
patches, like our island forest
of six trees eight inches high.

I refused to leave my hat behind
when we lowered a trap for shrimp,
or when we watched "sea otter" Jones,
dressed in his wet suit, pull up
king crabs from the rocks offshore.

After eighteen months, we boarded
a ship which brought mail, fruit
for the PX. We sailed to Seattle,
our 1953 Buick covered in canvas.
Bald and stuttering, I entered

(no stanza break)

first grade in Maryland, my seat
at lunch close to kids in helmets,
kids in wheelchairs. Every month
doctors at Bethseda examined me,
my x-rays letting them diagnose
alopecia, prescribe a daily dose
of vitamins. Finer than before,
my hair came back on my head,
my arms, my legs after two years
of treatment, earning me the name
"bald eagle" in third grade.

The next time became no easier,
at twenty, after I stopped
guarding nuclear bombs, stopped
sleeping on the grass mounds
in a weapons storage area, stopped
standing near the steel doors
sealing every weapons' silo.
All the stares, the jokes,
the teasing, the men who touched
their hair when seeing me
I had not forgotten. I stayed
inside through my twenties,
my thirties, sheltered

like a Minuteman III in Montana,
only emerging at the start
of the SALT III talks in Moscow.
Now I hear the girls at Hardee's
call me "sir," before I join
other veterans on a park bench
and feed pigeons ground up corn,
once the color of my hair.

Politics

Communists holding red banners
led the march through London.
Joining those protesters still
in the States, who pitched cow's
blood outside the Pentagon, who gave
my father the finger as he crossed
the street in uniform, I walked
with other GI's in the rear.
I carried a sign against American
troops in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia.
I waved my sign at one couple
waiting in their Bentley for bobbies
to wave them through an intersection.

The communists burned the flag
at the embassy, called Nixon names.
I stood to the side, in silence.
Our movements filmed, the military
matched our faces with their files.
Americans studying for their master's
at Cambridge organized our group
of GI's against the war. We risked
a discharge for their aims. No jobs,
no colleges, would welcome us home.
It was the military or nothing for me.
I marched against my father,
against everyone who gave me orders.

My father, after his tour
as executive officer at Edzell,
a naval station relaying messages
to the fleet, intercepting them
from Russian submarines on patrol,
shipped back a Bentley. He asked me
to wash and vacuum it on Saturdays,
after I mowed the lawn; he took it
out on the interstate on Sundays,
almost tracing his commute to D.C.,
before he sold it to a collector.
I sat in the back, hoping no one

(no stanza break)

would see me. I wanted to fit in.
I spent my life switching schools
and continents, none of them a home.
I felt disoriented, weaving from side
to side as though someone spun me
out on the lawn. My father retired

in Northern Ireland. His house,
filled with brass from Turkey,
rugs from Iran, stick barometers
and grandfather clocks from Scotland,
overlooks Belfast Lough, the view
my mother dreamed of owning someday,
when her cousins took her boating.
Last year, my father bought
a new Mercedes with leather seats,
his last car, he says. I rent

a house in Oklahoma, in the region
I made into a home, cluttered
with six-year old secondhand chairs,
a twelve-year old car sitting outside.
I borrowed forty thousand dollars
to get another degree, to find a job.

One day I want a Lexus, an Acura,
a Jeep, for commutes to work, trips
on weekends. For now, I'd settle
for Sunday afternoons with my dad
as we wash and wax a car, my son
helping grandpa by dripping a sponge
over the tires, smiling at himself
in the hub caps, before we go out
on the highway for a ride to Perry.

For My Son

My father wants everything sold,
even those things--clocks, knickknacks,
pictures--shipped five times
across the Atlantic and given
to us by his family in Virginia,
my mother's in Northern Ireland.
After their funerals, when my father
and mother's remains stay overseas,
too far away for you to visit
grandma and grandpa on Sundays,
my sister and I will get a check
to touch, to show others, to pass
down to my son. I'll always have
souvenirs of weather--my early ones,
before age eleven, before Istanbul,
still in need of restoration--
to say I have this for you.

My father saw ships hauling missiles
back from Cuba to the Black Sea,
when snow thundered out of Asia
and swam the Bosphorus, like horses
the sultan claimed for janissaries
laying siege to Vienna. I met mist
when riding the ferry into Cobh harbor
at sixteen, my family the only one
climbing down the ladder alongside
the SS United States. That morning
reappeared for me at Ocean Beach
in San Francisco one November evening,
again in Wichita one March afternoon.
Twenty years later, in Ireland,
I watched clouds drop and shower me
with mist, as ships remaining
in Belfast Lough dodged the storms
on the Irish Sea. At night clouds
scudded overhead, quilting the moon,
as wind pushed them off the Atlantic.
We hung onto railings, saw waves
swarm the decks, when we sailed back

(no stanza break)

to New York. I heard waves of fog
roll at dusk across the Fens, flooding
the flightline and muffling sound,
as the cops doubled up at their posts
in Victor Alert, where fighters sat
waiting for a battlefield in Europe.

My mother, when hearing thunder,
in Maryland, hurried and turned off
the television, the air conditioner;
my father, retreating to the garage,
the door left open, puffed his pipe,
tallied the number of lightning strikes.
None of those storms measured up
to those in Montana, where umbrellas
sailed overhead, topped off flooding
served on the rocks, the hailstones
melting minutes later. Tornadoes
in Kansas tottered across farmland
one night around Concordia, flattening
corn fields, when I lived without
a radio or television. Sirens wailing
in Wichita sent me into a closet,
then outside to look for a twister
above Wesley Hospital. I slept
through a hurricane in Connecticut,
the wind, like a nearby infant,
rousing me only once with its cries.
I dread spring every year in Oklahoma,
where I check the radar on tv
during every storm, keep listening
for a locomotive barreling toward us
and grabbing every mailbag on its way.

III

A POSTCARD FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

Home From the Peace Corps

My friends returned from Africa,
toting stories and photographs
of their cook, their maid,
their climbs to the snowcapped
rims of volcanoes. They abandoned

their clothes, their books,
their stash, their students in Rwanda,
when mortar shells began landing
four miles from their house
like boulders that flatten huts
and litter fields in an eruption.

All the Americans retreated
to the embassy at Kigali,
until the evacuation by bus to Kenya,
where they mailed out postcards
and shopped for souvenirs.

Even if they had stayed behind
to help feed the refugees in a camp,
they could only hand out
bandages to anyone bleeding
for fear of carrying home a virus.

Now in Kansas City my friends
push their cart through the aisles
at Dillon's, buying food canned,
boxed, or wrapped in cellophane.

Two months after the evacuation,
the students remain in camps,
eating the protein in their bodies--
their muscles and the cells
in their brains bursting
with Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

Coming into Money

For books to insulate my walls,
to cover windows like the paper
a day sleeper taped inside his room,
like the layers of cork installed
in Carlyle's attic study in Chelsea,
keeping out the hawkers, the steps

of his neighbors climbing the stairs
on the other side of the wall, I want
money to slip between my fingers,
as it splashes from a spigot
and puddles at my feet. I'll break
the handle twisting it with a wrench,

creating a pond deep enough to account
for evaporation, the rippling of Grant's
face making crowds gather at the curb.
They spoon off bucketfuls, believing
his face brings luck to all who see him.

Because of drought, a neighbor
pastures his cows beside the sidewalk.
At midnight couples strip and wade
out into the middle. Old people looking
for a cure come at noon to soak
and rub the mud across their chests.

I refuse to open the door to anyone,
and peep out through the blinds
when the doorbell chimes. I call
a friend at 3:00 a.m, load everything
into his truck but a pile of bills
covering the living room and reaching
the ceiling. I'll take noise next time.

Sitting Alone, Listening

Since Montana, I have come to know
nights marred by sound, beginning with
trains wailing as they slide through town,
their moans clogging the air like smoke
as they are pushed toward the Rockies.

I heard trains in England switching lines
and clacking over rails at 2:00 a.m. to Ely.
Foghorns in San Francisco spewed out
the sound of cows grazing in a far pasture,

as though boats churn the ground in Kansas,
where in five towns I have heard trains
rise through the night and blow like whales
before diving back into farmland. On Adak,
an island next to a volcano venting steam,

silence broke when tremors shook the ground
like four diesels coupled together
and pulling a hundred cars into the ocean.

Union Pacific

I miss hearing freight trains.
Two engines shift cars along

this spur on Thursdays and Sundays.
Trains ran to and from the yard

on two tracks alongside the river
in Kansas City. Their horns

separated afternoon and evening
like an hour hand, reminding me

of the motion going on around me--
gondolas carrying coal from Wyoming,

autos shipped west across Kansas,
containers stacked on top of each other

brought in on flatcars from California,
Trains gave me my only sense of home.

On my stoop at night, I unwrap
my bundle of memories, sifting

through those places strung together
like paper dolls and connected

by horns sounding in Great Falls,
March, Hartford, Pratt, Wichita.

Nightclerking at the Baron's Hotel.
Concordia, Kansas, 1973.

First Topeka then Kansas City
signed off the air. I sat
in a chair by the front window,
waiting for someone to hand me
the money for a room where a fan
shredded the air at the ceiling.

No one moved at the signal
as the light on the corner changed
from green to red. A man bicycling
through town, after his shift welding
together sheets of steel, coasted
through the intersection. The clock
at the bank read 1:16, switched
to 89 before a minute passed.

Look at me there, waiting,
all one summer, for $5.00 a night.
Insects swarm the streetlights,
forming a cloud that spatters
the sidewalk with their carcasses.
A train of hoppers filled with wheat,
its horn sounding at Lincoln Street,
at Broadway, signals its approach.

Two blocks south, it rolls
onto a siding. Its crew enters
the lobby and takes rooms near
the woman who has asked me to tell
them she waits, whatever the hour,
for their footsteps on the stairs,
their walking down the hall toward her.

I try to tune the radio to KCMO,
but the music fades no matter how loud
I make it. The clock reads 2:18.
I wait at the window like a mother.
I listen for the screen door,
the sound of someone who needs me.

A Postcard From Northern Ireland

Two boys in Bangor stand facing
the Long Hole, a shelter for boats
against weather that sweeps
into Belfast Lough from the Irish Sea.
One boy sits on the concrete rim,
fishing the water that separates
him from three boats tied together,
no tackle box or bucket nearby.
His younger brother, standing
beside him, imagines himself sailing
past the mountains at Newcastle.

Children play tag on the seawall.
Their voices carry to the houses
that line the front, facing
a wash of blues as the lough meets
the sea and the sky. These boys,
for twenty-odd years, have been mailed
to America, Australia, Rhodesia,
South Africa. They both moved
to Aberdeen, then London for jobs.
Their children find ways to fill
two weeks at St. Ives every summer.

Every Christmas, these brothers
fly home to Ulster, their children
eager to see grandmother, whose house
on Beechfield Street was razed
after a bomb exploded one door away.
Her new house overlooks Harland
and Wolff, the two yellow cranes,
shaped like dolmens, enclosing
where grandfather welded plates
onto the hulls of freighters.
Every half-hour, the children
hear the train leaving for Bangor,

where I once stood at the end
of Maxwell Lane, watching clouds
drop over the lough, the spray

(no stanza break)

of the sea mixing with the drizzle
blown into my face, separating me
from the lights of Carrickfergus
across the lough. A ship, waiting
to cross the Irish Sea, dropped
its anchor, as shoppers hurried
home with sausages and wheaten bread
for dinner, before I wrote out,
"wish you were with me at the folks',"
mailing it to my wife in Kansas.

Outside Concordia, Kansas

A man came to walk about his land.
He took the path that light threw

from the door. He reached the gate
and crossed into fields, where he saw

his house signaling to a train,
as though a buoy marked a channel

through land for hoppers and boxcars
clattering over rails with his harvest.

Just before bed, he opened a window
as engines rumbled through fields,

as a horn quaked the air like thunder.
Moonlight misted his wheat stubble.

He looked out onto a beach to hear
sound swell in fog, waited until

it moved over water to fill a harbor,
to pull boats through fog to moorings.

Memorial Day

The barn door slamming shut
loosened hundreds of moths--
millers to us. My niece and nephew
called me outside to hunt for them.

We threw open the door of the shed.
Just shy of collapsing, it leaned
southward, its walls folding in
like cards, sending a cloud above

our heads. We dislodged more
by opening the hoods of the pick-ups
parked in the yard, jumped back
as millers burst out like confetti.

That night their bodies knocked
against the windows, visitors
wanting to warm themselves around
every lightbulb. A dozen more

barged in each time we opened
the door. Our cat cried at those
out of reach, knocked over lamps,
and batted them down onto the floor,

holding her paws around each one.
She snacked at first, then left
their carcasses littering the rug,
as though she were shooting buffalo

from a westbound train in Kansas.
Outside, squatters, who squeezed
past the rubber seals at the doors,
escape when I pack the car

the next afternoon. We lose
travelers even in the Flint Hills,
three hours away from my in-laws'.
In Kansas City, with the garage

door open, the lights off, I open
the trunk, see millers break
for the streetlights, a dozen ghosts
haunting the air above our house.

86 Beechfield Street

Fireworks screaming like banshees
rise skyward in a fountain of red
yellow, white, and blue. Bursts
of red and blue unfold above them,
their color raining through the sky.
Duds exploding on the ground,
each boom seeming to break apart
the sound barrier, recall for me

the car bomb at a policeman's house,
after he drove home from Belfast.
Two streets away, my mother looked
outside, hurried to hear the news.
Over tea, she told her stories
of the blitz in Belfast, sirens
sounding nightly in spring, 1941,
sending my mother, her father's
sister, and Grannie, his mother,
to the shelter on Templeton Avenue.
Her father on patrol prepared
to call the fire brigade as bombs
whistled their delight at the fat
prizes below--the shipyards,
the aircraft plants, the rope works.
An incendiary bomb took the roofs
of row houses on Beechfield Street,
forcing my mother and her family
to spend a year sleeping downstairs.

If a place we return to is home,
I called 86 Beechfield Street home
as a child, coming back to it
after Rabat, Bremerhaven, Istanbul.
Straight from the Heysham ferry,
which made the overnight crossing
of the Irish Sea, docking at 7:00,
we woke Aunt Annie, who opened
the red door and brought us inside.
She had us sit in the dining room,
added shillings to the gas meter,

(no stanza break)

made tea, and sent out Margaret
and my sister to buy the fixings
for an Ulster fry--eggs, steak
sausages, potato farls, soda farls,
wheaten bread. A turf accountant,
Uncle Sammy hurried to work tallying
the wagers placed on horses and dogs,
his brown suit frayed at the collar
and cuffs. He rushed at dinner,
too, to catch the first dog race
on Donegal Road. Margaret bathed
at the kitchen sink, went outside
to pee, the wc behind the house,
brick walls capstoned with glass
separating one garden from another.
I went outside to fetch a bucket
of coal, a hundred pounds stored
below a window. Coal fires
scented the air, mixing with mizzle
blown off the Atlantic. For dinner,
my sister and I brought back fish
and chips, wrapped in wax paper
and newspaper, from the corner shop.

A car bomb, placed by Catholics,
early in the Troubles, destroyed
this block twenty-five years ago.
Grannie died in 1964. Aunt Annie
joined her next, then Uncle Sammy.
Margaret married a Catholic
and moved to London for ten years.
They came back to work at the BBC,
every other British employer bombed.
Her husband sailed to Stranraer
once a fortnight, his Scottish
mistress meeting him at the dock.
He died on the M1, his drunken speed
clocked at 75 mph, before he hit
a concrete barrier. Margaret's boy
just turned twelve, her girl twenty.
I have never met either of them.

Nightfall at Boomer Lake

Alone, still sitting in the car,
the engine off, the window open,
a hundred years after the Boomers
left Kansas to lay claim to land
in Indian Territory, I stare across

the water of this manmade lake, hear
the wintering geese before eight
of them glide onto the far shore.
Great egrets summered here last year,
feeding along the shore across

the road, but roosting at dusk
on limbs that leaf out every year,
the drowned trunks close enough
to shore for these birds to appear
in detail, all five facing north

in my photos. I no longer look
northwards toward my last home.
These lights on the eastern shore
mirror Kansas City from the bluffs
above the Kansas River, resemble

Ireland, the castle and town
of Carrickfergus, when riding
the ferry from Belfast to Glasgow
or standing in Bangor across the lough.
I carry every place inside of me.

A Model for Renoir

After your bath, you come
into the room with a towel wrapped

around your body. You move before
the dressing table, and as you start

to brush your damp hair, the towel slips
from your breasts, tumbles to the floor.

Lying across the bed, I watch you
stand at the window to let the sun

touch your skin. You rub its heat
along your arms and below your breasts

as though sponging yourself with summer.
Showering the rug, you grab your robe

and walk from the room, leaving me
to draw a window awash with leaves,

the swirling patterns across the floor,
my palette left outside when it rains.

Postcoital in Northern Kansas

I have put my wife to sleep.
She moans softly and rolls over,
wrapping an arm around my pillow,

as I leave our bed and dress
in shorts and a shirt left open.
Our cats chase after millers

let inside as I wheel my bicycle
out the door. Everyone else sleeps
at 1:00 a.m. The streets are mine.

I pedal and coast, letting the air
fan my skin. At the parking lots
downtown, I get closer to sprinklers

each time I circle around them,
feeling the spray cool my arms,
my legs. I take a street north,

past a store, its windows papered
with prices for bread, chips, soda.
I hear katydids whose songs rise,

then fall with each tree I pass.
I stare overhead at stars arcing
the sky, thinking how I missed them

in Wichita, San Francisco, Hartford.
The sky reflecting a city's light
greeted me, for the first time,

in Kansas, fourteen years ago.
At home, at last, I have no needs
but for this place, this night.

Chasing the Blue Moon

For a blue moon, we drove
outside of town, and near a hill
took a section road south,
followed it past farmhouses,
past a pond where cows stood
in the shade of cottonwoods
and cooled themselves up
to their knees. We climbed over

a fence separating us from hay bales
and an oil pump, its clocklike
iambic motion helped to bring down
darkness, made weights slip
a little closer toward the ground.

We set up the camera. You turned
around to photograph the sunset,
its colors--red, pink, and orange--
lingered in the sky like laundry
bleeding across western Oklahoma.

We watched the moon rise above
the horizon an hour after sunset.
It appeared no closer. You slammed
the shutter over a dozen frames,
a woman hurrying through rooms,
opening and closing doors, to find
that best view of the country.

Back in that field, a diesel
powering the oil pump gets torn
away by the rising wind, its sound,
like pollen, dropping off, as other
seeds now drift over us like dust.

Asylum at the Tulsa Zoo

Their lures sway above and below
them like worms. Colored gray
or yellow, royal blue, and red

along their heads and down
their sides, these fish swim
the length of their tank holding
the coral reefs off the coast
of Florida. Their eyes turn
to look at me. The glass reflects

my face, the half-moons
under my eyes totally eclipsed.
My wife and baby call me outside
to where ibises and egrets stab
at sardines dropped on the grounds.
A pair of storks preen, after
the party for cygnets born weeks
ago. Swans dry themselves
next to turtles sprawled in the sun.

Geese and ducks, visiting like me,
waiting for the stands of food
to open up for lunch, clog sidewalks,
doze on the grass, while their young
play games of follow the leader
and Simon says. If I could join them,

I'd stay overnight, my tent pitched
on the African savannah nearest
a waterhole where birds, impatient
for breakfast, wake me before dawn.

A Burial Plot in Pratt

I will die in Kansas
on a night when heat enwraps
my skin, when insects mistake
my window for a moon, their bumping
against glass relaying messages
from relatives, dead ten years
or more in Virginia, Texas,
England, Scotland, Northern Ireland.

I will be buried at dusk,
next to my in-laws, as swallows
spin shadows, as a tractor breaks up
wheat stubble, as an oil well
repeats its plunge, its chug
nearing for an instant like a boat
trying to dive through surf. Bored
by summer, boys will tire of riding
their bicycles through Lemon Park,
around the pool, out to the lake,
down the road to the cemetery,
where they throw stones that land
like runes, revealing more evenings
of circling the town. No couples
will sit on the bridge, dangling
their legs over the cracked creekbed.

Neighbors will sip tea inside,
talking about a record high of 107,
reading that James Cooper is dead.
They'll get up to see the cars,
trucks, and vans returning on Main,
the traffic broken by a Santa Fe
crew switching cars. No one will
see the backhoe operator coming
home, where his dinner waits,
where his wife hangs sheets outside
on the clothesline, shaping them
to look like ghosts all in a line.

Spring at the Wichita Zoo

As planes flew overhead,
heading south to Texas or Oklahoma,
as afternoon traffic rushed by
on the interstate, we climbed
a hill to South America, the alpacas
coming to the fence as we approached.

We fed them alfalfa pellets,
the hungriest one eating the cookie
from my son's hand. He smiled
and laughed in his stroller,
until the alpaca leaned over
the fence, sniffed his jacket,
and ate the pellets I placed there,
the alpaca's nose pressing against
my son's stomach. The youngest one,

too shy to come near, too small
to lean his head past the fence,
stood behind his mother. Two goats
at the American farm, their bodies
swollen, their teats distended, begged
for food, showing off by standing
on a bench and nuzzling my neck,

by jumping up on me, like a dog,
when I started to walk away. My son
screamed to show his excitement.
He turned around to see them,
after we gave out our food pellets,
after they attacked someone else.

My son naps as planes run up engines
at takeoff, their wheels drawn up
before their shapes shadow our car.
I think I hear the lion's roars
that hurried us, like prey, toward it.

Eckankar

Too far out on the pier,
where the wind shifts direction,
sometimes ceasing between gusts,

I struggle to keep my kite
above water. It loops. It dips
a hundred feet in front of me,

before I tug back on the string,
holding it afloat until the nylon
ripples in another surge of wind.

It seems as though I fly my soul,
controlling it with a string held
at my chest. It tugs at my arms,

daring me to unwind all five
hundred feet, to let it climb
to the height of geese navigating

dusk over the lake, warning others
to move aside. I lost three kites
over this lake in a week's time.

One came unattached from its grip.
Two others broke free, catching
at the air until they settled

between the two shores, becoming
snagged below the surface, a cover
for fish against great blue herons

waiting for that first movement.
Given too much string, my kite
plunges. I work it toward shore.

I send it aloft again, allowing
the air to dry it and flake off
the bits of mud staining its wings.

VITA

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Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: NIGHTCLERKING AT THE BARON'S HOTEL: A COLLECTION OF POEMS WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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