IMMERSION:
A COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL POEMS
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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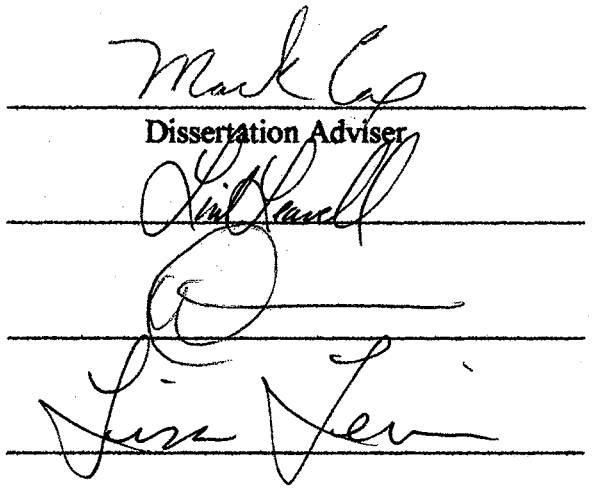

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Introduction

A first collection of poems represents a unique challenge to a writer. A second or subsequent book may be written more or less as a piece, or at least around a certain theme. It almost certainly will be written (if written at all) during a more compressed time frame. But a first collection such as this one, by a writer still somewhat uncertain of himself and of where exactly he fits in, represents work composed over a wide span of time, under the influence of various poets and theories. The initial drafts of some of these poems, such as "Nuptials" and "August Song," date from the late 1980s. Others, such as "The Outskirts of Love," "Christ of the Ozarks," and "King of Beers," were written during poetry workshops at Oklahoma State University and revised extensively over a course of months and even years. Works such as "Skid" and "Asphyxiation," on the other hand, are only a few months old and may well be seen as works-in-progress.

Similarly, some poems had their germination during periods when I was actively reading and studying certain authors and movements and letting my influences overwhelm me. Thus, poems such as "Oklahoma Panhandle" and "On Sparrowhawk Mountain" show the legacy of Romantic nature poetry and of the 1960s deep image poetry of Robert Bly, Gary Snyder, and James Wright. Poems such as "To Kathy, Killed in a Car Accident" and "King of Beers" came out of a period in which I had been reading a lot of late Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and early W. D. Snodgrass (the "Confessionals," in other words). And the poems in more traditional forms, such as "In an Arkansas Cemetery, 1992," "Domestic Violence," and "The Church Janitor," resulted from a brief but intense infatuation with the theories of the so-called "New Formalists."

The challenge, then, has been to find some unity in what is admittedly a very mixed bag of poems. I realized that I had to distinguish between subject matter and *true* subjects, or, as Bly puts it in a 1980 essay, between content and meaning:

> I associate content with the griefs we have experienced since birth, that is, the so-called accidents of our genetic inheritance, our relationship to our mother and father, the sorrows of friends and lovers, the knowledge that we are mortal. When a poem has an emphasis on content we may call it a confessional poem.
>
> Meaning I take to be associated with a master. I assume that we meet meaning mainly outside our or our parents' house. Meaning comes down, passed to us through centuries by old men and old women, hand to hand, so to speak, and something secret comes with it . . .
>
> I imagine content to be close to the chest, perhaps inside the chest; it is dear to us; we have to be careful that we don't say too publicly what is deeply private; and yet through its warmth and closeness to our lungs and heart it gives life to the poem.
>
> Meaning I imagine to be floating several feet out from our chest, between the chest and the human community. Meaning is more intense than content . . . . ("Form" 22-3)

Bly is often so cryptic that his criticism becomes useless, yet here I think he speaks to the heart of a very important matter. What poems are *about* is important, because it is the human and personal subject matter that makes poems accessible. Yet, in the

Confessionals as in some contemporary poets, saying *very* publicly "what is deeply private" creates a feeling of voyeurism in some readers (myself included). Obviously, what is "sensational" to some readers, though, is "honest" to others. Meaning always involves the intersection of the poem's content with the reader's subjectivity. Poems that offer little or no specific, personal content to help the reader establish meaning (John Ashbery comes to mind) run the risk of seeming needlessly obscure and emotionally distant, even chilly.

As I began assembling this book, I evaluated my poems with these poles of content and meaning in mind. Far too often, I think I have leaned heavily on content, letting the particulars of certain situations speak for themselves when they were really incapable of doing so. Therefore, revision in many cases has meant striving to make the poems' *meanings* clearer through some prolonged meditation or commentary on the events narrated, striving to find a balance between the personal and the universal, between what, to echo Bly, lies in the heart and what should hover between the heart and society. In doing so, I often found myself seeking guidance in the poetry and prose of Wright, who described his own work in terms similar to my feelings about this collection: " . . . I suppose anybody's poetry is autobiographical, but I don't think it [his work] is confessional. I think confessional poetry is a pain in the ass. Most of the things that confessional poets confess are not worth confessing" (*Collected Prose* 175).

No doubt some of the incidents and obsessions "confessed" in this collection aren't worth confessing. But if that is the case, I must plead partial ignorance. As a poet and as a reader of poetry, I was definitely a late bloomer. I *did* write poetry as an adolescent—

lyrics to accompany my air guitar routine, or rhymed meanderings on lost love or the meaning(-lessness) of life. But I didn't write a single poem between the ages of 17 and 27.

When I was 27 (in 1987), I started writing poems again. My reasons were hardly noble; I was enamored of a young woman who wrote poems, and thought the sensitive-poet bit might help win her. The relationship was over in a few months, but I've been writing poems ever since. From that very first poem of my adulthood, I realized I had found something real which had been missing from my life.

I had never read much poetry other than what was assigned in school; I've been making up for lost time the last twelve years. As an English undergraduate, I read all the "classic" English and American poets, many of whom (Blake, Keats, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Yeats) remain favorites. But my knowledge of contemporary poets was pretty limited. Then a teacher at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Joan Isom, introduced me to Marge Piercy, Galway Kinnell, Bly, William Stafford, Snyder, and Wright. I was surprised by these poets--their work didn't resemble most of the poets I'd studied in my literature classes. But if their work sometimes lacked the music I loved in, say, Keats or Yeats, they offered different pleasures--directness, honesty, accessibility, and models whom I could much more immediately imitate.

While Bly's critical theories appealed to me, his poetry was far less interesting to me than was Wright's, and it was Wright who quickly became a main influence. Today, as I evaluate my work thus far and look toward the future, I recognize that one of my main tasks as a poet must be to move away from Wright in some ways; focusing too much on one model is a dead end. Yet I have chosen to use Wright as a jumping-off place from

which to discuss the poems in this collection and my poetic development and niche in general.

One obvious contrast between Wright and the poets of his generation and myself and poets of my generation has to do with the thorny issue of form. Wright, like Bly, Kinnell, Adrienne Rich, Philip Levine, and other poets who came of age and began publishing in the 1950s, was well-schooled in the New Critical school of modernist poetry in vogue at the time. James E. B. Breslin, in his insightful book *From Modern to Contemporary*, explains the forces influencing Wright in his first two books, *The Green Wall* and *Saint Judas*:

> As a result of both temperament and training, then, the young Wright's response to early modernism was, like that of many of his contemporaries, to participate in the revival of traditional forms, to look away from the now exhausted line of descent from Eliot as well as from the more immediate and possibly even more threatening presence of Ransom and Roethke [his teachers at Kenyon College and the University of Washington]--and to identify his work with somewhat more obscure and more 'classical' poetic origins." (185)

In Wright's case, he turned back to Horace (whom he cited as his primary influence throughout his career) and to the English Romantics (much despised by T.S. Eliot and the New Critics, though certainly not by Theodore Roethke). But whatever his sources, his poems in the first two books were tightly controlled, metrical poems which made rich use of rhyme, metaphor, and allusion. Later, partly through the influence of Bly

and the experience of translating German and South American poets such as Trakl, Rilke, and Neruda, Wright broke away from traditional forms and, in *The Branch Will Not Break* and his later books, wrote a free verse that was often simple and direct, almost conversational, even if its meanings tended toward the mystical and transcendent. Wright's movement from received forms to open forms was a move also made by many other writers of his generation. Even Bly, later notorious for his contempt for "prosody," wrote a first, unpublished book consisting of rhymed, metered verse. This movement was so successful that by the late 1970s free verse had once again become the norm in American poetry, as it had been during the Modernist era. Breslin, whose book was published in 1983, saw the issue of form as having been more or less settled:

> A major achievement of contemporary poetry has been to settle (or at least depoliticize) the issue of free verse for what should be a long time, but, ironically, the poets' very success in creating a readership sensitive to the effects of this complex medium has relocated them from the 'outermost brink' to a re-conceived, and much widened, mainstream. (253)

Breslin's last clause foreshadows the inevitable backlash which resulted from free verse poetry becoming the "mainstream." In the mid-1980s, a group of younger poets, many of them trained in formal verse at Stanford by Yvor Winters, began publishing poems, and, more importantly, manifestoes proclaiming a "New Formalism." These writers, most notably Dana Gioia, Timothy Steele, Brad Leithauser, Vikram Seth, and Charles Martin, maintained that American poetry's readership was dwindling because of the lack of music in contemporary verse, and proposed that American writers might rejuvenate their work

through an injection of good, old-fashioned prosody. Often they couched their rhetoric in terms which made their movement seem truly revolutionary rather than reactionary, as in this quote from Gioia: "Free verse, the creation of an older literary revolution, is now the long-established, ruling orthodoxy; formal poetry the unexpected challenge" (159).

Now, almost ten years after the New Formalism had its heyday, it has become clear that its influence has been considerable but also considerably less than its founders no doubt hoped. Many younger poets, myself included, have begun to experiment with traditional forms as a result of reading New Formalist work, and a casual reader is more likely to encounter sonnets or quatrains in little magazines than she would have been in, say, 1980. Johns Hopkins Press and Story Line Press have become major publishers of collections and anthologies featuring New Formalist work, and even older free-verse poets (including, incredibly enough, Bly) have felt compelled to moderate some of their earlier, more vitriolic condemnations of "fascist" forms. The New Formalism has had much more of an impact on American poetry than the other major development of the past two decades, so-called Language Poetry. The movement, despite its excesses, has broadened the range of contemporary poetry. Younger poets feel a greater freedom and have a greater range of models than in the past two decades. Meanwhile, some older poets who had abandoned or de-emphasized traditional forms have returned to them on occasion. The movement has no doubt made it more acceptable for poets to indulge their guilty little iambic pleasures while refocusing much-needed attention on matters of craft and poetry's relationship to prose. Yet free verse, in all its various forms, remains the dominant American poetic idiom as we prepare to begin the new millennium.

As a poet searching for a "system," I found myself swayed by the New Formalist rhetoric. Whereas Wright and his generation had grown up with metrical poetry as their model, my generation, taught and mentored largely by older free verse poets, has grown into writing without much real experience in traditional forms. (I can truthfully say I've never been required to write a sonnet for a class.) I suspect a certain insecurity manifests itself here; I wondered if I could really call myself a poet if I didn't know how to write in metrics and rhyme. And here, again, Wright emerged as a model. For despite his seeming "abandonment" of traditional forms after *Saint Judas*, Wright in fact continued to produce and publish metrical poems and always insisted on their validity and importance, as he made clear in a 1972 interview with Michael André:

> I don't think I've dropped traditional forms. That is, I tried in some later poems to make further experiments in the formal possibilities of the American language. But I think that all poetry is formal. Images are always fairly sparing; I've never written a richly metaphorical poetry [critics such as Breslin would dispute this allegation]. My own ideal, which I've tried to accommodate to whatever abilities I have, is really a neo-classical one. I believe in the kind of poem which does have a single effect, and I try to subordinate whatever I know about language to one single effect, every time. (*CP* 134)

A few years later, in a 1978 interview with Bruce Henrickson, Wright said, "I do not think that there is any opposition between traditional iambic verse and free verse, not any necessary opposition; they're simply two different kinds of form" (*CP* 174).

That last statement sums up my attitude nicely. Yet as I assemble this collection, I confess my enthusiasm for formalist approaches has waned somewhat. Part of this is practical. Some of the poems here, including "Imagining Emily Dickinson," "For My Son, Now Almost Five," and "Sewing," began as formal poems, either sonnets or rhyming quatrains. Yet I found myself, after repeated revisions, simply unable to *naturally* say what I wanted the poem to say in those strict forms. I am simply not proficient enough in traditional forms (yet) to be able to consistently produce poems in those forms that don't sound stiff. Sadly, this also seems to be true of some of the New Formalists themselves. This point was driven home to me clearly a year or so ago by the Cape Cod-based poet Brendan Galvin, whom I had an opportunity to work with during the Oklahoma Fall Arts Institute. We were discussing the New Formalists after class one day, and I mentioned that I found their theories intriguing. "Maybe their *theories* are OK," Galvin said. "But if so, why aren't their *poems* any damned good?" Galvin, a crusty New England sort, was exaggerating—some of the New Formalists have produced some good poems (though the best formal work produced in the last decade or two has often been by *female* poets such as Marilyn Hacker, Molly Peacock, or Mary Jo Salter, not all of whom are associated with the mostly male New Formalist critics). Yet, on reflection, and on re-reading some of the poetry of Steele, Gioia, Martin, and others, I came to feel Galvin was right. Compared to formalist work by, say, Roethke, Richard Wilbur, or Randall Jarrell (or Wright, for that matter), many New Formalist poems seem flat and a little awkward. Perhaps it is simply impossible for a writer today (particularly one as admittedly unschooled in traditional prosody as I am) to be convincing in the forms of the past. After

all, most of the great poets throughout literary history have to some degree (with notable exceptions such as Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams) worked *within* the dominant poetic modes of their cultures and times.

My other reservations about the New Formalism—and my earlier infatuation with it—are more theoretical. Gioia claims in his essay that free verse is a "long-established . . . orthodoxy." Yet the free verse tradition in America, though it goes back to Whitman, is far from "long-established." Whitman was practically alone in writing in open form until the early years of the twentieth century, when such diverse poets as Carl Sandburg, e. e. cummings, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and, of course, Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Williams, revolutionized American verse-making. But after those revolutions, under the influence of Eliot and the New Criticism, American prosody in the 1940s and '50s became essentially conservative in form again until the Beats, the Black Mountain Poets, and the Confessionals re-popularized free verse in the late '50s. So how "long-established" is the American free-verse tradition compared to the English metrical tradition that has held sway now since the Middle Ages? Free verse may be an ancient medium, as its apologists have repeatedly pointed out, yet in America it could be argued it is still in its infancy, with potential that is far less exhausted than, say, iambic pentameter.

No matter how much both sides of the tiresome debate over form try to downplay the political and social implications of form, they nonetheless exist. As a poet with working-class origins and a community college and state university education, I bristle at poetic elitism. And at some level the New Formalism, at least as practiced by some of its most vocal proponents, does smack of elitism. Jonathan Holden, one of the most

respected poet-critics in America today, sees the New Formalism as essentially a reactionary movement against the "democratization" of poetry in the 1960s and 1970s:

> The New Formalism retrieved the genteel strand of ironic, fixed-form, Late Modernist poetry which had reigned in the forties and fifties, a strand epitomized, perhaps, by the vintage work of Richard Wilbur. But whereas Late Modernist poetry . . . had been 'metaphysical' . . . the poems of one of the first New Formalist poets to gain a reputation, Brad Leithauser . . . dealt with such issues as the poet's adjustment to the practice of law and the social and sexual dynamics of tennis classes: it was poetry by the rich, about the minor worries of the rich, a sort of expensive, very tasteful interior decoration. (267)

Form should be a matter of individual poetic temperament and choice; certainly there is no reason poets should feel compelled by teachers and critics to write free verse any more than they should feel compelled by teachers and critics to write metrical verse. Perhaps that is the New Formalism's greatest legacy and lesson. Personally, I choose to explore various approaches, but feel free verse offers the greatest possibilities for me to express my ideas clearly, naturally, *and* musically. Most of the poems in this collection, then, are in open forms.

Another kinship I feel with Wright has to do with the issue of origins, class, and a sense of place. While Wright eventually attended a prestigious school (Kenyon) and received much more of a classical education than I have ever had, our beginnings were not dissimilar. He grew up in the dirty little mill town of Martin's Ferry, Ohio, where most

men were destined to follow their fathers and grandfathers into the factories and mines. I grew up in a small desert town in southern California and in an isolated rural area of western Arkansas. Most men (and many women) worked factory or agricultural jobs and barely survived. My father once killed chickens in an Arkansas poultry processing plant for five dollars a day and all the chickens he could steal. Later he ruined his health breathing paint fumes in an aircraft battery plant during the Vietnam "conflict." My mother picked and boxed oranges, worked the assembly line at a LaZBoy chair factory, washed dishes, and wrapped meat in a supermarket. The lives of many of the people I grew up around and attended school with—including, in California, many poor Mexican-American immigrants employed in the citrus industry—were about as far-removed from the poetic concerns of many of the New Formalists and their models as people could be.

Later, during my first attempt at college and before my second, more successful one, I went through a prolonged period of relative poverty, dead-end jobs, depression, anger, and substance abuse. During this time I met and associated with a lot of working-class and lower middle-class people—including a lot of drunks, drug addicts, dealers, and petty criminals--who would never read poetry unless forced to by some sadistic English teacher. I wouldn't want to relive most of those experiences, just as I'm relatively sure Wright never wanted to return to Martin's Ferry or to the Minneapolis jail where he spent some time for drunkenness. But in a very real sense I loved those people I met then, and pitied them. Consistently throughout Wright's career, and particularly in his early books, he demonstrates deep understanding of and sympathy for working-class people, drunks, outlaws, and outsiders. Similarly, here, in poems such as "After a Poetry Reading," in

which I meditate on my rural and factory-town students at the community college where I teach, or in the poems such as "Reading Thomas Hardy," "Asphyxiation," "King of Beers," and "Domestic Violence" in which I reflect back on and narrate stories about some of my friends who have been damaged and destroyed by alcohol, drugs, and violence, I hope to strike the right balance between honesty and art, between admiration and pity. Obviously, a poem such as "Asphyxiation," based on true and unfortunately gruesomely violent events, runs the risk of seeming sensationalistic or gratuitous. Yet to dress the poem up in too much rhetoric would seem tasteless.

Whereas "Asphyxiation" is a fairly new poem, "King of Beers," though in a similar vein, is a poem that has been around my notebooks and diskettes for several years and undergone several mutations. The poem, originally titled "To an Alcoholic Friend," is based on a former drinking buddy of mine whose capacity for both booze and violence was ultimately much greater than mine. The original draft of the poem was much longer, partly because of added details which I later cut, but also because I initially employed a short line and more stanza breaks. The beginning and end of the poem came fairly quickly, and they have remained fairly constant throughout the dozen or so revisions. Early drafts stayed fairly close to the "truth"—my friend had, after an adulthood of drinking and drifting from college to college and job to job, reached rock bottom when, after having lost his license to a D. U. I., he assaulted a woman whom he claimed to love while under the influence. He had beaten her badly enough to put her in the hospital, and for her to file assault charges (which she later dropped) against him. (The poem "Domestic Violence," which follows "King of Beers" in the manuscript, is also loosely

based on this incident, this time from the woman's viewpoint.) Horrified at what he had done, my friend attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting the very next day and has been sober ever since—a decade now.

What always fascinated me about this tragic event was how my friend—in many ways a gentle, creative, open-minded man, a writer and a musician—had ended up this way when I had not. I realize, of course, that genes are partially (or perhaps wholly) responsible. I do not have an addictive personality; my friend did. But I wondered when he had known he had a problem. Had he been able to deny the problem for years, even when an outside observer might have clearly seen a self-destructive pattern? In early versions I contrasted my own drinking experiences with his. Ultimately, though, I felt the first-person speaker became obtrusive; this was my friend's story, not mine. When I made the move to a strictly third-person narration (in about the third or fourth draft), I also began to "fictionalize" by combining experiences of other friends of mine, such as my late friend Gary (mentioned in "Reading Thomas Hardy" and other poems), who have struggled with substance abuse. Imagination thus became as important as "reality" in creating a truth that was in some ways *more* true than the literal "facts" of my friend's illness, crime, and eventual recovery (which I decided for dramatic reasons to omit). Listing became an important device in shaping the poem; in intermediate drafts I piled up real and imagined "offenses" my friend/character had committed while drinking. Many of these were later cut for the sake of rhythm and brevity, but that process, even when the things I mentioned were entirely imaginary (such as the 16-year old girl in Houston), helped make the poem more real to me, and hopefully to the reader as well.

Early versions of "King of Beers," as I said, featured short lines with approximately three beats per line. This may have been an unconscious result of my reading of another model whom I should mention here--Levine, whom I first read extensively during a poetry workshop at OSU. One of the things I like best about Levine is his uniquely American focus. Other than a few poems about his trips to Europe and a few about European and/or literary history (his poems about Keats, for example), his subject matter is distinctively American, and blue-collar American at that. His work has a grittiness to it that few other contemporary white male poets can match. (Holden cites Denis Johnson and C. K. Williams as being among the only white male poets besides Levine to deal convincingly with working-class life.) Levine's poems about factory work and suburban life have the ring of authenticity; this isn't a poet slumming, but rather a sensitive artist using the raw materials of his truly humble origins to make universal comments about what it means to be human in late twentieth-century America, a place where it often seems damned hard to be human. The people in his poems, whether factory workers, milkmen, teachers, soldiers, unemployed, or criminal, know, as his later poem states, "what work is."

A challenge for a poet such as Wright, Levine, or me—a poet who has grown up working-class but has through education become middle-class—is to somehow maintain that humanness, that sympathy, in a society which all too often tries to pretend class distinctions don't exist, and to blame the poor for their status in life. How does one respond to one's humble origins when one is tenured, insured, and mortgaged, in other words? Levine rises to the challenge. Levine's later poems, dealing with his admittedly

much more comfortable life in California as a college professor, often reflect not complacency but, rather, a latent anger. Holden points out Levine's strategy here when he says, "In American male poetry since 1976, the most vital strand of the new 'realism' has, like poetry in the women's tradition, derived its impetus from acts of exposure--exposure not of veiled truths about gender and power but of the hidden costs of middle-class comfort in American society" (264). Our comfort is made possible by others' suffering, a fact which Levine chooses not to accept, but rather to expose.

But Levine is not content to simply tell us stories of the downtrodden. In some ways, he is a deeply spiritual poet. [I define "spiritual" as indicating a search for transcendence and meaning, whether that search involves a specifically religious element or not.] Peter Stitt, in his blurb on the back of Levine's *New Selected Poems*, notes Levine's debt to William Carlos Williams, and certainly that debt is present and considerable. But Levine's work seems much closer to that of Whitman, not because it celebrates the "common person," but because of its quest for meaning and its stubborn refusal, in the face of much evidence to the contrary, to give up that core belief that life consists of more than meets the eye.

What Levine seems to realize, as Whitman did, and as, I believe, Wright did, is that one does not have to "transcend" the world to attain spiritual enlightenment. Rather, one may obtain enlightenment by facing the world and accepting it for what it is. One does not have to believe in the literal transmigration of souls to see how we do live on after death, as our bodies decompose to blend with the earth and feed the grass and trees and animals. In a very real way, part of us *is* immortal. By focusing attention on the small details of

contemporary life, by showing the importance of family and history, and by dealing honestly with difficult emotions, Levine achieves a richly spiritual poetry which has nothing to do with "religion."

This idea—that spirituality can involve a focus on the small and seemingly insignificant details of one's day-to-day life—is also present in Wright's work, particularly in such well-known poems as "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," in which a catalogue of simple images observed by the speaker culminates in the devastating last line ("I have wasted my life"); "Two Hangovers," in which the speaker observes a blue jay "springing up and down, up and down, / On a branch," and realizes something of grace in the fact that "the branch will not break"; and "A Blessing," in which a chance encounter with some horses in a field triggers a moment of Wordsworthian epiphany. Here, as in Levine and in many of my poems, Nature (yes, with a capital "N") becomes the catalyst by which spiritual peace or insight is reached. This "easy" escape to the natural is a move that has been open to ridicule since the time of the Romantics themselves (the late William Matthews, for one, offered a devastating take on "nature poetry" in one of his essays). But that doesn't change the fact that for millions of humans, myself included, the natural world offers a peace and sense of spiritual retreat sorely missing from modern urban and suburban life. David Perkins, in the second volume of *A History of Modern Poetry*, explains well the pull the natural world held for Wright and the "deep image" poets (and which it still holds):

> There is no reason to believe that . . . "nature" is superior to modern "civilization." But once we think in terms of this antithesis . . . it is almost

> impossible not to sympathize with "nature." We live in "civilization" and are intimately familiar with its injuries. "Nature," which we do not know, inevitably becomes the realm onto which we project whatever wishes "civilization" evokes as its antithesis. . . . Poets of the Romantic age expressed an identification with all living creatures . . . own feelings of oneness with nature are less religiously and more existentially toned. . . . Less confident in the guidance of a providential God, man feels responsible for the survival of life and hates "civilization" as its destroyer. . . . we are motivated to attribute to primitive man a better relation to "nature," a relation of closeness, harmony, fulfillment, and reverence, and to seek this as our ideal. (553-5)

This view of nature as the desired "other" is so commonplace by now that any nature poetry runs the risk of appearing banal. After all, how many writers would say, "To hell with nature"? I do not believe that poets have an *obligation* to address political and social issues; in fact, I tend to agree with Auden that poetry "makes nothing happen" (because the people who most need to read it are the people least likely to). But poets who *do* have a genuine interest in various issues can and should find ways to address those issues in their work. I cannot claim to be much of an environmentalist (certainly not when compared to poets such as Snyder or Wendell Berry), but I love nature and find in it spiritual sustenance. Many of the poems in this collection are thus unapologetic "nature poems": "Oklahoma Panhandle," "Quartz Mountain, Oklahoma, Fall 1996," and "On Sparrowhawk Mountain," for example. I hope that, as in the best nature poetry, the

poems ultimately are about *us*, about human emotions and ideas, as much or more than they are about trees and rocks and clouds and birds. For, as Snyder points out in his preface to his book *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*, we are *part* of nature, and our destiny is inextricably linked with its:

> But we do not easily *know* nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfill our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. There is no single or set "nature" either as "the natural world" or "the nature of things." The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional. (*v*)

The challenge for the nature poet today, it seems, is to find a way to write about the natural world without seeming too derivative of the great nature poets of the past, particularly the Romantics and the deep imagists of the 1960s (including, of course, Wright and Snyder). The deep imagists have particularly come in for their fair share of critical bashing ever since the late 1970s, when an inevitable backlash to the "stones and bones" mode set in. Most of this criticism is justified; too many deep imagist poems do opt for a easy type of "Oh yeah, man" mysticism by evoking supposed Jungian archetypes. Yet, to be fair, it's rather hard to write about nature without using words like "stone," "fire," "water," "earth," etc. The best nature poets, from Wordsworth to Dickinson to Frost to Ted Hughes to Snyder himself, have realized that poems must contain *human beings* to sustain interest and to attempt to make "nature" meaningful. I confess that I

love much deep image poetry, and nature poetry in general, and hope poems such as "Oklahoma Panhandle" and "On Sparrowhawk Mountain" serve as calming, meditative influences.

A discussion of "deep image" poetry (and of Wright) always brings up the issue of surrealism, a topic I confess I'm uncomfortable with. On the one hand, I'm quite fond of many poets, including the deep image school, Latin American writers, and people such as Charles Simic, who are routinely referred to as "surrealists." At the same time, I'm to this day hard-pressed to say how I feel about surrealism or to what degree it may have influenced my work. There are a few poems here, such as "Cinema Noir," "By Another Ocean," and "Soul Music," which may betray faint whiffs of something which might be called "surrealist," in that the poems may not easily be seen as "realistic." But such poems are few and far between; by and large, this collection has its feet fairly firmly in that mundane arena we call "reality." Both Holden and Perkins argue that realism is in fact the characteristic American poetic mode, and that surrealism, language poetry, and other attempts to break out of that mode are simply aberrations. Holden maintains that "[a]lthough the drift of American poetry has been . . . in a conservative direction, its main and central strand has been its 'realist' component, continuing the liberal, humanistic, and egalitarian cultural projects of the late sixties and early seventies" (261). A few pages later, he says, "Realism is perhaps by nature democratic and egalitarian--*low* mimetic, to borrow Northrop Frye's useful distinction. Since 1976, American Realism in poetry has, in every sense, been 'middle of the road.' Its formal characteristics--free verse, vernacular diction--are natural to it. They evolved almost inevitably from Whitman" (266). Perkins

concurs, and argues that even those writers such as the deep image poets who are often associated with surrealism lack a true surrealistic quality: "Virtually no American poet has been a Surrealist through the greater part of his career or in the majority of his better poems" (560). I agree. Not having ever visited Europe, let alone lived there, I cannot clearly identify what it is in the central European (or Latin American) intellectual climate that makes it more fertile ground for a surrealistic temperament to emerge, but such seems to be the case. The surrealism that seems natural and so powerful in García Lorca, Jiménez, Vallejo, or Neruda often becomes self-conscious and forced in American poets. And some of the American poets who seem most comfortable with surrealism, such as Simic or Andrei Codrescu, are of course of central European origins, or, like Elizabeth Bishop, have spent much time in Latin America or Europe.

Wright was often called a surrealist, but didn't see his work in quite those terms. Asked by Bruce Henricksen about the influence of surrealism on his work, Wright replied, "Surrealism is dangerous for me and I think for everyone. I don't think I'm intelligent enough to manage a genuinely surrealistic style. The masters of surrealism seem to me to be comedians. Genuine comedians" (*CP* 180-1). In a 1980 interview with Dave Smith, he reiterated that opinion: "Americans who have tried to follow the Surrealistic way don't get the joke" (*CP* 207). Certainly there is a loopy gallows humor at play in the best of Simic's work, for example, that is missing in most American poetry of the so-called surrealist vein. Humor is desperately needed in poetry as an antidote for too much angst and seriousness, and some of the best American poets, including Wright, Levine, and Matthews, have on occasion been very funny indeed. But the humor is again usually grounded in the

"realistic" mode rather than the surrealistic. I have included here poems that I hope provide comic relief, given the grimness of some of the subject matter. And certainly there is imagery and lush language here at times. But I would place my poems, by and large, squarely in Holden's "American Realist" mode.

One final link between the work of Wright and my own poems has to do with something I touched on briefly earlier, in relation to day-to-day life and nature. There is, operating at various levels throughout Wright's body of work, a religious dimension. Sometimes, as in some of the poems from his first two books (such as "Saint Judas"), Wright's work reflects a Christian preoccupation with themes of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and punishment. Certainly in his poems about the executed killer George Doty, Wright grapples with the nature of Christian love and forgiveness. In other poems, including many of those from his most intense "deep image" period, Wright comes close to an Asian spirituality, reverencing the natural world and the unity of creation while acknowledging the eternal suffering of human reality. Wright always acknowledged that spiritual concerns—the "big questions"—were close to the surface in his work. "Ah, but we have our inner life, do we not?" he said in 1972. "We have what Virgil meant when he talked about the *lacrimae rerum*, the tears of things, the ancient pity of things. That pity is ancient. . . . But the inner life goes on" (141). In a 1978 interview, he made it clear that the poet should also be a bit of a philosopher:

> . . . an intelligent poetry is a poetry whose author had given a great deal of slow and silent attention to the problems of craft; that is, how to say something and say it in a musical way, but I feel that ultimately any writer

> has to come to terms with ethical and epistemological questions about the meaning of life and of his life . . . It seems to me an aesthetically legitimate thing as well as a morally legitimate thing to try to figure out what one's own life really is. (172-6)

By now Eliot's dictum that "poetry is not religion" has been repeated so often it has almost assumed the level of a truism. Yet poetry certainly can be *about* religion, or about spiritual issues at least. Many of the poems in this volume center around religious and spiritual themes. Since I was brought up in a fundamentalist Protestant home, Christian orthodoxy and biblical narratives and imagery appear in many poems. I make no apologies for these elements of my work. Poets throughout literary history have used the myths of their cultures to explore the nature of their individual realities, and of ultimate reality. *My* myth, the myth I grew up with and which continues to occupy much of my thought, even when I am most openly rebelling against it, is the Christian myth. Several of the poems in this collection, in fact, can be read as a record of my spiritual struggle, my desire to believe and my will to disbelieve. Most prominent among these are "The Church Janitor," "Immersion," "For an Existentialist Friend," and "At the Gospel Singing," though many other poems in the book touch on religious themes.

Along the way, the fundamentalist Christianity of my youth gave way to other influences, including drugs, existentialism, atheism, Buddhist and Taoist thought, Romantic pantheism, agnosticism, and, ultimately, a much more liberal, inclusive Christianity. Literary theory and poetry itself also took on spiritual dimensions. Poet Mark Jarman, whose recent book *Questions for Ecclesiastes* contains several poems,

including a selection of "Unholy Sonnets," dealing with Christian faith and spiritual matters in general, feels that religion permeates much American poetry, whether the poets are conventionally "religious" or not:

> I do not believe that there is one genre of religious poetry being written in America today, as there was in England in the 17th century . . . Still, religion is important to contemporary poetry. For poets who have grown up with strong religious training, it provides a background, usually a violent one. The desire for atonement, secularized by the romantic movement, takes a characteristic form in American poetry about nature. The imagination, in Wallace Stevens' terms, provides a substitute for God for some poets and the need for alternative, non-Christian myths fills the gap for others. When the above alternatives fail, poets may still try to make a peace with present circumstances and regard grace or mercy with almost theological reverence. (135)

It is fairly easy to think of poets whose work reflects Jarman's description. Andrew Hudgins's poems, for example, clearly show the violence of Southern fundamentalism. Nature-as-healing-force appears throughout the work of Wright, Bly, Snyder, Mary Oliver, and countless others. The many disciples of Stevens, including Ashbery and A. R. Ammons, elevate poetry itself to the status of spiritual discipline. And Buddhist, pagan, and tribal myths have animated the work of some of the major writers of the past four decades, from Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan to Snyder, Bly, and Louise Glück, among many others. A poet like Wright exemplifies Jarman's final point in a poem like

"Hook," in which the speaker's contact with a disabled Native American man's metal hook becomes a bestowing of grace.

Writing about religious faith (or the lack thereof) is dangerous in contemporary poetry. One runs the risk of being called didactic, superstitious, or proselytizing. Yet surely poetry should—and must—seek to deal with the big issues of life, whether those issues be social, political, or spiritual. Any poetry which seeks to evade that ultimate responsibility runs the risk of being intellectual window dressing. Suffice it to say that I am a confused but dedicated spiritual seeker who chooses to chronicle his journey in poetry. The task, as always, is to render that journey in a way that will be accessible and meaningful to readers.

Throughout this introduction I have referred to the various writers and movements which have influenced the individual poems which make up this collection. I have discussed the New Formalists, who have, despite the occasionally shrill tone of their polemics, taught me that the time-honored poetic devices which have created such sweet music throughout the centuries are still capable of making sweet music today--if handled in the right way. I have looked at Philip Levine, a true "blue-collar poet," whose generous example has given me a model for writing about my earlier life. I have examined the roles of nature and spirituality as themes in my work. Most importantly, I have talked about James Wright, the one poet, above all others, whose great spirit animates this meager assemblage of verses. I fully realize that progressing as a poet will no doubt involve stepping out somewhat from the shadows of Wright, Levine, Bly, and the other writers whose works and ideas have inspired me to try my hand at writing poems. No doubt as I

continue to read, teach, and write poetry, new models and influences will arise. One direction suggests itself now, one that Jarman and Robert McDowell, editors of *The Reaper* in the early 1980s, suggested as an avenue for poetry: greater use of narrative. This idea is hardly original. But certainly some poetry of the last few decades has suffered from the lack of cohesion and purpose that narrative offers writers. In the past, I have tended to save most of my storytelling for my prose fiction experiments. I plan, in my future writing, to incorporate narrative into the structure of longer poems and use stories and characters as media to explore some of the same issues I have previously explored in a more lyric mode. Holden, who has also championed the use of narrative in the work of Levine, C. K. Williams, Galvin, and others, says, "Narrative could serve as a reminder to poets that in order to make a good poem one must have a valid occasion to write about, an occasion urgent and dramatic enough to be the springboard for a story" (266). Louis Simpson, who was linked with Wright, Bly, W. S. Merwin and the other deep imagists in the '60s, has gone on to compose many poems which employ narrative as a framework to explore modern suburban life and its ambiguities and complexities (Jarman and McDowell, in *The Reaper*, often held up Simpson's work as a model of clear narrative) argues that narrative allows poets an opportunity to step away from themselves and thereby to step toward the reader:

> There has been a failure of imagination among readers of poetry. They think that poetry has to be "sincere," by which they mean talking about oneself, one's family, one's friends. They don't want anything to have been "made up," and as for poetry setting out to give pleasure, these latter-

> day Puritans dislike it wholeheartedly. They want sermons in church, the Church of True Confession, or the Church of Supreme Meditation, whatever. But I am interested in the variety and sensation of real ideas. Poetry makes ideas seem real by removing the detritus of fact and substituting something else that is more to the point. (168)

The role of narrative is one area where many free verse writers and some of the New Formalists actually agree. McDowell, who champions narrative poetry, has also been a prime mover and shaker in the New Formalist movement, while Holden, who favors free verse and attacks New Formalism as elitist and reactionary, has also advocated greater use of narrative in contemporary poetry. Jarman has written some formal verse (particularly his "Unholy Sonnets") and edited a New Formalist anthology, *Rebel Angels*, but has often employed open forms while writing longer narrative poems.

I hope this collection holds together in some coherent fashion and is pleasing to its readers. I have attempted to fashion a record of my poetic development and concerns using the primary poetic mode of my time—the realistic free verse lyric, employing elements of narrative and discursiveness. Along the way, I have made forays into traditional verse and surrealism. I have employed the details of my personal life and freely fictionalized when necessary. And while Wright has been a guiding presence throughout my writing and throughout the assembling of this manuscript, it is Wright's teacher, Roethke, to whom I shall grant the last word:

> I take it that we are faced with at least four principal themes: (1) The multiplicity, the chaos of modern life; (2) The way, the means of

establishing a personal identity, a self in the face of that chaos; (3) The nature of creation, that faculty for producing order out of disorder in the arts, particularly in poetry; and (4) The nature of God Himself.

I take it as the poet, the intuitive man, I am entitled to, am expected to, throw out what suggestions, what hints I can from my own work, from my own life. I think of this life as an instrument, as an example; and I am perfectly willing to appear ridiculous, absurd, if a real point can be established, a real dent can be made. (19)

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I

THE OUTSKIRTS OF LOVE

OKLAHOMA PANHANDLE

By day the sun revels in the sexual wheat
and the sky shimmers in the sticky heat
and the brown children dance among the corn
in the brief cool of the morning breeze.

The nurturing land is bloated with bones
of nameless things sunk in the muck of time,
irrigated by red rivers pumping
from old wounds deep within the earth.

But at night the moon broods too closely.
You feel like you're at the bottom of a bowlful of stars
about to brim over into the heart of something
hidden just beneath the world.

IN AN ARKANSAS CEMETERY, 1992

The south wind, warm on our faces, blows
the leaves around our heads like satellites.
My great-grandfather's grave, the tallest, shows

time's traces on its face, the days and nights
which blur the memory as much as stone,
storm tracks of hail and wind, the dust which fights

all our efforts to cover up its home.
His name contains an "e," and mine an "i."
Such things make little difference to bone.

Under a row of marble angels lie
five children dead before the age of two.
The cherubs perched above prepare to fly,

but, heavy with the past, they never do.
Instead they merely hang, commemorate.
My father sighs, whispers, "It was the flu."

And suddenly it hurts to contemplate
the way the good old days resemble ours,
the restless rumbling toward a certain fate,

the marching of the minutes, of the hours,
same as it ever was, ever shall be:
the movement toward the final, fragrant flowers.

Our last stop is filled with irony--
my uncle Don, a singer (though unknown)
whose name I wear, but not his memory.

His name is mine, mine his, upon the stone.
In 1958 I found this world,
a month after his final breath had gone.

My wife shivers and turns away, arms curled
around herself. She wears my flannel shirt,
but shivers still. The falling leaves are hurled

high in the autumn air, until the hurt
heaps them around my fleeing feet like dirt.

FOR CALEB

Under the hazy sun
cows graze in the green field.
My son's warm smallness
turns sleepily in my arms,
oohs and ahs.

I pick up a rock, a small thing
like him, but alive with so much age,
so many memories he has yet to have.
He holds it like a talisman
in fingers unused to holding
anything but fingers and breasts,
plastic toys and blocks,
grin spreading from his face
through my arms and feet
into the ground which
gave up its stones for him.

He is before and beyond words,
yet his sounds make perfect sense
to the rock, with which
he shares his secrets.
I strain to hear, to understand,
but the mysteries of stone
are behind and beyond me.

Nature gives up its stones to him,
its trees, its grass, its million
small wonders.
I have only myself to give,
and I am not nearly
so solid as a stone.

I count up my gifts

and those of Earth
and hope they're enough
as I turn toward home
with my small passenger,
and his.

NIGHT OWL

I never want to go to bed
to sleep, not as long
as there's wine to drink
and poems to read.
If all else fails, there's TV--
thirty-six channels with nothing
on, but at least I'm awake.

My wife and friends
don't understand.
"That was fine when you
were seventeen," they say.
"But you're a grown man now.
You work hard all day
and you need your sleep."

They're right, of course.
They always are.
How can I explain
to them how much death
looks like sleep to me,
whether it be
my grandmother in her coffin
when I was four, arms folded
for her eternal nap,
or my first wife,
face discolored
by the bruising and broken neck,
so still, yet I was somehow sure
she'd wake if I kissed
her pale fairy-tale lips?

I open the patio doors
and step into the night.
The stars cheer me
with their eternal optimism,

an insomniac's dream.
Of course, I'm not an insomniac.
I'm so sleepy I sway
in the slight night breeze,
and the wine isn't helping matters.
But at least I'm awake.

Finally I can stand no longer, not
without the cigarettes I've given up
so as to prolong my slow waking.
I rinse my glass and check
all the locks. I pause
in my sons' room and watch
their pajamaed chests march
in ragged unison. How much they hate
to go to sleep. Just like their father.

In bed the night nestles around
my wife, this woman I love,
who grinds her hips into my groin
and tucks herself into me,
snoring all the time.
I hold my breath a moment,
then let it out in sync with hers,
joining her at last
in her dreamless routine.

BOGIE

He's been asleep on a paperwork pillow,
lulled by afternoon sun and Jim Beam
until a big-breasted blonde strides
into his office, wearing wealth
with a nervous backwards glance.
Her story holds more holes
than the soles of his shoes,
but her money is green as tomorrow
and he's two months behind on the rent.

He doesn't know whether to kiss her
or slap her, since he only read
the script today, but he takes the cash
and no one yells, "Cut!"

If she were first wife Mayo,
partner in the tabloids' "Battling Bogarts,"
the choice would be easy. Take a drink,
hold his breath, count to ten, then scream
while shielding the famous face
that his surgeon father once,
without a scalpel, scarred.
But she looks enough like Lauren
to ease him into the scene.

Things speed up one frame at a time.
He follows a lead to the one bar
he's never been bounced from,
drinks with an extra he shot twice last year
until he learns what he needs to know.
When he leaves he's tailed, but loses it
while the cameraman changes lenses.

At the docks he's badly beaten
by faceless thugs in ill-fitting suits
who leave a hotel key behind

leading, naturally, to her,
and this time he kisses
her into soft-focus where
the violins have been waiting, then
lets the stupid cops lead her
to the green room where he'll later join her.

Now, alone with a mirror
and another cigarette,
he reads fan-mail from teenagers
who think he's Sam Spade.
They don't know he's blueblood,
mother an artist, father a surgeon.
The only prison he's seen was prep school,
where he was bounced for being "rude."

Somebody will send a photo,
maybe one of Bacall.

As he rises he listens
for the sound of applause
but there's only the silent set,
the buzz of the fan, and his
sudden, furious coughing.

CINEMA NOIR

Always a lady killer, the man in black
holds a belladonna bouquet
choked with white ribbon.

Katherine doesn't know
he knows where she lives,
what she feels late at night

alone with faded paperbacks
and a short-stemmed glass
of cool white wine.

Her friend waltzes
in the shadows with a man
with a black boutonniere.

She will die soon,
horribly, but mercifully offscreen.
She had it coming

because she was the friend,
because she knew too much
she didn't know she knew.

The drunken detective's wife is dead,
killed by a man whose breath
smelled of garlic and roses.

Don't worry. Simply
eat your popcorn and pretend
it'll come out all right in the end.

The reels will spin around all night.
Everyone who deserves to die will.

NIGHT FLIGHT

At 18, he dreams of being in movies,
someone the girls would all know
and want. Working in the video store,
he judges them by their choices—
the blonde who likes horror films
is dangerous, perhaps in a cult.
The redhead who comes with older men
to rent porno is an obvious slut.
The smoking, thin brunette
who's into Fellini and Louis Malle
just might be his nervous type.

After closing he rides his bicycle home.
The cool air carves his pores with black sharpness.
Vague shapes melt into gray and black and blacker.
If he blinks his eyes fast enough
it's as if he's the film
holding the movie in his head.

Frame by frame he rolls until
he doesn't know what lies ahead or behind:
a turning point in the plot.
Then he hits a bump in the road
and his wheels leave the ground
and he's flying faster
than the camera can track
into the dreaming darkness
of his future, the film flopping
around and around on the reel
as the girls shout and stamp their little feet.

THIS POEM LEFT NO FORWARDING ADDRESS

Cold April rain rattles the windows.
The radio says snow is possible,
so the redbuds may lose their blooms.
And the poem I wrote an hour ago was poor--
a pathetic shadow of the poem I meant to write.

The subject was--and is--my rootlessness.
In 39 years I've lived in 39 homes,
apartments, trailers, houses
haunted by renters' memories
of bills they couldn't pay.
Now at 39 I finally own a home,
and feel it as a stone around my neck.
I'm looking for yet another job, and on days
when my students' papers seem stupid and mean
think of going to seminary to pray for their souls
and mine.

But the world needs another priest
(or pastor, as I'm a WASP)
as much as it needs another poet,
another nag to remind it when it fails
to be beautiful and meaningful and still.
The still-ungraded essays are never as bad
as I imagine they'll be, and the phone
isn't exactly ringing off the hook.

I've seen much rain, but little snow
since I was a kid in California
where in some mountains it never melted,
but hugged the earth even in August
when Oklahoma wilts in humid heat.
I'd like to see those mountains again,
climb on a big red sled and fly
wherever the slope would take me.

SKID

I'm driving the snowy backroads drinking
a beer—irresponsible and downright
bad for a man my age (I'm thirty-nine).
But I'm not drunk; anyway, I'm thinking
that hardly anyone's on the highway.
I just needed to feel this young again,
to feel almost anything *could* happen
but nothing would, to feel that slight shimmy,
the back wheels sliding around a rare curve
on this prairie road. Is this how the spirit
feels in the face of death—like it has hit
an icy spot, lost traction, begun to swerve
into the darkening fields of winter wheat,
wheels buried to the axles in the white?

FOR MY SON, NOW ALMOST FIVE

Days after snow stretch soundlessly
save for boots' crunch. You laugh
at snowflakes, carelessly, and catch
them on your tongue as I marvel
at our lives, minutia born
of winter, age, and time.
You ask me if the trees are truly dead.
I tell you that they're still alive,
just waiting for the spring,
the sign to start it all again
(the play of light across the bark,
the bud, the swing of branches
bearing newborn leaves). I say
this, and you laugh, and lurch away.
So still it hurts, I hug myself
against the chill.

RADIO COSMOLOGY

Some fifteen billion years or so ago,
the radio announcer said, the flow

led nothing into something else and Pow!--
the universe was born, and that was how

we got to where we are--one brilliant flash,
a word, and there was light from fire and ash--

one blinding *to be* verb, sudden intrusion,
reality into the dark confusion.

Some fifteen mere minutes or so ago,
I felt the full extent of my ego--

quite proud of my accomplishments, important,
full of myself. But now I feel impotent

to face such mystery, such awesome age.
The universe is "lumpy," an image

of darkest dough in bowls of infinite
depth, lightly powdered with stars sugar white,

the galaxies the swirls left by the spoon
that stirred us all to life. Upon the moon

the chef laid down the spoon and made a face;
He saw that it was good, all in its place.

Yet even then He must have seen the fix--
contaminants like me were in the mix.

NUPTIALS

At this wedding no one turned water to wine.
The Anglican organ mourned as the procession entered
to join my friends, whom I knew were not in love.

He was in his thirties, but still wild as hell, smoking pot
in the parking lot in his immaculate white tuxedo.
He'd left two marriages in his arrogant wake.

She was nineteen and ready to share her life,
a trick he, after three children, still hadn't learned.
She was a beautiful storybook bride, oblivious and young.

I knew he wanted an instant mother for his kids;
she would drop out of school to take care of them, of him.
He counted on this marriage to secure the custody.

Yet, none of us objected, so we all share the guilt
if this one turns out long, loveless, bitter as dry-swallowed aspirin,
or ends, lawyers pocketing the profits.

At the reception even Father Winston spoke of divorce
(in hushed whispers of course). No wine or champagne—
I couldn't even get drunk, just sip too-sweet punch, nibble plastic sugarcake.

I waited, rice in hand, as they opened boxes
of crockpots and towels, chatted with new in-laws,
endured their nudgy-wink queries.

Finally I went outside and wandered through an herb garden.
How simple it is for plants--pollination, pistil, stamen; no priest,
no organ, no in-laws, no presents, no romance, no pretense.

When they came through the church door,
I threw my rice right in his face.
The black clouds rained on the thirsty plants.

A RAIN OF LEAVES

Walking the woods with me after the storm,
My father said, his voice so cool and flat
it made me stop, "I'm worried about your mom."
He paused as well, took off his cowboy hat,
and stared an endless time into the crown.
All around the autumn leaves continued
to flame, display, and die, and then drop down,
covering the withered bottom grass which showed
the brown effects of winter's sullen wind.
She'd had some tests done at the hospital--
x-rays and blood work, and poking around
her stomach with a light. I wasn't told
because they didn't want to worry me.
They knew that I was working very hard;
besides, Mother's doctors knew best, and they
said not to worry. "We're just getting old,"
He said, and laughed, and walked ahead to check
whether the storm had blown down any trees.
I felt the autumn crawling up my neck,
breathed winter's promise on the sudden breeze.
My dad had brought her home later that day.
She said she felt better the next morning.
For days they'd crept around, afraid to say
the word they knew would destroy everything
they'd worked to build for over forty years,
until Mom had finally called us to come down,
bringing the noisy grandchildren to bear
upon the strident silence of the unknown.
Ahead of me, my father surveyed the barn
we'd built together when I was just twelve.
In several places the storm had torn
the tin sheets from off the sagging roof.
"I'll have to fix that soon," Dad said, "or all
the hay in there will rot." I tried to speak,
to say all the things I felt that fall,
had ever felt. But suddenly a flock

of honking geese lifted from the black pond,
and there was nothing worthy to be said.
The falling leaves just dropped without a sound.
The ones that filled my eyes were blazing red.

TO KATHY, KILLED IN A CAR ACCIDENT

One thing still is strange,
still irretrievable,
after all these years
of remembering so many things
all too well: drinking beer
and watching a ball game
at my friend's house, wondering
where the hell you were
with all a young husband's jealousy,
the phone call,
the look on my friend's face
when he hung up, the way he
touched me then, telling me
the heavy truth without
ever opening his mouth,
the drive to the hospital,
down Downing Street,
past Mr. O's ("Mr. Slow's,"
you called it) and IGA,
the local motels vacant
and hungry for summer tourists.

I remember
the pale, tired face of the nurse
I knew in the emergency room,
the way she told me you were dead;
the words stumbled from her mouth,
as if to the blinding white floor.

But I still can't remember one thing,
the very most important thing:
where I saw you last.
Was it that morning when I left for work,
you in your underwear, curling your hair
in front of the cracked mirror?
Or was it at noon? Did we eat lunch

together somewhere, share horror stories
about the bastards we slaved for,
trade kisses in the car, the heater cranked high?
Or maybe you came by work that evening,
told me you were going out, that
you'd see me later?

Death is too damned easy
to remember.
But the life before it
somehow fades
into the distance
of another time, another town,
another person I used to be.

It's hard to just let go;
I wish you'd kept a diary,
written down everything you ever did,
updated it before you left that night,
so I could remember exactly
the way it was, must have been,
the way I can't remember it now.

THE RAIN REMEMBERS THE SADDEST SONG I EVER FORGOT

Unsullied, with photographic recall,
the rain reminisces against my windshield
on this windswept Oklahoma plain.
Ahead, the sky is lit by my town
so bright that our home seems bigger,
like a city shrunk to fit in a bottle.

You, my daughter, sleep in the back seat,
slumped against the door. We've miles to go,
and Miles on the radio, and suddenly
I wish home were farther away,
over that flat horizon, so I could drive
into the rain while you dreamed
of horns that are kind of blue.

By the time we hit the town, still small
after all, Mommy's asleep as well.
The only stoplight glistens
in the night, on its way to green.
I listen closely for the secrets the rain
has to tell us, whispered over
your rhythmic breathing.
The light changes--and I remember.

THE OUTSKIRTS OF LOVE

Someone used to love her when the nights
were shorter, sharper, wrapping their bodies
together in the darkness. Now she walks her days
like some men walk their dogs--dragging them
chokechained around the trailer park.
She snaps her words like chickens' necks, leaves
the feathers to fall, accosts the paperboy with a broom,
then retreats to her dark, dusty livingroom.
For forty years she measured her days
by Daniel's morning cigarettes and coffee cups
while she packed his lunchbox, by his evening paper,
his angry thrusting into her late in the summer nights,
the moods she couldn't explain yet grew to love.
And, of course, the children weighed her daily in the balance,
with their dirty faces, skinned knees, and, later, their broken hearts.
She always felt like a stranger somehow, as if someone had left
orphans on her doorstep in a cartoon picnic basket.
Even as she held them in her arms she could feel them
sliding out and away, toward the open, waiting door.

Lately she's moved to California, closer to the kids,
leaving Daniel to his windy Oklahoma grave.
But she seldom sees them until they need her to babysit.
The days are cycles of *General Hospital* and *Opra*,
Bob Barker, morning mass, and silly old women playing bridge.
Salesmen call at all hours with carefully rehearsed pitches
for things she doesn't want or need. Only last week
a young woman who reminded her of her daughter
tried to sell her a premier burial plot.
And at night she stalks the trailer with a candle
looking for familiar noises, like fevered children
rustling in the night, or like him squeaking
into his LaZBoy and asking for another fucking beer.

II

LIFE INSURANCE

TO EMILY, BORN ON NEW YEAR'S EVE

Bible-black, the clouds
crowd the hospital window.
Cars and trucks slide by,
headlights freezing in the rain.
Inside, while your mother naps,
face pale from the labor
of your being, you lie
under a soft white light
and try to find your fingers.
I search for Christmas lights
but the other window faces
only heavy, barren trees.

Outside in the hall,
nurses in pastel scrubs
push carts of soiled linens,
nutritionally balanced meals,
syringes and tiny paper cups
of brightly colored pills.
Smiling people crowd
the nursery window
and speculate on features
they think they recognize

while somewhere above us
in a windowless room
the surgeon makes his incisions
as someone suctions the blood.
Down the hall, elsewhere
on this floor, a woman bares
her breast to the probing light.
And an old man huddles
under sheets and wires
waiting for Death
to fold him quietly,
final as futures can be.

Fingers in your mouth,
wide eyes open,
you stare straight ahead
and dare anyone
to look away.

TWISTER

Gray bearded and fat and often so very tired
in the face of the children's triple assault,
I sigh into my red recliner with poems and wine
and a hundred reasons not to play.
"I'm too big for Twister," I say.
"I'd fall on you and hurt you, or hurt my back."
The oldest briefly shrugs, the youngest pouts,
the middle one just spreads the plastic out
and soon I'm simply the audience, eager
to applaud contortions, giggles, and squeals.

An only child, I wanted three children
so none would ever have to be alone.
Knowing my moods, my need for solitude,
I wanted them to always have each other.
They must learn to trust my love
as I trust theirs; to watch them play is all the play
I need, to drink the barely-aged vintage
of their eyes and flashing teeth, to read
the free lines and open forms of their three bodies
as they flow across the solid floor at my feet.

MY SONS, NOW SEVEN AND FOUR

As usual, I don't want to sleep, or can't,
so I patrol the house, munching cold pizza
and searching for something to read.
It's just past midnight on a Friday night,
and I'm thinking how years ago
I'd have been drunk in some bar by now,
some college dive with a bad blues band,
a perpetual odor of cigarettes, sweat,
and youthful, drunken philosophy.
Then I'd have gone home alone, hangover
already threatening, and smoked a joint
while listening to music lonelier than even the blues.

Looking for a magazine, I wander into the living room
where my sons sleep tonight on the hide-a-bed,
a special treat to them because so rare.
The oldest, as almost always, is on his back,
sheets wrapped around him like the bandages
preserving the movie mummies he loves so well.
His small snoring gently moves the sheet.
His brother sprawls resplendent on his face
and stomach, clutching a purple dinosaur
and, with the other hand, the mattress's edge.
Their postures reveal the boys--the oldest tight,
controlled, yet always gazing at the stars,

brown head dreaming of dragons and aliens,
the youngest sinking toward the earth,
small asthmatic body embracing it with ironic grace.
I consider that once I hadn't wanted children,
had known I'd miss the freedom of solitude,
would feel responsibility too much to bear.
And sometimes I do, and sometimes it is.
But sometimes, times like right now,
I've never wanted to do anything more
than to watch their chests move safely up and down.

Around us, the night holds its breath
and waits for them to wake.

FOR AN EXISTENTIALIST FRIEND

The modern myth proclaims the gods are dead,
yet late at night you often hear them speak.
They're only tired, they say, of being fed
our piety, hypocrisy. They're sick
to death with indifference; they're playing hard
to get. And after all, can you blame them?
So you're just like the children in a yard
behind a house where parents always seem
to be inside, oblivious, asleep.
But parents often rise to yell at you,
remind you of your homework, so you keep
one eye upon the door. You learn to do
the minimum to keep them off your back.
Yet all the time you crave the love you lack.

AFTER VIEWING A MOVIE ABOUT VINCENT VAN GOGH

Poor bastard--
to you the bold strokes
on the cautious canvas
were service to the only god you knew,
the only way to stave off night,
the absence of light,
phosphorescent confusion
that only made painted sense,
an absurd colored gospel
purer than any but Gauguin's,
with his primitive women.

I, with my music and rhythmic words,
wonder at the madness
of destroying your ear.
Did it offend you with what it heard?
Was it to show your jealousy of Paul,
or a love you couldn't say,
he wouldn't hear?
Could I ever feel so much,
see or taste so much, hear so much,
deaf in spirit as I am?

Now, each cracked perception
is worth millions,
and thieves and filmmakers
who can't even pronounce
your name shadow
the tracks of your brushes
like crows.

READING THOMAS HARDY

Earlier today, as the pastor sermonized
on how evil often leads us on to good,
I almost believed, in the organ after-glow,
stained glass glossy as angel wings.
But tonight my window's clear;
vague shapes drift under the distant stars.
Pam and the kids are asleep;
reassuring rustles and snores
issue from the other rooms.
Life goes on in this place, strewn
with plastic toys, disposable diapers,
the mundane debris of love.
The heater hums warmly in the wet night.
Life is gorged with possibilities.

Yet, I still remember
hunting jackrabbits with my father
in the southern California desert,
"the Wash," we called it,
along the Santa Ana River, dry and dusty
in the insanely perfect weather.
I was learning how to hit a moving target
after years of plinking beer cans with BB guns.
And the silence of the day was broken
when, like a beer bottle pitched
from a pickup truck, the small plane plunged
and shattered on the rocks.

Months later (or was it years?),
while I sledded in California mountain snow,
two boys in a yellow Corvette
skidded off the road, landing thirty feet below
in a tangled tree of metal and glass.
My father and I ran, or rather slid,
across the slick road, anticipating flames
that never came. Rather, when we

poked our heads over the edge, we heard
stoned laughter, then a pause, then
a frightened, sobered voice say,
"Man, my dad's gonna fuckin' kill me."

Years later, living in Arkansas,
where my father had fled to try
to escape the sixties, he and I watched
from ten feet away as an old man
with a deer rifle gunned another down
for reasons I never fully understood--
something to do with money,
and something to do with pride,
and the fact that the murderer had cancer
and knew he would die,
and wanted to take the man he hated
down to hell with him.

Fifteen years or so ago,
two bikers in an oil patch town
who'd turned to making and selling "crank"
--white trash cocaine--
after oil prices bottomed out
and many wells shut down,
hauled my friend Gary out in a field
and broke open his thin, drunken head
with flinty rocks, a stone-age murder,
because he owed them money for drugs
and couldn't pay. Gary was a painter
whose red blood poured out
on the red dirt of that Godforsaken town.

Does evil lead us to seek the good?
I don't know.
But I remember that time in the desert,
that by the time we reached the plane,
two uniforms waved us away.
Something lay still in the wreckage,

like the lone rabbit in the bag
over my father's stooping shoulders.

BY ANOTHER OCEAN

Sifting hot sand through
his fingers' wet webs,
a young boy with coral eyes
plays along the August shore
as his father reads

an ancient book
with tiny words,
eyes full of language
and his sunburned mother
drowses near the grasping tide,

every green wave threatening
to draw her away.
The boy can't move
nor speak to tell Daddy
Mommy may drown

while he finishes his book,
for the boy knows only
the words for the sea,
the open flame of the sky,
the wet sand, the wary

circling of the endless gulls.
Then, as the sun slides
behind a gray cloud,
a wave white and wild
as the very first word

washes over the woman,
who wakes to her weeping child
throwing sand into the wind
blowing down the beach
into his father's rising eyes.

PACKING THEIR BAGS

They move around each other like feeble ghosts,
unable to touch, and mute. After tucking
the children in, he lingers to watch their small breathing,
while she rustles for something to read. He gives
her time to get in bed beside the sleeping baby,
then heads for the couch with his pillow and novel,
wishing he'd bought some beer.

Each word they said earlier that night, each word
they've shouted now for years, fits neatly in a chest
beneath the bed where no one looks. They know
what's there--his drunkenness, her restless moods,
the money fears folded into obsessive squares
stacked beside those stupid words. They're moving soon,
and that chest will be heavy. They'll each grab an end
and bury that bastard in the back of the idling van.

CONSUMERISM

Last night we dragged the kids to Wichita
to search, we said, for glasses and groceries,
to see, to eat--to tend to basic needs.
The night was a disaster of frantic scenes,
wounding words, spankings in mall bathrooms.
We arrived home angry and exhausted,
packed the food in the freezer, hung
the unnecessary clothes in the waiting closets,
removed our lenses, fell into our forgiving beds.

This morning, new glasses perched on my pale nose,
my eyes are indeed clearer. I see
how we seek in possessions the security
we cannot find at home—house rented
and transitory, a passing phase
measured by the moon's push on our flesh,
children's falling teeth and rising height,
the clutter we accumulate covering
every bare inch of our leased box:

three TVs and VCRs, a microwave,
a deep freezer full of fresh-frozen food,
stereo, two computers and a complete selection
of compact discs and videocassette tapes,
a treadmill and an exercise bike
to provide illusions of progress and health—
a compact commuting car and a minivan
capable of hauling children and goods
eagerly to and from the shining stores.

I step outside with my mug of Arabian roast
and watch the grass die in the early morning heat.
A couple of cardinals perch hopefully
on the concrete rim of the dry birdbath.
The pears have all withered in the drought
and fallen shriveled to the waiting ground.

But in the shade of the mimosa tree, still rich
with its ridiculous pink blooms, the children play
with sticks and stones, digging happily in the dirt.

THE LAST TIME WE MAKE LOVE IN THIS HOUSE

We don't know it's the last time,
that our bodies the next few nights
will only rest upon these sheets,
too exhausted from packing boxes
of clothes and toys and books
to need anything but sleep.

Tonight the children dream
of green bicycles and outer space,
their breathing from their rooms
lost in the air conditioner's sigh.
Your freckled shoulders tighten
under my clumsy hands as I come.
You nuzzle the pillow
to muffle your moans,
but I cry out, defiant
in my joy of you.

The ceiling fan sends the sticky
smell of our loving through this house,
into these white walls, these carpeted
floors, these rooms that love
has rented by the year. You sleep,
your drying skin warm under my arms,
and I slide against your back,
ready to follow you
anywhere.

THE CIRCUS OF LOVERS

They ride only white
horses harnessed
and saddled in red.

Their bicycles are all
built for two,
and none has any brakes.

The lions and tigers
are too sated to fight,
so seldom need the whip.

Still,
long after the ringmaster
has ended the show,

the tents have folded
and the clowns reversed
their savage smiles,

they dance across
the high wire
without a net,

balance poles
perpendicular,
with their bodies

forming crosses
night after
three-ring night.

CATNAP

When I think of you,
which isn't often (really),
I think first of the cats,
white and black, blue-eyed
and full of attitude.
"Siamese don't like strangers,"
you said, then sulked
when I moved in and they
grew to like me better.

So I not only betrayed you
when I moved out
but I betrayed the cats,
who used to sleep
as much on top of my head
as I would allow.

After a while, I came
to think of you as a cat,
who woke me in the morning
when your paws hit the floor
so lightly

So now when I think of you
I see white skin and black hair
and blue eyes
and I see you sulking
and feel your body
warm and smooth
muscles tensing
under my touch

After we made love, you relaxed
and, laughing, licked the scratches
you'd made on my back
as if to mark me forever yours.

But our love didn't have
nine lifetimes, no matter
how often you bared your teeth
or purred.

SEWING

Spring-drunk and hopelessly green,
we walked the pagan pasture.
You danced across clods and rocks
like a laughing angel on a wire,
so loud the sun began to flare.
We lay on a handstitched quilt,
sick with pleasure, rearranging
the blocks of light threading
the patchwork of the leaves.
You traced across my back
a sticky trail, slid across
my mouth a teasing nail
as we rolled across the quilt,
above, beneath, beyond.
And in that instant
the final stitch was *there*.
We traced the patterns of our lives,
the alternating weeks of sun and shade,
the thousand things that needle us to love.

LIFE INSURANCE

When we first met, I knew
the world was sane, at least
for a little while, since
it moved on its axis just enough
to slide you toward me.

Now, nothing is safe anymore:
planes fall from the sky
on kindergartens,
radiation seeps from
our shower heads,
tornadoes pick apart
the remnants of our lives.

Strangers with black eyes
break into our houses,
dissect our families,
carve their initials
into our children,
melt back into the abyss.

What a time to try
to be human--
with so much so jagged,
so bitter,
how much it means
to taste your salty flesh,
to move into you in the night
once more, and again,
and forever.

III

AT THE GOSPEL SINGING

THANK YOU, LORD, FOR WHAT WE ARE ABOUT TO RECEIVE

Driving this morning, Thanksgiving Day,
with my wife to visit my parents,
we see many men in pumpkin-orange
ride pickups through the frost and slush,
gun racks bristling with firepower.
It's been years since I hunted deer,
but I doubt the scenes have changed.
They drink coffee and whiskey (but not too much)
in the cold morning air, tell lies that freeze
six inches from their faces, then mount
their stands, watchers of the trees and fields,
attentive in a way they seldom are
to wives, children, or even jobs,
alive with the arousal of the hunt,
or rather the wait in the morning chill,
itchy trigger fingers deep in pockets,
wrapped in gloves, eyes scanning the
treeline for flashes of tan, sudden movements,
antlers rising through the fog, white tails
across the tall, wet grass.

Like me, my father no longer hunts deer.
He confided to me a few years ago that
he never liked it anyway. He said
he hated the cold and the stupid drunks,
but I knew what he really meant.

Rounding a corner, we see two dead
does by the side of the road. The first
is bloody and skinned, huge hunks of her
still-steaming meat hacked away crudely,
tawny hide huddled around her ankles,
head turned up, eyes staring at the overcast sky
unaware of what is missing.
A half-mile down the road another lies,
unbloodied, uncut, intact but stiff, her eyes as vacant

and hard as those of the first. She probably
ran from hunters right into the holiday traffic.
All around both of them lies trash,
beer cans, fast-food wrappings, cigarette packs,
empty boxes of shotgun and rifle shells,
the debris of the Oklahoma day.

In their stands the men blow their breaths
into the air like prayers, but this morning
nothing happens. They wait and watch
until the sun, if it were visible, is high,
then amble back to their trucks,
back to their families, their massive dinners,
their football games, their bets and beers
and routine prayers of Thanksgiving.

ASPHYXIATION
(FOR DARRYL KEYS)

The boys massacre the plastic bag
in their rush to get to the toy,
torn cellophane fluttering aside
like a transparent, lightly lettered bird.
"Put the bag in the trash," my wife says,
"or your sister could put that on her head and die."
The oldest dutifully tucks the sack away
before they race to their room.

Plastic bags can kill, I know, because
that's how you died, Darryl, in 1984.
The Tulsa police found you, naked, raped,
wrists and mouth tied with duct tape,
a plastic bag taped tightly around your neck,
covering your handsome, gruesome face.

We were all living dangerously then,
playing music and playing with lives,
our own and others. You tolerated
the ineptness of my stumbling bass
and never ever missed a beat, even
when wasted on the cocaine and Scotch
I kept flowing in embarrassed apology
for my amateur musicianship.

You were the one who took care of us,
who helped to cover our tracks,
like the time you rescued me
from some girl's mother who was knocking
on my door and screaming about the cops
while her daughter, someone named Kim,
I think, shimmied into her clothes
and I huddled on my bed and cried
in the mystery of my bloody sheets.
I didn't know if the blood was mine or hers

because I didn't remember what we'd done
and whether or not it might have hurt.

You'd gone to Tulsa to a club, to check out
a band or to check out girls, to live a little.
You met these two men there--
convicts on the run from a Florida hole--
these men who fucked you in the ass
and put their cigarettes out on your back
and wrapped your head in cellophane.
The police didn't know why
you'd gone with them to their rented room
in a cheap hotel, but I knew you,
hardened to thrills and decadence.
A little toot was probably all it took.

Apparently they just wanted your car,
and what little cash you had saved
from your night shift at the 7-11.
You planned to go back to college,
get a business degree, maybe marry
your high school sweetheart, whom I'm told
grieved for you long. The bastards
could have just taken the car.

I couldn't kill, not even them.
I'm at least marginally Christian now,
and I'd try to forgive them, to show
them the grace they'd probably never known.
But I didn't believe in anything then,
and your death confirmed the meaninglessness.
Now, as I look at the crumpled bag
in my wastebasket far from you, and then,
I know that then I could have wrapped
the tape around their red necks myself,
watching their faces press against
the crinkling clarity of death, gaping,
like giant fish, until blackness swallowed them,

clear and cold as the memory
of who I was then, and who you were,
and what you'll never again be.

KING OF BEERS

As if it were a moment ago, as if it were
the coffee he just drank, he tastes the cold
initiation as the beer bit his tongue, cruising
the Indiana backroads to the radio's static Beatles.
Even then he tasted regret.

Beer was the breakfast of champions,
whiskey risky but worth the gamble,
sin gin, fine wine, and tequila--he always ate the worm.
He found brief order in poems or songs,
brief love in hazy bodies, but nothing ever replaced
that mellow gauze that covered
all the totalled cars and jobs, all the bastard bosses
and cases of clap, all the lost women
and causes and chances.

He reached a point where it wasn't working anymore.
It wasn't losing his license, or wrecking his car
the day he paid it off, or waking up in Houston
with a 16-year-old, or forgetting his mother's birthday.
It wasn't even when his best friend died
from simply having had too much damned fun.

No, it was his fists reeling into her,
that sudden random rage, the surprise
in her blackened eyes just before she dropped
to the autumn ground and curled her body
and covered her head and begged him not to kill her.

When she dropped, she dropped much further
than the ground, and he fell with her,
into himself, somewhere where a thirst
burns his skin, his hair, and won't be quenched,
no matter how much regret he drinks,
or how much forgiveness,
with its bitter aftertaste.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

I'd never say I told you so.
And yet I knew it when I saw
him standing in his sullen rage,
his feral fury an image
impressed upon my mind--the raw,
red suspicion of the hollow.

I saw it in his turn, his touch,
his deep distrust of you and me,
of you and anyone. His eyes
were restless, like two black flies
which, searching for a dead body,
never do land. He was too much

the predator--how else say it?
But, victimized, you talked of love;
you needed someone then, you said.
He needed you as well, your head
and its soft wool the wolf dreams of,
his teeth upon your body bit

away your pride, swallowed it whole.
He used your house, your car, your money,
your pills, your Scotch, your cigarettes,
and finally your heart. Regrets
were cushioned in the night--his body
shared your bed--but not his soul.

The son of wolves, he gave
the only kind of love he knew:
the beauty of the bruise, the pride
of knowing pain has been survived,
enduring pattern of the black and blue
to mark you his. And so he'll have

and hold you. Now you drink too much,

alone, consider pressing charges,
send letters to an old address
he gave you once. Always, the press
of hands upon your flesh enlarges
the places it still hurts to touch.

FAMILY TREE

My uncle R.E. was into genealogy,
always sniffing around scrapbooks,
tracing the carvings on tombstones,
eager for that missing link to clarify the past.
Driving in Mississippi once, he saw "Stinson"
on a mailbox in front of a white frame house
with a green shingled roof and a Buick on blocks.
He stopped his truck, got out, and knocked.
A small, nervous black woman answered,
her face wet with sweat from the cast iron stove,
three small children flocked around her feet.
R.E., who had the gift of gab, was mute.
He stared into her dark eyes and stammered
something about a dog for sale, and left.
He saw her watching him from the window,
a strange-accented, nervous-acting white man.

The Stinsons came to Arkansas from Kentucky,
"in a covered wagon," my father always said,
bringing visions of Daniel Boone and coonskin
caps pioneering into my mind.
What had they left behind there, or in Carolina
where my great-great-great-grandfather John
lived before Kentucky? Were they planters
who lost the plantation after the War,
who found themselves transplanted
into the sweaty ranks of white mountain trash,
a long way from the cotton fields
and gleaming houses of tradition?

A mile down the road R. E. met a red pickup,
the driver's face like a pine cone under
his bright green baseball cap. The man raised
two fingers from the wheel as he passed.
When R. E. tells this story now he laughs.
But he says something then made him pull

over to the side of the road and stop.
The other truck kept going. But he saw
the green cap turn, framed in the rifle rack,
and felt the man's eyes on him as he stepped
from the idling truck and stretched.
He fished the whiskey bottle from underneath the seat
and drew its slow clarity into his mouth.
The departed sun still edged the sky with yellow.
He stared straight up until he saw the first stars.
He remembers the rising moon was almost full,
and the crickets and whippoorwills began to chatter.
The wind was warm against his cheek as he lay
across the pickup bed, eyes filled with twilight stars
just beginning to appear against the graying distance.

NEW AGE ANGELS

And all this time I thought you were mine,
the guardian I see in velvet paintings
preventing Rockwell children
from falling into swollen streams,
the one who no doubt helped me out,
kept the cops from searching
the trunk too carefully,
guided my drunken truck home
safely through the lakeside fog,
kept leukemia and cancer at bay,
whispered "Just say no" in my ear
so often the message finally took.

I always thought you were mine,
and pictured you a shoulder-riding
cartoon conscience whose halo
kept falling down. But now
I see you everywhere, you slut.
You've become trendy, the latest fad
for fools with more money than sense,
along with Gregorian chants
and the Goddess that your Boss
(the Big Bully) evicted from Canaan.

Yet, despite the sound of money changing
in the background, whenever
you come around, whether at holy communion
or when I'm mowing the lawn, alone
with my headphones and my thoughts,
something real remains: a lightening
in the bones, a feathering along the spine,
a sudden impulse to rise, to circle
the Earth once and disappear like you,
lost in the memory of me,
a fool who used to be a child.

CHRIST OF THE OZARKS

In Eureka Springs, Arkansas,
high in the Ozark Mountains,
Christ stands in sculpted stone,
arms outstretched over
the impossible hills as if to say,
"Look what I can do."
Tourists crawl around His feet
like ants at the Last Supper,
longing for a crumb.

An engineering marvel,
Christ can withstand
500-mile-per-hour winds.
Hanging an automobile
from each hand wouldn't
faze Him at all.
But what would you expect?
After what He's been through,
this gig must seem easy
as jumping in the sawdust pile
behind Joseph's workshop
on warm Nazarene mornings.

Still,
with His arms outstretched,
He looks a little like
He's about to dive into
the Arkansas soil and down,
through the underground lakes
and fields of diamonds and coal
to the heart of the matter,
to swallow hell in
that grim stone mouth
and spew it out, another
hot spring bubbling up
to cure what ails us.

MARY M

She watched Him, wishing
she knew what He was--
a man of course, yet nothing
like the many men she'd had.

Once she had been insane,
they said, tormented, cursed.
He had touched her;
her mind had cleared.

Joanna and Susanna
just laughed at her
when she confessed her love.
(He had touched them too.)

"He doesn't like girls," they giggled.
"He's got twelve boyfriends."
She covered her ears.
Mary wept.

When they killed Him,
she couldn't watch.
But she followed the soldiers
to the tomb and waited.

When the earth shook, and the angel
told her He had risen,
she expected that now
any miracle could happen--

that he might even marry,
settle down in Galilee,
with a fallen woman.
After all, He didn't judge.

But He rose far farther
than she'd ever thought.
And she was left
to disappear into history

alone, remembering
little things--the touch
of His hard, carpenter's hands,
the taste of magic fish and bread

salty in her mouth,
the way He looked at her
as He waved, just before
vanishing into a cloud.

LINES COMPOSED ON AN AIR MATTRESS

As the sun burns the tops of distant trees
and the sky assumes the shade of bruised knees,

the lolling waves and clouds are tangerine,
seeping slowly underneath my red skin.

where they insinuate themselves with blood,
with bone, desire risen from human mud.

I'd been so dry, unable to break this drought.
You rained on my unworthy head the thought

of You, and blew the breath that made me feel
my fragments fuse, cohere, if only while

I cried and felt the kiss of ancient love
that had been so long absent from my life.

As I float, You rain on just and unjust.
Were we really conjured up from dust?

Or did You tread the water with Your thighs
and laugh us into being with Your eyes?

IMMERSION

I still remember the night that I was saved:
the white-washed church in Arkansas,
the faithful folded in the pews.
But that night something clicked.
I was a sinner, this I knew.
Something settled in my stomach
as we sang "Just As I Am,"
sifted through my groin,
forced my wayward legs to stand,
and shuffle, half-lurching, down
the carpeted aisle, to fall into
the gray-suited arms
of the Aryan minister who ten years
later left the church for tutoring
teenagers in the forbidden pleasures
of Baal. He asked if I believed.
What was I to say, having walked
that center aisle, between
all those joyous eyes? My happy parents
drove me to the lake. Lightning
licked the August sky, the teasing promise
of absent rain, and Jessie Bentley dunked
me and pronounced me born again.

The lake was called the "strip pit,"
for at least a couple of good reasons.
For years local men lucky enough to have
an honest job had mined coal from the valley
between those piney hills. When the vein
played out, the company left the gaping hole
they'd torn in the land. As it filled,
it became a favorite place to party and to swim.
Some even fished, though most agreed
nothing good could live in that dangerous pit.
Many a teenager stripped off her clothes
and skinny-dipped (or worse) in that dark,

bottomless water. I was one of those,
losing my virginity to an older Baptist girl
two years after being born again

Today I'm miles away from Arkansas
in an ascetic office over a golf-course town,
happy to be anywhere after diving
so deeply into temptation that I almost
didn't come back up. Many of my friends
didn't, and I sometimes picture them,
swollen bodies sodden with booze,
junkie arms pock-marked and thin,
noses bleeding into the sooty waters
of the endless pit.
I haven't read the Bible much in years—
sometimes I wonder if I ever did.
Truth lies around me now, in the blades
of browning grass beside the narrow country road,
the sullen eyes of kids driving up and down
the only drag in town, in my daughter's arms
rising toward me every morning,
in my own graying beard in the mirror
when I wipe away the shower fog.
What else can possibly matter but this?
What devils could devise such endless hurt,
what angels such endless joy?

And at the lake, the strip pit,
children and lovers still splash
fearlessly through the dark waters,
secure in the faith of their bodies,
their long-held breath.

AT THE GOSPEL SINGING

My father sings and taps his foot,
Words soar in summer air,
Salvation songs, damnation songs,
How we'll all meet up there,
That happy land he'll see by
And by. I sit beside
Him on the pew we shared for years,
And try hard to decide

Why God makes fools of all of us.
I only feel the sweat
That pools upon my lower back,
The penitent wood, and heat.
I hold a recorder in my hand.
He'll play the hymns for years,
For an eternity. He'll play
Them loudly when he hears

My feet fall on his creaking porch,
The prodigal come home
From wandering in the sinful world
From which no good could come.
He'll pour hot coals upon my head
And have me fetch a cup.
He'll smile above his Maxwell House
and turn the volume up.

But now he sways, eyes tightly closed,
And sings the gospel truth.
He seems to *feel*; I can't be sure.
Can just God be enough?
The sound that flees his mouth is cool,
So clear it cleans the air
Around us; I quietly sing,
And shake my head and stare

At the good man who gave me life
But whom I've never known.
He followed Jesus up the hill
While I sat out alone
And found the peace of being lost,
To find my own way out.
My road has led me to this church--
To Father, Son, and Doubt.

REMEMBERING MY MISSPENT YOUTH ON A RAINY NIGHT IN SPRING

Two a. m. I guess the bars have closed, though
I've not been in one for years. I've learned
all sorts of lessons, lessons which encourage me
that sometimes it's OK to drink alone if it keeps
you near your family and out of bars,
and that weak beers are better than the Scotch
of once upon a time, in a now-defunct dive
with the ironic name of The Big Apple
where a tired brunette barmaid named Brenda,
with too many kids and a too-much older husband,
stacked ashtrays behind the bar and wiped tables
with a tattered rag that yellowed in the thinning
smoke that no one seemed to notice.

I made love with her once--just once--
on my mattress on the floor of a tiny house
I shared with a roommate I seldom saw.
She made me turn the light off and turn my head
as she skinned her clothes from her white body.
We were high and a little drunk, so made sloppy sex
that left little to remember save the sad fact it happened.
I used Brenda then as a blanket of flesh, a blanket
to wrap around me until I had what I sought,
that momentary shudder of connection I knew
would leave us lonelier than before.
I didn't give a damn about her husband because
I'd never even seen him, only knew what Brenda said,
that, though young enough to hit her, he hadn't made love
with her for some time, told her he was too old.

Miles away from The Big Apple, which was torn
down to make room for another parking lot,
I approach middle age, as Brenda was approaching
it then, but at least I'm lucky enough to be creeping
up on it in the company of someone I love.
The trip is still fearful, yet one that I can make.

We're all too old at times, and too young.
The silence of the morning hangs over my rented house,
in which my three children and my wife I love sleep,
in which I gratefully sip another weak Oklahoma beer
and watch the clock hands wheel away
the rest of my short yet blessed life.

WINTER SOLO

Sunday after Epiphany the world
has been quieted in January ice.
The roads are too slick to drive to church,
so I walk through the silent cold
of this sleepy town to buy newspapers.
I see no cars, no dogs, no birds, but tracks
of animal and man cover the white ground.
I think of those preachers from my childhood
who told of the rapture, how the faithful
would be caught up in the sky with the Lord,
leaving the faithless behind. Today's like that,
as if I were the only sinner wandering
through a town evacuated by God.
A cruising police car reassures me I'm not alone;
it's not the end of time, just the beginning
of a week in winter's darkest month.
At home my wife is still burrowed in bed,
trying to sleep while the children
watch TV and eat Captain Crunch and ask
again and again if they can build a snowman,
though there's little snow, only cold and ice.
Here in this little Oklahoma town I call home
I and all the world wait silently for a revelation,
like the ice melting on the young, green wheat,
the flower tip pushing its way through the dirt,
a stone of cold doubt heavily rolling
away from the open mouth of an empty tomb.

IV

ON SPARROWHAWK MOUNTAIN

SOUL MUSIC

The soul is a very good dancer,
Fred Astaire in top hat and tails,
capable of calypso or tango or trots--
or me, scruffy in my best jeans and flannel,
lurching and leering after too many beers.

The soul never steps on your feet,
though it may give you an occasional bump
with its hips, which are wide and soft
as Buddha's butt, and have never been spanked.
The soul keeps dancing when the music has stopped,
leaving you trying to follow, or looking around
pretending you didn't know it until the next song begins.

The soul sips its drinks at your table
at the end of the night, near closing time,
and eyes you through the small talk and smoke.
Does it want you to take it home, get its number?
Will you promise to call? You watch,
and it winks, and you're home free,
its arms around you as you stumble into the night.

THE RABBIT

The rabbit comes from that same nowhere
they all come from: a streak of brown before
Raymond's tires. He swerves, listening
for the sad thump he's thankful not to hear,
then glides to the shoulder and grips the wheel,
waiting for a sharp pain to radiate up his arm,
tightness in his chest, shortness of breath.

He waits for these symptoms because he's forty-five,
divorced, and his oldest daughter just got married.
Lately he's been eying younger women and cars
but always stops himself when he starts to feel
ridiculous. At his age men worry about death,
then worry about worrying when they realize
how little time is left to worry.

Through the bug-smudged windshield his eyes
stare straight ahead into the Oklahoma sunset,
pink and orange above the flat horizon.
His pulse slowly settles into the regular flow
that is his life--the thousand bumpy, potholed roads,
the swerves and thumps and dented, bloody fenders,
the constant waiting for life to end or begin.

PASSING LANE

I drive across the bridge, the lake stretched out on either side
like sequins in the sunset. The singer's voice on the radio
rolls itself into a tight little ball of sadness.
A small red convertible passes me, and I think I see
an old lover, a woman who ate my heart
and never even tasted my callow love.
I wasn't young anymore, but thought I was, and acted
as if I was, writing moping poems about broken hearts
on yellowed napkins in smoky bars where loneliness
goes to seek itself in the glassy eyes of strangers.
She'd been dating a friend of mine, and when they had a spat
I moved in with typical self-destructive zeal
and betrayed his trust, and mine, by pretending to comfort her
when all along I wanted to possess her, to hold her head
like a trophy against the wall of my skull.
Which would have been fine if I hadn't drunkenly stumbled
into much more than her vacant bed, fallen into a place
beyond my darkest intentions, and found love grinning there
like a malevolent gargoyle. Of course, she dumped me
and went back to him, and he and I have never spoken since.
In those days I badly wanted to die, I wanted to die badly,
wrapped in Scotch and burning metal on a snowy country road.
Today the sun is a beautiful cliché, and so is my life.
I want to live long enough to burden my children's children
with boring stories (and poems) about loves long gone.
So I'm crossing this bridge, driving home to my children and wife,
and when I see this lover I don't even wave, don't bother honking.
But as she cuts back into the lane in front of me, the sun
hits her shades and prisms, blinding me. And then she's gone,
if it was her, exhaust fumes leaving a trail of might-have-beens
hanging in the August air between us.

AFTER A POETRY READING

Tonight I sat,
in an uncomfortable seat,
and heard my students open
their poetic veins.
One by one they shuffled
to the ridiculous podium
clutching manila folders
like rosaries.

My colleague and I
leaned back and stroked our chins
as they rambled on
about saving the world with art,
cursing the memories of lovers
who'd broken their hearts,
offering meandering meditations
on the meaning of God
and seventeen rhymes
for the word "fuck."

We'd heard it all before,
of course, bad imitations of Ginsberg
and Creeley, pot-fueled rants
of disaffected white trash
aspiring to something more
than trips to the mall,
Friday night football games
and satellite TV.

We'd heard it all before
because we'd written it all before,
only more self-consciously.
And tonight we listened
in amazement as they chanted
to music in their heads,
soaring on hormones and health,

cheap speed and the promise of sex.

Afterward we admitted
that we'd been charmed,
though we clucked
over how high they'd been,
eyes so cannabis red
they'd glowed in the hall's dim light.
Their work, we agreed,
was derivative—
strange what a strong hold
the Beats still had.
Our poems are middle-aged,
the work of survivors
who chuckle over bad old days,
ask if the muffins are low-fat.

Our students leave
as soon as the mike is off.
They have nothing to say to us,
to me, the old burn-out
good for an easy "A."
But I'd say to them,
if I only could,
Thank you for reminding me
how important it is,
how bloody and scary,
how unspeakably sweet.

IMAGINING EMILY DICKINSON

The red-brick sidewalks of downtown absorb the autumn sun.
I've been teaching your poems to students who find you weird,
depressing and hard to understand. What can I say?
That life is often like that? They try to deny it now,
sure in their youthful bodies. They'll figure it out.

Ahead of me, in what looks like a gown, shuffles
an old woman who looks like my mother,
arms thin as pipecleaners. She talks to the dead air—
riddles, charms the clouds with soaring, bird-like hands.
She wears a sailor hat flat-brimmed over graying hair,
with magic marker inscriptions like the language of a child.

I pass her by the florist's shop, and she turns her face to me.
Her skin is smooth, her forehead burns with sweat,
a silver, salty shine as from a little girl at play.
Her eyes, large and fly-like behind her glasses, buzz with energy.
And she says: "It wasn't what I drank that made me drunk."
I pause politely, but she fades into herself and scuttles away.

I walk on and think of you, alone in your white thoughts,
wandering through your chosen rooms,
gaze like stone to break the world you reassembled into words.
I see you in that old woman, ageless and full of riddles.
Tell me, Emily--is the human condition ever thus, to stalk
the streets of every town and talk to men with ears of stone?

AMONG THESE STONES
(AFTER A POEM BY JUSTICE AFTER A POEM BY VALLEJO)

I will die in Seattle on a rainy day,
but then all days in Seattle are rainy,
and people die every day.
I know this day, though: February,
the sea black under a low gray sky,
the woods wet and dark as my dreams.
It will be Monday, appropriately enough,
as I write this on a Monday. Nothing
quite works out on Mondays. Today,
for instance, I have to stand backwards
to see the day I'll die.

Don Stinson is dead. His best man
comes to the funeral in the same damned suit
he wore at the wedding, powder blue
in Seattle in February in the rain.
I wanted to be burned, but it's raining,
even in my coffin. My witnesses
are Monday, the bored backhoe operator,
and the groping, eager worms.
My grandchildren watch the fishing boats
scuttle across the wide white bay.

AT LAKE TENKILLER, OKLAHOMA, SUMMER 1993

It's so beautifully hot, lover.
This day demands our attention.
Yet you and I are drowsy
in our burns and swimsuits.
This scene surely has potential:
splatter of clouds like lather
awaiting razor-wind,
skim of birds against the sun,
trees serious and green
reflected in the lake.
Our skin glows bright and warm.
Around the lake's horseshoe
should be a mysterious calm.
Instead we hear the mosquito-like
buzz of jet skis careening
around the whining boats,
and heavy metal rocking
from up the shore,
and suddenly a jet plane's roar,
ominous as thunderheads.
Across the lake a lonely sail
slides on amidst the din.
We can see only the sail,
but know the boat beneath
is beautiful, crew ancient and wise,
full of stories quiet and deep
as the bright water around our feet.

On Sparrowhawk Mountain

Through Oklahoma hills
the river rolls below the rocky point,
cold and green in the thick spring.
Old leaves crackle,
slipping under lovers' feet.

Gouged into stone, names stare:
"J.K. + S.T.,"
"Sigmas #1,"
"Jesus is Love,"
so many words massed here,
simple, senseless joys
falling all over one another,
layers of lust and God
beneath so much sky.

Fish slide through the heavy waters.
Above pale clumps of clouds
a sparrowhawk hovers
against the sun,
feathers of light in its eyes.

AUGUST SONG

The stagnant Illinois River
that carries my canoe
no longer gurgles its song
of seeking, of longing
as it does in the spring
after a long, wet winter.
It's as sluggish as I am
in the humid Oklahoma heat,
green and slow, contrary
enough to make me paddle
if I want to get anywhere,
which I don't.

The cows along the bank
lie in the shade wearing
looks of stupid contentment.
The Pumpkin Hollow Road
is concealed from view
by a tangled row of briars
and stunted saplings
that support the fence within.
Leaves overhead look worn,
cloaked in dust tossed
by passing cars, burnt premature
brown by the summer sun.

It's already been a long year
of compromises and retreats
and occasional, bitter victories.
For a while there, I thought
we would drift together
on the current, lashed together,
laughing as we shot the rapids.
Then one day the rain stopped.
Now the sandbars stand above
the green water and feel

the heat on their arid edges,
wishing for fall's forgiving floods.

WHAT I WANT OUT OF LIFE

To feel the wind each morning as a friend,
and to settle for dinner at sunset.
To notice the seasonal changes in
the patterns of light upon my wife's head.

To know my body's pleasure and its pain,
and my wife's body's pleasure and its pain,
the bodies of my children, the trees' names,
the gossamer shells abandoned by snakes,

the bread of the moon, the blood of the sea,
and all animals, whether wild or tame.
To see the world no less in a bright leaf,
a drop of water, a smile, a small flame,

erect nipples, headstones in silent rows.
To hear music green as trees, see paintings
black as the sky, to run my hands over
statues, and dance without self-consciousness,

make love in the mornings, air rich with pines,
fall asleep at night to crickets' scraping.
To find life in poems, poems in life,
and, ultimately, poems in dying.

To watch my children ripen into love
and slowly learn what *they* want out of life.

A Sonnet After Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring"

The motion of the night upon the wind
still mesmorizes me--ebony waves
that break over the darkening world to save
our eyes from seeing what the human mind
has manufactured after its own kind:
a trail of wire, of metal in the leaves,
a taste of iron monstrosity that heaves
its way through earth, water, and air to find
its home in human memory of loss.
But night is healing, such a little death,
that covers all our sins in sleep's facade
from which the morning breeze will surely toss
us. So I wake to see my darkest breath
drawn back and forth across the throat of God.

THE CHURCH JANITOR

The dust dances the light descending through
the windows as the boy pushes the broom
over the worn-out floor between each pew,
around the silent, empty podium.
His face is round and smooth as the burned light
bulb he replaces just before he mops,
the summer heat making him sweat, the bright
drops running down and bouncing off the tops

of Bibles, hymnals, stray Sunday School texts,
his breath so heavy in the soggy air.
And suddenly he hears a sound. Perplexed,
he listens as he works, can only hear
the children's cries as they play basketball,
the thunk the ball makes on the parking lot,
the whisper of the mop--and that is all.
He shakes his head, and sees he missed a spot.

Washing communion cups he hears a murmur
like angels praying in the attic loft.
He climbs the creaky ladder, puts an ear
up to the door, hears nothing but the soft
rustle of wind, the pumping of his blood,
the snap of neurons in his racing brain
almost audible in the ancient flood
of silence rising through the air again.

No one can really say where such thoughts start.
At fifteen, ideas come out of nowhere.
He's locking doors, now ready to depart;
through the stained glass a billion black eyes stare.

QUARTZ MOUNTAIN, OKLAHOMA, FALL 1996

The jet from Altus Air Force Base hangs
heavy in the western sky, huge
as only distant things can be.
The sky surrounds it like a frame.

I've come here to study screenwriting,
but right now no dialogue or plot
can compete with this sight.
The hike up was tough, especially

for a sedentary man like me.
"Watch out for rattlesnakes,"
the Native poet in my class said.
"They'll be sunning themselves on rocks."

So the summit is a good place
to catch my breath. I didn't see
any rattlers, only rocks and Jimson Weed,
the sparse grass that grows here

in southwestern Oklahoma,
almost desert-like compared
to the lusher northern area I'm from.
When I first saw this place

I thought it stark, like the setting
from an Eastwood spaghetti western,
all flat, dry fields, then, suddenly,
rock hills rising up like humps

on the backs of the buffalo
who used to roam this plain,
fleeing Kiowa and Apache who
hunted them to the mountain's edge.

At some moments, your own life,

this life you live and write about,
this life you try so hard to love,
seems itself a false front, a facade.

To the east, an eagle does acrobatics
over the dam and lake--so small,
yet it holds its own against Heaven,
which dwells within it like a flame.

VITA

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