Plain in Level Grass

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PLAIN IN LEVEL GRASS

by

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B.A. St. Cloud State University, 1973

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Where We Are: The Montana Poets Anthology: "Crossing the Lake," "Called Sleeping," "Outcast," "Fishing," "Letting Down the Fences"
What are we to do with the brokenhearted plains, the outstretched hunger of their wonder? For that which we think openness in them we see ourselves as we drift into sleep.

—Osip Mandelstam
To live— is a battle with troll-folk in the crypts of heart and head;

---Henrik Ibsen
INTO THE FOREST, INTO THE HEART

I

I was four when my mother said
I could not touch her breasts, forbidden
as the orchid.
They were soft, like pillows.
My brother and I dreamed
we had some. We drew them
magenta, on paper the color of cream.
We gave breasts to everyone.

That summer we pioneered the neighborhood,
selling visions. Smoke-eaters, we forgave
the meanest kids, believing the inner ear
to be the heart. In the eye of the forest
Babba Yaga's house rose up
on its chicken legs, glutted
with stolen children, their cries
staining the needled floor.
Our words flew up, dark fans
between the shed and garage
where we confessed to each white face:

She'll come for you sleeping,
Her memory is rock. Your mother
will remember you dead.

The pact, then, with blood.

We search now in bodies of our own,
the vein we opened as children healed
to a faint scar, the razor edge
but grass stored with pebbled vows
forever honey bees in a glass jar.
The blood we share will not suffice.
It cannot feed
the deadly flower. She waits
for each of us to come alone.
Sleep will come when we have cut
and pressed her scent.
II

I meet her bleeding from the heart
in churches or wherever
daughters mourn their mothers. Years
I would not think of her
until she turned in her pillar of salt,
the stems of her arms growing soft,
and dropped her eyes into the sea.
I feared, then, she would overflow
me in a breach of love. What
if I turned her back
to the smoking ruins? What
deliverance from men who thought
me sad or mean, who loved
her locked inside, fixed
like that in final passion?
I could be the coldest angel
with breasts of ice
and save them all from the mandrake's
kiss. Though hard,
my heart would keep forever.

She sways, lovely, in some valley.
A ghost lifts me, body and all,
in dream and I speak of her
in babble my husband can't understand. Again, the tower.
He waits on me like a brother
though his touch admits. Deny her
and she will make an anniversary of her death.
For each imitation, a severed head,
a petal blown in warning
from the bloodless shell. The house
you say is burning is my own.
Better to meet her there,
to know her power,
her softness, as the milk
of some disaster I will survive
than meet her when a daughter
or a mother dies, her opened blouse.

(for my brother, John)
CHILDREN AT TABLE

We are left without our places.
The hair-line crack in the only teacup
from when we belonged, recedes
into longing. Years of refusing
the weak darkened our lives,
where our lips touched and forgot.

The fault lay in our fingertips—
vioence of too many washings.
Serpentine, random, it bewitched
whose gaze wandered
to become the road our lives went down.

For one it was to be seen and not heard
like smoke-rings or salt.
For another it meant everlasting,
faithful as a centerpiece.
Not even the idiot among us, dropping cup
after cup, could save us. We belonged
and our longing was endless.

The crack grew of its own accord.
Our foreheads mirrored
the damage and when we smiled
the unforgiven grew rigid on every face.
This is why we moved away,
the table sagging beneath us, the circle
fragile, broken to last.
Merry Christmas. Or is it happy
I'm trying to say? Happy was
a rabbit where I grew up, a town
so small misery was canned
like tomatoes. Misericordia
it was not. No piety,
just cold potatoes and endless
lemons. God was like
the foreign legion. So Lutheran
Mogen David was the only saint.
I wanted to ask him to the prom
but I was grounded because I had no
breasts. Honest confirmation, great Grandma
nodding Sundays, demanding I give up
cards for Rook, that dirty bird.

Happy New Year, Madeline. I resolve
to leave the ranks
of the tragic for a spell, new
order, new word. Your name
stays with me like a wand, one
move and the sea waves.

(for Madeline DeFrees)
CONFESSIONS

Those roses. I stole them in broad daylight to prove I was mean. Other kids swore truer when they saw my hands bleed.

My father was quiet and sometimes unhappy. I wanted happy and thought he was mean. So did my mother. She sulked and picked raspberries, pulled beets. Dad mended our back fence and burned an acre of trash. Summers at dusk he'd call us home — you kids and we were his. Mom he called Josie and loved. She was pretty then and baked pies, lemon meringue and home-made apple that made Dad think he dreamed them in the war.

My mother grays, her face changing into her mother's. The sorrow of farms does not calm. I refuse my life like cream and even dead my father loves me.

I wept when others wept, buried the dead animals under lilacs when earwigs curled the leaves. Mothers said it would stink.

Once I lied and Mr. Wilson knew. I played with his old plow and didn't ask. Something broke. CarolAnn, he said like my father in my dreams. I was ashamed and so I hated him in his snuff-stained shirt.
He never told, though I stole
his flowers and his wife cried.
Behind his back I called him
old, making fun of his suspenders,
the way his shoes flopped open
like slippers in wet grass. He still jawed
with Dad and tipped a white hat
to Mom Saturdays. Just a farmer
from Missouri, come west.
I couldn't know he came to die,
his poppies bursting orange every spring.

I lied and lied. The Rialto,
black and white movie,
a blond woman in her slip
screaming you bastard, slapping
the man dead. Stealing money
and telling my friends I prayed.
If being beautiful was love
I wanted to be mugged. No,
I said until they let me be.
OLDER SISTER

Common words remind me of you. Our family, five secrets in a white house. Nights when mother jangled the hush with hymns: Blessed Be the Tie that Binds. You waited gradual in your second-storey room, counting our steps on the stairs. Father was climbing narrow, one elaborate star at a time, skies beyond the sure bad land of Flasher, the old place fading.

You waited on his glory, frantically waving earth from that room. Porches from 1936 grazed your ears with their amazing music fields away from Gideon's Bible. You stayed on and on. And now I think of you in the backwash, bound and grateful to these words. That year remains serious as air: it was August and we honored our parents.
FOR ALL YOU KNOW

You choose a day and ride it close
as a daughter, loyal to invisible
hairs on the arm of a small-boned girl.
At home in the glitter
of a five and dime you are worth it

young again and freely stupid,
wearing white on a dark day
like a flag. This morning, your mother
mouthed love when she cooked your egg
sunnyside down. To go from here

means pain, your guard let down,
the childhood farm where all
the animals have been eaten or sold.
Grandpa never loved the barn
and Grandma gives her past
away like someone else’s china.
Where you played house in the machine-shed
it was oil you smelled, not grain.
The queen, the king, you knew
the truth about the humpbacked
chicken-coop. From the doorway
you watched far stairs ripple in grass.

It seemed yellow horses galloped
the twister down Johnny’s field, leaving
everything unchanged. Ten years your uncle
stalks that gray mouth in every bottle
rising and falling with the backbone
of his life. The perfectly ugly August
his dream touched down
high winds buckled the tracks, drove
straw through fence poles.
You might have surrendered
to learn it never leaves, the calm world
riding the same twisted rail.
In the granite station blocked
at the town's heart, you discover
changing levels without moving.
It was a stairway you stood still for.
That wrestling before dawn to know
the most honest thing you've ever done.
You mother yourself at last.
For all you know, the angel
refused you like money.
POINT OF ENTRY

Snowfields are the proper backdrop for human beings. With so much covered the body stands free to lose itself, unsmothered as box elder, older than the road that leads from home. Amid the white, body fades, trunk and legs diverge in rivers to the spine. Purity is what is lost.

This is the way away from guilt. To be invaded long before you leave the solid banks for that ocean of nerves, mysterious estuary. The tide that pulls dry land is like a river without a mouth: neither can lose itself. A curtain that falls to rise, annihilation, the mud given up, the river taken in. Every drop, a homecoming.
We walk away like ghosts
leaving the car buried.
Night snow, the road fallen
away, soft sides tunneling
the gorge. Our feet follow without sound.

My hand floats a small moon
into yours, palm cupped,
blood beating the air between.
Together, all bends to field,
random bodies of willow and ash.
The big house sleeps
and we are free to pass through
the gate unseen
having lost all color and age.
Far off, cottonwoods stand guard.

We come for hay, two brown horses
walking out of night
for feeding, snow
islands on their backs, flying up
from the tangled manes.
SAND AND STONE

Through the gate we are wisteria, shades of crane and tortoise. The last rock-studded bed a miniature of pain from this calm afternoon. Strolling ponds nod to our held hands with the clear eye of the unblessed. Poor enough to inherit the moon's blue heaven, we find it miles from the purity of roses, their too beautiful heads pressed finally serene in the lap of the Iyo stone.

In a flat garden, sand becomes sea in a minimum of grass. To be distinct in such a place is not to be lonely. Moss, not from Shikoku, strokes an irregular touch. Thorns give in to iris, and I to swimming carp, shadowed by a toad on stone.
MOTHS

Day lost, an unknown afternoon
like water after months of ice.
We stroll distance to the cut,
river never rowed, worshipped
like a famous scar. Down the road
blanched by ghost light, wrapped
in leaves to the narrow gate. Snow
moves us over board, stray rock, manure.

Twin horses stamped and snorted.
We fed them through winter,
pitching hay to a bland sky.

Today, a Sunday, I'm drinking beer.
Words ring and leave like trains.
In town, the days demand romance
in smog, affection under spruce
when hills let down their guard. We're home,
we haven't lost a thing. Milwaukee line
gives up the ghost to barrel down
a track with failing ties,
cheers from lovers, hobos hanging on.
We're on and won't let go for any
gandy-dancer. Illegal fires

put out the night along that run.
Wasn't it July and weren't we
arm in arm? We started out pretending sky
would always be so calm. The usual distance,
the day we found them gone—
dazed and trolling bluer water:
moths in cellophane air.
A brief invasion—storm, remembered love—
when bridges were there to wave from
and winding paths ended nowhere sad.
We were smiling then and growing blind
the way you do when life runs good
for years, when everyone's alive.

Blue sky seldom rains. Somewhere lovers
are leaving only to return, come spring.
Come fall, they promenade through cloud.
Where the Blackfoot flows along a dusty road
dogs are glad to leave the town behind.

Arm in arm we walk the razor streets
to all we must become. Come clean

and turn to stone. The brown-headed cowbird
has a blue, blue tongue. A muddy river runs
for years through plain and empty field.
The faded cowgirl broke the mirror out of love,
pulled out the day Salvation Army closed.
Happy people know they want it all

for always, learn to trust their own deaf ear.
That girl was ignorant of farms. Her words were blond,
her hair was true. She leaves you as you were—
a crow's-wing pretty with your man. Call in
your life, the smallest tip of finger left
behind, the rusted blade a dying threat.
When you decide you've had enough, slam
the rotten door-frame hard for every lonely year.
No one dies of thirst who watches
cities burn but they die just the same.

(for Richard Hugo)
The warmest waters beckon and blind. Once I believed time could be owned, returned to, that I could find my childhood the way I find a grave.

A man fishes all day beneath the sun. He could be your father leaving the river, body like a tree, the root invisible, come to rest in the sparse farmyard remembered as it was before the burial. No name to touch him, his face becomes a star and three white horses follow.

I consider the peril of any relation, hooks caught in the lip of the eyeless trout, living off its entrails.

In the tea-colored afternoon, a man walks toward dusk. He carries a basket, three silver fish, their open mouths pools of milk in the dark. It might be August or Christmas, the toothed faces of the aster, blooming, the tide of the man flooding an acre of tamarack. He sees only the light leaving the valley. In the absence, his soul like a bell.

Fishing demands belief: the line cast out reeled back again.
II

So when love, the tender blond monster,
Turned back on you so many futile tender feelings
Your hand smashed death open, red and vast, with one bullet.

—Luis Cernuda
La chingada is a girl I know who drinks the eyes of men like grey water.
When flesh burns,
men trade their tongues for a single night.
Ash-skinned babies fall from her body, cold like the pale river
men seek at death.
In the dawn of Cihuacoatl she leaves them: blind, dumb, praying to virgin saints.
LETTING DOWN THE FENCES

A blackjack sky has come to rest on the bridge of my nose
and my body has been flattened to a smile.
In the arena my life has become
I grow naked. The ugly princess
inside weeps at the terms:
what was white and soft
must be exchanged
for the privilege of being
without arms.

A phone call from another state
is pending in my dreams
and crosses burn each night
at the foot of my bed.
Alone in the white house,
your castle, I find no room
of my own
to explain the trophies
cluttered on shelves. Only
closets, piled deep.
The smell of my girlhood,

What it reliable in me goes
begging for a sleeve of red silk.
From our mutual tower we watch
the king’s daughter bleed
in the field below. The hand
you asked for feeds
enemy fire at the edge
of the kingdom, bursts
like a lung in your throat.
We gloat no more
of order in our lives.

There are no lines where I begin
letting down the fences.
The games are over.
I sleep with the infidel in daylight,
pocked face beside me in the bed. Once
upon a time is up.
Inside me a weapon grows.
If I move even a finger's width
our bodies reverse, your head
solid against my thigh.
A hand falls again and again
through my hair, dropping down
to cover the eyelids.

Your eyes are two black stones
that enter me at dusk. They always know
where they are going. That is why
at night you look so empty.
When light peels from the room
I feel your eyes sink past my heart.

When I meet your gaze inside
I want to race you to the edge.
I want to open myself, an empty hand,
on the lip of your dream,
I want to be first. Your right arm
throbs at the base of my skull.
I am on the verge of leaving
for good, a taste of metal in your mouth.
CALLING YOU

In my worst nightmare of you dying
I tell you heaven, a loyal wife,
mine the last hand that held you
in this world. Now I cradle the small
black body of the phone
against the ear you said was deaf
and say Yes, I am happy,
across distance more certain
than any traveled together.

Time is what unravels
when I lay down your echo. The number
forgotten like your face
weeping. Days
circled on calendars,
one with its pages thumbed back, spine
broken from the long train ride south,
the night the blackest porter cut our cards
non-stop from Indiana to Greenville.
When I doubted you bought me a pillow.

Now everything’s loosened and all
the time in the world won’t stop this spiral
letting go, your words
dead on the line: If you died first
I'd never forgive.
THREE BIRDS

Nothing can be saved. Like fractured magi
I gave the wrong gift. The wound
you carried I did not know
could speak. I cannot speak
like bells, time clapping
one hand across my mouth.

Years before I found your face
in mine. I met you walking
in the grey eyes of a young girl.
Her hair, the bridge that brushed
my breath with its wing. In the water
your face grows old, ripples
as I kiss.

Rain cools silver bracelets on the wrist
I turn from you. Spring,
the breast I offered once. Tonight
I walked your death home
until dark and I arrived. Three birds
cawed. Three birds
flew over me, left
out of sky. My body,
winds they rush into dark.
BLOOD CANOPIES

You should have said, what good are hymns
at the stony edge, the leaf-ridden
afternoon I begged to come home. You knew
it was over the way you knew
from red at the foot of one odd tree
it would be a slow fall.
And so you looked at me.

I know how to weep in common
places, At Grandma Dow's
red enamel table where Mrs. Halla danced,
coffee spoons rattling like castanets
in a blue glass. In blue sky
in a strange city or inconsequential town
I find my sister with new hands,
my dead father goes by in a car,
Every bakery the one left in St. Cloud
on a crummy street
above a highway I can't recall
the tender night you called me wife.

I pray for love to fill the empty porch
we watched storms from.
Some call it prayer when the heart goes
making its own way back.
The screen bangs slow, you
coming back at 5 a.m. for no reason
you knew. The heart cannot be pushed.
The wall has entered: I must love the wall.

—Theodore Roethke

OUTCAST

I found your face in mine. Once
you kissed me in public (or did not)
dreamed me (or did not)
and I was. In your one slipping of love
the day, the night you wanted me
I scarcely saw.

So much is needed: that lie
masquerades as dire principle. Lonely,
all are afraid. Home
crouches before them, lion or dog
and still they climb.

You do not willingly go, and I
am shamed. I think you go
toward me in some other life, some country
where scars are beautiful. Here
we save ourselves for graves, withholding

love. The day that word was wrong
my mouth went blue. I turn back
the mountain. None
gives truly to another. The long
hill, skull and rose.
WATERSHED

I might go blind, going out
like so many others, the lap
of a little known valley, morning
clotted behind the one good eye.
Nobody called love, good-bye
the day we rode the train away.

It was a regular day, dogs humping
on the lawn. Down the hall
secretaries swooned when Venus
barbed the daylight. Everyone was betting
on the stars, a tourniquet of cloud
to prove the paper right: Fly high,
go east and north -- Wolf Point's

home. I know enough to hold my own.
It's at your door, rewon
for higher stakes than love or
money talks, a thickness in the throat.
The odds were bad. To follow dawn
the way we did, dogging south
until I fancied you along
a heavenly line, mine the better weather.

Christmas Eve the diamond snowed:
sparkling into slush. Oysters gave
no world, the priest no luck. Innocent
of meaning but the large one
pertaining to God, we stumbled home
on thinner ice than stars.

It was a question of the moon
to say the brighter dies, comes
back overcome. Skies can clear
too late for damage. One hundred years
or minutes your chance ticks by
and dogs don't care, as sure
as going blind for looking longer
into light. It's never safe.
The river drains away.
WINTER SCENE

The Volga is flooded with reindeer, winter poured out around the thick arm of the train, infinity breaking the backward glance. The silent bodies at long last deliver the garment of winter, sad jailer living still among the kingdomed villages.

Brilliant windows of a blizzard town, brittle faces of a future none can face drifted under. Go, the wind herds me, its calm burial.

Cell by cell the lonely women expand until they resemble bags of blotchy wheat, weeping for men gone from the heavy flesh so white they trembled in the long embrace, for men left forlorn and honking into their sleeves.

Reindeer are herded like cattle into the frieze. The Volga weeps tiny hooves. Immense longing melts the eyes of children and summer arrives anywhere — babies blooming popeyed in carriages. Suddenly at home, suddenly family on the darkening road.
WHAT I SAID

I could say I have come to visit, knowing the preserves must be opened and the sweet jam taken in with the dark tea. You open the frail door and take me to sit beside you. I lean into the grain of your table, leaving no mark you would ever remember into a future that could be only yours. No wife, no mother can see you so clearly now with butter sun spilling from your palm, knotting its secret heart into the wood’s calm face. Familiar was what I said instead of love, wanting the sad truth of family to descend through my slightly open mouth like a small portion of bread, taken with honey tea. However early, the sun is falling. I know this. What loveliness holds me now in firm arms will remain until night sends me away. On the table before us a feathered ear of wheat bends in glass against the grain of our meeting.
The edges of the summit still appall
When we brood on the dead or the beloved;

--Theodore Roethke
REUNION

You have kissed the fire
that will lead you back to the gray house,
the one-horse town where your mother
and father think you safe,
all the people you'll ever be
locked clean away. One night you'll leave
a bar in another town where man means
you work at the mill or in the woods
or not at all. You drink too much
and women think you're shy.
When you leave for home
alone, you'll trust the night, coming back
like a boy to a burning room
and call your name from the bitter porch.

Someone else's father shot himself
in the basement where his wife washed
clothes and his son slept. He uncovered
the hidden weapon beside the neat, black
typewriter and made his final threat
against the blood, the skin beating
his ribs from inside where no one, not even
he, laid a healing hand.

Your aunt said, weep, when you cowered
from the chapel, confusion
of flowers so bright blood seemed
abstract, the dark stain
washed away before you saw. You dreamed him,
later. The fever meant you lived, gave you
his ghost. If you must pay, reward

the porch for creaking until you found
the door that scorched your palm. The sudden
swing the mind makes. The town was exactly
the same after Darlene Smith was raped
and came to school the next day in the same
white blouse and sweater she always wore.
When you opened the door, the world
you slept in died. You couldn't stop
watching till everything sank into ash.
Sifting now, firm in the place
your body allows, you call
each one by name. Rondel Schanz, 
the stupid boy in math, has no address
the reunion committee can write. Lake Melissa
has gone to carp and algae. Rita Lona,
the pretty, bright one— never made
the stage. Some people no one liked
live on in town, on your street
sleeping in a room you thought you owned.
FROM WHERE YOU STAND

So you will love after all this time
the man called father in your dreams.
See him as he was, pictured
in the cardboard album, a dark
and happy man holding you alive
out of the small pool.

In that paper reflection kept as proof
your father's face glows smooth.
If pictures tell a truth
he was a loyal son, flanking
the old man and fate
is nothing we can know.
You wouldn't know him then,
his brothers gone from too much sky.
Anytime or seventeen, home's no
longer. War, the only way to leave.

Say the sea imagined becomes at last
the sea. Waves and waves return
those wrecks that see us home.
We lower our heads as though it mattered
as though we pray. Say we find
unfolding in this room, the way
he held his hands smoking
in the old kitchen, circles left behind?
Sure as tide the child turns, plain
from where we stand. You didn't know.
SO LONG

Good-bye was all my father said for years. People knew it mattered when he'd pump their hands, shifting weight like a wounded buck. He'd look right through them to the sun the slow smile of a man who kept his friends, eyes blue behind the squint. Like some fall gone irrevocably by, so long, he'd say and they knew they could leave.

Family, sometimes a friend from war. It was always summer. He'd stroll to the curb and lean heavy on the car while they started up. We'd stand with Mom like tulips against the wooden porch and wave.

Those days my cousins and I talked sex and God and bragged about our Dads. We'd hang around, holding up the family name. Sometimes our folks would all sit down together over World War II, all eyes turned inside and far away. You kids, almost without speaking. We'd all be scared when they'd talk that way. Tell us, we'd beg, wanting to know some horrible secret that made them old.

One August we grew tragic, walked along the beach kicking sand pretending it was sea. We'd all fallen for love, got drunk, gone all the way. We knew we'd fallen short so long it mattered now.
Uncle Adolph died and the one collecting junk in Flasher. Mom felt bad she wouldn't drink his coffee. Suitcase shabby, Jenny Rose came out and Uncle Roland lost it again flying the same plane as '44. Dave drove down his cycle and weeks after I wished I was a hood. Dad looked older, less hair and wouldn't talk about his brother writing the weird book to save the world. Mom was appalled at the relatives and Dad smoked alone, said good-bye less and less. So long now it seems all one summer.
In the naked flesh-mass exists a real man of no titles. He is always coming in and out through your sense-organs. If you don’t know him yet, look!
—Rinzai

A REAL MAN OF NO TITLES

He comes out when the last great aunt has gone to sleep on the farm no one in the family will admit is ours, barn broken down garden gone to weed where we all stood twenty years ago for pictures.

I know he reads Grandpa’s dirty books, I know he is knitting now the family history as afghan, alcoholic uncles and all. He hounds the chicken coop where I played dolls and pioneers, the nutmeg wild in his hair. Where my brother, John drove the jeep into the ground he pauses, remembering how guilt is born. I follow him far. Over one and one half miles to the next farm another brother’s land goes brown. I played there too, undressing the china doll, her sawdust legs naked in clover. The velvet bonnet is still lost. So many dog-days I carried lunch to imaginary men working that sad field.

He comes for my sister shunned by Grandma one whole summer she had no friends. No boys believed in that hick town. I hope they skate on wooden wheels to hell. She had to drink that sour nectar we all hated and dumped, walked me out at night to pee, our long gowns shimmering past the windbreak.
He is the bogey man
who gave bride books and hearts
to little girls, The one I watched for
all the years I ran home from school.
He is the bum that Mom fed
and regretted for twenty years. The one
that made Dad love her long
after she'd forgotten and the trains
quit and we moved to the right side.
He is not our father, shy man
who was the most beautiful son
the Russells ever had. And so the aunts
made sure he went to church.

He went to war. Sad man
came home and we were born.
That man who comes out now
that we can't name, it was he
that taught Dad all those songs
he sang. Old Joe was black
and dying long before, and Red Wing
still waits on my wall. That man
of no titles is real, like chickens
were, and the big board fence is not.
CROSSING THE LAKE

I

In clear light of summer, I gather in armloads of soft purple, white. I dream a river, the cloud around my body a lake of ash. To see you clear of death is not enough, the bridal wreath endlessly braiding, the lover-swing gaping. The forgotten kiss, forgotten. All the purple cut from the trellis. Flowers drop their petals and night slides its bolt clean into our bones. The door opens in, out, and we are alone.

I see you as a young man saying good-bye to your brothers. A hand moves the blood's full weight, open, waving. You planted your feet like corn, your right arm swinging high.

II

Old women, their freckled hands, exotic shellfish in the sea of evening. When storms move down the Gallatin, they perch like crows, shuffling their ancient cards. They never forget the chair not empty, when war brought its glory wreath and all the boys were men. You are there, under the dripping birch, wrapped kaleidoscope of leaves. A day of dedication, the bandage hidden. Beside the Nazarene Church I make your bed, press the soft white robe against your mouth.
III

Memorial Day. A storm threatens the parade and out back, Mother takes pictures. Then we are moving. You, the sailor, buoyed up by a cloud of flags. You told me secrets. Aunt Olive served potatoes in a flowered bowl hand-painted by a German. The way we carry blood, slow. The invisible shock of snow. The fall through a century, a steady ghost, the even touch that never melts the tongue.

I believe I belonged in the car when it crashed, the white line frozen in my mind, your words a river I still drown in. You are always on the wrong side. Now a lake. Now a letter mailed across an ocean. I lose you again, the sea exploding in your brain, the alphabet gone mute as shrapnel.

IV

Father, I was the unfaithful one. The long grass sweetened for your mowing. I played only hymns when you were dying, the motion of my hands like birds on their lake of keys. We lie humming in the deep. Now walking on water, sleep in the belly of the whale. Shells of our former selves hug the shore, breath and lap of lake water, slow river, the subtle slap of midday bath. Listen. We are crossing the lake.
AUTUMN PARALLAX

Leaves drop aimlessly through the month
I was born. Like words,
or years across a face.

My mother, pregnant in autumn:
yellow light going south. She turns
her cheek slightly,
powder drifting into sun.
A whisper of net keeps her face
hidden and from within her dark
pupil opens. Never closer to her heart
I pause with her beside a standing train.

Pieces of sky, blue dust, leave the station
when my father waves. Not farewell
but distance like China
held to the lips of one who has broken
anything or away. His love--
the space between two wars. Mine
the ties I follow wrong
moving one direction.

A field of snow allows the few
slight weeds of summer, odd
from a window where seasons matter.
There comes a moment when everything
stands still and ripens.
I am both moving and confined
the way leaves dance without leaving
their small circle of air.
STAY IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Standing with care to the left of myself,
I saw the stricken woman
slip from your neck the chain of bones
worn each night
when your children left you
to the dark, the fenced plots
of North Dakota farms,
deliberate homesteads
and good family people, standing
in the freshly plowed fields.
I remember her ruby throat,
the quiet violence
when she called my name.

You died, the woman
and the darkness sealed.
I passed through like water
for the last time, sliding within,
just missing the bullet myself.
I did not expect it to grow, bloom,
be born on cold nights in my bed,
the ruby throated woman in my arms,
assuring me
I am still your daughter.
The clocks have gathered in my face, planted long sounds in my head. I hear women walk in low fields, break their hands, spread them dark and plain in level grass. They speak softly of their men who ride out summer on cold plows, open the ground, mount the sky, thick arms reaping the sun.

I hear their breasts calling in dull cotton dresses, low tones sowing rain, discontent, an early dusk to bring the men striding to the porch and finally to bed. Their solid bodies roll in the low fields, heavy with the smell of horses, new mown hay marking time, marking time between the long legs of their wives.
THE LONG WAY HOME

Sleepwalking, we understand and touch what lies before us. A purple scar, a patch of hair —these wear us thin. All we have to stop the world.

Think of Beverly Figgins returning nights to the faulty calendar, her parents openmouthed in that poor house— their daughter beautiful and walking half-naked across the chipped linoleum. She held her arms like wings before the pictured trains. Then, her methodic pull into days.

Believing the dark outside, body softer than our mother we wondered, would one of us rise before the other and go out into night with all its impossible stars? Children practice walking in the dark, away from themselves, praying backwards: Amen. ever and forever glory.

God willing, people die in their sleep. When I was four, Grandpops rode the day-train home. When the last car groaned those who drifted were caught. We who stood against the sun saw everything plain, dust rooted to the platform, far as we could see.
OLD BLOOD

Father, at night your picture, worn with smiling, slides from its frame.
The wall turns blue as lead twilight, gunmetal, my eyes that hang,
suspended by veins from wax eyelids.

The room is still with old blood.
It is the darkest night.
I watch the bullet bloom.
SOPHIA APOLLONA

In any door I stand and wave good-bye
to an unknown figure leaving my house. The embarrassed claim on the stranger
shouts back a poverty that binds like war. The record shows six sons
the last born perfectly still
the moment of your death.
You left them all children. Even the house slept in monotonous purity,
a grieving that could not last.

When we returned, grass rutted
the foundation. We brought no seed
but a red wind to track
the invisible frame. By then
Pops was dead, and one son gone crazy
flying his bomber every dream
since the war. I was ten
and scared of falling. But Dad and I knew it mattered
to look into the hole.

I dream you indistinct. Among the mounds
of grass your fingers shine
like young fish. To the edge
my father weeps for the buck he wounded
but failed to kill. He tracks each slender
sign into the night.

Hunched over the pine board
cut and cured before I was born,
I lose myself in the softness of bread.
The solid odor of yeast
brings back my hard farming grandfathers,
men who buried whole families on the prairie
and scrubbed dirt from their hands
every night for their wives.
I work raisins into the rough grain
as if they were rubies, pressing them one
by one into the thick dough.

(In memory of Sophia Apollona Kaufman, my paternal grandmother).
Those were your girls I glimpsed in Darby, Montana. Two girls walking, long hair to hidden waists, plain with open coats. Their hair, more the yellow of lumber than wheat. Skin the same as yours, soft cuts of pine that don't show age. Such a narrow canyon to grow young girls in. Trees can sleep the winter here and never know the axe. Small storefronts boom in August, harvest the men who ranch and leave for town Saturdays to lean back their heads and smoke. You wait dinner and sift the ashes for your mother's diamond. She lost everything once. Beyond your kitchen window, sun dyes grain deep red at dusk. You think fire, remember Lost Trail Pass, how he took you down. Half the mountain went that summer. Bare trunks point the way to sky.
I wanted to write about coming west, falling
from grace, good neighborhoods
to bad, divorce and poetry. But none
of this is news. Death
does not come from east to west
or always in the afternoon. It can happen
best in cars, the people fancy
and holding hands. It happened
to da Vinci's "Last Supper"
molding in Milan, the resin giving in
to smog on the wall of the Santa Maria
alle Grazie Church. It can be written,
as weather here it too often scattered, sunsets
turning thunder in the contiguous states.
No season is right for dying
or fishing. For truth I look in the papers:
the famous fresco now a supper
for mold. It all begins peacably enough.

(for Jon Eastman)
THE BARN COMING DOWN

After the roof fell, someone gave up.
The rest went slowly, taking years
as though a life all its own.

To admit neglect hurt most.
Where the vane crowed into prairie wind
the first beam cracked. The loft buried,
stories resurrect. Great
great grandfather stalking Indians
with a hatchet. Uncle Robert
plugging magpies. There were cattle once
and one girl milking with cold
hands before school.

At first we hardly noticed. It was time.
It was only right it should come down.
No longer safe. A generation,
and it was old.
HARVEST

In the museum photos hang like planets and we are lost from home. Times like this we happen upon unnatural views: the composite of human, ourselves in foreign landscapes. We are tempted to look for God.

From this angle people are pictures. The first reads "Pueblo warrior attempting to become farmer." I see a man braided into a field between two plows. His eyes, magnetic, hold me to family, story I remember wrong. So little sky to break out of, small width of glass between histories. We let ourselves leave him frozen in trees, the only mountain sloping east. All darker where plowed.
PHOTO OF WOMEN PLOWING (circa 1899)

The driver's face has no features, a dark day-moon above eight women harnessed to the plow. They do not look up or talk of beauty wrapped in cotton. They hide their eyes in bonnets, nothing certain but the driver, slow and heavy-booted. They know they are better than horses. They have eaten silence with chapped lips at table, more bitter before son or husband than this boss man. His face blackens from too few words.

Under billowed skirts, soft forms blur the ugliest field. Wind melds with grain dust, and moths fly up suddenly at night when the women wash their legs lifting them softly in the half light behind the shed.
CALLED SLEEPING

I am called out. The leaves are letting go.
A man steps up for his hanging
and the dead woman cannot forget
the day she let him in,
the cloud of maples, burning.
Some may never turn
this way again. Some are naked already.

The falling is everywhere, so gradual
even the trees have forgotten
the pewter gaze of sky, unflinching
through miles of snow.

It is Sunday in October.
The maples accept me, losing
their leaves the way the mothers
who lost themselves at birth
lose again at dying. Once you left me
at the foot of a mountain
to bring up a day's water. Immortality
of gesture is all I have, the particular
straws of your being.
Do the eyes dream? Memory,
you ask me less and less
of my life. This age
collects like autumn,
even the small-boned plum
and lilac. Through the haze,
the brilliant skin of the birches.
NOTES

"Poem for Octavio Paz," page 23: Cihuaacoatl is an ancient Aztec earth-goddess who, today, in rural Mexico is associated with the legend of la llorona, a weeping woman who cries out in the night.


"Photo of Women Plowing," page 53: The original photo is contained in the Saskatchewan Archives, University of Regina. The photo is of Doukhobor women immigrants who escaped persecution in Tsarist Russia to settle in Saskatchewan.