Chasing the moon to earth and other poems

Paul Stewart Zeigler

*The University of Montana*

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CHASING THE MOON TO EARTH

And Other Poems

By

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BETTY

You sit in front of me,
your lined face slides
into your neck. Our talk
means nothing and you
know it.

You're not up there
on the wall, you're sitting
across the table.
That picture isn't you,
you're different.

A friend, you met him
tonight, is too fat,
and the rest of us
are just sitters,
watchers.

"I didn't shook it!"
You're right, Fred just
can't pour a good
glass of beer,
always foam.
Your friend, Betty, hasn't yet been found.
The old man reached for something no one would ever find on the floor, turned, wild eyes unfocused, and came back.

Betty, your flowers are dribbling all over the floor.
White on white
(for Linn)

Painter, where are you? Your lake
calls from a green frame
hung beneath warm air. A kitchen table
supports a waterfall studied by orange figures.

People stare at your dragons, smile,
pass at 60. Light picks us out now. Kangaroos
will never work as well on small cars.

Seattle fog settles deep inland, blocking a familiar
Bozeman. That trail used long ago
closes every winter. On the Beartooth Plateau
no snow fights wind at 10,000 feet,
rain has no chance to freeze.

A quiet filled with orange juice
separates us. Etchings, chalk on grey paper
build soft bridges, weak in winter rain.
Your red has become necessary. Painter,
where are you.
You're right--he does look ordinary,
a man, poet to be sure
but he doesn't flaunt it. His words echo
from the page, set up reverberations
that ripple into Montana. Here's a lake
so big no trout has ever finished the course.
Obstacles, logs submerged for years,
now rise to the sun again. This chessboard
has no squares,
no rules of conduct. Poets here
are easier to catch than fish. I hear
a close name, a friend who madly chases
northwest trout. Why do I always hear broken
glass when poets speak?
RETURN

I ride seven hundred miles to hear
wind blow my words down an empty canyon.
I'm Northwest, but not far enough. This port
stops long before the land does. The gulls
complain so loudly. They have to fly
so far to get this city's garbage.

I ride a thin wind up the Columbia,
get lost somewhere over the Snake.
The dams keep getting in my way. Due back
yesterday, I spin a web
to catch lies with. The wind spits
at me from the river.
SCRUB TIMBER

Metal should be left to rust,
to bleed into pine needles, shards
for the future, middenheaps of forgotten machines.

Old corral tied down by the wind,
ghost horses...

I taste dry rot, poison mushrooms.
A lake lies past that ridge,
old trailer never lived in,
old boats that never touch water.

I've seen this before.
A hundred shadows,
rain patterns in short grass.

Nude in a cold autumn rain,
quail explode from every rock, drumming sound away.
NORTHSIDE VIEW

Greyhounds only go to towns you're running from. Walk the north side where empty brick steps drop twelve feet into unused kitchens. Here, kids tremble with the train tracks. This town carries a load too heavy for worn out timber.

The derelicts haunt me. Old men in red winter hats hesitate in the June sun, caught by a slow light. They've sold Rudy's and cars still circle to return next year with fresh paint. The smell of raw gasoline washes my nerves.
WINE CAN'T MAKE IT WAVER

In the desert, I remember the sounds of drinking. Sun heats my flesh, hot winds cool my face. Dry-eyed, I try to find stars hidden by the city glare. Your home has a swirling pool, I soak in my own sweat. You look into the valley, eyes following the street grid, hard diamond lights... all for sale.

Tires spit gravel at me, pellets of a ground down mountain. Two yellow eyes in the night, a cat up the hillside nurses a traffic bruise. I must hear it all. The night sounds, the whistle of a duck's pinions, the cry of geese buried forever in cloud. In the desert, wind quietly steals the rock.
THE DELUX BAR

In a company town, the jukebox isn't loud enough. Powder blasts echo through every night. Friends fade, drift with snow. We run, headlights blocked out, night locked securely in. Colors fade in a brightly lit bar, bodies move solo.

A large man, image of a poet, burns matches, struggles against falling mine shafts, brick walls, endless train rails disappearing into the same spot. Looking at each other, we toast silence, return to Missoula and Mozart.
NEON CROSSES

People gather where there are no rows
where every desk has gone back forever to trees
bare from frost. A Seattle visitor gives
my wife doves,
then leaves. Our marble birds take wing
past neon crosses and silent fears. In the upper room,
a motorcycle keeps company with thin nuns
and long blonde hair. Sorry, I learned to swear
in Italian long before I prayed in Latin.
MRS. RILEY

Nursing homes are beaches, capturing the last driftwood. Hold her hand for one hour, but give up following her paths.

They made her wait two hours for lunch.

"I should know, I timed them."

But, what of the lovely view? An asphalt lot begs for one car. "No one ever comes for me."

I was told to love you well. Ninety-two years carry a lot of weight; muscles sag, bones show under the pressure. We are her children now. Listen...
birds are nesting in the earth's shadow.

Time for us to leave.
"Harold knew I'd been burnt out in the valley."

The sun had dried his tongue, burned
the shack he called home. Loose boards
and tarpaper can't win that war. "Settled back
in 'eighty-eight, burnt out late last year." Snow
settled in these bones, scattered them
through spring's green meadow.

But wells dried that hot August,
cattle left the salt licks to die in the hills.
The valley turned brown, the grey walls of the shack
couldn't hold that fire. A dream charred.

Now, a room above the bar,
an old terrier to share lonesome nights when hot winds
blow. And day after day, strangers
who never knew.
MORNING SUN

They march slowly across the bridge,
wind chipping away early morning paint.
You turn, asking "Where do they come from?"
I shrug.
"Where do they go?"
The wind rises off the river,
catches,
then loses the bridge. A lone fisherman
gripped in white
watches upstream. A line drifts,
forgotten memories of summer hooks,
river fires. There are no fish tonight.
SIX MILE CREEK

There are no reasons in falling leaves
or cow elk skulls. Governments dissolve
as trees close in over trails
to corniced snow. Red packs
follow each other through deer tracks,
shallow fords.

Ever deeper: trees lose their bark
to hungry teeth, snow is trampled to ice,
dyed red in winter frost.

New leaves hide the snow markers,
our ski tracks have become mud.
Scarred trees regrow in the deer yard.
TIDAL EXPERIMENT

Broken words drift in foam,
messages torn, scattered: jigsaw
puzzles in the sea. Who can put
them together in Japan,
Ceylon? Return them in fishing floats?
What nets catch scraps
of sodden paper? Ink
runs, replaced by salt,
the blood of tuna. The message
is lost, nonsense chasing the moon
with the tide.
CHILD OF MARS

"How many tears, how many drops of sweat."--street child of Viet Nam

War baby, where are you? What strange blood burns your mind? The savage dawn light gleams in your eye as you search.

In America, you'd like it. We have no refugee camps. Our barbed wire is for cattle. Pens are not plastique, the sound of jets causes no fear.

War baby, help us. Come and live with us. We can do so much for you. We'll buy you toys, an education, even a car when you're older. And, war baby, you'll never hear exploding bombs anguished cries or see tears, sweat.
From one piaster note, we'll give dollars, we'll give flowers. Your new parents will even love you.
KINDERGARTEN PAINTING

"Trees aren't red,
they're brown and green,
and the sky is blue."
But a man's blood
stained that tree.
Over Japan the sky
flashed white.
TREE BRANCH

It's not the well-drawn line I prefer:
continuity defines itself,
a sharp line against the sky
where nothing grows. Trees branch out,
obscure my vision. In this land
there is no 180 degree arc.
It becomes lost in pine mountains
not knowing to turn downhill,
follow a stream to the sea.
Turn uphill to glaciers,
a world of white
each step lost before it reaches ground,
echoing in blue-green depth
bouncing off moraine
to lie still against a mountain face.
The only life is mosquito
and pictures of lichen.
DAVID'S CABIN

White horses step to the window,
pause,
wheel and tear sod
as they flee reflections.

No graves mark this valley.
Indian bones, picked clean
by the air, are scattered too wide
to find. Our papers fill
the air with words, sighs echo
the wind in our chimney.

A bald eagle circles lower into the valley,
chases our shadow into the rock.
We join the night,
looking east.
WINTER DREAMS

Spin your eyes. Follow the wavering neon finger past day-glo buses, mirror walls, tents. Parabolic microphones pick every sound. Bulbs pop, pictures to be filed. Next year's winner felled by a chain saw.

Wake to clouds, sky dead again this morning. Wait, thumbing ads for fifty, news for one. The drummer's backstage hiding bad style.

Foul.
Three players kneed by a midget. And your eyes spin again.

No births at St. Pat's, no deaths last week. The church--a nice ruin, but bulldozers--shapeless dust cloud, today's ghost, dirt haloes.

It comes full circle in spinning cherries.
A guarantee.
Wealth, health and death.
Zero degrees, wind in every corner.
Eyes turn, blue lies behind contacts.
Fake hair, fake soul
nylon ribbons of nothing.

Your eyes spin into your throat,
turn uphill and watch fish die.
Club them.
Eat their poison and chase birds
into the brush.

A hunchbacked late show screams
into your waking, leers
at nude bodies reflected off camera.

Spin one last time, cats
flying in all directions, earth
heaving to stars. Fall to the window
and look.
BARTENDERS AREN'T PAID TO SMILE

Faces ease past the glass rim,
peer into pools of liquid deep enough to drown in. Laughter spins a fantasy of light,
small candles hide the register. In Butte,
the barking boy has died, pressing his face through the screen until the wire caught
his throat. No one cries as bricks tumble into abandoned mineshafts. Each year
gallus frames show less light for Christmas.

Go to the museum, try to catch
a mirror image of yourself as you spin into a candle flame. Dark halls carry none of your ghosts.
They ride the future winds,
breath bubbling through stagnant puddles.

There was no need for an ambulance. Rusty wire spattered with red echoes the brick dust in the air. A black face, snarling at a copper town gone green with age. Children quick-step past the door, remembering red lights and taunts.
PLAINS PORTRAIT

He slumps over a small glass, aware
of the frost in his mustache, while his wife
watches a blind TV. Grey-eyed from too many years,
too many miles, he searches
amber puddles for ancient treasure maps.
Compost heaps brace a crumpled farm,
watch the one road into town. Fingers
twitch the dead string a kitten
killed. The last drop past decayed smiles,
he stops in time. The road map
shows no arterial connection.
"DREAM OF THE WILD HORSES"
(From a film of the same name)

Horses leap with flames--
diamond water.

How few
lift the head
before we plunge.

Earth shock
from silent hooves.

I still hear them,
beating
against the grey fog.

Grind the lens to powder
and let the shards
rest quietly in the sea.
A PENNY THOUGHT

Just smelling hay,
watching insects hide from wings
and following the sun
as it stops for a moment
before it slides downhill.
There are no messages in my mailbox.
Clouds linger over dandelions. A bird
lifts its wing,
bringing sky to earth.
BOARDING AT BUTTE

Crawling the bus, pillows and feet
fight the aisle. Heavy treasures
spill. Smiles.
Her friend says nothing---
six feet of silence under a broken hat.
There are no questions to ask. Distance
is hard to judge at night.
CAN I GET YOU ANYTHING?

A bullet, placed carefully
one inch above my left eye. Visions
are no longer vital. The music
runs on all night, meets the dawn
with a raucous tin horn. Behind every cloud,
dust.

What can I do?

Sing quietly until the traffic
stops dead on the bridge. Sing past
a hoarse throat into an ear
pierced with the taste of river water.
Sing along with cats who have swallowed
owls, children screaming out questions,
and paper rattling in my throat.

How can I help?

Place the shroud gently. Walk soft
away into deep grass. Then, watch a cloud
form above our mountain
and throw a snowball deep into the valley.

When should I do this?
On the last day of the new moon.
Keen one last word into the wind,
return to the city
and find all the quiet spaces
we build around each other.
SEA SHELLS

for Ann

Gulls circle,
pick rocks to swallow
the foam. The sea
catches the shells,
blows them to caves
a thousand feet below.

We climb to the sun.
Below us, children play,
ignoring the pull
of moon. No gulls follow.
They ride the ferry
miles out to sea.

The sea returns. Our beach
and cliff depend on it.
For children, there could be no clams
without the sea.
And we climb to watch
the moon pull, to spin
our fingers among webs.
There are no strings--
a thousand feet
air to water,
mist to skin.
BETWEEN THE NOTES

Silence
to the sound of my own breathing.
Five hundred miles inland
the moon tugs my blood.
The spider weaves it all together
a flower
shade
sun
the wind
A LOT OF CALVES WON'T MAKE IT THIS YEAR

Rain rolls across the highway off tires
draining to earth. Click on click,
a ballpoint breaks the rhythm. Seat 13 on the bus
west. Five signs stare into my mind. The land
rolls away, small hills blocked by grey as soon as they leave
the road. I miss the sun
racing along the wires, leaping from jagged poles.
High tension lines fade before they pinpoint
the horizon. Birds are walking today.
The world's tallest smokestack hides in clouds
it didn't make, and rails bleed
where the train gouged too deep. A lone cow
flicks at non-existent flies, catching only snow.
A road is being built,
dead brush and scrub pine
traded for faster travel. In the window
the girl across the aisle is seen, always chewing gum.
ROAD EAST

Arrows point to weigh stations, the only light
from Clinton to Drummond. Signs leap into headlights,
swing away into dark. Food, phone,
no services.
Fenceposts hitchhike east, guide the cows
still walking the road this fall.
Silver Bow, Rocker, Ramsey...
old towns die so long. These people with arsenic
in their bones know time,
watch it edge children's faces,
dry valley soil.
Cattle block the wind,
hide behind fenced-off willows.
DEMONSTRATION

Idiots: clicking pins
on empty chambers. Click...
Click... seconds apart.
Lethal toys.
"I didn't know..."
"I didn't know..."

Explosions in a body.
Light at both ends
of a tunnel
carved by a .38.

And we go on playing.
A trigger,
a button.
Click...
105 DEGREES: NO SHADE

I know the old songs, sung by others
around fire, know them by book
and tongue, by gas heat and coal-fired
turbines. Wax figures melt,
drip through a hot night,
rise and fall through black canyons,
revolve around thoughts of rain.

But clouds only show light behind mountains,
offer no relief. The flicker picks at notes
from old weddings, litter on my desk top.
Wax can give no protection from old pain
burning with night.

Trout come to me in the river
tonight. They talk of hooks,
worm tidbits or bear claw.
I should follow them deeper, to pools
hidden from sun.

Bubbles pattern the surface, break
into stars. The gill-breeders
lied. They know only water
and insects, root and mud.
Still they urge me on. Castles
with treasure lie
in roots of mountain creek,
small life hides in sand bars.

Fins marked for science, trout
talk eagerly of hatcheries, strange motion
then, freedom of lake or river,
Mayflies, a worm or two.
But hooks wait,
blades in every pool.
214 South Jackson

Old man, your rooms haven't changed in years. That stuffed trout you caught when twelve still hangs behind your chair. What bodies twist in your mind, turn in your dreams to chase and devour? The sun stands motionless: it only moves with earth shocks, tidal waves.

People gather, watch your contortions, spin with you through fantasy into deep pools. Tears flow from corners of an eight-sided room as you miss all doors.

Laughter muffled in winter clothing, Puck with no stage, a son without a father, we choose songs to spin away night, to block out age. Happy songs, bird songs and trout.
CHASING THE MOON TO EARTH

Frost beads the crucifix above the bed. Hell can't char these cold bones. My rosary turns, bead chasing bead in mysterious chant. Candles burn in silver mirrors, reeds whip against low glass: the last touch of summer light.

There is so little life to them. The flowers. See? They died when cut. Their colors, thin shades of brown, wilt, hang on the lip of the pewter pitcher. No hands will weave these stems.

Night leaves, shadow chased into the broken mirror. Nighthawks wheel against the dawn. Red glints on shards, dances in webs and dust. The cat left, finding warm mouse flesh while pawing through the frost.
DREAMS WITHOUT FIGURES

Your tale of the Cherokee
can't touch me. It's been too long,
too far. I can't hear
those children
falling into mud,
the death keen,
the falling snow. Your god
was the world, your brother the buffalo.

I'm married to a flag-draped
corpse. A deer skull decorates the table.
Dried weeds in empty wine bottles,
drapes pulled to close off
exterior light. I can't burn
my goos like the Potlatch,
I no longer feel ticks in my hair.
Behind the curtain, flies are gathering.
ELEVEN YEARS CHIP THE STONE

for Judy

One hand holding a stopwatch,
I look out windows,
marking the position of every
falling leaf.

A small stone.

Tail twitching, a lone cat
shares my time,
pawprints in window frost,
street light reflection.

Words and numbers.

As I leave the room, snow
joins with falling leaves
hiding those marks I'd made
on the lawn.

Jamming hands into pockets
I crush newsprint,
marks and patterns
topped by a cross.

A name.
BORROWED POEM

Birds flying into mist drown
in raindrops. A generation
of worms dies each night
on concrete walks.
A doll talks from my madness
but I can't hear it,
or the always wind. I look inward
to darkness: my night is complete.

The moon disappears, eaten
by the sun's shadow. A dragon drives
its barbed tail deep
into my mind. Trolls rush along paths,
and the rain has become god.
JANUARY DEATH

Shut up. I don't care why it can't rain in January. Water drips into sewers, boils in popcorn poppers. Hot chocolate is easy to make. Cards turn, face up you know them, red on black, black on red. Only kings can move alone.

A leaky roof in January: do all years begin with drippy water? Where people walk grass is green, puddles show cement wrongs. I should climb, disappear into mountain clouds. I expect tents to leak, pines to drip. Lava Lake has no visitors in winter, every one brews his own tea.

Three years is too long to wait. Cookies turn stale long before bread turns green. Food for others--not me. Sail Grace Lines, escape to Caribbean sun, take a side trip to New York, or Moscow. Fly American, 10,000 feet's not high enough when you begin at five.
Watch the sun, it knows where the day begins. Travel the horizon, leave the land to watch the edge begin. When you catch a cloud, will it rain above you? Stand on a log, feel the rotten wood do a slow roll and dump you, ass over pride into a rock pile no one knew was there.

Philosophers will never run out of paper. Trees grow over a thousand years, it's planned that way. Run me off seventy copies--choke me with shit. I haven't any choice. If I keep a form up to date, will it mean I can be mean? Indians knew what to do, so did passenger pigeons.

I make noise, rooms should be tested for echoes. Yesterday's tenant punched ears in all four walls. Listen. Cover sound with tape, hide your voice in reels, watch fish leave your lure to die down stream.
SIX DAYS HOPE

January 9, 1970

Walls...
impossible,
too large.
Snow isn't safe,
falls underfoot.
Ropes,
iron
can't hold
forever.
Hammer blows
open cracks,
rocks fall to wind.
Roaring.
God damn it.
Rocks can't
feel
pain,
snow won't hide
forever.
Down's light, it floats
above the snow.
A READING
(for Dick Hugo)

Sitting on a tall chair, you hope
enough money will appear for a better light. Enough
has happened this week. I've heard you echo
through my typewriter, but now, only a few
candles light my words.

Old friends listen to Italy speak. We have
a word for loneliness. Each of us looks
from a window, watching seasons turn.
Old brick lies of age, unable to match
the grass or trees.

You hope for fish names, but I want
sounds of water to explain why sparrows
leap from bridges. They never will tell
me. Your eyes haven't lied, your heart's
not false
on a torn sleeve for those who whisper
in the back. I'll return to wine, go
to Italy to capture four minutes of light
at the edge of a mountain. I'll chase
a trout,

and catch the sea from behind.
GEORGIA STRAIT

A cloud stands, hand reached
to western sun while fourteen gulls
fight over a chocolate square. I know
no nautical terms. Pacific green reaches deep,
an invitation to madness
a letter to Mars.

Poets talk all night of first ministers
and vice presidents. But the salt
clogs my throat; my fair weather friend
has left the sky and joined with earth.

This dock stretches two miles
into the sea, clouds sail north
for Canadian winters leaving a wet city.
My storm caught me last night; rain washed
my beach and left me exhausted.

Where the earth-shadow meets the edge
I talk of bottled water,
crazy friends at border crossings and
tired stars.