Connemara Moonshine

Mark Gibbons

The University of Montana

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CONNEMARA MOONSHINE

by

Mark Gibbons

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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CONNEMARA MOONSHINE

I carry the worn luggage
of my Irish ancestors
in the darkest chamber of my heart,
stacked dusty, unhinged
but never unpacked,
and when I listen
alone,
holding my breath,
I hear whispers calling
from trunk to glen,
uprisings,
green as the Twelve Bens and cool
as moonshine on Lake Connemara
March evenings when no one knows.

My grandfather said his daily prayers,
in Gaelic away from the church.
His fingers worked the rosary
beads he hung above his bed,
just over his head,
blood lucky as an ocean of ale.

Adrift
in my shanty ship of fool dreams,
I pray for Galway's,
Montana's moonbeams to heal
the sins of fathers and sons.

Molten waves merge and crash
blue drunk on a frozen sea.
This legacy of liquid terror
and pride
is stuck between absolute zero and steam,
tears cold in my burning veins,
insane
messengers of impending doom
like rude and ravenous
tabloid reporters
chronicling my wayfaring shame.

Bottles of Bushmills,
smooth as gasoline, comfort
the combustible marriage between
Jesus and the devil
Himself in my mind.
If the bottle's half full,
    I'm only half empty
but know my rage will go wrong.

So I'll drink
    till ice ignites the song
burning hotter than the fires
of Hell in my gut and cry,
For the love of Jesus H. Sufferin'
    Christ! What the fuck am I supposed to do?

    Just one more time
    I'll try to hide
    like a leprechaun circus bear.
(Do you suppose he's happy
    behind the bars
    tipping bottles and dancing
in clothes?)
    I must dry the blind Madonna's eyes,
pack my bags for Butte and go,
decide to be my mother's son
    and know
    my father's moon will rise
    once more
    St. Patrick's Day.
I. Old Country
I was a rich kid in Alberton, pampered inside
an old two-shack, ship-lapped, slapped-together house
right beside the Milwaukee Railroad. Creosote ties
footed our faded linoleum floors — they supported us like trains
to the splintered end. Barren beaver board walls

Bled frost and our dreams. We were rocked
by vibrations of a westbound freight, electric engines
and diesels rattled windows and teeth, promised
fear could be soothed by iron. A worn groove on the coal chute
doorsill lip made a perfect rifle rest. That shed,

Fort Apache, held our secrets like swallow
and wasp nests. September nights, bears came
for our trash. We waited breathless, dug down in sleeping bags,
clutching flashlights and holding our water. Our hearts
raced like hummingbirds. Each hour another fantasy indulged.

Skittish deer found dinner along the tracks, nosed wheat
spilled meals in the snow. Dawn and dusk, white tails twitched
at us. But we were spoiled most on long summer days
tormenting rattlers and climbing castle rocks, skinny dipping
and fishing up Petty Creek from the narrows

To the old goat farm. We swam the Clark Fork like beaver,
circled and slapped, threw hoots and full cannon balls.
We gorged ourselves daily like Romans or kings
eating filthy-rich feasts, everything in season: green apples,
ripe plums, wild onions, and garden-raided dirt-sweet carrots.

We discovered the neighbor's basement, ate jars
of silver salmon and gagged smelling limburger cheese. We sipped
on sour dandelion wine, felt our way up the dizzy stairs.
Through a door left ajar, fully framed in a mirror, we saw nipples
round as our mouths — secrets — only told to our dogs.

We lazed under lilacs, read clouds going by, never denied
we were flat spoiled rotten and ruined for good, like Huck Finn,
our hero back then. We, too, would have settled for a raft and Jim,
but we damn sure didn't want to run away. Those days are still
a toy chest so filled that the lid cannot be closed.
UNDERCOVER COWBOY

Up to my chin in bucking horses, cowboys, rope and corrals, I snuggle down deep under heavy wool blankets, rustle and kick to warm cold sheets. I peek at the whirling, dancing shadows thrown dusty across my bedroom floor in a shaft of light below the door. Crazy as a matador rodeo clown, it's my mother slipping out of her clothes. She's tucked me in. She won't be back. My dad's already in bed. I hear her slippers scrape the tiles -- hooves begging at a barn wood stall.

A bullwhip cough cracks my ear, and I hear the rasp of my father's rough thumbs turning pages of a hardback book. I study the panicked mustang on my western bedspread: rearing, nostrils flared, desperate to be free but held down by two lariats. Then wildfire erupts in a stick match flash and tobacco hisses to life. Fresh smoke dusts the arena again where punchers die and rarely win like Hoppy or Rory Calhoun. My dad gets up, makes his final pass at the toilet, kills the light. No saloons tonight. No chute gates bang. No cow bells clang. No thundering battle dance, just bedsprings settling to silence. Still. All that's left is sheeted dark.

I press my cheek to the cool wall and pray to wake or my soul be taken to that roundup in the sky where cowboys sit on rail fences, joke and roll their own. Sporting Stetsons and spurs, they grin and spit, drink whiskey and never back down. They wrangle all day, buck wild as the stock in the arena of my dream, where cloudy big skies and lonely tough guys flood my home on the range.
MUSIC MY SISTER GAVE ME
    for Connie

I.
Sitting outside in my S & H Green Stamps rocking chair
in the shade of the cottonwood tree,
I played records, 45s,
you'd left behind -- Pat Boone, Bill Haily, and Elvis.

Your old RCA Hi-Fi fit perfect
one square of the sidewalk that circled our house
you left at seventeen.
I taped a stack of pennies on the metal tone arm
to keep the needle in the grooves --
    I want you. I need you. I love you with all my heart.

I needed you, like Rock
Hudson needed Doris Day,
the way Murphy (our Norwegian Elkhound)
wanted me to lay my ear on his belly,
so I could listen to him gurgle inside.
    Put a chain around my neck
    and lead me anywhere.
    Won't you let me... let me... let me... let me...

The phonograph stylus needed more weight,
but I knew if I touched it
    there was a fifty-fifty chance
    a zap-jolt of electricity would shoot up my arm,
    buzz my teeth, my peter, and my hair.

Those shocks were funny with you
laughing when I jerked
but scary when I was alone,
after you'd gone --
    For my darling, I love you, and I always will.

II.
Is it like that with Parkinson's Disease?
Like your life is skip, skip,
skipping away? I wish I could fix it,
fix it, do something simple
    as grounding your haywire connections,
the erratic, ratic, puppet dance
your pills drag you through.
Dyskinesia is better than nothing,
you say. If you stop,
you'll turn to stone --
Don't be cruel to a heart that's true.

No matter how much you joke,
joke, joke about it, about dancing
and running out of gas, the jerking,
the shaking, the kicks and sweats,
your yanked expression
holding on for the ride, saps
this wooden heart of mine,
the one I carved for you.
Tell me who pulls the strings, laughs
and cries, for marionettes?
You have taught me, Big Sister,
after thirty odd years,
the folly of pity and shame --
    Yes, anyway you want me, that's how I will be.

III.
Even when I was six and you were seventeen
you left me the medicine of music -- Connie
Francis, Johnny Mathis, the Everly Brothers,
Conway Twitty, Johnny Cash and Percy Faith.

Remember the day we danced
with Murphy around the yard --
    *wild as the raging sea?*
You held his front paws, and I pulled
his curly tail, tongue lolling
out the side of his mouth.
Head thrown back, he rocked to the beat.
The whites of his eyes flashed --
    *You ain't nothin' but a hound dog.*

We hopped and spun till we tumbled
in a pile on the grass, laughed
so hard it hurt my gut. Murphy
panted beside us, kept time
to the revolving click of the stylus
riding the groove at the end of the record.
I couldn't move but felt soothed
by rhythm. Your stomach bobbed my head.
In my mind we were motion
like Elvis. I gyrated my hips;
you tossed your hair --
    *I'm in love. I'm all shook up.*
    *Um-Hmm-Hmm, Hmmm,*
    *Yeh-Yeh. I'm all shook up!*
HINDSIGHT

When buttercups freckle the ground, and farmers harrow their fields, we ride in the back of Burt's pickup truck, but can't stand up and look over the cab like we do when we go to the dump. His dad makes us sit down on the bed with our poles, tackle and gear. From there we can see the tamarack feather on Indian Head Rock before we bounce across the Natural Pier Bridge over the Clark Fork River.

The old International (we call a "corn binder") whines in granny gear up the grade at Panther Pass -- a one lane road cut above the cliffs after a logging truck broke through the plank floor and took out the Petty Creek Bridge. At the summit we pause, let the engine cool, roll rocks off the overlook curve. Only boulders that take two of us to start will snap branches, tear brush, and jump the railroad tracks -- two hundred feet down -- to splash a shade of Poseidon lurking below the surface of the swollen current.

Coasting into Lothrop, we welcome the smells of alfalfa and dust, tell our secret "Little Johnny" jokes, and shake the Hills Brothers' coffee can of worms we dug behind the shed -- the best bait for high-water, hungry trout along the banks of the beaver ponds.

Our backs to the cab, we face the west, watch the world slip away from us. Sure that we'll catch a mess of fish -- Cutties, Brooks, Rainbows, or a cross, pansize, for Mom to fry -- we plan the scene of our triumphant return.

We'll stop and pick two bright bouquets: Shootingstars, Bluebells, Yellow Fritillaries, Arrowleaf Balsamroot, Wakerobins, Lupine, Indian Paintbrush, Syringa, and Dogtooth Violets. With wildflowers clutched tight in a fist behind our back, we'll hold out the stringer with our other hand.
When she pinches her nose, we'll spring our surprise -- be Odysseus finally come home.
WASH DAY ROUTINES

Every Monday Mother washed clothes. Winters we wheeled in the washing machine and galvanized tubs from the shed behind the house after shoveling a trail through snow. She wiped them clean with a damp rag -- the best season for Black Widow spiders. Mounds of sorted clothes hilled the kitchen floor. Mother boiled extra water on the stove; bleached grease and grass stains in the sink, scrubbed knees, elbows and cuffs by hand. She filled the tubs with scalding water.

The loud, churning, agitating slosh and the thrum of the washing machine motor promised production and danger. The wringer squeezed each piece of clothes flat and compact from the washer to the first steaming tub. Mother stirred the blistering cotton with the wooden stick her father had made. She snagged the sodden dead-heavy rags, carefully re-fed the wringer -- the final rinse. Mother collected the stiff-squeezed wads in wicker baskets we helped her haul outside. Wiping the old clothes line wires clean, she shook and pinned each wet item to freeze-dry in the crystalline air.

Before dark she filled the house with damp, stiff forms. Draped on hangers and backs of chairs, they hung from every doorway, knob, and ledge. Newspapers yellowed beneath gangs of overalls -- racked and thawing around the oil stove. A reunion of familial silhouettes swung on the indoor line that spanned the length of the kitchen. Mother would iron, keep adding to the crowd overhead while I scanned the Monkey Wards catalog for toys, flipping slowly past the women's lingerie.

Winter wash day nights I settled into the weighty comfort of the kitchen wood stove, a house full of clothes, the iron hiss and hot smell of pressed cotton and wool. I felt warm
summer sun on my skin. Stripped naked and standing on a gravel bar, I waited for the catalog model on page 239 to join me on the beach, unfasten her bra, and let gravity have its way.
GOOD FRIDAY

I'm a son of a Catholic who didn't worry a bit about church or his Easter Duty since he'd received the last rites (pneumonia) as a kid. My dad was condemned by Father Leshner to burn in the everlasting fire, God's cure for selfish, passionate desires and confessions of masturbation. At thirteen Dad ran away from the order and the house of God.

So it was no great surprise that I was baptized a Protestant in the Methodist church where my mother taught Sunday school. We sang *Jesus Loves Me, This I Know*, down in the basement where we played with blocks and glue and crayons and scissors, heard stories about Adam and Eve sharing apples and fig leaves on Noah's Ark with Samson and Delilah. Old Holy Moses, the jiggle-armed organist, glared at us when we clung to the rungs of the old rugged cross, built Jericho's wall (to knock it down) or stumbled into "the valley of the shadow of breath" where we giggled at our "rods and staffs."

Maybe since cleanliness was next to Godliness (that and for the twenty bucks a month) we became diligent janitors of the church. We vacuumed and dusted every week, cleaned the pews and straightened the chairs. The pulpit was quiet on those afternoons that we tidied up for God, so I sat down in the Minister's chair and asked Jesus what he thought about last week's sermon on old Solomon's eye for an eye. And how did He like being left alone all week, locked up in the stinky church?
Wouldn't He rather be doing miracles 
like He used to do, or wandering around 
with His gang of disciples, 
instead of being stuck on the cross? 
When I was there by myself 
(my mother downstairs) I opened 
the windows so we could breathe.

The last Friday before my mother quit, 
I decided I couldn't leave Him 
like that, like some lonely little kid 
or a caged circus cat, a prisoner 
like Monty Christo, so I asked him 
if he wanted to come with me. 
It was so easy. We left the way 
my dad had run -- out the front and down 
the stairs, tennis shoes and shirt tails flapping -- 
chose the fire outside in the sky. Behind us 
the church doors, thrown wide open, 
stood dumb as the Calvary stone.
HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

White
Dragon flies
Into ram's head. Gray eyes
Fix me on the ground.
An antelope leaps over
Two howling wolves.
All shape-shifting petroglyphs
Turn dark as Mother's
Scorn. Gunmetal rabbit's feet and fur
Make dirty wads of cotton.
A toy poodle sundae melts
To the Virgin's praying hands.
Fingers stream and spread,
Unfurl to Pontiac shoulders.
Thunderbird wings curve and loop
Into a child's wailing mouth.
Toothless, it swallows the pale
Half moon quick as this summer
Afternoon. How can I explain my
Fear of playing or my fear
Of missing the scene?
Some clouds give but can't receive,
Call home stormy skies.
Others softly dissipate
Like smoke to hinted smell.
Curling claws or eagle talons
Become my father's long ear,
Deaf to words
Dissolving in wind.
All forms bend
Blue.
SCARECROWS

We took turns dying
every night of the summer --
compulsory prisoners of war, not a game
for tenderhearted Momma's-boys.
The big kids (some my brother's age)
liked playing the Nazi guards --
loved to torture and make us beg
for mercy they'd never give.

Breaking across the moonlit lawn,
we'd attack bare-handed, no hope
to survive but knew what we had to do --
die... rather than drown in our fear.
I'd fall for them in a slow motion dance,
spin riddled with bullets, blown
out of my bones, hear the thud of my back
on the ground. Stars whirled above
like dizzy doves, my heart
beat full as the moon.

Nuremberg was a joke to them.
Half-pissed, they couldn't kick us alive --
called us losers and chicken shits.
We hissed our rank and serial number,
then just before we died,
we cursed them: You dirty bastard Krauts!
with our last gasping breath.
It drove them nuts we wouldn't go
and play their prison camp.
They wanted us to cry, run home
like Dicky Sloan did that time
they rubbed his nose in crap.

Next day they sniggered at Dicky's mom
when she snapped her apron
and stomped the ground, so mad
her face turned red. She swore
they'd wind-up in prison or dead!
But death meant nothing to them
or us. It was worse to quit or tell.
Christ only knows why we bled for them
and didn't whine like bellied-up dogs.
Gape-mouthed-blank-stares is all we'd yield,
our arms splayed wide as ragged scarecrows.
SWALLOWS AND RAIN

Dark clouds burn yellow over Lolo Peak
heavy with rain now puddling dust.
That sweet earth smell, recalls my youth
on hot summer days when I waltzed
hay fields and conjured thunder clouds.

Bucking twine bales, building golden temples,
was muscle art to us. We danced and whirled
around the wagon: a clean and dip; jump and push
through sun and hum and sweat. We sculpted
tiers like puzzle kings, compressed the loaves
of cattle larder firm as a stonecutter's touch,
each corner tied tight and square enough to pass
the niggling pharaoh's eye. He weighed the threat
of darkening sky molding his crop on the ground.

I craved much more than chaff and wind,
or blisters that proved my worth:
vole and tractor putter black dirt; Blue-Boy
nips their heels; a pregnant doe on Butler Creek
bloats dead, hung by a broken leg tangled
in barbed wire; barn swallows dive to bomb
our stack, flee from our apple missile attack
and leave their nests for rafter targets --
hearts of mud and straw.

The pump house hose and lunch break swim
quenched our arid, sticky skin like afternoon thunder
pushing winds of promise like weekend pay; raindrops
began a syncopated increase -- like gun shots
on opening day -- bombarding the tin-roofed
barn. The wagon crew cut the elevator engine
ran for cover to wait it out. I collapsed on my back,
grateful for rain and drank the cool damp air.
I watched a swallow watching me, both of us dry
while the torrent raged on. She was collared
by her bulbous brown pebbled nest, calm
and grave as a sick pet. I took in and released
alfalfa breath, fingered eggshells glistening in straw.
ABOVE THE RIM

I followed each shot like a bird dog,
possessed and wet as my dad must have been,
1936 State Champion
in his junior year -- my age. I tried
but never perfected his two-handed shot
that my coach corrected. My old man
didn't watch me play all season.
I think he'd lost his faith in scores.
But he came to divisionals in Anaconda,
sat reluctantly in the crowd somewhere.

Twin Bridges played us tough to the finish.
The whole game was back and forth.
I picked, rolled, hit the fade-away jumper,
was a wolverine on defense. With
less than a minute, I broke to the wing
off a perfect screen, faked a jump shot, ducked
and drove, went baseline, took it to the hole.
I sailed above their outstretched hands.
Open mouthed, they stood below, dwarf trees
rooted to the court. They couldn't stop the clock
or the spell I'd cast with my father's burning eyes.
I owned the air that lifted me above the rim,
above words he'd never said but been.

His silence broke in my throat at the buzzer,
filled the gym like a thunderstorm --
a Celtic flood of replenishment
let go to cleanse our kind.
Through the pandemonium of electric blood --
a tidal wave of screaming fans --
I scanned the crowd for his clouded eyes.
Colors swirled, blurred and smeared.
I couldn't see, but I knew
he was gone. Sweat dripped from my fingers
and nose, pooled on the floor --
convex mirrors, translucent pearls,
the blood of my black and white dream.
II. Waxing Gibbous
LESSONS IN DIRT

The shovel, 
strong under my weight, cuts 
sharply through the grass. 
Its smooth handle promises 
leverage I need to snap roots 
and dislodge stones. The sewer 
route I design is shoulder 
width, across the lawn, 
all the way to the street. I 
peal back the sod and set it aside, 
expose worms and loam to sky. 
Let the digging begin. 
Sculpture of a ditch. The rhythm 
of torso, hands and feet drive 
the chanting words I mouth 
to dance with breath and sweat. 
Blood, like bars and picks, 
knows the temperament of soil, 
teaches patience, pace, and ease, 
secrets hidden in muscle 
and bone -- what's under 
the tongue. I carve, shape the trench 
behind, burrow ahead with 
badger arms that know this work 
leads home. Down here 
in sweet-musty air, the mind 
follows the body. When I stop, 
recline in the cushioned earth, 
cool clay drugs my skin. 
I've never known such 
rest before. This soil is rich, 
brown-black as the woman who 
walks through my dreams. When I 
close my eyes, she beckons me 
with open palm to join her 
on the alder shaded ground -- 
submerged in the aroma of leaves.
NO HALFCOCKED COWBOY MOVE

*for Leo Jarvis*

The old cowboy was all gussied up:
boots shined, best Stetson,
and a western sport coat.
He sat mute out of the way
on a kitchen chair looking
nervous, embarrassed, and confused
as a steer in a corral full of heifers.

His head ducked slightly down,
pulled up shy each time we passed
lugging his furniture and boxes --
the remainders, reminders of his life.
He'd nod, finger his bolo tie, dab
at the end of his nose with a handkerchief
pulled from his hip pocket. Restless
meaty hands skittered and danced
along the crook of his cane.

We were moving him out of an apartment
into his daughter's ground level house.
It was a part of the job,
but I didn't feel right invading
his underwear drawer to get a better grip
lifting his dresser. We grabbed
a pile of dirty linen, his pajamas
on the bedroom floor. I found
a loaded pistol tucked under the mattress.
We stripped it bare, clean down to the stained
glass stallion that hung in the window.

He waited, watched us and didn't watch --
his eyes looked far away. Will James
jumped out of the night stand drawer,
and I stuffed him back inside.
We were almost done, had to set up
the bed, when I caught him eyeballing
me, craning his neck to see
how his life would be arranged.
I said, *Movin's sure fun, ain't it?*

He reacted quick as a cutting horse,
*I told 'em to just leave everything,*
he said. *Hell, I don't need this stuff.*
*Ya know when I was packin'*
in the Sawtooths for hunters and dudes,
I only had one camp stool,
and all I did was walk around it.

When we were done, his daughter
offered us a beer, and the old cowboy
erupted with tales of cowdogs, roundups,
latigos and dallies -- in one day
we branded an' docked an' inoculated
a couple a hundred head.
Charlie Russell and Will Rogers were alive.
He said, I got those Navajo rugs
from a custom saddle maker
outside of Mackey, Idaho;

showed us a pair of buffalo-hide
chaps that belonged to one of his wives --
a small woman, kids' size,
but she could rope and ride good
as any man. Later she ran off
with a bullrider from Melrose, Montana.
Which was fine by me. I figured he
did me a favor. That little gal
plumb wore me out.

My partner and I laughed but stood up to leave,
truth was we were still on the clock.
We finished the beer.
The old cowboy wasn't through --

And I was a fair hand in those days.
But a lot of brush has growed up
in the corral since I drove range cows
and wrangled wild horses. Now
I'm just glad to be close to the stove.

We shook hands all around. His daughter
invited us to come back. We said we would
like we always did, but his lingo glowed,
burned in my veins. Next time
you're in our neck of the woods, he winked,
we'll see if we can rustle up a jigger or two
of somethin' stronger than beer, and I'll tell ya
the story how her mother and me
broke in those Indian saddle blankets
one cold September scoutin' trip
snowed in up on Chilcoot Pass.
ALL THE LIVELONG DAYS

The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific had nothin' and everything to lose that summer in Missoula. Our job -- the Catlin Street crossing replacement -- four men, water and tools: spike malls and pullers, shovels and picks, rail jacks and tie tongs and wrenches.

Shirtless under August sun, we dug and pried at broken ties exposed below the rails, weathered in creosote, sand and cinders. We scanned for tacks to tell us the date a tie was spiked and tamped. Like fingerprints or DNA, those tags were metal proof. Drenched in sweat, we baptized the roadbed --

Track shamans burned black as tunnels. Our hands blistered and bled and cramped. Back on our feet, bent at the knees, we begged for Christ or the lions to be merciful if tongs didn't bite. Our spines burned till tail bones went numb. Half-done and lightheaded, we broke for a drink. No one ever had to pee.

An old gandy dancer shuffled up in suspenders, leaned on his cane. "You boys're lucky! When I was your age... didn't have no goddamn machines! That was back in 1929! Those days you earned your pay! Snaked those ties out full length! An' guys standin' in line to do it!"

Eyes down, we dug for Copenhagen cans and wondered, "Was the old bastard blind?" "You got the wrong railroad," Billy said, stuck a scoop under the Old Timer's nose, "they ain't bought a new shovel since the day you quit! Next year we're goin' back to steam!"

He squinted and glared, spit in the dirt, stared us down one by one. We went back to cussin' hardwood and steel, didn't watch when he limped away. I felt beaten and sore as this wounded railroad, hoardin' tie tacks cached in my pocket--one was a 1928 and two were '29's.
INTERIOR FORECAST

Wind tosses the cold
white dust
around our house.
Whirling in sheets,
we watch it rage --
a chilling dance
we want to learn --
secret to us as fire.

It promises no control
except all plans are certain
to change. We stare frozen --
animals on the road
at night -- trying to see
what's behind the light.

So we talk about weather
outside and believe
we are cut off
from the storms
our machines and calendars
have taught us to avoid.

Why can't we read
the signals, feel the pressure
all birds know, the rhythms
of moon in our hair?

We fear that weather
will find us in here
somehow, somewhere
and sooner than later,
always unprepared
for the breath
that doesn't come,
the mystery of fading
sun in our bones -- hidden
by clouds, particular
as snowflakes, yet common
as a blanket of snow.
BENEATH THE CLOUD

She bought his ticket,
Spokane to Tacoma.
He'd never flown before.
The wispy clouds and wild blue yonder
pushed too close to heaven for him.
He looked down on ashen, gray peaks,
the Cascade range, like photos
he'd seen of dead elephants,
skin draped over jutting bones.
What scared him most
wasn't being in the air, landing
or taking off. It was seeing the factories,
highways and cars, high rise buildings,
houses and malls all moving, turning,
a chaotic maze he didn't want to know.

His daughter was sorry
her vacation was changed,
still wanted him to stay.
He didn't blame her or anyone.
He knew the price of time.
After one night, he slipped away,
hitched to the railway yard.
At seventy-three, a Milwaukee freight
was as fast as he wanted to go.
It might take him back to his hobo days:
an open boxcar, wind in his hair,
rolling slow and easy as summer air
blowing warm over fields of grain.

Then out of moonless black forest night
came ghosts from Belleau Wood.
He heard the thunder of distant guns,
the boxcar shook and heaved.
Was he blown off his feet by mortar fire?
He pitched into the dark.
His shoulder ached. His arm went numb.

Stars winked like fires on a battlefield
he knew he'd walked before.
He crawled on his belly to the ditch-side door,
found dust or smoke or mustard gas,
couldn't find his rifle, pack or mask.
He tried to hold his breath and run
for trees on higher ground.
There were no guns, no enemy,
just the hiss of compressed air.
Overcome, he tripped
and plunged to earth
in weeds beneath the cloud.
He sucked the trenches
black with blood so thick
he knew he'd drown.
In his mind he told his baby girl,
"Don't cry. It's not your fault.
It's just my time has come,
you know. They missed me years ago."
He rose above the battle sight
and soared into the sky,
no fear of flying home this time.
He left all wars behind.
BONE FRAGILE AS STEEL

To replace a broken coupler,
my dad held a boxcar drawbar up,
lifted with his legs. The strain
and cold steel burned his arms to his neck
while the brakeman pinned the plate.
He'd done the job a hundred times --
shouldn't have turned his head.
Pain exploded
in the middle of his back
like shrapnel
blown through his pack and lodged
against his spine.
He dropped to his knees,
couldn't breathe, went down
between the rails --
  dumb struck as buffalo
must have been when iron horses came.
  His vertebrae broken
as coupling knuckles rusting in the weeds.
More railroad steel fractured by stress,
the years of neglect, or maybe
just a flaw in the cast.

He rose to his feet on the brakeman's arm,
refused advice to stay put,
felt his way to the end of the train,
and crawled on the caboose to die --
  got twenty more years instead,
turned to the bottle in his grip
he knew would ease the pain,
a remedy that flushed the bitter taste
of creosote from his craw.
Fire medicine numbed the days
of toxic blame and railroad
trains he'd never called his friends.

The whiskey brought the buffalo back --
  outside of Wisdom he'd return
to work the fields with horse drawn drays
and beaverslides to stack wild hay,
wrangling horses in sweet morning sage
and singing the primordial tongue,
his lungs full as the Big Hole Basin
painted in his mind.
Those big shouldered days before
freights and booze hardened his heart,
softened his bones, he was strong and fast
as an Indian pony
pushing into a bison herd -- vast
as the grass covered plains.
Thundering sure-footed as the thumping drum
now pounding in my chest --
I hear his echo in the choir of stone.
PASSWORDS

I waited till Mother was out of the house, then quietly opened his door. Flat on his back with blankets to his chin: eyes gaped up, mouth slack -- open.
The beating heart was mine.
Then he blinked, and hacked.
His chest rose and fell -- mute passwords that allowed me to breathe.

So I said, *I heard you ain't feelin' so good.*
His eyes found me at the foot of his bed, *Just tryin' to mind my own business,* he said and went back to staring above.

*I understand you're pissin' blood.*
Those eyes flashed back, rough and flat as his hand on my neck when I was a kid. *I'm a miserable son of a bitch,* he said.

*You don't look like you're ready to kick the world in the ass,*
I said and tried to grin, but his grimace didn't change.
He pursed his lips, frowned at me and took a shuddery breath. *Yeah,* he said, *I think you're right . . . I feel like I'm gonna die.*

I was tempted to say *Sooner or later,* but the ground kept slipping away -- a talus slope of shale.
I helped him stand then he waved me off, made the trip to the toilet alone. I watched him struggle, shamble back, his hands grooping for holds.
I shadowed his elbow from the dresser to the bed, then lifted the covers. He lifted his legs and shuffled them under the sheets.
*You oughta go see a doc,* I said, *before it's too damn late.*
He caught his breath, glanced at me, said, *Yeah.*
*Maybe I should.*

I tried to pretend I'd saved his life.
Standing quiet in the darkened room there was nothing more to say.
Just turn the knob and go.

*Can I get you anything before I leave?*
The brow relaxed. His eyes leveled on me, *No,* . . .
*thanks,* he said. I nodded and smiled.
Neither of us said good-by.  
His last words stuck: *If you would* . . .  
*just close the door.*
MOON SONG

I watched my father lying
in the hospital bed, the gray
whiskered hollows of his face --
rugged coves on a distant shore.
The falter of his breath
eroded the starched-antiseptic
smell of St. Patrick's,
a snarl he'd tried to avoid.
Those raspy, struggling gasps
hurled me into his dark
bedroom years ago: closed doors, his snore,
the reeking weight of trespass --
a chill, sharp, medicine-sweet blast
of whiskey and stale cigarettes.

He told me one time in the Palace
Hotel bar, there are places you shouldn't go.
Since blood was no license
to traverse the paths he walked alone,
I hunkered in shadows, picked at bones.

His exit, the silence of coma,
a jaundiced departure we left unprobed,
seemed right for the private, quiet man
we'd known and never known.

My mother sat slumped in a chair,
resigned, exhausted with guilt.
I clutched the side rail, considered
my father's laboring chest, the cave
of his toothless mouth. A queer
chant entered my head -- you can go;
it's okay; we'll be fine; you'll be fine;
it's okay; it's all right; you can go.

Sun blazed through the hospital window
glass. Rooftops and trees outside,
below, clung to their coats of glistening frost
late in the afternoon. Winter, cold,
was upon us, yet inside
words licked and lapped like flames:

It's okay. You can go. We'll be fine.

White sheets, my knuckles, the clock
on the wall blurred edges, swam
clean into sound, into rhythm, into light:

_It's okay; go ahead; you can go._

And I knew my father's heart
was mine, my mother's, my sons' and yours --
a moon song turning in an endless sea,
the mystery that we are all
rising and falling simultaneously.
Water, the seasons,
this dream.
FAMILY PLOTS

*for Colin*

Avoiding the work of weeding
is a habit handed down from my dad,
a piss-poor farmer who'd only raised
hell and a few eyebrows.
Panicky days I wish I could be
the good gardeners my brothers are,
plant some burgundy lupine or painted pansies
neatly in short-clipped grass.

But I must find my own
headstone, discover my faith in earth
rich in blood. The sandy hole
we dug on Petty Creek holds the fired
remains of our father. Funny,

My Old Man liked reading
cemetery markers, wanted to be buried
in a gunny sack. We did it wrong:
left him bound in a strong plastic bag,
sealed inside a cardboard box.
We dropped him square in the ground,
staged a silly B-movie conclusion.
Only Mother's tears played right.

Weeks later, my brother and I
resurrected Dad, our final family plot
as outlaw sons. Afternoon grave robbers
digging gold dust and whispering our need
to be good boys again, we cut his smothering
shroud, freed the flinty ash at last,
our skin and bones, to breathe deeply
the burlap -- soil and stone. We put him back
in the dirt, sent him home.
DROWNING ON SCHEDULE

My body is a vessel filled to the brim
Tip-tap -- tip-tap
Where tremulous drips crest and spill
Tip-tap -- tip-tap
   My neck is stiff
   My temples strained
I grope for handle
   Valve or plug
Must drain this cauldron full of blood
Before the rivets pop from pressure I wish I knew by name ...
   It begs me call it crazy --
Satan -- Silly -- Sorry -- Shit --
   .. Listen, listen, subtle drums
   Tip-tap my mind with clicking tongues
   Torture me with liquid curse
My lungs expand to drink this verse of metronome
   Swimming strokes and shallow tugs for air
That spare my death in tick-tock time ...
   I kick and dive to gain escape
   But cannot find the main spring
   Or a way to swim away from things
That go tip-tap and tick-tock sing
   So I promise measured metrical feet
   Won't wind it tight -- Won't let it leak
   I'll punch the clock
   And pack a lunch
Praise no thoughts
   But murdered sleep
   Salute my locks
   Destroy the keys
That claim unpatriotically there's joy beyond the swelling watch
   I'll oil the gears and kill the fox
   count tick-taps and dance tip-tocks
   I know I know you know I know
But I cannot stop -- I cannot go
   No pills or bottles can halt the drops ...
   tip . . . tap . . . tick . . . tock . . .
   I'll sink again in measured time
      And drown . . . tip
      Perchance . . . tock
To breathe . . . tick . . .
   tap
III. Eclipse
JUST WHEN I THOUGHT I UNDERSTOOD WHY

Just when I thought I understood why
I risked having children
or why my dad died,
some preacher's kid robs a convenience store --
shoots an agnostic clerk in the face
for thirty-eight dollars plus change.

Sunday morning I hiked up the Lost Lake trail,
made camp, cut my finger to the bone.
Can anyone explain such carelessness?
The curled fawn lying in the foot worn rut,
a stone in tall grass? That young deer
never moved but must have smelled blood.

Was it aware of the ax in my hand?
A trigger bold as words on a page?
Have I forgotten something? My father's name?
Do iron and shell and flesh
really sweeten the garden roots? Is it enough
to pretend we think we know? And how
do we decide what path to take
or which direction we won't call lost?
I feel better believing I've done it all,
the maniacal as well as the sublime,
that I haven't missed anything -- but wonder
about the panicked bird in my gut,
wings beating hard as the fawn's pulse
against the cage of russet hair,
that wavering moment before I walked away
and tramped on to an emergency room.
THE OWL IS BACK AGAIN

Sorry I missed your wedding reception, got lost on the way, should have ignored Casteneda's directions. When I finally arrived and settled on grass outside the bar, down by the water, I watched an owl glide and prey on a gopher in broad daylight. I thought it rather strange, especially when it didn't leave but perched on a pole to eat, silent as bells on the masts of sailboats tethered in the bay below.

Remember that morning, twenty years ago, when we woke before dawn after running the town all night? Our sleeping bags damp with dew, we watched the shadows lift and fade from the mountain across the river. Then a wondrous light filled the valley up, and the cliffs glowed a vibrant gold. When I looked at you -- puffy-eyed, hair matted into tufts -- you blinked and slowly turned your head. That vision stilled my open mouth, until the robin's perfect song pulled me back to earth.

Now, I wonder how the owl decides who should go with him, back to the void to speak the wind.

Both of us tried our wings. You chose paint. I played with words. Attentive as Icarus -- deaf to rebuffs and blind to gravity, we labored to forge our masks. Does it matter our efforts disguised our need to claim all hearts as ours? Your practice offered us an open hand.

The owl is back again, my friend, hungry for dusk and nocturnal blood. He waits for those who lose themselves
in their business on the ground,
then spreads his wings, talons ready,
falls easy as feathery wind.
PISSED AT POTTER'S FUNERAL

That frosty November day,
Tom stood at the edge of the grave
we'd dug the night before.
The preacher, stern, Bible in hand,
prayed God have mercy on Potter's soul.
Guilty as Potter of too much fun, the rest of us
bowed our heads, bit our tongues,
but Tom never played by the rules.

He whistled, barked out a staccato laugh,
then poured Budweiser on the casket.
His cackle yanked and lashed
every sorry neck erect.
B.W. and Rastus both sprung for him,
grabbed his arms and shook him hard,
hissed he'd better knock it off
or they were going to kick his ass,
but Tom was drunk, beyond, and crazy-strong.
He threatened to piss in the grave.

Only Potter could handle him well,
speaking those low, gentle tones
he'd used to calm horses and dogs.
I watched the pine box in the bottom
of the hole, knew easy was over
for good. Tom struggled to open his zipper.
The three of them almost went down.
Potter's mother let go of the minister's
arm, crossed to Tom and sheltered
his hands with her hands.

She smiled. Her thumbs rubbed
the ridges of his knuckles,
and he melted, bent forward and cried.
She whispered in his ear, slipped her arm
through his arm. The two of them
shuffled away. The wind swayed tall pines
that banked the plot. I looked west,
and two ravens hovered motionless
in currents above the river, then peeled off
and disappeared downstream. There was snow
up Whiskey Gulch. I didn't know what to do,

so I scooped the first shovel of dirt in the grave.
It covered the inlaid cross on the coffin lid.
and interred the gifts Tom left behind,  
he'd made for Potter's journey:  
a pipe and beaded medicine pouch --  
beside the empty beer can.
PASSAGEWAYS

Why was she there last night?
That girlfriend of that friend
of that friend of yours from some
twenty-odd-smoke-hazed years ago
who lived in that upscale, west-side
trailer court, curb and gutters,
spindly elm trees. You remember.

They had a king sized water bed,
tapestries and beaded curtains, a loaded
bong and pistol on the bar.
Her favorite album was Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. Her boyfriend,
that friend of that friend of yours,
complained she was getting too fat.

He planned on dumping her since
she couldn't button her bib-jeans. Diana --
that was her name. Was his name
Jason? No. Jay. He said he had to
close his eyes to get it up for her,
but he was humping her when she went
into labor and delivered a diet of sorts.

So who was the guy she was with last
night? The three of you wandered
through a succession of tunnel-like bedrooms,
stucco ceilings low as a crawl space.
Gray wadded sheets on unmade beds
couldn't cover your veiled intentions.
You wound up in a daylight basement.

Walls, white-sterile as government housing.
Metal speakers and directional lights
inset in the tile above intoned a tinny mood.
Diana swiveled on a bar stool
while the guy you didn't know
mixed drinks and talked about mass
suicides. She didn't look pregnant to you.

Diana suggested the three of you play
Trivial Pursuit, but you opted to explore
the damp riddle of those Manson-like
rooms. Were you tempted or just afraid?
Or did you hope she'd follow you there?
Find out what you were searching for?
What you fear everyone knows?

Maybe days as lost as friends and words
like friends and love and time? Nothing's fair.
You're gray and you think you're alone. Not even
you can follow yourself back home
without trusting that that friend of that
friend of yours is you with a gun in your hand,
or you're Diana returned full term.

Ups and downs, ebbs and flows, the phases,
the cycles, your dreams. Remember.
Forget your frustrations -- prepared speeches,
the photographs you cannot find -- crave a mattress,
a pillow of stars. Isn't looking the finding
you're looking for? The moon, your eye, shutters
and black holes -- all feed you light and speed.
GALLOWS JUBILEE

They found the dull-witted neighbor boy
sitting beside the railroad
tracks by a wild, stunted apple tree,
two miles from the house, alone.
At home his once bright sister
curled into the leather smell
of worn shoes and suitcases
in the back of an upstairs closet,
whimpering under the hanging clothes.

Down stairs the crib was empty.
On the bed, Mother and Infant dried
together in stiffened sheets --
rent and flaking rust.
Black flies dug in the iron
wounds. The jewelry box was gone.

What flash or fluctuation
in barometric pressure drove rain
deep into the furrowed garden rows?
Father face down, unmindful
between potatoes and squash; the sad
ax washed almost clean, haphazardly
leaned against a cabbage head.
One strand of hair stuck on the edge; brown
outline of a cloud stained the blade.

Two suspects caught, black and white,
pawning a locket and pocket watch,
both gold and inscribed with love.
Fifty years ago -- this newspaper column
recalls the last man hung (black) in Montana.
No account of the aftermath -- who
scrubbed the bloody handprints from the walls.

Years, miles, copyrights -- belief
is a matter of distance.
Dramatic measures. Coffins speaking
in dreams, the pleading voice -- our own.
We would rather harvest beets,
dig graves, bring food for the funeral
than think about what went wrong,
or worse -- that it's right, that pain is love,
and murder is perfect as childbirth
or apples we pick each fall.
SUICIDE NOTE

_ for Michael Dorris_

I am slick
bear grass on an alpine slope,
the talons of a red tail
hawk. I am cottonwood
bark floating in an eddy,
a double rainbow
over Flathead Lake.
I am cool granite
skin, the raven's caw, a mist
on Marias Pass. I am
comets, the moon, my father's
ash. I am bloody,
the swatted mosquito. I
am frost and dust,
a gravel road,
the embers of a forest fire.
I am fresh turned dirt
in the April sun. I am the reason
you fear the dark. I
am licorice, baby, and whiskey
breath. I am leather, iron,
sweat. I am cinnamon toast
and whispering voices
that hiss — _there is no forgiveness._
I am music that puts you
on the kitchen floor of the house
where you were born.
I am Christ, Hitler, Blackie
Marquette, buttercups,
sauerkraut and beer. I am
chemotherapy, cockle burrs on
socks, sunrise over the Mission Range.
I am the bones
of pottery and thunder. I
am wind blowing in stone. I am
changing my name to plastic, cold as
my blood, clear as a storm.
THE EDGE OF THE FOREST

I have glimpsed myself bounding
through the woods at night, shadow
in shadow, aware of the watcher
and my pounding heart. A lone
eye flashes first yellow then blue
deep in the dusky lodgepole
thicket; or is it Venus
winking from behind branches
moved by the evening breeze?
Again, I pad the trail, once
worn down to rut, but the path
grows fainter the further I go.
This knowing and unknowing
about direction or shape
is odd as the appetite for flesh;
our molecular make up;
and my yearning to smell, move
on and return. I hear the panting
of patient breath from the Dog
Star in my bones, thirsty
for mineral blood. So I pull
these wolves inside -- these agitated
electrons of earth and sky --
but I cannot hold them there.
Circles, motion is what I am
certain of, that nothing stops
at the edge of the forest for long,
where the moon is my guide --
a lantern in the window --
and all curious tracks lead home.
FISH CREEK

No matter how much I promise
to listen to the song
of the rushing gorge

or pay attention to the secrets
of whispering cedars
and owls who know,

Fish Creek remains a beautiful
lie. No trout dance
for me. I exercise

my cast, drink sweet dogwood
blossoms deep. Feet
root, bathe in gravel

stream. Hot sun burns me clean.
Over and over my
elbow rocks. Eye

and fly are one, coasting the current,
returning to air and
circling to flow again.

After I release a hooked fingerling,
I wonder, will he survive,
rebuild the hoop

for cutthroat warriors? I'll be back
around to help
practice magic

chants or steps or whatever it takes
for this water
to remember its name.
THE FISHING KING
*for Dick Hugo*

You drove here to catch a Superior fish,
got snagged in The Montana Bar.
This bartender knows your word is good
for nothing, runs you a tab all cutthroat feel
is wrong as shadow ghosts on a stream
and cracked as your life -- an honest need
to lie about sizes of fish you've caught
and women you've never had. Maybe
you'll write her a poem some day, you tell
the skirt two stools away who noses
your artsy Royal Wolf -- cast like a spell
on a beaver pond, always dim as your opinion
or the mirror at closing time.

When you order two Turkeys and beer backs,
she asks where you plan on dipping your worm.
You curse her ancestors, her children and dog,
tell her you're proud of your rhythm and fly,
don't cotton to vulgar slugs or slime
that sully the graves of true fishermen
and swear you'll piss on the bejesus bar
if she keeps talking trash or bait.
The brazen twitch steals your keys
when the bartender points to the door.

The air outside, stifling when you came
opens lilac in her hair. She suggests you try
her nightcrawler with a little taste of corn
and drives you fast to the mouth of Trout Creek,
points out her favorite hole. You cast,
retrieve, cast, retrieve, cast, then let it go.
Your fly rides the current slow, before a Rainbow
flashes and dances -- tail fin arcing the sky.
The hook is set. You play it long, till it rolls
its heaving side. She opens her *Busch*
in cottonwood shade and sucks a Lucky Strike.

Her wink tells more than crippled words --
you know your rod and line. You finish
the beer and afternoon, drive her back to
the Four Aces Saloon where a run of jacks
could drown. You head for Chet's in Alberton
on the frontage road you know for sure
will never lead you home.
When your tongue wakes gray at Forest Grove,
the moon is full and blue as your Buick
flirting with suicide, halfway down the boat ramp,
its grill in soothing tide. Your head throbs
like a knife wound as you search for the roll
of twenties gone and know you'll never find.
You think her name was Brooke. No.
Wasn't it Dolly Brown? A damn good catch
for a fat clown who calls all water pain.
You remember her skin, those golden spots --
pretty as they come, and admit your pole
could never again stand up to her spinning dare.
Your silly grimace begs a smile you want
to wear back to town. Forget this river,
your pride and youth you sold for cheap disdain.
You know reverse like hangovers
will take you back to war. Inside you're still
the shriveled worm good booze won't let you
ignore. She left you dry as rotting carp
pitched high into the weeds -- rank air
you crave like your broken need
to snare this poem or that Superior girl
who claimed you both a Missoula sucker
and The Clark Fork Fishing King.
SPIDERS

The spider weaves her web.
I spin my sticky words
to catch the heart of image,
surprised to trap
such gracious prey
with music, the beat of blood.

She merely trusts her nature,
ever suffers the defeat
of wind or bigger nouns
that break her strands of home.
Spiders feed their progeny
fresh meat of art and storm.

My patterns change to serve
the space I choose. Like Spider
I was born with tools
for charting death and joy,
silky songs that praise the odd
taste and breath of bone.
IV. Home Brew
THE MISSOULA CLUB: BURGERS AND BEER

i.
I may have been ten or nine or younger
the very first time I sat on a stool and leaned
on the Missoula Club bar. Dad ordered two burgers,
a chocolate malt, shot of whiskey and glass
of draft beer. Gene grabbed a gob of fresh ground beef,
made patties by hand and scraped
the grill, sliced onion a quarter inch thick.
   Our hamburgers sizzled, promised my nose
I'd found a sacred place to go. The milk shake
   machine whirred and whined as we scanned
the wall of championship teams, photos
   of ballplayers, a gallery of dreams
and heroes like my uncle and dad.

   I raise my glass to Nells and John
for not fixing what ain't been broke.
   Time-honored before Joe Dugal's days,
seasons change but the mustard remains
   a recipe for my sons who ask to come
for hot pepper cheese and hard ice cream, peanuts
in the shell. They listen to stories (that take me
back) of Mo Club warriors who fought my dad.
   Or was it my brother? Or maybe it was me
did battle on a muddy football field?
   Did I know these guys years ago,
stare eye-to-eye an instant before the whistle blew
   and signaled I'd never lose my heart
if I found this bar someday?

   So we share a pitcher of truth and lies,
   transcend our daily work-a-day lives
of jobs and bills and bigger distortions
   than memories of ghosts and scores.
Way back before tomorrows never came
we'd go for broke every moment,
every day, reckless kids living legends
   that would feed us till we die -- served
up with burgers and beer. Last second shots,
goal line stands, that coach who kicked
my ass. There aren't enough quarters
   for my boys to decide
who's the best at pin ball or pool.
A LETTER TO MY FIRST BORN SON

for Sean

Months before you were overdue,
the doctor threatened us with Caesarean section.
He used his hands to illustrate the problem,
fingers extended and opposed, tip to tip,
while he told us the dangers small women could have
if the pregnancy went on too long.
He claimed (and I swear he said this with a grin)
that your mother had a *borderline pelvis*.
Insecure fool that I was, I took it as a compliment,
this gynecological knowledge I shared
with him, about the size of your mother's bones.
He had a hunting trip planned the week prior to your date
and thought plucking you out early was best.
But your mother wanted to wait, to give you a chance.
She thought you or her uterus should decide.
I pretended I agreed with her, but I was confused,
afraid you didn't know what to do.

Was it a week or ten days? I can't remember,
but exhausted, she finally relented to the pressure
to induce, assign your birth day.
Don't blame your mother. She tried to hold out,
but I supported the doctor's wisdom,
his professional opinion -- force
you out or cut his way in. I lost faith
because I wanted you here.
I wanted to end the mystery, so I stole
your birth from you. Yes, it was a selfish thing
to do, but I thought I should take control.

I underestimated you, my son, tough and bull headed
as your ancestral bloodline. You were determined
to hold out against the mercenary drip
of the I.V. that battered the walls of your lair.
But you were doomed to my will when I gave
permission to drain your amnionic air.
I begged you to ease up, to go with the flow.
But I didn't listen for your reply. Did you tell me no?
Have we fought for dominance from the beginning?
When your mother's womb awoke to its desperate need,
she muscled you into position. Face up, head braced
against her pubic bone, you were wedged firm as
a constellation, until the good doctor, my right hand man,
reached in and turned you like a dial, a combination
that only he knew. And once you'd rolled face down,
the crown of your skull appeared --
black swirls on a waxing moon.

It was the moment I'd tried to prepare myself for.
I'd never been a father before. Nothing
(whoever I had been) mattered once you arrived.
Then Doctor Blade slipped cold steel scissors
next to your scalp, an untranquil sea,
and cut your mother like an ax hewn log.
I'm sorry. Even your magic failed to blunt
the sick misogynistic ceremony of drugs
and knives and fear. We shuddered
when you slipped free from her wound,
slick as a fish from your hands.

You entered the world blue, covered in blood and dappled
with muddy gray scraps, wallpaper from your ransacked house.
Your forehead was dented above the eyes,
and when you cried, what I heard was music.
Then the smiling doctor handed you to me
as if your scrotum made you mine. I took you
to your mother's side, writhing against my chest.
Your joints flexed and extended outward, searching
for where you belonged, unsure as my hands in the dark.
So I placed you in your mother's arms,
and she held you close to her breast. When you rocked
in the swells of her breathing, I watched
your panic ease. Lightly, I placed my hand
on your head, the way my shipwrecked
father had done to me, and knew
the role all men play: that I would fail you, too.

I stared at the dark placenta cooling in the tray:
the sutures and staples; the needles and thread;
the bloody rags from your mother's brutal wounds.
I stood useless, the grinning mask. Watching you
rooted against her salty skin, your tiny mouth,
blind to the nipple brushing your cheek, unaware
of the dripping milk. But when your tongue came out,
you found your way home, the connection
that continues the dream, that stream we all swim,
the wet appetite we need to survive. So I knew
I'd lost you before we'd begun. You taught me
what fathers learn from the birth of their sons,
that letting go is as right as holding on.
NEW STICK, OLD BASKET, SAME SONG

for Cache

My nine foot Shakespeare Fiberglas fly rod
had struggled the last few years, hampered
by a missing eye, to deliver my casts just shy

Of circles within circles. Crushed in the trunk
after a camping trip, it guides my son's hand now,
magic, braced with a duct taped splint. Tomorrow

We'll hit Fish Creek below Hole-in-the-Wall Lodge,
walk the west fork in our Converse high-tops,
trade the brush for wet pants and slick rock.

At each hole and log jam I'll flip my Adams upstream,
float it by doped and dry, sweet as a platter lean sirloin
drifting luscious against the reeds. These little cutthroat

Are greedy takers, not keepers. We'll wait, jawing
before the hook is out, streak back into shadow,
go finning downstream. We'll keep searching

For a submarine Dolly Varden we can play
long, bring it panting to our feet, drinking deep,
not vexed by fishy spring creek hands. We'll kneed

Warm sand between our toes, and know all those
reeling bones mutating in the stream. We'll come to our
senses there: red willow, cedar, elderberry, and hucks.

My son will turn to water, my lips will whisper
stone. We'll breathe the rhythm of her song along
the path back to the road. That trip will pass secrets

To my graphite Eagle Claw. It could measure up
some day to Colin's old bamboo, be as eager, too,
as Dad's brittle wicker creel, its cracked leather

Buckled close to my chest. That basket still
begs for fat spotted trout to rest on the beargrass
nest in its belly, like you before you were born.
MESSENGERS

Claude was a cross-eyed Siamese male pussycat. He was our baby before our baby was born, but lost it, whatever he might have had before -- gained all kinds of shit you didn't want to know: yowling all night, inside or out; spray-pissing the carpet and walls; finally, a pile of cat-shit between my toes. I loved that cat, and I snapped.

Was I primed for the chance to play the man, be responsible, administer the blow? I insisted on pulling the trigger. Be a George for a Lennie. No rabbits. And what about the neighbor who offered? Was he dying for a killing, too? A dress rehearsal for suicide?

I drove Claude out past the cut-off road down the lane that flanked the old Milwaukee tracks. I baited him with a baggie of turkey scraps, placed the pistol barrel at the back of his head. Didn't know what hit him, is a line of shit. He blew and coughed, spun and flopped. Sung a pulsing, rushing, panting,
gushing, whine I recognized. My heaving, barking cry dropped to the ground between clumps of balsamroot. Soft lichen greens and pine needle tans were spackled with blood and dirt. Clots and clods. I stared at the .357 in my hand, silent, certain of nothing but shame -- and, that there are times and unrecognizable deeds that deserve our poems, our tears.

Murderous moments we see our fathers fading into the dark woods, runaway boys compelled by the damp, sharp-black intensity behind the trees, behind the stars. Secret as wolves -- the bullet in the dream.
There's a dull burn at the nape
of my neck I'd lick clean if I could.
This I know about jealousy -- it cleanses
to the bitter root of forgiveness.
Wounds behind us take care of themselves:
scars fade and sons leave home.
THE BLACK IRISH

for Sean

Your grandfather's eyes
   snap angry as mine
   in your face
at twelve years old,
   then narrow to a lethal
   sideways glance,
your body
   pitched forward
   in a boxer stance, up
on the balls of your feet.
   Another Irish raven,
   ready to pick
at bullies, shoneens and
   bloody bores, arse lickers,
   stool pigeons and company boys.
Melancholy black
   is the color you choose.
   You hide in your room
and claim you don't care --
   wearing the scowl
   I stole from my dad.
Did I teach you that hate?
   What made you decide
   that you want to escape?
Please try to fight the urge, lad,
   to medicate your cynical soul.
   I'd show you my scars,
but I know it won't help.
   You must wrestle the beast
   alone. I traced my father's
heroic wrongs --
   rebellion and booze,
   his thirst to win --
bitter troubles
   bred deep in his bones.
   And my shit?
Well, I blamed him for it --
   the sins of the fathers,
   a hand-me-down shame,
our needs to be right and wrong.
   It's my hope, my son,
   you're beyond those shores --
the black islands of blood and words.
BECOME AS LITTLE CHILDREN
for Cache

The sharp sound of clack, clack, clack, clack interrupted our serious household chores of balancing the checkbook and washing clothes, beckoned my wife and me to see what the hell was going on outside. Peering out the bedroom window into the back yard we watched Robin Hood (our ten year old son) and Little John (a two hundred pound neighbor kid) tilting (not with staffs like you'd suppose but) with (duct taped, wooden) swords.

Both wore battle helmets (aluminum-cone light shades -- held tight to their heads by clothesline cord chin-straps.) Robin's shield was huge (a patched together cardboard affair) the face emblazoned with a Christian cross (done in blood-red Crayola) mark of the Crusades. Little John stood large as legend, his stout but common shield (a rusted, cast-iron tractor seat) was lashed to his arm, encumbering as feathers on a wing. Clack, clack, clack, clack, they parried and stepped in a circle dance -- Noh theater shogun warriors -- (no Kodak would do justice to their drill) battle on Sherwood bog.

I felt wide awake yet walking in a dream leaving the window and returning to my simple mathematical chore (but I couldn't focus on the task or recall the practical process I'd hidden from myself -- tactics of subtraction and addition.)

Later, the Sheriff of Nottingham (my wife) caught Robin red-handed inside the castle (trying to sneak a pocket knife and roll of sinew out the back door.) The Merry Men needed bows and arrows. It looked like Locksley's days were numbered. (She told him arrows were dangerous; he could lose an eye.)

Robin bristled at the Sheriff's false charge.
("No, Mom! We're not going to shoot each other. Don't you remember in the movie?"
He took one step backward, dropped his right knee to the floor, arched his back, and punched his left arm up toward the sky, as if his fist gripped a bow; the other hand drew taut the imagined string.) Swiftly the greatest of archers let fly the barb that set him free.
("We're going to shoot them up in the air," he said. Then he hopped to his feet, bent his arm at the elbow to cover his head, jumped forward, then crouched on the floor. "And when the arrows come down they can't hurt us see? We're protected by our shields.")

The Sheriff gave up (smiled at me, went back to sorting laundry.) Robin Hood escaped (took his booty outside.) King John (stopped counting his cash) abdicated to Richard at last (where my lion heart still pumps typewriter keys for play. Clack, clack, clack, clack) Long live the King! (And forgive me, Father, if I have sinned, for I have not put away childish things.)
SISTERS

Fireweed and golden rod
stalks soon dry, turning blossoms
into bleach-blonde weeds.
A willowy teenage girl in bikini
steps graceful as a swan in the pool,
her sister clinging to her neck.

She sits with toddlers in the shallow end
and plays with screaming children
yet tunes to the cackles and watchful eyes
of young cowboys -- horse playin'
(breed-wise) -- runnin' ragged
as their cut-off Wranglers.

She holds her sister heart-close,
tiptoes the edge that separates
the swimmers from those who can't,
that danger zone she knows below,
underneath the buoyed rope line.

Her eyes catch cannonball and belly-flop splashes.
She smiles rocking in the wake of the dives
pushing "wee little piggies" from her throat.
All beacons signal she's flying blind,
flushed by silly, rude remarks,
their teasing jokes and bragging lies
she hates but wants to know.
Later she'll swim in the deep end,
laugh and blush, try to pretend she's angry
or ready to wrestle them
after her "la-de-da" mother shows up
to take her sister home for a nap.

Till then... she'll whisper, nose-to-nose,
secrets of skin and lips and hair,
catch tight the child (she can't let go)
safe as her papa's arms were
not so long ago, back
before she gave up dolls
for the fall and flow of days.
WORDS WORTH WRITING DOWN

What could they possibly teach you
about the healing power of love
when I'm here
doing the dishes again
and you're there
in a San Francisco hotel?
You call twice a week, try
to soothe my abandoned ear,
say you're worried
about me (what I want
to hear) and the children
you left behind, but you can't
disguise the music in your voice
that stabs my orphaned heart.
Isn't love without touch
another word for death?
I know this thundering storm
in my head is wrong
as space between us.
I don't say much.
I want you here,
a piece of me is gone:
spreading wings,
kicking sheets
and pulling me into your hair.
How can I tolerate the noise
or the silence
when the sweet smell
of your skin in my bed
grows fainter every night?
I couldn't find words
worth writing down
until you phoned today.
They say ospreys mate for life,
build sturdy castles in the sky.
Taking turns, one
stays the nest while
the other rides the wind.
The osprey scans the river
for fish on the surface --
dives, skims, talons
ready. It takes home
the flexing carp or trout
to feed its young
and its faithful mate.
SMOTHERED IN ASH

I watch with longing
the rhythmic motion of her
jaw as she chews each sandwich
bite, the slow, circular movement of her
lips. Her tongue retrieves crumbs
at the corner of her mouth, and she stops.
Frozen for a moment by something she's read
in the newspaper on her lap.

My life is a comfortable shoe,
a peculiar friend who lives
in the basement. It is safe there. Safe
as my wife and children. Not
impetuous, fickle, or queer --
an insulated ember smothered in ash.
Is it a crime of the heart to want more?

Is she aware of the hex
her almond eyes have cast? Fingers
lightly raked back through long hair?
Her pendulum ankle languishes
in the air, beckoning my thumbs to ply
her knees, count spaces between her ribs.

I am hungry but unable to swallow.
So... would it be worth the risk to cross
this café, say, Excuse me. Is that homemade bread?
or Weren't you in my mythology class last
semester? And if it worked, if she smiled,
what next? Could I disguise it
as friendship, this ache for her smell?

When she takes another bite, I stand
and walk away. All prisoners
are guards of slaves. The pulse in her neck
as she kneads the dough,
flour on her cheek, loosened wisps
of dark hair send me flying,
burning, trembling toward home --
the taste of butter on a slice of hot bread.
RIDERS ON THE STORM

Into this world we're thrown
like a dog without a bone
an actor all alone
riders on the storm -- The Doors

Layers of sun slash through blinds,
find my thighs in a foreign room, press
warm there as your palms and blood
red nails that have traced my femoral veins.
I miss you. I want to drive home,
swallow the salt of your skin.
When I imagine you here,
my breath flutters like flame, the rhythmic
lap of fire we pulsed four days ago
open and naked as the sky. Sweat,
our secretions, love beads in our hair
bind us rich beyond our rings.
Never doubt our address, my hunger
to return. I am flinty and fueled
by distance. I crave the friction of desire.

I conjure you now to take me by the hand,
hold me till we dust to ash.
Make me understand fluid music,
transport your body slick with song.
Our tongues know the work, language
without words, dark and wet as rain.
You know it would be untrue
if I said the Earth was separate from the sun.
Come to me. We'll tend to our rust, our weld.

I don't care about the Greeks
or voodoo economics.
Let's start a new physics, make a world
that's strange, refuse the responsible
pose. I rouse you to claim this space
with me. Let's collide like gongs, like bells,
merge flesh to fire -- ignite on the other side.
Say to Hell with custom, the rules and the rest
for a moment, the moment,
just one fucking moment we can relish --
two Riders on the Storm.