Consolation of Physics

Robin Luz Hamilton

The University of Montana

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THE CONSOLATION OF PHYSICS

By

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B.A. University of Montana, 1971

M.E. University of Montana 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1992

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Date

May 26, 1992
Acknowledgements

Thanks to the publications in which the following poems either have appeared or will appear.

*CutBank*: "Blue and Green"

*Northwest Poets and Artists Calendar, 1993*: 
  "Autumn on the Great Plains"
For my father, who sang to me,
and my mother, who taught me to create,
and Peggy, who inspires me.
CONTENTS

1 This is What Comforts

Blue and Green 3
This is What Comforts 4
In Place of Chocolates:
   A Valentine 6
Harvest 7
Cold Night 9
The Consolation of Physics 10
At the Health Club 11
Amniocentesis 13
Let Me Give You Some
   Background 15
Five Lilacs 17
Resurrection of the Artist 18
From England 1985 20
April Seventh, For Chris 21
Summer Session 1980 24
The Lost Son 25

2 Stalking the Competition

Every Decision 28
Morning Run 30
The Butchers 32
Racquetball 34
Mountain Lion Dialog 35
Marathon 37
Skinning 39
Triathlon 40

3 Recipes for Teachers

My Week to Cook 43
Autumn on the Great Plains 45
The Domesday Book, 1086 46
Learned Helplessness:
   The Seligman Experiment 47
Entelechy 49
Teaching at Gayton High School, London 50
Driving Swan Valley in March 52
Manifest Destiny 54
The First Mathematician 56
This is What Comforts
Blue and Green

Her favorite present is a blue glazed bowl filled with limes, like leaves curled in a palm of wave.

She touches her blue dress, sees the gray lake, but in mid-sentence she forgets his name.

Behind her, the huge trunk of a ponderosa pine disappears into long-needled branches.

In the house, upstairs, behind the chifforobe, hides a trunk filled with her dead brothers' things:

a football trophy, several textbooks, a school annual, three photos that show how brothers can look like sons of different parents. Her father, the patriarch in a cream suit, will be dead in two years.

Her mother will live lonely with her biases. Now, surrounded by ceremony, the name of the man she hopes to love escapes her. She hears rain on a green tent in Brittany, sees the cabin on Thompson River, blue water, feels his strong hands. She remembers his name.
"The way we order represents the way we think."
- Steven Jay Gould

This is What Comforts

We learn early that things with four legs have sharper teeth and never take off their coats. We learn about fire and warmth, what burns and what comforts. We explore the world with our mouths, pull tongues across taste and texture, spit out what gives no pleasure. Distinctions become difficult, categories specific but abstract:
- early flowers that are also purple: crocus, hyacinth, lilac;
- people we respect: Dick Hugo, Ghandi, Joan Benoit;
- reasons to be married: shared meals, an end to loneliness, freedom to depend on someone else, a bed warmed by another's dreams.

This is how we make sense of a world as complex as spring, societies, or the way two people live together. My wife, according to Jung, is an extrovert who validates her day with words. She needs to share each day's intricacies with Nancy or Vicki and together they remake the world with the balm of speech. I, an introvert, reorder my life in quiet thought or poetry, relish the difference between imply and infer, solstice and equinox, skin and sheet. We try to teach how words can shape a thought and bloom in action. We believe a bus full of medicine, food, and tools for Nicaragua makes a difference, though the White House calls such aid "intervention."
Peggy, we complement each other
the way magnets do, the way force fields
circle the earth, or green confirms spring.
We need to know why warm light
wakes us hours earlier in April.
This caress means years and miles
as well as passion. Every night
evening Venus shifts retrograde
and in June shines a morning star.
In Place of Chocolates: A Valentine
for Peggy

Though I know you love
a rich heart inside
sweet dark, I'll try
to please you more with treats
saved from other seasons,
hand-wrapped in bright paper.

In silver are six-mile runs.
Dissolve one slowly
under your tongue and feel
deliciously relaxed, virtuous.

Gold hides fine summer days
at Swan Lake, when you ski
water or glass and lean
your shoulder to cold, blue, and deep.

The rest have French names
I can't pronounce, but the pictures
on the wrappers show
afternoon in a Beaune vineyard,
winter in Chamonix, spring in Brest.

Save the one wrapped in white
for a day when rain
obscures the Mission Mountains
and your appetite is lost in doubts.

Don't eat it. Remember the scent
of an early hyacinth. Smooth the wrapper
and read it over and over
as if it were a poem
from someone who loves you.
This poem. This someone.
Harvest
    for Peggy

When your brother says, "The barley's ripe,"
You hang up the phone, pack bib overalls
and old shirts, drive 300 miles east
through mountains to flat, dry land, Rudyard,
the family farm. Our house is empty but calm
without your anger at an imperfect world,
a drawer that won't close, a stubborn stain,
or colleagues who don't teach
as hard as you do.

When the winter wheat ripens
I join you to drive truck behind the combines.
A north wind blows August cold
and Scott fears hail that can shell grain
wasted to the ground.
You both worry. Two years ago a storm
flattened 200 acres of good wheat.
Scot and I hammer all afternoon in the shop
replacing sickle sections broken on rocks
that bloom every year between rows.
You watch gray sky from the kitchen.

But the rain drifts east, across the Bear Paw Mountains,
and you wrestle the old Massey-Ferguson
around a strip, grin dirty from the cab.
I throw you a wheat kiss.
Weather has held for the first good harvest
in three years since your father died.
Scott needs grain bins bulging full
all winter and the price up twenty cents.
to feel finally comfortable as father and farmer
instead of little brother, last son.
You're still shaping yourself: French teacher,
athlete, woman strong in a man's world.
You are both learning to live
without the help of Clarence Patrick,
who taught you sun and rain are both important.

Rows of stubble point toward Canada
or west to the Sweetgrass Hills. I watch
two machines grind confidently north
while last sun slants hot across the strip
we'll finish in darkness. The last load
groans to the elevator and the sample reads
14.6% protein, 13% moisture. Good news.
Hose down the equipment, pick chaff
from your hair and clothes, enjoy the last
of the August heat. Take this harvest warmth,
hard kernel reward of hard work,
to your teaching, to everything you do.
Cold Night

My wife's round warmth
and two brandies cannot dull
my infected body to sleep,
sinuses clogged like a creek
in December, ice accumulating
until sluggish water gathers
enough weight to swell
frozen pastures liquid glazed
and even stout horses slip
behind the squalid barn.

This helplessness defeats me,
though I stumble through the day
inside my brown paper bag head
snuffling and blowing
toward dinner, Monday night football,
tissue, and yoga for expecting parents.
Peggy bulges the bed warm
but I cannot sleep, anchored
fevered beside her, one nostril free
to breath. I cough thick phlegm,
spit, and walk dark windows and floors
until grey light mumbles me
to fragile sleep.
The Consolation of Physics

Lately, I have been reading theoretical physics. I am disturbed to learn that laws of science do not distinguish between past and future. Leaves outside my window fall, have always fallen, will fall. My retirement plans are absurd. My mistakes are always with me. But Newton provides direction and names it: entropy. Disorder increases with time. This year I could see my whole life fall apart,

but I will not see a broken bowl fly up off the floor and reassemble itself on the table. A blue bowl on a checkered tablecloth is high order. I understand how Heisenberg proved uncertainty is all we really know.

Next week my wife will be sedated for surgery to remove the tumor swelling her pituitary big as two thumbs. Growth hormone blocks ovulation. Her wedding ring cuts and her shoes pinch. The surgeon will start the knife under her upper lip, set aside the cartilage knob of nose, follow nasal passages to the phenoidal vacuum behind the eyes, above the roof of her mouth. Then tiny, cunning tools can carve away the intrusion.

I hope and wait. Physics posits a consolation: gravity. Even light bends to the pull of another body and speed warps time. Each orbit balances another. Everything else in our universe hurtles away,

our pasts, plans, stars, galaxies, but friends are close as touch. All hope pulls toward center, a state of "infinite density," a singularity, a birth. I have never doubted a beginning.
At the Health Club

My feet pound the banked track round again, 22 laps a mile, circling bodies stretched in bright nylon tights, racks of dumbbells, bars, clever machines of balanced weights, levers, oiled cogs and chains linking us to January, renewed effort. Every lap seems fast in so small a space, so humid with resolution. I promise to drink less, maintain my fading fitness, not just for vanity now, but because the son we expect in March will never see his father young. I want our lives to overlap years more than adolescence.

Wall posters of heroic figures pose with no skin, each muscle group a different color, show how any body may be improved, any weakness remedied by exercise. Serious builders shuffle steel disks after each set of grunting lifts, add or subtract exact kilograms for precise, sculpted effect. Their optimism inspires me but I have no desire to occupy more space, carry more weight, however shapely, though I believe work sweated today blossoms next month as taut abdominals or springy steps up three flights of stairs.
Compare the optimism of parents sifting a book of names for the perfect combination of ordinary and unique, sound, meaning, history and, of course, possible nicknames shouted across playgrounds, hoping the curled fetus becoming child in just two more heavy months will make them happy, complete, or at least less alone.

At the other end of the long room men and women strain gently, row, ski, bike, or climb nowhere, read magazines, and glance at the steaming mirror, all hoping for less bulky but equally tangible results: strength to endure another winter, the comfortable illusion of a day made meaningful, or enough careful hurt to justify an hour in the sauna or steam room.

In the pool, my wife plows lap after slow lap, breathing in, stroke, out, stroke, in, trying to remember to relax and push at the same time, each hand cupping water like a spoon, pulling along her body, past the swelling keel of her abdomen, and releasing at arm's length to reach through air to stroke again until she touches the wall, turns, pushes off in the same, warm water.
AMNIOCENTESIS

A sonogram shows the skeletal fetus curling safely above,
more completely formed than I had imagined.
A thin, elegant needle slips smoothly through her skin just above the pubis
while gloved hands attach a vial, tap firmly, twice, and amniotic fluid pale as chenin blanc fills the cylinder.
The needle slides away without even a spot of blood.

My wife closes her eyes, leans her head against the wall of the small, blue office
and exhales a slow breath.
Today she taught three French classes, two English and will teach until early March, shortly before we finally become parents at 39 and 44, surprised by simple addition.

"Still hoping for a girl?" she asks, thinking of my brothers and nephews.
I say yes mostly to please her though I secretly refuse to wish for what I cannot control, like praying rain for spring wheat or sun for the picnic.
Difficult enough to practice acceptance, relish change at any age or try not to fear a July storm hailing half the harvest flat in minutes.
The doctor glides in, smiles
congratulations, and hands us
the lab report, twenty-three pairs
of spiraling hieroglyphics
which determine intelligence, health,
hair, whose nose, but mean nothing
until I see the last X and Y.

Peggy looks to the doctor, then me,
and I realize for this language
she has no Rosetta stone,
or simply wants to embrace
all possibilities a few seconds longer.
In the brief space before words,
limited but enriched, I mourn
a daughter and celebrate a son.

I cup private knowledge
in my hands like a flame, breathe
the fire larger, toward her, "boy."
Let Me Give You Some Background

My friend Tom
tells every story
from the beginning,
understands
talk for its own sake,
and feels a whisper
of loss
when my restlessness
begs a conclusion.
He knows
what many women
and some men know,
that words work
long after meaning,
touching
what philosophy
and fact
can not.

My impatience
is a hound
that wants to run,
fetch a stick,
tree the cougar,
get to the point
when he tells me more
than I need
to know.
But I am learning
to appreciate
a caress of voices
that lingers
like an embrace
instead of a handshake,
that means as much as coyotes calling along Thompson River in September, my wife retelling her blue day, or Tom's elaborate accounts of each marble step climbing to this long hall of Hellgate High School and the way people live together.
Five Lilacs
   for Glen

This morning I pulled down
a high branch on my lilac bush
and broke off five sweet blooms
that now purple my room with scent.

I walked to school wrapped in spring,
lilacs in one hand, the whole blue sky
and Lolo Peak in the other.
I found your note on my desk.

Glen, I can't accept an apology
if I can't remember the offense.
Maybe if your pointing hand bloomed
lavender lilac I'd have remembered

the gesture. Your words are friends
and sound sweeter than any finger point
except the glorious branch tips
of spring that shout lilac, lilac.
Resurrection of the Artist
       for my mother

You do not remember
collapsing on the floor

of the Fred Meyer variety section,
so this is just a story
told and retold by friends,
sister, and sons, like a legend

of death and rebirth you believe
because your cracked ribs

still ache. The young grocery clerk
pounded blood to your brain

four minutes before paramedics
arrived with the shock cart

and insulted your tired heart
to beating again. You woke

protesting, strapped down, tubes
attached to each bruised arm.

"Why am I a prisoner," you said.
But you have forgotten this, too,

as though some kind thief
had cut all power and in the quiet
dark, entered through your ears
to steal five days of hospital beds,
nurses, roses, and chrysanthemums,  
your room a scented palette

of color and bedside concern you felt  
but couldn't find names for except

as figures in a Rivera wall mural  
defaced by revolutionary violence.

Healthy enough now to sketch all morning,  
you paint spiraling mandalas in blue:

cobalt, prussian, manganese, cerulean  
between viridian and burnt sienna

on taut canvas, opening each day  
like a gift of landscapes and portraits

brushed three dimensional in time  
almost lost, like a seed lodged

in the corner of an envelope, saved  
and planted when April

warms earth for another circle  
of colors around the sun.
From England 1985

to Jeanne

The terrible surprise, the betrayal
by your strong heart hurt almost as much
as hours of pain before you knew
you'd need help to live. So you live.

A water color week of doubt, drugs and hope
washed you new and ready to go home. Free
of obligation and ambition, you learn
to rest, paint each day, walk yourself healthy.

In London, I imagined your voice, your firm hand
dabbing canvas blue. I felt farther away
than myth or dream and rowed a hopeful boat
through nights ringed with rocks and doubt.

You're blessed by change, though not comforted.
You grew with us, after Dad died, and now
you'll grow again, without chores and errands
and debts every day. Take time, accept

all the help that's offered, just paint
and love. You're good at both. In spring
Keats said, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty--

that is all ye know on earth, and all
ye need to know." He almost had it right.
Add love. Teach, learn, love: we all will.
That's the beauty of it. Love, Robin.
April Seventh, For Chris

In Montana spring is only fat buds
weeks away from open but I imagine
you on your birthday
    Brother
kneeling in your Seattle garden
digging away the office pressure
arms swinging a planting rhythm
moist ground warm and heavy
with smell of leaf mold
and a warm wind familiar as touch, rich with smells
of early hyacinth and pear blossoms
announces your birthday
    number forty
echoes green through new leaves
    a bell-like reverberation
shivering the hair on your neck.

The surprise you feel stands around you,
tangible as a shopping mall or the new banks
that may earn you partnership or at least
a good bonus.
    I see you pause
    sit in the red garden chair
your hands on the arm rests like a gymnast
on parallel bars ready to straddle press
into a handstand, then swing down between
bending bars and up, tucking
somersaults to stick the landing.
    Whose body
do you wear now and what connection do you feel
with the lean 17 year old
tumbling clean routines and perfect toe-pointed form
to 2nd place all-around in the state
though Dad was too embarrassed by praise
and too untouched by his own whiskey father to tell you what he bragged about to friends?

Maybe the seeds of cancer germinated then, fertilized by beer, a smoldering pipe and the anger that sometimes ran through the fingers of his controlled fists like water he swam so well

anger at life that failed to appreciate how far a Montana boy has to travel how many battles survived in Normandy or high school classrooms before retreating to a climate he understands

anger you let evaporate on flower garden afternoons or burn away with a bike ride on winding trails anger that rotted him in a cool fire summers at Flathead Lake couldn't extinguish.

You escaped to rock bands, Bozeman, architecture, Calgary, finally Seattle, where you grew up settled down, married, and learned to dress for success, where you live comfortably by Lake Washington and swing confidently through a career linking form and function like fine tools that fit your hand and make work easier. You know how space molds people and distance separates brothers. We lost you for two years through loving neglect but you worked your way back and rebuilt the family on the concrete foundation of yourself. I love how you've learned to value the human in your work
the way I loved and envied the giant swings
you looped on high bar, scooping air
and building speed for the release
of secure steel,
twisting free and high to land on soft blue mats,
feet planted, hand raised to judges.
Summer Session 1980
for John Hunt

I heard all words true
or not in time to remember
the flattery of imitation, density
of words black between lines.
I saw myself walking
pale July dawns toward a long hallway
whispering philosophy, theory.
A new song echoes the wall of trees
along the clear lake,
bats of summer evenings
lurching through dusk with the blind desire
of insects, cold water vomiting
smooth gravel on a private beach.

Do you know why clay
holds its shape, reflects spinning
tension? How three needles
in a bunch attract thunder?
How the color of good wine rhymes
with time? Let the committee decide
if the rainfly is necessary,
if the fish will bite.

You know you have to run,
that competence is the exception,
rewards rare. You still believe
people matter. You repeat it
like a litany every day.
Students can learn to trust the ground
that shakes the theory of touch.
The Lost Son

Terra cotta tiles reflect
Heat from pastel walls
To a patio
Where two older children
Feed cans to a goat.

A quetzal glides magically
Through the green jungle
And lands on a lawn
In Sacramento, crying
Fear of B-52's.

The third son releases bees
From jars to attack
Blue-green feathers
Until the bird dies, flapping
Wings on sandy ground.

The captain, father of sons,
Sings their quick retreat
To stark Montana,
Far from oceans, desert air
And flying insects.

His older boys build snow caves
And fight over ice
Crystals. The youngest,
left alone, learns to hoard grief
Until he burns cold

In his bed, dreaming of days
When sun shines on him
Alone. His hands grow
Blue steel and carbon fibers,
A machine quick-forged
Of oil, gears, flame. The boy runs
West to the sound of
Water, builds models
Of a man he wants to be
when his name matters.

Ten years later he returns
To bury parents
And fight his brothers
For the right to sharpen knives
And teach the children

Who know his name. Horses graze
In a brown meadow
And even the deer
Accept him. Years of neglect
Settle in fingers

Of his left hand. He instructs
Children to cut them
Off with knives dry-honed
On fine stones. Rage disappears.
He holds them all close.
Stalking the Competition
Every Decision

A cow elk lunges through dim
November morning, uphill across a road
and between black trees,
barely disturbing two feet of new snow.
You start tracking, rifle heavy
in gloved hands. Your partners
are miles away, circling to where
they don't know you will be. Each muffled step
is slower than heartbeats or cold
that reminds you how you are foreign,
vulnerable. Twenty years ago you rejected
the arguments of violence, swore
not to kill for anyone, even
your country, protested jungle deaths
more remote than democracy.

Now, after fifteen years of teaching
and poetry, you stalk an animal
elusive as doubts. Absolutes mean less
than how well something is done.
On a ridge above thick spruce
you see where she rested, her head
and one heavy ear outlined in snow.
Half a mile later she paused again
to browse tender willow,
then ran twenty yards. She may have heard
your delicate steps, smelled wool or man,
and chewed like cud an idea

that must keep moving or die. You wonder
how long you can listen, breath held,
and look for a dark back against

green and white. Is it more honest to kill
your own meat? You promise to waste
nothing, thank whatever God understands

how man and animal depend
on random death for meaning, a reason
to continue the repetition of step

pause, step, pause until
you know that you can do it, can pull
the trigger, see her leap

suddenly sideways, run ten quick
yards, stand half hidden, listening,
bleeding, until the second shot

drops her heaped brown and quiet.
All winter, this wildness
will feed you in your warm house.

You will remember cold hours,
hard curve of knife, steaming guts,
long pack out, and two echoing booms

that stab the quiet confidence
of every decision you make.
Morning Run

Shivering despite stocking hat
and gloves, I run along
the Clark Fork River trail,
over frost shadows of aspen and pine.
Seven miles later I sweat up
the hill from Toole Park,
and ahead of me, head down,
shoulders hunched in thought
or daze, a figure in blue
jogs slowly toward town.
My wife runs too, and tells me
how her heart accelerates
when she hears a faster runner
pounding behind her, so I stay
on the other side of the street.

But the woman hears steps
or my breath rasping each stride,
stops, turns, her fingers
fragile bars over a startled mouth,
and her eyes echoing a scream
that hits me like a fist.
I lurch sideways and hold
my palms up and try to look harmless,
smaller. "It's OK, OK," I say,
unsure how to undo centuries
of arms and knees muscling women open,
nights or streets made dangerous
by the hungers of men.

She gasps to scream again
but her eyes discover soft October air,
fresh snow on Stuart peak,
orange leaves at her feet.
The echo of her voice fades
like frost in weak sun.

We stand a moment, the whole street
between us, traffic gurgling across
the Higgins Street Bridge, and we both
apologize, not quite sure why.
Then, as if nothing had happened,
she turns and shuffles west
past the intersection. I turn left,
and all the way home, dead leaves fall
like small birds stunned by cold.
The Butchers

A rounded wedge of dark muscle
still anchored to bone lies before me
on the scrubbed plywood. I hone
my knife dangerously sharp.
"Thanks for helping," Ken says,
social studies teacher and hunting
partner as he hands me an apron.
I trim yellow-white fat
and filmy membrane from seams
between muscle groups while he describes
the hunt and the long drag out:
"Five miles, mostly downhill, but cold
and two feet of snow." Beneath the words,
like bone beneath flesh, I hear
awe and apology moving together.

Near the scapula I see where a 30-06
lamed the elk before the last killing shot,
remove white fragments
from shattered meat,
save the worst for dogs, the rest for burger.
"I wish," he says, "every kid
who thinks war is patriotic
could see what a bullet does."
I carve one large section
into beautiful, lean steaks, arranged
and wrapped in shiny freezer paper.

We warm our hands, sip beer,
and I admire the antlers,
early twenty pounds of phosphorus
and calcium carried for no other reason
than rattling aspen, alder and small pines,
trumpeting the right to mate.
If all men hunted and became the animals they consumed, they might cast off old beliefs as often as elk drop antlers, suddenly light-headed in spring. All left with raw pedicule stumps for a few days before soft velvet begins to form, based on another year's experience. But no, the new rack is bigger, just as hard, with more points, and every fall, the woods fill with hunters.
Racquetball
for Chip

I'll admit I enjoyed winning close three times last week. You compete as lovingly as I do and understand why I contest each point, even in the third game. Two days later I'm still stiff. At 43 I recover slower. I wonder how many fast days I have left, how many quick steps before I lose speed, flexibility, the chance to win a close match. You know how sport can make us, on a good day, feel fast and alive. Smacking concussion of ball, strings, and wall echo after each point ends and we meditate in the square, white silence. This week we'll play your court, a bounce you know, how high the ball climbs the back wall. Vary your serve, lob or Z, and make me compute another acute angle, double the abstraction. And smash a few right at me, the hell with touch. I'll be calculating possibilities and hit weakly to your strength. The few I get will make me feel fast and young. I'll settle for that, even losing.
Mountain Lion Dialog

Rifle balanced loosely over my left arm, safety on, I muffled through new snow in slow, uneven rhythm, scanned the lodgepole mountainside for movement,

a horizontal line of backs among black trees, or mule deer ears sprouting like huge leaves from a slender stalk. On Thanksgiving morning, alone with the warm cloud of my breath,

weak sun loosening snow from branches, I heard irregular soft falls hitting like fists in fat gloves.

A new sound, like tearing paper or guttural wind, and close,

twisted me toward it. A mountain lion crouched ten feet away, waiting perhaps for me to jump, deer quick, exposing a long neck to his hunger.

Imagine waking,

stomach sucked up to backbone, restless, to stalk open hillsides and brushy creek bottoms for deer scent, the weak, careless, or young, and hurtle the last long yards to land

snarling on graceful shoulders like a stone wrapped in burlap. A cougar in winter must kill every seven days, gorge and return until only scapula and ribs remain.
The black-tipped tail twitched. Too scared
or proud to run, I stood in the frost air
on his ground and counted my chances.
He rasped a cough and lifted one padded paw

so I, the bigger animal, roared back--
my first error.

He stepped closer, stopped,
and until that moment I was his,
but I thumbed the safety off, waved

my rifle and backed away--another error.
Encouraged, the lion oozed forward.
I aimed, braced for tumbling contact, claws,
and resorted to language, clearest English:

"Go away! I don't want to shoot you! Go!"
Confused by such diction
in a clean forest, the puma epiphany
circled once and slipped into woods,

bored by conversation or the game.
Still tracks marked the snow around me
and I exhaled a tight breath,
my pulse thudding the wild air.
Marathon

At the starting line
You look for calm
beneath deep breaths and long stretches
but your body beats alive
beyond control. The gun spills
cautions and adrenalin dictates pace
faster than strategy. Fight
for a second wind, don't think of distance,
only the leap through space
leaving every step behind.

At five miles your body breaks
through to theories of perpetual motion.
Your mind, transmigrant,
floats free and remembers why: air
is only important when you run
gasping to the end of it.

One foot shadows the other, passes,
is passed. Thighs lift
and stretch, feet slap ground
in a primative rhythm that rings hurt
to an inner ear, pumps blood new red
to smallest capillaries. Muscles
discover ancient truths.

At fifteen miles you look for meaning
to outlast reasons.
Some racial memory hums
across a landscape old as lies
where a man runs because he must,
where swift motion wins
food, safety, life another day.
Your mind drifts to shorter times.
After twenty miles only structure, 
burning pale, is left 
to fuel motion’s demands. You wonder 
what necessity makes you choose 
to hurt this much. Run on will 
and begin to know 
that without pain would be without 
meaning. Look into every small 
corner of your inadequacy 
and see it feeding greedy on itself 
leaving, at last, the heart, 
a kinetic miracle beyond your control 
or reason. Love this steady wear, 
essential motion, because it is yours.
Skinning

The deer hangs in the dark garage, front legs frozen stiff in mid-leap. I open the door, pause, hold my breath, as if noise might startle him. Touching the fine stiff hair, hard curve of antlers, delicate hoofs, I remember the mountain where he died. My wife helps with the skinning. "I'm glad," she says, "you put his tongue back in."

We work together. A line through hair tipped white follows my blade around the neck. Peggy begins to peel hide from solid red muscle, amazed how loosely skin surrounds a body, how much pain and death sustain us. We pull down, touch knives to translucent film between hide and flesh. Naked shoulders, back, and ribs appear. A small hole behind one shoulder echoes a bloody smear on the other flank. No meat wasted.

My thumb touches cold fingers around each thin leg as I cut skin loose at knees. Three black ticks still burrow close to the body under the left foreleg though live warmth whispered away days ago. Even the long cavity from neck to pelvis gapes cold. Thick pads of tallow around the hips make skinning harder. I cut the tough fiber on hamstrings and hang the hide to dry. The carcass is no longer deer, just bone and meat. In the house we wash dulled knives in warm water and our numb hands touch.
Triathlon

1
Some call it escape, selfish, vanity
but I love this celebration of human power,
internal combustion of carbohydrates
instead of petroleum, no stock cars,
snowmobiles or monster trucks,
just rows of delicate bicycles
arranged for take-off, arcs
of wheels and handlebars echoed
two hundred times like a huge cornucopia
spiraling away to the green lake.
All around me lean bodies move
purposefully, like lazy cats
hoarding energy, clothed in colorful skins
designed to slip through air like fish
in current. At the very least
I can hold one aging body together
and wish I could learn how to burn the fat
blocking flacid arteries of a country
marble sure of its right to consume
every tree, ore body, fertilized field, even air
in the race for Gross National Product.

2
Red-capped swimmers flock
at water's edge like ducks, then explode
across the lake, arms flailing to the far shore
I stroke and breath toward forever, unable
to think beyond my own buoyancy,
the rush of cool motion
around me, beneath me, until sand grates
under my feet and I run
on unfamiliar legs to my bicycle
where I change skins, evolve into a black-helmeted
piston hunching a sleek frame and thin wheels
dizzy around the course, pursuing
what I love, not winning, but the leap
through space that says any action
is better than doing nothing
in the shadow of mountains that can't hide
missiles bristling security and plenty
among fields of hard red wheat.

3
Thousands of revolutions later I abandon
the bicycle, exchange cleats for soft shoes,
stagger tired legs
to a different rhythm, run
as though it were important to prepare
for a time when oil wells bubble dry,
when Safeway fails to satisfy basic needs
and electricity flickers out,
when legs are the only vehicle
that can pedal me warm to work
or to my mountain refuge,
an enlarged badger den below a talus slope.
Sometimes ten pounding miles
is less painful than news of rape
two blocks away or a car bomb in Palestine,
dull television gameshow afternoons,
a bridge game or a stadium with ten thousand people
cheering a few high-paid athletes.
My warm-shower mornings
need the bite of a particular muscle's hurt,
a connection to the history
of human endurance, the pain I chose
to sharpen convenient push-button days.
3

Recipes For Teachers
My Week to Cook

Pale liquid bubbles and a bouquet garni floats in the stockpot. Carrots, onions, and celery soften around a turkey carcass another hour before every sweet pocket of meat slips from breastbone and back. I pour off clear stock, skim fat, save the small corners and feathers of flesh, add rice, pepper, a thumb of Indian curry, and set it all simmering thirty minutes until dinner. My wife abandons student papers, follows her nose to the table. Her compliment: "I don't trust a man who doesn't cook."

Ten years ago when I first heard that bias I thought it silly. What about humor, skill with wood, numbers, paint? "A man is as good as his bechamel." How could a woman ignore strength, security, adventure, biceps? The answer: Ockham's razor. My wife says no other rule is easier, more dependable. A man who cooks, she says, understands the history of kitchens and the women who occupied them in all seasons. The shopping, too, selection of bell pepper, ripe cantaloupe, cheese like God's feet, or spices for stew fosters sensitivity that is hard to fake. A woman can love and forgive a man who cooks well.

If he cleans up afterward, tucks each spoon, leftover and saucepan home, it is no act. Anybody can taste, enjoy a meal, gorge,
but someone who has rubbed garlic into chicken, kneaded bread, or arranged paella can truly nourish, and love the result the way women love their children and refuse to send them to war.
Autumn on the Great Plains

Remember the lonely quail woman
whose hands mix feta cheese
and small birds lovingly, her wrists
twisting like waves of soft
copper echoes. Bald October
dances wheat dreams she hears
at dusk and her ash eyes compose
the sky. No stars hesitate.
Musk candles burn shorter
on the pine table. Believe months
of walking toward home will end.
Imagine ripe apples and wine.
Watch how her elegant breasts
appear at the window of a church
open to an autumn of singing.
The Domesday Book, 1086

Fire smolders under a pot of boiled grain
hanging over the hearth and day
repeats a wet, grey litany my husband
endures since he won this land, me,
and five thousand sheep
on a foggy morning near Pevensey,
charging uphill through orange beeches
and killing three men defending
their blond king who also died,
a Norman arrow in his startled eye.

My first husband died the same October,
his estate forfeit, so I won this knight
to my bed and marriage folded us
together, separated by language,
joined by conquest. Twenty years later
he calls orders to the shearers in English
blurred by the lilt of a language
shaming native speech to shadows
and fields of dirt and dung. I keep
his house and raise his dark children
in cold comfort despite the wool robes
on our beds and tapestries lining walls.

I wish another great star would freeze
the sky for weeks, water become bone,
a new champion march across the sea
bringing a new son to kill the King
in his drunken castles, and burn
all the maps and deeds that spell my race
in bleeding knees and unrecorded tongues.
Learned Helplessness: The Seligman Experiment

1. Dogs in group A receive a mild shock that ceases when they push a panel with nose or paw.
   Dogs in group B receive the same shock but no action they take will stop the shock which stops only when a dog in group A pushes the panel.
   Dogs in group C receive no shock.

2. All dogs are transferred to shuttleboxes (large boxes divided into two compartments by a low wall) and shocked again.
   Dogs in group A jump the barrier and escape the shock a few seconds after it starts.
   Dogs in group B whimper and lie down, although the shocks continue.
   Dogs in group C jump the barrier and escape the shock.

4. Results: two of three people in group B give up, endure the noise.

5. Conclusions:
   Helplessness is more than punishment and reward.
   We learn to accept pain.
   We can learn to stay in an unlocked house.

According to the director of the domestic-violence program, Sarah Reilly "was doing everything right," but her husband Joseph rented a car in Coeur d' Alene, drove to Missoula, and waited in the parking lot of the Southgate Mall for his wife to leave the first job she ever had. "She's my wife," he said, and shot her three times with a 9mm and then himself.
I sit on the shore of Swan Lake, hear birch leaves blown brittle from trees and see them flutter into deep water, then drift slowly toward the grey foot of the lake and ten miles of white water before spilling over the dam past Bigfork and into Flathead Lake, more rivers and dams, through the wide mouth of the Columbia to the brackish sea.
Entelechy

Cold milk wind whines through the old osier in a parabola of thin branches. Last year's thistles bang dryly against the garage. First flowers, crocus, hyacinth, tulip, rinsed by rain, shout a soliloquy of red and violet at indelicate air. Small bright birds retreat from the late blizzard to thick branches near the willow's heart. April snow hisses horizontal and accumulates like piles of rice, white among iris leaves stabbing upward, early season scimitars.

Tomorrow sun will erase a last scrawl of winter and green enforce the theme of spring.
Teaching at Gayton High School, London

For six months I have been trying to teach Daniel enough to pass the O-level test he knows he will fail. He liked me for the first three weeks of school, asked questions about Indians, Yellowstone Park, and loose American girls. At sixteen he can play charming, ingratiating, even polite, "Yes, Sir," in his blue school blazer, striped tie, and official gray trousers. When I read Lennie, "Tell me about the rabbits, George, tell me about the farm," he listens like an honors student. But he will not write, will not think and write, will not shut up, and disrupts a class as ruthlessly as a terrorist.

Today his own anger surprises him. He throws a pencil hard across the room, swears out loud, "Bloody, fucking paper." kicks over his chair, and stands at the back of the room thudding the soft outside of his fist against rotting plaster. Prashant and Graeme cheer, Michael cowers, and I ask Daniel to stay after class. We have talked before. But this time I indulge my anger in the British school tradition, tell him I don't care if he fails, I have never known, in fifteen years of teaching, such a nasty, inconsiderate waste of an intelligence, I soon return to Montana where even poor students have the quiet dignity of someone who keeps his family warm all winter by cutting, hauling, and splitting dry larch or kills an elk each November to fill the freezer, I don't care if he doesn't do another piece of writing for the rest of the term, I won't bother him if he sits in the corner and sleeps,
but if he continues to make it impossible for anyone else to learn or speak I will throw him out of class and make sure he never comes back.

He is stunned. For the first time I have earned his respect. This is how a teacher acts. He mumbles, "Sorry, Sir," and for two weeks he is quiet and cautious, even composes a letter for his thin portfolio. I have learned something about failure, authority, class, empire. We despair.
Driving the Swan Valley in March

West, the Mission Mountains sharpen
grey shadows and hide high lakes.
East, the Swan Range hoards snow

in granite niches for summer streams,
reflects short orange waves of evening light.
Below treeline geometric clearcuts

glow white among darker forests,
varying shapes of rectangle, trapezoid,
and obtuse, blunted triangle, empty shapes

connected by strips and huddled islands
of trees marked for future harvest.
In the highway barrow pit a deer carcass

dissolves in ribs and fur, winter road kill,
exposed as plowed snow melts. Ravens erupt,
circle, and return to carrion coyotes ignore.

In a field near Beck’s road two boys
hump their snowmobiles from fence to fence,
leave a blue stink in fading light.

Downstream toward Swan Lake the river
flows wider, swells, and bulltrout bludgeon
their way upstream to spawn, gorged

on smaller trout, whitefish, sculpins.
This year eggs laid in Jim Creek suffocate
in sediment washed from bare logged slopes.
Long-stemmed beargrass thrusts upward toward June and flowers like white clubs when water will crest, flooding, then ebb.

Tonight, my headlights find bright deer eyes and brake lights flash, hooves slip on asphalt, white tails disappear in growing dark.
Manifest Destiny

So many arguments build on concrete slabs
the passionate speakers call rights,
tons of gray conglomerate

displacing sagebrush, fescue, manzanita, wild oats,
the winter range of mule deer,
a healthy herd thinned

by Kennworths, Toyotas, and subsistence hunters
who leave steaming gut piles
near the eighteenth green

unplayable four months, snow crusted
and tracked by suburban
neon country skiers

whose successful pursuit of happiness lies distant
from wild mountains viewed through clean glass
of cathedral vaulted rooms

where no baby can be conceived in poverty, neglect
or infection scabbing eyes blind
at birth, abandoned

beyond an asphalt cul-de-sac for coyotes
whose rights are where they find them
in every city

from Boston to Los Angeles, encouraged, fattened
on well-fed schnauzers and garbage so rich
the landfill burns
deep into the twenty-first century when everyone's rights
born or unborn, black or female, will be measured
in teaspoons of crude oil

and the lifespans of winged insects who cannot survive
on the carcinogenic sweat
of a race secure

in its own inalienable privilege, its children
dying within the impregnable walls
of islands like fortress America

where all survivors are free, equal in fault,
skins thickened by genetic engineering,
united in Patriotism.
The First Mathematician.

Last year I invented the zero to prove nothing sometimes counts.  
This morning I finger my abacus and glimpse a flash of blue  
through a rift in the pervasive clouds, blink as it vanishes  
like an oddly timid jay into thick brush.  
A new concept, infinity, blossoms  
like an exotic flower in the safe dark  
behind my eyes where I live.  
"Flight," I think. Flight will show me where parallel lines  
ever meet. Wings grow from my small white shoulders; when my feet leave the ground I am afraid. Sudden hunger for a sun I scarcely remember urges me higher, faster.  
The speed of my ascent pull my eyes into my mouth.  

From thirty thousand feet  
clouds hang low and dull below me, horizons diminished except for the next sad storm even jackals hide from. A huge swell of ground curves west in haze, beyond theory. Neat geometry (the word is new, my mouth trips on the sound) arranges itself in circles, arcs and rectangles all the way to the sea. Suddenly mad, I curse the farmers.  
"Fools. Ingrates! Why haven't they told me about the lines, angles, and shapes pregnant with meaning? Me, who taught them how to count more sheep than fingers, how to add their debts and subtract
the bad years." I substitute new figures into the old formula for gratitude. I discover how ratios in proportion indicate more and less equal relationships, different as people, more manageable than children.

I do not feel tired. I calculate loft, vectors, drag and plan to fly forever. Something on the ground keeps pace with me and I am startled until I recognize my shadow. I watch fascinated how the darker self below proves the lines of light, the way the sun bends the shine of stars older than stone. Pressure of so much knowledge forces a yawn. My ears pop. The shadows of what I don't know are longer than I had guessed. I want to know more. I fly away from land toward water's end until I realize the color of infinity is blue. The sun beats on my shoulders and my shadow follows; I see it, him, me, moving exactly beneath the waves. Water whispers in a language older than figures about the explosive singularity of birth.

Later, days, months, years, I don't remember, as though a dark hole swallowed all time, barefoot men in fields stop behind plows at the sight of my small shape growing nearer in the eastern sky. The strong certainty of my flight, my bronze skin, scares them. "Mathematician," they shout, "don't you remember?" I do not reassure them. When I land all clouds evaporate. A dark-haired woman hands me three golden bracelets.