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Dangerous amusements| [Poems]

Jon Davis
The University of Montana

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DANGEROUS
AMUSEMENTS

By
Jon Davis
B.A., University of Montana, 1983

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts University of Montana 1985

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners
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DANGEROUS AMUSEMENTS

Poems by Jon Davis
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The Georgia Review: "That Modern Malice."
Indiana Review: "The Unmetaphysical Esteves."
Mid-American Review: "James Lee Howell, Trucker, Reconsiders His Profession."
The Minnesota Review: "Proposition and Lament."
The Missouri Review: "Blue Sky, the Girder Falling."
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Swallow's Tale: "Grandmother Speaks From Her Chaise Lounge Near the Dock."
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"White Body, Green Moss" is copyright 1985 by the Modern Poetry Association.
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For Terry
I. VOTIVE

"Must every experience--those that promised to be dearest and most penetrative,--only kiss my cheek like the wind and pass away?"

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, letter to Caroline Sturgis, February 4, 1842.
"PERFECT LANDSCAPES, RICH BRANCHES OF BLOSSOM"

It is your world to make
and you choose to fill
rooms with necessary objects:
a Chinese vase, a painting of a woman
arranging flowers by moonlight,
a book of poetry by Basho.

A rose leans, revealing its moist stamen
within a halo of fragrance.
Why not a Spanish guitar
leaning in a sunny corner?
Why not music: Villa Lobos
or Rampal and his sentimental flute?

Your women are French, Oriental,
your men—artists, dancers, poets.
Don't you see? Even love
is a luxury. And now you have
cactus blooming in the sun room,
an oriole chirping from the flowering plum.

Someone is quoting Garcia Lorca.
A man wearing white silk,
a woman in a dress of pale cotton:
they sit at a wicker table,
in wicker chairs, looking away,
thinking in image, not word.

In this luxury of sun
they hold crystal goblets
filled with the glittering rosé
of thin blood. They kiss,
the nature of their desire revealed
by his restraint, her surrender.

Later, when they make love,
she recalls Nijinsky, turning,
his eyes, his shoulders, softening.
He thinks of Degas: his girlish ballerina
practicing: imagining each smooth stroke
along the flushed inner thigh.
AGAINST SARTRE

You begin by refusing the leaves,
the brown leaves of the oak,
last to stutter against branches,
last to fall. Then
you refuse the tree, the sky,
clouds slumped against rock,
the flat-boat
easing through an inlet,
the two fishermen in yellow slickers
facing the sea, imagining nothing--
caught in the routines of joy,
the motions of light and fog,
undulations of water
thick with color; yellow slickers,
the new green of bud and flower,
the slate heron aloft,
trailing its yellow legs.
In this confusion of seasons
these fishermen drift
while you watch from your porch,
the heat clanging in the pipes,
your breath fogging the glass,
the coffee cup steaming in your hand,
wet leaves stuck to your bare feet,
the door left open--warm rain
and the wind. Over the bay
you hear the plunge and stroke
and you know that this
is the edge of an impossible future,
the absence of everything you know.
Over the bay you hear
droplets falling from a stilled oar.
THE SACRED

Is not found in the sudden whorl of fingerprints, the spider's web, the oyster-drill waving its tiny trunk, the trumpet worm sunk in silt, its pink fronds scything the waves' repetitions—though each quickens our longing.

Nor is it found in the inexplicable joy of contrast—the black bulk of mountain severed by the red ebullience of the sun, the angle a tree makes with slanting ground, a white cloud soaking gray stone, the radical enjambment of cliff and sky—though this is closer.

Perhaps it emerges when the sea dissolves into a shining, when mountain and sun collapse into a single line, when rock softens and clouds root deeper, when a web becomes slivers of silver light and the oyster-drill, settling on its prey, begins the tender rasping.
THE PARADIGMS OF EXPRESSION

After Maurice Merleau-Ponty

A rose—
petals soft as moth wings, crimson as papal robes—
nods into fragrant death. These curling parchments
are the documents of love, that brief fierceness
of the affections when we touch,
kissing, and create ourselves from dust.

It is raining—
and you, love, are dreaming of betrayal and loss,
a child watching his wagon burn—an impossibility
in a world of impossibilities. The rain falls
stinging the child's face, hissing against the wagon
that burns like acetylene, like metal consuming metal,
and then, inexplicably, a heron in the sky
as if to say, this is only a dream.

It is fine—
this praise of loss—the rose wilting,
the impossible wagon impossibly burning,
the child’s grief for his lost world. These
are the paradigms of expression, longing
and love and the love of longing. These
are the lessons of language:

man is mortal,
and the parched body leads us into speech
where everything we need enters
and is stilled: the rose, the rain and the wagon,
the heron, and the history of flight—
there, and there, and there.
WARBLERS, RELIGION

Today I walked into the woods and saw warblers scattering among the yellow leaves of birches, willows, ash. Parula and cerulean spun and fluttered. One dropped sixty feet from the black willow, twisting, gaining control. I wish you could have been there. I wish this could mean something to you.

It must seem dull: inconsequential birds launching from trees. But think of it as a kind of religion. When you go to church think of warblers alighting on twigs, bouncing, then gone, think of a rosary of birds, think of lives, a thread. Walls, church walls. Think of sky, stars, other suns. Let everything press inward.

Imagine an ovenbird kicking and scraping among stiff daffodils. Imagine a warbler trapped in the church, perched on the altar and he won't stop singing.
THE SPOONBILLS

For Terry

The gas lamp built a globe
of white light. Wind roared
in the fire's glass. We huddled close.
Beyond, the nylon tent, inflated, shuddered.
Florida Bay churned into white.
That day, we'd watched black skimmers
make their glittering incisions.
Vultures dipped from the wind
to drink from fountains.
A hawk screamed
from the low plumes of a palm.
The anhinga, pteranadon of the marsh,
clum to a mangrove
and turned, wings fanned in the sun.
Towards evening,
the laughing gulls gathered,
squawking near our tent. Then,
at dusk, the spoonbills flew:
the sun's long last rays reflecting
pink off the soft feathers,
the feathers we knew were soft,
the graceful legs trailing,
the long necks outstretched,
and the flattened bills
we knew but could not see.
What is love? We pointed
and understood.
A VOTIVE FOR EMERSON

Auroras flicker like the soul of a city rising
From the wilderness beyond. I grew up in the east,
Manhattan: from the sky at night, a circuit board of lights.
The aberrant loveliness of human effort.
Not the single farmhouse, one road to town,
But the complications of clover-leaf and staircase.
Some nights, into a sky blank as philosophy's,
The moon rises full and clear.
On such a night, I saw you
Wander out of Madison Towers dressed in your green coveralls,
"Emerson" embroidered over your heart.
Walking to your car, you felt the weight of the moonlight,
And turned to see it—a pearl in the blue-black sky,
And when you turned back to the car, your hand
Had broken into a million shadows, and you felt
The planet moving, skyscrapers like cardboard,
And you remembered a former time, another life,
And your lips formed a shape,
And you touched the gleaming door handle
And you opened the door.
Soteriology

"Soteriology: the theology of salvation."
--Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

According to the saints, the chosen walk by grace alone through an obedience prepared for them, as if faith were a thing granted, not a thing we summon up within us, a sap willed from the center of whatever root sustains. Seeing it their way, nothing can be accomplished. Desire is a river of sand, a hand sketching a hand that sketches a hand. In Escher's lithographs, for example, it is not the pleasure of repetition he shows us, but the emptiness of reason, how even as the apes become men we know that in the kernel of light in which the world invents itself, they are still apes, and unsaved. Picture them in Hell, their attempts at abstinence and virtue exchanged for lives of absolute terror, mouthes twisted beyond speech, flames dripping from their upraised arms. Even Aquinas, puzzling over such figures, must have been astonished to hear himself say that, yes, they were free only to choose their sins, to choose their seats in the circle of fire. Knowing this, he must have looked hard in the eyes of his brothers; he must have thought all that kindness betrayed by this. But they are the evil ones, the background against which the saved prance and calumniate. So today, in a classroom filled with students who feign interest, I can envy the young man who leans his head against the window and lets his eyelids drop, unconcerned, uncurious, waiting for the future to swallow him, to mutter him into a dull simplicity, saving him at last from this language of need.
THE DROWNING

A young woman, lithe and anxious, is taking her first man. Her hair veils her small face. She laughs. He is somewhere else. It is noon. They are draining the lake in Westerly. At the bottom, in the crater of cracked mud, caked with a fine silt like the victims of Vesuvius, they will find:

a tangle of arms and legs—a young girl huddled against death.

The couple groans, though there is little pain. They have forgotten wars. They have forgotten the drowned. They are swimming into each other. At four o'clock, a uniformed man will lean, drained, against a stone dam, and stare at the water mark—3' 6"—where the body lies, clutched and still. Other men will be standing nearby, holding cigarettes, looking away, into the comforting emptiness.
BLUE SKY, THE GIRDER FALLING

All day long I've been thinking about justice,
that young man from Helena--quarterback, scholar,
wife and young son, the girder falling from the sky . . .
Last week on campus he said we'd beat 'em good this year
and a case of beer was riding on it. I imagine him
kissing his wife good-bye, holding his boy up,
burying his face in the puffy stomach.
Then the long drive north to the work site,
past farmhouses, their windows blazing with sun.
All day long I've been thinking about justice,
the steel falling, Jim Burford smiling, tanned
and shirtless, the yellow hard hat
on the perched shell of his skull. I think
of the crane operator; stories told over beers at Rudy's;
the flask tucked beneath his belt, his wife
unbuttoning her beaded blouse behind the trailer.
All day long I've been thinking about justice.
When it was done they grappled the iron off the body
and the toughest men in Montana looked away.
This afternoon I rake leaves, trying to forgive God.
When I look up at Mount Sentinel I remember
bitterroot blooming in a secret valley,
ticks clinging to the tender slips.
All day long I've been thinking about justice.
Last night, a thunderstorm, lightning
falling in sheets, the muddy river slugging trucks.
I sat with my wife in a car and watched:
pine boughs crashed around us, a ball of lightning
sputtered across the field. My wife
took my hand, kicked open the door.
She walked me into the storm: across
startled suburban lawns, swing sets clanging,
a mutt crashing an aluminum door--whimpering,
the glittering cars, dithering birches,
puddled driveways drenched in light.
All day long I've been thinking about justice,
leaves rushing under the rake, blue sky, the girder falling.
BREATH

If it is Tuesday, the fifteenth of June, then the curtains are lifting and wavering in a slight wind. The thin song of an Audubon's warbler rises and falls through the window where a woman is baking bread. The woman's husband runs an edger along the walk, cutting back the sod. He is trying not to think of his mother's death, how she counted herself out of this world.

"One," she'd said, and breathed, and held with both hands to her son's hand, feeling the silver ring carved with a horse's head that he'd worn since he was sixteen. "Two. Three." When she'd reached nine her hands had tightened, then gone limp. This morning, while he was still half-asleep, those hands had come to him, the skin dry and smooth, the fingers bent, the knuckles slick and misshapen. He remembered being afraid to touch that skin, then, unexpectedly, taking her hands. He'd thought she'd smiled then, but he realized later that he'd been mistaken and that what he'd taken for a smile had been an expression without meaning, an expression that signalled the beginning of meaninglessness.

That was Sunday. Today is Tuesday, and he leans to tear a chunk of shelf fungus from the rotting trunk of a dogwood, a tree he'd meant to cut down last fall until he'd discovered the hole and, inside the hole, the nest lined with pale blue and orange down. The odor of the fungus is, he thinks, sharp and sexual, unlike the smell of baking bread that he thinks of as feminine and not sexual but gracefully erotic, as when he watches his wife at her tea, absorbed in the play of sunlight along the blonde hairs of her arms. When he stands, the smell of baking bread blows past him, and he sees his wife through the gauze curtains. He thinks that she is older now, and that he is older. He thinks that he and his brothers are all that's left of their mother, and he feels diminished.

Since Sunday they have done nothing but make arrangements—they chose the coffin, picked out clothes that she might have worn had this been her sister's funeral and not her own, and wrote an obituary notice for the local newspaper. He'd wanted to say something grand about his mother, but found there was nothing he could say. She'd been a good mother, undistinguished except by idiosyncracies whose pleasures were private and arose from repetition—how she would
answer the phone so cheerfully when her children called from college that it seemed she knew they were about to call, how, later, she'd watch football on television, cheering so loudly at touchdowns that someone would inevitably rush into the room to be sure she hadn't fallen.

He knew that reading these facts in the newspaper would not make them more true. He knew that the agony of all this would pass, that the warbler singing in the cedar was simply marking his territory, that that was the only meaning, that beauty was incidental. He breathed deeply. Bread, grass, his mother's hands, the curtains blowing, his wife's quick motions behind the kitchen window—all of it was in the air. He felt it. It filled him. He breathed again.
LANDSCAPE ASSEMBLED FROM DREAMS

The lake under mist like an eye, opening,
a disc of light adrift among the drawn
shadows of pines, quivering hemlocks
pressed tight to the tensed surface.
Three boys move on the cliff face, down
into the stroke of sunlight pushing
through mist, slashing a single vein of light
across the basaltic spires. In this
plausible light, green deepening to blue,
air thick with moisture, with the smells
of fern and moss, of leaf-mold, the boys walk,
revising this landscape assembled from dreams,
the drift of intelligence stilling each sequence
as it occurs—the hawk pinned to the sky,
the single cry that quickens stone,
the lake suddenly clear and without detail,
the hawk gone, the boys stepping back
into their separate lives.
TOURING NEW ENGLAND

In New England tourists curve through towns on slick pavement. Every bend brings new gusts of weather. Here the sun shines and women--tanned and made grave by summers at the cape--stride among the keen details of landscape: cottages thrust against sea and sky, waves rummaging through gravel. Such steady pressures carve this place: the men stream from factories where the least error makes the blood go hollow, or ride to work six to a car not noticing the shoreline recede, the wreckage fouling their rivers. Generations here are united by granite, cut, polished, thrust up into new formations. Whole walls of sunlight stun the cities. Tourists gape at the horizon, cluttered by cloud and spray, water too cold to swim, or trudge through heat to purchase schooners and stuffed seals, landscapes made of surf and surface. They return to Kansas or Missouri where neighbors gawk at the shapes attained by sand, the gull's awkward flights, a sailboat tilted beyond belief.
THAT MODERN MALICE

"So you get all them weird chords which don't mean nothing, and first people get curious about it just because it's new, but soon they get tired of it because it's really no good and you got no melody to remember and no beat to dance to. So they're all poor again and nobody is working, and that's what that modern malice done for you."

--Louis Armstrong

Listen: a rose lynched in the arbor,
a honeybee frisking the orchid's heart:
variations on a theme. Not lovers
murmuring near sleep, the rituals of love
completed in the room next to yours,
not that kind agreement to deceive,
but this: a purity rising in your throat,
just the truth--how you looked in her eyes
and thought for no reason of car lights
drifting over the bridge into Manhattan,
or the nameless future that draws all of us
to the edge of madness or drink, then
turns without a word and plays the chorus straight,
the way a tree full of crows purifies the heart.
The way you walk alone on a city night
past bars alive with smoke and noise
where the neon snap and buzz plays every memory,
your heart punching you on into the heartless solo.
Desire is not a concentration of fact,
but a glissando, a sudden modulation,
snatch of "Melancholy Baby"
in the midst of "Yardbird Suite."
No moment is big enough, and when you
break into the chorus, even the comping piano
chafes like a woman on the phone,
like the rhythm of paycheck to paycheck,
show from nine to three, dress codes and charts.
Each note is a history of itself,
an embolus rising to the brain. Listen:
a honeybee drones in the orchid's heart.
II. A STREAM OF SOULS

"We may come to think that nothing exists but a stream of souls, that all knowledge is biography."

--William Butler Yeats
This child that wobbles from living room
to kitchen wearing his diaper, his fat legs
blotched with pink, his hair twisted into peaks,
babbles a language all syntax, like
birdsong or the rhetoric of hounds,
while I sit in my thirteen-year-old's clothes,
novice at fashion, at not being different,
at not drawing attention, at being stupid
like the rest of my thirteen year old world.
The child's mother waves her dry, white-skinned
arms and chain-smokes menthol cigarettes
where she sits at the black-and-white specked
formica table. I'm too young to understand
any of this, but I listen to a story of abandonment
and sin, doors slammed, an all night bus trip
from West Virginia, some lust that pries a man
from a woman and sends her into the corner
of her brain where speech is backed-up
on an assembly line one part against another,
saying nothing. I listen to the child
and the mother speak this language
of avoidance, of deference and sigh. In one hour
I'll go to school and learn to hate what makes us true,
to snub the lonely and the poor, the mad
who know something suddenly and can't say what it is--
an idea, or a feeling, or the ghost of a feeling.
I'll wear the same pair of jeans all week, the same
stupid shirt everyone wears. I'll speak
the same language filled with the flash of chrome,
verbs like gemstones, nouns big and plural as cadillacs,
adjectives that print foreheads.
I'll walk around behind my eyes taking everything
that's given. I'll pledge allegiance, line up
behind the future. I'll come home, lie awake, and listen
to the boy shaking his crib, his mother
tapping ashes into a half-filled coke bottle by the bed.
THE YOUNG WIFE

Once I walked here whistling the sparrow's song, arranging porcelain figures on the windowsill and spinning the wind chimes. I heard swallows breathe clouds of twittering song, a cat purring, a jazz guitar. Now I watch grosbeaks lurch like rodents in the cottonwoods, a robin-- puffed-up, violent--perched stiff as a thumb. The man who walks through the gate is wild-eyed and gestures at trees and vines. He speaks a language of grunts and sighs and belittles the cat. His mouth grows slack, like an infant's. Nights I lie in bed and listen to him clicking his 21 channels. What kind of world is this that promises so much? Our yard grows wild. I don't ask him to mow or trim. I don't look him in the eye. At dinner he mentions the plumbing, or work. When he leaves he kisses my face good-bye. Last night he stayed out until dawn. All night I waited, listening to the wisteria--grown thick as a man's arm--as it grappled with shingles, twisting and creaking, thatching the windows and doors.
BIRTHDAY: THE WATER PUMP

In February the gift will come: coal heaped against the bedroom wall, kerosene slogging in its black lung, a sewing machine, a radio that crackles with weather all week then clears for fights on Saturday night. She dreams of nylon pearls, earrings too bold to wear, extravagant and stifling fragrances, flowers, gowns that could only be loved by a man: flowers big as fists bursting to the hem. Not this pump, this humming hunk of iron clattering in the cellar. Not this gift of water from those she serves with water.
GRANDMOTHER SPEAKS FROM HER CHAISE LOUNGE NEAR THE DOCK

You boys could give us
a thrill once in a while, something
to set this day apart
from the others stacked behind us
like dominoes ready to fall. Soon,
my heart will be a white line
on a scope; it will sing
a single note
in the white room of my brain.
So give us a thrill, a skier
upside-down
in these bushes by the dock,
a near collision of these fancy boats,
a boy tangled in the ropes,
dragged like a log
through the hard water.
Let's see a boat
tipped-up on its side
until all that fancy hardware
falls out like the soul
falls out of the body.
And why not whip a skier
through the shallows--
a big man, a smart-ass
when he loses one ski,
when he sends it skidding
to where it just nicks
that young girl's forehead.
Then bring her here
so I can touch the spot
where the blood flushes out
from the temple,
so I can rock her
and listen to her cry.
THE ASTRONAUT REMEMBERS HIS FIRST SPACE WALK

After Dick Allen

As you walk in the long present,
boots on gravel,
the branch-ends of the mimosa
like feathers, the pink flowers,
even in moonlight, like tropical birds
perched and trembling, you remember
floating in light, the cord unraveling,
one stone white, the other blue,
swathed in vapors, and the surprise—
nearly alone, one line tethering you
to the craft—you were only yourself,
the past like a stone, a ballast
to your life, and you remembered
oatmeal, your grandmother, sunlight
falling through glass, and how you
placed your hand into that liquid
and thought of honey, and bees
swarming over the lawn—a cloud of bees—
and all the children called inside
watching at the windows as bees
buzzed and battered glass, and you turned
to see your mother standing alone
in the exact center of the room,
her face pale, drawn, beautiful.
A COUPLE FROM KENTUCKY WITNESS THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS AT DUSK

Fifty feet straight down, the river trembles with light. The woman moves her hands to frame shades of blue and red. A lone cloud—puffed and virtuous, ruminative—grazes the orange face of a cliff. "Georgia O'Keeffe," she says. "Only Georgia O'Keeffe could make that real." And clear as agate. Beautiful, meaningless: the code of the eye broken into shades of blood and bone.

Her husband's fingers pry at clips and latches, coax legs from their metal sleeves. He watches light fail on the purple mountains. She speaks with a voice like wind rushing over stone. He snaps each section of leg into place. "Kentucky," she says, "was never like this." Light nests in the cirque. Darkness coddles the lake.

Her husband bolts the camera in place. She will remember colors, cool air blowing up from the canyon—unpaintable darkness, indefinite sadness, a river too far from its source. Tonight, while she sleeps, moonflowers will open: damp petals fluttering in moonlight. But now her husband frames the scene; the camera clicks.

Overhead, a blue heron strokes towards its nest, silken wings rustling, legs trailing, each toe visible, each joint a delicate bud.
A victim of thought,
you fall asleep to happy novels.
You propose these laws: happy ends
for every book, at least one character
no one could hate. In New York
old Agassiz walks with God along the cases,
 naming: each species distinct,
 enclosed in mahogany and glass.
Tomorrow, he sails for Tierra del Fuego
and the finches of Galapagos.
Looking on those islands
he will lean against the rigging,
pull his great-coat close,
and close his eyes.
One year from death,
he will see God's plan revealed:
"Had it been otherwise,
there would be nothing but despair."
Charles, you did what you could.
You'd written his son:
"Pray give my most sincere
respects to your father.
What a wonderful man . . . . "
You are sorry to have made
this world without purpose.
You question your own morality.
Why can you no longer find
pleasure in human works--
in art and music, in poetry?
You'd planned on the ministry:
the phrenologist had moved his hands
like spiders over the bumps of faith.
"Enough for three men!" he pronounced.
You sailed for Galapagos instead.
There you saw your finches
honed by time and weather.
There you learned the meaning of Pele's tears:
small monuments to heavenly sadness,
iridescent droplets of basalt.
"Look," your father said
as you hoisted your journals
and peered over the rail at Falmouth,
"even the shape of his head has changed!"
Who's been stung so often he brags, 
"Poison makes me strong!" Claims a heart 
that hums and flutters, won't start 
without the cash in hand. He drags 
a suit and mask from the back of the van, 
leans a makeshift ladder against the porch, 
speaks in German to the queen. "Meine Liebe, much 
you've got to learn," he says. "Come home, 
leave home, each thing will be all right." 
He eyes us where we cower behind the storm door 
feeling the needle-prick of air that swarms 
beneath our shirts. "They say a bee's like a man--a slight 
to bees," he says, "who work as hard as immigrants, 
hum a little hymn, and die old and ignorant."
THE UNMETAPHYSICAL ESTEVES

After Fernando Pessoa

The unmetaphysical Esteves has a new plan: he will memorize the states and their capitals, learn to wiggle his ears, teach himself to write backwards, set a new pogo stick record, time himself coming home from work, find out which is faster: highway or back roads, learn to recognize cars by their grilles.

The unmetaphysical Esteves has found a pipe tobacco that doesn't bite, he's saving box tops, knows all three MVPs with the number 32. He wants to invent a hot-seat for football games, a flask that looks like a book. He's got a new computer watch; he's adding it up. Look at that smile.
Cows are dumb as clay and these
the dumbest I'd seen, wide-eyed
and oblivious on the two lane bridge.

At three a.m., such sights are common--
you might jerk the wheel some night
and pass right through a ton of beef.

But not this time. Imagine a volkswagen
made of beef. Imagine a dream that is
not a dream. Imagine the slugfest
when my bumper socked those cows
and my rig shuddered and pitched
and slammed the steel guard rail. Then

it was headlights veering
like spotlights, a sheet
of sparks, and a sound

like the lowing of cows in a stockyard
who know they are meat and have always
been meat despite the pleasant

futureless days of grazing. Then I was rolling,
clothes, pens, books floating past me,
the CB--miles away--busting with static.

I thought then, right then, that I
was dumb as clay, my wide eyes
blotted out, and a wife somewhere

beyond any voice I might have mustered.
Sunday again, and a hard rain blows
against red brick and trashcans,
gusting against the Oldsmobile
sunk in its gray sadness,
and the windows multiplying skyward . . .

again, and the man sags
lower under his burden--
his wife's accusing face
each morning of his failure,
how he sits all day talking to a mirror--

1969, his son,
the football slapping off his hands . . .

* 

Not madness with its bottles smashed in the alley,
not grief with its flakes of rust in the tap water.

(For hours he has been thinking of Crown Street,
the theater there,
seats of crimson felt and the curtain lifting,
a cone of flecked light parting the dark.
On Sundays, after the movie,
he and his wife tossing popcorn
to addled pigeons and fierce gulls,
their son at home, sleeping
under a mobile touched
by his slow breathing, the babysitter
kissing her boyfriend in the next room.

Later,
the chunks of concrete and iron spikes
strewn in vacant lots,
the pigeons flicking their stubborn wings
above the women with their shopping bags,
the sleeping drunks,
while office workers swung into their cabs,
he and his wife, on the bridge, the river surging
through the bent frames of shopping carts,
February sun a single spike through a break
in the low clouds,
time stuck in the river's throat,
in the wink and gasp of the sun-struck windows . . . )
There is no word for any of this, nor for the dumb river of light washing over the glittering screen.

*

It's not cash or no cash, not love's eye gleaming, but always beyond this dailiness, routines of hurt and forgiveness, the laundry flung in the closet, the television's needle deep in his brain . . .

*

Sometimes, when the buildings close off the sky as they do now, so surely, and nighthawks beep, and slash their wings through the high windows' faint light, the bars close, and men and women huddle in cars, the engines running, and warm their hands over defrosters, nobody around to shake their shoulders until they wake in their childhood beds.

Some nights are longer than life, the son dead in a white room in another state, as though carved in marble, and a country song whose melody won't fit the words until the nurse clicks it off and the doctor, unprofessionally, strokes the slack wrist.

Some nights are longer than life, when a mockingbird creaks and chatters refusing to be emblem or symbol, and his wife rises from bed, gathering her robe, and listens, as a confused pleasure drives through her flesh, to the telephone's small voice, the curve of words, the tree and the
flames,
her son, the idea of her son.

* 

He wants to stand on the bridge
in darkness, in rain,
and see something adrift on the water—a light—
and point with his son's hand.

* 

This is the night when the tankers and barges ride
low in the hurricane tide,
when the black crude in the hulls
is memory, and the harbor, like the horizon, recedes.

Fifteen years, and he remembers Gulf Beach, the breakwater,
whitecaps, and eels thrashing in the shallows,
how they beat them on the rocks . . .

So he has come here,
the bartender snapping bottles off the shelves,
the phone waking him
to another dream,

his wife cutting back roses in the cold rain,
with no thought to her sagging print dress, her bare feet
sunk in mud; around her face,
the coarse hair
hanging like moss.
TAKE IT BACK

On the flowered tablecloth: a white vase, violets, a tongue of beef
in a white dish. Rings of fat blossom in the brown fluid. I was painting, he says. In the living room
an aquarium bubbles. My father said turn off the music. He called my painting trash. A cello leans against a wall
on the sun porch. A bow clotted with rosin on the walnut desk. On an easel, a painting:
two scenes. In one: a dogwood in blossom, an opulent sun. In the other: a gray peregrine perched on a charred stump.
He tells how once he looked out of his bedroom window on a new fallen snow and watched milky streetlights go out across the valley.
And how he'd thought of his mother, and the angels that visit her dreams. My father, he says, and pauses. His students laugh at him. They throw things
when he turns to the piano. He shows me the score his father played from, the bathroom door—shattered, the three stairs he shoved his father down. He points to where his mother stood, one hand covering her mouth, the other plunged down against the piano keys.
He strikes the dark cluster of notes that startled her almost beyond hope. The house is quiet. Only the aquarium, bubbling.
He stands beside the piano and looks out on the yard, the mint billowing along the walk, the bird house painted pink, the stone patio his father sweeps each morning.
I look at his face gone white and remember the day he walked three miles to confront a boy whose name I forget, a boy who'd called his father a drunk, and how he wrestled him down behind the swings at Center School and sat on his chest. Take it back, he'd screamed, take it back, take it back.
THE MECHANICS

Fifteen below, and they're under the Jeep.
A handful of teeth rattle in the transmission.
Inside the house, parts warm on the woodstove
or stew in a bath of kerosene. These men
are my brothers, who dismantle carburetors
all night beside the lamp in the window,
or gulp coffee discussing Einstein:
this wrench is a comet, that piston—the Earth.
When they talk philosophy, life is an engine,
God the ignition, God the battery, and God the PCV.
They know the importance of timing,
quote the scripture of piston and ring.
Writers, they say. Everything looks easy in books.
We squirm and grapple at the simplest task.
They scoff at engineers and architects,
hang the extra parts in the shed. Beauty
complicates matters; they leave what makes it run.
They lean on the fenders swigging beer
and listen as the starter grinds. Rings
slide in their honed shafts. The engine shudders
and squeaks, clattering until the valves settle.
III. STREET SERMON
Hallelujah and Praise the Lord, I used to drink like a fish but now he calms my hand. He speaks to me in tongues, a sound like a bumblebee trapped in a tulip. A tiny sound, but I hear him loud and clear. When I take him under my tongue my stomach whines like a tomcat; a thousand little horses begin to gallop through my veins. And I'm ready to do anything, even call my mother who will drop into hell like a fat red coal despite all my good intentions.

She won't hear me when I tell her she's only a vessel, that I'm delivered of her womb into the Lord's. She won't listen to John 3:16 which is clear as a jar of lead-free and sets a fire in my heart. But the Lord is easy as multiplication. He stands up in my brain and rolls His eyes, and I know that one night He'll come down to suck her breath from her lips and I'll have lost her forever. This troubles me deeply, and so I tell her the parable of the night, the dark night of the soul.

her soul. Which is like the pit of a prune and will be so until she hears the voice in the darkness, the voice that is a light, that is the entrance ramp to the freeway of salvation, the salvation and the eternal life. Such is the voice of the Lord, such is the mystery. And he is real, real as the bullet that rips the heart of the mayor who dips his hand into the till, real as the bloated stomachs of African children who wave flies away on late night T.V., real as the bottle that rolls past my feet
when I preach in front of K-Mart,
when I call forth the sinners
in their corrective shoes,
with their quick eyes that would
swallow me into their need. I am not
an educated man, but His voice pours
through me; He is with my mouth.
My tongue falls asleep and wakes up
a strange animal. It shouts about
"the purifying flame of the Lord,"
tells how "He will cleave the rock,
and the inhabitants of the rock will sing."
Such are the wonders of the Lord; such
are His works. That a man like me
could stand on a dirty sidewalk

with the sunlight stinging his eyes
and deliver a sermon blazing
with big words and the names of apostles
while the buses groan and whistle
and jackhammers rap against pavement.
But I am not, as Christ was not, loved.
The teenagers come out of Video World
in their t-shirts and leather jackets
and bark like the dogs of hell, throw
cigarettes and bottles at my feet.
But God will damn them to float
on their tender backs in a pool
of fire. Damn them to a hell
much like the one they spend
their Saturdays in--behind everything

they say, an evil logic. A logic
I speak against daily. Hear me: Our souls
are butterflies closed in this city's hands,
this city whose veins pump blood
into the drunk man's eyes, whose voice babbles
from a thousand black boxes. This city
where buses spew the lost and ignorant
into the underground mall to cover their bodies
and fill their minds until nothing they say
can touch what they once were . . .
But the Lord will damn them as he once
damned me to swim upward
through an amber liquid towards a wafer
of light so thin and distant
I thought my body was a weight and longed to be rid of it: the hands that thought bad thoughts, the mouth that suckled like a piglet the glass teat, the voice that flopped like a toad from my mouth. One morning I woke cold at dawn and saw my ghost sleeping beside me in the window of what I later learned was the K of C and I knew I was alone and dying.

I walked to Sears thinking White White White, counting my footsteps because they wanted counting. Between a hockey game and a movie of four young men who could not play their instruments, I saw a man crying because the Lord had paid his rent. Such is the mystery, I now know, of the Lord. Such are His works. I felt something move on my heart like a school of minnows, like whiskey steaming through flesh. When the salesman asked me to leave I knew what I should say. "The Lord will take you into His arms," I said, "and kiss you full on the mouth, and you will live forever." I felt a huge weight unbuckled and lifted from my shoulders. I felt a thin man begin knocking kewpie dolls down with a softball somewhere far back in the carnival of my brain. Such are the mysteries of the Lord. Such are His works. Now I preach daily to the congregation of the Five-and-Dime. They are the ones I would live forever with--the women with both hands on their purses, the men with their coat-pocket flasks. They stand in their glass booths, picking their feet up and putting them sadly back down. They understand that these bodies are plaster; they feel it flaking and falling. They hear me when I tell them the secret of their deaths. They push their glasses back up onto their noses; they cough into their fists. I can see them already in heaven, laughing.
in their new bodies of music and glass. And they are grateful, grateful
the way my mother is not. Sometimes
I feel the Lord sink so deeply
in my heart that I am prepared
to tear all of this down for Him,
ready to begin the new flood, the flood
of fire, and I see so clearly
what must be done--the jars and jars
of gasoline, the rags dipped in,
wrung dry . . . . A sacrament
to burn the longing from their hearts,
to make them pure as they once were
and can be again if they will fall
as I have, into the arms of the Lord.
IV. TESTIMONY

"Unless all existence is a medium for revelation, no revelation is possible."

--William Temple
NOTE TO THE RESIDENTS OF 412 BEECHWOOD HEIGHTS

We don't take much—the ten records you got for ninety-nine cents, a jar of pennies, your teenaged daughters' diaries. We've seen enough television to know the tricks—a flashlight taped until one line of light seeps into the room, dark gloves, ski hats, sneakers blackened with magic markers. The footprints we leave outside your porch are smooth, without direction. We X your glass with tape, crack it with a flannel-wrapped hammer.

Last week we watched from behind the hedge while you undressed, your bodies glowing in the lamp light. Now, we walk this well-imagined route from porch to kitchen to bedroom, fanning the light's thin beam over jars filled with flour, sugar and tea, over snapshots and keys, a list of the miles you've run. We don't take much—a bottle of whiskey, a letter you left on the counter. In the bedroom we find gold earrings on the nightstand, a silk gown my brother swears he saw you drop.

We stand at the window and look out at the hedge shaken by something we don't quite know... We don't take much—a water-stained copy of Peyton Place, a stack of Playboys; these secrets are safe with us. We stand in the kitchen and watch headlights flare against the blinds, hear every sound—a dog barking two houses down, a garage door rolling open, the alarm clock ticking beside the bed. Tonight your daughters will undress in our dreams, and nothing you can say will call them home.
"I want to take this time so 'generously' given by the court to tell you of my genius for destruction, the drugs that slide like honey through my veins, the nights I've spent with women you can't even dream of—the model who crashed our Labor Day picnic with her hand-shaking boyfriend, who left and came back alone at two a.m. to take her dress off and lie down in Tony's van... That was my life until some idiot baby-faced hero jumped from behind a wall and I pulled my piece. And blew him backwards to nowhere, and past that to where the devil picked his heart up like a magazine, flipped the pages of his life, hissed like a blown piston, and tossed it on the fire if you believe the crap they hand you..."

That's not what he said, the man who killed Larry Johnson (who bowled on my uncle's Thursday night bowling team), the man who lived with a friend of mine named Jack until Jack decided to move out because "You hang around with guys like that too long and pretty soon you're in trouble, too." So now Jack paints houses and tries not to drink too much and every once in a while he remembers his life with Lisa, how he chose the only direction he could, and chose wrong. He feels sorry for the guy on my uncle's bowling team who lived down the street from my wife's father's house and never did anything wrong, but had a half-sister who stole a bag of cocaine from a man with a .38 and a quick finger because "If you led the life I lead you'd understand I had to kill any man who turned a corner or came down the stairs like that." So now he's in prison while the guy on my uncle's bowling team is dead, and my friend who lived with a murderer paints houses, and my uncle continues to bowl, holding a 200 average in several leagues. I can't say I feel anything for the dead man. And I can't stop thinking about the man who pulled the trigger. But what I wrote is not what he said, the man who killed a man on my uncle's bowling team. The reporters asked him what he thought of the life-sentence, and he said, "I thought it was a good sentence. A damn good sentence. I'm getting a warm place to sleep and a good hot meal. Larry Johnson's dead in his grave and I'm getting free room and board. What do I think of the sentence? I think it sucks, you stupid assholes." Then he pushed the microphones away and sang "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out." Then they took him away.
I've got my own way, see, I don't want to live like my father— thirty years in a sweat shop then one day you're fishing beers out of a tub of ice with the whole family jabbering and flinging lawn darts and your heart just swells and bursts. I know, I saw it all. And my mother, her face went flooey--eyes wide and darting. She looked at me like I could fix it, then watched the whole thing, moaning, "Jimmy, Jimmy." She just watched, just watched him in front of the whole damn family and me just a kid, what could I do? I could've played basketball; I can handle the ball, shoot ten-for-ten from the top of the key. My father knew the coach of Notre Dame; I could've gotten a scholarship. But then he went and he died. It pisses me off sometimes to see other kids and their fathers. I hear them in the stands saying, "Protect the ball with your body," or yelling, "Three seconds" when I'm standing in the lane. No, I'm through with sports. I've got my own way now, my own plans. I'll learn to drive a semi, join the guard, maybe pick up the guitar again. There's a lot of things I could do.

Saturdays I spend waxing my Camaro. I pop Black Sabbath into the tape deck and all the kids ride down on their bikes to listen and help clean. This is the fastest car in The Valley--bar none. It's got an Edelbrock Hi-Rise Manifold with a big old Holly Four Barrel squatting right on top.
pissing gas into that motor
faster than an elephant. Yeah,
I've got my own way.
I don't like to be bothered. My mother
comes nosing around here sometimes
on weekends. But I don't let her in my room,
I don't tell her nothin'. She checks
my tires for wear, but what's she know?
I tell her it's normal. "These tires," I say,
"they're soft rubber—for traction—they wear down."

But I tear 'em up on Red Bush Lane,
alongside the railroad tracks. I carve J's
all over that road and the kids go wild.
No one's ever seen a driver like me--
I'm a little different, I like to take a chance.
Some nights I'll run that whole goddamn road
without lights. All three miles. Last week,
driving like that, I hit something.
I felt it thud against the bumper.
The car shook and jumped. It sent us
skidding, but it felt good--
like crushing a berry under your boot.
Like I said, I've got my own way.
We turned around--Crazy Joey and me--
and went back to see what we hit.
We went past it once, fast, and Joey,
well, he said it was a dog.
But I saw it good, and I know.

But I didn't say nothin', just drove.
Drove fast enough that neither of us
had time to think—not about what we hit,
or what's right and what's wrong,
or about my father, dying like a fool
in front of the whole family.
We closed The Prog Pond that night.
The series was on, Joey got drunk,
Jackson hit another homer. I had a friend
hung himself in the halfway house
across from The Pond. I used to
whip his ass on the asphalt courts
back of Beaver Street School. Lately,
I think about those games, how,
with the score nineteen to one,
I'd drive the lane and jam it, or,
in a close game, I'd rock back on my heels and nail a twenty footer. What did I want?

Home from The Pond, I stood in the driveway until three-thirty just looking at my car—how the moonlight glittered in the chrome, curved along the windshield. I listened to cars rushing on the highway; twice I heard sirens. I know what I've done, but I'm young—I've got a life to live.

In the morning I washed the car, walked to The Hiway Diner for coffee. I didn't look at the papers, not even The News spread out on the counter—a picture of some woman who killed her doctor husband. Only I know, maybe Joey but he won't say.

Later I walked the fire roads through Water Company land and looked down on Red Bush Lane: two cops cruising, then, for no reason, flooring it past the torn garbage bags, tool sheds, stacks of railroad ties, their 440s howling . . .

Today, for the first time in a week, I stopped at the courts, shot baskets with the gang. Chuck's van was pulled up close, the tape player blasting. There was a girl there used to be in my home room. I drove her to school once and she said she'd seen me play basketball and she thought I was good. I remember her eyes looking at me through her brown hair. I think I'd like to go see her, to talk about those games on Beaver Street, maybe go for a ride up the River Road, past Newtown and Sharon, past the lake where Joey keeps his boat, the dam, past the Crossroads Diner, farther than I've ever needed to go . . . . I don't want to live like my father, that's not my way. I've got something better in mind.
MR. CELENTANO REMEMBERS THE NIGHT JOHNNY PARIS SANG "HEARTBREAK HOTEL"

I'm not proud of what I did. I'd rather not have made the choice. But Johnny Paris came in here dressed like Elvis and bothered the band all night, as if to dare us to do something. Anything. Paris is no stranger—let's get that straight. He's a drunk as far as I know, another scavenger left over from the war. You'd think we'd take better care of boys like that—all shot up, and worse—trying to collect what we owe them. Don't think I forgot about that: I lost a brother. That's a debt nobody can pay. So Paris comes in here, wants to sing. He's not bad actually. Could maybe make a go of it as a singer in a wedding band, casually crooning and pointing at the ladies in the front row. You know, the whole tux bit: cigarette bobbing between phrases, diamonds dazzling in the lights, maybe he untucks his shirt for the big finale. It's a Tom Jones sort of deal, big down at The Elk's Club and over at The Riverside. But it doesn't go here, and John, well, somewhere in that sliver of brain he's got left is a notion he picked up after Elvis died: he's convinced that he's the new Elvis, that the motion of the stars spilled Presley's spirit into him, evinced he told me—God only knows where these guys pick up these words—evinced by the fact that he never could sing a note until the moment Presley died. So now he wanders through the tables in a fever.

So that's Johnny Paris. Shell-shocked and lonely, needing someone or something so bad but so far gone you can hardly talk to him. He's locked up in that spintered brain of his. It's sad
you know. I wish to God I never had to do what I did. But like I said, he'd come in and stand at the mike while the band set up. Most of the guys let it slide. Some of the bands know him. Not that they like the guy. But they understand. Even these young guys—they know what war does to a man. Usually it's the best men, too. My brother hung around with me and my buddies all the time . . . . Then, nineteen years old, he got shredded by one of our own cluster bombs.

All State in football and basketball, he used to write songs and sing like Buddy Holly. Then some slob looked at the map wrong, or made some slight error— that's how the report probably read—in his calculations. . . . I don't know . . . But Johnny, God bless the poor slob, trots into my bar this night like he's going to explode.

I catch him standing in front of the mirror in the men's room, practicing some kind of move with his lower lip. He lets it fall slack, then quivers his top lip like a cow trying to shake a fly off.

Then he starts twitching like Chaplin doing doubletime. Combing his hair in the front window, strumming an imaginary guitar. Just before showtime he walks up to me and says— he's humming "Love Me Tender"— and he stops and says, "Mr. Celentano, I'd like to sing tonight." That's all he says, and he walks away through the tables. Then he sits on an amplifier beside the stage and stares. Just stares.

Not at me, or anyone at all. He just stares. It's like his eyes aren't seeing anything real. I'm drawing beers, but I keep an eye on him. I can smell trouble. A fight in the bar next door will make my nostrils flare.

The guys in the band— it's just a local band, I think they call themselves Nightflight— take the stage for a sound check. It's funny, now that I think of it, but they pick an Elvis number to warm up with: "Heartbreak Hotel." Strange.
And Johnny takes it as an omen. He starts gyrating his hips and twitching his lip and dancing across the stage. The guys in the band react funny, letting Johnny take the mike. He gets his leg flexing, hunches over, and starts singing. And he doesn't sound too bad at first. A little off-key and he misses his cue on the verse, but it's not too bad. When he's done he blows kisses at the crowd--myself and two bartenders, a couple of barmaids, the regulars--and walks off like he's just finished a show in Vegas. I mean the whole deal--waving and bowing and kissing his hands. It's a little weird, but everyone plays along. It takes us a while to see what's happening to the guy. But by then it's too late to undo what we've done. He jumps back onto the stage. I'll never forget how smooth he was, his black shoes shining, his black slacks, white shirt, jacket slung over his shoulder. He leaps onto the stage and does, well, like a pirouette, I guess you'd call it, and winds up facing the crowd with his knees tucked together and his head tilted, and he's off--singing "Hound Dog." I hear my manager say, and I know we're in trouble. Johnny's barking at the mike while the band watches, amazed. He stops singing. But I spot his toe tapping and I realize he's marking off the solo. He's hearing the guitar, that ringing lead we all hear when we sing that song in our heads. Johnny finishes the song and the guys applaud again. A few of the regulars yell encore, but I quiet them with a nod towards the door. The lead guitarist buys Johnny a brew, and they let him sit at their table. I call the singer over to let him know what kind of trouble they're letting themselves in for, but he won't listen. They tell Johnny he's a ringer for Elvis. I know they're trying to be nice, but they're setting a snare for themselves. Then I hear Johnny ask a favor, and I know. I feel it right then: trouble. About ten o'clock the band tunes up. Any later and I dock them ten percent. Double
for every fifteen after that. It's good business; the customers know when the music starts at my place. So they play some adolescent love chant, some dizziness about vans and drugs and a little girl who's the town disgrace.

Same old nonsense. Then I see Johnny weaving through the tables. He stands to the side of the stage, tall and proud, and right then I get a little sick. He looks so forlorn, like a kid unable to grow up but wanting to so badly. He stands there. The lights wash across his face. He slicks his hair back and coughs into his fist, then stands at attention, waiting. The band starts another song. It's not "Heartbreak Hotel." Johnny coughs into his fist again. I can feel the tension in the audience, wondering who the guy is standing by the stage. And the band plays, one number after the other. No Elvis, no Johnny Paris. They look straight ahead, afraid I realize, to even look at Johnny, ignoring the promise they made before the set. I don't know. I've done the same thing--made promises with all intention of fulfilling them and then when the time comes, it's not possible. So they finish the set. The singer mentions something to Johnny as he gets off the stage. Johnny turns and stands in the doorway, facing the street. His head hangs forward--like it usually does; then he snaps straight. Stern and businesslike, he crosses to the bar. He bangs on the bar--I'd never seen him do that before--and says, "Mr. Celentano, I was supposed to sing. They promised." By this time the place is jammed, the dance floor crowded with kids waiting for the next song.

So I lean close to Johnny and I say, "Maybe another night, John. The kids want to hear the band." I reach over and touch his shoulder. But he snaps away. "Mr. Celentano," he says. "They promised on their word. They said I could sing tonight. I'm getting older,
Mr. Celentano. Give me a chance. My good friend is here tonight.
My good friend Harry Blount. Right over there.
And he points to a round-faced little guy. But I've decided.
"Johnny," I say. "The time is not right. Come back another night." Johnny knocks a glass onto the floor.
He walks through the tables, knocking aside chairs.
He sits on the edge of the stage, sulking. He glares at the band members. I'm torn. I've got to get him out of there,
but I know he's right. I don't know how you decide these things, but you do. You don't think them through.
You don't say this is a venial sin, that's a mortal. You can't divide it up so nicely. But you decide. Something more thorough than thought decides it. Something built-in, like instinct.
So I take him by the arm and lead him out.
I try to explain, but he won't have it. He stalks back and forth along the sidewalk, shouting nonsense. It doesn't even sound like English. It may have been some language he picked-up in the war.
Then the cops come. I don't know who called, but they grab him, cuff him, and take him away.

I'm not proud of what I did. I still don't know if I did the right thing. He couldn't sing.
Not like a singer. If he'd had a family, they'd have gone along.
Maybe that's what he needed. Me, I've got this business to run.
WHY I LIVE ON SUTTER'S MOUNTAIN

Here all I remember is failure--
two years lost at school, a buck missed
at fifty yards while dad looked on,
my divorce--as if it happened
in someone else's life. No one
knows me here; or they know me

so recently they can't imagine
my past. My cabin is perched on
granite, surrounded by flowers.
I lose myself in the garden.
Weekends I work out there all day
among gladiolas and tulips.

Breathing like a horse, I root out
weeds, let bone meal filter through my
fingers. Some afternoons I drink
at The Overlook. I sit in back,
stir my gin and tonic, and look
east--Old Saybrook, Connecticut,

the coast, the flimsy bungalow
where we lived one summer. Evenings,
I pack a sandwich and six-pack
and fish the Hudson. I cast for
bass and perch in the shadows of
steel-gray battleships retired from

service and dragged upriver from
Manhattan. Some nights the cadets
come down from West Point with their girls
to shoot the hulls with rifles and
hand guns. In these boys I see my
younger self--life like a series

of walls to punch your fist through. I
plug the river with my spinner.
Bullets hiss, tick the sycamore
leaves. The sounds roll against the ridge,
curve along the angled face like
something alive--a snake of wind

rushing through the grasses. I hear
the cadets above me. I see them
sprawled on the hoods of the hot rods
their parents buy them, tossing crushed cans
into the dry weeds. No one knows me
here. If I were to dive and swim
in this dying river, those boys
might fire on me, urged on by their
girls. They won't know what they've ended—
they'll think I'm a bum or a dumb
animal that deserves to die . . .
But there are things worse than death. Like

looking for something nearly dead,
something that won't stand still for the
final blow--the chipmunk I hit
while driving Route 82, who
paddled his crushed body into
the blackened weeds while I watched in

the mirror and tried to forget.
But I couldn't forget, and I
couldn't wake the woman who slept
on the seat beside me. There is
enough pain for each of us; there's
no need to share it. Who can we

blame when a chipmunk runs under
a tire on a perfect day? . . . In
Nepal, I've read, relatives eat
chunks of their dead kin's flesh. Down by
a river, where silt glitters like
flakes of skin sloughed-off the tall peaks,

where the lammergeiers cast their
simple and frightening shadows,
I imagine the widow of
a good man kneeling to feast on
virtue. The body is a house
for terror--tell her that. Goodness

is a skin we shed at death, like
stucco on a Mexican church.
Dig deep and find the patchwork of
chicken wire and rotted planks we're
made of, the hollow where we kneel
to worship, the makeshift altar

where we confuse life and death, where
the goats lie down and chickens roost.
Last night I woke from a dream
and lifted one hand into the moon
above my chest and stared at it.
I felt my chest, my face, amazed
that I lived, that the crazy truce
the body makes with absence had
not been broken. A providence
works here to deliver me to
sadness, to fill me until I
am larger than darkness, in love

with this flesh that is not me. If
there is a god, let him be as
we are—passing time trying to
make things grow, trying to forget
and remember, to imagine
a world he can bear, waking in

the night, amazed that his house has
not collapsed, that the sunflowers
sway in the garden and do not
break, that the moon soaks them in a
creamy light and is not jerked from
its socket. Tonight while I fished

the Hudson, a storm blew down from
Eagle Crag. The drops fell big and
cold, then it began to hail. I
heard the cars start above me—straight
pipes, glass-pack mufflers rapping. I
reeled my line and sat on the bank,
grateful for the wet and cold. The
battleships creaked in the wind, pulled
at their anchor chains. I sat and
listened until I was soaked and
the sky washed clear. I did not cast
or move. Near dusk, a blue heron

flew so close I could see the wind
lifting the wings, the feathers stiff
and carving the air. A tiny
mouse slipped between reeds and skittered
across the taut water. And I
remembered my wife standing

on the porch looking out at the
morning—at the poppies collapsed
from a storm, tulips uplifted
and filled with water. The deck wet,
the hem of her nightgown where it
dragged . . . . I remembered and was
saddened by the memory—how
the past is a world filled with friends
where I am always alone. I
remembered my wife telling me
she was happy, and how I would
not believe, could not believe in

a happiness not innocent.
But tonight, at dusk, I stood on
my porch and watched a peregrine
stun a sparrow at the feeder,
lifting it through layers of gray
into an encompassing light

where it was only a black shape.
From inside I heard a woman
talk softly of El Salvador—
men, she said, in wooden crates, mere
breathings behind forbidden doors.
I walked out into the garden,

through gladiolas, sunflowers
looming taller than men, and looked
down to where the moon first lifted
out of the hills. I pulled at a
sunflower stalk. It was like the neck
of the first duck I ever shot,
and, not unhappy, I twisted
until it loosened and broke.
WHITE BODY, GREEN MOSS

I.
South of the river,
on the flood plain
I walk each evening,
cranes lope through saw-grass
and blunt-headed fish
rise in murky pools,
the late sun spreads
a thin film of light
across the calming waters
and olive trees gather
the thousand swallows
for the long flight.
There, beneath those trees,
the speaking began:
a voice without location
filled my bones,
yet seemed to rise
from the marrow.
It was a sound so deep
it set bushes ablaze;
mountains lifted and swirled
and faces loomed
until I knew that voice
was the voice of God.

II.
My son was sleeping, the rough white cloth
riddled with shadows as the sun struck
through our only window. I have only known
this impossible world—our burnished sun
rising from its lake of color, the thick wind
that blows all night, the howling wolves
and the deep pond of a woman's flesh.
He was sleeping; I woke him.
His long lashes fluttered like my hands
as I lifted him from the bed,
the bed of burning straw. I thought:
the beast inhabits my eyes, lurks
in the dark between words. And I lifted him,
just six years old, and held him
as he looked out from his dream.
I stood him on the floor; he looked at his feet.  
I laced his sandals, and when he spoke  
I knew the deed would be done.

III.

While vultures carved their spirals  
into winds raised by the sun, its word for heat  
rising visibly from the sand, we walked.  
Near dusk, we reached the mountains  
and he dropped onto the cool moss—his white body  
wrapped in white on the green moss. I turned away,  
prayed for strength, unwrapped the knife.  
My son slept, his hand draped over his face,  
his legs warm and twitching. A fly  
hovered over his bare shoulder;  
olive leaves shivered with wind, were still.  
I raised the knife, and as I did, I looked up  
and saw, flying over the single line of black mountains,  
two figures, and I heard them call: two violent syllables.  
Then they were above us, the two of us—  
father and son, and they called again, and again,  
the notes I took for words.  

Today,  
walking south of the river, I remembered those figures—  
wide, dusky wings flapping, necks of carved ivory—  
and I knew that I had seen the birth of a new language,  
new hope for this singular world, a new word for dust,  
or sun, or the thick wind that rages all night.  

I placed  
the knife on the white cloth, wrapping it slowly.  
I did not wake my son; I did not speak.  
Now, I no longer hear voices.  
I stand beneath the olive trees  
and watch the sun plunge into the desert,  
and I remember an affliction that seemed an ecstasy,  
the knife in my hand uplifted, the white body,  
green moss. Even the wind  
stilled for my perfect witness.