1995

**Echo and Shell**

Carmen Gail Hoover

*The University of Montana*

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ECHO AND SHELL

by

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B.A., University of Montana--Missoula, 1990

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1995

Approved by

Committee Chair

Graduate School Dean

May 2, 1995

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Mark/Oarfolk Records

Do you remember me? The bus stop across the street used to say LOUD FAST RULES for the longest time and now they're famous for something else. Ha ha. I used to call from three blocks away after I went to the co-op and checked that you were working then I'd have a couple of beers and then I'd call you on the phone. "Does David Allen Coe have a version of Purple Rain on vinyl? I saw him do it live in front of all those bikers and it was great. Could you check for me?" That was me! I think we said once we should have coffee, not a drink cuz you don't drink, but coffee, a long time ago, and there's that breakfast place across the street or the CC Club katty corner or else the windows of the hardware store with take-out and waiting for the bus. We can't go to the bakery -- that bitch Melissa works there I'm pretty sure and I hate her -- let's go downtown. Your hair is so short all of a sudden. How old are you, really. I'm married now Are you OK? Do you remember me?
You could have drowned, both of you in this lake, or in other water. Many have, the lungs so near the heart. Long moments pushing in on skin-wrapped bone, the elements could disappear. Dreams, put to sleep by sleepy water, movement even, can be stopped, the thought of reaching over, two hands touching can be drowned.

This could be the center, here between Bismark and Red Lake Falls, Minneapolis in the backs of minds, New York, Missouri, Missoula. Maple Lake may have been the first place, swimming, planning, reaching, shoulders passing through the same plate of sun dropped jagged and coiling in the water, fingers, toes, bubbles passing, colors peeling, one action rotating into another, wave by dissipating wave. Anything could have happened here. You may remember.

The chill and burn that has wriggled through you, the urge to play and talk and listen may be the memory, the need to watch and figure. This liquid must have made an alphabet, a body, a thick geometry, lines finding circles like echos, the swollen hinges of the way things are. Traveling from shore to center, shifting edges of the surface, feeling for the curve of the lake, slippery earth, solid and remembering. Down here everything is out of focus, no time for silent understandings, for knowing looks, for finding all the answers all alone.

Drowning is still possible. You could do it, tonight, the exhaustion of trying to fill a human body, to fit your whole self inside it, this alone could stop the motion, and the light.
But consider: the litany, the liturgy, all relatives
have risen, fingers crossed, eyes blinking,
from the sea, together.
Stay Calm

I.

I stand against the warehouse
wall on a dare. I hold a buffalo
skull in my left hand, away from by body.
I am tired. I start to shake while Everette loads
the .45. From 20 feet
he puts a hole in my encyclopedia.

II.

He throws a pointed black boot
across the living room. It is aimed
at my face, and I don't have time to duck.
Or did I?
It hits the painting behind me, dents
the frame but nothing shatters.
It's a watercolor: *Still Life Near Radiator*.
The neighbors are retired.
They think everybody is on crack.
He pushes my head into the bricks
and boards of my book shelf, holds his weapon
to my cheek, near my mouth, says
"I'd like to see your head explode.
Or maybe shoot you in the stomach and watch
you crawling away from me.
I can't decide which. You think you're so pretty."
We are close now
My cat walks in the room and sniffs at my fingers.
The phone rings. It's 911 calling me back.

III.

I pick up the goose down pillow and the quilt from Uncle Charlie's wake.
I sleep in the bathtub. The door doesn't really close.
My toes curl away from the water dripping.
I wanted to say something about love.
Good Neighbors

I figure I'm doing you a big favor every day
I don't knock on your door
and kick your ass, O
Princess of the Intense Fantasy,
the things
my lawyer wouldn't let me tell you.
Let us speak now
of progressive
community, you
white-liberal, self-righteous, busy-body, phony hypocrite bitch.

I'd rather deal with a straight-up redneck than your plastic
ass sitting on my good Salvation
Army couch like a social worker,
reciting your do-gooder resume, telling me
how to run my life through your pursed lips.

Don't say Hi to me in the produce
aisle at Safeway -- I'll see
through you. Don't run
for office, or I'll write
my own name in and worse.
I have pictures of you.
Stay away from my family.

That map you dug up
in the park was in somebody
else's pile of shit.
And I would never shit in the park.
And I would never eat my map.
And I would probably never throw the first punch,
but realize,
my life is scotch-taped where one section
of road meets the next, like a crazy
quilt of paper and ink, erased and redrawn,
scrap paper added where I needed
the Greyhound to go.
When I sleep by a river, I sketch it in.
When I go home, I unfold to the east, filled
with sweetgrass and backroads and secrets,
but I am here.
You are here.
Your house is on my map.
This One Moves

This one moves
By heart
Same scary night where
She wanders
Through that public toilet
It is Gentlemen?
It is Ladies?

Where a man
Takes her
Hand says trust me
The difference
Between fear and adventure
Is faith

Where she walks by
Big water
Crashes in a rumble of lace
She wishes
For a watch that ticks
Holds her
Heart up to her ear
Pounds it
Out like a penny
For value
For trade
Study Of A Cardboard Box

I.
We set a box on the electric range, a corner
on each burner turned to high. We wait
for fires. God can use this box
for a stool to sit on -- God doesn't weigh
anything. It will kindle better on a gas stove.

II.
The entire sound of Carmen, the opera, would fit
in this box, counting only the space around my head
when someone pulls the needle over the soundtrack
one time. Masking tape won't lock the sound in.
Neither will glue or God.

III.
A woman throws a box of her husband's clothes out
the bedroom window into the front yard. The divorce
is as real as the one God gives. The husband won't come back.
The wife won't open the door or close the window. The box
corner that hits the ground can't be coaxed back into a point.

IV.
A box is under the wheels of a car -- eights corners
leaking air like a lung. One moment,
the surfaces are flat, turning exactly.
Then the skin is pushed off, the corrugated
insides drag behind like God's club foot tangled in a storm.

V.
I expect to find my husband in a box.
I look in every one, empty them.
He really is gone. At least he's not in a box,
hunched over like God, thinking of everything.

VI.
In another life, I wrote FRAGILE, and DEAR CARMEN
on the top and sides of the box, mailed it from Corsica.
Unbreakable clear tape has been sliced to spill the contents,
which have disappeared.
The room is as empty as the box, and God is missing.
VII.

I put double-sided tape on the bottom
of a cardboard box and fix it to the ceiling
over the bed I share with God --
a little place for my halo
to go while I'm dreaming.
Unrequited Self Love

The floodlights have been turned on. Sadly, there has been a mix-up with the schedule of events, and now we could turn to ashes, the stage is so small, the wait so tangible. I can't apologize for the airbrushed versions of the new pope -- one on each of these four walls. I won't plug in the string of glowing plastic santas or the Jesus night light -- his face pearly, unknowing, though he must have known. I have finally burned my diary and believe that I have selfish motives. I could never walk easily down Hennepin Avenue, push against a steel door and sign the exact papers to become a bone marrow donor. I see the need, and I am sentimental. Blood, yes. Maybe, but I am thinking: what can be done for me? How might I acquire something easy, extra? Something jealous that will last forever?
Vermillion River Bridge

Someday, I will take
my boy to his home
town, mine for twenty-five
years before him, and say
what kind of town it is.

And say whole stories, when
he is grown. And before then,
the parts of stories to stare
down his innocence.

At what age do I
tell what people died of
really, do I say what killed
Clifford could kill us all.
That we lived, our church,
our donut shop, our sheriff,
basketball and pow wow and
rodeo, like a show
of tolerance would be enough.

The men who pushed and pulled
into their car said they suspected
him of being a drunk Indian faggot,
which are complicated
allegations, but the news
crew from Sioux City especially
liked the part about the flirting.
If this were Mississippi you would
call it a lynching, but this is South
Dakota, so let's just say he died
of exposure.

When we were ten he told
me he liked animals better
than people, but I could
count on him for talking
like it mattered
what we said, this
ex-marine, brother,
uncle, son,
pool shark, owing
me twenty-five dollars,
stripped,
strung up,
barbed wire,
fists, branches,
tire iron,
fire.
Dear George Bush I Remember The Gulf War

It paced my sidewalk slowly,
then faster, it watched me
through the strobe of the slated fence.
It took me personally.
Like Dan Rather said,
our new best friends
the Syrians are lighting up
my bedroom.

My mother had that same
thyroid problem you had.
She said it gave her violent
dreams, extreme thoughts, made her
very very touchy.

War knocked on my door. I let it
in. And in and in. I told my troubles
to war, even in dreams, embarrassed
to be human. I had the hallucination
of progress, of time shimmering in this
moment that feeds on time.

I dreamed my sister's glass chest,
a window over her heart like a science
project. When the glass shattered,
it pushed up in scales over the dagger
shove of roots, veins, growing
out around her shoulders. In the dream
I wasn't crying. I was crying here.

When war became my confidant,
I opened my two sides,
a door swinging under
each arm. Tell me
what has happened here.
Chaos Theory

The chemist divides beaded strings in the doorframe
and talks his way around the edges of the room
until he stands too close to me. He is as thin
and generous as a spoon. I squint and lean forward.
He mumbles when he invites me to walk across
the ice to Nebraska. It is summer.
He understands that there is no Nebraska for us.
We sit in the grass near the river instead,
while the afternoon breaks up
into cool breezes and orange flashes
to pink in small angles of the current.
He shouts, "Never take the guided tour,"
and stumbles aboard his wooden canoe.
"River" was my first word.
Through the hole in my hand, I watch
him struggle to move upstream. I want to tell him
stories, exaggerations
about how I came to be deformed.
I'd overdramatize everything if I knew how.

There is evidence we've never discussed:
A bottle of zinfandel -- full, then empty,
then splintered across someone's open face.
The love triangle. The race war that's always
been going on around here. Baseball bat. Such loud
voices. The sheriff, a funeral, lawyers, appeals.
Enough heartache to spread thin all over town
when the time came. I stood in line
for a portion of blame after my cousin
killed the chemist's little brother,
and we all floated apart. That started years ago.

The chemist paddles evenly among the last
bright blades of fish slapping dark whirlpools.
I have only seen his scars at a glance.
The moon is steady and removed, and I am surrounded
by frogs on the bank. They are silent frogs.
A blue heron poses stick-like in the swampy crook
of a mud island, and the river bellows past it.
Fireflies bulge and split
open over the foamy sand. I continue
my crabwalk toward the water,
an old nickel balanced on my warm belly.
I move so slowly, I don't hear the noises I make.
Mercy

Three shadows fill a yellow box on the freeway just this side of Mexico. The sign warns that the silhouette of a family may rise up from the ditch too late to stop a car. Two hundred have died here. Cold bumpers held in yeasty flesh, the splash of bone met half-way at night, poor-people find a windshield suddenly, eyes turned to the vibration, lungs rattling with fine stones, zig zagging the soft point of headlights in pursuit, the melting eye of the border patrol. It begins

with faces pressed to the glass of America, an advertisement that says Yes and means No. On the sign, the man-blotch pulls a woman, who pulls the blacked-in outline of a windy child. Through sun and stifling moon leaning forward, elbows wild, fingers locked, spilling arm into arm, hands swelled together, as far as they go. The hair of the smallest pokes the left region of the painted metal, the largest pausing inches from the right edge, their framed territory, barren and enforced.
This is not falling rock
or deer crossing or fire
hazard high. This is the international symbol
that denotes: Caution, humans
running for their lives.
Self Defense

One

I can totally fake any and all
of my emotions. Now
I am practicing with reality,
with the idea that there is no story
too sad to tell. But the truth is
not always the best defense. Our lies
are so brittle, so unfocused,
even an encyclopedic telling would not
explain what has happened.

Two

For years, I sat in front of my television,
read *Time* and *Newsweek*, willed the death
sentence away. Then
that morning they killed Ted Bundy
I set my alarm to an hour of witness,
before dawn in my time zone.
Next to the clock radio, the remote
for cable TV -- a live broadcast.
I should have had some ceremony --
sage or whiskey or a plastic
Jesus, I wish
I would have sent a Hallmark card.
It was dark there, too, the prison
walls lit up then dimming with
flashes of pulse, struggling.
I watched, went back to sleep.
Some people deserve to die,
so kill them. This is the logic
of governments and serial killers.

Three

A proven fact: Experts found
out why Black men have high and higher
blood pressure. It's the daily grind
of the way White people look at them.
A proven fact: I found
out in Minneapolis, no matter
how crowded the downtown bus,
standing room only, there is always
one seat next to a Black man in the back.

Four

When the police busted that party at Rick's,
at 3 a.m., I went over the tall back
fence in my red sundress and high heels.
Walking home, down the alley past 7-11
and Super America, up my tree lined
hill to home, alone, no one I didn't know
attacked me. The mayor said any woman
walking drunk at night is asking for trouble.

Five

The man was killing only
Indian women in the city
that year, after bar time, and leaving
their bodies ruined, sticks
in every place
a stick could go, and other
places he made for himself.
One reservation sent whistles
and a note, "we, your brothers
and sisters, will hear you."
Old ladies and the Guardian Angels,
Curtis and Lisa even, piled
into old Impalas all night
long, cardboard signs duct-taped
to the doors: AIM PATROL.
Some of those dead women were last
seen in Arts, or the Corral Bar,
which is no longer there, but is where
(no stanza break)

in one story
the American Indian Movement got its name.

Six

Self defense is intimate.
If a man is hitting you, he is checking
up on you double. How delicate we are,
all of our thin skulls. If you are being
physically insulted, you must know
you cannot fight at arm's length.
The air between you is all his.
If you feel yourself falling
backwards, grab on tight to lapels,
coat zippers, hair, you must
hit the ground before he does
and get up first. Never kick
where his hands could reach.
Kick from behind, from below, run.
You need to know
what you will do before
you do it. There is no
time, during, to decide.
You must know now.
Dogtown

I call out in my sleep: Gato!
But the dogs have taken over. The small slippery
one pulls my elbow into his mouth.
He barks at my door when I try to leave.
I go out back. I have a new tattoo
so I may be identified. It is an "L,"
plain on my shoulder.
I watch the busy shoppers,
and walk into the warehouse.
When the door shuts, all the noise is gone
except the immediate barking.
Today is my Independence Day. In other words
I am alone. I move dizzy through a black stairway
for a good massage. When she is through
I drink gin and tonic and count eddies of plaster
cresting behind the large ceiling fan. I sleep.
When I open my eyes, it is just about time
for the Central Stadium Ceremony.
Hoyt Axton is singing the number one song.
Bonjour, he says.
He never returned my calls, but it's OK. It took
three hours to get my pig in a box. Now it's done.
Love Poem #3

He holds my feet under water and promises
to polish my toenails bright red.
He puts on the gorilla suit head and brings the mistletoe
from the Norwegian trunk in the bedroom.
When we kiss, our guitars
bend under their own weight down the hall.
He is singing a song about my nightmare.
I eat honey roasted cashews and watch the candle melt.
He prefers pistachios.
I have had the nightmare so many times
it's a song about itself.
It desires to frighten me. Verses chorus verse chorus.
When he comes to bed he has the head on again,
and the hairy vinyl hands, but not the fur body.
He whispers. I can't hear him through the motionless lips.
I demand that he roar.
I ask that he take the mop and the broom
and dance with them both at the same time.
Tonight I do everything he does but I'm not mocking him.
I'm laughing because I'm happy.
Love Poem #4

I hear better with the blindfold on.
He opens the refrigerator then pulls
something off the shelf. I hear a lid
unwinding from a jar. He holds
a spoon to my lips.
I want to guess what it is.
Strawberry jam.
He tells me, "I'm washing the spoon.
I'm drying it with a red towel."
Wheat germ. Honey.
Taste is half texture and I'm good at this game.
He wipes my mouth
with the damp end of the towel.
Chinese mustard. White wine.
When I'm stumped I put my fingers
in my mouth. He ties my hands behind my back.
Outside, a couple is arguing. They walk away
from each other screaming. I tip
back and forth in the kitchen chair.
We're listening to the Violent Femmes,
and I whistle along but he doesn't like that.
He says "please."
Between bites, I'm happy to sing instead.
All the sherberts taste about the same
and I feel stiff. I lean forward.
He doesn't want me to stand.
There is a sound like dishes breaking
on the floor. He says "what was that?"
and is quiet for a long time.
The air is smokey and I can taste it.
He says there is a shadow on the wall
behind me taller than the two of us together.
He washes and dries the spoon again,
I squeeze my eyes shut without guessing
and dream that all the faucets in the house are running.
Is someone correcting the spin of a bicycle tire?
I wake up alone in his bed holding a can of peaches.
Love Poem #5

We stand on our heads and try to kiss.
This is harder than we thought,
and too much like a science project.
We look in the freezer for ice cream.
We put our lawn chairs in the snow
and feed each other quickly with bare hands.
We discuss the merits of windchill measurement.
We break two branches off our only tree
and start a sword fight.
He tells me to be careful but I really want to win.
When our swords cross, they clink like glass.
The first one killed cooks tonight.

Inside, I shout instructions from the Lazy Boy.
He needs something to do while the water boils.
"Look for the wire whisk," I suggest,
then holler out clues:
"warmer, warm, colder." It's all random.
That's what he likes.
When he finds the whisk, he lays it at my feet.
He knows I would do anything for him.
He chooses the first three ingredients
he sees and devises a menue.
He scrambles eggs with the Emmy
he won as a child. None of the past
can hurt us now. We're living in sin
with candles and wine.
We always have enough to eat.
After dinner, we prioritize the things
that could never happen to us.
We wash the pots and pans.
We throw the plates and silverware away.
Crowd Control

We call it The Club, and like to think
it’s an important bar, full of minor celebrities,
the city growing over all around us.
From the huge bowed windows behind the second
story railing, we can see a freeway pierce
the southern suburbs. The parking ramp that once
blocked our view crumbled last Sunday.

The bouncers are having a debate:
Should we acquire stun guns?
I slouch in my black chair and watch
shadows curve around the edges of the dance floor.
I say No, but the others say
Yes. I have a well reasoned argument
and a colorful parable to harden my position.
Each of the others has his own account of this moment.
The meanest bouncer says
he needs to defend himself. When I roll my eyes
and click my tongue my head flops
toward my shoulder and he says
That's It.
He's done with being scheduled on my shifts.
His big neck is in motion and his hands.
I expect him to tip over, but he keeps
both feet on the floor. The manager says OK
and all but the two biggest guys agree
they won't be my security partners either.
They still want their weapons. I want
to tell them how I, too, am impressed
with technology, with violence, but it's too late.
We've drifted into a different, unfocused, kind of clash.

The manager says No Stun Guns
and keeps me in his office after the meeting.
It was in this room that I first saw
two men kiss, in love.
He asks me please not to make faces
when I disagree and wants to point out
the new cashier, Jan, who's a bit shy
and a real nice person. *Maybe you could lead the way.* he says, *in making her feel welcome,*
*so she can fit in better faster like part of the team.*
Friday night is outside.
I walk down the softly spiraled stairs
and unlock the transparent wall of four front doors.
Health

Boxer

I am running -- a prissy
girl run that I can't control.
There is a man following me
and he gains in giant strides,
his stringy blond hair blowing
back with the speed of his step.
A tough-looking beautiful woman
in a sequined dress intervenes
behind me. She shimmies and jerks
her fists toward the man,
her back to mine, keeps the man
from touching me, though he tries,
his fingers graze my shoulders
or elbows in the confusion from time to time.
No longer am I running.

Hell

You can't just go
to the devil's house
in your little human
body and expect
to make any headway.
He does not care
what you think,
or about your feelings.
This is what sets him apart,
and makes him be the devil.

Home

Fireworks are my first guess.
The yard of the mansion is lit up
by the lights blinking and diving
over their heads as they lounge
and drink — a dozen children
and adults sipping lemonade from fluted
glasses and martinis in goblets
the size of their skulls. Each person
is operating at least one remote
control airplane, with all the landing
gear flashing and buzzing. Amazingly,
the flight patterns never collide.
Their planes move quickly and unexpectedly
between the unforeseen paths of the others.
Their riches afford them luck and lawlessness.

Box

Before I became a teenager and lost
interest in things, my button collection
was glued, one button at a time,
into the lids of shoeboxes. Under each
button, a speculation about its origin, use,
or magical qualities was written: glass and metal,
intricate, floral design, consistent with delicate
ladies dresses at the turn of the century.
Stored on the shelf in the closet, those buttons
hung like bats in their boxes,
or cocoons, nothing changing
into something. Moving. The moss
and lichen collection kept on the back
of the toilet. Each type
had been carefully peeled
away or dug up from its natural home
by me. Each was named and categorized
from the Peterson's Guide, and the map
of their placement was stored in my brain.
Technology

Two very large women fall from the sky 
just as I turn into the alley. 
They land in a child's red wagon 
which expands to accommodate 
their size at once. 
On impact, each folds 
at the waist, and they flatten out, 
become queen size mattresses. 
One slipcover is blue gingham, 
and the other repeats a miniature 
Thirty's Modern lamp again and again, 
just like their dresses.

Palm

Slender pink glasses shimmer 
and the red wine inside is covered 
with a thin film: jiggling 
reflections of the pastoral 
scene. The exulted ruler 
presides at the far end 
of the room, near the cash bar. 
My date reaches 
into her pocketbook 
for an embroidered hankerchief, 
dabs at her dry eyes, 
and returns to her drink.

Lights

I wonder. Do the actors 
mimic their characters in rehearsal 
or do they respect them? 
Do they walk around with their butts 
stuck way out, and their faces pinched shut, 
or do they believe? 
If I read that they all did their own 
stunts I'd be slightly more impressed.
Manners

There is a suprize party
in my trailer house,
for me,
because all of my former
students are getting straight As in their classes
now. They wanted to thank me.
And so they have,
in the traditional ways
known to, and believed in, by us.

Belly

I didn't realize Mick Jagger was my uncle
until last week. Obviously I knew my
Uncle Mick talked funny and had
the energy to deconstruct
every family reunion with his smoking
and drinking and vulgar yet touching
stories around the campfire. His laugh.
I could see that he was somewhat extroverted
when compared to the rest of us.
I hit me when gramma
served us coffee in the kitchen
then led us to her closet and invited
us to pick out a few dresses to keep.
She has so many now.
It dawned on me as he held
grammas tattered wedding dress, one hand
holding lace to his throat, the other
arm held first across his waist,
then straight out behind a narrow
sleeve, shuffling a momentary waltz.
Cocktail

I get paid in cash. Everything here looks back at me, looms like fish eyes, fat noises and sticky floors, the red slant of lights, spotlights spilling over grooves of high notes spread thin against black walls. The woman is counting on her fingers held up high. Then her sheer red dress is held up high over her head, thick black slip pressed shiny against the one line of her body.

Soon, I'll drink champagne from her combat boot. Tall white cop walks in, I think: he could have been a punk rocker. He's not. Some nights. His hands. Blood red.

His heavy gun fits the holster nicely, black nightstick gently riding his stroll to the back of the bar, and back. I play pinball. The band is loud. I am hungry for a Twin Bing. I have a beer. The drummer is a stand-up drummer. She is perfect. She never smiles. She plays the kick drum with her big left arm. She smiles if somebody makes a mistake.
Brush With Greatness

His wisdom teeth are in my girlfriend Linny's jewelry box, tangling with rhinestones and flash collected in the Reagan era. They came to her in the dark sleep that is not sleep, having her own teeth properly disposed of.

Waiting in the waiting room, groups of chairs arranged discreetly into rectangles around wood-like coffee tables, I was looking over People magazine, my eyes glancing for her, watching him fiddle with messy black hair recently bent from afro to almost jheri curls. He wore sunglasses, clothes second-hand groovy,

1982. Pam, with her nametag, the assistant, entered the top of the room, clipboard, clean-costumed, clunky white nurse shoes, opened her cheery mechanical voice for calling patients: "Prince?"

He strolled on tiny high-heeled boots into the same mystery of surgery my friend had gone to. Pam returned for me, Linny would be awake soon. She's a big fan, I said, Pam's blank face an invitation.

She answered questions, listened politely to groupie facts. He was having two teeth extracted, he'd be under, yes. I swear I didn't tell her what could happen next.
I held
my girlfriend's hand, her blue-green eyes
opening unfocused,
noticing Pam slip into the pale room with a palm-sized envelope.
"Here, a little present from us girls,
don't tell."
What I Heard

He said Certain People
are cousin to Rattlesnake.

Times Past invented her extra
set of eyes: Pit Organs, so
called, below an everyday pair.
They are heat seeking
vaguest movement,
some breathing, turning,
watching. Connected straight
to being.

Sense what they need
to sustain her.

Detonate adventure,
lusty hunt,
union and reunion.
The idea to survive,
vision like a hot blizzard.
Night eyes
shift by old scaley heart
when sun backs out
the sky, blind eyes
that understand
like holes
in a rock that knows
what walks by.
She could paint up
your dreams with the stab
and feather of her tongue.

Like having eyes in the back of your head, only better.

Believing without exactly seeing.

And this is how you get out alive, or

how Elijah told me, if everything goes waste.*

*Waste (wash-ta) is good or beautiful in the Lakota language
Curved White

The man in the red coat wants to hurt me.
Have I ever seen him? No. I wouldn't recognize his voice.
He is breaking the egg now. He is careful.
Moonlight enters cutouts in the outhouse walls.
I am afraid of running water.
I turn the fringed bedroom lamp off, go outside.
I step loudly on the arched path of pebbles.
My toilet is the one-seater outhouse I walk toward.
The man must be gone by now; he is.
The door squeaks and slams
in on its spring. He wrapped the eggshell in string,
put the damp ball in his pocket. On the brink
of the splintered seat, the yolk is unbroken.
Cornfields shake on two sides around me.
I want to run. Instead, I wait. He will come
back to scrape egg off wood. There is something
inside me I want to show him.
Spring Grove

I asked the rocks. Their answer is: figure it out for yourself. One plays dumb. One slides apart and becomes three, claims to be confused. One rotates nightly, turning its back, now, again. Always someone in this house is making a cake or fixing greens.

Marcel repeats one word when discussing any subject: courage. He never tires of chess, or of his back window view through the trees. His bride is happy and unfocused. He is in love with the large glass.

When the bottle rack came through his window, I asked the rocks for guidance. There was glass in my eye, so I could not hear. Fran delivered what she knows about physics at dinner: A circle is the same as infinity, right? Yes, but

Patrick and I play war, flat green box of cigars between us receiving stacked paper spoils. We are watching: For the fresh widow, for the metaphor that will replace strategy. Here, the books' drilled holes can shift. Supervise? I asked the rocks.
What Clay Does

Some clay slips into water and turns to mud.  
Some clay gets stirred up with blood and walks around.  
Some clay turns to stone and explains things.  
Some histories are whitewashed.  
Some histories are steeped and hardened in flame,  
and in the burning red spirit  
that solidifies and melts and slams  
and meanders through us this way  
and that way while we are here.  
Some clay is busy being clay.  
It sits still or it goes somewhere.  
It is not greedy, but it remembers.  
Don't be fooled by euphemisms for clay:  
Art Concrete Flesh Manmade Natural.  
Don't be tricked into thinking  
that a boulder is less or more  
than a pebble.  
That wind and water are unrelated.  
That giving and taking are opposites.

Somewhere in Africa  
there are silky granite puddles  
left by two feet  
at the ends of two legs walking  
three million years ago.  
Not knowing how far away three  
million might be I stood over  
that spot yesterday like Cinderella.  
Felt the shiver and flash of being  
here  
and there  
now  
and then.  
A leap like counting  
your toes for the very first time.  
Felt the motion and light of being  
alive  
and dead.  
But these words are rigid.  
They shatter at the first sign of departure.  
Not like what clay does.
Husband Figure

His hand is in the crook of someone else's elbow. It's an arm he has rigged, removed in handfuls from wet clay. He talks to himself, looks around. He is gone. Here is the body of my husband. He cannot talk to me, deaf from the sound of his voices. He breaks off pieces, splashes glue, he's whole. He trades parts with himself. He paints his throat, his fingertips, his knees wobbly blue. One forearm shimmering, his jaw dulled, this is how he moves. One ear is like an ear that's made -- a polished spoon cemented to his temple -- a clay snail, both echo and shell, rattling, or clear as a cricket. He's crooked. He lives this room. He's bent like that -- strange as sunlight inching from wall to whistled wall, his backbone edged against steel, content. Not without pain, his half-space, his half-life, not without beauty. He draws out the elbow that won't admit to itself, the leery joint, the dark corner, a skin unshivering beside its cold interior. The elbow will be connected to a shoulder, waiting for the spin of the weak spot in the chest.
Putting His Foot Down

What does he look like inside?
The artist builds a skeleton with paper plates
and thumb tacks. He cuts the fluted
edges for bony fingers and toes.
The joints can rotate
on the tacks but he doesn't dance much.
His internal organs are quite sensitive.
He leans in the doorway
of his "office" and smokes a cigarette.
He nails the skeleton to the wall by the dresser
and mirror. It leans forward with the stiff
curves of the paper.

He goes to bed with the lights on
and waits for something to burn out.
The smoke alarm is the same every day.
Operational.
He drops his left hand over
the edge of the bed. The mattress is soft.
He thinks there is a monster/man
underneath. The bed
is shaking and lurching.
He pulls his hand back.
The growling gets louder. The artist screams,
"come out from there--"
and the bed moves again.
A soft voice says "no."

The skeleton's white teeth are drawn in
with black outlines. The artist
gets up and digs through the crayons
in the red box. He touches the skeleton.
He turns the arm up and makes the hand wave.
Living With The Elk

I forget, and the waitress at the Silver Dollar
Bar doesn't remind me: don't drink the water in Butte.
I order a tall glass with ice and lemon and take
it with me. Across the street, I break windows
out of the old whorehouse.
I'm not interested in whores. I like noises --
especially the sound that follows a really good noise.
A car covered with mirror-squares pulls up. The driver
warns me that the corner I'm standing on is not safe.
I lean my 2x4 against a parking meter.
I start taking pictures and walking in circles.

Someone who looks like me is trying
on a $10 fur coat at Saint Vincent du Paul's.
She rinses with diet Coke after she brushes her teeth.
She walks to the end of a long tunnel with tiny lightbulbs
and stands at the edge of the mining pit.
She pushes a button that says "information."
The recorded voice explains things,
including the happiness of tourists.
She pushes the button again.

I am busy. Nobody can talk to me.
I walk toward the bar. The pigeon resting
in the doorway died while I was gone.
The band is too loud.
I meet a nice man
with his fingers in his ears. He's nudging
the pigeon with the toe of his boot.
We take turns dancing on the narrow sidewalk.
We stand by the window, press
one finger each along the crack in the glass.
We hold hands and listen for the sirens.

We are hungry. We sit behind
a paper curtain in an orange booth
and talk about the night I slept on a waterbed.
We eat fried rice and hamburgers.
The waitress hasn't come back with the money,
so we just stay.
I want him to come to my room and teach me how
to fold paper airplanes but he seems to think I already know.
I'm afraid to ask.
The continental divide is out there, but I've lost interest.
Club Foot George's Foot

Your foot is domed under glass,
ankle held together with kite string,
a dollhouse gravestone rises behind
dirty bones looking not quite
human -- chicken bones
with a toenail, somebody said,
jerkied flesh shrinking between your toes.

They say your difficult childhood
included never having shoes to fit,
so you became a shoemaker. Now,
for wild west summer tourists there is
a storefront display, a cracked-headed
mannequin lifting hammer to delicate nail,
window ledge crushed full of ladies boots,
a clock on the shelf. Dust over everything.

Maybe you weren't making money
on leather -- you leaned
in your shop doorway, a mirror rocking
in your fingers. You let your three armed
partners know the stagecoach was leaving
with all the town's money. You got your cut.
But you kept on making shoes, your straight
job and disguise. You all were caught, eventually.

The hanging square is graveled
parking lot -- nobody will build here,
still. One haunted house is good enough
for this little ghost town. You hung
by the neck with the road agents.
Packed into the ground with painted wooden
slabs for gravestones, the town lost
track of the four of you. They knew,
by 1927, if they dug up the club foot
they could put everyone in order.

They didn't plan to hack-saw your foot
off at the ankle, but that's what they did.
You are not alone in the town museum.
The gramma hostess watches me for a while, then gives me a postcard of your foot, and a 1992 road map, points out where the reservations "used to be."
The glass cases are arranged close, like library book shelves, stuffed. There is the arm of an Indian, elbow to fingers, taken from her burial. Her skin remnants match yours. A birthday cake made by a Chinese woman for a White miner's child in 1899 -- 35 years before your death -- it was never eaten, its spirals and steeples, sugar embroidered onto flour and eggs. Then, the "petrified" cat, died mid-howl under a porch, stretched out the long way.
Weathergram

I.
Twine.
Get it at the hardware
store, because Mr. Reedy wants to know
that everybody's doing fine.
It should be sturdy
but not too heavy
Choose brown
if twine comes in colors.

II.
Grocery Bag.
Cut a strip that's about 3 by 10 inches.
Fold the top 2 inches down
and put a hole in the center
of the folded-down part.
It doesn't need to be perfect, but it should look nice.
The hole punch is probably in the desk drawer,
on the left.

III.
Poem.
Make it up while staring out the window,
or sitting on the hillside, depending on the season.
This is also a good time
to pick a spot for hanging your weathergram.
One dozen words are enough.
The message should be a meditation, or a celebration
of the available landscape, or a metaphysical observation.
No sarcasm. No politics. Rhyming is discouraged.
It helps to drink tea with milk and honey.

IV.
Assembly and Placement.
Copy the poem onto the paper strip with permanent
liquid ink and a calligrapher's pen.
The first letter, a capital letter,
should be red, and the rest black.
It's nice to have a rubber-stamped symbol of some
kind at the end. The emblem should not overwhelm the words,
but it should be red.
Cut 6 inches of twine and tie the ends together.
Loop it through the hole to make a hanger.
Put it on a tree branch near the house
or out in the woods where humans never go.
Observe it quietly for a short time.
Leave it there forever.
Millville

Standing against the jack-in-the-pulpits,
creeeping charley and queen anne's lace,
gramma's cinderblock house on the Zumbro
river is the easy stopover for Harvey,
with his burlap bag of rattlesnakes
collected in the cliffs for their bounty,
and, as he likes to say, especially to children,
for the fun of it. For forty years
he's been drinking gramma's coffee,
telling stories about how her family
helped his family through the depression,
though he can't remember the cold
years when the fox farm went under
and the only people with money
were the halfbreed bootleggers who gave
up the reservation in a game of chicken
and built mink ranches and a cemetery
behind the small white church where communion
is still a loaf of gramma's buttermilk
bread and a pint glass of grape juice.
That church is just over
the rise, near town -- a town that's all
God's houses and devil bars, except for the gas
station and the undertaker's storefront --
a town Harvey never goes to except to pray
on holidays. But he calls every place
around here home, and drinks coffee with fresh
milk. Today there are leftover cream
puffs from Wednesday night's bible study
saved for him by the kitchen window, where he watches
gamma bend and fill her apron with spiraled
orange agates on the sandbar half way across
the river -- he makes a short low noise
in his throat and keeps chewing when she steps
onto a big rock, her red dress wet with sunlight,
her work boots worn gray. She waves
like she's polishing glass until he wiggles
his fingers in a hurry and turns to the coffee pot.
My Erotic Double

I thought if I said the words I'd ruin it all:
The dinner, the shortbread, the party chatter.
I'm used to living on the prairie. Emptiness.
I was raised on shooting rats in the chicken coop.

The dinner. The shortbread. The party chatter.
How does she know what wine goes with which meat?
I was raised on shooting rats in the chicken coop.
I urged her not to interfere, but she came --

How does she know what wine goes with which meat?
The phone rings. Mother calling. All news is good news.
I urged her not to interfere, but she came
running when I screamed. All forms of death are moving.

The phone rings. Mother calling. All news is good news.
Hold the mirror up for a chorus of two,
running when I screamed. All forms of death are moving.
And then I saw the horse. And then I

hold the mirror up for a chorus of two.
They're pretty, like puppets with obvious joints. Clean.
And then I saw the horse. And then I
shut my mouth. I'm the silent twin. For now

they're pretty, like puppets with obvious joints. Clean
blue shirts. The message warned not to
shut my mouth. I'm the silent twin, for now.

Blue shirts. The message warned not to.
I'm used to living on the prairie. Emptiness.
I thought if I said the words I'd ruin it all.
Forecast

From my bedroom, at night,
I can see the great horned owl station
herself at the peak of the corncrib.
Soon she will be diving for kittens
and it will be spring. Each year,
the mailman delivers a crate of screaming
chicks and a swarm of new bees in a ventilated box.
Today in the almost dusk I am cleaning the floor
of the bull pen, the middle third of the barn,
with a shovel in gloved hands. The transistor
radio announces that a well regarded
rapist has been reinstalled
in the Governor's office. The bull
is loose in the woods, somewhere,
because I am uncertain about the order of my duties.

I look up through the barn window at my own
window. I have the best room in the house,
the clearest view of the narrow valley
on one side and our property, with a gravel
road snaking past, on another. On my way
in, a group of roosters follows
me at a steady chicken run and their hard
feet come at me like stars, slice
my bare legs. I push
the heavy back door open and see
my little brother — ghostwriter
of my life, partner in the game
of "orphanage" — sitting palms down
at the oak table. His jaws are wrenched
open like a robin in the nest, requiring
help. I take the forceps
from the kitchen drawer and pull
a fishbone from his throat. I wipe
his mouth with my sleeve and serve
goulash before beginning the climb

to my room. At the top of the stairs,
I run past the hazard of the hired man's
locked door. Some days, I am composed
enough to walk, breath held. At the end
of the long hall, which might have been
lined with photos and oil paintings,
but is not, I enter the pale blue room.
The lime green close-and-play is useless
since the 45 collection turned up missing --
hundreds of records pressed in black, purple, red
and yellow vinyl, taken while I was
in the yard, or sleeping, or wandering
through the trees, probably
by a member of my family. I sit at the map
table by the window, its large
thin drawers stuffed with manuscripts,
and examine an old credit report,
trying to crack the code.
I have been warned that lightning
could strike here, through the window, attracted
to a small figure leaning forward above the landscape.
Relocation

I.
Ariel sits at the kitchen table and cuts off his ponytail with dull scissors. He loops the hair into a red-tissue box, silver-white from Dayton Hudson's hat department. From the sofa, he considers the objects generously, past his bent knees. If I existed, he would dedicate this scene to me. Over a cut up paper bag and strapping tape, he addresses the package to Eisenhower, who is pacing his office, right-hand men fishtailing behind him.

II.
Ariel waits at the corner of Franklin and Chicago. His application for citizenship has been denied? A woman at the bus stop explains it to him. He sways in time with the clack and glitter of her hands. If it was lost in the mail, he must make a report. It will take years to grow his hair back out to gray.

III.
When the Corral Bar has been broken and wedged under the sidewalk, when the crying baby has been kissed and ordered down the steps of the Temple, when the Chef Cafe has been delivered to the long black wall, I will claim the 99 cent breakfast that Ariel is just about to eat.
Investigation

There is a dime on the floor
that wasn't there yesterday.
I check the freezer again
for illegal bird parts. I find steak.
When I left the border
town, I thought I was a free
agent. Now I'm crawling through this
basement in a suit.
Where are the outlaws?
My camera is tiny -- a spy camera
like Sue's -- it uses my favorite
film: T-MAX 400,
for tiny clandestine pictures
I can make as big as I want.
My stake in the operation
continues to grow I'm almost alone.
Everything is not going according to plan.
The parrot died on Tuesday.
The grave I've been digging out
back is not as shallow as it used to be.
Custer Battlefield Cemetery

The parking lot is puddled with oil and shadows of oil, there is the slash of the flagpole, white against horizons. Graves from the Indian Wars stand still here. We read as many markers as we can, strangers moving in and out of us, quiet. This is a church, a prairie, a place where children died. Their stones are lambs with ribbons, verses, some without names. We cup our hands over the lambs' heads, look into their worn faces, drag our fingers down their nappy marble bodies.
Engine and Debris

These are courtship photographs. The ground is so flat, it's easy to balance and turn my face into the wind. I pose in front of a fiberglass cow the size of my house -- the one back home. I feel small, but superior. We never looked at a map. The car we drove away in is bright blue, except for the white driver's side door. The bumpers are even. The hinges are rusty Duct tape hold connections in the engine together. When the car starts to shudder, we talk more. And faster. When I turn toward my window and close my eyes, he asks what I see. Experimental pavement. Antelope. I want to stop to pick sage, but who has the time? My memories started to leave me last year, but I know where I am. Approximately. The horizon is clear now. Soon it will be uneven. Beyond that, moonlight. And stars. So many. When I look at them spread out thin like a rash I tingle.

There is such a thing as leaving the past. When the top came down
from the windmill,
when the fireplace was closed
with a ceremony, when the barn
door was chewed through
by the dog locked inside,
it was too late for pictures.
The bull in the yard.
The seven roosters surrounding
me with their pointed claws.
When the sheriff got tired
of driving by,
he sent a deputy.
Eventually, the government
came dressed as two men
in dark glasses.
There are limits.

The car turns off and on
by itself on the freeway.
We both pretend not to notice.
We pull into a truck stop
and ask a few questions.
A tune-up would be a good idea.
There is a small man, he
half pushes
half carries
a woman down the street.
It makes sense to lock the doors.
It's raining and the view
turns to gray like plastic.
The mist of his breath
breaks up in front of me.
The shake, stop, jolt
continues. The owner's
manual doesn't mention
our predicament, or
trips to the ocean.
The batteries in the boom box
start to wind down.
Our silence.
When the engine stops,
we sit by the side of the road
for awhile before walking
to a farmhouse. The woman
home by herself sends us to the barn
to use the telephone.
We kick the hay looking
for a Yellow Pages.
We make the call,
and we wait more.
Everyone is driving so fast.
The teenager who tows
us puts the car
on a lift in his garage.
It's awkward.
He replaces a tiny steel
ball near the left front
wheel and asks for all our money.
Fifty miles later
everything starts over.

It always goes back to
the room. The same
room at the top of the stairs
that was empty and cool.
The door had to be forced
open and closed.
The music coming from downstairs
was no comfort.
The bathroom lights
came on three at a time
but didn't reach to the end of the hall.
The linen closet with space for a large child.
The laundry chute with its smooth oval latch.
The hole in the ceiling
that opened into the attic
rattling with wasps and asbestos.
The tiny window there
that looked out over the Missouri river
valley and then Nebraska.
The constant typing
that could be felt --
an irregular vibration through the walls.
The beating took place
between the washer and dryer.
The back door was so close.
I refused to lie.
The boot that kicked my stomach
when I fell.

Mountain streams
are more startling, but
the ocean is bigger than we thought.
Drive onto the beach.
We lack sacred objects.
There is an orange on the dashboard
and dried flowers stain
the mirror on one of the visors.
This coast offers sunsets
and we roll our pant legs up
to get a closer look. When we're
done running, we stand very still.
We listen to the noise
and sit back to back.
The unstable sand.
The parking lot on the ridge.
The rock pier that points away.
The key waiting
in the ignition,
and our belongings packed tight.
Imperfect sand dollars
lead us to the one that isn't
broken. The jellyfish,
half rotted. The sky is busy.
The truck with its lights
off at dusk swerves
to miss us.
And it does.
There are photographs that may not
prove the truth of this.
We stop for gas and backtrack.