1986

Telling

Joseph D. Martin

*The University of Montana*

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THE TELLING

by

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B.A., California State University, Chico, 1984

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts University of Montana 1986

Approved by

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

11-26-86
"This hour I tell things in confidence, I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you."

--Walt Whitman

This manuscript is dedicated to my mother and father, and all of my teachers. Special thanks go to William Pitt Root, Paul Zarzyski, and Gary Thompson, who helped these poems along. Grateful acknowledgement is made to The Bloomsbury Review, Riverrun, and Watershed, in which some of the poems originally appeared.
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I. The Telling

"If I worship one thing more than another...
Hands I have taken, face I have kissed, mortal I have ever touched, it shall be you."

--Walt Whitman
THE TELLING

Sometimes in a sudden flutter of wings,
The skittish heart surprised

In flight and the night rain heard
As the world goes silent, I am gathered

To particulars. And I tell you
How, this morning, cold sun pulled

The oak trunks south with the steady slide
Of January days lengthening and the movement

Of the scrub willow's brush-like limbs
Was small and circled. I say this

And we are suddenly present
Together on our personal shorelines,

Eating the strangely familiar fruits
And witnessing stories, singing. Seeing

Each day in its many small deaths: a dog barks
And the old man slips on his back in the icy grass,

The legs of a woman pass into sunlight.
And the many things which cannot be said

Well up in us daily and are gone. The body
Swells like a bowed cello, thrumming life

Into air and the space between stars
Groans wider. There is sound, motion, solid light.

There is my father, 1956, speaking with my mother.
Late summer, Minnesota, the first warm rain

Shakes a few leaves loose from their towering poplars,
And the young woman smiles, feels herself go.

It is the beginning of a story.
ALONG THE SOUTHBOUND SPUR

August, mustard flower and teasel singe to brittle grass and thistle, knapweed greying narrow fields along the southbound spur.

I walk alone behind the rented houses of the poor migrants, blacks, and Indians, their trailer parks and bleak apartments, backyards a patchwork of clothesline and tomatoes, shuttered windows, chained down hounds.

Voices spar from an open door in Spanish I half-understand. A thrown plate breaks against the wall. It is noon, windless. The field's edge wrinkles with heat and distance. The argument, as I can glean it, has something to do with words and what is never said, words and the heart's adherence.

*

Once, mid-winter, snow packed tight between these ties, I walked in the glad surprise of sun, eyes on the grey horizon's line.

Fired by that singular light, the locomotive's lone eye shining over the iron freeze of rails, I watched the figure of a man rise, striding, to stand for a moment, head bound in that shivering halo's web.
A quarter mile later,
we passed each other, each yielding
the well-packed path at track's center
with a nod, an exchanging of faces.

The locomotive droned in its still spot ahead.
We waved blue tassles of breath.

*

Parched earth cracked
as gravel, shrivelled
ties inconstant
in this absence of ice,
I must walk slowly, step self-conscious,
picking my way
between potholes and beer cans
in the heat, the torn cardboard
boxes of condoms, poisons,
Cream of Wheat.

To the east,
through a tear in the chain-link fence,
a rawboned, scraggy hound
charges the yardfull
of panicky chickens. It snatches
one white Leghorn, snaps
the bird violently lifeless,
and disappears in tall dry grass.

The brown-faced girl
jumping rope in the yard
has seen, screams, runs
to the front porch
yelling for Mama, who leaps
through the screen door just in time
to see stray feathers settle
in the driveway's dust.

But
she laughs, this ragged woman
laughs from the porch in her floral print dress,
and covers the eyes of her bawling child,
buries a face in her skirt.
What can the mother say?

(no break)
That it doesn't matter, it's all over, all just flecks of sprayed blood staining. dust and the crippled feathers? Here, where I am, I can't hear them, but as I pass in the slant late summer light, I can see the way she holds her, how this must mean something like love, I am here, it will be all right...
HER EMERGENCE

White-tiled shower walls shine under the bent shapes of faces changing. Under the solid rush of sound, a quietness, a distance we do not speak of, but lean and kiss, knowing we do not love each other anymore. Short brown hair soaked tight to skull, she is somehow smaller than I’ve ever seen her

and we stand a long moment, examine each other, two creatures suddenly unfamiliar. I begin as I always have before, gently soaping at the forehead over each eye, hollow of cheek and crook of neck, let hands glide the knobbed length of her spine, to lather at breasts, collarbones that I have kissed, and the long field of her belly,

a valley to sleep in. I push almost inside her, press to the pliant flesh of her hips and down the muscles and joints of her thighs, to kneel at the feet, unspeaking. And when it is over, I am stranger to the kind flesh of her fingers. She emerges immaculate, transfigured, the small whorls of steam sprouting like feathers from her skin.
"AND BARELY A GIRL..."

After Rilke

And barely a girl she sent herself fresh
From the twin-throated luck of voice and lyre
To gleam clear through her springtime dress
And make herself a bed inside my ear.

And sleep in me. And that sleep was all.
Every tree that I had loved, the distances
That I could touch, and all the instances
When awe and wonder struck my soul.

She slept the earth. God of Song, tell me
How she was born complete, without desiring
Even waking? See, she rose to sleep.

O where is death? Will she not seek
Her theme before the song consumes her singing?
Where will she go, sinking from me... a girl, barely...
From here, it is easy to see
where we went wrong, how
the ceiling folds and wrinkles
under sections we worked
first. My Dad and I
set those early pieces
upside-down, beginners,
not yet understanding
how we'd wrecked
our upstairs floor forever,
made it warped and corrugated
as the cabin's sheet metal roof.

Later, angered, realizing
we'd gone wrong, I hacked
and pried at those thin planks
fastened wrong to rafters,
splitting boards to splinters
till he yanked
the crowbar from my hands.
We glared and argued, cursed
and shouted, there
in the wreckage of all we'd done.

In the end, we shrugged,
did the only thing we could
and turned our next plank
bottom-side up. Tongue
and groove, tongue
and groove. Some pieces fit
together easy, others
take sweat, and fretting.
We went on together
this way, living
under the warp and woof
of what could not be changed,
trying still to make things right.
MY TURN AT THE DISHES

Wednesday, noon.
A perfectly vertical rain
drops from the clutter
of stormclouds pitched
against hills southwest
of this kitchen window.
My turn at the dishes,
but I am thinking about Plato
and what I know of
his flawless world
of truth and ideal form
as I stand scraping egg yolk
from the cracked
plastic plate I found
in a bag of Mainstay dogfood.

I lift it a moment
in the wet grey light,
raise it till it shines
like the ideal form
of itself, a sun, luminous
there in its separate world,
and I imagine the egg I ate
this morning, itself a sun,
turned now in the dark
fire of the body.

Distracted, scrubbing
flecks of burnt meat
crusted like rust
to the skillet, the smell
of frying burger rising
from the quickly clouding water,
I hardly notice when
the discarded pickle jar
lid slides and plugs
the rinse-water running
in the open sink.

It is a perfect fit.

I try to pry it free, but
the sink keeps filling, sealing

(no break)
with a greater and greater weight
the only way out. Light
shifts on the kitchen walls.
Water floods and splatters
over the tiles, drenches
the halls, the house, the yard.

It goes on forever. We drown.
There is no stopping it.
IN GRANDFATHER'S RAINCOAT

In Grandfather's raincoat
I stand in black rain.
My name, thin winter branches.
The traffic lights shining wet streets red.
Inside the left-hand pocket:
a few coins, a key,
and an old handkerchief
still spattered and stained, crumpled
in pain. The old man knew
his death, his friendly death
that greeted him each morning
from the pocket of his raincoat,
the death that came to him so slowly,
gently, like water rising over the heads of cattle.
BECAUSE THEY KNOW

Grandpa Joe told me a koan once, driving
the gentle lift and glide
of narrow vineyard road
that last September we had
together. Around each curve
in that stuttering light,
squirrels and chipmunks
skittered through the path
of rushing wheels.

"Know
why they always start across
soon as they see us
coming?"

I shook my head
and watched the answer
ripen his face
to cloud-shorn moon.

"Because,"

he said, eyes on the road,
"they know they might not make it."
II. The Metamorphoses

"If we relish these artifacts of death, it's for a sign that life goes on without us..."

--Robert Wrigley
LOYALIST SOLDIER SHOT, SPANISH CIVIL WAR

On a photograph by Robert Capa

It is the single ear, fragment
of skull that fell, forehead splashing
dark blood red onto field
the color of sun just south
of perhaps Pamplona. And the face
buckling, turned into light, blind
to sharp crack and instantaneous click,
the knees reeling, belly thrown open, torn
limbs pulled two-dimensional. It is the hand
gone buoyant, gently rising, offering
the length of an arm, the weight of a rifle
surrendered just left of the shot. It is the shadow
folding into itself. It is autumn. Flushed
from the parched scrub brush, three quail startle,
blurred into noise. It is a slight dry wind.
SONG OF THE DEPARTED

The flight of birds fills with harmony. At dusk
green forests
Gather into the hushed cabins,
The crystal pastures of the doe.
The murmuring stream appeases darkness,
the damp shadows

And summer flowers toll so lovely in the wind.
Even now, night falls on the thinking man's face.

Decency, like a tiny lamp, shines in his heart
And in the tranquility of suppertimes.
For the bread and wine are blessed
By the hands of God, and your brother
Quietly gazes at you with his nocturnal eyes,
Looking for respite from his thorny wandering.
O to be deep in the drunken blue night.

And the silence of the room embraces shadows
of the elders,
The blood-red martyrs, and the grief
of a grand family dying
Piously in a lonely grandchild.

And shining from the blackest instance of madness,
the patient wretch
Awakens at the petrified threshold,
Embraced by the shining curve of autumn,
the cool blueness,

The still house and the legends of the forest,
The judgement and decree,
And the lunar paths of the departed.

--translated from the German
of Georg Trakl
FOR GEORG TRAKL

1.
Face
Reflecting
The blankness of water

Wading
In, you reached
For that imagined moon,
Hearing the trumpets
Bloom in your skull

But
It was no use—
Even gravity betrayed you

Feet floated up, leaving
The low path of your moaning,
The path you would search for again
And again

Under the empty face of the snow,
In the place where the ink-black horses leap
Under the screaming wheels of a train,
In Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire,
And there, in the water, reflected
In water

2.
Autumn evening.
A girl is walking,
Weaving the wind with flutes
And bells.
    Sister
Flesh of my flesh, remember
How we danced in dark gardens,
How we once drowned together
Deep in deaf water?
    Margarete
My blue little doe, smile
Your impossible thin smile
Inside of my eyelids
    Again

(section break)
3.
At Grödek, ninety wounded moan
For death and nothing,
Not even an angel,
Can stop them.

One impatient one
Blows bits of his brain
Across grey planks of wood,
Across dirty straw and the bodies
Of the suffering, steam still rising
Up from broken mouths

And you ran out screaming
Into the blind snow, unable
To follow or to save them.
Found flesh frozen and blood scattered dark
In all directions

No escape.

4.
Georg
Forgive me
I've stolen your grief
Wanting my own
Words to hobble on, wanting
Dark bodies to place in the snow

Forgive me
I must breathe

5.
In the eleventh month
The third day stood still.

When the moans of the living
Finally died down, an angel froze
Inside your lungs and you remembered
That black path through the lake weeds

(stanza break)
And drifted away from yourself
The way stars lose track of constellations,
The way notes fade as the quartet scatters,
The eyes and ears and guts of the composer
Reduced to a heap of ink-spattered feathers.

Twenty seven years.
Now, death
Will not leave you.
PRAYER FOR A BLACK STONE

"Poesía del pomulo morado..."
--César Vallejo

The broken cheeks, the purple bones, the books
That sprouted from a corpse, the weeping dead
Who break in two, and carry bits of bread
On shoulders torn by ropes and broken hooks--

These sang for you, to warm the ink, and drown
Your voice below the page: the wingless birds
And pagan girls, the distant curving roads,
And silver flutes that ring like hollow bones.

So long alone below the ground, you breathe
The marrows of the sea, and prayers march
The candled halls to chant your darkest nouns.

They sing black stones, the broken moon, fallen trees
And empty shells, and praise your purple arch
Of bones that rise up to be broken down.
THE METAMORPHOSES

All things are possible. Transformations
Of sun into sun, hair
Into hair, even grass
Can become grass.
Remember

The violent roses that crushed the whole ocean?
The cataclysmic birds that barked down cathedrals?
The babies that rang all your telephones blind?

Hands can be hands. Your face
Might sprout hair. Fingers
Might grow fingernails.

We are made of accidents
THE MUTE

Carrying the dumb stumps of my fingers past churches
and schoolyards
Where the birds built language like a brittle nest

Over the bare heads of children hurrying into their
own bells
I listened until I heard them sing/ I did not desire

To wear my tongue like a black robe
That is always shining like hair in the daylight.

Should it matter if my mouth remains frozen over
The thick vowel still stuck in the ragged ice
of my throat?

Inside this body I am breathing
A complete algebra of movement and light

Bursting from the dull sutures of my skull
Like a wet seed splitting its thick husk

I learn the elaborate gestures called survival
I count the prayers of the world/ they are not infinite

From the mosque of my silence I open my mouth
And I will name and name and name the world
THE KILL BUCKET

Almost nothing does them in.
You can hang one upside-down
on the stringer for half an hour

in hot sun, batter
his black knot of skull
flat with an iron grapnel,

or lob him back to near mid-lake
with a sidelong looping cast,
catch him and cast him

and catch him again: the bullhead's
thick-webbed gills still pulse
and puff as the slick knife
cuts into unscaled skin.
They are the last things left alive
each year when the Cascade Reservoir dries.

We find them gasping in stagnant pools,
seething with heat, and net them
only grudgingly, remembering

chinook, perch, and browns
rumouring the once-clear depths
before nitrates and the algae bloom

killed all but the bullhead. Now,
we troll this muck for squaw, bitching
the trashfish's inevitable bones, the bullhead's

helmet of horned skin. They are survivors,
at least, we say to each other,
and lower our day's catch alive

into the boiling water
steaming in the kill bucket,
where they thrash and rattle

and are finally still.
BURNING THE STUMP

"I rock between dark and dark,
My soul nearly my own,
My dead selves singing."
—Theodore Roethke

1.
Two decades it lurked, a malevolent shark
darkening lake water out past the dock.
My bowels went hollow. Back muscles cramped.
I shivered whenever I dogpaddled over
the stump's black torso, strangled old wreck.
Root of my nightmare broken neck,
the careless slip and misplaced leap,
it had hands to snatch at dangled limbs
and a huge-toothed mouth always calling.
I dreamt myself wreckless, sometimes falling
hard into water with a quick white snap,
and watched myself go floating, slowly, buoyed
by the suddenly weightless body,
to break the mirror-skinned surface, waking
with a shiver on some strange shoreline
as quick light flickered in the white-rooted spine.

2.
Dry summers, lake shrank back
from shoreline, revealing
quack grass and snailshell,
the foul, fish-smelling sand--
and the stump rose tip first
by degrees, inching into sunlight

all wormholes and ragged
rotted knots, fishing line
hooked into dull root wood,
the wrinkled and pocked face
of a god gone mute

testament to the wind
that howled and battered
its waterlogged spine

(no break)
to splinters, the huge pine
crashing, branches snapping, dropped
in the wind-chopped waves.

3.
One summer, dryer than ever before,
bullheads rotted on the cracked mud flats.
The beaver and heron had no home.
The osprey and kingfisher found no food
where cattails greyed and the stale channel ran.

Stagnant, restless, uncontained, I walked to the water
and walked back again. Seeking seclusion, I met
desolation. Seeking the soul, I met nothing at all.

I stood face to face
with my lifeless trunk, broken
stump opening voices in wind,
crying out to the imperfect silence.

I heard the dry witchgrass hissing,
listened for the ghost of the water's lapping,
hushed, the short waves thinly sweeping, brushing
the sand's edge lightly, swaying
into old slow tidal motion, spectral
waters almost chanting, faintly
present, calling

saying
flame, burn,
turn me to stone,
open the flower of going...

4.
Ice, I'm ice
I'm bright like a fish
I'm black as a seed
Dark as a moon

If broken trunks have quit their growing
I should burn the stopped limbs home.
Why should dead roots dangle down?
I have seen where they are going.

(stanza break)
So then should the air be empty?  
Shall I ask my bones to wobble on?  
I may tell these bones to run,  
Break white roots deep under trees.

**Dark as a moon**  
I'm **black as a seed**  
I'm **bright like a fish**  
Ice, I'm **ice**

5.  
And I am given my same dream of flight, seeing  
the body sprint blind over the land's edge  
flailing, the panic and twitch in my terrified limbs  
And I am naked  
to the violent headlong wind, animal  
lusting open space, the blood-fire  
spreading, the numb limbs aching,  
the feet turned quick to sharp-nailed claw  
as I stumble, crawl, lumber along  
And I am running  
insane through the nameless landscape,  
raw throat choked under thick white froth,  
sprinting and lunging and feeling the burning  
beginning to grow from the pit of my throat,  
the nostrils straining, black wind roaring,  
the running and running increasing the burning,  
the burning and burning consuming the body  
And I am light  
translucent, a bodiless flame  
fading at last into vanishing fumes,  
rising to cirrus, the woolpack and nimbus,  
the fleece-white rib of a formless wing  
And I am born  
high up in the gathering light,  
a white-feathered soul, a windswept thing.

6.  
Whiteness, impossible  
whiteness brightening. I wake  
alone to storm-tossed fields gone still  

(no break)
with the first light snow. October. The scent of fire, electricity. The knowledge that energy passes. I step slowly shuddering into my bones. Was it here I fed pale flames to light, and followed dead roots into darkness? There are many ways to become lost, and I have strayed far off through the fields of the fatherless. I have wandered too long, alone, inconsolable. It is time for returning. Ice melting. Dawn breaks sharp between dark jackpine, shining black limbs to diamond. On a bare branch there is room for growing. And I am ready.
AT THE BURNSITE

New grass gleans from damp ash,
Feeling the breasts of a warm spring rain.
Fifty feet up, pines climb skree.
III. The Returnings

"That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past..."

--Ecclesiastes
SNOWFALL FUGUE IN B-FLAT MINOR

prelude of distant crystalline bells.

Each flake perfectly placed and ancient as these eighth notes falling in fugal counterpoint

across the clavichord, swirling minor scales torn open like an old wound, pouring out
gentle pirouettes, genuflections, rituals of discord and resolution, praise played out in the delicate ghost dance of brittle finger, brass string, wind frozen in precise attitudes of perfection, suffering, Bach's pain now three centuries dead. Yet it is all repeated, repeated endlessly in the blank air, this delicate skeletal order falling open, falling out from itself like the first few flakes of autumn snowfall, the ageless patterns repeating again, the fragile architecture of descent.
EARLY SNOWFALL OUTSIDE KOOSKIA

Three colts dance
in their whitening pasture
because it is their first snowfall,
and they are not mules.
DONNELLY, IDAHO

Northern Pacific left and the packing plant
Closed, Corbin Ford
Burned down ten years ago.
Past the empty Libby's warehouse
Through pea fields turned pastureland,
The dead rails rust twenty years disuse,
Oil-soaked ties split for firewood.

* * *

Notice the real estate office is empty;
The door swings back and forth in the wind.
Notice the tiny house by the spillway,
The sign selling nightcrawlers, 75¢ a dozen.
The grey woman in her wool cap pulls worms
From the trough in her garage, counting them
Slowly, throwing in an extra, "for luck."

* * *

Some nights she wanders these pastures
Alone, picking bluebottles by moonlight.
She goes to the place where her children are buried,
Sees the shadows of cattle asleep on their graves.
And when she is not looking, dawn comes
Again, rising between the Twin Sisters,
Another day she must live down.
ODE TO AIR

Walking down the road
one day I met the air.
I greeted him with respect
and said
"I would be happy
if for just this once
you would quit your transparency,
that we might speak."
The indefatigable one
danced, rustled the leaves,
shook the dust under my botheels
with laughter,
lifting all
his blue sails,
his skeleton of glass,
his eyelids of the northwind
still as a bedpost, and still
he kept listening to me.
I kissed the long cloak
of the king of the sky,
I wrapped myself in his flag
of heavenly silk
and said
"Comrade or king,
thread, petal, or fowl,
I don't know what you are, but
let me ask one thing of you:
do not sell yourself.
The water has all been sold
to the aqueducts
in the desert,
and I have seen
the poor world, the villages,
stagger with thirst
in the dry sand.
I have seen light in the darkness
rationed,
and chandeliers in the mansions
of the rich.
All is dawn in their
new hanging gardens,
all dark the terrible

(no break)
shadows in alleyways,
where the night,
detestable stepmother,
appears
with a dagger
in her owl-like eyes,
and a cry, a scream,
lifts and is smothered
under the gluttonous shadows.

No, air, you
must never sell yourself,
must never be channelled,
never be piped,
never enclosed
or restrained,
ever captured in ledgers
or put into bottles.
Beware!
Call me
if you need help.
I am poet, son
of all suffering, father, uncle,
cousin, blood brother
and inlaw
to the poor, to everyone,
my country and all the others,
to the poor who live by the river
and the poor who live in the heights
of vertical Andean ridges
chipping stone,
hammering nails,
sewing clothes,
chopping wood,
bearing with the world;
for all these things
I am in love with their breathing.
You are the only thing they have.
It is for them
you are transparent,
so that they will see
how the future has been sold.
For all this you exist,
air,
you who allow breath,
you who do not enslave,
you who do not trust those
who come in their cars
to examine you,
but leave them,
laugh at them,
send their hats spinning,
rejecting their propositions.
Let us go together
dancing over the world,
demolishing
the appleblossoms,
entering through windows
whistling together,
whistling
songs
of yesterday and tomorrow,
already bound one day
to liberate
the light and the waters,
earth and man,
and all things for all people
will be as you are, air.
But, for now,
beware!
Come with me,
for we have many things
to dance and sing.
Let us run
the whole length of the sea,
to the tips of the peaks,
let us go
to where the new spring
is flowering
and the wind is rattling
and I sing
as we part the blossoms,
the sweet scent and the fruit,
the atmosphere
of a new tomorrow.

--translated from the Spanish
of Pablo Neruda
"I find you, O Lord..."

I find you, O Lord, in all the good things
I am bound to with love like a brother.
In small seed you shine from the tiniest rings,
And from great things you pour forth your power.

Such a wonderful game that your energy plays,
To move like a servant through that which it sends:
In roots it sprouts, in thick trunks it sways,
And in cut limbs it rises up from the dead.

---translated from the German
of Rainer Maria Rilke
LOSING THE WAY

I have just passed
by my own house, watching
earthworms wander the wet pavement,
so lost in this world!
THE GRASSHOPPERS

silent, reptilian,
sun-baked grey

as two wood chips,
the grasshoppers copulate

in still august heat—
motionless, until

the shiny blue forelegs
stamp, quiver

pensively, pensile, suspended
as wide russet eyes roll back,

yellow-black checkerboard wings
exploding with voices.
THREE MID-WINTER THAWS

1.
Surprise is the pale bleached color of grass
When it is a coarse green and February.
Lee-side of the high, thick-wooded vale,
The faint trail flecks with sign:
Cleaved hooves repeating the ice,
And black shit delicate as rosary beads.

2.
Down by the river New Year's Eve
Three quick gunshots stitched the air
With whistles trailing lengthwise
To the water's frozen reach.
I stopped dead in my tracks
To hear: silence. Nothing
But my startled heart
Thudding its drum, and the Clark Fork
River droning its lone slow note.

3.
A face assembles in rain,
In the black limbs of bare oak leaning
And tangling over the stream. I remember
The warm trace of pulse beat tapping
Blue at the base of her thumb.
We watched huge jams of ice dislodge
And lurch to the opening ocean,
A world hurled in on itself.
SOUTH OF NEWPORT BAY

1.
Seven waves to each set breaking and flattening over the sand,
Seven waves turned back, receding seaward
With undertow and tide. Slow, currents shift and swell
Among the kelp-drenched reefs and skerries
Lifting and sinking with ebb and flow, heaving
Past mussel-coated jetties toward the far breakwater
Where huge swells cleave through lowlying stones,
Disperse, scatter, yet return
To the pulsing of ocean, sun and moon.

Over flat intertidal stones home to sealion and pelican,
In the quick breath-space between waves
Where sandpipers race after crab and small fishes,
Rooted in the crevices of wind-carved cliffs
And everywhere the water is, this life
Of web and feather, mouth and gill, anemone, stem and root.

2.
A line of rusted barges lurches by
So slowly they may not be moving at all.

Even the seawind,
Now steady, feels still;
The fog no longer churning and thickening,
The gulls no longer swarming and quarreling
But lifting themselves in diaphanous flight,
Motionless,
But for the wingtip's shiver,
The angular beak's turn leeward.

Sometimes in the absence of motion,
The body seems stunned, superfluous
As air we breathe in our dreams.
I lie still in warm sand,
Sensation draining out of my limbs,
The crowd-sound of seaways grown indistinct,
The light behind eyelids blurred and unnoticed.

(section break)
3.
All things return to the cadence of light;
The pulse beat of all wild creatures measured
In the orbits of sun and moon, the lean and drift
Of continents shifting underneath migrating stars,
And the tangle of seaweed, the undulant dance,
Exist, not alone
In the net of the present,
But always and everywhere, once and again.

At day's end,
Under the darkening San Joaquin Hills,
An echoed brightness
Swells expectantly.

4.
Two nights past full moon,
In the fourth set of a full tide,
The grunion run south of Newport Bay.

The female feels a strange itch in her midriff,
Feels her brain flood with the babble of moonlight
Charging the knee-deep shallows,
Sends herself spilling out over the sand,
Urging and wrestling, digging in
Tail-first, half-buried
As the males come at her, curling and closing
Over the exposed flesh of her belly,
The three of them writhing and shuddering there

To exhaustion,
Spawned out, waiting
The next set's inundation,
The rush and heave of return to the sea.

(section break)
In the next tide's peak,
In the final nick of moon,
When the waves wash highest over the strand,
A jumble of hearts beat mad for the sea.
The black waves swell and crash unseen,
Glowing and rolling in over the shore
As the small fish glimmer briefly and drain
Away with the turbulent current.

In this bright time of birth, this echoing light,
I hear how the mute world speaks its faith
In the patient language of recurrence.

Imagine faith as this trust in returnings!
Be as the sea is.
Lie still.
Breathe.