1992

**Snow Country**

Paul Scott. Piper  
*The University of Montana*

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SNOW COUNTRY

By
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B.S., University of Montana, 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1992

Approved by Patricia Gerecke
Chair

Date
May 26, 1992
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Acknowledgements

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This thesis is dedicated to my family, and to all the friends that sparked these works, especially, Rick Newby, Bill Borneman, and Bill Elison. Thanks to Rick Hanners for technical assistance.
SECTION I
The Sun Poem
   for Michael Palmer

The sun poem is in the small Japanese
book
a friend is lost to me lost
in the mail
the road is dry the wind is damp the log's
bleached
branches have broken off after the year's
fiction
a table is set for four the rock's hesitant
blush
masked by grey lichen
a pine
squirrel chatters and sets off a chain letter
the last
glimmer is a seed in an endless succession of days
blood
splashed on the snow a wish that haunts the white
words
that punctures silence
outside
a friend cries out and his voice reaches me
through
thickets and clearings like long
sighs
the sun poem is a circe beyond the grey
clouds
far off the white bark shines a friend's
voice
enters the room of prophecy in her
hands
the soft echoes of trees is an offering
to memory
the sun poem is whispered by repeated
images
soon my steps will
melt
or fill in they cannot be retraced
quietly
the frost grows a rock breaks free
a cloud
passes by the sun poem
is a seed
in the endless succession of nights
planted
in shadow when the book is closed
Meditation

I was drinking impatience again this suggestive evening, or perhaps impulse, the link of material to phenomenal mind. The window waded along shores of a marsh where two moose fed. We had a child and named her Passage, and trains flecked with faces shuddered into the mired night. Yet ahead of it all I saw the steamy yellow room, smoke and music burnished by the blind light. The distance from caprice to anxiety was optional. I think it was the Messiaen, or the way you moved pulling yellow across shadow, provocation always lurking like another breath, Outside, the path curves into loss and we call it origin. And outside it is snowing.
The Whales

It's morning and raining again. The sleepwalkers wander the streets through thin mist, through puddles thick with blurred color going nowhere. But the man who is watching them from the window of his cramped room is roaring at the gate of his own terror like Okeanos storming off the coast of Onekotan where the whales are killed every day of this season where their blood rises like camellias into the sky at dusk, and in the morning it always rains.
The Words

On their way along the path that leads to us that is not a path the words die their husks litter the past

There is no way around them no one to sweep them up into a pile the wind and rain will rot our car doesn't bother to swerve

This is all one can say there is no one who owns us now no one who owes us anything
Child

Born to walk on water
systolic lilly
the color of blood-house
the color of sky
you dehisce the blister
of rain
with your white hands
you bury the roots that feed you

How can you help but wander
calling the goddess’ name
stars framed in the window
watching everyone
in the empty streets
The Questions

The First one falls through the cracks
shrieking at stars "Do you
love me? Will you follow
me?

The Second is entangled in pensive intaglio

The Third is a machination, a pair of
legs wound tight
that walk in rage
around and around the shuttered house

The Fourth is the color of blood
hitting oxygen, a painting
that hangs on the walls of the rich

The Fifth is unnerving, the coming and
going of surfaces

The Sixth is distraction
the code of burning fields
the TV, voices in the other room

The Seventh is shy
and flees with her reflection
her production and reproduction
water remembers her flight
and the reflection of her flight

The Eighth is a plucked art, a telltale
heart, the sun-star,
dervishist and clown

The Ninth is a tongue of corners
a rived glottis

The Tenth is a table
set for four
on which in a shaft of sunlight
rests a fly

The Eleventh is a return
to the pause between words, between
breaths, the silences
like crows crossing the white sky
The Twelfth is a prescience
the pressure of fur in our mouths
as we speak

The Thirteenth is the perfection of circles
the radiant hunger of mouths and words
for a wilderness that can never be entered
an eye that opens only to see itself
He sits in the car and stares straight ahead
It is night
The wipers scrape across the dry windshield, scrape
back and forth, back and forth
It is the rhythm of ablation
He feels his presence as aleatoric
He feels her presence as absence
He hears the leaves scrape the brittle skin
He feels they finally had no new words,
no way out
He feels the words come and go like breath
There is no solace in the constant sound of traffic
The only light is in the kitchen window, it could be waning
I am not cold he says or thinks
There is no motion though he hears himself say the word 'sudden'
He feels himself falling
He feels nothing, not even lack of feeling, nor feeling that
a perfect hole
She put a plum in his mouth once, round, smooth, yielding
The wipers clack back and forth, back and forth
Then he is 'here', he realizes it
And again he realizes it, that he must have been somewhere else
He feels again the weight in his hands, of his hands
Smooth and cool he says, or thinks he says
There are many hands he keeps folded
He hears the car fail repeatedly to catch its impulse
He knows there is something there he cannot quite reach
It is like an itch, like night
There is a great machine he thinks or says, it is unwinding
He knows what already happened waits to happen
He hears sirens
Haunted Annelidics

The knife is still in the drawer
The lights are out
It snowed
last night without warning, a quiet black light
between the flakes
A dark lobby
muted jazz, a man waiting for a woman in red
An inefficient
symmetry
A half-eaten sandwich
No one heard footsteps
I always think of this table when I think of the war
Spoons tilt, light glints, when you lift
your eyes
White triangles inside
red
triangles
are the only warning
They tell me later
the sign reads
yield but says nothing
They tell me too late
the pieces of the puzzle don't
fit
A wet knife with six inch blade
in the quiet drawer
Where were you
last night, around 3 A.M.?

They didn't finish the wine and their clothes
left a trail
still warm
Nature is cruel
Without the additives
the cigarettes, one smudged with lipstick,
would have burned out
Decay is always a factor
Past and future meet in the mirror
faster than their shadows
I turned it over and over
in my mind
before I acted
Fractions have no faith in themselves as factors
It was initially a trick but something slipped
They sifted through it several times and got ash on their hands
A man can always use a drink

Waiting to remember
hesitating to forget
the title
of the current number one song
Like flies
either on or off
(alternating current)
we are
without closure
Do you hear the phone, the doorbell, the voices of the Tao?
She made me do it
Each intrusion an eruption
A voyeurism where language watches us through a crack
between the yellowed shade & sill
Or that time I had the chance to look in your drawers
The lines so long now
So long
It's been good to know you
Did you read that or hear it from the authorities?
We spend so much time waiting to break the lines
To avoid delay
pick up the hairs under the floor
Blood in the xylem, she's phloem the coup

The knife dreams it is a sliver
in the obsidian cornea of God
All night it snowed a quiet white loneliness
She passes the salt to avert her eyes
   Talking
too loud
   I forgot that you had the key
Perhaps it is all relatives or reflexive
   Ghosts
in the disappearing rainforest
   I dropped my drawers
when some amateurs rummaged them

Her lips grazed my leg
   We sat in the folding metal chairs and waited
   for the lecture to end
   I remember hearing bells
seeing the raven on the ledge, the nun going after
   it with a poker
   We should have waited
somewhere else,
   for something else to happen

The demolition was thwarted by critics
   who spotted a radiant clue
The monks walking by shrouded in brown muslin
   walking in pairs, chanting
on their way to the grottos
Apples heavy on the green fuse
   I was walking by
It was raining in the cave where I waited
   for you to show me
   your hands
In the room is a presence without a name
   I was walking or riding
in a car when it happened,
   rain blurring the windows
Traces of the scar on your wrist
   You were walking or riding
in a car
   through tall buildings like canyons
You held my hand at the door
   The scriptures wobbled
in the dark
   The drawer was closed when I got there
The knife
trembles
    like a stamen stung by bee's legs
I remember the smell of rotting timber
    and camomile
    I remember it was raining
my tongue was full of salt
    Are you still searching
for perfection? for love?
The cops are out in droves
    I can see you now in red satin
spiked heels
I could hear the screams clearly
from where I stood
    The knife was drawn on the wall
of a cave
where it hung until we came
    I reached through the wall and
you were holding me
    I remember
the world was going to end
The Terrorist

As an Ecosaboteur, an idealist of violence, in pursuit of an absolute truth, I have turned my life into an absolute fiction. I am forced to create illusion, to wear many hats, to live in mirrors, crouch behind doors.

I have lost locus, existing simply as the transference of energy from one transitory condition to another. Remember Al-Ashid the commander of the Assassins who shouted, standing high in the stirrups of his flaming Arabian, toking hashish: "Nothing is true, Everything is possible." This is my truth, and hence my lie.

My friends and family know me as a house painter, the owner of a large import-export business, a small-town gas station attendant, a migrant laborer, the president, a worker in a Montessori school, an accomplished composer for the harpsichord, a fanatic fly-fisherman, a hermetic monk, a collector of art, a child, a vinophile, the father of 4 beautiful dwarves, a whore of theory, a gay activist, the reincarnation of Mary Magdalene.

Initially I thought this monstrous fiction was for the sake of subterfuge, an evasion of the Law, an anti-toxin for a poisoned culture. I was wrong. It creates its own momentum. It spirals heavenward like some Babel. My family, my friends. They love me as they know me. They love only what they know.

It began, if it began at all, innocently enough, working construction, demolition, mining - learning explosives. I witnessed what we all do: rivers poisoned by chemical excrement, forests leveled, toxic nuclear waste added to breakfast cereal. But it changed me. I combined philosophy and dynamite
bypassing politics. Zen pyrotechnics. I scorned my history as a liberal. I practiced the way of diamond-heart, the direct flash. I numbed myself to flesh; I crippled only monsters of steel & glass. Destruction always preceded creation. The phoenix rises from corporate rubble. When the pot-smoking janitor bit it in the closet in Tacoma I hardened. When the R&D man evaporated in Indiana, I turned to glass. When a boardroom imploded in Amsterdam, I celebrated with friends who thought it my birthday. Nothing is true, everything is possible.

I switched from dynamite to plastique, then to a nitro-glycerine compound set in styrene, triggered by an alkene once positioned at the target. Easy to carry, easy to work with, tastes like wintergreen. I became a master janitor, plumber, electrician, boiler maker, garbage collector, vending machine tender, plant-care person, secretary, technician, boss, cop. I became faceless wherever I went, faceless in my diversity. To carry the lie further I also became nameless, allowing the destruction of a name to germinate another. I preferred the names of celebrities, a name so public it defied any locus. If I couldn't be nailed down, I couldn't be caught. I crept down hallways in Miami, smoked cigars with board members in Minneapolis, stayed forever in Newark, flew planes into Seattle, was constantly on TV. Everywhere I visited I left the burning fragment of a message that would some day become as obvious as the sun. A sun that even now is expanding slightly in size. Even now it expands. This is all I'm saying. That it is going to get a lot hotter before it cools down.

But have you even listened? I lie like a rug. I sell real estate outside Fargo. I drive race cars in the rain.
I am a nun in a convent below the surface of Montreal. I sing love songs. I write books. What difference does it make? We are all in pain. This is my only means of lashing out. The violence of a lie. But whose life now is not a fiction, is not in some capacity created? Who can claim to know intimately and completely themselves, much less the person who sits next to you, or brushes their teeth at your side? How many times do they say, "she seemed like such a nice woman, such a good mother, he was such a quiet neighbor, such a good student, they always gave to the proper charities." Who could ever suspect. Go to the mirror and face yourself. The lie has thin fingers. It touches us all.

As for me. I lied about the wine. I'm strictly Bud Light. But my sentences continue to explode long after you've left the room.
SECTION II
MONTANA NOTES

It's always the longest winter
*

on the shoulder
of the highway
a pile of headless deer carcasses
*

Fences cross
the wind
crosses fences
*

Square of light immured
in quiet pasture
*

"Smashed Enfant"
& "TEX"K.T. in red paint
on 2 cement bridge abutments
*

My arrows are made of desire
*

In Persephone's cow pasture
a black angus bull
sleeps with its eyes open
*

'lots of bar(n)s around here'
take some
honey home
*

Small flock of Buffleheads
on the dark Clark's
Fork free
floating signifiers
*

The last best face
in the crowd outside
the theatre
*

Chipheads and cowchips
face off across
barbed wire
*

Yacking it up
up the Yak River where
Rick Bass
fishes for trout
*

Ravalli Cafe - The does stop here
to meet your bucks
*

Shattered mirror
on larch needles
walking along, alone
pieces of sky underfoot
Sign along highway
Bull River valley
in the shadow of the pines
"Corporate greed is killing us"

*

Meat farmers lounge on the fence,
wave as I drive by

*

the fact of it simple
as standing up, walking out
into a terrain
that will never be entirely
familiar

*

a stone sinks deeper in the water

*

Bales of hay stutter in dry fields
clouds coagulate
'a hard rain's gonna fall'

*

PARADISE : white letters
on a green sign

*

"The day opens like a woman who loves you"

*

The billboard's repetitive semiotics
skitters like a fresh colt
across the obsidian night
Lee Konitz on the radio
miles from nowhere

* "BRKFST - 8 MILES"

* The orchards here
grow frost and
not much else

* the language of pre-cambrian mudstone
breaking apart

* a sudden cloud in your voice,
shift of wind

* Red neon "HOT TUBS:
C'mon in
fiddle around
tickle yor fancy"

* a word is a gesture in the air.
knowing this, one knows that the swallows
write renga
above the river
by the old iron bridge

* a woman in a pink top, blue shorts &
white shoes walks straight after sidewalk cuts
right
out onto new mown grass
mountains that are not mountains
rivers that are not rivers

Birddog and Burdock, Attorneys At Law:
They'll sue the bull for shit

Embryonic hail

All the places we didn't go
makes it hard to know

rotting ice in the black water

there's no story that needs to be told

Sky cream, peach
spears of soft purple

rounded hills thick with lodgepole
lake flat, dark
your voice the purr of night
moving in

the entire thing is made up of
1 and zero

the collision of atoms
brings more news
old road
leads here
*

the sun through pine
splinters the story
*

frost covered spider web
outside the window
*

wind blown grass shivers
*

On page 303 of the collected WCW is the "wind's force"
*

Wisdom, only 28 miles from Wise River
which is only 28 miles from Opportunity
which is only 8 miles from Warm Springs,
the state mental hospital
*

Polar Bar
*

Ed's Road dead ends
just like Ed
*

After the author died
her ashes were scattered
over rivers and mountains
without end
The bronze sun/coin
spins in
endless cobalt

*

That night you were too sirius
at 7200 feet

*

Sky here
from ear to ear
leaks out the eyes
when the light's right

*

Sharp chips of juncoe chatter

*

Once by cloud, once
by cloister
the same place
"yet, yet"

*

Marasmius in a fairy ring
picked for the morning's omelette,
carefully, so the circle
is left unbroken

*

In the field
below silent mountains
theory decays as
a flower is held silently
aloft
sunlight flickers in the shadow
chickadees flutter in the lower
branches empty
coffee cups on the table

*

five-toed track of black
bear in
the snowbank

*

Dumb fucks
in pickup trucks

*

a pile of pages to pick from

*

Hail the size of tennis balls shatters
the Capitol's skylight

*

and Cheryl, walking her dog
Rio De Janeiro in Missoula, MT
finds a street named Poignancy

*

Sitting
on a log
eating
watching
a squirrel
that watching
me eats
nutmeats
mallard quacking while flying
peppers popping while frying

*narrative is oedipal*

*truck tires tipped against the blue metal shed*

*My eros is a maid of desire*

*early afternoon after making love
walking
limp green hose
on white picket fence*

*"Not my hands but green across you now"*

*this north wind
which tears even our sorrow from us
scatters it over a landscape
of mountains and rivers
without end*

*and you so Lacanic*
Swapping stories at
Liquid Louie's
"the desire to eat your apple
got me in this halter," sd horse
*

Umbrage of beauty and will
*

flesh and blood, skin & bone
*

"DEER CROSSING NEXT 53 MILES"
*

flies buzz
wind purrs
waves slap
crows caw
*

Two Swainson's thrushes communicate
in a language much quicker,
much more beautiful
than ours
*

On my desk -
yarrow stalks, spool
of thread, scat, scattered letters, empty
glass
*

High of -16 today
ghost dance

*

Four women -
one comes to bear
one comes as bear
one comes bear-masked
one comes bare-assed

*

Ted Berrigan dead,
read it in
"In Transition" Newsweek

new week starts tomorrow
with a rosy-fingered dawn

stirring milk in my tea
need more time, send some

*

a woodtick crawling up my levis
meat at the end of the Denim Desert
only shadow a hand overhead

*

Wheat stalk sways
one way, another sways
another way
in western wynde

*

often I am permitted to enter a meadow

*

reading that
porcupines too, masturbate
Silver gash of aspen

*

And he was saying, ignoring
the dying fire
that grizzly bears still
consider us a delicacy, eating
the buttocks and thighs
first, often before
the victim is dead

*

In the beginning was the word
now there's the work

*

a V of geese gaggling

*

Coffee 'thick enough to float a crowbar'
cools in tiny styrofoam cups,
in huge hairy hands
the clink of spoons
buzz of conversation
men at work

*

Through the heatshocks
4 mountain bluebirds
fly toward us, kamikazes
of color

*

semilancerata, semilancerata, semilancerata
the wind's white far
c(r)ows in a stubble field

*

Car window churches

*

the deer skull bleached white
Glacier Lilly growing through
left eye socket

*

Dolly Varden spawn
in the Sand Carrying ceremony
of Yugyo

*

Postcards
in a chrome rack
spin from
drugstore
to the mail sack

*

the phrase "BUTCHERED HAIR"
carved in log wall
of the john

*

Sun ignites
the white wall
drums
the blue sky
On my knees
breaking down a tent-pole -
princess pine, spagnum moss, wild
lilly-of-the-valley, bracken ferns, pine
towering overhead -
I bow to such diversity

*

Cry of Swainson's thrush shatters
jet thunder then
silence again

*

Umbels of ideas

*

a river runs through it all

*

Ultimate postulants -
rock & roll
stop & eat
get some sleep
drive he said

*

Be still and REALIZE!!
the Curlew Cattle Company

*

the oil, timber, and mining concerns
would have us believe
in rivers and mountains
without end

*

Video Corral
Lewis and Clark were here
*

roots cleave
the song-bones free
*

Lovely, she,
at the Mission Mountain Merc
blond hair, green eyes, smile
nipples
stretching green turtleneck out into
the small space between us
*

In Helena
in a store window
a DeStijl washbasin, white
with red lip clean orange
rings
*

russet mushrooms
white strawberry blossoms
*

missile silos piloerect
on the sage flats near Choteau
*

growth throws
concentric whorls
*

Yoo-hoo Li Po
the moon again floats on the water
for us to grab
artichokes at Chico
*

can't seem to
get you
out of
my mind (life)

actions still
completed by you
my sense of it
creating two
*

in Helena
round fan whirls
in upstairs window
walking square circles
for a beer
*

Horse snorts. Dogs
flush birds ahead.
*

sun spokes through the pines
*

plastic wrappers, styrofoam cups &
beer cans most common litter along highway
*

pissing, listening to
vireos
top of Evaro Hill
Russulas in a ring
under the spruce wing

*tense white vapor trail
across blue space
near the Airforce base

* Rolling stones gather no moss
rolling logs lose their ants
Rolling Stones are all washed up
rolling logs are washed away

* 94 degrees in the shade today
fish won't bite
lying on this foam pad
all my energy turned to matter

* 'to fill, to fill'

* voices of creek
no end to what's in the water

* A bad day fishing is better than a good day working

* Charybdis, Charybdis
Charybdis I cry
if I don't drink Charybdis
I surely will die
Clearcuts suck

*

petting
the dog named Zeena reading
Gertrude Steena

*

the ten gallon hat
cost twenty

*

Scree slide
across the creek

Sedimentary slivers and
slabs of sheared shale

*

Rock ring
with a grill on top

bottle caps
in the tulio box

*

It's the end of the world as we know it
and we feel fine

*

love
you harbor rage as well

tho night has many lights
as well
the marlboro man on the billboard
stares all day at the shopping mall
practicing sānadhi

*

Early July and the arnica leaves already
droop

*

Headline on paper in cafe -
"Mine Tailings Kill Thousands of Trout"
Slogan on jonn wall in Libby -
"Remember Bo Pahl"
Book on the coffee table
"For Whom the Bell Tolls"

*

Fire snaps dry sticks

*

Form is no other than emptiness
emptiness no other than form

*

I started my campfire
with an American flag
and called it Art
Garfunkle 'cause I was lonely
wanted some company
up here in the hills
so I hummed a few bars of my silence

*

Sunset Hill
Sunrise Basin
Avon calling
oro y plata

* 

a kind of singing 
just after the storm 
driving, windows open 
some animal crying out 
against the darkening 
or for its coming 

* 

heifers and haute cuisine 

* 

Twin Bridges - 
fraternal or genetic? 

* 

"moving to Montana soon 
going to be a dental floss tycoon" 

* 

The Necklace Lakes 
I hang around your neck 
The Island Lakes 
float in your turquoise eyes 

* 

when we kiss under the stars 
the world imperceptibly comes apart 

* 

spiculate visions
Dog fights and gun shots
across the creek
this evening. Lou
and Tatsy's friends

*

the gatha of pine squirrels -
wisened eyes
and a sharp tongue

*

earth rising into mountain
mountain rising into sky
sky falling into valley

*

April is the Blackbird's month
and May the Warbler's
Pale dawn
and you are in and out of me
like air, the curtains yellow, parted

*

Jewel hail

*

I come from Montana
I wear a bandana

*

a rose of blood spreads across the sky
the sexual heat interrupts dinner
Sign at county fair:  
"Top Herefords at stud -  
get entered soon"


Arcurate cloister


Where I am: Sun  
Green Buzz
  twitta twee twee twee  
nhoooooo  
chi-chi-chi-chi-chi-heet


Yesterday we saw the blue  
Yves Klein leapt into


green bottles on the shoulder of the road  
green bottles with no shoulders on the shelf


Blue aster  
Dis aster  
trans and cis aster


the canyon slick between your legs


The violence of love  
that it could so wake you  
and so startled you  
reach for my hands
Thistle grows
through the empty window
of an old DeSoto

*

the water still
is also cold
and flees with our reflection

given back
the sky’s embrace
ancient imprint of our face

*

Jocko Hollow

*

I called to her
crossing the sage in fading purple light
after much wine and slippery words
but when she finally heard me
she could do nothing
her horse recalcitrant
her distances misaligned

*

Circle K’s
plastic sign
obstructing stars

*

Nightcrawlers $1 dozen

*

a town of 64 decent yolks
another bent aluminum beer can ditched
in the ditch

rust never sleeps
aluminum never rusts

Motel motifs

"HEAVEN CAN WAIT
800 PRIME ACRES FOR SALE"

Objects in mirror
disappear

Yippee kyi yi yo
let me kiss yor toe
Yippe kyi yi yee
let me lick yor knee

Drummond -
"Bullshipper's capital of the world"

Big Sky
Security

Cowshit dark in thawing fields -
excremental writing
Autumn dogwoods & willows
along creekbottom
"bad Russell Chatham"
says my buddy

*

Black plastic garbage sack
snagged on mullein stalk
blowin in the wind
flag of the new west

*

The mother of all rivers

*

Hysteric point one-half mile ahead

*

Honey, take some home
SECTION III
The Heart

I felt for years that the heart
was an organ
but I could not play it -
too many valves
and variegations, a complexity of keys and locks,
complicities.
Now the music comes easy through an open window
as my son picks peas
in the garden, or the thrushes last night
while fishing. I find
enough to believe in, to hope for, reach across
an always impossible distance,
feel you moving toward me under the crisp sheets,
sun, like heavy faith, across the bed.
Sunday Morning

Stayed in bed late after a night of
dancing to the Big Sky Mudflaps, now
Verdi's Requiem on the radio
but nobody's sad, we're wolfing french
toast, scrambled eggs, coffee, a thousand
things dangle like spider silk in the thin-air
sunshine, new snow on the mountains, you
kiss my neck as Jordan drops gobs of
eggs on the floor, the cat stretches, yawns
as if to say there's enough time
for anything.
The Middle Road
   for Jordan

I walk, singing, you ride on my back,
      sky in your hand
      and out, slippery,
walking the edge of a ravine, weaving
      in and out under alder
      on a thin path
of crushed quartzite, cliff cleaving
      pure blue space
      to the left.

Down in the ravine, twisted
      currant thickets, loose
      shale, the scrape
of sun on rock and thorn. We feel the eyes
      of shadows stare at us, shadow ourselves
      silhouetted against the light
prussian-blue sky.

      I feel the sun, the weight & release
      of the heat of it,
      as surely as I feel your weight
      which I climb into, as we climb.
      You must feel
the giddiness of weightless sky,
      near flight. The earth rises up
      to greet us each step.
Earth, sky,
      we walk a simple path between them.
      'The middle road.'
You wave your hands and yelp
      at crows that circle above us, cawing.
      Here we exist it seems,
for no more than this, walking in,
talking to, this world.
Living in Real Time

Next door the light is on in the living room; David sits at the dining room table reading, drinking beer. His wife left him 2 weeks ago, taking their 4 year old daughter back to Minnesota. She called before she left and talked to Joan of betrayal. Then again, 5 days later, to say she'd made it safely after driving all night through North Dakota.

The other night out walking the dog, I saw him at the same table, crying, head buried in his hands. His shoulders heaved against the rhythm of reggae music that leaked through the windows. "She told me I was incapable of love," he told me the next day. "Fuck love," he said. "Fuck it. I tried."

The night I saw him crying, I walked further than usual. Far enough finally to see empty highway flee the sweep of headlights, fields of dark wheat heaving in unseen wind, stars crashing through the windshield of the car where mother drove and daughter slept. Stars that hurled on, leaving no light.
The Fields

When I was a boy
I stood in the fields of common erasure
watching the monarch butterflies
as if under a river of orange and black water
moving south and there was no end to it
nor to me until I turned away
and walked out of the field of waist-high grass
into the remnants of my mother's voice
For Mother

It is the body's own hunger
    that fills its lungs with water
instead of air, that needs this weight
    to bear it down.
And the air, like breath full of light
    slips away
through the twin, tall windows,
    through the towering elms. And roots
grow down through the heart
    to their last thirst. And the heart
comes to rest like a folded bird.
    And the ripples on the water still.
And the reflection on the water stills.
This Bear

This bear slipped into my mind
as easily as a hand slips
into a familiar pocket not its
own and curves around the leg toward
but can't quite reach
like mist over bowed saw-grass
on the morning of the first real heat

her face broad, scooped body rippling muscle
shimmering copper the color of wire
I'd strip from old radios as a kid
and unravel and quit unraveling realizing
it would take a lifetime to get it all out
Boy on the Beach

the boy
in black shorts,
white sweatshirt holding
the limp stem of kelp like a snake
eating its tail
his arms spread wide
spinning slowly clockwise around
and around and the beach
disappearing in all directions
into the receding fog
Walking

on an abandoned logging road
sunlight splashed like puddles
in stride to the fragrant song
of thrushes the revving hum of bees
splash of the silver creek legs
in synch swinging out and up
the gradual climb to a wooden rickety
lookout where we float on an island
of glacier lilly and lush bear grass
in an ocean of boisterous cumuli
hub in a wheel of hushed mountains
spinning slowly through the empty blue sky
Vigilance
  for Bill

I'm skiing at dusk as soft clouds
move in and the air stills,
tired, having laid down several miles of tracks
through 15 inches of powder,
now skiing good slick tracks I've been over 3 times,
skiing fast, listening to Brian Ferry on the walkman,
mind wandering from thoughts of family to Desert Storm
to the Soviet breakup, not lighting on any one thing
but flitting like a hungry insect -
technology, simulation theory, ice cream
drifting in and out of the shushing of the skis,
thinking about Talk Radio which I saw the night before
and disturbed me terribly, skiing faster
in the thick blue light when you visit me in the form
of a grouse erupting under me, snow exploding
every which way, wings whoosing air as it flies
into a dark fir where it sits complaining,
and I hear your voice in my head saying "Be ever
vigilant sucker, be ever vigilant!", the hair
on the back of my neck erect, and a giddy shivering electricity
rises through my body, crystalizing my face in a perfect smile.
Where the Raspberries Grow
"desire is full
of endless distances."
Robert Hass

It is barely morning sun just breaking
the crest of the Swans and we
are miles up a gated logging road talking
about terrorism, my friend having just read Mao II
by Delillo, saying
that psychologically we cannot escape
it, it is everywhere,
everywhere but here I say, the dawn
like an old friend, and I
pick a handful of raspberries and give him one.
They are wild beautiful red, like aggregated rubies,
each one so potent they remind us of candies
from France we ate as children,
packed tight in a tin,
and he smacks his lips and puckering
blows me a kiss,
and we're stopped, bent over picking methodically,
when overhead a jet catches the glint
of sun and seems to ignite as he points,
and we stand watching it fly on
beyond the explosion we imagined
no sound yet and then
the roar of engines backfiring
through the canyons.

I think of the passengers in that tiny steel cylinder
staring at magazines, talking, sleeping, each
with their web of dream and desire,
their great quiet faith in what burns,
they don't know where the water is,
they're as lost as we are in the long run,
nameless they've entered our lives.
We've stopped picking berries and stand silent,
and it's as if everything has stopped
in the eye of this ubiquitous fear.
Our human violence, our terror, our dumb love
like the rhizomes that connect these bushes,
in some strange way giving birth to each other,
as the great roar fading into thickening sunlight,
the passenger's imagined faces still hovering
like butterflies above the raspberries.
The Garden
"Well said," replied Candide, "but we must cultivate our garden"

They were romantics, Alice and Joe,
moved out
from Maryland to 'live off the land.'
They believed in a terrible symmetry, in Arcady and
the moon, yet craved a simplicity,
calling the antipodes day and night, love
& hate.
Suddenly though, there were more ravens
in the trees, and at night they talked
of the annihilation
of the sun which Alice had read would be inevitable.

The cabin they built
of lodgepole pine, pressed a rough cement floor
between 2 ridges fanning north
from the valley mouth, small knobs actually, tits
as Joe liked to call them, though only dust
and flakes of rock really, under sparse
scrub juniper and bunchgrass.
In a bed of logs bleeding amber
under goose down, they crushed themselves together
to make a child which never came,
to make spring,
finally to make it work at all.

This land, once swelling in the mind
like breasts to the hand,
became a convexity of hunger,
the very air eroding it all away, this
place called home, where only the sky grows
in profusion.

And the sky. It empties the windows and the eyes.
Joe and Alice still talk of yin & yang,
systems of sense, but what allows January
wind to rip heat from cracks is blameless.
They talk always of leaving,
but scrape dry soil with a rake, planting
what they will, harvesting what they can.
This First Snow
in memory of James Wright

This first snow comes in early September, before we are ready; flakes almost breaking their form to form water, yet hesitating, hearing dark winds far above earth too thin for light, in a matter of minutes whitening the bruised colors of this small city, the lumbering, peripheral mountains.

It is suddenly quiet. Quiet enough to hear the earth breathe, the billions of seeds lengthening into their temporary oblivion, suspended, safe. Across the street a girl has stopped walking and is looking up, up into the slow fury of the hurling snow. Even from here I can see her eyes are closed, that she is falling backwards into the sky, into the origin of snow, of herself, the huge flakes break wet on her warm skin.
The Painting

At the opening, the attorney stops
to consider a painting,
pure arctic white, and his female companion
whom he has not known long, but known
in the 'right way', and who invited him here,
asks him what he thinks.
And although he has not stopped thinking
all day, about a case in which he represents a mother
accused of sexually molesting her little boy,
he doesn't think when he sees the painting,
instead, he sees a white hole in his blue office wall,
a rectangular moon,
sees under his eyes the dream he had last night,
of himself as a little boy
on a run-away horse under a white sky.
His father chasing the horse, running frantically
stumbling over hummocks in the swampy field,
and he is laughing wildly, riding farther
and farther from his father's grip.
But he cannot stop thinking about this case.
And he curses silently the chaos of the world
that prevents him his perfect machinations.
He knows exactly what he needs, a witness who quavers
between hilarity and hysteria, a woman
early 30's, like Streep, who seduces
the jury into their own imbalance,
a sacrificial lamb he can deliberately slaughter,
driving the jury to pity, and acquittal.
He hears muted talk, laughter, sees in front of him
a painting that now tells him nothing,
and he loves it. Peace in its very lack
of information. "How much" he asks?
"$16,000" she answers.
"Is that good?"
He feels oddly panicked by the question,
as if his lack of knowledge has opened a wound,
("Is it good? I don't know. I don't know that.")
and his reaction is to want
the world to be his world, to hang
where he can tip it just so much, bring it back,
balanced like chords of Bach, poised, sunlit
crystal, yet his reaction to Bach is always sorrow.
"Is that good?"
"It's steep. I think we can bargain
with her directly. Ditch the dealer's 60 percent.
Get it for maybe eight." She stroked his arm.
You like it?"
He sees a blizzard and is walking through it, head bowed, streetlight sparking the snow. He sees an egg. If life could only be as simple and perfect and round and white as an egg.

And he's thinking of eggs then. Did he need some? Did he eat too many? How many things were they in. Foods, women; how men tried to reach them, how many things hatched out of them. And he remembered with startling clarity the first time he'd helped his mother make cookies, how he'd gotten her an egg from the refrigerator, and was carrying it back to her balanced on the tips of his fingers, and how it suddenly tumbled off in out-of-reach slow motion to the floor and splattered. He heard his mother yell "SHIT!" and begin to cry for no reason, for no reason he could think of, and in the painting he saw a tiny vein of blood.
Memory

He remembers walking at night once late
holding a bottle
the sky a wash of stars
the scrape of gravel the bitter cold
his head craned back looking up
a sudden dizziness a giddiness of depth
as the blanket of sky withdrew
grew a sudden third dimension
stars abandoned to black emptiness
he climbed a barbed-wire fence and sat in the door
of an old shed the stillness clipped by an owl
the shimmering clarity of stars through
the smoke of his cigarette
he sees how far from town he's walked alone
what he's left behind and what for
how he consumes himself
to produce this isolate light he calls "I"
The snow is very fast. Two inches of cold powder on an icy crust. Fifty yards ahead of me I see your red parka disappear into the trees. Then my skis catch the slope and start to float. I take the S-curve through the fir staying in your tracks, the shift of weight as I cut the turns, and I'm in there, on top. Then it opens up and the bottom drops away. I'm in the sky, the closest I've come to flying. Blue air. Above the roar I hear Katrina's voice pound in my head. "Don't fight it. Lose your control. Let it go."

Here in the snow country we watch out for each other. Carol and Jessie take care of the angora rabbits, the goats, llamas, and our malamute Al. Keep a fire going so the plants don't freeze. Steve picks up the mail. Others ask if there is anything they can do. Kirby drives us in his old dodge truck with the radio eternally tuned to C&W. Returning from Spokane, I think of them all and thank them silently. Clouds obliterate the mountains. We pass white fields just coming to light, cut square from dense lodgepole that cover the valley floor. Split rail fences and horses huddled head to rump. The tests were conclusive, the bone marrow transplant failed. This doctor, Erlington, a young guy with a permanent tan, pulled me aside in the hall. 4 months at the most. He holds my arm for a moment then walks away. The highway is snowpacked, chitinous in the wavering headlights. Three crows fly low over it
looking for carrion. Snowbanks 8 feet high. Kirby sucks on an unfiltered camel and squints into the fading night. Tire chains slap the wheelwells. No one talks. Huge flakes begin to fall as we reach the Goat Creek turnoff and the one wiper that works squeaks into action. Almost home. Katrina begins stirring on the bumpy road, her blond hair thrown back, her thin face peaceful. As I watch her she opens her eyes, stretches, and softly begins to sing along with the radio. A nameless country song. Her throat thrusts slightly forward, trembles, catches the light of the dash. Her voice is so clear it startles me. I look over her head at Kirby who meets my eyes and smiles faintly, sad & sweet. In this way we enter another day.

Here in the near dusk on our down quilt Katrina softly scrapes my chest with her nails and whispers in my ear. She is leaving soon she says. When, I ask? Soon, she says. Overcome with sorrow I shiver in her arms. We have been over it and over it. To her, it is a matter of will. Be brave, she says, I will visit. In the night coyotes come within 100 yards of the house, floundering in deep snow. They howl at the sliver of moon which slides in and out of the fast-moving clouds. Al picks up their song.

Although our country is known for snow, this year is an exception. The first flakes fell on August 28th and didn't stop. 21" by Thanksgiving. It is now December 18th and almost 4 feet have fallen. Snow clogs the fir and silences the sky. Closes us down, returns us to intimate space lit by candle, kerosene, propane. When I reach for Katrina in the long night, under the heavy covers, an emptiness, a slight depression where she lay, is all I find. Instantly awake, I sit
up, see her, unaware, staring out the window into the radiant moon reflected off perfect snow. So thin her clothes seem to hang from her like cloth from a tree. Her body is a hole in the light, a shadow.

I crack ice with an axe, dip the pan, and carry it into the cabin. Icy water from a metal cup reminds us this life stings with clarity. The Swan peaks are immediate, so clear Katrina says they're right here in the room with us. They move in and out of us like air. Her hand is hot in mine as we stand watching the sun fall behind them. At night when I am inside her I confuse our movement with the soft shushing of skis. I see the tracks shine behind us. The light in the holes the poles leave is blue.

At night the wind howls in the stovepipe and fine snow rakes the windows. Katrina's fever is unremitant now, a new symptom. Smoke rises lazily from a bay leaf candle which flickers on a book she was reading. Unable to sleep, I watch shadows turn to memories on the log wall. Watch them fade into the soft shudder of her breath. Her sudden coughing like someone shaking a gourd. The next morning she is baking blueberry muffins and singing. I am filled with joy to see her like this. I put my arms around her from behind and we stand holding each other. So thin, she is becoming air. Our 12th winter together.

In dream we ski at dusk. Katrina's tracks are illuminated ahead of me. I watch her powerful thigh and ass muscles compress, spring open in perfect 1/2 rhythm. She disappears ahead of me over a small rise. I ski faster, desperately trying to catch her but when I top the rise she is gone. Dusk closes in fast with
the north wind and I sense fear. I yell her name over and over but it is torn from me by the wind. Then I realize the tracks will always lead me to her. I wake laughing, joyous. The bed is soaked from her sweat. I get up and go outside. Shining a flashlight up into the snow I watch it hurl down like a meteor shower, let it bury me in disorientation. Biting black cold, no wind. I feel Katrina's heat begin to fade. In the Snow Country we come to know death intimately. No different than sleep, its dreams are the same. Its season never changes. It seems the reason for our lives.

Sun after 4 days of snow. Everything glistens. Bran waffles smothered in maple syrup for breakfast. Norm stops by and has coffee. We listen to some jazz. Talk. It is like always. A flock of chickadees in the alder outside the window scatters. Days go by and Katrina doesn't leave the bed. When my tears fall on her bare back she wakes, asks if it is raining. Is it spring yet, she asks?

In the Snow Country we are like family. Bonnie uses the horses and Norm keeps a spotlight on the ski tracks. Ernie, Alec, Ralph Townsend, Carol and others use skis. The rest wade through waist deep snow in the wake of the horses. We know what we know but also what we must do. With unbelievable strength Katrina has climbed the south face behind the cabin to the ridge, climbed the ridge until trees thin out and the steepness of the slope stops us. An avalanche chute breaks off on the left and plunges 2,000 yards to where it cliffs 170 feet above the river. Sky and stars, dwarf fir buried in snow. Norm turns the spotlight off and we watch her tracks cross the bowl, then veer sharply, dropping straight into moonlight.