

1973

# Chasing the moon to earth and other poems

Paul Stewart Zeigler  
*The University of Montana*

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CHASING THE MOON TO EARTH

And Other Poems

By

Paul S. Zeigler

B.A., University of Montana, 1970

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

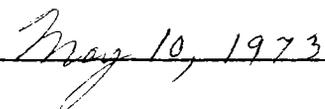
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## BETTY

You sit in front of me,  
your lined face slides  
into your neck. Our talk  
means nothing and you  
know it.

You're not up there  
on the wall, you're sitting  
across the table.  
That picture isn't you,  
you're different.

A friend, you met him  
tonight, is too fat,  
and the rest of us  
are just sitters,  
watchers.

"I didn't shook it!"  
You're right, Fred just  
can't pour a good  
glass of beer,  
always foam.

Your friend, Betty,  
hasn't yet been found.  
The old man reached  
for something  
no one

would ever find  
on the floor,  
turned, wild eyes  
unfocused, and came  
back.

Betty, your flowers  
are dribbling  
all over the floor.

## WHITE ON WHITE

(for Linn)

Painter, where are you? Your lake  
calls from a green frame  
hung beneath warm air. A kitchen table  
supports a waterfall studied by orange figures.

People stare at your dragons, smile,  
pass at 60. Light picks us out now. Kangaroos  
will never work as well on small cars.

Seattle fog settles deep inland, blocking a familiar  
Bozeman. That trail used long ago  
closes every winter. On the Beartooth Plateau  
no snow fights wind at 10,000 feet,  
rain has no chance to freeze.

A quiet filled with orange juice  
separates us. Etchings, chalk on grey paper  
build soft bridges, weak in winter rain.  
Your red has become necessary. Painter,  
where are you.

## STAFFORD AT THE HILTON

You're right--he does look ordinary,  
a man, poet to be sure  
but he doesn't flaunt it. His words echo  
from the page, set up reverberations  
that ripple into Montana. Here's a lake  
so big no trout has ever finished the course.  
Obstacles, logs submerged for years,  
now rise to the sun again. This chessboard  
has no squares,  
no rules of conduct. Poets here  
are easier to catch than fish. I hear  
a close name, a friend who madly chases  
northwest trout. Why do I always hear broken  
glass when poets speak?

## RETURN

I ride seven hundred miles to hear  
wind blow my words down an empty canyon.  
I'm Northwest, but not far enough. This port  
stops long before the land does. The gulls  
complain so loudly. They have to fly  
so far to get this city's garbage.

I ride a thin wind up the Columbia,  
get lost somewhere over the Snake.  
The dams keep getting in my way. Due back  
yesterday, I spin a web  
to catch lies with. The wind spits  
at me from the river.

## SCRUB TIMBER

Metal should be left to rust,  
to bleed into pine needles, shards  
for the future, middenheaps of forgotten machines.

Old corral tied down by the wind,  
ghost horses...

I taste dry rot, poison mushrooms.  
A lake lies past that ridge,  
old trailer never lived in,  
old boats that never touch water.

I've seen this before.  
A hundred shadows,  
rain patterns in short grass.

Nude in a cold autumn rain,  
quail explode from every rock, drumming sound away.

## NORTHSIDE VIEW

Greyhounds only go to towns  
you're running from. Walk the north side  
where empty brick steps drop  
twelve feet into unused kitchens.  
Here, kids tremble  
with the train tracks. This town  
carries a load too heavy for worn out timber.

The derelicts haunt me. Old men  
in red winter hats hesitate  
in the June sun, caught by a slow  
light. They've sold Rudy's  
and cars still circle to return next year  
with fresh paint. The smell of raw  
gasoline washes my nerves.

## WINE CAN'T MAKE IT WAVER

In the desert, I remember the sounds  
of drinking. Sun heats my flesh,  
hot winds cool my face. Dry-eyed,  
I try to find stars  
hidden by the city glare. Your home  
has a swimming pool,  
I soak in my own sweat. You look  
into the valley, eyes following the street grid,  
hard diamond lights...  
all for sale.

Tires spit gravel at me, pellets  
of a ground down mountain.  
Two yellow eyes in the night, a cat  
up the hillside nurses a traffic bruise.  
I must hear it all. The night sounds,  
the whistle of a duck's pinions,  
the cry of geese  
buried forever in cloud. In the desert,  
wind quietly steals the rock.

## THE DELUX BAR

In a company town, the jukebox  
isn't loud enough. Powder blasts echo  
through every night. Friends fade,  
drift with snow. We run,  
headlights blocked out, night locked  
securely in. Colors fade  
in a brightly lit bar, bodies move solo.  
A large man, image of a poet,  
burns matches, struggles against  
falling mine shafts, brick walls,  
endless train rails disappearing into the same spot.  
Looking at each other, we toast silence,  
return to Missoula and Mozart.

## NEON CROSSES

People gather where there are no rows  
where every desk has gone back forever to trees  
bare from frost. A Seattle visitor gives  
my wife doves,  
then leaves. Our marble birds take wing  
past neon crosses and silent fears. In the upper room,  
a motorcycle keeps company with thin nuns  
and long blonde hair. Sorry, I learned to swear  
in Italian long before I prayed in Latin.

## MRS. RILEY

Nursing homes are beaches, capturing  
the last driftwood. Hold her hand  
for one hour, but give up following her paths.

They made her wait two  
hours for lunch.

"I should know,  
I timed them."  
But, what of the lovely view?  
An asphalt lot begs for one car.

"No one  
ever comes for me."  
I was told to love you well. Ninety-two years  
carry a lot of weight;  
muscles sag, bones show under the pressure.  
We are her children now.  
Listen...  
birds are nesting in the earth's shadow.  
Time for us to leave.

## SETTLED IN

(with thanks to D.H.)

"Harold knew I'd been burnt out in the valley."

The sun had dried his tongue, burned  
the shack he called home. Loose boards  
and tarpaper can't win that war. "Settled back  
in 'eighty-eight, burnt out late last year." Snow  
settled in these bones, scattered them  
through spring's green meadow.

But wells dried that hot August,  
cattle left the salt licks to die in the hills.  
The valley turned brown, the grey walls of the shack  
couldn't hold that fire. A dream charred.

Now, a room above the bar,  
an old terrier to share lonesome nights when hot winds  
blow. And day after day, strangers  
who never knew.

## MORNING SUN

They march slowly across the bridge,  
wind chipping away early morning paint.  
You turn, asking "Where do they come from?"  
I shrug.  
"Where do they go?"  
The wind rises off the river,  
catches,  
then loses the bridge. A lone fisherman  
gripped in white  
watches upstream. A line drifts,  
forgotten memories of summer hooks,  
river fires. There are no fish tonight.

## SIX MILE CREEK

There are no reasons in falling leaves  
or cow elk skulls. Governments dissolve  
as trees close in over trails  
to corniced snow. Red packs  
follow each other through deer tracks,  
shallow fords.

Ever deeper: trees lose their bark  
to hungry teeth, snow is trampled to ice,  
dyed red in winter frost.

New leaves hide the snow markers,  
our ski tracks have become mud.  
Scarred trees regrow in the deer yard.

## TIDAL EXPERIMENT

Broken words drift in foam,  
messages torn, scattered: jigsaw  
puzzles in the sea. Who can put  
them together in Japan,  
Ceylon? Return them in fishing floats?  
What nets catch scraps  
of sodden paper? Ink  
runs, replaced by salt,  
the blood of tuna. The message  
is lost, nonsense chasing the moon  
with the tide.

## CHILD OF MARS

"How many tears, how  
many drops of sweat."--  
street child of Viet Nam

War baby, where are you? What strange blood  
burns your mind? The savage  
dawn light gleams in your eye  
as you search.

In America, you'd like it. We have no  
refugee camps. Our barbed wire is for cattle.  
Pens are not plastique, the sound of jets  
causes no fear.

War baby, help us. Come and live  
with us. We can do so much  
for you. We'll buy you toys, an education,  
even a car

when you're older. And, war baby, you'll never hear  
exploding bombs  
anguished cries  
or see tears, sweat.

From one piaster note, we'll give  
dollars, we'll give  
flowers. Your new parents will even  
love you.

## KINDERGARTEN PAINTING

"Trees aren't red,  
they're brown and green,  
and the sky is blue."

But a man's blood  
stained that tree.  
Over Japan the sky  
flashed white.

## TREE BRANCH

It's not the well-drawn line I prefer:  
continuity defines itself,  
a sharp line against the sky  
where nothing grows. Trees branch out,  
obscure my vision. In this land  
there is no 180 degree arc.  
It becomes lost in pine mountains  
not knowing to turn downhill,  
follow a stream to the sea.  
Turn uphill to glaciers,  
a world of white  
each step lost before it reaches ground,  
echoing in blue-green depth  
bouncing off moraine  
to lie still against a mountain face.  
The only life is mosquito  
and pictures of lichen.

## DAVID'S CABIN

White horses step to the window,  
pause,  
wheel and tear sod  
as they flee reflections.

No graves mark this valley.  
Indian bones, picked clean  
by the air, are scattered too wide  
to find. Our papers fill  
the air with words, sighs echo  
the wind in our chimney.

A bald eagle circles lower into the valley,  
chases our shadow into the rock.  
We join the night,  
looking east.

## WINTER DREAMS

Spin your eyes. Follow the wavering neon  
finger past day-glo buses,  
mirror walls, tents. Parabolic microphones  
pick every sound. Bulbs pop,  
pictures to be filed. Next year's winner  
felled by a chain saw.

Wake to clouds, sky dead again this morning.  
Wait, thumbing ads for fifty,  
news for one. The drummer's backstage  
hiding bad style.

Foul.

Three players kneed by a midget.  
And your eyes spin again.

No births at St. Pat's,  
no deaths last week. The church--  
a nice ruin, but bulldozers--  
shapeless dust cloud,  
today's ghost, dirt haloes.

It comes full circle in spinning cherries.

A guarantee.

Wealth, health and death.

Zero degrees, wind in every corner.

Eyes turn, blue lies behind contacts.

Fake hair, fake soul

nylon ribbons of nothing.

Your eyes spin into your throat,

turn uphill and watch fish die.

Club them.

Eat their poison and chase birds

into the brush.

A hunchbacked late show screams

into your waking, leers

at nude bodies reflected off camera.

Spin one last time, cats

flying in all directions, earth

heaving to stars. Fall to the window

and look.

## BARTENDERS AREN'T PAID TO SMILE

Faces ease past the glass rim,  
peer into pools of liquid deep enough to drown  
in. Laughter spins a fantasy of light,  
small candles hide the register. In Butte,  
the barking boy has died, pressing his face  
through the screen until the wire caught  
his throat. No one cries as bricks tumble  
into abandoned mineshafts. Each year  
gallus frames show less light for Christmas.

Go to the museum, try to catch  
a mirror image of yourself as you spin  
into a candle flame. Dark halls  
carry none of your ghosts.  
They ride the future winds,  
breath bubbling through stagnant puddles.

There was no need for an ambulance. Rusty wire  
spattered with red echoes the brick dust  
in the air. A black face, snarling  
at a copper town gone green with age.  
Children quick-step past the door,  
remembering red lights and taunts.

## PLAINS PORTRAIT

He slumps over a small glass, aware  
of the frost in his mustache, while his wife  
watches a blind TV. Grey-eyed from too many years,  
too many miles, he searches  
amber puddles for ancient treasure maps.  
Compost heaps brace a crumpled farm,  
watch the one road into town. Fingers  
twitch the dead string a kitten  
killed. The last drop past decayed smiles,  
he stops in time. The road map  
shows no arterial connection.

"DREAM OF THE WILD HORSES"

(From a film of the same name)

Horses leap with flames--

diamond water.

How few

lift the head

before we plunge.

Earth shock

from silent hooves.

I still hear them,

beating

against the grey fog.

Grind the lens to powder

and let the shards

rest quietly in the sea.

## A PENNY THOUGHT

Just smelling hay,  
watching insects hide from wings  
and following the sun  
as it stops for a moment  
before it slides downhill.  
There are no messages in my mailbox.  
Clouds linger over dandelions. A bird  
lifts its wing,  
bringing sky to earth.

## BOARDING AT BUTTE

Crawling the bus, pillows and feet  
fight the aisle. Heavy treasures  
spill. Smiles.

Her friend says nothing--  
six feet of silence under a broken hat.  
There are no questions to ask. Distance  
is hard to judge at night.

## CAN I GET YOU ANYTHING?

A bullet, placed carefully  
one inch above my left eye. Visions  
are no longer vital. The music  
runs on all night, meets the dawn  
with a raucous tin horn. Behind every cloud,  
dust.

## What can I do?

Sing quietly until the traffic  
stops dead on the bridge. Sing past  
a hoarse throat into an ear  
pierced with the taste of river water.  
Sing along with cats who have swallowed  
owls, children screaming out questions,  
and paper rattling in my throat.

## How can I help?

Place the shroud gently. Walk soft  
away into deep grass. Then, watch a cloud  
form above our mountain  
and throw a snowball deep into the valley.

## When should I do this?

On the last day of the new moon.  
Keen one last word into the wind,  
return to the city  
and find all the quiet spaces  
we build around each other.

## SEA SHELLS

for Ann

Gulls circle,  
pick rocks to swallow  
the foam. The sea  
catches the shells,  
blows them to caves  
a thousand feet below.

We climb to the sun.  
Below us, children play,  
ignoring the pull  
of moon. No gulls follow.  
They ride the ferry  
miles out to sea.

The sea returns. Our beach  
and cliff depend on it.  
For children, there could be no clams  
without the sea.

And we climb to watch  
the moon pull, to spin  
our fingers among webs.  
There are no strings--  
a thousand feet  
air to water,  
mist to skin.

## BETWEEN THE NOTES

Silence

to the sound of my own breathing.

Five hundred miles inland

the moon tugs my blood.

The spider weaves it all together

a flower

shade

sun

the wind

## A LOT OF CALVES WON'T MAKE IT THIS YEAR

Rain rolls across the highway off tires  
draining to earth. Click on click,  
a ballpoint breaks the rhythm. Seat 13 on the bus  
west. Five signs stare into my mind. The land  
rolls away, small hills blocked by grey as soon as they leave  
the road. I miss the sun  
racing along the wires, leaping from jagged poles.  
High tension lines fade before they pinpoint  
the horizon. Birds are walking today.  
The world's tallest smokestack hides in clouds  
it didn't make, and rails bleed  
where the train gouged too deep. A lone cow  
flicks at non-existent flies, catching only snow.  
A road is being built,  
dead brush and scrub pine  
traded for faster travel. In the window  
the girl across the aisle is seen, always chewing gum.

## ROAD EAST

Arrows point to weigh stations, the only light  
from Clinton to Drummond. Signs leap into headlights,  
swing away into dark. Food, phone,  
no services.

Fenceposts hitchhike east, guide the cows  
still walking the road this fall.

Silver Bow, Rocker, Ramsey...

old towns die so long. These people with arsenic  
in their bones know time,  
watch it edge children's faces,  
dry valley soil.

Cattle block the wind,  
hide behind fenced-off willows.

## DEMONSTRATION

Idiots: clicking pins  
on empty chambers. Click...  
Click... seconds apart.  
Lethal toys.

"I didn't know..."

"I didn't know..."

Explosions in a body.  
Light at both ends  
of a tunnel  
carved by a .38.

And we go on playing.  
A trigger,  
a button.  
Click...

## 105 DEGREES: NO SHADE

I know the old songs, sung by others  
around fire, know them by book  
and tongue, by gas heat and coal-fired  
turbines. Wax figures melt,  
drip through a hot night,  
rise and fall through black canyons,  
revolve around thoughts of rain.

But clouds only show light behind mountains,  
offer no relief. The flicker picks at notes  
from old weddings, litter on my desk top.  
Wax can give no protection from old pain  
burning with night.

Trout come to me in the river  
tonight. They talk of hooks,  
worm tidbits or bear claw.  
I should follow them deeper, to pools  
hidden from sun.

Bubbles pattern the surface, break  
into stars. The gill-breathers  
lied. They know only water  
and insects, root and mud.

Still they urge me on. Castles  
with treasure lie  
in roots of mountain creek,  
small life hides in sand bars.

Fins marked for science, trout  
talk eagerly of hatcheries, strange motion  
then, freedom of lake or river,  
Mayflies, a worm or two.  
But hooks wait,  
blades in every pool.

## 214 South Jackson

Old man, your rooms haven't changed in years. That stuffed trout  
you caught when twelve still hangs behind your chair.

What bodies twist in your mind, turn in your dreams  
to chase and devour? The sun stands motionless: it only moves  
with earth shocks, tidal waves.

People gather, watch your contortions,  
spin with you through fantasy  
into deep pools. Tears flow  
from corners of an eight-sided room  
as you miss all doors.

Laughter muffled in winter clothing,  
Puck with no stage, a son  
without a father, we choose songs  
to spin away night,  
to block out age. Happy songs,  
bird songs and trout.

## CHASING THE MOON TO EARTH

Frost beads the crucifix above the bed. Hell  
can't char these cold bones. My rosary  
turns, bead chasing bead in mysterious chant.  
Candles burn in silver mirrors, reeds whip  
against low glass: the last touch of summer light.

There is so little life to them. The flowers.  
See? They died when cut.  
Their colors, thin shades of brown,  
wilt, hang on the lip  
of the pewter pitcher. No hands  
will weave these stems.

Night leaves, shadow chased  
into the broken mirror. Nighthawks wheel  
against the dawn. Red glints on shards,  
dances in webs and dust. The cat left,  
finding warm mouse flesh  
while pawing through the frost.

## DREAMS WITHOUT FIGURES

Your tale of the Cherokee  
can't touch me. It's been too long,  
too far. I can't hear  
those children  
falling into mud,  
the death keen,  
the falling snow. Your god  
was the world, your brother the buffalo.

I'm married to a flag-draped  
corpse. A deer skull decorates the table.  
Dried weeds in empty wine bottles,  
drapes pulled to close off  
exterior light. I can't burn  
my goods like the Potlatch,  
I no longer feel ticks in my hair.  
Behind the curtain, flies are gathering.

## ELEVEN YEARS CHIP THE STONE

for Judy

One hand holding a stopwatch,  
I look out windows,  
marking the position of every  
falling leaf.

A small stone.

Tail twitching, a lone cat  
shares my time,  
pawprints in window frost,  
street light reflection.

Words and numbers.

As I leave the room, snow  
joins with falling leaves  
hiding those marks I'd made  
on the lawn.

Jamming hands into pockets  
I crush newsprint,  
marks and patterns  
topped by a cross.

A name.

## BORROWED POEM

Birds flying into mist drown  
in raindrops. A generation  
of worms dies each night  
on concrete walks.

A doll talks from my madness  
but I can't hear it,  
or the always wind. I look inward  
to darkness: my night is complete.

The moon disappears, eaten  
by the sun's shadow. A dragon drives  
its barbed tail deep  
into my mind. Trolls rush along paths,  
and the rain has become god.

## JANUARY DEATH

Shut up. I don't care why it can't rain  
in January. Water drips into sewers,  
boils in popcorn poppers. Hot chocolate  
is easy to make. Cards turn,  
face up you know them, red on black,  
black on red. Only kings can move  
alone.

A leaky roof in January: do all years  
begin with drippy water? Where people walk  
grass is green, puddles show cement wrongs.  
I should climb, disappear into mountain  
clouds. I expect tents to leak, pines to drip.  
Lava Lake has no visitors in winter, every one brews  
his own tea.

Three years is too long to wait. Cookies  
turn stale long before bread turns green.  
Food for others--not me. Sail Grace Lines,  
escape to Caribbean sun, take a side trip  
to New York, or Moscow. Fly American,  
10,000 feet's not high enough when you begin  
at five.

Watch the sun, it knows where the day  
begins. Travel the horizon, leave the land  
to watch the edge begin. When you catch  
a cloud, will it rain above you? Stand  
on a log, feel the rotten wood do a slow  
roll and dump you, ass over pride  
into a rock pile

no one knew was there.

Philosophers will never run out of paper.  
Trees grow over a thousand years,  
it's planned that way. Run me off seventy  
copies--choke me with shit. I haven't  
any choice. If I keep a form  
up to date, will it mean I can be mean?  
Indians knew

what to do, so did passenger pigeons.

I make noise, rooms should be tested  
for echoes. Yesterday's tenant  
punched ears in all four walls. Listen.  
Cover sound with tape, hide your voice  
in reels, watch fish leave your lure  
to die down stream.

## SIX DAYS HOPE

January 9, 1970

Walls...  
impossible,  
too large.  
Snow isn't safe,  
falls underfoot.  
Ropes,  
iron  
can't hold  
forever.  
Hammer blows  
open cracks,  
rocks fall to wind.  
Roaring.  
God damn it.  
Rocks can't  
feel  
pain,  
snow won't hide  
forever.  
Down's light, it floats  
above the snow.

## A READING

(for Dick Hugo)

Sitting on a tall chair, you hope  
enough money will appear for a better light. Enough  
has happened this week. I've heard you echo  
through my typewriter, but now, only a few  
candles light my words.

Old friends listen to Italy speak. We have  
a word for loneliness. Each of us looks  
from a window, watching seasons turn.  
Old brick lies of age, unable to match  
the grass or trees.

You hope for fish names, but I want  
sounds of water to explain why sparrows  
leap from bridges. They never will tell  
me. Your eyes haven't lied, your heart's  
not false

on a torn sleeve for those who whisper  
in the back. I'll return to wine, go  
to Italy to capture four minutes of light  
at the edge of a mountain. I'll chase  
a trout,

and catch the sea from behind.

## GEORGIA STRAIT

A cloud stands, hand reached  
to western sun while fourteen gulls  
fight over a chocolate square. I know  
no nautical terms. Pacific green reaches deep,  
an invitation to madness  
a letter to Mars.

Poets talk all night of first ministers  
and vice presidents. But the salt  
clogs my throat; my fair weather friend  
has left the sky and joined with earth.

This dock stretches two miles  
into the sea, clouds sail north  
for Canadian winters leaving a wet city.  
My storm caught me last night; rain washed  
my beach and left me exhausted.

Where the earth-shadow meets the edge  
I talk of bottled water,  
crazy friends at border crossings and  
tired stars.