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DRINKING IN THE BONEYARD

By


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B.A., University of Oregon, 1978

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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DRINKING IN THE BONEYARD

Many thanks to the editors of the following magazines in which these poems first appeared:

The Greensboro Review: For My Father; The Unfinished Man;
Tree Roots; As We Dark Awaken; Grandfather Crow and the Grave

Tar River Poetry: Revisiting the Field; Elegy

**For my family
and in memory of James Wright**

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"The dumb humiliations of the poor,
Swallowed back in bitterness and tears,
Do not forget them with an angry poem.
If this is touched with pity for myself: well,
The thirties made an ugly kind of drunk."

John Haislip,
"Fewer than Necessary Rhetorical Stanzas for the Poor"

"And I, too, went on my way, the winning and losing, or what
Is sometimes of all things the worst, the not knowing
One thing from the other...
But what can you say--
Can you say--when all-to-be-said is the done?"

Robert Penn Warren,
"American Portrait: Old Style"

"The footsteps come pounding into words
and even the finger I give death is words
that won't let us be what we wanted, each one
chasing and being chased by dreams in a dark place.
Words are all we ever were and they did us
no damn good. Do you hear that?"

Dave Smith,
"The Roundhouse Voices"

Tree Roots

The dark wind soared.
We huddled in the basement
certain everything--
house, moon, the old Plymouth
would blow fast into the Pacific.

Candlelight made all our young faces old.
Mother outside, her housecoat blown big,
went gathering shingles, as if
there was anything left to collect.
And father, shop-apron still knotted

to his back, went out through the storm
across the bridge leaping like a jumprope,
to bring his father canned meat and water.
To make sure the old man believed in his home.
We were not hungry that night.

But later as the cedar struggled and fell
and the picture window broke into plates,
we moved to the metal cabinet
opened peach-tin after tin with my brother's knife.
Finally tree roots pointed the wind away.

The cement floor told us nothing
we would ever come to fear or believe.

The Bridgetender

I wake up to the face
of a fifty-year old man.
He had lost his job as bridgetender
been asleep among the gears
when the freighter hit.

We have coffee and talk rivers.
Mine was thick, slow. We'd catch
suckers and smash their heads
with a brick. And in the middle
an island of beasts we never swam to.

Each slow day grows slower.
He knows that. He knows
his mouth is a broken music-box.
I repeat our names to the mirror.
They come back empty sacks.

He's deaf in his left ear
says mornings grind him down to rubble.
He sets a bottle on the table
"This is another river."
I drink and tell him to go to hell.

If I were his son or brother
I'd take his weak hand in mine
and tell him one good story--
a lie. He says he's going to work.
I tell him "Watch out for ships."

He opens the door
"You can't even feel 'em when they hit."

The Man with Boxing Gloves

"Mr. F. repeatedly undressed himself and paraded up and down the east wing. As a remedy to the situation, his wife bought him a pair of boxing gloves."

--"Nurses' Journal"

"I'm an ironworker, not a boxer."
But every five a.m. they lace them up
and choke me with oatmeal. I never sleep.
On Tuesdays I dream of a boy in Oregon
chasing crows down a dirt road.
He loves them, they're never caught.
In the afternoon, a young girl asks me
what I need. "Bourbon" I say "and lots of it."
And everytime I get a caramel.
This is no hotel I know it.
George's soft-tied two beds over.
They make me mad. I piss in the bottle
and pour it over my sheets.
If I weren't so goddamned tired
I'd go back to work and smell cut metal.
They say maybe next year. I hate my wife.
There are no birds in their grass.

Crow Tries

Crow looked down
at the boy walking to school.
Its eyes pointed, black cries
reached for his skull.
But his head was stuffed
with father and mother
the quiet tiger under his arm.
Crow asked "What can you learn
ignorant of flies ramming windows
the way puddles stiffen in gorge wind
the five odd keys repeating a piano's heart."
No answer. Not even a stumble.
Crow shifted then jumped into wind
its great wings bleeding the air.

Who will stop the Crows?

Through ploughland, dirt roads,
I am the one they want--
prisoner to father and black wings.
Describing wind in high beats
above my heart, they say it's wrong
to wish away the grinding stars.
With enough bourbon they keep
miles down river hunting through scrub.
Once almost a man I split one tongue
and learned the danger of dark music.
As he lifted gathering air
I knew we were wrong to name them,
hoarse in each other's defeat.
Black chatter keeps me migrant to homes.
The only choice is desertion,
leaving the mad boil of feathers
in blue flight. Another boy
waving in fields below.

Neurasthenia

Ten minutes in this wind and I know
the failure of warm homes. Repetition is boring.
Sky, black bird, hold me calm and shaking forever.
A woman is overdue.

My father says men are beasts, suicide and war wrong,
but never enough. Mother says those movies are still
fun to watch. Let's agree, they've misspelled rivers,
children. Every stone marker fails its conclusion.

Only bad signs remain. Crow flies close over my roof.
The same one as before. He won't stop again.
Offers of meat or trees won't bring him back.
His cry burrows further into a heart, leaving him alone.

Dark notes are losing their melody. What's left?
The woman is here, she won't go away.
Her father returned in blue silk warning
"Dead is too easy. Unpack your life."

Elegy for John Berryman

I never knew so gently a man
could wail and gripe
could sing cold notes.
Not a man that stood up
well in wind or touched
the crowd with father hands.
No, too much lava down the throat
an open trench from his heart.
What now six years gone?
Animals couple, lives retard,
graveyards gush and eat men.
He knew something better,
gave December an awful ring
that shakes us now.
Let's do it again. Here, let me
hold your coat and beard,
cup my hands and hoist you
upward over the rail
into the brilliance of nothing dead.

Losing the Edge (after Picasso's "The Tragedy")

The blue tragedy brought it on.
Neither did I have the white stone foot
nor a feather-strong hand to hold my father back.
Shuddering at something lost, probably in water.

Questions begged and scratched all day.
Even the flies wouldn't leave me alone.

The old voice hummed
A limp heart bulged
Eyes walked their alleys.

And after the strain, the consistent beyond,
return lay quiet, smoldering in my bones.

Only one sound now: the red tree burning
without hope of favor from any wind.

Minuet in G 1941

He lumbers up the stairway
staggering under a ninety-pound sack of flour.
He'll wrestle the circus strongman
tomorrow night and win
thirty-five dollars.

Later he'll look in the mirror
at the bruise darkening on his chin
the quarter-size welt on his temple
and lie in bed all night
counting the stairs
the green in his pocket
hoping it'll all be different tomorrow.

Five six it never changes
nine ten step after step
until none of the sacks remain.

She carries three plates
up each arm
fixes her hair
like Jeanette MacDonald.
She makes thirteen dollars a week
and wants to buy a piano.
She doesn't know she's pretty.

Maybe they meet at an Oddfellow's dance
on a slow August night.
Maybe the band won't stop playing
and they dance to the moon and back.

1941 and trees sicken
with the blood of adolescents.
He can't buy her the piano.
She tries to brush
the flour out of his shirt.

Painting It Over (for Carl)

You are the slow boy
waiting for the end of rain
the final taunt
swallowed back in our throats.

We pointed at you
collapsed to the floor
at the eyes escaping back
into the inward guess of dreams.

You are the slow boy.
We are the lost and losing again.

You painted sky yellow
brushed with furious strokes.

Fifteen years later
the same rains beat the schoolyard
rage still screams from the walls.

Does that day still burn in your mind
falling off the cold bars
and in that one gentle moment
your hands were anxious birds
lifting to fly away.

II

"Don't ask me why
I came down to the water's edge--
hell, I was young, and I thought
I knew life, I thought I could
hold a cup of coffee before
he wakens, the way he pulls
at a cigarette and wonders
how he came to this room, the walls
scarred with the gray brush
of years, how he travelled so long
to waken this sagging bed, and takes
up his gray socks one by one
and the heavy shoes smelling of oil,
and doesn't cry out or even sigh
for fear he will hear."

Philip Levine,
"Here and Now"

Always raining
headache rain. I'd stand
on the corner, wet transfer,
my trumpet case
a load of stones.
An hour and a half
to her house past buildings
I was sure no one lived in.
Dusty venetian blinds, only
a kitchen light staring out
through the brick. Her doorbell
shook the walls.
"Come in, come in. I'll take
your coat. Play me a tune."
She'd laugh and clap
on the davenport as I
blew my brains out silly
and bad. Spittle gurgling
in the tarnished brass.
Music rested in every corner:
piano in the dark living room,
music-box upstairs, a banjo
in the attic with two strings.
But I came for the stories.
How her father left Minnesota
abandoned the family for work
out West. Seattle, Portland,
all day walking the hills.
They came out anyway--
Selma, Helen, Ruby, Eleanor.
She ended her stories early.
A slow dying lingered
in the rain-dreary light,
in each thick curtain.
She never married.
Lived once with an old German,
a Shriner, who died upstairs
in her father's bedroom.
Of course, she sold the house.
It creaked under too many ghosts.
Rain kept drumming up voices.
Voices the new owner, a dentist,
cannot hear. They're easy
to ignore when you're young.
Of course, I sold the trumpet.
Who'll play just for himself,
badly in a room, in a room
just for himself?

Revisiting the Field

I come back to cold lights
high above the field. We learned
how to lose every Friday night:
Jefferson, Madison, every goddamned team
in the league. Remember the last game,
when Henry ran that punt back in the mud?
Didn't we all block big as trees?
Later, the crowd outside, drunk, too cheap
to buy a ticket, threw insults
until Wallace swung his helmet
and ran them to their cars.
It was ourselves we hated:
the coach, the cheap shots in practice.
Knocking our friends down,
out of breath, out of confusion.
Isn't it all bull-in-the-ring now?
The terrible smack of our hearts
against our lives. Look you sonsabitches
this is no sentimental crap-game.
I can still hear those cleats
echoing off the school walls.
I don't know how we got here.
I don't care.
I'm talking about this ugly ground,
a memory of forgotten dirt.
Go ahead, finish this beer.
Sing if you need to.
You'll get the same empty applause.
Look at this picture.
Can't you see the floodlights, blurring crowd?
Didn't we all block big as trees?

Explanations to the Mirror

Two hours along a quiet road
you tramp the first tracks
in woods heavy with snow.
Those pines always bend
to the darkness of snow.
Grandmother, is this how it was?
The corners folding, the room
crashing down in white?

You wake next morning
world dead in your arms
and know the damned stay damned.
Everything dark survives:

the eye is a pin is a river
is a madman in the corner laughing with the walls.
Where did the angel go?
Who put water in his tears?
Mother crow swallows the air
that drunk men burn in their sleep.

No. Tell the mirror you need old hands.
Why old women dance in the ceiling of your bones.
That light never knocked. It entered.
And she dumb from light left you
with one tree leaning in its nightmare.

Maybe your dreams are wrong.
Maybe you dissolve like weather leaving another heap
for sky to wind down on. What then?
Ashes, ashes we all break down.

The Bridge: Somewhere Between Darkness and Morning

Leaning over the frozen river
I will surely fall to ice.
We do not forget. If I could raise
my hands, enclose the black throat...
But he, sudden as night-train,
crows behind, aims for my shoulder,
drooped and heavy.

In graylight he gives away his home
never loves the same branch.

The blue heron dream is dead.
Old men swallowed its wings.
A no return to nothing.

When I was a boy this was enough:
afternoon maple
water-skippers teaching pond music
the deaf-blue sky.

Now I've stumbled out of the world
into a night with more tension
than an over-wound pocketwatch.
One certain morning I'll find my heart in slush.

The Analyst Says "Quit Thinking From Your Genitals"

But I know my mistakes--
every waitress I meet
won't divorce and flee to Reno.
My grandfather is not
that old drunk wandering
down the boulevard.
His life went bust
sold for parts twelve years ago.
I could tell her
every loss must be counted
packed away in some closet.
How snow is white ash
lending me its darkness.
I live by ancient lies
remember a world
the smell of grass-stained pants.
I could tell her
I'm quitting this town
driving any highway West
to a town of two bars
one store and no dogs.
I could make up
names for everything there
adopt gulls as my sons.
I could explain
that every winter
my life goes to hell
and tastes like stale bread.
I could say nothing.
"We'll see you next Thursday."
No, I've had it.
I know my face
without a mirror.
I'm on the bus
sitting two rows from the back.
Her voice is thinning
along every telephone wire.
I can feel the ocean
rushing in my fingertips
and hear mean gulls
crying out in wind
hungry for no one
abandoning their hearts for now.

As We Dark Awaken

Once you lose, the water-way's open.
She says Walter, lie down
to the blue turn of sky,
leafmeal long buried in snow.
This day of fifty-six cigarettes

we use windows and lamplight
to watch a river nudge the bank away.
Know the hills are not soft.
From here, two clocks run finally down.
We break days in two, afternoon

by sleep. And when we awaken dark,
we've forgotten the bird-thrust and fall
and believe his black heart
will have any alley, oak or air.
Now it's breathing, the rising water.

Ruined fields hold the only light.
When I prayed, it was to answer by dawn.
But anything that ancient has lost
its motherface to the red-eyed men.
What's caught tangles in the others.

She says no, and repeats blue blue for the wait.
For if crow returns, no wall will save us.
Better forget the names we're given.
In his circling, it's too late now.
Two stories up, helpless in evening and water.

Another Afternoon with the Mirror

At this hour birchleaves are dying
and too damn quiet about their fall.
Days like this you drink in the kitchen
worshipping the insane. What would you give
to hear green laughter, to see your stuffed tiger
hanging washed on the clothesline?
Snapdragons roared. Their roots tangled in
and out of sun-baked stone. Now roses cough
on hills and an old dog scratches to come in.
Hell you're young, but a young heart decays
like all unwatched stars. Remember the man
who couldn't forget ashes, laid in the alley
and flapped wings like a retarded bird?
He prayed to an ugly dark. Give in to that nightmare
and you'll wake certain every wind carries
the last breath of your father.
It's always this way: a break up and down,
all questions buried with the limp and empty dead.

Loadstones (for John Haislip)

You try to forget the words:
"bookish, shy, a coward". But they remain.
Your slough of years ago has stiffened,
frozen in a deep wind. That wind hung
crow on a treelimb, left him burning
and he dropped heavy in the snow.
No one gathered him up, dogs looked away.
Your loadstone is now the black shawl
found by children in the river. They use it
for a dark game until one runs home
through the brush crying for mother.
For awhile you believed all this was nonsense.
Now you pray for anything, even a nightmare
to break the crumbling circle. Try to remember
something simple, a dirt road, dandelions
breathing the air. Quit memorizing the dead,
their collection of stories and bones.
Where is the cry of joy that first
roused you into song? You're just a bearwatcher
looking for stars in his blue heart.
He's staring down through the night,
never at you. Never at the footprints
walking home, left behind.

Elegy

At this hour, you've come from the mirror
to plumb a young heart. Why now,
thirty years gone? Hasn't my ignorance
floated you further away? I'll tell you what I know:
all things are lightly won and darkly paid.
Illness teaches an early lesson.
From your second-story window, you watched
a bird shudder, then dip into the stone bath,
and knew a breath could live on its own.
In your insomnia, our father
spoke of a gentle passing. It shook you
all the more--too many nights of wings
feathering the attic. You murmured for days,
"The roses are afraid. Someone hold their hands."
We looked out to the ragged stems,
our lives pared down to ugly marrow.
Now you're back, wordless, telling me
there's no difference between the window and the mirror,
that birds rove the blue because there never
is a home. My dear sister, I've been listening
to my birds. They say begin again, wishing
isn't enough anymore. They're right.
I'm learning to live without comfort.

III

"Dying's the best
Of all the arts men learn in a dead place.
I walked here once. I made my loud display,
Leaning for language on a dead man's voice.
Now sick of lies, I turn to face the past."

James Wright,
"At The Executed Murderer's Grave"

For My Father

Then he did not know joy.
Day after day at ugly 5:15
he'd park the dust-black Plymouth
climb out and walk downstairs
to the basin. Lava soap, dirty brush,
could not wash thirty years of shop away.
I thought his heart too was metal.
When we drove down to Front
he pointed "there" where his father
had sold meat. "They broke down
his building in two days."
And he wept for the first time
into his thick hands.
Later at the green, square house,
where his father had died alone
in a kitchen chair, he talked
of the last slav, and the bill collectors
knocking at the back door during supper.
Bohunk, one after another
lost seven thousand miles of hope
to this port town.
I don't give a damn what they say,
some men live to die and become saints.
And though my father cannot hear me now--
his ears lost to machines that wore them down,
I can say horseshit to the Ironworkers
when the check arrives. Never enough
to recover what was once never lost.

Father and Son

In the unlit kitchen
we laughed and drank an afternoon to hell.
Words and bottle gone
we sat quiet for an hour.
I said "Father I haven't learned a goddamned thing."
He said nothing, knowing I'd barely learned
how to screw a girl or spit
in the world's eye if it needed it.
I slept head in arms on the table
and tried to love every mistake
he'd ever made.

What Bourbon Sends (for Jim Crumley)

He came here early century
to avoid war, cut meat and drink nights
alone in the kitchen. I'm second generation,
the first traitor. The dead can't see.
That was a lie some priest told to keep us
from learning our groins. My father hated the war
but likes those movies. He says I worship tin gods
and pours another drink. I say drink until we can't
lose our names. Sometimes bourbon brings you
face to face with the dead. My name rhymes
with sonofabitch and all my anger is old.
I need those hands, that dark wine and words
like bocko and bakala. I'm still here and that's sad.
My father's still deaf. His best friend is bohunk
and they drink everyday but Sunday.
Was there something in Grandpa's last breath?
Some curse to remember? I know better.
I'm a sip off the old drunk. He's buried
with the dagoes and that's my name in the marble.

Grandfather Crow and the Grave

Here on Mount Calvary
you tilt over a city.
Ten years ago you died,
today your hand let go of my shoulder,
white hair stopped burning my cheek.
I'm sorry they gave me your name,
even water will rest in pools.
When did the trade-off begin:
bone for black feather, blood for air,
long flights over the town
you won't ever leave.

You fly nights over my tracks,
counting knee-marks in snow.
Almost home now, I'll go inside
to the gathering loss, draw curtains,
and ignore your hands pressed against the window.
This stunned and this frightened,
my life is stalling.
Nothing will live in this house except you.

Someone breathing remains. Though no
brother, he waits for us all
in the corner, mute in a chair.
Fresh walls fail the old light.
He's weeping and his days
mutter into his nights. We drink
his last bourbon and tell him
"Gosho, you live and need nothing."
We leave ignorant and drunk,
thieves of his weak horizon.

Old Stories, New Lies

"I was almost ready to learn what imagination is--it is only the lie we must learn to live by, if ever we mean to live at all."

--R. Penn Warren

I have lived with quiet men
all my life. I have told many lies.
Maybe not enough. My grandfather
did not die alone in a kitchen chair.
He left on the fourth floor
waiting for a blue crack
in the walls, flying through a hole
in plaster. His wife's arteries
stiffened. Blood traveled a slow route
to her brain. Next door a blind girl
counted her steps to the store. She had
six mean brothers. Dagoes, Grandpa said.
During the Depression he gave them
meat cheap. When he went belly-up
they would not answer their door.
I knew all this early.
Near the end he drank Cribari
evenings at six-thirty
watched the fights on Fridays.
I tried on his hat once. It fit
like a bowl on a stick.
Fourteen years later I went back
to the house. A few of his
empty jugs were still in the basement.
The woman said I could have them.
She'd found a picture upstairs
behind the bed, kept it for years.
Every morning I wake up with his name.
I didn't tell her it wasn't him.

Damage Report (for Bartel Petrich)

You must've heard the news by now.
He's gone. Dead at eighty-eight.
I can picture the gravestone:
"1892 to a funeral of zinfandel slavs."
Every bohunk in southeast Portland there.
Black suits, black wine and more wine.
Lenny couldn't make it. He drank one leg away,
stays in bed knowing he's next.
Remember the last time at Bartel's house?
Wasn't it you, me, Simic and the old man
drinking away six feet of heavy dirt?
He couldn't find his village on the map
somewhere in the green hills behind Spljet
some land between Dalmatia and the sea.
You're right Paul--we face the days ahead
with a broken gyroscope. Look behind us though
to the old croat treated worse than a thin horse.
Jammed through Ellis Island, half his name
thrown in a wastebasket.
How about thirty years in the same metalshop
working for some sonofabitch named Hanna.
Until one Monday morning he calls you
into his office and says "Go home. You're too old."

Lately I've been drinking too much.
I dream of going back and beating up
that kid who used our name for a joke.
I'd scrape his face on the dirt road
and never say a word. Other bad news:
Due to east wind and an ice storm,
our walnut tree uprooted. They sawed it up
that same day for fifty dollars. Turns out
its guts were rotten anyway. So much for memory.
If you write back, send your letter
care of Lutz's bar.
All revenge is soft there
flowing back from the mirror.

The Unfinished Man

I never lied to my daughter
as the blood gnarled and bloated her legs
and she began to die.
Nights of solitaire in the kitchen,
waiting.

A rump of lamb softening,
I would eat for nine days.

When I told her the blind girl
couldn't see her face or the rain,
she cried and beat my hands.
That day she left half a nose
on the sidewalk,
I watched it bleed down her yellow dress.
Then finally reached for a towel.

She learned the butcher was a proud man,
respected the way a man drank quietly
into tears.

I showed her
where the dark hair and bone
of her mother lay.
Pointed into clouds and said "there."

But I can't say they're together now,
hand in crumpled hand, beyond the gray.
Though I know rain is gathering
over the sea.
I press a bandage on the punctured wall
and leave the angel food I fed her, crumbling
in the freezer.

Drinking in the Boneyard

All our stammering gets us nowhere.
From nowhere to here: a hillside
of veiled bones
a graveyard like any other.
Should we baptize the marble
sprinkle bourbon on every stone.
Maybe a few drops would open
one mouth and words would rise
in whorls of old music.
Have you ever heard a dead man sing?
It leaves a tiny burning in the skull.

You might find yourself on your knees
bothered by generations
you've never met, whose breath
you never tasted. You might lie
on your back, give thanks
that you can't grab hold of the moon
and stick it in your back pocket.
You'd probably hear someone say
"dum vivimus vivamus" touch
your lips and find them moving
almost bursting with names.

The next morning you watch
a bird outside the window
singing from a leafless tree.
You tap the glass with your fingernail
murmur "crow, birch"
and his heart matches the beat
of his wings. You wish
the bird was watching you
even as he flies away.
You remember the girl who placed
a pillow in the oven, who reached for the gas.

You realize the wilderness you've built
over the years with eyes and hands
and sit by the window until evening.
You imagine the men with shovels
cutting into earth. You know
their steel dulls with every blow
as darkness gently hugs the roof.

The Room

You know something's wrong, but won't admit it--
behind the closet door, another door.
You climb the stairs, find a room
where there never was a room. Windows
to the north, south and west.
Weather a perpetual gray.
You sit at the desk waiting for dark.
It never comes. Once a month
a man who looks like your grandfather
shows up and asks for food.
You tell him you haven't eaten in years.
Bones in his face show through
like sticks. He stands there crying
"Get out. This is my home."
One day you think there's a bird
outside you can help. You pound the glass
with your fists. He hovers near the window
then drops in the yellow grass.
You try to remember a name, the date
of your birth. No luck.
Even the hands running over your face
seem foreign. You decide enough is enough
and reach for the stairs. They ascend
in a brass spiral. You feel more tired
than ever before and sit on a step,
head between your knees.
You will live in this room forever.

Elegy for James Wright

I spent the first nine years of my life
thinking the Oregon Artificial Limb Co.
repaired broken trees.
I thought the men were doctors
lathing wooden arms for cedars.
But the doctors did not come
when that October storm
laid my trees out lengthwise.
I walked each one from thick-roots
to their tangle of branches.
On Camelhump hill I found a nest
and scraped mud from the windbeaten home.
For three weeks the birds did not come back.

An epileptic drank coffee in the cafe
to keep himself from sleeping all day dead.
Customers would not eat
during his blue electric fits.
When his head banged the table
cigarette butts jumped from the ashtray
and coffee spilled over his fingers
from the cup frozen to his hand.
You'd hear him stamping the tile
all the way into the kitchen.
The cook turned up the radio.
We said "It's ok. He'll be back soon."

Dying is getting too popular.
It would be nice to think
that he died happy and drunk
reaching for a bough in some small meadow.
Maybe as the ribcage settled
his air seeped out little by little
and redwings gathered up his body
lifted him skyward to a horse
waiting among the clouds.
Did all of Ohio go with him?
That day a man told me
"I'm sad, tired and running out of fire."
Me too, brother. I'm sick of the lessons
I'm learning. Only the epileptic
can call him now. At least
one good man has found his home.