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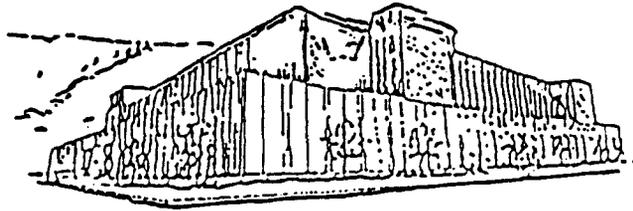
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Economy of Light

by

Robert D. Buchko

B.A. University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

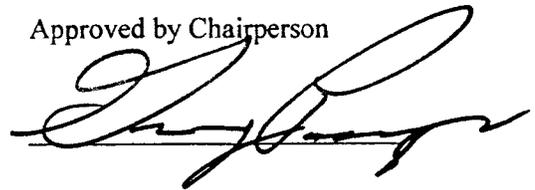
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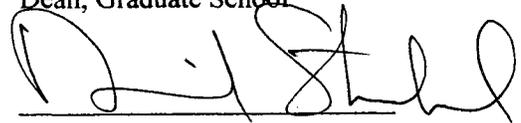
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Table of Contents

Drowning Garden	1
In the Desert, Water is a Myth Not to be Believed	2
Economy of Light: <i>Brooklyn, NY</i>	4
<i>Rockfish, NC</i>	5
<i>Jones Chapel, AL</i>	6
<i>Shallow Water, KS</i>	7
<i>Lame Deer, MT</i>	8
<i>Massacre Lake (Dry), NV</i>	9
<i>Los Angeles, CA</i>	10
Bread for Ghosts	11
The Opium Nexus as Experienced by the Murderer, Fou-Tchou Li During his Death by One-Hundred Cuts	12
Shadowscape	13
Before the Spring Slaughter	15
The Autistic Child's Verse	16
The Farmer's Verse	17
The Mixed-Blood's Verse	18
The Lover's Verse	19
The Immigrant's Verse	20
The Bartender's Verse	21

Mind of Rivers	22
Reeds	23
Deer Skinning	25
Properties of Ice-Fishing	26
Arrangement of Antonia in Blue	27
Death of the Baker	28
Still-life of a Jar with Holes	29
Hunger	30
Form of Flying	31
Gathering the Wild	32
Pallbearers	34
Homage to the Bronte Sisters	35
Courting Night Herons	36
notes	37

This book is dedicated to my family:
blood and other

*We live in a cage of light an amazing cage
animals animals without end*

-Ikkyu Sojun

Drowning Garden

Too much music now and the world has become
a river wailing through the forest. Rosemary,

fennel, pansies, and midnight violets
rustling within wind against this river

which does not freeze against cold night air
nor divide itself into sea. I've lost my

ears to this calling. Just before dawn has
scythed land from its darkness and moon

from its orbit of night, I hear a pike
rise one last time to flail at the surface,

feel men who have set sail in my heart
wreck themselves on reefs of my island.

Dear father, all rivers come back to me,
lose themselves in my arms, vanish

in the floodplain of my embrace.

In the Desert, Water is a Myth
Not to be Believed

*-New Mexican High Desert, 1999
Inspired by the paintings of Rafael Salas*

I.

Brushfires caught and roamed throughout winter.
Juniper branches, once moon-thrown silhouettes

fanned across canyon walls,

transfigured to ash before the spring equinox.

Dawn near the levee, spin-drifts of smoke,
gauzed horizon— washing in what remains of a river

I reach through my reflection's thin currents.

How silently that which we enter, enters us

the life we thought we'd lived darkens now flagged
with phantom-bloom,

age begins its somber haunt,

even the swallowtail's cocoon oscillates, dreambound.

II.

Beyond the eastern embankment a flatbed truck
jostles past, radio blaring yet another vapid anthem—

Navajo teenagers returning from school,

their long black hair wind-loosed— frayed ribbons
disappearing beneath

a scorched-blue expanse.

III.

Another day hammered from the quarry,
slowly, the valley burgeons

branding fallen constellations across land.

In the distance, cattle moan in the last scrim
of rising heat, heads bowed, suffused in deep horizon

a man on horseback surfs the herd into night.

All succumb to this slow transfusion—
shadow into body, black filaments threading
the heart; we ache into sleep

as fires braid another acre into dust.

Economy of Light:

Brooklyn, NY

By the first pulse of morning
all eyes are ruined with fire.
August's moths thread between
dampened streetlights, indifferent
as a child's nightgown
rising in a thousand embers.
Twenty people strangled from sleep
as smoke charred their lungs'
soft tissue into blackened wings—
each breath flailing. On the street
a woman is wandering; the skin
around her eyes, mouth, and chest
covered in soot where grief was held.
For a year her voice lingered above
the wreckage, commanding the cries of birds.

Rockfish, NC

Beyond a nearly abandoned town,
dawn-heavy, each presence is awash.
A highway skeleton-crew
tends the last mile of broken road.
Their bodies, momentarily held
by the light of a passing car,
dissolve in a pale-red wake.

Jones Chapel, AL

Sunlight enters a roadhouse
erasing the delicate division
of bodies rowed against the bar.
A farmer, over eighty, drops
a coin into a sleeping jukebox
yet the language survives,
perhaps, more than it should.
Outside, hollow stalks of cotton
buoy in dust, a dog whines
circling her own thin shadow;
nothing forgives.

Shallow Water, KS

For years she practiced
the art of escape
among rows of corn
where her mother's hands
blossomed in rough husks,
waving her back.
Once, everything was possible
beyond that landscape
of silos withering against dusk;
even as she died
she imagined her own
beautiful entrance
into the world,
her fingers still
working at the lock.

Lame Deer, MT

We push off into the silhouettes
of twilight, cattails gently rapping
the aluminum hull of our canoe
flanked by faint light wreathing
through willow branches.
Unanchored, we become one
more burden of the river,
though no more than the tin-
bluegrass notes trembling down
from an open shanty window.
At this hour the Turtle valley blossoms—
crickets and bats unsettling August's
stronghold with needful music
as we pull and wake past the vaulted,
lime-quarry, where pike school
in a calm measure of current
like black clouds surfacing
against the moon.

Massacre Lake, NV

No one comes here to believe
that sand, more than flesh
survives with light.
Yet, it does. Where rain
once shaped itself
into a canyon lake
and a traveler could kneel
down in the shallows
to see his figure etched in water,
only dunes remain.
Perhaps, if he had stayed
a moment longer to watch
his reflection vanish
from the surface into night,
his lips would have opened
as if to drink deeply
as the darkened water
began to flood with stars.

Los Angeles, CA

The hour arrives, dragging
the remains of the city's sleep
through littered streets, where
lives begin to wake, newly-
risen at their windows, while rain
disappears into gutters after a storm.
Beside the gun-grey coastline a row
of palms groom the last stars through
their branches, shifting pools of light
where a moon still wanders
across the steel and glass faces
of buildings sheathed in pacific,
which, in millennia, will edge-
off and drown in northern drifts.
Everywhere life seems unsure
of happening— pigeons lift,
circle, and settle back,
a car stammers and stops,
our hands reach out, afraid
to touch the unfamiliar image
in a mirror. We could enter
this life the way eyes look up
as sunlight first enters a city.

Bread for Ghosts

-for Basquiat

Jean-Michel, bring red wine,
I've set the table for two.

Each night the city darkens
to this candle, even now

I wait.

The Opium Nexus as Experienced
By the Murderer, Fou-Tchou-Li
During His Death by One-Hundred Cuts

-Peking, 1905

Before I died I did not dream; and moonlight
that survived the barred window

slowly turned to sun against a soldier's blade.
All evening, gathered with fire outside

the prison, they chanted my name,
my sentence. At dawn I was led in shackles

to a room of children, their mother
weeping black lace into her hands—

they followed me to the stake at noon.
As my head was lashed back, opium tea

poured down my throat, I sensed the first
cut. At that moment I was my father's son

riding his shoulders to the ocean,
held in how his arms spun-cast each net

pulling it in against autumn's current
as in ebb tide my legs grew numb.

When at day's end I could not move
he leaned towards earth, taking me in

warming me against his body of salt-
water dried in the late light.

Shadowscape

Cold has found our bodies
once again, and we have let it
happen. Call us inheritors
of an awful history, let hammers
descend through a winter

which will never really leave us.
I've studied documents, left
my thumbprint upon treaties
now buried in dust.
I see my grandmother's

name misspelled to obscurity,
her face superimposed upon
midnight— songs diminishing
too with my age. Where have they
planted the bodies?

Where are the knuckle bones
and jaw of my great-grandfather?
Even now I see them growing in
a field of wet corn where they
will survive only another season.

So for this I dance and sing
the drum, part my body, always
another layer of flesh unfolding
at my feet. Who remembers the night
my ancestors walked a frozen lake,

silhouettes trapped within the broken
ribs of a forest, eyes searching
for a moon buried in clouds;
how they wept when they realized
there were no stars left to guide

their bodies? I am only half
of my story. The rest make their way
through darkness, blindly palming
the air, leaving their own unverified
prints to find a path home.

Before the Spring Slaughter

I am awake as my mother stands beside a window,
face softened by the light above our barn, looking out
upon shadows grazing beyond the barbed wire.
Gently she places her cold hand against my cheek
and walks out. Across the hall I hear my father
finishing his morning prayers, the sound of his body
rising, almost ancient. It is still dark as I stare
into the ceiling above my bed where rain pools
after each storm, staining white tiles to rust.
Each spring we paint them over, but they return
with new magnificent boundaries, waiting to be
named. Though I tried, I could not find them all.

The Autistic Child's Verse

There is a castle in my hand.
Water is all around the castle.
Sometimes I am the water
that touches the castle walls.
When I am water I am cold.
When I am water I hold
everything. Sometimes
a stone falls from the castle
and I swallow it. Sometimes
I am the stone I swallow.

The Farmer's Verse

That night in my chair, reclining a bit closer,
I remembered the winter of 1957, how Orion
had pointed his arrows toward the frozen earth
beyond my barn. The following spring
the county planted power-breakers across my fields,
after that, nothing would grow. By autumn,
I stopped paying for electricity, lived by fire,
took to wandering the pastures, hurling empty-
whiskey bottles and shotgun blasts at steel
and wire. Other interests offered to buy the land;
for years I refused every bid. When my wife died
I sold it all. I sold it all except the gun.

The Mixed-Blood's Verse

I do not belong to one body,
but to two nations I've never
known. If I could I would
spit into my own face and be
pleased. Yet, one must learn
to live despite the inevitable
break in composition— trying
to braid each tattered strand.

The Lovers' Verse

Side by side, in the anesthesia
of our whiskey-breath warming
our bed sheets, we sleep
as a western-sun grows full
beyond this trailer. She turns,
her blonde hair trailing over
her shoulders. A radio crackles
among beer cans we emptied
ourselves into all night, wandering
from trailer to trailer, hand
in hand, celebrating all that is not ours.

The Immigrant's Verse

In a distillation of neon I am
sweeping the stoop of my family's store;
sleepwalking through this nightly ritual,
singing the ballad of another life.

The Bartender's Verse

I arrive, many nights, to nothing.
Each empty barstool leans to the closed
door. It has been two years since
I have seen the sun set; years
since I have watched it rise, with my son,
fishing for bullheads on the Rock River.

Mind of Rivers

-for Langston Hughes, Feb 1st, 2002

Far west of 125th St. & Malcolm X Blvd., where snow deepens in mountain-folds, and light, for a moment, holds the vanishing-point of each perspective, a current moves beneath a thin membrane of ice. It is not the Mississippi nor the Euphrates; not the Congo nor the Nile, where ashes of your body were planted in water. It is here, from a frozen shore, that I call you back.

Above this bend of river sunlight languishes upon frosted spines of spruce trees, tagged with orange ribbons, soon to be harvested and carried away. In a break of the thin canopy a hawk is circling, turning its head beneath each outstretched wing, finding nothing to fill its stomach. From a branch a mound of snow falls, and I imagine the price of shovels, the cost of salvation, and the immutable silence of an entire forest lifted from the earth.

Years ago, in Harlem, I spoke with a homeless man who claimed to see your ghost rise, each night, from a sidewalk-grate outside the Apollo Theatre. For three nights I sat with him on 125th St. from nine to midnight, drinking whiskey and swaying to the cool perfection of Monk and Mingus crackling from his radio. Suddenly he would stop speaking, stand up, and stare at the rusted grating. His eyes slowly moved upward, as if watching a river swell in a storm. Each time I asked, *Where does it go after rising?*

*It just rises, man.
It just keeps rising.*

Reeds

-for Joan Cornell

Some days it is impossible
to imagine her body, emaciated,
lines of her pale face drawn
even deeper into skull.

Yet, somehow, daily, she awakens
within me. Her thin arms spanning
the distance of my memory,
eyes opening once again to feed mine,

feet marking their places in the frost—
the sun quickly subtracting their definition.
I see her still, almost completely packed
away into a dark room, a woman

martyred with I.V.'s and tubes
strapped to her bed as if at any moment
she might fly from our grasp—
a metaphysical acrobat leaping

from her body into a world that only
the dead own. I waited at her bedside
to catch a glimpse of that world
reflected in her eyes.

Even in those last hours I wanted
her to rise through the curtain of death
surrounding her, to take me to the water,
where as a child she held me towards

the sky, toes dangling above the surface
of Lake Mary, arms outstretched to her
swirling figure beneath me. At night,
sitting upon our wooden dock,

inside her embrace like a Pueblo worry-
doll, we would watch lights upon water
breathe out against twilight, thin reeds
sway, hypnotized from their wind-dance

among shadows. We still have not left
our places. What have they done
with the stars? There is so much you
forgot to tell. At your grave I come

to whisper our secrets once again— *Yes*,
loons still cry out over small congregations
of lilies in the shallow waters, *Yes*,
the moon still arrives shrouded

in heavy lake clouds, and *Yes*, we could
have walked on water, very deep water,
if only the dock had let us go.

Deer Skinning

Her figure hung that winter night in the yellow flush
of a bare light-bulb in our garage. One doe, slowly
pirouetting from hind legs, blood dripping from her
black nose onto dried oil stains. In the kitchen my mother
and grandmother were preparing spices and herbs
for the flesh we would eat through winter; singing to each other
through soft stone sounds of mortar and pestle. The room grew
warm as my father unsheathed the body, its weight vanishing
as dogs whined and scratched at the door. All night
the women sang.

Properties of Ice-Fishing

In the cold air of our fishing shanty,
long after the auger has drilled through two
feet of ice, gasoline fumes linger.
Men and their sons have died in these
small fishing huts on Lake Elizabeth—
oxygen burned out by heaters, they slump
over like dolls, fish fighting on their lines.
Today we drop our bright-blue filaments
through a clean cut on the water's surface,
minnows descending on thin steel hooks
into the shock of cold. If Greg is fishing
further out and the wind is south-east,
we can hear Gillespie or Goodman blowing
across the distance. We do not move, but
watch for a sudden bend at the tip or
a shadow to pass through the luminescence
of the opening. Later, as we sleep,
the hole we drilled seals itself, light diffused.

Arrangement of Antonia in Blue

One took my arms to the meat-grinder, singing
Wagner in a Spanish, turpentine howl. After

severing my breasts, dissecting their soft tissue,
each was placed in a bowl of red pears. Another

opened my uterus beneath tapestries of gold,
burgundy, and plum; cast holy-water

upon my womb with brushes, left bare
my ovaries to stain a canvas in Milan. Hour after

cloistered hour, climbing blocks of wood, mounting
me in a trance, they broke each bone to fit inside

a frame. Still I come to sit among the models—
lips, once studied against breath, now

wither in the blue winter of my body. Young-
eyes trace death's map scrawled upon

this torso— its inevitable, slow prophecy.
They contort, sweating in the artist's palm,

lost in artificial light— lives like wreaths,
simple impressions.

Death of the Baker

Late summer dusk and the dead remain
dead among the last shards of stained light.
In the piazza, a vendor weighs the hour in coins
moving gold from shadow to shadow,
as a soldier's horse stamps once at the earth.

Walking the Lungarno Della Grazie,
cafe lights staining the Arno's current, I hone
my breath to the cadence of water. All day
I mourned your hands, folded upon your chest,
sculpted into the awful gesture of death.

Each day you rose before dawn, hurrying
past lingering prostitutes who could not find a bed,
to light and stoke the ovens until the stale air
blossomed with warm yeast, lemon, and rye.
One week, a loaf of your bread was all I owned.

At your bakery I touch a blackened wreath
hung above the chained door, dried leaves
sift through my fingers. Crumbs have been
scattered throughout the city, only the starved
can bring themselves to eat.

Still-life of a Jar with Holes

How long have I had a name, a body,
emptying myself from this world
into the next? When a hand touches
the cold contours of my form
it does not give back. Light,
from every source, is reshaped
in the water I carry. If you held
my figure to your eyes, the landscape
would change. Place me on a table
and I would be indistinguishable
from any other vessel. We are
all profoundly cracked. Some say
the spirit is a jar with holes,
filled once and left to bleed.

Hunger

On a river's ice
two black crows cry and scavenge
the hide of winter

Form of Flying

-inspired by Damien Hirst

The room holds each artifact in its place:
her stockings, eye-liner, and lipstick
still bear warm impressions of the body
they anointed only hours before.
One can only imagine her praying,
each night, into the looking-glass
which now rests face down on a table.
On the floor a photograph torn in two—
a young girl standing at the edge
of a garden of orchids. Once she held it
to the sun, and believed. Blood has dried
on every wall she touched in those last
moments when her wrists blossomed
into wings. In a glass bowl a fish swims
an endless turn; by the open window
a white dress hangs in near perfection.

Tomorrow will flood beyond my cabin's
perimeter, where sleeping bloodhounds
release their breath in plumages of frost.

dreaming of the dead.

But today, I was only a body, mapped
by threads of lightning, hungry to rise.

Pallbearers

I arrive at an ocean with the dead
in my pocket. Waves turn, flash,
and fold into sand; nothing here wants
to be forgotten. Seagulls rise through
thermals, the moon rises above
a city where three-thousand are now
waiting to be buried.

In a home at the edge of a desert
a man places his dead father into water.
He enters the bath naked. His father
is naked. Slowly he washes the body
as his father had first washed him.
Each is a horizon against a horizon—
to look long enough, they disappear.

Homage to the Bronte Sisters

It was midnight that spoke to them
first, working in candlelight, the silence
of a world unfolding from shadows.
One must believe in the languages of darkness—

words, soft wing-beats fluttering to
page, distant villages that quaked
against nightfall, fields that turned
like oceans in crests of elm and moss.

*How long were you held, suspended from that
hook cast by the moon— stars dripping from your
gills? One by one they carried your bodies to
the grave, tongues from the archives of imagination,*

from the penetralium, across the threshold
to the open air, your eyes still casting sunlight
inside the oak caskets— gold coins
buried near the sea.

Courting Night Herons

Because the music was still with me
at dawn I parted a trail through snow
where, beyond shore, an abandoned boat
whined gently in a clutch of ice—
hull buckling, mast cracked— a wingless
body pinned to the frozen lake.

When I returned to my weathered cabin
I imagined voices in my hand: three herons
who, on summer nights, bellies full
with minnows, summoned me to the piano,
waiting for two answering chords, each
now bare as the earth beyond this window.

Notes

In the Desert, Water is a Myth Not to be Believed, The title of this poem comes from a series of paintings (same title) by the contemporary Mexican-American artist, Rafael Salas.

The Opium Nexus as Experienced by the Murderer, Fou-Tchou-Li During His Death by One-Hundred Cuts, The subject matter for this poem came from the text, *The Tears of Eros*, by Georges Bataille.

Form of Flying, is based on the conceptual art installation of contemporary British artist, Damien Hirst which is titled, *She Wanted to Find the Most Perfect Form of Flying*.