

1996

Ejo | [Poems]

Derick Burleson
The University of Montana

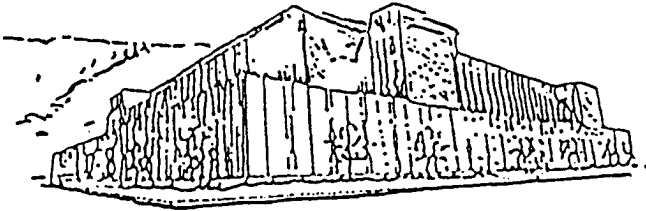
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EJO

by

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

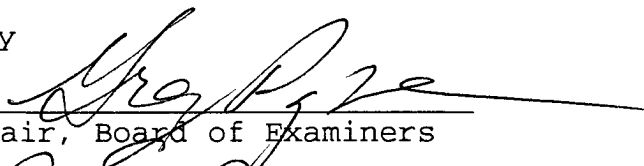
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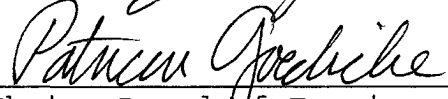
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1996

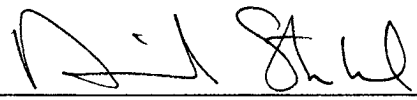
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EJO

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Crab Orchard Review: "Bienvenu"

Cutbank: "Taxi"

Kansas Quarterly: "Assimilation," "Driving Through Fire in the Flint Hills," "When It's Over"

Poetry: "In This Country," "Democracy," "Skipping School," "After This"

Talking River Review: "Crossing Over," "Birdwatching at the Nearman Creek Power Plant," "Building Fence with My Father"

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I. PARADISE OF SORTS

AND SO ON

This is prairie, grass and wind.
Foothills that were mountains
dim to disappearance again.
You can travel just so far in a day.

Moonrise, sunset, this is east, this west.
We wonder how our ancestors knew which way
to go, and how the land could grind so slow
beneath dust-churning wagon wheels.

Remains of homes rise up now, stone on stone,
most fallen. We fight to keep
hills on the left from hills on the right.
This is light, later dark.

Here was ocean once. Then you could see
where water met sky at the far edge
of the season. Sea-creatures settled
into stone, layer on layer, until
earth rose in waves.

SKIPPING SCHOOL

And then it rained days and nights
at a time, rained until the rising water
swept through our house like spring cleaning
and carried my bed and me still in it
away down the roaring river that used to be
Main Street. I can still see my mother
a healthy glass of orange juice in her hand
standing on the porch, near where the door was
before Main Street ran through my room.

The bed began to spin
and rainwater foamed all around,
railroad tracks turned to rapids
and all the stop signs swept away.
My bed rose and fell, bucking
half-hearted like a green-broke colt.
I was wide-eyed, not at the ride,
but at the households loose in that flood,
a whole street awash in dirty laundry,
the next-door neighbors' Brittany Spaniel
still chained, howling on top of its house,
even a man who must have been my father
sitting down to lunch
at the floating kitchen table,
one eye still on the television weather.

I dreamed that Main Street wound on forever
through all wheatfields that were home
past small-town grain elevators
gleaming in the distance like ivory towers
built by the slaves of some ancient culture
to confuse all us who came later.
Finally the river widened into interstate
and all the other kids who'd skipped school
began to build bed-slat masts
and raise bed-sheet sails and the wind
always blew from the right direction
and we sailed on together through neon
cities we'd never even heard of, then
out across the bay, out over the chaos of ocean
until we struck land, always far from home,
found the horses that waited there
tethered patiently as a promise.

BUILDING FENCE WITH MY FATHER

When he's finally cranked the come-along
as tight as it goes to the concrete cornerpost
he wants the wire clamped down now.
But somehow like it always happens
when I take the time to daydream
cottonwoods down by the creek,
the ratchet turns the wrong way.

The last nut glitters down, disappears
in drifts of dust at our feet.
The wire snaps back and his face screws tight:
Goddamn it son, you got no common sense.
A man has got to know his left from his right.
Then we both step back.

There was nothing
left to do but begin again, a quarter mile
of barbwire gleaming between us.

FORTY DAYS

Tonight like last night
and the night before, thunderstorms.
And after this years' drought
the morning coffeeshop talk finally turns to flood:
September, and fallow fields
still too wet to sow wheat for winter.

The farmer senses thunder
from far across the border hills even before clouds
fill the sky, low and clear, the overheard
voice of a prophet, light from somewhere
catching the corner of his eye, glimpses
through the wind-blown barn door, open,
closed, then open again until he goes out
into it for good, gives in to the god
he prayed to for rain all spring.

My friend finally conquered his fear
of what comes next, put a shotgun in his mouth
and sprayed his blood across the apartment wall.
We gathered the next night and struggled
to recall exactly whom he'd asked to dance
to which songs, each word, each syllable.

You and I begin with his end:
Thunder demands we see this world
in its light, frequent and random,
so stark blue and full of shadow
we might as well be underwater,
learning to swim, light
and sound becoming one voice,
the god roaring over the torn surface
of our perfect sleep, a south wind sheer
and curtains of rain through all
the windows we left open
to let the night breeze
ease this heat between us.

Tomorrow and the day after
we'll slip apart and wander
again, sun breaking through
the divided clouds by noon,
and with clothes like a second skin
I'll wade through air so thick
you can chew it, ankle-deep
in the same mud as my father
on his farm, as that friend
who comes home in time to stay

(FORTY DAYS, cont., same stanza)

up all night, stacking hope
against hope, mopping at the water
that won't quit running under his door.

Our huge passion swallows me daily until
I love the sky that slowly clears
then clouds again with all kinds of weather,
I breathe air heavy enough that with each step
we swim or drown, our bodies' water
flowing everywhere over sodden fields,
rivers swelling already full lakes.
I love the small space my body takes
on the steamy earth, the way
everything spins drip dry, pulling
the fevered sky closer,
riding the rampant rise and
fall of this flood.

ASSIMILATION

These are the first days of our fall.
November clarities and already
the world assumes its winter shape:
wind builds a predictable squall
high over the Flint Hills, whipping
horse-tail clouds ahead into galloping night,
and the whole tall-grass prairie hangs heavy,
each uncertain seed
haloed in late season light.

Our future might be local
as this lake, reaching out past
dead trees, past the limestone cliffs
that fracture year after year.
Already oceans of snow shoulder south,
a pale moon rises in a pale sky
and we clamber from rock to rock,
climbing away from the time-worn water
into what has already passed, our separate
breaths twining into one,
rising white, lost in wind.

FISHING OVER THE STRUCTURE

One day beneath our boat the world took
the chance to mirror itself, the same
way we traded secrets all day, the way
heat stilled us enough to sleep through the night.
Below, elms and oaks that used to grow
beside Sand Creek before the Corps made this lake
stretch rotting limbs for the sun.
Bluegills flock from branch to branch like the lighter
birds before them, schooling after minnows.

That day, the black bass had gone sullen, patient as crows
awaiting small death in the shadows, smug as the jet fighter
circling the lake on a low training run,
contrails icing clouds white as wedding cake.
A bleached moon circled the boat and we wanted to know
why, no matter which bright lure, the fish refused to bite,
fingering our lines, waiting that late in the day
for a soft bump, subtle as the sound of your name,
the signal it's finally time to set the hook.

TURBULENCE

If you could see it when
the Medicine River goes crazy
every early spring and begins
to boil red and muddy
rolling all the rain down
across the Kansas border,
you might imagine, as I did, something
surging under the turbid surface,
maybe catfish big enough to eat you,
until someone older, say a grandfather
explains how the current can suck you down.
Even grown men drown trying to swim
when the river's like that, he said.

Through the dusty windows
of an abandoned church on the edge of a prairie
no farmer and no wife and not even the children
have attended in thirty years
you can see how some slow pull
still twists the summer sun until evening
sweeps away the withered windbreak elms outside.
But if you still don't believe glass
is a slow liquid, no one will stop you
from breaking out each pane to see
how much gravity's pulled to the bottom.

In city streets everywhere, the eyes
of those of us who for whatever reason
would like to hide our fear
of sudden change, the nightly
anxiety of what we all used to call passion,
mirror feral electric lights.
Black on black is back in fashion this season
and no one knows which friend will die next,
which country will flood into which,
flexing the slow hydraulic flow of power.
We've all taken to watching each other.
Our crowded glances mingle in murky pools
slower than spring rivers, quicker than windows.

WAITING

Nightly in the perfect garden behind our white house
snowpeas swell their pods, the greenbeans bloom.
Cornstalks, bright in new silk, whisper secret
warnings about nothing while cucumber vines
climb them, trying to listen. Tomatoes blush
to see asparagus spears jab at the moon.
Radishes and carrots and beets, the potatoes serene and sweet,
tunnel deeper beneath compost.

Inside, we love then dream, hoping morning never comes.
The house keeps its own counsel in the neighborhood. A pencil
reclines on blank paper beside the phone that rarely rings
this time of night and the refrigerator goes on chilling
while a lone fluorescent tube hums the blues. Behind
the butcher block a troop of quiet knives gleam
in rank, waiting to be used.

AFTER THE BATTLE

The world returns.
Hilltops emerge
like green dreams
from muddy water
and trees toss their leaves
into the song of rain receding.

The last couple
sends out a bird -- who cares what color.
It flies back with muddy feet, an olive branch
then away again, leading.
They row to the only
island where they fall to their knees
and kiss the earth. They thank
the wind, thank the bird and
then they pray,

two faint voices
winging over infinite water
to the place where God bakes
the world fresh each day,
clouds and sun and wind,
dancing the steps of making.

A nod of the famous head, a word
and water and fire unite
with the same fertile discord
that first set the world singing.

And the boulders strewn in battle,
articulate fragments of the mountains
they heaved in rage, become
men and women again, who stroke
and touch, loving each other
in the mute struggle to escape
the granite of their flesh.

CROWS OVER THE WHEATFIELD
after van Gogh

They sail in silent ranks,
wings cupped on nothing
beneath a Prussian blue sky.

This field's a hell with hope,
musky hot as a wet wool shirt,
dry grain sunk up to its knees.

Back down the blood-red road,
behind where you stand in this picture,
a farmer does rainy-day chores,
his boots heavy with mud. For all

the fence he mends, for each
hopeless burlap bag he sews,
he wants one sweeping stroke
with his sharpened scythe, stalks falling.

But he knows another year's gone pithy,
too dry early, wet too late.
He waits for the birds to settle,
flapping and fighting and tearing

dried husks with stone beaks. Maybe
tomorrow they'll land, rough
greedy caws racking the humid air.
There is no blue without yellow, without orange.

AFTER THIS

We'll all walk together
out of this room, through that door,
down the well-worn stairs
and out into the twilight
where no one else will notice
that we are still glowing.
No matter what else happens,

we'll kick through fallen leaves
to hear the sounds they make
like all kinds of water running together.
And when the neon glare stops
sneaking around the dark corners
of our favorite streets and goes
back to its usual brilliance,
when talk fades to disappearing
and music is only music again
we will slowly dim, only our eyes

and the teeth of our shy smiles still showing.
We'll go back to our own places
and finally sleep, smug
with this fierce pleasure of knowing
that soul is just the particular song
we learn to sing, that our lovers
will always be gardens beside us,
blooming the colors we dream best,
graceful as the glitter waves,
waves bursting on a moonlit beach
just beyond the foot of our bed.

DRIVING THROUGH FIRE IN THE FLINT HILLS

Say you left your dusty life behind
left a wife, a child, say what you like
tonight's the night to burn.

These pastures know April, new moon
so ranchers drag their torches at a run
through tall winter-dead grass
opening new scars like experienced lovers.

They could be dancing, as the first men
must have danced, round fires struck from stone,
loving their wives the way they love this land
passion searing at rock-bound roots.

We burn it all away, believing as we do
in spring rains, in the heat that grows under ash
believing new grass will breed beneath thin soil.

WHEN IT'S OVER

Great plains will turn back
to a prairie of wheat growing wild
dropping its seed and rising again.
All the fences fell long ago,
sheep ranging north, their fleecy coats thicker.
Horses eat apples off orchard trees.
Herefords roam like buffalo.

The farmers all left when dust
began to drift, rumors
of oranges free for the picking.
Their house cats grow ferocious
stalking white rabbits
and pigs still root for potatoes
where watered gardens used to make
lush monuments through the summer.

We could all come home
to this paradise of sorts.
You would love me, I would love you.
Then we could begin again
and wade out into it
our hearts fluttering wildly,
peacocks flushing at our feet.

II. A LITTLE HISTORY
(Rwanda, 1991-93)

IN THIS COUNTRY

So you've come into this country
searching for what? Not the diamonds
of *King Solomon's Mines* or even
Gorillas in the Mist. But every
morning when you wake, the romantic
volcanoes you hope stay extinct
are another adventure
waiting to greet you when you kiss
your wife Stewart Granger-style goodbye
and sail off to teach *Moby Dick*
to students who already speak
three other languages and play
basketball in the afternoons.

Equatorial mornings and nights drip regular
as the faucet in the indoor bathroom
you never imagined you'd have, and rains
rise and fall with the rhythm of love.
Circles and cycles, all Newton's heavenly bodies
hug the earth in this country
where *ejo* means both yesterday and tomorrow
and your skin turns dark as strong tea.
Mwaramutse, the word for Good Morning
sticks like honey in your throat each day
and the passion fruit you eat for breakfast
tastes multisyllabic as its name, *intababara*.

Untranslatable, landlocked, what is whale?
Why catch it? What is the significance of white?
Queequeg guards your house with a machete
each night, and before you sleep, you kill
the mosquitos which used to be as big
as elephants, the story goes, until
they learned to drink *urwagwa*, the bittersweet
banana beer. At least *imodoka* means Toyota
in this country where malaria
is more common than the cold,
the colonial rose gardens
brighter than stoplights.

And even in the rainy season,
with all its fevered nights,
you wear nothing to bed and dream
Lawrence of Arabia in the language
you learn little by little like
the bird builds its nest:
Ndashaka, I want. *Amazi*, water.

ON THE SPICE ISLAND TOUR WITH MR. MITU

In the dank basement of the lone
Anglican Church on Zanzibar
he lights a candle and apologizes
there's no electricity today.
Bent double, my American shoulders
scrape coral ceiling and all
the waxy smoke and ghosts
down this deep make it hard
to breathe. He wants to give us
just a little history
before we see the clove
and cinnamon trees, to let us feel
an inkling of what millions
felt centuries ago, enduring
the night, five hundred herded
into this dungeon before each auction.
Church bells above chime
their hourly apology
and a little light filters in.
It's Ramadan and Mr. Mitu's
dying for a cigarette.
As mosque tower loudspeakers squeal
the midmorning call to prayer
we all gather under a shadeless
tree and he passes a handful
of berries to each tourist.
His helper brings along
a demijohn of water
and Mr. Mitu demonstrates
how the berries when crushed make
a creamy lather. Then
we all wash our hands.

NIGHT TRAIN TO MOMBASSA

When we slid back down
the burning snow
slopes of Jomo Kenyatta's
bright ancestral home
cold to the bone
we wanted beach, masala and coconut rice
so we boarded the old colonial train in Nairobi
bound for the Indian Ocean.

Southeast of shantytown
sunset consumed the national park
framing a giraffe among evening leaves
neatly as a postcard.

The full moon clambered up
its hemisphere of sky
and we were alone together
intimate as the first time
we crossed the frontier of skin
back in our corner of Kansas

where innocence like milk made us think
we could save the world
from itself. All night
I watched highland savannah
slip away under circling moonlight
and thought high romance
in rhythm with the train's steel drumbeat.

Next morning, we boarded a bus
north along the coast, Kenyan soldiers riding shotgun
against the threat of Kalichniokav-carrying
Somali refugees, hungry as Jesse James
for fame and travelers' gold.
A pregnant Kikuyu woman hands her toddler
down out of the human crush, thinking maybe
we could all use a little luck.

BIENVENU

It's the Fourth of July
and getting hotter in this tiny East African country
made famous by Dian Fossey

and a mountain gorilla she named Digit.
The whole crowd's standing on the middle
tier of the American Ambassador's triple-

terraced lawn which is painfully green
and leads up to the back porch of his Georgian
mansion. Nearby, a Rwandan man in high-collared linen

serves ice-cold Coca-cola in plastic cups.

Anybody who's everybody's here:
Isn't that the Minister of Information? the AIDS Researcher
from San Francisco whispers.

Then gossip turns to the Ambassador's wife's school,
her plans to level the lawn and install a swimming pool,
Olympic-sized. The attache's sweating bullets. *Bienvenu,*

Welcome. The loudspeaker squeals, a moment of feedback.

Dinner, McDonalds hamburgers flown fresh from Belgium,
is served and soon yellow paper wrappers litter the lawn.
President Habyarimana arrives looking pretty calm

considering his country's embroiled in civil war.
He gratefully accepts the Coke offered by the ambassador
as Boy Scouts from both nations flag-salute Rwanda's proud R

and the Stars and Stripes writhing like cobras together.
Visiting Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor
orates in French tattered as a poached lion's mane of honor.

As the crowd applauds, bright fireworks shed petals
from heaven and the soldiers of the Rwandan National
Band, who've been standing stiff and proud at attention all

evening slip into a hip-hop rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner.

LA SYMAPATHIQUE

Tomatoes and sauce thick with peanut flour,
onions, two chickens, a sheaf of green bananas.
It's so good, Igisafriya, enough
to feed the whole army, we laugh,
Rwagasana and Ulali and Anita and me.

A tethered goat bleats outside the kitchen.
Our waiter chases a barefoot beggar
away with a stick.

Elbows propped on the blue table,
we lean in around our platter,
spooning sauce and bananas,
tender chicken, sipping Primus beer, so good.

They learned to speak American
at Stanford. I ask how would you say
igisafriya in English. He says casserole
or maybe stew. Rwagasana and Ulali live next door.

They're so happy we're here,
we eat at their house every day.
Friday afternoons, we all come to town,
our favorite cafe, La Sympathique.

It's the rainy season
and thunderheads cut us some shade.
A man stumbles in wearing a 100 kilo-sack of potatoes
like a helmet. Eucalyptus smoke spirals up from a babura.
Two crows peck through the garbage heap.

A soldier strolls over to say Muraho
and shake hands all around.
Have some, we say.
He lays his rifle across another table,
grabs a spoon, digs in.

Rain drums out communiques
across the tin roof. We scootch closer
to keep our backs dry, look up,
and smile through steam still rising
from our food. It's so good
we keep at it until
even the soldier
leans back and groans ndahazi.

DEMOCRACY

Butare
November 3, 1992

Here it's the rainy season,
but it still hasn't rained
so there's nothing for the dusty woman
in the roadside field to do
but lean on her hoe as if it's become a part of her body

and watch the bored checkpoint soldier
ask the suited and tied businessman
for the identity card he can't seem to find.
Unconcerned, the Mercedes Benz pants in the heat

the soldier wants a cold beer,
the woman would rather be planting her beans,
and the businessman, who's obviously from the wrong tribe,
keeps sweating and praying that the magic card

will materialize in some inside jacket pocket.
And if a tourist had snapped a photo of them all
like this, had in the instant stolen the souls
from this frightened man, this half-smiling woman,

the soldier just beginning to swing his gun around,
anybody with eyes in their head
would still swear years later
that something was bound to happen soon.

TAXI

Doorman slams the sliding door, yells go
hurryhurryhurry, cursing the ancient
battered Toyota minibus, cursing God,
the gravel in the gearbox, Driver,
the soldiers at the next checkpoint,
the choking six-cylinder, the president,
the bald tires, the dangerous curves,
the sun that rose not long ago: StopStopStopStop
he screams and Driver does his best to cram
the brake pedal through what's left of the floorboards.
Doorman slams open the door and smiles
and swings his arm wide in welcome.

So we climb aboard and take the last places
in the back on a leopard-print naugahyde seat
we have to ourselves. Good Morning,
a man smiles. *Mwaramutseho* I answer.
Imana bless us, Driver says,
Truly the world's coming to an end.
My brother speaks their language
and the *umuzungu* speaks ours.
Doorman yells *TugendēTugendē*
and we go, Bob Marley on the radio jammin
I need a hamma, a hamma, a hamma to hamma them down.

And even the soldiers smile and wave
us through the barricade as we head out
of town, Driver hunched over the wheel,
begging the engine for speed, racing
all the other taxis north to the capital,
gaining altitude, the carburetor wheezing
like an asthmatic cow. We open the window
for a little air and the woman in front
of us shuts it. We open it. She shuts it.
Wind gives you malaria, she says.
Mosquitoes give you malaria, we say
but this time the window stays shut.

Driver pulls us onto the shoulder
and Doorman grates open the door
for a family traveling to a wedding,
the mothers wearing their hair bound
up under strips of bamboo, their three
brightest cloths wrapped tight.
Then we're wedged together,
brothers and sisters and children
all sharing rivers of sweat.

(TAXI, cont., new stanza)

The bridesmaid hands us a basket
finely woven of turquoise and purple
to save it from being crushed.
We pass on hills, pass on curves,
pass more battered taxis, trucks hauling
green bananas and sacks of beans,
women with hoes over their shoulders,
men walking to visit their neighbors
carrying gourds of banana beer,
platoons of soldiers marching to the border,
a bicycle so strung with live chickens
the rider seems to be pedaling
a newly discovered species of flightless bird.

Driver skids us around another blind corner
and now the taxi's a sauna,
with every breath we breathe human,
smiling, trading handshakes,
even though we all know
that when they demand our identity cards
at the next checkpoint
the soldier's Kalichniokavs will be loaded,
that the basket I'm holding could have a grenade inside,
that wired beneath the 100-franc bill
six schoolchildren cluster around
in the playground across the road,
there is almost certainly a landmine.

VOLUNTEERS

I. Getting There

Children again when they step off
the plane, they can't believe
how direct the sun, how short
their shadows have become. Cold
orange Fantas the schoolboy sells
from his ice-filled tin bucket
cost a quarter.

At the border shack
while a soldier stamps their passports
the first Rwandans they see flash
down the hill chiming the bicycle bell:
Wake up! Look out! A bunch of green bananas
bound to the rack, mother and child
balance on handle bars,
precarious as cease-fires.

English worthless
in this new country, they *Ça va?*
each other mornings before passion fruit
breakfast and trundle off to class, arms
loaded with books full of *les bons mots*
they'll need in the market. After a dinner
of fish they no longer know the name for
they trundle off to bed, sleep
in two cots shoved together,
swaddled apart by mosquito nets.

Pale barn owls
swoop like nightly ghosts, fetching mice
to owlets safe in a nest built through holes
rotting under the eaves of the abandoned Belgian
boarding school they live in. Beyond the window
Lake Kivu kisses the same beach it's kissed the past
million years and fishermen chant songs old as water
to haul their nets by.

II. The Source

After savage love they come out
naked into waist-high ferns,
bathe in the brisk waterfall and notice
how their bright-blue nylon bower
seems to be drawing

the rainforest up around it.
Later a Batwa man lopes up the trail,
marveling surely at the complexities
white people need to survive. Deep
in the eternal shade of mahogany trees
they sight orchids, the pale and sometimes
carnivorous flower which thrives

in low light. If only
Stanley and Livingstone had made it
this far upcountry, discovered their passion,
this hidden source of the Nile, and then died,
how many slaves could have stayed
home with families and fields?
Tomorrow or the next day

they'll backpack down
into the valley and pay a guide
five dollars to hack a path through the jungle
to where the fabled spring boils up from beneath
and feel a little born again
when they kneel to drink.

III. Trash

Victims of packaging in this place
where there is no garbageman,
they ask Joseph, nightguard and gardener,
what does one do?

For compost, they agree,
a pit under the banana tree. Burn the rest,
he says. So into the fire go their students'
first essays in English.

They save all the glass
for the bottle man who comes collecting
once a week and Joseph himself winds bag
around plastic bag, a ball for his nine children
to kick at home.

Soon the crows learn
where to find hamburger scraps,
circle the house after lunch.
Joseph keeps the Cheetos canister,
a Christmas gift from home,
to store his garden seed.

Finally there remains
only the problem of complicated medicines:
the plastic and foil bubblepacks
anti-malarials come in
won't burn.

Then one day
they come home from school to find Joseph studying
the dense French instruction-pamphlet
that arrives with each and every moon's
worth of birth control pills.

IV. Charity

Outside the boulangerie, a kilo
of beef bumping in the backpack,
they face off with a baker's dozen beggars
gathered in a semicircle to block the way.
Hands held forward, palms cupped, everybody's
missing something: an arm here,
a leg there.

Then a mother
pushes through the crowd
gripping her child like a plow,
their clothes twisted generations
of hand-me-downs the color of dry season
dust. She shifts her grip to one arm
pries open the boy's lips: new teeth
already rotten to the gums. When they try
to shove by, she steps in front again, demands
that they pay.

But they've had some practice
with this sort of thing, change
jingling in blue jeans pockets.
They've agreed to contribute
at the post office and nowhere else.
So they press on past, straddle
mountain bikes and pedal home, hair
and dead skin cells swirling a precise
accounting in their wake.

V. Attack

First thing they know
a friend's pounding at the door
saying, Hey, come on, there's a war
going on out here.

It's the middle
of the night and sure enough
the syntax of attack sounds real close:
machine-gun ellipses, mortar shell
exclamation points. The whole
neighborhood gathers outside
voices slung low

as if guns had ears.
The fireworks go on until first light,
when they think sunbirds will sing as usual,
the battle will retreat over the volcanoes
as it always has before.

But when a government
soldier stutters up the road
his leg-wound articulate crimson,
never having been refugees before,
they shoulder their backpacks,
join the whole countryside carrying
whatever's too important to leave behind:
a baby pig, a Singer sewing machine
the broken camera that will never
take snapshots again.

VI. Hostages

I feel like talking
Ntuhinyuzwa says somewhere
in the middle of those dark twelve hours
when they'd given up hope of rescue
for the night.

 Behind them in the schoolbus
thirty other students and teachers
mumble or sleep, plumping
their thrown-together bags
of clothes like pillows.
So they all three lean together
around the gearshift knob
as if it's a campfire
and say the poems or parts
of poems they can remember:

*Let us go then
you and I while the evening is turning
and turning in the widening gyre the falcon
gets lost the center cannot hold I should
have been a pair of ragged claws the blood
dimmed tide is loosed I heard a fly buzz
tattered clothes upon a stick to say I am
Lazarus come back from the dead to tell you all
I shall tell you all.*

Ntuhinyuzwa teaches
English Literature at the university.
The hills around here are very gothic,
he says, positively out of Edgar Allen Poe.
They've all heard the rumors of massacre
in this village. And what a great story,
you know, this will make if we live
to tell it. Bus windows fogged over,
the season drizzles into itself and
every so often outside, another
 ancestor saunters by.

CURFEW

In the cone of the headlights of the last
taxibus home from Ruhengeri, a family hustles
down the macadam, great aunts and second cousins

and neighbors, at least a hundred bare feet
calloused by years of walking pumice-covered hills
slapping asphalt. Night punches through sky

like an obsidian fist and it's past time
to be home. In the middle of the group in the middle
of the road, strung between two poles, a bamboo basket

they weave here to carry the sick or dead.
Three men shoulder it on each side, striding
in unison so their burden hardly bounces

and in the dazzle of headlights we see their relative
has become an ancestor, already cocooned
in old blankets. They've come from the hospital

in town. Picture them there, gathered
around the cot where their failing grandfather
has already divided the land among six sons.

Stubborn as mahogany root, he refuses
to let go until sundown. They shuffle
their feet, glance at the dimming window,

wishing he'd hurry up and die. A year
from now they'll use hoes and machetes
to harvest their neighbors' heads

then flee across the border to refugee camps
rampant with cholera. Outside the hospital window,
soldiers drunk on an afternoon's worth of free beer

man their posts, ready to mow down those out too late.
This is how they live in war. The beans have been planted
and market day is still market day. But they must

carry their ancestor home at a run
where all night the women will wash the body
and shave their heads and keen, the teeth

of men outside around the fire
gleaming as they pass gourds of *urwagwa*,
counting the cows of the dead.

MANGO

Some people can't eat them at all:
an allergy that swells
tongue lips cheeks
until it's hard to breathe.
Mango rot, they call it.

(I never would have believed
anything could be sweeter
than a tree-ripened peach.)

Even beneath the tough
green-mottled skin
it's still not all sweetness
and light: a large fibrous pit
overripe and sticky strings
get caught in your teeth.

(No travel guide says how sharp
morning smoke smells rising
from valleys like hope.)

I like them green with lime juice
and *pili pili*. It's best to know the price
before you barter in the market.
The biggest varieties ripen
into two hemispheres like a planet
or a heart.

(I wonder what's become
of the thin-featured woman
who sold bright baskets door to door.)

On the dusty train
from Arusha to Dar es Salaam, escaping
civil war, we ate mango after mango
to save our souls. Mt. Meru
wavered, a half-glimpsed god
drowsing across savannahs of heat:

Mangoes diamonds bullets
if I had two
I'd give one to you.

AT THE BORDER

a pile of machetes and hoes
higher than your head most bloodstained

and every thirty seconds or so
another body pounds
down Rusumo Falls in the pool
at the bottom they bob
back and forth so
bloated and grey
one might think
massacre had created
 a new race

beyond the border a million farmers
who piled those tools of food and war
sit for days and wait for anyone to give them a kilo of beans
rains begin again like always this time of year

nobody drinks from the river

on land the bodies
seem wings of laundry
bright cloth spread
on the banks of the Kagera
to dry flat as if
the flesh inside
were already sinking
eager for the river

in water they're pale balloons
and so float easily
all the way north to Lake Victoria
putrid enough even Nile crocodiles
 stay away

behind the border every day
while the gods hover like starving birds
Achilles still chases naked Hector round the walls of the
city
and makes very sure
when he finally catches up that he waits long enough
to hear the voice pleading
before he swings the blade home

LETTER TO REMERA IN RWANDA

Since by now we know
that probably you're already dead,
that your sisters and brothers are dead,
that your mother and father, aunts and uncles are dead,
all your rotting corpses and twenty thousand others
clotting the air down the hilly streets of Nyamirambo,
I'll keep this short.

We hope you remember us
like we remember you, the two years
we spent together: That first day we met in Bukavu
and you told us how *mauvais* our French was, we could barely
say *Je ne comprends pas*, how you couldn't think of leaving
us alone for our first anniversary. *Toute seule?*
We keep your photo on the fridge.

Maybe you're still alive.
We know you're smart and lucky
but the *amakuru* we see on CNN, the man
who slashes his neighbor, bends to check,
then slashes again, piles of dead women still
wrapped in bright *pagnes*, flies laying eggs in their eyes,
how could this happen *chez vous* where we all danced
New Year's away together, *umwaka mwiza*
the whole city shouted at midnight.

Buhoro, buhoro ni rwo rugendo,
little by little, the bird builds its nest.
We've heard stories from those who escaped, how they hid
beneath the bodies of their mothers, fathers, brothers or sisters
until the soldiers rumbled off to kill another town. Just
hoping you're one of them.

WAKING AGAIN

He woke beneath the bodies of his friends
and couldn't seem to tell which blood was his.
Here is Hell, they say. How does it begin

and who sent those soldiers to shoot him when
he became a name on someone's secret list?
He woke beneath the bodies of his friends

and clawed up through them until night lightened
into morning and limped past the brass hiss
of mortar shells. Who can say how he begins

to breathe again, past dying once? He sent
a letter saying how it seemed so senseless
to wake beneath the bodies of his friends,

then to go on living while his father's skin
dried tight to bones dogs gnawed. Only wraiths
of war can tell how and why it begins,

stuff fingers in each bullet hole to stem
the flood hot lead first loosed all over this
man waking beneath bodies of his friends.
Maybe he could say how history ends.

III. DINNER OF THE MILLENNIUM

CROSSING OVER

Eastward into sunrise, civilization,
we stay lonely in our skins
and it seems everyone in Kansas City's
on the way to work, Missouri rising
up across the river, silhouettes
of what could be a giant jack-o-lantern's
wilting teeth, executives already
inscrutable behind one-way windows.
This time last year I was half a world away
where the word for tomorrow's the same for yesterday
and the scenery stays green year round. Family names
translate into nouns, the sun rises and sets at six and six
and spirits still stalk the night, people say.
Each house wears its own mask to ward them off and how
strange suddenly today I turn thirty. All this time
Kansas City's kept on fence-sitting, snagged
halfway between its two Bible-belt states.
My friend Kanyandekwe's come to study American literature
and can't get over how pretty
everything is here at the university,
so many trees, the way all the colors change
this time of year. I try to explain
that snow's coming on and he smiles and nods
since you have to say *amasimbi*, innocent water,
in his mother tongue. At the stoplight
on Broadway the woman in the next Nissan over
carefully lengthens her lashes in the rearview mirror.
This late in the year, the sun smashes
democratically into everyone's eyes. So, sunflaps down,
each commuter's car curves on down past a fountain
whose watery horses may or may not
be telling some ancient story,
the old millennium cruises inexorably
toward closure, and my day begins.

BIRDWATCHING AT NEARMAN CREEK POWER PLANT

In the dead of winter
we drove over the bridge into Kansas where
six bald eagles
thirty-seven Canada geese,
too many mallards to count
and a dance troupe of crows
crowd around this water warmed by waste heat.
Everywhere but here the Missouri's
frozen over and who can tell
if the river runs underneath
or not. We cruise slow, aiming
our binoculars out the car windows
separate breaths fogging in below-zero air
watching the birds watch us back.
The power plant keeps right on warming
our houses: smokestack, coal chute,
and when our Honda rounds the fly-ash pit,
the greenheads rocket off in one smooth body
as if some well-vacationed American
still wearing his tropical shirt had videotaped
the swan-diver's ten-second flight from the cliff and
then home drunk, laughing with friends,
played it backwards at high speed.

MY NAME

Visigothic in origin,
it grinned straight out of the 13th Century
when Theodoric son of Theudemir declared
it meant famed ruler of the people.

Then the executioner, Theodoric of Tiburn,
changed it to mean gallows. Ships
had already sailed for the New World
when it became a crane, transformed
finally to oilwell, several of which
multinational companies tried to drill
back on my father's farm in Oklahoma.
Dry holes all. He hates
his middle name, Mansfield
and signs his loans Warren M at the bank.

My wife Anita's name begins and ends in Alpha and means grace,
my friend Minkah Makalani renamed himself for justice
and a quiet place, Daniel Kanyandekwe
the only exiled Rwandan writer I know
means man who carries spears and arrows
alone into the lion's den. How fatherly
Adam must have felt that day all
of creation filed slowly by, when he discovered
saying the word makes
it yours to keep forever.

My middle name, Wade, means a place
or a way to cross the river
my family name, son of the cupbearer
who must learn in his turn
to bear the cup with both hands,
careful not to spill a drop.

DANTE IN THE AIRPORT

After an hour in holding pattern
he finally pulls his bag down from the overhead
and disembarks with dispatch

scanning the shifting crowd for Beatrice.
But she's still sitting in the airport bar
watching the jets land and take off,

take off and land like the mateless scissortail flycatcher
who sits on her barren nest and broods all April,
watching all the other birds hunt and gather fat worms

for their always open-mouthed chicks, just so
Beatrice nurses her drink and can't stop staring
out the window at the planes' comings and goings

as the birds' arrivals used to darken the early-season sky
snipping their tails to land on electric highlines:
Isn't that pale image her own reflection in the window?

Among all the kissing couples, Dante can't help thinking
how much older he feels: the places I've been, the things
I've seen, he sighs, standing two heads taller

than the crowd. As a professional basketball player
home from a winning season greets all his fans,
stooping to sign autographs, just so Dante

looks down on the clustered humanity waiting
for luggage to circle round the stainless steel carousel.
Where could my true love be? he wonders, as Orpheus

so near the human world of failure must have wondered,
his quivering song leading Euridice up from the banks
of Lethe where she was kneeling to drink, his head

turning to glance behind him, so Dante steps onto the gyreing
escalator, glides down into the bowels of the arriving flights
terminal where he'll stand in line another hour
waiting to clear customs.

AUGUST SINGULARITY

A funnel cloud pirouettes over the airport, declining
to touch down as jetliners and hawks circle
in rising spirals, fleeing the turbulence,
what's left of the sun and reflections of lightning
sparking their wings. On the local news at six,
Jill Valley's hair-do looks a little windswept,
broadcasting live from the Western Montana Fair.
Next week, she'll marry Channel 13's sportscaster
who's had his eyeliner tattooed on
for what promises to be a highfalutin affair.

The storm, she says, has just about blown over.
Look, the Ferris wheel is up and spinning again,
the cotton candy machines churn out pink sweetnesses.

In our top story tonight, a thirteen-year-old Missoula girl
reports she was hit by a blowdart. Police continue the search
for two Caucasian teenage males cruising Brooks Street in a
late model Ford pickup with a blowtube in the gunrack. In
silos across Montana, National Guardsmen stayed busy this
weekend replacing all the old intercontinental ballistic
missiles with new ones. And a quorum of last year's planning
committee voted to push the fair up a week to escape the low
pressure system that rumbles into town this same time every
year, but now

somehow a Holstein cow

has blown quite out of the barn,
drifts like a black and white splotched zeppelin
across the suburbs and over the South Hills.
Storm cellars empty all over the city as we go out
into a world scoured raw by rain and fat wind
where the saddle broncs stop bucking across
the rodeo arena, lawyers rest crucial cases,
cutthroat trout stop their wary slurping
as college professors turn off desk lamps,
slither out of basement offices, blinking
like miners emerging from earth's big belly
into the silence that yawns across clearcuts
when loggers kill their chainsaws
and even the nearly sawn through
Ponderosas teeter on their stumps
and look up and wonder.

CATASTROPHE ON SIXTH STREET

At the core of the day
a demolition derby driver
fresh back from the derby in Plains
tried to pass me on the left
while I was changing lanes
crumpled my pickup door

like the skulls long-dead Samson
crushed with the jawbone of an ass.
While Montana spiraled through its arm
of the Milky Way, the few bottles
of Olympia I had not already drunk
that Sunday afternoon silently turned

to foam on the passenger's side, cold
under steel caps. My parents confessed
not long ago I was a child unprepared for,
an after-church mistake on the '62 Ford's
back seat, the egg accepting one among
galaxies of sperm. While black holes gnawed

their way through any belts of matter
they could find, funneling energy through time
like water under Hoover Dam, Skoog sauntered
down from his upstairs apartment to see
what all the racket was about. Quarks
crashed through his nuclei, but he didn't seem

to mind. The demolition derby driver's boot abused
his well-used Chevy, whose crumpled steel fender
felt happy to know it was headed for the crusher.
The universe appeared to expand toward a final contraction,
fist of God, new stars fusing hydrogen into gamma rays.

This is why we buy insurance: the late sun
surely was in everybody's eyes that day.
Skoog and I went fishing anyway, opened
and sipped foamy beers, cast to rainbow trout
that couldn't resist rising while molten yellow
leaves struggled a bit, then hissed into the river.

EPIPHANY AT THE GOLDEN DRAGON FIREWORKS STAND

We're all agog
with the taste of gunpowder
still wound tight in bright tongues
of paper shipped like myth from China:

Black Cats. Whirling Birds. Vesuvius Fountains.
Place on Ground. Light Fuse. Move Away.
Morning Glories. Sparklers. Roman Candles.
Hold Away from Body.

But where have the popbottle rockets disappeared?
"You buy them over on the reservation,"
the Golden Dragon saleswoman says.
"But watch out for those ATF guys."

They set up surveillance at the border,
their unmarked van packed to the roof
with the confiscated firepower
of our youth. Suddenly I realize

that with a chunk of galvanized pipe,
a lit punk clenched between my teeth
I could launch a drive-by rocket
and force all the federal agents to bail out,
their sunglasses mirroring a blossoming van,
the zigs and zags of fireflies gone kamikaze,
upholstery blasted with the splat of sulfur

and nothing left to do
except cross their arms
over their badges and celebrate
a little.

FISHING IN WINTER

We sink maggot-tipped glow hooks down
black holes drilled through ice. Augers sound
like crazy horseflies, green with spring.
It's a carnival day, fishing
January in short-sleeved shirts.
Pickups parked across lake ice flirt
within the inevitable
thawing wind like horses stabled
too long in winter consider
the necessity of barn doors.
When the school of salmon moves in
electronic finders begin
their shrill beepings, schizophrenic
as alarm clocks on Mondays.
Pressure's low, the weatherman says
and catching silver's a quirk
of faith. So potbellied anglers
wake from whiskey dreams. Believers
in shadows swimming under ice,
we congregate under this slice
of God's huckleberry pie. The world
would end today if the sun whirled
around it like a choir's one tongue
whirls around the words of a gospel song.
Already it's so warm we sweat
as Kokanees fret in the heat,
flounder dry on ice, fling planets
of blood like the pomegranate
seeds Persephone ate to seal
her winter deal with the devil.
We drink whiskey, speak of good old days
when ice fishing meant a blue haze
of lustrous cold, a hell only Dante
could dream up. I've heard preachers say
that someday soon apocalyptic horsemen
will saddle up, mount, ride out, and then
our spun world will turn to mirror,
lions and lambs lying down together.
When love turns to hate salmon will have
augers and bait. You might save
your sinful soul by thinking twice
when, miracle of miracles,
wine and bread like strange icicles
ascend through black holes in blind ice.

DINNER OF THE MILLENNIUM

Even if there were only 500 ortolans left in the world, we should eat at least 50 of them.

-- Alain Ducasse, Chef.

The woman drapes a linen napkin
over her blonde hair like it's one of the seven veils,
blue eyes peeping out into the photographer's lens
as if she'd called the camera here. Coral lips,
ivory teeth, the tip of her tongue beginning
to taste the ortolan her delicate fingers lift there,
tiny rare songbird, plucked and cooked whole
on a rotisserie flown in from France.
Her lacquer-tipped nails grasp the beak.
She'll eat it still sizzling, guts and everything
else from the neck down. The embroidered cloth
holds in the aroma, protects fellow diners
in case something squirts out.

We look on
from the corner of this, today's front page art,
the course served piping hot, the woman who seems
pleased to pose like this, the hors d'oeuvre poised
at her mouth. Makes me want to join her and crunch
a little bird. It looks so good. I could open my mouth
and let a whole flock of ortolans swoop in, then
the Golden parakeets, Spotted owls, the Hooded cranes,
a rainbow of rainforest birds. I'd hinge my jaws wide
as wrought-iron city gates to welcome Black rhinos,
Red Wolves. Even Grey whales could navigate
between my monolithic molars two by two,
as if into the yawning maw of Noah's Ark
last time there was a flood.