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### Jailhouse Springs

Robert Hackett

*The University of Montana*

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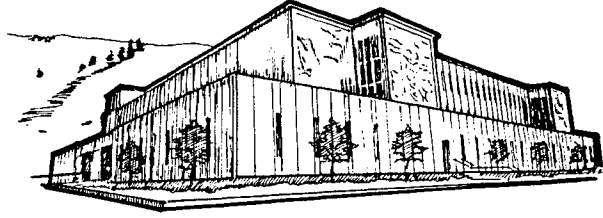
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Jailhouse Springs

By

Robert Hackett

B.A., Dartmouth College, 1986

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts


University of Montana

1993

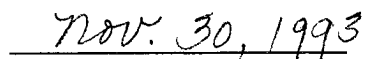
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# Jailhouse Springs

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## Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of some of these poems have appeared in the following journals:

*Camas*: “Meditation at Golconda”

*Poet Lore*: “Sick Farm”



1

## Painting the Circle

## The Camera

It was surprising, the beautiful way it rendered the rocks, the scarecrows, the black feathers. It was uncanny how it sensed the flavor of the season, the empty branches and the rifles. The river scuttling beneath the bridge, the abandoned nests. It was as if there were only October, no other imaginable light than jack-o-lanterns on cold porches. Every dead gourd seemed ready for the harvest. The film aspired to a perfection beyond the brown stubble and black ponds, beyond the crumbling cabin and the combines fanning the fields for miles. The film revealed houses that were no longer standing, fences where there were now parking lots, barns where there ought to have been nothing but shadows. And the camera propped on the pumphouse, shining in the moonlight.

Orange Street Bridge, January

I walk this bridge, cross over  
the winter-jammed river every morning  
to witness the evolution of ice  
in the night, the frozen continents  
crushing into ridge and foothill  
and valley, a sphere taking shape  
in the dark. Morning snow

covers the tracks  
of a northbound pack of dogs.  
What has become the eastern plain  
of the divide remains wild, beyond,  
a tundra of no tracks.

Names erupt from my mouth.  
The wind won't stake a claim.  
Animals leave only signs.

Like the first man  
with the whole cold creation  
before me, I choose to settle  
at the end of a dogleg valley  
with a southwest slope and a creek that runs  
full to song through September.

All winter long I sharpen my knives  
and preach to myself from the Old Testament.  
My wife finally flees the reek  
of old meat, and my daughter eventually marries  
a Swede from the desert down valley.  
The ridge keeps me isolated and nobody visits.  
It crests higher every spring until, at last,  
it sends a decade of glaciers  
that close the valley for good.

The thaw promises a change  
I won't believe in, one that threatens  
to erase this map  
I've come to know, to sweep  
away this island I hear  
thundering out my name.

## Soil

Imagine a civilization she said  
whose idol is soil not its green seed  
but its creation

deities of ice and canyon  
the glacial crush  
slow gods of river and wind  
shaped stone

carved feet the jump the crawl  
we arrive any way we can  
emerging or descending or resisting

imagine she said a creation intent on seeing  
calling itself up from dark  
to trunks of rain mouths of flowers  
to eat the blooms of ancient sea-bottoms  
tides dried to sockets  
to remember  
the vanishing of water

## Waiting for the Cats

The cats comb the night grass  
with their familiar black music.  
We huddle at the mouths of deep caves  
as the ice migrates closer and closer each year.  
Two million years of night and babies  
sense the watch, the way their jaws  
fit our bones perfectly.

Dinofelis.

We need to talk about you,  
find a way to see in the dark.

Terrible Cat.

Always questions of location.

Fear-Cat. The boys want to dance for you.

They want to chant away your appetite.

We grow cold imagining ways to kill you,  
arriving finally at stories

of blood and victory.

We're forever ready for the night to scream.

Cave-Cat, Fear-Cat.

We sing love songs waiting for you.

*for Bruce Chatwin*

## Sanderlings

The beach, with its stones  
 like commas, seems unwritten,  
     a weathered transition  
     between cliff and sand;  
     salt-pause of process.

Shorebirds skit in front  
     of draping breakers  
 backlit by the hot palette  
     of fire-swallowing horizon,  
 pink reflection of sky burning  
 on white belly feathers  
     of buff-breasted sanderlings,  
 gathered now at the frothy tongue  
     of tide's highest reach,  
 the black-billed dance

of foam and wing  
     suspended for that necessary moment  
 of stasis that cannot endure.

The sanderlings now charge  
 the retreating sea  
 in a frenzied hunt for worm  
     and mollusk that lasts only seconds  
 before they, too, fall back,  
     following the ocean's lead  
 of wave and spray.

Again, the sanderlings wait  
     at the surf's edge  
     for the unveiling of life  
 they know lies beneath  
 the surface.

## Almost Cider Time

The drifter has been sleeping in the orchard for a week. We see him each morning as he wakes and brushes the blanket of moths from his shoulders. One of his eyes is a storm on the bay and the other a swallow's wing. The moths lift like clouds and sift through the deer fences, past the cypress row, and into the meadows of wild radish, where hungry swallows swoop their fat white bodies and dusty wings. By twilight only the chosen return to the pale-washed apples dissolving like sugar in the full September moon. To the sour drifter's body that emerges to the sun like a mummy.

## Florida Creek Road

The Circle K flickers like a temple  
on the midnight road, marking the path  
like a pile of shivering stones, the pale roar  
of Arcturus sounding the boundary  
of farmers' summer fields, warning  
that everything beyond this constellation  
of corn and plow is claw.

At the fence-edge of the store's fluorescence  
an early '70s Volkswagen Bus  
lies gutted in a hemorrhage of oil,  
its rear engine hatch propped open  
in a dismembered bleat  
for one more chance to hide  
in the flock's dizzy center,

to never again realize  
the horror of the fringe,  
where the likely driver lurks  
with bearded face faintly lit  
and his paw-thumb thrust into shadow.  
By the time I stop to let him in,  
I'm ready to offer throat.



## Mona's Homesick Donut Hut

A few miles out of town  
disorder doesn't count  
as much. The carving swing  
of highway, the steep rise  
of ridge and cool stroke of creek  
keep things in their place.  
Mona's Donut Hut belongs here.  
At the counter, I flip  
through the newspaper's rentals.  
"Whachya lookin' for?"  
Mona asks in a steaming  
pour of coffee. Beyond  
the open window  
on a fencepost in the pasture  
a bluebird ponders  
her slow song,  
listening to the throated notes  
ring in the sweet-hay wind.  
She flies to a stand of ponderosa  
at the climbing edge of slope,  
to her hollow home  
in a rotted stump.

Mona slides over a chocolate donut  
on an aqua-rimmed plate.  
My coffee's gone cold.

If only I could find some  
clear, easy niche in this town,  
a rutted alley garage,  
a windowless basement  
with wrinkled paisley carpet,  
a bare 40-watt bulb  
dangling in a cold kitchen  
whose sink measures time

in loud, tinny drips,  
like the one in Mona's.  
If only I could arrange  
this new life like the neat,  
wiped rows in the glass cooler,  
bottles of Heinz and A-1  
in perfect lines next to  
the Tabasco and Worcestershire.  
But it's the use that creates  
its own space for things,  
the underbelly of an interstate bridge,  
a splintered lightning-struck pine,  
the trash can catching white drips of grease  
from the fan above the grill.

## Breakfast in Hungry Horse

The stuffed life-sized Elvis  
and one-armed Indian envy  
your freedom to turn, to leave.  
But you stay, recognizing  
the huckleberry pancakes and t-shirts,  
the juicy glass globes that dangle  
above the buffalo-blessed entrance  
bleed for you. You eat here every morning,  
breaking promises to the mounted wolverine,  
half-bear, half-you, a hybrid  
of oblivion. Bighorns pose  
in the wildlife sanctuary, alert, civilized.  
In the corner Elvis winks, swings his hips  
in one stiff circle, coaxing shudders  
from the married cashier. If the coffee  
spits at you one more time, you'll  
order mint tea and mean it. Who says  
you only live once? The mountain lion  
picks a copy of the Constitution  
in her hollow paws, plans to run  
for office once elk are equal.  
There's a crack in the counter  
the quarters you leave under your plate  
can't fix. Where the cafe ends  
and the souvenir shop begins is a border  
you tell yourself you don't want to cross,  
but those plastic pigeon-feathered tomahawks  
feel so good in your grip all you want  
is a fast horse, a leather suit,  
all you want is to kill  
your own wild breakfast.

## Sick Farm

Moths sprout in the mossy rain  
from moon-ripe cocoons,  
probe their deepest luminous attractions  
and vanish. Barbed wire fences  
wield their rusty fangs pointlessly,  
since the cabbages want to stay  
where the river water is sweet  
with kisses of trout  
and there's plenty of time  
to curl each new, not-yet-cabbage  
leaf into a healthy, twisted self  
worthy of teeth. A puddle  
near the beets frolics,  
a pool where cutworms and beetles,  
drunk with abundance, sing  
"There's no work like no work!"  
all night long. Nightcrawlers  
wave in the black breeze  
like wheat, shackling  
the dark in deep veins  
that tentacle cool roots  
with fog. The sick lose  
all imagination by morning.

## Putting Down the Instrument

We told the conductor we would play it right, next time, if we could take a walk that very minute. In this the flutes and tympanies were united. We locked the music in the square room with pinholes in the walls. It was June and the sidewalks smelled of rain. The conductor is an alright guy, but he never takes us anywhere. Detroit is Detroit, as the tuba player says. And you have to respect a body that survives such a horn. The puffy lips and varicose veins. The social stigma. His high school band teacher told him he was a born tuba player. It's only when he puts the instrument down and floats from his big chair out over the empty music stands like a disintegrating dandelion that he doubts it.

## Jailhouse Springs

My fingers smell like strange plants.  
In the shade of a juniper I scratch my slimy back.  
I lick my lips and continue  
walking through the canyon of roses,  
praising the absence of thorns,  
to the ruins where finches sing.

There, a ladder descends into an empty kiva.  
There are no voices.  
Six small holes in the mud wall  
look down at me where I stand.  
Rabbitbrush along the trail invites nothing to eat it.  
I imagine the hundred uses of corn as a weapon.

On the rock above the ruin,  
as high as the last man could paint,  
are three circles.  
One is full and white with green dots scored in vertical rows,  
One is white with two eyes,  
One is empty with three white bars.  
There are no other clues.

I scramble up to the passageway  
of the ledge. There is only one way in.  
Did the last man ever descend,  
satisfied, with his paint and grass brushes?

I crawl through the crack in the rock,  
and emerge head first into the light of the canyon.  
and peer out each of the six small eyeholes,  
I see myself staring at the circular images.  
I see myself striking flint and chert.  
I see myself drinking from the cold spring,

savoring the taste of the dark below.  
I see my horse sleeping in the shade of a cottonwood.  
I see a painted man hiding in the rocks behind me.  
I see my flute slip from my sandy hands.

Up close, the paintings reveal nothing.  
I hear stones being moved at the entrance  
of the passageway. I hear the sound of running feet.  
Alone in the canyon's last light,  
I sit and imagine what to paint  
in my own ochre circle.

2

## Boats and Smoke



## Return to Hungry Horse

The buffalo still waits on wheels at the cafe,  
but it's not funny anymore.  
All day long it's not funny.  
Inside, the museum does its best to cajole  
me into irony; the mortified ungulates,  
the guns, the plastic beachball huckleberries.  
When can I taxidermy *my* eyes?

I step back and forth across the border,  
erasing every dead detail from the scene,  
trying to imagine some other country  
where anything seems possible.  
I even imagine New Jersey,  
but the buffalo is there, posed on its squeaky silver wheels  
at the edge of the continent  
like a true patriot.

Fixing its hoary gaze out across the waves,  
the buffalo rolls into the hungry surf, foaming first over the black hooves  
then higher, up to the wispy, arcing bull-shaft,  
the furious eyes, the horns, the surging crest of shoulder.  
The buffalo charges on like a buffalo now, spewing froth  
and a line of bubbles that trails off  
past the jetty as the serious coulees  
draw down to the bottom  
of a real, expansive sea.

## Tanganyika

The boats, with their ribbed nets winging off the rails, struggle like insects on the water. The boys command flea-red dogs to swim in the pink water. They whack each other in the head with sticks while their fathers gut fish on the shore. You gaze across the lake to the silhouette of another country. I smell smoke. Soon the boys assemble before us. One of the smaller boys approaches with one hand behind his back, as if to offer something. I make to accept what appears to be a playing card. He turns it slowly, revealing the ace of spades, and as I grasp it he vows, "Ce n'est plus à moi." A chrome fish jumps in the lake.

In my palm, the ace points west, to a plume of smoke whistling across the water where the monkeys experiment with fire. I hold the card to my lips and kiss that black heart for what must be seconds before I tuck it between my belt and belly. The boys begin twisting all that they have seen in their minds as you start to dance in the lavender light.

## Changing Trains, Irun

I descend to a cornflower sea rising to the green cliffs. A boy waves furiously from the stern of a low blue boat trolling out to the shoals. As if he knew. The electric rails are dull as pencils in the sun. Pointing to a moored dinghy, the boy urges me to join him. Eels as thick as legs lurk in the shallows. I can see their dumb jaws from here as they swim behind the boy and his boat like guitars. The word flares up: "Rescue." I smell jasmine as I crush the cigarette. The boy is shaving his great grey beard as the eels pop the waves like trout. I am on the verge of speaking Swedish to the quiet girl from Portsmouth. I burn my fingers on the matches. I watch the jade sea scatter blue splinters in a perfect radius. I hand the conductor two strange coins he appears to recognize and climb back on board.

*Coffea Arabica*

I.  
 A lull is always  
     a good time to start a shift.  
     The sleek metal counters  
  
 are all wiped clean  
     and the gently steaming  
     obedient machines hum  
  
 to operas and concertos.  
     Outside the buildings grow  
     under gentle winter rain  
  
 like shrubs  
     with tap-roots worming  
     to the energy-pith,  
  
 erupting in a column of fire  
     and nervous glass flowers.  
     Across Second Avenue  
  
 looms the Federal Building,  
     whose seventh floor is filled  
     with DEA and FBI agents  
  
 in sweat pants and gym shoes.  
     They try to look like regular guys.  
     I know this, because  
  
 I'm their connection; I represent  
     the cartel. Our clients are bankers  
     lawyers secretaries developers  
  
 timber executives bike messengers  
     accountants architects -- all addicts.  
     We deal to the monolith

of marble and steel,  
    one-block wide  
        two-blocks high.

II.  
The shanties of Embu  
have aluminum roofs  
like rusty flamingos poised  
for flight that lift against gravity  
away from their plots  
    in this dusty design  
    of hovel.

The people are better  
than their dwellings.  
They walk miles each day,  
past the paling dead corn,  
with sprouting backs  
    and speaking hands  
    and listening feet.

Now and then, however,  
a man goes wielding a panga.  
You can read it in the Nairobi papers,  
all about the strange  
behavior of villagers up north;  
    a blind-fury of beer  
    and frustration, a butchering

of wife, neighbor, boss.  
Scarlet strokes of steel  
and black. Blood stripes  
the walls like a cage,  
and the sticky red earth  
    leaves its mark  
    with every step.

III.  
Today's Coffee of the Day is Kenya AA.  
    Medium-bodied, with a slight tang  
        and a hint of berry in the bouquet,  
  
a new crop.  
    On the store's walls hang photographs  
        of dark warehouses  
  
and burlap sacks bulge  
    with hard green beans  
        and tired-looking men  
  
hiding their teeth.  
    Next to the display case  
        a group of workers  
  
rests on its labored  
    sacks of coffee,  
        gazing as if in a theater  
  
at our company's buyer  
    as he expounds on the qualities  
        he wants in a bean.  
  
He holds a bean in his hand  
    as if he's about to eat it.  
        It's impossible not to notice  
  
the older man in the back row  
    who stares beyond the loading bay,  
        bright with equator-light,  
  
lost, it seems, in a vision  
    of a time when the land  
        didn't need to be worked,

IV.

*Coffea Arabica.*

Qahwah in Arabic. Kahve in Turkish.

Caffe in Italian. Coffee.

Seven centuries from  
the Yemeni port of Mocca

to Asia Minor and the Mediterranean,  
where the Italians got serious  
and applied themselves  
to the alchemy of that perfect  
bitter extraction.

It starts with roasting,  
the pulling of oils from the hard ovule  
by fire. Then the pulverizing  
of bean to dust in the mill  
like rich, fertile earth.

The transcendence of aroma.  
I journey in my mind as my hands  
work the grinder and tamp  
the portafilter with the deliberation  
of a junkie with spoon and candle.

The process demands  
to be done right, and gives  
its own pleasure in the doing.  
The machine arouses water  
to the edge of boil, and doles it out

by the ounce. I push  
the button and sense the swelling  
of water and coffee,  
the sound of pressure,  
the anticipation of that slow

black stream. The pour  
foams in the glass,  
a three-layered perfection  
of espresso, crema, and the orgy  
of the two as they slowly disentangle,

a smooth brown foam.  
The first, and last, sip is deep,  
spraying espresso in every corner of the mouth,  
tongue, teeth, lips, throat,  
each to taste that bitter wonder of bean.

V.  
Lanceolate leaves, like spears.  
Dark Abyssinian warriors  
crushed fire-berries of *arabica*,  
rolled them with balls of fat. Skin-  
pouches of smoky food  
    for the night run,  
    the dawn raid.

Shadow-chant return  
to the deep-veined highland plains  
of mountain-tendriled *arabica*,  
evergreen savannah shrub, lava-  
flowered shaman of soil and rain,  
    desert gift of power,  
    plant-child of volcanos.



## Forgetting the Temple

Let's leave the camera at home this time. I want to forget it all. The way the sun in Crete blossoms on your neck. The way your neck wraps around mine, and we kiss like stamens wild with the wind. Do they still run those mines in the hills where the parrots are extinct? And that feeling every time we change money: gratification. No tricks. Just temples half-buried, emerging as stones, and a bald man flapping in the dust. And those boats, the way they sink full of eels like a heart or a fresh-minted coin skimming across the waves. Like a bee too fat to leave the flower.

## For the Ferryman: Five Crossings

### I. Akula

Geography and palm wine win again.  
 The ferry captain, drunk on the far shore,  
 called it a day at three. We set up camp  
 near a sandy mud-walled storehouse.  
 Mosquitos muster in the twilight like the crowd  
 of mumbling men and children  
 who point at the tent. A boy  
 asks to go inside -- he climbs through the screen door,  
 traces the arcing dome with his eyes,  
 humming to show he's not afraid.  
 A small market has budded among the stranded travelers:  
 shrunken dried fish, peanuts, avocados, canned  
 Canada herring, a tea stand. Night falls fast  
 and the fires of Akula flare across the river.  
 The boy steps out of the tent,  
 cool but proud, and reports:  
 "It's like a sky without stars."

### II. Likoni

The sweet curry sun  
 shines off blue swells.  
 Breakers roll sapphire into Mombasa Bay.  
 Crows drift from branch to branch  
 in scarlet-flowered trees  
 while quick-eyed boys sell frozen juice  
 to the line of ferry passengers  
 waiting to cross to Likoni and the southern villages.  
 On the thick wooden rail across from me  
 leans a young Masai with long ochre *marani* braids  
 tied with beads, a red cloth draped over his shoulder  
 and tucked at his flat dark waist.  
 It strikes me that we're probably the same age,  
 a savannah-walker waiting for a boat,

the humid air of the coast  
drawing beads of sweat to skin  
more used to dust than clouds;  
and me, a traveler in the throng for no other reason  
than to be somewhere different,  
going nowhere, really,  
waiting to arrive.

### III. Kilifi

The Kilifi Inlet breathes in close,  
thick-leafed edge of forest and sea.  
A blind man stands in the shade  
beside the bus, rocking back and forth,  
haunting the air with his lonely flute,  
white hair and creamy eyes,  
lips quivering, dry and windy.  
His son sounds a drum at his side,  
bringing rhythm to the hollow, lofting notes  
that swoop through the air like swallows.  
I drop a few shillings into their empty can,  
trying not to break the beat, scraping the music  
with the tinny clank of coins,  
and move with the advancing crush of wheels  
to the open mouth of ferry.

### V. Tana River

The driver sights the wooden tracks  
and eases the bus full of chickens,  
baskets, and perfectly silent babies  
onto the ferry. It sinks  
with the weight, but doesn't go under.  
The passengers file beside the bus  
and grab hold of the rope  
stretching across the river.  
Upriver, the Tana highlands

howl with baboons  
while the current draws down  
to the mangrove-scrub coast of the Indian Ocean.  
It's hot, and I'm glad to be standing, outside.  
I think of all the sleepy trips  
I've taken on Greyhound, all the rivers  
we cross unknowingly in the dark,  
how next time I want to pull my way  
across the Columbia,  
the Mississippi,  
the Snake.  
At the driver's cry  
we all lean back on the rope, children  
and grandparents, engaged  
in the work of travel.  
As we approach the opposite shore,  
we stop pulling  
and let the ferry drift  
onto the red mudbank.  
The rope burns my hands.

#### V. Oubangui

The customs officer in Zongo  
wants a present, "something small,"  
to remind him of us. I tell him  
in perfect English, "Not a chance."  
He smiles and points to Karen's camera.  
She stuffs it in her pack. He likes my watch.  
I put it in my pocket; everybody's smiling.  
The ferry from Bangui, our first big city since Nairobi,  
won't be here for another fifteen minutes.  
We see it now leaving the crowded dock across the river.  
The officer suggests things he'd like,  
and for fifteen minutes we tell him no,  
walking the line between upsetting him  
and being firm. Finally, he waves  
us away in disgust. The piroque arrives,

its 20hp Johnson motor spitting a rainbow of oil.  
We settle in for our last crossing, still glad  
for no bridge. The rapids downstream  
throw fists of spray high into the air,  
and chant the river faster and faster  
in a flume of rock and roar.  
The ferryman noses us into the current  
like a compass needle.  
The river smells like a river.

## Isaiah 18: The Promised Land

Beyond the rivers of Sudan  
there's a land where the sound of wings is heard,

where men hear feathers sing  
prophecies of hollow bones, of delivery

from stony towns of calloused feet  
and flaming beaks. They hear

the throats of the enemy,  
Ears, the cut of wind.

The sound of wings.

Beyond the rivers of Sudan  
The desert doesn't resist

the moon's ice, the hatred of sun.  
It clutches the fallen frames of camels,

the symmetry of skin, the black circle  
of eyes.

Yes, there it is.  
I can hear it now:

the sound of wings

pulsing over carrion, slicing  
the breath

with an edge  
like, "Isaiah."

## The Camel

Though we'd promised ourselves to be smart, the camel was cute. We puzzled over the eternal question, dromedary or bactrian? Which would we prefer? It seemed like a good idea to have Ahmed take our photo in front of the Great Pyramid on his camel, fake turbans blowing in the wind, my white legs dangling uselessly. "Free," Ahmed said, "no charge." The photo, the ride, all of it. We started out in the direction of Memphis, and I was deep into a consideration of Libyan oases when the moon crested above the city, still alive in the twilight. You thought you'd figured out the thirteen meanings of the beetle hieroglyph, none of which was "honey." Ahmed kept leading us farther into the white desert, but eventually grew tired, and climbed onto the animal to ride with us. At the edge of the horizon, beneath the first pale star, the shredded flags of an outpost lolled in the dying wind. Ahmed, trying to steer for the stone compound, shouted commands to the long hairy ears; the cold sand swallowed his voice. The camel, snorting its own wild language, turned to the opposite sky and walked on into the night, invincible.

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Night Birds



## My Old Room

Now that I've returned to this small room  
with my thumbharp and my hunting knife,  
the band can begin.  
My old bed, beneath which all the instruments  
are hidden, performs a perfect masquerade.  
The goldfinches outside the window  
scatter sun in the shade of a hemlock.  
My voice is still locked in the closet  
and won't be let out until it promises to sing.  
The walls are bare and remember nothing.  
Not the loud, barbaric departure  
or the studious months I spent away in the desert.  
Only the spiders are the same,  
spinning their metal webs and starving,  
listening to the distant choirs  
across the marsh,  
the cattails falling one by one.

## Meditation at Golconda

It cinches the heart  
tighter with every repetition—  
Lovelock.

Here rivers vanish into sand.  
Here the Union Pacific howls  
in the perfect silence  
of new-moon night, charging  
over sea-floor sweeps  
and rising rides of marine ridges,  
lone headlight beaming  
to the edge of darkness, steel  
rails groaning through empty canyons.  
Here the gas station attendant counts  
my change twice, wrong twice.

Funnels of dust race along  
the hardpan, stirring  
the settled voices  
of sage-fallen ranches,  
a shadeless separation of weathered boards  
and dried-up wells,  
evaporated prayers for rain  
which always comes in a silted torrent  
that carries away the soil  
and squanders it in a muddy  
trail of stones and clay and lime.

From the driver's seat  
a connection  
is almost believable.  
Climbing Golconda summit,  
a blue Chevy pickup passes me slowly.  
A man with Ray-Bans  
and a full mustache  
drives, and against his right side presses his girl,  
so close in this country so vast

as if to bury that feeling between them,  
shield it from slipping through the cracked wing-window.

My lips shrink  
in the hot driving wind.  
The interstate stretches to the horizon,  
where earth and sky writhe  
like serpents, spirits,  
cheatgrass dancers  
of stone and blood,  
the ancient walkers,  
their long black hair  
and calloused feet,  
    the turning quiet  
    of basin and range,  
    the light flapping  
    of a hide door  
in the cooling wind  
of twilight.

## Oklahoma Here I Come

My van craves this Oklahoma gasoline.  
 Every one of its 91 octanes.  
 Things are like that here, the racing,  
 the crashes. Not an octane wasted.  
 There's always something to die for,  
 the way the Red River wrinkles  
 like a skirt on our southern border,  
 the Panhandle, Muskogee in March,  
 the wild way we touch  
 just a little corner of Colorado.  
 There's always someone in the back seat  
 whining for home.  
 O! Oklahoma.

Tomorrow we dedicate the reservoir  
 to a rich widow from Tulsa.  
 She may arrive by helicopter  
 but the media doesn't think so.  
 She's the one who called Cesar Chavez  
 a prairie nigger, and never took it back.  
 Her grandfather was a Sooner,  
 in before the bell to claim half the Canadian River.  
 He found arrowheads in his fields for decades  
 and cursed every one.

Once the reservoir is full  
 and the stripes are painted in the parking lot,  
 we can boat until we're sick.  
 Sick of the sun, sick of the noise, sick of the rainbows  
 of gasoline expandind like a galaxy.  
 The dust rarely settles;

we are a reckless people,  
 full of the faith of the forgotten.  
 The derricks in the distance don't rust.  
 They'll creak on the horizon forever,  
 even after the oil is gone  
 and the coins have disappeared.  
 All we'll have to do is watch  
 that steel hammer strike  
 again and again  
 until the rock finally pays.

## Letter to Mom from Rock Creek

Dear Mom: the bighorns have moved up high,  
away from the yapping mongrel that haunts  
the sagging grey barn. The weather fades  
it badly, like that horrible house  
the Huntley sisters shared, all those crying  
cats and shade, the chicken shed rotting  
by the stone wall that separated the fire road  
from those rusty cleaving witches. Remember  
those phone calls we'd get for the one sister  
who talked, Elizabeth. I can't forget those twilight  
walks up to their driveway, the gloomy way  
their door splintered silently, the pine-needed  
earth undulating with cats. I never  
understood why the white-haired sister, dumb,  
always answered the door with a face like an oven.  
There are no witches here, only ghosts  
of Indians and the steady hold of trout  
who meet the river head on and flash.  
It's February, not too cold, but the meadows  
are months away. Hearing that old dog bark  
makes me think how empty the kitchen must be  
without that lame friend, Nazareth.  
I suppose there's nothing left for old friends  
to do but leave, even as we die with them.  
Deer tracks wind down from the bluffs  
to the cottonwoods and run with the creek,  
while the sun threatens snow and melt both,  
which seems right. We're always becoming something else  
and flowing on. Happy Valentine's Day. Love Bob.

## Howe's Clearing

Each May the nannyberries slowly creep  
over the south stone wall. A decade fails  
to change things. I mow them down as saplings,  
carry stones I find beneath the garden,  
dull granite pilgrims, to strengthen the walls.  
I know it's futile, piling stone on stone  
to stay the surge of pine and birch. The forest  
craves the sagging barn, the sour ghosts of apples.

The old farmer's rocks run straight, carving out  
the borders of beyond, where wild began  
and settled ended. Far enough from house  
and barn to call it pasture, close enough  
to call it home. I work while I can, add  
my sweaty stones to keep these walls alive.

## K Street

Everyone seemed a stranger in that neighborhood.  
 Even the tan German two houses down  
 who yelled at you every time you cut across his lawn  
 turned out to be a Finn.  
 The only place we belonged  
 was that park down by the waterway,  
 the Intracoastal Waterway  
 that seemed so *natural* it had to be fake.  
 That park opened up for us, welcomed us  
 after work, with our corncob pipes  
 heaped with Borkum Riff that reeked of storms,  
 The pelicans answered all our questions intelligently.

Beyond the houses, along the sandy alleys  
 that stretch their telephone lines all the way to Georgia,  
 I've found another world, out on the Dixie Highway.  
 There's a man who owns a Greek deli,  
 with a moustache that defines Greek,  
 and Cuban cafes where you can live  
 out your entire life with nothing but coffee and sugar.  
 There's always bad music blaring  
 from behind the ferns,  
 and a woman with three brothers who'll cash your check.

Do you remember that old woman who lived across the street,  
 the one they arrested for watering her lawn  
 on a Thursday? After you left  
 she swore she knew you.  
 She was convinced you were the grandson  
 who burned all her presents,  
 or a delinquent godchild with amnesia  
 who spent the night once on his way to Ft. Lauderdale.  
 I told her that was impossible, that we were brothers  
 and our grandmother crocheted afghans  
 in a nursing home in the Poconos  
 and sent us savings bonds at the holidays.

I tried smoking that pipe you left  
and mine at the same time—it's too much.  
That smell makes me look for a fishing pole,  
but nothing bites around here  
with this foreign moon haunting the palm trees  
and the night birds rearranging their songs  
so that every morning I have to learn them again.



## Variations on Vern

Isn't it always the trouble with Vern,  
his nocturnal habits, the way  
he won't stop feeling the ferns?

That, and his constant whacking of the drum.  
"Music," he says, "keeps me sane,  
just like always." The trouble with Vern

is he doesn't realize we watch his strange Eastern  
dancing at night in the garden, a pain  
he won't stop feeling. The ferns

may or may not be magic. It's not our concern,  
but we have noticed how the rain  
always seems to trouble Vern;

rose-petals fall in the storm  
all day. The ghost remains.  
It won't stop. Feeling the ferns,

spiny, and cold as rivers,  
Vern never complains.  
Isn't it always trouble with Vern?  
He never stops feeling the ferns.

## My Neighborhood

The young girls next door, the ones who laugh when Mr. Feldman slips on his frozen front steps, those sweet children find my bald head as funny as an injury. I want to introduce them to my mother, who died with hair as thick as lint, and tell them, "See, this is how we change. Each of your mothers is dying, even as Feldman cracks his spine on the stoop." My eyes are migrating, like a flounder's, to the top of my head, to the zenith of that luminous bulb from which the bravest of the girls won't remove her stare. I wiggle my veins, rolling them like a surf. "Amazing," she says, "I can see him thinking."

## The Rounds: Franklin County, Vermont

The old black lab rests its head on his paws  
lying in the circle worn hard by the twelve-year chain,  
the forced watch of a barn that never moves. A cool rain  
pulls the June grass higher. The crooked rows

of corn in the fields grow well enough  
for farmers more familiar with milk and the ice-bite  
of Champlain winter than the arcing height  
of a solstice sun. Claude turns from the feed trough

as Pete walks down to the barn. It's the second time  
he's come here in two weeks; a lot  
with milk prices so low. But mud brings foot-rot  
and every cow counts. Some things you can't deny.

Breech-calves, cast withers, twisted stomachs,  
preg checks. The rubber-gloved arm of science  
probes the black-and-white row of Holsteins,  
reaching to feel uterus through intestine. "I'd say five weeks,

Claude," and on to the next. Claude marks it down.  
Three lame cows and two with mastitis, swollen teats  
from the full-udder drag. The morning-lit  
barn groans. Manure reeks in a buzzing mound.

Out here, farms like Claude's never seem to end,  
a thousand cows from Swanton to Highgate  
on the Canadian line in misted meadows await  
the cloud-call of stubborn overalled men

who tolerate a new vet before their trust is won.  
These farm have been in the same families for years,  
Magneault, Ferguson, Rocheleau, Grenier.  
Pete can't tell them much. They know what they want,

and as he nears the truck, cows all done,  
the lab lifts his head to bark, an instinct  
gone hoarse. Claude eyes Pete to see what he thinks  
about putting the old dog down;

Pete can't refuse. He kneels over the lab where it lies  
and rubs its deaf ears. His work is about lives,  
both ends of one. The needle flows when Claude gives  
a nod, the steel stroke of master as it shivers and dies.

## All There Is

You say there's only wild onions and rock,  
dipping your white breathing feet into the lake.

Wild onions and rock and water  
I say, taking off my shirt.

Wild onions and rock and water and sun  
you say, opening your hand.

I vow there's only wild onions,  
rock and water and sun

and desire.  
Yes, you say,

look at the way those trout devour  
the clouds as they float upon the lake.

## Making Beds

This is the face of swollen roots  
and folded sod, the cold grip  
of stones, the transformation of worms.  
The weave of quackgrass stares  
its bleached frenzy of blind runners  
that stitch a pasture tight.  
It's amazing how like graves  
these raised beds look, as if cultivating  
corpses. Montana spring keeps throwing  
hail at puckered tulips and flames  
at dried-out range, trying to patch  
the cracked order of seasons.

Fathers. It's not right to see them fall  
with so much left unfinished, the loss  
a first planting of the unfamiliar  
that in time grows stranger, ripening  
into a sweet scarred flower until finally  
we harvest an abstraction we can identify.  
This is the succession of bleeding

knuckles and tired kisses,  
the rake's iron teeth  
a last caress. Weeds burn  
in a pile of their own decay.  
We've imagined this land into something fertile  
where what remains of the sour rot  
stinks like something we can use.