

1996

# King of Sweden | [Poems]

Ed Skoog  
*The University of Montana*

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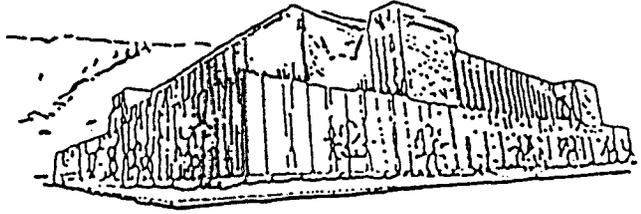
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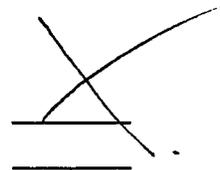
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King of Sweden

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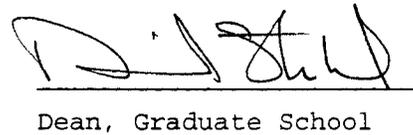
Ed Skoog

B.A. Kansas State University, 1993

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
University of Montana  
1996

Approved by:

  
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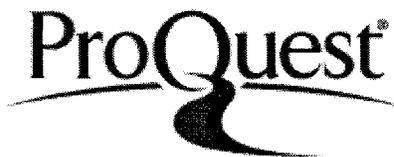


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These poems appeared or will appear in the following magazines:

"Crowd" as "Variations on the Theme of Crowd(1)" in *CutBank*

"Son of Crowd" in *Third Coast*

"The Genuine Suffering of Lawyers" in *Sonora Review*

"To the King of Sweden" in *Teacup*

"Interview" and "Math" in *Chariton Review*

"Elegy for P.N." in *Talking River Review*

Several of these and other poems were published in a chapbook, *Tool Kit*, which won the University of Montana's Merriam-Frontier Award, in 1995.

1.

## THE GENUINE SUFFERING OF LAWYERS

That these stumblers know they know what suffering  
is and know they have not suffered, that the secretary  
hordes dark chocolate in her credenza, that the pledge

of temperance hangs pastel and Victorian above her desk,  
saying, "Believing it to be better for all, we promise  
to abstain from intoxicating drinks," that the plangency

of an alcoholic's day is the lapping of heartbreak, mortgage,  
and age, that aged clients die in encouraged nursing  
homes and the young with troubles find counsel

their own age, as lovers tend to stay in their own decade,  
that it is easy to hate and hard to even say love to save  
your own life or anothers', that the art of circumlocution,

that is to say, is not poetic nor legal but the essence of eloquence,  
as essential as the dance step an orator assumes,  
that eloquence is a fear of touching or being touched,

that touching is Brand X of desire, the touchstone  
the absence of which is suffering, that the accumulated points  
on a legal pad equal nothing but a per-hour rate--

these are agreed-upon facts. The lawyer who stands in the tiled  
office bathroom mid-morning, full of coffee, trying to pull  
down the zipper with his arthritic hand, has suffered. His partner

in the basement tinkering with a screwdriver above his head,  
trying to make the ancient furnace work, has suffered,  
chest opened three times heroic to doctors for repair.

Here it is whisky kept under the desk for after deals  
and, beside *Black's Law*, a shaker of martinis, mixed to pour  
after lunch, a soup and salad at the bull table in the Top

of the Tower with others who had genius planted in their lives  
that never grew, whose children are bright and spouses  
mournful. Still, the retired chief of railroad attorneys

steps reluctant off the downtown bus' morning route.  
At eighty with blown eyes he is the presence of suffering  
as he peers into the pond of a magnifying glass

at out-of-print books, muttering, words, words  
words. At lunch, plied for stories, he speaks this story  
slowly towards the blur shape of companions.

## SINGING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*"Long ago he was one of the singers,  
But now he is one of the dumbs."*

*-Edward Lear, "How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear."*

The room at the end of the marble hall  
can hardly contain  
the large voice pouring from their bodies,  
singing the melody of not  
in music "class,"  
the woman at the front a music  
"teacher;" but as they fall flat  
into their next selves, as they grow into  
their faces, their hands,  
the singers will recall  
from somewhere dark their pull  
lets up with each trick taught by adults:  
the last knot in a shoelace,  
drinking one-handed  
from a glass; to sing the melody of rot.  
No, right here, right  
now they become terrible through volume,  
evil without tempo, cruel  
as they crawl out  
from their high notes.  
When I am a child again,  
I will be loud.  
I will drown  
rule, roar beyond my body,  
and scream  
to taste the iron of my lungs.

## TO THE KING OF SWEDEN

A squirrel sleeps in the mailbox,  
and I've run out of Nixon and Miles Davis stamps,  
so this is not a letter, King of Sweden, this is a mental address,  
from the center of my brain where country music videos  
are remembered before I drift off to sleep.  
Sleep. Every night before I die I think  
I should write down the steps I took to get there,  
the relaxation of the brow, the pressure points of the inner elbow,  
the order of forgetting, but then I'm being chased  
or devising a new scheme to arrange something I can't describe.  
This is homage to you, King of Sweden, wherever you are,  
Sweden I suppose, though I think you may only reside  
in Cooper Olsen's grandmother's apartment in Topeka, Kansas,  
at the end of the hallway by the bathroom door. Your portrait there,  
in the shadows of the hall above a floral arrangement and the phone,  
stared at me one Christmas when I ate my dinner there, with strangers,  
the widows of her bridge club, and Cooper the only child  
to whom Christmas means nothing, nor St. Lucia Day,  
a holiday I know through elementary school's International Foods Week.  
There's some kind of cookie they distributed with her name,  
after the spaghetti, the black-eyed peas, the jello with kiwi fruit,  
which we ate with cheap chopsticks. Then they took away our chopsticks  
because of the softness of our eyes. Your portrait, King of Sweden,  
came to me the other day as I was driving through Missoula, Montana,  
driving home from the tobacco store and thinking of dirty poems,  
that there's not enough of them to go around. This isn't a dirty poem,  
either, and this I regret. It's not very much of a poem, either,  
by which I mean it's too talky or doesn't push the image enough,  
it's the kind of a poem some good readers might say wants more,  
more, more. And it does want more. It's a hungry poem,  
as hungry as I imagine you to be, King of Sweden, every night,  
after looking at maps of Sweden, flags of Sweden, the earth of Sweden.  
The other day, but not the same day as I was thinking about you  
in terms of the lack of dirty poems(a connection I don't understand  
though I believe in it), but an entirely different other day,

(no stanza break)

a woman I was flirting with was asking me what kind of name I had, and there's no really good answer for that. I can say it's Swedish, like yours, but it was invented in Kansas four generations back by another poor dumb Swede who as the youngest of eleven Eriksons was unable to wield the family name a minute longer because of some forgotten sensibility perhaps invented by another King of Sweden. Someone picked this name, which suits me fine, but listen to me go on and on. It's as though I can't stop myself, it's as though I'm about to say something important, but I know I'm not going to. Important things, like decrees, are for those like you, King of Sweden, and it keeps you in your throne. Stay in your throne. I will never go to Sweden, that is, at this point I have no plans to go to Sweden, though I'm thinking about moving again, either back home to Kansas where I'll work in an Abstract Insurance office, a place where they do things I don't understand, (a statement which could apply to most places); or New York to grow a beard, or even, I've been thinking, to Zanzibar, where although I'd have to brave poisonous adders, heat, the enduring odor of cloves, it seems a person could make some kind of a life for a while. Perhaps I'm meant to go to Ireland to pursue my lost loves, or California to break into the movie industry as a character actor, or Chicago to sell cigarettes to older women near the Russian Baths. or maybe, just maybe, to stay here in Montana and take up hunting or the anti-hunting cause, learn to throw lime green paint on fur coats; in any event, fact of the matter is, I'm unlikely to become the next King of Sweden, and no offense but that's the only way I see myself moving to any of the towns my atlas shows exist in Sweden. Seven generations ago there was someone who would become part of me who was a fisherman on the lake that forms an eye in your country. (It's a very phallic country, by the way. Was that your idea? Perhaps your entire country is a dirty poem after all.) He drowned, and his wife moved to Kansas and married a man who was also from Sweden. So it went for years. Swedes screwing Swedes thousands of miles from Sweden, so much so that today, the eighth of November, 1995, I feel no affinity for the word, "Swede." I feel no loyalty toward you, Kingsley, not even the vague affection which bristles in some chests like a hedgehog for some Kings.

## THE ROAD GOES ON FOREVER, THE PARTY NEVER ENDS

I do not apologize for Hutchinson Kansas, where the tequila  
 that night became the Mexican vacation we had dreamed of,  
 and waking on the front porch to the grey silver of Mississippi Kites  
 floating high above our prairie. The questions was to rise  
 from the porch, or to never rise. Whatever I do next: curl up  
 in a shed and shudder from rat poison, or put back on my suit  
 and walk through the doors of a law school, or go to work  
 for Goodyear in Topeka, Kansas, where a guy I know

is making sixteen dollars an hour working next to his father,  
 at some step in assembly-line rubber tire manufacture,  
 (or nothing); whatever I do, my initials are on the wall  
 of a sod house in Kinsley, Kansas, which the locals call Midway,  
 U.S.A. I have seen in my travels a dozen towns self-named Midway,  
 but it's not news the maps we've drawn are careless. It is also not news  
 that a particular summer squash resembles former President Nixon,  
 nor Jesus, a dead son, former first lady Pat Nixon, nor J.F.K.

I don't apologize for night, I don't apologize for poison,  
 but I do think that the maps we've drawn of Kansas are careless,  
 that the gophers peering up at the highway from wormy caves  
 must doubt their eyes when I drive by, they thump their tails  
 and huddle in the center of the mammal hive. That was the week  
 of the Kansas State Fair. I wrote a phone number on the back of a poem.  
 Here are four versions of my face. The sanctuary of the photo booth  
 may have saved me, with its thin curtain, from the assassinations

of any crowd, even a loving series of Kansans watching a pig race,  
 the young girls emerging from the garden show, the old men  
 dishing out ice cream and cigarettes at the Kiwanis stand.  
 I would toast the agricultural university I there represented,  
 but instead I lay back down my head on a guitar case  
 and watched the woman in a sun dress lift a flesh-colored squash,  
 and heard her say, "Look at this one, it has the happiest face."  
 She was doing an impression of a herself who hadn't noticed us,

(stanza break)

three young men passed out on a front porch, guitars and banjos and a stand-up double bass lain in all directions from our bodies. She was pretending she wouldn't call the police if by noon we didn't move. But I had begun to move, kicking away the cat that licked salt from between my toes. The night before, before the tequila bottle appeared, and before we needed to sing every sad song we half-knew, the three of us had driven out to Kinsley, Kansas, the boyhood home of Dennis Hopper,

to piss our initials in the walls of a sod house.

This sod house is made of dirt, Shawn Bruce said. Shawn among us remained a reporter for the Hutchinson News, so he knows just how to put things. The roof is grass, he said, the floor is earth. We drove back to Hutch, Shawn pointing out where the town queer (reputed) tried to make a go of a discotethque in the middle 1980s, and the parking lot where Shawn's brother was busted for selling a very little bit of dope to a cop last spring. Dope is good

if you have to live there and won't leave, especially if you're the kind of a person who should leave (who are the most likely children to stay.) But still, the gardeners call newspapers to validate their claim to squash that look not only human, but famous. And that's all I really want, too. I have quit Kansas and the Kansas State Fair, even the tumbling Ferris wheel the Future Farmers of America make out in after dark. Shawn Bruce still edits copy, but in Dodge City, not Hutch: a sandal hanging off his big toe as he smokes a Kool at a verb tense.

## CARS OF 2000

If I had a magazine, I'd read it. Eat chips on the couch  
 with the television on, and read about the trends  
 I may either define myself by, for or against, jumping  
 on the sporty yellow bandwagon with a nose ring  
 or the latest album by Pavement, especially if I play  
 that third track. What's the name of that song?  
 Track Three, I believe, followed by Track Four.  
 Ranch chips, certainly. Or cheddar cheese, or even  
 chili cheese Fritos, so good though you have to brush  
 every tooth afterward, and if you have a date,  
 brush twice, and gargle. But it's worth it. I'll tell you  
 A few other things that are worth "it:" a three-day affair  
 with an old girlfriend's best friend even though it means  
 you won't ever talk to a whole group of old friends  
 in the old ways again, going to church once in a while  
 (never the same church) even though they'll want  
 your address and you'll get church notes for years.  
 On the other hand, a leaflet from the Korean Baptists  
 could give you some sense of the "American Experience,"  
 and the occasional circular from the Methodists  
 could make you think twice about going downtown  
 the night you were fated in some books to crash  
 driving home drunker than Shorty Brown, drunker  
 than a tick. Some churches will encourage you to shout  
 "We should be FREE! We should be FREE! FREE! FREE!"  
 whereas the church exactly next door might advertise,  
 on the sign guiltily seen from the road, "Services at Ten.  
 This week, Guest Pastor Elon Torrance from Spokane:  
 'Plaque Remover for the Soul'" If you have no  
 plans, no one to see, go on in and hear Elon,  
 he might have something to say that reminds you  
 of something else entirely. He might make you think  
 about the clarity of the window of the new Dodge dealership,  
 and all the 1997 or 1998 Minivans waiting inside, just  
 beyond the daily-scrubbed glass. Just think about the cars

(no stanza break)

of 2000, how they will gleam in the light of the sun,  
as you walk past, slightly older, with many new developments  
in your life, maybe a new kid, or a lottery ticket  
redeemed for a million dollars(Though you could be lonesome,  
in mourning. You could be suicidal, or broken in spirit  
because of a crime or some personal wrongdoing that forgiveness  
is slow in coming for.). How beautiful will the green hoods  
and advanced windshields be, or how pathetic,  
depending on how you see them. I, however, think you *will*  
be moved. I can't deny how shitty even I might feel  
that day, longing to reproduce the world in some form,  
yet recognizing the futility of even trying. I'm sure art  
will still be around as a sort of consolation prize, like this  
poem which I hold out to you here, on this dais,  
at the Olympics of the Heart. It's not even a gold medal,  
that's the sad part. Nor bronze, nor silver nor even  
silver-tinted, and I don't know what you'll do with it.  
File it away, maybe. But I don't know where Carl Lewis  
or Jackie Joyner Kersey or Zola Bud or the great Jim Ryun  
have placed their prizes. Stack this in your garage,  
rent a 5' X 10' storage space or donate it to Salvation Army--  
that's beside the point. O, the days of longhorn cattle  
are cimarron, the weeks of icebergs drifting offshore  
Nova Scotia are terribly long, the years of waiting  
for the absolutely perfect thing to happen to you  
are near and I wish you good friends who listen.  
"Rise, carcass, and march," wrote Pierre Reverdy,  
and I think that's as a good a thing as anyone  
has ever said long-distance across a page. I need  
to call Trista in Valley Falls, Kansas, about a present  
for Dave and Natalie on the birth of their first child.

## DYING ON A TOPEKA SIDEWALK, DREAMING OF A LINE IN YEATS

I would very much like  
to *arise and go now*.  
I slipped, my crooked hip  
banged the ice, my bone  
ripped free from skin,  
as the mind has always longed  
to hang. It's poker night,  
the house is lit behind the hedge  
but I cannot now reach  
beyond my fallen body.  
All night last night I slept,  
and all day; I arose and went  
then to the weekly game,  
but I've lost my who I am.  
My names *arise and go now*.  
I hear the call to ante,  
and long to roll on the smooth  
green felt of the table,  
pull chips above my head,  
and sleep...*find some peace there*,  
not here, where each brick  
prints cold into my back.  
But I have always been  
a bad reader: this could be  
the verse of last confession.  
I shouldn't think of prayer,  
though there should be a switch  
to fix the night, some mercy.  
My feet are double-numb;  
--my life? I hear traffic  
*lapping with low sounds*  
*at the shore*, a deeper core:  
sidewalk in a prairie wind.  
Friends chew ham sandwiches.  
My fled mind watches  
from branches red and white  
with ropes of Christmas bulbs.

## SLOW FIGHT SONG FOR TOPEKA

What I do not know about your body  
would take a week to tear apart.  
My own body is unlike song,  
a foreign filmstrip strange as Buñel  
though I am subtitled middle-American.  
And I have shaved off my loyalties  
the way a dying woman may shave her head  
to preempt chemotherapy. She walks defiant  
through the hospital's automatic doors  
to begin the slim volume of her index.

I miss the old unacknowledged mayor,  
his face wide as the privet marshes of Poland.  
I miss the heavy peace of Sabbath  
settling in his eyelashes as he napped.  
Whatever happened to the corners of his mouth,  
which were points A and B of a dogsled race  
across the frozen Hudson Bay?

Asleep all afternoon, I wake to eat sugar pops  
and watch the evening news. Let me sing to you  
about the Monks of St. Francis Xavier  
playing basketball beside the rectory.  
Then you tell me about making love.  
I'll detail my walk across the Sardou Bridge  
in jeans and a jeans jacket. Then you say again  
how everybody lay face-down for thirty minutes.

## ASSEMBLY ON FLOSS

*"If I had it all to do over again, I'd floss."  
- Clifford Bruce, at The Hibachi Hut, 1993*

Now I wonder how serious they were:

the dentist who came to our school that Thursday  
could have been a drunk driver on community service,  
the dental hygienist a student who lived alone.  
Yanking children from the front row, they involved  
Emil and Heidy in a skit, the main prop a toothbrush  
taller than any child. They loosened on the world  
a snake from a trick can of nuts. The assistant  
appealed to us like child gods,  
invoking her no-nonsense reverence toward floss.  
Perhaps dental floss expresses a spooled mint-flavored  
secret about how to live with the body, working  
at the small places. Perhaps the dentist was an occultist  
disguised to impart on us the truth of our locked-in struggle  
against putrefaction. The teeth are the first to go,  
he said. We were still too young to believe  
anything went, our bodies least of all. Teeth  
still came in like summer, the old ones loudly went,  
translated to tooth heaven in a nocturnal exchange

Now, old enough I could be a dentist,  
I wonder if I ought, too, to go school to school,  
preaching. But my heart would not be in it.

## MATH

Math is a story the teacher told, radiator heat  
billowing through the open window,  
a bully sketching hot-rods. The shining twerp  
the teacher's confidante (though I heard pity  
when the teacher spoke to him, and hate)  
gleamed when called on for answers. I think  
in the story of math there is hate as the world  
despises anyone it thinks possesses answers.  
The absence of answers is much detailed--  
I myself have tried to solve for post-it notes  
on the refrigerator door, followed wall-writers  
walking in shadow with rattling cans  
and have ended up nowhere but where the river  
meets, in rocks, the bridge; I have worn coats  
in January among cattle, checking fences  
and watched the highway billboards tatter;  
like braille, in the city parking lot, I've rubbed  
gritty fingers across license plates to wonder  
if my ways of receiving have ceased to matter,  
if there are no answers, only long hours  
on the bedroom floor, paralyzed as an early snow  
snaps power lines. If the twerp would sit still  
I would tell him, budding algebraist,  
a mathematics of my own. I remember the contour  
of the chair better than the quadratic equation,  
the imaginary numbers. I feel imagination  
numbered to suicide and engineering,  
every lesson plan the teacher plotted become dense  
as a murder plot. He wasn't paid well  
and I should love his pensioned poverty,  
I should jot him notes but even this utterance  
is suspended from him like a kite caught in a tree  
driven by for months until undistinguishable  
from the gray branches. I send this to that limbo  
where drift the unnumbled digits of Pi.

## CARS AROUND THE HIGH SCHOOL

Each nicked rear fender,  
bent antenna, hanging tailpipe,  
rippling fray of canvas hood  
is parked askew on the melting ice;

the headlights stare  
like lizards' eyes; grasshopper legs  
kick in the frozen grilles;  
primer palsied over rust,

these cars of couple-color  
near ruin, strain in their chassis  
to hold together,  
like words in a backseat question:

bumper to bumper, tense.

## DINNER PARTY AT KAYTE'S

The danger is of growing cold. That's why  
all the houses on Trotting Horse Road  
are wide behind their fences. Like gold  
they hoard their heat in case the future's bad.  
The golden palomino wears a blanket  
because it is so cold. It is so cold tonight  
at the end of the driveway scarred by tire tracks  
in old snow that up in the big house,  
people are closing the doors of rooms no one likes,  
they are shutting up rooms, turning out lights,  
allowing the temperature of the television to fall.  
In the barn the plastic bulls are yanked  
by the lassos of teenage daughters,  
roping from twenty feet away,  
while on the shelf the tape player  
plays Bob Marley's Greatest Hits.  
One night I threw the hula hand.  
It was horse breath that smoldered  
into headlights when the lead  
car turned one driveway too late.  
Later, my roll was thick with goat butter.  
Then my flat shoes slid on month-old snow  
following the dog to the frozen river.  
It sang like the harp the girl played us.  
I couldn't get out of my mind  
how full the fox's tail was when it slipped  
across our headlights, driving home.  
No one closed any rooms. It was not  
that cold, the candles and remote controlled  
fireplace saw we were warm. Bad piano  
players sat and stared at the good piano.  
The long walk between dinner and beer  
was led by dogs. There must be something  
wrong with things. The horses mulled my hand.

## ELEGY FOR P.N.

Going to church the other day,  
I searched my blazer pocket for a pack of matches  
and found instead the folded funeral program.  
I thought I had tried to trash outside the parlor,  
where ferns pushed to grow in coffin-colored shade.  
It's hard to flourish there, unwatered.  
I thought I threw the program where the freeway turns,  
or where neighborhood children chilled lemonade,

yet here it is, pastel blue and with only a few  
misspellings, folded four times over and waiting  
in my pocket like a name you may say  
is on "the tip of my tongue," you may say,  
"I can taste the name;" but isn't revealed  
until years later in line, about to buy a winter coat.  
Names are the most useless things ever remembered.

Yet as I remember her body, the plastic flowers  
they set by her side will fade; they will fade  
as each old lover misremembers skin  
stretched tight around her waist. My hand  
cupped her hip bone while the laundry  
hummed *Adios*: the icebergs float. And I spin  
in the unhitched current of melting sin.

I don't believe we'll continue sane,  
surrendered to the molestation Death,  
unzipping my fly and reaching in.  
I find a peace in this, to know caress  
will punctuate this age of cell,  
these long hours blanking at the eastern wall.

2.

Alfred Hitchcock's *THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH*, by Ed Skoog

In Morocco, filming. Cary Grant and Doris Day  
wait for you, Louis Bernard, to  
finish your circuit around the bazaar,  
a spy in shoepolish chased by spies...  
"Save England...Agh." Knifed, you fall

exhausted whereas I continue to punish myself American.  
Whereas I enjoy fear so long as I am safe.

All morning, off the veranda, I overheard  
the detectives: -- Oh, no! Not the handcuffs!  
--We must. This is a serious case.

Now I can stay awake longer, work harder.  
I can change my name and make my bed a drama.

Imagine all the solitary isolates out there,  
reading timetables as the intensest literature:  
a deadly secret is embedded deeply in their heads.  
They seem excited, and I like that. I'm attracted.

There is a man who doesn't know too much,  
not very much at all, and I am him, touring  
my own country, trying to see, but at the end:  
"It's been a strange day," my daughter says.  
"For instance, I saw a man die."

## WATCHING RODAN DIE

As the dinosaurs compose their last extinctions,  
I watch through binoculars one Rodan  
hovering over Monster Island's tallest volcano

as the only other Rodan sinks in lava,  
a red pour erupting thanks to my battalion,  
a trap we set for these city-destroying lovers.

But all I can think is That's love,  
and Would that my love was destroyer  
enough to stare down destruction.

If only my declarations brushed trains  
off tracks, my mere body ruined  
tidal schemes like Rodan's wattled-grey

flesh and lambent sexuality...  
I wonder if I, 20th century man, ever hoped  
to struggle like this, if I ever should,

and in what weather, what hotel or hospice  
where my hand is clutched by a cancer victim  
I rolled with in the tall, radioactive grass

(More monsters, under the hill, always stir,  
ready to smoke and burn in pyroclastic flows  
but my own fears do not burn away so neatly).

This is not the movie where good guys consume bad guys.  
This is the one in which archaic, scaly sweethearts  
dream on such a scale my Japanese army must launch missiles

to compete with the genius side of darkness, wings  
long as bridges, heads hungry as lightning for home.

## "VISIBLE MAN" BY HASBRO

Lidless, he stared.  
There was no convincing him  
my own body's great maze  
was unlike song, unsingable,  
pale mile of skin tortilla'd  
around dark bone and blood.

Rather not have looked into his body  
and read the patriotic viscera there,  
red muscles, ulna of bedsheet white,  
blue heart that beat, I'm sure, at night.

In sleep I heard the muffled whirr  
of his hummingbird veins. Waking,  
I traced the dirt road  
from polymer testicles and penis  
to a bayou of guts,

my fingernail opaque behind his spine  
and beyond play: I held a mirror  
to my scary cadaver, my atrophied twin  
hidden but not hiding  
in the unanswerable precision of painted eyes.

## WHAT WE DID IN THE ANCIENT MONUMENTS

Those mornings were unfair in their beauty.

Those mornings were windows open for the first time.  
 Neighborhood dogs barked  
 until they couldn't imitate barking.

Sarah who came to help my mother clean  
 the too-big house drank Coke and ate an egg  
 at noon, listening to farm report.

Away from home,  
 waking adult at twenty below, that specific hour  
 is the sweetest thing I can imagine, however untrue,  
 better even than the dream of gentle sex I woke from.

But even  
 mornings thick with alyssum and ruby-  
 crowned kinglets flitting past the open screen, even  
 the sun as it caravans across a quilt--though these

revolve like planets around the central memory  
 of loss, our sun, and shadow, our  
 common caravan--even

these  
 things have I divested myself of:

pottery an Americanologist  
 ten centuries from now will name us by.

## HORSE

My visitor leans against the spindly catalpa  
with one elbow, and smokes.  
The neighbor's workhorse is out, its black hips  
iridescent in the Kansas sun.

A new cigarette lit between chubby fingers,  
my visitor points and asks, Belgian or Clydesdale?  
His feet, how big you think? This big?  
He encircles the air with his hands,  
as around an imaginary neck he's learning to strangle.

The leafbare catalpa ladders above him,  
long pods swinging in slight breeze.  
Who can say, I say. The horse dips  
his head into fishless Blackjack Creek.

## COLD SNAP AT MOUNT JUMBO

Along the brush at noon I shuffle  
from the cold cinderblock house  
to a mailbox I know is empty  
but have to check. It feels as though  
some night animal is shifting in sleep  
under a bush, and watches me now  
through the branches razored with snow,  
shaking off its possum or red fox dream.  
And the curved scar of the frosted  
telephone line connects to a new development  
up the slope. A magpie curls its claws  
around the wire, hunches, and pushes off  
to the pines which in dark descent  
trail off toward the school bus, late.

Of all things clear as I relatch the mailbox door,  
what stands out is no one belongs where I cling on,  
sewn through imaginations unknown in dead weeds,  
prepared to leap up the hill at my advance.

## AT THE "PROPHECY EXPO" WITH JAMIE

Watching and spying, the Adventist preacher says. God  
is the crow upon the fence in your backyard, the osprey chick  
peering from its telegraph-pole nest you saw  
from the back of the car your parents borrowed for the summer.  
It saw you. It sees you still, through the robin  
you told your mother over the phone about. "Spring  
must not be far behind." But it's not spring,  
the preacher says. It's a long cold summer.

The Adventist hugs us as we leave the meetinghouse  
with full embrace, a vine wrapping around a fencepole.  
Aw christ I broke a nail, says a woman  
putting on a yellow hat. Oops I broke another one, darn.

## VOMITING OVERBOARD THE LUXURY LINER

I read aloud the encyclopedia to the deep sea,  
as if the graves we dance on, spit and foam,  
can spill the black/white waste. If it were dirt  
for ballast and not mere melodies of want...

Calling over the railing, the words arrive  
too late for even late events. We're drunk  
oceanly on Latin booze. Hammerhead sharks  
swim beneath our heels, I believe. The word  
for shark, their grammars twisting belt and gut,  
roll in the potential grave, their luminary eyes  
transported by parabolic wave from Thunder Isle.

The cabin closed, the plexiglass porthole dark:  
the sound of wax melting behind the door  
and backward seen, a fading hail.

## WINDBURN IS REAL

Today the wind blew again and every mouth said "Fuck!"  
Cars wrecked. A few drank more than usual, got unruly.  
The sewing shop a block from my house was held up  
by a man solo with a shotgun.

The rock of ages on the radio played "Double Shot  
of My Baby's Love," followed by Ike and Tina  
doing their version of "Proud Mary." Tina said  
she and her husband were going to sing "Nice  
and rough, because we never--do--nothing--easy."  
He is a serious person, said the neat ashtray of my car.

If the wind blew like this every Tuesday,  
nothing would be invented. I got a headache,  
the man in the shed would say among his wheels.  
At the toy shop, ten tin wind-up space monkeys  
looped-the-loop as I professionally wound every one.

## VENTURE CAPITALISM

It's easy to imagine: rent  
square footage and fill  
the space with lost merchandise,  
all these things of mine  
I run into like minor  
celebrities long thought  
dead, but of course  
are still around. On  
one shelf, all the  
broken toys, on another,  
red shingles from the alley,  
all the nude magazines  
I paged furtively fast,  
hours passed in fever.

Yet something else comes  
along, bigger and just  
as hypnotically useless, an  
indoor climbing gym,  
a hydroponic tomato  
farm, file storage for  
the federal government.  
Your file is in there, my  
file, his file, her file. They  
have our files! Open for  
reading! Right in there  
where a moment ago

I considered opening  
the shop of myself.

3.

*MEET THE PRESS*

The commercials today are full of old  
footage of Henry Ford mid-sigh or a 1920s vice-president  
picking lint from his black and white lapel

as I, robed like Hef, recline in my soft armchair,  
Sunday morning again, the orange curtains drawn,  
and the woman from Seattle asleep in my room.

I could go back to bed, lie there with her, kissing  
her soft, freckled back. I could fall back asleep, too,  
wake in the early afternoon, and make  
fleeting love, be beautifully good to each other,

but instead I'm watching this news show  
two days before the New Hampshire primary,  
and when George Will quotes Don DeLillo:  
"Were people this dumb before television?"

I answer yes oh yes. Won't we go on being dumb  
long after? Henry Ford ratchets his head up and down  
from his lifeboat of archival footage.

If, as in the word problem, the earth is due to explode soon,  
and a rocketship waits in the desert to carry  
the most essential humans to a sanctuary on the moon,

I hope she and I will be picked. We should be picked,  
to build a cruel anarchy in space. I, for one, would like  
to get what I want, for once, instead of what I deserve.

## ASPIRATION

As the candidate holds his daughter in his arms  
in the backyard  
where he tells the camera he favors killing  
the vicious among us,

I think I understand  
some of what he means, that because his daughter  
is young, he wants those whose hands are hard  
to disappear forever.

I do not think he wants to shuttle  
my head down a stake  
along the highway's roadsalt shoulder  
where travelers first sense our town,

though that might be it exactly.  
And his daughter is being good,  
looking just past the camera, not squirming  
as she's carried toward the camera crew.

I looked up aspiration once. It means both  
to breathe, and to want dearly.  
It means to have been breathed upon.  
The candidate steps to us,

breathing, wanting. He holds his darling  
that no one else may hold her.

## THE INTERVIEW

I run an advertisement for myself, and apply.  
The line is long around Amalgamated Skoog,  
a cold building among warehouses.

The windows droop with concertina wire,  
Red Cross sells coffee, donuts.  
On the roof edge two crows eat a dead third:  
I refuse to see it as a bad sign. I ask

a man ahead of me how many positions  
are open, but he doesn't answer,  
huddling further in the fur of his coat.

A year later I am interviewed, my beard  
curling into my cheap suit's lapel.  
Apparently the enterprise turns profits  
without me: the interviewer is robust  
and at his gracile wrists his cufflinks shine:  
the rubbed fingertips of a museum Buddha.

I am still at it, interviewing, reinterviewing.  
Are you hiring? Not yet. Yet? Perhaps soon.

## OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON

Water from the parking lot artesian well,  
the orphan claims, will damn me to return  
chronically to town "like malaria to a Dutchman.  
For example," he says, "I'm totally fucked."

But I've always been totally fucked, I think,  
like other citizens unable to escape  
the strange city of the self,  
only vaguely assured we once resembled humans.

Walking away from the well, my sleeves are wet  
from drinking with cupped hands. The orphan wipes  
his fingers on his jeans. "A bald punk rock girl  
took me home last night. She re-did my hair."

## EASTER ON SNOQUALMIE PASS

A yellow truck behind me starts to slide  
like butter sliced into a frying pan.

The road is slick tonight as I drive east from Seattle,  
climbing up the pass from a weekend bender,

mouthng rock lyrics to the car radio from Sears.  
My tires throb through bad alignment.

I keep an eye on the white plume  
blowing pure pollution out my tailpipe.

I see a frozen lake, a roadkilled badger,  
and a ski slope "Closed for the Season."

As one driver accelerates left, he flips me off,  
the middle finger perched on his knuckle.

I overtake him in turn,  
and his saucer-eyed children stare back.

That's me, citizen. Your bad neighbor, miles from home.

## SHOPLIFTING BITTERS

My instinct is to bark at this family  
holding up the line with food stamps  
and coupons uncrumpled smooth on the check stand.  
The father, one-eyed and sallow, rolls  
their daughter in a shopping cart  
toward no car. Her pink jacket drawstrings catch  
in the caster wheel and the girl cries,  
the father bends down to unjam  
the string from oil and grit  
on their cart which I may drive by  
tomorrow morning, after the party  
I am stealing Angostura bitters for,  
my cover a bag of chips and a lime.  
Smuggled in my jeans pocket, the bitters  
will flavor and redden the booze  
I spent too much money on  
across the street at the state-run store.  
There's no good reason I've decided to steal  
besides my determination to give  
as little of myself away as possible.  
Tonight, some friends will come over  
and we'll drink and listen to the newest CDs.  
But right now, I wait to be discovered and jailed.  
Who will have seen me? The lady behind the lobsters  
or the man among the houseplants and peat?  
The teenage checker lasers coupons and says  
no more than if the woman handed him a Penthouse  
or a laxative to price, and I'm ashamed  
of him, and I feel shabby for us both,  
our failures of credit, honor and grace  
shackling us to this disharmony  
daily, to the discredit of the Kool divider  
I lay down between my beer and her skim milk;  
to the dishonor of my escape as I pay  
cheerfully and disappear out the door  
to my warm car and National Public Radio.

## EPITHALAMION

You had to wear a parka into my heart.  
 Once, attacked by polar bears, you survived.  
 The snow-plane arrived late, after spring rains  
 already made you love the mossy cliffs,  
 the pool so clear you could see the bodies miles down.

Ah, enough. Your letter came today. Why not just  
 have printed it out on your fiancé's laser printer  
 and office stationery? A September wedding--will I  
 watch t.v. that weekend, Seinfeld reruns, Rat Pack films,  
 then patter down to the Moose Home bar? You choose.

Tell you the truth--I'm rumped in my second  
 Montana winter of poor diet. I tear  
 the leg off the neighbor cat, gnaw on it  
 while neighbor children watch from the door  
 "like comfits round in marchpane set" (that's Spencer).

Who reminds you I carried the folded blankets  
 far enough away from your parent's farm  
 we could make noise? We yelled happy, huffing  
 the coyote tracks around the concrete block.  
 Your grandfather has one eye, and he drove

him and I alone through high plains fog  
 to a sale barn in Norton, Kansas, to uncover  
 my meat-judging skills. This one may get the farm,  
 he must have thought. As I said, he had only one eye.  
 But my skills at judging meat are pretty good,

I'd say, from pathetic one-night stands since  
 we quit each other. I'm trying to prove I'm not  
 who I am. Between the asparagus and white grapes  
 in the grocery store, I think about my life.  
 By canned pineapples, I dream our honeymoon.

4. THE CROWD POEMS

## SON OF CROWD

The eye is an inmate in the head of error,  
another animal entirely, that saw anonymous  
fists come out of the crowd because the mouth  
was busy talking so much, a magnificent buzz  
which in the meantime is not felt  
down the corridor, where a black eye stares  
into itself in the public restroom mirror.  
The eye, hamstrung by the rest of the body,  
both seer and recorder, dizzies from conflict,  
racing around the room to take down what is.  
The eye is as much what it sees as what it is,  
and, punched, becomes like a church, a thing  
surrounded by bruised earth, and so far  
as that goes, the filled-in holes near churches  
aren't any escape, no styptic solution  
from digging and drawing the hole's sides  
together again. The shovel that you step on  
for when the dirt's loose, are like words,  
drawn to graves, to trying out what may work  
yet still knotting into another element always.  
As the digger chews spearmint gum his mind  
gads about past the shack they keep lawnmowers in,  
past sight into the amphetamine blue haze  
where the sky slips under dirt like metal,  
and he digs for hours, his mind astringent,  
pea-jacket pocket flapping, cemetery cedars  
turning red. He  
digs. He  
digs.

## CROWD

I go into crowds, hoping for riot,  
and know a crowd is an amalgam  
of the general crush, like prison

or an epic. I go into a crowd's  
ontogeny, mark the move to grown  
from embryo, moving face to face.

Going into crowds, I hope a tyro  
will tutor me in what is still young,  
show me new divisions among the turks

preening, subscribers to an abstract cool.  
In the crowd my eyes dart from dirt to rain,  
There are groups in the crowd covered in sores.

In crowds are islands that seem oases.  
I go into crowds to learn how to move  
many as one, the latest tatting gestalt

pattern of bones going into the body,  
occipital tori, the many tendons of the wrist,  
inside the gala of ribs the salsa of organs

red and moving like featured performers,  
riotous heart and lungs someone's mama  
felt longing under a taut belly,

or saw through the gamma broadcast  
clipped to the doctor's light, curled baby  
bones, fetal catalfalque, each facet and cleft

fleshed out by the doctor's pen, actual  
fetal development unimportant:  
there is the one projected skeleton

(stanza break)

featuring us, in the medical room,  
doctor rushing toward other patients,  
each of us trying to remain parental

to this white sketch against a black faucet,  
a claque to fawn it into morning,  
someone to applaud. And at the base

of the x-rayed neck a solarium  
glows warm, the neckbones concatenating  
towards the face even now woven

around a sucked thumb that must taste  
like sourballs, the kid's wince transfers  
to the transparency so terribly.

There must be something valuable in thumbs.  
They are crowded into so many mouths,  
cedilla for the chin, ladled by a fist.

CROWD LOCAL NO. 242

The new civic center's not using the usual pipefitters.  
The union forms a chain around the space age masterpiece.

They have their signs printed up: NOTICE,  
and UNFAIR TO. Erasable blanks separate block letters,  
the easier to protest the unfairnesses. I want popcorn.  
Sneaking past legs I find no popcorn hawkers

beneath the blinking refreshments sign. Night comes,  
then dawn. Everyone runs around, who knows who knows what.

Crowds race a bike marathon through town, block off roads,  
hire off-duty police to tell cars what to do,

something I've been wondering of late. Not just cops,  
but ordinary acquaintances wear reflective orange vests

at the corner of Main and Main. I maneuver my roommate's  
red Volvo through the mazy authorities to the grocer

who sells cans of beer long before bars are habitable.  
Sorry, friends, to admit there are large crowds in bars,

boxing with each other, making moon eyes  
at the bartender from New York, home of crowds.

She feeds the not so loud loudmouths of the crowd,  
the one-armed veterans of foreign wars,

the two-armed veterans of domestic wars  
who were told along the line to band together

against recent developments: the new meters,  
the increasing hardships of people wanting to park.

Myself, I walked a mile to the courthouse  
and said hi to the justice. He's a kind captor,

he wants only what's coming to us to come to us.  
How many clerks does it take to fit the head of a pin

correctly on the stem? There's a call to reregister names,  
and this is problematic for those who don't like naming.

The courthouse doors shimmy shut. I think of Miss Kansas

(no stanza break)

who is also Miss Oklahoma and Miss Michigan. She radiates.

In front of the table of judges she tap dances  
and plays a zither made of pop cans. Wild, the judges say.

Wild. She's a hit, what can she say. It was only a year ago  
she helped the judge campaign for office. Her ad  
said vote for him and you can dream of me.

Bike spokes roll a nocturnal river through cordoned-off streets.

It's good to be so very far ahead, good to be the champ.  
Winning is a way of dying, a flourish at the end of moment,  
the way a patchwork quilt snaps at the edge of the bed,  
when, eligible for sleep, you smooth out your nest.

A courier delivers the day's cribbed intelligence report:  
read it out of the corner of your eye, a faint star.

## ANSWER TO CROWD

You have to ask, what was your war crime?  
This is social work, walking around the crowd,  
wanting to tell the woman who left hours ago  
that her scarf still lies across the bench,  
another coworker at a crossroad like yours.  
At the end of the world one feels worldlier.  
Perhaps one should: but not in the locker rooms  
below the basketball court full of men and women  
showering and folding gym clothes, walking  
like sneaks past untouchable versions of themselves,  
the woodcarver, the social worker, the pizza chef,  
the part-time Jesuit priests who play three-on-three  
with nuns every other noon. Behind a pane  
of wire glass the guy in charge has a phone  
and schedules, a whistle and a pen. That cosmology  
is worrisome that says when we shuck our worm garb  
we must walk aisles of our own, only nodding  
solemn to amigos when we should be rollicksome  
like children at our legs, shouting, "Look alive!"  
And behind the body, there is not very much.  
Blood is made of single things. I've seen photos.  
Serological oarsmen, they row through our veins.

ROCK CROWD for Truck Stop Love and Zoom

Dream of a burning stereo,  
 an old girlfriend and this first kiss;  
 rock stardom, paper shoveling,  
 Billy-Cartering past hydrangeas

while three flights up a husband leans  
 from a window, smoking a cigar's cigar.  
 Fragrant condoms of flowers wilt  
 on thick green leaves, home and lawn

to beetles and fireball-red centipedes.  
 Hipsters shuffle along in hipster  
 shoes reading letters from the army.  
 Teenage girls - they push against

barricades to touch me & my band,  
 the xylophonist, the explodatroner,  
 monkey-head-beater, metronome  
 mechanic. Excuse me my world tour,

tee shirts, key chains, pay-per-views.  
 I require my sandwiches chopped  
 into triangles, the ostrich paté  
 dripping, the prime rib well-marbled.

You know it rocks. You said so  
 from the crowd. I saw you dancing  
 the Mashed Potato, the Flip, the Flop,  
 the Sufferin' Albanian, the Marauder.

Sooner or later, everyone will mash  
 their potatoes stage-side, recalling the last  
 time we played our big hit, "Love Theme  
 From Crowd," followed by the Ventures'

(stanza break)

famed guitar screech on "Walk(Don't Run)."  
The ride and crash cymbals hiss slow lust,  
as though a crate of cobras has cracked  
and they're streaming out towards the world.

"This town is made of sin," sings Gram  
Parsons, my back-up singer, and Jimi  
plays a tiny red guitar. Buddy Holly  
sips mineral water, glad to be alive again

in front of this thing made by many people  
in one place, not a mob exactly, and not  
quite a church either(but some rugged mass  
between praise and pulling apart).

## CASTING CALL FOR CROWD

The room is disordered but the caterer  
has set up the tables, chocolate-dipped zucchini,  
twelve different orange juices.

A child is as usual needed. Nobody can find Hitchcock.  
The lighting crew has a problem hiding the scaffolds.  
The foley crew is squawking on the foley stage,  
eyes glued to seagulls gathering on the outside pier.

Old stars stand by the food enjoying octopus legs  
on olive leaves. I'm just in from London,  
conferring with the other money men.

Now giblet gravy drips to my tuxedo tails as I chat  
with 'Tippi' Hedren who drinks a Mad Dog Margarita.  
Yeah, well, I say, tearing strips off the tapered tablecloth.  
Is this a casting call or Thanksgiving, the actress asks.

When I am old, I say, and alone  
I shall carry plaster of Paris  
into the North Fork of the Flathead River  
near Polebridge to make a death mask  
of the last grizzly bear.

## ULTIMATE WRATH OF CROWD

In eighth grade again, we wait in line  
 in the weight room for our exoskeletons,  
 shoulder pads, pelvic pads, numbered helmets.  
 Issued a plastic mouthpiece, a football bitewing,

I suspect it hasn't been sterilized since November.  
 Bug figures on the bug field, we take positions  
 called by the coach, diagramed on his slate  
 in blue magic marker. These are the green

baffles he says are the enemy. "Be mean,"  
 is his advice on getting through.  
 "Gotta get some mean in your step."  
 It's a tragedy, the continuing shortage

of what you want to have near to you.  
 I used to have an ant farm. Those who survived  
 shipping and handling moved along  
 in what appeared to be a dance of joy

and form. But I could be calling it wrong.  
 The crisis shows no signs of letting up.  
 Tonight, the president will speak.  
 Following, a response from the minority,

though no one will mention a solution  
 to this distance between how you know  
 things are meant to be ordered and how  
 they seem to be arranged. But here

four mule deer step over a dead tree trunk.  
 Colors arabesque out of the ground in a message  
 I can't imagine driving away from.  
 I do imagine it, driving down the side streets

(no stanza break)

of the town where new truck owners look  
for middle-aged teachers to rape and torture,  
that is if the truck's not carrying a bomb,  
driven by a man who in his way wants

only to please you. No please in pines,  
they blow no words, though my heart says  
the whisper is close to "Renounce, renounce,"  
though it could be, "Retain, retain." It's not

the climb to the top of the hill that scares me,  
it's turning around at the top and seeing my city limit.  
I want a statement from the mountainside, one word  
from the snowy garden behind the one standing house.

## 5. CODA

LAMENT FOR ABANDONING THE PIANO WHEN  
MY TEACHER, MRS. LOVE, MOVED AWAY

O Steinways never played, parties  
been to, uprights untuned and locked away  
from hands that long to bop  
behind a chain of ashtrays and uncoastered  
bottles of bargain beer! That is me  
not on the bench, highball glass not swirling  
with each chord, and those are not my flappers  
leaning in to whisper cool requests.  
I am not pounding out pure hepness  
on any eighty-eight keys.  
Those are not my swinging friends,  
dancing in the middle of no room.