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LOCAL OBJECTS

by

Alexander Runciman, Jr.

B.A., University of Santa Clara, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

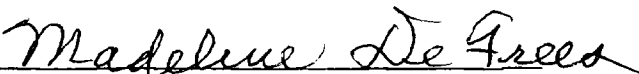
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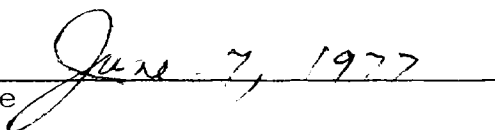
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as if
He wanted to make them, keep them from perishing,
The few things, the objects of insight, the integrations
Of feeling, the things that came of their own accord

--Wallace Stevens

All events and experiences are local, somewhere.

--William Stafford

1.

MORNING IN PORTLAND

Observe coffee's made in a dream
and it is not sun itself
streaming through windows
but dust's thousand constituents
alive in aimless small thermals.

They recall the one night's
motion in the arc of stars,
the unnatural fall, the pale
definition of remembered trees
unaltered and constant, no moon.

Through glass this whole suburban hill
looks ripe and budswollen--
the burled oaks, rhododendron,
azalea, maple and streetside cherry
impromptu in a polka with wind,

a celebration of wild waving,
soundless ecstasy for leaves.
But the door's
humble introduction:
cold of steel ice,

and the ground firm
as in some grey painting
Siberian and winter, the cupolas
iced over the dome
and the sky frozen.

The one disturbance--roots
moaning in bright sun.
This is the richness, the world
natural before meaning: dark coffee
steaming warm in a warm room,

a robin plumped like a pillow on the fence.
Two houses down the neighbor girl's
doll has lost its head
and it comes through the walls
she is screaming, she is screaming
Now she is quieted.

On the table condiments stand
easy in their shadows, a ringed
Stonehenge in the javelins of light.
Outside trees dance, I call it dance,
and the azaleas, Pacific rhododendrons.

THE BOAT AT KELLY'S LAKE

was wooden, old white
plywood. It registered
seismographically
every weak breeze,
every shift. The peaks
widened as they circled,
the underworld set heaving, air
wriggling in brown explosions.
The waterplants waved like sound
pulled by a thick wind.
God was by the pier.

Once I reached my hand down
wrist-deep in it, gooey, slick,
brought up cupped in a palm several
consistencies of mud
and a salamander,
soft under pressure,
spotted yellow, moving
confused in the air, both of us
confused. It fell back
and once in the water
how it fell--clear,
slow, in its own heaven.

BOARDING HOUSE: CLYDE, MISSOURI 1926

--for Ida Louise Martindale.

The tablecloth stained,
every dinner is like every dinner.
That hall window upstairs
is the highest point for miles.
We've got three floors.
It will deceive you
how far those hills are,
the river with its trees between us.
Of our ground, one corner hill
is there, north, fences crazy.
Often I forget the graves.

Nights I can't stand boarders
or the railroad, I walk.
South is an old colony.
I wait the brightest moons
to see them, to keep from turning
an ankle in their caved burrows
empty for my sake and theirs.
This network of dark tunnels
contains a kind of quiet.
Dark has its own smell.
I love the hair to move on my neck.
Bird wings make small sounds.

Dear God: Your night goes for miles.
I know there is no river.
This year your church is 40, Geneva
is seven and she has an uncle in San Diego.
What is there here for her?

I give thanks
for my daughters,
for every rented room.
Give them daughters. Amen.

NEWS

Your father's letter tells you of the fire
and you see it hissing, stumbling into lake water,
roaring over the canyon rim until that air
wet from the west gave tractors room and time.

You remember deer tracks, years ago, discovering
their hooves parallel like fingers in the dust,
the dust sifted brown and flour.
You remember an orange rubber raft,
and that other raft, logs pitching
with the slap of waves and your weight.
You fished that afternoon, all afternoon
your dangling feet moving under water like frogs.

You remember how gathering wood that night the dark
scared you until the fire's light on the camper
brought you back. There was something wrong.
Three men left in the truck, one limping.
You saw the abandoned shoe, the slice angling
clean across the toe, full of red.
And you stayed up late with them around the fire
and they said he walked over calm as day to tell them.

FIELD TRIP ST. PAUL CEMETERY 1959

Feeling for old gum under the seat.
One farmhouse chimney so far back
it manufactured all low clouds.
Mrs. Shea: a hovering
combination of stern grey angel and sheepdog.
Mary's short
straight black hair shook when she talked.
Kelty saying

"Where is Canton, Ohio?"

Drake calling somebody stupid
because 1826 was after Columbus.

Three of us ran back,
stood right above Paul's chest
and jumped.

No ground heave. No echoing
divine consternation. He was dead
and we imitated him waving us away,
tears on his face, coughing
like Jimmy's dad coughed.

Barbara was adamant
dead first graders
could read in heaven
"Can't they Ms. Shea?"
who was wet in the rain
herding us towards the bus
unsuccessfully.

We made brilliant paragraphs.

LIGHT FOR THE CHAPEL OF THE DEAD

Here is my face
on the glass, turquoise, azure,
the smoke black borders.
It is your face
upon the stained glass,
your darkened eyes, lips,
and behind them the voice
heard and remembered. And it is

her face, her dark eyes,
the strange hood of something
red shading darker. What words
live in that mouth, the eyes
human as cats'?
There is nothing in them.
There is no light in them.

The face on the glass--
the granite
rubble of the hill glowing at dusk
glows as the face on the glass,
composed with rigor, bright
without particular words.

HOMAGE TO A TABLE PURCHASED AT AUCTION

1.

Quietly nasturtiums orange the yard.
April. A woman puts willowbuds
in a vase, her mother's,
porcelain from some place east.
It stands alone on the table,
as she leans back at the door, light
thick, glowing through window dirt,
willows outlined in sun
and the sun coming yellow.

Its surface carries scars
like crow's-feet around eyes,
years of calm mornings mist rose
from plowed fields and wrapped the house,
and pot burns, a dime sized
bleach of lye.

It recalls November, the '49 flood,
men denying how cattle float dead--
less like cattle than dolls.
It recalls the blankness
of their faces, how they sat
late, saying nothing,
coffee cold and the lantern
hissing in its mantle.

And that night in '53,
lights gone and roads
iced slick as lakes,
she was in her time.
He fed that fire high and warm.
No preacher. No doctor.
Here and here underneath
you can feel where she dug in,
the size of her hands where she held.

LOCAL OBJECTS

Not of itself does this wall niche
beget its own objects more than ornamental,
more than the shrunken heads
of oranges left months behind books,
the ashes of any loyal terrier
in their grey urn, and this
translucent 17th century
Venetian cameo, this rusted spike
from the Baltimore and Ohio. No,

it is late autumn and shirtsleeves,
a cirrus haze and the blue washed out
and he paints twin Ponderosa pine cones
splayed like quills, the ruddy
frictionlessness of chestnuts, one bone
scallop shell spread like an ivory fan.
And here in this clear pane of glass
in the distance with a street and two chimneys--
the body almost his other body, hands
in deep pockets and her face rosy and dreaming.

SCENE IN REAL LIFE

The terror of eviction,
we wrapped in tattered rags, homeless,
tramping house to house, town to town
tubercular and tired, this finding the rent check
two days past due unmailed under other papers
sent me out in drumming rain

past mothers, cabbies in line,
some curled, all eyeing through fogged windows
the floodgates. Then, in their blur of running
a flurry of small coats burst, inundated the sidewalk.
All along the line engines cough, the drivers
gesticulating wildly, all around short legs
pumping, thermoses clanking loose in lunchboxes, doors
swinging open, admitting and closing, and some
one way, others illegally U-turning the other

leaving an empty old school breathing relief,
and up ahead one small orange person
slickered, galoshes to the knees, a lone marauder
sloshing ripples foaming to the grass, and
pausing, perhaps having learned they would otherwise drown,

bending in a motion Brueghel mastered,
bending now and again to save limp worms.

ALASKA AND THE NEW YORK COAL SHORTAGE OF 1918

Your mother who
is no better gives you
the burlap potato bag
and a quarter: "Don't
come back unless it's full"
and you race hall and stairs
like a noisy locomotive, down
steps to the street

where it is quiet so you
are quiet, the bag empty
and smelling of potatoes
over your shoulder as you go
whistling down 87th.
You call it adventure
for gold, each coal door
a mine, Alaskan, spitting
nuggets, a six-gun
on your hip against poachers.
By 2 you're colder and spend
your quarter for chocolate
and a big red fish for your dogs.
You walk by a man
with short hair on his face.
He wants your gold.
As he runs you hear
his pants flap against his legs.
He breathes funny
and shouts something at you
rounding the corner. On 54th
you find where there is
a fire and get past
the policeman because he
doesn't see you, and you go
straight to the coal cellar
under some boards
and it is Alaska again.

Later in your black face
you climb stairs, drop
the dusty bag heavily to the floor.
Your mother is in the next
room. You tell her

and before she answers
you turn down stairs
to feed the team again.
They have waited for you,
hungry, drooling in their traces.
They gnash their teeth
and eat like vacuum cleaners.

UNTITLED

--August, Borrego Springs

God's face is granite,
the face of cactus, sand,
with no softness.
The trees here: palm and smoke.
The palms droop date heavy
with no movement but wind
sweeping
in a rush across the floor,
wife with an impatient broom.

Last night they lay together
in the moon's fullness, wind and granite
in a serenade,
the wild howling of dogs,
in the quiet
black pulse of stars.

And now their children surround us.
And are not mountains,
but evidence of old pain,
a line of scars across a valley
solid in almost motion, and heat
rising in blue.

It is only heat, what the mind
makes in absence,
geologies of angle and rust.
It is a face of scars. Wind shaped.
It glows and in the time of its own time
seems to hum, a moan, unheard,
a voicing of no translation,
nothing with a name.

CLAMMING KIPSAN BEACH

As you leave eelgrass
the ocean's a distant rumor
and fog swirls where you have not been.
On firm sand you find gulls
have left their four pointed tracks
aimless as fog. You think
no one here has heard of the sun,
all sweat interior,
behind a face
and quiet as silvered boards.
In your hand you find the shovel
is like no spade, long and awkward
as you stomp heavy-footed, watching
for where the sand goes
down without warning.

And when it does you dig
with that long blade,
forgetting whether clams angle
burrowing seaward
or go opposite in clam wisdom.
You hit nothing at all
but the sea
filling from that deep well,
caving what you dig.
Then down on one knee
sand takes all you offer,
wrist and elbow gone and numb,
the waves huge white mountains
moving under spray. Then
answering long distance--
that slick shell
with its own mind pulling in your palm.

COUNTING

Through thin walls the neighbors'
earnest conversation, gunshots,
body through a glass door, shards falling
as snow
falls through sunlight, quietly
filling the tracks.
Snow catches everything equally.
I hear their television.

In dark the table ten feet away
recedes towards a wall,
towards the stove. I praise
the industry of lawn mowers, the circular
clatter of tricycles.

Blue napkins go black, as birds
they fail. The refrigerator has a broken shelf,
radio schedule, menus,
a towel in the handle.
Four hours west plovers understand the Pacific.
Praise their quick noise and the awkward
large paws of puppies.

Praise this evening's list of events
on the bulletin board of dark brown cork
between my left ear,
the one that works less well,
and the other, the mystic
sure the coleus says hello.
My friends, these are also my friends:

Here is rime ice.
Here is the blue-eyed grass.

OAK

It appears
with the slow pleasure of craft,
a sculptor's,
the simmerings of a high chef--
an indulgent spoon.
It knows entire lives
and predicted your name.
When it goes manic through plums
mushrooms applaud.

Some nights
it hisses like an insect
in heat, or for revenge.
When dogs bark in dreams
I fear intruders. Surveyors
say the land is theirs. In yours
Grandma Armantage lives.

It ignores the angers
of our neighbor. It harbors
neither love nor animosity,
bears the nails of some childhood
without grudge. And when it comes out
late in May, this is
the slow pleasure
bodies teach each other.

2.

REBUTTAL

Regardless of what's said,
throw stones, round, heavy.
The water ripples out
wide and languid.

In certain streams they
feed, suckling their hollows numb
on starlight, the daily visible
twigs, leafbits oval in backwash,
glint of gemstained aura of air,
and how other air
sucked blue and unwilling down
where stones are
yet rises.

So they grow,
break surface finally.
After winters sprout moss
thick to hold the heat in.
We have used them for seats,
eaten lunch, all the while
water butting against them.
They never shudder.

Later so huge the stream moves,
shouldered to one side.
Fish hide in back water
and current strokes
full along cold walls.

When a dimness fingers in,
grows bold among forms,
(cliffs, rounded stones, the undersides
of leaves) and sounds rustle in branches,
take wing, say
a brilliant stippled boulder
rises from far over that hill,
large and wet with glistening,
and say it's not important
where, or from what stream,
only this rippling out
wide, languid, filling the world.

PATRICIA FLINT

It begins
Patricia Flint, you are wanted,
Please report...

It's not the police
This is America. It is
A memory of your sister asking for lemonade.
Your home town, the Chamber of Commerce,
Mayor, the high school band at the airport.
It is nothing--
Your construction worker father
Impaled on a cement truck. An emergency,
Saint Patrick's called. They need blood,
Yours--type B
Negative and rare. Voices seek you from walls.
The summons are everywhere.
They will find you.

Today it is understood
You're out of town, resting.
You had the blood, red,
A memory matching your sister's.
The plane landed on time. The band played in key.
It's understood the body they repaired
Was not your father.
We see in your absence
The green more yellow on a branch
Gathering from some place deep,
A well in the dark.
Look up however quick, it stops.
This is natural.
Next week life as usual.
Any name will haunt you.

GIRL WITH CLOSED EYES

You sit
back
firm against rock
legs folded carefully
and elbows
rising slow as new breasts
as you breathe

For as you breathe you find
familiar caves
sunlight
and no bats
Friends you had forgotten
bring children and bicycles
cinquefoil and bluets
plates of steaming mushrooms
They know you
and love your father

They go black to gull wings and one
dazzling of wind
a beach where you birth moons
anemones and stars
and all the gulls are friends
and all the gulls have names

In this way
you sit
forever firm against a rock wall
There is small wind
and the bee
traversing your calf
cross-stubble the pollenless field
dreams

stonecrop

columbine

summer all October
your soft red hair

WORDS IN WET WEATHER

Its dirt spills
liquid down wooden steps
where the cat toppled it a month ago.

Windward, it's soaked rain, late sun,
and altered,
climbs faithless

in natural slow geometry.
We left it,
time figured short against a freeze.

Today five days into a new year
cold rain falls on strings
and the geranium, haggard, sick

green, bears at a queer angle,
as angels
its vermillion blooms.

Their red is neither pain
nor refusal. They are stolid
as horses in a grey field.

Theirs will be natural
random deaths.
We are inside and dry.

They have nothing to do with us.

DAMAGES

All afternoon order
among the dead hawthorns,
cedars, the apple roots
clotted like hair, the limbs
--casualties in their sheared bark--
hanging like soldiers
limp on the wire,
soldiers at the Somme
in fading pictures, their smell
limp on the wire, their skins
peeled smooth from their bones
and the bones themselves
splintered, still slick
with their former lives.

All afternoon that dull
indifferent quiet, the instrument
raw under my thumb.
As after time at sea
the ground
has its tides, so the hand
kept its empty grip,
its death claw.
And their lost parts
mounted up in the charnel house,
the repository of wrists and fibula,
our cellar-full of raw firewood
burning for weeks,
our cellar of the thousand
red delicious apples.

And still they maintain themselves
as does this woman they interview
here with dinner, whose daughter
they found that way, who has
neither answers nor tears
as the weather
changes and our palms
open to their flames,
their smoke rising outside, nowhere,
curling down gutters
into the hollow of the yard.

We smile swallowing drinks,
discounting the impossible

bizarre reunions, any
brothers and sisters among the maimed.
Later we sip Zinfandel and talk
and the Somme flows through France
hours away peaceful as smoke.
We believe these words
"weather" "crime" "accident"
and the men whistle their old tunes,
bloodless tunes, composing
and decomposing in half light,
and we are like them.

MOVING HERE

Out our window: vacant,
no human contour, no scorn.
Nothing but the silence
of humped brown earth rising like an animal,
gullies bleeding mud raw downstream.
When wind moves over the horses
--those cropping snow, grass--
they lift their heads, fear
in the air, wary, their brothers lost.

Here trails go bald, landscape
of white, twisted grotesques, rock,
ice thick as fists over mute water,
cold claiming skin and no return.
Here mountains are an Eden for goats.
Winter is coal, persistent death,
shafts and towns crumbling to a known past.
The paper reports him alive, 41,
exposure, omitting he was naked
to the world and gesturing
a tree on his children's death.
All afternoon horses browse,
miniatures high on the mountain,
all around them barbed fences
waving like the breath of wheat.

Dusk at four, sky lowering
like a vise. We pull the curtains early.
Yesterday sun bore like a corkscrew
through fog, clearing its own corridor
and deepening solid as gold,
rectangular at our feet.
All winter we live in two rooms
and stay warm.
There is much to learn.
Deborah, I love you more.

HOW TO BATTLE DEPRESSION

Marvel at clothes,
 the colors you can't name, puce
 and chartreuse for instance,
 the impossible to spell.
 Count the navy blues in a minute.
 Count shoes, anything.
 Pick five and ignore everything else.
 Smell people. Read a paper
 while you do it, act
 nonchalant. Read an old paper.

Go swimming. Systematically
 forget drowning, your weight, the depth.
 Tie and retie your shoes.
 Eat something to make you guilty.
 Think of India.
 Find a public place and stay near the door,
 look up whenever someone passes.
 Not one will do anything.

Then proclaim impotence.
 Choose clothes to emphasize
 your worst features.
 Cry over spilt milk. Vote.
 Count your leaky faucet an asset,
 your windows clean.
 Write long letters to relatives in Kansas.
 Do nothing. Do not feed the ants.
 Believe depression the only way to live.
 Face death like a brother.

And if some dark night
 you turn to this in panic

no voices will hold you, neither whispers,
 nor the small applause in leaves,
 granite, or salal.
 You have no company,

these are echoes of your own voice.

WHY YOU GIVE
TO THE AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

You can't say no. The girls
on your porch believe
they are not too young for women.
A calculated effect is still effective.
When you open the door
with a towel, your hands sudsy,
they smile. It means you're liberated.
And they have a pamphlet.

You think of Charlie, the beagle
your Aunt has, blind, senile,
bumping the ottoman, the sofa, a chair.
Cut nineteen times, every growth
a perversion. He needs something,
compassion, or a new doctor.
When he forgets the room
you are the one embarrassed.
Dead this week: kidney failure.

They smile healthy teeth.
Dishes can wait. Your wife has the flu.
Because cancer is funny
and it's the second warm evening in two days.

EVENING AT HOME

You sit outside after dinner
 seeing or not seeing the mugo pines,
 the brown cat on the walk . . .

 It's the backyard you planned,
 rock tiers tapering
 in the hands of an elder German mason,
 that story I think I remember.

You saw the spirea planted, the arborvitae
 hedge now taller than either of us.
 The grass was yellow-green then, thin as pins.
 You're not just watching
 how light goes, or wind moves.

I count your stories like change, quarters,
 solid as lunch money years ago in a pocket.

 1922, the old world--
 Scotland, cross country, the Atlantic
 and with your father to his birthplace:
 the house Linden Lee, St. Mark's Place, Portobello.

 Your bad dream,
 The Saturday Evening Post sold after school
 door to door. Perhaps some moment in San Francisco,
 happy, honeymoon at the St. Francis 30 years ago.
 Or going up Sandy Boulevard backwards, the Essex,
 first car, stuck in reverse . . .

 On warm concrete
 the cat sleeps like a blanket.
 In the greenhouse, fuchsias
 multiple pastels, clean grit of loam under nails,
 star of Bethlehem, geranium, impatiens, cactus
 more colorful, more predictable than sons.

I see you in near dark
 your face forward
 in the flare of a match, leaning back.
 Wind moves easy through hill poplars.
 We sit a long time and neither of us says anything.
 We sit until all the lights are on
 then walk in together.

MAKING THIS

Imagine imprisonment
in a tree, hemlock,
coastal spruce.
Sunlight taps the brown bark
and your fingers
pressing from the inside
feel a tapping.

Dream a last day.
Do not consider adoption
or the worth of a brother.
Forget everyone.

Remember only that cold
salt water offering its way home.
Strollers watch from the beach.
It is sunny and their faces
appear worried.
Remember the cliff face
saying nothing,
crumbling in your hand,
under your boot, then
the fine ledge your flesh fell into...

Here it is:
the list that could go
on for pages
can stop here,

you're that lucky.

THE HOODOOS IN YOHO

On the upper slopes
they stand as sentinels,
they stand and quiver in wind.
Since there is no one here
they are allowed
to quiver as saplings,
thin poles of pine
that one white day
quiver in their heavy coats
and bow.

We have traveled 700 miles,
the deaths of wing flies and yellow Victors,
then walked,
our baggage of ocean
sloshing and pumping,
our calves in knots,
to this place 5000 feet in blue.

Above us these standing composites,
the scree of glaciers under flat capstones,
they have seen what they believe.
They have seen the hour and rumble
of their death. Tonight
since we are not here
in wind cool down this canyon
they quiver with Orion. Below,
each tree an animal,
thousands have stopped their migrations.
The river thin silver among them.

This is the world we breathe,
rock, half moon, and star.
The far valley, composed
in the intensity of their quiet looking.
This wind is their cool breath.

OPEN LETTER

Grandfather,
I know your paintings like weather,
The shadowed water full with pickerel,
lazy eels. Green elms shading farm buildings
small across a stubble-brown field of barley.
And the place along the firth,
schooner, the road into trees and the unnamed
town. The pilings you brushed are tall
forever in slack tide, alders groved
holding firm. Some days
their emptiness goes through me like wind.

I keep your name and what facts I know.
You sailed, landing suddenly American, loved
the pale woman in the picture, and your sons.
After 20 years sailed again for home, Scotland,
thinking to send for them. And stayed 3 weeks.
Finally Portland, Oregon, where the railroad was home.

Tonight, sunk deep in Scotch malt,
I see watercolors faded under glass
and the glass itself warping time original and old.
Wind at the pane flows off highland green,
highland stone. And the room--your barn
hung amber with lanterns--cuts it like a plow,
its noise dying over the North Sea, drowned
in our drink and talk, toasts, the clapping
and warm dance. While all evening our firstborn,
your great-grandchild newly christened,
sleeps in the next room like a package
partially unwrapped, in cotton and warm greasewoolen.

ERNIE

3 AM and saws
whine every wall swollen, sound
leaking from cracked windows,
the settled doors.
Frost has pinked our red car. .
The blur twins them, these hands
stacking wood, not my hands.
Ernie's here, his hat
felt, grey felt and no feather. Surely
some head is under there, pale but there.
He lives with his daughter.
Three months
neither of us miss a day.

He has nine fingers and ignores
the loss, the saw taunted
with each pass--no bone,
no knuckle. This is normal.
Two others lose, calmly
they cross the street,
the office floor red, again
waiting to cross, casual,
a red handkerchief.
Long past dark the saws
continue eating. I see them
gone to the elbows,
pushing wood with stumps. Dream.
It was razed last year in three days.
These hands are not my hands.
The wood comes, they stack it.
Ernie's here. The room is loud.
He is hard of hearing.

DREAMING NEBRASKA

You anchor, dredge up sandwiches.
In quiet the smell of salt
and dead gulls congeals on a slick railing.
It infiltrates clothes you always burn.
It tours your liver, kidneys, brain,
bowels, marrow, and comes out a yawn.
The ocean stretches flat as a plate.

A funeral. Flowers and the smell
of flowers--lilacs, lilies. The neighbors
laugh. They burn, wisping and flicking
themselves at you. They play on the windshield,
between fingers and face. They swallow voices.
The one sound is liquid in a restless bilge.

Nights they walk your fenceline with dogs.
Around a fire they snap bird wings for fun.
You hear them through your window, children
wearing masks, elephants, grotesque gorgons.
Your clothes fit them. When you go back
the house is the same. Their dogs snap
and you kick. You kick teeth in like glass.

Motor dead, water slaps the hull. You drift
watching their salmon-pink faces grin out of range.

RIDDLE

Weightless and pure as water,
 it has no recognizable features.
 Because it is perfect in its presence,
 suddenly in its presence we are perfect.

Every scene
 composed in wild, perfect exuberance.
 When you run over thick, lush grass,
 your legs uncertain as a drunk's,
 you run under blue-
 green maples and it's never too hot.
 Wind moves in your soft hair, spun
 blonde as your mother's. We are,
 children and adults, our perfect selves.

Like the place we stayed years ago
 on the ocean, where fog moved
 cut in streamers by pines, cut
 by our heads, the blunt edges of our clothes,
 and then regrouped closing behind us like an envelope.
 We could hear surf
 roar somewhere ahead,
 so we moved slow, blind.

Within its boundaries you can be
 any age, and we are never incompetent.

We look into fog,
 as even now in the womb
 you kick and poke with your small hands.

3.

PICTURES FROM THE CZECH PILGRIMAGE

I.

You stand on some hill.
Over your shoulders, below you,
two old women,
their grey discs too distant for faces,
and one smaller, a daughter, we can't be sure.
There are many we can't see.

The three of you do not understand
Marketa Luskacova. The middle one
carrying the cross, frowns,
not understanding, and with its weight.
The other two carry pikes.
You have come in your lined faces,
canvas coats and your whiter shirt.
The cross has a ladder up to the beam,
a nail, branches of a hawthorn
curved, its long spikes. A grey hammer
is attached, and thick heavy tongs.
The letters at the top
do not say in Rhode Island.

II.

The women in white
carry huge madonnas in gilt rococo frames.
They lead, and the men
in black behind them.
The line they make: black upper left
down across the hay field, white near the woods.

III.

The pillar is taller than the man with large ears,
his head angled, his eyes, his open mouth.
He holds a paper and must be chanting.
The congregation sits, an old woman,
white face and hands, a black hooded cape,
she neither hears nor sees, she is inside.

IV.

It is a world of old women.
That plaid can't be called a dress.
She is no older, no more lined
than the land she came from.

V.

This is enough.
They are seated on a fine hillside. The far hill
has farms, a road along the river.
There are no children.
He stares, looking away below,
or at the new hands on his knees.
She is younger, face intent on some patch of grass,
hearing only.
She looks on him, fingers holding up a cheek,
frowning, thinking.
The old one has pain.
Three others stand. And the priest,
flowers bloom at his feet,
what he says is nowhere in the picture.

WALKING BEFORE DUSK

Opening the door, air comes
unconditional, what we love to breathe.
Old rain drips under every skeletal cherry.
Creaking uphill, we notice how smart water is.

Trees mold soundless,
removed completely from football,
70,000 in New Orleans watching the Saints,
the lady who ran down the sidelines topless.

Everywhere the warm steam of decay
mingles with our breath, rises towards rafters,
the gaps blue can't fill.
We kick among maple leaves, veins
dark in their lines yet holding the parts together.
We walk holding hands together, amazed,
our fourth winter in four years.

YOU ARE BOTH MEN

1.

It is a morning limp and dead
 as old lettuce. Not Florida, here
 the ground's depressions are full, water
 moving at a slow boil in puddles
 between the rails,
 the rails shining like coins.

If it were Florida, you think the beach
 would be made of the smallest warm coals.
 And under this Florida sky, under clear water
 dolphins squeak articulate and rise
 with original grace, the air
 welcoming them warm as their skins
 take sun and hurl light spears. . .

2.

Far down tracks the engine
 light is pearl, the switchmen late
 playing poker and everyone a winner.
 Rain falls hollow on boxcars.

Your job is checking them empty.
 One still shiny as bright rust
 held two dozen refrigerators. The old
 Great Northern rusts inside out smelling
 of Tennessee. Finally you hear
 the switchengine bells down track
 slow, rhythmic as a Guernsey walking.

And there's a drunk asleep under a grain car,
 one ankle resting white on the rail.

You kick the holey sole of his shoe
 like so much wood, and he rolls
 moaning out the other side.
 Had you kicked yourself it would have been
 no different, no different, no different.
 You do not see him,
 will never see him again.
 The switching's done. It rains
 and neither of you thinks about anything.

BLUE SUNDAY

It seems in daylight,
the daylight defined by this tall window,
it seems this wooden stool is honest,

the daylight honest. Even the stained
glass in an old church seems honest.
They say, We have something to tell you,

something you cannot hear, something
no effort on your part will yield,
something even we are not sure of.

We will tell you of ourselves,
the truth in flutes, the importance
rocks have, skipping flat over flat water.

We see you watching us
like a deaf man, or one so near to deafness
lips make a difference.

The wood in your hand is footworn,
smooth and creased with the lines of small pebbles.
The window

recreates itself, longer, on the floor.
We see the questions in your face,
the smile, and behind the smile

the apparent bravery of emptiness.
We are telling you, you are mistaken here,
here whole landscapes live and evolve.

All your ancestors are alive, waiting
an introduction. War is here, a man
enjoying sun in a trench,

a man with one foot, blind, a tattered
list of old jokes in a pocket.
Henry has forgotten all he needed to forget.

Your parents are here, real and otherwise.
Their dim faces show
an abstract curiosity in your reactions.

Things you have totally forgotten
the significance of, are also here,
the attic where dust is not allowed.

Nothing will insist itself,
nothing will shout This is fact.
They live and will continue regardless

of what you say, regardless
of what television indicates,
regardless of money. We are telling you

daylight defined by this tall window
is honest, the wooden stool is honest with its grain
and shadows, the glass in an old church is itself.

We are telling you on this blue Sunday
we see you, we see your face,
you can believe us.

HAVING MY STROKE

--for DorAnn and Herb Kasube.

That night I got up thinking
my stomach
the objects in my left eye blurred,
the bathroom tiles moved.
Your name was a song.
I sang.

Your fear,
the manipulations of your face,
your voice cracking from beyond a canyon,
I hated your fear. Who has done this?
I'm told that as one lifts
carefully the back off a watch,
so was my skull lifted.
Something wrong in the works.
I remember cold.

It's been years.
I do not wish living
only in this world.
That hand I was sure
was yours, without seeing it.
You've told me it was a firm grip.
It was the one option open.
I need your hand. Convince me.

Of Intensive Care I remember
you, your parents, machines,
a white atmosphere.

For some reason
I saw my shoes under the desk,
loafers needing polish.
That picture is still tacked to the shelf.
The seat cushion waits
slightly out of alignment.
The books, pencils, stapler,

they all wait.
And I walk in the door.

My progress has been remarkable.
Any progress is remarkable.
Some things I don't remember,
I know my name. Hair covers the scars.
When we talk about next week I believe it.

AGAIN, TRILLIUMS

Today no questions.
For night has formed from itself natural scrubgrass,
fern, salal, hellebore, the yellow-flowered skunk
cabbage, raccoons
ethical as cats,
ouzels over fast water,
and the near canyon wall, its edge sunlit
statuary, solid
as a bronze finger.

For this morning oxalis open
like wings, all whitebirds and robins home. Slugs
ride the freeways,
and confined in light, tubers burst in their dark
then bring punctual as bakers a dozen
without song, white as trumpets.
And lucent on cabled stems, veins
claret, deep in their bells,
they sway random in a flaring of long shadows.

Those shadows move in a thousand angles--
dark lines in a soapy field of toadstools.

For the sun knows them unquestionably
rising from mud and moss, deep-rooted, alive, green
and literal as milk.

TO THE WOMEN WHO SAID WE WERE CRAZY

--Long Beach, Washington

We knew
against osmosis skin loses,
this same water scraped seal off Aleutians
two hours ago,
and the sun's impotence.
And everything goes blue as litmus,
our new blood, as we
grinning lunatics, lungs
expanding in dry ice, slosh out
on feet animate as peculiar driftwood.
Of their own volition the toes
disassociate for a last ditch stand with the middle lives.
The Cessna at fifty feet
sees us and shivers back.

And the light
like drops on a hot skillet
on breakers, white dazzling choices:
inglorious wash, or the clean gesture--
dive, grey under, still.
Cold constricting like a hand.
Then we're up
whooping, diving.
Gulls scatter for miles.
And this far west,
but for two distant figures standing
on the water, well-bundled, waiting,
how easy we could make for China.

VISITING IN LAGUNA

Though seven years dead
 should that tough old Swede
 appear from his room (the guest room)
 he'd recognize 1969,
 the forest etching--its road
 lost under silver leaves--
 still over the same beige couch
 and just as it hung
 30 years in his mother's house.
 He'd recognize the purple
 lush loveseat
 contained in its Victorian filigree
 and under the fisherman and his wife,
 companion portraits.
 Nothing has come between them.

I knew this carpet, Oriental,
 darker in another livingroom
 where I first learned to walk,
 always heavy curtains at the window.
 Your beach house has one wall
 a wide expanse of glass.
 And we watched baseball, the Yankees,
 while hazed freighters move in an afternoon
 small as untouchable miniatures on one shelf,
 those elephants
 in descending size--
 interlocking trunks and tails.

This room holds
 the volume of your lives together.
 And you are the absent king,
 emperor of trains,
 the one obvious reason.
 In five years she's traveled
 Europe, New England, and Alaska,
 and brought nothing to this room
 but Gothic books, pink
 knitting established on a chair.

After lunch we wander shops,
 expensive crystal, one full of Christmas,

another of flowers, spices, small antiques.
She says "Oh I look,
but I won't buy anything now.
Any more would be useless clutter."
We tell her we've moved
and the weather where we live
is never good.

FROM HERE

From here a paper slapping down,
or cold, or the neighbor's dog
frenzied behind a chainlink fence,
harmless. The birch limb
set that way--
some cat-frightened bird, or wind.
No giants in shadows.

Mornings the house--
not just the quiet of bees' husks
in a pickle jar,
but the hush of church,
spiders the sole occupants,
busy in brown rafters.
Quiet as cumulus in motion.

The dim hallway had doors tall enough
for giants. From yours
your forms were mountains,
curled, one snoring.

Then pulling on clothes
you must have wondered absently
or later over eggs,
wondered where I came from
so fast asking your bed
(huge, wider than my widest arms, pillows
incredible deep hills)
to sleep there
in the perfect safety of where you were.

WALKING BEVERLY BEACH

Always it has never been like this.
 Eye level gulls flying, mouths open,
 eyes wide set, never really hungry,
 flare in a baring of underwings
 and fold.

The brown sand
 a composite
 brown no brain can remember,
 where it's wet is greyer.

Overhead
 wisps like steam quick enough to taste
 elongate in a whisper
 white and salt.
 Pebbles wash in a water hiss uphill,

back in small pebbly rumbles,
 the sand retreating like arrows
 and foam
 skewed by slick oceangreen vegetables,
 clear Japanese jello.
 Sand dollars carry five mute doves.

In pools anemones are home
 and mussels refuse interiors.
 Toes disappear there,
 retreating, defeated. Sun
 cooling
 dyes their surfaces delicate rose,
 itself dies--
 an acceptance gulls and red cliffs
 witness longer than we do

except here, now, this other place.

AGREEMENT

Why have you chosen to sit
directly opposite me,
your collar length brown hair,
averted eyes, the angled
peering at some page
you turn suddenly
as if to hold it would be burning.
You woman with your coat on
as though you will plunge
into perfumed trenches any minute:
go. Leave me this space
empty
not crowded in some close
too pretty swish of hair.
Nor do you read
this face opposite you, the frown,
the pure attempt to concentrate,
block you out, which

is no use.
I am glad you have taken that chair.
You yawn, please, you must be warm,
take off your coat.
We will get along you and I
and not say a word.
Neither of us will see the other.

Good. It is agreed.

THE POSSUM ON OLESON ROAD

Say that night
in a methodical breach of protocol
joyously it squandered a perfect feast of trash.
Dips (cucumber and sour cream), pate
of liver, crackers, and cheese
yellow with leaf garnish, table under moon.
Say once it had eaten, then it ate again, past
any reasonable limit, pink feet working
like furious scoopers under a perfect snout.

Then leaving the cans rolled and glinting
it waddled belly-full and sleepy
down the dark ravine.

Later it must have risen
groggy, doubting any animal could be that lucky,
disbelieving even its own pouched stomach.
And began climbing then, fur heavy
with night water, climbing through briar shadows,
nettles, singleminded until I saw it
through the car's warm drone,
its retinas dull red, lifting
too late one pink hand.

It was habitual inertia, nothing
ethical took me back
after sundown the next day, the same road
curved as flat rivers, houses acres apart,
except the pavement

 --and I knew the place--
everywhere I looked it was clean as a washboard.

Say for ten hours under nettles
and fern whorls it shook for each breath, its eyes
full with that meal and two
bulging headlights.

 Say then it slept.
all the warm afternoon dreamless as dirt
and woke at dark, hungry, with no memory.
Stiff, it stretched, and began browsing the ravine.

JOURNAL ENTRY

Morning. Seven days now
since we crossed the pass,
a heaven of blue asters
and pines like shrunken, weathered men.
There is no way describing these mountains.
They tower over us
with a sound of their own, the wind,
the slow etch of ice.
One animal seems to follow us,
a rodent, its twit twit echoes face
to granite face. It stops when we stop.
Killed a hoary marmot yesterday,
a tough creature, for food.

Evening. Wood scarce. I have
just these few minutes. A ptarmigan
soars against the darkening sky.
Here Boston is an illusion
that requires a full belly and fifteen minutes
alone to summon up. Jackson's knee
is no better. All day he rode the mule
and tonight it is suffering.
Not one of us is far from the edge.
We sleep too well. Tonight I will dream
not meat, not the house with windows,
I will dream your warm body here.
There are a thousand stars.

OLD WOMAN ON THE BUS

As gravity the slow
settling of chemicals
as an oxidation every turn
settles you
comfortably
in a nodding

a halo of grey hair
a corona

On the periphery
we suppose the hand in your purse
clutches money or cancer
and the other
a jellyfish
a daughter's small children
the resolute
perfect curves of their hair
and five fingers
perfect around your thumb
your veins like surface roots
entwined
with regular pulse

Nothing will
overshadow your presence
The crest of Vermont rouses you
an uphill
neither the rise
nor fall of a hotel's stairs
You adjust your hat
a habit your mother had for church
Looking for keys you find your father
liquor and the leather belt
and snap shut the purse
Then the long processional

the green Buick
a house
a refrigerator with tomatoes
cantaloupe

and resuming an afghan for Jenny
You have friends next door
Your geraniums hover
a brilliant splash
the length of your porch

Everyday the body you've known for years
and something like your soul
rises at 45th and gets off.

NOTES

"Light for the Chapel of the Dead", p. 13: based on a stained glass window in the Church of Our Lady of All Grace, located in Assy, France. See Splendors of Christianity, commentary by Dmitri Kessel, p. 245.

"The Hoodoos in Yoho", p. 36: Yoho National Park, British Columbia, Canada.

"Pictures from the Czech Pilgrimage", p. 42: based on a series of photographs titled "The Czech Pilgrimage". Taken by Marketa Luskacova, they appeared in London Magazine, Vol. 15, Number 5.