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Midstream | [Poems]

Jean Croxton
The University of Montana

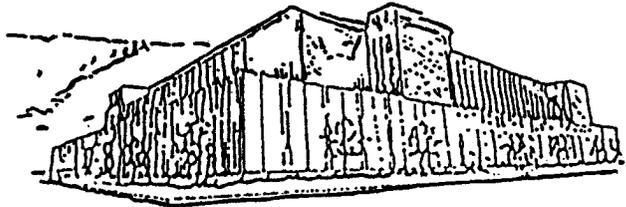
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Midstream

by

Jean Croxton

B.A. The University of Utah, 1991

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1999

Approved by:



Chairperson



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**We walk on the lake
in dead of winter above
silver trout swimming.**

The Divide

Visiting Hearthstone

The woman beside me thinks we are on tour -
white halo hair,
cardigan and beads, hose and handbag.
Is this your first visit to Japan?
And I can see why she believes this
here in a group with our Cream of Wheat
at an hour that could mean early departure.
I know where I am. Bakersfield in a drought year.
Breakfast before heat settles
makes institutional sense.

My father wears a cowboy hat against the sun,
weaves through patio trees
strung with faded paper chains.
The people in charge sing out, bending and touching
like kindergarten teachers.
Dad doesn't talk anymore. Aphasia, dementia -
gentle sounds like Santa Ana winds
coming in warm whispers out of the desert.

Dad's little dog Echo lives here with him.
Happy in company, she passes herself around
like a baby at church.
Sarah is digging up the azaleas again. Echo helps
and we watch her long hands in the dirt
finding the delicate roots.
Someone else will come to stop her. Virginia
would like to visit but must get home,
her girls will be coming from school. We avoid Sam.
Yesterday he stood, his hand on a doorknob,
I can't be wrong, not all of the time.

We sit while they read aloud from newspapers,
but we don't listen.
Tillie is black. Dad strokes her hair and arms,
learning the texture.
I bring oranges that grow here the size of softballs.
They fill my father's hands,
too large now for his frail body.
We let the warm juice run down our chins.
He naps in the afternoon on his narrow bed;
I can't hear his breathing.

(stanza break)

I join the others. We are allowed one cigarette
under the mimosa,
waiting in the still shade.
When the sun is low, Dad puts on his hat,
and shoulders my purse.
Out by the cinderblock wall, his figure
in the dusk like a wrangler working fence,
he lifts Echo and sends her in a high arc
out and over, the tongue of his spirit
tracing through the pale evening.

Faith at Easter

She carries a basket
of ice shards.

The frozen river
is breaking up.

Three flickers in bare cottonwoods
argue in russet flurries.

The eggs below might be the issue -
yellow and turquoise -
impossible to hide on a milky day.

Her father has gone south to Mexico
to paint churches at Easter.
A scarecrow in straw hat

and patent leather, she follows
the melting trail of turquoise, yellow
and salmon stucco

to a dead stop.
The radiator hose
spits a green stream,

the smallest fissure.
That vein in his head.
Just this?

In some sanctuary
her father raises his voice.
He is risen!

How else to explain it?
He is risen, indeed.
(the mumbling fold.)

Walking the Dogs

In morning sun the dogs lie quiet.
The woman calls across the meadow and they come,
bend their heads under her hand. At dawn
the dogs had awakened her from dreams of strange
and empty rooms, dreams of confusion and loss.
She wants to walk. Excited to go, the dogs run
beating up dust, then circle behind her
touching the back of her knee to urge the pace.

The road winds into stands of deep green larch
tipped with the lightness of new growth. Once
she skied this road on a day so cold
the young dog made a bed in the snow and lay down
as if to stay. The old dog and the woman coaxed her
to freezing feet, then all the way home. This day
hums with heat, the long snouts of the dogs
pulled into panting smiles. Ahead of her,

the dogs make the turn onto the trail that climbs
the ridge and wait. They hope she will follow,
not call them back to take the shorter route. The woman
wants the long walk today. She is thinking her father,
is with them still, sweating under his hat,
pausing at the lightheaded white
sky of the mountaintop, breathing the thick
air in the undergrowth as they follow the dogs

down a deer path dense with wild rose, down
to the creek where the dogs kneel in the water
cooling their bellies. She undresses and eases
into the shallows until she lies flat in the bed
of smooth stones. The older dog noses her clothes,
remembers the night the thunder came and the woman
let the dog bury her head there until the fear was gone.

Naked

My daughter massages
the open umbrella of her belly.
I've seen the child inside
by a process that traces his image
in light. The arc of his brow
a corona, his spine a silvery
chain. My father's frailty
was translucent - skin sheer,
bone thinly veiled.
She lies naked as full sun.

Natural History

At the Museum of Natural History
with the woman who is my daughter,
a campfire of native storytellers flickers
in a forest clearing and voices tell
of the people trying to lift the winter sky. Quietly
her tears come in spite

of the oriental glyph that signifies
strength tattooed on her body
in college days.
And strong she is - born in the time of zealous belief
in breast milk and natural immunity.

It seemed almost that simple. *Men on the moon*,
I told her that first summer of her life
looking up at the night sky with her father
who believed if we sheetrocked walls of the cooperative nursery school
and breathed tear gas at anti-war rallies -
the positive progression of history was ours.

She was four at the time of the accident.
They came saying *fatal*; I couldn't think what it meant.
It was morning when she said *He was reading*
and then I went to sleep. I knew she meant
we should have been more vigilant.
We were the ones to guard him.

Each day the war went on, glaciers advanced,
the unimaginable grind went on without heed.
She folded loss into our days
with acceptance only a child knows. Tears
fell freely, not for the unimaginable,
but for missing her love.
In the story, time for sorrow fades

when the death of winter melts away at last and the buffalo return
to the people who understand the gift.
We lunch at a cafe after the museum
because we are together for a time in our adult lives and
it is to be celebrated. She jokes about my old eyes
and reads to me the fine print of the impressive menu.

A Bird in Hand

Before the alarm of breaking glass below
the bear bloomed in the nostrils, spread like fog
on the tongue. And after. With a bear, now
splinters, unmappable in memory—how long,
how near. Sliced peach, plum jelly,
color in shards on concrete. And who hasn't
had a swift down the chimney,
perched in a one-eyed moment
with the answering machine, the andiron claws,
fly frantic through the rooms—feather script
in soot. A child born comes through walls.
This grunt, this wail, a feral concert kept
for welcoming our own. Blood-branded
and breathless, the child flings a starry hand.

My grandson begins to walk

A sweetness accompanies the naive
belief in linear progression.
The primitive map in an old movie
traces a toy ship's course between sketched-in
continents - a plot advances, though
nothing's left behind (*Think barnacles
on a whale*, I'll tell him) and things come and go
and come. He's seen each season's spectacle
once; he may assume perpetual changes,
and that's true too. It's all true at the same
time (*an idea that encompasses
linear, cyclical, perpetual : time*)
I'll take him a jack-in-the-box to show
the element of surprise - so he'll know.

Cottonwood seed sails
through the rafters of memory.
A child in summer.

Oases

Nevada

The movie crew came to town when I was ten
and still rode bare-chested in the country
with my best friend. Free
to ride levees in full sun until
we gave in to the hard current
of irrigation ditches carrying us like twigs
through fields of hay, acres of man-made oasis
spread out in the desert. In town
road tar melted soft and
held our footprints as we slept
through the hazy bass of toads.

Far out in sage, the Paiutes lived
at the ends of wandering dirt roads
I was not allowed to ride.
Unturned land crusted white with alkali
boiled dust behind beat-up cars
headed to town. They came to
the church rummage sale, mothers
sifting piles of clothing,
babies strung tight in beaded leather,
older children silent and watchful
at their wide skirts. At the rodeo
a thick figure vomited alcohol
beneath the bleachers.

This rodeo, staged for film, brought us all
to see Marilyn Monroe in polka dots,
the tops of her breasts white
and shimmering like heat
on the desert horizon. She was sage
in bloom, a summer thunderburst.
Misfits cast in a higher reality,
we wore red to stand out in crowd scenes.
Before the stand at Rosebud and public pow wows,
long after Lahontan Dam tamed the Truckee,
our town was home to their drama.
It was years before I understood,
it was a movie in black and white
about desperation in wild country.

Wellspring

My mother said the waves were a flying mane.
She called it Horseneck Beach, a curve
of coast I could feel in my body from the name.
I was taken, rolled neat as a sow bug
in a sea that told me, *See how I carry you
touching you everywhere.*
It rolled me crown back feet hard against the bottom
to say, *This is how I meet the land. Don't be surprised
when you find Flaming Gorge,
Grand Canyon. You are a small thing, but you
are here. Open your mouth and swallow.*

The Blackfeet say backbone for continental divide.
The wellspring, headwater of the river that runs by the road.
In August the river will lie flat, sun-tamed -
the color of tea. Now it races loose
with wide-flung arms carving new channels, breathes
the morning downpour, flexes its dark braids
in an unbroken gesture of welcome. Today
I was secretly glad when the rain-swollen river
took the canoe, broke it against the rocks
and swept us away.

Texas

Pretty Bill took her everywhere in his Oldsmobile,
gold-flecked paint and power windows.
Meet my granddaughter, Jane. His Texas twang mangling the name.
Jean, she offered.
That's what I say - Jane. She's in second grade.
Seventh.

She was an easy tease, tactful and plain. (Years later
the smooth-cheeked boy ran his hand up her dress,
Girls are so plain!)

On the road to Texas and Pretty Bill
signs promised moaning caves, two-headed snakes.
The jackelope - pronged horns and rabbit haunches,
big enough to ride.

Kiss your elbow, you'll turn into a boy.
Pretty Bill's idea - but against her shirt
tender nipples, worried as a wisdom tooth,
secretly chafed.

With Pretty Bill she smoked dry grapevine
cut from woods behind his house,
drank the child's portion from the bottle cap
when he poured whiskey at night,
learned to lie for no reason,
(I'm here for the summer
til my daddy gets out of jail.)

which pleased Pretty Bill. He played monster at bedtime
walking stiff-legged in cotton pajamas
wild-eyed, coming ever on until the frozen curl of fingers
and flat yellow nails stirred fear and he would
tuck her down to sleep with a tumbling heart.

He sent her to the garden for a melon to ice for supper.
Thump 'em for ripeness.
Hidden in tall corn, she split the melon on the ground,
ate all she wanted and considered her legs,
chigger-bit and downy, but plainly pretty
when she twined her thighs and pointed her toes -
like a twin-headed snake in the sun.

Mouths of Babes

Anyone could see - the headlong piety of his father,
a recovering alcoholic, was to blame
when Jeff Sutwith at eleven in his navy suit
recited the gospel of Luke from memory .

It was summer. Outside until dusk in thin cotton and loose elastic,
Sarah and I named ourselves Star Blaze and Fancy Dancer.
We neighed and galloped and tossed our hair in the alleys,
somewhere between go-go boots and the barn.

Biff Martin spied and pelted us with dirt clods
but we were bothered by Jeff Sutwith -
Who does he think he is?
I took up the cause of Jimmy Weaver -
next-door boy whose mother
washed his mouth with soap
for calling Tina Johnson's bosom *balloonies*.
Jimmy and I ran away.

Like experienced escapees
we found the river and played like otters.
Vendla Bradley's father, the high school shop teacher
fired for advances to female students,
came upon us while fishing and drove us home.

I knew my mother was frightened because she spanked
hard. The danger was not spoken
and something dirty like the grey patches at my knees and heels
lingered in her questions.
It must have been in the midst of my remorse

that Donny Thompson caught me looking down.
I like your eyelashes, he said and the sweetness of that boy
had such effect -
I gave up my wanton self to practice a new purity
I thought was best displayed
by pretending to pray.

Middle Child

The phonograph holds stacks of 45's
and the big sisters sway in bobby pins,
*They asked me how I knew
my true love was true. . .*
The big sisters are twins,

enough arms and legs for a spider,
one animal that lives
deep in our house, a voice rounder
than harmony.
Smoke gets in your eyes.

This has nothing to do with me.
In the after-dinner dusk of summer,
I clamp on my skates and leave
my mother busy, bending lower
now over the baby *Yakety yak,*

don't talk back. And don't ever
cross Main Street - the side of town
where casinos never close.
At the Aces and Eights

the walk is studded with silver dollars
that click click click beneath my skates,
my legs a pearly smear on the mirror
of the black tile building - a bird's
wings pumping beside me. And the big sisters

sing *When the shark bites
with his teeth, dear. . .*
chasing me down the long block,

away and safe into the near-dark
streets. Then the child is rushing
home in every stroke, the big sisters
calling through the evening
Come softly , darling

Spring

When I was small
my cat disappeared for days
and there was precedent
(I'd heard it said -
Crawled up under the house and died.)
to send me searching
that worst place. On my belly
in the powdery dirt
I found the cat
tending three kittens - small
as mice, buds of eyes
nodding at nothing. Life
so tenuous I began to worry
again. In spite of the crocus
and the greening field.

**Belted to the chair
the chair bolted to the plane
the plane in the air.**

Traveling

Red

I braked for a black dog that ran into the street up ahead. A man on the sidewalk called the dog back but the dog only hesitated in the middle of the road, then continued across. A woman was walking a yellow lab on a leash down the other side of the street. The black dog was not distracted from them though the man's voice rose sharp, insistent. The dogs nosed and wagged one another. The man stopped yelling and stood watching the woman with the dogs. She moved in a slow revolution, the dogs circling at her feet. Her hair fell over her face. The red leash wound around her pale legs like ribbon. It was the first truly warm day of the year. A motorcycle roared up behind my car, then passed on the right, accelerating in a sweeping arc around me. As I moved on I heard the man call, *Come! Come! Come here!*

Bird Dream

In the palm of the valley
the pheasant cock on tiptoe
one-eyes his harem, squawks
at the sky, and me,
"Pale is your color!"
The river coils in sleep.
Submerged shadows move whole-bodied,
turn in trout unison
from the edgewater of waking.
Sandpipers leave forked glyphs
on the tongue of wet sand.
Precarious nests balance
on cottonwoods with gnarled roots
that claw the bank. Smooth round stones
will grow to fill their grasp.
Brothers in the high church
of flyfishing unfurl humming
whips, read the contents of trout bellies
like tea leaves. "Comment allez-vous?"
(the inquiring meadowlark)
Fly on to town, Jean Allison,
to the bar where the mounted elk head
keeps his peace.
"Whiskey in a go-cup," I crow.

Touch

A man in the next lap lane
veers wide on a flip turn,
a glancing thigh or arm
as we glide off the wall
of the pool and I remember,
pleasantly, as though
it were someone else,
a shower with a stranger.
I am a careful person
who calls ahead before
visiting friends. How is it
that we can be startled
by meeting ourselves?

I was young, off the continent,
on an island, warm and watery,
jet-lagged, and not myself.
There are times when
we forget ourselves, touch
a baby in the supermarket,
or when everyone forgets,
as at the end of a war, though
this is only a photograph
we all remember - throngs
embracing in the streets.

How dangerous can we be?
In the news - a woman
so fearful of hitting a child
on the street with her car
retraces her route again
and again to see her way clear
of bodies. My hand
turning a page in strong light,
unrecognizable, flecked,
parched, near burning.

Only a body of myth

can encompass a day when the morning is ceilingless
and the apex of the range to the east, lifts

the eye skyward and I blink unhindered
through the wood-frame, white-washed

brilliance of Pray, Montana - a place safe
in the logic of fence and ordered stacks

of bundled bales, abundance stored in stock,
shaggy-coated and fat with early calves.

A crease of valley lined like a palm
retelling the story of the garden,

a story of goodness and mercy.
Grinding up the divide to Pipestone Pass

the face of the rise is a tumble of stone
stacked haphazard in impossible balance,

massive monuments to vertical risk.
Earth sounded a grunting, shrugging exhalation

when it heaved and left no handhold.
Could a person slip her body into a crevice, live

with eminent collapse above and below,
hollow a place, a path? The story would unfold

in this landscape like a lava flow,
a creeping, fearful tale. Forsaken

and cast into the desert for forty days or floodwaters
over the face of the land, cleansing and purging,

until it is understood: a foot put to ground
is less a blessing than a bargain struck

while riding a behemoth. When the thaw comes
and I can hold dirt in my hands, the word *earth*

suffices. When Earth emerges whole from a satellite,
zooming out with speed I see but will never know,

another story forms round and whole
as an eye freed from the body.

Thursday

Just now the music - piano and stand-up bass
a tune I've sung for years without words
and the dogs,
mouths open like singers
jaw and tussle on the carpet.
*On the way to work? Maybe yes
maybe no.*
Something moves outside the screen door,
only leaves in sun,
and the pages of the book
so white in sun, why leave?

The crossing guard
sits on her sign at the corner.
If I gave her the book
she could go on with the story
of love and death.
On the way to work?
How much could be left to do?
Hands freckled like my mother's,
my daughter a bride
and the larch line the road
twisting up the hillside
yellowing by the pines.

I wish it were my work
to paint lines on the road
dark enough and straight
on and up the mountain
falling with the river
ribbons through the orchard
hairpin swirls and cloverleaf
until I reached the coast.
Then I would swim.

On the Island

He had twenty-eight years
to gather secrets of tide and current,
walk the circumference, define
his solitude. Crusoe planted stakes
and soon there was a grove.
Having failed before, he put his hand
against another thick trunk
to pound out a fit boat.
When he watched men come to shore
murdering those taken in war,
he continued pensive and sad
for two years.

There is a moment
that returns to me at waking
like silver at the end of a thin line,
a trailing gossamer of past
as I move forward to another place
which would be the next moment.
Driving on a winter morning
- dawn in Iowa farmlands. Far white
field and sky, divisions drawn
in hoarfrost on wire, sheer cold
the only sure surface. I am still
in each second I continue
on the thread of road, stung
by the inert fact of physical wonder
that is not of my purpose
but embraces me.

A Train Going West

They speed through the broad basin, still and clear
in an autumn morning rich with possibility
left in the air by those who came
just a century before, their engines fueled by coal
pressed on the floor of tidewater marshes
long before the people, long before the buffalo.
The bared breast of earth
stirs a memory hard and whole, they bump
and jostle in the aisles like toddlers,
the waters of the Yellowstone gliding beside them.

Joe follows pintails rising from its shimmery surface.
Free for more miles than any river has right to expect,

Will we go through Columbus? Grace wonders,

Her father worked the quarry outside town
shaping pale rock for the capital building -
sandstone from a barrier island in a shallow sea
seventy million years before,
sharp ridges of the Crazy Mountains
filling his child's horizon with silent tales
of ice age glaciers. The station stands
solid and blind-eyed, too few people
for a dinner-house conversion, but Grace
is pleased to read the sign, *Columbus*,
her voice like water over gravel.

There was a time they might meet in the club car,
dance to cowboy swing, *don't fence me in*,
as a steward in starched white shakes martinis
and the hunting party hums drunkenly
dreaming moose and bear.
But Grace and Joe are old,
like geese aground on the morning shore,
bottom-heavy and plodding.

Been here long?
My whole life, you?
Not my whole life - not yet.

*Hardware - not computers,
tools, paint, lawn seed.
Days of the independent are gone.*

*It's a small condo, in town
near the kids, all I need really
since Charles passed.*

Parting with the Yellowstone outside Livingston
ridge-lines slide by marked with the new nakedness
of logs peeled and stacked in high houses

*My granddaughter - out of control. Tattooed herself - a scorpion
here on her shoulder.*

The familiarity comforts Joe; his Vera
would be digging for photos.
*White-tail! Left side, high
by the road.*

Searching patterned browns, flat grass,
earth and stem, her heart lifts
at a flag of tail, and for a moment
they rest in the easy gait of animals.

Galatin, Madison, Jefferson - the rivers merge
their tunes of buoyant birth
and the Missouri stretches her throat
to the refrain as sung to Lewis and Clark.
Pelican, cormorant, coot, merganser,
limestone light and cottonwoods pale.

Flowing with the current beside him,
Joe remembers himself kindly -
smooth surfaced, hissing
through snags - friction no impediment
to power or haste. Lately
Joe wakes bewildered,
his life strange as a guest room,
Vera's release
hollow as a screen door slamming.
Clear depths dammed,
creeks drained to small seepage.

Old Misery moves oblivious to past.
Fur-trading, gold-fevered, Indian-fighting river
deceptive in silence, running the canyon
Toston to Townsend with the train.

At the divide she imagines the exact moment
the edge of earth passes beneath.
Grace Felps whispers her name,
Grace Felps, in the tunnel.

Eyes closed in the darkness
she thinks it would be a good note
to end on, but things are never
so tidy. Like Eustasia

dead in the draw. It took
the backhoe to see the old horse under,
half a dozen neighbors
and as many dogs.

Grace regretted this end - hooves
akimbo, the roar of the machine,
dogs barking wild and Eustasia's
fly-blown eyes rolled in a grave.

*It may be homesickness on their faces -
that distance.* Grace spreads the book open across their laps.
Old Crow, Two Belly, Long Elk stayed two months
as the Crow commission in Washington
trying to imagine rails across the Yellowstone Valley,
then left, their blessing withheld

for a time. The Serb came to the celebration for driving the last stake
in top hat, the Crow in Hudson Bay blankets, solemn
by the platform bunting, red, blue and white we know
though we can only imagine
the words spoken, the oaths and promises of this opening.

*Visited the reservation east of here
where Custer fell.*
Joe searches for foothold in the crevasse of history.

The Serb named a town Belgrade
to smooth the coming of countrymen
following those following
the first gold strike.

Hundreds of Chinese miners
reworked Gold Creek claims
after the first wave left for richer strains
then sold out to the English.

*Cincinnati Reds beat the St. Louis Cardinals
the day of Custer's stand, my granddad
was at the game.*

The train slows by the sites
only miles apart in the shallow draws.
Imagine that. Stake and strike by the creek,
quiet by low juniper.

*They're planning a new mine up the Blackfoot -
gold - biggest yet.*
Grace flips the glossy pages - *What on earth?*

The Clark Fork runs in slanting sun
through tangles of prickly pear
and rose brush. Grace has drifted off.
She shifts with the train and dreams

of baseball players gathered by the river
removing ropes of gold from around their necks,
caps in hand as if the national anthem might begin.
Joe allows Grace to lean in.

Miles ahead, townfolk gather
for the weekly farmer's market.
String-bags of remarkable vegetables
trail as they stroll arm in arm
outside the old station, preserved

as a brew-pub. Joe and Grace may stop
for a pint when they arrive. He settles
against the warmth beside him and imagines
again who they might be; she will make ham salad
and he will catch thick-bodied trout.

In her dream Grace empties her jewelry box
on the heap of glittering metal. At the window
above the sink in the ranch kitchen
she follows the rise of the hill
and the slow amble of cattle grazing.

Whistling a solo
the black-capped chickadee calls
Alone together.

Toward Summer

Falling

Zinnias remain erect and crimson,
leaves curling yellow.

Lying belly to warm wood
wet from swimming.
On the wake of some distant motion
the dock lifts and dips.

My student absent-mindedly
undoes the dark knot of her hair
in the florescence classroom.

In a dream - my mother holds the spoon high.
Like light on the morning,
the stream of honey.

Squirrels rummage in the elm.
The dog leaps against the trunk,
and leaps again.

At Risk

One day young Susan's performance
is explained. (High correlation:
anorexia slash failure.)
Note wide folds at the hip
that obscure a longing for nothingness.

Laws of confidentiality dictate
you hold information
privately, arms at your side. Twelve
girls may give birth within the year -
or not. Not out of line
with averages. You may detect
a hump forming high
between your shoulder blades.

Look for the humor. The runaways
missing all week from class
have called home to say
they ran out of gas in Wyoming.

Parents and experts gather periodically
to propose a plan, typically,
before the winter breaking
point. Anger therapy, peer mediation,
psychopharmacology. *They can't
be serious, really afraid, something
drastic.* This is not you, but the child

in your head. Refocus. Prepare.
If not today, odds are a vehicle will roll
with adolescent exuberance;
a bullet may find the arc of despair;
a child will wake to the flash
of belt buckle in the doorway.

One day you will notice a young man
studying the water meter in his brown uniform.
Lo, it is your student from years before, Alex,
resurrected from rehab. When the young woman
checking your groceries greets you
with surprising affection,

(stanza break)

you embrace her finally. And this is not to say
they grow out of it. After many years
you suspect a growing away -
like heavenly bodies, ever further
from impact. A private parallax
creating the distance at which we find comfort.

Fall Fishing, Missoula

The round moon stands still
in the early sky as the mother with
small children works the bank of the river.
Under traffic by the bridge where whitefish gather
she lands their meat, unhooking and hooking
the catch again on the lines of the children.
Carefully carrying their willow stick poles,
they reach into pools to touch
the cool wholeness of fish.

On the golf course sprinklers churn
across mowed meadow and ordered forest.
Mountain ash cluster red near spruce and
elderberry blue. Silver leaves of olive float
the pond that sprouts a fountain high
in air. Above, an osprey treads sky.
Carp roll heavy. The osprey
dives to the surface lure and
with a glinting gold fish flies away.

Waking

I let the old bed hold me
like a seasoned catcher's mitt,
and listen, hoping for the hush of new snow.

As a girl I read about Jane Goodall
hiking naked at dawn through rainforest
to keep her clothing dry. My guess is
she liked the spongy dampness underfoot,
the brushing of limbs.

The brushing of limbs. There was a time
flushed morning faces
my love and I wore into the world
made all else trivial.
Rousing slow, breath and body, crescent and arc,
resuming the rhythm together.

My baby was lovely in waking,
each day waiting in the tight bud of her body.

As a child I slept years twined with my sister.
At untouchable twelve, she drew a line between
with a serious finger. I would wake
worried at the tangle of us.

Sleep swallows grief and sometimes
waking brings a choked dawn. I hold
to the past I rock to sleep
at night, and wake to touch.

Weather

One morning winter wraps us, blunt
and insular, in drowsy iciness.
Slowed to a stuttering step, surfaces
uncertain, you and I creep repentant
of ease and speed. Disaster seems nearer.
News of senseless death in Egypt--we watch
bare-limbed mourners on a balmy day clutch
one another by satellite. Farther
away, snow-crueted hills above our house
surface in late-breaking sun, flanks smoothed
and still with light. Angle of an arm, chilled
sheet of skin--we count bodies between us,
remembering. Outside dusk deepens,
inside the fronds of a palm open.

January 28

The first of January I resolved
to hold each day apart, itself alone,
imagining that this would slow the slide
of weeks and months that move ahead toward some
eventuality that most times lacks
crescendo. Say you begin to nod off
and then your foot begins to coast across
the daybed, thuds against the floor of dusk
and wakes you just enough to drowse again -
the drift of winter. But a common day,
focused in attention, exaggerates
the length of cold. My dog in winter gains
some weight and heavy fur. She dreams long dreams
in which her paws pretend to run. And I
begin to see the absent lightness lies
behind closed eyes. Today I am resolved
to sleep and drift and dream unfettered.

March

In Chile the phalaropes feast on brine shrimp,
rest fat under the full moon, waiting to fly north.

No need to think about what I do, the reflex of winter
lingers. A dying note,
the breath between movements.

Under thin sun, deer on the hillside
nose the ground, sensing new shoots
just below surface.

Or - I can think any thoughts, draw conclusions,
contradict them. Snow flies
through sunny afternoons.

And meanwhile I create things - clam chowder,
a dress in cream cotton - while you sleep
heavy, your cheek

a gibbous moon turned away in the night.
I think I have made your pale body
for ballast

in my bed, in my arms. I think
I will wake you soon.

The phalaropes appear as if they had been there all along
spinning on the ponds,
the neat sails of their bodies caught

in an eager eddy. Stretching
to flaunt her color, the female
raises her rusty throat.

Perennial

Peonies, dark red from China,
can live in a family for centuries,
so it wasn't surprising to find it specified in the agreement:
Seller retains bleeding heart.

We moved into the house (no bleeding heart)
in late fall, the garden withering. A time of year
for prayers in broad daylight.

Scatter pennies beneath the hydrangea
to deepen the blues and lavenders in July. Bone meal,
a serious offering: here is a body
broken for you, roses, tulips, narcissus. Down on knees, hands
in dirt - intimacy unavoidable. The forsythia

in my mother's yard blossoms gold every spring, though
she's years gone (the bearded iris mute,
waving fuzzy tongues.) And in the summer

garden of the new house,
day lilies show briefly, they thrive in memory, vivid orange.
Deer come out of the hills to eat the roses again,
cedar waxwings disappear in the leaves of the strawberries
and emerge like frilled flowers in the air.

There may be a god

This afternoon's signs - two things. Sun
slanting through low branches of the honey locust
repeating complications of honey locust on the wall.
And pot roast -
the air old as baked bone.

When I was a child, I thought as a child
when I heard
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass.
Now I think
He's not found traveling.

I lie down with the dog
in a square of sun on the rug. In the prayer
a grateful bell sounds in the second breath
hallowed - the exhaling of a second self.
Something ticks at my wrist, licks my temple.

A few days ago a small flock of magpies shrieked
high and loud from the back yard.
They held one bird pinned down on the lawn,
a crowd circled and pecked its body, others on the fence
cawing fans of the fight.

I wondered if they knew someone was watching,
would they be ashamed and fly?

Summer Crowds

I saw the snake again today
at the same cut in the bank, rippling easy,
less startling than yesterday.
My dog and I come to swim. Not another soul about
on a weekday. Though the dark sheet of river
still has its way, you can ride with the current,
scramble up where the bank allows
to walk up river, cold and wet in the sun.

Sandpipers dive the dog, whistling over a hidden nest,
like the starlings that roost in the roof of our house.
Down the road from home, miles from the river,
hammers echo through the afternoon
and the welldigger thumps and hums as new people

find their place in the unbroken field. The snake
whips its delicate end where patterns of brown and black
are repeated too small to follow. A sedate shrug
and it glides underwater. I watch for the tapered periscope
on the surface of smooth swells, but it has gone.

Sustenance

He settles a plate over the surface of the steaming paté,
then a large stone for weight as it cools.
Most days the stone is a doorstep. At another time
it may have been a bone-crusher, freeing marrow
at meals, or a bed-warmer, taken from a fire ring
on the hillside where we live.

*

He rolls the dough, prepares to *raise the coffin*,
forming pastry to hold the deboned birds; the chicken
nests inside the goose, sealed in the pie
with forcemeat and mushrooms. This dish
is meant for a journey. A slice reveals
concentric layers, a topographic map
or a fingerprint.

*

He says
ancho, chipotle, habañero, poblano,
the voice pungent,
temperate zones in his bass.
He splits the fiery pods, furrows
out the seeds and chops
a confetti of red, yellow and green.
His touch will be dangerous all day.

Pursuit

Always beside me his length defines
a distant horizon I've watched for years.
As a mote crosses the film of the eye,
he moves in and out of sight. I know where
he can be found. To hold the boat steady,
oar blades must break surface like otters -
easy against the current. Overhead
he loops the line, settles the fly to water,
and we wait together, suspending focus
beneath the river's surface and above
murky ground to the shadow of a fish
rising to us. And there we are - my love,
the open-mouthed ascent, the hunger plain
as the path of the trout, one sharp line.