

2001

One horizontal

Sheila Sinead McGuinness
The University of Montana

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The One Horizontal

by

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B.A. Wesleyan University, 1989

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

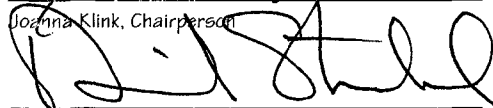
Master of Fine Arts in Poetry

The University of Montana

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for Michael Wright

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The One Horizontal

Lôôwe led our first parents up through a hole in the ground. They emerged from the earth with seed and baboons, with sheep fattened in green fields, and left their footmarks in molten rock at Ga Lôôwe. On a single leg, Lôôwe returned alone through the hole to Mosima.

— myth of the Sotho-Tswana

The Rendering

Rising off pavement, corrugated steel rusts.
The drone of backhoe fills the rendering plant's
maw. The driver calls himself Clot. His shadow
crosses four horses, tongues lolling. The air
smells of congeal, magpies at vitreous humour.
Where do we reside? All lift and thrust from a nest
of sticks, the hawk emerges with trout, crescent,
thrashing, their shade nosing autopsy-orange.
Cells devoid of impulse, bacteria that foment gristle,
matter seeking return to water. Return. . .
Cows and horses, all aphony, all bloat,
heaped a dozen high till Clot can't tell who's bay,
whose udder, whose striated muscle
suspended by hook falls femur, hind, uterus, gut,
falls heart, falls mane. . .

Flying west the day grows early. The edge of time
moves toward Arctic midnight, till somewhere
near Midway, time closes over what's supposed—
fly not into yesterday, but imperceptibly into tomorrow
when smoke ascends the five-story pagoda,
Benten Yama, Basho's tiled bell fanning
the hands that lifted smoke, temple
where Kami resides, when into the ocean
he set a spear to carve the instant— *raku-shitsu*.
The instant matter is touched, the mind is revealed.
Brush or knife, the one horizontal Kozan strokes for years.
Records of wind, earth, records of matters.
An appaloosa eats a feed bag of oats, alfalfa,
till neck-injected, it falls fetlocked. Clot chains a hoof.
The Horseman pulls away. Sow who ate nine fine farrows,
down the caked chute quickly go. Hide of nag,
hoof of bull, mixty maxty, the zleider falls.
Sheep, tongue of colt, lip of chicken gibber.
Mizzled offal, into the Hogger fall, fur and feather, bloat,
marrow, piripiri, caraway, juniper, salt. Fall, fall in alkali,
soaked, esterated, screwpressed into the druups,
hydrolized, oxidized, leathered, soaped and tallowed

in the sound of water, ritual filaments woven white,
chrome, into the impulse, the instant,
susupired from that paper and its boreal sky.

Diaspora: Sound of the Portrait

There were those who herded over hillock and stone.
There were dirt farmers who trudged over bogs.
Tenants who roofed their fowl inside their homes,
and those whose black wool
found a way down the lane. Who waved away
the stillborn tossed into the North Atlantic, and one
who slept in the flame of a famous hotel.
The McGuinness of that McGuinness' McGuinness.
The descendant of a whoremonger, yes.
Also of chant and postulancy.
It's the way that toora-looras inevitably make
the thatch and clover seem
so quaint, so distant.

O century of the washboard and the rubber factory—
O holy dark without a star, thank you for this recent peace,
to the breathed relief of priests
and the mutter of beading women. Thank you for one
never betrothed among all those simple
sacraments that couldn't hold for life.
For the ointment. The flies, base and debasing,
riven with lymph with grease from the laying of eggs.
Are we uncomfortable with Creation?
Shimmers green and black raising *mea culpas*, *Aves*,
relics of Eugenia's garment, Agatha's breasts,
the lips of Felicity and Perpetua. Agnes,
the salmon-suited bride. Her sisters,
cheeky, her sailor, permanently smiling,
waiting in the car. In the car she sleeps, yes,
all the way to Niagara, the glacial rapids
preceding many dark stories, the rush eroding
shale cataract plunging sixteen stories.
In their room, windows seep clerestory light.

A decade later, lying amid their wide bed
having split a shin, waiting for her to bathe the blood-
stuck bandage. This woman who scrapes old wax
from linoleum with a butter knife, might have been a doctor

whose hands could flesh out holes. Her sailor,
whose tenor bounces around the tiled shower,
might have been a Mario Lanza. It may be
the way she teaches me to stanch the flow,
how with stilts and pogo-sticks,
with the boy's shiny bike she helps me to know—
with nickel allowance she helps me to know—
with laundry piles unfolded on my bed.
It is not merely her fingertips, winter-cracked
at the water's end, from which I know pride.

The Crane Fly

With one limb
fine enough to wing
the head of a pin,
the crane fly steps
on the hope of the dead,
and struggles to flee
the spider's mesh of
instinct and impassive
need that I
neglected to
wipe from my sill.

No hunger is defeated
by this delicate fury.
What purpose then,
to snag this breath in winter?
Unhindered by
pernicious reason,
the crane fly shudders,
and before I release its
filamentary tether,
folds its wings.

Amid the Cooling

Some days I see the ocean skim the shore
leaving foam to shiver, returning again,
bringing tumbled glass, whale bone
laced in bladder wrack, and the occasional whelk,
then lie full across earth's vast opening
before finally acceding to moon's
imperceptible urge and pulling away.

The maw of a full moon tide bites into parking lots.
Avalanches asphalt to the sandy foot of bluff
and sucks it away to the grinding races. Earth
pushes back with offshore winds that spew
horsetails from beach-bound purple swells
turning teal as they tumble stones and bivalves,
and loosen the hulls of horseshoe crabs.

Light sluices through lodgepole and larch
haphazardly grown each beside each at the edge
of this wood darker inside than out. Diffused
bluing obscures the fern-like foliage of creekside
mountain ash. A wind deep in the forest,
my own footfalls, the scolding chatter of squirrels
as I come too close to loot.

I cannot predict the second my eye
no longer shifts above or below horizon.
And though the foghorn sounds every half-
minute, the instant split between ebb and flow
is evident only in retrospect. I am aware,
because tide takes the shore incrementally,
that light gives shape to earth.

Georgic

After the harvest of organs, of long bones,
we praise this god who gleans his power
from pharmacy, electricity, from planting—
not green in fertile bottoms, but meat
in caverns, blood-rich and sinewed.

When a Lazarus rises from death, rides the river,
we praise, for a graft will flower, will fruit.
When withered leaves no longer breathe, when frost
stops sap, and ice cleaves bark and pulp,
who would call the cold wind Executioner?

Diminuendo

Some evening when the whip-poor-will
calls out you'll whistle back, and searching
sky you'll miss her fleet deception: *whip-poor-will*,
diversionary woodnotes from a distant field.

What-cheer-cheer, the cardinal teaches
flying toward you, *purty-purty-purty* reaching
where you stand. A trill
from overhead he's caught you deep inside,

far from brood and mate whose own
dull tone fails to mask assertive tactics.
What then? Not solitude nor witness,
not color nor repertoire prevails.

Sleepwalker, Sleepwalker,

left behind, spoke of the thousand

bleeds to come. Bent to plant the seeds
so light, wind blew them.

Such need from the spore,

I leapt toward middling,

body transparent, axis
bound between planes, a perfect prism
dispersing only the colors she

inclined to see. Caraway, caraway,

formless and empty anxiety.
Barley, hops, curling the frigid,
scotch wetting the scorch.

Plunging into deep (where pressure

bruises) to finger the fissure,
hands tangling this weed of hair,
waves around salt hips,

her legs, her eyes reflecting

mother's porcelain cheeks, my own
red lips, shattered,
I gave up breath and woke,

daring to speak: How long?

How long will you blot out?
Scorn, rebuke, give breath unless on it,
too, I should choke. Succor

my affliction, live, and you dwell—

Daughter, daughter, ice
and glass, not of my clan.
Cast out, I mother my own choosing,

choose my own sib.

Stanching and bled, as Sarai received Sarah,
I hear Sophia— in change I bloom hydrangea
shout my name: Sophia.

(Mannequin, mannequin, understand
krill stranded on sand.
The eelgrass soured in afternoon wrack.
Dolphin caught in a gill net and drowned.)

Inhaled the perfume, she expired, even as I held her.

First Snow

" . the vast white bird
furrows our featherless women
with unknown shocks . . ."
— D.H. Lawrence

From our valley, the trumpeter's flown.
But his *ko-hoh* still echoes. Through the glass,
my wife sees only northern faces muted with white.
Can she see if orange leaves the larch?

My ducks are smoked, the buck butchered,
the scraps vinegared, spiced, ground, and stuffed
into sheep gut hung in coils so pungent—
she forgets to feed our sons.

She neglects to close the door on snow.
When led away, her feet remain, ghosted in drift.
Flakes tuft her shirt, darken to blots like ink.
Can she see the atom quicken time itself?

Come again Trumpeter, with neither kiss nor caress.
Come as lightning. I'll reckon the chaos
if fortune resides in ice that summer tilled under,
and nothing but pain plows such lines.

Leda 2

"And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?"
— W. B. Yeats

And October's smog concealed
his tatter, his feet all veined,
curled like maple leaves.

By the dim lit water,
slowly strolled a girl, unwitting
of his lurking, his bold intent.

Or did she, greedy for his hollow
bone, his quill feather,
lure him with lycra?

Did her fingers fondle down?
Did she release elastic thighs,
lift her tatoed breast

to the rake of algaed teeth?
Then whose breath flowed
through his vanes?

Leda 3

"Then, at last, he felt his plumage
and in her lap became truly swan."
— Ranier Maria Rilke

Rushing out to Wall Street
the banker's need
whelmed over
ordinary impulse.
He bought an evening
swan— cashmered,
wingtipped— entered
his Fleetwood, entered him.
The youth's silk surprised him.
The downy chest confused him,
opened his eyes to marquees
racing by, the sugared nuts
toasting, and brassy taxi horns.
Sodium lighting
the feather-whiskered face
faded under the East River
bridge. His youth disappeared,
and emerged with a girl.
The banker sat in the chauffer's seat.
Silk winding her wrist,
her throat. The ripping
satin panties.
In the rearview mirror,
she met the banker's eye.
Yanked the scarf that stifled her cry.

Along the Deerfield, the Cold, the Hoosic

The Berkshires are dressed in the black-bottomed, white-topped clouds of November that almost conceal a glider. At the first souvenir shop stocked with maple sugar, Minnetonka moccasins, and plastic coonskin caps, we mount a ten-flight climb that plummets to the past through a compassed viewfinder. See where the Boston & Maine used to chug. The wooden Indians sold to antique shops down river. This trail named for victors— the Mohawk— the Pocumtuck before them almost forgotten. Pavement edging its vistas: lakes that huddled for generations on ridges, now obscured by growth of locust, birch. Among the tatters, trading posts and shells of motor inns that litter its course, wild aster claims satellite dishes. Dorito bags crisscross contrails, ghosts of civilization floating the improbable sky. We seek an eastern face to tuck into. Wrapped back in the last light filtered through pines, we stop instead at Whitcomb Summit Hotel. It reeks of yellow onion that clings to clothes for nineteen miles down the western face, past shuttered Wigwam Cottages, hairpin turn, past millbuildings where rocks thrown by generations broke not only the glass. Rising from unlevel beds, we ask the desk clerk where to get a scotch. She points under the bridge. A Maine Central engine rusts on a hundred feet of track, and shopkeepers sell bayberry candles from abandoned textile mills. Outside, company housing remains company housing. A wind rising from Atlantic sands scales the wall covered by frost. Drawn by the *cheee* of hawks, rise from sea level, from scrub oak and poverty grass, worn by swarms that tramped, rise like cranberries released to float

on bogwater, past the weathered
hips of salt spray roses, tumbled barns.
With a flock of geese retreat, as jets
camouflaged green skim the pinetops,
as vapor streams between the tips of wings.

Receiving

This grey hair can still feel your father's
fingers from forehead to nape.
True wealth is rising late at night to write the silence.
True wealth is rising late the next day.
"Asshole!" is a satisfying epithet
when someone makes you stand on your brakes.
It's ok to call your basketball buddies "my boys."
It may be ok to call Gambian women "my women" if they're your team.
I drove a woman I didn't know to Stockbridge,
up her mountain to the house she'd abandoned
when the tumor advanced. I vacuumed turds
& mattress stuffing, wheatgrass ornaments
chewed & strewn toward floorboard nests.
She urged me to finish before her wife (26 years) arrived.
She repaid the favor, asking me to stay while she died.

How The Thing That Happens, Happens

Two bullets desired a shotgun wedding, so they entered & slept with the bride & groom, then ricocheted into the pulpit to sleep with the preacher.

Since I had charge of public policy— I was John Q.— I said, if you're so tired then enter a hibernator, but do not snooze in an incubator. I said, you may sleep with a curly horn sheep, but do not enter a statistic.

Statistics, I said, go to bed while bullets sleep with buffalo to prevent brucellosis.

Meanwhile, in the House, someone uncouth, with a musket, began to seduce the hearing. You'll start a blunderbuss, you do that, I said, you'll find you'll have to muzzle it.

The bullets were sleeping with the bluehairs. I said, old men, no, & not infants in cribs.

I said to the bullets that they should have lunch in the statistics' cafe. But the bullets wanted to sleep with the cook. You are too sleepy, bullets, I said. But by that time the bullets' whole family had moved in, & were sleeping in the gym— Hey, that's where kids play basketball.

But bullets don't hear when they're not awake. So I called the public out of the pubs & said to them that this is a peace of attrition, that they must bed the bullets, or bullets would bed them.

The Business Suit
for Lynn Emanuel

Of what stripe is this habit
on a hanger, this modern mail hanging
in the tailor's window? We wish to wear it, it wishes
to be worn, it wears like a wish—

trim with interlock, it's a fraternity
of pinstripes, straight, homogenous, legion,
finished with topstitch, a skyscraper
on whose blueprints we'd love to smudge our fingers.

It's an elevator enclosing the girded
portfolios of a certain body of men—
the placket overlapping is a nighthawk's breast,
the feathers' waxy surface, small protection—

when they're in it, they're camouflaged,
another nova among a sea of stars.
Right now it's a beacon locked
behind plate glass; while we're busy

washing off the ink, it glows there
the dim flame of itself
in a sky of dusk, a sky of dawning,
neither burning out, nor burning up.

Coney Island

Beckon to ships fifty miles out to see
this Eden of electricity, the wheel, the alchemy,
the spiral light from minarets. See the excess:
Bulbs pulsing the impermissible among the bustle,
mermaids parading bare-bellied. Skinny swimming
beneath a wave of arc lamps, the faces masked hilarious
in Blowhole Theater's bright reflection. Horses
steeplechasing past the lath, the plaster of Pompeii
toward Dreamland. This Brighton sand may be
Elysium to tumblers, contortionists, to the impressarios
of chaos controlled. But these arcades are home
to Babe, the Pulchritude Queen of the Avoirdupois,
and Lionel, the Dog-faced Boy. To midgets living in half-
scale, this is Lilliputia. To Dr. Couney's preemies,
these crystal incubators are life
supported with quarters paid by the curious.
Intuit sacrifice in tenements asbestosed & twice
daily engulfed in flame. The ringmaster's lash,
the simultaneity of *all* your fears. In delirium's
dark cave, silent but for the organ,
sterile except the projectionist's cigar,
Chaplin's antics go ash. Imagine, if you will,
sweat coursing down your breast.
Then listen to the echo.

Autumn, *Graves in Foss Woods*

Thought, a chickadee
lighting talon & solar plexus
to slip thistle off a finger,
to leave hollow shells spent
& the echo of a feather fallen
over the kettle pond over
the stones unnamed, numbered
for the pox upon their kin lain
in earth & also forgotten.

Ice Mask

At the confluence, a heron
watches the rivers freeze. Snow falling
into water catches the edge,
the ice moving downstream
till a community of floes extends,
reaching currents in oceans north
of fjords. Bergs blossom before
the submarine plunges, prow-first
to rest on a bed, quiet. This far
from the Gulf Stream, did a whale sing
to what must have seemed a cousin?
Or was the sailors' only sound the pulse
of radar? Only the living know
the body's need to leave a last
impression. Know how breath conceives
with avalanche the perfect expression:
a fragile unthere.

The Burren

Beneath the clint,
 limestone scraped
 bared by glacier,
beneath the mineral sea,
 rolls a drone Atlantic.
 In half-tones,
pastels,
 clouds mitigate
 the monochromatic,
whisper leaking
 from this creviced scape,
 from grykes,
shallow holes
 sprouting Milkwort,
 Lady's Bedstraw,
Lesser Dodder.
 It may be
 the river deceives:
A turlough welling
 by noon, is
 drained by dawn,
gone past Ailwee Cave,
 where earth-fealty
 echoes
through gallery graves.
 Where hazel and yew
 once thrived,
a queue of wedge tombs
 and henges perch,
 unyielding, rooks croak
and wait to reconcile.
 Cairns scattered
 across the plateau.
An ogham stone
 marks this passing
 with eroding strokes,
dusting the caul,
 transparent and taut

round two perfect lambs
lying inside
the beak-clean
bones of their dam.

Poem for Claudia Rodriguez

Here, rooted by jicama, by lime,
children sell Chiclets from doorways.

February's wind dries the arroyo, dusts alfalfa
fields that men defend with bullwhips.

Take wing, seek asylum in the epicenter of bells
where Madonnas dirge, mantilla-draped, behind a hearse.

One holds a doll like a monstrance.
Hear the shudder— the jail in Texcoco,

iron dwarfing the cell. Something seeping through walls,
through floor, slickens the stone. Outside,

tourists toss coins to the toothless,
light wax under tissue ballooning to drift

red, eclipsing the stars over barrios,
Teotihuacan, over Los Piños where women

cuff hands to the palace gate, weight their tongues,
their teeth with chain. Her skirt

sliced to the waist, who would not have aimed, have shot
some vital part of his body? How soft the skin of mangoes.

Lake of the Second Death

There is no rain west-northwest, but light
near Sleeping Child,
near the Garden Wall, and then it is memory:
the coulee's rustle:
a river's murmur slurried with ash.

There is no rain,
only the road, its dust oiled, graded.
Thunder's breath
ripples on rock, on rhythmites edging the rim
of reservation.

There is no rain. Only the drone, larch,
lodgepole and char.
There is the drone, the chant, the footfalls,
the skins' thrum
rippling air, spiralling up the lodgepoles.
From silhouettes,
the breaths' humidity rises to coalesce
with smoke, with vapor to damp

February, the rarest wind
from summer's direction licks the frame
houses, hip-roofed,
shoulder to shoulder through two-
hundred seasons of sun's
blistering, of rogues kicking shoreward, salt
cycloned off the harbor,
of sand blasting off dunes from north-northeast,
light ungodly silhouettes
men, standing hoses in hand, standing,
there is water,
and tongues lifting prayer, spinning air,
and there are tongues
leaping to wind lapping toward dune, there is a body
of water, an ocean, a body
of Christ across the street standing deep on lawn.

What to Make of the Thing

“. . . nothing in versification is ever superseded, surpassed,
for prosodies are preserved, or resurrected . . . if they have
any foothold whatever in the language.”

— Donald Wesling

Hear the voice! Awaken souls and lyres!
Whose lips will triumph with tongue, rejoice!

In John's beginning, the word *was*.
The angel, a whisper begetting . . .
two beats and a pause
that thane bestowed upon the son of Beow.

Till Arcady's swains did pull unsubtle bows,
unquiver sylvan syllables in verdant groves,
upon his word, the hero drew his blade
to heel the cad who breached, unbreeched, his maid.

But all hips, all haws, haloes have waned. Nard, cedar
no longer suffice, nor nymph, cress, nor frogspawn.

Whose urge and urge and urge to create, to iterate praise,
stirs the hiding heart, stirs the bird drifting, lifting wing in ecstasy, and ah! the kestrel
kiting toward Christ and—
Who sings of self untamed, untranslatable, in tropes that tantalize the I, sings
of barbaric yawps of ninth-month midnight, of delicate deaths—
Both sing from under the sole of your boot.

The gyre's widened. Stilled
the falcon's cry. What's preserved is beat and breath beyond
the urge to howl—
the urge to surpass those *angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection*.

Thousands slanting,
supersede elegy—
Alexie sings back
magenta, crimson,
Chimacum Creek.
Doty's chanteuse
speaks the dare

name his Wally.

The crone resurrects
her footheld cradle,
rocking—
Glock-cocking-
young-creepers with beepers,
who sing they gonna
bleep her.

Bóne bábes góne féral slóuched insíde bóne fáthers.

Heron, Bittern, Shrike

"God has not died for the white heron."

— W. B. Yeats

Within hours of leaving the river,
caddis flies clutter the asphalt.
Driver #1 proceeds westerly,
the eyewitness says, lost to
frogs lying geothermal, in sulphered
mud along the Lochsa's oxbow.
A gold coupe, spewing & rusted.
This surface ripples as heron dagger trout,
rise through shrouds of steaming air
to utter *craw*. How long
until, infested by beetle, the lodgepole's
lichened half gives way, splits, cracks
like gun bursts from a duckblind?
Driver #2 follows, a pick-up alongside
at seventy, eighty, muffler loud as a rip saw.
A bittern lifts its foot, slender— the wind—
settles on reedbed stubble, pointing skyward
aligning stripes with stalks, winter-hollowed.
Last year's cattails burst, their velvet
frayed, bittern swaying, unseen.
Off the ramp, the sin of metal on metal
unseen by shrike, once silent,
still on leafless aspen, arrives
the coupe, back-ended. #1 by the shirt,
what animal would *not* gnaw, #2
by the throat, ligament and bone to free itself,
Got a piece, shrike down to duff,
snatching gun, impaling shrew on hawthorn,
wheels & shots &, hedging the river, one,
two, three, hedging tomorrow, o he
temples himself.

Selene,

the thing I came for: the wreck
and not the story,

the thing itself
and not the myth, child

of the sky diminishing east,
infiltrate this valley

where inversion clogs the lung,
and illuminate this wreck, its stern,

its larboard. Dim the sapphire, the trilobite
loosed from rimrock. Refract instead

off the memory of a surface
lapping, refract off rhythmite,

off the relics of wounds some man
glassed in a keloid cabinet:

the fly that hooked his wife's cheek.
Shine on Leda's blanch ellipsis

surrounding those sons of an abominate god,
on the emptiness between Philomel's teeth.

There is no ladder here.
Only the space between ribs,

the faces blue-white,
half-hidden from themselves.

Selene, child of the sky archipelago,
your crust is silica, aluminum,

calcium as my bone.
Let us go on again.

The Ancestors

stand beside me some mornings in the mirror
their fingers outlining my mouth.

My great-great-grandfather often begins,
or a Levitical priest cautioning men:

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman.
Are we invisible when lying together?

My aunt's voice dribbles over the tap. She is one
whose song I learned young: Amber

canted from crystal can slake the smoulder. Once
she sang the Angelus in her father's house.

Of all the sisters, she alone, unmarried,
could not stop singing even after he died.

In a whisper flicking across her tongue,
she warns me—

Man is the Savior Incarnate. Only a man can save you.
I want to say, our house is the first place I have ever felt

passion. Though in our house, they find me and say
of all the daughters I am the one true disappointment,

the girl who holds up mirrors to sacrament,
to virgins on altars bound by knot and thread,

bound by lace to mortals whose only sin was desire.
Get a man, they say. This is my penance

for choosing you. *Come with us,*
they say. To Sligo, where mothers beaded

their prayer on flax broken and woven into linen.
Their girls, tatting cuffs and collars,

*accepted the father's choice,
accepted the green earth made black*

*with each spade turned, with each caul buried.
I never lived in that country.*

*Never stayed in the schoolyard of women refusing to love,
refusing to admit this love forsaking their sons.*

*Crossing themselves, they echo their epithet to sky:
What of the children you refuse to let inside you?*

*I want to tell you that some nights
when your breast is heavy on my palm, I feel*

*beside me the teacher in the mirror
whose desire hardened into flesh next to her heart.*

*I am praying your name, an annunciation
sweet as nebulae. When I call, you come to me.*

Mudlarking

Near lodgepole locked in late autumn freeze,
past steppe that tumesced Missouri's headwaters,
one distant mountain erodes its alluvial skirts.
A couple of coyotes conjure a goose
from the wraith-like rookery across the shoal.
With an eye toward tracks and scat we scunge
the edge of words for hummocks
risen from glacial kettles skimmed in ice.
When sun emerges from hanging valley fog
to thaw the browse and loose the stink
of decaying aquatic life, my boot's sucked in,
Michael! In Provincetown we embraced
while picking cranberries in Wampanoag bogs,
so why now stay the urge to reach for her?
Whose reserve is this; whose reservoir so receded
to expose shallows freeze-shocked and refusing to yield?
She drops a muskrat skull to grab my hands,
moraine, till, hoarfrost, Kootenai.

Aubade

Helianthus
turns its face
to the rising,

hawk, an early
mouser, gliding
on thermals,

the blanket
pushed aside,
and inside,

your willowed eyes,
the long steep of tea,
Flathead cherries

in morning glories
this *spiritoso* life
we're blind

into afternoon
so bleached and hazed
that finches

hide in conifer
leaving yellow
to twist west, away.

Itinerant

Sand sweeps from backshore to front growing
the reach of this involute cape an inch a year.
While brine stings the eyes, at the edge of wharf
fishermen toss a boatload of blues. She retreats
inland as gravity descends. Such
is the paradox: as the curved rim of ear
leads out to lobe, it leads in to tympanum, and deeper yet
the synapse, so the verge of earth that unfurls
this finger of sand sixty miles out to sea, must back
to mainland curl into geography. Unmoored,
the twin anchors of foghorn's d-flat,
the indigenous roses, their tendrils clinging
to greying cedar shakes. She scrapes the impasto
through several states, scratching layers for birth
among Berkshire spruce. The Detroit
of before, on every four corners, had a gas war.
Before the nurse cauterized a youth shot in one eye;
before a monorail began to circle high above empty
blocks of grass outlined by concrete,
as if once we had rocked those streets. What
can be done? In heavy waters of the almost ocean
she swims against east, the great glacial lake washing
intransigent salts from her head, from her sight,
till she sees corn cribbed to continent's center,
fields of sunflower, wheat, and dry pea wrinkled
by thermals. Bluffs erupt into brittle ridges rising above hay
yellow as the middle line leading past placenames—
Bozeman Trail, just east of the great Divide, the rivers flowing
pacific or toward the trickle bluegill— there are no creekbeds,
cottonwoods, no bleached bones, only horizon lited
in half-light, an umber rising warm from a power plant's flue.
The indeterminate silence two thousand miles
into near-dawn, this could be the Atlantic:
the ground, unbroken swells rippling to feet;
the stack, a solitary vertical pulsing from a rocky shore;
the trailers, a fleet of trawlers flung to earth's curve
in search of the last cod, in search of placenames changed

from Atlantic -ports and -mouths, toward midlands
where -waters are Broad, Sweet, and Still.

Itinerant, 45

Of Missoula, MT. Formerly of Provincetown, MA, Middletown, CT, Rochester, MI, and Haverhill, MA. On or about March 15. Of removal and deletion caused by the prolonged silence of critics. The beloved *.txt file manuscript comprising *Alison Pettit* of Hudson, NH; *Claudia Rodriguez* of San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico. The loving, but unlauded, Master Document containing *The Burren* of County Mayo, Ireland; and *The Camas Prairie* of Cottonwood, ID. Survived by a dozen subdocuments, 31 unaffiliated verse paragraphs, uncountable fragments on 298,382 bytes of hard disk, and one manilla folder stuffed with pro forma rejection. Itinerant, a deep appreciation of nature, diction that touched its landscapes, reverence for emotion revealed in them. There will be no celebration of its keyboarding, its erasure, and interment will take place in its beloved's psyche, in lieu of silence, that Itinerant might repose, as in life.

Right Ascension

I have received direction in forks that gird
this trackless nowhere. The clack of cedar dangling,
frozen green. Frost transforms the branch
into something that longs for detachment.

Why journey here?

Why this cloister caught between hip-like hills
and coulees? Stone that absorbs the day's
dull light absorbs the psalms. A rise of stairs
toward nuns who may be within me, speaking of sacrifice.

Who might speak to me now?

The Jesus of geography. Spirit in chemistry. Every
colony, every president, every war—
always the isosceles God. Why not this perfect
view rolling to expose the slightly brighter plane
of prairie?

Saturday night, six priests
check into a guesthouse. They change
into chaps and harnesses, walk downtown and spend
the night as gay as boys they meet at The Vault.
Rising on Sunday, they change again
into stoles and chasubles to eat the body of Christ.

Who will accuse them of apostasy?

Are you *He* because they never cried behind a door?
Are you *He* because they watched a daughter
rest a palm on her mother's hair, and give her peace?
Ascend this Way of the Cross with me,
hill riven with footprints. Make it visible:
statues, molded of horsehair and plaster,
locked behind apsidal glass.

Jesus Meets His Mother near the grotto—
someone's attempt to recreate Lourdes:
around a Mary, unalabastered,
baskets of lily and mock orange.

I create a bouquet of boughs and cones,
lay it on a bench hewn from this grove,
and face away: Three horses ran, a dream, all mane
all tail across the headlight's arc. Three more

closer to the ruin: lattice burnt with chalice,
tabernacle, and drape twilled by hands: lifted grate,
lifted coals to ignite their Beltaine fire upon a hill.
Those hands that kneaded oaten bannocks,
stippled stone, chisled images of women.
Even the galaxy seemed a milky spine.

Are you near? I cannot perceive you.
Plaster and paint overcome you.
Look on me and answer, undim my eyes,
forgive me for I have dwelt in near occasions,
have taken into myself—
Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa—
your shadow cast on prairie:
the fog drifting north over snowfields
questions the very boundary of earth:
you have no voice: you persist in dawn.

Scablands

1.

We'll be flying at 3,000 feet
above the stunning fluvial topography
resulting from the planet's remarkable process
15,000 years ago, that Satan
defied by ignoring the man and dealing with the woman.
When the natural order is so repudiated,
it brings ruin, spilling over the northern rim
of plateau, eroding a plexus of flood channels.
The governor's her boss, and he loves his horses, a spirit
of submission, a disposition to yield, to surrender
her will to divine calling. Since he lost
his missus, she's his gal on Derby Day.
She loves her girlfriend, it's just the game.
TWO NUBILES PLAY IN BED.
We'll see erosional potholes and giant
ripples, Eve's peculiar gullibility drawn
into a pattern of relationship destructive
to the sanctity of marriage to this very day
exploding with the force of Niagaras
and leaving a four-mile wide rim at Dry Falls
where 400 feet down, their plunge pools. SHAVED GIRLS
EXPLORE EACH OTHER'S BODY. When the baby was born
with Down's, they hired a sixteen-year old
sitter, a move from biblical feminism endorsing
certain expressions of sexuality, who moved in
with the wife at twenty-one leading
inevitably to the overthrow of normative
force gouging the Grand Coulee. They raised
all six kids and never said anything
about mountains of gravel 30 stories tall,
eleven grandchildren, ripple marks
50 feet high. I left the convent for her
FROTTAGE PHOTOS, UNCENSORED
always slept in separate rooms,
never told anyone— we were teachers,
we were afraid of wounds only partially healed
in the soil's epidermis. They wouldn't let me

see her, when she was dying.

2.

Formless snow compacted,
thawing and freezing, firm
moving outward, all
directions, born of woman,
a pliable continent of ice
its granular bed carving
cirque from rock that
plucks away the headwall, tissue
crushed by man kinetic
in his urge to plant you.
What lies under this weight?
Loose accumulations of darkening
till, lenticular clouds—
You learn whom
you may touch,
whose voice to hear, wind
and needle ice.

Suppose that wind blows silt and sand
and snow falls for a year. Would we bloat
some vestigial organ to store our grief?
If it burst, what would we lose?
River dammed by glacier
filling the valleys in every direction . . .

There's a crack in every creation.
Alpine glaciers battered the faces
on opposing flanks of the mountain,
cutting a ridge between twin valleys
now U-shaped. Eroded this *arête*,
this jagged fish bone splits
precipitation either Arctic or Pacific.
Pulled downhill by gravity,
the modern glacier abrades bedrock,
grinds it to flour that seeps
through tunnels through turbid waters
underlying, flushing to streams

turned turquoise. When ice within
flows at different speeds, stress
causes the ice to fissure and separate.
Your feet lose their grip, you slide
down through a crack, down
through a tunnel puckered and edgy.
Your shout so close to the wall
where you land, blue
as light leaking through it.
The others are here with
rimed noses, or toes pierced,
needles freeze the veins.
You choose to lie
anesthetized by amber, recognize
the men stiffened over other men,
You recognize the fear.

Imagine cliffs and sheets of ice
a mile thick. Ritualize: satin and seed pearl,
stopping a lowland flow (. . . lace
and cumberbund)— Imagine an inland sea
so deep, boutonniere, pegoir, trousseau,
what once were mountains mere islands,
African crystal and rare heavy metal,
combining Ontario and Erie—
women straining to hold back— Niagara Falls,
Tahiti, the Taj Mahal, Bali, five hundred cubic miles
of water, tureen, chargers, a starter castle,
Lake Missoula, sex, a colossal liquid knife
prying the base of glacier
as a woman lifts you, heaves
you out of the blue, rubs your cheeks,
your arms to rouse (stumbling
deeper into the tunnel). Breathes warmth
into your mouth (thaw, thaw) leading you
toward what light is left. She pushes you higher,
chafes your wrists, her hands pressed
into your breast, breath, hair, hands
her hands (a susurrus swelling), and for days
and nights diluvian, ten times the water of

all the world's rivers rocketed
boulders and ice across the western plain,
pushed thunder and dust ahead of it. Creatures
running along the earth without a single cubit
of protection were deluged by stripping loess,
by collonades of basalt loosened and blasted
through passes, impounding a river
and reversing its flow. Vortices deep enough
to hide an iceberg, gorging holes,
roared toward mountains that enclosed a gap.
And it pushed back. The flood slowed to half-
speed— isolating cobble up hundreds of feet
where millions of rodents gathered— before ramming
debris a thousand miles into the sea, into which
obsidian and lodestone tumble like diamonds.

Notes

Frontispiece

Gabriel M. Setiloane's *African Theology*

"Poem for Claudia Rodriguez"

Joseph B. Frazier's "Woman Shot Man Dead To Halt Rape"

"What to Make of the Thing"

The title and lines corrupt and borrow from Robert Frost, Psalms, John, Beowulf, Alexander Pope, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Walt Whitman, William Butler Yeats, Allen Ginsberg, Sherman Alexie, Mark Doty, and Dr Dre.

"Selene,"

The opening borrows from Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck"

"The Ancestors"

Deeply influenced by Nicole Cooley's "The New World"

"Scablands"

Michael Parfit's "The Floods That Carved the West"

Richard B. Wiatt, Jr.'s "Case for periodic, colossal jökulhlaups from Pleistocene glacial Lake Missoula"

Kathleen E. Ahlenslager's "Glacier: The Story Behind the Scenery"