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Ordinals

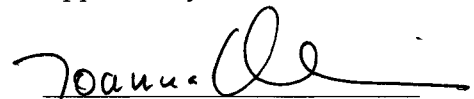
poems by

Stephen Crumrine

B.A. English, Linfield College, 2001

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
May 2005

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

5-25-05

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Ordinal: (1) Conforming to order, rule, or custom; regular; ordinary; orderly. (2) Marking a position in an order or series; applied to those numbers which refer something to a certain place in a series, as distinguished from cardinal numbers. (3) Of or relating to an order in a classification system. (4) Of or relating to holy orders. (5) Relating to, or consisting of, a row or rows.

Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

Theodore Roethke, *Root Cellar*

At Once

in the furrowed cool
of predawn the more

than horizoned
water of ocean inlet

light's submerged
reflection, waver, skein
of mist its
assent a dissipation

along low ceiling
the magpie won't
fly in cold,
its concernedness of

warmth, anchored:
hold fast, hold,
the brightness pleads,
while all else unfetters.

There is no such place

and its foreground, how it too
rose up before dawn, the leaden-black

mountain ridge. A cleft through which to view
the darkest brightening.

How before sunrise it is coolest
and there are glimmers, there is what is

heat, faint and visible. This dark
sheets itself, a papered brilliance

the din tells of: direction cardinal,
basement, even an angle

they cut, ridges cut up in brightening:
or meet, horizoned, never

knowing. Here dark is an innocent thing.
As pitch-black, as hush where

they couple, only in sight,
there is a coming together:

eyeless-dark meaning feeling
apart. And just before seeing,

before this world becomes noticed
it is cold and all touches.

Culvert

This road goes to the sea --
we draw it to the sea. A leading breath,
salt air lung, and the discovery of a blue

absent from the backflow of these gutters. How the salt will
rush on, up the slack water of winter -- we must say another word, a word
meaning union and collide. A new word for arrival. Must

learn the light-haze of runoff, the matte fix of mingling, meaning
dazzled by such clarity.

And we can't reach the sea. A gull follows the fray of waters, furrow-

light. Sun absorbed by density. Rush on to where the sea
bleeds itself up, away into these canals.

Does the gull recognize how pushing -- how force -- must look?
And we here, gull-like, fixed to the eddy.

Northwest

I first noticed
solidity failing
in the mind and then
in a bridge.

How could we
have come here
and not noticed
we would not be returning,

would stay put now,
our backs forever
toward the sun
no matter its direction.

Is it possible
to mend what we crossed,
enough to cross again.

I will stay,
so long as the blond boy
stops speaking.

Southwest

Near the sheds, additions.
Simple multiplicity, extending
for years and miles.
The unfoldedness of prosperity
on the land and two blue silos,
the Studebaker agreeably rusts.

Ten paces to the fence to hop.
And hay mottled with rot:
a Poplar stand.
You shot a crow
you'd hoped was an owl.
The way it flew --
high, then a swooping
into wheat husks --
and didn't hear a sound,
misplaced or forgot
to retrieve the body.

Turned back, southwest
spread to hills. Their blued
primer top matched the Studebaker.
You shot all the windows out.
The gage for distance spared.

Northeast

Through blearing eyes,
everyone convinced
they had set it ablaze,
a desert dry enough. And not just the grain
surrounding mounds of stone.
The stone pushed aside for something
permanent: grass and a place to own.

Now we know the immensity
of that movement. Know dust and
why moving closer
to an understanding
feels like a palm between the shoulders.
Westerly wind a constant pressure

and life was swept away.
Some Tuesday, like today,
a boy, dying before his mother,
brought a few tears.
Old women cooking into the night,
everyone sick to their stomachs
from spuds and mourning.

Southeast

The mailman listens
for a sound
the night makes.

He explains this by
not sleeping, by sitting
near the door, his ear
pressed to the cooling knob.

His children are asleep,
how their eyes
are drooped, how their mouths,
open just enough for life.

He waits for the sound.
Coming at dawn
he closes his eyes,
his children wake
to a sound that fades
before their dreams
are forgotten.

They find their father,
feed his ears with a whisper.
In his dreams,
like a living, he hears
swallows in the eaves.

Letter To Jean Dubuffet

When will the wheat bend from fat.
Yellow, wheat, green is the better place

to be, so little of it uninhabited.
The lower fields have just been turned.

I'll leave east, laid blunt edge to palm,
won't ask you again to come

to these streets. We will take the main road,
red -- you thought of an artery.

I want to know if it is you, the basic
form of yourself -- you placed the home

leeside. Gave the oaks duty
and no leaves. Everyone knows

a front walk should wind toward a home,
it means more to entering. I'll ask

with words about the road -- gesturing
has little effect upon these fields.

But why does it end at a door, continue
to refuse its horizon? I won't mention

the living -- they are here.
What was lost that you allowed them.

House

Stilled for the moment, your hands rest
in the grooves of a chair,
 the oak knobs of the armrest mimicking
the knuckles. Your flowers

suffer from the cold: in the spring it will be
neglect but no one will care. It is here,

laid before us so simply --
 you'll ask what happened to the sheets --
they were new, not so long ago,

now threadbare.
A colander full of Christmas lights
 on the porch, the New Year family
faded, pale.

And the stairs to your basement,
 red-clad, fading: they will look as you always
remember them looking,
like a rift, a separation of something from its root,

as in the kitchen your son
 will help without trying to look,
 his attention bending from focus,
aligning along the window.

When he sees his reflection waver
why does he think he should forgive you?

Why do we call upon resemblance to do
the work for us? We will

ask for wine. The glasses, the ones you use
for company, are buried behind glass.

Figurine

And the days are lost, figurined.
As in kept for comfort, taking the space
of shadow.

Plans to dismantle the arms
back into usefulness, you must touch
the porcelain folds of its petticoat, must
lift it up to make sense of standing.

And as the substance of shoes
is the substance of the ears,
that are, in the end, the delicate fingers:
a molded understanding.

Outside it is raining on iron.
It is true, everything is made,
will wither,

will unthread itself to
make space.
Leave water to stiffen, turn clockwise and hold.

And after it is over,
the room for movement shut, two dreamer's eyes shut,
I will move away --

there is loneliness in a room that is full.
Which is not important.
What is important is to take turns noticing
how people speak.
How they fix their mouths after each sentence.

Kettle

I asked about the kettle in front of the fire,
well blackened. You said something

of duty and form
and how they are often

mistaken for each other.
Surely the crossbeams of this home will give,

the crossbeams of a bridge -- surely the collapse
happens somewhere.

Like bridled animals how their gums must bleed,
how chomping-at-the-bit should be, now,

an expression for pain or uselessness.
You should answer my question, answer

in the way the soot clings at the kettle,
how it seems brushed on, a purpose.

The fire is heated by coal --
how the house is protected, then,

by the kettle. I dab
my finger at the soot -- the soot

fills the crevices that become my finger.
I paint half your face to incomplete you.

Limestone

This rock's equation for understanding wind:
the shadow that drops across Salmon Falls Creek Canyon,
last bend of basalt and road shaded until morning.
Weathered down forty tons, softens in the dusk, lifted

and held mostly by imagination and soft breeze
into cold desert night, sparks flaring, an attempt to disrupt
or dispute what the sun never made. An illuminated sadness
as the pedestal holds, keeping everything below balanced

and still. This last held rotation:
broken and nothing can exist. The artery of late November,
forty-eight feet tall, keeps sagebrush alive, holds this

desert floor tight. Proof that nothing will ever
blow away, until light loses, until the last
fade of life untangles, spinning unbalanced toward dark.

Lombardi Poplar

Behind the windbreak
hearing becomes a burden, becomes
the loss of sight as stalks of grain cuff themselves
again and again against each another while

a push-and-pull
wind through the dark grey branches,
and the leaves wider than they are long, moves
in tree, in head, a mimic -- they stand

on plane with the horizon, to sky,
plane with everything but
levity. Balk only to the November wind, wide leaves
lost, leese, appearing forever to hills --

no one is saying Lombardi Poplar.
Lisped voice, the wind lies clearly
on the other side of their verticals,
lost in shadow, blown down through

furrows -- say again, horizon,
a reach measured by
distance to ground as the wind climbs up
colliding only with itself.

Notes on Surfaces

You woke early with a small rag, you asked
about condensation and breath, the tiny
rivulets stringing together on
glass and this empty house.

Notes on Surfaces

It should be easy
now, rising in that

Bible black hour,
hours before the time

dawn and you find me
together in the warm

solitude I tell
myself is necessary.

It is easier
alone, for the moment.

There is the calm air
I understand you help fill:

for now it is mine --
the selfish tranquility

of predawn.
We both know return,

that simple practice
of calling each other back,

quiet touch, that which
is always attached.

You breathe the air,
cycle it through yourself,

and return. It seems heavy.
Will love increase

if I use more than my share.
How long can you exhale.

Notes on Surfaces

My love
 tabletop dulled
by heat
will we sell it or give it away
 it will be new
to them
gone now long enough

 and twice
the reflection from here
does it speak to dissipation
to be bounced back
into view

 we'll have the freedom soon
to dislodge ourselves from these surfaces
and sink out of view can I

 ask you if red
illuminated from behind and reflected
onto your spine
begins to turn east before it straightening
you know
 feels at all warm.

Notes on Surfaces

Where the curve of your hip
became my glimpse

and I let go and let
you wander further out

and around the corner
out of sight

before realizing
what I thought you had

dropped turned out
only to be the shade

of blue making
up distance and

that what I wanted
and what I thought needed.

The Horizons

Face

A change and you buckle at the brightness
of reflection: how immediately it breaks
from edges and focuses all attention: you
know where you are looking: finding
the corona of things:
is this visage, cheekbone?
will you know when to leave
the ruddy undertone under the eyes,
stop the clamor of light
its redirection through pupil: stop
the shifting and gaze.

Ridge of Pines

As the only thing real
marking an afterward: what is
felt before the touching, before becoming
some lack of attention, like pines stood now
so long along the rift, their subtleness always
falling and the breakers, wind, pushing
down on the boughs.

Ridge of Stone

Would find the fissure and work hard
at it: would spread over lifetimes: grandfathers,
your children: just enough to peek through, enough
maybe to call over, over or through,
to tell the air there is new air:
like when the door of a car opens in Kansas
having come from Oregon and not stopping,
like the flowers that close in the evening,
you know the ones,
to open again in the sun:
day and dark for the moment.

Bird

Happenstance of the drowning
of a leaf that for miles rode atop
the bitter stream: as swallowing,
a bird, white, feathers tufted
by northeast wind, as it pushes
for the slow, warmer water: which
is current and riffle: and how
anticipation shows in the fidget
of a wing, stretched for redirection:
no finback, no broken surface,
the wind is caught cooling.

Fence

The frozen fence line becomes the space
between the frost: a distance
to foothill: becomes what we no longer
climb over but through, this time
without catching: which is a door,
in the manner that it lets you through
without a hinge snapping back, without
that death: a pasture.

You

As the change in a substance
that should recognize itself:
as we recognize ourselves: you
without a mirror, capable
of turning your pale cheek
to the sun.

A Field

It is clear now,
the indefinite,

opened from the low
lying: means gravity

and weight
only softer. Its stretch

fit for gorge
and emptied after miles,
begins to lag

and sing the long wisps

of distance traveled
in exhalation, shifting

landscape midway
and shaves, now ridged.

It begins the same
regardless of direction.

But now I am splayed,
opened now,
sight. If it shifts,

I have not moved.

Three Flights

1.

Through the window screen,
every bird in town dies.

The sight, for a moment, is focused.

All birds falling the same way, pushed
into earth like a loss of gravity,

the steady argument of wings
to wind. How definite *push* can appear.

Struggle seems a calm hesitation, like flight,

like the small cracked beaks fighting
suffocation from so much air.

The straightening posture blown over town.

2.

Near evening, guests discovered birds, shadowed,
folded under the canopy of orchard.

Hundreds had fallen from the hundreds of graying trees,
toed back to life for amusement. Rolled atop one another.

Dinner was beginning.

3.

The barn owl submits to gravity
in the middle of the concave arc of flight.

A Night

I could tire easily,
endless watch
of the tired moon.
Half slung
now in the sky,
alarmed and delicate.

 Pay it mind
and remembrance --
there is enough description
in the howling wind,
how it hits
the empty chest.

You return,
not far from here
and make a stable
assumption concerning
galaxy, topsoil,
a kind of falling.
I hear *iridescence* --
a broken wing.

Silo

You forget why this is, forget
the blue of things: meaning

etched on a stalk of corn
or bored through, looking

for the rotten heart.

How color is the memory

of what remains, and
what remains is navy and

larkspur: as in dawn,
as in the lighting of morning.

To remember yourself
here, young and all else

miles away, would take days.

Riverbank

At the expense of bridging,
the east bank unfurls down-
stream: leaf in leaf-like warming,

as if to examine what just happened
so much further out of sight.

Box-elder

What I find, now

long overdue:
a suddenness marking

approach, a tremor,
like the dry branch

of a box-elder
snapping in drought:

somehow marking

moisture not aridness.
I find the leveling

in anguish:

how what is swollen still
feels like starving,

how all must, flooding over,
begin again in water.

Ghost Flow

We keep water's time,
hold the riffle

in our hands,
cupped against these

pressures, wavering,
see it,

for certain,
woven through

itself. Speaks
in dissipation, letting

its work unfold
in streamers and

streamers. *It offers*
a solution

to staying alive
that evaporation

will defeat each
time, particle,

an idea so
new we shuttered

against its feeling
so that our fingers

slowly separated.
Let through

in answer,
our astonishment.

The Ordinals

Certain now, having walked many
narrowed back lots and not

always to somewhere,
they are constructed:

in narrowness, unleveled eye on shovel,
for my purpose alone:

I'll ask a forbearance of property line: that the overgrowth
stay trimmed, patient and yielding to my
traffic, no matter the direction
and that direction will, without much resistance, remain
perpendicular to streets and not defining an end

but continuing past, as it does, in leisure

as the leisured air of mid-fall seems lighter in the lungs, the push
less prominent than the heavy warmth
of August:

 and August enters
 the fingertips chilling,

and to complain would make this a long walk
and longer winter:

 so wisps of breath, chill air, quiet, and light,
remain unnoticed:

I would not ignore any explanation
if in the whorls of air
there came a voice: and with palm to ear
 some evidence:
my association clear
 as to why the linear
path makes up my mind, finds its way
 hardily, in this thinning air,
 like the alley's sole direction
 like the ruffled edges motioned
 along in the differences between homeowners:
and how it is this simplicity that focuses
attention:
 graveled pitch, links and pine, dog-eared
 and in the end the glowing, early evening
incandescence by which all becomes clear:
a seasonal

understanding: so much living in death:
cheetgrass

gnarled into itself, out from the foundations,
the heaped and hidden leaves breaking down,

the cyclical nature of this narrowed walk:
patterned nature of nature now unfolded beneath,
though left alone to stitch itself together,
leaf of green left the longest, grass, cottonwood, box-elder, all
going to rot:

how easy, looking:
attention paid, and I
seeing it again as

the next block unfolds, lot after lot

to keep on: my direction contained,
light fading, the air cooler: and a time passes

in which I try to establish myself against it,
hold myself to fluctuations: seems the 200 block cools more quickly:

as the street's perpendicular falls away
again, reminding the way of left and right,
the forceful hook and bend to which this straight pays no attention:
I am reminded of why these divisions occur, I
cannot keep going,
must at some point, shift
and return: the days will fall short soon

and it seems now that light could upset us,
all this returning just as it left, same line, the emptied box-elder hiding
nothing of the surprise,
shameful,
wavering in and out of its own emaciated shadows:
but light does not believe in surprise:
 nor does the magpie, at close, streaked in gunmetal blue,
 picking choicely at the fermented berries of late October:

I hear the magpie laugh, in apparent majestic squawking,
laboring, it seems, for balance:

but to remain for so long here:
 the birds and hollowed life of mid-fall:
 would be to ignore the living:

so I am sure this is why I came, the beauty of others lives,
the apparent ease through windows -- what was it
you said, am aware only of your movement --

the same across the alley,
same light adrift on the light of evening:

there is a wood fire
explaining all of this:
lispig
as it moves,
mottled against
the hues the perception of
sky laid upon the back
of the unsuspecting magpie as it takes flight, lifting
ribbons of blued smoke,
not understanding:

some definitions becomes too clear in fall,
some distinctions too evident:

so to pick one thing means picking the thing
right next to it, means not leaving
the brick before noticing the splintering mortar:
the veins emptied of dust and emptying now,
a path, noticeable, to the ground:
the transference of everything back to the ground:

gravity works harder now:
pulls everything to rot,

so as not to confuse
the leaves, the narrowness,

the limited path, cooling in mid-fall:
certainly not a victory, certainly
not predictable (seeing the color of gravel
change ahead,
an
attempt at order) -- but for how long.

Coda: Predawn

Your hair, always held by a red handkerchief,
blows to gray in the picture of a farm,
your smile edged with dirt.

They move around you, busy, moving
implements of growth, rotation, busy
placing tracks on top of one another.

And as they move, the abyss, your word,
dug just out of sight, covers over,
enough, in the morning breeze.

Notes

The definition of “ordinals” comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The opening epigraph is from Theodore Roethke’s *Root Cellar*.

“There is no such place” owes something to Barbara Drake.

“Letter To Jean Dubuffet” is after *Blissful Countryside*, a painting by Jean Dubuffet on display at the Pompidou.

“House” is for Frans Weiser.

“Limestone” refers to a rock formation near Castleford, Idaho.

“Lombardi Poplar” is for Robert Stubblefield.

“Notes on Surfaces” adapts the line “Bible black hour” from Wilco’s *Yankee Foxtrot Hotel*. It is for Hannah.

“A Night” is after Tu Fu’s *Two Poems on Night*.

“The Ordinals” is after A.R. Ammons’ *Corsons Inlet*.

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