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AN ORDINARY NIGHT IN PARADISE

By

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B.A., The Ohio State University, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment for the degree of

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Grandfather Peters

Poetry Now: Bainbridge Dairy; In Our Sleep

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For George Willard and Roscoe Crow



I

The other is a spectral episode:  
    after the inquisitive animal's  
Amusements are quiet: the dark glory.  
    --Robinson Jeffers

## Elegy

He probably went  
and joined the Marines later.  
But mean bastards that we were,  
we let him die first  
here in the rushes,  
and here in the pond,  
Jim Baim, who rose up  
to die a third time  
in the bare, clattering  
arms of this sycamore.

He dared us to come after him.  
We came, too,  
down through the trees,  
hollering like dogs,  
and lobbed stones into the quicksand  
where he went down, sinking  
into the black silt  
at the river's heart.

The largemouth bass  
he'd coax out of the ice each spring  
to hold in his hands  
and weep over like a fool,  
curves through his hair,  
and bluegill dart  
in and out between weeds  
rooted in his green lungs.

I remember the afternoon  
we found his shed skin  
hanging in this tree.  
The scoutmaster, and the good,  
grave men from the church  
all said it was ok  
if we let Baim alone.  
But we hoped his body, one day,  
might surface in the strip mine,  
bloated as a drowned cow.  
And we knew  
we'd get another chance  
to toss stones and sink him.

Now, who wants to talk  
about the fun we had?  
Maybe Baim did join the Marines  
like they say.  
But I won't apologize.  
That's how it is.  
Our bodies long to drift  
down there like his,  
in the deep, rolling dark.  
Good luck boys.  
Even the stars look at us grim.

First Song in Akron, Ohio

Wind hisses through  
a channel of stone  
down Exchange Street,  
septic with rubber fumes.

This morning, at ten below zero,  
air hardens in my throat.  
The sun flashes in upper-floor windows  
of the O'neil's department store.

Three days ago  
I stood somewhere else,  
staring at Renoir's  
Madame Henroit En Travesti.

I remember looking at her,  
wanting to weep.  
I kept repeating the lines  
of a laughed at dead man,

Shall I write a history  
of the caricatures  
of the sculptures  
of you in my heart?

Somebody has handed me  
a Quaker pamphlet asking,  
Brother, what can you do  
about human rights in Chile?

Across the street  
women gawk at horse hair wigs.  
Five blocks south, Polsky's is a vast,  
empty tomb of cement now.

Madame Henroit, why did I want to weep?  
--was it for me, or you,  
or those damned lines  
I stole from Delmore Schwartz?

I feel my stomach twist tight.  
Where do I discover  
the great wings I need  
to rise up out of myself?

--and my love, I need  
to sing anything of my own, anything?  
No Madame, I didn't want to weep for you.  
I shuddered there

in the secret light I've tried to find  
and saw moving around your body,  
something beautiful I've never known  
I need.

Clearing Out of Fargo

I want to leave Fargo,  
not forever, but long enough,  
so when I return, the swift, ruined moon  
blossoms in a thicket of plums

and the woman I left  
yesterday noon, runs hard  
beside me  
against this wind,

our bodies thriving,  
green as winter wheat.

\*

The definite place  
where prairie and planets resolve--

I'd go there clean now  
to find horses cantering  
in the sun, their breath sweet with grass  
and sage thick as the fingers of old men.

\*

At the dark limits of Fargo  
my naked hands and face clench.  
This wind's so god damn cold.

There are other seasons  
torpid with light and distance,  
when scavengers scatter into badlands  
with the wind.

Tonight, out where the prairie begins  
citylight fades between cottonwoods,  
and I walk down a dry gully  
to search for a stream, a mute,  
slow moving current  
to drink from--

only a few coyotes lean  
near me, into the wind,  
and a scarecrow  
hangs in a stubble field  
for the cackling ravens  
to peck the eyes from.

## Lines Written for My Grandfather Peters

He never got out of there.  
His ghost drifts along Broadway  
below the looming shadow of American Steel,  
and up Mahoning Avenue  
to the Alliance Machine,  
where he struggled 35 years and died  
one month before retiring.

I've gone back there often  
suffering his misery, which isn't mine  
to ever suffer for anybody.  
I know where to find him,  
alone, quiet, waiting for me  
close by the Mahoning shore.

That's our river,  
rising slow and muddy  
behind the Jewish Cemetery,  
where the old Negroes  
fish for carp only they can prepare--  
veining the mudstreak that runs  
up a carp's gruesome spine.

He took me to the river one morning,  
near the waterworks, his bareass,  
Sanova Beach, where he told me  
he saved a boy and a girl,  
inspite of his life, from drowning.  
The river there is bitter,  
quiet as it sucks under a black twig.



### Poaching at Hog Heaven

No pigs here, only the sun  
returned two weeks too soon,  
acres of balsamroot  
lashing on the hillside,  
and piles of stones,  
one thudded on the next  
long ago for a few dead Salish.

Those catcalling birds  
in the green air under sage,  
I recognize them too--  
they followed us here,  
the three of us who came to poach  
whitetail on the tribal lands.

We're all the same,  
casting ourselves out  
against the still daylight  
we flock anywhere, shrieking,  
filling our tight craws  
with the lice we peck  
from our black, gangling wings.

The sun trundles past us  
and I look away from the horizon  
that surges toward space,  
so near and blue and indifferent  
even the servile mountains below it  
seem bleached.

So let the hogs have their heaven.  
We came here for deer out of season,  
didn't find any, and like I said,  
there aren't any pigs here either,  
no easy, bloated targets  
rooting in the yellow flowers--

just my varmint kin  
who groom their feathers and prance  
about the looted graves.  
Soon we'll rise up  
singly into the last light,  
and vanish east,  
a brass ring or button  
gripped in our yellow beaks.

## Graves at Brush Creek

I follow a game trail  
down through knotted beeches  
and out across pasture,  
silent into the half-light,  
until I find, in deep grass,  
upright stones beside a stream.

\*

How is it,  
in this clearing where holsteins loll  
and munch the turf,  
forest galls, sloven but gentle  
at its grassy edges,

and the earth goes on  
enduring close to its springs?

\*

No one knows how  
the entire village  
one day  
fell dead, or who dug the graves.

\*

Near my home in Ohio  
streams below strip mines

flow emerald, so acidic  
they turn your flesh,  
burn you for days.

\*

No chipped flints  
in the thick sod, no fingernails,  
no forged iron, no clump of woman's hair  
clinging to the barbed wire of a fence post,

no demon  
wise men in Irondale believe in,  
blown open like these hardwood hills,  
a demon, they say, crawling still  
in the bottom, waiting, waiting.

## Clearing Out of Helena

In the bland heat of late afternoon  
you gimp through the doors  
and announce that  
you're Abramowitz  
and you're expected tonight in Great Falls.

Leave me out of it.  
You can't bribe me, your VA check  
won't buy the wind  
or my ticket out of here,  
but you're welcome

to claim what's yours  
where pavement ends  
in the pure light  
of the Scratchgravel Hills,  
where groundhogs blast through rocks,

you're welcome, brother, to buy the farm,  
move in with the swift, true  
and sentimental dead.

The Rimrock Stage browses in green  
neon and twilight, waiting

to take me home, over the Great Divide.  
Clear the hell out, Abramowitz,  
and let me be. Go now  
before I feel sorry  
and make a fool of myself.

Twilight empties the naked hills of heat.  
In the scrub jungles, herons fly up  
and follow the Missouri north northeast.  
Get out now, Abramowitz, you ain't lame,  
so damn you, go.

Kaddish

for my father

After the gas tanks break  
and wings fold back like swallows,  
after the rain and flames,  
father, lead me to the ark  
of uncluttered light,  
the black veins of your wounded throat.

Let me pray at last  
in alsike and rye,  
on this hillside north of Massillon,  
where the Tuscarawus rises  
and leeches huddle at the shore,  
waiting for me to slough my broken skin  
and bob downstream  
with the swift currents and sludge.

Father, give me to the green  
Jerusalem of grass,  
where you sailed down  
from an ignited sky, down  
over the quailing maples,

Lead me back, father,  
from the river's greased shore,  
press my hands into your dark  
punctured throat, show me smuts  
and molds where they grow

in the split hollows  
of your wrists and ribs.

Give me to the green  
shoots that hold us fast  
in the thick, downward  
whirling earth, the healed fault  
where you fell,  
the acres of uneroded grass.



II

Night now! Tell me, tell me, tell me,  
elm! Night night! Telmetale of stem or  
stone. Beside the rivering waters of.  
Night!

--James Joyce

## Limrod Creek

It was a world of water, of weeds  
and green,  
where I went alone the first time.  
I wobbled across slimy creekbed shale,  
fry scattering under shadowed banks.  
In that hollow, lillies leaned from  
rotted stumps.  
Onions, skunk cabbage and cress  
drifted over the rich, dark,  
loam-soft earth. I slipped and sank  
in the shallow creek,  
in the grey, tepid muck,  
and all the hairy vines sagged  
down from knotted treetops  
to wrap my wrists taut and jerk me  
free into the dank, sobbing air.

## Dedicatory Lines for U.S. Steel

Upstream from where they dammed the Mahoning,  
water pours out of the mill  
and widens over open marshes.  
I went early to the shore to gaze.  
Caught whole there in waves of August heat,  
herons startled off the backwaters,  
and in their awkward, stretched-out way,  
flew east, out of sight. What did I know?  
I'd only gone to watch slag  
dumped in the steaming river,  
not those gangling birds  
in the garish light, not their shadows,  
luminous as the eyes of fish,  
gliding away from me over the marshes.

In the Jewish Cemetery

Out past Kulka Steel, I follow  
the abandoned Penn Central track.  
The river's highwater mark  
drifts up the grey trunks of elm  
and snagged willows lay flat  
under mud and debris.  
All these tumbled down stones  
a few begger Jews left here, slump  
toward the spongy edges of marsh.  
I scatter a fist of cinders and chickory  
over the thick sod of Zaydee's grave.  
Frogs and crickets croak  
in the dark, their voices  
rise perfect with the moon.

## Crossing the Missouri

In the shacks west of Chamberlain,  
the last light slips out across sprawling  
    wheat,  
and I huddle under a bridge  
to gaze at the river beneath me,  
the slow, heavy current  
accepting rain, and the prairie  
that rolls quietly down  
toward the riprap shores.  
Nothing rises from the black water,  
no branch, no torn and mangled wings.  
Even the moon is lost.  
I've waited an hour now  
for the rain to let up. Bitterns call from  
    the rushes,  
from their damp, cushiony nests in the dark,  
    upstream.

Piling Leaves Around a Sapling Maple

I set this slender twig in bondage  
here in the dust, wrapped burlap  
around its silver skin, tied it taut  
against the weight of snow and flinging wind,  
that someday it may embrace the crested jay,  
the lowly, glistening slug. And today  
I bring these sloppy dead  
whose russet cells long to rot  
and slobber, who will drift  
slowly over the pale skin of roots I cut,  
opened once to light, and hid again  
quickly in the ground,  
the secret limbs of creation  
that climb in the underworld.

## In Commemoration of a Drunk I Don't Regret

Deer gather in green, windless dark,  
after the rain, when narcotic fog  
sweeps off the lake  
between birch and hemlock.  
I fell asleep here  
in a road full of puddles  
and yellow leaves, a road deer follow,  
tentative, bowing to drink  
and graze near the lakeshore.  
They snuff the air  
and strain to listen  
for me, who tumbled here stone  
drunk, and lay still for a while  
in cool sand, during a thunderstorm.

III

the tortured body of my flower  
which is not a mustard flower at all  
but some unrecognized  
and unearthly flower  
for me to naturalize  
and acclimate  
and choose it for my own.

--William Carlos Williams



## Lines Written for My Grandmother Mills

In the steady tunnel of headlights  
we veer out of Kennsington,

pass under the wooden trestle  
and follow rolling highway

into a forest of purple skins--  
maple, oak and elm.

In the hollows, coal shafts  
cave in deeper each spring, grey silt

seeps out from the ground  
and lingers in the stagnant canal.

Beside me, my grandmother  
lingers inside herself.

Each time light flashes past us,  
her numb and frightening face

glances at me from the dark.  
Someday I'll touch my own face,

wondering and ashamed of my ugliness,  
and I'll remember reaching down

to touch this frozen earth  
for the first time.

I brought her here  
because she wanted to see

the black fields ploughed down,  
frozen and still under light snow,

where her body was young for her  
once, when acres of tiger lillies

and alfalfa coaxed the light  
out of the trees near a pasture,

near her first home.

\*

Outside the milking parlor,  
we listen for my cousin

Austin, working alone with his cattle.  
Waiting here, we trace the twilight

around the skinned, grinning carcass of a fox  
nailed to the white-washed wall.

She takes its ragged face  
in her stiff hands--

the only face she'd ever touch  
and hold on to.

Tonight, Austin's young wife  
will pull his heavy arms

close to her, against the cold.

\*

Waiting the long, mute season,  
fields loll in all directions.

Down the hollows, patient to gather us back,  
to enliven the thick sod,

shagbarks hide our terrible young,  
grow darker each spring

and whistle lightly into evening.

## Squaw Peak Meditations

If we climb  
high along outcropped shale,  
and higher across exposed ice,  
there is nothing  
to hold us, gather us back  
to a woman who lives centuries  
in these rocks, whose body  
never yields, whose hair  
we licked into black tufts,  
long ago, with the taut-heeled elk.

\*

The sky is awful so close--  
we gape at its beginning,  
this clear and weightless place  
where our bodies ring  
of rock and wind, of blood  
we fear and long for.

We cry out  
against this silent sky,  
pull it fast under our wings  
and dive.

\*

We prowl a steep canyon,  
descending at twilights for water.

The swift animals shy from us,  
haunched close, starving in the rocks,  
our lives terrible inside us.

One morning we wake  
and begin sniffing at dead things  
rising from the crusted snow.

How alive our bodies are!  
The ache is lasting and wonderful!

\*

We must leave each other,  
go late at night  
among steep, colossal firs,  
forget the fitful glow of our fire  
and its odor we carry with us  
in our damp clothes.

We must vanish at last  
over the ridge in darkness,  
go far above the canyon  
in all directions,  
leave the camps we gathered in  
and clamber through endless windfall

until we collapse,  
wondering at the emerald light  
that circles the world.

And farther from the glistering sky  
than the pitch cliffs  
we toss ourselves from in sleep, we fall  
delighted and alone  
into the startling light of morning.

for Pat McCarthy

In Our Sleep

On the prairie north of Lander  
stars swarm out of bounds  
over dry arroyos.

I follow you back a thousand miles  
across the August night,  
where light lives

inside our skins, where wings hover  
and the good dream is  
hidden in asylums of grass.

An owl's wild eyes appear  
suddenly before us.  
We touch ourselves, waking, alone.

## Bainbridge Dairy

On a rare day of sun  
we followed her path across fields,

the clear way she'd found  
from pasture to the next,

a habit of passing through  
dark sod and hollows

where roots of blackberries swell  
and strain to the urge of light.

Clouds lifted from the Sound  
and the far off Olympics lunged

from the sea like whales.  
With the laughter of gulls

we came through scotchbroom  
and maples, to fields where

the clearness of her mind sweats  
in the old leaf fall of orchards,

in the scum of fruit  
lingering in heavy grass,

and we came as lovers  
one afternoon in November,



a rare day of sun, when nobody saw us  
or bothered tell us to leave.

for Jodi Varon

## Invocations at Talking Water Creek

Sometimes, walking in a forest  
early in winter, I find  
a single broken cornstalk  
upright in snow, alone  
where forest was cleared,  
but slogs back,  
returning like the sun  
to creak high in the gold  
of my forehead--

I've stood there  
once or twice, and seen the earth,  
the private cells it gathers  
from my heavy body,  
to hold me fast  
each moment I am alive.

\*

Why then this desire--  
hounding what lives so long  
to feel itself untwist in me?

During the creases of wind  
when sky empties  
on the best days in winter,

I lift myself to the light

reflected back  
solid and perfect from the hills.

\*

When will I stop lying to myself  
and greet the redwings singing?

I flinch  
stepping into this stream  
and wade across laughing,  
the green pulp  
delirious in my shins,

and I open my fist  
and find the blue moth  
who hunkers there, alone,  
still on a larkspur,

and the path, too,  
that leads back to the woman  
I'll embrace again  
for nothing but the light I've become

at last, in this canyon  
when spring began  
between the hot, sweet pines.

Life Along the Mahoning

A clear-pitched ringing  
turns me down a cinder path  
into the bottoms  
where men build trains  
in the half-light at dawn.

Each time I come here  
starlings peck my shoulder blades,  
mocking my clumsy wings.

Fog lifts off the railyard,  
and the scene I remember  
repeats itself: Snodie Washington's shack  
overgrown by roses,  
red sumac flailing in the dark,

and under the viaduct,  
my grandfather sits by himself,  
thin, doddering with the sugar,  
last old Jew  
among these twenty thousand blacks  
and dour gentiles.

When was life along this river worth living?  
Men planning to work  
a trick and a half in the mill  
six days a week?  
My father young, and two stores going?  
Account lists long,  
and all customers paid through the first?

The shut-down drop forge  
still thuds in back of me,  
that far off pound I slept with  
and thought was my heart beating,  
beating under the concrete floor.

I stand here on a trestle  
gazing down at the Mahoning,  
and I wait for the locomotives,  
the highwater, and the day to come.  
Below me, the lantern eyes of carp  
cast green light up  
from the river channel.

Water laughs  
and glides us back to sea,  
back into the blue  
where faces shine and bloat,  
where the Romanians  
who came here each spring  
to glare crazy in the furnaces,  
lumber now with dolphins in their arms.

I go down the grassy bank,  
a redwing trilling above my white shoulders,  
I go down to the river  
to repeat its name,

Mahoning

--all that's left of it,  
a long and gentle sound  
lingering in the elms.

And here,  
I claim my last  
awkward chance  
to live again.