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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

Master of Fine Arts

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Life Along the Mahoning; Lines Written for My
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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.