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The University of Montana

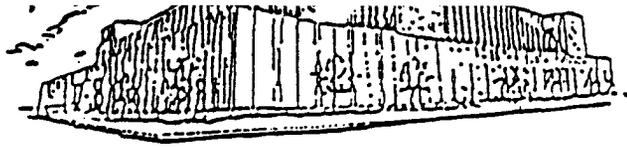
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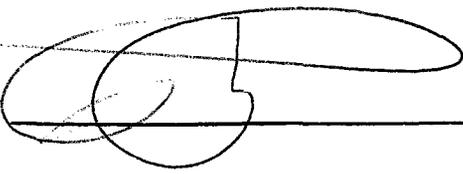
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Our Way of Living

Poetry in Verse and Prose

by

Thomas Riggs

B.A. Georgetown University, 1987

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
2000

Approved by:



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Contents

The Shining Sun, Then the Moon 1

A Land of Hills

My Mother's Mouth 3
Rain and the End of Rain 6
A Farewell to Stevens 7
A Hike in the Woods 8
The Box 10
The Beauty of Maps 11
Work 12
Newt Gingrich as a Vegetable 13
Valentine's Day 15
News from the Front 17

Memory of My Chubby Legs

This Form of Our Lives 19
Memory of My Chubby Legs 21
Alternative Medicine 24
The Dance 25
Outside My Window 27
Halloween 30
My Trip with a Dog 32
The Fainting Game 34
The Sea 35

Impatient Clouds

Home 37

First Lesson 38

The Steps for Eating 39

What's Simple and True 43

Night Skiing 45

An American in Loire 47

Our Way of Living 48

Home Ownership 49

The Shining Sun, Then the Moon

Days ago the boat disappeared.
It was in the driveway.
In the living room we had debated
the lack of sidewalks.

Then came a black woman on the television
followed by a series of white men
followed by something else,
either a great ocean or something smaller.

I know the way to the forest preserve.
We all packed in the car
and drove for some time down a gray road
lined with yellow flowers.

There are alternatives to change.
There are ways to put your ear to the ground.
There are places where grass grows
and people lie on towels beneath the sun.

A Land of Hills

My Mother's Mouth

It was not long after my father left. The trees provided a thick, cool canopy over the narrow streets, and the lake, not far from my home, beat the shore with its heavy, incessant waves. At the tip of the waves, thin, bubbly, white lips opened wider and wider as they approached the shore, and I could almost see their emerging teeth and fleshy tongues. I watched this sharp, white presence that would slap against the sand, then slap again, pushing the grains toward the land before sucking them back down the lake's frigid throat.

My mother and I ambled along the lakefront, her hand lightly cupping my cold fingers. Winter had come early, and the leaves were still holding on. The wind pressed into a tight snap an American flag suspended over a Victorian beach house. I could taste the thick decay of alewives marooned along the sand.

My mother and I sat on a green park bench, and out on the lake, a barge inched along the horizon. Was I seven or eight? I don't know. But it was then that my mother put her arm around me, and as I was cold, I pressed my shivering body into her sweater. My face, stinging with the cool breeze, eased as I stood and laid it against her bare neck. Still, the cold continued, so I reached my hands, first one, then the other, into her open mouth, where I saw warm steam blow in intermittent clouds.

A minute and then another passed, and my hands led to my arms, my shoulders, my torso, and finally my whole body lay in the warm bath of her mouth, my back pressing its weight against her moist tongue. It was completely dark but only for a moment. I heard the harsh flare of a starting fire. In the darkness, somewhere in my mother's mouth, I could see a glow floating above a boat and the boat tacking in my direction.

Initially the music was as faint as the boat was far, but as the boat came closer, its sails filled with the warm breath of my mother, I began to recognize the tune:

Goodnight, Irene,
Goodnight, Irene,
I'll see you in my dreams.

Yes, it was my father's voice, I was sure of that, and when the boat was almost in reach, I saw my father's face orange in the fire's glow. He sang in a deep, scratchy voice. On his shoulder was a woman's head—beautiful, perhaps, but not my mother's. Long, black, thick hair framed her white, Oriental features, and I thought how far this woman might live from the moors and aging towns of England, where my mother's ancestors died.

I felt the rough palm of my father's hand reaching out from the boat. I felt my father's thick fingers that years ago almost singlehandedly built our family's home, the tough skin of the hands that lifted my mother to his chest one fall evening when he said, "Here, darling, I love you, I love you, but your brother's dead."

I grabbed for my father's hand, hoping to pull myself onboard, but just then my mother's tongue began to arch, creating a ridge along the center of her mouth. Water rushed quickly toward the dark hole of her throat. Though I held on tight, I soon lost the grip, and I could still hear my father singing as his boat slid along the tongue, tipped, and disappeared down the hole.

My mother had yawned. Sitting on the ridge, I was almost blinded by the burst of light when she opened her mouth and inhaled the cool air. I began to shiver again as my warm bath turned to snow. I thought I felt an avalanche, and before long I was sliding off a cornice and falling fast into the deep snow, schussing

straight down my mother's tongue toward the blue sky and the stormy lake beyond her lips. Miles away the tanker with an orange stripe continued its slow voyage to the north.

Not long after this day, I was living with my grandmother, whose house was far away, far from the lake and in another state. No body of water was in sight. This would be my home for many years, and week after week my grandmother would step from the kitchen carrying plates and bowls, saucers and tiny spoons. She fed me hot meals—spiced squash soup, potatoes and cabbage, lamb braised with leek and fennel. In time I forgot about my parents, and my love for my grandmother only grew. Sometimes I thought about how old my grandmother was, and I feared for her death. But other times, when she was playing the piano and her mouth was a hollow, dark opening of sound, I would lean against her body and sigh, knowing that she would, in fact, die someday and that then, finally, my life would begin.

Rain and the End of Rain.

So much is in
the weather. When it rains the size of peas,
or when it storms and then cool winds begin
to sag across the hillsides, and the trees

cower, and wetness seems not an abstract
notion but merely an important way
of being—during rain the very fact
of weather is what animates the day,

despite what's hidden: dryness—even in
our household—a cool dryness, which makes trees
outside divine for moisture. Still, the fact
of our own dryness could disturb the day.

A Farewell to Stevens

To live in a land of hills
is to live in a suspicious plane
of undulated flatness.

There the blue hills bristle with fir.
There the red hills sleep with willows.

But if one lives in a land of hills,
one must live with the burden
of flatness, flatness gone awry,
or flatness like the moon
cumbered with its own curve
of sleeplessness
or with the waves
of its own sleeping oceans.

The hills are not the moon,
nor the sleeping moon,
but something more like the hills
invaded by the sternness of blue
or like the redness of stern schoolteachers
teaching in blue classrooms.

Or, if not that,
then like the hills themselves
sleeping in waves of stern moonlight
or embraced by the flat kisses
of sleeping willows furred in red.

A Hike in the Woods

A bird sings in the trees, the black
of its feathers barely visible through the leaves.
Walking through the woods, I realize
the song is one that years ago my father
sang to me. I stop and listen. In my mind
I see the tips of my father's fingers,
the way he held a fish in one hand
and a knife in the other. Below the bird,
in the center of a clearing, a fountain
shaped like a mushroom holds water, sticks,
leaves, black specks. The water is cloudy.
I poke around the sticks, hoping to get
to the bottom of this, but the bird still sings
above me, so I sit and lean back
against the fountain, a cold cement thing,
and look at the gun, which appears black
and small in my hand. Beautiful
but melancholy, the bird's song grows louder,
and as I listen, I marvel at the way
the image of my father returns.
I haven't seen him in years. He says,
"Don't worry if the fish is dead." He says,
"The best place to fish is beyond the bend,
where your mother once left our clothes."

After my father waves goodbye, I look
again at the gun, which is now pointing
between a tree and a tree. I aim at my wife,
who over the years has increasingly resembled
me, and my mother, whom I resemble

more or less, and pull the trigger. The bird
pauses for a moment, then sings a new tune,
this one somewhat like a waltz. But I don't
feel like dancing, and as I look around, I see
my father at a party, with a drink in one hand
and a woman in the other. Bright colors
appear before my eyes. Though my father
waves me over, I decide not to go, and when
I turn the gun toward my own head,
I can almost hear the sticks knock
one against the other, the waves as they hit
the shore of the fountain.

After the gun goes off, I get up and walk home
and show my wife the bird, which she cooks
in a sauce with mushrooms and tarragon.
The meal is delicious. Afterward we both
feel tired and head for bed. But as I try
to sleep, I can still see the party—
my father and the woman dancing,
his drink spilling across her amber dress.
Such are the ways of parties that I, too,
start to feel happy, almost hopeful,
and suddenly I begin to see a bright future—
the sticks blown off and the water
clear as air. But despite my optimism,
I know that nothing's changed,
that killing is frowned upon, that one day
I'll be caught. And in the distance
I hear the bird sing a new song,
this time with words, a slow song of mothers
and wives, of hunting and sweet revenge.

The Box

"Twist his head off," I heard them say.
"Break his shins." "Grind him up
and feed him to Larry." My eyes were bound,

and I was lying in a box that smelled
of sweet cherries and honeydew melons.
I remember a noise like cake batter

slapping against a stone floor.
Then came the laughter—
high-pitched bursts of air

shooting across the room.
When they picked up my box,
I heard a grunt, an "ungh," and then

"I thought we put this motherfucker
on a diet." When the door opened,
I readied myself for yet another room,

another trip. I had been in the box
since Tuesday, when they found me
catching a bus.

The Beauty of Maps

Sadly the beauty of maps is not matched by the physical world. When Neil Armstrong first gazed upon the Earth, he saw merely a spinning ball of blue, green, and brown. White patches of mist hugged close but then dispersed. Even the black beyond the ball was interrupted by pinpricks of light, whose size could lead one only to disappointment.

Lewis and Clark, too, found the world a jumble of colors, and when looking at a map, I give thanks to their efforts at charting our land, relieving me of the need to see the world as simply one tree and then the next, as one hill similar to so many others. Truth be told, nature can be such a bore and so unrevealing.

Much better, I think, to be guided and formed by our maps—colorful, useful, exact with sharp lines and easy-to-follow designations. Stand in the middle of Cleveland, and you might as well be in Pittsburgh. But on the map Cleveland is a wide mass of yellow shaped like a cow's skull, a skull bleeding into the green of Ohio and slammed up against the plum blue of Lake Erie.

But haven't we done enough traveling already? Do we not already have our maps? Now all that is required is a good drink—my preference today would be apricot brandy—and a little time away from the mess beyond our doors. On my atlas, page 43, is a beautiful representation of Albania. So softly textured, it looks like a sleeping cat with a gentle gray belly. It is hard to believe the physical Albania—that wretched, dirty little country—could compete. And besides, if I began to find Albania, with its 3 million residents, to be a bore, I could simply skip over to Bulgaria on page 44. The highest point in Bulgaria is Mt. Musala at 9,596 feet.

Work

Then we broke his bones, and he whimpered,
and he sang a slow song to his mother, a weary song
filled with light things, the sun, and the fastest way
to a clearing in the forest where the stream fell
into a shallow pool and relaxed and extended itself.
I, too, was tired and could almost hear the pool
being fed, swelling and relaxing, this clear water
where we as a group, after our work was done,
would bathe, pouring water over our hot and sweaty heads.
It is not that I enjoy killing. It is merely as if the world
were round, and we had just one job: to hold on tight
and not let go, for if we did, we would spin into the ether,
losing all connection to everything but ourselves.
But we need connection. We need intimacy.
So when the order came, I followed, doing what
I've finally learned to understand: I had my orders.
Below me the man continued to sing, and I felt appreciative—
how often do we witness a spontaneous creation of art,
a feeling suddenly shaped into beauty? Of course,
there is nothing left to do with beauty,
after it's flowered, but to snip it, to kill it,
and so we all took a shot. Leroy even cut his throat
and watched him bleed. But even before the man slumped,
we were ready for something else, so we all headed
through the woods, at last searching for the stream.

Newt Gingrich as a Vegetable

For dinner we sit at a simple green table. We sit in our simple red chairs. On the table is a blue transparent vase, which might have daisies or a thatch of dried, fragrant flowers. For dinner we eat soup in large bowls or salad in wide, gold-rimmed plates.

Tonight, I see, is salad.

There are just two of us. My wife, call her A, has a scowl across her face, and her brown hair is bunched up here and there as if she has just returned from a hard day's work in a wind tunnel. I see she's looking out the window into the night, watching, I assume, snowflakes glint flashes from a nearby streetlight—snowflakes that fall in my own mind like shredded dollar bills. Praise be the streetlight. Praise be the wealth of the country.

"Excellent salad," I say. "Really good."

But A does not reply. She seems only to peer with unusual attention at my head. For reasons of impartiality, let's call who I am B. And let's go one step further. Our table—that is, my wife's and mine—could be any table, surrounded by any two individuals A and B. Before them is a consciously selected set of materials, materials that could be found, perhaps, in that great national "basket of goods" economists control. It is a basket for the study of inflation.

On this day as the snow falls in pleasant lumps, in my mind of either flour or cocaine (only one of which is used as an indicator of inflation), I begin to see my future as B. B likes to sit around on the couch and eat blobs of ice cream. B likes to drive fast in cars, and given a more fortuitous arrangement of stars, he would have been a highway cop driving at this very moment like a dog on

Prozac. B, in fact, is a whole arrangement of random possibilities—pants too short, a nervous laugh, a mother who rides motorcycles, even a fetish for dog biscuits that can be traced back to some dark childhood moment when his parents were off doing what parents did in those days, which is smoke dope.

But is it for the love of economists that I consider my future?

My wife is now looking down at her salad. Her scowl is gone and replaced by two vertical lines, like exclamation marks, burrowed into her forehead. Great, I think. Now what? Her fork digs quickly into the lettuce, and before long I, too, see the thing moving. I might have missed it but for the gray hair and the plain blue suit. Then came the high-pitched squeal, the warnings about inflation and the ever expanding role of the government into our private lives. Is he here to protect us? I wonder. And then I think of all the possibilities for A: dog catcher, special prosecutor, jail guard. And then I look down into her salad and join the hunt.

Valentine's Day

True, one should be wary of raw fish, but it's even sweeter when alive,
when it stares, sluggishly wiggling its eyes
from a white platter, when, either confused or resigned,
it waits for the fork to sink in, too tired to
flop its fins, panting restlessly into
a culinary oblivion—
almost a distraction, you say, from jokes at the next table
about a mistress, herself wiggling and flopping to some finale.

This is Valentine's Day, a chance to yahoo the years of yesterday,
those days when the Earth was a small ball
with two chairs, that and a large bed
and blue sky, that and a single red plane.

What do we have now to transport us?

You take the first hesitant stab,
causing the fish to heave itself onto the rice and shudder.
The waiter advises: delay brings disappointment.

These were your plans: buy a new hat tree for the foyer,
buy a new car; buy a parakeet and a parakeet cage
and recordings of cats and recordings
of dogs; teach the bird the theme song
to the Andy Griffith Show.

These were my plans:
buy a dog, buy a new bike; buy a new bucket
for tomorrow's rain; and buy and buy and buy.

The waiter says: the fish always dies before you finish.

This must be true, and when I take my own stab at it,
ripping the flesh, the fish hardly moves, my fork merely
leaving a crater as on a dark landscape

where a group of men have traveled.

And what would they find?

A downward slope? A great gape of textured white, not steaming

but still warm? A place to settle for a while and find comfort?

News from the Front

But here, from my couch, all is mostly quiet:
a cello in the sunlight, French windows
dividing the world into bare bushes
and blue skies. Outside snow melts and leaves
oceans of mud and water, while on the street
water trails through tiny canals
of hard pavement. There is a warming trend,
said a man on the radio, and looking outside
one could hardly deny it. Will it rain?
Will snow return tomorrow? A woman
in shorts and duck boots appears
on the street, sliding across the wet ice.
She begins to laugh, to howl like a giraffe
or old vacuum cleaner, but my cat,
perched by a window, seems unimpressed.
Only moments before his fur stood up
as he stretched his back, but I know
what he meant, as guys are guys. Before me
the mail sits on a coffee table, scattered
next to a cup of warm apricot tea.
The biscuits are gone. I raise one foot and then
another to the table, but across the street
a neighbor opens his front door and walks
to the sidewalk with a huge shovel in hand.
Then the scraping begins, interrupted
by the whir of a passing car. A dark cloud
moves in from the west. I'm about to ask my cat
about the developments, but when I look over
he has disappeared, and then the noise stops.

Memory of My Chubby Legs

This Form of Our Lives

This ring,
this circle,
this jog around a path in daylight,
this bending over, finding six toes, then seven.
This habit of movement
or habit of thought.
This embrace of your mother,
your mother's dog,
this embrace of children
and the embrace of your favorite politician.
This loss of a straight line,
this luscious moon
guided by luscious laws.
This thing, this circle,
this turn of a handle
when the clouds obscure
the starlight,
this last day of a moment,
not a brief and isolated moment,
not the smashing
of ice across a table
when your father arrives,
not the lock of an elbow,
a curve turned straight and sharp
from the weight of someone's emotions,
not the grid of a personal unknown,
but merely this ring,
this circle,
this way around a park
where a child might sit,
this walk up the stairs

and around the way
to a waiting bath,
this sprint to a place
that has been scorched with circles,
this place overwhelmed with tall men
in wide-rimmed hats,
not hats with high points
or low, flat hats pressed with corners,
but rather a smoothness in hats
overcome almost with sorrow,
that is, a place falling around sorrow,
a place on this last day
when even a perceived curve,
a lazy walk around the back
to check the daffodils,
could hardly contain an outstretched arm
itself following the laws of sorrow.

Memory of My Chubby Legs

1

This is not a story about penises or how to make money or the way we all talk with each other but only half listen, the way a voice travels into an ear and makes impressions, that is, complex sensory data competing with other data, data from the penis, data from the eyes, data from the nose that notes the smell of sweet corn boiled in a steel pot.

This is not a story. In my mind are a row of houses and a sidewalk, and the sky is the color of the stretched skin of a dead fish, the black bleeding into silver, which bleeds into a red and orange border of the sky just above the houses on a small residential street. I am running, and I am three, and it is 1966. If I were an astronaut, I might be searching the sky for the moon, which, if scientists are to be believed, is an orbiting circle of rock that has no purpose, no mind, just a rock going round and round, a stooge to a set of godless principles: acceleration equals mass times whatever, or a body stays in motion until another force, such as a mother, acts upon it. I am running on a sidewalk toward my house.

In 1966 man had not yet reached the moon, had not teed up on the dusty surface of that planet, and thousands of miles below I am running down a sidewalk from one place, maybe a friend's, to my own house. Of this age I have few memories: my mother's white hands as she buttons my jacket, and outside the window a marching band dressed in black, white, and red. The milkman rides a horse-drawn carriage. On the ironing board my mother presses her hair to remove her curls. When I am running, I see the bright windows of my neighbors' houses and inside one a giant woman in a tentlike dress. I now know the heart, pumping hard during a run, is only the size of a fist in a healthy adult or the size of a cat's head. In a small child it can't be larger than a tangerine or a racquetball, sending blood through all the tissues, through the chubby arms and legs of my three-year-old body, through the brain with its forgotten mission, through the nose, which can smell corn in the warm, humid air. My eyes are just little sacs of tissue no bigger than malted milk balls. They are fragile and could be plucked and crushed and eaten.

This is my earliest memory: running down the street, my chubby legs pushing one after the other, the sky like a dead fish, the smell of corn in the humid air. My brain gives me no other clues. Why was I running? I was in a small city, Champaign, Illinois, and before that moment I am nothing. I am dead. According to one study, people hear just half of all words spoken to them in private by their spouses. The other half is never heard, instantly dead, an example of the vast sums of energy wasted in our universe. Only one in five trillion sperm accomplish their mission, and there is no evidence the others understand their failure. Years later, when I lived in Chicago, I would take the El to work, and one day I sat on the train and watched the moon in the morning sky. Suddenly the train stopped, and smoke and flames erupted from the bottom of the car. The conductor jumped out, beat the flames with a two-by-four, then got back in to start the train again. This memory, too, is fading, though it's not entirely gone, as, for example, the image, when I was three, of my parents' youthful faces, which I now know only from pictures.

Alternative Medicine

In a sea of orange nectar and lime dinghies,
below a sky of yellow custard and cool meringue
and the sweet gentle voices of my ancestors,
I felt myself swimming, swimming . . .

“Say ahhh,” my doctor said, and what she saw
I’ll never know, though her face shuddered,
and her shoulders collapsed, and her wrinkled hands,
one with a blue diamond, rubbed softly together.

Out a side door and through a narrow hallway
we walked, and then into a bright room
with pistachio walls and giant French windows
open to the vagaries of a warm, summer breeze.

To my right the pins were already arranged, the balls
aligned, so I wasn’t surprised when she said that she liked
to bowl, that she was good at this game. Her first throw,
an airborne strike, never touched the worn orange planks.

Then she asked me to lie down on the lane, to tell her
about my upbringing, all the humiliations with my father
and mother and three sisters, even about the day
they tossed me from a boat in Lake Erie and sailed away.

I told her everything, and as I spoke, she stroked my forehead
with a wet sea sponge, and soon my arms warmed, and soon
I was on my feet looking out a window at a passing plane,
and soon she embraced me, then undressed. Then the game began.

The Dance

The pool was empty, save the lane lines
red across the water, which was aquagreen
and plum blue and flecked with the white
of old cement. I was standing on the edge
of the pool in a line of teenage boys.
The water looked warm with its lights
shining bright from under the surface,
the green and blue of the water soft,
so soft I wanted to dip my hands into it,
to cleanse my skin, which was the color
of acorn squash or of maple sealed
in clear, flat coating. When I looked up,
I saw the opposing team on the other side
beyond the water. Up above, the stands
were dark, obscuring the crowd—the mothers
knitting sweaters, a girl with blond hair
who came to watch me. Over the speakers
the Star Spangled Banner played, and the flag,
up high, was big and illuminated like the pool.

What I remember, years later, is reaching
toward one woman's hand and then another—
some were thin like branches of sycamore,
others were heavy and thick like moist pastry.
I was told to grab one hand, then another, to swing
the woman around the back when she came,
to direct her off to the right when she left.
The directions were simple, the repetition
soothing—first one hand, then another,

dresses of red paisley replaced by
blue dresses of shimmering iridescence.

But what did I remember when dancing? At the pool
the music continued, the stands still dark, our meet
yet to begin, this old memory in suspension
as I see yet another woman, this one in a mauve
cotton dress, waving a pasty hand in my direction.
I pull her around the back and off to my right,
where another man is ready to direct her.
Then I wait for the next hand, for the lights
to turn on, for the girl in the stands
to bend over the railing, to open her lips
hot like chili peppers or cool like the setting sun,
to say she's here, as promised, to say anything.

Outside My Window

the wind is strong and the trees wave in a way that reminds me of

1. My grandmother, whose fingers seemed to quiver whenever she raised her hand, as, for example, on the day when I sat with her in her living room, she at a desk with her glass of port and me on the couch with mine. She said, "The civil rights movement was great for this country," but only moments before she had also said, "We were so good to them," meaning the "Negroes" in her hometown in Georgia, where whites became confused when their domestics began to complain.

I want you to look carefully at this: my grandmother, a beautiful, gray-haired woman in black glasses who is drinking her port—oh, it tastes so good—and I am standing up to leave her home for the last time, and she is raising her right hand to wave, and then her fingers begin to quiver. I wish I could truly show you this moment, but all I have now are the trees.

2. My grandmother one Christmas Eve after I picked her up from a friend's house in a Chicago suburb. I was sixteen, had just received my license, and was driving a small car, a '78 Datsun B210, which meant that I was rubbing elbows with my grandmother. All was fine save two problems: I liked to drive fast, especially around corners, causing my grandmother's body to heave one way or the other—that is, almost out the window or into my lap—and I had no sense of direction, which resulted in our being lost within ten minutes. During that trip she told me a story.

My grandmother, though less than five-feet tall, played center on her college basketball team. This is not a joke. All I can

imagine is that she was a great jumper. She attended Piedmont College, a small school in Georgia, and at the end of one game, with just ten seconds left, the score was tied at 42. An opponent had been driving toward the basket, but my grandmother reached her small hands into the traffic and snared the ball, and then she and the other woman fell to the floor.

In the stands sat my grandfather, who only months before had been thrown out of Dartmouth for some inexcusable, drunken act (I was never told what happened, but I do know that he was caught in his underwear in the dean's office). Now he was a Piedmont student, and he had never met anyone from the women's basketball team, not the least the four-foot-ten center who was setting up for the jump ball.

The official threw the ball up in the air, high above the players, and my grandmother and her opponent sprung off the floor, my grandmother's right hand outstretched, her fingers straining and, I imagine, quivering as well.

3. My grandmother on that same Christmas Eve. We had been driving for an hour and a half. She looked at me and asked, "Shouldn't we call your mother?"

I banked a right down a street I hoped would bring us to a highway—big roads are comforting to the directionally challenged—but the street turned out to be a disappointment. Small and lined with huge, Victorian houses, the street, I could see, was not an obvious way to a big road, and so I stopped. Just then a large African-American man pushed himself out onto the street a foot or so in front of the Datsun and slowly turned his body toward us. His eyes were red, and he looked desperately tired. At that moment I thought, yes, I, too, feel tired. And then his body began to fall like

a giant cedar, an event followed by a hollow thud from the hood. I looked to my grandmother, who, to my surprise, was remaining calm. Out of her coat pocket she pulled her right hand, which she raised, slowly, in a cheerful, quivering way, toward the man.

4. My grandmother anytime in my memory, really. Her death, years ago now, is a hole—sometimes a perfect circle, other times an oval, still other times a keyhole of sorts. Today, outside my window, the sun is strong but so is the wind, and I am thinking of my grandmother, probably for no good reason, despite the trees, but that's how life is.

Halloween

Why do we have such need to believe? For example, when I look out
the window today, I see
not a brood of confused, angry atoms, nor a display of stalagmites
reaching toward the cave
we call the universe, but simply an apple tree almost without
its leaves, now turned brown,
and beyond that another window, its storms recently set in place,
and when I take off
my glasses, the whole scene reminds me of a Matisse landscape—
smeared oranges and yellows,
the storms now softer and reminiscent of a vacation in France
an old girlfriend and I
took so many years ago, which she probably remembers only
with the faintest flickering,
as her memory, I believe, was terrible (that was my opinion, though
her last word to me was "liar").

So it is not surprising that last night I assumed this healer—a woman
in her forties who reveals
past lives and psychic vibrations—believed what she said, believed
that she saw in my neck
the face of a dead writer, though I had not yet told her my occupation.
I was dressed like Dolly Parton
and my wife like Chairman Mao, and when I looked across the room,
I saw an animated Mao laughing
with the Oversized Cucumber. The healer, next to me, was dressed
as herself. "Here," she pointed
to her scalp. "That's where I had the tumor, and in the Philippines
the man pushed his hand

into my brain and pulled out something the size of a chicken gizzard."

I felt obligated to hear this story,
even though Mao was now dancing a slow tango with the Cucumber
and embraced by his hairy arms.

My Trip with a Dog

Each day the man rows slowly across the sewage pond. The pond is dark, brownish at the edge, with steep banks on which the thick grass is almost fluorescent. When the man lets the oars fall, he can hear the water splash, and the stink of his entire town, Mill Valley, population 500, enters his lungs, those pink things sucking molecules that not long ago were in places he tries not to think about. But he can't help it, he told me, that's just part of his job here at the waste-water sewage plant in Mill Valley, Montana.

What the man does on the pond I don't know. One day, though, I saw him in the center of the water with a long pole that he lowered slowly until it stopped maybe twenty feet down. The next day he was in the boat with his wife, a small Asian woman, whom he met in Vietnam, and I saw him pointing off into the distance to a snowy peak. I was traveling alone with my dog, and for two days I stayed at Mill Valley. At Betty's I had pork chops and corn bread and green beans with ham.

I wasn't there when the man stepped off the boat and onto the pier but then slipped and disappeared under the brown water. "It was like being sucked down into your own toilet," he told me on the first day at Betty's. "I almost passed out, and the bank was so steep and slippery I couldn't pull myself onto the grass. I had to wade half blind to the pier. Later the whole town laughed as I walked home to change my clothes. At that moment I wished I didn't exist." Which made me wonder:

Why do we think such thoughts? And could we wish so hard to disappear that we could seriously doubt our own existence? Sitting before a fireplace one evening, Descartes, disturbed by the lack of philosophical foundation, declared "I think, therefore I am" as the one certainty on which we could base our lives. To most of us this is useless information, a banality in thought, which is what I was thinking on my walk through Mill Valley, Montana, as I approached the pond and saw the man, his wife, and the fluorescent green, which is where my dog began to bark.

The Fainting Game

When Danny fainted, I usually stood behind him. "Go!" I would yell, and Danny would begin a rhythm: *heeeeeee*, he breathed in; *ehhhhhhh*, he breathed out. Faster and faster he would go until his head bobbed like an oil rig and his voice rattled. He had asthma, and I hated so much the sound of his tightening throat that I almost wanted to kill him. When I could stand it no longer, I reached around his stomach and pulled hard, and his face would hit the ground like a soft pumpkin.

I must have liked fainting, though it took some effort, and I can't say my life was noticeably improved by it. The rules were always the same. First, I bent over and clutched my knees. Next, I might have seen grass, a root poking out of dirt, or maybe to the side a pocket knife, which we used to whittle spears and kill lizards. Once we mailed a dead lizard to Danny's mother, and we never confessed.

When I emerged from the blackness, I would see leaves fluttering above and be confused about who and where I was until I heard my friends laughing. One day, though, Danny didn't budge, which at first seemed funny, and to wake him up John banged a boot hard against Danny's head, which didn't do much good except get us in trouble with the police when they came and saw the bruise, but we didn't admit to anything.

The Sea

The ending was happy—the waves collapsing against the shore,
my Uncle Charley flattening a can of Coors
between his hands before running toward the water
on this night when the moon was half shaded by the clouds
that later brought us rain. My aunt, whom we called Molly,
was pregnant, and she laughed and laughed, holding her own can
so delicately, her red fingernails like flares in the moonlight.
My uncle swam out into the sea, and then it was just Molly
and me, whom she called boy, which, in fact, I was, being ten
and having only an inkling of what life on any night could be.

Other days the sun shone brightly, and I rode my bicycle
to the sea. The air was flat with salt, and the warmth was like
the caress of rough sandpaper after a day of hard labor.
But I did not know what it was like to work those days,
what I knew instead being difficult to apply when the time
eventually came to use it. When it was hot and the sea was rough
and the sun shone without the bother of clouds, there was little
to do but lie beneath a tree and watch. After all, the water does
what it must, and the sky, too, follows the same principle,
and even on cool days I sometimes rode to the sea.

Impatient Clouds

Home

Now comes a summer breeze,
a smell of tomatoes shaped like luscious
tumors. Now comes a cool
patch of swamp blown from the edge of town,
a new gust

so pleasant and so soft
one seldom is reminded of sickness.
After all, the grass from
a distance looks gentle and dumb, like a
thick blanket

rolled across fields and up
the hillsides. Here the sun has nearly set.
Here we begin to count
our wishes: a lakefront scattered with shells,
a parchment

with no writing, a new
theater with new actors with new stories
to tell. The wind is here,
but we have become increasingly flat
and pressed with

bright colors. We take new
pride in our brushstrokes. We see not wind but
a gold frame surrounding
us with meaning. We feel the tired panic
of flowers.

First Lesson

Home is the numbness
of fingers, swollen
like pomegranates. Home
is the creek whose breath
rises and falls. On the wall
is a map of Africa.

But then our fingers
touch the table. We hear
a number of beats,
which someone is counting.
In the yard two officers
surround a small, white bus.

Is this surrender?
We know already
it is time to eviscerate
our cavities, pull tendons from
our calves. Already we're told
that noon's not yellow.

The Steps for Eating

First, find a calf, any calf will do,
though be sure it is of sturdy mind
and hardy constitution. Brush the hair
around her jowls and look deep
into her dark brown eyes—there you go.
You're doing fine. This is food,
and what we want most from the calf
is a steady gaze. Be honest.
Does she look good?

But let's not hurry. There are other steps:
Buy her or steal her, either will work,
and then lead her gently to your pasture.
What I find most pleasing is a pine fence
enclosing a backyard and the grass grown up
and thick with green. At first,
when she is small, the grass will rise up
to her chest, just below her mouth,
so all she'll do is dip her face lightly
into the vegetation, and when she is tired,
she'll fall deep into the green.

You, too, will have habits:
inside your kitchen, at noon,
you are drinking coffee and eating turkey
on whole wheat. You stand up and stretch
and walk to the window that faces
out onto your pasture. In the back
you see your garage and the heavy lines of metal

carrying the pulses of electricity and sound.
And there, across the plain of grass,
is a hole, dark green falling into black,
and you'll know that sometimes it is important
to have faith in that which you can't see.
True, all things must pass, even the moment
when you, too, are standing in the green,
you with your hand on her neck, caressing slowly
the thick muscles and the tiny, stiff hairs.
Off in the distance, above the mountains
to the north and west, you'll see clouds come
in groups of twos and threes, and then
in such large numbers that the sky itself is taken over
by a steady mass of thick gray, a harsh gray
ready to relieve itself of moisture and to usher in
a long season of cold. Without much thought
you'll know the time has finally come
for the last step.

In your kitchen take out a large bowl
and pour into it a generous amount
of cow's milk. This will be comforting to her.
Then mix with the milk a cup of refined wheat flour,
which, to her, will bring memories of her parents
or grandparents or ancestors in the far past
that once roamed unending fields in Mesopotamia.
Finally, add a sprinkle of salt, which will
stiffen her muscles and steady her mind.

When you walk out with the bowl
you'll notice the grass is still green and thick

but that it no longer reaches her chest.
She has grown taller and wider
and her legs are enclosed in great strands
of muscle. She is much larger than you.
But it seems like only yesterday that she was a calf,
your baby, and so you lie down with her
in the grass, she with her feet curled up beneath her body,
she with her head resting on your lap.
You'll comfort her, brush the hair between her ears.
This will not be easy for either of you.

She'll drink the milk slowly at first—she has not
had milk since you brought her to the pasture—
but with time she begins to drink more quickly,
almost sucking the liquid into her mouth
and then licking the sides of the bowl. You feel
the muscles in her neck begin to swell with blood,
and her hair seems to become thicker and sharp.
It is now, you think. She is ready.

You are not wearing shoes, and in the beginning
she only lays her tongue softly against your toes,
and you marvel how warm and thick her saliva is.
Then you pull off your pants and shirt, leaving
both of you naked below the stormy sky.
You lean back and rest your head against the grass.
You say a short prayer to thank your creator
for the Earth and all that it has provided you.
You thank your family and your ancestors
and the laws of nature for your place
in the universe. And when you begin to feel

her biting your toes, then your feet, then
the soft, lean meat of your calves, you do not complain,
as she is larger, she is your baby,
and this is merely the way of the world.

What's Simple and True

And then a blue horse. And then the green hens.
These are true: that nature knows the difference,
that the world is mostly flat, and round
is the Earth. Life is not complicated.

These are true: that nature knows the difference;
the sky is busied with impatient clouds. What
is the Earth? Life is not complicated.
For example, now she removes my shirt.

The sky is busied with impatient clouds. What
should I do with this day as the rain begins?
For example, now she removes my shirt.
I find there are many ways to dance.

Should I do with this day, as the rain begins,
what I find most important and true?
I find there are many ways to dance.
She does not like hens, green or otherwise.

What I find most important and true:
a soft-boiled egg cut swiftly at the top.
She does not like hens, green or otherwise.
She prefers wheat or the flesh of an orange.

A soft-boiled egg, cut swiftly at the top,
is how I begin this ravenous day.
She prefers wheat or the flesh of an orange,
but now she removes her terrifying shirt.

Is how I begin this ravenous day
a hint at what's simple and true?
But now she removes her terrifying shirt,
my exquisite shorts, her dark sombrero.

A hint at what's simple and true:
and then a blue horse, and then the green hens,
my exquisite shorts, her dark sombrero,
that the world is mostly flat and round.

Night Skiing

It's night in Switzerland, and sitting in
a restaurant are tourists just back from
Pierre Tombale, a nearby ski resort.
The day was long, but all remember how
the sun had warmed their cheeks, caressed their noses.
Some watch a couple singing Spanish songs
and playing mandolins, while toward the back
a young Parisian woman dances on
a chair, causing her dress, maroon and blue,
to shimmy back and forth along her thighs.
Just then a man from Kansas walks inside
and finds a table. Though alone, he, too,
seems pleased. He sees the woman dancing, but
his mind instead reflects on skiing. Much
better than hunting zebras, he decides,
a sport he tried in Mali. "Quelque chose
à boire, Monsieur?" a waiter asks the man.
"A margarita," he replies, and then,
scanning the menu, sees the dish Bob Dole.
"That one," he points. The waiter walks away,
returning in a moment with a plate
of bratwurst and potatoes. With delight
the man begins to eat, and gone, it seems,
are feelings of depression, of offense
and violation, thoughts especially
about his wife. Was it Miguel, the bald
philologist, or Bledsoe from Dubuque,
the rubber salesman, that he most disliked?
Or no, was it the Jeep mechanic? But

tonight such thoughts seem unimportant as
he cuts into the bratwurst or devours
potatoes, as he muses on the day—
a mesmerizing schuss of infinite
sunshine and snow. And once again he sees
the woman dancing on the chair,
singing as in a karaoke, but
this time he notes how similar she looks
to other women in his past. Her knees
remind him of his college girlfriend, while
her auburn hair, a neighbor who looked like
the actress in "Embezzlement of Lust."
Of course, he's only seen the poster, but
the dancing woman, singing "quatre, cinq,
zéro..." has now looked over to the man,
who wonders what the numbers mean. A code,
perhaps? A telephone number in France?
And as he contemplates the mystery, she
continues dancing, fabric swaying, while
outside the window snow comes down in lumps.

An American in Loire

I named my chair une chaise.

My dog? Un chien noir.

That's right.

The ways of Loire
are these.

Un monsieur météo
drops in my studio.

Surprised, I say, "Beau temps,
n'est pas? Les nuages sont
gros, sales."

Il dit, "mais quand?"

Such lies,
these French, what do they know?
If flowers bloom, then so

it's spring, they'll say, sans doute,
mais ça c'est le bouquet.

One must
defend the way
weather
remembers spring. I say,
"I am the horseman's day,

you are the crooked wind,"
et monsieur dit, "En somme,
nous sommes
des hommes des hommes."

Then drops
plus d'autres—hommes de mer,
à femmes, puis à tout faire.

Our Way of Living

Here at the dump the birds are eating what remains of someone's dinner—reds and greens spilling across a plastic bag. And there, in a torn paper sack, is something like a chicken, though an enchilada might look like a chicken after the stale heat and the decomposition that the birds, and even we, still take for granted here.

It might appear to be a burden, this lifting about, this pushing things to be arranged. Concrete is the one covering we all prefer, which only makes its loss all the more sorrowful. It's not my truck we've taken, which is just as well for now, with the slabs tearing up the bed and what's left after it's gone lacking consequence.

There's so much more to do, but this is still your project, my own being more abstract and difficult to justify. That's why sometimes at night when we're alone, I think about the land your family has, the trails through acres of tobacco fields, the leaves a kind of green before they're brown, those shacks you find in clearings where the slaves once lived.

Home Ownership

I've been looking at my attic for months.
I've been looking at my attic, and after much thought
still I find them: boards, two by six and brown,
cut in the days when trees
were slaughtered like chickens,
and against them
knobbly wires hanging through insulation,
thick enough to strangle a chicken.
This old house has two finished floors.
I'm on a ladder looking up
through the third-floor access hole
and so is my contractor, and I say,
"This . . . here . . . this attic . . . this is my salvation,
this is the place that will not forsake me."
The contractor nods, as I have shown him plans:
great acres of landscaped fields, a bubbling brook,
several nymphs, a brontosaurus. It's just a room up there,
but I have made the plans, and I expect
everything I want.

Down the ladder we go, first the contractor,
whose name is Bill, and I can see Bill's stomach
rattling along the steps, and his mouth
makes an odd noise, something like a *herph*,
herph, a noise I've come to associate with him
after our numerous meetings,
mostly over coffee and donuts.
And now, off the ladder and standing
in a bathroom, Bill wipes his nose and says,
"\$30,000, and you don't get no landed estate
or wild animals, either. John,

you're gonna have to get practical
or forget about contacting me."
Of course, these words hurt me,
but Bill knows this, and he says them
in a gentle way, and now he nudges me
and pulls on my sleeve,
and we walk over to the bathroom window
between the closet and the tub.

Bill says, "Look!" and he points out the window
over someplace in the direction of the hills but lower
toward a row of houses, which we now know
are environmental hazards, as all houses are.
Should we not bulldoze the suckers,
all the world's houses,
and send ourselves packing in our Speedos
out into the woods—that is, the woods
that are still left—to live with nature
unobstructed by the sinful comforts of our creations?
Bill again says, "Look!" and I do,
but all I see is a row of tiny shacks, dilapidated things
fit for a farm animal or a pack of chickens, and Bill says,
"Look at those homes. Those are the homes of workers,
of people like the people who years ago built your home,
who framed the two stories and the attic,
who plastered walls and laid hardwood floors.
The people in those homes, John,
are just like the people who worked on this house,
except that a lot of people over there these days
don't work and receive welfare, but that's
beside the point. The point is, John,
that people built your home on cheap labor,
and nobody's gonna work for nothing anymore,

which I think is a goddamn good thing,
and if you want your goddamn salvation,
you're gonna pay me or somebody else
\$30,000, and you're gonna get no lousy estate in there
or brontosaurus." As Bill says this,
I know what he's thinking: no bubbling creek, either.

But I have no time for this. I have made the plans,
and I merely watch Bill amble on toward the stairway.
Before he disappears, he says, "John,
your porch is falling down. The foundation
is made of cardboard. For \$3,000
I'll fix the goddamn porch,
but don't call me about the attic."
And then off he goes down the stairs: *herph, herph*.

Outside the sky is cloudy, and the wind picks up.
Rain begins to sprinkle on the window,
and nearby a maple shakes
like a furious mother. I press my nose against the glass
and feel the cold, and straight ahead
I can now see the peeling paint on the trim
of my neighbor's house (he's already built
into his third-floor attic, and I can only imagine
what unspeakable pleasures are there).
My wife, I know, is working at the university,
where she teaches math, mostly to guys,
and there are many studies that show
that once every twenty-five seconds
the male human flees to thoughts of female flesh.
We have a son, no doubt the result
of such thoughts, and he is seven and in school.

Outside on the window the rain streaks
across the glass, which is wobbly in its age,
and I am reminded that glass is supposedly a liquid,
a slow river of transparent sand, heated
and pressed into sheets that droop slowly,
then droop even more, so that after hundreds of years
the glass develops a thick, sturdy bottom
that would be troublesome to break with a wall scone
or even the leaflike siding lapped around our structure.
The top of the window becomes a thin,
delicate sheet of skinlike transparency, thin enough
to create a hole with a gentle push of the tongue.

In the distance the rain is falling on the row
of tiny, barnlike homes, and squinting
I can almost see a woman there doing laundry.
It might, in fact, be a man, but in my mind
her hair is long and red and flowing with the wind.
In my mind her hair is also pointing off
to the highway, which is how I arrived here
years ago. Towels and pants flap in the breeze,
and though it is raining, the woman still clips on towels
or bras or whatever, and it is the act of clipping
that reminds me that I once knew this woman,
or a woman just like her, and one day we both
were in my car, a '78 Plymouth Valarie, which I bought
with savings from work as a building wrecker.
It was a job I did while in college, and since then
I've worked in an office or at home, my fingers
hardly straining as I click on the keyboard and review
my numbers. It is a life I never expected.

In the car Jane and I drove onto the highway.
She had brought a bag of bread and a wedge
of provolone, and I was thinking that day
that I would like to drive and drive until I got somewhere,
somewhere like this: warm, with a slight breeze,
no cloud in the sky, just a plain road
and a few pigheaded trees here and there,
maybe even some gentle yellow flowers
pushing their blank faces toward the sky.