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Reaching Home; Poems

John Holbrook

The University of Montana

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REACHING HOME

Poems by

John Holbrook

B. A. Oakland University, 1965

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1972

Approved by:

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Chairman, Board of Examiners

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Dean, Graduate School

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**Antaeus**: 'The Weight of Our Music'

**Colorado State Review**: 'The Request,' 'A Cult of Salt'

**Inscape**: 'A Lodger's Complaint'

**Intro #2**: 'The Dance'

**Intro #3**: 'Getting Started'

**Poetry Northwest**: 'Santo Domingo Pueblo: Three Years Without Rain,' 'General Motors Special,' 'A Clean Sweeping,' 'Once a Revolutionary'

**New Collage**: 'Reaching Home,' 'Words I Like to Hear'
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GETTING STARTED
GETTING STARTED
(For Judy)

Here, an act of love, for you.
Not a twenty-four hour consummation
to be sure—not even a song.
Just this: I have you,
that green bush and white line,
those Sunday punches
and big bay windows.
And the way you take a powder
isn't much, I know.
Those cracks on the walls could be worse.
And yet, you would have it all—
the cupboards and ashtrays,
sink stains and flies on the sill,
--as if it were nothing.
It is nothing. No one
will ever know or want to know
how you hold your comic nose
to scrambled eggs.
And there's no mistaking my confusion:
there's magic in your potluck bloom.
This or all the easy ladies in Kalamazoo?

You know I stand for you,
your usual rhythm
and common hue.
A LODGER'S COMPLAINT

That is not garbage on the lawn, lady.
That is bread and those are sparrows.
They are not chickens. They are hungry.
I am not hungry. This is my fashion.

Look at it this way: I pay the rent,
I live in a coop, I look up my cat.
This business gives me the business.
Ma'am, I'm fed up with your feathers.

Today I speak for the birds.
They understand me. Stand under me.
They say you did not make the first jump
or a thousand thereafter from hot balloons.

Sweet songbird, there's something up
your sleeve. What's packed in your hand
that goes with the sack on your mower?
You want another deposit? Some cake?

Look, God doesn't make you my mother.
She's in Michigan, bowling.
She always said if I had a brain
I'd take better care of a sparrow's.

Well, that's it tough customer.
For a couple of bread winners,
we're both for the birds.
That's all, love, my harp.
THE DANCE

You're at this party and finally
you're next to the prettiest girl there,
what will you do? Dash a cigarette
in your shoe? Pick a number from one
to ten? Decide innocence
is a good disguise--
rise like a swan in a trance
and ask her to dance?

And what will she do in your wings--
fling herself famous and cool?
Beat you to breakfast?
Think you handsome, quiet but cruel,
in your lofty common sense, a cinch?
Nothing to lose and why not she sighs,
the things girls do
if you give them an inch.
HALLOWEEN COMES TO MISSOULA, BADLY

They're back again, thumping doors, those giddy hop scotch goblins, their pockets full of black cats. They're stabbing their backs on my porch. They know my walls'll crawl out.

Go away. Shut up. I'm busy. A man like myself has deep feelings for his marbles. Cross my heart, with thumbs like these he'd win over Rome. Look, practice steadies his nerves in the dark!

I'm pooped sick of it kids. My woman's experimenting again, something about...anyway, this time it's with an objectivist, a serious lark. God, take your mob someplace else.

Say hey, can't you hoof it across the street, call a cop, tell him some nut's fooling with his marbles? Tell him I've gone bananas, a country bumpkin nifty in a jiffy. Tell him how sweet it is, hands on my knees, mooning the moon.
After all, the clouds
doing their level best
simply bumped our wavy heads.
And the stars, though
we have them named and
time now on our hands for naps,
well, I said, stars are fast
the finishing touch,
--the only catch.

You look at me, some star
some catch. And I,
once upon a time
the dashing concrete flagman
signaling affairs up and down your one-way street,
--once removed and having moved
the heart of the matter
from the seat of my pants
and up a notch, agree...

agree to fiddle with the dishes,
the dill drying in the window,
seeds on the sill,
your deliciously graphic apples
here and there

bobbing in my wicked head.
ON THE RUN

(For Saxon)

Tucked in our hoods, sprigs of spruce! Larkspur. Pine. We stroked our chins for strokes like this, slapped our backs, packed our breath off into the hills.

Cotton filled our shoes. We had to admit we brought the house down, that barrier we call sky. What lofty birds circled in our hands!

Our value grew. Monstrous in thickets, plum bushed on the run, we buried our tricks, pitched camp, filled our boots full of stars.

Stars listened. Farm lights cleared the sky. All around us mountains closed in, shook off leaves, stomped on sticks, woke up the stumps at our backs.

Heat caved in. Sparks blew up in our eyes. Dampered in blankets, we wrapped ourselves around ourselves, crawled under our skin and fell headlong into the space of our lives.
TODAY IS THE NAME OF THE WORLD
GOOD NEWS FROM A SMOKED OYSTER

I'm out in the street
up to my neck
in my new star engine
sweeping conclusions.

It's sheer perfection
sustaining my momentum
aiming for a spot
adjusting my stuff.

Now the whole world moos
a bit too capricious
and I use the name 'Bub'
every other Christmas.
THE REQUEST

Dear Friend:

Though it is itself non-adhesive, that is, the task—the proof is to lick it onto backs of stamps. Lend the paste of it to your word.

P. S.

Now taste is the precision of a postcard --goddamn send me some news.
HOME DECISION

I am naked, stripped before you,
your bar of strawberry soap.
Slip off your rings.
Dive at me like a cormorant.
Wash my leg the way a cat rubs.

There. Now I'm Mark Anthony,
covered with suds and sturdy.
Say, you're getting out of hand...
bring me kettles of water,
this soap's getting pretty dirty!

Go. Your task is done,
down and out, washed up.
Meanwhile, I'll keep the ship afloat.
I have plans Egyptian cliff-hanger.
I know most of the ropes.
THE WAY A GOOD FELLOW FISHES WHEN HE'S SKUNKED

Shall I tie this string to my toe
and go fishing down by the river
when moths gang up on the moon,
off that log jammed round the bend
last spring, feet ahead of that deep hole?
Will I have questions to solve
before the river dissolves,
some grounds for a morning stroll?

And how shall I set a pace
if a patient face is put on the line
and limits of myths are taken?
Is it enough to hide in the dim light
of fame or stake my name on streaks
to empty the luck of a pool?
Should I butter up the fool on the moon
and deep down miss the chances of grace?
ONCE A REVOLUTIONARY

I

Pride moved him through a perfect whim.
He tackled history like a hound,
theory like the wind,
the future the way a whistle goes,
and like the lot of us:
wisdom by its weight.
Fiction thrilled him to the bone.
He was wry but not too loud.
He could tune a fork
or murder a prune.
While you had distance to dance
his rhythm improved.
Ask him was he brown.

II

He had his quirks.
He dreamed a lot,
wore jeans.
He admired other years,
propped antique lamps
on the ground,
ilit them: stood around.
He'd knuckle down at times,
know how to farm.
He'd pace entire days
just to say he'd seen it all.
He followed his school
like a fish, tinkered with a spark,
swept gods away with a broom.
Eventually, he tolled the din
of an electric doom.
His tools, however obscure,
were never up a sleeve.
Yet rehearsals and universals
bothered him.
Ask him was he accused.
III

What politics craved
he’d spend in a day,
— any constitution was reason for sport.
On top of it all,
he could wind round
a finger
(that digital cure-all)
the strings of his scope.
While you camped on Olympus
as if you were Greek,
not exactly down to earth
or up on your feet,
he read his palms
to bathroom walls
and slept like a nail.
Ask him was he amused.

IV

He took it kindly
if you tossed him out of doors,
or tapped an anthem forever
on his head with a stick.
He could water you down.
He could mix up the picture
scot-free,
measure the riffles of a river
or sit in a bathtub with a plug.
— He never really asked
an essay for an answer—.
Though ten thousand years old
and fundamentally pert,
he was deceptively apt
to take life this way: anyway.
Was he capable?
As serious as art?
Did he sell himself short?
Did he fail to score the apathy
that carved up his throat?

Ask his shirts where rainbows drown.
RIGHT NOW

We've all heard it before, the robin bringing to his song the end of day. It is as if what ends has its own way and beginning then with our indifference catches us either awake or asleep taking for granted all we imagine we've heard in a song before and so much more than this.
The Devil as a Second Grader

Can you guess what'd go with it
if the tallest tree in the world
fell down?

Some said: nests.
Others, birds.
Some spelled it out: s k y.
Others poked a cloud.
The boys went as far as Mars.
Girls eyed the whitest star.

Then somebody
in the back row
teachers seldom count on
but when he's there
could growl
said G O D three times
real loud.
LIVING IT UP WITH THE MILK MACHINE
AT THE SNACK BAR IN THE FIVE AND TEN

On any given day you might have two cows. You might milk one. You might give one away
and milk the government. You might say the government has two cows and you prefer water.
You might have two governments and sell one, stand in line--like a cow--and get some milk.

Now you have in your mitt a pint of milk. Something runs down inside your sleeve
to the ground, like water. You have a minute. You stand up. Shout. You eat cheese.
Two cows, out of your range, sit down. You might hold your pants up for some pie, join them.
LETTER TO THE MAYOR

Sir:

Why doesn't the city council get in on it and clean up this city of stray poems? They are roving around in packs creating havoc in people's back yards.

The poem catcher you got doesn't seem to be on the ball or there wouldn't be so many of these poems running around. On the west side there are people who have females that are in heat and the poems are running around like mad.

(I can't understand it. I wouldn't dream of letting my poem run around with a bunch like that.)

Why don't you get the sheriff to put his foot down, even his beat up? The poems are fairly dripping with raw venom and asking for real trouble. He could exceed the limits, lay the law down on the line, enforce suspect expression once and for all. In the evenings, Saturdays, Sundays, poems are plentiful.
If school kids and little old ladies hack it, why can't you?
Mr. Mayor,
it's just that you seem strung out so completely lately at the end of your wit.
GIVING GROUND

"Ok buzz saw, let's finish the spagetti."

Roots. Roots father speech.
Squeeze a breast: what does it measure?
I plant my feet. Ground is source.

Bullion on the stove. Substantial light.
Salt. Basil on her sleeve.
I take shape. Plant my feet.

She gives ground. Sweet relief.
She takes my hand. Gives it shape.
I squeeze her breast. Father speech.

Roots. Substantial ground.
She shakes her head. Plants her feet.
I lose shape. Measure speech.
WORDS I LIKE TO HEAR
NO DICE FOR WHITE MEN

(After Arlee, the Powwow)

I came like this: white,
on grounds of currency, sporting
popular teeth, expecting legends,
content, with meaning, off the cuff.

From ritual thump to gamble chant
they spoke to bones for sticks,
stopped me cold,
ignored my worked up public feet.

No breaks for me, no shoo-ins.
These Flathead fought box office bluff.
Even as I coughed up chips
they brought me to their game, my knees.

Squaws pinned me down for dimes,
told me white was never what they dreamed,
and that their children, brats in moccasin,
were better off for what they'd never be.

No one brushed me off, or stood up,
or told me where to face the other way.
And no one saw me leave.
Braves knew history, ignored the fuss.
METAPHOR ON THE FARM

After watching a farm horse
far from the barn
march up to a fence
and stretch its neck
on barn yard wire

I decided, after awhile
--put a string on the thing.
Let it go like a kite!
Stretch it in any direction.

I said this
after deciding,
and after a fashion
certainly risking my neck,
whatever I might imply
either loves my skin
or it itches.
WORDS I LIKE TO HEAR

I'm putting on a show in my shoe.  
I'm laced right up to my kisser.  
I'm not bowing out in the cold.  
I'm stepping ahead into my exit.

What's going on on the cob?  
I have an image at hand  
with butter on my chin.  
I'm green inside all this music.

Who can say of your meals,  
right here on top of my toast,  
--I'm not satisfied with your bones?  
Mama, my blood runs when you're home.

Razzle-dazzle, I'm coming unglued?  
You say it's cold when I know?  
I say I'm buttoned up to here.  
I make tracks when it snows.
Because I'm huskey
I leave the gallery
only to return
moments later
with a sigh and heavy ladder
the newspaper lady
needs to adjust the lights
with an eye for fashion
so the gallery director
can stand there by the canvas
with her daughter for a photo.

"People don't like pictures
unless they're full of people,"
her polaroid snaps.
"Like anybody, they're use to
sizing things up with their eyes."
I turn in time to leave
and hear the director ask
a group of girls on a fieldtrip
what they think an airbrush is.

Outside, on the steps,
boys in the same class
are spitting on their shoes.
Clearing the air, I ask them
how in the world
did you ever get here all together
in that yellow, Buick Special?
"In the trunk, under the seats,
the glove box, round the fan belt,
carburetor, the muffler,
--in your mustache, mister."
THE CLASSIC EGGNOG MADE OF RUM

I feel like the bitter end.
The honey in this hive is too green.
Bees pick on my watch.
A home is made of good skin.
The lines in my pencil forget.

My sensitive end's a tip-off.
A corkscrew on the bottle,
I go up my pipe like smoke.
This is breath, my boat
in your sail: air under water.

Remember that day? It's all
in the dark. So I blacked out,
slapdash, up your skirts to my hip.
Listen, skin is for keeps...
the sky lit up like a match.

You're back. It's been tough
jumping off the top of my head.
Oh, I've had it with good behavior,
the deep end. Let's put it this way:
back in the saddle--high in the heart.
PUTTING HORSESHOES ON THE MILK COWS
IN GRASS RANGE, MONTANA

I hit the town
the way some stranger might
step off a bus—head down,
collar up, feet first.
I did it so they'd have something
to step on. I said what I could
under my breath,
saw a star hang it up above the street,
pushed my way past the thought of coffee
and into Lib's Bar.

Twelve shots later
(my nerves on ice)
this cowpoke,
— an 8th grader—
called his shot on cue

and polished me off.
I sit around typing like a Spaniard. I love it. A fly flats itself against glass. There is a smudge.
Blood. (You wouldn't think a fly had any.)

I've got two teeth. I found them. They do not hang from my neck or anything. They belong in the woods where I found them. At the time, they belonged to wolves.

I make ashtrays out of bottle caps or bottles or anything. I'm handy. This isn't even my own voice. I'm talking, so, --who knows? There's that fly though.

I might just take a bale of catgut off to Africa and fly a kite back to America. It would be choice. And, I'd have something on the world at last to tell my grandchildren.
If not by chance then as luck would have it, area dogs are doing just as well in residential districts. Even the farmer's milking cow kicked the bucket on the spot. A week ago, a local doctor spent the day off prescribing noise for curious tourists, though no one really gave a good hoot. And on Main Street, two flights above it all, desk boys were doing it with fans again, this time like Marines training for control. God's honor.

Saturday, the Woman's Auxiliary painted the park rocks green and hydrants red. High spots hit the sun and the wind got the dickens. Sunday was another ball game, a minor social. It was the Hip Sirs against the Title Seekers for a case of cold beer and a couple of office girls out on their first base picnic.

Although news that Moscow admits it and agencies better than blue chips are questioning existence, wheat and corn are on the skids, hogs are holding their own, and goobers, a la Alabama, --always slow rollers-- are popping up, stikiing for perspective experience. In Hungry Horse, Coram, and Ronan, --featherbedding's exclusive, trucking's been signaled home. In Poland, on deck and substantiating threats, metals are mutual, bullish factors in gleaming engineering.
And so, after a good day's catch, the very latest up to date ends up wrapped up and fine in the crunch of cold fish cuts.
THE PERFORMANCE
THERE IS ONLY ONE BIRTHDAY IN APRIL

We are putting shingles on grandpa's roof. It is early and hot already. It is July and we're right in the middle of Michigan. Grandpa's down below, setting things up, setting things up in rows. We are having fun. We are stapling our toes.

It is still early, nine o'clock almost. Grandpa has his dander up, lets us know with a humph what he thinks of our toes.

Across the alley, in spite of us, a man in green, --a business suit-- looks up but past us, mulls for a moment our oats in the air, adjusts a sprinkler, the brim of his hat, moves his shoes through a garden he does not grow, and, with his heel slams a gate that looks what's left of our rhubarb in.
GENERAL MOTORS SPECIAL

Dogs creep with clock-like feet on oiled tracks, banging into trains of alley cats.
All tunnels into sleep again and out.
Dreams smoulder in cans of kerosene, kick and twitch against the wife. Jones burned last week.
Alarm clatters into six.


You have to wear winter clothes here--keeps the heat out, the sweat in.

Whistle's over. Monday's day after next. Sunday. It's an accident--takes one to relax. Clip the hedge. Trim the walk. Morality of the lawn mower. This is a dog. That a cat. These are kids. Communists give me gas. Garbage out. Kick the can. Marbles. Yo-yo!
THE PERFORMACE

He was wide across the chest
had a good arm
and his name was Bob.
Straight from the farm
and a step or two up
in his Roebuck slacks,
solid bleachers egged him on
and the lady acrobat
marched him front and center
to the middle of the floor.

Proud they had their man
and glad God missed the best of them,
those "Troopers" came alive
when the lady
rounding out her program
zipped him in a leopard suit
and pumped him full of air.
Wild Bob was just their kind of man.

Where she might have laid her head
and blossomed like a queen
she placed a patch, no, an acre
of hot black hair. And Bob,
not to be undone and stretching things a bit
stood there in his shoes,
cool as a cucumber
King of the Prairie
and sucking in some air.
--He was her man.

Spread-eagle, with all that blood
rushing to his head,
Bob's legs buckled under
when the lady
striking a pose in leotards
then spinning like a dime
jack-knifed through the gym
and came down like some flower
and handed him her knee.
The crowd of course loved it best especially when they kissed.
And no wonder. From ear to ear Bob's grin gave that gal and one small town all the latest if not the widest birth since Lord knows when.
Making a fist or having made one trying to let it go, grandpa gives it all he had so easy then rocking now just so tall in his saw-back chair and woolly bones.

A younger man when moving West meant moving west or someplace all the same swallowed up by snow, grandpa packed the family north, settled for a foundry, a fine life, and flatcars full of Southern coal. He grew stronger then as tests of strength were all but news; built himself a dandy house, fixtures of brass, hardwood doors, a spanking Monarch stove.

Never quite strong enough to suffer up his woman's grief (seven times she turned Christian, finally abiding with the Scientists, diabetes and a wordy grave), he moved downstairs, fancied a second wife—a social gal—practiced his chin-ups, one hand at a time, twenty times, not once but twice in a row, and continued to shave. Crocheted cups and plates of lace, --starched just right of course-- set the pace, fashioned all their days. And, too, though not exactly sold on this, grandpa let her go, hard at first, then slow, from his arms, and again, so slow.

Still, his preference was for solid cups, cold coffee, a place to maybe trim his toes or count. And I remember him like this, beginning with his chair—the fact his fist never lost its grip, or opened up for air.
HOLIDAY ON CADILLAC SQUARE

Pedestrian enough, uncle
is your name, pigeons
your friends. Framed,
perhaps shot down,
you wave, smile,
--strike us oddly on the arms.

We pass by. Such fondness
makes us mad. We're made
of better clothing and mad
about your sign, the piece of cardboard
with Sunday's funnies pasted on
you hold for some alarm.

A real loo-loo. We return,
speak of the Purple Gang,
whores on Hastings, on Gratiot
a garage in the Numbers Game
making bucks for dimes. You listen.
No strings. Stick to your mind.

We stick to your sign.
Closer, it's simple. There's Abner,
a laugh, mum, green around the gills,
--Daisey's still a dream. Here's Tracy,
pissed off, hot on the trail,
deep blue in a zoot-suit for disguise.

We're back to our feet, Detroit,
its postcard traps and dead end dames,
--back to you, deadbeat, and still no name.
Blocks behind us, you loose face,
strike out with your sign. You're soft
and ludicrous, spit, fondle our dizzy dimes.
BLACK SEPTEMBER
JUST FOR THE RECORD

Ruby Coleman
65 or thereabout
last count
at large
and still from Spokane

jumped the bridge
this morning
apparently down under
and into some water.

Sometime later
stiff-lipped frogmen
found her
although downstream
still down under

floating the river.
A CULT OF SALT

Mary.
The night
we raged,
wild, savage,
goat-gloved,
drunk.
We wanted the moon
brutal more gentle.
We drank it empty and flat.

That night we raged,
sour-gutted,
fist-faced,
dead certain
we'd scrape away the past
and scratch up stars.

Remember?
We crept apart
and wakened strangers.
We knocked on
knot-wormed wood.
We bolted walls up tight.

Mary.
That dark
night-nest
seven dollar
slot we sought
wasn't ample
but a rash chance
in a cult of salt.
NAILING DOWN NIXON’S STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS ALONG HWY 2

Night or day I’m driving along and it’s usually straight ahead wheat or stars when all of a sudden a perfectly clear turned on tuned in sewed up dream touches my pedal.

Dreams wake me up. Bad ones. Item: "...we are not a great nation because we are the richest nation in the world. We are not a great nation because we are the most powerful nation in the world. We are a great nation because we are a good nation..."

After miles of it what could I do but agree and ponder along with those seldom from Washington about this man, this down to earth sure-fire poker player from WW II, --who speaks his piece--our Pie! an awesome burden of truth a wee bit on his feet, his shoes full of laurels, we are seldom ourselves... and only then when bids for feeling are either desperate in reach or full of surprise.
WITHOUT AS MUCH AS A WORD

I've never really wanted anything more than smoke drifting off a roof into spruce, have I.

Warm as the nude's bust stuck up on my window, I've done Indian gallops sticking to my spear.

It is me, this old thing I hold running off hair hung, barbed on wire. It opens my church.

This place where I live melts like snow. It should you know trip your tongue like my tooth.
BLACK SEPTEMBER

(After the Munich massacre)

Dead center. Rings on the river
move away just like that,
no matter the size of the splash.

Stones tumble the bottom.
I put down the news.
I grab hold. I kneel.

A plane goes by;
---another and another.
So much sun gets through.

Oh, if only the world
took hold, loved,
could see itself through.

I move away
and move away from myself.
I cry and cry.
REACHING HOME
SANTO DOMINGO PUEBLO: THREE YEARS WITHOUT RAIN

A man with a bag of bottles stoops in cattails between a Burma Shave sign and a windmill with a face full of broken bones.

Indians know better. When times are bad and moons hot, smart ones carve more Indians. Others practice Mexican or hunt cactus skeletons for lamp posts. I came to Santo Domingo Pueblo before. I was small. I can remember the thump and chant, buffalo and antelope dance, but it hasn't rained for three years now and tourists are out of season.

I stopped to huddle with children around a bucket of broken pottery. We pieced and faced legends together. Night fell and fears drove them home.

I can't remember how long I stayed, only the crow in my mirror, hobbling back to the highway, something small in its mouth.
I suspect, even for you the sky must ring a bell. It was not enough to have learned from that Depression how to plant this wheat. I suppose you've had your fill.

I suppose from anywhere and for news you simply call collect. Charge it you say, what the hell, the world is out of step. Diversion's the word: you step on sidewalk cracks for the love of might.

It must be easy for the rest of us, our world, you see, is round, yours curves—somewhat less and flat. Wheat or snow, this land goes on and on. You stand up straight and call it work.

A stranger to your town, I spoke of love as if from books. I sought a voice to tell me what I am is really here, on level ground, your way of life a step ahead of me perhaps, --a breath away from all your farms.
WE WERE TALKING ABOUT CHARLIE MILES,  
EARLY BISON, THE GULLY & THE KILL  
(For R. D. 'Mac' McCurdy  
Originator & Curator  
Broadus, Montana)

Up, up the kill they drove them,  
boxed them in, clubbed their bones,  
--ate the meat at their leisure.  
Clubs again, bone, horn,  
(flint points cracked their spines you said)  
--all this you've uncovered  
as if it wasn't enough  
yards above another era  
to find them again  
where they drug up rocks,  
drove them up and over and,  
in another language,  
--cut them down to size.  
Everywhere they left a mark  
and everywhere you found those marks  
that touched you--and found  
all you touched a part of yourself.  
You knew they knew the best:  
kill and eat the kill.

Then came the horse  
and white-faced buffalo grew rich  
not wild, and all across this earth.
LIKE ANY CHILD, THE WHOLE MAN

Leaves, at least the leaves
know when to fall--but you,
Sunday six-gunner, I know
you're going to tell me,
tell me years from now
you're still alive, kicking
the daylight out of pine,
--and only for the whiskey.

I know and you know a man
can't last forever--some vacation.
Drunk, at least once, maybe twice
in your life, --how the saints
must thank the sky for snakes!
Snakes, so cruel you fixed
their heart-shaped heads with planks,
took your boss's lip to task,
broke it off, tipped your hat
and damned the lucky railroad
down the road. Some engineer
and what a switch you pulled
that day you started building ships
and lied so well captains
tapped your back and laughter
hit the deck. Some war.

"Don't you better believe it, John.
Five times you cut a man's stomach out,
his vagus nerve...you've got trouble."
--And now you're buying guns.
Guns like you've never had.
But you never shoot.
Hank. If it goes by another name,
can you tell me? Does it hurt?
A TIME FOR HEALING
(For Sister Michele Birch)

Then, with no time to poke around
you leave what holds your hair in curls
near the door. I turn up the light
on my wall—find it wasn't easy
in the picture,—or the blacksmith
at all, admit I was tied up with my tone.

The blacksmith never missed.
Only the glow coming from nowhere
breaking up the room, the ice and fog
on a hill back of the phone,
--that message from home--
the toothpicks I swept with a hand
to the floor, the wet place
you thank God for in the mirror,
--have said it better.

The blacksmith, your man,
a deep chest, lifts his cross up
off your back, knows
the supper we practice will last for days.
For days we'll keep our eyes this way:
deep into this scene framed on your wall,
across a bridge all covered with snow,
past a cabin in the wood too good
to be true,
--all the way up that hill to the moon.
THE WEIGHT OF OUR MUSIC

This much is suspect: a beautiful human name, trees turning down rain, the doors we kick to move our keys, the rooms we lock to hide or brood, --a woman too foreign for a dream-- a room without room for rain.

Those girls we'd move till they're nude, the sharp moods we steal from moons, the moon we cup with our hands, the hands we kiss to kiss us home, --are all too common, too common to claim the earth we rub like apples on a Sunday afternoon.

This much is certain: love is enough, a name, the heart of an oak misses the rain, the shades of a woman life deep within her views, and man, that man she understands, --that rib of hers on wing-- tips all the apples red before they fall.
SONG FOR A WOULD-BE ASSASSIN

"...for me, the best swan song
is the death rattle before
the firing squad of a tyranny."
--Alexandros Panaghoulis
Athens, 1968

The snow is falling. It is falling
the way snow falls, deadly white,
heavy as iron. Trees are bending.
Saplings are confused and will snap
no doubt. Birds have simply frozen.
Light fumbles at the window, brittle,
finished in the frost. Acquired glass
shifts in the sink. --All is in balance
as if some great weight were coming
or as if what is common might pause
suddenly for one last and final look.
The look is cold, the look of old leaves
left crazed by the wind, played out
in the fence. It is not for you.

An arm on the back of your chair,
your hair on my arm, I lean away
from the table: "Listen to this man--
he holds the world up by the throat.
His song is lovely like his blood.
He loves to sing. His blood is loud.
He lives to die and loves his hate."
But our dreams are never careful.
There, take that puppet in our corner,
that rag doll with the brass eyes,
a mouth full of mold. We took him in.
He was crucial enough, something to rush us
through our wedding, the crust of our wedding
raked upon us, the business of cards, duplicate gifts.
It is nothing. We will survive.
Our children will grow to know us,
ignore our grief, the span of things,
and die. Few will remember we abused ourselves
in better moods: ambivalent hero, amusing,
--fat feather self-inflicting wound,
sing! It is no matter. They'll say
the loss we lived was always our own,
dreams will have broken down for them before.
History will bury its nose.
The grave are dead to the world.
Dead wood for a box, a flag perhaps is all,
all or nothing at all, Alexandros,
for a nation on its knees running the wind.

It's quite Greek to us, Alexandros,
we mean, we're just not thinking--
you would have dropped the prevailing
arm of state to the street with a shot
after all, and after all, all
would have gone well? And now?
A prince in Rome protests your execution,
while you, standing off, protest
a stay of execution for a pat gift,
a lasting sentence...?
It is not enough, Alexandros.
And what are we to do sitting here
folding up the news, without fear or fear
and too much sugar in our coffee?

Alexandros, behind the saplings and our necks,
our wedding knives and the ice, the leaves
in the fence, your fists in print,
the cream on our spoons, the powder,
shot, blindfold, bad grape and the rush,
the magicians in our women, metal in our men,
--the birds that can't sing--
in a word, the tag end and the cup,
who will know the tangle of assassins at our feet,
in such a wind, where one stands or snaps
like glass, the beds of roses and blankets of brass,
the deep seeds we salute, and who,
who will gag the moulting swans,
--rattles in our throats?
REACHING HOME

That man on the Swan takes trout like himself--by the teeth. Small ones he saves to keep me common and young. He says the sun makes his mornings not a sack filled with fish. He wades in--fixed on the glare--the craft of my tin coat, a strong drift in the air. He signals a way up the river.

Other men come to an end. Contemporary, like vegetables, they do not care for the sun unless it meets them half way. I think it through--through a window facing a road their fear grows: always a river.

Now age moves me, twists my arm like wire. The back of my mind is just right, the slack on my line is nice and easy. I take my cues from those with the sun slung over their backs, one foot on sand, one in the river.

And, if it shows, father, the sun, I'm up to my neck, --I know. Any morning now I will leave you for dead. I'll wade into your arms like this river. And for any child at hand, yours, mine, I'll thank your stars. I'll set the hook, my teeth, and thrive like the sky, my song--your blue familiar hum.
LETTER BACK TO MICHIGAN
(For Don Johnson)

It is not vision that isolates but memory
arching backward that ushers me now
beyond considerations of Time, Playboy, T.V.
and the filing away of, until another time,
--a more appropriate moment--an answer
to your letter, and, those punch-line
snapshots of self, son, and dog.

What was it drove me away?
Drove you back? It was not green in Seattle.
I think Michigan--think traffic, fetor, angina pectoris,
that now penciled-in engineering father of mine
designing in a drastic grave; and mother, thank God,
still alive like most people, white designs of clouds
on canvas, flecks floating high and low above her heavy
head.

Is such the price of hope when money fails
and sons run off with the ends of the fairest ropes?
I think: over my head--Despair--you are still there.

In this shot, your dog, a fine looking mutt,
tugs at the tail end or beginning of something
(can’t make it out exactly, don’t want
to make it up), the other end of which, black
as white--though not on record--does not itself,
let go. There is something here I cannot see,
something for the life of me and all my strings
I cannot twist in place, tie together, weigh,
or if ever satisfied, stack into a corner, like rope.
No! This test turns my face directions I cannot face,

am inside, not free to see. I turn my back to the wall,
pick up your letter--your really refreshing prose.
Oh, if you could only see out my window now.
We have mountains here, bluebirds for the first time
in years, foxglove, spruce, fast water and faster fish,
--and cold beer. A day does not go by that snow cannot
touch the sky, all summer--sometimes straight through.
We are very lucky and never afraid. Most of us are white
or tan, hardly ever hear of the war anymore.
When something happens we get tough and think God out loud,
and say our grace. Even our scraps have a place.
Montana. It was Michigan, Lansing I'd guess where for kicks and hours on end (like kids) we made the most out of a dismal day at city dump. Remember? We didn't build a raft or need a cave like a couple of crafty characters we knew but took to limbs and sticks, hairpins in car seats, thread from old upholstery, worms in the mud and whatever else we turned up turning back the clock. And wasn't it just our luck to catch a whale of a fish between us--a bluegill, and a runt at that? Some kids are smart enough--they never grow up.

Michigan. Montana. We do what counts. There is that choice. For ourselves, we do as our wives: what we can, --and stay alive. For the rest, our sons, daughters, pets, --we do what we can but with distance. And so, cameras bring us close. There is no choice. We love an image that locks us in: brings us home. And here you are: son in one arm, dog in another, you--dangling your danger in-between. Up King! Huck boy! And there you are, in the middle of your life, headstrong, stuck on top of your big feet. Sweet Jesus!...it's beautiful.

And so we frame ourselves and the scenes are overexposed. I'm not surprised. There are monuments men turn to in the nick of time, when, whether out of love or hate, --it should never become a question of which or how or why-- night or day, here or there, now or then, whatever it is we are we become in an instant, a flash, --Angel and Ape. Can you see it, years from now, the photos fade and we're up on that mountain top we always talked about still looking for those holes in the air where the sound of silence comes from, where, for a single instant, the sky breaks--and all the words in the world look straight at us and say absolutely nothing, --and we crave and crave?