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## Still point | [Poems]

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**Still Point**

by

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B.A. Hope College, 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2004

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The moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field,  
adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept, which is of the same type  
as the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world.

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty



**I.**

## Still Point

Place at once

instinctive:

the dappled trees,  
the needled air,

the source – bare,  
in spite of, just –  
inside the body  
what we can  
and cannot give: the weeds' dew  
not a drink offered

but so sifted by the sun – here,  
each diamond aches –  
the buckle of cloud  
not the beginning

but a hole that in  
the rousing admits  
little room  
for accident,

what we choose  
to fill our spaces with – be it  
prayer, flesh, this air  
gravity bears  
against us.

## **This Far South**

Believe me, we  
will not always be  
this graceful,

the thing that ought  
to make the heart  
beat will cave

under our refusal,  
in this place, to  
stand and know

it, our body's  
veil delirious  
under the sun's

riot of stars.  
For this far south  
they irrigate

*graves our lives*  
*a mist each*  
limb's run off

pushed beneath  
the fields, marrow  
fodder for

the chili plant's  
rustle, vacant,  
the incessant

*quake if we*  
*do not praise*  
*the rocks, trees*

*shall cry out –*  
and you, do you trust  
that something

here is not  
capable of you, we  
*could not have*

*bought this storm  
that has come*  
barren, indecent,

this place buckled  
beneath a debt  
you have no part

to owe. In distance  
we must believe:  
surely, our dogs

whine in gentler  
tones, our tombs  
quite still – here,

the fires hissing  
alive not from  
our own hands.

## Appearance

Like fog  
stirred over a river, a cord of  
smoke ascends  
the mountain or instead,

the mountain unties itself  
along a gully, deep vapors or  
a sleeve of ghosts  
slipping from their trees  
(on the pine's top spire  
a magpie, bobbing,  
the tall now taller) or is this

an arm pulled from a pool of  
ash, ash curling down, limb's  
silhouette, then stealing  
inward, fleck against fleck, grey plume  
collapsing to the earth or – here,

water sheeted  
across branded skin (we  
fevered ones) or here, a ribbon of  
sky shed like a scab –  
the river  
at our backs, this smoke  
binding itself – feet  
testing the earth.

## Night Walk in the Mountains

And none  
save me in  
shoes, arcing

crickets, kernels  
from the grasses  
cracking waves to

the pines, wind-  
stirred, across  
distant hills,

the fire – a ruby,  
an invitation –  
the only match

to see by  
in this dark room  
and to take off

over the moon,  
threadbare,  
under smoke

trapping the stars  
low enough  
to pull down,

handful of glitter  
should I forget  
my own

tracks while  
on this mountain  
pass, a dog:

breeze-stolen,  
pink-tinged  
ears, white

flame before  
me, unfastens  
the field.

## Appeal

And the river. And its banks skinned with snow,  
the house plant on the sill petaling down,  
I can so easily walk on  
my first Christmas alone.

As witness fog glazes  
each limb overnight, silver  
butterfly chested  
on your black dress. Stunned still

we are all in our own snowglobes  
praying down. I didn't want to  
join in turning away.  
Nevermind the porch light,

the snow taking over, our breath's  
pattern for safety through  
the night, lengthening, how you've,  
I won't believe, walked out

over these frozen roots seeing  
your body sung I  
can't make out the speed of river  
below me, for all this fury, the ice and the light.



## Small Procedure

Harvested from the body  
like a pearl, a piece

of myself: sheer,  
moon-white, circling inside

a darkness broken open as  
my own. How should I

give myself so boldly  
now, in another's hands,

portioning out the unwanted  
held up to the light –

and entering sleep, raindrops  
like coins, like the sky

had nothing to lose,  
nothing but its own unfolding.

Where could this be?  
That moths, marble-winged,

thread the air around me  
as if to bring a message, here,

in a space kept hidden  
until the body tucks away,

band of mercury  
as the ocean burns into the sky.



*Rock Climbing, Lost Horse Canyon*

Like a birthmark. Lichen skips  
across the rock, lime on grey, tide pools

trapped from their ocean, burning, or a chart  
to recover you by, pale limbs diminishing  
like a key between the shrub's branches

splitting out of the cliff: a dancer,  
palms breaking for the sky,  
slender shadows dividing me

into flickers of metal and flesh. And now,

the drunken bees, looping about  
these last hot spots of autumn –  
pure flurry,

weaving and weaving...

And in this plea  
of continuous movement,  
what do they understand of faith?

That the lime on this cliff will keep  
with the sun, expanding over the muting  
earth? That my shoulder might bring

safe passage? And in this passing,

a final sensation: oil's disappearance into paper,  
a cry from scattering trees.

*Trapper's Peak*

I could brush my hands over  
these trees, mountains,  
  your jawline  
  three days deep  
in hair, the needles  
forgiving under the sweep of my palm.

Exhausting themselves to the peak, clouds,  
  
a place we'd finally know, offer  
the boundary of our bodies  
  (on our cheeks, a bit of  
  cloud, pockets  
  steaming), an open

invitation to fill  
what we are trying to fill,  
our eyes straining for a star, each hand  
clenching or these rocks:

  patient tutors  
  huddled beside us.

Blackened by the dimming sky,  
behind the mountains, for seconds,  
a double exposure:  
  dim cave of drapes  
  this morning, your body  
  saved from the sun,

the shadow's border  
only finding me in part.

## **The Attending**

Are we not, then,  
broken, the way  
we feel in our knees

the approaching  
rain, the wind  
entering us

as dry stalks  
in our throats; or  
as in a dream,

a glimmer  
we cannot name  
for the leagues of

sea beneath us,  
some thing waiting  
for our limbs to

exhaust; or  
is this shine at  
our feet a door, lit

with the promise of  
all that we have  
lost and keep

looking for: fingers  
scraping low in  
pockets, under

our pillows,  
maps caught up  
in the stars.

Descending, if we  
pass through  
what we discover

behind closed lids  
do we ever  
return, and how

can we trust  
what comes for us  
here, never answering

our questions like  
a parent worn by  
an aimless child; how

should we commit  
such an act of  
faith as to submerge

ourselves in sleep,  
the specter's  
certain approach

like the heat of  
summer's siren?  
Even if we

are beyond clarity,  
can we deny it,  
as pulling from

the water we are  
blinded by  
our own bodies'

capture of  
brilliance, covered  
in such light.

## Spider In A Water Bowl

On the water's still sheet,  
    willowy, ashen,  
a warrior rendered  
    mere. Puckered scar  
I return to  
on this clean skin.

        I touch  
one sickled leg, and then  
the body, chattering, the water  
plumed.

        Two scallop-toed legs  
clawing up  
like bayonets, too slight  
to chance upon  
        boundaries in this  
        bowl, this cry  
for loam mute by visitation –  
                                Spider,

I come to you,  
    having no greater range  
    than these murmurings, feeble,  
                                my slim soft arm  
fleshed out next to yours,  
    my spine, stooped,  
                                racing blindly  
up my back, intent before you.

Feral rogue rendered  
holy, I am hushed,  
small,  
    as of a child  
    saying amen.

## Chandelier

Because in this way the rain could  
stop: pieces of water halted  
mid-air, hovering  
torrent, our world suspended  
in chandelier. Touch a drop

and a sheen on the skin, gripping,  
single bead passing into  
burgundy and bone – feathery cracks  
from the strain of ivy shooting  
toward the roof. How then  
should we trust it? What it must know of

friend, enemy. To walk out  
among these shards – vision  
wet-warped, trees and roofs and faces  
slurred – is to decide:  
some thinning themselves between  
each flicker, tuck and side-step,  
some abreast and pushing

through this rainscape. Our bodies  
leaving tunnels from door to car,  
driveway to stoplight, up over  
hills, to the edge of our city, the rain  
finally re-slashing across  
our tracks; what relief in this

plurality, where buckets flood over, fields  
spill ringlets of weeds and dirt  
into streets. Sticked together  
our hands collect a drink, two thumbs,  
each to its left and right, stretch up

like stalks for the sky, fleet of violent drops  
coursing down; where puddles swell  
and lock our ears against  
each note.



## Midnight Snow Angel

Scarcely-limbed,  
hovering,  
wings crumpled arcs –

                                  the moon  
a fingernail sliver caught  
in a black cape  
                                  (and how

do children draw  
the sun now,  
                          lines detonating  
                          out or  
listless,  
milky swirls)  
                          the moon

a cherry stem  
          I could pull, a thread of  
          color curling in a marble –

all you white ballerinas  
                          toeing down  
slight with tremble, take  
me up.

## The Cave

into the thinning sun  
a puff of bugs lights

into boiled water shivering  
the river sheets off rocks

magpies feed on a deer  
the ribs risen clearly

an atrium opening beneath the fan of bones  
everything in strips and silver

all outside of where  
the last berry rests not on

the slim tree but leathered and  
red in my palm in the wind

\*

the crow striking up  
sunlight-slicked

wheeling joins  
the cloud of green light

above flashes I am  
where the sky lingers

close a thought  
descending in the cave

of a lake the lungs  
sleek and taut swelling

the slow breath I  
cannot see the glow

of the forest wait  
for me the aspen's

white robes the bright yellow  
vibrato of leaves

## Suspension

A pheasant's

feathers, scalloped,  
spray out, purple  
teeth of flight,

your hands  
tuck the head  
beneath wing's

bend as the tail  
thwaps twice, then  
still.

A pendulum, you

rock the bird,  
languid arcs, sleep-  
nosis injected, each

cusped breath  
from the lax fowl  
lifting in me

speculation:  
why am I  
envious, hungry

for his iridescent ex-  
posure, this melt of  
hesitation, belly

arching for the sun,  
puffed and softening?  
Eyes no longer

called on  
for understanding  
in this lullaby as

dust swirls up  
from the blistering  
farm step we

sit on, masking  
the glimmer of  
bird into something

we might call  
real.

The pheasant loses

his bodily functions,  
(he's that deep in  
suspension) and you

still hold on  
to this hooked  
creature, the only

platform,  
difficult  
dice of air.

## Lullaby

Across the yard,  
the stars  
chattering and

bright. 5am and still  
alone. My spine  
a whisper

among this flesh  
I was warned  
to temper, crisp

silhouette –  
maybe

I am  
having all the wrong  
conversations, maybe

when I offer  
myself to the whimsy of  
the mind, certain

parts turn  
inside, and what  
will they do – the body

rabid, keen – to be again?

Why  
can't I remember  
anything but  
your mouth,

its spark and how  
it chose me  
like brandy,  
like the red

strewn across cliffs –  
a place

I recognize. Here,  
we could never  
name this but call it

anything we want  
until we believed

it real, until we put

on these bodies  
we've laid down.

## Sharp Night

It begins

    this way – or,  
with any scene, it begins  
where it needs *were you to be here,*  
    *with me* – the white dog

stretches like putty beneath  
my hand, each rib drummed

*what strange soldier*  
*is this* a single bee  
curls on the window's edge,

I am listening

for you *this is soft, how*  
*my mouth wants*

*something still*  
begins here, in  
the smallest space of  
recall, I return – or

deny? – or, like  
the moon – fault? –

so that lacking, suspect,  
the moon tires itself  
to the city

lights: sequins  
on the mountain's hem.



## **II.**

## House Frame In November

Snow passes through  
the living room  
like sand spilling

from an unfolded  
hand. The upstairs  
closet tucking

its white linens  
deep in each corner.  
From the crest of

Lincoln Hills, trees  
dyed with the last of  
autumn pour down,

host of barked wood  
shivering behind  
these smooth beams,

a canvas for  
each room, browns,  
grays surfacing to

orange, the rafters  
unable to quell  
the fire of

leaves taunting  
the gauzy dome  
above. If we found

the room where  
first prints  
might rest, palm

the gathering snow,  
our flesh's heat  
taken in by the floor,

the space left above  
our chapped hands  
an echo of

what we once were,  
we could rise  
from this much.

## Paragliders

But my body won't lift  
with these strange prophets,  
                        strung in a fan of floss  
like puppets  
from scalloped moons; or  
                        could these be slices  
                        from the earth – red clay,

blue volcanic glass –  
  each flyer enticing  
                        a single instance of  
                        land up into the air, billowing arcs  
to wheel like birds over  
                        this city, knitting rooftops, maples and  
  clouds to their peaks; how the wind  
so easily cups these creatures

                        rushing over the gathered pines,  
                        in the valley, the same wind  
                                feathering the river, white petals  
stolen from the flowering  
fruit trees.

                        And above this peak,  
one hovers near a jet stream

                        as if to land, walk  
in the sky and when he reaches its end  
                        what worlds will he find  
                                in these channeling thermals, sky roads  
                        not yet discovered. What is possible  
to understand in air and should I

follow, drape my arms on the lift  
                        off the ridge, the wind's push  
                        at my back belief  
enough, these useless legs  
  taken up in  
                        the breeze I cannot see.

## Airplane

But soon we'll see the city,  
our neighborhood, the roofs (scribbled  
fleet of children's doves) and  
if we've ever thought up here

our house is like another  
house, locked houses leaking light  
a little like the light of  
clouds, grey, don't worry

if you cannot smell  
the raindrops left behind,  
young ones blown down,  
leaking light – the exits, blinking

wings – all afloat: ice cubes,  
pencils, buttons, eyes, and the light  
(less white than grey), the metal  
dipping – vibrations – elbows tapping

elbows, utterly small, and  
the light (less here than fading) of  
this cloud, touch of drops  
against metal we cannot

touch, of grey shifting –  
the cups, bags, bended bones  
rapping, like these clouds, under,  
we will slip, like a private joke

between lovers, we will slip, our gaze  
passing through – will there be time – heads  
shivering – the sound you cannot  
hear – for prayer – of metal slicing cloud.

## **Black Corridor**

*Rock Climbing, Red Rocks*

And to pause here, mid-dive, falling  
out from the black band of rock,

whisk of rope, metal chinking,  
the winged clap of swallows accelerating

low through the corridor. To understand  
every instance in this strobe light of

reds, oranges, sun and skin,  
purple petals from the locust tree stilled

at my feet in their break for  
other worlds, scurrying

from the white branches below me, a mouth  
opening, visible breath

from my chalk bag, each small flake  
a star to catch myself on –

won't you rise, then, for this body  
framed in sky, the weight of bones

unable to comprehend anything  
but down, the parting of

the earth in so many penny-sized arcs  
for the beetle's front legs, incessant,

ambitious, swallows lifting once again  
between these planes of scorched stone.

## From the Barn

Peering through  
these rotting planks, this flurry of you  
an occasion of some weather from  
another world or  
a thing beyond, insisting –

with each lift  
the horse closes in  
on the sky, further,  
you, then, with him,

what seems beyond repair  
finding itself,  
in this spell of  
dirt and horse, pieces of fence  
splintering –  
each hoof

cuffing the dirt in  
a song made  
visible, rising,  
a veil off the dust,

a fierce  
showing of tail,  
glimmer in his brown coat  
calling to  
the radiant field

he breaks for.

## Horses

standing, and in the standing,  
melting, two-headed creature fused  
without tail. Left to themselves  
this might continue, flanks, haunches

giving way to the other, legs  
buckling like the last snap of cards  
shuffled or a man bending  
a final prayer to the sun; or,

will they pass through the other  
like molasses through oil, extracting  
their own bones, amending the delicate,  
signature face, this settling back into;

that their bodies might deny  
the journey but for a spot on the coat  
misplaced, the low whistle of  
a chipped hoof, lifting, wisps of hay

in the wind, shedding from the bales  
tense against their ties, the labor of green  
as it exits each cube, rushing to the safety  
of pines, some caught up in impatient

mouths; how slow the transformation  
here, of green and yellow, bud and stalk  
between teeth, turned over and ground  
into treaty, and what they must become.



## Blue Whale

To lay this body down  
would mean finding a space un-  
interrupted, shimmering and vast,

beyond our hallways and passing through  
walls, the fence at the edge of  
our land collapsing under

a fin, rigid shield to  
canopy by. And when  
it speaks to hear its own breath,

a voicing bound to a mass  
not our own but, in our throats,  
a call reflexive. What, then,

is the matter of us? That we  
should comprehend the tenors  
yawning from the sea

as a moan we give  
to the end of things, our faces  
lit back to us as the sun

curls silver into each wave,  
folding smooth and then  
around our legs, compelling us

further in, descending, clouds  
in scaffolds from the cliffs, our breath  
fixing itself to sheets of

fog, fog crossing back as vapors  
in our mouth, ears, a whale's note  
resonant as crystal glass.

## Apology

*for my grandfather and our search for coins, Lake Michigan*

How should I now be kinder?

These past years, folding your dismissals  
along a shore that steals behind us,  
cleated prints taken under, my words  
useless to you now, heaps of  
copper rimmed in dirt.

What would it take to find  
the coin worn by the tide, long ago, the sand  
scouring the face but leaving the penny?  
How then should we name it?

Or now, as you pull back from water and sky, the dazzling slur  
between, into the hard earth waiting – is this  
what tends me toward you?

For there are minutes  
in each day when we both look to the mirror  
for understanding, the veil of  
solitude insufficient as the sand's  
migration beneath waters.

For this, not knowing  
what you'd have me say, reaching out  
across the lake, for the ship  
your finger tries to thread, walking out to the end of  
the dock, our mere lives suspended  
above something that would take too long to contain,  
a million glasses luminous with lake  
and only the beginning, and where would we keep them,  
and for what.

## Translative

We can bury as well as plant.  
    We can print ourselves  
into the ground, catalogue  
    dirt and sand filling, water,  
    but the blue cloud still steals down  
the mountain as a cat hugs low  
    his grasses, the leafless trees  
    slouched over the thick deer, feeding, ice pulling

away from the river like skin cracking over  
    a wound. What to do with these intricate  
    ends, brown tips harried thin  
on a frond, before you, fisted, then  
    expanding as if thumbing out

the moon were a solution, as if clearing the yard of  
    snow might bring us spring, white cowering  
    in, out of numb, staggering nerves, brittle  
needles of icicles thawing into  
    mouths, open in liquid prayer.

II.

Never needing  
a name, the grey bird fretting  
on the pole, wisps of straw and twigs  
casting from the nest as it slices down  
but for the bent wing spiraling, iron helicopter  
small and plunging, a call  
mid-flight, that these arms

cannot extend enough, even taken  
from our bodies, stitched  
shoulder to fingertip; but the crocus  
you broke from the yard is opening  
in the water glass we left  
on the porch, on this bridge, the vine of smoke  
still rising from a cigarette long  
abandoned, beating the last of its air,  
the bird. And if this is the end of

our beginning, let us not be fooled, for dropping  
to the river's edge, the pine needles  
we took for dead are roots, fingers jungled as  
we search each eddy, the bird lost  
but the mountains still lifting.

III.

Closer still yet  
not enough, into the cloud haloed  
full by the moon, past the streetlight  
steeped in haze, around the uncollared dog  
ghosted outside this door, so many

entrances known, so many hands  
put back into these, here,  
deeper still into these palms, sweet tools  
traveling blind and personal,  
rising for you like the scent of rain.  
They are calling for you, an owl's faint blue-note.  
We must know this, so small,

believe; we don't know when we  
let go, the stitch between mountain and sky  
forgiven, the flower wasting in the vase  
no longer loss but discovery,  
line between the living  
and the still so fine it  
echoes.

Two

*Rock Climbing, Kootenai Canyon*

Between you and me: refraction.

Such song  
inside the yellow flower, the bee

so lost in purpose, his buzz  
in this smallest space  
turns to tinkling.

A spoon stirred  
in a china cup, though I have never owned one.

Which you might have been, then, hanging  
off some tiny ledge and quiet for all  
your detail.

Looking up, birds  
swirl in eights between us,  
rain traces my face,  
each clear torpedo,  
diamonds shattering

in this strange marriage of  
water and sun,  
skipping, tucking bright  
across the rock, the rope:  
at the other end,  
your body.

So gentle for all its coming.

## Ruins

Trees, many. Bull's snort, the smoke  
lifts, furiously, green left to

memory.

How should I  
enter, come together as if,  
in your own hands, equally  
suffered, having set aside –

the unforgivable said.

Soft, were I  
to graze my palms before  
the sky, swollen taut, each plume of  
cloud;  
your body, both,

and still with me, ashen,  
who's to say you now  
hold nothing.

Yet, I  
have found; how  
you flash.





bright and boundless  
as the metal cranes of axes

pocket the face, spate of scars,  
the screws splintering spider webs

white beneath the ice's  
surface, dripping –  
the bleached sun the snow  
expanding like the sea

~

and even breath has silhouette,  
water charming  
just below the planked river  
as we search for what's good,

green ice, blue,  
the snow the iridescent skin of  
fish,  
crowding up, the haunches of deer  
flashing, snow-clutched  
to the knees –  
at home, the dog's water  
quartzed, the porch door  
stitched in glaze –

under the impression this mirrored dome  
is on our side,  
the loom of ice  
like a ship's hull we might reel in or  
an arch reaching  
past the clouds, we try  
to name this – ice  
so vast  
it is a ballroom –  
what can we  
name this into.

**Last Snow**  
*for R.H.*

On the cement step,  
willingly, a paw print  
holds on. Tiny spheres of  
winter gloss, how long  
have they been waiting  
for testimony, not hurrying

away with the flocks of  
clouds coursing over  
the nickled moon,  
the sky shaking  
itself clean. Everything  
begging relationship: balmed  
in vapors, the mountain, the tree  
collecting white lace.  
Blue and white and shadow –

night, keep here,  
where no birds dare  
give voice, where  
my breath finds the moon,  
peeling its edges away  
like a glass shuddering

loose its waters.  
And if this is the last of  
our forgiveness,  
the cat stealing away  
but for the tiny holes  
pattering out  
across the yard,  
the thermometer's red trigger,  
my name  
from your lips shooting  
out across all this

white but for its joy  
any interruption  
lost; if, then, we

should find each other  
now, in these last minutes, send  
a white bird arcing into night,  
the tight beads of stars  
breaking in and out of  
its body, invisible

in the clouds but  
for the agitation of  
wings, white mark  
reaching above us in a line  
never concerned  
with its end.

## For the Waking

Careful, divided,  
the fire that waits for you –  
flickering necklace

searching for its other  
end among the hills,  
breeze and its complication –

somewhere in this  
dream, not running from  
but into, the open window

you claim in the midst,  
to pull your body  
through, where stars

rest eye-to-eye,  
numerous as the grasses,  
the moon gone

because you never  
loved it – spring bulb  
refusing to open, such

luxury – and the eventual  
wither, to wake  
to a bed scattered in

sheddings – shingles  
of skin, teeth  
ground to dust, a lash

for wishing – the sun  
emptying into  
the fish, gold and silver,

caught up in the body,  
circling in  
small disease – the sparing

into tomorrow  
as if this eased  
the possession, bones

curled and the last grace of  
the heart – why  
shouldn't it? – taking off

in small waves  
like a call – slight,  
fisted – in the open

field, expanding,  
paring the exhausted  
weight of air, at last

put into motion – and we  
will not fault it,  
belonging ourselves

to translucence.

**Notes:**

*Epigraph*

This quote is from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, Chapter Four, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," page 152.

*This Far South*

"If we / do not praise / the rocks, trees / shall cry out" is a phrasing of the line "He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out'" taken from *Psalms* (72:12). See the *New Revised Standard Version* of the *Bible*, published by the Oxford University Press, 1977.

*Pines and Rocks*

*Cezanne, 1904* was written in response to his painting, "Pines and Rocks"; the title of the poem shares the title of the painting.

*Spider in a Water Bowl*

"I am hushed, / small, / as of a child / saying amen" is a phrasing from the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of *mere* (adj.).

*Blue Whale*

The lines "it speaks to hear its own breath,/ a voicing bound to a mass/ not our own but, in our throats,/ a call reflexive" is a phrasing from Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, Chapter Four, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm." His words read, "My voice is bound to the mass of my own life as is the voice of no one else. But if I am close enough to the other who speaks to hear his breath and feel his effervescence and his fatigue, I almost witness, in him as in myself, the awesome birth of vociferation"(144). This poem is a reflection on an experience in fifth grade: my class measured the length of a blue whale in string along the school hallway. We ran out of room.