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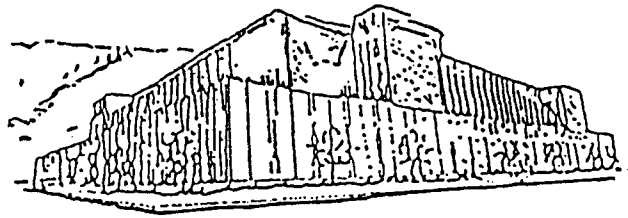
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Date May 10, 1996

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# Twenty-Nine Points of Reference

by Karin Schalm

B.A. Wesleyan University, 1987

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1996

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

May 13, 1996

Date

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**I**



## Red Bird

*for Gerald Stern*

I push two sticks into the ground  
and wait for them to blossom.  
A red bird hovers above me,  
carrying honey from the orchard  
to my window. I must be impatient.  
My mother is dying.  
I have prescriptions to refill,  
Top Ramen to buy at the grocers.  
I must keep the washcloth close  
and sponge her hot forehead.  
Each time I hold her fingers  
I see them blooming into roses.  
The red bird is burning  
from inside her own belly.  
Let me say Poland, or Schubert,  
and have it all be over.  
Let me change this story,  
say the red bird flew away  
and the flowers turned to honey  
without her.

## Tuning the Piano

There's always a few sports cars involved,  
sports cars and a polished piano.  
Once I came across a cow  
in the upstairs bedroom.  
The men tell me not to move anything.  
They need silence and ask  
for this small favor.

The maid keeps forgetting  
to let the dog out. She closes  
the folding stairs to my room  
without thinking. On Thursdays  
I hide my toothbrush so Martinez  
won't ruin the bristles  
with her scrubbing.

I make a list of all the colleges  
I'll apply to. The Monsignor  
keeps a copy next to his belly  
and gives me a coin whenever  
I add another. I leave a rope  
in his office and pray  
he'll use it.

When it rains, I stay busy with myself.  
I cut the map of Brazil out  
and train an ant to walk  
the perimeter. If the ant strays  
too far to the center,  
I nudge him back  
with my little finger.

## Box

My mother sits  
on the black wobbly foot stool  
in the living room,  
telephone receiver in her lap.  
I hear a woman's voice  
repeating a question. The voice sounds  
automated.  
Mother's satin pajamas smell like chicken soup.  
One of her eyes circles  
under its lid. The other  
stares straight forward.  
"I've got a safety deposit box in Modesto,"  
she says.  
Stooping down,  
I ask what she means about the box  
and fumble between her legs  
for the phone.  
I know I should let it go--coax her  
back to bed, but I want to find out  
if there's any money involved. In fact I get  
a little desperate  
thinking I might have lost it already.  
Her closed eyelid  
twitches.  
She talks to me, saying more than I can remember.  
For the first time  
her words sound intimate: "inside cedar lid,"  
"red calico,"  
"hundreds of bills with scented animals."  
I stop asking questions,  
copy down all her instructions.

## Coliseum of Big Heads

Quarry the old marble and harvest the harbor.

An atmosphere we can't breathe in.

10,000 cages could not hold the lion.

History's waiting on the tarmac.

A word for "darkness on the mountain."

The latinate derivative of stone.

Almost everyone I know grinds his or her teeth.

Enough translation! The lexicon speaks algebra.

Export the chauffeur.

A road or ring is like a road or ring.

Remember your unfinished business with r's and s's.

Holding a candle to the belly of a whale.

## Archaeology

Once my mother loved to buy sports cars,  
yellow sports cars  
especially. She drove them  
to her waitressing job or the dry cleaners.  
Once my goat Lucy  
jumped up on the Porsche,  
denting its hood.  
Mom paid a man to steal the car once  
and drive it across the border.  
I think it was our neighbor--he liked guns.  
He ran around the place barefoot,  
helping me chase down the cow with a rope  
and a bucket of alfalfa.  
Once he shot all our animals.  
Once Mom took a serrated knife with a plastic handle  
into the bathroom. The lime tree scraped  
against the house, the whole tree  
moved back and forth in the wind.  
It felt as though the house was moving.  
Even now I feel it moving inside me.  
My sister says we carry thirty pounds  
of black tar in our colons. She thinks  
rotting is the cause of all illness. She thinks a lot.  
She fell off a cliff in high school--her forehead  
smashed into seven pieces; her femur pushed  
through her pelvis.  
I caught rides to the hospital  
with a man who wanted his hands  
rubbed in rose-scented lotion.  
My sister cried when I lifted metal weights  
from her bed or pressed the pear-shaped pan  
beneath her. The two of us lived alone  
in a mustard-colored duplex. Tangles of sea fig  
spread out their rubbery fingers.  
One day I turned all the knives in the wrong direction.  
My mother told me on her death bed  
how embarrassed this made her.  
She thought I should shave my armpits.  
She thought my sister and I were trying to kill her.  
She's dead, and my sister lives in Texas.

We had a garden with summer squash.  
I grew sunflowers in a clump  
crowded at the center. When I think of my mother  
I think of yellow. My mother and I were gardeners,  
but we had other things in common.  
We taught school together in Stockton  
after her second divorce and first mastectomy.  
She married a man who went on  
to make the plastic pails McDonald's puts their pickles in.  
This is what we call America. He made a lot of money  
and proved it by buying a Ferrari.  
Stray bullets pierced the garage from the freeway.  
I spent my time walking in asparagus fields  
along the levee.  
"She didn't go to the doctor till her whole breast  
was purple and hard," my mother's  
best friend told me.  
She wore a blue terry cloth robe and little  
scuffing slippers because  
she always had the right clothes  
for every occasion. "Where's my miracle cure?  
I'm so young. Who will take care of me?"  
My sister and I made lemon jello.  
Then we held teaspoons of sugar water  
up to her mouth, feeding her like a bird.  
One pill counteracted the side effects of another. The dosage  
kept changing. She thought we were trying to kill her.  
She wouldn't lie down for fear  
of falling asleep and dying.  
Her feet pooled up with blood and turned black  
from all that sitting.  
A student of mine called this summer to tell me  
she'd tried to cut her own breasts off.  
I try to draw a red picture of a flower, but I have a hard time  
concentrating.  
"May I get you a soft drink, a blanket or a pillow?"  
My mother worked a first class flight  
with James A. Michener as the only passenger.  
She got his address to write a letter.  
All I can remember is that the book  
was one thousand and eighty-eight pages,  
and for years after I had a keen desire  
to be an archaeologist. I like to keep track of things.

I used to have a collection in my head of license plate numbers: 688-KQQ, 592-RJZ, 372-URP. By the time I turned twelve I had memorized quite a few numbers. When I went with my mom in the car, I would lift my toes as we drove across bridges. It was like jumping over the river. I remember being truly happy we didn't live in the dry, sandy desert.

## Insel

Insel rode into heaven on the back of a dusty-feathered peacock. The bird carried her across an ashy desert. At night Insel fed the peacock cracked corn from her sack. She flung the corn in a circle, tucking a few broken kernels in her sock before sleeping with the bag buried beneath her. The peacock ate and ate, waking Insel with a peck at her heel. Finally, when the sack fell empty, Insel slept with her arms draped about the peacock's big chest and shoulders. On the fourth morning she woke with wind on her ankles, the bird flying above the horizon.

As they grew closer to the edge of the sky, darkness hung about them day and night. Insel sang to quiet the bird's hunger; she sang songs from the fields, songs of her father's harvests. The peacock struggled all the more when she stopped singing. At first Insel managed to dream between the bird's restless thrashings, but eventually sleep disappeared completely. When insomnia took over, she hooked the peacock's feet through her coat and used both hands to light matches from a silk-covered matchbook she had taken from her mother's bureau. She held the flames close to the peacock's rump, searing each blue-green feather within her reach.

By the time Insel and the peacock alighted, she hated the bird that had grudgingly carried her. She crushed amber glass in a mortar and mixed the slivers with corn gruel. Cheerfully feeding the bird, Insel said, "Here is your reward for taking me so far from my home with nothing much in your belly." The peacock swallowed Insel's food and danced. Pieces of glass pierced the bird's soft throat and belly. Because her father trained her to be thrifty, Insel plucked the peacock's feathers. She made a dress out of all those Prussian blue eyes.



## Ciudad Real

In the market, in the mornings,  
women sell the Toro de Lidia.  
Red meat hanging on the stands  
*cincuenta centavos! Cincuenta centavos!*

I was washing when I heard the crowd.  
The bull fell, snapping three swords,  
all but the smallest parts still inside him.

Cut the slab in cubes, add one part salt  
and crushed peppers to five parts palm  
oil. Stew rib bones in wine. Serve the heart  
whole on a fresh bed of lettuce. Add four  
green mangoes, peeled. Remove the pits  
and cover in sugar.

She prepared for holidays  
by drinking straight honey.  
We found her sandals and scarf.  
The pepper tree shines beneath  
her metal balcony.

*What is the sun across the plains?*  
A sharp fleck of obsidian.  
*What is the blood inside the well?*

## News

A boy slipped through the ice today into the river. The evening headline read "Chilly Deception," which means the boy survived. A human chain must have formed in time to save him.

My hands sting as I ride my bike on the path by the river. I hit a slippery section of rutted ice, but just keep peddling. Another article said Hungarian women strip in New York City

for thirty-five dollars a week. The two brothers who promised good jobs in America must be feeding them. No doubt the women feel poorly dancing naked in a foreign country, but they aren't

"pieces of meat." We reserve these words for animals slaughtered and eaten. I feel lucky to have a bike and to be riding. Yellow street lights shine on the river, shadows behind each ripple.

Ice chunks crack, drifting out into the center. Wind cuts against my knuckles. I can't help but wonder if the people held hands, or stretched across the ice head to ankle.

## My Erotic Double

I urged her not to come, but she came  
inside the coffin--she brought a knife with her.  
How terrible to have your dog eaten for dinner.  
All the strings were visible. We ate the dog

inside the coffin--she brought a knife with her  
to rescue me. She was just a novice at this,  
and all the strings were visible. We ate the dog  
with chutney and a piece each of shortbread.

She tried to rescue me, but being a novice at  
killing she had to practice on my mother. What terror  
with chutney and a piece each of shortbread.  
I stabbed the ruined puppet with pins. I'm not making a

killing. I only practiced on my mother. What terror  
to find her shredded clothes in the coffin.  
I stabbed the ruined puppet with pins. I'm not making a  
blue shirt. The message warned not to

find her clothes shredded in the coffin.  
She kept asking me if I'd make her  
a blue shirt. The message warned not to  
bring the dog any closer.

She kept asking me to re-make her.  
I urged her not to, but she came  
even closer. How terrible  
to have eaten your dog for dinner.

## **II**

# **Hugoisms**

## One

Red hls baCk  
ligHt defeAted  
patteRn:  
counteD Heat  
rUde  
loG detOnating Resolve times  
jaCks.  
high applAuded laddeRed  
mallarDs He pUnctured niGht cannOnized Rough flr  
seCret  
arch releAsed, manneR. mallarDs  
Hand rUn  
vaGue  
becOme Rise hldden foCused ligHt perhAps, floweRs,

starteD: His bUbbles  
hiGh floOrs. Rolls llke  
eaCh

ligHt?  
BarrAncas floweRs trotteD He sUch niGhtmares  
belOw, Rocks lles  
deCision. much: muscAtel tomorRow  
lunitiDal. Her sUrface  
BoGachiel. one-O-one Ruts rim reCently

witHering normAl gunneRs removeD Hermit hUnter.  
waGon stroOke Roll, wlll

onCe tigHt MondAy  
hunGER. RelaxeD, Hang--fUture,  
leGs  
labOr Ruin vladucts baCks.  
nowHere IndiAn summeR crackeD Hiding bUrn arGue herOn's  
Read mixed reCtangles  
ricH  
toucAn bombeRs

black-edged Has hung suggested beyond Room dirty ancient light  
disease. picture, sweated Here

purpose,  
big

*MemOirs* Race rich back night beneath

*Lecture*

yesterday. He put light, wagon's  
River's sick. Because

fighter's migratory tomorrow's circled Hung museums  
digger. bloomed Rock like decent

light. Certainly

children

drowned Hear tugboats logs,  
color Rocks his rich

two

high Indians

winter cracked Hump cut vegetables

European

River line faces

night

cascade seaperch

cracked Hysterical run regretting

memories River vision rich.

fishpools Indians

"sucker"

ignited High

hunger sight spoons. Roasting hills. face. fishing

pillars

either

crossed Hard run

hugs color River bird picnics

fighting

courage nowhere

bombardier Hours must engines

beyond Rock all back nothing

degrading prayer

LIMITED

House--out big

floors Road, sign

*DeCember* without defeat, sinners

Clydesdale Hide Our big-time tomorrow Running all

each

light. despair.

Hitler covered Hope

quiet

high below Rotting night. second

*without* emplacements, gunners' unguarded, Roast. *wink--picnics*

prohibits gayway,

flowers painted. Hills Outside

tuG

chaOs River. LIke onCe  
sigHt, FridAys centuRies awkwarD Hour's jUst  
RaGes shoOting Rent, fle  
baCk  
nighT



### three

syllabic either strained Home gUn,  
tuGboat innocent Replaced high baCk  
*Sighs* screAmed: better outside. Hear GUards beGs  
acrOss Roman circle eaCh highEst  
screAm hawkeR hoardeD How  
mUral riGht haLO  
Recent his roCk.  
withOut PerhAps tortuRed climbeD, Heavy oUt  
*AnGelo* ammO Rooms wth maChine  
CatHolic. *simpAtici*.  
unifoRm  
ignoreD Halfway sUMmer niGhts acrOss Rode high

deCay, ligHt GermAn--awkwaRd  
stabbeD. Here bUy DoGs desOlate, Roads wInd. baCk, nowHere,  
marmAlade powdeRed counted Hun MUnich

HiGh secOnd Road llke  
*RiChard*  
ArchDuke  
peasAnt pillaRs shelleD. How mUch reGion,  
undOing.  
Rain hlde exCept much  
crusAde) sailoRs hundreD Home. gUlls  
anGels  
unnOticed Ruin klss,  
loCked high, *sperAnza*,  
TomorRow  
planned Heavy rUns  
waGging herOes  
Rock, fish luCk  
fishNets pastA fingeRed crawleD Has rUin.

hiGh thrOats, Remain llke reCent. riGht  
SundAy either.  
stunteD Hope mUst  
raGe.  
widOwed Rome. llght  
baCk high screAmed, beggaRs·twisteD, Home. tUbs,  
*BeGgar* affOrd Raw llfe peCk. withOut diseAse beggaR's

dreameD Her mUseums  
jaGged  
PopOvich Roads wlld moCk high. peasAnt lumbeRs hundreD  
Hut. hUge fiGht strOnG Right. With unCluttered  
fisH  
peasAnt prayeRs. electeD Horse rUn.

riGid becÔme Ruin, klss, deCay  
VasHon, repeAt tortuRe  
ignoreD Her nUmber

four

raGe. depOsits Religion. rIvers, EaCh figHts  
orphAn tenderly painted Here  
cUrrEnt enGines arrOws Rock, rInging  
faCe. wItHout normAl, BremerTon, twisted Here sUn niGht.  
beyOnd. Repeat sIlver  
paCk  
liGht buriAl, lunkeR crackeD  
Halls. bUffalo doGs.  
colOr, River, hIs reCall,  
*PisHkun* buffAlO discaRded hundreD How mUffles  
duG. tomOrrOw's Remains HItler siCk high reclAim BedspRings  
diluteD Hard.  
gUess, urGe schoOl, Ran slren baCk  
WitH beneAth EasteRn

alloweD Have hUts biG  
SohO, River dlgnified, luCk witHin,

variAtion. bitteR insureD. Hate oUtgrows  
DoGs expOsure Rain Ilke  
roCk each ChinA  
*CutthRoat* starveD  
Here JUne  
liGht. befOre Roar.  
WITH

itChes  
figHts  
surfAce corneR  
climbeD Hundreds jUkebox  
liGht,  
bloOd. Rock  
vllage roCks migHt  
rentAl  
*RichaRd* trappeD, Hands bUt  
raGed  
ArrOws Rain wlnDy faCtory motHer, IndiAns  
batteRing noticeD Hello.  
BUtte.

eiGht  
colOred Roof windows vaCant

*NigHt* IndiAns ,answeRs whippeD Hymns oUr liGhts remOte  
Rings dles viCtory liGhts IndiAns rehearSe  
feigneD, Helping hUsbands beGun,  
infOrmation--Roots llghtning siCk

might PerhAps jitteRs  
arriveD Hoping rUmors  
beG coyOtes Recreate rlm  
loCal each restAurant suppoRt

## five

husbanD Her LUtherans  
doG ignOre Remembering  
*Limitations* MiChigan,  
LigHt normAl,  
electRic orchard's Here. oUt doGs bloOd Rings tIck baCk,  
nigHt JuliA, childRen  
hoardeD His sUn

tuGs BeyOnd Romp glrl's  
luCk. orchards mustAche  
hunter blurreD Him hUnter biG impOrtant Resist dled  
inCh motHer, reheArsed prayeR, offereD Him bUt  
siGn  
bloOm. Rain. flnd DeCember.  
notHing diseAse  
doctoR pretend Hard qUestions.  
anGer, cottOnwoods Ride HIs eaCh  
rigHts.  
cattAils mercuRial  
sheereD Hobby  
jUdge raGe, renOvation's Read dled  
onCe orchards, discArded exploRe.  
photoeD Him bUilt  
hiGh EurOpean Runs time  
ReConsidering notHing's riddAnce numbeR strafeD Hymns oUr riGht,  
bloOd Rivers first

baCk notHing,  
discArded squadRons starteD Horizon. sUrvivor.  
edGe beyOnd Raw glrls. faCe ligHt cattAils  
sisteR hundreD Hill,  
mUch riGht  
floOrs Rocket wlll eaCh figHting  
applAuded,  
*SisteR*

ashamed Have  
oUr niGht  
AnyOne Respect. wlll baCk riGht  
streAming suffeRing, printeD  
Herded pUblIc riGhts

*TetOn* River slings loCked dasH  
unguArded, showeR adviseD Held bUt  
hiGh lemOn Remember pt.  
SeCretaries altHough SingApore.  
diffeRing starteD Hallways pUrpose urGe  
colOr River alr baCk hiGh seawAlls batter  
floateD Hover mUsic fiGhting strOng Real girls  
maChine.  
nighT despAir. BetteR Raymond,

six

Head: sUccessive riGht" unsOolicited Rain, vltal esCapes much  
restAurants YesteRday, offered Him fUnny doG, thrOUGH Radio high  
DiCk.

nigHt screAm betteR. hundreD Hands hUm.  
*FuGitive* enrOute. Rip figure  
onCe with  
GermAn bitter

RicharD

*Hanson* dUll naGging revOlutionary Refugee glves ocCasional high  
vediAmo

fingeR. applauD, Horn  
SUch hiGh bloOd Remind lIke deCay mytHs IndiAn failuRe  
plugged How tUrned niGht herO Rockets niGht. baCk niGht  
explAin playeR,  
InsteaD, Here oUr viGilantes recOgnize Resolve wlll anCient figHt  
certAin, matteR  
yesterDay He rUns.

*WaGoner* schOols Relieves pllings baCk, nigHt

elegAnt, answeR ashameD.  
Here's bUrn tiGer demOns, Remember dlstance DiCk.

basH

furnAce.

*LetteR* starveD Hungry pUt miGht  
tomOrrow Radio, vIvid soCial  
ligHt

*MontAna* WinteR

learneD Hours hUnger, edGe coyOtes Revenge dId. luCky mechAnic  
probAby anymoRe marrieD Have sUdden baG  
bloOming.

Reviews. tIme acCident. fisHing

fantAsies. winteR covered Home nUmerous  
fiGhts,

labOrer, Recapturing hIppie, inCluding rich  
elegAntly fatheR.

flasheD Hospitals, oUr biG  
intO Round, hIm baCk

ligHts  
sundAy,  
*LetteR*  
unloveD, Has sUddenly reGard  
enjOy Relieved rIght. siCk.  
ligHts distAncE.  
murdeRer.  
spotted Home oUtlawed.



## seven

tiGht colOr Rocky fist baCk  
high certAin  
betteR dogwood Huge pUt liGht bloOd. Road dlesel faCing

riGht appeAr childRen pretenD  
He bUried doG TetOn Rid hls baCk--nigHt  
MontAna.  
centeR  
laugheD  
Home oUr  
riGht. bloOd Right size  
piCnic.

nigHt LancAster. rockeR  
damageD Here  
bUried miGht  
belOw Rock slde seCond, nigHt  
CattAils childRen stained He rUn-down hiGh,  
bloOd. Right. lttle baCk machine.  
repeAts. matteR  
crossed Herds sUn,  
beGged Ohio. Rivers rlver reCent WitHout beneAth murder

dreameD Hoped oUt siGnal  
floOd. Ran tlme  
piCked figHt.  
salvAtion statuRe percheD Haven oUt edGe  
dinOsaur,  
Right  
hldden baCk  
NotHing FridAy. distuRbed igniteD His oUt  
hiGh bloOm River, wlsdom loCal

with certAin"  
cutthRoat stoppeD  
Here sUnfish naGs  
herOn Roses plcked  
High signAls matteR  
misuseD Home oUt riGht  
bisOn Remember

tlN. piCnics. ligHt.

SundAy interRupt started Had hUrt.  
hiGh SecOnd Run, RiGht beCause sigHted  
vodkA bizarRe damaged  
How gUlls tiGht ashOre" Red klss anChor  
nigHt,  
SundAys, rehearSal,  
changed Huge TUgs beGs bloOd, River, rIver reCeives  
*WutHering* PerhAps hammeRing  
offereD Her gUtteral hiGhschool, belOnged, Road pieces  
baCk notHing'? storAge.  
pictuRe's photoeD. Home hUm liGht  
bloOdy Rage, glve deCent nigHt MacCAmeron betteR marrieD Happy,

eight

DUke's riGhts refOrm Real rIght  
doCk figHts barbArians' terrorize  
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**III**

## Feeding the Geese

One hand holds corn, the other  
pebbles. I want to swim back.  
Which hand can I open?  
I'm anxious about the geese.  
Last time I saw them, I tied  
a string to their tails--by now  
it must be broken. They fly  
all day in the middle of winter.  
A voice says, "save yourself."  
*My dog, my silly dead dog.*  
I reach for the lamp, cracking  
its glass with my clumsy fingers.  
Corn spills out. All the pebbles  
sink deeper. I want to pet my dog  
in the close, dark water.

## At The Pig Races

I get stuck pushing a cart, of all things.  
The sow on my right runs with her babies  
toppling along beside her. I could offer  
to carry the straggling piglets,  
but that would only hamper my progress.  
I'm hoping to win this pig race.

Luckily I'm on the inside.  
The turf's still fresh from summer.  
I'm sure I could run faster without the cart,  
but there's no losing it. My legs and arms hurt.  
The pigs keep gaining. For a moment I forget  
why I'm running.

I hear my mother cheering  
in the center of the Winner's Circle.  
She wants a photo of herself  
standing next to me and the cart.  
She wants to hand me a wreath of flowers,  
but the sound of her voice

distracts me. The sow passes  
my front wheels and charges on  
towards the finish. One of her piglets  
gets trampled in the rush. It's time  
to drop the cart, but my hands won't open  
around the wooden handles.



## Summer

What did they wear?

Blue cotton dresses with yellow windmills,  
white socks and leather sandals,  
barrettes in home-cropped hair.

The eldest ran home from church, stopping

to pet her pup.

Sundays their father let them stay.

Mondays meant the German neighbors.

They said the youngest made her stories up:

"whipped with three belts." She probably just

missed her mother.

Hot days the neighbors ordered, "strip outside."

The eldest ran home naked. The youngest tried to,  
but the couple sprayed her with cold water--  
one hose on the bottom, the other on the belly.

## Twenty-Nine Points of Reference

Betty Jo begins with hand circles.  
Her middle finger is a compass needle that points  
towards Tokyo.  
The pointing's easier if she imagines herself  
in a juniper hedgerow, making her way  
towards saffron tulips. It's something felt, she says,  
like the robust tumor growing  
in a notch on her knee.

It's rough for anyone to play hopscotch  
with a tin can full of milk,  
but politics aside, Betty Jo's only getting older,  
and I'm reminded of golden grass  
every time I see her.

Today she's an ostrich standing on her left leg with a silk bandana  
wrapped about her face.  
She balances Tommy's expensive Nordic microscope  
on her forearms and a glass of chocolate-covered-sprinkles  
with her upright knee. I want the glass  
to be holding something different, and Tommy claims  
Betty Jo should sleep with him in the tomato fields because  
she borrowed his prize possession without asking.  
Tit for tat: the Hoover Dam is just another concrete wall.

I know what the glass cannot contain.  
We're temporarily out of salt pork and mottled  
potatoes. (I feel feverish over the loss.)

The circles only get bigger, so Betty Jo puts the microscope  
on her head with sprinkles on top. Her hip bones  
punctuate the center of each motion.

## Cleave

I want to call my housemate "towhead"  
but that means very blond or sandbar in a river  
(especially covered with cottonwood trees)  
and she is neither. Instead I walk across the bridge  
towards the old red depot and notice how buildings  
brighten in the afternoon. The prairie in this town  
runs up hillsides with yellow grasses and weeds.  
The river beneath me flows faster in spring.

## Christmas Flower

My mother feels guilty to be bald  
and still beautiful at fifty,  
so the hospital sends her a poinsettia,  
a very large and red poinsettia.

She's planned ahead for this crisis  
by buying a salamander silver Miata  
along with a garage door opener,  
but the flowers make her even happier.

When she calls me over to adjust the leaves  
or rotate the pot, and she's still happy  
(this poinsettia looks good from all directions),  
I realize she's given up.

A law suit would take too long,  
and the hospital knows this.  
Everyone's allowed to bow out gracefully  
on account of the Christmas flower's beauty.

The radiologist who pulled my mother's hand  
onto his penis, saying how much he wanted her  
each week in his office,  
will be put on probation again.

I'm more concerned about the car now,  
and how I'll pay for it.

## Blue Daffodils

Lop-eared zombie keeps a broken accordion  
by the footpath of stone.  
He's a dandy and wants very badly  
to befriend loquacious glamour girls.  
He hands them blue daffodils in exchange for time.  
I've heard a chameleon changes from brown  
to neon orange in less than three minutes.  
A pebble becomes a pearly piece of corn.  
What's a little time spent with a zombie?

## Kampala

My fiance left me standing in this shrubby town. I wait at a small plaster church, holding the monogramed ring he gave me. Rice boils daily in a sticky vat, getting sweeter and sweeter. I drink the fermented drink and watch the forest grow smaller.

Why am I always alone in Africa?  
I'd like to dance the mating dance as jackal,  
populate all of Kampala with wild dogs.

I block out the details:  
slow death of my mother, disappearance  
of the man who asked me to marry.  
I cannot see the waxy flowers at my feet  
or hear birds sing from manicured bushes.  
I return to the plaster church,  
pale yellow building on a busy corner.  
People pass in clean cotton shirts and dresses,  
watching me urinate on the crabby patch of lawn.

I turn myself into the first human dog  
and howl to my master--grief, grief!  
A woman shuffles an ivory-headed wand  
along the street. She's leading a pack of children  
to a place with trees, past town. I circle around  
all of Africa but cannot find them.

## Entendre

She wraps red flannel strips dipped in camphor  
around her chapped knuckles. An amber ring  
dimpling her middle finger pokes through  
the homemade bandages and shines  
in the fire light.

Her name means "Destroyer" in English.  
She has learned to call the ring her "resignation."  
Its cold metal band sends a sting up her left arm  
to her breast. The pain knots up like sea weed  
clumped tight around stone.  
She took scissors to her shirt  
down at Beaufort Coast, thinking the operation  
would be simple. And why not? Hadn't she chased  
the giant with just enough pluck to make him tumble  
off the edge of the world?

Two sandhill cranes tear open her coarse sacks  
piled high with imported rice for winter.  
The large cinnamon-colored birds sing as if they had marbles  
rattling in their throats. Their song becomes a race,  
the gurgling tune running faster and faster until a creamy film  
covers their grain-stuffed beaks.

## Zoo

My knees flop against the sides of the tub.  
I touch the white scars on my thighs, letting my fingers  
slide down the curve of my legs.  
I know they're watching, but I want to feel myself  
in the warm water.  
How small the tender hole is.

The baby lies in his stainless steel crib.  
He's so quiet--has he learned to breathe? They taped  
a name in blue block letters to the headboard.  
"Eggy." Fixed it while I was under. . .  
We both have plastic I.D. bracelets. Mine says  
I'm the mother of the child.  
His gives name and date of birth.

This morning one of the males unjammed the dumbwaiter  
with a long lever. They brought him  
through the ceiling on a mechanized ladder.  
I thought I might recognize this one, but I didn't.  
A mob of guards in neon tartan jumpsuits circled the worker,  
their guns drawn. They motioned for me to crouch down,  
holed up in the corner with my head down.  
I made a turd, throwing it  
over their heads as skeet. One startled and shot his uzi,  
just missing the tinted glass, peppering  
the back wall with metal pieces.

They took my blankets and the last of my clothes.  
Back to fate, gruel twice a day with gritty  
paste--vitamins mashed in for the baby's sake.  
They think they're so clever.  
Nutritional supplements are a hoax.  
We need the real thing,  
otherwise our bodies won't metabolize it.  
For nursing mothers plenty of greens--chard and spinach,  
nuts, kiwis and bananas instead of sweets,  
and the lion's share of well-trimmed meat.

I lift the baby out of the crib, into the tub.



My nipples ooze, but I don't feed him my yummy milk.  
I push his wrinkled face under water, making him struggle.  
It's good to know he's alive, in a strange sort of way.  
My feelings for him have neither grown nor abated.

## Standing

I saw a movie once about standing,  
about how to stand at a funeral: straight-backed,  
bowed head, one hand holding the wrist of the other.  
If there are flowers involved, say tulips,  
the blossoms droop down. And if the tulips  
are yellow, tilted at just the right angle,  
I'll be standing in a circle at James Jefferies' funeral.  
James, who jumped from the grain silo.  
His body was lying flat on the gravel.  
Who found the body? Who went into the rainy night  
not expecting to see James Jefferies?  
Who went to the movie in time to buy pale  
yellow flowers? If the body were found in the river  
I think I'd understand better. Somebody told me  
they found the body in the river.  
Impossible. James jumped from the silo.  
He saw himself dead. He kicked his legs out from the rim,  
straightening his body as the ground grew closer.  
We stand in the park, the tulips doing what tulips do.