Walking Backwards| Poems

Mark Holthoff

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WALKING BACKWARDS
POEMS BY MARK HOLTHOFF

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, University of Montana, 1995.

Approved by:

Chair, Graduate Committee

Dean, Graduate School

May 5, 1995
for my grandfather, James Louis Smith, Jr., 1912-1993

WALKING BACKWARDS

The horizon follows me.  
The tall buildings lurch by.

I overtake someone,  
or someone turns and smiles.

We stop and make small talk:  
--Birth. --Love. --Death.

They read the lines of boredom  
in the rare book of my face.

They read between the lines  
and turn away, hurt.

I leave them. I leave the squares  
of which I am an angle.

And the truths, the great truths,  
at the ends of their chains, barking.

--Henri Coulette
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WALKING BACKWARDS
SNOWFALL

As day vaguely begins in Mission, Kansas, it hardly interrupts the sleep most sleep that hour of morning. Only the still eyes of some young boy are open—a boy, perhaps, much like you, or anyone at that age, eyes opened by a light we may have seen only as boys, after an all-night snow has whitened the earth as unexpectedly as tears well in our eyes, a light that hangs in our silent rooms like an uncast shadow, where we feel unfamiliar, yet welcome, as grazing deer are welcome in our pasture.

In this strange light, in an old bed, we wait, moments before the alarm, envisioning acres of snow as yet untracked, the land both filled and empty, like a young boy's mind, like your mind once, not long ago, awakened to a small Kansas town filling with snow.
WORDS WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up now thy loins like a man.¹

I. Home

Fourteen years have past since the place burned down.
The rectangle of yard is overgrown with wild onions, dandelions and milkweed.
Milkweed just won't grow in soil like ours.

Too much red clay. But it made good dirt floors.
I haven't seen Mildred since then. Remember that time you were no more than three feet running behind your daddy's tractor turning furrows over at the rice field and came across a nest of baby rabbits? I never told you but I drowned those babies in the pond. I'll show you fear in a handful of dust.²

Their mama wasn't ever coming back.
I have forgotten the addresses, forgotten them all. I think these back roads deliver me to the right place.
I wave to everybody I pass.

There is a sense of order on a golf course--browsing the pro shop, testing the curved greens, leaning to take a ball from the cup. One must observe the rules. Surrounding fields of cotton in their clean rows lead straight to the notion that inert mass is simply latent energy.³

The freight train comes each afternoon, parting the air with a whistle, hauling empty trailers back to their trucks. Enjoy Coca-Cola.

Wal-Mart: Discount City. Let our frail thoughts daily with false surmise.⁴ Be the fifth caller and win. You've got two tickets to paradise.⁵

Danny Day has given up farming rice; he'd rather sell the land and play more golf. He notices how the rain stings his eyes.

---
¹ Job 38:2-3
³ Albert Einstein, from "What is the Theory of Relativity?"
⁴ John Milton, "Lycidas," line 153
⁵ from a popular song by Foreigner, I think
II. The Theory of Relativity

When I was a kid, the astronauts landed in Papa's catfish pond. News vans and spectators flattened the buttercups and scared the Herefords. Be careful of cow pies, I said. Papa, in his Stetson, took us for rides on the Party Barge. One astronaut stayed the night with Aunt Glenda, in her ranch house across the pasture. I scraped my beets onto his plate. Their voices lasted until I could not stay awake any longer. Daddy came back in the morning and I showed him the pond. Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,\(^6\) he said. He shot bullets at the shiny metal cone. I kicked the paper coffee cups scattered in the grass. That's just an old silo top blown down. He shot a Japanese carp that swirled in the mud.

\(^6\)Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare"
III. To Write Ones Own Obituary

I know when one is dead and when one lives; she's dead as earth. Who pays her bill? That sugar water pumped through her cost as much as good steak. Claudette, her garden will go to deer and rabbits if we don't get in there soon.

Imagine picking squash in her garden. The room was sharp with ozone, overloaded with machines. They hadn't planned, hadn't thought of all the blood, the lips this respirator has kept red. Bathe every vein in sweet licour while life floats out across the sterile floors. The dinner trays are shipped in from Ohio.

They never touch a human hand. Get out. Tap your white pumps out of my room. Hands out of my garden.

Let deer eat spiny leaves from my tomatoes. You're only my cousin. He fathers forth whose beauty is past change.

I shall lie with my machines and breathe each of every breath, let my heart coast, watch as the windows fail.

---

7 Albert Einstein, from *Autobiographisches*
8 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V.iii, line 262
9 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, line 3 of "The General Prologue"
10 Gerald Manley Hopkins, from "Pied Beauty"
11 Emily Dickinson, from poem 465
IV. Letters to the Editor

A man wearing a yarmulke doesn't belong at Sunday dinner with the family. Salt pork and grits weren't savored in the Baltics. Newsweek says that migrant workers live hard lives in California. But, the town of Tyro shrinks one inch each day. We're all still waiting for kudzu to reach us across the Mississippi, for killer bees to find the Texas border. It's hard to sympathize with frozen oranges when the price of juice just hit three bucks a can. They said, let us posses one world, each hath one, and is one.¹² So the banjo player has locked the door and won't come out—we can't remember his face. Today, Margaret Thatcher read her poems in the Multi-Purpose Room. Rain pinked the metal roof and farmers cheered The Rubaiyat of Adam Smith. Walking the rain-dusted fields, one can almost hear the seeds take root, taste the dirt rising in the air. The broken stalks of corn in winter bring a cloud of snow geese to the ground. Before long, our antennas hum in the dry air, channel seven turns to snow, the dogs want inside. While we sing at midnight service, Santa Claus sounds his barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.¹³ Mildred feeds the cat another strip of meat; she thinks, now more than ever seems it rich to die.¹⁴

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¹² John Donne, from "The Good-Morrow"
¹³ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," line 1333
¹⁴ John Keats, from "Ode to a Nightingale"
V. Bible Land

Take off your chukkas, help smash the apple cider. In fearless youth we tempt the height of arts,\textsuperscript{15} bright rides whirling above Bible Land. We found the lair of a burrowing animal,\textsuperscript{16} dug behind the storm cellar. He shapes the earth to body, touches dirt and pins the soul. Someday the land that was your father's, his father's before, will belong to the banks. Spines of rice curve by the highway, catfish ponds get diseased and sold, what bread we eat, what wine we drink\textsuperscript{17} got stolen by the rhythm band, five cuffed convicts from the Desha County Pen. Daddy, take me on your shoulders, so I can see the horses. I can't see the horses.

Walking the park, beneath the spinning conifers, I watch flocks of pigeons dart and disappear in the air. Tonight I'll drape a wilted spinach leaf along each prepared timbale,\textsuperscript{18} watch the street lights come on, one by one. In the city, there you feel free.\textsuperscript{19} Chauffeurs, in their hats, lean along State Avenue, by the Old State House, where, I hear, the Governor's daughter dances at her high school prom.

\textsuperscript{15} Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," line 220
\textsuperscript{16} a definition of "earth," from Webster's
\textsuperscript{17} Wallace Stevens, from "The American Sublime"
\textsuperscript{18} from a recipe for spinach, broccoli, and boursin timbales, out of The New Basics Cookbook
\textsuperscript{19} T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," line 17
Back then, we lived across the street from woods. I used to go there after school and take my dog, Lizzie, a pure-bred Brittany Spaniel. That was in Arkansas, in a small town called Benton, built on bauxite mines. When Mom kicked Dad out of the house, I kept his dog. I fed her, bathed her, walked her to the vet—soon, she was mine, as if she’d always been. And the pine woods were ours, although I know the deed belonged to a paper company.

The afternoons stayed warm—Indian summer—and on the school bus home, I could see dogwoods standing like shafts of light deep in the forest. My house was the last stop, and when the bus rolled off, the tires humming away, I stood between the woods and the tall kitchen windows reflecting them, clutching my books and lunchbox. I’d wait for Mom to look up from the sink, for Lizzie to come to the fence, perk her ears.

The road there was a kind of bridge to cross—

Lizzie and I crossed one Tuesday. School was out, the stove was on, and we were disappearing between the tree trunks. Squirrels ran on limbs cris-crossing overhead and chattered us away from their food caches packed for winter. Then Lizzie went straight for a slender dogwood; I followed her but didn’t see the deer.

In the slow breeze, white petals wheeled to the earth and trembled there like Mom’s summer nightgown. The doe lay dead, and I drew in the heavy air.

I let it go. The legs stuck straight out, petals lay on the stiff fur, a liquid had crusted around the deep black hole in her pale belly. I could smell piss. Lizzie would not get close. A berry dropped—many of them were scattered on the ground—scarlet berries, and the deer. I ran home, late for dinner. The mown bluegrass of our front yard looked silver in straight lines the Lawn-Boy wheels had bent; I could hear Lizzie run just behind, her paws brushing the blades.
SQUIRRELS

The squirrels scratched bark
and rocked in pine limbs while I shot
blunt-tipped arrows at a hay bale.
My brothers had the gun. Hidden
in forest, their rifle rang
a muffled thunder, and when they spoke,
they held squirrels in their hands:
flesh draped, little blood.
I weighed one game vest, swaying
its cargo over my feet, then helped
arrange the bodies, luke-warm
in the belly, tails all fur.
Mom brought a knife and bucket,
and pines cast slender shades
across our porch, where cutting was more
jagged than I pictured, guts
gouged, pieces flicked from fingers.
Head, tail and legs got sawn, skin
and fur yanked from muscle--
Mom floured the glistening bodies,
stood them on elbows, and the oil spat.
I propped my scrubbed hands
on the counter, watched her dice
carrots and onion, crack the skillet lid--
a lungful of steam rose
and she tossed the cubes in. Crouched
in broth, the squirrels looked like dogs
sad to be in bathwater.
I know that squirrels are rats
with better tails, that they eat holes
in roofs--my neighbor traps them
and plunges the traps into water--
but their name is Greek for shadow
and they run with ease on wires.
in youth, they fall from trees as boys do
but rise and scurry up again. They save
food, nurse young; they teach
their progeny to climb. Four plates
and four squirrels sat before us.
Mom made us hold hands and pray
a silent prayer. That was when
I squeezed my brothers' fingers
and counted backwards from ten.
REDWING BLACKBIRD IN THE REEDS

Day falls down the levee
to the banks of the Mississippi
and kneels on Arkansas.

It's morning. A pregnant spaniel
jumps against the kennel,
her tits still red and raw

from the last worthless litter--
a breed begun to wither.
My daddy practices law--

her small-town Matlock
thinks my step-mother. Padlocks
clenched tight as jaws

bang the ruined barn
nearby on Howards farm.
I was the boy who saw

their stash hidden with the gun.
Brown beams of the sun
lace the river water

and touch the man-made ponds.
Silt is the soil of many lands;
it all slides by and is lost.
Rumor before flesh, his penis
was a vague bulge, an image
stolen from Jockey ads,
and his locker was near mine
in eighth-grade P.E.
After dodge-ball, the line
for required showers formed,
Mr. Timmons called roll
from the open shower door--
Hargrove, Hendren, Holloway--
the same wispy patches
and pasty bodies each day.
Usually I was dressed
when Josh returned in a towel--
it wasn’t good to linger.
Though, one noon, finger
fallen on me, I stayed
to pick up the dodge-balls,
then hurried to my locker.
The line for showers dispersed,
I walked straight in, hung
my towel, turned to the spray,
and there he stood, smiling.
A thick weight swayed
between his thighs, and my gut
bottomed when he brushed
my shoulder wet, close
in the doorway. I rinsed, dressed,
walked to lunch, and knew
Josh held complete manhood
in his simple underwear.
Josh, I think of you sometimes,
how we mocked you in the yearbook,
left you drunk in a field.
Your eighth-grade penis
wasn’t just some kid’s dick.
Let’s meet again, older,
maybe at our class reunion,
where you walk in, monster
tucked inside your boxers
and pleated trousers, a woman
on your arm, the crowd parting--
I’ll shake your hand, hard,
smile at your wife, and wink.
LEARNING BRIDGE

A path between two rectangles of dormant grass led to the house where we played bridge.
For two weeks in January, we'd taken classes in barbecue and rock and roll--Lee had spent his lunch breaks teaching us the odd suburban art,

a beige room of high school boys learning finesses, grand slams, and trumps.
At the end, he offered us his own folding table and chairs, and we to played Saturdays, arriving

in carpools, sweatpants and t-shirts, flaunting our adolescent bids and flubs,
tricks stacked on the rickety table, until one word one Monday ordered our experience: queer in his case was loneliness

so raw we felt the need to punish it,
left him checking his watch, his front window.
Still I wonder who but me would pass, headed elsewhere, slow before the house, and glance, hoping to glimpse him on the doorstep,

one man I could point to, whose slim fingers I'd touched, toilet I'd pissed in, whose bedroom door I'd never looked behind, whose house-- where I had mouthed the air unknowingly--became a place I beg God not to let me return.
MEDICINE RIVER

I walked through stands of sawmill pine, the woods beside my house, where ocher roads were tongues I followed, little more than truck-carved ruts
and puddles filled with ocher mud; they led to the shade. Beams of headlights lanced the night when high school seniors gunned their daddy's cars up to the city dump, a bulldozed hole they drank and smoked and necked by. Empty cans, and some half-full of Skoal spit, never lay too far beyond the dump, so I outwalked the trash; I walked the road until the road dissolved into a trail I took down hill,
as deer must, gathering at sunset towards the river for a drink. The loggers left an oak there, wide enough for several doors;
beneath its canopy was a dirt floor where deer might shelter from the rain. I leaned against that tree to break my gun and load.

Each gunshot seemed to haul the wind away, scattering metal seeds in the dirt. Oiled and warm, the barrel tasted of char, a trace of cigarettes and coins. I gripped the shaft with both hands, clamped my lips to metal skin, and brushed the sight along my palate. God would not have been so gentle, his crude hands too large for kindness; yet I wanted Him, and the barrel gouged deeper with each stroke, my finger resting on the trigger cage or hovering within. Was He there? Would I have said "God" walking home one night to find a couple yelping in their pickup? I don't know what I wanted from the woods--maybe to find something my own out there.

When I imagine it, I see a river--I'm lost, perhaps, and tired, and even now, when I reach the water's edge, and I look down,

(stanza break)
I see a boy's reflection, eyebrows thin
and jawline smooth as current. This is water
where I might wade and drink and quench my thirst.
NIGHTFALL

I trace the edge of the shadow
cast by the sway-backed barn;
a migratory window
traced in edges of shadow
darkens as I follow
and drains into the lawn--
where I edge the trace of shadow
cast by the sway-backed barn.
LIGHTNING OVER ROELAND HEIGHTS

A chance group of us watches
lightning over the suburb,
the sky a cerebrum ripped

and flickering with thoughts.
We have just seen a movie--
Friday, late, at the Ranchmart--

and a rain has wet the blacktop.
Fingering buttered popcorn
within those velvet walls,

we shelved our passing lives,
yet pellets of rain have drummed
our rooftops, the storm now past.

What stray, riddling logic!
Therefore, we are silent friends
while the last clouds roll off.
2 A.M.

I’m past the point where pain is physical,
follow polished tracks to the railroad bridge.
Below tar-blackened beams, a deep pool:

twater bellows in a quiet whorl.
When he takes me, he takes me to the fringe,
past the point where pain is physical.

I’ve covered the blood-spattered sheets with soil--
worms hunger like the dark camouflage
below these tar-blackened beams. The deep pool

whispers, and I want to love, or just to fall
asleep with my clothes on. I want to binge
on the past, a point where pain was physical,

simple as a spanking. Now my schedule
demands fresh scabs to scratch and gouge,
tar-blackened beams, and below, a deep pool,

a weight of water, falling sand and gravel.
I have an appetite for earth, and I dredge
past the point where pain is physical.
Below tar-blackened beams deepens a pool.
DOORKNOB

When light bends parabolic beneath the cracked door, I know that flimsy blinds collect kinetic dust. The year pine was cheap the solid oak was sold; now ocean air swells doors and windows shut. Would just two of us wreck the twirling prism, forget that Arctic sun goes pale by noon? You have the fingers of a harpist and wan lips. Make my name appear on the page you read; then, won't I step from a dark edge into drowning light?
CEREMONIAL: TOM'S WEDDING

My palms are hairy and I can't show Mother. His cigarette burnt down, trousers not pressed, Tom zipped up and refit his wedding gloves. Kiss me, he said. I tasted a rain-wet penny. (The handsome packages, the cake frosted with glass, the sunny foyer.) I toss a crimped carnation in the toilet. The struck basin fractures with shadow and my face is an ivory reflection.

Too late--the priest stands altarwise; the organ pierces my tongue. Christ, if my love were in my arms and I in my bed again
STATIONERY FROM A COAST MOTEL

At the edge of Puget Sound, I leaned
over the ferry railing,
watched the boat
break from the dock. Gulls
dived from the aft rail
to our wake of wind,

pressing to the bow, buoyed
on air, as on a wave
thrown back
against river current,
the sun-obscuring mist
we furrowed and tossed over us,

gulls seed-like, aligning
the split airs, falling in from sides
to climb the length again.
I stood alone
in swirled mist, watching
the gulls, the whole

of them or a single one
passing a wing along
my rail, its weave of feathers,
a white-edged black
or black-flecked gray, composed
like rooflines of a house.

And it was more
than the birds reminding me of you:
the motel mattress spread
with thin blue sheets,
a blue like morning, finding
my arms around your chest--

I could feel the life
defined beneath your skin.
But I've seen gull prints
in sand, egg shells
laced with dirt; I know
the space between us on a map.

Distance is crystal
in this room, tonight,
with the glass door
open to the surf, with the sheets
turned back on a bed
I've never awakened in.
THREE-DAY WEEKEND

The Gulf or the Atlantic? Layton wonders. He feels his warm flesh falling off the bone, has to peel languid straps of lounge chair from his naked back. Even the water is hot. The smooth brochure and its chilling, eye-blue shallows, enamel beaches, perfect hair—perhaps this place some other time of year. Today: no fuss over some dog-stained carpet or sun-bleached shag, just his own breasty mat glistening in the golden sun. Close off-shore, on the grey, rocking water: a white boat, silent and shadowy with people. Tourists?

Black dots bob in the swells, twenty or more. The dots are swimming in. Layton sits up, the lounge stuck to his back. Already a woman clambers to shore, drops to the sand and gasps like a huge loggerhead ready to bury her eggs. Another rises from the foam, two spitting infants on her back, an opossum with her blind babies. Men wade ashore kicking the waves, their shirts stuck to their ribs like wet fur to a cat. Layton lifts his Pepsi, fearing a spill, while more bodies rise—their limbs slender and dark, their hair crusted with salt—

and carry themselves past the scattered tourists. They eye each other. One man nods and grins. Another grips his sandy daughter. A leg bumps Layton’s chair; a droplet stings his arm. She apologizes with a wave of hand, a finger to the lips: quiet, relax, we will disappear. Layton rises, walks toward the sagging fence, toward the beyond swallowing each figure: the glass and steel of Miami. Something must be done. Something. He spots a clerk. He aims a finger at an empty boat on empty water, a husk drifting away on wide, exotic water.
DELIVERY

Dale,
This is Mrs. Vandermeer. (Madeleine from now on, my dear boy—you're as grey as I.) Today I hauled out the junk I'd stored away in the storm cellar. How my heart tripped when I heard your news! Don't hurt too much because who ever thought she cared at all for flood and drought farming around Ponca? The floods bumped trunks up against my floorboards, spread a mud over all the mess. I hadn't hunted down there since Jim came to fix some haywire gauge—but ghosts ignore women my age and today I went by myself. I knelt beside your little elf at Communion once, and I'd swear she took His blood without a prayer, at least without a proper pause before she drank. Forgive me. Laws weren't broken, but these things matter to us—and I know it's better that you hear this from me. (The mud will make a perfect garden spread—have you seen the daffodils, up despite the rain?) So while I mopped the silt away, I thought of you hoisting me into your canoe from my front porch. The water hugged my hem. Or did we wade, tugging through the current? I remember all Nebraska flattened under flood, us eating ice cream before it could melt. A watch Father wore lay under the muck--soaked, of course, but if you'll repair it, it's yours to keep. I'd like to hear its tick again; that was my first music. I've balanced the old phonograph on the back steps so it can laugh at me while I hoe the garden. You can find me there (please pardon my appearance!). This week I need: molasses, raisins, yeast, a head of lettuce, salt, and everything else on my list of what to bring. Thank you. (And ask me for the watch.) Just set it all down on the porch.
EASTER

We draw invisible wax designs
on dry shells, and splash the counter
by dropping heavy eggs
in the colored liquid of the cups.
The counter bleeds a brown dye.
How I love the smell of vinegar!

The air is sharp as vinegar.
Red-buds and daisies, early designs
of spring, bloom like spots of dye
in the yard, and live counter
to the last winds of a cold March. Buttercups
sprout in the pasture, and frog eggs

pepper the pond, five hundred eggs
for every frog. If vinegar
were August, April would be cups
of wine or apple cider. (What designs
might the hand encounter
passing the cup, preparing to die?)

The children ask, Did Jesus die?
and go on dipping eggs.
I have become the egg-counter,
and I portion out the vinegar.
I praise designs
that come dripping from the cups.

The cups!
They speak with mouths full of dye.
They wave their arms and carve designs.
They whisper to the eggs
in breath stained with vinegar,
What we say you must counter.

A child, I dangled legs from the counter
and sipped, to cure my hiccups,
a tablespoon of vinegar--
what Jesus drank in order to die.
I had eaten too many eggs,
admiring their texture and unexpected designs.

Midnight. I sponge the counter designs
with fresh vinegar, and weigh the last of the eggs
in the cup of my hand, dark with dye.
THREE ON THREE

It wasn't much of a court, the driveway
slanted to a backyard creek, women cheering us
between coffee sips. The rim was netless,
bent a little to favor a ball thrown short; we were old
or out of shape or injured; we had our excuses.

Nothing, however, could explain our competition,
the force that pushed us beyond civilities,
easy warm-up shots and boards we passed away before
the game. Divvied up into teams, we became teams,
forgot reunion manners. I wish the camera film had been lost--
dog-slobbering, red-faced men, we played to forget
our incompetence. Among ourselves, we could:
a fast inside pass, an awkward alley-oop to score;
three of us would win, it was assured.

I study a photograph, delivered today, faces
dated and bound to paper—six names
document the underside. And I wonder who we are, now,
separate, left with this common slice of memory.

We fail each other, fail ourselves, carry failure
with us to this game each year wishing forgiveness
or to forgive. Here, we are teams, and we pass the ball
to anyone with an open shot and hope
he drains it. Still, I am thankful my team won,
that I said, "Good game," and shook hands afterwards,
just as I'd learned to in grade school.

Something was understood in that win, something
missing from the hands and eyes of my relatives
who had lost. I see it captured, contested, in this mid-game
snapshot: behind comic poses and sweat, an intensity
manifest in a flaw of the light: the flash
on that darkening winter day
lit the ball-handler's pupils red as lasers.
LINKS

Two cold swings, and we jog down
the front slope of the first tee,
easing onto a fairway
edged by over-grown Bermuda grass.
Our shoes brush dark prints
in the dew, and I wonder what makes silence
proper between us. Clubs
jangle and click with every stride;
I smell the dew rise with the sun.

What wakes in us walking the course,
slicing the shady air? What balance
is struck in each wrought swing?
My dad and I cut the same path in the grass,
a path dissolving in the sun,
and chase the ball that makes two human arcs
a circle. As I look down,
I try to see his hands on the club,
feel his feet pressed to the ground.
&

A certain Shostakovich quintet spins above the laser, and I weigh my shins one at a time behind my back. I pull my foot to buttock, hold until a dull burning ignites, and then release—that touch of fire tells me more would be too much

(an almost pain that runners come to love.) A crescent moon of skin waxes above my waistband when I bend to link my hand and ankle, arching back—an ampersand. I watch the mirror turn my moony skin more lunar, and a quiet violin

redoubles, fusing sound and space to make this atmosphere, a tent of mind opaque to anyone who stumbles into it, an air that lets my neighbors' dogs forget themselves and fuck in public. Selflessness incarnate breeds in rooms where music is,

where, hand to glass, I stretch before a race, my face become an image of my face.
THE OTHER, LESS BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

It's hard to be the most beautiful man,
to shoulder his gym bag past the slack ones on benches crouching
over half-socked feet, to stride for the last row of lockers
stacked before a wall of mirror. It's hard

not to have the mirror to himself, his own image undressing there:
jacket hung shoulderless on the locker hook, t-shirt pulled
over the head, a momentary blindness yielding
the upper body musculature, distinct beneath taut skin,
the short male fur in a narrow line down

from the knuckle-shaped navel, the biceps waking
as the hands move to unbutton the jeans, to unzip, to slide
the fabric over fabric, over the flesh of thighs, the bone and tendon

of knees, and down, socks swept off in the same motion, baring
the curved, vein-run feet. Only before folding and placing
the shed clothes in the locker does he catch his eyes
meeting his eyes beneath the brow, gain permission

to roam the swells outlined in his briefs, let a finger
slip beneath the waistband, tugging it down past the moon-colored skin
of the hips, the dark pillow of hair, the tilted, wagging cock.
Alone, he would not have to endure the mirror flashing with eyes
that will not be met. Alone, he could walk from the room, body

sacked in sweatclothes, and not hush conversations, nor let someone smiling
allow him the urinal. If he were alone in the gym,
he would not have the chance to see the other, less beautiful people

stretch their lanky hamstrings, buckle themselves to machines,
grit teeth under bars of useless steel. He would never
find himself following a wan young man from bench to bench, weights
to pool, sauna to shower, as though wanting
some chance meeting, a chance to leap like static the gap from flesh to flesh.

But he is not alone. The young man is there among the bare limbs
and butts, the shrinking, sexless dicks one sees in a sweeping
glance of the locker room, and the young man's eyes are not by chance

pillared to each blot of towel, to each band of thigh he tenses
feeding his feet back through briefs, socks, and jeans--and when he is dressed,
his wet hair finger-combed, his gym bag zipped, only then do they couple,
in mid-turn from mirror to door, their deep and naked eyes.
HANDICAPPED

When I make love to him, I unfold
the legs, open them akimbo,
like pupa wings unfurled to sun.

Astride his chest, I ride in hands
gentle as a father's,
between tongue and palate, almost
throat, and I love the innocence
of his penis, lolling
over a thigh, inhaling blood;

it quivers when I warm it
with breath that would fog glass.
Wind swirls all night, rattling

the back door, singing through winter
limbs, and when enough light
gathers at the window, I rise to report

whiteness, thin snow
snaking through the street.
Tell me again how it feels to walk

on snow. Snow groans
to ice, collecting
prints, lengthening a trail

of shadows. I pretend
I'm walking on water, and I forget
to unclose my eyes.
FIRST SNOW IN CLEVELAND

Flames are second river
spilling down a bed
of water, the Cuyahoga,
silt laden and laced
with leftovers of crude oil.
One match in the water
and the river casts shadows
beneath the bridge. Now flames
are eddies over eddies,
and thin smoke is another,
third river rising,
carrying bits of carbon
and wind-blown paper embers.
Water can't stop the fire;
the fire flows like water;
a flood of ashes sinks
into air, through clouds
hung heavy, not yet burst,
snowflakes not yet fallen,
not singed to drops of rain
above the burning river.
THANKSGIVING WITHOUT FAMILY

Cooking done, I wanted a break,
   a long walk
around the loop I would have made
   had the teams been even.
   Students, laundromat
clerk, fire door salesman, others
that pick-up football gathers--
   I guarded the Olympian,

   who loafed so I could keep up,
   and flubbed up
   a few passes, caught one
   Hail Mary for a touchdown.
   Though I came to them alone,
   what I'm trying to tell you
is that by the game's end I knew
   and didn't know these guys;

   I wanted them to be
   my brothers, and momentarily
   they were. The rectangle
   of grass and mud we fought
   within was a single
   space we shared, the game,
   a single thing, and that simple frame
   ordered us, made us free.

   We had our plans, though,
   and I knew
to leave the field--a field
   that was just clumps of grass,
   a park lawn I strolled
   that day, the oysters steaming
   in the oven--was to leave these strangers
   strangers. What I'm trying to tell you

   is everything I could not
   tell them, that
I wanted to love them as brothers
   who weren't brothers, so
   I shook the hands of the others
and invited the most beautiful, the loneliest,
to my house for the meal, where we kissed
   our wine glasses together

   and broke bread and ate,
   emptying the great

(no stanza break)
bird, all of us, the whole leaf-
extended table filled
    with strangers, complete
then, there, in that time when
the air ripens with silence
    and each in turn speaks

    not a prayer, exactly,
    but words, carefully
spoken, wine-slurred, lost
    once they leave the lip,
    but no less real, blessed
as we are, in that time before
one thinks of closing the front door
    and turning to the dishes.
POEM IN THE MARGIN

Then Severini met the Cubists--
his pyramid "Self-portrait,"

the dynamism of a surface.
A thought. A clothes-free floor.

Mouth of warm air, particular
air at dusk, contents of a dream:

the figure lay on mosaic marble,
shuddering with helpless breaths,

bones torn down by gravity.
Stone angel descending, lowered

by cord from backlit clockworks
awhurr in the ceiling, and we fell

naked into bed, where these hands
memorized your shoulder blades,

where absences of floor made us float.
If angel weight were water poured

to polished stone, a surface touched
and animated with her gown folds,

I would wake with you to find light
distinguishing the floor.
HUGO HANGING IN THE SEMINAR ROOM

The great man can't contain himself--
his belly seems to spill
even past the portrait frame.
The photo itself is swollen,
as if the name

Hugo were some expanding vacuum
his image now must fill.
But he knew clouds that climb a mountain
find themselves too high
and fall as rain.

That is the nature of his state:
beloved rivers in the west,
and the east plains dry and far-reaching.
Tacked to the wall, and legless,
is he still teaching

seminar students now, in silence?
Peter, from Philipsburg,
who memorized his town's one poem,
feels somehow reverent
sitting below him,

below his glass of beer, what's left
of his bent cigarette:
*your words took dust, turned it to clay;*
*they made tributaries one*
*and washed you away.*

A winter rain thawing the window,
the radiator ticking,
long silent hours turn the year;
his small students are sprinkled
like mist in air,

across the state, to the edge and over,
to where a grandfather waits
before dinner, in his swivel chair,
nodding with the newscasters,
composing a prayer.
SONNET OF THE DEJECTED POET

Sonnet, you and I are old. Don't be so strict
when I try to write you down. My thoughts taper
inside your walls, turn gaseous, to vapor.
In each battle between us, I'm licked.

Did you and the old guys have some agreement?
Sydney, Spenser, Shakespeare--they knew you well;
to those great masons, you were a trusty trowel.
So, come and join me now, come be the cement

of my stray words, precipitate my thoughts--
together, we can build a greater wall
than China's. When brash Caesar conquered Gaul,
he paved the streets of Paris, and so our plots

can lay new roads, new passageways to Rome,
where we'll sip wine and welcome poets home.
Riding the Bergen train from Oslo, I traveled up the Hallingdal to where it falls out of a shallow lake and the tracks wend on through talus piles patched with snow. Vanished in a tunnel banked along an esker, I heard the wheels clack like newsreel, and gaps slatted the walls, throwing bands of light across blank faces. I panned the scene as the track curved: still frames of a snowfield bound by shattered rock and a sharp ridge, fallen chunks rolled down the slope to discs. I thought of the Swiss Alps arched over train tracks, the lowland farms captured from the sea, Einstein tossing out his mail at the Bern Patent Office. Then a tin sheet closed the gaps. I could just see the frame of wood, torn from a sagging barn, hauled and hammered by young men under wool coats, high and far from Oslo, from Bergen, from Lillestrom, a mile farther today, camped at the fingertip of track, where dusk draws arctic shadows and the scent of snow and a rising call to war.
THE DIAMOND CUTTER

Clean-cut grass sweeps the square 
of yard beside the driveway, beneath 
the stenciled sign: General Electric. 
Cars come and go, or come and wait 
in the clean lot for their owners, 
for Miss Dobbs in her Tuesday dress, 
Jacob Parker and his sensitive 
teeth. The eight low-slung sheds 

have stood now for eighteen years. 
Councilmen signed the coffee-stained 
papers, and construction began, though 
Jackson never saw his land leveled, 
spread with tire tracks, cement and strips 
of pre-grown grass. He sold 
the rolltop desk, the ottoman 
and chair; the rest was worthless.

Jacob doesn’t work in the hangar 
one can see from the nearby parkway. 
The buckets of diamonds come in, 
as usual, warm from the diamond presses 
in that hangar. He spills them, sorts 
for size and form, and taps off the shards 
that leave the shape of a drill bit. 
At lunch, he brushes diamond dust 

like dandruff from his coat and sits 
alone in the dim lunchroom. His eye 
has studied stones for eighteen years. 
His wife’s hand holds a precious lump 
of Kentucky anthracite. Home early, 
the last piece for her tiara safe 
in his belly, he pauses at the doorstep, 
removes his diamond-shredded shoes.
THE WINDOW

There were giants in the earth in those days. I saw their swollen corpses roll in waves, tangle in limbs they’d ridden. Above calves and empty pots and tables and sideways carts and lopsided chunks of house they rode. But as the bruised waters rose, God’s anger swallowed earth from every gripping finger, and the trees fell or they were overflowed.

Of course, there were children, whose garments swam like ink in water. A fleshless sandal lapped beneath the window once—I recall hoping to fish it up, a piece of flotsam I might remember the bastard world by. Those days passed. The rain stopped. What floated dead sank to join the other dead, and we floated alone. So I loosed the raven, let fly the dove—they cawed and cooed, fervent to nest anywhere. But that was no home. That scow of God parting the dead across its prow was never home. I wonder, are we blessed when God chooses us to witness his tantrum? I led His faithful creatures, one by one, to the sole portal He bade me captain, cast each to voracious sea: first penguin, platypus, ocelot and snowy owl, since they seemed the most precious specimens. And I was headed for the larger pens when I heard someone or something howl my name. My sons slept. The wives slept. Alone I climbed back toward the window. The ark heaved aground. The sky was utterly conceived. And the soil tasted promising for wine.
DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME*

The days are getting longer, and I hear lovers complain. Some watch a clock all night. Some fuck past check-out time, until they’re caught, maids rattling the doorlatch. Each year pale couples from the college appear at the front desk, figuring they have a right to pay less, since night’s an hour shorter. What I like to do is quote them some Shakespeare:

“Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight!”
They’ve never heard it in a spirit voice, and I can tell the words have their effect. Don’t they know to save this hour, castrate spring a little, so they might collect their love in colder beds, as days regress?

* "Daylight Savings Time” and “Elegy” are from a series of poems spoken by a ghost wandering her former workplace.
ELEGY

Today an elderly man checked-in to die.
He strode before a wake of sour air,
carried no bags, but wore a fine suit, a necktie,
signed with a gold-trimmed pen. He fingered his hair
to one side, swung the leg he slightly drags,
and followed our trainee to the best suite.
His scabbed left hand shook a vial of drugs.

I watch him now. Naked, bones afloat
in bathwater, he kneads his cock and warbles,
clips his nails, shaves without cream or mirror,
then stands, drips to the balcony, observes cobalt
and shadows, waverings in the pool, before
sliding the glass door shut, slipping to bed,
the sheets down-turned, voluminous, and cold.
I was the man you kissed
last Friday night at the Re-bar:
you mouthed words to my ear,
and the hot lights and bodies
flickered like televisions.
When I leaned to the bar, you kept
my balance with a firm hand--
thank you. I'll remember that hand.
Snow is falling now, hidden
in grass, patched on the asphalt--
the mountains must be in blizzard.
The radio says that passes
between us are closed or closing
in this weather--Seattle rain
falling here as snow--
but last night a fault shuddered
in the California desert,
near a town called Desert
Center: no one injured but
the aqueduct is fractured, spilling
precious water to the dirt.
I don't really know you,
but I felt close enough
to kiss when you brushed my cheek
the third time with your chin
and I couldn't tell whose stubble
sent my hand for support.
When I opened my eyes again,
the closing lights were up,
and the last men were walking,
coats half on, to the door.
Perhaps you've heard by now,
perhaps you're listening
to this same woman's voice
falling to the receiver in waves
various as snowflakes.

(stanza break)
Now, when I close my eyes,
I see water slide the channel
in long, green plates like glass,
churning below the break
where silt and sand eddy in—
water darkening with earth,
earth darkening with water—
a beautiful catastrophe
ripening dusty seeds to birth,
soaking cactus roots
with Lake Havasu meltwater.
Loneliness is that canal
unbroken, its pointed flow
wetting only the wind
and cultivated crops,
never finding an edge
to plunge against and smooth.
I'd like to send my voice
by wave, to inundate
the air and believe someone
could hear me. If it's you,
say that your eyes are closed,
that you feel the desert grit
in your fingers, or say nothing,
just watch the flowers fold
their heavy red petals
out to the sun like tongues.
INTERSTATE

A strip of pavement runs the length of it, 
save gravel patches and hardpan, the roadwork 
crammed into the last long days 
of August. Summer's always a crescendo, 
ending as symphonies end, or giant stars, 
too hot to last, in flames. 
There's no mistaking it: when light 
and heat, or music, collapse into themselves, 
they leave behind a touch, a coloring-- 
it's how I think of autumn, the leaves flashed 
an oak orange or aspen yellow, singed 
but not burnt by one last day 
that penetrates then sinks to earth 
ushering in the cold. Tonight 
summer is still and heavy in the air; 
it lets my car pass in a muffled rush, 
roof open, not to stars 
but to the cloud-dark sky, unpolished 
by city lights or roadside truckstops, 
a black reflecting the hills 
and badlands of western South Dakota, 
where land lives only in shadow and light. 
The road descends and ridge after ridge 
drops me farther down.

I've lost my appetite the last two days. 
I've lost the faces of my friends, just pieces 
remain: a veined nose, a blond goatee, 
an eye that slightly wanders. 
Do I know someone who lives around here? 
The other drivers, behind windows 
of obsidian, become the cars, the trucks headed 
for the coast, the family sedans pulled off 
miles back to clean motels and meals, 
some semblance of home. My headlights haul up 
stretches of cement, asphalt, dotted lines-- 
the road moves beneath me, 
I am still, accepting what comes. Lightning 
strikes in the far dark, yellow through the weight 
of wind. Seconds later, the next strike 
loops from cloud to air to cloud, silent. 
I see them almost every second 
across a new, massive horizon, whiter 
each mile, soundless behind onrushing storm. 
I know this is something I should remember, 
that miles ahead, when I lift the window 
to wind and lie back shoeless on the bed, 
the first big drops, the first explosive bolts 
will rattle motel walls from slumber.