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Walking Backwards| Poems

Mark Holthoff
The University of Montana

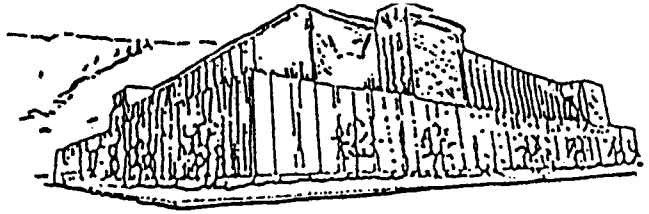
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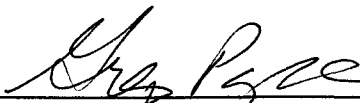
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WALKING BACKWARDS

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 _____
Date

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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

CONTENTS

SNOWFALL	1
WORDS WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE	2
SPRING, 1978	7
SQUIRRELS	8
REDWING BLACKBIRD IN THE REEDS	9
JOSH ROWLAND'S PENIS	10
LEARNING BRIDGE	11
MEDICINE RIVER	12
NIGHTFALL	14
LIGHTNING OVER ROELAND HEIGHTS	15
2 A.M.	16
DOORKNOB	17
CEREMONIAL: TOM'S WEDDING	18
STATIONERY FROM A COAST MOTEL	19
THREE-DAY WEEKEND	20
DELIVERY	21
EASTER	22
THREE ON THREE	23
LINKS	24
&	25
THE OTHER, LESS BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE	26
HANDICAPPED	27
FIRST SNOW IN CLEVELAND	28
THANKSGIVING WITHOUT FAMILY	29
POEM IN THE MARGIN	31

HUGO HANGING IN THE SEMINAR ROOM	32
SONNET OF THE DEJECTED POET	33
TRAIN	34
THE DIAMOND CUTTER	35
THE WINDOW	36
DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME	37
ELEGY	38
POSTMARK MISSOULA	39
INTERSTATE	41

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
dally 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

² T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," line 30

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.

⁶Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare"

III. To Write Ones Own Obituary⁷

I know when one is dead and when one lives;
 she's dead as earth.⁸ 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 licour⁹ 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.¹⁰

I shall lie with my machines and breathe each
 of every breath, let my heart coast,
 watch as the windows fail.¹¹

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 possess 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

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,¹⁵ bright rides
 whirling above Bible Land. We found the lair
 of a burrowing animal,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 drink¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ watch
 the street lights come on, one by one.
 In the city, there you feel free.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.

¹⁵ Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," line 220

¹⁶ a definition of "earth," from Webster's

¹⁷ Wallace Stevens, from "The American Sublime"

¹⁸ from a recipe for spinach, broccoli, and boursin timbales, out of *The New Basics Cookbook*

¹⁹ T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," line 17

SPRING, 1978

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.

JOSH ROWLAND'S PENIS

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:

water 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 shrugging, 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 uncloset 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.

TRAIN

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.

POSTMARK MISSOULA

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.