1970

Before and After Photos of the Heart

J. D. Reed

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BEFORE AND AFTER PHOTOS OF THE HEART

By

James D. Reed
B.A., Michigan State University, 1962

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

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1970

Approved By:

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

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"The Only Bar in Dixon" and "Organ Transplant" will appear sometime this year in The New Yorker; "How Much Do You Charge to Watch Your Train Go By?" and "Fair Game" appeared in the spring '70 issue of Sumac; "Ford Hospital" and "Launching My Father" appeared in Hearse, #12; "Note Found on the Back of The Great Seal of Montana" appeared in Garret, 1969. "Rubber in all Four Gears" was included in FIVE BLIND MEN, (Sumac Press, 1969). "Sorry You're Sick", appeared in Garret, 1970.

"Glacial Wine" was one of Six Poems for Christmas, broadsides from Sumac Press, December, 1969.
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PARALYZED FISTS
Eating sweetbreads in the yellow kitchen,
the taste hollow and metallic, coins
I've bitten off and chewed,
the dirty meal of a dry spell;
a midnight snack for the caved spine,
a thing that chews and swallows
these growths from a calf's windpipe
makes me a #6 black iron brainpan full of grease.

Eating sweetbreads in the yellow kitchen,
he, she, it is eating the moon's yellow gland-fat.
This appaloosa's huge, stained teeth
grind my life to saddled pain.
The tears running in his mane become
damp hair on the forehead of some glutton
eating sweetbreads in a yellow kitchen,
extension of my international deadline.

Eating sweetbreads in the yellow kitchen,
these tombstone poems accelerate
like a sideshow barker's rant
run backwards through this stage-prop room,
go ass-over-teakettle in the creek;
and the prizes raise their gopher heads,
undercover cops. One good right to the gut
and the manifestoes go flying.
Eating sweetbreads in the yellow kitchen,
I wipe my lips, rinse the plate. I try.
I have tried, all the tenses,
the false tensions of everything glandular.
The horse clears its tongue in creek water,
the dry spell hawks his commendable thalamus
in the sink, stretches his real limbs,
thumps his big, artificial belly.
TWO MILES -- SEE LIVE SNAKES!!!

The occasions of my life
are on me like a real necklace
at a roadside stand;
a ring of plastic bear's teeth I covet.

Snakes dream in glass coffins,
mottos glaze on pine plaques
and ashtrays shaped like tires
rest in bins for tourists.

Before and after photos
of the heart reveal
the same thing;
a paralyzed fist.

My heart clutches its fingers
at the sunset's idiot rhubarb
and hollers,
"last gas before the desert!"
BARRoom

The halt-tongued, lame-headed,
stupid and cuckolded
tell me their stories,
spew their deserving guts
over my whiskey.

Why can't I say.
"listen to this, brother..."
I've done it too,
these drunks don't own it;
but I can't come across
with this shit I carry.

All men are not brothers,
confession's the megaphone
that divides us:
shout it out
before you're jumped.
OIL TREATMENT

I drank a can of all-weather fluid.
I won't freeze or boil over:
mother drank it,
father drank it,
the girl drank
and nearly choked on it.

Flesh doesn't help down here
in the crankcase: does my life
mean that little to me?

I'm guaranteed against
engine wear,
chug on through the seasons
and I'll endorse anything
if you'll only let me lie
    down again.
Again, again, again --
My palms come together
on a face that isn't mine.

Friday drunk, Saturday the same,
Sunday be penitent crawler
after pain in coffee grounds.
Today I'm drunk again.

I bang my shield and roar
for wine and food.
The woman's gone, or leaving,
o mine, mine;

who knows that better
than the me that isn't,
and this full glass?
The doctor took his pills away,
then his extra blankets;
prop after prop
until his lungs filled
like a magnum of champagne
and hit him across the brow.
Down he went,
down the ways.
Mother lay in Ford a year
while her heart healed.
It wouldn't beat
in time with itself
they said, and gave her pills
and made her breathe
to get it going right;

and it did for a few years.
She came home. But she liked
the hospital better, I think.
It was so clean,
and she could hear the traffic.
The ones who hammer the air with fists
or ones with moving lips, trying to repeat
the soundless instructions of physical therapists,
or the boy with saliva on his yarmulke
chanting geometric theorems, or the veteran
in the electric wheelchair, rubber tires
squeaking over tile, muttering, "cathode, diode,"
or the girl, one puckered leg clicking in its brace,
a hobbled chemistry of sties and baths at night,
flounces the reducible fraction of her sexuality
like a petticoat: o moon droolers,
o hairlips pooping speech. O men and women.
SUN DULL

Cow-pie frozen.
Tundra.

The glove won't flex,
horse neck creaks to hay
and a bulb burns all night
in the pump jacket.

Horse-shit frozen,
tundra. Barbed wire twang
at thirty below.

Forty below, he
buttoned up his vest.
The song choked out
and he dropped in the snow,
horseshit.

At twenty below he had no pulse,
orange county truck
plows the road
toward his head.

Cowpie horseshit frozen, numb
fingers on the dip stick.
They're shouting and waving 
their mittens across the pond, 
their breath coming out 
like comicstrip balloon, 
the sun dull 
as any number more than one.
RUBBER IN ALL FOUR GEARS

I get pushed outa shape
and it's hard to steer,
but I get rubber in all four gears.

--Brian Wilson

Twenty eight, broken for the house
and pussy whipped a little,
he thought of Yeats' "wives & harlots";
of Pierre and Isabel gagging in a loft
old New York style.
Hawthorne married a thousand sluts
in his lamplit study.

Michigan got the U.P. for Toledo.
Erie's a thick peasoup
and the peninsula a joke-shop necktie
for Superior's bombers.

Smell of leather.
How many tacks to stretch
a coonskin?

Scraping fat and purple
meat; fat rendered
into tallow; tallow
rubbed on boots to slosh in marsh;
hides, giant furred coins
traded for whiskey.

Whiskey to woo;
a wife to support.
Gnawed foot in a trap,
suck of boots,
this marsh the stars.

Neon burns a hole
in whiskey poems
that only drank
their weight in ink.

In Michimilimackinaw
St. Martin's shirt caught fire
from a drunk's shotgun trick.
It was put out by his own blood.

In Prairie duChien
Beaumont dipped strips of beef
in St. Martin's unhealed flap.
The thread was eaten before the beef:
        Means & Ends.
The Indian drank
and prayed in French.
Beaumont drank, got famous,
parading around in military sideburns.

St. Martin married, sawed wood
to drink in his shack. He answered
no letters from Baltimore.

His squaw put his coffin
on sawhorses outside Cavendish Church
ten days. No white, Listered finger
would plumb that dumb
Indian gut again.

He drove the lens
right down through the slide.
It got that microscopic
when the shot glass broke.

O, lady of the roadmap
why must I squat and chew
this peroxided wad of hair?
Caress this fatuous length of bone?

I've studied history.
I'd carry a flag to the moon for you.
"Guile," you say, "is not enough."
On your forehead's written,
SENTIMENT, WHORE,
and I know metaphor
puts no bacon in saddlebags.

Camshafts and wide slicks,
undercoat the tank
after a California rake job. Bored
and stroked, pleated and rolled,
chopped, channeled;
fiberglass resin smears her blouse.
The mechanized son pumps a tit.

Driver downshifts eight gears
outside Eugene. He carries ridgepoles
for Scranton, bennies for nights,
flares for wrecks, and a heart:
believe it.

He wants something he can't name,
like a popular song,
therefore, he collects.
If *Things* would turn brown
and musty like this whiskey,
maybe he could sit
with his arms around the lady
of the roadmap;
living politely
in the syrup of history.
Gun barrel blue, red thistles.

He exercises the room's treadmill
knowing this won't be fun.

Wet feathers imitate a minnow,
pain hooks cartilage
from memories of spruce flies at dawn.

Whiskey bottles have bumps
at the bottom containing a residue
at sunrise that won't pour.

Friends call from town,
but something holds him here:
loneliness, this empty-bottle poem,
or a wife who wants him home
to buckle his shoe, pick up sticks,
close the door of love's room.

Wait in the river every morning
with an undershot jaw like J. Edgar Hoover
for the current to bring
an accidental breakfast: salmon eggs,
bits of claw, shrimp and black shore worms,
your fins do a Hong Kong fandango
to keep you stable in this confluence.
Everything that enters from the surface, bends.

An ant hill big as a land mine
waits for H.D. Thoreau.
I draw nothing from it. Sure,
it reminds me of my mind.
I've got one today.

Mrs. Ruffed Grouse nests on her egg
like a state secret.
We're going to meet, Mrs. and I,
in an extension of trajectory:
her pin feathers and these lead fingers.

Copper wires frizzed at the ends like a giant's hairdo
bring me a connection without insulation,
but someone's hacking the underwater cable,
I see his flippers screw off in green water,
and for a few days, Paris doesn't know
what Washington is saying.

When the barrel first touches your lips,
you stick your tongue in it
as if it were a woman or a man. Get over that.

It's metal, has its job to do,

(Silver Stars and Purple Hearts).

Such a long armed American,
you can release the safety
with your thumb,
and smoke this final pipe with the chiefs.

Ducks lift from the marsh's glue,
honking into low clouds.
Near the Grouse's drumming log
spattered white spells "lost" on the ground.
We pace over a dry wash
and crash into the brush.
My hunting partner's out of sight.
I see his gun barrel glint,
hear him thrash in red thistles.
This is as close as I'll ever:
THE DIXON BAR

Dixon gleams through a six power
scope on a deer rifle, bar lights wink
in the cross hairs, foot prints of drunk braves
weave through bone dust snow,
(a wine-stained version of fox and geese):
this shack-pocked village, a lumbar vertabra in the spine
of the Rockies, grates on its cartilage neighbor, Death.

Trucks creak in front,
white faced cattle chew and stare
at blizzard clouds massing near the valley's rim.
Hay freezes from inside out,
a failure of combustion in the gut.
For sale in the bar: a shotgun, an electric guitar,
wine by the glass, some medals from a war, ten minutes warmth.

The deck of night shuffles
its sad, laminated face
over fields of thistles and sage, over trout
lined up like exclamation points
under ice. The moon nestles in dank hair,
in the black hair of Flatheads sweating
in a pick up truck, whooping against the windshield.

The dance on earth's crust throbs,
beavers stop on their dams, 
the otters hear it on the muddy slides. Ankle bells chatter, 
bone bracelets clack, 
a gourd beats its seeds to death 
and the chief shines in bear fat under a skull. 
Ghost dancers sway from the hips: cartridges in a belt.
FAIR GAME

The dentist sights in his new rifle across this low butte from me.
His wife perched on the Jeep hood twitches at each dry-twig crack.
He pots the G in G.E.
on a swollen light bulb crate.

The smokejumpers training plane putts through the low, skull-clouds,
full of Blackfeet bucks who wait to scream an Apache name as they fall toward burning pine,
to the fire earth is,
and the teepee burners glow like the ruby necklace I gave my mother on the night of someone else's car wreck,
and she is no city now.

Love's scream parts the diesel air,
and the cougar falls from his bitch in a grove, and licks the splinter of wine bottle in his paw;
these words fall and bang,
a temporary corral of rough lumber
near a railroad spur. I'm half whole
finally, a worm of parts, smiling
for the first time since my father died.

The dentist bolts home another reload,
his hunting suit glows
(burgundy in the filtered sunset),
and I go down to the house
in a whine of log trucks,
to write this poem and others: fair game.
WHISKEY PROFILES

(For Jack Thompson)
STONY BROOK TAVERN

And the first among them
would be Tom Foley, Irish-
man and damned sinner
with the rest of us,
peers wise-puppy-wise
over the bar's back side:
a gentleman and rogue.

He gauges his drinks,
tight as a hawser;
goes home each afternoon
as if from sea,
where thirty years
went under a tanker's keel.

He stood before a soft coal oven
as if it were the Dublin symphony;
fried steaks in sea's pitch
and watched the forbidden whiskey roll
in a chain-locker nightcap.
He pilots this tavern
as if it steamed up a port channel.

Foley on his duckboard bridge
dreams nights gone under Galveston's
plowed surf; grease, black griddles,
port and sweet muscatel: sticky Gulf nightmares
so bad when he woke on a whore's bed,
flies spelled his name on the screendoor.
Dream of bare bulb rooms,
and lime burns in plaster d.t.'s.

In Boston's hospital
for the seaman's liver,
he shook poached eggs on the gown,
remembered Aqua Velva passed
through a loaf and drunk
in the galley hatchway.

Now pisseyed in the afternoon
of trucker's arguments,
anchored on this gravel sea of parking lot,
he stands at the taps dreaming
Rahway and oil slicks.
Visions of priests and world-wise mates
fill him like a bilge. He loves
salt, itself.
Another one's down:
venetian blinds of this barroom
fracture the red light
of an ambulance.
The bridegroom, second time around,
sucks toothless foam,
his mother-in-law dances with a broom,
and the jukebox punches on (someone's
lost in Abilene).

His head went down like a hammer;
just plain goddamn dead on formica,
cheek skin floats with wedding rice
in his drink, and o he's getting pale,
he's no

poem I've written.
Strapped under a blanket - last compost
heap of social security chills -
little wheels squeak him to the door.
A drinking buddy roars and pounds
the padded arms of his wheelchair,
it's spokes glinting like sabers
in a cavalry charge.
I drank,
my arteries filled with fat,
the ventricle went lax
and a clot stopped my heart.

Now I sit
in St. Petersburg sunshine.
No whiskey,
wearing a girl's heart.

My blood has adopted a child
who shuffles through my chest
carrying a doll.
MARY THE DUCK

She's got ankles to raise the dead,
no teeth to speak of here;
hers laugh's a dark tornado-mouth.

"A gay soul," bartenders say.
She bought a lawnmower at Sears.
It's still in the carton
by her first husband's ashes
and last night's empty quart.

But she's a queen down at Kelaher's,
bought more rounds
than any tenth share scalloper;
sits under the lacquered lobster shell
on the end stool, thighs pushed apart
by some unworldly anti-gravity
that lives under her Woolworth dress.

They say she owns Greyhound lines,
probably whored for the hell of it
(but maybe not: too drunk).
Anything goes in a town
where every seventh bum
is honorary mayor. She's one.
Like any ruler, she meditates
and mumbles to her drink.
Where are the angels today, Mary?
Do they hover like buses
over the dark wood bar,
or are they stock certificates
beating in some savings bank?
Class of '40, Alpha Chi Omega meets
in the back of their college bar;
a blur of harvest colors in wool suits,
fallen leaves of women around a table
of technicolor drinks. Outside a row
of Buicks is pulled up
like a row of pastel pearls.
Every plate says 'M.D.'

Gin-foot crows have danced
for years around these glittering eyes,
and red girdle-welts draw
a loose-fleshed trigonometry
under too-expensive slips.
Their stockings are filled with nothing
but legs.

They watch each other drink,
pretending they're in school again
and know when to stop: an afternoon
of pills and lipstick talk.
The husbands drive golfballs
a long way on rainy saturdays,
finger their stethoscopes like coins.
There've been a few affairs,
but half remembered, drunken ones,
(their wrinkled magnet still attracts).
Now they live in almost-chastity,
that thing reserved for Popes and girls
and old-men drunks in bars.
0, they've been around a time or two,
and order one more round.
Swigs

from a pint
cheap California port;
drains its vegetable dregs
against the wall of his trailer,
he claims princehood in Hungary,
before some war or other
turned his castle into a technical school.
Who cares in Montana sunshine?
His tigers loll like stuffed toys
in the August heat, ready
for absolutely nothing.

He stinks of rubber diving suits,
beer breath in air hoses;
navy demolition, Coral Sea.
How far the mountains are,
or seem to be from this sawdust rank
of lion shit and flies,
from a field house of crippled children,
gathered by Shriners in Egyptian hats.
Sunset's a drool of red mouthwash
like this wine and cheap safari suit.
The organ pumps a march,
he picks up the chair and whip,
stumbles on a ring block
and locks himself up with bored,
stale animals. Man and cats
grind through their chess game,
badly played. After that he drinks
and dreams his cabbage things of central Europe.
He never thinks he's caged, like a cat;
but an animal trainer,
that he is, and serves.
SYMPATHIES

(for Richard F. Hugo)

How does an ape ape
a bear?
You're me 20 years from now.
I've been you yesterday.

Brother of t.v. sleeps
and dead plates of bacon grease;
eldest son of whiskey swoons
and lover of girls (at a distance),
I've told your lies
in tight scrapes, I think.
We must own the same scalp.

We'll exchange recipes and poems
like Chinese gluttons on horseback.
Our ponies stand in the Bitter Root
while we salute our exiled interests,
their harness jangling and hooves numb
in rushing water.
ONAN MOTEL, PEDDLERS WELCOME

Under a rented bedspread he shuts his eyes
tighter than in sleep and fists a dream
of a starlet's room with mirrors on the ceiling.
Dreams he's lock-stepping as a general of the air corps
in her closet, among nylon straps and boots.
He swaggers with the best champagne,
scars her belly with a dollar cigar;
convinced that in this roadside stupor
he has all his teeth and half his hair.

He forgets this dream and dreams his life:
a thing that drools and kicks in its sleep;
a wife who washes her fresh incision with soda
and mostly empty pints in four dimensions.
He grabs again at this better life, but cannot finish.

The life and the dream counterpoint
like windshield wipers and the rain.
The dream throws its zippered boot
on the heel of the wife in cold cream,
wipers scream on dry-glass fantasies.

His things lie neat on the plastic desk:
watch, glasses, Rolaids and hankies.
Never, no never, will he think "day-to-day" again,
he'll wash out a glass for whiskey,
press it to his forehead and not think, "prison."
A wino in his lobster shack said clocks could talk.
They whispered, "tick-tock
  take your time,
tick-tock
take your time,"

But the pitch changed with his brain he thought, and then they yelled, "Ticktock hurryup
ticktock hurryup."

Uppy Gronbladt found his body in the quarry; it's bloated, broken watch gone haywire.
TIME TO HAUL BACK

Deck awash in cod blood
on this used dime of ocean,
he skids to port and back again,
swearing to Maine lobstermen
with vowels shot from guns:
spoon-cheeked, Yankee, high liner;
Bunt's drunk.

Wimpy is passed out
belowdecks, dreaming
watertight compartments
of a liberty ship. He hears
them burst again, and fill.
Bunt's drunk,

comes abeam of the trawl
ready to retrieve.
Diesel farts a melody at idle:
   go down ye blood red roses,
   o, you pinks and poses,
   go down
winch whines, line creaks
and sweet flesh comes up
to breathe. The net's
a purse of silver
but a string-yank makes
it flesh again
and Bunt's drunk.

He has a woman larger than himself
who drives in the powder puff derby,
York Harbor, Maine; shucks her helmet
and goggles to hug this pear-globe drunk,
sweet codfish Bunt.

Hauling nets he dreams
of shore-side pleasures;
fishing in streams, or the God of shore
who sings in Vet's halls all over New Hampshire,

I walk in the Garden alone,

while the dew is still on the roses.

Dreams a wife gone batty
in the tick-ridden sand dunes,
he dreams a drink on a solid deck.

Catfish cracks a broom handle,
dogfish go over the side
and big cods come up for judgment,
poor men everyone, no lawyer
for this last sham-justice.
This drunk man slices and drinks
in a rubber apron.
He sorts with a picker
the lemons, dabs and grays;
looks up smiling once,
growls, chugs a beer
holding the deck in cleats.
It's time to haul back again
and that calls for one more gin,
Bunt's drunk.
THE WHISPERING SAXOPHONE

Andrew Jacobson swoops to his drink
as a gull to a trawler in this welter
of shipside taverns.

He played tenor with Sousa's band,
found a brewery tour in Winnipeg
and almost missed the train.
Played all the expositions in Canada.

A Finn, old Jake reserves
a special belch for Ravel,
hums Sibelius to himself.
Called 'maestro' in bars,
his trunkful of unplayed arrangements
collects a reputation.

He scores himself in rambling talks,
carries his mouthpiece in a pocket,
and orchestrates these brand-name afternoons.
102nd STREET

These small neat people
wear fake matador ties and shoe shines,
buy radios that never work
and walk past me to men's rooms
as if life were a circus act,
or a bull's horn gleamed in my drink.

Sometimes in a wine-fire
and for love, they rip antennas
from cars and slash each other's exile:
the sugar machine grinds their island
to an industrial sweet tooth.
I see them puke by what plate glass is left:
bad crystals cut with sugar
and coffee all night in another neighborhood.

I know all kinds of people, Conchita,
and mostly their lives are too much for them.
Even in your dancing heels, see my size
in the bar mirror: I'm up to my ass
in hair oil and death's five-foot tango.
Pushes the desk drawer shut
on a hipflask of Tangier pewter,
swivels to a window view
and watches a civil service gardener mow
the oval in oval sweeps,
belches like Euripides
and remembers teaching the Bacchae
with too much punch in the Greek.

Tangier was long ago
when young men were gentlemen;
no colleagues then
in day-glo turtlenecks
whining over Wittgenstein,
or this pushiness in rank.

He swallows. Tangier. Pewter
like a horn concerto.
Swivel forward to the hatrack.
It's time to tell them
their good news:
the O.E.D. is out in paperback.
SORRY YOU'RE SICK

Chicago-tough Sally you must
get out of that hospital,
and back to your best bad house
in Livingston County.

Last summer you nibbled
a friend's ear while he
drank in his waders,
you giggled, prom-struck,

and Sally, I hope you're
better, now. It's winter,
cowboys need something more
than lanolin on their chaps,

need warm whiskey, jukebox
and your girls,
like in Kansas City, chosen
on the hoof.

Get well old dear.
I'm driving to you,
the car heater blowing
across some divide I found.
THE VETERINARIAN

Up to his armpit in it
for half a day
with a sticky pipette.
The cow watches
this red-cheeked ham huff
tiny love darts to her need,
bleak, without bull's crush for comfort.

He gives pills large as pancakes,
treats bags, milks teats
and opens bloated cattle
with a special knife,
drenching his cuffs in rumen.

Back against the silo
he drinks warm whiskey;
sow's hard litter's come.
He's wiped each piglet,
put ointment in an eye,
hears them squeal at the first
open-air meal. He drinks
and swallows in barnyard sunset.

A life of cracked hooves,
mange, removing nuts and horns...
It takes a little rye
to walk in warm barns,
going to needs and aches
that don't speak, or write
on headstones.
GORILLA YEARS
HOW MUCH DO YOU CHARGE TO WATCH YOUR TRAIN GO BY?  

What a synthetic diamond the skull is!  

--Vallejo  

From this tattered counterpane of eyelid  
the corporations of the East  
shine like vertical pickerel  
in an underwater non serviam;  
universities pick research projects  
like a trout a caddis fly,  
and the "revolution" appears  
as thirteen armbands in a sunfish belly.  

A monk in monk's clothing,  
convinced that retreat builds character,  
I read the biographies of lonely men  
out here by the well house  
and try to believe they chose it;  
stew a cult of love in false whiskey gulps  
and long distance calls.  
The poet and I pretend we know  
each other for a public that doesn't exist.  

Arms around a capillary,  
I learned love,  
that love's a container
containing nothing much:

hairpins, a kotex,

a list of objects and a map

of the soap factories...

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rust on tin,

    water

over flat stone and

the flowering weeds:

to live respectably in this meadow,
drink ache-cold water from a cup

and let the heart become an empty boxcar,

and let it contain a little straw,

and let me lie down there:

telling the truth is no more

important than that.

She lay face down in her own puke,

like most of us;

croaked, "Make glad the heart of man!"

and bubbled and snuffed and vomited

and died one last time.

"What?" I said.
Stag swags
his big rack in practice,
driving pine again.
He'd bring down the sun
if it were attached to anything but sky.

I'd like to see him
sieve the woman
hidden in the tree
from tit to tit and down
to gentle knee.
We would draw
her principle rivers
in blood,
    right here....

A tiny engineer at dinner
dams up the mashed potatoes,
making a gravy reservoir
that wipes out a thousand farms
for the good of the valley below.
Fork tines sing back vibrations
of drowned cattle floating over hay,
and catfish bumping in wheel spokes.
A shred of meat trolls this lake:
"I said, eat your vegetables."
The law abiding citizen of the cranium
tends his medulla geranium
in its silly pot, and hopes
the fucking thing doesn't drown
in affection. He goes in to dinner.

Through the window and through
the see-through blouse of the barmaid
he could read NP on a boxcar,
NP NP NP NP NP NP NP NP NP NP
and could see cowboys doing the men's-room
trot around a pool table;
stunned Blackfeet watched in silence,
wiped noses on stay-press sleeves,
and remembered
not a goddamn thing.

Skippers tell you
red, right, returning.
Don't forget it. You'll
rip the bottom out of everyting.

Crab and paprika taste sweet,
mornings, on East Baltimore Street.
Beer cans sweat, you can turn
to your nearest man, tell him
you never killed in Rahway or Galveston, 
or played piano in Ketchikan. 
You're much too free to lie, 
stranger.

The regions are carameled with crossroads; 
taffy apples of men's names glisten 
on a sheet of butcher paper, and my songs 
appear on a diner's placemat 
like the map of a state: 
  bird: 
  crop: 
  size: 
  date: 
  song: 
  dead-- 

All my poems begin, 
"driving back to the farm..."

Driving back to the farm 
I ran out of gas, 
looked back at the swale I'd crossed, 
crossed now by a marsh hawk big with mice; 
swung the jerry can 
out of its canvas straps,
and filled the tank
with maps.
The world pivots on leather hinges,
dry, cracked, torn fiber from fiber,
swings on its middle fulcrum,
banging on a pickup grille.
Mao's eye flaps its burlap lid
in the tool shed; and the moon
is a glass eye in an elk head
cataract with nicotine
and hung in a lodge twenty years.
Hunters drink their kills,
gut does too early.

The tool shed hollows out
its own smells: oil in gray dirt,
fishy leather, hammer-kissed
nails. She tears her slip
repeatedly, tells me: he who
measures, measures that eye in China,
and tells me: I am doe guts,
soft and honey colored, plopped
in pine needles, and how I am
in Canton, and I can't even
listen:
that oompah in Peking,  
blare of red anything  
in the hammered plowshares  
and the burlap eye and:  
alone by the banging door.
THE GORILLA AT TWENTY NINE YEARS

Only by looking at gorillas as living, feeling beings was I able to enter into the life of the group with comprehension, instead of remaining an ignorant spectator.

--George Schaller, The Year of the Gorilla.

Twenty nine years of stale cake and flat ale,
of the gorilla mouth belching bamboo shoots,
young and tender; twenty nine of moderate thought:
I expected a change of heart, at least of mine,
but iron frying pans clash on my ears,
a dime drops through the machine endlessly.
I can barely count to ten.

This is not the truth?
I want to hear one nursery rhyme
over and over a thousand times
until the syllables shatter
into Rumplestiltskin's gibber:
a gorilla with a prize in oratory.

Ten years of working at it,
ever quite went over the edge
of the abyss; I dangled,
a one-lunged arachnid on a thread
of twenties, a Detroit bankroll,
and clanged my garbage lids of "style."
Ten times I said, "my heart is chrome"
in lying notebooks. What I meant was "mirror."
Ten years of distrust, ten of hybrid scholastics;
in and out of schools like a heartbeat,
boring as a pulse. Ten of false selflessness.

For five years the heart knew
it could be exchanged for one of elastic,
a sock-foot beating in the chest.
Five years were free inside a bottle, perepeteia,
lashed like a waxed gorilla to vodka's mast.
The urinals sang five songs,
I strained at the five ropes of my fear.
A note propped on the mantle by the ship
in the bottle: she won't be back.

Five years dumb-tongued,
lax and sterile. Five of nest building,
a succession of gorilla butts I pressed to
pretending sleep or love. Five years
of women forgiving. Bless them,
fur and all.

One year of knowing I lived
through lives of other men,
knowing it's not right & wrong,
not process-product, or ball bearings
clicking in equal and opposite reactions,
not gorilla options in a laboratory.
One year of finding no principle
   in uncertainty,
a year of drawing the spear blade
half-way out to see if the tip is poisoned,
a cross-section of the dance.
This day the gorilla polled his friends:
they showed the tartar on their teeth,
scratched and grinned.
OUT FROM LOBSTER COVE

All day swaying in the tower
decy feet from deck,
beat hell out of it,

Beautiful Thing.
White caps are cotton a nurse uses
to swab out this boil of ocean.

One man, one vote, one thing
stretched and cut...
deaf to whole numbers
in the false wind of sixteen knots,
I look for the white bloat
of tuna belly turning on a mackerel.

What matters to me
I tear from the book and save:
part of a ticket, my father's
Mason's ring, thirty seconds
over Tokyo.

I see tops of heads
on the bridge, see from up here
that the blind must think with their eyes,
that the amputee loves me
with his pear-wood limb; that the dead,
the dead they live on the worms
in their lovely parts.

Boom swings full tilt inboard,
block of ice (300 lbs.) splinters
on the hatch cover.
     A tendon swells
and throbs.

He got way up the hill
in his Merc, popped the clutch
and almost smelled rubber
when the wheels left the dock.
His sleeping mistress slept on,
he went
     that far out.

Abeam of the swell,
the main bearing's a flounder brain
in the black guts of the engine.
Roll with it,
jelly-knee in the lookout.
Your brown arm throws a bottle leeward.
On board eight miles off Folly Point
you can't say this
is where I get off. No,
you're here all day,
   beat hell out of it.

Running across the bay,
salt caked on the binnacle,
I steered all night at 345°, or just off that;
my dirt-bred hands tight on the wheel,
until York Harbor's lights
clicked off at dawn, and I throttled back
into a channel once more.

See it skim the water out from Maine!
Hear it buzz, please, and thump on a short chop--
this new speedboat loaded with men and girls.
Far from this perch, binoculars are like a movie
you make up from parts of things.

   Tuna:
    we angle in from their port,
Gayhead harpooner balanced in the pulpit,
   switch off and glide
    into their school.
He hefts the ash lance with its double head.
It must enter
just behind where the ear would be.
It makes a boomerang, half in
and half out of water.

The black back rolls,
line sings around a fin
and the keg goes over, hollow.
He'll drag himself to death this way:
the dart working in toward his parts.

Where I went, I went in fits,
beat hell out of it,
and went stooped over
without sea-charts.
Where I went with my flesh
was my business, I forget.
I picked up the Joads out there,
hugged the lightning and kissed
the bride's sweet knee. I sulked
and moved at night. I forget.

Beautiful Thing.

Forty feet from the blade,
forty from the belly gouge,
I can't go down to drink
the blood from a cup,
we're after two.

I keep a level eye for surface signs:
a hump, a fin, a tail,
any part of flesh alive breaking water.
We hack at the parts we see,
trusting this space we live in.

The cracks in the windows filled,
the brine bubbled in,
his breath went out and stopped.
His wallet floated up around his eyes,
and butts swam from the ashtray.

He went out to the end of the dock,
to see what he could see:
part of the tugboat tied
to part of the dock. Part of the water
lapping both, o, cone of light!

holystone,

beaten out of it,
yellow soap and brass polish.
We wash parts from the deck,
skin and blood we couldn't use.
The liver soaks in brine, a few red steaks
fry in the galley. White fish
on a blue field, our tuna pennant rips the air.
One thing is done, and it bells
up in the throat.
AN EMPTY BOTTLE, A BROKEN HEART/AND YOU'RE STILL ON MY MIND

I have beaten out my exile.
--Ezra Pound

The country's tension twangs
in lightpoles, lights and wires.
Everything is sky from a bar door.
What could ruin a bourbon morning,
ten A.M. and 'round the first bend
of memory? I sit here on the frontier
where the cowboys cry-1-t
when cashing welfare checks,
where spurs hang out to dry
and the consonants do double duty-o.
The clear pine sings the saw to sleep;
clear throats bawl songs
to Lewis and Clark's waterfall.

Came west out of tin praise,
out of smoke and jackhammer verse
of the east to rest a minute
in Wyoming, watching three does
graze the median of a highway.

Forgive me, three,
for me two wives and stupid lovers,
for me this sapling ignorance
and have another drink.

I brought a woman with me, and we lived so close
I learned to love her
in this land of cabins and calendar art, where the calibers of guns increase behind their decimal points and mean more than a breadth of heart.

Have a drink.
We'll let the gouge of false madness buy a round.
Don't coddle the egg of scholarship.
Learn diffidence and memory, acquire a dictionary.

How the rainbow shivers under the priest of this rock!
It pales in my creel, a lesson in optics. It's not what I came here for, but it's not half bad.

The tavern boss eyes his snowmobile, a gas cat that tracks its prey by radar, and with a noise you remember
and remember.

A barber pole screws
through my hangover, a red way
up purgatory's mountain.
Clippers hum through hair
that grew from another love affair.
A flag waves on the cash register.

But these still-shots fade
like a trout's rainbow;
I wanted to get inside things,
like my skin for instance
after instance to see what gave:
it was me, my Song.

Even the woman's gone from this dirty snow
and morning whiskey;
went to San Francisco to talk with friends
in pastel rooms. She speaks of exile.

The stove's metal shrinks and groans,
the bitch dog sleeps by my leg;
I read esthetics in lamp light.

Two hard rolls in a restaurant:
two graves in Albion, hardly fresh
(Eastern Star, pyramid and eye),
two Masonic crypts in my eyelids
mirror the breadbasket of the country.

Near the cemetery gate
a girl passed out leaflets
protesting something or other.
Three of her toenails were painted.
She said she was free,
but lines around her eyes
squeaked with bondage.
Some people can't tell
the difference between freedom and release.

A gull slick with crude
wobbles down the beach,
has his wings spread
for a news photographer.
The cry goes up
like last year's war poem,
"Select yer cause/with care,
then write it up."
So much depends,
said the white chicken,
on a little oil....
All my change is in the jukebox,
thick glass retains my hand
and the morning moves toward noon.
Counting losses is a book keeping I admired;
I thought my life would audit its own accounts,
but I'm still what I came here with,
a skin and a plan.