1992

Dark Graces

Dennis Held

The University of Montana

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DARK GRACES

by Dennis Held

B.A., The Evergreen State College, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1992

Approved by

Chair, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

October 25, 1993
Date
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My thanks to the editors of the following publications, in which some of these poems first appeared, often in altered states:

"Spring Stone Picking" in the *Cooper Point Journal*
"Satan Owns a Boneyard" in *CutBank*
"Sacrifice" in the *Fuller Poetry Prize Publication*
"A God's Song: Shamirpet, India" and "Learning from the Dead" in *The Guadalupe Review*
"Two Ships in Broad Daylight" in *The Illinois Review*
"Dog-Day Pets" and "Paradise Springs" in *Kinnikinnik*
"The Host" in *The Madison Review*
"Letter to Mary from Missoula" in *Northern Lights*
"Reuben, Sunday Morning, 1967" in *Poetry*
"Leviathan" in *Slightly West*
"Impact" in *Tar River Poetry*
"The Worst Fools" in *The Windy Hill Review*
KETTLE MORAINE

I read the language of the land
in my brother Karl's geography book:

drumlin, esker, kame and kettle,
yazoo stream, dolomite escarpment
recessional moraine, terminal moraine.

When I walked among the ponds and ridges
I knew their names and I could feel
the heedless power of the glacier,
a continent of ice pressing over
the old land, dragging itself south
an inch a year.

And I could see the dull bully
slowly shouldering through,
pounding mountains into valleys,
digging deep into the soft flesh
of the continent, leaving great
gaping holes for the earth
to fill with meltwater.

Huron Ontario Michigan Erie Superior
They taught me how to remember:
the first letters all together spell homes.
Mr. Marquardt made us square our corners on the way to the playground, marched us two linoleum boxes out from the wall, every day. Harold Radke yanked a random pony tail and Mr. Marquardt grabbed Harold's hair--"How do you like it?"--pushed his nose onto the cross chalked on the blackboard, made him hold dictionaries at arm's length, pulling his shoulders into pain I could feel Marquardt enjoy. I turned away, the kid anybody could make cry, and did. He hid where they could always find him.
At twelve I mixed shots of instant coffee and lemon juice, wincing it down to keep me up late to watch Dr. Cadaverino's scary movies with three older brothers who played Dad's jazz records Saturday nights, Boots Randolph and Bix Beiderbecke's clarinet needling through the popcorned air. That music wasn't made of the wrenching bleats so much as the pauses between, the unnamed desire that dangled from the end of one note then leaned forward, lingered, and reached for the next sound in longing.

The folks were off to Wagner's Dugout for fish fry and brandy old-fashioneds. They'd bring us back peanuts in Mom's fat purse, two parents all giggly and ready for bed. They chased us upstairs, and when everyone else was asleep I rolled over for my brother, who slid in beside me and after a back rub I took his cock in my mouth. "Do it until I get that feeling" he whispered, not yet nine. Some kind of love hovered between us, and we knew what we did was wrong and felt good and we'd do it again. Later, we turned our backs to each other so we wouldn't tangle our thin arms. In the quiet, I remembered the music, and listened for that once-in-a-while sound, a deep ache alone in the dark.
THE GOOD INSIDE

I.
Two rowboats full of uniformed men
lowered a wire cage with bullhead minnows
to the bottom of Lannon Quarry, dumped
50-gallon drums of poison overboard
then checked to make sure the bullheads
were dead. With longhandled nets the skimmed
hundreds of fish, some still twitching
the surface--bluegills, mostly, a walleye
or two. They wanted to manage
the quarry for trout.

II.
Hot Sundays we watched Land-O-Lakes league
Double-A Legion hardball games in Lannon,
the diamond surrounded by handpainted signs
for Carl's Soap Center, Halquist Stone,
and behind, abandoned limestone quarries
we scrambled in, chasing down homers.
Half-full of water, ringed by rusted cranes
those pits drowned a couple kids each summer,
so we watched our step, as we had been told.
Before the game, Rick Naughton's dad
pulled a Waukesha County tractor around
the bleachers, pulling a fogger that blew
a scarf of pure DDT into the evening air
shocked blue by stadium lights.
We trailed in the smoke, children
of shadow adrift in the clouds
while our dads and grandpas
nursed shorties of Pabst.

(stanza break)
III.
The thick liquid had a skull
on the can, my dad spraying
burdock at the orchard's edge.
I knelt close, afraid to touch
the thistle tips curling back
toward some blackened past
I didn't want to know about.
The poison made the plant
destroy itself from the inside.
The sprayer came from Mr. Lazynski
who owned my dad's work.
Saturdays I'd help cut grass
at the boss's lodge, then fish
in the man-made pond for bass.
Scouring the pool with acid,
Dad crawled out, heaving, face
slack and yellow, then back in
with a plastic bag over his head,
ten breaths at a time.
"In goes the good air,
out goes the bad air"
we learned at school
and I wondered what inside us
turned sweet air to poison.
REPAIRS

I.
Work cars began as the family wagon, but after eight kids, one always learning to drive, things stopped working. Dad learned where to slap the dash to start the radio, tucked a screwdriver into the defroster, clamped the muffler with Campbell's cans. The car was a tangle of hacksaws and wrenches, vice grips and lug nuts--a tool box he drove. Wax paper from sweet rolls got sucked out the floorboard rust holes you could see the road through. Under the seat, a Playboy for me to read when no one was home, rubbing young man flesh through dirty blue jeans. Brake jobs waited until the metal shrieked and Mom said "Reuben, it just isn't safe." Being broken wasn't the same as needing to be fixed.

II.
My seventeenth birthday, we finally fought. "I need the car. I've got a date." "Road's too slick. You can walk." I grabbed the keys and he snatched my wrist, choked them out. "You'll do as I say." Into the snow I ran barefoot and he chased me, past the orchard into the swamp, my ankles raw from ice. He kept coming on until I dropped, shaking in the cattails and sawgrass. Wheezing, he marched me back, didn't hit me, didn't have to.
At thirteen, shooting hoops with a broken arm made sense until the fat kid, coach's son, came down hard on my right ankle. Across the gym, my brother heard it pop.

First, the doctor sawed the arm cast off. I didn't recognize what came out hooked to my shoulder, skin hung on bone, wrinkled, a turtle's scaly leg.

It stunk, dry, like hair on fire. Weak and weightless, it bobbed alongside, an annoying dog that would never go away.

Getting this unexpected body part wasn't like my new grown hairs below, they came in slow, one at a time, gave me a chance to adjust.

Was this how my mom felt when she was pregnant, watching her body grow away from her?

And how did it feel to me, to my seven brothers and sisters, to everyone ever born, growing into our skin from within?

The nurse smoothed the plaster around my calf, damp and heavy like a warm hand around me, preparing my next foreign limb.
ABANDON

Pelted with forty-mile-an-hour gravel
the glaciers hauled for punishment,
I skid down the dirt road in Wild
Rose, Wisconsin on a red plastic saucer
with ten feet of bad rope between me
and the bumper of Jerome Pokorny's
Pontiac, oven mitts for safety gloves,
my helmet a paper bag squeezing a towel
around my adolescent forehead, dipping
a shoulder to scuff off the ruts,
a telescoped blur of dirt and chrome--

then the blistered sled melting against
my butt, the road a funnel fenced by pines,
Jerome slows for the final turn and I
tuck a shoulder, duck my chin and go
for the roll, the blind headlong tumble
toward some indefinite mix
of physics and luck, whatever's
at the end of a boyhood
waiting for me in the dust.
Complacencies of the pee-jays, and late
Instant Folgers and fried liver sausage on the sofa,
And the green-and-gold of the Packers
On the black and white Zenith swirl and sweep to remove
The unholy husk of weekday work and hustle.
He listens to Stan Kenton and Pee Wee Hunt
A little, and he ignores the dark
Encroachment, that old catastrophe, for a moment,
As a horn blues up the living room.
The smell of the liver and the sweet, clear notes
Seem things singular, declaring themselves alive,
Skimming lightly across untested water.
The day unwinds like a funeral procession with no corpse,
Breathing for the sake of our own breaths
Through the all-forgiving air, on thick ice,
Alive for the dream of the deep pool below.
BEDROCK BLUES

Fred's pounding the door again, put out by
His own cat, his limestone fists a cartoon blur.
Those mitts were just helpless, up in the air
In Mr. Slate's office as Fred stomped out,

A transmuted Gleason with a wall
Of frustration that goes back before
The stone age started. At home, he hollers
At Barney, who knows like we do that Fred's

Not mad at him, he's yelling at the guy
Inside who can't quite get a handle on
The random chunks of life that blot out
The sun and come straight at him, too big

To dodge. Later, he'll make up with Barney,
Kiss Wilma and we'll know he means it. Well,
Here's to you, Fred, a toast in your honor,
Just one more insignificant gesture,

Like beating a door, like saying a prayer,
Like falling in love and staying there.
TORNADO AT FOUR

Mom shook us awake. "Hurry up, into the kitchen, there's a bad storm coming."
She smiled but her eyes made us move.
The house went dark and I held Jim's hand in the hallway, Davie crying soft behind us.
A fat church candle sputtered beneath the table, my dad on his knees, and we crawled under.
All around, a roaring howl, the wind of the dead.
We felt the house move, and waited.

All the windows blew in at once, rain slashing inside our house.
A tree punched through the back door, a swirl of leaves, inch-long fingers of glass pounded into the walls.
We shivered together, holding each other, too quiet to cry.

Next morning, our locust trees stood bare, stripped and corkscrewed at the tops.
Dad held a shingle, stared at the roof.
Mom hugged her chest with eyes deep as weather.
In my bed I found a branch, pale and smooth with all the bark gone, a limb the shape and size of a child's bent arm.
ON THE JOB

Highway 32 north to fish Bear Paw Lake with my friend Steve, the dispatcher whose father owns Dawes, the crane outfit that laid me off last Friday. "Don't sweat the cash," he says, "I'll buy the gas and beer. You can clean fish." We fill the company Suburban with diesel at the only station in Cecil, climb a mile out of town and the truck sputters, quits. Steve looks under the hood. "Shit, it takes regular." Forty gallons of bad gas.

A skinny guy--late teens--shrugs up in oily green coveralls, says "Hell, I'll get it out if I can keep it." A jog downhill to a trailer home and back, he circles a half moon of five-gallon buckets, wags four feet of stiff black hose, sets his face, blows out his air and sucks hard, eyes clamped tight and head shaking, flips the hose in a pail, turns toward me and gags, and jewel-red fuel pours from his mouth. He retches, wipes his eyes on his sleeve. His face carries the dull weight of age. The kid hangs onto the luggage rack, looks off west, the sun going down.

He helps us roll the truck to the station, we fill again, regular, and we're ready to leave Cecil for good. Steve digs out a twenty. "Take it, you earned it." "No," he says, no name over his pocket, then he does, ducks his chin. "I shouldn't." He won't take a ride, walks off toward the ring of buckets, waiting alongside the road.
FIRST BLUES

Nobody else seemed to mind
when a big truck with a bell
on the door hauled up
and drilled my yard.
"Stay clear kid," the workman said.
The hole grew down like an icicle.
They slid a skinned pole in
and packed raw dirt around.
One man rose in a metal basket,
pounded brown wire holders
and ran wires back to the barn.
The truck tires left
wide ruts in our soft lawn.

"Cut out your howling, Jesus,
it's only a pole," my brother said.
When it got hot I went outside
and sat with my back pressed flat
against the burning creosote and cried,
not sure why but already in love
with the sliver of cold,
the mysterious glimmer of hurt
that felt just right, mine alone.
I held the pain next to the pleasure,
kept them distinct, separate like me
and the boy with his skin
to the splinters, like the pole
and the hole it filled.
SWEEPER

I sweep the streets of Waukesha, a town done up in lamps and benches, cobblestone and central springhouse, parks along the Fox. Years ago, famous people came to drink and bathe in fabled healing waters: Bethesda Springs, Paradise Springs, European-style artesian wonders. Mary Lincoln stayed a week, after the tragedy. But limestone's healing powers fizzled, downtown hit hard times, so they hired me to push a cart with brooms and maps. I sweep their sidewalks, help the shoppers find their way through one-way streets and dead-end alleys, downtown Waukesha.

The river hunches over a shallow gravel bar, raising its old backbone. A hypodermic needle lies alongside two bleached crayfish claws at water's edge. Broken glass mosaics pave the alley down by Gaspar Street. The early morning crowd hits K & D's and Hammer's Landing--second shifters, Mexican laborers and just plain drunks with skin that stinks. Out on Main Street, cigar butts roll in front of the rooming house, Lucky Strike straights line the cracks outside Chicago Ed's tattoo parlor. Clumps of hair drift out from Dick the Barber's shop. He offers me a job: "Not cutting hair, I got a buddy needs some guys to build a bridge out by Eau Claire." No thanks--I sweep the streets of Waukesha.

(stanza break)
Cold mornings, a stocking cap and gloves, two sweaters and my cart. Broken pigeon eggs show half-formed birds, bulging eyes and shiny skin. I sweep them off the sidewalk to the gutter—the bristles send a shiver of flesh through my chilled fingers, tight around the handle.

A permanent oil slick blacks the pavement before the Checker Taxi Company. Fat young guys with cigars packed in their mouths drive drunks and old people back to their homes. The rescue squad pulls up at the rooming house but today leaves empty. Yesterday some guy dropped dead of a heart attack and split his head when he fell. I sweep across the blackened stain.

Carol who owns the flower shop talks to me but looks down at my cart. "You know, I think they ought to get a retarded to do your job—no offense—but since we are the county seat we got all these social service cases running loose, maybe they could give one of them your job, get them off the streets." She looks off at the crab apple trees, heavy with blossoms, and smiles. "Just you wait till those petals fall, then you'll have some sweeping to do."

Two-high school kids hump by as I sweep past. One spits at my feet, stops to look me in the eye, makes sure I know it's no mistake. An old guy sees me sweeping butts. "I guess then Charlie Knoll is dead. He used to save the butts from taverns, drank foam the barkeep skimmed off the top. Had a shack down by the river, lived off what he found in garbage cans. Us kids would bug him, 'Hey Charlie Knoll, you got limberger cheese in your pockets?'

(no stanza break)
Then we'd run like hell." He coughs on down the sidewalk. A tiny woman in a tan cloth coat grabs my arm, her shoulder sporting a six-inch square rhinestone American flag pin. "I want to say, God bless you and your work. I saw you sweeping and I stopped my car to tell you--well, God bless you and your work."
THE FIST OF GRACE

At 12:10 we met in the gym, a twitchy one-credit dozen. *Show up once a week and you get the A*, Jerry Klingbeil said, five feet of trim lilt and swagger, fencing coach, golf of course and grey in the sideburns gymnast. *But ballroom dance, that, ladies and gents, is art.*

He hurried us through the standard steps: foxtrot, waltz, a fumbling jitterbug. *Just step slide step* he begged us, clunky boxmakers who forgot each week's new spins.

But Jerry's every partner turned to grace. *You got to hold them firm at the elbow. Let them know you mean it guys, with pressure. You.* A different woman every time, prettiest first, last my partner, Mindy, easily fifty pounds over his one-twenty-five.

She glided through turns I'd kicked her calf on. *Let them know which way to go. Give them a little boost. It helps.*

Halfway into the semester, Jerry waved us over. *Forget it. Time for the Latin numbers.* Cha-cha, samba, tango, rhumba. *Gentleman, it's in the attitude. Stiff above the waist but loose in the hips.*

I let Mindy be light as we swivelled sweet down the foul line, our grips waiting at the turns, cheeks just brushing, guided by new Latin hands. We broke our first sweat together, heels chopping the hardwood slats, our dips propelled by my unthinking shoves, the fist of grace.

(stanza break)
Jerry slapped a firm hand on my damp back. *Watch all that swishing. Don't want to look like a fag.* I nod, and feel Mindy wince in my hands. Our feet resume their scuffing, the rhythm of maybe and mostly no.
LIFE AFTER

The rainbow nips a chartreuse jig,  
is lifted clear and slaps the ice  
three swipes before I knock its head,  
not mercy but to keep the meat  
from bruising. To find its food,  
I slit the belly, and look  
for the dead inside—a minnow,  
slick and pasty white, a ball  
of leeches, water mites—instead  
the caddis larva, lifting one feeble leg  
as if in courtly address, a bow,  
its stone house already softened  
by the trout's insistant fluids  
but waving, meekly, still alive  
in mile-high mountain air.  
I placed it gently like a communion  
host on my tongue, closed my eyes  
and pulsed with the larval throb.  
When its fire was spent, I blessed,  
cursed and swallowed, and as the trout  
came back to life, I walked home.
A balding man, a little older than me, 
old enough to have gone pushes an open 
stroller, runs his fingers over the marks 
chiseled in granite, a hole alongside 
each name, one filled by a plastic rose. 
He raps the bronze Vietnam soldier, a hollow 
ring. Larger than life, his boots cast a bit 
rough, he looks up into the impassive face 
of a muscular angel who carries him aloft. 
The man with the baby cries, tears perhaps 
not specific to any name except his own. 
The sprinklers turn themselves off. The spruce 
let slip the beaded drops in late July's last sun. 
The grass is trimmed close, rose gardens laid out 
in parallel plots around a concrete obelisk 
to World War Two vets. He turns to the names 
of the roses, to the roses themselves: Pink Peace, 
Holiday, Remembrance, Fireball. Snapping 
blurred photos before the light fades, 
he stands beneath pines, new shoots 
below the circles where branches were sheared. 
He turns to go and the sprinkler starts up, 
catches the stroller and the baby hollers. 
The father lifts the child, holds it dry for now 
and it quiets, under the sheltering needles.

PARADISE SPRINGS

Late snow slumped in shadowed ditches
but frost long gone from the ground,
first day alone together for two lovers.
We find a good name on the map,
Paradise Springs, a healing spa
for turn-of-the-century dandies who sport
in rain-streaked photos on posts along the path,
elegant ladies carrying parasols, taking the air
in genteel canoes.

The old hotel's foundation
crumbles in jewelweed and burdock.
Springpond trout nip the grubs I dig
from beneath damp rocks. The mortar
flakes off the roofless springhouse walls,
but fieldstone holds eight sides up to the sky.
We dip in the roiling spring, and all we know
is cold that tightens our skin, sucks wind
from our astonished lungs.

Crouching through dense
dogwood, through low pines downstream
we find a patch of warming sun, a small pool.
Holding you, the spring whirls
through me in distant shivers.
The trees and moss reflect
our true voices: no words,
just cries of loving.
FIRST TIME

Nervous, of course, and more than slightly cowed, I pull into the rendezvous ten minutes early, pace the mattress of needles and wonder. Greg's pick-up swings into the empty lot, he bounces out before it's stopped, tugs boots and two funky hats from his truck and takes me down to where it all begins.

I stretch my feet into new rubber waders, cumbersome, lovely. He slides into his neoprene, slips on a khaki vest with pouches and rings, pockets with rulers, a tuft of sheepskin sprouting over one breast, net on a cord and a bit of bicycle tire: to straighten the line. He shows me a blood knot for curly new leader then two feet of tippet of four-pound mono and finally the fly—an inch-long brutish nymph of thread and feather, the golden stone. "Strip out a few yards and keep your arm high, but most of all don't break your wrist." My limp cast slaps the fly down ten feet out, but his silky arcs unfurl beyond sight, into the slow track of flat water along the far bank. I wade in slow, unsure how to feel my way, the rocks slick with silt.

(no stanza break)
The river tugs my legs, confident,
   ice-pick cold and persuasive,
   pure muscle and vigor, pulling
   me down to a bed of stone.

"Cast to the back of that diamond chop"
Greg says in a language I never before heard
but know--a German brown might be lurking.
My index finger blisters as I work to flip
the nymph to slack water, and once, my arm
high, wrist unbent, a cast that sings
above me, the line in a gracious loop
that unfolds with gesture, a gracious bow.
A small trout taps the astonished surface,
finds the steel, a short run and I
lose it unseen, hook a willow or two
on the shore behind, and call it a day.

We bump the gravel mile back to the Florence
IGA store, wet from the waist down, slogging
the everyday aisles of chips and beef, up
to the front for our Swisher Sweet cigars.
The river runs still in my legs.
The clerk, white hair in a froth,
smiles at our puddles. "You boys
been on the Bitterroot?" Hell yes--
no fish in the cooler but many
bright flies in my new hat.
AUBADE FOR A PLASTIC BAG

Bag dancer,
the seventh veil alive, you
twist and writhe beside
the songless Montana highway.
Your gravel dancing pulls me
over with a breathless chant of rhythm,
rising delighted in diesel thermals,
Jesus, can you shimmy, whirling,
your translucent body swelled,
undulant, a plush champagne grape,
soft belly round
as a Rubens beauty.

I gasp
in the logtruck fury
that spills you upward, again
and again, filled with dust or
indifference or possibly
love.

When it's almost too much,
when I find my distant hand
clasping the door latch,
unbound to any yardarm,

a cabover

Freightliner rolls by
with a downshifted wink of smoke,
a two-trailer wiggle, and you
are gone for good, sucked
into the impatient vacuum
of longing, and I
am alone, grinning
like a fool, not quite
full of regret.
The highest grapes
remain unplucked,
but I am still
a fox with a taste
for sour.
LETTER TO MARY FROM MISSOULA

Start with a hike up my back yard, the hillside an upturned basket of blooms, lupines and yellowbells and mountain lilies, broad indecent swatches of arrowroot, a snappy crimson of Indian paintbrush and the breathy purple of heather littered with elk and fox scat and magpie feathers, something's meal amid the loose scrabble of slate cut with glistening chunks of reluctant quartz, blue-veined and crumbling, then back down to the street, all Missoula turned out for the Welcome Back from the Persian Gulf parade with a zillion yellow ribbons and a real live Prisoner of War, the one whose beat-up face graced the cover of Newsweek, his name's been up in 24-point Bodoni Bold, by God, and chartreuse fire engines tooting sirens and the Little League and Boy Scouts and National Guard and ROTC cadets all in their uniforms and the Junior Miss and a Brigadier General in a convertible with a late-teen beauty queen in a red dance-hall-girl dress with lots of breast showing and two fighter jets ripping by so low my friend Mark and I can't talk and the crowning glory, a real live tank, no shit, clanking down Higgins Street, crossing the Clark Fork, and slogans on banners: "747th Engineering Brigade--We Went and Got the Job Done" with stars for punctuation marks and me not saying a word, Mark's ponytail already earning us hard glares from fellow countrymen and World War One vets in closed cars trembling and smiling under brittle pith helmets and your letter hot in my pocket from Prague about the pranksters who painted the one Russian tank left in town pink, too shocking in fact to do that here where they'd have your hide, wouldn't rest till they did, damn straight, well hell, ain't America great.
ADRIFT ON AN ICE FLOE, LAKE SUPERIOR

My shiner minnow, lightly hooked, will swim below me as I drift, a continent cut loose from moorings. For now, why not fish? Night pulls in like a train to the station of darkness.

This hole connects me to the lake, a circle all the way down to hard bottom. The edge of my ice raft is softened by warm air. Murky, it slicks my cheek with a veil of moisture.

At home, the circle waits inside the track. My train rolls slowly past familiar buildings, nice and easy around the bends, comes back soft, like sleep, to where it was in the beginning.

If Vera thinks of me at all, she'll know that I am anchored, steady, to this hole.
PEELING

Her daughter's thin fingers pull
the peeler slow, press the potato's length
in an unsure glide. At thirteen,
only one year older than this young child,
she'd worked for wages, quit sixth grade
to help out when her father left home again.
She peeled for hours at Merrill Hills
country club, near Germantown
where they rented a house without
enough rooms along the railroad tracks.

In the restaurant basement, her back
to the walk-in cooler, the peeler flew,
long strips flicked off with an easy slide
into a black kettle between her feet,
gritty potatoes pulled from burlap sacks.
Dust rose as she shifted, sneezed,
then saw the man watching from the steps,
his face red and pock-marked, smiling.
Her eyes ran from the dust,
and she felt the clutch
of his stare.

No, she remembers,
he left then, that was the first time.
She worked a month until her father
came home and the house got small again.
Still, at night, she sees the white bodies
of potatoes, and her hands
cramp from the ache.
THE WORST FOOLS

This pond is just about ready to rest.

The air, cut thin by chill, holds only the click of brittle rushes shuffling in a cool breeze.

A curled oak leaf lies anchored, decaying. Next year's marl then back, food for the open-mouthed lilies.

Bent reeds play puzzle on my faded vision. Where does the reflection start, where does the reed stop?

Two ducks slide soft across the long mirror trailing ripples.

Bright ember glows through the net of bare trees. The tired sun drags down.

Its red-tinted tracks on the shore of dark clouds are slowly eroded.

And I should get home. I forgot my old watch cap. I too have grown cold.
A GOD'S SONG: SHAMIRPET, INDIA

But then, some mornings I awake so proud
of my divinity I feel my horns
can scoop the disappearing moon and hold it
where I please. And when the mortals mark
their foreheads with the ashes of my dung,
I know what comfort my existence
lends to lives of dust and hunger.
And when I walk among them, all bow low.
No hand is raised to hurry my slow passage.

But when the infidels clamor through the marketplace
my head hangs low, my nostrils in the dust.
They curse my name and lash my flanks with sticks.
They say my flesh could steal from death
a thousand hungry widows. They say
I feed upon the grain
of starving children.

They want me gone.

But I am
not moved.
OCTOBER

Damn it all, nearly knocked the bird cage over
and I barely bumped it. Steinbeck
the canary probably wouldn't have survived the crash.
Claire'd be all busted up
since we just lost the parakeet, Billy Budd, last week--
some strange bird disease.
We tried everything: vitamins, first, then antibiotics.
Not much we could do, I guess.
That three-legged stand just isn't that sturdy,
so maybe I'll give Billy's cage
a good cleaning with bleach, put Steinbeck in there.
Though Claire probably won't want to look at that cage.

Brain's fifteen and he's driving
Claire to the store today in sleet
while I do the dishes and try
not to kill anything else.
DOG-DAY PETS

Squatting on the shores in Plainview Subdivision, among the houses of our friends, bullfrogs roared, pond lions defying our midsummer lunges, tennies lost to vacuum muck.

Frogs were only daylong transients in my backyard animal prison camp, a foot-deep dark blue kiddie pool bought at Gesserts with birthday cash.

We staged sidewalk crayfish races to amuse ourselves, summer-stunned boys turned thumbs-down Caesers at our underwater Coliseum: Crawdad versus The Perch, an outside aquarium with limestone fish buildings, bluegills and water lilies hauled in plastic buckets barefoot along the blistered highway.

Bad teenagers put painted turtles upside-down on Townline Road, but we pulled Mission Impossible rescues, condemned the gaudy and desperate reptiles to pace the pool walls like zoo leopards, crude claws dulled on stiff plastic.

When back-to-school ads clogged the August Menomonee Falls News, we filled our canteens for a final campaign of hiking or grass fires or anything that felt like true summer.

I came home to belly-up bluegills fuzzy with rot, turtles freed from their shells by flies. Behind the barn I dumped them out, retched at the bad flesh, saved the rocks and cracked pool for next summer.
THE BAD KID

Down Lannon Road among the farms sat shotgun shacks, converted turkey houses rented out to swollen families with absent dads and cars on blocks--Katzers, Klemples, Gordy Sable--patched-pants kids with broken teeth, slow for a couple months in math before they moved away.

They told of a kid who lived alone in a roofless coop with an old coal stove where years ago they raised the peepers, some older kid who never went to school who stuck his jackknife in a cow's full bag until blood and milk spilled together, somebody's kid who didn't live there anymore, some kid worse than you could imagine, some kid worse than us.
LEARNING FROM THE DEAD

Tim and I walk past a baby in a tall jar of tea-colored liquid, a precise oval of skin cut from chest to just below his navel, intestines coiled like a string of cartoon sausages. The professor lectures on the muscles of the shoulder, points to a life-size wall chart like my mom's old medical book with clear plastic plates of a man and a woman, side by side. I could peel them apart, page by page, lift the skin, the muscles, the internal organs, all the way down to the bones.

Through a locked door, a long white room with seven steel tanks on legs. Tim opens the hinged cover. "This is Old Joe." A man floats face-down in a clear fluid that stings my nose. His skin's removed, back muscles ribbed like grey corduroy. The students point with pencils, name the parts, then turn him over. Stiff, reluctant, Joe rolls with a quiet splash. His nose and eyes are gone.

In the only picture my father has of the Korean War he kneels, smiling, beer in hand. Behind him, long strings of ears the Turkish soldiers cut from Chinese corpses. "That was a long time ago," is all he'll say about the war.

(stanza break)
I wonder who could do this,
strip a man of his skin,
neatly trim his face away.
A medical student, someone
like Tim, someone I might know.
Or I could, I probably could.
A girl on a too-big bicycle looks back
over her right shoulder, yanks the bike
square into my Nova's grill, going twenty-five.
She snaps up into the dangerous air, her hands
held up to fight me off, face turned away--
the thud of bone and flesh on glass.
Her neck jerks, she slides up over the windshield,
one bare leg and a tennis shoe the last I see.
She becomes the girl who hurls toward me
in nightmares, and I am the faceless man
in her bad dreams forever.

I realize I am stopped, put the car in park.
Ten feet away, the girl lies perfectly
still in the hopeless roadside dust,
curled obscenely, one shoe off, looking
as though I have thrown her there, hard,
not crying, not making a sound.

She pushes to her feet, staggers two steps
and falls into my arms. My absent hands
catch her. "My bike, you ruined my bike."
Her shoulders twitch with sobs.
I sit with her head in my lap, silent,
the words I hold back: I am sorry.
Here is a young man holding a broken girl.

I hear a siren, see kids running
from sudden huddles on driveways.
The paramedics rub her legs,
check her ribs for breaks.
The ambulance driver touches my arm--
"She's all right, she's going to be all right."
They strap the girl on a stretcher,
pull away slowly with lights, no siren.
The cop hands me his clipboard with an accident form and a drawing of a road, a bike, a car. I am Vehicle A. Writing it down, a storm in my hands, I try to get the words just right. All I can say is I hit her.

I drive past the skid marks, two long fingers a block away from my home. Kids on bikes point at my car.
HERE AND GONE

I.
The kids on the bus whispered it:
"Yvonne Arndt's brother got killed
in a car wreck down on Schlei Road."
We all saw the spot--two black stripes
where the brakes locked up, tiny squares
of broken glass and the tree:
foot-wide gash in an oak
big around as a fat man,
bark tore raw like a wound.
We drove past it twice a day,
even after Yvonne
started riding the bus again,
the day after the funeral.

II.
Six-foot arcs scarred in gray boards
just beneath the second-floor window
of a deserted farm house in Plover.
Scratches left by branches long since gone,
they whisper of a tree
cut down, and a child
who lay awake with the sound
of the branch scrape
late in fall,
with the leaves all down.
I.
Sorry, Karl, but if not you some other guy would have gotten around to naming it all, embodied that old Adam impulse, but even your name got the treatment, your lowbrow sloppy Swedish got sweetened into Latin—Carolus, for Christ's sake—but after all you were the specific man to draw boxes around all the living: genus, phylum, species, family, individual. Only 200 years ago you gave us the monikers for everything alive, the first step in owning them all. Snail darter, Florida panther, grizzly bear, Blackfeet, Crow, Flathead, gook. The rest is easy. We're naming ourselves.

II.
In fifth grade, the euglena was my favorite: "An organism so simple experts can't agree whether it is a plant or an animal, a green protozoan with a single flagellum and characteristic red pigment spot." The dictionary told a story: from glene, Latin for the pupil of the eye, cousin by sound to Eugene, the reckless uncle who died coming home from deer hunting, drunk, the coffin around him like a new name.

(--for Karl von Linne, aka Linnaeus)
LEVIATHAN

Ribs made of water,
quarter mile spine
of stainless steel
on eight sets of legs
with soft black feet,
crawling the corn
and feeding itself
to the hungry grain.

A sucking tendril
at its farthest end
sinks deep into the earth,
draws up the liquid difference
between dust and mud, life
and death on these hard plains.

It moves slow, allows
the suckling shoots a long
pull as their mouths unfurl
to the torrid blue.

Late autumn, rest,
the grown stalks cut
and ground to fodder,
waiting in icy patience
for the spring.
PASTORAL

En route, the silver car a greasy sheen of Kansas insects.

A couple.

In a stone-pocked pasture a crow, its claws in a red calf, slack and alone, tugging off slivers of flesh. Christ, he says, why doesn't somebody clean that up?

She nods, the black bird lifts and returns to pull at the tender, fly-blown anus. A tear carves down the ditch of her cheek.

The darkening road rises between them.
IN HATRED OF BIRTH

When mothers rush back into flaming houses for inaccurate children's pictures, who blocks the way and who's to save? These remnant missals signal some break in the traditional fabric of wishes, a visceral shifting of regret from one generation to the next, a desire for a slight demise no different from our own, no more or less meaningful than a last kiss thrown before a dive off the usual bridge into the waiting arms of our next best future, driven upward at 32 feet per second (and squared, as always), an outward fling to this tempting diversion we call, for better and worse, the end.
TWO SHIPS IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

Got a twenty buck a day Robitussin habit and a prickly attitude, so just put down that crossways tire iron, Eunace, and I'll roll you for the last purple bottle. That blistermouthed pastor at the rectory scratched my Mohicans for the last time, sister, and it's a bet you ought to haul your ill-gotten booty clear of here by a county or two. Moroccan Claude don't sell those wahoo smokes no more, seven for twenty, and the light man who hired me to buck in the Marshall amps balled up the belly of his work shirt with cheap sweat and vigor and Jesus, could that mysterious Marlys shimmy, housekey poked in her hard-flung fist, a smacked up whorl of juice and drab beauty. When the marl of a spent life's scripted with no more pomp than a pork belly's got, it's time to roost in a trustworthy port, a false slip of hope we pull our sea-worn ships to, all hapless and shallow, hollow and ready for love.
THE TROLL

Sixth Street viaduct, 95 degrees
at twenty past seven in the morning.
Ahead, the road is rising,
swinging up slowly on giant hinges
because the Huron Cement ship
needs to go under.
The kid in the heavy metal
t-shirt swings his elbow-long
shudder of hair and bums
a light from a car in line,
goes back to jamming his air
guitar, head bobbing hard.
He hangs his skull
and cross bones flag
on the candy-striped gate
that holds all the cars back.
A dusty blue gull drifts
over the truck before me.
Coal smoke pitches from the red
and black smokestack, a twenty-foot
H outlined by golden rivets.
The name's painted on the side--
it's the S. T. Crapo!
The man in the glass room
lowers the bridge and the kid
walks up the road while it
slides down, waving his flag like mad.
Mephisto Motors, Used Parts and Whole Wrecks, nine miles out of town, the handmade I-beam gate patrolled by a three-legged mongrel, a hundred and fifty pound snarl with bad gums and oily fur. The boss is in the shed out back, no mask, joining iron with that resolute blue spark, slashing through steel with a torch, skrick-skrick and the air goes from zero to 2000 degrees in nothing flat, a cigar stub, unlit, tucked under one cheek and by god he's grinning as he looks out over his lot: an obscure Belvedere, a misspent Fury on cinder blocks, Valiant in decorous rust, seats blown like a milkweed pod, black Falcon up to its trunk in muck. "Meat," he hacks, "that car's bad meat and you're lucky if I take it off your hands, what the fuck you mean what'll I give you for it?" He's a perfect mimic, pisses your defeated words down into the mud. Try to pick up a tie rod or clutch plate, get a break on a camshaft. "Step inside, we'll talk." He chucks a log into the oil drum. "That car? The Gremlin? Forget it, that thing's a collector's item." His gut shifts suspiciously under his coveralls, greasy and blue. "Listen, you take it out, no guarantees, cost you a hundred, you want it or not?" It's too much to pay, but you know you can't leave it, you want him to like you, to ask you to stay.
Look-a-me, pard, I'm a high-steppin' Ponderosa buckaroo
with a way about me
that says, "Wa-hoo!"
A brand new wrangler
who rode to Montanner
in a covered station wagon
down desperado roads,
pulling me a U-Haul sportin'
a painting of wild-eyed horses
snorting real foam.
Back off, Buster,
I'm a real straight shooter
with my own mahogany cue,
ain't never punched no doggies
but I've kicked a cat 'er two,
eat raw Steak-ums with Jim Rockford
like a real man will do.
My Bronco's a mud-crusted
wet dream come true,
twelver of Great Falls See-lect
chilling in the saddle bags,
ranch style Doritos
clipped to the gun rack.
Reach fer the sky, ya pesky Paiute,
that E-Lec-Tronic Kino
machine's got my name on it,
gonna crush my Coors Lite can
barehanded, I keeps my
powder dry and carry a Bic,
and Slick, I wrote a dozen
them cowboy pomes today
but I need a five-letter word
that rhymes with crystal meth.
"Gone the way of all flesh"?
Nope. Durn.
FISH JOBS

Northernns are ruthless, cold-blooded killers
(I hear Mack the Knife was a big northern pike)

Trout are the gamblers, high-rolling card counters
Smugglers of diamonds, con artists supreme

Alewives fill factories, go home and get loaded
And die in a car wreck one Saturday night

Sturgeons are Old World, dinosaur royalty
Deposed, they eat caviar, take high tea with milk

Bass are broad-shouldered blue collar laborers
Chugging down Pabst in mud-caked work boots

Bluegills run street gangs, wear their caps backwards
Kick in your wing window and yank out your tape deck

Salmon are fat cats, industrial magnates
With mistresses, penthouses, champagne and Brie

Perch all sell junk bonds, cluster in fern bars
Some day, they think, I will tell all I know

Carp are dull brutes, half-wit old farm hands
Scaring young daughters with thick-lidded glances

Walleyes are finicky, artists and craftsmen
With an eye for detail and a taste for the grape
THE CASE OF THE UNWRITTEN

I know you're out there,
hat pulled low and a smirk.
I turn my head and you're
still there but I can't see you,
only feel your stare.
I try the corner
of my eye, whistle a little,
scuff my feet. Of course,
you never fall
for such kid-stuff tricks.
Handcuffs make you laugh.

I've gathered your brothers
by the dozens, half-breed bastards
who share your features
but are smoke inside, no flesh.
I've chased you down hundreds
of dead-end alleys but always
you give me the slip.

Look, this shouldn't be so tough.
I've read your description on
post office posters for years.
Truth to tell, I admire your style:
assault with a deadly simile,
possession of assonance with intent
to distribute, felony irony--repeat offender.
I keep hoping some morning
I'll wake up and there you'll be,
sacked out on my couch.
I stash a pen and pad close by
the bed, just in case.

--(for James Crumley)
SACRIFICE

There were more starving children in my grandma's kitchen than anywhere else in the world.

Maryknoll, the Franciscan, especially the Mission, magazines stacked in a drawer to the left of the sink, each one packed full of North Dakota Indians and wide-eyed Koreans and Brazilian kids no older than me who had to live in filth and squalor on the streets of Paraguay begging their meals from strangers.

Those brats were all just competition for the few coins that I knew rested on the bottom of Grandma's leather coin purse, her money, from selling eggs. Saturday mornings she pulled up in the brown Studebaker, wood blocks on the pedals, two Sears catalogs on the seat to get her high enough to see through the steering wheel.

All Good Shepherd Church meant to me was no fishing on Saturday. Grandma kneeled the hour away while we got Catechism upstairs. When the nuns let us go, we bolted for the back pew where she crouched, halfway down another rosary.

(stanza break)
Sometimes we got stuck
with a full-blown Saturday Mass.
I said the priest's part in Latin,
memorized the sounds, figured that
was the language God talked.
Grandma caught me and I thought
I'd get a licking but instead
she smiled, nodded her head.
At the end, she strapped her hard
black purse to her arm again and we
walked out past the poor box, a slot
on the back wall, right by the door.
Cheating, I thought, those priests
are cheating. Grandma always dropped
in some pennies. We had plans for that cash.

We knew we were going to the A & P Tea store,
and sometimes we could get a gumball each
from the Ford machine with the tricky slide bar,
two for a penny and it went to help the blind.
Grandma picked up a can of salmon, some macaroni,
black bananas from the damaged produce rack.

That tired maroon pouch rose from her pocket,
one folded dollar and some change picked out.
Our lingering gumball desires were shattered
by the solid snap of her coin purse clasp.
CAT DISEASE

Grandma kept a squall of barn cats, half-wild matted scratchers she gave fresh milk and table scraps for gnawing down the barn mice. Every spring brought dozens of kittens, fuzzy and lots of fun when they got old enough to leave their burlap nests in the back of the barn loft. But we knew enough not to get too attached because all but a couple were sure to fall victim to the Cat Disease.

It tore though the farm, a mystery plague that claimed the lives of countless innocent newborns. Grandma agreed it sure was a shame. "Sometimes God has a plan we just can't understand," she said, a flowered scarf tied beneath her chin, standing in the back of the garden near the blackberry bushes with the shovel, the bucket of water, the dark and sodden burlap sack.
BURNING LEAVES

I rake the afternoon away, ten years old, all around the farmhouse, oak leaves lined in long piles like Grandpa showed me, then dragged on a musty canvas to the slab behind the barn.

On the porch, he hands me three wooden matches. I go back alone, light the pile and watch the flames.

My clothes smell of leaf smoke and Grandpa comes out, says the lawn looks good. He lights his pipe, Prince Albert smoke curls from the burnt bowl. His face softens as he watches the flames.

He says come in after the pile burns down, make sure it's out. He looks small, passing through the bright circle under the yard light on the way to the house.

A gust of late October wind blows a chill through me as I stand alone in the dark and rake the embers in.
Grandma said to hush on the way to Saturday church, said to watch for the part in the Mass where the priest holds the hose up, that's the most important part.

For a change, I couldn't wait to get there. What did a hose have to do with anything and would it be running? Would he water the pews? Once in a while they snuck in stuff like ashes on your forehead, bells and incense and Midnight Mass, no telling what this hose was for.

On the smooth edge of the bench I sat, waiting for the priest, kicking the green vinyl kneelers. Finally he swooshed in and started, a chopped-down version for the dozen or so scattered like unlit candles around the church. We sat second row, right on the aisle and I watched that priest's every gesture.

No hose yet.

When we had to kneel, I played with the spring-loaded hat holder mounted on the back of the first pew, but I kept one eye on that priest. Still no hose. Before I knew it, the Mass was over.

On the way home, Grandma asked did I see it, the part where the priest held the hose up high. "Oh yes," I lied, and turned away to look out the window.
SAVING GRACE

When the choir leaned into Amazing Grace, 
the bass section billowed through first 
and hummed inside me, a deep-chested rumble 
of crew-cut uncles and gas station owners 
from town, dark robes hitched and dipped 
from thrown-back shoulders. Sopranos in bee-hives 
behind the organ cut in the sweet, 
the high and lonesome sound that shivered in 
under the skin, blew cold along my backbone.

I didn't quite get what "genuflect" meant 
or why my grandma rolled hard 
beads most nights in her rocker, 
but I knew what I felt inside 
was holy, and was inside Grandma, 
the priest and the old German farmers, 
stiff faces softened in song. 
I wanted to know those words, to sing 
without even looking at the book, so 
everyone could see the holy in me.

I got my bad idea on Tuesday, 
had to wait until Saturday Mass, 
starched out in pinching shoes and pants 
that itched, clip-on tie. Grandma drove. 
"Say five hundred Hail Marys 
and I'll buy you a rosary of your own."

When we shuffled back 
from communion, the kneeling part 
she pressed her forehead against 
the golden wood of the pew before us, 
moving her lips in tiny winces. 
I slid the book with the right words 
into my pants and prayed, please 
God don't let me get caught. 
(stanza break)
Late at night, under the quilts with a flashlight lifted from the toolbox, I squinted every word in, mumbled them out loud, then closed my eyes and said the remembered sounds.

I rode the Studebaker with new good posture, hymn book cinched at my waist. At the offertory, the wicker basket passed over my lap, I smiled at the usher, dropped in a nickle. Grandma looked down, dipped into her coin purse, I slid the book out smooth behind me and became an innocent.

I stood tall on the kneelers and belted Amazing Grace straight out, every word strung in order like beads of wood.

But with all the words clear in my head, the feeling, that blessed connection, slipped away somewhere and escaped.

Then the choir sang through me again and I felt the sound, still there under the language. I sat back, rocked on the hard pew wrapped in the blanket of rhythm and vowels, divine in the dialect of sound.
SPRING STONE PICKING

I.

till

the earth
before planting

yields a harvest

frost wound
spring rocks

till
the earth
before planting

II.

Grandpa Held squeezed a palm
of dirt, pitched it hard
at the fieldstone wall.
When it stuck, still too wet.
When it crumbled, time
to pick stones. All the cousins
came out and Grandpa hitched up
the tractor to the wooden wagon.
We rode the lane, past the old
pasture, onto soft fresh-turned dirt.
Any stone bigger than a fist
we tossed onto the splintered planks.
The big kids dug around
the pumpkin-sized rocks.
Grandpa helped hoist them on,
then toed the hole back full.

(no stanza break)
Lunchtime we ate in the shade at the fenceline, surrounded by rock piles, and drank lemonade pinched with salt. At dark, we rode in together, all tired in the shoulders. We knew what we did would help run the farm, would help run the world.