1969

Designs on a classic | [Poetry]

William M. Velde

The University of Montana

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UMI
DESIGNS ON A CLASSIC

By

William Velde

B.A., University of Montana, 1968

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1969

Approved by:

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Chairman, Board of Examiners

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Dean, Graduate School

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DESIGNS ON A CLASSIC

for Richard Hugo

The wind has a voice, you claim, as many friends
as times we listen, wanting our will to freeze
in one good word. I will put down your poem

and its claims, trying to clear my ears of a drone
you can't give thought to, notes drifting for days
while wind combs the land we and our friends own.

The word for hollow and yellow isn't one
that fits. In a lull the sense of all leaves
is just one, dead words pulling a poem down.

So let this be true: intended is nearer than done.
Say it the other way around, if you can't believe,
and a storm claims you as friend. What we mind

we recognize by sound, not order. At home
with slogan, we hear the rest as pitch, waves
making the worst of our words. And all poems

suffer. Suspect an egg and it smells brown,
an ode to suggestion, taste losing to belief
while breezes bring friends and never belong,
and one bad word makes us put the poem down.
ITALIAN WEDDING

Bread rises, the wine
is only cool in a story
we all believe. If true,
a loud word makes it fall,
in the oven or on the table.
If only sound, our glad songs
stir the candle and spill wine
when the glasses are low. Wake
those children and let them join,
girls helping with food, and boys
in the big room. Paint the wall
with a woman you know, call her,
and if she's true she will come
as a dancer, bread will rise,
and the wine will be cool.
QUARANTINE

for Sister Madeline DeFrees

In my fever I felt the fire had gone out
in all its literal warmth, leaving my joints
with an idea of dead winter. Play a word game,
stare and concentrate on your name, and it becomes
a stranger. My poems, mixed in the mind like dream,
came to a point I must have been approaching, an urge
for devotional. God, in a mathematical sense, must be
a function of mind, mind taking itself to its own power
or dividing itself by zero, one of those tricks to focus
the oriental puzzle on its central compartment, its outer,
and the lapses between. Add flesh to theory and get lover,
a warmth no longer literal. There is the contour of brain,
the shape your thoughts take in mind, the path you inscribe
as you cross the yard. Ask your neighbor for the good news
of last season in his own words and he'll laugh. His prayer
is not conscious, not even good verse. Blab school is a blot
between our eyes, put metaphorically, and metaphor. Dissolve
these notes (we overhear with a qualm), they throw a bad light.
My music will suffer. The analogy in a moment of calm is this:
is the voiced, worded devotional a shy way, within my disbelief,
of asking to be overheard? There is an intricate harp, strands
of different length in our ears, presumably tuned, through which
we say the globe turns with a sound. Do we live in the same mind, as we stand in the same wind? Is the drift of our collected word a food for the indifferent harp, no hand in the spin, no appetite except that the chorus of our urges have harmony? Presses turned a billion agreements on an item. We find the item through words, and the agreement follows. But our talk goes to an incinerator, not the altar. The effigy holds our silver but not our beliefs. The chorus blabs a hymn with no flesh, no eyes. A proper name for my reaction to this virus is panic, given a voice and tune, given my embarassed hopes, not for an audience to overhear it, but for hearing itself. A chorus is whatever sings, is sung, listens in a way that is like singing, or only feels, alone and without ever saying, feels part of a continuity, focus whether of flesh, shape or just gesture. There is an ear because we have voices, that habit of passing a struggle with the germ. There are even lovers. We are in order, a disagreement the indifferent fire can't ruin. Song and listening, once we adjust to ourselves, become the same urge and voice, filling the same calm.
AT A STOP SIGN

The man in the next lane looks familiar, young face
my grandfather had before he quit. The whistle works
in a story he smiled after, all impulse stopped cold
like a photograph. First a light fails, then voice.

The old lover, posters peeled from her face, never
relaxes. Pedestrians walk by blind, a long line
waiting in grey and the good sense to frown. Indians
in bars are older than old men spending my quarters.

My friends could be anywhere, white faces hanging
the curb. This is the trick dream where two cats dig
a dead codger open for food, and I wake up still drunk
or asleep, startled, stuck in live traffic in Naples.
A POEM ABOUT THE UNITED STATES ARMY

The Red Army has a terrible reputation for staying
in Eastern Europe.
John Hersey wrote about the atrocity of troops in Detroit,
seeing them as individuals.
If good armies have a bad reputation to live up to, then,
they go on living.
There are trials like that Boer War affair with an ostrich,
the soldier offering marriage,
but these facts don't only apply to the British task force,
or didn't,
now that Empire is out of the question. If a man's in jail,
it's the past he's still in.
History catches us leaving valuable equipment for the enemy,
or just being Italian.
A good past makes for bad tactics, too predictable. We're set
by convictions
which, once public, we give up to those enemies. Study Rome.
Who couldn't beat a Roman army?
The general consensus reaches a position: nobody couldn't.

But abandoned women
dissolve our forces, and we defect. Consider individually.

Study the Romans again.
Could they have contained the persecuted majorities?
Is our John Hersey really writing about their atrocities?

He is,
and it is the Roman Army's reputation we call history.
We call the scattered bones of private conviction,
those deserters
these inevitable ruins,
isolated studies abandoned to the Italian.
DIALOGUE FOR RICKLES AND HART CRANE

I believe in superhuman sprints, two urges named Frailty and Grotesque. If for example a first-quarter washout comes for his shower, weeping for Reuben, my answer will be yes.

Your idea of love is to swallow a snake and run to sick bay with a good story. Your hand in Walt Whitman's? He wouldn't take your hand if you were a runaway slave named Abe Lincoln.

I try to chin myself, or just make lockerroom sounds, but the sun fills my wounds. If I tried slang, or bled on the warm fingers of your gauze, I'd be called an incredible softy, incredible.

That's it, puke all over the Jewish kid. You're so fucking sad you could get a face lift by tying your buttocks to a fire hydrant and walking around the block. If I said jump you'd get a hard on.

Oh I would be a mystery. You could swallow me whole and cough and I'd come out mercurial. Why do the sad Indians in drunk fits love my poetry? Don't you read me twice, somehow not irritated?

Listen, the closest you came to a second reading was a nightmare about getting whisker-burns on your hickey. If I'm not irritated, then neither was Pantagruel when his donkey gave him hemorrhoids.
I would salve the ruptured sore of his tongue, bandage his soul with the pads of our crucified Captain. Harsh light in the alley makes us freeze, the iron strings of our startled nerves choiring.

Let's not go overboard. You wouldn't give a damn about myths, except somebody once told you they were queer moths. Do you always hang around licking bicycle seats, or is it just because I'm here?

When the tired shoulders of God drop me moaning to the world, I can carry in my bosom a shred of our talk. I will say you and I feel the same sadness closing over our heads, and are the same man.
WE REFER BACK TO THE ORIGINAL

Here ends the fragment, scarred by fire in the middle of a word. We are left on a road to the Runes, nothing to show for sense but mute marks in stone. How does a good son name vengeance that ends with verse, sung to the deaf and then gone?

Women scoff at his song, or kiss the ball of his hand. They are rich, dumb or nude, the right word a smudge, the truth locked for centuries in dirt. A girl could have loved his voice, or moved the rectifying weapon in his mind.

Scholars claim the Gothic tongue had over a hundred words for power, but the key will always be lost. A hero meets death in our heads, with words we all secretly know. And the famed version by Pound only sounds foreign, too good to be wrong.
Laying a stone is your occasion to be glib about laws, one of which forbids the way you look on your daughters. By dying, let us metaphorically say, the woman inside you was sown back in the soil, up for grabs the original moment she broke light. Changing color from the root, she has cut her old relations, learned to tell time by the sun and dark that dance on the nerves of her cheek. If your kisses hang, there are other tendrils to touch. Maybe the Irish convent and the cafe crowd will fight in her, maybe she'll find both in me. Rather than ask for her hand, I take her in my own. Packed in dirt, your rage can do nothing but starve, burn at the roots of old trees that are our room, our canopy.

Take the word volcano. Connotations of stone that flows in the heart of our sphere like raw bread. Beer is bread, sacrament of my ancestral Dutchmen. But who can find bones in central Michigan, or trace us back to our primal eruption? As for the references, I married the daughter of a geologist, whom I imagine crouched over his stone like a harpist. Tune I can liken to a volcano, music as a form locked in old wire, leaking out wherever my warmth is applied. But this medium is too concrete, what the tender-fingered romantics called hyperresistive. A softer approach is in this loaf of earth, applied to the potter's wheel with germanic fingers, blended with its trajectory to a cylinder, again the volcanic mold.
Imagine a tide drawing particulars of light and shade
to focus. What textbook cases of flux coming to crystal
are visible? Is the world a troubled lexicon? Say words
are globes spinning on the minds of their makers, a music
of insects drowning our garden at night, rubbing together.
Stone, as a medium, is too tight a spectrum of edged parts,
no interacting shapes to fit the impulse of our busy nerves.
This means the universal mind has neither urge nor freedom,
no preference among its spheres. Does the sun? Do spirits
hug their mediums, like couples in a frozen park, out of pure
rebellion? We're obedient to the cold. The word is our eye,
an arc attached both to flight and rest, the same centered clay.

Will makers of graph and legality say my soul is the lexicon
Roethke and Stevens tangle in? We are what we address, wops
only when locked in a room. I remember you a little swollen,
claiming you were pregnant, and I believe you. It only died
when I came to understand, then to love, to put our new love
in its arc, under corrupt bowers of verbiage. This is a way
to bring these spheres into one place of peace, and dissolve
whatever of myself was not compounded of us both, both flesh
and nerve. I imagine your father was a dead poet whose soil
I take root in, because you've become a poet's dead daughter.
I say these poets loved you because what they loved has died,
because they have died, and because my music will survive me.
BECAUSE I COULDN'T STAY

I was never twelve, never
that old. Love was a word
my hands hadn't held. I read
about couples who died loving,
passed by vague schools, bound
in this book in my lap. Songs
by the blind were made civil,
silly words dreamed up, sung
by a dark daughter of Greeks.
Knowing my song was the note
of exile, I never grew wiser
in this world I can hold now,
and yet I was never a child.
WHILE OUR IMPORTED COCOA WARMS ON THE STOVE

I can put this surprise together and hope it works, something mechanical under my fingers while the organic brews. The house is stale and I make you take it easy.

A virus slept all afternoon with you. The mess has time to come back bad as when I was here alone. I remember the walls brown with crude spatter, the venison I fried.

No mountain ash, if I was disabled, signalled the world to wait on its wine till I got well or died. Those days were so dull I forget them. No cloves in the custard.

The phone rings with Kennedy's voice on a record. Can I contribute? I'll say my wife is in bed and is calling, the cocoa is bubbling over, laundry and old papers gather in the corner like a neglected body. I bring a food tray, your own medicine, and nothing surprises you. The soup needs salt, and we can only smile. Look how anniversaries have lived with us. Look at the way your uncles and aunts still treat us. You withdraw not in self-defense but in mine. I bring this warm cup for your eyes, no unexpected spice.
TRANSPLANT

No ear for my voice. Only this image can hear my voice, a maker of women from foreign parts. The parts are an image, fragments, a lapse I've labored into flesh. I dream of a dead man to share my bones, fresh from the wars. My eyes will go dull, pool of reptiles who burn to take air first. A fish sleeps under the tide and wakes, naked, with the world off his head.

That fish closes in my eye. The sea blankets my women, the dance of my women, the corpse crawling under their fire. Fire is no dream born of our bones, not pure form curling over itself like an ember. On a beach they are running with the dead man in my mind, gone in the fire. My mind is that man.
SCANDINAVIAN GIRL IN A SWEATSHIRT

A writer knows all walls exist to be wailed on, like women. Whatever is shut out is part of history, the hand withdrawn.

Say that girl came from a small town, brought her distraction to throb in this talk of vocalic shift. Our eyes come to life.

The white letters of Wisconsin follow the warp of one breast, a word and its curve as sculpture. Chaucer smiles to himself.

Say I tell lies praising the virtue of some obviously bawdy aunt, and you snicker. It means I'll have no trouble taking you home.

Winter shrinks down to a spot I remember seeing a dead bird on. What we see will take both focus and shape as the season fades.

Then you learn I stole my story from the Wife of Bath. My love showed its colors slowly, the way words melt down to a resolve.

What you see only shows the space around it, and is nothing next to the feeling of finding out. Even words are a habit.
My Neapolitan woman turns into a child. That turn she and my good metaphors make is like what this love is like, unorthodox.

You wake to a day of study somebody learns was lovemaking. Your look is a light like the facts, perfected by fresh eyes.

This nonsense is on Chaucer and his music, a theory that love is like the times, tensing us till we mispronounce our language and become strangers. Unnoticed till we act out of character. Poets understand this, but the walls of our world go unadmired.

Again what we know is near nothing. Somebody steps on a bird we put in their path, accepts the surprise fall as Nature's, and is embarrassed. Our legs touch under the seminar table. Confirm this and we'll skip class on the pretext of loving or needing a good nap. It doesn't matter that songs of Naples are nothing to you. Neither is my music, or the way I found it.
RESTORATION OF FLORENCE, 1966

Legions of part time help are airing wet, dead books. This flood is a fresco, the Arno shown jumping his bank to wash the pagan Graces.

He is hard on the old mosaic. Our treasure cracks, and centuries fade. My work is to scum the heroies, a dirty skin on the wall.

Old parts peel, here where a drawn bone defined you, here where your hand rested on me, or didn't rest: tell me how I continue these parts.

One of my oxides, too warm for the original hand, is tempting. But how full do you want your arms? Will an expert buy your looks?

Penitents wear pages off both knees, mumbling for the dead altarpiece. I will do the best work where your figure was prime.
Worst damage is here where my eyes went to your form
during mass, where the rage interrupted your form.
As for patches that call for tint,

my kit is good, my estimate grim: a balm for tone,
tonic for flush, and to give your dark tissue life.
There's a compound for the faults,
great faults in our bones. I'll make your legs great
and leave you basking in stained light, playing Titian
where the master let you fade.

You have given my fingers that arrogance. A fragment
of your name left, and the whole wall plays dead. I wake
and find your image at my hands.
MEDITATION WITH MORNING AND MORNING COFFEE

My theory is framed in the kitchen window, dull like its pain. Journey to Our Goals is in color on channel four. To say my piece has conclusion is to say one script erases another, a clearing is left where wet shoots can break through the char. But this end, if there can be one, is interrupted by news of the August riots, a boy caught robbing the window. It's anyone's guess: a television set? Two suits in a plastic bag? The cops gun him down, or don't, or watch while he and a girlfriend run off.

But television isn't worth thinking about. We're all gunned down, if you can believe the news. Eyewitness Whitey Whitney tells how the gang forced their way out, waving guns and yelling Where's The Money. Some mob is always breaking away from its pen in the Deep South, impatient for the parole that comes up and comes up like the finale of a soap opera. It's time for Work, if you can call what we do work, time to find out what is worth stealing from this world, what ain't, and what is left over. My job is a dull pain just like my theory.
Where's The Money's one slogan to stir with, a pause where we fully expect to applaud. We fail to exploit the one problem that's not boring, that line between finale and conclusion. I wake up with a broken window, living room full of rocks wrapped in illiterate threats. One says he's got friends. Mobs like him are always escaping the vague limits of this meditation. The other comes with the gaps promises make, shading the world as sugar shades coffee. But it doesn't, it comes like bad news, breaking the beam of bright thought like mad policemen.
I'M THE INFLUENCE I WAS WARNED ABOUT

Blackening apples and all. To love one thing is to leave another on the drainboard. The result is that clutter Bartok pretended to control, a mess you said Rabelais never admitted being revolted by.

A good proof our love is never aimless is the Gospel, a fragrance you wanted us to smell with the stale macaronics, your paradigm of good centuries going into the wine. But which course do I try?

Is the way I read Rabelais a quirk of the glands that control taste? I take issue with whatever you say he said. I refuse to digest it. The upperclassmen are ripe enough to squirm, and you become cross.

But envy is nothing original. You dream of warm kids to be pestled to rudiments. Music as recipe. The roast as a meat and its sauce. And we get through the glossary with a sense of tragic conclusion.

Is my detachment a trick like yours, gesture against the impossible love of all things? Sleeping beside me, her body is like something remembered, or just met. My eyes are open, her feet are small pigs.
Why have a glass of wine and some cheese? Why? Like burlesque, the instruction parades its fat and old bones, gimmick of doves and trained dogs. The dirty dishes are naked after a good wash, wine gone in the gutter with waste. The dirty-minded greats are safe in the soil, dead drunk as usual. Here's where I slip out. Worlds fill up till they change, and we love. Two art students struggle upstairs with a trash can of clay. Beer loosens my voice, and I stop meaning Father Rhinewood by the word You. We relax into each other, eyes the same color and depth. Noticing we are a man and his woman is easy as changing the subject. We name the animals in us, the look we share, those pups we threaten the world with. And our love is like the unlikely, like having what we can find names for, and what we can't.
IN ANSWER TO YOUR CALL

The office door had a warning light, so it's likely the four still at large were known to Bureau staff. The fact that it all happened while two payrolls were in a drawer implies an inside job.

The public is urged to be on the lookout for four wounded men, most probably armed with illegally concealed weapons, records as long as your reputation. Known felons are warned to steer clear of one another.

There was no trace of drugs, no sign of a struggle, no toolmarks or visible means of escape. Suspects are brought in on charges of breaking and entering, rape, gambling, disrupting peace, and nonsupport, but meanwhile we are asking for your aid not just in stopping these petty outbreaks but in finding the whole movement's source. Anyone with information leading to arrest will be rewarded. This is a recording.
THE NEIGHBOR GIRL'S CRUSH

Her retarded sister looks like that dog in The Tinder Box, a Grimm story I remember odd parts of. We were trimming dead twigs out of my hemlock, other kids wanting the stuff to sneak off and make fires with. If she sees a dog piss, she'll taste the ground where he went.

A blind dog leads her through three rooms, the three things you keep to yourself. Saying mad things about me, she admits to nine older brothers. "Don't ever divorce me, okay? I hate my new father." There were three candles and a tinder box, I don't remember their part in the story.

In a vacant room we found Need, that bout with the first of her riddles. Will we always have orphans? The clues all burrow like fleas. And the eyes of the kid, that dog's unforgivable eyes! The one she closes like a poached egg: "Can I come in your house?"

One phrase, like a favorite old cane. When did she get it? At the store. When? At the same store, wherever she goes.
But her folks are even worse! Her brother's head shaved like a kidney, the rest like guessing the sex of an unborn, the orphaned part of her mind.

She jumps the hedge in a bad part of town, and we burn.

Tied belly down to the couch's arm, she dreams dad's dogs are trained to dance on her back. Our three nights stick on Need, the end of a record. I'm in my house, scared, cutting the dead mouths from my brain.
This is the way it has to be said. Any demand for calm is for weak water to test on your mind the way a girl drops milk on her sleeping husband and hopes a storm she can't understand will open.

Say only fools talk of a hush of loud trombones in fragmented trees that drop sweet, whole plums.

Or call music a field where his bizarre cages were set all night in tall grass, like a table.

Can his brain be pictured under pressure, his ear punning on gong and flute for the first time ever?

We hear one tempest twice. He gets away with murder like the terrible pet Gorilla who thinks he's Caligula.

And we humor him. Why pretend we have nerves of virgins when his irony dawns the wrong color, his loaves unleaven?
CANTI DEL MEZZOGIORNO

Ruins stranded in a vine tangle the day Baia dropped underwater,
city of fallen arches, dry bathhouses people visit in trains:
in the legend the lake is seen just before dying. Coughing
incense in the late sun, birds land on a forbidden water.

Our schoolbus mired in a goat herd, herdsman smiling and beating
his children apart with a staff. It was my habit to look away.

Tall as a nun bending to listen, I taught myself about bricks,
vines wringing them soft, a sterile green Rome can't understand.

Rome, still brick when marble sinks. Pigeons float in furrows
after the rain. The catch in, I've seen them puking in a net.

They dirtied the fountain, always the quick flight straight up,
always the couple turning at my noise: I am neither heavy nor tough.

When I pull the blind we share that room in Baia, bedroom altar
with a dim bulb, fishoill smell and the breakwater in your hair.

Do you know the grotto where he sleeps his herd? A stray goat
lies dead in the lower cave. Broken sculpture hides in Pozzuoli,
the rubble fading to moss. Our sound is traffic and the sun slapping wet wash, flies at the table. I had come to steal marble.

Can you imagine the fountain gone bitter, a heap of rusted coins burning the ankles of lovers? Feel us sliding in the Gulf of Naples?

I sleep in those colored rooms, draw slats over the warm neon of your eyes. The black gulf sings out of its oils and carrion,

sings in our sunken hearth. Tallow drips from the fishing lantern. A breakwater sounds where we doubled over the pain for food.

How many times have the neons run grey, our southern gold? You were a thousand, sprawling indifferent, mine on uneven beds,

like a river. We lived on nicotine and stolen chocolate, hating our blackmarket perfume, loving its smell.

You are my armless statue, sugarcoated fly. How much of your neon colors me? What of myself have I left haunting your gutters?
THOSE FORMAL OCCASIONS WITH IN-LAWS
(Accepted for publication in *Poetry Northwest*)

The form of our mind is how well we misunderstand. Crystals believed to have happened just now grow on us, a burning microscopic but like stars. Picasso can't be told from Casals, except in that antique form now part of the song.

Do you insist all stories are like the sky we fly to?
The red rain is a daydream we avoid even while having it?
So is the museum, its distortions of the wooden violin and white glove as bits of smoked fish in the appetizer.

Most of all shocking is the author, a man to misunderstand and put in a frame, his perfect parable rows of empty seats.
A wet sky becomes the cause of a street we get wet in, naked, no pattern to the maple wings on a tweed bolt of faded lawn.

The only forms are headlines and the marquee titles it is part of my job to replace, at the same rate weeks resume each other.
The crowd takes warmth and the better part of its popcorn home, muttering to itself about the lost insouciance of our souls.

But these are just adjectives, and we misunderstand. Nothing is colossal or new about the escape of that mountainous monkey
or the young widow, still a virgin, who tempts us to buy tickets and see what will happen will happen. Assume the two coalesce, crystal and chilled consomme, King Kong getting laid, a not so dumb blonde rampaging both wilderness and corrupt city. Stars are set in a three-dimensional sty, and today's rain is all down. Only walking home gets worldweary, and the walk back to work.

Or say each step is the frame of a film, part of the blur of continuity toward some end. Each shift of weight is not from foot to foot, but from one misunderstanding to the next, warming to some approximation of good sleep, or a weekend.

The box office flop was a western called Pablo and his Gang of Fictions, all victims of misunderstanding and censorship. These are funny hours to work, walking home in a ruined city of empty rows, imagining the form of music and of applause.
THE BLUE GROTTO

No seaweed woven to the wharf, no traces
the night you fell off the wreck and sang,
and sang till dawn. No hair,
none of its oils on the sand
or the granite veins you touched.

These cliffs forget a wall, roman villas
easing down the wall to the wash where a king
dropped his guests, A kiss
on your temple. Tides drag
in the tangled roots of your eyes.

Held down on the hard salt, lovers give in
with a small echo. The rest I make up:
a trench too deep for the beach,
gulls picking the bare sand.
And the mouth of this cave goes underwater.

Today they pulled a child from the shaft, alive.
Does your voice break on joy, your singing stop
when they drag the sea clean of men?
I see where you fell from Capri
in a broken house. See, you tug and my oars sing.
THE NUMBERS GAME

Driving home drunk from the Forty-Four bar,
I fill out a form in my head. Say you married
a girl named Bunny Hunter, and this is a plea
for divorce, your first.

Young's not specific
enough for age, Miss Hunter, and color of eyes
means your own, not the zeroes you sleep with or
see in a true love's head. You die with my drink,
laugh when I come up with gas or the whole night
of bad gin.

Why not is not what you put for your
reason, and So What is doubtful response to the issue
of Consummation. There's a fee if we went nine months,
so I hope for one-night rates. Say you bared a chest
with weak knobs, or hairs, or took out your teeth as
we kissed.

The car jolts and I remember two poems
about furry lumps on the road to a cheap motel. One
was a song a trio of drunks made up on the drive down,
the other I saw on a poster.

Yes, referendum fifty
will cripple the Water Quality Act. These are figures
to quote in a dumb woman's face. I look for the last
three digits to match, then sign on the line.
GETTING THE THIRD DEGREE

The first test is to act out certain criticism you make, a fortyish moron raking leaves with the kids, allusion to Rabelais. Where were you on the night in question? The eyes of two stars cross. Is it true your mind is part of the palest acre of sky? Your answer is always what you will be when you grow great, a defective who stands in awe of nothing but the death of words.

Aren't there ways of making the most heartfelt pain dull? The humor is stuck in his gaze. You say we can't speak without making him young, that's why he's not bored with our children. A simplicity burns in their sky and we call it sun. When a name comes, the way he frowns is its wound. When you reach the limit where words die, the impulse you get is his: play dumb and then go home.
A CENTAUR PAUSES FOR PROVISIONS IN BOXELDER, MONTANA

One sign is blank to scare off strange trade, one says Big Sandy lies to the south. Truckers pull into this gravel flat of a town for coffee, white gas and days of speed in both lungs. I am miles in their exhaust, down to the floor of a pint in my saddlebag. What can you do when you fit the image of a whole town's belief, even to the fleece on your jacket? Bums are rumored bent on rape, cold wind and warm beer for warmth. Suddenly I'm shovelling snow in Great Falls, tolerated anywhere but here where a young girl brings change, glares with the eyes of a community saying wait, take a minute to violate our worst laws, then get your ass out.

I can tell your boyfriend is coming, maybe the one with pockmarks from self-abuse. A string of identical evenings leads your life to that hushed ceremony in green. Is that smile your tribe's word for a man whose beard is red, or does it mean downfall on two wheels? Confining your pain is a low drumming of wind in the crops, pride for one of a dozen good names in town, names like Beefcrans, Crowder and Boyle. With one bank unable to cash my five dollar check, what can a town say but sorry? The word comes out surly. Banks and bars and the hotel were reclaimed from some original bricks, Indian lore and jail, a past no typical teenager can live down.
When I find you I'll ask where you came from, when, why, and what road you took. As long as I'm heading west, will I spread the news we made it through winter? Our excuse for making love in the wilds can be that pioneers live on in our bones. Nobody gets in trouble they're already in, so live with your father's guns. All ways are shown in our signs, no vacancy or credit, just miles to Big Sandy and points south. Bears mauled the girls because they were bleeding red moons, spread by wind. I lay out my sleeping bag, and it storms on your begging eyes, on the meanest land and the least legendary daughters, the soured drinks of townspeople and oriental strangers.
AT A WINDOW WITH GREEN PERSIAN BLINDS

In a dead sky old architecture poses,
a bistro says come catch our skin show
while the Metro goes under us and rattles.
A lilac bush drops all its chips in one last day
of falling. For love of the urban films we've sat through,
we stroll in a yellow garden, that blonde silk of your arms.

I joke about pregnant women who jumped,
those car bodies shoring up the left bank.
They lie with roots in their teeth, keeping them
warm till dawn. A frozen water will bend their image.
You say we can't make sense of the naked soil, so why try.
Remember the museum in Metz where we saw Chopin's playing hand?

You are french to your bones. A breed
of city pigeon has decreased to the point
of danger. Turds wash up on the beach, and dull
holes in sidewalks turn out to be water, the loose snow
gone clear. I found a get well card that implies you taste
like new coin. I bought that silver creamer you wished we'd buy.
We've heard lunch hours are spent walking
with lovers, eating fat pickles and calling them
mice for laughs, for effect. So we play chase you.
Only sheens of wet street and naked tubes of neon words
are clear to us, and my cold hands. The sky's a pool of tea,
lemon always sliced thin, no waste, no tarnish on the silverware.

I picture finding a guitar with streaks
where the strings were. Outside, the lights
are famous, trees are a tragedy of age, and no one
feels our sunburn drag on the sheets. Let me be the man
who drops ice in the stale wash of your bourbon, your eyes.
Let's lie here expecting the moon to swell, then melt back to calm.
WINNING THE RACE WITH MY SHADOW

I crawl for the bottle I heard drop,
foam dried in the neck, an old penny taste.
Nine floors down a brick alley, ore cars slam.
Father reads: when the coal-soaked river
bears barges full of memories and garbage,
what isn't scrap? A penny's first luster?

Laughing at his fat wop, he sings limericks
about his last time out. She kept me in safe,
thought him down bleeding somewhere all night.
No punchline. Two rubbers looked stuck to the
floor where he threw them, had dried all cloudy.
Dead. He has won me with a book of dead songs.

Father Meany might of slept out himself,
Mary, when his legs were young wood
and the sun took sweet water off his back.
You ruined our names Sunday, the secret
shame of our tongues. A little girl
hangs her bat in the father's black closet.

A cattle stink followed me south. She prayed
with strong hands: this man carried Christ across
and he'll stay with you. See, his face is wet.
His eyes were never pearls. Each splinter
is from a different martyr, and twenty popes have blessed it. How can you follow the magic?

I learned things when this room moved, mary pulling her straps. She cried till they were loose and the knots went sweet in her legs. Now the world couples under us, hard, and slips us down in the cool straw, she laughing like a bird under all my bones.

I never got the way Father Meany rang bugs out of our heads. Tonight this room I got her down in dances on rails, jogs me in its belly. I learn lyrics to all this iron, cold and awake in my bones, and will love what makes home and your dearness far.

Bu ms had built a fire to char that car's ribs. One rough guy bullied me over a gap in the boards, another stank and was tender. I skid a dead priest on the rock bed, his skin gone thick with oil, jolted from this cargo. A mile back, the yardbull sits winded.
THANKSGIVING, 1968

No hymn or history or old song opens
with the part we'll always remember, just
a poet hinting that rhythm is the woman
he lives with, his dark, oriental half.

Call us alien to any ground, faces on waves
as they turn, all but a few, from light.
Hymns are words for depression, that hurt
I imagine in private and then swallow.

You disagree, say what I feel is weight, sky
sagging with rain. Public life is a shrine
we feel wrong for making noise in, a date
that never falls on the day we saw coming.

In a slab of image and altar, we watch
ashes from old shacks mix with the ground.
Break it and coins fall out, antiques with
square holes and a name not worth spending,
picture rome as wet ruins, women in raincoats
running after buses. A medieval wall is right
across the street. Cover my sense and sounds
of tires rip the wet world blanketing us.
Panic is what we share, that and being raised overseas. We walk and the earth sucks our feet. Take my picture under an awning while I wait, your arms dragging in my sleeves. A vendor pushes his cartload of clams from the coast, lemons on a spike. Does the muse live with hags in a swamp, dying for fishheads and rice? Smile and Ancient becomes a word they fool us all with.

Those shifty customers at the customs gate, are they gangsters? Can I tell about your thighs whispering on grass? Your silence means use my imagination. The latins know enough to play dumb.

Assume all formal religion is a beggar harping with seven fingers. Over broken glass embedded in garden walls a serf plays lover following some legend. Pills cool the mass but add weight, and love is no deeper than doom, the lyric goes. The moon is in your blood like a pill, smoke from a fire that can't cool. Easy as breathing, you pick up my stocking cap and wring the rain.
Do you still go up and hold your lover in his cave when the wan orb fails, the sky cools? My eyes are birds tired of wind. Neon becomes the one mood making night obsolete, the muse a fugitive from plans.

Listen, you can hear the last ones dying in smoke. Will anyone run off to Naples with me? Will we curl where I curl and walk the sky at night, your fingers at the wet moon on my back? Nobody says for sure my nerves are sunk in the sidewalk, or knows I can't carry you south on my back. Only you could have teased me to these fears, no form I follow like a crowd into the soft ground.

But there are days to hate writing. This river is batter, solid. A bald man sits in his office, turning our power to tangle. While a pretty nun says go to painted fingers on the wall, ten muses lie just under the tide, cramps in their classical groins. The cool tips of womanly fingers are waving kisses to my face. Did I say waiting? I try, but you dangle all day, caked
with nylon and tar, holes in your veins. My last move was panic, yours will be panic, then we're alone. Luck has fit me to forms, this rhythm enough to draw me to my escape, my song, your legs laughing in the sun.
A PRIMITIVE PUTTING ON WRAPS
(Accepted for publication in Poetry Northwest)

Trying to teach me to drink, a stewardess measures
her laugh to my face, my lip touching our thumbs.
I am taught what a date is, and that we have one.
The nun means no harm frowning, reads the first line
of her song for sisters burned in a bombed school.
Grace, you are flaming. A woman lies dead then,
the girl with gum answering her call, years muffling
our ache with words. I ask with my hands and learn
she is young, and what it means to serve time.
We are only as young as we grow, stiff as the sun
makes vines. My song is how earth and the years
conspire to dry what we drink from a girl's hand.

We bathe under the hood of a garden this month
made its musk in, giving the guard a few raisins.
We fly east with conjugal birds, with prunes green
in our gaze. Voice dims at the edge of land we keep,
the only good state, its line far and moving to my song.
We are shut in a cask, pressing pulp with our belly
and our thighs. My gloves were the old laws of rage,
hands seeking the dark for hours. You can't prove
rivers look for the flat, then stop, that the love
of couples who use an assumed name can't be broken.
I say these hands move blind before proving a thing,
fading on your skin like sound, like what we gave.

Then I learn why a woman understands nothing,
only knows what she needs to have. Nothing's wrong
for a woman, or is a lie, nothing is holy or nude.
Rivers can only follow order, never listen, or define
what they make by defining it. And all we who love
are what we wear to the show. Old men give us hands
and pockets, then run to the ground with stone.
A wind says dates ache in the tree till they fall
and are called clay. The Hebrew for masterpiece
should be soil, our elders warmed by sun, our bed
subject to the same season that made wine. And our love
is a way we drink time, the look that says risk it all.
ELECTION YEAR

Our fathers have to find out whose defeat
would've upset Hitler. I can't be bothered.
My place is a field no range war has touched,
where what is the case and what could be
campaign as equals: a political poem. I chose
my notions over the cry of dead Romantics
who cared. Some of our urges we fence in
for others, choosing I guess to be moved,
and any old theory's drone, the hummingbird's
underwing thing, does in a pinch. Activist,
offshore research makes your last stand a laugh.

On reading a more recent German study, I rose,
homage to trommeled England, its name in water:
the bad parts were my fault, a nice pose
I share with millions in Dr. Rhinewood's poll
till election day. Maybe one woman has
slipped from the pew to kneel, a museum now.
Freely admitted, my ticket was just for show,
summons for a court of appeals not yet built.
Is the place real? A stave-church old as refuge?

Our bones season by the same weight that makes coal.

My prediction: the dead Keats won't talk.

Better to study the trouble in his sounds, one bird yielding a tone, not sure of the English word for high. Down on the floor, our man's man outwaits the tedious proof we serve and doublefault. The good doctor's grant has caused the rise in interest has caused the good doctor's grant. I count on my voice not counting. You can see blood up my neck when I chalk off one more thing the words can't mean, and my vote goes with the party that never survives.
FACILIS DESCENSUS AVERNO

Never a breeze off this lake. A brick rubble, the beach, roman and red in our eyes. Today birds flock in a water the legend lied about, seeing Naples and not dying. We can say late sun throws light on this water, thick with pine pollen.

A tourist gathered relics, peeled the moss, glanced up at us and tossed them out to sink. He studied where they fell, the lazy birds, we lovers, not knowing we watched in English. And you touching me like a native would, a nice touch.

Maybe where you study now, that man will pause and tell how Rome is still around in pieces. We wait for the lake to wash his feet back. His pet story will be about birds crapping up the shore. If he brags, you can show him up. Remind him of the moss, the bald slope, a glossy trench lolling to the ocean.

We drank fig wine fast. Complaining to his wife, he cried out that he saw the fall here, cool enamel of our open mouths, poet bruising his head and wishing whatever's wrong was right.
MY ANTI-COMMUNISM IS ONLY NATURAL

Mexico City, 1968

The metaphor is old: our blood taxing what we swallow, the head taking it easy for good reasons. And our hands are twins who can hit it off like lovers. The Russians wake men as they are born, turn their soil with a spade no one was first to invent. I have friends who suspect an old genius wanders in dreams nobody told them to have. They ought to come here as itinerant workers, claiming trees are part of the ground. We are told the climate is public, and to live in it. Air that thins our lungs is part of the nation, and Mexico coughs up the gold.

The coach had a moustache like Stalin, frail glasses, no patience with rivals. Say the games will turn up in China, and he smiles. Will he whip all who fail, and will everyone come in first? A pink angel arrives with odds in an antique book, the kind with a lock, and those Finns favored to swim till someone slips them a virus. In secret camps carved from Siberian wilderness the whole mob is in training, fated to fashion the tools of track and field. Do they sleep in factions, heads working for feul, hearts tempted to take the day off?
We run with both legs but only one crosses the line first, inseparable rivals like Stalin and Trotsky. That simile is newer, my own terrible invention. I put old eggs in whipped cream, cook it with onion and bits of pepper. It turns out the ingredients love each other, end up calm in our veins. Now look at our neighbors. When my eyes go, the night falls apart and I wake, blood gone from one hand, the other prying it off like a stranger. Left is one word that drops from the book we find in bad dreams. Another is Mortmain, faraway realm where land gives back the dead.
THE WHOLE WORLD SINCE MY LAST LETTER

for Ho Chi Minh

Neither of us had the guts to settle down in Paris and attend meetings, or even hold a job, remember? I could've said you'd be moody, your face faraway and bewildered wherever the snow piles. Shoveling wet crap from the gutter, I see that slant-eyed gaze on a banner, a vein of pink posterboard dye rivering down in the catacombs. Your parable was immediate, old Bonaparte mapping out cisterns for ages of waste.

We were first to criticize Trotsky, now revisionaries bombard us with abuse. Small price we pay for failing to compromise. Your father was dumb for sending checks, died in the thirties, I suppose, of food poisoning or jail. We have brats and blacks who set us old fathers against you and themselves. You'll say I live in a confusing state and don't know my own name, just like your friend Castro, though I never met him. I see they've killed him again.

By home—did I tell you I finally married? Strange, you don't even know her, Ho. They wave our tired eyes in Paris, that city full of bells. You said all empire is rank with brooding republicans, all following form. Their tolling means love me, I'm foreign. You'd know
the nature of blues here, a warning our home's rotten.
I can hear your reply, a word on burdening good soil
with ownership.

All weight you feel is ours,
the trite rage of an army, blond and black, bruises
for money and the word Love on a collar. I remember
the feminine genius you were in school, Lenin grinning
on your lapel, more busboy than turncoat. Look at you.
You'll never be loved here, even for what you regret,
drafting women, being soft on the French, etc. A group
with your interest vaguely in mind is forming on curbs,
on your fingers. It saddens us to learn our young men

confuse the colony you hated with Honduras, Spice Isles
we pale Europeans are everywhere wanting. I suspect them
of mispronouncing the key vowels of your name, singing
your army's songs with all the obscenities censored.
Or do you still have forces to marshal? Every morning
bombs fall on our porches, small comfort it brings you,
and what bells we have in Missoula show the time is
on our side singing, but meaning love me, I 'm broken.
SLEEP, LIKE HEAVY TRAFFIC

The cat hunting outside is a door opening. A lot of cars for so late, yours parked in front so I'll know you can't come.

Snow fills the grey with a hush, with wool, and the hum of your phone tells me where you are. Traffic lights change, I follow them home.

I will forget these nights, this fatal dream, an old black car you keep going away in.

Days bend under clouds grown quiet and dark, not enough good nights to go between. I remember the Forester's Ball, a smell of logs, the drunk chainsaw, and sawdust pouring from a diesel stack.

We rub in the floodlit park. Our house is cold,
the people gone, those lamps and the wind
in the parking lot laughing.

I wait up
by the black window and want you to call,
holding your face in the palm of my hand.
An idling motor stalls into silence,
into the sound of rain.

Then you cough.
Our bed has drifted the edge between us
out of focus. The wheels lock, the car
turns home and I am smiling, flywheel
playing to the rhythm of your lungs.
ON A WEEKDAY WAITING FOR COFFEE

Say the frost was high as grass, dead leaves
covered the dirt like spice, the thaw was a secret
we felt fading on our tongues, our mattress is part
of the ground, left out all year to breathe.

Call me a boy if today turns out rain.
The complaint is my knee saying no more back talk
and fumble, me waking to learn the roof of my back
has been the hard floor of your daydream.

This is our pose. In some derangement
of seasons the bed breaks, panic and laughter.
Cellini coined these forms, or Vivaldi drafted
our fiction from a book of lost phrases.

Boxcars plod, and maples will clutter
the lawn while we love. An ocean holds our hands.
Always a buried moral, the ocean winks and is last
to wear away, a movie with no lovers.
Stirred by a wind full of sun and snow,
the covers fade on one stray foot, and on my cheek
the brush of your eyes pretending you're awake.
Now we'll make up a thousand ways, alone
together. Like the drone of holidays,
our mystique is making waves in an upstream thaw.
The wall hangs with cotton from my eyes. And all
we can feel is waking, the taste of taste.
THE BEST MAN

Imagine a train passing this stream and its perch, nobody fishing them. A politician can doze in the dome, or can dream his way through tundra. An hour behind in the polls. The problem of farmers forms in his mind before we can ask. We think of an early frost turning the tamarack. In slow pools, if a legendary trout turns simple curves to the sun, his urge is to act out secrets of the earth we own. Words meant for mystery bring us to the farm question. What will you do if your kid sister runs off with a German? Vote Republican? Our laughter is nervous. Our name for fear is something that front runner knows about the man she married, the line an hour late, his hand tangled in the one we hoped would get away.
I LOVE MOZART THE WAY SOMEBODY STEALS MY CAR

(Accepted for publication in Poetry Northwest)

It was done Adagio Con Moto, nothing spontaneous,
and that modus operandi is a fiction in the reviews.
What I hate about neighborhood kids, and newspapers,
is how they gloat for a thief. Say the perpetrator
was sixteen, and then just think back. The beauty is
he'll get caught broke and with no excuses, nametags
in his pockets, the haul decked out as another model.

But will it be that simple? Our daughters know more
about poor Juan than the police. You smashed his head,
the shop replaced it with mine. That antique love seat
in the window is familiar, and so is the couple on it.
She wants her name sung, and the boy dressed as Mozart
obliges her, tells her his wife thinks he's working on
act three of Don Giovanni. He finished it hours ago.

Do we know what music we love? The glad laughter of brats
fools us, a newspaper trial entertains us. The notes burn
and we hear they were lit to stave off the cold, or soften
a poet's dead fingers. A mob of reporters says no wonder
he went, blocked up and rusting in the yard. Our ears ring
with an air that muffles most growing things, till we learn
the great juvenile genius is gone, and we were his audience.