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Fire in the bushes

Patrick Todd

The University of Montana

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FIRE IN THE BUSHES

By

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B.A., University of Montana, 1966

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Day and night now
cities are pummeled by thunder of cars
Fire orange glows in windows
And red alarm boxes burn
Chinese doors
into buildings and posts
One night like this in San Diego
I curled up
in a crowded flop house
where a drunk...hands
turned to rubber...rolled a smoke
at the bottom of a pond

There is hunger so deep
in this country
millions of suburban wives see eye
to eye with thieves and tramps
Somehow the sadness
of everything
narrows to sale of tickets
And inside the national anthem

forty drums roll...I can't go home
Tonight alarm boxes gleam
the enamel hour
glass on the spider's belly
It is the red of beacons and terror
of the assaulted nurse
Thunder of engines
swells the moon to four
thousand sails of the wicked mother of ice
consumed in blood of the rose
FURNACE TENDERS

Morning in the brick changehouse
Forty men pull on dries
Squeak and slam of lockers
First whistle
Then the long slow trek across the yard
Fourteen furnaces big as houses
and four stories up
Have to knock
the floors out of furnace
number five
Only three foot ceilings inside
so we break and shovel on our backs
Fierce burning of the eyes...
sweat and cough
Two hour stretches
we shovel dry chunks of zinc
out the port hole doors

**

Feed floor first thing
Dump in sacks of arsenic
Run down to the next floor
Long iron bar breaks up zinc inside
the orange blast
Plastic face mask
Leather gloves up to the elbows
and canvas apron to ward off the heat
Ten minutes facing off that fire
and you run outside for three
Ten more...and back out
Chunks broken down
Foreman in the shack
Sweep up zinc dust that floats
like water on the steel floor
Take five Once a boy
caught his broom in the conveyor
The foreman found him...arm...shoulder
and head crushed to pulp

**

Hook up your coat anywhere
in the zinc leach...
The next morning it hangs in shreds
Thirty years in the roasters
and dry rasping
breaks in the lungs
Some get milk leg
The skin bags paste white and men sit out
half their shifts on the benches
One guy...ten kids...
endless payments
and pictures of Christ
all over the house...pushes the bar
into the face of a routine
orange blast and forgets
Forgets he grabbed the guard loop
and his hand's exposed
Caught between
the bar and a steel beam
the bones mash like a bag of peanuts
Morley dies and the guy without
a hand gets his soft job
Finally sleep comes in a tunnel
of sand A red bird flies
between hay bales
and tiks a wall of ice lit up by the moon
Deep in pine woods the village
rack where eyes shine
thru holes
in the executioner's hood
I envy the idiot whose dreams
fill with flower fields

Or the monk after years
on a mountain
dreaming of dolphins
soaring over long grasses
In his best dream
a snowy crane stands inside the sea
Three hundred years

still as a flower...
Two feathers drift away
and enormous wings lift a white coffin
from the ocean floor
Suddenly Buddha
bends to see the tiger
sleeping in the lilies
Christ wakes alone in the desert
of a new planet
COUNTRY WEDDING

All nervous in country lace the bride
rode down the mountain with her father...
wagon reins springing easy in the early sun
Fifty mums banked the church walls white
Thick cream candles
The groom sat mute for the stiff picture
Both hands closed big as hammers

Women owned this time round the holy cake
The old fathers...faces puffed red
from years of whiskey and the blazing wheat
waited out weddings like a funeral
Even the sleepy minister hated circles
of screaming kids and spotted
a yellow toy he'd love to crush

Gone the bride in white lace
whose wedding moon lit up a long lazy s
of geese over McGuinnigan's pond
Now the farmers' sons grow mean in town
a boy beat a hole in a boxcar
with a hundred pound furnace iron
Gone...twenty horses steaming in the barn
LINES FOR MY FIRST WIFE

Too many hassles
with the wrong women I've said Christ
I need to be alone awhile
Now alone in the cabin
thoughts of my first wife return
Never forget our short
time together
I just get that place by the creek
She comes over and we lug the bed into the bedroom
When she slips her sweater off
her tits fall
soft in the gentle light

In our secret marriage
we move slow...
awkward...afraid and together
like two shy animals
Then the whole sky roars down at once
Her mother...no...maybe my brother's frenzied
talk with her father
That terrible grief of her
leaving pregnant
with another man's child is certain

Some meely arthritic doctor
in Havre injects
the womb for a hundred dollars
and has each girl run up and down stairs
till the fetus falls in a swoosh
She left her ring
on my desk in the empty house
I learned the road outside
the door goes
either way with new snow
Last night in a dream she sat on the edge
of my bed and leaves this
long hunger to see her again
THE BLACK FISH

Once more the body folds down its heavy skin
The war grows and anger rages in people
I saw a man strong arm his sullen
wife as if he wrestled a deer into the trunk
A new nun here keeps three messenger
boys on the run  And there are pimps
who hold back their girls'
money for one more exhausting trick
There are men who sleep in doorways out of the snow
And snow buries the soldier's face like a stump

The graves are filled with bright bones
Bones slip fifty feet thru coal drifts
for a three second swim in molten lava
There are bones thin enough to open every lock
And bones swivel water inside your
grandmother's knee  Bones my friend sift flour
and lace a million war crosses on the green hills

It's not the gold scorpion...blood kernel
For every calf trembling by the fence
And every mother humming over a blue crib...
machine guns open fire in the long grass
Tonight the welder's bead burns ice blue dots

on target screens  And smoke
rolls from the dikes a tornado of locusts
The blackfish...locked months in an Arctic
shelf...slowly lifts in the new heat
swirls out to the rocks
and wolfs mussels down like crackers
Thousands of people swarm Cambodian roads
till the dark fish of Pisces slumps over the world
and the northern lights swing black
LAST CLIMB UP LU MOUNTAIN

Walking along the stream road
Li Po sees thirty
flutes glitter spruce chandles of ice
Bright roils of fresh water ride
muffled under the crust
And climbing up

Lu Mountain in new frost
his feet click the stones hollow
Three crows whak up
from a bush and yellow leaves
drift to the snow

The same climb his last
spring out his soul
body leaps a hundred feet in thin air
Ten whole seconds a fallen pine
is a black stick
floating the cold white road
SLAUGHTERHOUSE

Once a farm girl wore red to the dance
The next morning her grandmother told
how spiders gleam in the eyes of roosters

At the new dome slaughterhouse
giant fans roar millions of feathers up in smoke
Dock trays of liver heap like squid

The last truck pulls out
All thru the night four thousand hens
thunder like snow in their cages
POEM FOR LEONARD BIG ARM

Stone cold and older
than the town this building waits
its last drama of the crane and ball
A sweet nun walks up
and the rickety hall creaks
like a storm ship
"I just need a meal" I tell her
and sight of her rubber
apron reminds me
of the Army and long racks of seeping mops
Once in an ocean of men in white
t shirts I laid my rifle
on the grass convinced
yelling kill at the air bordered
on the insane
That whole year went wrong
Wrong girls Wrong
time to burn my back crisp as lobster
on a Santa Cruz beach
Further south I was amazed

how match box houses
lined the shore the length of the sea
No wonder Leonard Big Arm
picked up his check
stone drunk after the sale
of tribal land Stone drunk
he drove his brand new Chevy right thru
the display doors...the stunned
salesman fumbling
frantic for the dial 0
THREE POEMS FOR ANIMALS

I love the loon...solitary egret
Driving my old truck down the single road
suddenly I see a heron weave
over the slough like a giant sting ray
There is another thing
Hummingbirds ride nuzzled inside
the down of distant geese

**

Something mixes the sacred
and sentimental in a sudden amazing fluff
A caterpillar hurries over the road
Aphids swell to clear
sunny grapes under the sidewalk
And the strangest creatures live inside the house
Still as a rock a huge black beetle
is a hole in the tub

**

The light snaps out
A bright pen and all the glass
in the room disappears
Only this big soft chair rises to meet the dark
It's a bear Dark and magnificent
a zoo bear...neglected all day
for years...wanders into the night

When man slowly kills every animal
the timid turn into stones
and lay in one spot for a thousand years
Lynx and jackals turn into daggers
Rising out of the grass
they tik across the rocks
One morning he's spotted
three miles from town
and by evening twenty more up the draw
Quick as a fox he runs forever
to warn deer
of fire or new hunters
One couple claims his heinous
scream split the moon
half a mile down from the cabin
Not one word
to another human in years...
Then two fires
under the foreman's truck
and inside the cab of a new loader
burnt to a crisp
Five men go out the next
morning with rifles
Hair...dry matted wax
Not four teeth in his whole head
And both eyes
stare up shocked wild
in the bushes
Knees and shoulders stick out
hard as a goat's...tied and shivering
in back of Merle's pickup
CHRISTMAS EVE IN MEDFORD

Down from the Medford depot
neon over The Salvation Army hums
fire red in the dark
I shower and bunk near men
twice my age
and barely choke down
thick gruel served from a big steel bowl
Can't say two words where winos
bald as angels
line up for cake
and Christmas hymns crackle
over a blue radio
One A.M. I wake to the whitest man
in the world snoring
under his sheet

Then dress and hurry thru whirling
snow for the night express
to San Francisco
Gold morning sun brings warm
relief on Noe Street
A little altar lit up with candles
Mexican lace and blood red poinsettias
...a small miracle
PIGEONS IN THE GHOST TOWER

No priest founded this small town
Money from the east
raised Hotel and depot
along the sleepy
Clarkfork...paneled the bank
mahogany and burned grapes around copper cages
What could be more innocent than
Worden and Higgins
posed with store goods
laid out for the stiff picture?
Missoula means "chilly waters of surprise"
and more than once
a fire haired whore chased
some logger off her porch
with a butcher knife
In '63 four road agents hung like socks
from a cottonwood and the timid
priest settled three
blocks back
from the town center
and painted his steeple soft gold
Now the mills lay off half their men
pigeons dot the ghost
depot tower forlorn as the parked
engines  On the tower
only one pigeon now
Wait...another one lands on the east
face upper right hand window
Three more drop
to nothing in the rocks
A strange new guy in town walks
into the Mercantile
holding his bedroll close in both arms
He might just as well lay down in the shirts
piled stark white
and useless as the icy sheets
This winter nothing
short of war in Cambodia
will open up the mills full swing
BREAD SOUP

Most come here from oily
shacks edging the mill
From wino's mud black sleep or two
days hitching the plains
Meg scrapes the gold jelly from canned
turkey into a giant simmering pot
Adds a loaf of bread
...salt...pepper
and hand full of rubbery celery
A boy waits in front of me with his mother
Shoulders bulge four sweaters
and his boots flop
open the size of small boats
In front of them an old man with hands
big as the boy's head
holds a grocery

bag filled with a blanket
After the lines go home
only blades of scum ring the empty pot
On the street...skinny white
chair legs stick out
from junk heaped
on an old blue flatbed
Cold wind...ice...flap of oily tarp
Sudden sparks of snow rattle
leaves on the black maple
BILLY

Bright as tree bulbs the red
velvet fantails zoom
thru rows of bubbles...thru long green
lettuce bushes...in and out
of holes in the rock
Every Saturday Billy stands
for hours...hands folded big as a ball...
giant shoulders stooped over the colored tanks
And dead perfect the part in his hair
plastered wet by his auntie
Red fish zooming
and zooming... Most people
look away from Billy
but fish eyes stare straight out
sideways...same as a chicken's or eyes
of a bike chain

Slow as brooms his big
shoes shuffle over to another tank
Moonfish drift up pale balloons
No...he likes the red
ones zooming
and shuffles back to the first tank
Fantails quick as sparks and beautiful sky
blue rocks on the bottom
This is the same
feeling he loves in church
When everyone sings
Billy cries inside and the whole
room fills up with light

One time he saw the kids hitting
A boy fell and blood
under the bars made Billy
run away to his auntie...away from kids
at the school hitting
In another tank
black lizard fish creep along
the rocks with rubbery feet
And the moray eel...alone in his hole...
breathes in and out like a soft
vacuum cleaner hose
Billy's shoes shuffle out the glass door
Past the hydrant yellow as a crayon
and snow heaped like brown
sugar on the corner
The boys kept hitting
One fell    Then the terrible screaming
All night the orange tubes hummed
in back of his static radio
Now he's learned
to turn it on...most nights
Billy lays awake where no one knows
Eyes wide as a fishes
he watches the tubes
glow inside the wooden box
And drifting away the bright fish
come back humming
inside the warm green water
BLACK CHRISTMAS

It's a dark Christ hangs
on a bunker wall
Wind roars down giant blizzard wheels
and whole companies huddle
in dead mens' blankets
When the storm lifts at Gumrak
the moon grows huge
and terrible to a man
hiding in the belly of a dead mule

Two soldiers ride up
Long boots squeak the icy saddles
and rifles riddle the mule
like a hay bale
The black lily of a gramophone wails
hymns in the warehouse hospital
Three villages grow
forests of wood crosses
and each tractor
and cannon in a drift
monument this miserable Christmas
January comes and von Paulus won't budge
to enemy offers
Russian tanks roll "geese
on water" and Hitler's Sixth Army
is butchered in the snow
CHRISTMAS 1973

Morning...the bar jams hungry eyes of friends with news of the explosion After tons of water...firemen find bread smashed all over one wall of the grocery ...bright pools of pop ridiculous antlers Just down from the fire a woman picks up a pin from the rug stops and reads the news for two hours The whole morning she moves from her bed to the table...up the stairs now back to the table This Christmas her father sweeps and sweeps the porch while her two sons string lights in windows of an old hearse When I wake to the stained ceiling I like to think champagne splashed those brown rings by the bulb Once a bride's garter laced the doorknob Really the old man's sink leaks upstairs till a big swill bubbled my wallpaper When my grandfather's store burned in the first depression he stirred a glass of water a whole year to come down Some kid locked three hours in an old car never forgets the smell of cushions
WHITE SIOUX

Dust rolls and the terrible
clatter of hooves
thunders blue stone of the highway
Sun blazes silk flames
of the mare's haunches
and her eyes swell with terror of the yellow
pickup roaring in from behind
All night the moon burns
the tin barn

where her rope cuts drain
hot sap in the straw
Not one mile of these plains unfenced
the last antelope
soar smoke white ghosts
over the far rocks

The last Sioux
deranged from white man's wine
brood in rows of silver trailers
Now the only prayer
chants rise odd and mournful
from single river shacks
The heart of the Sioux nation bleeds
its raw meat on the block
THE NUNS AT FT. BELNAP

Back up thru this old history
book and there's
little sections on the missions
Here's a tale of some nun trapping beaver
And here...three Ursulines
scalped...the truth
known their necks slit
like chickens
down by a lonely stream
At Ft. Belnap nuns hauled their own
milk from the barn

and this painting
with a purple sky shows one sister
hammering a charred wagon
In the dim photo
on the next page
thirty nuns squint in the bright snow
Every single nun smiling
must be a Christmas
gathering at the priest's home

In our school one old mean
nun always sat knitting
at the other end of the lunchroom
There should be a picture of her dragging
Albert Koonig from the big
steel kitchen
for drawing a man with a cock
for a nose    Or the last
picnic with Father Bailey roaring up
the bank with no fish...his whiskey face
scarlet as the falling sun
BLOOD ON THE SPIDER'S BELLY

Of a thousand tattoos
only the small yellow butterfly
wants to float off the skin
It is the same as three
brass bells disappearing across the ocean
Or the old Italian spraying his crates
of peppers that glow
red as Mexican lanterns

Steady as a torch the tattoo
man burns the ink in
till a blood rose
swells the girl's breast for a week
And all for the walrus
madam who watches from a soft

hill of pillows on the sofa
Home...the sailor tosses his shirt down
and two hearts slow
purple above the combine
Some people die easy as sleep
The little tattoo man
wants to live forever in one body
like the spider
NIGHT FREIGHT

Under the boarded depot tower
line poles buzz hot
in the storm
and the night diesel thunders to a stop
Rain drums the tin awning
The pigeon shit
streams like paint
Fifty yards down twenty boxcars
slam twenty more and more thunder
rumbles the girders

A brakeman walks over
His rubber hood glistens in the dark
Ten cars in Bill and I find
a door open
to the extra caboose
Hot beans in a can
Little table with seats and electric lamp
We dry our clothes over the stove

then sit back reading
old newspapers all the way to Reno
After one night in flaming
casinos Bill and I
hear stories of freight lurching on her climb
Two heads crushed by a load of pipe
This time on the night
freight only this endless wall of snow
We huddle like sheep in bedrolls
On the steel floor...
slow blue flame of the sterno
NO PLACE TO STAND

September...cold...downtown
Santa Rosa I lay out a sheet of plywood
under frames of a new bank
and find two boards to lay my head on
An hour I wake cold
check three churches and walk
to the other end of town
Tonight suburban
houses are tombs of red stone
No people Lizards scurry thick basement rugs
and rumble inside the tin furnace
The next street ends

in a little circle
Not one niche of bushes to crawl into
I try a car Locked The next two locked
Tall yellow grass opens white
under the half moon
Two hours half asleep here
and I shudder back into the night
About three some grocer
works early inside
his giant store and turns away

seeing so much hair at the window
Someone else left an old
panel in the lot
with a brown plastic couch in back
I climb over the front seat and set five cans
of oil on the floor
I curl in Really sleep this time
This time friends and I creak
thru an old mansion
The fog rolls in thick as bushes
under the sea
CATTLE ARENA

What can I say to my old aunt
in Fargo...enraged
with her own pain and fear the country's
turned fascist? No money or jobs
thousands stare out
dark buildings without hope
Black people line up
for the Hearst Food in Oakland
How many more wait out the seventies for soup?
Millions of ghosts file into the soap
white gas house...shower
then drift from the planet in a silky
blue haze The same skinny
secretary looks up
from a million desks
and here in the stone block cattle arena
students gaze dull as the cows

Who will save the people
in another world
war vicious with hounds?
Priests run out on churches by the hundreds
Even a minister shot himself here
last week In the pit
of the darkest dream
the dog black swastika spins to a stop
and ninety boots clap the pavement
DRIVING THRU AN ICE STORM

This giant street in Buffalo
runs a blind trestle into the storm
Somewhere in the wilderness
a red car thunders
over a clearing
The coffin...dug up and hauled
to an old house on the other side of town
is filled with sand
Where do people find space

in modern labyrinths of cement?
Over and over the timid
banker dreams of feathers
and knives Then one Saturday at the dump
he finds crows nesting in a caved
beauty parlor hood

Returning to a strange
house tonight I love knowing somewhere
...Norway or Wales...a man
comes home after pitching
bales all day in the blazing sun
He dunks his head
and arms into a wash tub
and rolls back in grass
utterly whipped to the ground
FIRST TRAIN

I can't remember getting on
Must've been terrified of the engine
big as an airplane
Must've known the little
blonde Dianne who helped
with the puzzle of the cow and stood stark
naked spread eagle in the window
would be gone forever
My first train clicked
on and on     Huge steel teeth
shimmied on the floor
between cars and the doors slammed
like refrigerators

Next to the sterling bowl
and pitcher...bright
yellow butter cubes showed the ghost
profile of a Milwaukee indian
The train clicked on
rocked and steamed thru snowy mountains
And outside the dark sleeper
red eyes of bears
gleamed in caves...the moon

rolled cold behind the clouds
and a million pine
swam past the window
Somewhere else a thousand black rocks
roared down a cliff and the ghost
rode away on his horse
No wonder depot
blacktop just hosed down
and steaming fresh still brings warm relief
There's some old sadness of war
when the maroon dot
of a caboose drops out of sight
FIRST FREIGHT OUT

August in the noon heat
I wake to drum
of boxcars clicking along the tracks
Outside two hundred miles
of wheat weaves her
secret oceans of gold
And right at home a little black
man sleeps sprawled at the other end
of the car   Who is he...
rising when the train slows?
He lays out a few
clothes that fold into his sack perfect
boxcar  boxcar  boxcar
Careful as ice he
slides his bottle of wine in...

and ties a quick knot
Alone as the buddha
or any monk he drops from the door
so easy he floats to the ground
PASCO...the sign reads
Here a thousand billion stars
sprinkle out the nights
In the photo of you standing
beside the white cross
your eyes shine dark and lucid as a wounded
animal's  Friends find you dead
and the air smells rose
heavy as if a big
tomb makes space for everyone
in your room  Or four
gold birds fly up in the total dark
Down and out this spring

I find you again in a beautiful
old Spanish church
in Santa Barbara
I lay down on the floor with memories
horrible as the dry grotesque
ghost hooked to a meter
in the airport
parking lot of New Delhi

Still there's no real harm
sleeping alone here
The cop for this quiet neighborhood
probably dozes off himself
somewhere out of sight
Both hands folded on my chest
I see your statue lift in the warm shadows
Thirty yellow vigil candles
weave and flicker
a thousand tiny ghosts or friends
iv
SOUTH END WRECKING

After five long months of snow
and winds from the north
what a relief to work again on soft ground
Early this morning
I split some larch clean
to the honey glow
of pitch  Fresh as coffee
Fresh as bright shafts of new straw
On the road to town
water runs
all along the cliffs

I stop at South End Wrecking
and four boys stand over
a mechanic cleaning lifters in a big can
At first no one moves
absorbed in a world
ancient as working the first
crude wheels or pulling dead weight
of a kill over rolling logs

Gas and oil smell so old
Old tires  A big rubber hammer
Everything here
is dug from the ground
On the way home purple willows lace the slough
There's no one else on this single road
And that old clapboard house
on the cliff...
See how quiet now
on the high salmon colored stone
IN MEMORY OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Each spring this rich black sod
Smell of creosote rises from old timbers
where twenty hogs snort
and steam over a huge trough
Suddenly a sail
Sail or burst of swallows
Your spirit soars...even in the last poems
You visit Pound and you're stunned by the scream
of another patient
Arms up...naked with a hardon
in the highest window
Like a great sea slug his
balls white hard against the cold glass
I see in your photo
terror and sternness of an age
There's sadness of love
in your old eyes
After three strokes you show
the slow and weighted peace of the turtle
Your neck has the folds
of a turtle's neck
Even that funny round straw hat

and the turtle's deep
internal need to be alone
I love the old woman in A Widow's Lament
She wants to sink into the marsh
where her husband
waits under the blossoms

All thru your poems
cold white blossoms toss and swing
in the wind   Spring!
You can't wait to see the naked
thighs of the police sargeant's pregnant wife
Big white moons!
Ah the full white belly of April!
You love tough old husks
of corn in spirit of Breughel
Chickens...plums...weeds
Once you kept a sleepy horse two whole
weeks in an abandoned garage
DINNER AT THE MISSION

Looking back most remember the odd
The retarded girl in yellow
who played for years
by a stump full of moss
The fairy tale rag picker or giant bald guy
who pulls his body thru the pool
hall on a tiny cart
In this town everyone
turns away from the guy with forty
rubbery tumors and one ear
an inch below the other
Whatever happened
to the spooky sisters who dragged
their ghosts down the street
after an icy fix?
Sweet Jimmy (shoe shine) is gone
And the guy who pawed thru trash bins
with a handy salad tweezers
Now it's mainly broken
down faces of winos that haunt the rich
Look up from the news before dinner
at the Mission and three
drag queens float
by to strike the world blind
The tall skinny one's
afro glows pink as cotton candy
SQUAW PEAK

All over town this morning
rows of maples bloom mint flame
Loggers in the woods
slosh ankle deep in run off
And beside the roaring stream at Greenough
...two girls...dozing in the sun
almost glow on the bright
glass    Days like this
people surrender loneliness the way

children wake to snow
on a ship deck
New sun is the joy in Brahms
Or a soldier running all night thru pine
finds a hay barn
at the end of a clearing
Down this skinny path

...crab grass...carrot weed
bone grass and wild
rose in less than a week
This is a day Squaw Peak looms clear
blue over the north valley
Suddenly a stone
black beetle shines purple
rain in the twigs
MICHAEL GRIPPING SATAN'S HAIR

All old schools have
the same smell
Food from the big kitchen and wood
floors lit with fresh wax
When I was a kid
the desks were bolted to flat skis
Chalk dust stained the blackboards endless
blizzards and my first grade
teacher used a rubber hose
Mornings she folded
down map size pictures of Adam and Eve
Christ wept in the suffering
garden and Joseph stood tall
and beautiful in his bright colored coat
Thieves from the bushes
attacked and left him in the sand
God and evil planted
deep in our tiny hearts
I remember ball coat book cup
and words about Dick and Jane

Mostly they played
on grandfather's little white farm
New car Brand new barn
and the whole family
happy together with perfect hair
Our fathers drove old beaters to the smelter
Abandoned mothers drew

monthly welfare and Bonnie
Dashner got knocked up in eighth grade
One indian kid lived
alone with an old old man
No wonder the giant
pictures filled with pain
In the best one St. Michael leans down
raising a sword for the big swath...
Satan's hair locked
firm in his other hand
WILLOWS OVER THE BARN

In every old farm house
this fluorescent oil on velvet
Here the wife made
tulips from egg cartons and laid a snow
flake doily under the glass
table top Crocheting
thru fear of night
storms she drifted away sprawled

on the purple sofa
In her dream a light switch
drops open its black
door and the willow grove whirls
over the barn

Where does her husband
go beyond his
routine check of the cows?
Only half awake when he returns
she sees his sleeves
rise soft as billowed curtains
weaving from side to side
HOME FROM MILLTOWN

Three A.M. in a cheap room
I thumb thru an ancient
'58 Post to a photo of two men running
an empty stretcher from a burning cab
Once a friend driving
in New York
had a snub nose pistol
pressed to his neck
Another time a guy opened the car
door stark naked No wonder
cabbies love that rare
day of nothing
but yakity women and the routine
nurse Driving cab
in Missoula I remember
the whole town
covered with ice at four in the morning
And the last man in the world

waiting for a ride
to the mill
I listened to one sob story after another
while old people counted each coin
out careful as diamonds
One night for pure
animal gluttony
a fat woman sucked down pizza
all the way from
Milltown to her tiny house
THREE TOWNS ON THE PLAINS

Six months old and she lays here
with her legs folded
Her eyes nod off a long terrible sleep
Six months...three boys break
her down with sticks
and she already
owns one spot behind these funky motel cabins
No one will touch her again
She'll never toss her head or run
In Babb someone will come out
and shoot'r...or she'll
die in the brutal winter
Last year snow buried a road grader
in two hours Sounds funny to think of it
left running and only
the exhaust hole found smoking
from the bank A man
was killed this spring
when someone drove over and over
him with a pickup

**

One car pulls in at Loma
where the grocer
stares at nothing from the door
His thick hands grip the cup and thermos
Each night he locks the bar
he must hate
the doorbell tinkle
Must hope some boy will hammer
the screen Not with questions for a room
but news of violence down the road
or a burning farm
Just passing thru most talk

of love for simple things
Crows work the slough toward evening
It would be fun to raise cows
People leave these booths
old and brown...punctured by the owner's
mean son. If on the road
sign Lewis points
to some event it's miles
past Loma where the orange canyon breaks
and whirlwinds drift on the stone

**

With craggy white peaks...
lakes and little green farms
west of here...people
in Nashua dream of moving from the plains
One young teacher from New York
goes west again this year
Someone threw a bucket
of red paint on his old car
Someone else heaped horseshit on his
front porch Centuries
of ice turn this ground
to rock hard gumbo
I remember the same torn buildings
in west Texas Same dry wind
The same skinny sandpiper weave odd designs
around the purple sage
Tonight...wind wants to tear
the roof off this old farm house
Up at three it's lonely
as hell the only lights
in the distance twinkle above the dam
ROOM AT FLATHEAD

Up the creaky stairs
a bulb hangs from a cord in the dark hall
Steam heat rattles marbles
thru the pipes And this blue
chenille spread looks
odd where both
faucets rust the sink
The last roomers were probably winos
trading bed and floor till some
farmer's fence went up

Who could be sadder
than women left in old hotels?
Frayed coat Pink necklace
coiled in the glass
Once a lady and I got a room in San Diego
No windows Ceiling high as a hand
ball court and nothing

but a cot we hugged on
thru the night
Morning on our way out...jukebox
blaring...I glimpsed someone's aunt
sleeping on a bar stool
Red hair fried to steel wool
Left arm out to anyone...
Her neck hung limp
as jelly thru the Sunday songs
GOING HOME IN EKALAKA

Alone again in a little town
I open a door to the gym where a janitor
works the north bleachers
Radio going Slow knock of broom
A cold wind jiggles
the last blades
of light on the ceiling
Only a few years ago the grocery here
roared up like wheat while firemen fumbled
with snarled hose
A girl sobbed by a car

and the crowd stood helpless
as if watching
executions four centuries back
Weekends a teacher hunts
fossils under shale drifts and only a few
bones are missing from the duck
billed dinosaur
in basement of the school

On my way home
to the yellow motel I watch
a man lift from a tub
of acid...a radiator clean as a dry
beehive  He studies it
solid...understood

and useful as a gun or good plough
No wonder St. Anthony's
face shines soft
as a child's in the brick church
parch hair rings his head like balled cotton
Whoever formed his dull gaze
forgot how each autumn
the humble saint watched
thousands of olive leaves flow into one
And the salmon runs
glitter flames in the sea
SAINT FRANCIS

At dusk mile long clouds
stream orange above the sun going down
Purple drifts over the mountains
far as the sea
After all is said and done...
all passion for wives
and lovers gone
...no one...not even a room this time
Only this walk along the road
...yellow trees...sky...
the bright cold grass
Tonight under giant ponderosa

slow blue flames rise
from blackberries
and the whole bush flares up blazing white
On the climb like this to La Verna
a hundred birds
swarmed Saint Francis
And the next morning Leo peeked
around the secret hut

to see his brother soar
high as the trees
High in the Sistine Chapel
fury of brushes lifted God and creation
on the ceiling In the basement
Michelangelo chiseled
ripples of silk in marble
There's no holy word for compulsion
to be alone In the far woods only this
steady light gleaming
in oil of the burro's eye