1990

Mahakasyapa's Smile | Poems

David W. Gilcrest

*The University of Montana*

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Mahakasyapa's Smile

poems by

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1990

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chair, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

June 4, 1990
I would like to dedicate this work to D.D.T.G. who has patiently endured the vicissitudes of the poet, at times with a sense of humor.

But I'm not going to.

Instead, these poems are dedicated to the memory of my father, Charles Henry Gilcrest, whose absence allowed me to write, and whose presence is the root of much that the reader will find in these pages.

To my wife, a promise: the best is yet to come.
"Standing on a mountain with his disciples around him, Buddha did not on this occasion resort to words. He simply held aloft a golden lotus. No one understood the meaning of this eloquent gesture save Mahakasyapa whose quiet smile, indicating that he had gotten the point, caused Buddha to designate him as his successor."

--Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man*

"To stay cheerful when involved in a gloomy and exceedingly responsible business is no inconsiderable art."

--Nietzsche
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Dharma Honey

for Thubten Pende

Fireweed Mountain blooms
bee buzzing in its shadow
his work close at hand
Business as Usual
Cat Television

On the lotus sits Brahma, the creator. Brahma opens his eyes, and a world comes into being.

--Upamishads

Opaline eyes wait
in the shadows, patient
and unthinking. In the tank,
business as usual:
Red-Tailed sharks charge
and parry, a White Cloud
sails by, and on a flat rock,
a Blue-Spot Gourami fans itself,
dreaming.

in this dream he is a being with arms and legs
in this dream he wraps himself around a woman
until she disappears
in this dream he walks the streets of the city
and the buildings glare at him
and the people glare at him
in this dream he wears a new uniform
in this dream he cuts open a woman
to deliver her baby
in this dream he cannot drink the water
in this dream even the rain burns him
in this dream he is an artist
he paints only prostitutes
he hacks figures out of stone
he has only regrets
in this dream snow buries the gravemarkers
buries the cities and the hills
buries the world without pity
in this dream he believes in the power of dreaming
and he sees the eyes of death
and he is afraid
in this dream the dream will not disappear
and the eyes do not blink
The Fear That Trees Have Legs

A potted palm stands in the corner.
I close my eyes, no palm, I see nothing.
I open my eyes-- a potted palm stands in the corner.

I back out of the room, eyes on the tree,
the door shuts slowly. I stoop to look through the keyhole: blocked! I beat on the door imagining the milkman stroking the feathery green fronds, making love to my palm, my inconstant palm. I try the knob, the door opens easily.
A potted palm stands in the corner.

I walk downstairs, old books line the walls,
I see a piano, on the piano a photograph, a woman with blond hair. I fetch a ladder from the garage and climb up to my window, peering in between the curtains.
A potted palm stands in the corner.

I wander the yard, squinting against the hard sun, strange to see so many trees unattended. The distance to my house, the front door, the stairs taken two at a time, is only a dash, a marathon of trust.
The Lookout

At the bus station, carefully stitched to the upturned ass of a suitcase-stooping girl, I see the Maple Leaf flying red and white on the blue of her very tight jeans:

I remember a different flag clapping in an east wind a good walleye wind flashing the same red and white over the blue of the Lower French River.

On the cook’s cabin porch, studiously screened and blessed, mosquitoes probing the fine wire mesh, Bill and I sit in broken wicker chairs, talking about Plath, or pickerel, depending on the wind.

In the afternoon we track the widening vee of a boat on the river below us: squat grey form in a tired cedarstrip, white wake spreading to our scattered shore lapping grooved glacial rocks and the thickets of driftwood bones.

When the wind scuds white curds of foam and the sky cracks against our ears we search for splintered boards jammed between rocks and pine at the water’s edge.

At dusk the sky darkens before the river, settling over the argent tongue dancing.

We breathe quietly under night’s star-quilt, cold wind stirring the trees, listening to the dock’s distant groan.
Vamp

Your leaning eye chills me, the backward glance at hard cowboy thighs, at men you want and do not, yet, hold in your hand. We are playing an old poker, this game of draw and stud.

It is all sketched out on my wall: a last chance saloon, sawdust floor, and you, Belle Starr standing cramped at the end of the bar, feathered boa, diving bust, hips. You count each night silver dollars and the men drawing queens to shadowed kings.

The blackjack comes to you, red-eye in hand, faceless. You love his thick wrist every time he deals your heart, the dull pounding of the piano hidden beneath the bed: I am the piano player, voyeur and beat.
Lesson

Neglecting scales, my horn sputters
and squeaks, wave after tortured wave.
I sweat quarter notes. She joins the chase
up and down the staff, pausing only to rest
when I do. She corrects my fingering.
We begin again, faster now. Time is
something she keeps. I finish too quickly.
This could be fun, I think, as I pay her
for the lesson, if only she demanded
anything less than perfection.
Black Molly

Black Molly died today.
At least he thinks she is dead,
she lies like Mae West
on a couch of colored rocks
at the bottom of the fishtank.

She was a queen among fish,
and he would weep but for her fishiness.
She swam with a regal stroke,
pitching and yawing with grace,
her royal ballast charming the waves.

If she had been more durable a woman,
if she had walked out
slamming the tank-lid behind her,
perhaps he would milk a tear or two.

But she just lies there,
dead he thinks, her fat
black belly bulging skyward.
He finds her lethargy tiresome,
he thinks he will flush her away.
Elm Cutting

I was wondering, friend,
if you could settle a minor dispute,
hardly worth your time, I'm afraid.
It is the small matter of a tree.

You see, my mother insists
that this tree come down.
It could fall in a storm, she says,
and crash into our house. Now
I know it looks rather old,
its leaves are pale and
many branches have fallen.

But sit here against the trunk.
You can see the lake, and over there
the church and the library.
This tree makes the finest seat.
When my father died I sat here
for hours, counting the geese
on the lake. It was October,
and they were on their way south.

I feel comfortable here,
sitting against this tree
and looking out. Mother says
we need more wood this winter.
She gets cold so easily.
I joke about the frost in her hair.

Late at night I find her
sitting before the stove,
a wool blanket wrapped around her.
I think the creak of the elm
keeps her awake.
Sauna

In the hard, dry heat
the body irrigates itself,

a sheen, a highlight of muscle
and hair, olive dark hair

of dark men, the skin
aching for cool, for a water

unlike the sea, sustaining.
Your mouth is parched

by the ancient dust of an ocean
which now lives within you.

A hot weight presses
on your lungs, you lean

to the door, to the quick
breath as someone enters.

Reflexes beg you to flee,
so you flee, running

through the door
onto cool, smooth tiles.

But the mind carries the body
back into the heat, back into

the baptism of vinegar and salt,
to the dim redwood cave

where the body forces
and redeems, this crying

through the flesh.
Signs of Life

You wake screaming and see the man of the house beading chill eyes your way from the abandoned hall. "You are an animal," he says, then descends to the basement to practice calligraphy, a church poster on the seven deadly sins. You want it to be a dream, but his face is your step-father's and it will not leave you alone in your room, in your sleep.

You wake screaming and see your father's face this time cracking with laughter. You remember that laugh, the fight outside the restaurant when you tried to drive him to the pavement. You were ten, and he just cackled at you, said "I can take you anytime, buddy boy." And you believed him, still do, more than ever with him in the ground, in your head, laughing, laughing.

You wake screaming and see your wife staring from her side of the bed. She says it was a nightmare, she loves you. You want to believe her. In that dark, crowded room you can only twist the damp sheets in your hands, straining to recognize signs of life in once familiar faces.
Fall is Gravity's Season

A squirrel falls, landing dazed
at the feet of a girl.
I smile, having witnessed
the near union of girl
and squirrel.

Behind my house I hack
at the stubborn ground;
the shovel splinters
in my hand. In the root cellar
potatoes close their eyes.

Acorns crack underfoot.
I pick one up, separate cap
from nut. Pressing thumbs
over the cap, I blow a high,
clear note. A nuthatch answers
with a short cry, then flies off.

A red squirrel lies twisted
by the road this morning,
his henna form frozen in the frost.
I keep walking, unable to bury
the small body. The crows
will raise him up again.
Gin Rummy
for Black Charlie

The cards bridge your hands
as you shuffle, offer the deck
for the cut, deal ten cards each.

Turn over the knock card,
it is the ace of spades,
"the Chairman of the Board,"
your father says, every time:
gin to win and double the stakes,
death catch the hindmost.
So you play your best, melding families
in your hand, almost enough
to beat him at his own game.

The fact is, he has not played
in fifteen years, so you've found
another opponent, your wife,
who forgets and knocks
when the Chairman forbids
going down. For this lapse
she must expose her hand,
allowing you to win with ease.

You are disappointed, learning
there are no victories here,
only moments of rest between games.

You wonder why you cannot put away the deck,
fold the table and chairs, walk outside
past the ragged lawns and houses
of your neighbors who play poker,
spades, solitaire or hearts,
according to their religion.
Not the Paradise Bar and Grill

I always know which way is up
in a bar. Beer runs downhill
and I follow it to the level of
peanut shells and the tears of drunks.
From a perspective slightly below my barstool
heaven consists of things I cannot reach:
a pod of fat dill pickles schooling near
the antique cash register, the stuffed
Pileated Woodpecker with a half-smoked
El Corono stuck sideways in his sassy mouth,
even the bartender, with his gut the size of
Montana and a thirty-eight below the counter,
resembles nothing if not a red-neck St. Peter,
wholly indifferent to my predicament,
yet compassionate to the point of calling me
a cab. I would like to think the obscure
men and women who slump together
at their posts fail to notice my staggered
retreat toward the door, but as I cross
I turn to meet their sympathetic gaze
halfway, for a moment, before withdrawing
into the night. Outside, a single mercury-
vapor streetlamp obscures everything
but the green crescent moon and a
'67 Country Squire station wagon idling
by the curb. When I approach, the yellow
TAXI light switches off and a door swings
open without a sound. Of course I get in,
though not without one last look at the bar.
The neon beer signs flicker and die.

<no stanza break>
I reach into a pocket for my wallet and find nothing. The door closes. The cabbie, another enormous man who must be the bartender's brother, puts the car into gear, and we begin to glide through the deserted streets until even the cracked and broken roads disappear behind us. My driver stretches a hairy paw to the dash and twists the radio to life. In utter darkness we listen to done-me-wrong country music together, steering across the wide delta of night to the barren shore where our father waits with open arms and a smile full of teeth.
Mandala of Suffering

for Carney

I

Rage against the rose becomes us,
who could not, even with a hammer,
satisfy our passion for the blood-
red petal and the thorn, ambient,
turning into the flesh without relief.

II

In you I see my own brief agony,
the aspen panicked on the hill,
the liquid roar of rocks in Cripple Creek:
Colorado is no closer to heaven
than Cleveland. We have climbed
the mountains of our flatland dreams
and found only our selves staring
dumbly at each other. What we expected
to find I cannot remember, lost somewhere
on the silent slopes of Mt. Cube.

III

So cold, the snow and sky
shared the same absence of color.
Ice rimed the trees which thinned
and disappeared near the summit.
What color we could see, the blood
spattered on the snow, black feathers,
the dying blue eye open without question,
we could not understand.

<stanza break>
IV

Other mountains betray us now,
peaks shining like teeth poised
for the feast. This morning
a million ants died in my kitchen.
We are comforted by such drama,
by our books, and worse, by
the hand we give to one another.

V

We meet where dinosaur bones
poke through the earth, pale
in the faint and fading light,
and find our way through mounds
of teeth, vertebrae, great skulls
with lilies growing in eye sockets,
to a small, indifferent hill.

VI

Stars wheel fixedly above us,
Aquarius spills his bucket of tears,
shadows circle our dreaming bodies
like wolves near death with hunger.
Something soft brushes my cheek--
I breathe in the maw of night
the odor of lilies:
"Here one must leave behind all hesitation;
here every cowardice must meet its death."

<stanza break>
VII

Morning blooms on the mountain face,
great birds ride the thermals
hunting ground squirrel and marmot.
The sun melts snow from boughs
of thick green trees, dripping
into channels of rock, gathering.
Rivulets flow into streams,
streams flow into each other,
a river cascades down the mountain,
the echo of its voice booming
into the bright, intractable day.
I heart Hawaii

Only the seven black garment bags
swaying slightly in the back seat
of my late model, sensible car
move to the accidental rhythm
of the American road. My eyes are fixed
exactly fifty-seven feet in front of my bumper,
on a point Reader's Digest says
drunk drivers must pass through
before smashing me and my loved ones
into a bloody, shrieking pulp. I obey
the speed limit. Though my attention
is unswerving, I am taken by surprise
when a rusty Gremlin swings into the magic spot
exactly fifty-seven feet in front of my bumper.
There, positioned unavoidably below the trunk,
a sticker declares I heart Hawaii
in rainbowed letters. I slow down to fifty;
the bumper sticker decelerates, matching me
mile for mile, corn field for corn field.
Red-tail hawks note my passing.
Beads of sweat form on my upper lip.
I begin to feel the tropical sun beating
down on my bald spot, smell pineapple
and papaya in the hot wind. The fields drop
away, all that remains is I heart Hawaii
and a fierce thirst for pina coladas,
a longing for rolling hula hips,
the long road home.
The Stranger

We sit in a circle, a different fire
in each dark eye:
    I am a stranger,
up from the desert,
    up into cold mountains.

Far away, my wife sleeps in our tent
tucked neatly between the dunes.

The air is still here, the moon
cleaves a silver trail in the sky.

These people sit like stones;
their eyes reveal nothing
save the everchanging fire.

I am afraid I will cry out
    like the wolf,
one leg clenched in a snare.

    My love,

I tracked the killer of children
to this clearing in the forest,
prepared to claim the blood payment,
but I am undone by the silence here.

I know now another death
will not heal the wound,
nothing I say will restore them.

Inscrutable Moon! You who bear witness
to our love and our sorrow, hear this:

For once let the light of the fire
be enough.

For once let the silence
speak for itself.
Caveat Emptor
Entropic Universe

I

OM

says the mountain,

and the cloud above the mountain,

and the star behind the cloud;

OM

says the well,

and the stones of the well,

and the water of the well;

OM

says the monk,

and the arhat,

and the bodhisattva,

(just sitting);

buddha says it with flowers

II

Dionysus Speaks

A poem which is not of poetry greets your mouth,
ferments and roils: it is your lungs,
the air in your lungs, it is hindquarter, flank,
and buttock, juice and jelly, it is an organ,
a condition. Willingly you go into that valley
of flesh, excited and vague, and you scratch
for love, you breathe.

<stanza break>
III

Articulation

[a duet for chorus and diva]

the big game's on hank
didja see them knockers

Well then, concerning tragedy

a seven ten split
two beers and a dog

and epic, both in general

hand me the spatula
before you know it
termites under the floor

and their species

one more word outta you

hope i can get her bra off

and component parts,

just in time

the toilets overflowing

how many there are

next time I tell you

outside without a coat on
to bed without your supper

not the crescent wrench

and how they differ;
too fast for you

a kind of woman

the causes of artistic excellence
to show the folks

think about the kids

your eyes in candlelight

captured in the act

and lack of it;
a lock of hair

one shiny key

a whisper

and about critical objections,

magic fingers

and a squeaky bed

and the answers to them,
sure I still love you

(bitch)

let this much suffice...
Confession

Saint Thomas saw God in the wind,
whose prime motion moved him to write
elegant proofs to save the soul.
Thus, for him, the power to heal
is set aswirl by blows which wound
in life, and for death make us wait.
Myself, I feel the gusts and wait
for what I do not know--death, wind
blown without cause. I mark each wound,
each corporeal rent, as I write,
and count the hours which fail to heal
my self, this body of my soul.
As if to say this thing called soul
begins where I am not. I wait
a day, a life, for time to heal
what time itself began. The wind
rips the body in time, and write
I may of life, the winds still wound.
And like these gales my words can wound
too often. Not body, not soul,
they resound in time as I write
in the eye of the storm, and wait
to become the storm, become wind
with tongue and teeth which cannot heal.
My Love, the words which calm and heal
elude me still. I feel your wound
and regret the violence of wind.
In silence alone speaks the soul,
yet in silence I cannot wait.
I confess my weakness to write.
This no man or woman will write,
this no saint nor sinner will heal;
here death must be compelled to wait,
only here will time fail to wound:
together we complete the soul,
together we defeat the wind.
When I write, it is you I wound,
you I heal; when I write the soul
of Saint Thomas waits on the wind.
I Beat the Drum

I beat the drum and the old, slow song;
can you hear it, the tom-tom
flood of blood in your ear,
head pressed to the pillow?
I beat the drum,
like every father before me,
as if there were no closed door,
no child behind it, listening.

This happened: my father died,
in the darkness the house was still,
quiet, even the crying soundless.
I remember to tell you this
because the razor he gave me
cuts my chin, because I remember
his face spotted with toilet paper,
stemming the reckless flow of blood
the last morning we were together.

The house is still, yes, and I beat
the tight skin, a rough echo alone
my company in this darkness,
this warm place. I am
the only sound, the beat within me,
I am the silence you hear.

<stanza break>
When I wake I hear it first,  
the muscle clenched, unclenched  
in my chest like something separate,  
alive. And then I breathe once, deeply,  
my own sound, the slow rush of air,  
the ebbing of blood and time.  
When I was four I would hold it  
until my face became red and hot,  
I held it like something precious,  
simply because I could.

I will give you this drum  
and the songs I play, as my father  
played, the echoes a father  
gives his son, not because  
he must, but because he cannot  
avoid it, a sound beyond  
the darkness, beyond every pain,  
the swell of a sea surging  
in our mute and forsaken hearts.
Otherducks

You can call this poem
whatever you want:
when you have waited
for six hours hunkered down
in a frozen blind without a duck
or goose in your bag, just
a bird without proper identification,
you begin to allow for many names,
some fit for tender ears.

Linnaeus was no different,
flinging names around
like he owned the place,
but you, the great white hunter
duded up in your Red-Ball waders
with a 12-guage Savage under your arm,
you run into trouble
at the check-out station:

No. shots fired: 6
No. killed: 1
Species: ?

You peek into your bag, hoping
against hope the bloody bird
will reveal itself as a mallard,
pintail, goldeye, or grebe.

At this point, you would even welcome
a coot, though from experience
you know they taste like mud.
"Are you a coot?" you inquire.

It's not talking. So you settle for "other"
once again, amazed that so many birds,
bevies and coveys and gaggles of them,
claim the same alias, and call it good.
The Ballad of Blindman Dick

What good are forms which plug and chug
and blindly grope along;
it's Modern Life which calls my name
to sing that halflsome song--

I mean the chant of Blindman Dick
who never learned to walk;
his feet were tied with fishing line
but still he seemed to talk.

Poor Richard was born like all of us,
out of his mother's womb,
with eyes and ears and nostrils two
and a mouth which seemed a tomb.

Even when young the lad was cursed
to speak his mind and heart,
until the day his sister Kate
decided he was a wart.

She lashed him up and threw him in
the river so cold and black;
down he sank without a peep,
or even a mournful hack.

And that was that, his sister thought,
her work was done that day;
until the first, tremulous note
rose above the waves.

<stanza break>
'Twas Richard who sang and chortled and gaffed in spite of his early demise; his voice grew strong, his meaning dense though eels ate out his eyes.

"O Kate, O Kate, you've killed me true, I'm dead as dead can be; but nevermore will you escape from my lonesome reverie.

"I'll haunt you with this voice as cold as the water up my nose, and when you die I'll sing for you 'The Wedding of the Rose.'"

With that old Kate could only die, that's how these stories go; her body swelled on the snowy bank and ravens picked off her toes.

And Richard sang that loathesome song of love which makes us sick; Listen now, my brother sings! 'Tis the voice of Blindman Dick!
Rejection Slip

It's not hard to see
what passes for poetry
these days. Sour grapes!
Now there's an image
I can sink my teeth into.
scratch these brooding silences
and what do I find--
art for art's sake,
and maybe traveling expenses.
I apologize, but I'm sick
to death of blood on the snow,
and the patter of rain on terra-cotta.
These penny operas,
these orphaned "acts of attention,"
so wanting mutual respect,
are panned in the Peoria of my mind.
So leave me to rake my muck
(I appreciate your concern);
a duck is still a duck,
even when feathers get burned.
Cacophony

One October, on a day red
of leaf and rank with flowers dead
or dying, I saw
a flash, saw him fall
off my wall, on his head:

A mockingbird, uncommon wight
on this our hackneyed, winkled bight.
He chucked and burbled,
nose-blew and gurgled
(tongued warbles his delight)

when announcing his kind intent
to kin with us, to represent
field mouse and friar,
deaf-mute and prior,
on tuned lyre and voice meant

for modest ears. My folk believed
these lies, the heart worn on his sleeve.
"Honest and true Bird,
Croon us your true words.
(Our shepherd, our reprieve),"

we sighed. So enchanted were we
with each high-voweled reverie,
that virgins pure, lads
and lassies grown mad
with love, grabbed at Bird, urgently.

<stanza break>
Puffed and swaddled, hardly contained,
Bird waxed loamy, mouthing refrains
fecund and sour,
turgid, yet powerful
our dourly swain!

Even the dogs, mutts critical
and wise, awoke from half-sleep, all
tousled and bleary,
to yawn, scratch a flea,
belch, and pee;
then in small

yowls at first, then brays and growlings,
added to Bird's song their howlings.
An uproar, a din,
a hubbub beguine,
rose from thin throats sounding

almost serene, though erotic--
quite nearly holy; uranic
(he might say)--Bird trilled
and quavered and filled
our ears 'til stove and wick

were lighted for supper. Then, O
then, that creature, that haunt, that ghost--
he ended his song
in a key so wrong
that the throng gathered close,

<stanza break>
(the dogs and their tails, the townsfolk, the virgins still sore), and we spoke
in one voice, neither
wary nor bitter
nor eager; for the joke

was on him, that hooligan sly,
who pretended to sing and cry
lyrics iambic
and sweet, just to trick
souls frantic for poesie

and craft out of bread, stew and wine--
"Have you no sense, no ear for rhyme?"
we asked. "Even our dogs
sing better than frogs
on their logs, yet you pine

and you sigh like a fretful gnat.
Good wretch, you've ended in B-flat
instead of B!" He
stared at us, only
then did he see, though fat

country cousins, we cottoned no
dissonance from strangers with hopes
of conning our sons
and daughters for fun.
The dodo, the yak, one-

<stanza break>
humped camels and snails, the deer
in the wood, the bear on the trail, hear
in the night tender
snortings of love, hurried
and fervent and near;

but the Mockingbird, when on the wing,
curdles his lyrics as he sings,
and while at rest, perched
stiff and proud, he lurches
through songs searching for things

fragile and trite, to harass our
ears and task our patience, and mars
the air with stanzas
blank and barren. Can
we blame candor in art

for Bird's caesura, for his terse
death by stick and stone? Which is worse,
to be forgotten,
or to sing and rot
in our garden of verse?
Caveat Emptor
for Tipper Gore

Christina can't come out with us today, she's burning books with nasty words like come and queer and spunk and balls, like head and bum inside. Her mother says we mustn't pay for dirty things, that little girls, and some nice boys, might get ideas and want to play. Christina smooths her Easter dress, watching collection plates circle around. She folds her hands, pretends to pray, eyeing the gold in the tray. Thoughts of Him beget a smile, an angel's grin, inviolable and cold, which Mother takes for virtue white, not guile in form unknown, inviting us to feast on the transfigured body of the Beast.
Incident at a Montana Poetry Reading

If form follows function, what of feckless poems which allow for nothing, and those poets for whom language is a top spinning close to the table's edge? Friday last, in a small hall remarkably filled with folk eager for art, a poet asked this question not in so many words, but in the way she cocked her head as she spoke, as if wondering if we could hear. Two girls, children, giggled in front of me, drawing quick and funny portraits of the enormous woman in the front row resplendent in checkered shawl and pink sensible shoes, of the dark man with a forked beard and a Dr. Barlow pipe wedged forcefully between hidden lips, of myself, square glasses framing tiny, pointed eyes, less professorial than I liked, a reject raccoon, or a rat impersonating a man. An attractive woman, the mother, I suppose, shushed the girls quiet in no uncertain terms; the poet seemed to sense a lull in our attention and read seriously three poems which otherwise might have been humorous: one concerning a love-lorn cow, one which seemed to suggest that males ought not to open doors for married women, and finally a very nice poem about a mop. The girls swung their feet together under the folding chairs and made faces at each other, turning their eyelids inside-out and sticking small pink tongues sideways in a fair imitation of worm-eaten corpses.

<no stanza break>
The mother was not amused, and a practiced glare stilled the would-be stiffs. The final poem, a long, drawn-out affair which stopped just short of being an epic, but which, nevertheless, exuded the confidence and ambition worthy of an American woman writing in the final quarter of our bleak yet noble century, touched on life affirming values, our place in the stars, the inevitability of death and love, and the significance of poetry as poesis; all of which failed to impress the young ladies seated in front of me who began to thumb-wrestle while their mother closed her eyes to more fully absorb the poet's message. Just as the poem neared its qualifyingly triumphant climax, one of the girls slipped off her chair when her sister tried to cheat by jerking her wrist left and right, up and down, like the brahma bull she had seen at the county fair. Only here it was no soft-headed cowboy, but a thumb and a pig-tailed girl, who got bucked off in a spectacular crash. The audience applauded the end of the reading and, filing out, exchanged appraisals of the poet's work, most agreeing she was good, although not great, certainly no Hugo. As for me, I liked the cow poem, and the one about the mop was moving at times, but I left wondering if the girls enjoyed themselves in spite of the poetry, and if they were going to get it when their mother got them home.
Son of Wine

Luis Buñuel prefers the surreal
and a dry martini. He holds the vermouth
up to the sun, allows a ray of light
to shine through before hitting the gin,
a process not unlike the Immaculate Conception,
he says, in which the Holy Spirit pierced
the Virgin's hymen like a shaft of sunshine
through a window, leaving it unbroken.
As I am neither Spanish nor Catholic,
I drink instead to the alchemical religion:

I drink to wine! By glass, cask or demijohn
your uncontained spirit translates my soul
into fool's gold. I am reminded, however,
by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and by my father,
who took his own love for gin to the grave,
that vinegar is the son of wine,
that when the grape turns bad
we can sniff and throw it out,
or we can pour some on a sponge,
clean the grime from our dingy panes,
welcome in every stray and fading beam.
Specularium

I

In the beginning Yahweh remained speechless. Before the beginning Jehovah swallowed his words. Advancing on creation, God danced on a pin. Then he sang wordlessly; he invented the prepositional phrase; he balanced his checkbook; he thought the semi-colon was a neat idea; he eschewed his cud. He made history to help him remember. And when he came to the end he thought he was finished.

II

To there I like it, but I don’t like the last two lines.

III

Is this one you worked on, or did you just rip this off the top of your head?

IV
I found him in that most unlikely of landscapes, Cleveland, nailed to the naked gallery walls, downwind from Republic Steel and the grimy pall of smoke which rusts the lungs and drapes the city in soot and money. His madness-shaped clocks dripped over the edge, but local mall shoppers preferred trustworthy Timex. At the tall stacks he thumbed his long Catalan nose, escaping to the relative absurdity of pink flamingos, dog racing, time-sharing condos, and bingo.

Salvador, you have left us again! I can only wonder if you were truly dangerous, or merely manic; this perfect sphere, this safe and gentle earth, assumes again a predictable relation to the sun if only we shut our inner eye to your frantic violence and lonely, lunatic mirth.
Private Library

When I am too busy to write it all down,
I pretend I am Caesar and send for my scribe
who appears with black slate and chalk
to accomplish what I cannot.
From his notes he composes songs so beautiful
the stars cry a shower of comets,
and old men remember their first true loves.

In his library are a thousand thin volumes
bound in oxblood and gold, bearing my name.
A stack of vellum dwindles in the corner;
by the way he averts his eyes I can tell
he knows that I know there is no more.

After work, as I rinse the dishes
and worry if the cat is in or out,
my hired friend bends over the parchment
upon which my life is fully illuminated,
gently inscribing the furtive letters
only I can read.
They stand together as in an elk family portrait: Papa grinning nervous teeth, Junior squirming while Mother combs his spit-backed hair.

I intrude on their huckleberry picnic, banging up the pass in my truck, but they do not run or cover their faces with newspaper.

Camera in hand, I approach, picturing their portrait on my living room wall, and they cooperate, standing there smiling, three elk smiling at me, all those teeth and velvety prongs, the odor of fir and huckleberry between us:

without even trying, we become the still life on Horse Creek Pass.
I believe somewhere up Deer Creek
a grouse sleeps in a slash pile
and does not dream of anything
like the irrefutable voice of my gun;

instead, the song of the tumbling creek
rising above stump and clear-cut
carries the sleeping bird into the sky,
higher and higher, until even the mountains
grow small and disappear, until
only the creek's infinite song remains,
and that too fades into a vast emptiness.

How lucky that grouse was to not exist
as I crashed through the brush
with my dog and my shotgun,
hungry enough to shoot, and miss.
Vermont Wok

bamboo wind-chimes knock,  
stick fingers clicking in the wind

vision of exact rock garden,  
tea cup and bonsai, now soft  
chompchomp of milk-full jersey,  
perfume of mown alfalfa  
cowpie

sun rises behind green mountains,  
Joshu wakes

esame oil smokes,  
dawn fog on Ten-Acre Pond--  
radish, bok choi slide like otters  
down slick aluminum sides,  
eruption of steam, incense  
sharp, cleaver and bell

Joshu swigs cold canadian ale,  
eats, the day savory

in his toothless mouth


**Where No One Speaks,**
**Silence Does Not Reign**

I would like to tell you of Opononi
and the redemption of all being.
But when last we spoke, you said
my muse sings with a sour voice.
If this music offends your ear, perhaps

silence is the sweeter gift: my teeth
cage this inelegant tongue. A sudden
calm reveals the sea. I will forget
the moon which hangs over the fleet
of small boats returning with the catch,

heavy in the water. I will not mention
the lone dolphin playing in their wake,
or how the girl Mahani fell in love
with the dolphin, and named her Opo.
Though I saw them sport in the surf

and touch each other gently, why speak
of magic in the common tongue? When
someone tries to tell you of Opononi,
of the time thousands of people gathered
in the waves to stroke the flanks

of a perfectly ordinary dolphin, when someone
speaks of seeing grown men and women walking
fully clothed in the water and holding hands
for the first time in years, do not believe him.
The world knows the people of Opononi are liars,

that since they began to speak to each other again
they are compelled to spread wild lies about
a young girl named Mahani and the dolphin Opo
who spoke without words in the gentle surf
of an island in an ocean which can't be real.
When the Cocks Crow

Nearly dawn now.
The crowing continues,
cocks raising thin voices all night,
as if this were the finale
of all passion.

I am awake, your absence next to me
more definite than a factual body.

I said, if I knew the end,
the moment of all leaving,
I could love you and watch the stars
burn away, counting their diminishment,
and you said you would count them.

In good time, all in good time,
I believe you will.
Ten Figures For Love

The bees at the end of the telephone line
when you hang up.

Twin plumes of glacial melt plummeting
to the Yoho Valley floor.

The tidal turning of bodies
in a single bed,
running to sleep.

Spiral lines of a shell
from Maine’s bellicose shore.

Wheels of a motorcycle kaleidoscopic
in the cider light,
the marbled leaves.

The long arc of your back
on a forgiving rock
in the Pemigewasset River.

Beavertail cactus, pink sandstone spires,
starwash of light
and soundlessness.

Your eyes, sapphire chips sprayed
across Montana’s infinite night.

Naked tombstone, a stilled tongue
reminding us
to listen.
NOTES

page

1. "Dharma Honey"

Dharma is "the Doctrine of Buddha, which incorporates both spiritual and realization traditions. Also, any object of knowledge."

16. "Mandala of Suffering"

1. A mandala is a graphic pattern which, in its largest sense, is a symbol of the innate harmony and perfection of Being.

2. The hammer in stanza I recalls the subtitle of Nietzsche's Twilight of the Idols: "How to Philosophize with a Hammer." Although not crucial, it is also not irrelevant that "Carney" was once a dabbler in "The Gay Science."

3. The final two lines in stanza VI are from Dante (Inf., III,14-15).

22. "Entropic Universe"

OM (sometimes spelled AUM) is the sacred syllable of Hinduism, symbolic of the unity of all being, including speech, silence, and self. "AUM" is a word that represents to our ears that sound of the energy of the universe of which all things are manifestations. You start in the back of your mouth 'ahh,' then 'oo' you fill the mouth, and 'mm' closes the mouth. When you pronounce it properly, all vowel sounds are included in the pronunciation. AUM. Consonants are here regarded simply as interruptions of the essential vowel sound. All words are thus fragments of AUM, just as all images are fragments of the Form of forms. AUM is a symbolic sound that puts you in touch with that resounding being that is the universe . . . A-U-M. The birth, the coming into being, and the dissolution that cycles back. AUM is called the 'four-element syllable.' A-U-M-- and what is the fourth element? The silence out of which AUM arises, and back into which it goes, and which underlies it." Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 230-31.
2. In stanza III, the diva sings the concluding few lines of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

27. "Otherducks"

Carolus Linnaeus (Carl von Linné) was a Swedish naturalist who established the system of binomial nomenclature. "The rationale on which Linnaeus based his system was necessarily very different from the phylogenetic one employed today. He worked a century before Darwin, and he had no conception of evolution, doubtless conceiving of each species as an immutable entity, the product of a divine creation." William Keeton, *Biological Science* (3rd ed.) (New York: Norton, 1980) 820.

30. "Rejection Slip"

The definition of poetry as many "acts of attention" has been attributed to Donald Hall.

38. "Son of Wine"

1. Luis Buñuel is the director of many films which some see as surrealistic.

2. "The memorable words of history and the proverbs of nations consist usually of a natural fact, selected as a picture or parable of a moral truth . . . In their primary sense these are trivial facts, but we repeat them for the value or their analogical import. What is true of proverbs, is true of all fables, parables, and allegories." Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, IV "Language."

45. "Vermont Wok"

Joshu was a renowned Zen master of the T'ang dynasty. A monk once asked Joshu: "Has the dog Buddha-nature or not?" Joshu answered: "Mu!"