1984

Short way home| [Poems]

Dennice Marie Scanlon

The University of Montana

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THE SHORT WAY HOME

By

Dennice Marie Scanlon

B.S., Western Montana College, 1972

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA 1984

Approved by:

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date 6/28/84
I'm this close but the pass is tough this year.

- Richard Hugo
  "Letter to Scanlon from Whitehall"
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prelude
From Across The Canyon

I
Under The Tabacco Root Range 10
To Fish A Young River 11
How To Leave A River 12
The Return 13
Backwater 14
Skunked 15

II
New Neighborhood Visitor 17
Dream House 18
Ballad For A Butte Miner 19
The Difference In Effects Of Temperature Depending On Geographical Location East Or West Of The Continental Divide: A Letter 20
No More Long Litanies 22
My Grandfather's Hands 23

III
Photographs In A Bottom Drawer 25
The Veil 26
Opening Night 27
Last Act 28
Words For A Friend 29
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homestead</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving South Sixth East</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trucker Special Includes Two Aspirin</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Answer To Long Distance</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To A Poet From Home</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes From The State Hospital</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawk</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Poetry Northwest - Dream House
Poet And Critic - Skunked
Intro II - The Veil
Malahat Review - From Across The Canyon
Chiaroscuro - Backwater
Urthkin - Leaving South Sixth East
W, A Worksheet of Poetry And Prose - The Return
Where We Are, Montana Poets' Anthology - Photographs In A Bottom Drawer
Montana Review - Photographs In A Bottom Drawer
A Trout In The Milk - To A Poet From Home
The Garret - In Answer To Long Distance
Cutbank 19 - Homestead
The Missoulian - To Fish A Young River
for my mother and my father
From Across The Canyon

for my father

I come knowing stone as the grain of wind. There will be others. Small grouse, pheasant at noon. Tell me about velvet in a chest of cedar, horns of elk in early March, east. We are the hill. See how the sky bows first.

I remember something young where your shoulders curve, a black dog slung across your arms. What is it that moves you from the fire into night? Must I stay? Kiss and rub the burning knuckles, search for berries, spices to trade beside the road?

Lean closer. I will break the current, talk of soft green cloth and elk above the river. This is new wine. Show me the sun and red barrels. I come, white birds. Wind. Look how I bend before the hill.
Under The Tobacco Root Range

These are just foothills that make
a stream more tender to the field.
For miles they set sun
traps, honing the fine edge of noon
from shores where trout grow

smart along my shadow. I've been caught
up here since I was a child, fishing
riffles to still pools, while far back
in the timber, elk locked horns
to die of strength. I think
this river with its meadows and misgivings
has always explained loss
as resolution, accepting my frailty in light

of time and the Loch Laven run. Beyond
the next bend, where the valley wrapped
my life in clover, I first flushed
a doe from sleep. When she bounded off,
wrong scent big in her eyes, I released
my speckled catch in current
and felt the surface break. I understood then
the comfort in distance, my struggle .
to blend in where limits define me. This

is only another summer in the Ruby drain, visions
of sweet creels and deer. Although I've learned
to keep whatever gives up
hope, my borders here remain
simply earth and water, passages

that sweep away with a homespun fly.
To Fish A Young River

You see straight to the mountains from here
like flat miles of snow nailed down.
Somewhere, lazing under cover, hungry trout.
The sun, a cowboy holding stiff on your back
rides for bounty. The sky is playing games
with you. The trick is to walk forever:
Father's girl, tired of hunting woodsheds,
trailing an image through brush and red wire fences
tight around your legs.

Fish for men. Your net will never be empty.
This creek won't spare a catch. The lines are old,
the lures too rusty. Only lead weighs your skill.
You watch for ice banks, tempt the edge to cave,
afraid what frozen reasons might become one early thaw.
Still, there is mother who would drain the dam
to find your way back.
Look for the hawk, piercing skulls,
feeding on years of promised gophers.
Forget the path.

It's a good day to die.
To lose your life and best hook in the jaws
of that lunker trout, to send your name downstream:
The bait will settle into warm black weeds.
How To Leave A River

I turn holding the curve of a cloud
for summer and all the ways
this river let me cross. On far banks,
rocks pile to test the wind or guard a catch
of crickets. Slow bends lay out long
and clean, cold moss on Bitterroot mornings
casting to a rise. Where land is too much taken
with its worth, shores are labored - a ledge
of silt, lean cattle at the slough. And even

with a name like Sun, water falls away. Only
the Big Hole - run of snug pockets, spring
fed and slick - gives me reason
to believe in legend, that any stream is good
if there are worms enough
to snag the bottom, a splash of trout
beside my line. It's a matter of trust
when dusk rolls the landscape
into a bundle of new hay, tender shoots

bounce back. Sandy mites are hot. Prime
stuff where Deep Creek dumps in
a wash of hard shelled grubs. Birds peck
riffle from the surface as if current
returns a friend. I haven't gone
with summer. Just the cloud that turns
for sky, a way of crossing. One curve
to hold my mouth.
The Return

I'm talking strictly of rivers in this poem, the long swell toward spring. When I was twelve, the wind went at a pace that let my need or the current have its way. Now I plan on rain and kinds of clouds that mean snow to change the sky. My dream should be so real: Love, next time like the sun, will bend each mountain pink against a burning face. I stand on the side that turns doubtful, look downstream then to the marsh. Isn't water its own course, I shout, life, what I take on terms? And what of gain, lines I've read in the bark of trees familiar with the storm: To last, give in? Is this how to walk, always away from something good?

There is a lesson in the silence of the flow. Anything that moves is forever. I wish to stay, have the feel of dust before my dream's grown fat and broken to plow. A scent of hay drifts from the hill, one crane, graceful to the ridge. I would leave like this: A poem, the river ends when I lose the voice to cry.
Backwater

for E. Loveland

You said to wait until cutthroat boiled
for hoppers in July, rain had washed out
all the deeper shades of moss. Skies turn
mid-October surly. I hunger for bends
that take less getting used to, less climbing
to the bank where roe clumps fill your tracks.

Did we need flies for every season: gray wulffs
when the river swarmed with caddis, olive quills
in damsel hatch, a muskrat nymph to trail
downstream or make our lives dance over waves?
A horse hair bug can fish up friends who know
big trout feed on night.

It's time for lines to cut the rapids, float
toward lesser parts of the Missouri and become
a greater branch of home. We could jam the inlets
fat with brookies, wade shallows until shrimp bob
in July, churning silt that washes out
our backed up dreams.
Skunked

Another God damned carp. Let's move downstream where German browns are suckers for a copper lure. Farmers can tell you the slough's never good past May 23rd. Too many trash fish crowd low water, white-faced as bulls guarding the lower field. I've spotted twelve orange butterflies with black thoughts of two bars in Alder where you could say I have legs like the one serving drinks who should be on TV. I'd answer you look five pounds younger through the middle. I'm switching to the Colorado spinner you gave me last Valentine's.

Willow on the other bank are wild with male canaries. You can't mistake the voice, bright songs of plain girls or berries forbidden in my outdoor book of edibles. Red: sometimes. Why don't we give Indian Creek a whirl? Remember the Livingston derby you kept a secret I won? How about the mess of Brookies you wouldn't help clean north of Jackson? I don't think you're listening. Maybe the dam broke above Ennis sending tons of murky depths to test our freestyle. Mosquitoes are big enough to sting the moon. All right, we'll bait the hole with Red Lodge corn.

Nothing's worse than lousy luck on the Jefferson, slow walks to a peeling green pick-up feeling a year ago you'd help me over the fence. I know -- your back. We'll stop at the A&W in Whitehall, Pork Chop John's in Butte, my place for Oly and potato chips, yours for you. Come on. Forget the extra cast, trout to tighten your new line. Sun marks a quick hot afternoon. Even carp are getting sluggish on a day with more to do than count what flies or lands or sings my love dragged out to you.
New Neighborhood Visitor

The wax bird dangling from my sill seems to draw her every night whimpering, the loose hair, her eyes ragged in the yard. I hold out sweetbread, a penny charm from the arcade. She limps past an elm to the gate with round shoulders. Tomorrow I will try small flowers, a word like China doll or wait.

There are children who never reach my dream: the one in yellow asking bottles for the corner store, a boy selling old postcards. I dust a painted music box, think the shape rare, dug up in the east with maps and a dinosaur rib. The song used to be longer but I forget how it begins.

On the next block, empty houses. This street, too long without oil. My room tilts with the drift of an underground cave, mine shafts and the need to give unanswered. I go without grace, a wagon of soft things: silt from the creek, a sack of marbles over gravel to the porch.

I should question now. There may be apples, roses for the shelf. Do I leave so early to lose the way or push it farther back? And do I return, paler each time to find I've really stayed? I know her better in fall tearing splinters from a woodshed, a game of kick-the-can and night brings all home free.
Dream House

I've read, in dreams a house is a symbol of yourself. Mine are pieces of pipe railing, stairs settling under the porch mining trucks pass. A road is bad for chasing dogs. Bigger shovels took the lawn, mother, her lilac to a different yard and father not missing flowers.

Thirty years it was red against a closet of empty barrels. Above our winewood, rugs that weave people who creep and call through hollow teeth. Are you the builder, hand on my shoulder, my hand the fortune you will trade? I tell on noises in the morning, the drone of gas in a stove. Lie or games the same. Faces burn out.

I recall the woman, a patterned shopping bag with oranges, talked of night and ghosts are really trees that never grew. Can you cast a spell? Such a nice girl. You'd like a plum. I'm still small at the dry bed of a stream. Crockery and water. I bring this heebejeebe to make a creek and sail the empty cup until it breaks. If one stick was left to pound where foundation's dirt, what ritual would bring bricks back, a wet spot on the sand?

I hold the deed for all it's worth, the right to leave what I've torn down, live where dreams expand the extra room. The blade sweeps closer and someone drives this hearse without a face. I don't know why we go so fast until cheekbones form or eyes begin to match. No sound of trucks like my heart against a hundred springs.
Ballad For A Butte Miner

4000 feet down the Leonard shaft, my father forked drifts from a slab of bark and the beam shot by a rusted headlamp. When cables popped or caps exposed a copper vein, he mucked out the dream every miner stakes on deep tunnel mud caked red on his knees.

Load up. We'll buck the Company contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
The scab we string in effigy will swing till the Irish curse their green.

The war raged for air in '22 from the stench of Black Rock silt. Turned despair by '34 when stopes closed with a blast. Some dug the ruins for silver chunks, others a leg or son. Mercy had a name that year: Union scale, first shift down, round in. Round out the last one up.

Settle my ass. Buck the Company contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
The scab we string in effigy will swing till the Irish curse their green.

Remember the Kelly cave-in, timber rot at the Lex, sulfur burn and shattered words that raise day's pay by the book. Lungs get hard after nerve goes limp or sinks into a bar mirror. Overtime, wage cut, time and a half, cut back, part time, lay off, draw your time.

Strike. Buck the Company Contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
The scab we string in effigy will swing till the Irish curse their green.

Miners choose poison like levels onshift: Silicosis, bootleg, gamble or bum. The mineyard thief who strips his fire from Belmont fence, dark corn bottled in pool rooms. Break out the best before cages drop the midnight crew, slush buckets block the crosscut. Pour the house three fingers and shoot for more.

Keg up. We'll buck the Company contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
Cut down the scab who swings in effigy for the Irish burn our graves green.
THE DIFFERENCE IN EFFECTS OF TEMPERATURE DEPENDING ON GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION EAST OR WEST OF THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE: A LETTER

I had a mind to begin by scraping April from the ridge. When in doubt, the saying goes, dwell on weather. Haven't we been blessed with dusk, a thousand ways to grieve the sun receding? You must find spring a welcome change where little changes. It's easy to spot along valley fencelines - the new calves, Hawn's mended coop, snake-edged alfalfa oddly whipped against the wind. Rain doesn't mean as much here. Pigeons clutter the eaves, softball's late starting but words wear thin for clouds in season, the sting of long drives home.

At fifty-two hundred feet, torn buildings soar. You left before mines with names dull as Alice closed Butte. The big strike settled like copper rings on branches. Cottonwoods wrapped around sewerlines to pop them at the joints and dusted days took root. I only mention it because land to us is personal as choice, whether it swells in bluffs, plateaus or Indian Corn, we both know what's enough. Yours gives back what you put in - grain, slim tops of asparagus, early beets. Mine demands something hard to thrive, a red metal core. When it's gone, dying's less complicated, slow, as one house at a time boards up, another promise of work falls through, ground that's left overlaps its people and keeps them from the boundary of their dreams.

(Stanza Break)
It weighs my mind to write this way
with sky in doubt, bringing April when gray birds
sulk in the eaves. There was more to say
but news is smaller on the page, neighbors
nice to lunch with, the friends we knew
still close. I wanted to tell you nights
are filmy and alive with bugs, invite you
for Shakespeare in the Park beneath a peeling
signboard, find a part for your eyes to play
out in stages or fold you like a paper star.
But I know what mountains divide, some
common ground unsettled. The best country
is one we can sow and leave with fewer words.
And the best letter brief, seasonal as wheat
or old town affairs. One that closes before
weather wilts ridges between with love.
No More Long Litanies

The steeple falters under April sky and Spanish tile
will be auctioned late next week. I salvage what is dozed
away: the frame of stucco banisters, collection dimes
rolled into spring. And inside, a flicker -- vigil lights
on confessional walls, the grave sin I cannot tell.

When the rectory block was shorter, Father Taylor counted
cracks in pavement, dreams of ore that failed the hills
I plundered with an old dog shaking off the storm. He heard
my prayer for infield breezes, a solid hit over bases
loaded, time to slide home before his brogue
ebbed in Latin chant.

I mine the town all over when it caves, a brief winter
howling at my feet: House by house. Street to wire fence.
Backyard rough with bluebells nearly humming. The church
that ivy climbs and dies against, trucks with lasting
purpose at the door.

Forgive me if I dredge up less, believe life that crumbles
can always be made whole. Gold or form. The need to hold
something dear as marble statues, faint choir loft creaking
like a hymn. There are few lies I haven't used in hunger
for a dream, vows at the communion rail while flowers wilt
in my grasp. Grant me shelter. Enough time
to till the fresh razed earth.
My Grandfather's Hands

When I think of hands, my grandfather rocks on the back porch with a wonderful pipe and cane. Wine cellar summers ripen three decades into memory — black grapes in the vat, fat bottles and new corks. I rush to his knee believing time spills over.

Everything reeks in the space between beams — brine from the cabbage crock, pork slabs hooked through the ribs, wisps of cinnamon stick and watermelon rind, mash beneath the still. It is in my grandfather's house on Park, its number hard multiples of four, where I recognize need compounds the past, the vintage he renders like some withered Merlin, wise old oak leg and peg teeth.

What he brings to my life is a kitchen feast steeped and salted. It jells on the rim like a catch in the throat. Sauerkraut steams. A big fork pulls the sausage from a cast iron pot. It's a harvest night when pepper moths brush the creamy bowl of his pipe and he rocks to the flapping of the screen door. I'm too full to know all brew is memory, the small fist buried in a great dark palm.
Photographs In A Bottom Drawer

The boy who brought me pale colored pictures of a dance was never in step with the music. We held hands and posed for the camera. I confuse that time, the scent of mother's expensive perfume with long white gloves, brass through the hall and me reeling. We walked until trees grew strange against the dark.

Songs were all so distant then, about angels or a wish, girls crying and running away. I said we should have one about love, some memory of a cold Saturday, your coat in the night. From my window, rain brings everything into focus: kisses in a storm cellar and water pounding on the ledge.

When I go back, streets will be torn, the school closed. Weeds have nudged their way between porch boards and farther on, a loose gate shifts the wind. I have a feeling the boy turned dark, certain, talking of nights and clubs on the lower east side and girls who aren't what they used to be.
The Veil

for Sister Jovanna Marie

I followed black forms and found you
holding me against the wind. Always parables
or Mary of Scotland, just enough morning
to take the gold side of your face for dawn.
Sometimes shadows are better: the way of moon
on water, starch I knew for hair. What does it mean,
the story of talents? Can you bury what you own?
I think there's no answer but your eyes,
that look hills have when you learn to promise.

Wood was your country.
Light where messages bend to smoke.
You followed Elizabeth and found me molding the form
of Mary at your back. A curtain can be shelter
more than closing. Play or oil. Those feet
that won't come clean. It doesn't matter,
only how fast you get up. I leave badly.
A doe. The veil your shoulders move:
obsidian in the lifeline of my palm.
Opening Night

Adding it all up now, she was amethyst, red chemise and Irish trying to dance. I look at a drawer stuffed with third place medals and remember one act about dying queens, her forcing tears in a mirror backstage the first time everyone thought she'd make it.

Down right, Mariella, read like a crazed monk. We will love you and do from the last row. Your sister thinks you're young away from her.

Off the coast, her voice rattles in like that of another: I have been, the sad mask breaking, a woman. Something in her tone makes the words familiar but the audience wants feeling even there: Lost, against the light somewhere in Washington, as a woman loses.

Up center, Mariella, speak like it's over. We miss you and will when reminded or mother lifts you aching from the floor.

Drunk farther west, it might have stopped. For play, her cheeks bloat or was that how her throat went numb and finished the script? Anyone could have told her, rummaging through trunks of sable and sixteen-fifty for the dressing room name.

Cross left, Mariella. Put your hands together. We care and always have with reservation if your father laughs at you in bed.

Today she finds the part again. Let me make it. A tragedy her fans expect. They say she'll end in a shower heaped by the morning news and come to me over and over blank screens. I have been a woman, loved as a woman loves.

In the wings, Mariella, don't show your trophy. We will believe and do from time to time. You were better than you are.
Last Act

Give me a mask bright as scenes of new clover, clowns I've never dreamed. Any role will fit the pain of wrong direction.

I want conscience cast a fool for reason in my past. Give me eyes the color home fades or stream-fed boys who live deep.

I want branches on my shoulders dying when wind is old from tears. Words are not enough. One voice becomes another without love.

Give me a part returning as the tide begins its song. I need a promise that quiet summer mornings will play on.
Words For A Friend

for Jonni Sorich

It returned yesterday as an afterthought
in a letter from Lodi: The children
Jonni taught here sang for her funeral. I tried
to place the music, the good life
you once said always sounded better
in a song. A waltz, wasn't it? Back,
two three. Slide, two three. We moved together

late one winter to a flat above a corner
market. Even fifteen years ago, it was far
from a bargain furnished. I thought then
small places became us -- the home town we left
for small campus courses, plans
to have small families after school, marry men
like our fathers who built small white fences around us
and let us sleep alone. By spring,

lemon geraniums lined the lawn. In the citrus
bedroom darkness with the neon humming
below, there was no space for secrets. We were afraid
on our own, me in my handmade dresses, you
in your tailored frame. But we both wanted to teach
the music of words, sounds we loved to hear
roll off our tongues and stay in the air
like freshly thrown kisses. They change
everything, we whispered. I laughed when you chose
form over meaning, lingering
on signs and symbols, while I longed for those precise
thin fingers, your touch. I wanted you

(Continued)
to carry it through - embrace the man you shaped
in dark passages, fill your coastline house
with spiced soap, your yard with orange trees,
their ripe fruit perfect as sound. I didn't want
to see you later, refusing to bear children, afraid
of being alone with rough hands on you. Then
your life would have taken my form and given
it meaning. I've been awake
all this muggy evening, the scent of flowers
at my sill, trying to understand why
girls tell secrets, why they cling and fall apart
like window curtains at dawn
as if they had never dreamed one dream
in the dark. I keep thinking about the children
whose voices you healed, how they must have stumbled
and stuttered at your grave. Or if the phrases
were clear, whether they changed anything;
whether their small sounds muffled
the fifteen-year-old cries in a rented room
far from home. We couldn't go back, you said.
Life wasn't really a song. Not even a waltz
that turned, two three and ended
before we could place the words.
Homestead

for M. S. Daniels

Dog days in high country offer no relief. I hunker where trails climb to claims that turned the century rich, ore Cape-bound for Scotland like a dream of easy ways back. It must have paid panning the creek with stillwater eyes, snapdragons to flutter in spring. What words came after dredges tunneled through for greed? Did old ones linger for a nugget or Sunday lighting up the ridge?

Roots and stone. Reason for returning autumn nights. Pictures yellowed under glass, faces torn or buried by the gray waste heaped behind, nothing grows when you find the road to town. Cold sky deepens the winter slope. Love dies. You learn to flood the shaft that fails, dig for veins you have no stake in.

Aren't all claims ancient where we settle our remains? Do words come after flowers dry or white stoops sag in the rain? And life we drain from timbered drifts -- will it still burn like the peacock rock it bubbles? There's little shelter in mines that work their own shift. No memory survives the short way home.
Leaving South Sixth East

When I go, it can't be any state, you
at the back of a month reading horoscopes
to find my favorite line. Someplace famous
or New England, not the blurred figure upstream
worried about fish. Water with salt, a glass bridge
and God, no crickets when I go.

If I swore geese were make-believe,
would you look up or walk the shore the way
a river draws me in? My efforts are torn grammar
that jars the lid of an oil drum. Corrected for reference:
opera at five a.m., brandy then spaghetti but why go?
Didn't we find lemonade across town below zero?
Doesn't the talk in your sleep start
my index under personality,
changes I can't make?

Take your clothes and oyster stew.
I've heard enough of Houston and diarrhea
on the bus. Your sister at nursing school
wouldn't approve my bathroom or double solitaire
on an odd cigarette-burned sheet. You want me to go.
Early where the floor creaks, the woman with cats
in her basement of electric wire has a slow limp
to the piano I play. The end, I think,
doesn't fit the same dream.

Stop me. It will be a pink wall
with two paintings mostly black. I'll smoke
more, pull the curtains before dusk. I may plant
cactus, a windowbox of herbs. No peonies. No Wednesday.
No Perry Mason reruns. Maine, perhaps
and less wind if you come back.
The Trucker Special Includes Two Aspirin

I'd say we made California but the coast is much too far. Spokane's enough for breakfast, drunk and raining on your love. Before I grow foolish with pride of you - so young to take sharp curves in hand - stop for coffee or repair, fresh pancake under the eyes, my forestberry frosted lipstick. There's money for eight gallons regular and a tourist booth snapshot of you and me with bear cubs in Glacier Park.

Your mother won't like the combination of fur and stolen passage, ranger waiting with a tattered picnic box. How old are you really? I am old, acquiescent tired of aging but I can't. We could have gone to Georgia, not sweet, not twenty and you needing me to guide. The bacon here is soggy. The fry cook knows it isn't your scheduled frozen pie run.

Take me to Las Vegas, dice, luck and promises of a long wet ride. If we stall in Jackpot, Cactus Pete's on Saturday night lights the desert sky. Never mind the gray in my upsweep, what folks think back in Rose Bud swathing winter wheat. I'll say we made Seattle stylish, you, twenty by July. As for California, I'm westbound every morning, the same rain driving hard far down the coast.
In Answer To Long Distance

You call from Seattle to say
it doesn't snow. Yes,
I have been well. The new year brought ice
to edge the window, steam
by one p.m. I picture you when
children flood the rink to cut figures
on the surface of their play.
Or how cold ended
bitter weeks before we searched the river,
named it trust and lived
the weather in relief.

Hands on the shovel
my memory drifts. We might have been twelve
hauling jackpine from the Pintlars.
Later losing balance. I yank
the chain until it snaps December at the neck
and tumbles us toward sun:
time to shake long shores down,
one eye keen for beetles,
the old tracks rattling our bones
with bluesy whistles of an evening train.

A front takes shape
along the Highline and Montana socks
me in. One stunted limb reaches
for Idaho. Another cowers from Wyoming.
I press against you
but the rocky world we loved
slides away -- wild strawberries
at the Flint Creek spillway, tadpoles cuddled
in pumphouse silt
or someone just like us. Peeling
in the heat.
To A Poet From Home

for Richard Hugo

Dick, this is a day wind could take
the pinecone I kick softly home. And foolish
with breeze, I argue direction, stumbling
through houses of odd friends. Ten years ago
I'd name any street eternal, forgetting blacktop
boils each spring. You name it better lonely.

Consider '36 here. Pay came rough as Butte itself,
your words in dust or company cut. Two weeks' wage
depended on bluff, not a sure hand at the M&M Bar.
Hospitals thrived on silicosis, bootleg wars, talk
of the next long strike. Timber sags the Neversweat
like echoes down the shaft: Eight cents more
by Christ. We'll buck this contract yet.
I just hear home like a stranger, new hail
ringing cobblestone back.

Clark, our king, had a cozy place. Three stories
make a nice tour Saturday. Marble, banisters
from Belgium slide like life late afternoon.
Surrounded so by history, you'd expect me rhyming
copper dumps with high grade veins
beyond my father's eyes.

An open pit answers: Old buildings first.
Drills and shovels dim the lights, hills before dusk.
Drifting, you wouldn't stop, wouldn't call it home --
forlorn as hollow towns are, mines a cold reminder
you can't go on cursing rock like love shipped
away forever. Men had to keep their vision small,
learn negatives for hope. You'd think of that,
load ore cars with your dream riding hard to the end
of the line. I must say home. Dying ten years ago.
Toasting the night shift done. But Dick, the beer
is more bitter than yesterday.
NOTES FROM THE STATE HOSPITAL

Breaking In

Rain and early summer fill my song with need to change the time, a draft gliding the wall. The girl at my side knows the power of spells. She dreams those friends in the photograph for years, each face a star. Shall I call her Joy from my home town, hard from the dust, mines, strange wrong men? I don't understand the day, why I take a chance and give my hand, warm for her song.

My Slack Hour

The cup I fashion out of clay is rough. No art here, nothing practical. I stare at a crate of polished beads and women who paint children with small eyes. There ought to be less black on canvas or in the expressions, less pain. Vision that place where boys chase lizards down the path of a rainbow. If my skill was oil, my worth in color lasting as defeat, could I mend the will to live? Girls are old who work with clay. We move to a grove where carousels turn purple in the sun.
The Walk

This back road ends where leaves begin their long affair with passing wind. The markers are simple, the dry ground heaped. It's noon when crickets hug the berry stem and fables are dreamed in a park. I walk the earth's cool way wanting love, the velvet-horned stag carved from a mountain of ice.

The Break Away

Tomorrow, the tree that scrapes my window will lure a hundred birds to close the season. Thin boys rake the yards. Yards turn brown and sink in grief. Songs are foolish to have meaning. We forget the words, the blue-sky carnival waving June's bright flag. Why did I fold it away and keep the day a lie lived frown for frown? Summer's for the girl who plays love a refrain, sure of the right to be young. I carry the promise of her message, gaining time to fit inside.
Teaching the history of Northwest settlement, I skim over the Mandans. Children find the Sundance useless now that old ways fit into a chapter; cruel tribes blend with white rain on the pass, trappers, fur hats and a pock-marked end to ritual.

I keep to myself their power, knowledge of words that fail – sun, rain, May fields lifting corn like a promise, hides heaped past the next good kill. And the unspoken name they had for wind. Something unexpected. Off the cliff with a shriek or far upcountry, drought eternal, hawk could blow the land away.

My lesson should include usage of new terms. Crop: A chief was wise to love what wind could soften. Chief: He kept direction for his people knew what words transform. Shelter: In the quiet of low hogans, their visions welled up and held the land like a map in a schoolroom – reference to grow from, hawk on the downdraft drifted home.