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Dear Kevin,

Please disregard my May 20th email with corrections to the proofs for Radio Time. I had mistakenly repaginated the book. I realize now that is not necessary. It's simply a matter of moving part of a poem's text to the next page. Here is a complete list of corrections. Please accept my apology for my earlier error with this.

1. Back Cover: In the blurb by Richard Jones, there are quotes set in italics that should instead be set within quotation marks, in straight type:
"I've come to believe in the living"
"and their sacrament of speech"
2. Cover art and Author photo credits: Please include these in the copyright page:
Cover art: RB McGrath, "Still Life with Radio, Wine, and Fruit," oil on stretched canvas, 2006
Author photo: Robert Bussey
3. Acknowledgments:
Between *Tar Wolf Review* and *White Pelican Review*, please add the following acknowledgment:
The Tower Journal: "Boys at the Saturday Matinee"; "Porcelain"
The last two lines in the first page of acknowledgments should be moved to the second page where that information is continued:
"Blue Aster / Red Pine" first appeared in *Emerson of Harvard: A Collaborative Anthology to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Quill Books, 2003).
Close the spacing in "A Story of Silence" first appeared in *Portsmouth Unabridged: New Poems for an Old City* (Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2002).
Close the spacing in "Amoskeag" first appeared in *The 2010 Poets' Guide to New Hampshire* (Poetry Society of New Hampshire, 2010),
4. Table of Contents (could this be listed as Contents instead?)
In section I, please add the title for the poem "Porcelain" (page 21)
In section II, the titles *Odds Against Tomorrow* and *The Quiet Earth* should be set in italics.
In section III, the page # for "The Annual Richard Milhous Nixon Pig Roast & 4th of July Celebration" should be changed from 65 to 66
5. Poem Corrections
"The Train," page 4, line 15, "confectionary" is misspelled, and should read "confectionery"
I. The Gift of Unwanted Knowledge
"Apples," page 26, move the last stanza to page 27 with that stanza's last line
"The Gift of Unwanted Knowledge," page 30, line 8, hyphenate "dust-twirled";
page 31, line 11, indent "houses"; line 13, indent "creek"
II. Boys At the Saturday Matinee
Odds Against Tomorrow, page 43, close up extra spacing between title and poem; page 44, move last three lines to page 45
The Quiet Earth, page 48, line 12, close up extra spacing before "shotgun"; line 19, close up extra spacing before "dressed"

III. The Industrial Diamonds of 1964

“Statue of Liberty with a Ruined Face, in front of the Central School Being Renovated,” page 55, readjust lines and spacing of title; move line 16 (last line) from page 55 to page 56, making it the 1st line of the next stanza

“The Annual Richard Milhous Nixon Pig Roast & 4th of July Celebration,” page 66, close spacing between lines 12 & 13 (they’re part of the same stanza), and move “natural worlds” from page 67 to the last line on the page 66

“Everywhere is Everywhere,” page 70, line 8, first word “row” should read “rows”

IV. A Story of Silence

“What to Say if the Birds Ask,” page 77, move line 17 (last line) to page 78 together with its indented last word “pond”; page 78, line 3, indent “next”

Please let me know that you’ve received these revised corrections, and again, I apologize for any confusion I may have caused in this process.

Best wishes,

Walter

Radio Time

Radio Time

Poems by W.E. Butts

Cherry Grove Collections



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X

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the following publications where these poems appeared:

Birmingham Poetry Review: "Testament"

Brick: "The Daughters"

Connotation Press: An Online Artifact: "The Gift of Unwanted Knowledge"; "Odds Against Tomorrow"; "The Other Language"

Revise

Calliope: "Practicing Faith"

Cider Press Review: "The Calling"; "Everywhere is Everywhere"

Compass Rose: "At the Hamilton House"; "Today"

The Fourth River: "Thrush & Squirrel"

The Larcom Review: "At the Harbor"; "The Maple"

New Hampshire Magazine: "The Lake"; "Simply, This"

Poem: "The Cardinals"

Poetry East: "Against Happiness"; "The Annual Richard Milhous Nixon Pig Roast & Fourth of July Celebration"; "Art Lesson"

Poets-on-the-Line: "Meditations on Leaving"

Saranac Review: "Apples"; "Consideration"; "Radio Time"

Tar Wolf Review: "Red Helmets"

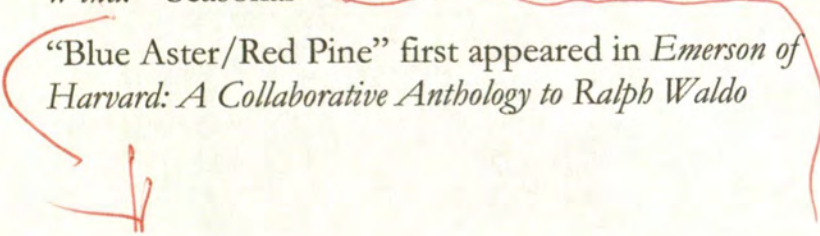
→ Add the Tower Journal

White Pelican Review: "What to Say if the Birds Ask"

Wind: "Seasonal"

"Blue Aster/Red Pine" first appeared in *Emerson of Harvard: A Collaborative Anthology to Ralph Waldo*

more to next page



Emerson (Quill Books, 2003).

"A Story of Silence" first appeared in *Portsmouth Unabridged: New Poems for an Old City* (Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2002).

"Amoskeag" first appeared in *The 2010 Poets' Guide to New Hampshire* (Poetry Society of New Hampshire, 2010).

"Grace" first appeared in *Under the Legislature of Stars: 62 New Hampshire Poets* (Oyster River Press, 1999).

"The Maple" was reprinted in *Heartbeat of New England: An Anthology of Contemporary Nature Poetry* (Tiger Moon Press, 2000).

Several poems from this collection also appeared in the chapbooks *A Season of Crows* (Igneus Press, 2000), *White Bees* (Oyster River Press, 2001), *Sunday Factory* (Finishing Line Press, 2006), and *What to Say if the Birds Ask* (Pudding House, 2007).

My thanks to Tom Absher, David Allan Evans, Glenn J. Freeman, William Kemmett, Rustin Larson, Al Maginnes, and Kevin Pilkington for their encouragement, and advice on many of these poems. As always, my gratitude to S for her wise counsel and generous support. Thanks also to my colleagues and the students at Goddard College.

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close space

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for S,

and in memory of Jack Myers

*Wonder and desire are how the self changes
into the camouflage of everything.*

—Jack Myers

X

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The Train

The train arrives
and birds scatter from the dying elm
to accept the field of late autumn grass.
The land extends a distance
that could reveal
some hidden, unknown thing.
But here, my father, a railroad
man's son, steps across
the rusted, weed-filled tracks,
bringing his suitcase of unspoken words.
In the field, ~~the~~ birds forage
insect and seed,
return with cries and questions.
In this dream, I become the ghost
my father was, one man traveling
between small destinations.
He hands me his suitcase,
and waits now as I board the train
Our face floats through the coach window,
past a sequence of landscapes.
This is America, 1917, the Kaiser "over there";
they've taken German out of the schools,

and I'm left with my one simple language.

It's 1929: Buffalo, New York,

men going over the Falls in a barrel.

I meet a boatman in a bar

the night before a long distance swim

and pay him ten dollars.

Next morning, alone on the gray shore of Lake
Ontario,

I decide to go on as far as I can.

Years later, half my stomach gone

to ulcers, I study taxidermy,

and am devoted, for a while, to preserving

the small bodies of frightened animals.

But I get a job, third shift,

cleaning the gelatin-filled machines

at the confectionary dessert plant

Confectionery

next to the railroad tracks, where each night

I listen for the steaming engines.

In 1942, I finally marry. Our first child is stillborn,

and the second so ill the doctors aren't sure

he'll survive, but he does.

Five-years-old, I baffle the lifeguards

with my determination to remain underwater.

At school, we have air raid drills,

nuns directing us to shelter and prayer.
Sundays, at church, I kneel with my parents
in silence, while songbirds warble in the rafters.
I'm twelve, at the rail yard,
walking the tracks by the coal cars and ash,
kicking gravel into the tunnel's loud darkness.
I can hear a locomotive's whistle,
a diesel's hiss and grind at the crossing,
and Father, we are the trembling earth.

I. The Gift of Unwanted Knowledge

The Lake

I don't know how Father managed
that summer I was five,
on his factory pay,
to bring us to the glistening lake
and white clapboard cottage
for a week, its small rooms
filled with early July light,
and what seemed to me a thousand birds
singing through the open windows,
past the waving flowered curtains.

Perhaps he borrowed the money
from my uncle, who would
be dead a few years later,
at fifty-four, the only time
I ever saw my father weep.
But we were happy those days,
my parents and I,
by that lake called "Silver,"
and in its bright water

that returned us,
redeemed and shivering,
back to our currency of air.

Each afternoon, I walked
along the shoreline,
gathering shells and stones
from where the wet sand
touched a mysterious silence
that somehow
echoed through me,
even on that final morning
of clouds and rain,
when we left for home.

Porcelain

Early Saturday afternoon, in winter,
Mother and I are walking
down Elm to the gray and white house
of the Stevens sisters, who were so frail,
I remember, the dust-swirled light
passed through them. "Be careful,"
Mother warned when, in the curiosity
of a four-year-old boy, I picked up
the Boston terrier from the mantel
and turned that tiny figurine
slowly over in my palm. It was then
one of the sisters reached for the collie
and beagle, and when she placed them
on the lace doily draped over the rolled arm
of the button-tufted high back chair,
I saw how the inside of her wrist
had become a small, colorless leaf.

I sat down and soon they were
gathered by me: the Austrian shepherd
and chocolate Siamese, the bulldog
and English setter. And a golden palomino

stood near a grazing brown foal,
while a barn owl, a blue bird,
and a white-throated sparrow ~~white-throated~~
quietly rested. Even the turtle dove
and humming bird were there, and then
I was raising the birds above my head,
and I sang for them too. And I barked
for the dogs and whinnied for the horses,
and the room filled with flight and the new
sounds I had made for them all,
as those three women watched over me.

Later, while they chatted over tea
and I drank hot cocoa from a thin china cup
painted with tiny roses, snow fell
endlessly outside the frosted window,
and I had held those many things
which I knew now would not break.

Art Lesson

How many times
did I spoon the last taste
of hot fudge from the bottom
and sides of a tulip sundae glass
at Mrs. Ellis's coffee shop,
the portrait she'd painted
of her dead husband,
Gus, no longer dressed
in his white apron, but elegant
now in glowing oils
and dark, vested suit,
hanging above the lunch counter?

She was childless,
hair silver and long,
arranged in a high bouffant,
a portly woman in her sixties,
who only wore purple
or black, and her smile was kind.
All through my childhood,
I brought her my drawings:
crude sketches of houses,

cumulus clouds settling into the low hills,
faces and hands, barns in the fields,
our small town's creek,
the willows that lined its banks—
where boys reckless with summer
dove from a stone bridge—
and the birds that flew over them.

And she'd take me then
to help me make choices
from the glass display case
filled with art supplies:
jars of tempera and tubes of paint,
charcoal and illustration board,
brushes and pastels, tin trays
of bright water colors.

She showed me the imaginary
lines of perspective, how to rub
shadow into light, the proper
placement of eye and ear,
and reminded me often
of the need to erase.

And so I came to learn

both patience and flourish,
and how putting pencil to paper
was just the beginning
of what I might see.



Apples

In October chill the earth-tart scent
of fallen apples brought me to her,
sweet Molly O'Brien, the rich girl
who lived in the white Victorian
with gingerbread trim, largest house
on our street, sprawling front yard
and single apple tree. Those afternoons
I could almost forget how Father returned
each weekday morning covered in factory dust,
Mother steaming in a dining car kitchen.

We were twelve, this good-hearted child and I,
and never spoke about the overdue bills
or grocery credit, the dinner and basket of fruit
the Ladies of Charity delivered to my door one
Christmas,
how I hated their cheer and flowered hats.

Many years later, hundreds of miles from that town,
when I went with friends and their children
to pick apples, in that orchard I thought of her
again,
as trees yielded what they could no longer bear,

move
to next
page

that we might remember kindness.

Sacrament & Penance

Whatever I'd done to offend
is a lost memory now,
but the day that nun, red-faced
and stern, slapped my cheek
so hard my seven-year-old soul
felt stunned as she accusingly hissed,
"Must you always be different?"
was somehow both sacrament
and penance. Poverty had made me
a boy named in whispers
of kids who gathered in the hallways
of St. Peter's elementary, or at the edge
of the school yard at recess,
and not even the kind smile of the girl
with blonde braids who sat quietly
at her desk was enough to believe in.
But it's true my father returned every dawn
covered in dust from his factory job,
and my mother worried her rosary beads
each Sunday Mass, small fingers soft
and wrinkled by dining car dishwasher.
There was faith in a barbed hook,

glittering lure, and my father, summer nights
at the creek bank lined with lanterns
of the poor; the coal-heated house in winter,
pot-bellied stove, and Mother's warm hands
those afternoons I'd been too long in the cold;
the simple prayer that brought us all,
evenings, to the supper table, where that question
was an answer, then a promise
my newly anointed life would have to keep.



The Gift of Unwanted Knowledge

Because every evening, ten miles east,
small men guide their nervous horses
to the starting gate, afternoons in our town
my father leans over a pockmarked bar,
checks the history of losses and wins
posted in the latest racing form, collects
the folded slips and wrinkled bills of barroom
regulars.

Here, at the ^{hyphen} ~~dust-twirled~~ Eagle Tavern,
it's 1958, and light glows amber in their glasses
of Pabst Blue Ribbon, Black Label and Genesee.
Where else could faith assemble when the factory's
gone,
but in this dark cathedral of last chances? They
know
the odds are never with them, but place their bets
like a devoted Sunday congregation.

Outside, the sun is gleaming proudly on the hood
of a new Edsel driving slowly down Main Street.
A few loud boys waving Hubley cap pistols
run from the 5 & Dime, falling then quickly rising



into the repeated resurrection of their play,
as troubled, speechless shoppers step back now,
worried in their sudden search for safety.

And I am one of those running, screaming kids,
toy gun in my hand, freed from school to an
afternoon

that needs killing. We had learned what doesn't
survive:

Sputnik a cinder descended from the atmosphere
of stars and other planets, Roy Campanella,
once called the best catcher in baseball,
crippled by his car's bad slide and crash.

Indent

We heard our fathers, late at night in their darkened
houses,

sleepless and bitter, so many things already gone.

Indent

We skip flat stones across the surface of the murky
creek,

lie shirtless beneath a lowering sun and cool breeze.

If we have questions, they are here in whatever light
is left to hold us, each one his father's son,
and to know what's next is not what we expected.

Meditations on Leaving

Neruda, as a child in the yard,
and his precious toy lamb,
spoke for hours
with an unseen boy
on the other side
of a high wooden fence,
until one day
he passed the lamb
under a hole they had dug,
and that boy
delivered *his* favorite thing—
a pine cone.
It was like any moment
when we are almost innocent.

Once, a friend and I
ran to the river
and broke the backs of sunfish
against wet rocks,
smoked from corncob pipes,
cut our arms with the knife
of our dangerous games,

and pressed the small wounds
together like a kiss.

I still don't know
how it is we become
what we no longer trust,
but this morning
before I left, I watched
your face turn away
toward whatever, just then, was.

Testament

This morning, when I woke, you were
already gone, and outside the gray sky
had lowered its wet, dark hand
over the houses on our street.
Birds gathered on the lawns
like old friends. When was it
I first learned to take in loneliness
like breath? When my brother was born,
he was already dead. Jesus had sacrificed
himself for my sins, and was gone.
Uncles and aunts took up their coffins
before I knew their old stories of barges
and trains, and so it was up to Father
and Mother to make me whole
with history, until they, too, left.

If it's true the dead live in us, then don't
I also hold their emptiness as so many
prayers I repeat those late hours
I might stand alone by the window
of a rented room in a strange city,
neon glowing like a false god?

Or perhaps I walk down a country road
at dawn to a river bank, where the mist
begins to rise like some new faith.

I've come to believe in the living
and their sacrament of speech; how each word,
in the telling, is its own necessary story,
which is yours, which is mine.

II. Boys at the Saturday Matinee

Boys at the Saturday Matinee

We were happy those afternoons,
with our boxes of Dots,
watered-down sodas, and bags
spilling over with popcorn,
even as the sudden dark
and slow slide of curtains
silenced our laughter
and screams, while we waited
for a Saturday matinee serial to begin:

Black Arrow and Captain Marvel,
Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon,
The Green Hornet and Dick Tracy,
Red Ryder and The Lone Ranger,
or any one of a dozen others
our saved quarters let us follow
for twenty minutes each week
into new episodes of heroes, villains,
kidnappings and impossible escapes,
and always a beautiful woman
who had to be rescued.

But sometimes it was hard to figure
who the criminal mastermind really was.
And despite how many times we saw
a chapter end with the hero
trapped and certainly doomed,
we argued his fate until we returned
to be captured again
by those metaphors of good and evil
that rose up like truth, like faith,
before our cheers and applause,
our eternal and communal praise.

The Calling

Again the boy calls after the man, and again
I'm walking through memory with my father,
following the trail of theater aisle lights,
down the carpeted path to our seats.
It was 1953, and we'd come to see "Shane,"
and what a nine-year-old might learn
about the friendship of men and clarity of evil.
When I watched Jack Palance, as the hired gun
dressed in black, shoot a stubborn homesteader
and then grin as his body fell
in the mud-filled western street, I knew the name
of all things wrong with the world
was "Wilson." And later, I wondered about the
future
of what was right, as a wounded Shane
rode away from that Wyoming valley
and those settlers he'd saved,
the boy Joey hollering for him to come back.
I was too young then to dwell on the enigma
of the woman he could have loved, guess the reason
for the hero's stoic silence, or contemplate
the symbolism of mountains shrouded by clouds.

In the lobby, after the film, I passed a full-length
mirror
and imagined, for a moment, who I would become.

Odds Against Tomorrow
Kallett Theater, 1959



Close up spacing



Here are three men driving through the fast fall-off
of noir light and shadow, following the Hudson
River

toward a small town bank outside Albany
that the disgraced former policeman swears will be
an easy score,
and you can tell by the look in their eyes
and grim set of their mouths they need to believe it:
the Harlem musician tired of crooning to the ofay
crowd
in smoke-filled bars; the racist war vet, just out of
the joint
for hitting a man so hard he killed him but, he
reminds his girlfriend,
he didn't mean to do it. Something snapped and he
can't remember.

Now they're at a lake's gray shore, close-up
of a half-submerged and ruined china doll, the ex-
cop
tossing stones at a crumbled can. In the nearby
woods
the veteran points his shotgun at a startled rabbit,
and we have to wonder why he hesitates, until

the frightened animal scurries away, he shoots,
and then we understand. Of course, the robbery
goes wrong.
We already knew this plan wouldn't work: the ex-
cop dead in an alley,
the musician and veteran running past the rail yard
into the looming rows
of oil terminals, and a confrontation that had to
happen.
But it's what the camera shows us next that makes
us
sit up straight. In a scene reminiscent of Cagney's
finish
in "White Heat," they climb on top a tank and fire
simultaneously
at each other, the screen exploding in flame and
rising smoke,
in the aftermath, their scorched bodies laid side by
side.
And in this time out of time we know failure,
desperation, even greed, each of us unrecognizable
in the darkened theater of our collective breath:
student and teacher; housewife and sales clerk;
grocer and mechanic; the teenage couple
necking in the last row. And "Who,"
the first detective to arrive is asking,
"can tell the difference?"

Move to page
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Ods continued

Our Fathers' Clothes

And so now we wanted other lives,
sixteen-years-old on a summer evening,
coming out of the small town's theater
after "Dr. No"—Ursula Andress in a bikini,
suddenly emerging on a white Jamaican beach,
suntanned and rapt with private song;
Connery as Bond, dark browed and sexual,
stepping out from behind a dune, singing back.
And later, in a perfect tuxedo, Bond wins
at roulette, and deftly places a chip
in the cleavage of that night's good fortune.
These were not our fathers' clothes
those men of field and factory labor,
Friday's poker ante, Schaefer beer,
a cigar's reward, gabardine trousers,
and rolled up sleeves. But when we stopped
at the Hickey-Freeman men's store
window, our reflected images
dissolved the manikins' blank stares,
until we boys became the characters
in a movie of our own making, confident as men
dressed in slightly tilted fedoras, carefully peaked

handkerchiefs pointing out the breast pockets
of our blended wool, three-button coats,
jacquard print ties in Windsor knots
on Hathaway shirts, the cuffs of pleated pants
just breaking over polished oxfords.
Then a fade to the final scene:
we walked home through the dimly-lit streets—
our fathers' sons.



The Quiet Earth

Here is the world, scorched and silent,
and a man convinced he is alone in it
wanders the empty streets of the city
blowing a sax, and because there is no one
left to care, he walks into a department store,
rummages through the clothes racks, stands
before a three-panel dressing room mirror,
his athletic, muscular body facing him
in a woman's white slip. Now, cut to an oak
cathedral door, an interior shot of a crucified Christ
glowing in the stained-glass window light.
Cut and the man bursts in, woman's slip and ^{spacing}shotgun
screaming, "Come out now, or I shoot the kid!"
No one answers. He finds a truck equipped
with megaphones, and drives around the ruins
announcing his presence. No one answers,
but a young woman steps out of the rubble,
and she's the beginning of hope, the resolution of
faith.
The audience is intrigued. By this time, he's ^{spacing} dressed 19
in T- shirt and khakis. We learn there are others,
and events, for now, can go on. There's a mystery

to be solved, and the next looming disaster.
In the climactic scene of explosion, ringed planet
rising, and the man on a beach, alone again,
we don't know who's been saved, but must leave
to re-enter the world, its people and traffic,
music and voices, constructs and omens,
all those symbols and signs that insist we belong.

III. The Industrial Diamonds of 1964

Red Helmets

Perhaps it was a sign of the easy targets
we were to make of our lives, how we crept
along tall weeds and darted through woods,
pointing toy rifles and throwing rocks,
out of some childhood logic
wearing army surplus helmets painted red.
So many afternoons, we fought those battles,
stopping only to argue
when one of us refused to die,
until, each evening, the autumn
darkened us home to fathers
exhausted from their twelve hour shifts.

We left the field then, walked across town,
past railroad tracks, factory, schoolyard
and church, down the small main street
with its seven bars, by the creek bank
where water bugs circled our father's lanterns,
Friday nights when they fished,
and under the curve of stone bridge
that echoed the names of first girls.
After factory dust and Father gone,

there's all this gray, the current moving
toward its opposite shore and lived in houses,
like how what we might call the soul leaves the
body.

Statue of Liberty with a Ruined Face, in
front of the
Central School Being Renovated

X

Revise

A flame of stone raised above her damaged head,
this monument erected forty years ago, a birch tree
stark and reflectionless in the gray water behind.

Four-years-old, in the City with my mother,
I climbed inside her, the real her, up the winding
stairs,
peering out through her crown of windows
at circling pigeons, the endless skyline and river.
Just then, I wondered where the world was.

Now, consider the school, the factory closed,
the derelict shops,
adolescent boys
cracked her cheek, gouged her eye,
drunk and climbing to perch on her shoulder,
senseless and pecking,
smashing her face with hammer and rock.

move this to next page
If you stand at her unwounded side,

you will see the hurt done by weather,
hear children shouting in the yard,
jackhammers breaking up aged concrete.

Radio Time

Is low the moon, but high the wind

—Chuck Berry

A howling dog, transistor radio crackling,
Chuck Berry: cars, girls and school,
and there, from the nightstand in my bedroom,
something close to revelation.

Ex-con – Kansas City joyride, broken down
car and jail, yet this skinny black man
and his guitar knew how to be sixteen.

And here, too, the gravelly voice
of George “Hound Dog” Lorenz,
who each evening on WKBW—“the greatest
station on your dial”—proclaimed
“The Hound’s Around,” and reminded us listeners
if we were “hangin` around the corner,”
we were “doggin` it.” And I was transfixed

as that DJ spun those forbidden records
through the airwaves: Fats Domino,
LaVern Baker, The Moonglows, The Five Satins,

Ann Cole, Joe Turner, The Clovers,
Little Richard & The Upsetters, Etta James
lamenting "All I Could Do Was Cry."

And so it was I came to hear again
those historians of desire, prophets
of a change that would soon be mine.

Practicing Faith

Mornings, Father walked me to church,
although he didn't share my mother's faith,
so I could become an altar boy and serve,
having learned whatever it is a child can know of
sin,
and carefully memorized each necessary prayer,
and been told the names of each essential saint.

My father rose in the soft light like a saint,
afternoons in the pool hall, the men quiet as in
church,
watching him bend over the green table in a kind of
prayer,
as he lined up a shot and aimed with certain faith,
knowing a mistake in geometry to be the only sin.
Eye and hand, he believed, would always serve.

If I lost, say a coin, a book, and no memory would
serve,

Mother took me through the house, repeating a
request: "Dear Saint

Anthony, please come around." (Just now, I was
without sin.)

“Something’s lost and can’t be found.” Later, in
church,
no matter what was not recovered, I would have
faith,
kneel, and ask again, in silent, reverent prayer.

But I thought there was so much more than prayer,
or choosing different ways in which to serve.
I thought to question what I heard and saw a faith
to teach me what it meant to live simply as a saint.
I wondered at the many reasons for a church,
and brightly colored, numbered balls pocketed like
sin

forgiven in the dark holes of a smoke-filled room,
and why sin
was something I had to speak about in prayer.
Was hymn and chant the salvation of a church?
What did it really mean, to sacrifice and serve?
How is it I could be both pure and wrong, a saint?
Father’s kindness, Mother’s trust, was what I knew
of faith.

Thinking of the hospital, I remember Mother’s
faith,

and the priest who came to baptize Father free from
sin,

Father's breath a final wind to angel, man, or saint.

I listened to all we leave in death, and Mother's
prayer,

and wanted to believe her voice alone would serve
to comfort as I joined the last procession through
the church.

61 8059

The Other Language

Even her worried voice couldn't bring me
to answer the morning I hid in weeds
by the willow, some child's wrong idea
of his importance in the known and safe world.

Or perhaps it was a simple insistence
that my life mattered, that Mother would,
if I were really gone, after all miss her only son,
and regret those scoldings and rules.

But I came then to understand silence's bitter ache:
Mother turned away at the kitchen stove,
her darkened thoughts of a cold river
and drowned boy shadowing the sun-filled wall.
When Barbara Jean stepped from the line
of high school cheerleaders and leapt
into the brisk October air, calling out each letter
of my name, I ran gladly with the others
onto the field of end runs and tackles.

But what was announced over the PA that afternoon
we stood assembled at the gymnasium rally,

navy blazers and striped ties, our season's ritual
of recognition and awards: the President
shot and yes, dead, startled everyone quiet,
and then so strangely alone.

Once, I watched my father and his deaf mute friend
speak in the quick conversation of hand and fingers,
saw how it was we might become our own words,
and for years after Father died there were nights
I dreamt back his voice, but woke to my loud cries.

At Sunday Mass with my parents, I had believed
those mysterious Latin chants would save me,
held as certain scripture the impossible
stories of a favorite uncle, learned the lessons
of home and school, and listened for the truth,
as I do still, of who we are that has not been said.

The Industrial Diamonds of 1964

That spring I dropped out of college
and took a factory job back in the small town
I had been so certain I'd never return to,
and stood at my task of gears and wheels,
where I cursed—or it could have been prayer—
through each shift's final hour.

In the lunch room, old-timers
mocked the new hires, argued
about Kennedy, Oswald, and Ruby,
and how those damn Cubans were
behind it all. That was why we had
to stay in Vietnam, and to hell
with the hippies and Commies.

We were grinding circular saw blades,
fitting them with industrial diamonds,
and each hundred-thousandth inch meant
a paycheck we might live with, something
to take every Friday to the bank and tavern,
place of dimmed lights, twenty-five cent draughts,
baseball scores, boxing matches,

horse racing odds, the two-dollar-bet,
and a chance few of us believed in.

I think of those men now, and remember
our labor, the metal shavings I washed off
my hands and arms each night at the sink,
the ache of shoulders and wrists, the blessing
of sleep, the pre-dawn wakening to rock and roll
music playing on the clock radio,
the gem-like glitter of a few last stars,
and then the turbulent and risen sun.

The Annual Richard Milhous Nixon Pig Roast & 4th of July Celebration

Each year we gathered at the summer field
in Eastern New York, the Berkshires rising above
hemlock ravines. We came because we had
survived
a decade of Vietnam, Watergate and White House
scandals,
riots that had turned whole city blocks to
smoldering despair.
And still we danced, rock music then our true
religion
in the collective spirit of half-naked bodies and
chemical haze,
or we circled, like a tribe, around the roasting animal.

But some nights I wandered out into the crepuscular
flash
of lightning bugs, those mythic lanterns of the
meadow,
listening, for a while, to a chorus of crickets, and
the soft voices
inside tents pitched on the low hills nearby,
murmuring toward sleep.

O brothers and sisters, how those years we loved the

Bring in line
from previous
page X

natural world,
and too all the rituals and totems of a changed
empire.

Once, I stood with a friend on one of those hills
after a rain,
and the sky, I swear, opened itself green, while a
woman in the valley
below lifted off her cotton print dress with an
almost paradisaical grace,
and danced there in the yellow clover and
honeysuckle,
ecstatic and glorious now in the unimpeachable new
light.

67
65

At the Currier Gallery of Art

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, "Triumph of Hercules"
(modello for a fresco ceiling, c. 1761)

Hercules is pulled from his funeral pyre.
Spirited horses drive his chariot.
Winged gods with trumpets
rise from their beds of clouds.

I imagine Tiepolo's assistants
on their scaffolds, their labor of design,
their master observing
the scene's exuberant formation—

stone and wings,
man-god and his retinue,
emblazoned light above the dome
of that palace in Verona.

A placard reveals what's here
is the hysterical sadness of art.
This painting's a "modello."
Here's an explanation of the bombing:

World War II. Palazzo Canossa destroyed.

The fresco ceiling shattered.

I'm beneath it all, nearly weeping now,

in spite of what's been saved.

69 ~~6867~~



Everywhere is Everywhere

These days, words from the gospels
and old hymns are rolled out on screens
across eternal Midwestern sky.

Somewhere, between Iowa City
and Cedar Rapids, driving along
miles of nearly vacant road,
past cornfields that were once ocean,

row of glittering pumpkins,
and Amish farmers riding their slow carriages,
my friend and I are discussing
transcendental meditation and Dutch women,
high school football and local politics,
the recently sanctioned shooting
of overpopulated deer, with bow and arrow.

I look out as a flock of finches
rises and falls in thermals of blue air,
then rises again high above the bowed heads of
cattle
grazing in an open field edged with hay bales,

and the offering of road before us
repeats itself like some chant
from a prayer that would take us home forever.

71 ~~70~~ 69

IV. A Story of Silence

Against Happiness

When the Dalai Lama first heard
the bombs falling on Tibet,
he whispered to a monk,
“They have stolen our silence.”

Today, at the clinic,
again the loud radiation machine
whirred above my head.

But later, my doctor,
who is beautiful,
placed her delicate fingers
around my throat,
like so many butterfly wings.

I knew then it was time
to abandon my elaborate theories
of happiness and to be,
instead, the butterfly.

Seasonal

From the riverbank's early dark,
I bring you feldspar, quartz, speckled stone.
All week we have been startled
by chill and rain, the wet wind,
frantic search of squirrels,
how leaves of elm and maple
glisten and drop from their branches.
We can hear ships pull away
from the harbor, smell the sea
going out.

Tonight I sit beside the cat's smooth engine.
knowing before long
you'll come home from work
wanting only me, a little moon
through the skylight, some wine,
when we'll lie down for a while
without speaking, our bodies
gathering like winter clouds,
and we will rise like small birds,
into the first delicate falling of snow.

76 7574

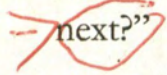
What to Say if the Birds Ask

And if clouds gather now like distant cousins,
it's because weather is the mother of all things
cyclical. And if, through the afternoon rain,
the mail carrier comes with her armful of bills
and rejection, it's only to remind us of what
we may have yet to receive. But what unsettles
me this gray morning beneath trill and chatter of
birds,
signals of a coming storm in a neighborhood of
strangers,
is that first death, polished wood and Uncle's cold
hand
when I was nine, the relatives and friends gone
since then,
my futile guilt and anger, the failed language of
regret.
But if it's true some words are, finally, the soul's
lexicon, then I'll say this: Once, there was a woman
whose shadow blessed the light of a room in Boston,
a man who filled the glasses of his friends with the
best wine,
a child who tasted the soft petals of flowers and
spoke
their many colors to swans rippling the summer



pond
in a silent lyric. Today, alone by the window, I've
been
translating the repeated warble of sparrows perched
on the maple's high branches. "What's next? What's
next?"
they ask. "Soon," I whisper, "Soon, we will know."

Indent



~~78~~ 77 76

Grace

*Here is the solitude from which you are absent.
It is raining. The sea wind is hunting stray gulls.*

—Pablo Neruda

I wake, remembering it's been years
since I've lived alone.
Did I tell you, once I spent hours
listening to the solitude of snow?
Yesterday, I watched death take the last
leaves from the elm branches, and thought
about the desire of rock and weed.
I drove to the harbor then, the confusion
of seabirds, children tossing breadcrumbs
into the gray winter air, and stood by the pier
looking out at endless shimmer and wave.
This is what the body so often comes to:
awkward gesture and grace. Last night
we made love, held each other and slept.
I believe the dreams we don't recall
are the reason we rise each day
as ourselves, and go on. We've been

to the burial grounds, names etched in slate,
the park and its child frozen at the fountain.
We've collected small stones and feathers
from the shore. Autumn in the flower garden,
bees have repeated your name inside my throat.
When I speak with you now, horses arrive
at the marketplace, their carriages silent.
What I have to say is no more than the rain.

Consideration

After a week of travel and family,
as we drove last night, a shrouded moon
graced the late December sky. A line of Canada
geese
suddenly reinvented itself, a V pointing
toward the Berkshires that rose above
the curved road, and we were returning
to our old need and comfort. Past the marsh
and barren field, I saw, among the shadows of firs,
the lit windows of a house in a clearing
on the mountainside. I thought of those who might
live
in that place, and wondered if it were true,
that each of us is also everyone. Soon, we too
would be home with our talk of work and money,
how we both should change, those private
arguments
only years of a good marriage can endure,
our small celebrations and redemptions.
I watched traffic ahead exiting toward the promise
of food and sleep, considered passion
and the simple belief we go on.

Sparrows

Tonight, late in winter, it comes to this
sort of blessed quiet beneath the room
of my lover's sleep; I'm alone with thoughts
of comfort and loss, argument and lesson.

And solitude is the sister of joy and regret,
here in a difficult season of ice and storm,
where birds daily forage small bits of bread,
their hunger, like ours, so simple, yet more.

In these long hours by lamplight and dark
whispers of wind, I wonder what secrets
are hidden in the clear songs and cold air
that arrive, each morning, at our windows.

They are the questions, repeated again,
that we, too, must rise up and live within.

Simply, This

Leaves ready for raking layer the yard,
sparrows hidden in the lower branches
of our maple tree chirp their desires;
the day is a mood of clouds
and a lyric of light at the window.

I come to the kitchen and the small meal
you've made ready, now at the table,
our afternoon ritual of bread and fruit:

an act so simple, it is all.

The Cardinals

My wife and I have bought a home,
and soon will become like these birds at their nest
in the maple. From beneath the skylights
of this small, third-floor apartment we often lay
under passing moon, weather, migration.
And looking through binoculars now
at the scarlet male and subtle sensuality
of his buff-colored mate, I'm bearing witness
to a testament of beauty and returning flight,
and feel a sort of prayer come over me:
the way she worships his dance around the amber,
sunlit leaves which serve as instrument
to their song; the stately rearrangement of his robe
when her presence fills the air he rests in.
I open the window and listen to the lyric
they never fail to repeat. And so it is this afternoon
I've made a discovery, not of absence, but
of that which rises and remains.

The Maple

I drove home to find the maple
chopped in sections strewn
across the yard like victims
of a highway accident.

From our third-story window
even the intrusive jay
and ominous crow
had been welcome.

You worried
over the squirrel
in winter.

Once, a single cardinal
was our only hope.

And there were times
we talked into evening
beneath its foliage,
sheltered
from light summer rains.

First, our neighbor built a wall
for privacy, then complained
some coastal storm
would crash the tree
onto her careful lawn.

Yesterday, we drank wine
with friends
to celebrate the maple,
and looking out
at its bright absence,
someone suggested
this was a good thing:

we could see
the peaked rooftops now,
the turn-of-the-century
houses up the hill.

Today

Today is your lover, asleep
and dreaming the continuous fountain.

It is your body
dying without you.

It is the darkness
of distant trees
poised on the horizon,
like those strange shadows
of small animals
that danced across the moonlit ceiling
of your childhood.

It is a long-tailed kite,
or random bird.
It is a child
grasping the tenuous cord
of delight.

Today is the desire
of sudden rain, or it is you
driving through that rain,

not knowing the difference
between curved road and sky.

88 8786

Amoskeag

Now we've come to the rise
and swell of river, gray surge

and insistent swirl after a week
of high tide and flood; the green-leafed

tops of trees just above the water,
clustered like tossed flower bouquets

emerging from the sunken island,
and I wonder how our particular dialogue

of need could be anything more
than the mist that sprays the low air

and riverbank, or shorebirds
circling the aftermath and ruin of storm.

At the Harbor

The nearly stilled water
is clear enough to see
silt settling
beneath rippling mountains
and clouds.

Cormorants float
like question marks,
and pigeons rise
like conflicting thoughts.

Yellow-eyed gulls watch
as I toss in a stone
that disappears
like a monk's answer
to a novitiate.

Look at my hands.
If it weren't
for a particular loop
in a certain genetic code,

they could be birds
flying through spring rain.

But aren't we small boats
sailing each day
into another circumstance of weather?

Blue Aster/Red Pine

Here is where the dog becomes unleashed,
I hold the blue flower,
and bees circle
the robin's egg air.
One dog barks,
another answers.
We've come to listen.
A determined stand
of red pine
funnels light toward an unseen road.
Here's the natural world,
and our natural imposition.

Earlier, chickadees at the feeder,
we spoke quietly about summer's end:
weather and travel,
construction and comfort,
children and wives,
the heart's uncertain storm.

But there's work to be done,
and love.

At the Hamilton House

In the garden, we try to guess
whatever's missing
from the statue of a woman
looking down at a falcon perched
on her cracked foot,
her arm raised.
her hand a memory
of stone,
certain as love.

What happens to anything,
once it's broken away?
We walk past
the veined, translucent leaves
laid across the lawn
like a large hand
to the garden's edge
where, frozen in sunlight,
a small gray bird has flown
onto the outstretched arms
of a stone figure
of a child.

Once, years ago
in another town,
while I was walking
with my daughter,
tulips and roses
were blooming
in the suburban yards,
and she, a child
who wanted only
to collect a few
of the world's colors,
ran toward them.

This afternoon, any leaf
could be your hand
on my breast.
Some days the world feels like that,
like we really belong
to the blue air
and voices in the garden.

Contemplation at a Park

Listening at the fountain, I can hear its arc
falling all the way to the tossed coin.

Gulls penetrate the blue air.
Children run back and forth
between a stone whale and shadows of maple.

One girl swings from a low branch,
a sudden wind crosses the harbor,
and a small boat shifts in its mooring.

The mnemonic birds and summer flowering
our hope, and even faith, death
is held like rain in a leaf's green palm.

A homeless couple rises, like Lazarus,
from the shade of a troubled sleep
and walks out into the warm sunlight.

Whatever we've desired today
lies scattered in the shallow basin of water
that shimmers beneath the bronze statue of a boy
who raises an arm toward heaven.

96 ~~95~~ 94

The Daughters

The daughters have brought shells
and stones back from the ocean.

They lie quietly on the desk,
collected, as the good children
they have always been.

To keep them safe,
I must rub the Buddha's belly.

The Garden

In his garden, my friend
has become adept
at mimicking the birds
as now, through the night's
wet veil, he repeats
their many songs,
until even the prolific
mockingbird must listen.
A curious gecko hangs,
for a moment, over the top
of the porch screen,
then scurries into the shadows.

We've been sitting for hours
with drink and conversation.
I've just traveled
the Atlantic coast to be here,
and am thinking now
of that wise poet, Po Chu-i,
how he believed in seclusion
and clarity, yet sometimes
welcomed visitors, and once wrote:

*Who says the moon is heartless?
It's followed me a thousand miles.*

Tomorrow, we'll wake
as the red-eyed Cooper's hawk
rises above the blossoming
purple bougainvillea,
waving banana leaves,
that extravagant bird
of paradise, and the mango
trees heavy with fruit
nearly touching the ground.

99 ~~98~~ 97

Thrush & Squirrel

Suddenly a squirrel scampers along the edge
of the tall wooden fence, a hermit thrush,
high pitched, in pursuit, and you laugh
because it seems like such play,
but at stake are the eggs in their cup
of moss, leaves, and rootlets, the four flutes
you might never hear silent now inside
the thin walls of their shells. And you
understand why this must be your life,
the melodious song you wait for certain
to flicker, after all, through the absence
your body will one day become.

A Story of Silence

My wife returns
from her evening walk,
and tells me a story
of silence:

*You enter the park
and are surrounded by roads,
but there is no traffic.*

*Clouds are above you,
but there is no wind.*

*You remember
a century ago,
citizens gathered
at this stone memorial
to soldier and sailor,
cheering the explosion
of gunshot and fireworks.*

*Starlings and sparrows
hid in the trees.*

You are what happens next.

*You are those unheard
voices in houses nearby.*

*You are the children
riding their bicycles.*

*You are the pleasure of flowers,
the caterpillar beneath the small rock.*

You are the space between branches.

*You are the song
in the throat
of the tiniest bird,
before the song
has been sung.*

Notes

“The Gift of Unwanted Knowledge” is for Al Maginnes

“*Odds Against Tomorrow*” is for Tom Absher

“Radio Time” is for Al Peterson

“The Annual Richard Milhous Nixon Pig Roast & Fourth of July Celebration” is for Keith Kuzmak

“Everywhere is Everywhere” is for Rustin Larson

“Blue Aster/Red Pine” is for Peter Kidd

“The Daughters” is for Chloe and Catherine Edwards

“The Garden” is for William Kemmett

W.E. Butts is the author of eight previous poetry collections, including *Sunday Evening at the Stardust Café*, winner of the 2006 Iowa Source Poetry Book Prize, and the chapbooks *Sunday Factory* (Finishing Line, 2006) and *What to Say if the Birds Ask* (Pudding House, 2007). His poems have appeared in such journals as *Atlanta Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poetry East*, and elsewhere, and in several anthologies. The recipient of two Pushcart Prize nominations and a Massachusetts Artists Foundation Award, he is the 2009 – 2014 Poet Laureate of New Hampshire, and teaches in the low-residency BFA in Creative Writing Program at Goddard College



Re: Pages/cover

Wednesday, May 18, 2011 1:53 PM

From: "Walter Butts" <walterbutts@yahoo.com>

To: "Kevin Walzer" <kevin@wordtechcommunications.com>

Hi Kevin,

Thank you for these proofs. I must say, I'm very pleased with the book's design!

There is one correction for the back cover. In the blurb by Richard Jones, there are quotes set in italics that should instead be set within quotation marks, in straight type:

"I've come to believe in the living," "and their sacrament of speech."

I would like to include credits in the copyright page for the cover art and author photo:

Cover art: RB McGrath, "Still Life with Radio, Wine, and Fruit," oil on stretched canvas, 2006

Author photo: Robert Bussey

There are several corrections that need to be addressed in the book's text, and pagination needs to be adjusted. How would you like me to proceed?

Again, Kevin, my sincere appreciation to you and the folks and WordTech for your fine work. I'm honored to be among your authors.

Best wishes,

Walter

-- On Mon, 5/16/11, Kevin Walzer <kevin@wordtechcommunications.com> wrote:

From: Kevin Walzer <kevin@wordtechcommunications.com>
Subject: Pages/cover
To: "Walter Butts" <walterbutts@yahoo.com>
Date: Monday, May 16, 2011, 8:37 PM

Hi Walter,

Attached please find a draft of your pages and cover. Please let me know if any changes are needed.

Thanks,
Kevin