



POETRY 2007

NEW POEMS

IN THE HANDS OF GRAVEYARD ANGELS

12/14/07

“As in your Bosom you bear your Heaven
And Earth, & all you behold, tho it appears Without it is Within,
In your Imagination of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow.”

-- William Blake

A gift from my daughter,
this sepia photograph
of a graveyard angel,
transcendent stone
rising up
into the late autumn sky,
in its hands
a carved wreath;
it stands at the edge
of the cemetery
she visits Sunday afternoons
to lay flowers
on her mother's grave and speak
quietly awhile,
but on this day
she takes this picture
and sends it to me,
a message
from that leaf-strewn,
nearly silent place
where small birds
take up the flight and song
of resting angels,
and earth and stone
are left to hold us both
in its shadow and its light.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

revision 12/22/07

EVERYWHERE IS EVERYWHERE

for Rustin Larson

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,
rows 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.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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These days, words from the gospels
and old hymns are rolled out on screens
across eternal midwestern sky,
while the sons of congregations
grow suicidally beautiful . . .
and gallop terribly against each other's bodies.
"O sing with us brothers and sisters,
fathers and mothers, and you too
who are, at last, nearly dead."

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and Cedar Rapids, driving along
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ABSENCE & EVENT

Because you are gone
for a week, and I don't
want to consider loneliness,
I go out to the garden
and water the red roses
that have climbed
up the white lattice
trellises and now probe
through the small
open squares of their windows,
like the bright faces
of curious children.

Back in the house,
I quiet the need of our two cats
with a bowl of dry food.
I make coffee and,
for a while, read the newspaper
with its reports of war,
accidents, town politics,
and sad photographs
of the dead and arrested.

If you were here,
I might ask that we walk
together to the river,
where ubiquitous gulls
circle above the abandoned
mills and current's gray flow,
a few locals fishing,
and the occasional ducks
scrambling onto shore.

But this afternoon
I'm alone at my desk,
where I'm writing
about the day's simple events --

and you are the space
between each necessary word.

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,
after a long absence.

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 bouganvella,
waving banana leaves,
that extravagant bird
of paradise, and the mango
trees heavy with fruit
nearly touching the ground.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire

“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 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 dressed
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.

SPARROWS

Tonight, late in winter, it comes to this
sort of blessed quiet beneath the room
of my lover's sleep; I am 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.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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.

ACCEPTED 2007

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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.

CIDER PRESS REVIEW

PUBLISHED POEMS 2007

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 big radiation machine
whirred above my head.

POETRY EAST

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.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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CLAY STREET

Here is the street in summer
and the old elm shadowing the house.
At the corner, the home
of a prosperous automobile dealer,
father to my best friend Charles
who later became a cop in the city
we all swore to move to someday.
But just now it almost seemed enough
for us boys to count and name the cars
driving toward the thruway entrance
at the edge of town, or chase each other
past the overgrown field to the creekbank
and grab sunfish shimmering just beneath
the surface of the shallow, murky water.
Or sometimes the village hall fire alarm
would blare, and if it was evening,
the grocer who lived next door
would rush out to join the volunteers.
Then there were the occasional parades:
beauty queens and fireworks, marching bands
and a soldier returning. Midday, the factory
whistles blew, and men and women filled
the dining car downtown. And maybe
we would leave whoever's front porch
we were gathered on to go and watch
the policeman, sales clerk, garage mechanic,
tool-and-die maker, teacher, mayor, and mailman
hunched over the counter, placing orders
with the waitress with piled-up hair,
who knew them all by name and would,
they were certain, deliver them
their plates of guaranteed homecooking.

2006 POETRY SOURCE (Iowa)

(continued)

CLAY STREET

Some afternoons, Sammy the junkman
came riding by, his old horse pulling
a cart full of metal scraps and cloth,
and when he cried, "rags"
we'd shout back our senseless taunts,
until he neared the small stone bridge
and the house where two spinster sisters lived
with their bachelor brother who never spoke.
Under that bridge we plotted our futures
of high scores and smiling girls, the secret lives
we believed we would have, and called out
then to the echoing shade.

JOURNAL

On a train to Chicago,
I stay awake
all night in the club car.
I'm seventeen,
enlisted in the Navy,
and know nothing yet
of Cuba, Castro,
the C.I.A., or Vietnam.

2006 POETRY SOURCE (Iowa)

When I return to my village,
the factory has gone
on to Delaware,
the rail station is closed,
but men still live
under the bridge
by the crossing.
I know I must leave.

In New York City,
I find work
as a foot messenger,
delivering packages
to elegant brownstones
in upper Manhattan.
I keep a journal,
and record my encounters
with professional dogwalkers.

I ride the Amtrak
to Boston,
where I'm hired
by Harvard
to transcribe the poems
of Emily Dickinson,
and become dedicated
to the proper placement
of dashes.

Evenings, I walk
past the fishmarket
to the harbor
and its departing ships,
the stone and glass shadows
of the city behind me.
I'm at that edge where
what happens next
is the rest of my life,
or fog shrouding the shoreline.

But there's a woman
I'll meet and sometimes,
late at night, in the dark,
I'll rise from our bed
and go quietly down
the stairs to sit at the table
with paper and pen,
those words that must
have saved me before
rearranged and emerging
again, under the lamplight.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

SUNDAY FACTORY

We walk the long street
Sunday afternoon,
past the stone church, on our way
to visit his place of work.
This is the religion of father and son,
the faith of a boy who's only five,
the factory a blessing of meat and bread,
the big machines still as statues,
an assembly of clocks
to mark the next week's labor.
Here are the instruments of the makers,
their testaments of gears and wheels.
This is where men and women are called
to the daily stations of common task,
and so I stand with my father
in a child's reverent silence.
Tomorrow, he'll enter the loud,
humming chorus of his eight hour shift
to hose down the conveyor belts
so many times his forearms will ache
until they become light as air.
This is when he thinks of the boy
and his schoolbooks, remembers his wife
and her lilac corsage that morning they married.
And he makes what he can from each of these hours
that will, at last, take him home.

2006 POETRY SOURCE (Iowa)

RED JACK

I was twelve that day Father brought me to the home
of his friend, a man living alone, small pension
and afternoons at the window. I remember the percolator's
aroma and dance, a cigar's blue smoke. They sat at the kitchen
table and spoke for a while about the factory closed,
the railroad gone, men they had known lost in the War,
and before that, the Depression and the ten dollar bill
my father left once in his mailbox. And so a boy learned
the tone and gesture of trust and resolve. At my father's wake
seven years later, Red Jack's nephew James stood next to me,
his uncle dead, and we held the silence between us
like a handshake. Once, we had been altar boys,
and served Mass for a priest who kept raising his cup
to the wine cruet, demanding more of Christ's blood,
and when James hid in the sacristy and drank from the rest
until he was sick, I never told. After the funeral, I left town
for college and the decades of mistakes a man can make,
whether he goes away from the place he was born, or not.
James went to work at a local plant, where he lost
two fingers trying to cut metal under a blade
like the older machinists, without using a safety guard.
It was piecework, and he needed the extra money
for the pregnant girlfriend he'd been dating since high school.
They married and, when their two kids had grown
and moved on, divorced. He and I still talk, and last night,
on the phone, it was as if the years of failure, faith, confession,
and hope were being emptied into this single moment,
each of us hanging on to the end of the other's line
and the chance to save ourselves, yet again.

2006 POETRY SOURCE (Iowa)

POETRY 2006

NEW POEMS

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 dishwater.
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.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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 mannekins' 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.

LEAVING MONTPELIER

Since many of us hadn't read
a newspaper, or watched television
in a week, we were late to learn,
here at the writers' conference,
there was yet another war. So then
we had to abandon our discussion
of symbols and turns, for the hard
consonants of bombs and dead children.
On the last day, I met with a friend,
a conscientious objector decades ago,
when America was between wars
but still training boys to take up rifles,
although we spoke now, mostly,
about that chance we've been given to live
our lives twice because we write poems.

At the depot, the bus for home an hour away,
passengers crowd the small waiting room,
strangers held captive by commerce and traffic.
Two ashen-skinned teenagers adorned
with silver piercings and tattoos,
dressed in army fatigues, boots, and black t-shirts
emblazoned with gothic art,
look like they're being shipped out
on some surely doomed mission.
They're wearing those drab knit caps
I remember seeing in old World War II movies,
an irony I'm contemplating when
I notice one of them holds a paperback
titled Zombie Survival Guide: Guaranteed
Protection against the Living Dead, and I am
no longer the anonymous traveler, isolated
by the solitary of simple meditation and memory.

But when the bus arrives as I'm struggling
with suitcases and typewriter, one of those teenagers
quickly pushes his way through
a half-dozen frustrated ticket holders,
collects my baggage and loads it
into the already packed compartment.

We look at each other then, like two people
suddenly recognizing someone they'd forgotten.
Everyone steps on board and settles in their seats,
certain now the places we go are where we belong.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

CREMELAND

Each summer afternoon, kids form
a continuous line at the "order out"
window for hard and soft ice cream.
It reminds me of 1952. Those days
anything was possible. You could
play dead, stand up, then be
whatever else you wanted. Transmutation
was a simple process of declaration:
You were what you said
you were. And most of the time
you were completely safe.

Oh sure, we had those random
Civil Defense drills, but the idea
of staying in a basement for a while
with canned food, some bottled water,
a few blankets and a radio
held a certain intrigue.

Then there were the beatings
and torment delivered by bigger kids,
that if you were eight-years-old
you had to endure; humiliation
at the hands of teachers and parents
was readily accepted. Resistance
would come, when we got older.

These children gather in August heat,
ice cream melting down their chins
and small fists, as they laugh and push
each other into the next thing to do.
But now, in this city of drive-by shootings,
convenience store robberies, and home invasions,
who really knows what to expect?

[stanza break]

So you can understand why, one night,
after my wife had decided
she was walking to the corner store
for milk and bread and no,
she didn't need me along,
I turned on the porch light
and waited for her to step into it.

A QUESTION AT THE PARK

Listening at the fountain, I can hear its arc
falling all the way to the tossed coin.
Gulls penetrate the blue air and music
from the bandstand would, if it could,
synchronize the randomness of a contra dance
performed by children in red costumes.
My granddaughters run back and forth between
a stone whale and shadows of maple.
Their mother turns in my dead wife's face,
one girl reaches toward a low branch,
a sudden wind crosses the shoreline,
and a small boat shifts on its mooring.
The mnemonic birds and summer blossoming
our hope, and even faith, death
is held like rain in a leaf's green palm.
Soon, the homeless will rise from their benches
and walk out, like Lazarus, in the warm sunlight
to gather coins of the rich from the cold pond.
Wouldn't we all be saved if our words were true?

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

MORTGAGE

We've just moved into this house,
and because, as always, I've left
the task of organization to my wife,
a patient woman, I stumble now
through its rooms, bumping my head
on shelves, spinning in the kitchen
like a dervish, looking for a wastebasket
or towel, the proper place for a dish.
My confusion will go on for weeks,
until I've cracked her necessary code
for where things should be.

Earlier today, I quietly watched
our tattooed neighbor tending her garden,
trumpet vines and snakes, a few
bright roses curling around her leg.
She, too, makes an order of things,
understands there are plans we can have,
even as the world's small secrets
call after us to come join them.

ACCEPTED 2006

PUBLISHED POEMS 2006

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."

WHITE PELICAN REVIEW

ALL OUR QUICK DAYS

I'm at it again, my old routine
of going places I don't want to be,
because this is what the world
of subways and bank accounts expects.
Overhead, silent messages
of disaster and warning flash
across a computerized screen.
Somewhere in Japan, the car I'm waiting for
was built, the stops I'll make in Boston
recorded in Chicago.
It's no wonder I'm confused.
I tell you, we're not ready for this.
Think about the masturbating monkeys
in a zoo. Years ago, someone homeless
and drunk said to me, "Desire
deferred sickens the heart."
My sick heart trembles now,
and climbs under the artificial suns
of all our quick days.
The purgatory of our troubled sleep
is why I don't take naps.
Instead, I'm sitting with a book open,
pen and paper on the table,
television sound turned off,
not really sure of what I'm doing,
and so look up at the babies being held
underwater by smiling adults
whose heads are nodding in the breathable air,
and although I can't hear an explanation,
I know it has to do with this theory
that fish, frog, infant, and corpse
are all connected,
and it's only time that separates us
from the submerged children.

CIDER PRESS REVIEW

PUSHCART PRIZE NOMINATION

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

INVOCATION

Blessed, today, are the starving birds
gathered on the winter yard.
Again, this morning, you draw up the blinds,
and again our cat leaps
on the sofa back to observe
the ritual in which it is
also participant. We're both
watching you now toss pieces of bread
into the chilled, wind-driven air.
as a cloud of white-throated sparrows
suddenly converges, and to rise into this
simple gesture is all I can ask.

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W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

PREDICTIONS

A spider,
the color of a rainstorm,
crawls over a rock.

A man
sits alone in his yard
in the gray afternoon,
watching the street
where a boy
leans over the trembling wheel
of a bicycle,
and teenagers
drive their incessant music.

POETRY EAST

The man understands
the logic of rain,
desire for balance,
urgent need
for someone to listen,
and thinks
how sometimes his life
is like one of those
television game shows
that gives you the answer,
but you have to guess
the question.

POETRY 2005

NEW POEMS

THE QUESTION

After the well-broadcasted storm,
I went outside with the citizens.
We got in our cars and drove
toward whatever the day would assign.
The sun glared across black ice and snow,
our numbed fingers gripped convenience
store coffee cups, clouded signatures
of breath rising everywhere;
we were bone-chilled and communal.

Listening to "Satisfaction"
on classic rock radio, I was thinking
about my friend in Florida --
his destroyed orange grove,
how he had learned to love
the space between things,
and now it was gone --
when a woman stepped out
from behind a parked truck,
her head turned away.
There was nothing to do now
but brake and watch
the woman slide back on her heels,
cars skidding behind me,
an alarm of horns startling
birds off the utility wires.
Then again, we were safe.

Before my friend moved,
we spent a night drinking wine,
It didn't seem like
we'd ever wanted much.
After all, hadn't we come
to accept the mysteries
of cancer and zen;
wept for the children
gone tragically wrong;
and didn't we still whisper
the names of the saints?

One day you walk out
the door suddenly open
at the middle of your life,
and it's strange to be alone
in the uncertain light,
the question you've been asking
repeating itself, then gone.

ACCEPTED 2005

PUBLISHED POEMS 2005

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
whenever one of us refused to die,
until, each evening, the autumn
darkened us home to fathers
exhausted from their twelve-hour-shifts.

TAR WOLF REVIEW

We left the field then, walked across town,
past railraod tracks, factory, school yard
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 what we might call the soul leaves the body.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

AT THE MERRIMACK

The river high against the shore,
its glittering, gunmetal gray
flows into rapids.

FACT OF THE UNIVERSE

The children,
those makers of shoes, the women,
weavers of cotton, and the men
at their foundries are gone,

but the river still gives what it can.

Here is the bridge
where your name is returned,
and stones sing in the shadows.

You stand on the bank
in the repeating wind,

the only time there is.

SEAPORT

The sea captain's picket fence destroyed
by teenagers wearing long, black raincoats. The eternal river
threatens to rise. Marathoners pass the funeral home
and parked hearse. Tomorrow, face painting in the square,
big band at night. A woman steps out of an upscale boutique
screaming into her cellular phone, "Let me tell you
all *my* problems." Under the Japanese crabapple
no one worries. Along the path through the garden of flowers,
there's a crisis of soft birds. And down we come to celebrate
the river, its tugboats and barges, all the departing ships.

FACT OF THE UNIVERSE

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

MAGIC ACTS

“Reality is things as they are.”

--Wallace Stevens

I.

“There’s a jungle in this room,”
my friends’ three-year-old
daughter tells me,
then disappears, returns
waving her magic wand,
and we have it:
coiled snakes and twisted vines,
prancing zebras and swinging monkeys.
The art nouveau lampshades on the ceiling
are a pair of exotic birds,
and the afternoon progresses
in amusement and delight:
a warm African wind across the veldt,
lions preening near the bushes.

POET LORE

II.

Some mornings,
between the bed and bathroom mirror,
I could be anybody:
a man who’s learned
there’s a trick to everything,
doves swirling white smoke
above his head --
a man with a rabbit
full of luck,
a routine of illusions,
the confidence
of someone who knows
exactly how all of this is done.

THE BLESSING

Standing beneath that blind eye,
the moon,
alone with the wind
and diminishing ships,

I'm watching a gull
drift in the harbor,
pieces of fish
dangling from its beak,
other gulls circling
with sly disinterest,

like when you're a child
pretending not to care
you've been born
into a world
of perennial desire,

as I was when I went, alone,
with fruit to the river,
and lay in my exile of weeds
and croaking frogs.

I don't know what I wanted
that afternoon I was angry
and shouted at Mother.
I remember Father coming
to bring me home --
his low voice,
the dog barking behind him.

Tonight, a ship's horn blares,
the bridge is raised,
those shriveled leaves
floating past the dock

(continued)

RHINO

Butts/The Blessing

over the quiet waves
repeat his death,
and darkness is a father:

the loudness and silence
of everything.

OBSERVANCE

Young girls racing
and giggling through fountains
of water sprouting
out of a lawn sprinkler.

TWO RIVERS REVIEW

Traffic rushing down
the narrow road toward
the intersection
and shopping mall.

The quick, ritalin-induced
pace of a neighborhood
kid walking past, talking
into his cellular phone.

This is summer in America,
the new millennium,
some desire or warning
flashing in everyone's eyes.

You've learned to live
with it, the way
a declawed cat learns
to live inside a house.

You both watch television,
as the President slips
in and out of war, and teenagers
dance around corpses.

And it's because
of nights like this
you've also learned to die
a little, without comment.

[stanza break]

What was it the poet
said? Then you remember:
“Only the dreamer
can change the dream.”

Meanwhile, an insomniac’s
popped open stare looks out
from behind drawn curtains,
at the suddenly empty street.

POETRY 2004

1
5

NEW POEMS

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
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 railyard,
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.

TESTIMONY

Who knows why it seems
there are certain things
we were meant to witness,
but I've come to believe
in that winter afternoon
I chose to walk and not drive
to the downtown shops
a week before Christmas,
and returning home
with the burden of late decision
under the crows' familiar caw
looked up at the tawny, still
and silent hawk
perched on an elm branch,
only the slightest ruffle
of wings suggesting
what was to happen next:
how, out of this congregate,
it would rise and soar,
just as it had
all my life.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

PARDON

This morning, friends left
after a weekend visit.
We had survived years
of executing our simple escapes
and small wonders,
and so we spoke
for a while,
gathering what brief testimony
we could live with,
our reprieve to go on.

A beetle just wrapped its six tiny legs
around my finger and startled,
I brushed it off.
So much is happening
between the chattering birds
and the cat's twitching tail.
The beetle makes a hurried crawl
to the edge of the porch,
its shell luminous
as the light evening rain.

THE CHILDREN'S ARGUMENT

Adults gathered in conversation:
350,000 Africans slaughtered in Sudan,
which the President,
wearing his red power tie,
fails to mention on TV,
and children play in the next room.

Suddenly, one of them screams:
"Catherine, if you do that again
I'm going to kill you, and then
you'll be dead forever and ever!"

This older sibling is, of course,
commanded to the corner --
her wall of consequence --
while the small sister
runs quickly to the toy box,
collects an armful of stuffed animals
and carries them to the punished child.

GRAVESTONE RUBBINGS

For three hundred years,
wings have flared
out of these local skulls.
And we come, visitors
of rain-soaked earth to read
the names and be amazed
the dead can seem so old.

We place the rice paper now,
a translucent task of memory
and shape, and with charcoal
rub the faces from their stones,
fixed images of rapture and warning,
palimpsest of need and want,
and carry away the stilled impressions
of vigilance and spirit.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Even the radio's blare can't keep me
from suddenly braking for those kids
scattering out of my driveway on rollerblades,
and I can't decide if they're a measure
of whatever innocence is left us,
or the predisposition
of a common suicidal tendency
rushing beneath the exploding sun
of this new millenium.

It's so easy to forget the arrow stuck
in the robin's throat -- how that bird jerked
and spun toward its small death the summer
I was twelve -- the torn flowers
and smashed windows. And the children
go freely over the street graced with light.

ACCEPTED 2004

PUBLISHED POEMS 2004

PRELUDE

It's been a long winter,
now a nor'easter
blows a storm across the seacoast,
and those small creatures
that populate our yard and trees
are mostly gone.

When I think of the human
propensity for wrongdoing,
I could provide a litany
of examples:

MID-AMERICAN REVIEW

a broken barn owl dangling
at the end of a frayed string;
the terrified slow boy
hanging desperately
onto a swinging gymnasium rope;

burning rags
piled on the junkman's cart;
the broken wings
of gravestone angels;

freezing bodies
curled on the subway grate
above the train driving
toward the shooting
at the next stop;

a man, alone,
in his room at night,
weeping into his empty hands.

I'm sitting next to the purring cat
as sleet pelts the skylight,

and we both wait
for the starved bird
to sing again.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

THE CARDINALS

My wife and I have bought a home,
and soon will become like these birds
I'm watching out the kitchen window.
We've called this small, third-floor apartment
we're leaving "our treehouse," and indeed,
under its skylights we often lay
under passing moon, weather, migration.
But 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. This afternoon I've made
a sort of self-discovery, yet more than self --
a discovery not of absence, but
of what rises and remains.

POEM

AGAINST DESIRE

From beneath hemlock and maple,
I listen to the drunk neighbors
across the street yelling
at their children again.

POET LORE

How often I've been in this yard
with cardinal and crow,
not far from the town square
with its gourmet shops
and jazz bars filled with tourists.

Isn't it wrong to curse the heart?

You might be standing, just now,
in the yellow light
of your window,
as someone you've never met
watches from a distant wharf.

Or you could be curled
on a park bench, homeless and waiting
for the Salvation Army
soup kitchen to open.

Some late nights I leave
the comfort of sofa,
walk across the small country
of my own life toward bed,
and it's like coming home.

That teenager sitting on the steps
holds her child, who sleeps
as the quiet dark surrounds us all.

A BRIEF HISTORY

“Anything is enough if you know how poor you are.
You could step out now in wonder.”

-- Larry Levis

We danced with older women
wearing beehive hairdos,
1975, New Year's Eve,
in a country-western bar --
danced as if we could not die.
I look at the mirror's creased face.
All this time,
I've been shadowed by mistake.
Was it wrong to stay poor?
On bad days, we threw the I Ching,
and meditated for money.
There were some drugged evenings
candles could explode
in front of us,
and we would not care.
It seemed like everyone else
was hurriedly driving
toward their unfinished work,
past the burnt-out buildings,
the morning's minor accidents.

SLANT

Today, things are different.
They don't make acid like they used to,
my friend reminds me on the phone.
Why once, we even taught the dog
to talk -- simple requests for food
and comfort, more music, the kind
you'd die for, like Joplin and Hendrix.
Back then, it was easy lying together,
the world so liquid and strange.
But now, most often, night after night,
our bodies bargain desire.
It's not enough any more,
to watch the neon flickering
inside our brains,

(continued)

to be surrounded by the vaporous
aura of everything.

Like my friend says,
we opened the door, so now
we are here, wondering.

POETRY 2003

NEW POEMS

CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS

Chill Wills, a popular character actor during the 1940's and 50's, was the voice of Francis (The Talking Mule), in the Universal Pictures series, and was cast as Chicago, the city itself, in human form in the 1953 film noir classic, "City That Never Sleeps."

--from Leonard Maltin's 2003 Movie and Video Guide

Listen. If I can play a talking mule, I can do this. Think about it. How many times did you see me handle Donald, that foolish kid who'd rather dance through the finale than go someplace quiet with the pretty girl who's put up with him the entire movie? Look. Since I was twelve, there's been a red-haired woman dancing inside my head, slowly almost removing the veils shrouding her secret places, but there's always some cop blowing the whistle, and now this: just when the gumshoe who'd been following my every thought was about to quit, he's pulled back in by that dame at the Flamingo, and I can't warn the flatfoot not to leave his wife because the el is rattling the tracks louder than gunfire. But you know how it is, to have your life fast-forwarding like a runaway train; this is just one night, and who wouldn't want a chance to be his own city.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester. New Hampshire 03103

BEGONIAS

This afternoon, I've been trying to speak,
but instead I'm listening at the fountain,
and can hear its arc all the way to the tossed coin.
Gulls penetrate the blue air, and music
from the park's bandstand would, if it could,
synchronize the randomness of a contra dance
being performed by a group of young girls
in red costumes. It is summer, and everyone
is gathered in their flawed, vibrant blossoming.
But the begonias now are what draw me
to the small garden with you: ornament and order,
the fullness and light of their yellow bloom.
Yet their asymmetrical leaves -- those odd
shaped tongues -- would tell us nature is the unexpected.
How else these bright sepals grown out of dark
soil like the charge and storm of weather; how else our love?

THE CURSE

Damn Williams, that red wheelbarrow,
those stupid chickens,
the high school English teacher
who had us analyze that poem in class,
then said to me, "You should be a poet."
Me, a kid content walking the corridors
of B movies, wondering what really was
beneath the buttons of Barbara Jean's silk blouse;
who wanted simply to tackle the quarterback
five yards behind the line of scrimmage
at Friday's game; who would ride his bicycle
down Mill Street, weaving through traffic
as if life were meant for dangerous crossings;
who stood at the football assembly in gym,
listening to the principal mourn JFK,
then buried his father a week later;
who had no language for the stone church,
the ghosts of whispering trains
along the tracks by the abandoned factory,
or the dying elm outside his grandmother's window.
It's taken years for me to begin speaking
of that poverty and faith,
and still, there is no word.

CREMELAND

In my neighborhood there's a fish fry stand, popular in the summer because they also serve hard and soft ice cream. Afternoons, kids form a continuous line at the "order here" window. It reminds me of 1952. Those days, as a child, anything was possible. You could play dead, stand up, then be whatever else you wanted. Transmutation was a simple process of declaration: you were what you said you were. And most of the time you were completely safe. Oh sure, there were the Civil Defense drills, but the idea of having to live in a basement for a while with canned food, some bottled water, a few blankets, and a radio held a certain intrigue. There were the occasional beatings and torment delivered by the bigger kids that, if you were eight-years-old, you had to endure; humiliation at the hands of teachers and parents was readily accepted. Resistance would come later, when we got older. Now these children gather in August heat, ice cream melting down their chins and hands, as they laugh and push each other into the next thing to do. Across the street is a convenience store and a friendly Moroccan clerk who's always polite, wants to know how I am, and I want to believe he really cares. But he's among those anonymous people in our daily routine of coffee, breathmints, the morning or evening paper; so one afternoon it wasn't until I read the headline that I realized I hadn't seen him for a few days: "STORE CLERK WHOSE THROAT WAS SLASHED 'JUST DOING HIS JOB.'" Earlier in the week, an underaged customer had come in with friends to buy cigarettes. Following store policy, the clerk demanded I.D. None of them had any. Because the clerk was mid-eastern, the customer said some things, and because the customer was black, the Moroccan said some things. Three days later, as usual, the clerk went to the fish fry stand an hour before his overnight shift, to have dinner. When two paramedics, who had stopped for ice cream, heard yelling behind the restaurant they drove their ambulance around the side of the building, where a small crowd scattered, and there was the blood covered clerk, who had been cut from his ear to the center of his chin. Later, the E.R. doctor was quoted as saying he was "... an extremely lucky young man." He plans on returning to work soon. "The whole town is kind of in danger to have a loose cannon running around like that," said the store owner. So you can understand why, tonight, when my wife told me she was going to the store to pick up a few things and no, she didn't need me to go with her, I went out to the porch, turned on the light, and waited for her to step into it.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

AFTER THE CHILDREN LEAVE

I'm on my knees in the basement,
cleaning the splattered green
off the newly painted orange walls,
like a monk doing penance.

When I finish and turn off the light,
my dark is their absence.

ONE DAY IN THE FIFTIES

We returned from factory shift,
dining car dishes, childhood's river
and flow -- Father, Mother, and I --
where our routines were small prayers
offered to that god of simple requests,
who would bless each day
for what it was worth.

Television reported
one of its many events,
and a nervous eyewitness
described the car leaving
the road near the bridge,
its crazy swerve down the bank,
its crash into willow.

Thank God, Mother said,
it was no one
we knew. It was time
for the variety show, and a thin man
hurried across the stage,
balancing spinning plates
on long poles from his forehead
and extended arms,
two tiny white poodles
yapping at his ankles,
and all of us laughed.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

BEFORE

Beside my mother's lilies-of-the-valley,
Father dug that first grave
for the family dog, and now he takes up shovel
once again, but this time we're both digging,
turning the earth for worms
to bring with pole and lunch to the creek.

I could mark my years with their passing:
Uncle at nine, cold casket and hand;
Father's breath I held as my own
that first year of manhood. It would be
twenty years until the telephone call
and final announcement of Mother's heart.

But this morning I am six
and everything is alive,
even the mist
that follows us down the hill
to the water's dark edge,
and lingers above the wet grass and reeds.

And when I hook a bullhead,
too small and useless for keeping,
Father has me return it
beneath the place it was shadow,
before lure and hunger's mindless desire,
before this boy and this man
sat on this bank, its lift
into the treacherous air,
the light rain at dawn.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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FACULTY

At the bi-weekly meeting,
we are reminded
of the need for profits,
standards to be kept.
There are promised acquisitions,
potential growth into the largeness
of things we can't yet see.
Someone, soon, will be observing us.

Earlier, a student had wondered
if I expected him
to be influenced by poetry
I'd read in class.

I'm still thinking
of an answer when,
fifty miles later,
my exit comes up
and I nearly miss it

I tell my students to pay attention
to what goes on:
that the Romantics had,
after all, a point.

So I'm walking downtown
when a woman rushes out
of a seaport boutique
screaming into her cellular phone,
"Let me tell you
all my problems."

[stanza break]

On an afternoon like this,
waiting for the late summer sky
to crack,
I could almost long for those years
of atomic power
and 3-D glasses,

and remember a student
reading a poem filled with passion,
while a younger classmate complained
it was revolting someone so old
could openly display such lust.

She had a difficult time,
off course,
articulating this
because of her diamond tongue stud.

Now, above the bar,
television warns us all
to stay inside,
that any moment we might see
hail the size of quarters.

GRANDDAUGHTER

Early this morning, she woke,
crying, struggling in the dark.
I lifted the light that was her body,
and spoke quietly into it.
But I could not comfort this child.
She wanted only her father,
who had moved away.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

MORTGAGE

Evening on my street, drizzling rain,
and our neighbor is pleading for "Starlight."
She's calling in her cat, and I wonder
what inspiration or sadness first brought
that name to her lips.

We've just moved into this house,
and stranger that I am,
I stumble through its rooms,
bumping my head on shelves, spinning
in the kitchen like a dervish,
looking for wastebasket or towel,
the proper place for a dish.
This will go on for weeks,
until I've cracked my wife's code
for where things should be.

Earlier today, I watched the woman next door
~~a tattooed biker~~, tending her garden. ^{tattooed}
~~Various flowers and snakes curled up her leg.~~ ^{around her leg}
~~They seemed perfect as the pink blossoms~~
~~of the rose bush that now waves tentatively~~
~~in the darkness, against the window.~~

I live on a street named for the trees
that line its sidewalks. ~~Although I've written~~
~~many poems, no one here has read them.~~
~~How will they know me then,~~
~~except as the man who sits on Maple~~
in the rocking chair on his porch,
beneath the many singing birds
who call in the night after the natural world
to come join him?

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to come join him?

CONSIDERATION

After a week of travel and family,
as we drove last night, a full moon
graced the late December sky; we were leaving
the gray winter of upstate New York
and its recorded miles. 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 whatever it was we had learned
of comfort and need. It was then
I looked past the marsh and barren field
and saw, among the shadows of firs,
the lit windows of a house in a clearing
on the mountainside. For a while,
in silence, 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, money, how we both
should change, those private arguments
only years of a good marriage can endure,
our small celebrations and redemption
of romance. I watched traffic
ahead continue and exit, on the way to one
of its separate destinations, or the promise
of food and sleep, and considered passion,
and the simple belief we go on.

ACCEPTED 2003

HARBOR SCENE

Almost evening
at the harbor,
where frequent tourists
and the occasional homeless
glow together
in the orange dusk,
children in bright summer clothes
race through dark clouds
of pigeons,
and low-flying gulls
feather the waves.
Near the flower garden,
a small eighteenth century house,
now a closed museum,
is filled
with the work of two brothers
who spent their lives
carefully observing
the birds of this estuary,
carving their shapes
into the wooden flight
locked inside.

POETRY MOTEL

SERIAL

One afternoon, while we waited
for the Saturday matinee, a pick-up truck
moved slowly down Main Street,
and Mighty Joe Young,
the gorilla hero, stood
on the flatbed
waving his arms by remote control,
eyes lit and flashing
like small red bulbs in a bowtie
I won in fifth grade,
for selling the most magazines.
Weeks I sat in back
of the classroom,
stoical as a confirmed bachelor.

THE ACRE

Again and again, I pushed the button
of that battery in my pocket,
hoping some girl would notice.
I wanted to be Mighty Joe Young,
and break out of the cage of inadequacy
built by years of parochial school
and atomic power.
It wouldn't matter then
if I looked like an ape,
scratched myself,
or got beat up by the older kids.
I would always be taking
the beautiful woman
away to the rainforest.

This was around the same time
I noticed the theater
manager's twelve-year-old daughter,
and her long hair
streaming over her shoulders
like the light
that so often swirled above my head
toward the movie screen,
and all I really knew of love.
(continued)

Even now, I feel
like someone from an audience
installed in the electricity
of future events.

ARBORETUM

The sun is a tumor
threatening our conversation.
Just now we're discussing
the possibilities of Zen,
the acceptance of everything,
the paradox of burlap
and sainthood.
We decide art
also has its place
in the world,
even as young hoodlums
in hi-tops are clustered
near bushes and trees,
like an exotic species of flora.

SPILLWAY

It's that kind of day
someone must have already painted,
and we are these two figures
made up of so many
colored dots,
distinguished from the landscape
by an artificial splash
of light.
But don't we really need
to be here like this,
thinking of our fathers,
the tattooed forearm,
sure stroke of a cue?
And what about our mothers,
their cumulus lips
floating in the spring air?

[stanza break]

ARBORETUM

Listen friend,
no matter what we make of things,
their details are always hidden,
like the songs
of those nameless birds
we never see.
It's like returning
to the difficult passage
of a book,
or standing in a roomful of flowers
with the body of someone
you might have loved once.
Let's study its pale, folded hands,
the heart gone gray.
Let's study the mysterious trees,
and the impossible names
we give them.

THE MESSENGERS

Between here
and there,
the radio tuned
to my favorite rock station,
I'm all engine and song,
my hands two birds
of determined flight.

SPILLWAY

Consider the complaint
of jay and wind,
the persistence of squirrel,
the burden of walnut,
the curse of dead leaves
on my windshield,
then the hours
of work I'm driving toward.

At each turn and stop
I wonder what it means --
this daily migration
of commuter and trucker,
schoolchild and police,
jogger and transient;
the punctuation
of blinking lights
and stalled traffic.

Tonight in the yard
with my tired eyes,
the grass wet
under my yellow leaves,
a ballet of light

(continued)

THE MESSENGERS

dances around me,
and above my head
birds repeat
the day's small thoughts.

But, just now,
on the elm branches,
those dark mystics,
the crows,
wearing their black capes,
their heads bowed
in the sudden gray air,
tell me everything
I'll need to learn.

PUBLISHED POEMS 2001-2003

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.

EMERSON OF HARVARD

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.

THE RIVER

Today I believe
in water, its course
along the bank,
cluster of kelp,
shimmer and ripple
of light.

THE LARCOM REVIEW

Today I believe
in the friend
who has died,
although her darknes
waves beneath me.

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.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

BLACK SQUIRRELS
(A Gathering of Poets, Kent State University, May, 1990)

Field after field, and gray sky.
Two days on the road, and we're here
for the gathering. After the shootings,
as students drove away from Kent State,
townspeople sat quietly on their porches,
some of them holding rifles.
Back then, like everyone else I knew,
I was going to parties. Once, at one of them,
after I'd taken a hit of blotter acid,
I stared at the bathroom mirror
and it was me all right, only forty years older.
I remember how I went about that evening
with my white hair and beard, my weathered skin,
considerably less astonished by my transformation
than Kafka's Gregor. Our brains were filled
with tiny windows we had to look through.
That's why I was screaming over the bloodied corpse
lying in some Vietnamese field,
or raging against Attica's injustice,
arguing with my parents in the Philco's flickering light.
Everywhere, in May, 1970, the shocked "O"
of that girl on the hill was circling around us.
Twenty years later, poets have come
to read lyrics and remember.
I'm standing next to a grotesque,
abstract metal sculpture with a small hole in it,
the scream transfixed, the bullet plummeting
from its high arc above my head.
Black squirrels scurry across the quad.
The poets are still reading, their voices
accumulating into songs, like those
of the bright canaries that, a century ago,
led coal miners who lived here
in and out of their darkness.

THE CONTEMPORARY REVIEW

CHANCES

That poor, cloned sheep on the evening news,
old before its time;
a man, blind for thirty years,
sight restored; the infant lifted
from the incubator at the hospital ward
in Belgrade; my new marriage;
the cat rising from its primordial sleep.

PINE ISLAND JOURNAL

Anything can happen: the wafer
of my dead mother floating like a leaf
across the late summer lawn;
crows resting on the maple
of my father's shoulder.
Who knows what to expect?

Each morning I step out to sun,
snow, rain, blizzard, or calm sea.
Here there is nothing
I can't believe.

ACTIVE

STATUE OF LIBERTY WITH A RUINED FACE, IN FRONT OF THE CENTRAL
SCHOOL BEING RENOVATED IN LE ROY, NEW YORK

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.

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.

TOWARD A FAR BETTER SCENERY
For Richard Hugo

From beneath hemlock and maple,
I listen to the drunk neighbors
across the street yelling
at their children again,
and remember Richard Hugo
at a reading quoting Jimmy Carter,
who said it's wrong
to think you're better
than anyone else.
How often I've been in this yard
with cardinal and crow,
not far from the town square
with its gourmet shops
and jazz bars filled with tourists.
Once, when I wrote
Hugo for advice on moving
to Montana from the East,
he replied, "Less culture
here than there,
but far better scenery."
But what about that compass point
of feeling spinning crazily
toward its magnet of want?
There's a rescue mission in Billings
and a sign that promises "Eternity Now,"
and at New York City, on 53rd,
between 8th and 9th,
a neon cross declares:
"Sin will find you out,"
which of course it always does.
But isn't it wrong to curse the heart?
You might be standing, just now,
in the yellow light
of your window,
as someone you've never met
watches from a distant wharf,

(continued)

Butts/Toward a far Better Scenery

or you could be curled
on a park bench, homeless and waiting
for the Salvation Army
soup kitchen to open.
Some late nights I leave
the comfort of sofa,
walk across the small country
of my life toward bed,
and it's like coming home.
That teenager sitting on the steps
holds her child, who sleeps
as the quiet dark surrounds us all.

THE MIRROR SEES MANY ROSES

(a suite)

I.

An hour contrary to most does
know a quiet tenderness today.

II.

Tears poured in a vase lie sober.
I am empty again, without happiness,
for an honest second of date and game,
no movement then toward lost reason.

III.

One minute of sorry fragrance,
prize sin, sin locked as a motor,
even as want is, also a star is
one in quiet and instant annual.

IV.

Our bell is free of lost repetition.
All day the troubadour sails,
the mirror sees many roses.

V.

Various questions prepare the lost way and
question the gaze, question the fragile,
victorious sin, sober vividness.

VI.

Say traffic is pure and pondering,
the rain and I can be harmonious,
purely somber, or sin has a need.

[stanza break]

Butts/The Mirror Sees Many Roses

VII.

The confounded choir has no song
to begin with on this occasion:
a quiet theater above the hands,
not a question on the heart.

VIII.

See how the luminous serves the unanimous
movie wide as tainted new stories,
no hidden answer under a grand silence of wavelength
interrupting an insistent star,
a star intending to know who I am.

IX.

I am a serendipitous motor.

X.

Obscene tears lie lost in the tall vase.
I praise the quaint portal.
I surrender to established waving.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

THE WINDOW

Because we live near sea and wood,
many things come to our third-story window.
This afternoon is cardinal, raccoon,
and crippled squirrel, leopard moth
and yellow -jacket, noise from the work crew
assembling vinyl siding on the house next door.
They're all moving in and out of places,
like a children's game of hide-and-seek --
1,2,3, ready or not, here comes your life,
wearing a dark coat and whispering its secrets.
These days my friends are worried,
studying Zen, or having operations.
Back in the trees, the crows are large,
and swallows dart across the leaves.
Meanwhile, tugboats I can't see
are passing, exactly as they should,
slowly under a raised bridge.

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LYRIC

Lately, I've been counting
songs on the radio
to get me to the other side
of my life, examining
the metaphysics of "Who Do You Love?"
or driving through the "Lunatic Fringe"
of Red Rider's America.
Twice, last week,
I felt a frenzied "Sympathy
for the Devil." Tonight,
just a song away
from being "home at last,"
I'm listening to a chorus
of desire that seems
as if it could go on forever.

The station I keep tuned to
declares itself the "Home
of Classic Rock,"
and so the past rides shotgun
on my daily commute
along roads bordered by strip malls,
and crossed by fox,
deer and moose. Who, or what,
do I love? Some nights
it's enough to be at the wheel
and hear the old songs,
shadows dancing
into the darkness behind me.

TESTAMENT

This morning, when I woke,
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 our 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 prayer 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 mist
begins to rise like some new faith,
current turning toward the opposite shore.

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
also lived in me,
even on that final morning
of clouds and rain,
when we left for home.

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

EVERYWHERE IS EVERYWHERE
for Rustin Larson

These days, words from the gospels
and old hymns are rolled out across
screens of eternal midwestern sky,
while the sons of congregations
grow suicidally beautiful . . .
and gallop terribly against each other's bodies.
"O sing with us brothers and sisters,
fathers and mothers, and you too
who are, at last, nearly dead."

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

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

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 shepard
and chocolate Siamese, the bulldog
and English setter. And a golden palamino
stood near a grazing brown foal,
while a barn owl, a blue bird,
and a white-throated sparrow
quietly rested. Even the the turtle dove
and humming bird were there, and then
I raised up the birds, 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.

[stanza break]

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.

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