

RADIO TIME

Poems by

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## Acknowledgments

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*Brick*: "The Daughters"  
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*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"  
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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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*for S,  
and in memory of Jack Myers*

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

—Jack Myers



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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  
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. *Case* **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  
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,  
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 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.

## 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 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.

We heard our fathers, late at night in their darkened houses,  
sleepless and bitter, so many things already gone.  
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 corn cob 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*

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, *check space*  
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?"

## 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 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.

### **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**

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.

## 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.

## **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 & 4<sup>th</sup> 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 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.

**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.

## 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.



**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.

## 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."

## 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.

## 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 novice.

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.

## **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.

## 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



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