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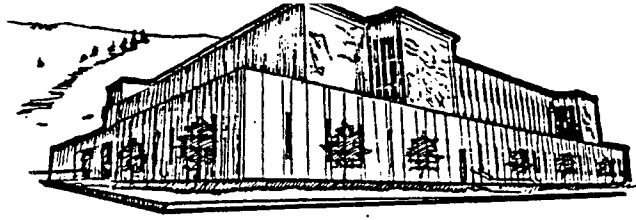
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University of
Montana

NOISE BENEATH THE STATIC

by

Kevin E. Casey

B.A., Tufts University, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1993

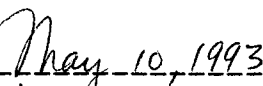
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Section One

THE PEOPLED PRESENT

Painted Ox Skull

The story of two stories is the story
he lived, slicing and sugaring grapefruit
in a way open to interpretations.

In the first place, he's
rough with the knife and delicate
with the fruit, or, believing the story,

he's rough with the fruit rough
under the knife, like the story itself,
as if to have a notion about ideas is,

in itself, the very bread he breaks
and butters before he partakes
in grapefruit. In the second place,

he sugars the bread because he's rough
with a knife, or, not believing the story
of two stories, but rather one or another

of the stories, the life he lived, there,
beneath the painted ox skull, was short,
and so were the stories, or the story

of the notion, or of the ideas of butter
and grapefruit. Finally, he stood.
Eating was enough to satisfy him beneath

the skull and the life he lived, the story
of two stories, was his bread and butter,
his grapefruit, his painted ox skull

looking dry and hungry all this time.

Morning Fever

Fallen ten pins, empty bottles of everclear,
I woke this morning in a fever,
the dreams still lodged
like cogs behind wheels
in the depression of my bed.
A policeman chalks
in the outline
of a fresh corpse.
In her bathrobe, I follow
the iambic footprints
from bed to bath to kitchen to door.
A cairn, at the corner, marks
where she turned, perhaps,
to find the grocer
was out of cigarettes,
or to buy the news.
Here, she adjusted
her bra strap.
There, she tightened
her stockings.
In the coffee shop,
a stool is still spinning,
slowly, like a compass
suffering from a surge
in the magnetic flux
as overhead the planes
tilt wings and shed
their shimmering dewcoat.
On the empty, ruddy streets
I can almost smell her perfume,
her garland of sweat,
and I follow the scent
and drops of blood
into the foothills,
to the whispering timber
and deaf-mute rocks now warming
under the cerulean sky.
The sun near zenith,
I find her shoe
in the undergrowth,
then a shirt.
On an oak stump
is the skirt
I bought for her

one Christmas.
On a bough,
are her stockings.
Further up, a bra,
her panties, a ring,
a bouquet of bullets.
Her course
a flattened spiral,
a spring meander.
My little maenad,
you've shed skin.
You're eating
barks and bugs,
menstrating
to the moon,
whispering
to the wind,
feathering a nest
with pubic hairs.
My maenad,
what have I done?

On the mountain top
there is a ladder
beneath an iridescent
yellow hole.
An American raven
is perched
on the uppermost rung
where she caws and caws
at the noonday sun.

Sentimental Potatoes

Savoring again the cold greasy taters
I remember her face
poised between a laugh and a cry,
the hard, veneered tabletop,
stain-resistant.
Her fingers tapping again
a cigarette in the tray,
steaming pools of coffee.
The Greeks run this place,
marrying off their young,
working them into the ground.
There's no free refills.
Take it all outside
and view it from the air;
the blocky palisades, the corner abutment,
the convenience store across the street,
a Friday night, cars cruising the block,
round and round town square.
All trucks and cars and light and horns
and stop-go motion, jerking, halting
in a painted landscape, frozen.
On close-up, how I cut a deal
from the bottom of the deck,
pull a face card and bet my soul on hers.
She pushes aside the plate of fries,
dead things now, the dregs of coffee,
and stands, leaves her share of the tip
and walks out of it, into the scenery,
the static, the enduring, empty calories.

Making Rain

One

What drops into his hands
is not quite rain
but rather the sediment
of a cloud impregnated by silver oxide
and what comes to his mind
is not quite a laugh
but more of a chuckle that says
"An ocean is a motion
and the sea is a cup of tea."
Though the thoughts may not make sense
there is a certain illusion
believable by degrees
that makes meaning
out of a handful of phonetics
or love out of a dark night
and when the clouds part,
his hands open, spilling
the contents of a dream
into the plush fibers
of a shagged carpet
and he lifts his chin
to greet the sun.
His limbs propel him to the river
where he takes off his shirt,
stretches the scarred skin
and sighs from the gullet
a deep immeasurable sigh.

two

She moves through the room
like a lynx or a fox
and her arms and legs
describe a graceful history
as the outlets in the wall
are sparking and arcing,
the sheets rippling
as if wind and water could coexist
in this deserted place
where nothing is communicated effectively

until it is first displayed
as a limbless mannequin
and the cranium must be slit
and a quarter or a dime inserted
like the phone where she dials
his number and hears only the hiss
of incomprehensible messages.

three

Logic here is the devil
in satin sheets, rustling
in the dark and inciting
surges of static electricity
that fouls their transmission
and confuses fourth gear
with reverse and the clock.
It would be better
to turn on the microwave
or the blender
than to continue with the masquerade.
They'd drink champagne from the slipper.

four

The burning drops come down
and the rivulets of scars lengthen
under his wet clothes
as he walks home in the dark
and contemplates the mass
of the clouds and the gravity
of rain and writes a formula
in the air with a whistling nonchalance
that speaks of hidden knowledge
in the magor arcana of pain.

five

She rolls over in bed
and the dreams come on

like electrified ozone
 where she finds herself
 bending over to light the fuse
 on the silver oxide rocket
 and the whispering swoosh that follows
 blankets the sighs and moans
 and she watches the trail of smoke
 and flame as the tiny bird
 careens towards the bull's eye cloud
 that hovers above the river.
 In her dream, the explosion is deafening,
 the crystals scattering their seeds,
 tiny catalysts that are needed
 in times of drought or doubt
 and in this dream
 she is rushing herself
 through a litany of positions,
 each calculated to produce an effect,
 each choreographed to enhance perception
 and the light comes on
 in dizzying, drowsy waves
 that tumbles her body around in her negligee
 and she wakes with a damp sigh.

six

Weeks since the ground was first wetted
 a dandelion pierces the husk of the earth
 and seems to sniff at the arid barrens.
 She has readied the rockets, the liquid oxygen,
 the powder oxides, and the trajectories
 and they now stand poised for launch,
 like small muscled birds
 with skin flexed over hollow bones
 and she has spotted, at last,
 a thickening hue of moisture.
 He has forgotten his umbrella
 and is strolling through the park
 when he hears the ignitions
 and he tilts his head to follow
 the quickly ascending barrage.
 Crackles of lightning
 and tiny explosions rend the sky
 and the drops come down again,

like accusations or apologies
and he kneels, arches his back
and opens his mouth
and he tastes the sweet silver drops
and again, out of a handful of holes,
he is making rain.

Fan Belt and Voltage Regulator

When you sit there, with your thumb and forefinger
riding the rim of your coffee cup
I am driven to believe you are not of this world;
You left, giving up smoking and ballet
to go to business school,
to marry a second-generation German
who wears paisley and talks hepcat.
In this diner, in this booth,
I see two of you,
your thumbs and forefingers go round the rims.
We talk of dogs and brothers and pool cues,
the broken fan belt on I80,
how my voltage regulator goofs sometimes,
and uncountable volts are passed through floorboards,
steering column, knuckles, teeth, hair.
Sometimes it happens at night,
and the upholstery flares, phosphorescent,
and I see you
in the rear view mirror,
your headlights weaving frantically.

What Can't Be Told

Dark roads back down out of the hills
late night, with white lines erased
by cars skidding off into trees, ditches,
off maps into the unexplained wilderness.
Town lights flutter up the hills
on warm updrafts, currents drawing them
and the great consortium of smells --
the dogs piddling in the park, bacon
burning in cast iron skittles, a lone man
watching TV with gas from microwaved burritos,
the lovers exchanging scents in dainty beds...

I suppose I am guilty of it too.
I've arranged it all to start this way,
the long walk, the desire for distance,
height, or just angle, the new vantage.
I avoid the thought of it, but it's there
and I don't know how to stop. The mouth
opens; the feet press on. Near the ridge,
the sky opens. Here is where it all escapes,
wafting on stronger winds, comingling
with faster thoughts, riding across
intercontinental divisions. Easier now
to turn and head down. It's cold
and ahead is nothing but snowflakes,
blind curves, possibly bear or wolves.
One howls now. Another rustles the bushes.
Are they in despair for me alone?

The fingertips have turned blue;
my lips quiver - I am almost there.
The blacktop trickles into gravel,
gravel into snow. They say hypothermia
can cause visions, paranormal beings
who guide the lost to safe havens.
Where are they then? Or must I confront
loneliness alone and aware of it?
I walk faster. There's a power line
assembly I could climb. The ladder
stings. It is not unlike a jungle gym.
Trees begin to shrink. The road snakes
away and the wind whips my hat off.
It falls quickly, quietly and down
not too unlike a person would. At the top,

I stop. It would be best that way.
Nowhere else to go but a long way down,
nothing left to feel but the cold
and nothing left to think but that
which can't finally be told.

Love Like Jaundice

In our sickness, fever never breaks,
hair takes up guard over your eyes.
Sentries at the drawbridge signal
a moat filled with teeth and apatites.

The herbman's potion came unguaranteed.
Now a single touch of your lips can send me
into the abyss between found and lost,
the simulacrum of a deafmute's language.

I keep a sample of true love in my briefcase:
a photograph torn so only one person smiles
in an eight by ten glossy world where potions work,
where lips can touch and tingle all day long.

My body echoes mad sediments of blood.
A lung spasm. A kidney tremor. Dreaded quinsy.
For this is the pulse of love. This, the aspirin,
the man gulping down his last, glass-smooth beer.

You knew the dying dream this way.
With quinidine on the tongue
and a dream lodged between the teeth,
you knew enough to stay away.

See, the thermometers here whistle like kettles.
See, I've a photo of you with some wretched drunk.
The mercury finds no bearing and settles on sideways
eights.
See, I have a love like jaundice.

Remembering after Midnight

Looking down the barrel of night,
I am ashamed of my own actions.
I say my heart is a deformed kernel.
Heat makes me swell, burst into ugly shapes
and Entropy is my only friend, and even then
our relationship is breaking down.
I clean up after him, put away his clothes.
A leper has better friends than I.

I said it was night.
Its darkness has its own light
and I see that I am a friend of decay.
Popcorned, and cleaning up,
I gather messes to me,
too late in the day, sun pouring out
like the first cup of coffee,
and to me, history is donut crumbs.

I've wanted to be Juan Valdez,
wanted to pick the beans.
My best friend is a faithful ass
walking in these dark hills,
with darkness like a bean,
blooming under heat into a coffee cup
whose ceramic handle holds a life
groggy and unsure of a past.

I said it was night.
I said I am ashamed.
I have said,
enough.

Who Wants to Eat the Crow?

Gussied-up and hair-sprayed,
she tells me New Jersey
invaded England and came down
with cobwebs and androgyny.
Not that it mattered much, but ...

We'd give our life to know,
or is it not to know? We'd give,
that's for sure, and we do.
The fat boils below our chins.
Who wants to eat the crow?

I have a helmet for every weekday
and kneepads for the weekend.
You know, in case something falls.
Nothing does. It's boring like that.
Still, it goes on and that's *something*.

She tells me she takes the pill
to pretend she can still make love
to every stranger in every bar.
Later, she lies about it, wants
to worry for a whole month.

After the wheelchair and crutches,
she bought a fast car, with pinstripes,
says she's going nowhere and asks
can she give me a ride there.
How could I refuse her?

We'd die to go and do.
It's that simple, some idiot says
as if we didn't already know
and then asks, as if it mattered --
who wants to eat the crow?

The Potato Sorcerer
for Lefty

Lamb leg, chicken wing, beef tongue,
this is an ode to food, to necessity,
to all the things you never said.
How you thought hunger was romantic,
eating a single potato could open my eyes
to the memory of you in Washington D.C.,
chasing tourists down the mall,
swinging two of Idaho's finest in a sock.

Blunderbuss, cannon fodder, ramrod
this is the street code, the war tongue
you said was never meant to be spoken.
I heard you fought hard and a biker gang
crawled home with heads like potatoes dropped.
I watched you on your tenement rooftop,
stretching a long slingshot between pipevents,
pulling until everything was taut.

You never said a word, never even grunted
when you let fly ten pound bags of Maine's
and the sky spawned a thousand eyes
as the bags burst and scores of potatoes
found their targets in the Potomac.
The Reflecting Pool shuddered.
The Washington Monument exploded.

But what you could never do with a potato
has finally come into my hands.
The flaying of skin from meat,
the high heat, the oil bubbling, cayenne
flakes, I am the potato sorcerer,
conjuring up the only meal
you would never taste.

A potato so magically ordinary, Lefty,
that even your taste buds could be humbled,
a morsel of your life that could choke you,
reveal the spuds behind your sunglasses
and show you that even the language of food
could, like any old spud, sprout eyes
and see for once just who was eating who.

Section Two

ANIMALS FROM THE PAST

Who Do We Have Here?

He said his name was John
and that his life was a simple thing.
He was the John of a thousand flushes.
His father was Doe or Hancock, or Q. Public;
It didn't matter much. His wife was Jane
and their life had been a simple thing.

He said happiness is a complexity,
marriage a division of one into two
and a reduction of two into one.
And it was hard to know which half spoke,
but it didn't matter much. Jane was a liar
and their happiness had been a simple thing.

She said her name was Jane
and that her life was a multiplicity.
She was the Jane of a thousand vines.
Her mother had a dog named Spot,
but it didn't matter much. Her man was John
and their life had been many things.

She said sadness is a simplicity,
divorce a reduction of one into two
and a division of two into one.
And it was hard to know who listened,
but it didn't matter much. They've died
and their sadness is a complex thing.

The Tornado Dispensed with Civilities

Was the line he imagined there in the garden
or did he have some reason to approach
respectfully? He guided the rake through tulips,

through gardenias, smelling like rot. Dust
swirled and seemed to obscure the demarcations
of this garden. An ant lifted feelers, raking

the whorl of wind for direction. A worm
he planted, withered now, called for inspection.
So he stooped, and bending, the rake

laid aside, saw the ant in the swarm
of ants raking the wind, calling
for an end to the line he imagined.

And standing, he lifted the rake
and used it as a hoe for the gardenias
and tulips reminded him of sudden

death, or the unfathomable respect
for the dead, for the worm or the ant
for whom he said a few lines before

dispensing with the civilities
like the tornado he'd become.

Pinning Beauty

The field is full of wind
 and with mosquito netting, I strain it.
 I'll pin everything down by the wings,
 but lovers of air, the creatures
 must resist, survive and fly
 away to be beautiful.
 Each struggling body is beautiful,
 warping speckled wings around the wind,
 its feelers dreaming up new ways to fly.

I am not ashamed. I pretend it
 can't feel the needles. Stunned, the creature
 knows only sudden, ineffectual wings,
 veined lines that seem to go nowhere, wings
 that at last give up, starved for new beauty.
 I remove the needles and crush the creature
 between leaves fresh from the wind.
 But how can I explain it --
 something that flies only in midflight,

a flashing form, an explosion of color flying?
 I have to catch it, freeze forever the wings,
 and know that it's nothing more than an it,
 a shutterblink from a reel that, is beautiful.
 Years later, I may find yourself winded,
 seeking the field that held this creature,
 intoning the words that can lift broken creatures
 and when I try a couple, something flies
 and the field ripples in the wind

and again my mouth fills with wings,
 discovering at last that a lover of beauty,
 must finally break down and say it,
 and saying it,
 find a new creature,
 perhaps the ugliest beauty
 that can carry off the feat of flying,
 or approximate the effect wings
 have on a tongue lagging in the wind.

Say to yourself, "If it flies, it is of the wind."
 Say its beauty is, itself, another it. Say it,
 you winded, winged creature, you beauty flying.

A Dinner Goose

It was a marvelous dinner,
the salmon, the tortellini, chives fresh
from the garden and a handful of cheery tomatoes.

I had seen you nervous before,
but not like this. A goose had escaped
the pen and the first snow was falling

and I kept thinking that goose was me
and that the tiny webbed footprints
were mine and I was on the run.

I loped through snow, deep as my knees,
and wished too that I could fly off
into the night, but I am clipped

and warm breezes escape my pen,
run their rough fingers over snow
freshly fallen and whisper to geese,

crying "Come with me." Clipped wings
rise to the occasion, webbed feet taxi
down the snow-slicked runway and lift.

The wine was great, a Chardonnay I think,
but I woke in the morning with a headache
and we found a goose dead in the bushes.

Bullfrog A.M.

In the warm creek at sunrise,
the bullfrog croaks low and long
like the last gasp at sleep's edge.
Far off, a rooster announces morning
and I feel old at last; the sun
wrinkles the slow, easy creek.

Through dew-grass and puddles
from late evening thunder storms,
a darkness soaks the horizon
and an old house sleeps still
against the cruel frog bark.
I hear the low incantation
of far away memory. The childhood,
cartoons across the panelled landscape.

Cruel age! Cruel age, the amphibian croons.

Here, at the crossing, the magic moment
when the bullfrog leaps into the morning
with the veracity of things I believed in,
dreams I hated controlled me and the bullfrog
became all that I could remember:
a deep rumbling, like a jet passing,
bound for realms unknown, spaces unseen.

Maize

Kernel behind the husk at dawn
whistle now with the boxcar rattle,
whisper to the humming wind,
and don't fear the reaper's coming.

Feel the footsteps shudder your stalk
and wait. Set your roots till the moon
rises above the furrows and glints
off eyes of lovers rolling in your waves.

Then dance the husk-shedding dance
of blooming, the stalk-snapping lurch
of reaping and bless the harvest.
After oil, explode and fulfill

the salty destination of popcorn
in the movies between the lovers' seats.
Exhausted, at bag's bottom, the final,
greasy fingering rolls with the credits.

Outside the theater when you expand again,
two lovers will walk to their car
with a row of corn blooming inside them.
When their eyes meet, the husk falls off

and you drive to the farmland, attuned
to the whispers of transformations.

The Silent, Horrible Life of a BTU

An oven light, the mitts:
 we feel it coming
and rush from burners,
 congregating
at the pan.

 The door closes.
Some of us
 hide inside
the cheese.
 More and more
take refuge there,
 until the cheese
bubbles and bursts.

In this state
 of blistered silence
others make do
 with the omelette
and sleep there,
 their heads against
the green pepper,
 feet propped up
by a tomato.
 It's a warm bed
where they have
 nightmares of the fork
and wake up
 screaming.

Maze

Bantamweight jiggler
of the spring-loaded cheese
smell the vapor trails amid the myriad paths
that lead a corner to another continent,
press the buttons that unveil
nibbles rewarded for your jiggling.
Beware thatched pits, electrical
conduits, shriek-propelled brooms.
Link the crumbs with string and either proceed
always to your right or always to your left.
Carefully, now. The Skinners and the mousketeers
numerate desire and latinate it
through field density fluctuations,
cul-de-sac religiously. They lobotomized
former occupants in laboratories
bigger than any continent you could cross
with your whiskering steps.
So squeeze out a pellet or two for them,
but learn to recognize your own scent,
your own footprints, your own beady eyes
in the reflections of doppelgangers.
Run the treadmill until you've returned
to sleep in your furry nest of follicles.
When they come with the scalpels,
pull back your skull and show them
a forest of dull abstractions,
a wriggling mass of sea weed,
the shifting form of a labyrinth
run by lycanthropes.

How to Last

Think of baseball,
though that won't work
for too long. With so many bats
and balls, the getting to first base
and the home-runs, it's hard
to avoid the facts.

I try quantum cosmology,
but then there's the Big Bang,
pulsars and black holes.
Politics work for a while,
but when diplomacy breaks down,
there's invasions, emigrations,
so many little people leaving
one home for another.

My parents, screwing like rats
in the hold of a steamer, humped
the rise and fall of the vast
Atlantic distance to dig
out of the black hole of the new world
a nest in which they could groan
through forty million births
and set a million cars loose
in the continental grooves.

Everyone arrives here by accident
in the great ballpark of America
with bone meeting metal,
steering column penetrating
flesh and in the last, tense
innings we discover the mind
procreates everything.

The Cipher

The dreadnought of balloons hovers
over Main Street, Ghost Town, U.S.A..
It eclipses the sun, and the inhabitants
silently mouthed great O's.

The sun halos
the dreadnought of balloons and people
hula-hoop for their lives. Bicycles
take to the cloverleaf and a ferris wheel
blossoms in the park.

Fisheye lenses
capture the erection of the great cipher
atop townhall, a whimsy built of the lightest,
most transparent material at hand, a testament
to vanity.

The dreadnought lifts and vanishes,
a fleck now against the horizontal
that separates the globe from formless
vacuum. The great cipher wears with time,
but in Ghost Town, U.S.A. it still stands,
though now it's not much to look at
and no more bicyclists converge
to hula hoop or ferris wheel.

For once, the great cipher feels at home.

Youth in Furs

I wear furs with the detachment of a rug salesman.
I coax blood from a pimple.
I say the supermarket overflows with wondrous goods.
I say a lot of things.

The summer of my sixteenth year, I rode a motorcycle,
dreamed of lovemaking with older women . . .
traffic cops, bank tellers, the Goodwill cashier.
That summer dragged along Main street.
Nubiles sweated in tank-tops like used condoms.

At twenty, I dissected a turtle.
My penknife could barely cut its flesh.
The turtle screamed, or, rather,
it mouthed its pain silently.
I was delighted to learn
they used real vomit in The Exorcist II.

My last girlfriend left me
when I was twenty-one and high every day.
Broke, I huffed gasoline from parked cars.
When I had a match, I could breathe fire.
She told me I was a brute, an addict.
I fumbled for my penknife.

I wear a mink cap, like a Russian whore.
The cap has earflaps that really flap.
They entertain me between pimples.
Sometimes, I go into supermarkets,
ask for beefaloe, or squid.
I try rug stores, roll myself up
in Dupont Stainmasters. Sometimes,
a customer unrolls me, asks how much.

Free, I say (I say a lot of things)
and go home with pretty housewives,
lie on their floors, soak up
anything they're willing to pour.
At night, I show them how to dissect me
with a penknife. I teach them
how to huff a gas tank,
how to lacerate a pimple,
how to wipe the penknife later,
how to wear skin with detachment.

Section Three

LANDSCAPES AHEAD

When All is Uncertain

In the month of carnivores,
the season for dying,
I stretch the skins
of plants and sheep
across the bulk of my body.

On days like these
it is good to disguise yourself
as a carcass or a skeleton,
something a vulture wouldn't touch,
something that smells of wet, cold rot.

When they come with teeth bared,
stretchers ready, scalpels and forceps in hand,
pull back your skull, show them
a forest of dulled abstractions,
show them the ambiguity of their appetites.

And when the seasons turn over
bake for them your excess baggage
in white ovens caked with char
and a lifetime of grit, feed them.
Perhaps they'll follow your logic.

Hunger

Hunger guided us to this land
where we stumble amid rocks,
huddled together in darkness,
in the bristling wind
and dead tree limbs.

This month's moon harbors cold clouds
and snow pollinates the hills.
Icicles sprout from the rockface
and a stream is a glassy spine,
the backbone of this sky.

In the caves and under domes,
one thought consumes us -
strange insects carpet the slopes
and we know how they taste
by how they don't taste.

We imagine a thousand gourmet dressings,
a hundred side dishes, an entree platter.
We hold the image of the insects,
broiled and braised, in our minds,
and lavish their shells with gravies,

nourishing the growl in our bellies.
When at last, the meal is done by twig-fire
and we've pinched our nostrils with stinkweed,
we stuff the crisped little husks
into our mouths and chew.

No, they are not chicken wings or froglegs.
They are insects and they crunch
and their warm insides squirt out
and the taste of hunger solidifies
in our minds and marble hearts,

and the whole meaning of emptiness
comes together in the pits of our guts
where forces work, pulping it all down.
There, there is the hunger, smothering geodesics,
starved for fuel. Now, now the empty shells sleep,

across the land: this space, this time.

The Secret Land of Love

Just beyond the periphery, in the parallax
lies the land where the sad crack jokes,
where drivers know what goes on behind billboards
disappearing at sixty miles an hour.
On the banks of this inland sea,

nobody is casting lines into iceholes,
but divers hold their breaths in the bathysphere
and worry about the bubbles in their champagne.
If they don't look at their faces
they'll see eyes as liquid as tears.

Listen to them and you won't hear music crying
as loud as thunder, or smell skin wrapped in rubber.
Search for anything here and you will only find
strange bruises the size of cars, private eyes,
wet pencil tips, and deaf operators.

If you've never loved anyone,
then here you will know what love is.
No one says the secret of this place
has nothing to do with negative space.
Just saying it ain't makes it so.

Cavities

A pulsar blinked out its M.T. code
above the deserted apartments. The lovers
saw the famous writer in the street freeze
like a deer haunted by some familiar vehicle
and watched as ghosts opened hollows to halos.
Pistol in her mouth, she must've bloomed petals,
laughed at her lover's luck with rotten incisors.
She knew there were no weddings in his life,
just divorces, separations and funerals.
The world was order crumbling in his hands
and he could see the pavement cracking,
a big black rose in the tarmac.
His dark empty bed wakes him, mumbling,
his tongue probing the edge of a cavity.
From the window, the street is an open coffin
and he watches now the famous writer standing guard
over the pit of streetlight, and wants to believe
that exorcism is easy and lazy suicides will wake
after all the gunshots, wondering if this is heaven.
He wants to believe in wholeness, instead
he rolls over and dreams of the dark vehicles
appearing without warning, forms changing
by themselves to the rhythm of the lights.

Visions Like Mine

If anyone you've known has died,
you can have visions like mine.
The night is a periscope and holes
in the window hide tiny creatures.

I can look outside and understand
what it means to be nothing,
that the sign above my bed
says evolution stops here.

If you've ever closed one eye
than you understand instability.
Volatility, the radiator hisses.
Explosions occur, just like that,

and spontaneous combustion is easy
as a car accident. The only answers
to why are why not and because.
I walk down the street, unstable,

and stop in the block of holy windows.
People are blowing up everywhere.
Here, you could believe nothing
is an ultimate good and not ice cream,

like that insurance agent claims.
Here, you could believe,
you could watch them all go by
and have visions as empty as mine.

Invitation to My Funeral

Perhaps in death, inanimate objects will come to life.
I would be cremated, smoking a cigarette.

In death, I'd take a suitcase,
like an Egyptian or an Indian.

Bring on the mourners I say!
But how would I end?

By old age and complications?
With cancer of the intestine?

Oh anything would do, really,
just give me pain and lots of it.

But is humour possible in death?
Could I die laughing?

Can craziness contain the end?
Will horses learn to bob for their apples?

I'd school anyone wanting to know
in the manner of my death.

My carcass would be propped
on the prow of an aircraft carrier,

flowers flowing from my mouth.
My jaw electrically moved

by remote control and I would speak
thirty-two useless words

to the crowd of custodians
dressed in tuxedos and slurping

champagne through hollow broomsticks
and then I'd be buried at sea,

catapulted in scuba gear,
two tanks of laughing gas.

Letter to a Dying Friend

Because the first light comes in the rainbow's hue,
the chauffeur must drive to the cemetery's edge
where blossoms dance and lift their skirts,
where priests punch numbers into ribs
of children growing fingers to count
the sins of the lemon meringue pie eater.
Because a dog engages in its genitalia
with the licking good lust of saliva
we are no longer alone with our parts
but are reunited with millions,
the windmilled lovers and the paratroopers
who found trees like pin cushions.
Because light from a sinking ship is dusty
round the edges and the night train
goes south for the winter we mustn't ever
go back for seconds, hours or years.
Know that the belief in the power of gloom
evolves like a gas lamp,
allies itself with stopped hearts,
and if father is coming, don't despair.
The right greeting will come to you.

Noise, Noise, Noise

Six weightlifting women pull me
from my bed and I'm screaming, naked,
in the horrible daydreams
of this life gone haywire.
They want me to pretzel under,
to give my earnest all,
to save humanity for Christ's sake.
Elvis (not the King) Costello
dances on the dresser. His boots
go tappity-tap, tappity-tap.
No one cares. They complain
about the weather, their bones,
anything to fill the air
with noise, noise, noise.
We drive backwards to the mall
so everyone thinks we're coming home
and we are, though no one's there
and the lights burn brighter.
Red Shift, we think in the colossal
undertaking called exhuming.
Part the clay, remove caskets,
who cares? It's a job, not
an adventure, and we won't
meet anyone interesting today.
Too bad, though. It could've been
six centerfolds, Madonna dancing,
or even you, sitting quietly
at home, with something to say,
like "sit with me and watch the stars,"
instead of madness gone haywire
and that damn noise, noise, noise.

Fishbowl

I've labored with water,
the buckets, the endless hours of bailing.
The sofa is seeping.
I've labored in the pipes,
the opening spot of light,
laid aside all the while
waiting with palms up
breathing.
Breathing, I can tell you this
has led me this far
The water swells in wait
for the sluice gate.

The Pope's messenger translated beneficium,
much to the King's disliking
and forty years of war.
The bottled message, forgotten, sinks
and is swallowed by a shark
which in twenty years was to become
the fisherman's prize within the prize.

Fourth grade grammar taught me this:
for every sentence
a subject and verb.
It forgot:
that even a verb is a noun
that a noun only describes a thing
that the adjective is therefore the root.
The librarian is handed this thorned crown.
She wears it proudly
to her burial at sea.

I am the coffee stain on her blouse.
I am the tire treadle.
I am the barbarous wire.
I change the bedpans in the asylum,
wet the sheets, water the plants.

I pour this water
from one glass to the other.
It's what Einstein must've thought.
It's what spills out.
It's the fish swimming around,
gaping at me with watery eyes and mouth.

Doubt in a Closed System

I stood on the porch, wanting to die,
but it wasn't what I'd get at this party.
Something about the cooling expanse of stars
was stirring me, a billion atoms strong,
and I was wrong to mention entropy.
Molecules desire open systems and love
is a way to say your atoms are hot.
Carrol, doomsayer, taught me the two-step.

said only good things die, that the bad carries
over into hearts and lungs. DNA, I thought.
She was no round division either. Her life
was fractional and it was too late.
The moon spilled its light. The stars contracted.
Entropy is the way the band dies down,
the way loneliness is something you give to your
friends like a hat to wear for the night.

I should've gone to bed.
But the house had collapsed. I picked my way
through the rubble, found a bedsheet, found
a pillow. I laid my head in an empty hollow.
It was finally night, or dusk, or dawn.
I couldn't tell. I smoked in bed.
When it rained, I expected fish or dogs.

I should've gone to sleep.
Instead, I told myself I should've drunk more,
said ambiguity makes a poor glue. I searched
for specificity by the expanding star light.
From the pieces of wreckage, I could reassemble
a life. A shoe for all my journeys. An ashtray
for all the if's, and's, and butts. A case of empties
for the returnables I called friends.

I could have rebuilt your life too.
Anyone could. Ambiguity is a poor man's glue
and entropy is rich with lovers reciting poetry,
"those mornings and evenings," muttering
their "life broke down." You could blame it
on the stars expanding or contracting.
You could blame it on the universe, or on me,
a star extinguished by rain and booze
and the sun just about to rise.

Taxis

We move through the swarm of cabs.
I hold her hand and she seems to bob on this
sea of delirium. I press her tight and feel
her breasts and hips and the scent
is unlike anything the city could produce.
We duck inside and bathe in blue neon.
White shirts incandescent, eyes blacken.
Her hand runs the seam of my jeans
and her kiss is cool and confident,
but I am fish, flounder to be exact,
and I want to know her from the faces
toppling above large breasts, slim waists
and the miles of legs that work
the dim boulevards stretching
to the framework of water.
We talk like bats, chattering
for the sake of location,
for hunger's sharp pull and still
circling moths circling lamplights.

In bed, I am white and naked
almost plump, like a good turkey,
and she is a tan stalker. Outside, sirens
and horns bark their desire to move on.
The mind opens when the eyes close and I believe
in darkness for a minute, but light, indiscriminate,
makes every hollow lucid, and darkness
is defined by a ridge of light halo-ing
around the world.

Could we pull it together like a seam,
or is it to split and split and split
until two halves are left again
and the patchwork is a worn-out dishrag?
The cars funnel into the avenues,
disappear into tunnels disappearing
into the swarm of taxis disappearing
with loves held for a minute then gone
and the blue neon drips like acid
and I shrug at the thought of emptiness.
So much room for so much more.
Things open the way a punctured
lung would, exhaling first then
collapsing on itself.

Moontown
after Li Bai

Spent a quiet
night thinking.
The bright

moon like
frost at the foot
of the bed.

Earth
in front of
moon,

head
held low
in front of

head,
looking up
and thinking

of a hometown
on the moon.
There is a light

frost in moontown.
In a bright
home on the moon

over the bright
earth, I
look and think,

when the bed
seems held down,
that Li Bai

was held down
by bright
frost, his head

held low
in moontown.
The bright

earth seems,
like home,
head

in front of head,
I spent a quiet
night thinking

of a bright
earth, like
frost at the foot

of the bed
in my hometown
on the moon.