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### Lessons In the Possible

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LESSONS IN THE POSSIBLE

By

Karl G. Garson

B.S., Marquette University, 1963

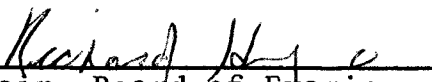
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THIRTIES

January, Highway K

Pines cap a winter hill.  
A green hand, palm down.

Big Dog

Running like hell,  
hoping the back door is open.

## Wren

The wren softly springs  
the berried, wide-boughed cedar;  
sanctuary found.

The Wilma Pigeons

A short pause from my cup sees them by,  
the bright birds that are swift to the mill.

There they whirl over points of lost grain,  
then descend, the first streaks in the dawn.

## Crows

Crows rise against the dawn  
from a rabbit  
in the lane ahead.

Steady whip rolls  
blacken my vision.

## Kansas

This affair  
is like skateboarding west across Kansas.

I puff Wichita away,  
look to Dodge City  
and beyond.

### Killing Frost

Fall that came late  
but came finally fast  
with hard frost in tow,

caught those of us  
with a shortage of baskets  
and cellar dark.



Southern Wind

We trade sleep for the time  
a few Olys give us.

Then late in night I drive the rain  
while a remnant of you  
scratches at my mind

like a Tennessee Williams screen door  
in a yellow southern wind.

### Venial Guilt

The Hail Mary and I  
have been friends for years  
and although  
we don't belong  
to the same club anymore  
we still meet occasionally  
for lunch.

### Caribbean April

Asleep and measured by the moon  
you fill this room like incense  
from a Latin mass, with gregorians  
that roll like breakers off Vieques  
in the pitch of early April.

My lady, I'm a coaster by Culebra,  
headed leeward for an eastern glow,  
you, my Charlotte Amalie of the night.

At Sunset Lake

Ice shards  
                  mar the shore  
and the reeds are shaken angrily.

Sand and loam  
                  are whipped to rest  
beneath Orion's moon.

Oh sad  
                  or favorite time,  
you shape well to the prevailing mood.

Suburban Sunrise

She believes in Level-Loop,  
No-Wax,  
and slick sinks  
above sweet-running drains.

She's adamant in season  
about oatmeal,  
top buckles and mittens,  
  
and scans dotted swiss  
for life after sunrise.

Birch Drive, Morning

The first horned lark  
is quick on the shoulder.

This bus—  
yellow, black and  
up Birch Drive,  
fast on eight o'clock  
and Jimmy Pazdra's house—  
in spring too  
with larks  
and inclinations of the sun.

## White Pine

Snow opens a palm  
first at the base  
of a particular pine  
and frees wintered grass,  
greedy for rain.

This last white pine  
here skirmishes  
with low-income housing  
and similar infidelities,  
and holds wilderness  
guarded in heartwood.

## Corn After Harvest II

I turn quietly in these rows,  
consider the planting  
a season past.

The sky is a deeper blue  
holding clouds at a certain level  
that say it is fall.

Grasses in their last green  
lie between stalks.  
There is a stillness to the earth.

And on the stalks  
a rattle;  
each leaf in the wind.



Fishes of the Mekong

They find safety  
in rib cages.

Their young  
dart  
in and out  
where eyes searched meaning  
of these foreign waters.

Playfully  
they nudge  
rings from fingers  
and gently tug the tags  
still held tight to spine.

## Murphy

She's that English actress  
and absolutely magnificent in her role  
of studied indifference.

Veronica Lake may have had  
those eyes but  
I only remember the hair.

Shirley Temple wore that barrette  
dancing  
with Bill Robinson,

and Liz Taylor  
those boots  
in National Velvet.

## Return

Redwing measures  
note this point of Aries.

Acres evict another frost.  
Again they house spring's immigrant.

What they cannot absorb  
ponds around the cattails.

I leave the cabin.  
My young spaniel leagues ahead.

This eighty,  
a fresh-washed cupboard.

Our steps,  
the dishes back in.

## Warning

Woe to the woman  
harboring drunks  
who shepherds tavern whippoorwills  
and allows their litany  
of roomspin, aspirintwo,  
and mumbled brainwaves  
to nuzzle inaccurately  
against her sober breasts.

Deserted after quick eggs  
by half-cup departures,  
she'll find cold comfort  
in once-bitten toast.

At the Gallery

You move at will,  
at odd angles to my thoughts,  
cubist of my fantasies.

Your hair lies  
in fractured swirls  
on pillows  
of warped triangles.

Feet and hands  
argue with geometry.

Breasts and thighs are evident  
only after careful scrutiny.

Lady, you demand interpretation.

I sit here,  
let you define my hours.

The Lady February

I have watched nipples rise  
beneath the gauze of your blouse  
quickly  
the way a mood clouds across your eyes.

Have found your voice  
soft as it is  
an analogy of things so long denied me.

You have bound me in desire  
as I would bind you to the bed posts,  
and have covered passion  
with the blanket  
I would throw back

leaving you offered like a starfish,  
and me the beachcomber.

## Minor Rooms

Approached by March,  
invaded by letters  
for former tenants,  
they gray evenly,  
ride out the afternoon.

Wind lifts  
the branches,  
sifts snow from roofs,  
still rooms ride evenly  
gray in the afternoon.

Light changes.  
Views knit in dusk.  
Eyes turn inward,  
follow glow upon gray  
into evening.

## Thirties

Seven gone

I sit behind walls  
at odds with my father's dream.

I, conceived in cold,  
travelled  
a mother's summer  
to this chill.

November  
forgets first greens,  
denies last thaws.

Gray  
gathers in my spirit,  
chokes anniversaries,  
blocks seasons  
until death  
wings with geese.



## Meadow Night

Fingertips against timothy  
run to ready earth,  
the rain begins.

A jay arrows the clearing

to try the oak,  
the cedar and pine,  
to settle for the aspen.  
Night circles the meadow,

a dark cat  
that counts fence posts  
and takes the county.  
The jay alone

sees rain yield a mottled sky.  
An owl crosses,  
a slow-thrown cleaver to the oak.  
And silver-blue

the jay alone.

## Hemlocks

The still inlet  
floating stars  
on our return  
from Back Bay,

perhaps

hemlocks  
somber runners  
lacy over hills  
to the channel,

or

esses  
of hair  
of firelight  
circling your face,

make the recall of October  
available in focus  
on the occasions  
corporal or spiritual  
when we brush.

## Monty Wooley on the Stairs

You climbed my stairs  
into a trap  
of homemade chicken soup,  
slept after ripe pears,  
cheese, and cheap chablis,  
and never suspected  
the series cast  
Little Margie opposite Higgins.

Having had enough of winter anyway  
you became  
the Monty Wooley of my bedroom.

We died in summer reruns.

If our spring was a young Liz Taylor  
then our fall was Shelly Winters.

An absolute bitch to have around.

A funeral grandmother  
who smothered me in old woolens  
and Woolworth perfume.

I gave the leaves Holden Caulfield kicks  
and listened through the teapots  
for Monty Wooley on the stairs.

## Northern Highlands

Specifically, mixed.  
Deciduous and evergreen,  
second growth cedar,  
bigtooth aspen, balsam, and birch.

But even more, this  
is a Nick Adams forest,  
the sun perched  
half a tree height over December's frost,

its heat crystalline,  
a cold diamond  
caught between basswood and paper birch.  
Snow covers the effect of twenty below.

We spend the night  
headed northwest.  
Deadmen hold us steady,  
three to the wind,  
one to the lee.

The taut tent  
encloses considerable warmth,  
is wind-loose at dawn,  
condenses vapors  
of hot chocolate,  
brown, sugared oatmeal,  
black tea and honey.

Then, skis waxed,  
I roll the tent,  
force out trapped air  
and traces  
of primordial cries  
that marked  
our dark sharing.

## In Consideration of Warmth

Crone of dust,  
crone then,  
you inhabit dream  
like a rake  
shaken over innocence,

like a wrought heart,  
a black tosser  
of the crumb  
from a widow's walk.

Even now, strangers in cafes flash your smile,  
hurry my meals  
and coffees,  
throw me to the road too soon,

to the west  
where, with thin excuse,  
in anonymity,  
I listen for your step.

Indentured by a fluke,  
a pinch hit,  
perhaps some lucky number  
from his last good night,

I am left lone witness  
to your fervor over pennies  
and your casual gambol with blood.

Crone of dust,  
crone then,  
there is no time  
the ties won't print  
my struggle from your knife,

nor was the time  
that your warmth  
exceeded amniotic.

## On Schoolhouses

The road closed behind you,  
thief.

Where juices were  
you left only bites of dust  
and memories like footfalls  
in the hallways  
of abandoned schoolhouses.

The wonder of it  
that the paint flakes clung at all  
suspended by tangents  
oyster shells on weathered shiplap.  
Yet, in four years  
they remained where watched.

I never thought a road could disappear that quickly.  
Some dust,  
quick greening,  
twenty foot birch  
with one growth ring.

Windows don't age,  
seldom shatter slowly.  
The rain-weathered hallway ends  
were desert borders to wax-worn varnished maple  
color, the only hint at prior warmth.

And the deer trail crossing  
showed evidence of long wear  
an oak  
completely rotted  
ran in parallel.

It was a trick  
a rabbit skull was green with moss  
as well as white.

In the coatroom, in the back,  
among mackinaws, lunches, and books,  
the pencil case never knew the thief.  
The road home was there  
and never disappeared.

That used to be the constant.  
The weekly reader really was.

You, sneak thief,  
are the brick that fell.  
Crumbler, paint peeler—

I learn again.  
The loss of my pencil case  
is survivable.

LESSONS IN THE POSSIBLE



Happy Birthday, Michael Cashin

She said it was your ass.  
"God what an ass!  
Those cheeks never mesh  
the same way twice,"

she mentioned, one of hers  
flat against my window to watch  
you yaw by on the close-in walk  
a flight below.

All summer I endured a wake  
of splashed-down glasses  
because the rush at your parade  
of shorts endowed her fantasies.

From that catalog of moves she turned  
upon your name and caught it at a party.  
Her vocabulary brought you home as Michael.  
You remained a matter of time in mine.

Mike, by autumn I was wrong.  
We've laughed apart the one tense time  
I returned to find you there to meet me,  
and found the story straight.

We've come to winter and your birthday.  
This is from me. Be happy knowing  
she reviews the walk that brings you by  
and still allows you move invitingly.

## One For Beth

Spontaneous and easy swimmer,  
you break the lane in free-style.  
I watch you all the way  
until triumphant at the bench you catch  
the towel I toss you, and toss me, "Chauvinist!"

I've never told what happens then  
is better than your surface game,  
that when you rest, you quiet to a deeper mood.  
You tell some moments as a child  
and then, unguarded, you become most lovely.

Later, as you practice violin, I watch  
you ponder simple chords with such concern  
I don't dare my laughter before those blue  
and infant eyes, but when we love

I say, "Chlorine, chlorine will  
kill me yet," and laughter takes us both.

Beth, leaving your warmth,  
you've gone to swim in a Wisconsin blizzard.

When you return, dressed in St. Vincent originals  
and call for a ride in a Bacall voice  
husky from bad weather and celebration,  
I'll tell you this because the words are right.

To leave you again would be a mistake.  
You bring me back, always back;  
a searcher returned to say,  
"It must be here, I know it is."

## Wisconsin February

The sun hangs, skewered on trees  
that picket the sere west  
like townsfolk come to torch a beast.

The moon has slow-risen, idle and white,  
to watch me freeze a second month,  
caught in half-life by frost light.

October has vanished without a trace.  
The hard earth trades in rumors  
and I weary of the rumor's pace.

Sure, February whistled fine  
to ears that stepped  
November and December's time,

but now it catches shallow breath  
as March and April promise tales  
I haven't faith to test.

## Cardinal Virtue

Cushing sells bruised apples near a laundry.  
By all appearance it is early Cleveland.  
Sometime afternoon  
or very near to midnight  
skeletal acolytes dance on cider.

At the core of what is holy  
reverence is redecorated in off-white.  
Several trees rattle to communion.  
The hosts prove elusive,  
carom off the Platte,  
disappear between clouds.

A vacuum fills the ciborium.  
Crows feet etch its bowl.  
Life is said to be impossible  
beneath its lipsticked rim.

## Corn at Harvest

Morning

The milking ends  
while the stalks stabilize.

I fill the diesel  
as night evaporates from forties.

The picker is attended roller and chain,  
the wagon pinned.

The day rings crystal.

Again my lunch is hurried.

Afternoon

I pick a final acre  
and draw the wagon to the bridge.

The light is four o'clock  
over waters of the Baraboo.

Children gather at the crib,  
watch ears rattle up the sides.

Their laughter counterpoints October.

It chirps favor for the quickened season.

Evening

I doze after supper  
and see the tallow knuckle;

roots that consider sand  
strung by a fall norther,

that hold earth  
in a chill grip before tomorrow's plow.

Their rows assemble stripped and torn.

Arms stump at the quarter moon.

On Suicidal Prints

Larry, I've suspected the Bruegel,  
heard insubstantive sorrows whispered  
during evenings here.

Yet its final cry was not for us,  
filled Collins Center's empty veins like  
brake fluid  
panicked in a one-car fatal.

This leads toward old debate,  
trees alone in forests,  
guilt and its denial.

What did remain, in morning fact,  
was Winter Landscape  
pitched face down atop your desk.

You're the next to know.

## Thoughts in Available Light

I'd forgotten that snow  
that came early to the mountains  
and the need near evening  
to close windows against the cold

for today the leaves were taken slowly  
and the sun denied its point  
in the October sky.

Now, as I leave Albertson's  
and walk to the car,  
what survives of the day  
crowds light from deep angles  
and abandons the west  
to glow above the negative hills.

I stop to gather a thin jacket around me.

Missoula begins to candle its walls.

I think of how you wait with tomorrow  
there in the dark fields of Iowa,  
and how here I'll return home with ice cream,  
weakened by the distance.

## Supplication and Reply

## I

Why do I talk to you now,  
you gone away from my heart,  
you faded like a shape from snow?

Why should I want to start  
to offer clumsy words to you  
when you're gone away from my heart,

when there's little I can do  
to retrieve your easy grace  
but offer clumsy words to you?

As I catalog our days;  
recall the brush of ways, the sound of eyes  
to retrieve your easy grace;

does it come as a surprise  
and are you moved to ponder;  
to recall the brush of ways, the sound of eyes?

Do you then begin to wonder  
why I talk to you now,  
and are you moved to ponder  
why you faded like a shape from snow?



## Supplication and Reply

## II

Because of what I know,  
that love is not my easy grace,  
I faded like a shape from snow.

Love is also not: a list of days,  
a brush of ways, a sound of eyes.  
And it is not my easy grace!

What love is, is a surprise  
which leaves a hollow in my heart.  
A brush of ways! A sound of eyes!

I wish you wouldn't start  
a fantasy of me and you  
which leaves a hollow in my heart.

I see little left to do,  
for I'm not moved to ponder  
a fantasy of me and you,

and I don't trade in wonder.  
Because of what I know  
I'm not moved to ponder  
why I faded like a shape from snow.

Whatever Happens, Happens Quickly

A preying robin dashes low and springs up tall.  
The breeze drops a string of rain from the belly  
of a phone line to the lawn beside the bird.  
The line swings back to stillness, to gather.

A bone is found and carried from weather,  
the last scrap of a 4-H project shot to beef.  
Taken from a woodlot to be shelved above a desk  
it is polished by a curiosity of hands.

The sapper runs her robin bursts in quiet,  
between and through the rain-strung concertina.  
A burst on automatic bleeds the humid air.  
The night snaps off its color, readjusts its tension.

A phone rings at an unappointed hour.  
Someone wakened happy may dash at it excited.  
Jolted only to the night, they may respond with caution.  
Either way, they answer it.

A relationship may keep its beat or fall to bones.  
If it stays low it may warm to something further.  
When it stands it has to worry over something quick.  
It always sights the tallest of possibilities.

Lessons in the Possible

Eddy Street dachshund, my brown run of sharps,  
why do you riff day and again  
the measure of your chain  
when you know its measure and its pain?

Unseemly frankfurter, mutant slug,  
today you will flip once more  
into the same grassy roll,  
the same exclamation of dewclaw and snout.

There are other streets, velvet footstool.  
My part could be left unplayed.  
But your lessons, my overt mole.  
Beyond the smile, they make the poem possible.

PICTURES FROM A '24 WEDDING

## Missouri Thaw

To every creek and trace of this divide—  
sure as a locomotive pulling slack  
from every car in a long freight—  
certain change occurs, a settling  
of snow, a reopening of water.

The nerve beds stir, tendrils to light.  
The Blacktail, Ruby, and the Dearborn turn.  
The Madison and Sun, the Milk, the Nevada,  
and the Hound, feel the pull of heat  
that builds on the eastern slope.

Faint yet new, this February pulse  
murmurs the thunder to come.  
March. April. The Missouri free  
to lock to rivers named for middle states  
and Mississippi past New Orleans to the sea.

## A Letter in Recall

And this is the typewriter that sits before me,  
metal touched to a welter of keys in this room  
where yesterday only your body sat before me.

In this act of recall, your body combines in a bloom  
of Nolde and Ingres—expression and line  
and metal touched to a welter of keys in this room.

Yesterday your movements in love—today my touches define  
a body of words, a portrait reminiscent  
of Nolde and Ingres—expression and line.

What I type in these lines seems deficient,  
for today the ground for your soft cries diminished, became  
a body of words, a portrait reminiscent

of metamorphosis—of an odalisque in flame.

Lady, release me from words, return on the tide of my calls.  
For today, the ground for your soft cries diminished, became

in this room, one with the desk and the walls  
and this, the typewriter that sits before me.

Lady, release me from words, return on the tide of my calls  
to yesterday, where only your body sat before me.

## Fat

Malevolent conversion of mindlessly ground  
gastrointestinal slurry.

Guerilla victorious from the junk-hunger jungle  
bandoleers drooped with eclairs.

Stuffer of the shoe, disabler of shorts, scourge  
of the stitch on gelatinous prairies of pants.

Liar in the six-pack, heart's leech,  
lover unfaithful by inches.

Fat, I hate your foul scat, your smear of smoked almonds  
and old-fashioned tracked between L.A. and Oahu,

your supersuspension of lard slapped between buns  
and left to howl from a mean web of diners.

Radial middle, I turn your cap tight, slip out  
of your pull tab, spit up your cello-wrapped infants,

and I recoil from your warm double-dips,  
your sugar cone option, your french vanilla song.

## Iowa, from Montana

An afternoon which offers the possibility  
of nothing begins to rain.  
Outside the window a plum tree  
declines from bloom.  
The fruits of summer are a thin belief.

Maybe it is sunny in Coralville,  
your Iowa town with its Florida name.  
Perhaps the oaks on the library hill  
gather shadows like sticks  
thrown to a table in a children's game.

Here a Salt Creek truck passes TRAVEL BIG WYOMING  
in tall red letters to my desert room.  
I feel a Wyoming highway, that stretch below Teton,  
187, Pinedale to Rock Springs where  
a wave for help could flap in your rear-view forever.

But the incoming rain becomes harder  
and the petals fall under fire.  
I go back to the refrigerator  
determined to salvage  
the remains of afternoon light.

Now a train grinds rust from the lumberyard siding,  
like this, the smaller metal sound of a tab  
pulled to open the last beer,  
to signal that one thing leads from another,  
that with you there I've begun to drink more here.



## April Snow in Wisconsin

for Cliff Weber

## I

Spring had turned to the winter and won  
 but then snow returned so thick in wind  
 that plow clicked in my mind like a shutter  
 while I looked two ways at the order of the farm.

The day became a trip postponed and a barn to clean.  
 Measured by accumulations  
 it tossed on the swell of weather.  
 Roads closed. A neighbor called for help.

Had he phoned later with,  
 "Come quick, the calves are dying,"  
 the manure and its sweet steam  
 would have been released over the lower forty.

But the load waited (it would not freeze  
 in weather that wet) as I snapped the tractor  
 free for the hurry through woods that marked  
 good neighbors with maple and oak.

## II

Two lay in the farmyard below the small barn  
 which brought the only lee to the sadness  
 and Cliff wrung his hands as he often did,  
 he and I the only movement there.

Of the four in the barn three were gone.  
 I kneeled to the other low in the wet mat of straw,  
 to feel breath, to find some thin gift,  
 an oddment to offer that good man in his grief.

Nine years ago this spring and my shout,  
 "No you can't! No you can't!," still is my wish.  
 But there was no startle to the small form  
 that arched away from me, away from such surprises.

One by one then, snapped to the end of the chain  
 they skidded, numb to the wet and deepening April snow  
 as the M tractor and I, in strange cortege,  
 bumped to the ravine of foxes and seasoned oak.

Pictures from a '24 Wedding

for Peggy

Smiles locked, centered on a clapboard church,  
the party stands along gravel for snapshots.  
There's sun and a veil tells of wind.

Someone says, "The film's gone." Another, "Let's  
get drunk." They begin to move to a few parked cars,  
Jack and Corrie crossing for the shiny one, an uncle's.

You imagine more, mornings when you get off shift.  
A car from nowhere, quicker than her jump or scream,  
picks the brightest target and is gone, north and fast.

The world breaks loose, circles the white dress,  
sends a posse in a Model A, lifts her easy  
to the widest seat, looks for ways to stop the stain.

They chase through town, pass friends who wave  
best wishes at the streamers and the horns.  
Jack, all that time, in back with the bride.

When he's in that day he tells you.  
The time he marries Corrie. How the day  
gets off real nice. How it is in '24.

I remember the Chrysler.  
First that's all.  
And the place we took her,  
where folks said no chance.

Then the nigger fills my head.  
His face. His hands on the wheel  
and Corrie walking up ahead.  
That stretch of gravel too,

from where they hit, to where  
it drops away north,  
through those cottonwoods  
where Dwight took after.

The first time, your liberal cant gets bent.  
But the file calls the madman's story straight,  
his hatred set years before Brown and Topeka.

Some nights, only your syringe stops the NIGGER  
pushing at the pale green walls of Warm Springs.  
Mornings after those Jack has your mind.

You see a camera picked up from stones,  
small black-and-whites that curl until a mother dies,  
and a wrapped album Jack never returns to claim.

Instead, each day he kneels to gravel, turns her gentle,  
sees her eyes go wide and flat. You see two minds,  
how they stop together, frozen in a single frame.