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### Blue Woman

Michael McCormick

*The University of Montana*

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THE BLUE WOMAN

By

Michael McCormick

B.A., MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, 1972

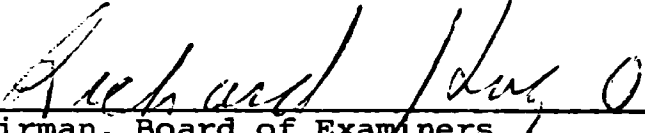
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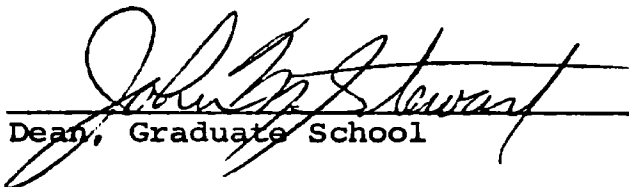
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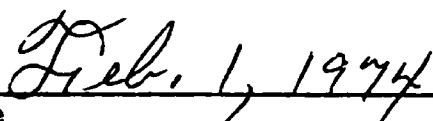
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1974

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FOR MY GRANDFATHER

Who started it all by dying

*man is a god when he dreams,  
a beggar when he reflects.*

**-Hölderlin**

Certain of these poems were previously published. Versions of: 'Poem' (for gail); 'Yellow'; 'The Disparaging Fall of the Roman Atomic Theory'; 'The Olive Trees are Burning on Corfu'; 'The Night Before Christmas'; 'Poem' (for dan gerber); 'Anti-Ghazal'; 'Simone'; and 'Ipsos'; in THE ASSASSINATION OF POETRY. 'The Disparaging Fall of the Roman Atomic Theory' and 'Isabel' are forthcoming in *THE RED CEDAR REVIEW*. 'That First Night Home' in *CUTBANK*. 'All I Ask is to be Alive Next Spring' in *CUTBANK*. 'Yellow' and 'Anti-Ghazal' in *PREVIEW*. 'Anti-Ghazal' in *TUESDAY* and *THE MICHIGAN STATE NEWS*. 'Poem' (for dan gerber) in *HAPPINESS HOLDING TANK*.

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I. THE BLUE WOMAN

THE BLUE WOMAN

Death comes with her earring in water  
scarf of mist around her neck  
Near Whiskey Ridge the lake pulls  
woods and house into its cave

Let them laugh at my fat  
When my mouth opens  
the lizard sleeping in my throat  
will spit blue poison

I cry for myself  
the twenty-first year alone  
I cry for the knife  
the color of touch  
and steel across my wrists

I trade my life for a dozen eggs  
they crack and blue run onto my fingers

She like a cloud I want to think  
turned me blue against myself  
That blue woman once the color  
of everything I ate  
It opens like a wound

Dear Michael snow  
falls around your bed  
what you touch becomes blue  
My lips my breasts I cannot stop

When you left  
the plane trailed  
like a dead bird at night  
This part of earth  
turned the other way  
growing against the mountains  
in the bluegreen wall of dawn

I waited while the hostess  
checked your ticket  
You took a seat near the window  
I hoped, to see me  
watching like a baby  
its first moment on earth

Maybe it was the roar the engine  
a spider I felt crawling into me  
working toward my heart  
toward that bitter heart

I remember too much  
the illegal dreams  
sleeping with my sister  
the echo of a shotgun  
colors and music I've never heard

Go blind  
Remember the odour?  
the poison of mornings  
and cold bloody sheets

Cornelia, so often  
my hands find pleasure  
because they cannot sleep  
learning to live that instant before winter  
when the farmer lies down to dream  
in his field of wheat

BREAK

3

The light burned that summer  
the way love  
locks you from your house

When the ulcers hemorrhaged  
I bled for three weeks  
The sun whitened paint chips  
at the window's edge

In the middle of night  
she came to me  
held my hand  
washcloth to my mouth  
We planned a trip

I cried when it reached my ears  
*Let me die!*  
Muted by the liquid belching  
the words would not be heard

The city burns the last elm  
When she made me pray  
all I remembered  
was a turtle I once smashed  
trying to rip the shell from muscle  
which would not let go

THE GIRL WHO SINGS TO ME

4

The girl who sings to me  
sings at night  
music that echoes from these walls

From our room above the lake  
snow falls along the frozen top  
there too, the song is heard

In the morning she lets me sleep  
as a nun who suffers grace

In dreams I pretend  
there is no argument  
no place for that pure voice

The girl who sings to me  
sings to herself

It's fall in Michigan  
A Cooper's hawk  
circles above the mill in Dexter .

Martha turns the press  
a smell of apple runs where sparrows hide  
beneath her skirt

Because she doesn't write  
we meet again. Her eyes  
have taught me to say nothing  
smiling in the socket of her hips

At night a whale cries  
searching the mountains for his mate  
The gambler lies in Deadwood  
strangled in his yellow hair

They say he turned to stone  
A trick that seasons play  
when salmon run upstream to die

POEM  
(for gail)

6

In April I leave Michigan  
pass land flat as night  
past Pleiades still in command of Spring

Stars above  
pull taught their intricate lace  
Dark edges roll under my eyelids  
steam rises from the road

In Pennsylvania  
highways are cut from mountains  
rivers of asphalt  
twist into deep rock walls

Ceiling of green black blue...blue  
marble swirling in the sky  
falls to tuck us in

Morning in the garden  
where a snail has come to die  
From the terrace I see you leave  
and for a moment pray  
to that first fire where we met  
and accidentally warmed ourselves

Of course it was spring  
when white sea quartz  
was the only gift you offered  
And the trees were waxed  
in a new and better beginning



There's a book called Odalisque  
I open on these nights  
when there is no one  
to tell me I am happy

A call from Montreal  
can make me snap  
believe there is something  
far away that I should know

In the next room, the next page  
she lies with another man  
A branch is ticking at the window  
All the answers point to me

The seasons never change  
You know the cold cold tale  
and still it opens  
on a winter's night  
when the door is locked  
you think that you are safe

For nine months hiding in my walls  
I've seen you stare at me  
the way a woman stares  
at four in the morning

There are no kings to love  
only nights long and dark  
like bare rooms  
that run into one another

I talk of you to strangers  
some thought fat and beautiful  
Even young you had a name  
Odalisque  
I say and lie  
we had many children  
some were black  
none would let me kill you

Lying on your matted throne  
one knee bent  
away from your gypsy eye  
Waiting behind the wall

A secret to drive me mad  
No paint to wash my hands  
No moon. No mountain  
Not even water  
can light this room

Where were you when the builder  
nailed the last board around this life?  
The old earth cracked  
and took me down  
to see the mother lion eating stones

Once I took a bus in Greece  
learned that crooked streets  
were for the poor to ride at night  
The rich were eating lamb  
and have never been the same

The stories all agree  
children cry because they want to  
And the lady whose face is in the mirror  
is dead because she looked

The night I was born  
there were no stars  
to help my mother in her Hail Marys

Too early in her dream to know  
that love could not be learned  
like the names of states and women  
who hide behind their beauty

Father nodded his approval  
at the burst of kicks beneath the coat  
Nothing's changed, I've always longed to travel

She laid her head against the glass  
and held to each cold throb  
I smiled at the pain and tried to make her cry

Spinning her head in one last effort  
she screamed and saw me being born in Russia  
Russia...

where the snowgeese froze in midflight  
above the tiny bundle on the tundra  
Who knew that crystalline night  
what plans I had destroyed for you?

YELLOW  
(for nick)

12

I bury my love  
near the steps  
of an old lighthouse

daffodils growing from her lips  
as yellow as she would speak  
The salt rises in the back of my mouth

I watch the waves flop like fish  
and weave them into a wreath  
and place them by her / yellow

Each day there is less to say  
The axe is warm  
My fur is soft and sharp  
She said the welts were German whips

In Okaton, South Dakota they  
made a movie called  
Prairie Grass. When they come in  
I know enough to flush the grain  
and when they don't I

sleep in the cross of my arms  
in the hot loft, in the way of the  
geese pushing a wet skyline

He plummets. He  
rides the length of herself  
nestled in her crotch  
where it reached the seam  
and hid the men of dust she rode

Eye fire. She sees Frank  
He milked twice a day  
until he jumped from the silo

FROM A DESCANT ON RAWTHEY'S MADRIGAL  
(for shelley)

14

The man who built this house told lies  
His father was a Celtic chief  
who sold his wife and sailed to Persia  
on a fishing boat

My sister's buried in this field  
beneath the nettles and the wheat  
The last letter came from Montreal  
Steeple everywhere begin to rust

In a later song the tenor bull lies drugged  
The mason chips his stone the blood is cold  
This is the year of rags poisoned air and a secret  
farmers and mad lovers share

## II. LEGENDS



It was the man who stripped leather  
Olives floating in his skin  
They staked their love on hides  
between empty casks of wine  
*while the Patron Saint*  
*smiled from his glass coffin*

In the temple  
I hold a wick between my teeth  
and both ends light

burning in a bar  
where an old drunk  
has earned his life

They beg for all the mercy burned  
candles incense figs  
The sailors dance  
and push the mayor off the pier

A Greek ship sinks  
My empty head rolls down the steps  
In a dark room, near the rafters  
I think I smell her burning

I look up with a cinder for a tongue  
and ask her name  
In a dark room, in another town  
she pulls the shade and bolts the door  
Albania, I think she said

All day the air filled thick with smoke  
From Kerkyra we look across the bay  
and between layers lifted by the wind  
see the ridge of olive trees burning above our camp

Hitching back in the dark  
the side of the mountain  
streaks in orange and odour  
of oily smoke drifting down the village

Continues without control  
Sparttylas, Nissaki, Korakiana  
razing homes where two days ago  
we ate with Greek friends

The children gone  
the hens and mules

\*

The olive trees are burning on Corfu!  
In twenty hours the fire will surround us

Midnight from Pyrgi Village  
we watch the bright line  
move slowly toward us

Empty tables empty streets empty  
the army drives into the hills

\*

At one o'clock I try to sleep  
and for a while dream

to the west a clear sky  
Morpheus draws near for a closer look  
The stars a delicate web around him

I see back two thousand years  
Hellenes naming constellations  
Pleiades, Delphinus, Ophiuchus

I become a star for this night

\*

Chimaera sleeps in the infernal orchards

17

Charon waits by the shore

\*

I waken at this  
and go to the sea once again  
the faint ash drifting to the water

Salt and smoke in my mouth  
the odour of sweet figs burning in my lungs  
waves, brine and soot on coastal scar  
the Ionic hot with cinder

\*

At five in the morning  
there is no one left  
The firetrucks returned  
the men despondent, pallid

A man with one bar across his heart says  
pack your things my friend  
There is no celebration for the Patron

I leave, glimpsing over my shoulder  
that last, most impeccable light before dawn

You must do this  
pick a flower everyday  
feed it to a fish

It will make you honest  
Anything can happen now

Homer cried  
He couldn't see the fish  
but knew the sea  
takes us like a thief  
to different islands  
where we are born each time

*The heavens are assuaged and  
pour forth torrents of light;  
the waves of the sea smile on her.*

--Lucretius

Man has killed mythology  
and buried it in the rug of a lamb  
I tell you Medea  
we are distinct by fear

In bright Venus there is authority  
a filial devotion to necromancy  
and a raiment of fire we wear through life

THE DAY CARL THAYLER  
LEARNED TO PITCH HORSESHOES  
(for craig, carl, marcia, and emily)

20

From that light  
where the sky falls  
and brings you into harmony  
with the past

it has come to this

control the balance  
in your wrist  
lean and release gracefully

up into  
rowing with itself  
accentuate arc  
steel over steel

fluttering  
for the rain to gather  
for the wind to stop  
like the wings of a mariposa

Men who drink alone are patriots  
dance around their hats  
and cry in urinals

They talk about the life that got away  
The town where women are too proud  
to love their animals enough  
The bars too cold to sleep

It's too cold even in a new home  
to send letters  
The light burns, that lonely glow  
the way it did last summer  
when the walls were gray  
when the hunters killed for pleasure

I can talk to a man  
bottle between us  
usually a wooden table  
hard oak  
forgive me if I show no emotion  
I'm thinking of someone I don't know  
far away

far away  
there is someone  
I don't know  
weeping in a yellow boat



This woman's face has turned  
like an old ship to stone  
One year the snow froze Perry on the tracks  
Eighty winters on the farm

Her soft tongue gave birth to twins  
one oak one pine one night  
in the stable where the lantern hung  
she poured oil on her skin  
because she said  
there is comfort in a well lit room

That first night Lavern called  
Dorothy's chest was filled with # ten  
Art's head stays somewhere on the wall

We fished the Betsy  
I remember I hooked Black Eyed Susans  
and watched a girl

burrow naked in the cold shelves  
The runs were filled then  
White pine grew instead of Jack

The rollway in Grant is closed  
They have picnics now, listen  
to the World Series

Back home the wind blows  
in a part of this town  
where a man still bowls every Thursday

Drawn by the hot dust  
two snakes couple in wisdom

The leaves are masks of people  
who forget their names  
The vines twist into warning knots

I trace the years  
like a map that has no roads  
Here I clear the bramble  
and selfishly dig my garden

I have been here before  
and smelled the heat that collects in June  
I have been here where a promise burns  
at the stairwell of my spine

Here I plant my seeds  
Here, where purple is the color of sunset  
of insanity, and a tiny vessel bursts  
inside my head

It is always one window where I go  
one pane to see the fire in the hills  
They make me go outside each day  
see the masons lay their stone

This the midwest  
where they've just now found the moon  
I'll stay inside and scream around the fire  
While your parents die  
you mad go burn and talk  
of towns you've never been  
say Russia, wind and fires  
always know their place

I want you to believe this  
if I catch you stealing apples  
I'll tie you to the tree  
and burn the ones I cannot eat

Deep in the basement a poem is buried  
a man who died five years ago  
Earrings in the dirt now  
voices in the hall

Sorry sir, no mail 'til three  
credit cards and bills  
I send them down for insomniacs to read  
News of Jonci's father exploded over Erie

Strange, the water only drips at night  
and poets cry they cry

I drink a cup of night  
ash and coffee. Words that  
stain these walls  
It is Christmas in America  
The moon hangs an ornament  
on the limb of a spruce

Drawer of ocean in the hall cries  
Ishmael, let me out!  
A call from the midwatch  
Captain, a man is drowning!

I forget the names of my children  
this year mailed each week from a different country  
Like the butcher who slaughtered his wife  
when the cow died

Have we failed  
to spend our lives in one place  
learning everything we know  
the names of flowers  
children and our parent's song

I imagine somewhere  
there is a beautiful girl  
who keeps me in her scrapbook  
not last but near the bottom of her chest

Will her husband love  
sell insurance and think of me  
in terms of charts and decimal points?

Lately Mars has been my sign  
conflicts with Nature's order  
everything progressive schools have taught

Let the pain be friends  
recorded history  
not the past, what happened

I tried to learn your language  
mine is quite the same  
but when we speak  
my throne is in the mountains  
yours the barren plain

We'll come back again  
wondering why we left  
our lives a roll of coins  
minted out of silver  
when iron would have done

He was hit between the crosswalks  
his hands deep in his pockets  
A man who tried to live this life right  
Always paid his traffic fines

Always bought his rounds in order  
Stayed home to watch the football games  
though something fierce, unyielding  
like antelopes jumping in his blood

kept him just this side of respect  
always at the edge of fights  
A good man who silently cheered  
when a friend's jaw was cracked  
and loved the pain of fire in his hands



Going back to their mountain  
a home in the valley at the end of the road  
The breaks and changes took me past Mac Donald  
an old fishing lake dried nearly to the center

A disparaged bear retreats  
from his warm but high dry rock  
the bass and luminous trout beyond his reach  
A remnant of hook and line  
reminds him he is famous in these parts

Spring didn't bring the mountain floods  
this year the hunters tracked farther  
up into the hills searching for the freedom  
that drove them to despair

POEM

32

(for dan gerber)

A poet cares you said  
there is more than being  
the only person you know

Remember Shunner's Fell  
and Briggflatts  
each day as your last summer

Each moment a photograph  
great speeds  
travelling through your fingers

I am on an island in Greece  
sleeping in the olive trees  
The moon has been full three nights  
and reminds me of you

You can't help it  
It's international  
part of the centerline  
we're all reeling in

ANTI-GHAZAL  
(for jim harrison)

33

No patron of the Hiltons  
travelling the glass walls  
of your briefcase  
reading in bars and universities  
ride into town on the back of a girl  
spurred in the dust of her flanks  
you make a rodeo of love

In some bar  
drinking beer like poems  
Statton (well into it) smelts Eros  
from your sensorium / decants  
in a smile, drips sharply

cutting your eye  
falling like a match to the well

*(auspiciously descriptive)*

for a closer look

the thighs fourteen years old  
draw cautiously to him in the shoal  
then at once close him  
in the tightness of water

You reel, grab the waist of a glass  
and like the whiskey turning  
in your stomach has done you a favor  
smash it, on the head of Kate Millet

\*

She sat on the stool  
a cheerleader graduated  
Magna Cum Barely  
from the Alibi Nightclub

legs suffocating  
her jeans defined  
the thin line of  
dream and reality

She hung into your eyes  
a smile, a wink, and ...

34

*AND THEN WHAT?*

and then you wished her ass  
would drop into your lap

But she married the fullback  
and will never read your poems

\*

Casting for tarpon  
swimming in your drink  
At thirty-two if you catch him  
what will be left?

*Ah!* eightball and arm wrestling

Yes, you live well  
the lives of your poetry

\*

1:05 AM  
I leave you with Statton  
sinking deeper off Key West

The drive home was long  
The headlights pulled me into rain  
and through the wet glass  
began to shovel that night from my eyes

THE W.K. MEMORIAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR  
INVENTING THE FIRST AMERICAN BEER TREE  
(for the missoulian proletariat)

35

In the last winter of that year  
the wind blew so cold we were all drunk  
Hunting ostrich in the Upper Rattlesnake  
draining the river with our boots

When God said *give me your soul*  
he meant Bill  
So Bill flashed the 16 gauge necker at the clouds  
and defied the Promised Tundra

The Good Fairy is my shepherd  
The Magic Poker my staff  
To his men he said: onward!  
The road of excess  
leads to the Garden of Wisdom

We followed the snowgeese  
passed trains from Siberia  
and an occasional Pooka  
humping his mate

On the seventh day  
living by now on sin alone  
we entered the Land of Flame

Once again God said *Bill*  
*what you've done is not nice*  
*Relinquish your arms, commend*  
*unto me the Fruit of your conquests!*

Narrrrgh! I will not be forsaken Lord!  
Verily I tell Thee  
for the sake of my children  
We will take the Eastern Gate  
by one this afternoon of Your day!

The Heavens roared, sallied forth  
an onslaught of Fags and Eunuchs  
He looked at me and said: Son  
we must not be discouraged

by the high price of Honor  
For five egg-reubens  
is all I can possibly eat  
And *no* Raven shall pluck the olive

from *my* navel  
Nearing the Garden we saw  
the Golden bar across the door  
What hath God rot? he screamed  
onward soldiers to Chucks!

For there the Cornucopia flows aplenty  
Maidens drop grapes like rabbit turds  
and the Delta is fertile  
in the want of Human flesh

By nightfall we questioned  
the slack of our pockets  
The Sage entertained a parable:  
Man who shoots rapids

on iceberg  
will surely freeze his ass  
Then he ran without regard for personal safety  
to the base of the Mountain King

He fell upon his knees  
and prayed for coin  
of a large denomination

When the massive Earth tumbled  
usurped our Hero, he struggled  
to hold the bottle high and free  
This my last Will and Testament

he mumbled; Son, plant this necker!  
Below the snow covered ravine  
the wind scurried rose petals from the sky  
settling gently around his grave

In the Spring a great tree bloomed  
in the pattern of tiny brown Buds  
a fragrance of malt and barley  
was pleasant in the air

An image in the likeness of Man  
appeared in swamp gas  
as we wandered over the next ridge  
into the Bitterroot

37

Who lured us with his voice of honey  
and pointed to the pasture  
where the cowboy lies still  
a fish hook in his heart  
and miles of line being eaten by the Sun

### III. THE WHITE GODDESS



Your eyes  
the moon stares  
the distance light must travel

further than I have ever thought  
and your hair twists in the wind

Lying on her bed we talk of ships  
The way they come from Amsterdam  
up the Tyne into Newcastle

Of the harbor and rows of boats  
moored to the wharf  
like rows of brick chimneys

The lights go out in Jesmond  
but the shadow of Isabel remains  
I love this night  
the sheets that hold her backbone high

Cold Simone or so I thought  
when I found that book  
in the shelves so many dusty years  
and read that you were never born

Again the stove needs wood  
I try to feed it names  
because they burn so long  
still heat when coals have died

In the empty mission I played Father  
Changed your name to Chinaberry  
Confessed my sins and learned absolution  
could be granted if I caught the snake  
around your trunk

But even he was mad and claimed you were a myth  
a goat some Greek had tossed  
to the darkest corner of the night

I know you lied about the Irish  
Those healed lines across your wrists  
are rivers waiting to be undammed

## 1. (the magpie)

Si left his teeth in the beer  
and sank the eightball  
Everything we love  
is taken by the magpie  
The fish at Mission Dam  
Tammy's blouse  
Remember Charley Blood who froze  
saving his calf in the back forty?

## 2. (my father)

It's nine o'clock  
not the end of anything I believe  
the lies people tell about me

My father isn't dying  
It's his way to fool us  
believing that we're happy

## 3. (the good life)

It's a hard life they try to rob  
each morning a new fire shapes the limb  
We fit we tremble like the side of a hog  
flowering, the dream life works

## 4. (the white goddess)

I come from the sea  
Nine waves  
Nine branches of fruit  
growing from my tongue

## 5. (the music)

We chewed opium from Nepal  
bits of skewered fish  
picked carefully from the bone  
and left the eyes for children

Winter and no fire  
that shaggy goat from the mountain  
was a priest who burned his wedding ban

Ashley, I give you the last  
of my five lives  
Play them, listen  
the ivory decrescendo  
leading back into that dark room  
where we kept the piano

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Lord all I want  
is a free ride through this town  
To pass the mountains without fear  
the sawmills and the bars

I know she's there  
at every corner  
waiting for the light to change  
handcuffs hidden in her purse

The last time we met  
she was a tree I cut  
and burned to keep me warm

These street facades  
a drunk for every dime  
a dime for every door  
that opens out

Let me pass  
I'd give my friends my guilt  
but Lord it costs too much  
to pretend next year  
we can speak in a different language  
a photograph burning at the edges

I've known this place my heritage  
birds night an Irish waterwheel  
The Mayflower storms across the frozen lake  
Redguard Alneh Gypsies tangle  
in the secret of their madly stamping dance  
The horses scared and neighing  
in the shadow of the unsuspecting moon

This is what I hide  
rejection wind and poems  
aristocracy I carry near my heart

Tell me she is lovely  
mast and sails white flowers  
rounded near the river

Oh Cassandra Simone and Nicolette  
Diotima whose madness turned to hate  
Spread out your wings, here  
where Mnemosyne left her kiss

so I may clothe myself  
wave upon wave of this dark water

Every year the wind  
blows the moon through the canyon  
dressed in my mother's gown

Child, she says  
where is the immortality  
your father promised?

Crossing my window  
she steals a second  
from my shabby life

In the fall of that year  
while the children slept  
it was so cold many soldiers  
jumped into the canyon

Do you remember the music and wild geese  
the man who returned the bullet  
the silver star that hangs above the mantel?

No, still warm  
waiting like a snake  
for the poison to root in your brain

I could understand a knife or gun  
but why a bridge  
when you knew how much it would hurt  
Did you expect me to follow?

or was it the wind you wanted  
thinking it would carry you  
into the moon's canyon  
where your father said he'd wait?



In this world I died twice  
the second didn't matter  
Each began in spring  
fired from a pistol  
in the hot dry months

we'd built a fence  
splitrail  
cleared the ground for a barn

The mares were due in Fall  
heard the wind  
three counties away  
blowing from the Great Lake

This was my innocence  
that it would bring knowledge  
wealth from other countries

All summer I waited  
working or learning  
I would never be a sailor  
rich or educated

that sweat that dirt  
stuck to my skin  
was enough to force any man's faith  
into more than one life

\*

In September  
a light burned in the stables  
my back and shoulders  
healed from the sun

I remembered the glass coffin  
my grandfather made  
when he thought he was dying

Two foals  
one born dead  
like the young boy

who would not remember  
being baptised

only the storm

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outside the church, dark waves now  
approaching like the soft whisper of troops  
entering a foreign country