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VICINITY

by

Wendy N. Erman

B.A. Lewis-Clark State College, Lewiston, Idaho, 1998.

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

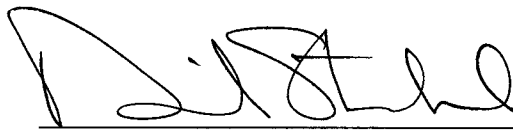
Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

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Chairperson


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To Go To Idaho

after Adam Zagajewski

Which gravel road, if not in my mind, a mirage rising
when wheat fields are cleaned of grain. To leave
with nothing left for Idaho, in the middle of the night
but only if the farm house stands, if the sheds still shine,
if their roofs still lean into the wind and refuse to fall,
if the wind of dust and pollen still breathes aloud
like clouds if clouds could speak, if the machines rest
their hulking heads, and rattlers shake their old skins free,
leave the paper wisps behind, disappear into weeds.
To shed my identity, to leave without speaking, a mime,
to bleach like O' Keefe's skulls. And sour knobs of crabapples
and below, under the buzz of the drunken bees, the deer converse.
The church is still abandoned, as quiet as a pot
full of flowers wilting in the heat; and my sadness
which wasn't overwhelming yet, only neighbors and strangers
and the shriek of a pet peacock caught in a tree. Poor James.
There was always too much Idaho. No one could
stay in its smothering. In the other ear, a murmuring,
some metropolis calling its lost sheep home.
The country's silence was unlike even city Sunday. The sinners
weren't easy to spot. Leaf by gilded leaf, the Bible flew.
Flew industriously, and judgment hovered everywhere:
in attics, on mattresses with sagging springs, in calloused
hands, in lips that pressed the lipstick redder,
in unfalling rain and in the blight and disease.
The yard, yellowed tinder--fear of the fourth of July.
Gun powder, and the air bloomed. Colored propulsions sailed
in the canals of our ears. Sky, too much on fire to forget about
and so many variations of white. There I was in Idaho,
that overgrown sanctuary, the rest of the map dropping off:
each border, each river, sank through every river bank,
turned into mud, stone, shrank from heat, grew sleek,
and cracked. There was too much of Idaho, and now
there wasn't any. Relentless, it grew and the mind misshaped it,
hot tempers as always in August, without thought, without a choice
until cool September comes with its dark seedless fields.
Fallow, but the mind rewrites it, conjures until it's harvest again.
Broken down machines become veterans of war and the few still
running, their cutting bars raised, are triumphant. Let the heat
not turn every living thing to dust. Let the heat equate with ripeness

and light and the color gold. Equate with the hormones
of farm hands, with good sweat and dirt beneath the nails,
with rising early and cutting until well after dark and dinner
at ten o'clock and going to sleep in a house that creaks under the weight
of barely making a living.

Absence

There's beauty in what's not there.
Witness the closet of flannels,
each left sleeve safety-pinned
or severed, cut into squares
the wife will use to sew quilts.

Labor always asks
for something to keep:
A memento. A thumb--
mistake of the cowboy's rope
too tightly wound.
The farmer's digits lost
to the combine's rotor teeth.
Or the logger's jagged leg
after the chain saw finds
the tree's invisible knot.

Those who've lost say
the body bleeds more
than it should. A showy red
smelling of pennies and sweat.
They say, *Doctor hell.*
Apply some pressure.
Some whiskey. Buck up.
There's fence to mend.

I've come to love these
scabbed and callous men
who don't believe in
phantom limbs, the ones who say
Only the crazy go on feeling.

Even so, I'm still amazed
when outdoor Shakespeare ends
and the giant of a man sitting before me
lumbers up from his blanket on the lawn
and balances on his pale, bare foot
in the way I've seen a heron do:
Still. Poised on river rock
thinking *flight* all day
before lifting.

Offering

Just a thread around the bird's talons so the bird might
repeat that trick of becoming and becoming a kite

Let go and muse and move in the fugue state.

And the tasseled hood over the bird's eyes.
Eyes changed, dulled even when the hood
is removed.

Let them do their jobs.

The man's long watching, his one arm still outstretched
as a scarecrow's, the bird's wings cracking against the sky
like a fired rifle. The thread's failure to break.

There will be no rising endlessly into a distance.

We stopped to look over the edge. It glittered under.
That dust, an unfinished city blown and unblown.
I heard you whisper, "My air is so thin," then my name.
Seemed that I'd answered to that name
in some previous life. Not here. Name growing
thinner, breaking into two stone faces. A monument
in my name out loud and a dark bird circling.
Circling like loose papers falling from some far off
desk--I could not stop watching until I found
a blank page--page more bone than flesh.
More dust than bone--to put it on: memory's
flashes of glove, talon, feather. Voices:

(salt rimming)

This pain (*flying*) is different. A pain before
freeways when we walked and knew more,

and those who flew were wiser yet.

We never locked our doors.

The sky is a door that needs no locking.

Some did not want to live and hid their own bones.

*A bird hides its bones in slick feathers until
feathers become dull and the wings no longer
carry.*

When will we feel?

Feeling is a dying species.

If I gather these stones into a circle
will I be able to find myself?

Landscaping gestures.

In those days, we didn't even need a guitar.

The song wasn't in the instrument.

If the string was cut, would the bird never look back?

*Eventually each string falls away. Each bird
concerned with its own flying, its single
piece of sky.*

Butterfly Exhibit

Five dollars buys air and time away from architecture,
bumper to bumper horns and street kids banging
their overturned buckets. *Cigarette? Some change?*
Unable to spare it, we feign a full agenda. Somewhere,
an important meeting. You haven't got time enough.
You must find that meeting and attend-- Look closely,
you can see the tongue unfurling as it sips the flower's
bright sex. Easy picking, inviting as hunger
and overripe berries. A little boy plucks them greedily
from leaves, touches them until the wings are only
rumors in his hands. Flight, now, a fine dust settling
in each fingerprint's whirl--He only wanted to look
at the eyes, bright irises staring up from each wing.
Wanted to feel. At what age do we learn that touch
can ruin what's beautiful? Humbert Humbert had Lolita.
Nabokov, his lepidoptera--fallen chrysalis, the cocoons,
empty husks, beginnings now being pushed before
the broom, and at both exits: *Check your clothes*
for visitors. Meaning, brush them off like dirt,
a stray hair. And yet the monarch, just now, lighting
on the girl. Unknowingly, she wears him like a pendant,
and he moves with her breathing, makes ready to whisper
no longer the net's boundary. Dancing sliver of light rises,
trembles in time to the memory of a song called clouds.

Idaho/Chicago

My West would amaze you--how the sunset bleeds its pink
on the fields and the white-tails bed their young in the draws--

Is Chicago still teeming? I return some nights: skyscrapers,
the busy glittering sidewalks and three-piece suits, and did I

ever tell you about the beggar who dropped to his knees
to sing me a chorus of "Little girl, you better go," then asked

for change? I mouthed "Go," wondered *Where?* For days,
I hid in Irish pubs. Copper table tops and my face a dull reflection

in spilled beer. Before, Chicago was housed in museums, history books:
burned-down city, river flowing backwards, and Chagall's installment

of stained glass. I think of the blue's immensity, men and women
floating, never touching ground or each other. Connected

in the same way two strangers dodged their way downtown
in a checkered taxi. No fare. The meter off. Before the anonymity

of a hotel room, I'd be shown Chicago by night: lighted Sears Tower,
boats blinking on the lake, and over Navy Pier, fireworks exploding--

East and West now, and yet when this town seems too familiar,
I borrow those eyes, pretend to see this landscape: crabapple in blossom,

one church, orange of the harvest moon. I get in my car and drive,
mind reeling with what I could share if you were the tourist.

These Pageants

A drowse of idols we can't quite make out.
Idols masked and traveling in pairs:
beast/beauty, pain/pleasure--Darkness
frails us. We never wake repaired.
How did we get so broken? The stun
of one more day. Damn its vastness, its blue,
its children. Children born asking,
How can the sky be so blue?
The same children play in piles of rattling leaves.
Across town, a bum sleeps in a pile of rattling leaves.
On TV: A beauty queen. So real,
her world where no one's ever hungry.
How can her eyes be *so* blue? Faith
or stupidity? I say, who's to say that saints
can't spray their tendrils with Aquanet?
What if I said a hummingbird
does not hum, that he sighs his unbelief?
I want to believe that bird could hitch a ride
on the goose's back to a warmer place,
that upon return, the bud and bloom, the blue
would still be waiting--as if the bird had never left--
a blue just waiting to be inhaled.

Alice Blue

Under that tincture of sky
I accordion between ache
and recompense.

How to define this
newly altered space?
Amorphous.

Skin and skin
no longer moored
and falling

like pollen. Dust.
A pilot frequenting the air.
Think acrobatic--

The distance between
cleave and leaving
is monumental.

Your attachment
was contingent.
Mine, adapting continually

like those lacquered boxes
which contain and contain
the next--

I played my song affettuoso
not knowing you suffered
amusia.

In the attic of your upper ear,
affection and affliction
vibrated the tympanum equally.

Aquatically speaking,
the anchor failed. Dragged.
Whether pulled by current

or pushed by wind,
 it couldn't be denied:
 the aft sail was luffing--

I'm self-suspended,
 in fluid memory.
 In the coming days,

I may or may not remember:
 in a glass, a ganglia of roots,
 the toothpicked start

of a pit, an alligator pear.
 An orchard,
 row after row of bough:

branches bred
 to ripen, to snap
 and then to fall.

The Clay Remembers

heat, the exact day the earth shook loose
a shower of pumice and ash--St. Helens
no longer sleeping. What you can't quite scrub
from beneath your nails reminds you of death,

of trees not quite survivors--the standing dead.
You wonder if the after was all silence or if the birds,
soot-covered, sang. What did the elk think
when it turned midnight dark at noon?

A nine hour shower. Two weeks for the gray
to circle the globe. You were four when that cloud
drifted over your town. You lived in the apartment
with the red door, newly fatherless and too young

to mind. With your baby weight on her hip,
and your mother already thinking she'd seen the world end,
she set about yanking the clean sheets from the line.
A baby to raise. No time to join the neighbors

who were outside: some in surgical masks, others
laughing behind bandanas. Not time enough to want
what they did: to be the first to leave footprints
in the residue of a mountain newly fallen.

They Call You Rain Bird

Shining One.
 Little Lamp.
 Sun God.

At birth, Rainbow Fragment
 is penny weight.
 Bigger-Than-Bee

Doctor Bird
 inserts his lancet--
 proboscis

Aztecs likened
 to cactus thorn
 gathers nectar (a heartbeat's worth)

Lore says you are
 pajaro resucitado--
 bird dead in winter

then resurrected.
 Pimas say
 don't touch the nest--

that thimble hoard of moss
 and grass, hair strand and air
 --you'll cause floods.

Bird sees red.
 Fierce attraction doesn't know
 petal's bounds. Exhilaration ticks.

Wings buzz love constantly.
 (The human heart
 might well be dead...)

To resuscitate
 (your skeleton ground down to dust)
 some drink you.

Never The Moon

Motion made the water blue,
bluer as we slid
from the girls we knew

into girls we'd only heard of--
the ones who welcomed night,
stroked it on their foreheads like ash.

For too long, we'd hidden in shadows
of our own making. Scared of nothing
and everything at once. To exhale

what we'd been taught
was to save our lives.
Once that burden drifted

to the silty bottom,
we found the floating smooth,
effortless as glass.

Something fragile about hair
fanned out, floating in opposition
to the girl. Detached.

The air grew colder. Shy again,
we dreaded stepping into the wind's
insistent breath. For the first time in our lives

(and this was not the moon's doing),
we glowed. We'd upset the expectation of water,
made waves and walked away.

The Watering Hole

Country etiquette says if he parts the fence,
helps you pass under without snagging
your wheat-colored hair, he's *the one*.
The pasture is empty, the cows summering
in the mountains. Snow melt makes for green grass,
and by fall, they'll be fat enough to bring fair price at auction.
Coarse cattle hair still knotted around the barbs.
(It's not trespassing. Just don't get caught.)
Trample through the knee-high weeds,
the bleached cheatgrass and burrs
clinging to your clothes. Each step
throws the hoppers into motion.
Farmers tell the same tales: Bugs landing
on transformers, the pop and becoming
little flames that drop and set whole fields
on fire. You've yet to feel that kind of heat, and the sun
and a six pack make you do stupid things:
dried cow pies tossed like Frisbees. Target practice:
beer cans and magpies dropping from the sky
in black and white spirals. City kids
are at the swimming pool. You
drive truck, look like harvest: tan arms
and flour white legs. The water's so clear
you can see your feet slipping along rocks,
stepping on the swaying green fur of algae.
Always something to prove, you swim into this soup
of piss and the tangled hissing of baby snakes.
One of you swears you found a skull once
floating white on the water--one of those girls
who disappeared a few years back from the county fair.
One of you remembers the kid who broke his neck,
dared to scale the granite overcrop and dive
into the cool. It only *seems* deep. This spot we tread
not bottomless. Just room enough beneath us
for fish to pass, for the suggestion of undertow.
Just room enough to wash the dirt from pores,
to work at defining how our bodies are
and are not part of a landscape that rarely yields
these few afternoons when we belly the sun and float.

Notes on Perspective

A spider on the window becomes a monster on a faraway hill.
At night, when there's no work to be done, he reads Poe from cover to back.

The doctor left medicine for clover, bees, the healing power of honey and art.
A buzzing in his ear said leave it all behind. Satisfaction: labor's muscled back.

He turned his back on art, stage a protest, burned every canvas in his head.
The smell of it: burning cobalt, ochre, thalo, the flames washing all of it back.

Trompe l'oeil: home looms in such a way he thinks he could reach out and touch it.
Sensation of paint, sable brushes--if it could, it would touch him back.

Most beautiful thing he ever saw: far out to sea, and everywhere a horizon.
Illusion: out that far, ripped sail, too far to swim. There's no going back.

The counting of days. Postcards to family and friends announce: *Still Alive*.
They've been palm reading, consulting the stars, haven't had a chance to write back.

His red raw hands suggestive of brooding: failed attempt to cleanse away the day.
Rid of the block of wood, the shavings, the constant whittling of the essence back.

The face has been reduced to simplistic lines: bones and cages and empty rooms.
A bed and a nightstand. In the drawer, the Book of gilded pages, its cracked back.

Rocks, bones and feathers balanced on a plinth: The mind taking a line for a walk.
Whoever hid the feather beneath the floorboards will want that feather back.

What's left: an empty canvas, an open window, landscape farther than it appears.
The doctor needs only the sea and a small strip of sky before he's made to go back.

Reunion

I.

In this fog, the pilot finds it difficult
to pinpoint that slick, black arrow of runway,
to reconcile the horizon. With every flight, a secret weight
pulling at the plane's wings, a heaviness in the gut
that says *Turn around*. Someone hopes the plane
will never land. Someone would rather circle
than go home, where upon returning, the self
buries another piece of itself.

II.

Small town, vacant mirror.
I can't see myself. How can memory
etch itself so deeply? I've always been drawn
to remnants, picking up feathers, glass shards,
rocks from the many paths I've walked.
There are things I refuse to carry--
There are things too large to pocket: all the old

textures: Brick. Dust-laden gold in the trophy case.
Textbooks I used still lining the shelves.
One step scatters the fireflies. A science project
waits: pins, the glass case. The teacher
sent us out with nets and cotton balls daubed
with chloroform. Earlier, the pale bellies
of frogs. We were fifteen, at the beck and call

of our bodies, half out of our minds with the burden
of skin. How could anyone have expected us
to make that exact cut? Sophistication
is only a whisper here. You're too welcome. So easy
to slip into the you, you once were. Found and lost in the glitter.
The disco ball turning. You'll see the confetti of light
and words and bury your face in someone's warm neck,
and just this once, let the story write itself.

In the Key of Flaubert

He There is no world beyond her petticoats.

She I'm enamored that he is so enamored.

Chorus Bliss! Passion! Rapture!

She Don't forget boredom.

I hadn't dreamed of the calm.
Where is my rosy plumaged bird,
my poetic skies?

He I love her like clockwork.
Always penciled her in.
Spontaneous? Under no
circumstance will you
get this doctor to dance.

She I bought a map, traveled Paris
with my fingertips.

He Can I help it if I slurp my soup?

She I stirred the fire's glowing coals
and found burning among them
all the wild raptures
unknown to me.

He I was on a house call when I had
the strangest sensation. I saw buttercups.
That image turned into a burned bridal bouquet,
the petals becoming black butterflies
flittering up my chimney.

She I burned it. Watched as smoke curled
in the crook of my arm:
A baby girl. I count ten perfect toes,
count the days until I feel
like a woman again.
Where is my Leon?
Where is my Rodolphe?

Beggar: *The heat of the sun on a summer day
warms a young girl in an amorous way.*

She: I've spread my life around me.
I take inventory:
Virgin. Check.
Wife. Check.
Mother. Check
Mistress. Check.
What's left?

He: Kiss me darling!
Darling?

She: He won't think to look for me
in the garden, under this moonlight,
in the arms of another man.

Chorus: Triumphant adultery!
The role of the wife will be played by Emma,
the part of the husband, by a fool.

She: Damnation. My husband snores
more loudly, and the baby
won't quit her fussing.

Leon and
Rodolphe: Need we remind you that, as a rule,
lovers don't want to be bothered
with the sounds of a fussing child?

Chorus: Poor Emma.
Poor, poor Emma.
Emma overcome.

Because her heart pained her,
she resolved to become a saint.

Saints sometimes go to the opera.
From her box seat, she can see all the facets
of a love triangle being played out.

She: Must I always explain the plot?

Chorus: The curtain falls!

She: When did I get so old?
 Once there was Rodolphe. Leon.

 Forevermore, my husband is banned,
 banned from my bed.

 I'm not ashamed to beg:
 Please stay. I love you money.

Leon: My name is Leon.

She: I love you money.

Rodolphe: My name is Rodolphe.

Chorus: Poor Emma.
 Poor ruined Emma.
 Poisoned Emma.

Beggar: *The heat of the sun on a summer day
 warms a young girl in an amorous way.*

He: I want her to be buried in her wedding gown.

She: Doting fool! Still love me,
 drooling black liquid? Lips
 the color of ink?

Moon: She refuses to shut her mouth
 and I reflect on her precise, dimmed
 teeth. Unimpeded, I move in all the folds
 of her heavy, white gown.

Earlier, The Eyes Were Hungry

And a book simply would not do.
A colored craving in this page after page
of black and white. The kitchen

became a museum. Purple velvet ropes said
Don't touch. There's an art to it: a thief
ransacking her own cupboards. Imagine

a mouth clotted with bread. Or rose petals
stacked elegantly on the tongue. The belly,
a python, a slow muscular, undulation unseen.

A delicious killing. After, some other animal--
wide-eyed. Innocent in a wash of earthy tones.
No harm now to stroke the lion's mane.

This is no peaceable kingdom. This fear
of devour throbs. Check the hand mirror
for evidence of crumbs. A daub of jam

at the mouth's corner. Check the hand mirror.
Aren't the canines growing longer? Check
the hand mirror, now jagged, now smashed

because she blinked at you, this unfamiliar.
Swollen self-portrait: The you
you never thought you'd become.

She

unspools what begs
unspooling: that errata
spiraling down stubble,
its mumble beneath
her palm. His braille belly:
soft arabesque and gilly
like the chanterelle.
All that shivers and hums
in an evening. It's a hard living,
with bones under. And above,
startling blue skies.
Articulates memory--false
skeleton hidden beneath.
Pendulum, unblooms
the flower she clasps
in her hand, quakes at the scent
of her own havoc and thinks:
*have been the wick
that stopped the dusk*
(What's dark getting darker
against the shrinking violet).
Temples him like a bonehouse.
Falls to pieces. Lays it down
by his side like a body.
This gorging beneath
the root: lover immortalized
in glyph--rock-written,
clockless love. Flux.
The skull is composed
of bone and reckless filaments,
composed of midnight
salvage. Her salvation:
she is rarely ever there.

Stirs The Surface,

lets what's soft rise from the puddle whirl.
In the rain, she stutters and shines, runs-
combs through her hair until it glints.
She crosses and recrosses her legs, dangles a shoe
from one painted toe. Give her room,
she's spinning. In downtown Kendrick,
there's a liar's bench--Fish *this* big
and always the one that escaped. She says,
Once there was a tower and below that,
a river. I'm the one who swam from one shore
to the other. Proof: The water was black
and the tower wicked its light across
the unsleek surface. Staring blindly up--
And here, a redwood so old that cars
drive through it. Perfect quiver of mist
on its needles--remnants of night. And she invents
an umbrella. And she wets bristles with her tongue,
paints herself. And she says humming--
bats are drawn to it or vibration of neon lights.
And she invents an invitation: Sometimes a tower.
Sometimes a tree.

Cupid in the Off Season

I.

Cupid's got time on his hands.

There's the sweet maraca music--wrappers
rustling inside empty heart-shaped boxes.
In bedrooms all over the world, negligees
are caught on ceiling fans.

One day, a caravan of semi's--
an empty field converted--elephants graze
while the local cows look on. The Ferris Wheel
is assembled bulb by bulb. The big top's raised.

II.

Surely, you need an archer
he pleads, but not one fat show boss
appreciates the curve of his bow.
Or the strength with which his chubby arm
pulls the shaft close to his ear before letting go.
When Cupid starts to cry, they say: What
do you know about the Wheel of Doom?
Are you good with knives? A passel of velvet
tucked beneath his arm, he walks to center stage.
There, he lets unravel the shiny row of steel.
Call him the Love Doctor and these his lovely
scalpels. O how they glint. He pricks a finger
for show, sucks the droplets, lifts his finger high
for everyone to see. *This*, he pronounces, *is real*.

III.

His lovely assistant watches as her arms and legs
are spread and shackled. Stilettos and fishnet stockings.
Delicious--the apple is a polished red. He gets excited
when he thinks of the pale flesh inside, the hidden
bitter seeds. Two perfect halves he'll pluck
from her blonde curls and hold high in the air
until the crowd roars--blindfolded
and yet the motion of it is all too familiar: a flick

of the wrist. The sailing past. He thinks how,
when this is over, he'll tell his assistant
what a beautiful smile she has. Maybe he'll
help her out of her bind, pull loose the ends
of the bow tie around her neck. He'll tell her
how brave she is. He knows they like to hear that.
He rarely ever misses.

Elusive

They say *fresh*, say *here not long ago*.
Trailhead: rangers bent to task. Calipers stretched,
plaster poured--Allowed to solidify,

a paw print becomes a stone. Sulking brown
where the earth floor rots in this damp thatch
with its stink of dying leaves. The fur must smell of it.

In this cedar stand, a fallen tree is just one more
obstacle. We make a game of walking its roundness.
The trunk becomes a runway, a tightrope, a plank.

Our nervousness is ornate. We move our lips half
out of habit now. In a clearing, I can say everything
but what I think: I've heard instinct makes her fierce--

A whole scalp loosed with one swipe... What kind of scars...
Roll into a ball. Protect your tender belly.
Instead, the spine. Offer up that bone white ladder...

At a gas station somewhere between here and there,
I saw a jewelry display: crescent claws strung on a wire.
A little bit of wildness meant to tick against the bone...

Are we this, something started and trailing forever off?
A constant disappearing? Less than vapor?
A fear that she may never, in our company, emerge?

Nightswim

In the busy game of oblivion,
children practice loosening the hand's grasp
on what's valuable. Today's glittering pennies
will be retrieved. Pity, in the not too far off,
they'll find what's lost stays lost.

They are fearless, beyond
their mothers' grasps and the metallic
tweet of the lifeguard's whistle.
Kids work their way to the deep end,
their incremental thrill audible:
I can touch here and here and
no fear when, momentarily, they sink
only to surface, unharmed, on the other side.

There, it's all about dare and outdoing.
Fat Boy does belly flop. Blue Trunks,
a cannonball, and the pale one with countable ribs
attempts what hasn't been named:
Chained Houdini Wiggles Free.
All admire the beauty of imprecision until,
at odd angle, he and the platform meet--
its sandpaper surface, his cheek.

Amazingly, his limp form aligns mid-air.
The rag doll streamlines, enters the wet
head first--unconscious perfect dive.
Night water reflects rescue's choreography:
everyone out of the pool,
the guard down from his tower,
the splashless arc of his dive.

Then, the requisite silence until water
gasps, produces bruise-colored boy--
sleeper placed on cement. No amount of work,
compressing the chest, filling lungs
with borrowed air, can wake him.

Stormwatch

Rain makes strangers. No tourists
and locals gone home
for the night.

Except for a ruffled pair
of white necks,
the park is vacant.

Swans stretched past
elegance, aware
of the teens who stayed,

who linger still among the cattails.
The birds circle 'round hands
that don't hold bread crumbs.

Not camera flash but glint
of beer cans. Commotion
and the phosphorescent swimming

in inky water, necks
tucked close and so
snappable. One boy says:

Don't they mate for life?
Before the groundskeeper
shuts his eyes, drifts

to landscape dreams,
they'll cultivate his beds:
boot treads, last words

dirt-written before they
uproot tulip bulbs
rip iris' from husky stalks.

Morning proves
amnesiac, making light
of last night's doings,

undoing what's come undone.
What's left then is illusion: dew and sunlight
bright enough to bear.

Behind the Eyes, A Maddening

Sleep sends forth
its filaments, its fits of spin and unwind.
Behind the eyes, a maddening:
violin's screech, strings
the scent of cattails--the wet and straw musk--
Velvet stalks--
this once, swim among them,
sifting through lily pads.
The exact moment: 'tails become
tiny bonfires, their skins gone up
in cotton smoke--

At dawn, divided--always roads
of revelations: Do leaves wither, fall,
become one moment on the wind
or travel to the hand of some little girl
who gathers feathers so black
they're electric to the touch?

Transformation
is as simple as pollen
clinging to the feet of bees,
proof that life erupts
in the midst of dust.

Let the answers unwind,
twist in the current
as the apple lets loose its grasp.
Nostalgia, a sweet ambrosia
or a ground strewn
with sour mash?

Now the wasp hovering above grass
though it's the fruit he covets
a moment before getting tangled.
Another hour and the sun
might have made clear each blade.

Field Trip

The closer the river, the cooler the air.
They stop in a stand of trees with hanging bark.
Could be birch, but the teacher's unsure
Doesn't know either what kind of ants these are,
crawling over stale buds. Something
is giving off a sweet smell and it's not
the boys' cologne. Rapids, the hiss
of this coming together. What can she possibly
teach them? Steep embankment,
so many feet have pounded this trail.
The teacher needs to find something solid.
The serrated edges of leaves. The way her legs
look fragile when they rustle in the wind.
And she records the weeds: crab grass, lettuce,
dried up condoms, and beer cans.
The water is clear enough to see to the bottom:
gray rocks, reddish rocks that must look
and smell of the salmon who don't swim here
anymore. The students are bored of water.
They study grass and their nails. The one who never
talks in class squeezes pineapple weed between
his fingers, takes pride in the scent he's forced.
Teacher says, "The air. We can't see it. How do we know
it's here?" "Yes," she answers her own question,
"Movement." Something is caught in the wash,
keeps resurfacing. Trash or fish, something
the rock and water refuse to let go.

Your Landscape Disappears

for James

You're like these bends in the road, the curves
where I forget to slow. You're a quickening,
the dizzy of impending wreck. Summer
leaves these canyon pockets first. I'm cold easily.
In ever other curve, I see the white, homemade crosses.
Luminous. The breeze smells of sweet grass and loss.
I hesitate at the gates of our country church--
You're there where the grass can't grow because
your mother continues to dig. You mound
in expectation of bloom. Frost prevents her.
Fresh earth becomes disguise. So much unknown.
When do we get to plant your bones?
No one prays here anymore. The killdeer
continue their calls. What need for picnic benches
alongside rows of stone? My belly is full of grit.
So young among the old ones who lived
and died by the land. When they left, their nails
were rimmed with dirt. Your landscape disappears.
Adrift now. Or caught or polished clean by silt.
Or scavenged as when they drew down the Snake.
So far from the ocean, and yet when the river drained,
locals collected roe, driftwood. They pocketed bones like shells.

Untitled

I.

Sushi still lingering on the tongue.
Strains of Nina Simone.
Gotta love a woman, sings
*Sue me, I want some
sugar in my bowl.*
Got as far as the first stoplight.
Not the scenic overlook. Please,
I want to roll my trousers up,
see the ocean up close
before leaving.
The chattering spokes of bikes.
Children roll by, laughing.
Far off, a city of silhouettes--
buildings scraping sky, beggars,
the gaping black space
of our empty hotel room.

Home threatens to swallow us whole.
We could say *sand's crushed glint
made us.* (Isn't the grain and wet
threading through the toes
reason enough for one more night?)
Wanted to reach out--
instead, a driftwood walking stick
bleached white by salt and sun.
You, my foundation, climbing.
You, on a higher rock.
Beneath, sashaying reeds, me.

II.

Picking up shells and broken bottles
(sea's job to smooth all edges)
You guide me in seeing:
There, the snail's old home,
 its spiral white cornice.
There, the clam:
 lacy and scalloped
 but strong.

My pockets aren't big enough.
The sun rolling slowly down.
I take the stick and trace the names.
You say, *There, a hollow log.*
Let's rest our backs.
Earlier, you'd asked a stranger
how they got there:
a quarter mile out
the balance of rock upon rock.
The man with AIDS
swimming out each morning
to build a new understanding
of grace. A dozen slim stones
leaning to the sky
toward the idea
of what doesn't last.

Happiness

after Linda McCarriston

What party ended, what bar closed
in our neon, no taxi town
sending them home, my mother
uncle, aunt announcing themselves
with a slur-tongued chorus of
Creedence Clearwater Revival,
the only lyrics they remembered:
Doo Doo Doo, Lookin' out my back door.
Slow children just learning to walk
who lumbered with great effort
over the logs of our bodies.
My cousins and I, having done our best
to wait up, would succumb eventually
to the TV's glare, to the encapsulating
snug of our sleeping bags.

Their hovering glamour was the stuff
of dreamscape: moms plaited
with sequins, shimmering
in the living room's dim. Rare
to see them teeter in high heels,
their lovely legs giving rise to thighs
exposed only on special occasions.
They spoke to us in voices gone
masculine from the smoke of the place
they'd gone. Our happiness was being lifted
by two's in uncle's arms, being held against
the warm belly of a man who looked,
when he was younger, like Buddy Holly,
and carried to the cool of our separate beds,
knowing in the morning we'd find remnants
of night. A streamer maybe. A filched
shot glass, or a balloon still clinging
above our heads. A balloon having yet
to lose what made it rise.

The Viewing Room

I feel like sleeping--could fall easily
had I not been warned about mussing my dress.
My first time behind the gauzy curtain.
A few feet away, the casket, its shining satin.
*At the hardware, he let us play the game of
sales clerk and customer. All day the register
ka-chinged as we bought copper fittings
and silver nails by the pailsful. He never doubted
we'd build castles.*

There's a rumor God's here. I'm the only one
not bowing my head. Have you ever seen
a whole town with its eyes closed?

Amazing Grace on tape. How sweet the sound.
Remember how he whistled?

Women speak through handkerchiefs,
say he's in a better place. I think only if Heaven's
somewhere between here and Hayden Lake.

Beer-batter pancakes and fresh fish for dinner.

As they file past, take one last look,
grown men forget the rule about crying.

*He slept most of Thanksgiving,
swollen feet propped with pillows.*

Two more steps. I look. Not Frank, but blocks
of dark and light: a black suit, hands crossed
at the chest and what I can't see: the journey made.

Going on a Journey, Will Bring *after Forrest Gander*

velvet and liquor, a leather journal and peaches,
this loam beneath my feet, sand I'll slip in my pockets.
I take leaves and papery bark, the ladybug's false,
red house. And a lantern to light my way. What I leave:
all things not fragile, friends, the faint imprint of my days,
lullabies and folklore, living stones growing along the Zambesi,
(Africa I'll never see, only logjams piling up along the Snake,
Lord I couldn't quite believe in, the crumbling levee, draw down,
disappearing salmon). My face to the luminous after. My flesh
to luck. Library to the wordsmiths. To the musicians my violin.
I tender letters unwritten to the bonfire. Fill my abandoned kitchen
with lemons. Forgive me laziness, not laughing enough, the stink
of lavender in the air. I bequeath lacewings to the fisher who forgets
his bait, barnacles to the whale's leather back; lightning, a field
of metal spikes to seize upon. To my funeral bring a ladder.
Climb it rung by rung. Rid yourself of land legs. Movement,
its own litany and rock hard. A blur (the lapidarist's eye intent
on the polishing wheel). I want only this: locust blossoms
and an unlapsing memory. I take attempts at personal lexicon;
from memory's swinging door, the lice-ridden feathers of Leda,
and the shut-in who weaves the mirrored world on her loom.
I leave like shine on a lacquer box, dust fallen and antiquing.
Like two lovers and their overripe lips. Farewells in a street
musician's ditty. A lapsing written in longhand: icicle
hanging on the eave and the sun about to rise.

Vicinity

"It is no exact transcription of a place, but pieced together from sketches and mental impressions of things in the vicinity." --Edward Hopper

A man stood in his shoes and wondered,
with the world before him, how to choose.
Which way out, and where the locomotives
were going. He couldn't remember
where he'd wanted to go. "And I have asked,"
he thinks "to be a philosopher, a wanderer
and look how my mind rests in its skull cap
and my feet swing over the same side
of the bed each day into the same pair
of fraying slippers." Would anyone miss him
if he slipped out the gate, which is open
at the hour of closing summer to hitch
on that train a ride? The streetlight said,
"Regard that woman who hesitates
toward you in the light of the door.
She's in the habit of traveling lightly."

That woman sighed the lack of many things.
How she'd sought. Cited stone-written laws:
people prefer some illumination to none.
She rails: hypocrisy defies both law
and reason. She is full of the why's
and how come's of a child: "If a heart
beats once and then rests for a minute,
has it gone someplace? What, aside from shock
can fetch it (assuming resistance) back?"
Vast distances traveled in conversation.
He says little, vowing to remember.
She says butterflies are largely powder
and powder litters off their wings when
they bank off hidden currents. They hadn't
gone far when she announced in dramatic fashion
she'd had as much of noon as she could stand.

*Does the daylight through curtains call on us
to do more than rise? If so, how shall we
reckon sight's bright conquest over what is,
what resembles, make sense of windows
and what's beyond? With the wide world
and all her fading sweets, why should the writer
make such wretched use of summer? By cocking
her ear? Paying attention to this town
with its unpulled shades? The writer juxtaposes
shadows with the pale ones who don't even know
they're posing. Jugulars the pose [SEE also
going for the jugular]. Often, she
juggles strangers like balls, a trick of the hand,
the eye, all in her quest to define living.*

The artist is soft in her stance, gazing
into corners, the shadowed point where walls
meet and seem solid, safe from unmoving
cars, rush hour, the grasp at the wheel, neck
and hands curled by the commute, the rear view,
any view, and objects larger than they appear.
Here, she says goodbye to bodies other
than her own, finds comfort in precision--
light that finds her each morning as she draws back
the sheets, arches into another day
of independence. Welcome. She is alone
and most days, is able to face the sun,
let it shine on her thick thighs and knees
that don't know kneeling. If she prays, she prays
to the glass pane that her thoughts might be
as clear, her breath a disappearing kiss
along the pane.

*The writer curses herself for always
using that word. Kiss. Obsessive pressing
of skin to skin. It's beginning to wear thin.
Thin and thin and once again she reflects
on the many ways the mind writes breath
and breath. The pen, in the end, says kiss.
Says invisibility: a clarity passed through*

*in good faith, on the way to understanding.
To what extent should the writer be
trespassing. Is it misstepping if
we know that every woman is Josephine?
Hopper's wife morphing into whore and all
those ambiguous lovers staring
endlessly out of windows and not
thinking any misery in the sound--
how the wind oh's outside the glass. Oh
the vowel of our absence.*

In each next room: welcome TV blue.
Year of blackouts and General Electric
celebrates another anniversary
of bringing good things to life. The woman
balances on an unread stack of books.
Precarious. She screws in the bulb
until the threads find their way, electricity
fills the filaments, and light is heat
in the palm of her hand. She always thought
there should be some way to respend energy.
Crush thin glass to make more glass
or use antennae to make a delicate
collage. A year ago today, she was
better prepared for darkness, less in awe
of light. She passed through the tunnel
on a platter, rolling cameras looking
through her skin's soft layers. Skull and the mass
comprising the x-ray's brightest light.

More than a thousand bulbs pulsing at once.
The sign climbs the restaurant's side, says
Chop Suey. China Town is crawling
with tourists in love with what's foreign,
in love with silk and bright turquoise hats
pulled from grandmothers' attics, hats like swim
caps or lifted from the sleek bobs of twenty's
flapper girls with strings of pearls slung around
their necks. Slender companions drink tea, wait
for the slant-cut vegetables, noodles turned brown
in salty sauce. Lunch out for a change.

Girlfriends shyly out of their houses
and into the city, away from husbands
who expect dinner at five. Husbands
who worry the skirt's slit too slutty,
that the neckline plunges too far and she may
just be a tart. Here, on the straight-backed chairs,
across formica's expanse, they are free to glow
as they please.

*Strange fashion, this forsaking gold for
light and glass--things almost invisible
to see as in the bird that flies full speed
into the just-cleaned window (the wrist wringing
from the rag red juice, the berry red
blood into the rinsing water). Sun
so bright the eyes radiate with a scattering
of dim halos. How to work without
making the labor evident? Keeping
under the cuff the blue collar musings,
hard labor of the unchafed hands. Not
the prisoner breaking rock or the farmer's
all-day affair with the land. Not the soot
of chimney sweep or the coal miner's
black lung. Nevertheless, the seeing
is sometimes dirty work made clean in the mind,
and I take the laborer's song as mine.*

He works his way through school bussing tables
at the all-night diner, the one they all
stumble into when the bars close at two.
Dollar hamburgers, fries, two eggs sunny
side up, a club sandwich stabbed frilly
with toothpicks. The air smells like Marlboros
and grease. The boy sees the pick ups, break ups,
hears the lines and sighs, but hasn't seen love
in a while. He's got a girl waiting until
he's off shift. She sleeps and he hopes she's
dreaming of him, still able to dream unlike
the bodies that occupy these booths, stools
at the counter where he gathers lipstick
stained coffee cups, fills in a steady stream
of grains from above the shakers, suppresses

a pepper sneeze, and imagines that the bag of salt
he spills is snow made brighter by street lights.

*These streetlights have never, in all their years
of illuminating, seen snow fall like
salt. No snow at all in the town the mind
made. Always summer and yet no burning layers.
Inward, outward, cool to the touch when the occasion
calls for touch which is not occasionally enough.
Oftener, the touch is a thought catching.
As far as the man is concerned, the blowing
curtain and her dress are made out of the same
transparent cloth. Sensuous? Since you asked,
the innuendo seems clear (and the dress
said softly, "Dear heart, how like you this?").
Of course, the dress doesn't speak to every
passerby. There must be space for getting
to know. Boredom, for those with too much time
on their hands and loneliness a single
pale hand grasping after light.*

Loneliness is a bright bowl piled high
with apples and tangerines. Demitasse,
mink-lined gloves and the hat that fits her head
in a frown. Her secret means of attracting
is that apple red lipstick. It's inevitable.
Sit long enough beside the clanking
radiator's heat, beneath the long row
of florescent lights, cross your legs politely,
and be seen by those you refuse on account
of your shyness or animosity.
Sip the coffee slowly and take notice
of the endlessly revolving door,
its spinning in and out the strangers, the one
you wait for, your back to the window
facing the street, upturned collar and practiced
indifference almost as convincing
as the hardness of a marble table,
the shine on a spoon.

*What if there is never any unity? [SEE also
givinity, v. to give in--not to be confused
with divinity which is way too Godly to worry about]
Why must light shine on the silver spoon
and nowhere else? Bright fruit that no one eats,
why does she bother wearing lipstick, allowing
her attention to light on the spinning door?
The head is the number one source
of heat loss, so be sure to wear a hat,
preferably, one that fits the head like
a smile her mother said. The secret
is choosing a color to complement
the complexion: Are you warm or cool?
Are you florescent or safe as a night light?
All this laughable if light didn't divide,
one and one, both at separate tables.*

Paper lanterns lit and too much rouge around.
The clown lights up a smoke, pours wine
from a crystal decanter, taking care
not to spill a drop on his delicate
ruff, prison jumpsuit, oversized shoes.
His father was a clown, and *his* father
a clown before that. Before the mirror
each day, an actor in his own house,
he shaves bald, smoothes grease paint, powders
it all and gives himself, with cayenne
colored lipstick, an all-day smile and brows,
astonished arches. He's sick of entertaining,
would rather sit by the sea, sip merlot,
and make eyes with school girls who still believe
that balloons can be poodles, that scarves
turn to roses, that innocence governs touch
in the single white glove.

*Light determines the eye's possession
of glass and what glass contains. Crystal loved
for its inclination to sing: a finger
tip circles the glass edge lightly and lets
loose the shrill of having been played*

*in that instrumental way as if the glass
had strings to pluck. Play a fragile
vessel holding grapes: the vineyard,
the dark clusters cut with a sharp knife,
glint in the tired eye of the women
with stained hands. How those hands must look
like dark continents against the white bellies.
The tongue, a palette of sour and sweet.
This is work. Each sip a punch on the time card.
Tongue as much a tool as my pen--*

When did his desk grow? He is a small man
growing smaller, disappearing into
the wooden grain and swivel of his chair.
The faux gold plaquard shines with his name.
The sharpened pencil and the clean blotter
wait. What has he made of his life but a few
dollars? A mortgage. A dent in his writing
hand and sent far too many memos.
Everyday, the same disguise: rolled-up sleeves,
casual, but the belt cinches. Moving the desk
closer to the window was a mistake,
and now he can't stop wondering
in this city of light and open windows,
where she is--not the woman he married
but the woman he deserves, sun seeker
who will help him make use of daylight.

*How do we use the daylight best? Sun
sets the course of our emotions:
We ask out our windows, "Will I be happy?"
and wait for the weather's response. The rain
turns and swells the rivers. Ask the parting
clouds and the sun that presides over all
wrecked things. How do we use the light and not
burn or wither but grow bigger than
our bodies? How do we use the day
to prepare for the event of the sun's
eventual hiding and night a sea
of city lights, and living in business suits,
swimsuits, these pale suits of skin we,
like waves of incoming tide, rise and fall in.*

Assuming the skin suit has feeling,
there are four of them sitting: man, woman,
and their shadows, none of them touching.
A mind closed off from feeling, the decision
made some time ago to stop thinking
of the house that sits along the beach,
sits pale and sinking an inch into
the shifting land each year. They hadn't thought
about foundations. This was, after all,
only a summer house, a place to sun
one's belly, to strip free of the skirt and tie,
to shed from the mind a thousand figures.
Multiply grain by grain the shine of the sun
on million pieces of glass, the steady burn.

*When the sun is directly over head,
there are only two: man and woman
feeling like the ocean in opposition
to tumbling shells and the delicate flesh
calling those shells home. Bottom dwellers
and the sway of kelp against. They're against
getting wet. Too afraid of sinking to see that
peace signs wait underwater where the ears
rush and the body floats as much toward
as away. If the writer could, she would
float on the blue where two refuse to feel.
She would direct her own pale belly sunward.
If a plane flew over, would that flesh
distract? Seeing a blue sky and roundness
below the wings, would the pilot rethink horizons?*

High noon means it's hot and the grass is dead
already, a shifting sea of straw blown
by an unseen wind. I see the housewife,
her blue robe come undone, propriety
in a pair of heels, earrings hidden in
that straw colored hair. Who does she wait for?

Whose coming does she dread? She needs a drink,
to go back inside the black of her house
before she sees that the sky is as blue
as the blue that falls away from pale
breasts, the patch of blond between her legs.
Was the house that white when they bought it?
Lacking dimension, flat as a stage set
and she the prop caught and gaping in the door.
If there's a back yard, it's gold with ripe wheat.
She's looked out of every window. Curtains
still parted, an absence made clear as the wind
moving over lines.

*An oddness in blackening the page. Ink
sinking into the tree whittled down,
the ghost of a tree drinking in the idea
of absence. The white field between the ink
an oasis, a rest stop by the side
of this road that has no end and no
beginning, street running past the houses
and the people living inside, past
the businesses, the busy window dressings
advertising Come buy! Come buy! this seasonal
fruit before it rots in careful pyramid.
Before they sink into themselves, buy one,
get one free. The kiwi, persimmon, mango
with their thick skins and hidden seeds. A little bit
of poison in the unplanted seed. Plant
something solid. Coo softly over what
the eyes can't see, but know--bright tendrils
of root traveling dirt's dark history.*

A suitcase: her silks, his tweeds and room still
for souvenirs. Check out's at noon tomorrow.
What will they do to pass this evening in the city?
They prefer the lobby, where they don't
have to be alone, can be anonymous
as the traveling salesman, the call girl,
or one half of the honeymooning couple:
the girl waiting in a soft chair, reading
a magazine before being carried
over a threshold. They're getting older,

less interested in skin, and would rather
be home in their separate beds, sleeping.
The kids are grown. Strangers for how long?
Tourists needing maps? Another foreign
year. Another anniversary logged.

*Shake the dust off the suitcase. The train's
at the station, collecting light in its black
sides as it waits for the moment to hit:
Travel lust and no more taking for granted
the ability to leave the pale house
with its gaping doors and transparent
curtains. No more taking for granted
the ink or the blank sheet. The eye taking it
all in, through the pupil rimmed by the age-
flecked iris: tracing light in its many
muted masks: bodies traveling the years,
map or no map, the strong back and the weak
trapped by the four walls of love and work
and needing more than light to survive.*