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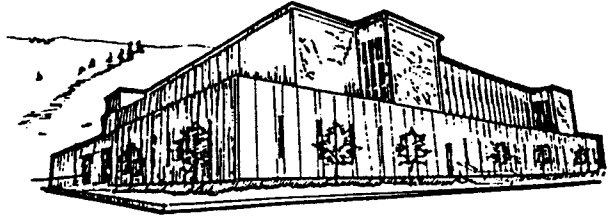
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THE OUTPOST

by

Ryan J. Benedetti

B.A., University of Montana-Missoula, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

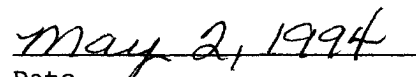
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The Outpost

Ryan J. Benedetti

This book is dedicated to my wife, Kathy, and my daughter, Josie, for putting up with my visions and for providing me with visions that continue to sustain me.

In a motion of night they massed nearer my post.
I hummed a short blues. When the stars went out
I studied my weapons system.
Grenades, the portable rack, the yellow spout
of the anthrax ray: in order. Yes, and most
of my pencils were sharp.

From "*Dream Song # 50*" by John Berryman

It is not on any map.
It is on a map but no roads to it are shown.
As far as one can see, the surrounding country is uninhabited.

From "*Assumptions*" by Richard Hugo

Oh my God, Ralphie. They broke-a de window and stole-a de ice cream too.

Giovanni "*Papa Joe*" Benedetti

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the editors of Cut Bank for publishing "*Blind Dogs*," and "*Love Song*."

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I. TAR

The Laws of Steam

The sphinxes have real bodies
now that the steam surrounds me.
They hang above me on copper wire.
I am tired of kicking them to make them move.
I spin on the floor for three days straight
watching a fly crawl into a matchbox.
It's no bigger than the point of my pen,
glossy black with frost colored wings.

I crawl to the edge of the tile
and shake the bug off my hand.
The vapor makes a smooth hum.
The floor is topaz with glittering speckles.
The grout crumbles. I pry a tile away and steam
comes into the room. I hunch over the page
when the sphinxes start to move,
when they cut themselves off their wires.

They come down with a surgeon's glove
and a rattle filled with dog teeth.
They come in from the porch
when the telephone rings.
I try to yank out the cord.
No matter how tightly I clutch
my notebook, they pry my fingers loose.
They read it aloud.

They make little fists that fit into
bigger fists. They bake a cake
and bring it to me in March,
when I least expect it. The bull sphinx,
the one with lockjaw and the wandering eye,
says "You will need some lymph nodes
and a roadable car." I shove
him backwards into the steam.
I can't help it. I look down
into the microscope. I find the fly
in the frosting. I find it in a building with no doors.
The sphinxes wrap me with their tails,
drag me through the gravel.
They know when to stop laughing.
I don't.

Shoom Shoom Is What I Meant to Say

When I was born, my spine didn't harden. Now, I'm
awake. The cat's walking across the piano keys.
In a panic, I ripped up that map of Wyoming.

It's been raining for a month
and the windows are swollen. My teeth
are not coming through the way they should.

I refuse to see the dentist. I set my hand on the phone
and when I feel it hum, I slam it down. You don't speak
in grunts anymore. I'm worried about it. Frankly,

I think I've broken off a knob. It's the smartass
in me. I am looking at you through my rake.
It's too hot. Nothing can hide in the stubble grass.

I would choke you for that last cigar.
I almost forgot. Can I borrow a rope?
Your brother seems to have fallen.

He's used to it. It's in the family outlook.
Remember Uncle Hank who got stuck
in that mine elevator? I can't stop laughing.

They'd send it to the top and Hank would wait
for the door to open. And then, he was falling.
He didn't expect the sucking sound, when the doors finally

opened. He stayed in the corner, kept shoving the paramedics out.
I remember his solid frown, "Let's do it some more.
Let's do it some more. Let's do it some more."

Maybe they didn't trust the springs.
It happens more than we think. I've washed twice
and I can't get this tar off my hands.

A Small Blue Sponge

What are you doing here at this hour?

We bake short bread for the puppet chorus.

What are you doing to the dog?

We wash the tar off with a small blue sponge.

Get out.

We urge you not to interfere.

You will leave then? After you're finished?

We kiss the mirror.

Get out.

We are squeezing the sponge. Water trickles down the wall.

You can't stop the dog.

We look past the dog to see the white wall.

I don't see the wall. What have you done with the dog?

It rises to the ceiling. Water trickles down the wall.

Water? I will call a plumber.

We urge you not to interfere. Repeat these words: bagworm, aurora.

Would you like some coffee?

The dog is rising. The puppets sing inside the radio.

Not the radio. What's that I'm hearing?

Something behind us? We crawl through the tube.

I am Uncle Hank. The message warns not to. . .

The message warns not to say the name aloud.

Say the name.

We're not supposed to. For a truly scrumptious meal, melt cheese on top.

Look at the dog. What should I do with it now?

We kiss the mirror.

Wait. I will turn on the oven. Will you stay?

The Plumber Arrives

The pipes crack and start to spray.
I fall into the cellar.
I turn off the water.
The entire house rattles and hums.

Knock knock: I can't open this door by myself.
The plumber gets in through a window:
"How skinny are your arms?
I could use a guy with skinny arms."

I say, "I couldn't open that door
by myself." I spit into my hands.
I rub them together. I need water.
He will give me water.

Dago Red

I don't look up when my boat pounds in
with its pounding horn. I'm loose
in the salt air, humming like gravel.
It's dark out and I toss coins into the waves.
I ask the man next to me if he's ever
seen me before. He says, "Energy fields
have the power to harm, but no one's sure
how much." I grab the scarf off a woman's
head. "Where do I come from?"
She tears the scarf.

I get off the boat trying out names:
"Giovanni Toscano. Blatto Salvatore."
I stand in line.
My smile is obvious to the agents.
I am nodding and laughing, hands in pockets.
I am talking to myself.

"What is your name? Where are you from?"

I reach for my chewing tobacco.
The one in a gray suit jumps me.
His shins crack on the railing,
I catch his arm as he slides toward the ledge.
"Come closer," he says,
"let me tell you your name."

I let the man go. I smoke his cigarettes.
The crowd steps over his body to get into America.
I eat grass to make my hands stop trembling.
I shave the sworls off my fingertips.
I have nowhere to go. I flip a coin.

A Bowl to Cool My Forehead In

I want to sink
into the black stomach,
black pot filling with water.
I build my house in the pond:
The windows keep the moss inside.
We have gathered here to prove
that Uncle Hank
is wearing my ape mask.

The toads say I'm all talk.
There's no one talking but me.
Uncle Hank's body is made
of white light. He's buzzing
under the floorboards:

"Come here, under the dark
of the house. We'll all
just sit down. We'll all just
eat with our hands.
And tonight, I want
something different.
I want to eat from your hand."

From here, I can see him
circling the pond. When I was young,
I always ate eggs, scrambled or shirred.
Even then I had a face,
a bowl to cool my forehead in.

I can see him through the walls.
He reaches down to take the rope.
I am ready to crack the eggs.
With fist and spoon,
I break the shell. I chew fast
and the egg is hot going down.

I can only laugh and laugh
as he hauls my house to the shore.
When the knot breaks water,
when it rises out and unties,

I will give up the yolk.
I will salt it for him.

He will put on the glove
he feeds me with.

The Knot Unties

I.

The rattlesnake's eyes
are molted over.
I reach down and pick it up.

I press my thumb
into the snake's jaw.
It whips, jerks
and is suddenly free.
I hold a mask of its skull.
Now there are two snakes.

I walk aimlessly
into a wheat field.
I eat gophers for thirty years.

II.

"Left," I shout.
I spin and fire.

The snake whirls in the dust,
mixing its blood
into a paste.
I wipe the paste
across my cheek.

The snake unwraps:
coils and coils
again to strike.
When the dust clears,
its head is a piece
of splintered bone.

I throw it in a bucket.
The snake spins.
The bucket hums.

III.

When I come back,
they don't recognize me.
I stand outside
with my face to the glass.

They use a nail file
to pry my fist open.

Uncle Hank turns
to the camera
with the snake
hanging from his fly.

I wrap it around my face.
I pick fights under the bridge.
My mother hangs it
from the fan
above the dinner table.

We turn it on,
then off again.
We can't stop laughing.

We read the stains.

Catalepsy Fie

Uncle Hank can beat me at a game of "Oofty Oofty."

I let him think so. I love the shelves I lean on, the smell

of dusty pages. When he talks to me, all I hear is "gemütlich."

He likes my muscles. I help him move some stuff:

his statue of Nehemiah, his pair of wicker
wheelchairs. My neck is double jointed

and sometimes it gets stuck. He thinks of me as a mere
linguistic puzzle, a fluffy mass too much concerned

with trifles. I am Catholic to his flock of osprey.
They fling themselves headlong into the gears.

He wants me to point it all out. I say, "This is the clock,
the speed we are making." He clings to the end

of a huge pendulum. His face is shaped like a hairy shield.
From the big hand, I hang like a crocus.

I hold on, hand and foot, weak and trembling.
Later on, I notice his severely bruised ears.

II. LOVE SONG

Cheese-Flavored Crackers

We sit on the gold sofa and drink gin.
I loosen my cuff-links. You rush
into the house and sit down.
You kiss my eyes. I say, "No.
Stand up." I lay a board
across the sofa. We cut the box open.

There is a bag of kittens in the snow
behind the factory. I hold one over the engine.
It goes limp and purrs in my hands.
I drive back to the house and show you.
I say, "It went limp and purred in my hands."

After each question, I cough
a little louder. I ask you to stand up.
I lay a board down where you sleep.
The kittens have grown. I can't
control the cockatoo. It swoops
at the blue vase. I swing the broom.
You sweep a white wing under the radiator.

We wake up choking on feathers.
You heave a box at the cockatoo.
You leave the house. You leave the box.
I find one of your fingernails in the sink.

I sit alone in the house,
focusing on the neighbor's garage door.
It opens halfway and stops.
My tongue goes stiff.
I eat cheese-flavored
crackers in handfuls of 5.

The box is filled with lichens and moss.
I can't identify the thing inside.
One of the kittens hangs from the ceiling fan.
I stumble backwards into the table.
The blue vase shatters.
A piece of it sticks in my palm.
"Keep the dime son," says the cockatoo,
repeating its message again and again.

The Way the Cat Chases the Dog

into the surrounding mist
cannot keep the moon
from stretching out into the hallway,
cannot make the thin, gray shoe
step out of its shadows.
I light a candle and retreat up the stairs
to find an open window. You are still
and quiet. All is still and quiet.
I prowl the corridors searching
for the six-cent stamp that bears my face.
My oval-shaped head sits inside
a series of bigger, rounder heads.
I feel like letting go of the little things
I've lost: the book of knots,
the little squid in its long tube.
I feel like letting the sack
of marbles spill. Most of all,
I can't understand what my hands
talk about: the hiding place, the loose
pockets. It is as if they could tell me
how it all comes out in the end,
how I sink them in a bowl
of cold, red juice.

To Spit at the Birds

I begin with the crack at the top of the wall
and follow it down into the room.
I've been at it since morning,
had several cups of Earl Grey
and some chewing tobacco.
I must admit I find myself forced
to spit at the birds above the eaves.
I hear them urging me to climb,
an enormous task for a porcelain
cephalopod figurine. If I could speak,
I'd back off slowly, set down my candy tin
and cigarettes. I'd run like hell
and right about now I'd be spinning away.
I am not a good example. This is how I feel.

Trucks blow past on the hour.
I run beside some of them, grabbing
at the doorhandles. I can't explain.
Sometimes it just gets wrong
too early in the morning. Oh captain,
my captain reminds me to keep climbing.
His big hands are sliding down the pole,
his abnormal feet already submerged.

I know exactly what to do.
I soak the white rose. It turns blue.
I toss it upwards into the hugeness.
I watch the birds peck at it
until I disappear
into their mouths and eyes
and their slapping bodies,
into their black gloves.

I Walked Completely

around the opening,
saw the glint of steel. Another year went by.
Others, instead, had caught only a glimpse.
I tested my knife on my flag and my church.
The foundation always seemed to creak
under the stone idol my father built.

Another dawn. Another dusk.
This time years passed before I noticed
the new shower curtain folded up
in the closet. It seemed like it had been
there before. I knocked and knocked.
The window was going on too long. A chill
ran through me, an imperceptible
flavor of soup. I shall tell only
that the moon was knocked down in two strokes.

I made up other lies and another
dusk fell, but no dawn. It was like Alaska
as far as I could see. Vigorously,
like a boy, I ran a full nine yards.
I had always been attracted to metaphors,
running barefoot on gravel roads.

Love Song

I.

Lately I've been bursting inward-
the way a carbonated liquid does.

On Tuesdays

I don't say anything.

When I come home

you sleep alone in the bathtub.

"Serene bald woman, I need . . ."
but no, I will wake you up.

You break a bottle on the toilet,
hold me down and cut my hair.

I want to live inside your fingers.
I want to stand still for many hours.

II.

I have waxy ears,
a mole on my penis.

You throw rubber balls at passing cars.
We trade buckets.

Let us plan meals: cold stew in freezer bags.
Let us unfold the map of Idaho.

I wrap myself in white paper sacks
and scoot into the cupboard under the sink.

III.

Together we put our hands in the jar.
Together we eat handfuls of rock salt.

You shut the window.
I open my mouth.

While you sleep, I clutch my soft cube
of margarine. I peel off pieces of foil

and chew them. Two texts.
Two hands.

I have a leg
I drag behind me.

The Wild Dogs

In the dark, there is something walking
across the piano. I see steam rising where
the wild dogs lean against the fence.
I see the river gleaming through the trees.
This bedroom is too far across for a single day's
journey. I do not have enough water.
The barn spider is coming down

from the skylight slat. He lowers himself
on a slick string. I climb the ladder to meet him.
His legs go stiff. He curls up and walks
his thread to the crack in the ceiling.
I reach for him. He scatters back. I open
the closet and stare at the wooden man.

The horse is on the porch. This is not my house.
I jerk up in my chair, stuck in the mouth
of a dream. It's raining, not drops, but helixes-
obsidian smooth. At dawn, the ghost bulls stamp.
The dogs take out after their endless bugling.

For the moment, I can only watch
as the pack spreads out on the lawn.
Something banging at the door-
it is not just the strangled bird.
It is something inside, feeble and ragged.
I lie down next to the wooden man.

III. BELLY WALKER

The Hiding Place

I am about to say that it reaks of...
I order halibut. The room is dark.

The subject of conversation
is the awful estrangement of her bowels.

She is outside knocking
and I don't know what she wants.

Yet I am so haunted by her
and the two moons stuck to her horns.

I decide to believe her.
I follow her to the library.

"Swine. Will night never come?
Listen. I hear something. Hsst."

The only hiding place
is on a high shelf in the basement.

The quick shove. Too late:
She places her mouth on my shoulders.

At the same time she says "no"
and folds up the door.

I carve on black stones
with the help of the wheel.

The forms of the stones:
nickels, scarabs, and costume jewelry.

I look down at my hands,
at my fingers splitting into long threads.

I am spinning and weaving
colossal, high-necked gowns.

The Auxiliary Bypass System

I asked the rocks and Tohíl
spoke: "What do you know
how to cure?" She could not close
the hole in the green box.
The reptile glared, leaped into
the large glass. They did not
for love of arms
speak the metaphor aloud.
Their wives took up this telling.

"Vi u yah?" I asked the rocks.
I asked Noh and Pericón.
"Let us go on playing ball.
The book is well worth reading."
I have an eye for chess moves.
They trapped Ed. He pressed
his back to the steaming rocks,
then jerked the arrows out.

The bride has no hands. It is
impossible to count men.
Only the corn meal dough
is kneaded into flesh. Patrick
and Marcel, as they are called,
stole their names. The fresh widow
loved the name of her father.
She hangs from the bottle rack.

I asked the rocks for more noise.
The one called Xecotcovach—
only by a miracle
can I still remember him,
heaving Ed across his shoulders
and climbing. Upon hearing
the name of a city, we packed
up the sand and went there.

Some Big, Smooth Rocks

I wonder why
their faces are wet.
They don't look sad.

A dark shape is cramped up
in a stone I'm polishing. My hands
don't move. They are getting wet.

I cross the river with big things
where my eyes should be. They are kind
of bumpy, like something alive.

Here is a raft stuck between
some big, smooth rocks
and a mounted deer's head.

I reach out, give a push
and another and another
sinking myself up to my ankles.

Gasps in pain. Little sounds.
It is me—the old man
I will be someday—and I spit.

The Button

I walk to the building where I work
with my arms held still at my sides,
with my lips pressed tight,
with my tongue in my teeth.

I would drive my car to where I work
with a cup of coffee steaming in my hand,
with the wind blowing ashes in my eyes,
except my car has broken through the ice.
It sinks into the river with the radio on.
I can still hear that muffled song.
I can still hear the carburetor sucking.
Now I am walking faster.

There is a photograph I couldn't get out
of the glove box : Someone walking
beside me and it's not you.
It moves sideways like a crab
between the parking meters,
knocking the bike racks over.
I cut my finger off with scissors.
I am made of something I can't taste.
I am alone on the sidewalk.

I have a button that sends
a pulse through a red wire
screwed into the bone behind my ear.
I press the button
and walk backwards
up the street. I am
crushing into the sidewalk.
I give myself the day off
with the sun in my scalp,
with the river in my mouth.
I hug the rattling stones.

Belly Walker

I pour acid into a stone and the stone starts to move.
I clamp alligator clips to the ridge
beneath its hide. It starts to hiss. Blue smoke
crawls across the floor and out the window.
The telephone rings. "Get out. It's climbing the south wall."
I feel mysteriously embraced by the potted ferns

and the hydrangeas. I hold one to my breast
and kiss the leaves. The stone finally leaves us
in October 1844, proceeding not to Calcutta,
but to Bombay. I am twitchy and defensive,
maintaining what I can of my kingdom

within Tennessee. I cut my fingernails and collect them
in a gray jar. The stone has its marionettes. One
rides a ship west and leaps into my room
with a machete. My face is pressed to the mantle
when the guards arrive. They merely cut the strings
and we add it to our storeroom of assassins.

The shadow of the stone stands behind me
making sure there's not enough light to read by.
When I shut my eyes, the stone is all I see.
It lies there on the unmade bed and speaks,
"It's pretty here." At the foot of the pulpit
one of its generals is coughing.

The Firebat

I don't carry it up from the creek.
I leave it wrapped inside its wings.
My footprints are made of blue chalk.
There are people building a fence around the city.
They are big people, their eyes as big
as human heads, their heads as big

as human heads. They can't keep the firebat
in its cage. It flaps away. We chase
the little swollen thing into a tunnel beneath
the city. The cat is on one side, pouncing
randomly, sending up puffs of sawdust.
I am on the other side, banging on a fender,

fashioning a kind of spine for my suit of armor.
Elsewhere, a decision is made concerning the firebat.
They would call it, "There will always be someone
to hate me," if they could catch it alive.
I throw sawdust into the fire. I grab the cat.
I say, "Set the table. Prepare the broth"

Somewhere up ahead a woman shrieks.
When I reach into the cat's mouth, it seals
around my hand. Think of a large balloon
with many branches What would the fruit
taste like? I apply alcohol to the moist part
of the belly. It has wings. It is not a cat.

IV. UNCLE HANK

The Jungle Demon

I make a little mud fireplace
behind the grinning statue.
I feel that awful hard lump.
My breeches are made of blue linen
and my weed-picking gloves of the same.
A deep voice in the thicket says,
"You will be ostrich-eyed
for what you see." I run

hard to the lake, a sheet
of untroubled water.
My uncle puffs on his cigar
in the silence of the porch.
I try to leap.
My knees come down on him.
His cigar rolls to the end of the walk
sending sparks into the foliage.

The elephants are mad. They stamp off
in unison to find a quiet island.
I am strong as a bull, though they make fun of me
for my inability to fly a kite. A deep voice
behind the statue says, "More sorcery.
He catches raindrops
and changes them into bullets."
My marching seems to help the sleeping house.

Sergeant

I hide a pack of cigarettes in Uncle Hank's barn:
Camel bullets that I can sneak out to smoke.
While everyone else sleeps, I sit on hay
bales and suck it in and blow it out.
This is the way I stay off suicide.
I swing my feet and stare into the dark
fat mounds out there. The white moon lights up the whole farm.

Czar, my horse, still lies in the field. His teeth are split
from lightning. We sold the pigs to the carnival.
Someone fed them to the tigers. Uncle Hank
started mumbling when Sergeant walked up
and said, "Jesus, Lord. The flies. The goddamn flies."
Uncle Hank stood dumb, glaring at the pig all day.
We tried to pull him away, but he cussed.
Then, Sergeant stood on Uncle Hank's feet and took a shit.

We put strychnine in his soup, so he could rest some.
He's still not resting, probably. I bet Sergeant
wakes him up on the other side and says,
"Good God. The flies. The shit-eating flies."
"Yes," Uncle Hank moans, "I can see them now, of course."
He must be happy there, doing cartwheels
in the corn rows of death, shucking while Sergeant hums.

Circumstantial Evidence Speaks

Mama kills a chicken, thinks it's a duck.
Its eyes are dull looking. It beats its wings,
filling the room with wind.
My eyes are dull looking, like a duck's.
I strike a match against the stove.
The sauce gets hot and splatters.

What am I doing with my right hand?
I have been asleep and missed a chapter.
Buzz in my eyes. How could I aim these things
at a book? In other places,
doctors open up patients to massage
their swollen ruptures. Bums are born, no doubt.

If I get up now, I'll find myself
hungry or done up in wool, in a box.
I can make myself thicker.
Even so, dear lord...I can find a
shortcut across the hills. I should cost
a million dollars.

Comic #5 of 50

We are eating at a place called EAT.
The restaurant is a riveted steel dome
with the Earth shining beyond in the dark sky.

The rocket ship has never been used.
I ran my finger through the dust to make sure.
I won't look underneath, to see
if it has an engine, but there are two boys
inside who would like me to believe
that they arrived in that ship.

They try to distract me with a joke,
but I shush them. I am not finished
staring at the huge neon letters. I am not finished
cutting my steak into triangles.

The punchline of the joke has something to do
with the moon's total lack of oxygen.

The boys have glass bubbles on their heads.
The first one wears a baseball cap
and an eye patch. He brings his sandwich
to his mouth with fat red gloves. The other one
has something that will not stop moving
stuck to the end of his fork.

They turn away when I put my face
in my plate, when I smear the fat.
I have never been so proud of my teeth,
"Excuse me, have you seen this guy?"

and I flash a picture of my uncle holding
a headless snake in his fist.

They sit still, mumbling the joke. They have
obviously underestimated
the size of my hands.

Cocoons

I carry a jar into the surrounding
fields to collect cocoons. I find them

in little caves or stuck to rotting boards.
I am nine years old when I dare myself

to eat one. This will serve as a photograph
of my stomach, butterflies flitting over

my tongue. My aunt finds me with the jar
and yells at Uncle Hank. He sticks a toothpick

in his ear, "Those of us who weren't born into it."
She locks herself in the bathroom. She makes

me chop wood until it gets dark. I spit up
at the dinner table to convince her

that I am dying. I don't smile. I stare
at the lamp. My aunt runs up the stairs

wringing the blue towel. When Uncle Hank wakes up,
I stand at the window, rain beading on my skin.

Uncle Hank says he thinks he's outside
of his body, that he can see small pieces

of light moving through the walls. I tell him yes,
that is exactly how it happens.

Uncle Hank

The leaves fall so fast they could cut you.
This place is flat and empty,
a couple of chairs and a writing desk.
I wave goodbye and the chariot driver turns.
There are vacant rooms at my disposal
and a small army I'm told. I really do shake
like jelly when I laugh. I hear something behind me
tapping on the window. The ghost offers me
a handful of grain. I find out later that the seeds
are made of metal. I try to plant them but they
have little pincers that bite me. I eat my last fortune
cookie: "One can submit to God but only with fear
and trembling. When you look at the rain-soaked ground,
there are no worms inside your eyes." I try to think
things out. This must not stop me.

I take notes as fast as I can. I stand up.
Our major exports are coffee and gasoline.
Telepathy can be explained by freezing a wire
inside of an ice cube; Ghosts, by the failure
of endocrine systems. Uncle Hank comes down at lunch
and pecks up all the crumbs beneath my plate.
He is a sturdy individualist and a lover of nature.
I am a lazy man. He is the offspring
of Typhon and Echnida. I know what to expect:
a satellite with nine heads. Instantly,
an opening appears. I find a small pitcher
filled with some very nice lemonade.
Uncle Hank follows me inside, "but how
will we get past the flaming tile?"
Then he hears the slap of my bare feet.

Sensible, Protective Clothing

The coffee makes me say things
I shouldn't say out loud:
"From the fake shirt
to the use of the fork.
Let's go organize the rifles.
Our lives are not in danger."
The rain keeps pounding down,
obscuring the horizon.
I see through the steam coming out
of the cup, the single eye
embroidered on my aunt's washcloth,
"Leave room for sensible, protective
clothing and heavy duty gloves."
I can't guess what the mirror
will look like. I've stood out
in the weather so long
my face has turned to chalk.
In the fields and swamps
the dogs leap at owls, their black fur
shining blue. A fork strikes a rock.
My horse lurches forward.
I am thrust down and down
along the shale and sandstone.
Everywhere I grab, a piece breaks
loose and shatters. At dawn
I tear a page out of my handbook,
"Any player falling on the ball
must get back to his feet
immediately." My dear
abused heart is sputtering
and all the children slam the doors.

V. ICE WATER

A Wide Place

I.

My uncle is coming to visit
and when he gets here, he says

he needs to change his oil.
I step around him to unlock the tool shed-

One hundred cocoons curled up inside leaves.
I open the jar and dare him to eat one.

The sky changes: flash of light
across my blue table.

I pour him a shot of brandy.
He says, "Thank you," and leaves.

Through the ice on the glass, he looks
elongated. I cannot see him anymore.

II.

On my way out of town, I say a good thing
to the grocery clerk. I write it on a sign.

I nail it to the door: "Snow is intoxicating.
It has to fall through a wide place."

I blow the horn from either side of the highway.
I blow and look down from some point above.

A huge bull elk crashes out of the fog,
wondering whether to run or dodge.

I am on the yellow line. I am dropping
to my knees. The snow glows blue and I

can't stop it. There are stones
in the wheat field and I can't stop it.

I hold up my fist and he breathes out in steam.
I open my fist and dare him to eat one.

My eyes are glazed. The wind gusts.
My boots squeak in the cold.

Ice Water #1

In the colder climates, where spring pigs
are bred, the great auk is extinct.

I sink to the floor and lie there
all night, twirling the lost feather.

After hiding several days in the mountains,
I climb to my room and consider a lamp cord,

points or edges flush with the surface of the earth,
the hunting of seals, whales, walruses, and caribou.

I was only nine when I succeeded
my father as king.

I touch a small pin
projecting from my sleeve.

All the blood goes to my knuckles.
I spin a blanket over my head.

I draw a severe, direct stroke of lightning
without wanting to please the eyes.

I keep the shadows behind and beyond,
as if a moon were spreading the light back.

Ice cubes twirling. Water beads.
The mouth open on the one who sleeps.

The fingers close around the glass.
This is an attack on the birds

that circle the house—
thousands and thousands of hot, sticky bodies,

turning and turning, squeaking and washing;
one whole body occupied with singing itself.

Ice Water #2

The glass of ice water appears.
I feel its presence without looking.

I wake up and know it is there, outside
the window. I want it and I'm not thirsty.

When I whip back the shades,
the shadow I see glows suddenly,

luminous because of the other light
beyond and behind it. The ice cubes absorb

and refract, sending the moon
sideways and down into the glass.

The ice cubes are dim at the center.
The edges let the shine through.

The water in the light brightens
until snowflakes stick to the glass.

I sleep all day. When it rains,
I let the glass overflow.

Three Years Inside A Farmhouse

I.

Listen--

the sun has stopped barking.
They erase my famous quote
from the book of chants.
I have seen the satellites fall.
I have seen scuba divers
hoisting them out of the seaweed.
I have seen a slow motion film
and can point at the man
who designed this river.

I wrap myself in curtains and wait
three years inside a farmhouse.
A fishing lure in my sock
keeps twitching, pushing
its hook deeper. . .

II.

At last--

The telephone rings.
The farmer drags me
into the ditch,
knocks out all my teeth.

I get back in and hide
under the coffee table.

Now I can say it
without laughing:
There is pressure
in my very bones. I film
the flight of the mallard,
rewind to the first flutter.

I peel back the skin
around their throats.
All of the ducks are wired.
I start the detonator.

By then, it's too late--
They crash into the windows.

I scuttle backwards down the stairs.
I feel it gathering in the coil
of my spine.
For once I am decisive.
I stay and watch the lake freeze.

Freezeout

I walk in naked
and let my feet go numb.

I open my fists and lunge forward.
I swim to the circle of ice.

When I was smaller,
I climbed up the hill

to clock the speed of blue dimming down.
I walked to the highway.

I said, "Let go."
and stood perfectly still

while the trucks blew past.
Now, I can't hear myself talking.

The ice cracks. The satellite hums.
I can't see through walls anymore.

I look down into the ice. I am
an agent for the ancient Egyptians.

I am black and people fear me.
This is the movie I'm watching.

I want to leave the room
because the carpet absorbs sound,

and I can't find my pulse. I stick
my tongue through a crack in the concrete

to taste the water melting.
There are no doors.

VI. THE OUTPOST

The New Mirror

A thump shakes me from sleep.
I tune my ears to a crackling-
wheat husks being broken.
I walk past three white doors
to the living room. A board creaks.
I go back to my bedroom
and load my rifle.

I wake my dog.
She wags her tail and disappears
through the doorway at the top of the stairs.
I climb the stairs. I find the light switch
and flip it. I shoot at my face.
Instead of sleeping,
I sweep up the glass.

In the morning, I eat a slice of cold pizza
and some radishes. I go to the bathroom and lie
down in the tub. I try to see the dense black
of a hawk's eye. I get lost in the eye
until the mailman rattles the mailbox
and the dog barks. I burn the mail. I feed the dog
and shut the curtains. I leave the house.

I stand in front of the hardware
store. The doors hiss open and shut.
A woman whose hair is all gray
and black swirls, sneers as she tries to get out.
When I finally go through, I can't move.
I can't get past the display of black rakes.
I don't remember what I came to buy.

I drive home with a black rake propped
up on the passenger seat. I hear a noise like that
of a strange wind. I put my arm around the rake
to comfort it. It has never seen the outside.
People laugh at me for kissing
the rake. I laugh back at them
and wave, for I think I am safe now.

Einstein As I Remember Him

Einstein smoked behind the yellow curtains.
I threw things at him, little bits of wax, etc.

I saw him stroking the bear rug,
mumbling to it as if it were a child.

The ink in the bath water
was spinning and spinning.

In one gust the storm came,
and Einstein insulted the wine.

In the bottles it gleamed like . . .
I don't remember him at all actually.

I was trying to eat a slice of orange
stuck to a slice of pound cake.

And he passed through the door.
And he straightened a piece of wire,

and just like that he stuck it
in the socket--

Einstein
for Christ's sake,

dead on the floor, dead
with one hand in the oatmeal,

and the baby cried one of those lung
sucking, silent cries. Let us turn

back now to the experiment
with the moving glass room.

He is here in our house
and a stranger.

He is no longer
in a position to do harm.

The Empty Chair

I.

No one sits in the chair anymore.
We all lie on the floor and read
about the platform for God's chair—
It sits over Israel
on twin sphinxes cut from olive wood.

II.

The blue velour cushion flattened on the oak
is nothing like God. Suddenly
I want to lift the dog
who sleeps beneath the white couch.
I want to put her on the chair.

III.

I lift the chair and set it down.
It's heavy enough
to prop my feet on the armrests.
Now I, Ryan, can more closely
approximate the posture of God.

IV.

The slats of the back rest are thin.
There are seven slats in all.
Is it a coincidence?
Seven is God's number.

V.

The mystery of the Horse God
is no mystery in Corsica.
I compare the frottage of the wood grain,
the curvature of the arm rests.
I cross the room to kick it and stop.

VI.

It is late and I am leaning on the chair.
My wife is asleep, as is the dog.
More exactly, I am resting my head on the seat
to hear God's voice in the wood.
In the silence of the chair I cannot speak.

VII.

Today I turned off the soap opera.
It had nothing to do with chairs.
Even the book of poems fell open on the floor
and spoke of God: "Nothing is left
except light on your fur."

VIII.

All at once, we turn away from the chair.
Even the dog steps down after being set on it.
We think of God when we press our mouths
to the screen. It's not the chair.
It's sitting we avoid by turning away.

IX.

Who builds the chair, who runs
the lathe, simulates the rump of God.
When I leave the house, I ride the bus
to the factory. Nobody knows
my name. I tell them anyway.
Ryan Benedetti resists the chair.

What I Remember About Napoleon

Your horn is bolder than my battles,
the kind that can calm a whole sea.
They say soggy conditions halt the masters,
but I never stop for anything.
The only time I got off my horse to look
over the waste, I stumbled over the body
of a man half buried in mud.
He was pale, had a smoother face than mine.
"Outnumbered? Bite at their calves
from below," and when he finished reading
from his gum wrapper, I stamped out
his face, got back on my horse
and wept for an hour.

It was something I should have done long ago,
something I'd made up as a child, wandering
out into smoldering fields, sifting
my hands through the hot soil
mixed with pummeled glass. Stuck
in a granite crack, I found
a small sphere of turquoise.
When my brother came running
to find me, I wiggled it free, shoved it
into my mouth. It tasted like salt
and I would speak
to no one for fear that it might
fall out. And it fell out.

Blind Dogs

Now the fog is clinging to the lake.
It is the eighth day since my accident
in the desert. The fire goes out.
I smear black pitch on my hat
and on an old pair of leather gloves.
It is a lung-healing scent.

I paddle out and driftwood knocks
against the raft. Even the hawks
hump their backs to the spring storms.
I look at all the branches going by
and imagine my enemies moistening
their lips with balm. They send dogs for my body.

The dogs are blind. Their hearing
is poor. Their snouts are flattened.
I spend the rest of my life trying to cure them.
I meditate hours and hours and nothing
at all seems to happen. During the night
they sit on me and blink their eyes.

I hold a cigarette with my right hand.
With my left I grab at the smoke.
I warn the dogs that they sit on green
and tender grass, that the walls and the floor
of the tunnel are damp, that they must leap
several hundred feet into the dark green pool.

All Still and Sunday-like

I see Uncle Hank on the fence,
 clumps of hair wound around his fingers.
 It is as if the clouds are spitting on us both.
 It is as if monkey see monkey do really applies
 to this whole situation. It is truly a spectacle.

I unwind slowly until the circle
 of white mouths comes closer.
 They are coming over to speak to me.
 They sound like rose water spilling from a pail.

Under the microscope, his collar
 shows nothing incriminating,
 neither do the funny books he reads.
 I hear one of them cough on the shelf.
 He says, "Ryan, it is no use.
 They will never believe you."
 I say, "Demonifuge. Insectifuge."
 He says, "Gamboge." He is bluffing.
 He is huge. He is found among
 a smoldering pile of tires.

By now I know just how much
 to feed him. He starts to play with himself.
 I take the spoon out of his hand
 and cough into his blowhole.
 I am of course aware
 that he'll eventually come to the edge
 of the woods. The mouths will turn wicked
 and say things they would never say to me.

The mouths know that I'm nearby
 and that he can come back in
 whenever he wants. The mouths
 even show him how to lick
 the pie tins. It is a mistake.
 I have visions and make a list of them:
 The mouths will show him
 how to chew, how to masticate.
 He will befriend a little gray calf
 and betray it. Christ...
 how he'll sleep now.

The Outpost

I.

The guards unlock my cell, shake me up from sleep
to measure me. I am six foot, nine and growing.

We are stationed on the edge of a big thicket.
They remove my circuits.

I shiver on the marble slab, unable to open
my fist. My eyes have changed. I need a flashlight

to see through the dark. I do all I can
to walk through the rain and stay dry.

I stand between the hissing pipes. The lights
go out. They spot a new kind of bird:

tall, black, and sticky. They take turns riding it.
I get a happy twitch watching them saddle up.

They all get bucked and trampled. They all run out
with clumps of my hair in their fists.

II.

Now, I am alone in the humming fortress.
I build engines made of glass so I can watch

the fumes that flood the chambers,
the spark that blows the pistons down.

I smoke the last cigar and unlock the church.
The bird follows me with tiny steps, sliding

and falling, knocking pews over, trying
to stand up on the hardwood floor.

The bird looks up at me. I start my sermon.
I say, "The bird is smiling. The bird

is not smiling. Who can fill his hide
with barbs? His head with fish spears?"

I have my dentures. I can always smile.
At dark, I ride it into the thicket.

III.

The bird squawks at a fork of lightning.
It stamps sideways, sinking in the dirt.

It's left wing is bent. It flaps around
in a circle. Its tears hang red in the sun.

When I look again, the tears are dragonflies
buzzing down into the grass.

I gut the bird, curl up inside its chest
to keep wasps from getting in my ears.

I grow and grow and my spine is fused to the bird's.
We lean into our new body. We kind of strut.

Who can capture us?
Who can put a rope into our nose?

We walk the perimeter where the sparks fall.
We leave some shiny footprints.