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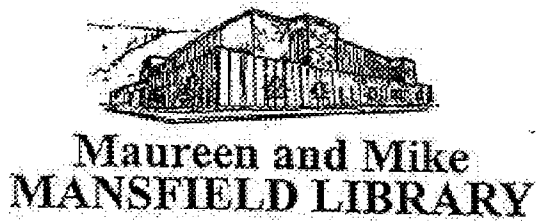
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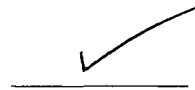


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The History of Barbed Wire

by

Chris Dombrowski

B.A. Hope College, 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

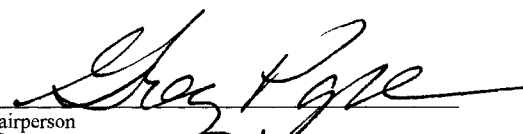
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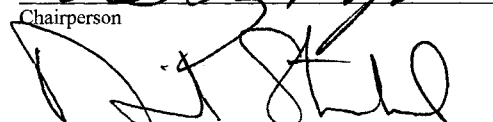
Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

2001

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* * *

These poems are for Mary

October Suite

Old dog October arrives
 half blind and wheezing,
 limping its track
 through ruts along the road.

.

I want to be worthy
 of this waking dream.
 my mother, before my birth,
 kneads clouds
 at the counter.
 Floured, rain-scent thick
 as balm, they rise
 in the far room and feed
 no one. My father
 walks the market
 buys hollow loaves,
 calls them little worlds,
 little nothings.

.

First hike after the fires,
 grasshoppers black
 as burn. *Go on, hopper,*
fly away somewhere.
 The knots in the trees,
 scorched, look like people
 clutching one another.

.

Tighten your purse strings,
 my mother used to say,
 your mouth is what you spend.
 Nailed to the barnside
 we earn our deepest hopes:
 To treat each other
 as if a music
 were barely playing,
 to go to bed dusty
 like some unlit chandelier,
 to sleep, and sing the songs

any words would ruin.

.

There were some dogs
in Vietnam. 1200
to be exact. Dead Shepherds
more prized than troops.
She was at the table
whistling. Why are you
whistling? He's dead.
It's a sad song, she said,
can't you see?

.

We each imagine it
arriving in a different season:
Hopkins fled Oxford each July
fearing summer storms.
Vallejo said, November in Paris
in the rain, was right.
I used to think: December
on some windless day,
bouncing along the bottom
of a winter river until
a deadfall snags me,
swings me under
a shelf of ice.

.

But this is the only time of year
and this the only cloud:
it sweeps the sky like a sheet
snapped from a clothesline.
We stand beneath
the burial of this light
lifting hands to whatever
we lift hands to.
And like a tack,
the near-full moon pins
a black note to the ridge.

Yard Work

(on the possible conception of my first child)

This morning, the old cat your mother loves
comes on through the wet grass carrying
a bag of fresh bones in her teeth. Held

to the just-up sun and breeze
near-bare lilac branches scroll
like a black and white film on our fence.

The wasp nest in the black ash
rattles. Jupiter and Saturn
have just set.

If you're in there, growing
as I imagine you are,
there's work to be done.

I take my hand
from your mother's belly
and move out to the yard.

The mower needs an axle,
and the board on the back stoop
should be replaced—

the little dooms curled
in each dead leaf
need raking.

Sleeping Outside

It's three a.m.
 and I am raking.
 I'm drunk and raking leaves
 in the backyard,
 big flood light behind me
 stretching my shadow
 across waves of frost on the lawn.
 I've locked myself out, but that's

not why I'm raking—
 I'm going to sleep out here
 on the hammock,
 so as not to wake my wife,
 who goes on sleeping inside,
 dreaming—
 perhaps of me fending off strays in the alley,
 scattering them with this rake
 and the coiled hose I use as a whip.
 I'd like to think

that she's dreaming of me—
 but aren't dreams for answers?
 For a friend's letter to arrive,
 account for six years in a line?
 Or a glimpsed face to appear
 as a sister, an old love? Or for
 the strong father of the child she wants,
 the daughter—no, son

who grows inside her head tonight,
 inquisitive through early grades,
 tender through adolescence,
 yet sound like his father—

the man who will hold her hands
 someday, as she waits on the couch
 for this son to wander home
 at seventeen, at first light.
 And won't she take his face,
 red like mine in the wind,
 cup it in her hands
 and say "My boy oh my boy"?

From the Bucket I Sit on to Write You

Here's the horse I've been telling you about,
the old bay dyed bronze with dust.
She has lifted her head up and has seen me.
Sauntering through the ditch, she frees
the rough, thick scent of clover.

She brings the night across the meadow with her
I blink and breathe and watch the draw go dark.

She will lean against my hat soon
and knock it to the grass.
Will graze my neck with the ridge on her nose
I hope to sing of someday

I am so sad.
I am this happy
She would like me to feed her this page.
I am trying to tell you what she's known for days.

A Stone

I think an agate, pocketed
not far from Plentywood, MT,

just after I shot at and missed
the smallish doe that windless day

last January Juggler
with a single ball to juggle, I toss

this sliver of a dawn-red moon
back and forth, palm to palm,

squeeze it, and think of all the ways
a Miniconjou or an Ogalala

might have used it as a weapon,
spear-head, blunt bullet

aimed and thrown from tree top—
of which there are very few

among the sage and cacti covered
Missouri Breaks, making it

more likely that the first man
to hold this stone, simply

circled his thumb around a curve
on its surface unstone-like

he had to think, or try not to think,
of a woman's shoulder or hip,

as around him red hills folded
under the quiet weight of clouds.

The man puts down his bag, slaps dust
from his coat. He has come home

without it: whatever it was
he'd gone out after. Except

for the millions of years
he holds inside his shirt pocket,

which he takes out now,
places in your palm.

Answer to my Mother's Question
Why Won't the Two of You Have Children?

The great-
horned owl

statued
in the maple

peers through
the neighbors'

nursery window.

My Father Walks His Dog Through Heaven

Great slivers of frost in the grass,
great light. Junked Chevy under
the tarp, old wind through its vents.
Good dust, wrinkled wrapper between the seats,
red hair in the cushions. Great red hair Quick
shadows on the neighbor's fence, maple
spilled black on the plats. Thin creek fog

climbing up the bank, waxwings wheezing
in the half-blossoms, the little nipples. Some green
some going red at the tips. Man on the roof
next door tapping the hammer, stopping—
stillness in the branches after last night's wind.

Bright cutthroat tilting back for a midge,
little seal. Kind girl I remember, poor girl,
bones pliable as fish bones. Awful suitcase
that fell and broke her femur. Black fire pit,
cold coals. Tall man coming downriver
trailed by a dog he calls Daisy Nice trout
on the willow branch he carries: bow, bounce
in the branch. Nice he says nothing
as he passes by. Cold feet. Wet boots,
wet socks. Good she lets me tuck these toes
in her warm coat, good dog.

The War My Father Fought

--for my father and the other C.O.'s

I had just finished mowing the lawn and raking the leaves I let sit all winter. I piled them into bags, their warmth and pith, and went inside to stretch before my run. I stretched on the warm wood floor, the room full of sunlight, and thought about my father and me dancing together in the same room, my mother on the couch smelling a jacket for my scent. Then my friend the photographer called. He'd been in Missouri, shooting what he called *The Death Machines*, the pig slaughter houses. *First they bleed 'em, then they halve 'em. 7,200 a day.*

* * *

Fishing, Orwell said,
is the opposite of war

What else
is there to say about that? About the girl
whose friends named her

Water Buffalo
for the hairy tumors on her back.

"It was sunrise," she said. "A small wren
falling slowly from the sky."

* * *

And later on the radio, for the anniversary, I heard Lance Corporal David Long whispering into the hand-held tape recorder he carried with him on the front lines for three months: "Oh, Jeezus. I just realized I've been talking to a grenade for the past five minutes . . . I thought it was the microphone."

* * *

Some Questions My Father May Have Been Asked:

*"Exactly what part of defending Democracy do you
object to, Son?"*

*"And will you state again for the record the moral objection
you have to defending the rights of innocent children?"*

*"If I might ask one more time—What would your
reaction be, should some unidentified armed man
enter your home, seize your wife and child?"*

* * *

That absurdity: As in the story my uncle once told me, about the time he discovered his Vietnamese barber a Tet informant. The old man had shaved his face three times a week! It made him laugh, at first—until he returned to Detroit and met the barber in a dream: the orange moon-of-a-face leering behind the razor's glint. For weeks, the same dream. A scene he could sleep through. Then one night, the old man spun the barber stood around, tilted his chin to the light, and asked about circumcision—he felt a nick, a beetle of blood travel down his chest, a hand reaching for his belt—

woke bolt upright, screaming, penis in his fist, right hand gripping left wrist. He had to talk himself into letting go. Outside he lit a cigarette, studied the shapes of frost on the roofs. He'd heard this species of silence before. Nothing moved. Then a dishtowel on the wire raised itself in what remained of the wind.

* * *

One day in Washington
I will take a black crayon,
unapologetically
the size of a bullet,
a small blank scrap of paper,
and rub the inch of unetched marble
between
Dombinsky and Domchello.

I will press hard on the paper
and thank the name
that does not appear.

Doxology: What it Would Take for Me to Sing

First, a rack of clouds—dark
and muscled—falling
river-like across the sky

Then a slice of moon
swallow-belly white,
casting pewter shadows on the cliffs.

A whip-poor-will, too, or a pair of cranes
so loud in the canyon
it's a wonder the whole valley doesn't wake.

.

Months I've wanted something to sing for,
some night like this
to lift me from my pile of wasted days.

So if on some breeze bent evening
this scene should happen to hang
above a meadow I know, a clearing

edged by blackened pines, I'll close
the door behind me and follow
the old dogs through the stumps,

where in the moon-bathed dark
maybe a doe will shake a coat of flies
from her carcass, stretch her legs

and bound above a fence.
Maybe the pheasant in the coyote's
mouth will rattle its wings, alight

in a nearby bush.

On a Photo of my Grandmother

The phone
that rests on your shoulder
seems more to grip
than to caress.
Its weight, its clumsiness,
the way it has you
craning your neck
to keep it there,
is all a way of saying
you're trying hard
to connect. You reach
for the dial,
through a slab of midday light
that slinks in through the window
and honors no one.
Outside,
the John R traffic drones
through a tarry haze
with the tired echo
of a dial tone.
Your husband waits in the alley,
napping in the cab
of his eighteen wheeler,
or humming
a Bing Crosby tune
with the grainy A.M. station,
waiting for you to walk across
the green stash of lawn
with a glass of lemonade, two
maraschino cherries.
If it were later in the afternoon
you might be mixing
a martini,
one you'd deliver to his cab
in the sweating shaker,
let him pour himself
into the ice-rinsed glass
he'd drain in one
long swallow.
But it's noon.
I can tell by the way the sunlight
doesn't split the room,
how it pools up only
on the open basement door—

thinner, less revealing
than the light I remember him
moving through, mornings,
on his way from your bed
to the kitchen sink
where he always shaved.
Where you stand now,
stern-postured, dialing.
And I guess it would be
too easy to say
you are calling
for an answer or two,
a theory, at least,
as to who this man is,
your husband,
who you said once
after his death,
was not born to love women
or himself.
You said it
with a kind of bitter dreaminess—
a tone you might take now
should the operator interrupt the hum
of long distance noise
and accuse you
of not trying.
Though I see the phone
on its cradle,
your soft knock on the window
which wakes him—
the cool glass, your hand, his.

**Letter on Public Library Stationary
Found Wadded Up inside the Card Catalog
In a Junkyard near Pulaski and 21st**

To whoever went through—
among other books, I'm sure—
the Chicago Public Library's copy
of Williams' *Journey to Love*,
with a sharp pencil
and a mug of tea or
cream-thinned coffee
checking lines you liked, drawing
stars, scribbling *yes* and *perfect*,
spelling adulterous incorrectly
I'll have you know it's taken
two erasers and an hour's
worth of wrist to pull
what you felt off these pages.
Your efforts (and mine) lie
at the bottom of a wastepaper basket
with a plum pit and a grocery list,
curled-up like gnocchi
slipped into a pot of boiling water
by someone's exhausted mother;
a mother whom, I presume,
would have taught her children
how destructive it is
to write in someone else's book,
even in pencil, and even
when the book is owned
by the citizens of the town you pay
taxes to, and even—
but no, she would not have heard
any one of these excuses.
She would have slapped the text
on the table where you sat and said,
Disrespectful. Erase it now.
But Mother—
and she would have shown you
her blistered hand
that never penned a poem,
a hand cramped with work
only she could be proud of
but wasn't, a hand
that later that night would lift
the thin book from your book bag

and leaf through the yellowed pages,
dog-earring a corner or two,
while reading what you'd written
beside the poems: *true* next to
that bit about the news; *cold*
near the end of "The King!";
and, just before "The Sparrow" closes,
where the female sparrow holds
the male by a crown feather:

read to mother.

Which is why I'm writing you,
I guess. And why, against
my better judgement, I reach
across the desk for a pencil,
press the lead into the hint
of your cursive. I trace
me too there, *that's awful*;
write *sweet*, then *sad enough*.

Two Deer

It was May. We were gunless.
 And though we'd seen this before—
 an arrow-grazed elk you have to track,
 a winged mallard whose skull you're asked to crush
 with your heel—
 when we saw the spike we'd struck
 bunkered in the dogwoods, hip bone
 bursting through his hide, hair
 littered with headlight thorns,
 Mary turned back to the truck, and I
 felt the hand inside my throat
 loosen its grip. I didn't tell her,
 as she searched the truck for a blade,
 something, to slit the spike's throat,
 of the tool I kept under the seat,
 or that each time I closed in on him,
 speaking as if a child were near,
 he would try to stand
 on his three working legs
 and scamper off, fawn-like,
 while the blood that purred from his side
 settled in the tea colored water of the swamp.
 Close as he would let me
 I could not feel the heat
 I knew to be escaping his body,
 or breathe any cool
 from the gathering dark.
 I stood still—numb as the night
 I watched an eighteen-wheeler
 hurl a doe across John R Avenue,
 over my grandparents' fence. And
 from the sycamore he'd painted white
 saw my grandfather sprint
 to the twitching deer
 and take a ballpeen hammer,
 simply, deftly,
 to the doe's temple. Then
 my grandfather—
 who years later I would learn
 did not father my mother or my uncle,
 and was happiest alone, or with his companion,
 John the Barber in Detroit's Boy's Town bars—
 in his just-stained work shirt, dragged
 the doe across

the clear green music of his lawn.

What else, then, to do
when Mary appeared at my side
holding the hammer head down,
asking what she asked
without words? Later she said
she wished we would have moved him
out of sight from the road,
across the meadow
to some unseen swale.
I nodded. But all I could think of
was how strange it felt—
using that tool to open something
and not to nail it shut.

Larry Levis' Motel Room

I have never been to Beatrice, Nebraska,
 but there I am and there he is,
 taller than I expected, shutting a gray trenchcoat
 into the trunk of his Pontiac coupe.
 We watch him, the motel manager and I,
 drive into a purpling sky
 towards North Platte
 and Colorado or Wyoming.
 Later, the sharp smell of smoke
 jerks me awake. I press
 my bare back into the cold
 vinyl head board. Don't worry, he says,
 I just left something in the dresser.
 And folding his thin body over,
 rattles open a drawer, reaches in,
 pockets what he was looking for
 He sits on the flowered spread
 tapping cigarette ash
 into his palm. What do you say?
 I grin, pull the sheets to my shoulders. Huh?
 Thinking of any lines, he says, wake up
 with tears on your tongue?
 I glance around the room for some nothing
 to fill with words, but grow impatient
 with the silence and recite:
Outside this room I can imagine only Kansas,
Its wheat and blackening silos, and, beyond that—
 he holds his palm up
 for me to stop. You
 need to quit stealing my lines,
 trying to impress me with your imitation.
 I am not your ghost.
 I didn't even come back tonight
 to tell you this. I simply
 forgot something in an empty drawer—
 some dust, a blue stone, nothing
 of your concern.
 What was it, I ask.
 Again he dismisses me
 with his hand. Perhaps
 you just haven't suffered enough.
 Here, let me tuck you in...
 But I'm already deep in the pillows,
 listening to the thin door

snag the carpet, his boot soles
echoing
one another on the asphalt, his keys,
the door, the door,
the engine.
He revs it once,
pulls into the drag.
For a while I lie there, staring
out the opening at Main Street's
passing pickups, semis—each driver
glancing briefly
into my neon-shattered room.

Rocks in the Jocko

Even ankle deep
 the creek they call a river
 could knock you over
 and the tumble of water
 stilled white in the frame
 spills into a pool
 that would float your cap.
 The steep mudstone bank crumbles,
 giving way to moss
 and branchless cedars
 holed clean and hollowed out
 by a woodpecker we didn't see,
 whose downstream hammer
 we couldn't hear
 over the silence
 just beneath the water.

In the photo I snapped
 you can't see the two of us,
 the young Salish man and I,
 standing on the bridge, taking turns
 behind the tripod and his pipe.

.

He stopped his truck
 in the middle of the gravel road,
 asked if I'd done any fishing—
Used to be big browns in there.
 I'd left my rod in the car, I told him,
 but was sick with anticipation.
 It was early fall.

What do you hunt up here,
 I asked, *cougar, elk?*
Nope, he said. White people.
 I wanted to be funny, said
Do you need a permit for that?

He lifted a case of Olympia
 to show me the revolver—*Got one*
right here, he said, and laughed,
 passed an open can to me,
 then nodded at the guard rail,

my camera—*What are you shooting?*

Down from the cab without an answer,
 he ducked under the black jacket
 I'd been using for a shade,
 closed one eye, I imagined,
 and stared at the bend he'd likely crossed
 a thousand times.

The cliff, I said, *see that face in the moss?*
 He was quiet. His back
 heaved and fell under the coat.
 I took a cool sip
 and thought of how stupid
 I must have sounded.
There's another, he said,
just above the chute.
They don't look happy.

He rose and held the shade for me,
 but grabbed me by the shoulder—
Hold on, he said—and reaching
 into his shirt pocket, brought out
 the lighter and the bowl.

An hour or more we stood there,
 finishing beers, peering
 into the box of water and moss.
 We found them everywhere we looked
 and said nothing: the tired jowls
 of old men, open mouths
 of children, women without friends.

Then he said he was going on to Greycliffs
 to shoot cows, and did I want to follow—
Some good pictures up there
where the valley opens up.
 I said thanks, I'd be along
 as soon as the light changed.
 But we both knew I wouldn't,
 that the light wasn't going anywhere.

Cuba Libre

In Quito it is not hip
to be found at the bar sipping
a Cuba Libre. Tippy

himself, the bartender serves you
with a look of grief, and the aqua blue
plaster walls crack and loosen

when you look up at him,
empty glass sweating in your palm,
say "Una otra Cuba," a line from a psalm.

"Rum and Coke with lime,"
you could say, at least one time.
It's the same drink, and not a crime

to botch a nod to Hemingway—but it's not
the same drink. An old, squat
bartender from Chicago told you this. "Rot

of the earth call that drink
rum and Coke with lime, is what I think,"
he said, then smashed a snifter in the sink.

You used to call him Monogram
'cause nearly every drink Sam
fixed had his initials embroidered some-

where inside it. He would ship
Key Limes in, just for you. And get this:
the toothpicks piercing a martini's olive

and pimento weren't
toothpicks at all, but bright,
brass swords he'd bought

from a woman on San Sebastian Day
in Trieste. "She looked at me the way
she did Love," he would say

quoting Keats. He was a mystic
but voted Republican! A mistake
you later learned anyone could make.

One day a Doberman found him in the shrubs
and three medics below the high-rise behind the club,
had to peel the dog away with gloves.

It had been sleeping on Sam's shoes
after licking clean the bright new bruise..
And so tonight, you'll call it what you choose,

because you want the whole damned paradox,
lime, Cuban Rum, American Coke on the rocks—
the bit about being free or not, the whole crock.

Smog; Dick Hugo's Grave

The smog I'm tempted to call your breath
smells like brass or pennies. It's New Years.
I couldn't sleep. I leashed the dogs,
a couple of thoughts, and wandered across
Missoula beneath the bottle rockets,
the Japanese Lanterns spewing clean red sparks—
past coeds copping feels on Front, where
it looked like the real drunks were down
for the night. My single resolution is
no elegies till April, at all if I can make it
but let's be realistic. These fireworks
have the dogs in fits: one is yelping
wildly; the other shivers, cowers
behind my thigh. Above six bored crows
circle like the hours, maples broadcast
static, rattle on the wind. I busted my knuckle
fishing today while slapping a whitefish
on a stone. Sent him skipping
across the snow in anger, then thrust
my fist into the water where he'd thrived,
cold field his cousins cut like sickles,
wild blades. Later I cleaned him under
porch light, flung the guts to the cat.
And still he seemed to swim—fins
stretching through frost-edged air—to spawn
against some unseen wind of current
the way his species will all winter, though
it whittles them to rib and scale. To step
back from this stiffening fish is to see
where we slice ourselves too deeply,
that somewhere beneath the bone-taut skin
beats an urge that's meant to stay, some
sin we may as well forgive. The dogs
have settled down. They lie beside
each other on Hilda Jeter's stone, waiting
to lope past the houses, the wheezing men,
the beautiful wives breathing in and out,
dreaming in their beds.

Suite to Winter Birds

1.

Between dusk and dark a dozen waxwings
wheel within the crabapples. Black
bad lonesome. Soul at a still stand. Here,
the sun is stone, a russet red pausing the birds
in their poses, letting go. One male rants in the world's
last puddle, and I would like to swallow him
inside my palm, smell the stench of his drying
feathers—spark, now he whirls inside the branches
with the others, who go on feeding, being fed.

2.

Why is it, walking through the crow blue dark
I hear only the crow, mewling
like my back-ache in the spine of the spruce?
Reaching, fanning for the familiar, the ears
adjust to darkness like the eyes, and like the eyes,
are just a pair of wings on which our thoughts
arrive. I knew it once in a death dream:
my dirt-filled ears kept catching swallow-song,
the ouzel's broken bell. Then the flicker
woke me with its single, red-veined call.
a screen door, opening to some abandoned room.

3

There are some birds you gauge your life by.
Today we watch the wing-filled
mountain ash, my neighbor Clara and I—
Clara in her pink robe on the porch, whittling
a last drag from her cigarette, nodding
to me, to the tree, as like a lung it lets in
light one moment, seals it out the next. They sing
what they are, says a winged voice to me,
but before I can remember who is speaking
the rising sound of applause follows
the frantic birds from the boughs—
a black band shoots over my shoulder, snaps
a late waxwing from a limb. Clara says
she'd seen it coming—Pigeon Hawk.
Sharp-Shinned. Whatever name we give it,
it stands in the sunlight on the snow
like a curtain called villain before its risen
audience, silent before my silent question.

4

The pink octopus tentacle stranded in
this Oregon tide pool doesn't know it's
missing. Chopped off by seal or orca,
or outboard prop, perhaps its brother and sister
branches groped the briny wash for it
for minutes, sifting with their sessile suckers,
and then gave up, went back
to hunting crabs. Nearby, two daughters
and a mother dig the spongy sand
for muscles and loose starfish, whose blues
and reds and yellows aren't primary
but salted, dusted with the sea. The tide
is so far out I could pick my way
across the cape to those coal-colored
caves, and stand inside one clinging
to the barnacles. One girl sees
me going, but warns me back. And what
would I do there anyway, exposed
at some brief moment with the hissing shells
and weeds? Would I sing some echoing song
to the seal, surfacing now, curious, perch
in its teeth. Or would I simply sit there
squinting in the light, stared at
by a million gleaming eyes.

5.

In Victor, we toasted the one eyed
poet and half blind cutthroat I'd taken
on the Bitterroot, from a glassy
knee-deep run below the rookery
The evening turning the color of those
great birds asleep in the cottonwoods,
their wide sheets of wings tucked away
like deep breaths ready to be cast,
smoke-colored, into the air. Stepping
out of the bar and into the misty low
shroud of clouds, each of us driving
downriver towards his town, away
from the Scottish sword perched
atop the backbar, the barmaid's eyes
unmirrored, milky in the copper trough,
the rough gods above us in the branches,
stirring, shaking out their coats.

6.

Duncan showed me his neighbor yesterday. Walt. Three tours on three WWII battle-ships, each of which sank, and on each of which he was the sole survivor. The U.S.S. McGill, his last ship, went down quite unspectacularly. While lying face down in the froth, Walt was thrust by some ill-aimed torpedo blast into a nearby rescue raft. This is why when Walt sips his morning coffee with a .22 aimed at magpies, or dumps his junked radiator into the creek, or as I saw him, smashes bottle after bottle against the rip-rap, Duncan, lover of water and wild things, says nothing. Or, as Basho might say:

*Man smashing bottles
against the river-rock—
what's his story?*

7.

Short night. Spring rain. A starling grasps the gutter. This morning reading in my notes Issa's *Here, I'm here—the snow falling!* I thought for a moment the words were mine. How difficult to claim this solitude, to inhabit that hut of phantom dwelling. In the year of his life, he twice bathed his son, second son, and daughter Sato. Then Kiku, young wife for whom he wrote *Crysanthemums don't care what they look like*, pregnant again, fell ill and died, her infant son following close behind. Dew drops, dreams of melons. Wild pink breaking into scarlet flowers they used to pick. *A bath when you're born, a bath when you die*, he wrote, *how stupid*. Now the new rain drips from the plastic flamingo's beak into the garden, and the little girl tiptoeing down the driveway, barefoot, out to get her mother's mail, explains things.

8

September afternoon shadows
shifting across the meadow, and half-
way through a letter to a friend
whose wife has left him unexpectedly
I write “But that’s not why I’m writing.”
It’s a trick to keep us both attuned, a stunt
I often pull in letters, my own poems
of all places—deflecting, reordering,
so that if I am permitted to return
to the pasture, the stack
of remembered stones near which
something magical or tragic happened,
it will seem like a surprise. Though most times
a makeshift surprise, as those presents
peeked at in your mother’s closet
were wrapped and unwrapped if only
so the dog could tear and toss the paper,
play coyote with the bow —It’s not love
if it isn’t a surprise, one wise old
suicidal poet said, which I don’t
believe, until my wife walks through the door,
untucks her shirt and wipes the smudge
from my glasses. And then I am more
like the shadow arriving in some unexpecting
field. Or am I the field.

9.

In the window sparrows fill the lilac,
then retreat through cloudless sky
I watch them trace the blue cube on
the television screen, a flat asphalt puddle
that seems at first to mirror nothing, but then.
I dream a little, and waking
am drawn to them as in a dream: they flay
the sunlight, flick shadows across the floor.
The sound of shallow water: bright,
sunsharpened, rash. The day is shallow
water, a blur stream shocked with melt
ripping headlong for a deeper, wider river
darkening through pines. A long moan
met mile after mile by creek and by light,
by song and by day.

10.

Back from where they've been, the waxwings—
wing-breath stirring the surface of the slough—
dip down to pick off midges, as below
trout rise up birdlike to do the same, their
steel snouts not breaking the skin of water,
just as the bird's beaks don't pierce the film
above. I lie on my back beside this cold water
boiling from both directions. I understand
I will not become anything else, but it is April.
I nudge the roof of my world.

Cloud Journal

It's Hopkins' idea—this cloud journal.
He kept one for years, noting *snowy blocks*
that filled the sky. Flat-topped anvils,
he called some, *dangerous looking pieces.*

I glance out the window at the hills
as the wind, that billionaire,
drags a brute across the sky—a baseline
through a snare-drum ripple of cumulus

—I jot it down. Put the scrap in the pile
on the sill. *Seven bowl shaped clouds,*
I scribbled some time ago, *half-lit*
and blown by the glassblower sun.
Last week I watched *a strand of cirrus*
sinking through a hole behind the sky

We are clouds, and terrible things
happen in the clouds. Still,
I want to go on living, even
when it takes the wind reminding me
to watch more than what is lit. You

crouch outside, gutting last night's whitefish,
running the blade up each belly twice
to sure the opening. There's that.
And how your fingers must feel
reaching in to the rock-born pocket,
the stomach that sat all night in snow.

You pluck the eyes for bait. Drop them
in a jar. A hundred thousand clouds
behind them, twenty some-odd moons.

--Liz Charles, 1975-1996

Afterimage

By now, taking your weak-kneed stance
in the mirror, you stare beyond your image

to the glassy run of river where the red neon
Thunderbird sign lights, wavers,

before being reflected again, righted
in the mirror. At the creekmouth,

a boy with maggots warm behind his lip
is taking tackle from a bucket. Above him,

swallows slice the air in swarm
as whitefish cut the water which repairs itself,

whistles along below the shelf of ice: the echo
of wind in a flag. You turn toward the window

surprised to see the word reversed, a single mallard
skating through its shine. Flick off the lamp,

the pool of letters does not disappear, or float away
downstream. Something snares it there,

the way a birdbath catches constellations, clouds,
a sparrow cleaning gravel from its beak.

You'd like to see someone this still, this sure,
but the we're without reflection. And dawn

wanders through the canyon with all its dumb light,
folding swallows into mud nests below the bridge,

turning fish to rock and glint again, sending
home the boy with his bucket full of tackle,

an empty blue plastic bag. Filling
the place on the water where the word shone red,

which is no place now, or has disappeared, or never was,
and which you stare at from the balcony, suitcase

in hand, while the maid runs a vacuum across the floor
looking for whatever it is you've left behind—

a toothbrush, bottle of shampoo, some scrap of paper
saying who you are, and where you're going next.

After Rilke

On a street corner near the edge of winter
 a man stands and feels the wind come at his neck,
 quick and heavy, like an unresolved dream finding
 you mid-stride to remind you of your loneliness.

And as it does, a log truck loaded with just-cut timber
 grinds to a stop at the light. Snow cleaves to the trunks'
 red bark. Sap pools on the bed collecting sawdust,
 frost—a wet scent coursing off the pile like steam

from some wounded animal. a fox the trucker
 struck an hour ago not far from Thompson Falls.
 At the corner the man sets his groceries down, reaches
 to touch the bark. He peels a scrap away, wants

to put shard inside his mouth, to bite down hard,
 and taste the woods. Instead he slips it in his pocket,
 stares at single pine charred by August's fires.
 Closing his eyes, he imagines latent flames

igniting along the highway, setting the whole pile
 ablaze. I'd like to try living like that, he thinks,
 remembering the woman in this morning's paper
 who chased down the Honda that hit her, kicked

five dents in its door before slinking to the curb,
 passing out for good. I'd like to live that
 violently against death, he says, under his breath.
 And of course for a time, he will. Rising early

to run against the cold blade of morning, pressing
 weights in his unlit basement, writing letters
 to his mother, old loves, packing lunches
 for the vagrants below the bridge. Until one day,

perhaps a Saturday, wading into the warm shower,
 rubbing his callused hands through his beard, he'll
 forget the girl in the paper, the timber turning east
 towards Butte. He'll forget these things the way

the trucker, revived by some late night Motown
 song, will forget a fox's tail he hoped to crop off
 and keep, dangle from his rear-view mirror The way,

just now, that fox forgets what it was running from,

and you forget the man at the corner, the dream
that found you at the light—which changes,
and blares above the honking cars.

On Hopkins' Self-Portrait, 1864

Sketching his face as reflected in the lake,
he leans into the wind-whipped glass, glances
back and forth between what water makes
of him, and what he has seen of himself:
the head bowed before the long success of sin,
face portioned by the shadow his weathered
derby casts—a young man trying to hone,
to be busied only by God, who sets the pad
aside now to resume his dedicated
melancholy. Here on August holiday,
lying on this gull-clad wharf in Wales,
eyes filling with salt, and the failure he claims
his whole life dogged by Though at least he knows
how to turn towards water, find himself in clouds.

Ash Wednesday

and I step out into a damp wind
to break the ice from the bottom of the boat. A sheet

thin as a page, I lift it from the hull, hold it
above the lawn. What was that wind called? The one

he said, blows where it wants to blow, touches
what it wants to touch? Watch the way it skates

the eastbound squall through the westbound river fog,
above the heads of the faithful

who wait in line to be reminded.
They are as homesick as I am, lying here on the grass,

holding this water I love and love to shatter.
—Watch the way it bends a loose field of sky

low enough to smudge a forehead.

Knowing You'll Never be a Cloud

But if you were, and if your spine
were pliable as willow, face the color of cocaine.
If your skin were wasp-nest thin, your heart
hovered loose as a gyrfalcon, and if your hands
were tied behind your back with the wispy rebozo
of a mare's tail so you could no longer hold on to the fence...
On a fogless morning over Mussigbrod Lake, floating low,
rising over a ridge of dogwood and greasewood,
dropping into brittle bowl of a cirque, junipers wheezing
in the first broad gully, a thousand cedar waxwings
stacatto in their scattering; turning southwest into
a sunrust canyon where once the Topinabee traded
roots for powder with a mule-footed man named Grich,
out of the pinched cliffs over stumps charred and lucky,
still-standing ponderosa swinging and breathing
in the bottomland breeze—seeing the tiny kestrel's sorties
on the magpie rookery, quick knife-of-a-bird stabbing
hatchlings, shrieking with the red color beneath its
wings, then lighting off alone; hooking east over hay
and shade-filled swales at noon, low over Melrose with
Dick Curran walking into the Piggly Wiggly, its door
swallowing the dark twin behind him—hearing
the high-pitched bells as Dick steps into the street
dragging the twin by the ankles; at evening, coasting north
past the abandoned Cuddeback place—listening to
what could be music but is surely cudding cattle,
a burro scratching on the twanging fence; then rising
west again along the river and mist-filled coulees,
your wide back portioning the early moon on the water,
air cooling to the color the moon makes there. Alfalfa
fields and cottonwoods growing the hoarfrost skin
that by noon tomorrow will be shed, eased
back to water—which you are, which you are.

The History of Barbed Wire

I.

In the beginning Rose
drove the spikes into
a strip of wood, then strapped
the prickered board to
the head of a breachy cow,
thinking, thus armed, the cow
would mind his fences.

* * *

Dekalb County Fair, 1872.

Behind the booth selling Sally Smitts'
rhubarb pie, the Elwood boy leads
the cornshucking contest by six ears.
Rita Elwood pulls her husband Ike aside,
whispers under the din: "Well, at least
we'll take home one blue ribbon tonight—
that Glidden fence was better than yours."
Ike wanders out alone, and into the wire tent
where his yellow ribbon, tied to the table,
kicks and settles in the breeze.
Behind the tent, the same breeze
chases leaves across the lawn, pins
sticks and plastic bags to the picket
surrounding the park, the children
swinging in their swings—*Hello, Wind*,
they cry, holding tightly to the chains,
Good-bye, good-bye—

* * *

Playing baseball with the dead, I stand
between rows of alfalfa, pitching
stones to a one-armed batter, his bat
a long thin branch of willow that quivers
in his hand. For the light, he can't see
the small stones coming. I mix it up:
a pebble low and away, a brush-back,
one fist-sized rock down the pipe. *Strike-called*,
the blind ump says, *Swing and a miss*.
In the stands the crowd is singing.

II.

At dawn, looking down the rifle barrel
 at a scrawny fawn. First whistling shot
 plugs fence post, bounds her off
 across the breaks. Through the scope
 I watch her at the wire, curled
 in question. over? under? through?
 What is it, I wonder Perhaps Scott's
 Cocked Rings, Upham's Loop and Lock?
 Or Jayne Hill's Barb, Ford's Kink
 and Double Twist—I knew an old timer
 who strung Forrester's Sawtooth Blade,
 and once, Phillips' Hollow Cocklebur
 This numb sound of wind-bent wire
 is like a stare. Some afternoons
 a southeast gust makes the whole pasture
 hum. The dead do not watch or sing.

* * *

Ike Ellwood says to Glidden: "If I
 get it patented will you give me
 half of all we make from it?"
 "Well, Ike, I hadn't allowed
 to make anything from it, just
 to keep those dat-ratted pigs
 out of the garden."

* * *

Then the lovers, picking chokecherries in the marsh,
 tufts of cattail loosed in the wind like plumage,
 down, postscript to last night's swan-slaughter
 seen through binoculars from the hill. seven
 coyotes, two distracted swans, the ambush
 frightening, beautifully white. Walking back
 with bucket-fulls and hands quick with slivers,
 she's talking about a former lover's fingers, of all
 the ways to forget them. He kicks a loose, red liver
 along the path, feels the clouds falling over them in folds.

III.

At evening, fence line fastened
 to fence line shadow. Willows
 footed to their darkening shapes

in the ford. On a green scrap
of paper, I draw the best horse
I've ever drawn. She's staring
over her roan shoulder, into
an unsketched field, wind
folding and unfolding her mane, rifling
through the other meadow of her life.

* * *

Then the ghost of the boy whose wallet
I found along the Big Hole River
must have heard me going through his things,
peeling dollar bills apart, reading
the note from Sylvia who'd written, *Call me, don't be shy*:

* * *

I had no idea water
could get this cold
without freezing November
the shelf ice stacks up
the fishermen quit coming
I miss the sound of the gravel
their boots kicked loose
its clack and shuffle
along the cobble
how I could hear it long
after it tumbled out of sight
most nights a dozen
deer stop to drink
their anviled hooves
punching through the ice
arriving on the black
mat of leaves in a silent
explosion it sounds
strange but I can sense
each inch of water
the river looses as they lap

so when tonight they drank
too long I reached out
and tapped a skinny foreleg
startling the herd into
the river's thrust dangling
legs a yearling's neck

and spotted flank
they forded weightless
flightlike fearless of
the other shore once
I spooked a great
horned owl
from its rook inside
a juniper those
slow wings opened broad
as a man hoisted it
above the alkali grounded
it could have been
a buddha and hanging
exposed a christ
but when I throttled
through the sage it simply
settled in beside
the truck and coasted there
awhile companion
before kicking off
into the darkness a long
while I sat in the sand stalled
truck listening for some
sure sign of the bird
light thud of vole
dropped to the ground
some barb of wire catching
the owl's great wing at
the edge of the world
but heard nothing
which is what I heard
for months until
the dogwoods peeled
open and I heard
their leaf music the river
under sun under
stars its song
increasing towards
morning until
only it is audible