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Psalm for the turn of the century| Poems

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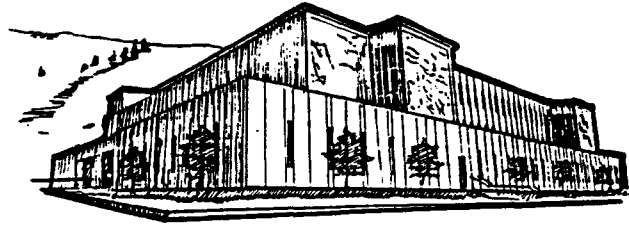
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University of
Montana

PSALM FOR THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Poems by

Joel Friederich

B.A., St. John's College, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

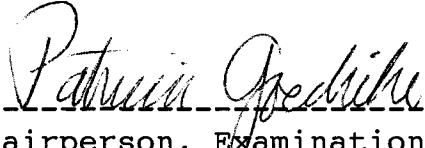
for the degree of

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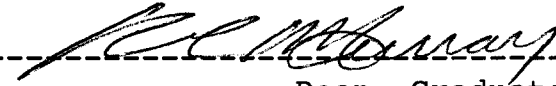
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One

OPERA

Beneath the arias of Saturday
afternoon, my father rustled
a newspaper, cleared his throat,
my mother strained, iron in hand,
radio at her elbow, and the silence of
scorched plains and failing
crops fell between them. Sometimes a train
swept across fields, and she
paused, listening as if a call
from a different life bristled her
skin. Father was glued to his futures,
hogs and beans, didn't see the need
for opera, would have tuned in a talk
show out of Omaha. I kept close
to her music, picturing ladies in silk
gowns and sparkling shoes, how they
fingered their husband's cufflinks so
delicately while the light of opera
spilled across rows of their rapt
faces. Tuxedoed men pounded
timpani, and the music swelled
to a violence of screeches and blows.
Faces tight with passion, violinists
gouged their bows into air,
and a beautiful shrieking
woman swayed in the center of fire.
Tranced beyond the world's killing
touch, she held the sharp point
of an iron blade against her breast,
her voice a dagger driven into octaves
no ordinary person could reach.
I wanted that voice
to shake the roofs off houses
in Iowa, shatter the dams that held dying
sloughs, and pierce the stern silence
of our living room, where my father
rustled his paper, and my mother
gripped her iron.

HISTORY PAGEANT

1

God watches
angels of the last century
burn with fervor beneath His easy
chair. He dangles gigantic
feet above the universe, strokes
His snowy beard and clucks with glee
when they slap the dusty rumps
of horses and shout "Hey there,
gee up!" They are so happy
in the heat of their activity, He thinks
and bends His furry head further
over the Milky Way, witnessing
the flurry of progress, how thirty pose
for Him on the stump of a giant
cedar they've just sawed down,
and hundreds hoot, waving from a train,
and still more heap mounds
of wheat and salmon and silver,
shoot guns in case He's dozing and belt
boisterous hymns until their faces turn red.
He can even see the small specks
of our fathers guiding sacred plows
into furrows, the graceful hands
of our mothers spreading
nets of seed across the earth.

2

I waited for hours
in the dark heat behind scenes,
itching in my sleeves while decades passed
beyond the backdrops.
My sister whirled in gingham,
flirting with men from other towns,
show travelers who spent summers
living in dingy trailers.
Light leaked through a rip
in the painted scenery and flickered
into a webwork of wires and scaffolding

like liquid oozing from a wound
in the body of history, its canvas skin
swelled by the pressure of great events
and the accompanying blasts of trumpets.
I crept closer to the bright flow
from that gash and saw inside
my ancestors made young, running
across fields still wet and clicking
in the earth's early days.
I stared until greasy arms
lowered like a deus ex machina
and lifted me toward the ugly grin
of a backstage hand. I struggled
against his grip, wanting a window
to the vital world, glowing sphere
where the story wasn't finished.

3

When lights went down on the Old West,
my parents huffed to the wings
and told me it was time for my sister and I
to step out into the Gay Nineties.
My role in history was to hide
in the bottom of a trash barrel,
representing the kind of gay time
a little boy could have in those
good days, while all the others gawked
at one new invention after another
as if the decade was a huge world's
fair filled with electrical devices,
flush toilets, pretty girls posing
in bathing suits and licking Italian
ices while mustachioed men rode
those bicycles with the big front wheels.
My moment would come after
the invention of garbage collection
when two hefty guys hoisted
my fifty-five gallon drum and I popped
up like a jack-in-the-box waving at spotlights.
I followed my father into the field's chirping
darkness while a tremolo of clarinets
and piccolos marched Sousa around the stadium.
The weight of invisible presence

pressed forward from the audience
through folds of dark, and I was lifted
into the quiet enclosure of the barrel,
its mouth closing around me as I sank
to the dusty bottom. Stuck, I curled up
in that scratchy womb and tried not
to breathe, a fetus refusing to be born
while around me history raged.

DISTORTIONS INSIDE A BARN

In the pigeon heights, it's a cooing sky,
daylight stars pricking through splintered
gaps as if some bright, encircling god
hovered just beyond the rafters--or it's

a pinhole camera, an enormous shoebox
on the plains, stabbed with the light's
geometries, criss-crossing slivers of sun
that slide across the horsestalls' rotting

boards. Or maybe it's the hundred tiny
eyes of mice, blinking at me while I
monkey-climb the hayloft's crown and unhinge
the world's one biggest eye, throwing wide

the hay-window. All of Iowa floods
the barn's black with brilliance. Thunder-
storms blossom blue as hydrangeas, huge
over a toy tractor and haywagon tilting

along a backroad's bend, lifting swirls
of dust that float down over fields
like scarves. A train whispers its rumor
among the hills, almost too low to hear,

while four boys on bikes careen down
River Road. Beside a white house
at the woods' edge, so small in her bed
of marigolds, my mother kneels,

pulling weeds before it rains.

LEARNING TO READ

1

On the first warm day
my brother drove me in his blue
convertible through rising country in the north.
I felt suspended in the white
space of spring, hurling downward
into the palms of hills. He grinned,
gunning faster toward the dark margin
of a thick stand of elms. Light broke open
in the prism of the windshield,
and the road was dissolved by winding
shadows. I couldn't find ground to hold
on to and believed death
was a forest, a mixture
of light and dark, the sky caught
in the throats of trees.
The woods opened
its mouth and swallowed us.

2

In this story
we are brothers woven together
into a Gothic script, hushed
under the branching of dark letters
into arches, vaults whose ribs
sustain high, blue shafts of light
we strain to see. How quietly
we step over the roots of sleeping
giants, far from the yellow ball
we dropped in our father's orchard.
Black strokes, tangles,
close over our footsteps
erasing them after we pass. Ahead, we are
not yet written. Where we are
the buds grow full
and red.

NEBRASKA HIGHWAY MONOLOGUES

My mother hummed the whole way
from one town to the next, three or four
notes loosely based on *Bye, Bye
Blackbird*, and at the same time knitted
and cursed, pausing only to break
her routine at random moments by
gouging her nails into the dashboard
and sucking air through her teeth so hard
the nerves jumped out on her neck.

My father held the wheel fairly steady
on the wide plain, rolling flat out
at ninety plus straight for the grain
elevator dead ahead in the next hundred
mile town. He held a beer can in fat
folds between his thighs and spewed out a story
that rolled on and on without a point.

My sister slept by the other
backseat window with her face pressed
into a magazine, her speckled horn
rims cockeyed across her nose. She drooled
a little on the glossy pages and mumbled
the word *blackbird* over and over
into a double spread picture
of Englebert Humperdinck.

Telephone lines arched across the sky
weaving the spaces between towns. Up
when a pole flashed by my window, and down
through the slow curve between, they crissed
and crossed, stretched like guitar strings
from rim to rim of the sky's echoing bowl,
or like different melodies always trying
to meet, but never quite, never quite
kissing, and I recited this story to myself:

*These lines outside are
the people in this car, changing
places, changing back, flowing*

*forever above the land. This one's
me, and this one's my sister--
we almost touch, then ease
apart. My mother comes close,
crosses with my father who flies
away then dives back down,
and we all stay together
until town.*

**MY MOTHER WITNESSES THE WRECK
OF THE DARLING C-J ON I-70 EAST**

Glanced up from my fourth crossword
since Kansas, and the neck of the hitch just
snapped clean off the back of Carl's
U-Haul truck while he was barreling it
down a hill. I swear that boat never moved
as slick through water as it did
down lanes of freeway, dodging traffic, even
tried to pass a Honda, until the broken
hitch bit pavement and that CrisCraft sprung
free as wet soap slipping from your hand.
Who'd have guessed the dead
weight we dragged from Denver ached to lead
a life of its own?

I've seen geese
in a field before dawn, asleep or waiting
until something in the air or in
their spines clicks, then Bingo! the sky
explodes with wings. It was like that.
Thirty years of marriage, mothering
kids and moving them in caravans--
I've logged ten-thousand miles of crosswords
and sat quiet, gripping the cords
of family until I was damn near quartered
while the men barked back and forth
like truckers.

I wanted to ride that boat,
captain all forty feet of cut loose
cabin cruiser and blast both horns
when it rose like a blue
whale breaking surf, turned in one
slow, stunned pirouette, then splintered
to bits. They'd have found pieces
of me for weeks, flashing like TV's
split open on hills. Jan's fur was roadkill
in the mud; Carl's weight machines were
twisted up as modern art. It was one glory
of a mess, and I say Thank God
it wasn't any closer
to rush hour and nobody
was killed.

WHEN DAD GETS DONE IN THE BATHROOM

When my dad gets done in the bathroom
we kids all squeal, we squirm and giggle
and run screaming down the hall
while wallpaper peels and turns brown.
Some of us bury our heads like parrots
and some climb high to attic windows, lean
way out pinching our noses and wearing big frowns
when Dad gets done in the bathroom.

And when my dad gets done in the bathroom
the cop on the corner falls down
and all the traffic in town goes haywire
crazy. People turn around on the freeway,
go home and say *Hi Hon, it's a holiday!*
Then the streets are empty except for monkeys
who escape from the zoo, break open the school
and squat on my teacher's desk
when Dad gets done the bathroom.

And when my dad gets done in the bathroom
the bean fields wilt and tractors tip over.
Bald farmers scratch their wrinkled head
and look up at the sky. The Governor calls
the President and the President calls
the Generals and they all walk around
in a row. Then the Pope has holy Mass
they broadcast on TV, but we don't watch
because of parades and football games
when Dad gets done in the bathroom.

And when my dad gets done in the bathroom
the stars go out one by one, the sun spills
loose in the sky, and God Almighty steps out
of His stinky Kingdom, rumbling down
in His stomach. He swings His big door wide
and we kids run and hide when He grumbles
What's going on out here? Then He hitches

up His pants, scratches His great big belly,
and strides right into our kitchen where He
kisses my mom and says *What's for breakfast, Hon?*
when Dad gets done in the bathroom.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC WORLD ATLAS

My father handed it down
to me, saying *Be careful, this*
is heavy--the great red book, wide enough
to be my bed. I turned the pages of the world
with both hands: magnitudes of stars, structure
of topaz, cirrostratus and cumulonimbus, ocean
bottoms with mountain ranges so clear, I tried
to touch edges and hollows that weren't
there. I could curl up and sleep
with my head on the Himalayas.

In August my mother
ran like mad getting ready;
my father fastened the carrier
to the top of the car. My brother and I stared
at the blue and red veins of Wisconsin,
tracing highways with our fingers
and trying to imagine what it would be like--
the musty cabin, long watery days, children
with strange languages; and nights--
laughter and silence and music hanging
forever on the lake while we lay breathing
in beds that were not
our own.

When they came
it was before dawn
and I was not asleep, listening
to my brother's dream
and watching the darkness
congeal into continents of night.
He began to cry when they lifted him
wrapped in blankets, and I saw
how small he was. I held my mother's
hand out to the car, surprised by
the chill of the air in August.
I had never seen a night so enormous, so
quiet and aware. We were going, we were
thieves and we were travelers, shadows

sneaking across a star-lit lawn.
From the backseat I looked up
at my father holding his bundle
of sobs, and he nodded his head
to me as if to say *Be careful,*
this is heavy, and he handed
my brother down.

STORM, LAKE MACKENZIE

1

Shutters bang like gunshots,
and the cabin of my childhood
swells with breath, breaking
a spell of twenty years.
The boy who was left behind
wakes to mothwings shattering
the air. Voices in hallways
whisper harsh secrets. Drapes
billow with an absence he reaches for
like a hiding brother. The forest
laughs, and the screen door flies
open as if his soul were escaping.
Four discarded hands of hearts
are laid around the table,
and the wrecked icons of 1970
are scattered across floors--
the spinning dial of *Twister*
braiding bodies of wind,
chemical smears of Polaroids
gaping from unswept corners.
In the frame of the picture window
the world tears at its roots,
throws itself on broken stone
and slides back to its furious bed
of water. Galleries of trees whirl
like manic dancers wrapped
in scarves; he's smothered
under layers he can't peel away,
seized in the earth-grip of fear.

2

The summer my brother disappeared
beyond the world's blue borders,
I learned to sail in an orange boat
so small I named it *The Parakeet*.

Gliding in the golden haze
of morning, I believed I was Henry Hudson

setting out for the farthest shore.
Slipping into the stillness of coves

I searched each turn of bank, tangle
of limbs and rushes, for a darkness
that revealed depth behind a mask
of leaves, doorway to the hidden

link with the East. When shorelines
rubbed into the red glow of dusk,
I'd be gone, sliding deeper
into rich kingdoms on the other side

of evening, while my parents called
across the empty lake. When storms
rose over the water, I stayed inside,
studied names in the atlas:

Mekong, Quang Tri, Song Cau--
the rivers and cities of Vietnam
were the songs of parrots, monkey
screams my mouth couldn't form.

Once, cold rain tapped windows
while my sisters played hearts
and my parents swept and straightened.
We listened to my brother's voice

in the static and snapping hiss
of a tape he'd sent from overseas.
He said, "Tomorrow we fly over
the Delta. Bad weather coming in."

3
When you died, dark arms
lifted your body above crowds,

laid it on a door with hyacinths,
lotus flowers, your hands closed

around dancing gold goddesses,
a silk fan spread over your face,

(new stanza)

and they carried the empty mask
you'd left down to the water

like an offering to the sea.
You watched from black clouds above,

watched the city burn,
faces seized in lightning,

children crouched in blackened eyes
of buildings. You rose so high

you saw across oceans
to where I stood over the gray lake,

a lost child, a wooden boy
fixed behind the cabin's window.

Battalions of waves disassembled
on the shore, and the sky broke up

and reassembled into a new geography
of violence and uneasy calm.

In the quiet between the lightning
and its thunder, you listened

to my small voice counting
out the seconds between us:

--One, one thousand--
like the enumeration of losses

--Two, one thousand--
or a last prayer before

--Three, one thousand--
I stepped out to meet you.

Two

INVENTORY

One
red button falls
into hundreds, and then
another, then still
another, a succession
of soft clicks each gives
in coming to rest with the others,
like the mute tick of minutes
passing through a night,
gathering into a life's
completed past.

I am nine,
alone at night in the brilliance
of my father's store,
and I love the feel of buttons
falling from my fingertips,
the pearl-like collision of each
into the rest, how the sound spreads
through aisles empty of people,
filled with uncounted bowls and pins,
accordion-like paper fans,
and I know I can go on
counting forever
down these long aisles of night,
counting even the smallest
clicks of stars.

Another button drops,
and I listen myself into the silence
that holds the duration of its fall,
imagining I step through this
buttonhole opening of time where
the enormous store of my life waits for me
to lift and count each minute like thimbles
or shoelaces, or the clear, glowing worlds
of marbles, a richness that goes on and on
until the sound, that small soft click,
the breath going suddenly out,
the simple kiss
of ending.

TEN A.M.

Racks of dresses make a permeable forest
I burrow into, pushing aside sleeves,
dangling beads, soft pleats of wool
until I'm hidden in a secret
cave where hemlines brush
my cheeks. The black shoes
of a salesman creak, glide by
on checkerboard tiles. Maybe I'm a mannequin
buried naked in these clothes
and bald without a wig. My legs freeze,
fingers lock. Not a blink or twitch
anywhere in this empty body.
My eyes are painted on.
Macaws shatter the green canopy
into a spectrum of rays. Creeping
things climb around my wrists and ankles.

Now say centuries
go by and they never
find me. A lady's sharp heels
click closer, closer. *Here*
I want to say but can't
look, breathe, speak. Hanger hooks slide
above me, shadows of days, seasons,
shift across my hollow head, and she is always
there, hovering somewhere beyond trees,
giant in the real sky. Imagine her
surprise when, one day, she parts
the limbs above and sees me,
then reaches down to touch
the smoothness of my forehead, her fingers
on the curl of my dark lips.

NATIONAL CASH REGISTER

An old salegirl's crooked
fingers stroke the buttons
on its face so quick
her gold rings
glint and blur. She flicks
a splotchy knuckle
and it turns. Wheels and ratchets
spin inside its warty skin,
rumbling hungry, dumb
in its ancient sleep.
In glass cases the silly plates
are startled out of their silly wits.
Naked, they blink
their wide eyes and blush.
There's a cry, an almost human wail
from among the toys--the clown-faced dolls
twist their mouths into bright red O's
and shriek. What a ruckus! My father runs
from his office, tries to beat the lampshades
down, grab the tails of laughing
kites. The marbles! how they flee
from his fumbling hands. Salt
and pepper shakers march
in columns across his shoes.
A sudden thunder. Drums
beat like a wild pulse. The monster churns
its metal guts alive. Tambourines shake
along its spine. Bells clang in its fingertips.
Bang! the mouth flies open,
filled with dead faces.
The circled tribes
are silent.

OPENING THE STORE

Aisles run back to darkness.
Rows of pitchers, shelves of plastic daisies
are silent as congregations waiting
for the first words of prayer.
My father is priest of packages.
I listen for the swish of robes,
the jingle of his keys shaking blessings
on the safe. He props open doors
and morning floats through
on mothwings, raises shades
and the street's gold pours
in. Each aisle sings its own
note as he switches on lights,
a chorus like angels in their lofts.
Collectible porcelain saucers sing
sharp and high, toys rasp
harsh hosannas, caps and shoes say
aaahhh like mouths, and dresses
flourish bright trills.

On the front sidewalk we sweep
finding dimes in piles of dust.
Then, he lifts me from the pavement,
and with my feet dangling I turn
an iron crank, lowering a sky
of blue-striped awnings.
The shadow falls on the face of a man
who can't walk or speak, who scuffs
along sidewalks in a child's
red wagon, and the tiny sticks
of his arms shake as he rolls nearer.
I slip to the ground, and he opens
his mouth in silent anguish, his lips
twisting back over black stumps of teeth.
A thick gob of vowels fills his throat,
and my father is gone, swallowed
in the holy order of his store,
leaving me alone in the sound
of the wagon man's one word--*pain*.
In their high, dazzling windows
pretty mannequins stare down.

GLESSNER'S GLASS ROOSTERS

1

Bears wear sleeping caps and yawn
in the dimestore's gift and keepsake
aisle. Gawking baboons scratch
round bellies, and barefoot boys
with cane poles strut and whistle
toward the fate of truants.
Some you fill with pennies then smack
with a hammer so they spill. Others
are just for show. After school
the sun glazes their ceramic bodies,
and I watch Glessner's hands, blue-
veined, breakable glass spiders,
tending them carefully as children.
She lifts each and speaks in coos
and clucks, dusting their compliant
lips. I want to touch her silver
hair piled like angel's hair
in swirls, the loose wrinkles of skin
jiggling in her jowls and arms
as she slides feathers across
the porcelain shoulders of owls.

2

Once, she led me
to her rooms, a tiny
apartment over Main Street.
There, she warmed milk on the stove,
made us a supper of white bread
and gravy. She opened a secret
compartment in her footrest
and showed me games--*Candyland*,
Chinese Checkers--and soldiers,
some plastic, some old-fashioned lead.
I lined them up on registers
ticking with steam and shot them
off with rubberbands while she unwrapped
a photo with brown, eggshell cracks.
Her son, dead thirty years, burned

in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1939.
Glass roosters crowded every nook
and cranny of her life, clutched
shelves, hundreds of them,
combs and beaks burning red,
claws splayed and the terrible beads
of their eyes bearing down.

3

Some nights, waking, I can't
breathe. The black shapes
of my room flow like lava.
Outside, the ordinary shadows:
dog rounds a corner,
rooster flies to a wall,
while everywhere a fine ash
sifts down. Fire burns my skin
smooth and poreless,
melds lips, joins fingers,
fills nose and mouth.
It shimmers through bones,
turns my hollow insides
solid, until I'm hardened,
a boy made of glowing green glass
you can look right through.

THE LADY BEHIND THE FIREWALL

has never been seen. She steals
into the maze of hallways
above Main Street stores. I listen for her
footsteps, the quiet tap, tap
across ceilings, through hidden
attics, tapping a code.
She lives among musty boxes of Christmas
ornaments left behind by families
no one remembers now, gathers fragments
broken from lives that pass
beneath her feet, obsolete goods
shoppers glanced over, briefly
touched then left to her quick
fingers. Her quilt-work
landscapes are intricate as fields
in fall, broken windows
where she sees the bent past
refracted. Mirrors scatter her
single face into many
separate eyes, separate angles,
and she's buried in her making,
alone in a skylight's dim rectangles
holding shards of sky, fingering
the fractured edges.

Once, I stole
into her wrecked stories,
feeling along ripped edges of wallpaper
through living rooms of the long dead.
An armless, headless dressing dummy
leaned out of a closet
lost in folds of bustles,
wads of cotton bursting out
split seams. The ceiling's ancient
stains blossomed like dying roses
I could stare myself into
for hours. A firewall
sealed off entrances,
was thick enough to keep fire

from passing through. I pressed
against its dark mass,
and it almost breathed against me
as I listened into that fire-
warmed interior.

Three

JUGGLING

with Lee Evans

He drops his dusty suitcase at the center
Of the square and snaps the catch.
Cigar boxes spring out, white blooms
Of irises look on, and he begins to balance
An Indian club on his nose, turning in orbits
Beneath it and wobbling like a drunk

God. The crowd swells like an amoeba. A drunk
Lurches across the square to the center
Of chaos the juggler lives in, or, bit
By bit, he dies in. The drunk tries to catch
The yellow pin but can't find his balance.
He knows the yellow pin would bloom

If he touched it. A toddler sticks a bloom
Of cotton candy in his ear after the juggler's drunk
Fire and spit flame keeping one foot on the balance
Bar of a unicycle. Devils dance around the center
Of his whirling sticks believing no one can catch
Their tails, but he winks and shifts the orbits

So they tumble. Now the crowd screams Orbit!
Orbit! They want to see those devils bloom
Like cactus, to hear them taunting Catch
Us! Catch us! All alone, the juggler stumbles drunk
Into the surge of voices at the empty center
He knows to be his heart, that point of balance

Between himself and nothing. The crowd's off-balance,
Tilting, and some start to fly, thrown into orbits
Above his head. They rise through the center
Spinning, reaching for solid, but instead bloom
Into a single, still rose that's drunk
The sun. Now it is the juggled who catch

The juggler in their shifting patterns, the catch
Shimmering in a net of air. The balance
Of longing and delight opens above them. Even the drunk

Can feel the bone-thrusting thrill of these orbits.
Now he is the yellow pin that blooms
Like applause in the juggler's hand. At the center

Of gravity, the juggler catches these lonely orbits
Alone, his hands a balance from which blooms
The rose he's drunk from--the constant, replenished
center.

SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY

Toes have never been so naked
as ours touching at the end
of the bed, twenty lovers curling
under a single blanket.
What would the neighbors think
if they knew
about this shameless samba?
I listen for sirens,
the click of a telephone,
a knock on the door.
Revolutionaries, these toes
are well-acquainted
with the means of escape.
Their names have been recorded
by the FBI, so they shed them
like loose clothing, slip nameless
out the back way. In alley doors
they cling close for warmth,
then run in empty avenues, crouch
in wet grass behind the best houses,
climb into the rooms of sleeping
citizens. At 3 a.m. the Mayor is still
occupied with his business.
Unnoticed, they make love
in his heart-shaped jacuzzi,
smoke his wife's slim black
cigarettes, waltz in the living
room's thick white rugs. Near dawn
the city pales, and they drift,
Spent apparitions, out along riverbanks,
curling in the cool mud.
In a waking woods the bed
they came from calls them home,
and they bury themselves
in leaves, sinking like roots
down through the green, the black
mulch and ferment of soil, while
beside me, you wake, bright
as the first lit tops of trees.

for Lee

EDWARD WESTON AMONG THE VEGETABLES

It is only an errand for something to slice
into salad or stew, but in the street
he notices how shapes cast on hydrants
by slanting light suggest not only
hydrant, but *small soldier* and *chubby*
child as well. Names, he thinks, are costumes
worn by hydrants and schoolchildren
whose bodies still shine beneath.

He follows the skirts of a woman
swishing into the market, crowds in close
between grapefruit and avocado, sees the nude
lengths of carrots resting in her hands.
A Filipino woman pares the lumpy
bodies of potatoes, bends in fleshy folds
and dark curves around her work. A pregnant
mother holds her enormous abdomen,
touches the taut purple skin of
eggplant, and nothing, he thinks, not even
cabbage, can hide its nudity, its repose
like prayer inside clothing. He closes
his eyes, folds his hands
around a pepper's sculpted pose,
and forgets the salad, knife and dressing.

**EVAGRIOS THE SOLITARY MISTAKES
TEXANS FOR A BAND OF DEMONS**

I've heard of the ones called 'deluders,'
who come sweeping across desert floors
like dawn winds, who can lift a monk
from his lonely cell and lead him

dumbfounded on the slanted roofs of cities,
through the pale streets, show him lovers
tangled in sheets, let him hear the murmuring
dreams of the rich, the sighs of sleeping

children then return him to his dirt where
he wakes to a cold, black dawn. I've learned
to guard stillness, and I've watched demons move
in next door, dumping their trash

into the cactus and sage. The plates said
'Texas,' but I knew better, and kept a secret
vigil on their ways. The husband drove a Motorola
Repair Van, and sometimes came home from work

to just sit for hours behind the wheel, staring
while dusk erased the outlines of his face.
The kids toddled through tumbleweed, picked sticky
popsicles off the tops of anthills, chewed on

transistors. Every day the wife paced up and down
the mesa in high-heels and pink spandex, wailing
off-key hymns to her little dog and spilling
whiskey when she tilted back her head to laugh

at the flawless sky. For months their heap
of garbage grew huge and seething as sin until
one false dawn I felt a lifting like wings inside
my sleep, a battering against the thin walls

of my solitude, and I walked out into winds,
into a dim world filled with whirling

diapers, cereal boxes, panty hose, you
name it--it was alive and dancing

like a demon on my roof. Boxer shorts and bras
puffed up and shook with an unholy spirit
inside them, coveralls ran toward Albuquerque,
and I just spun, defiled in such sweet corruption.

MOUNTAINS TO THE SOUTH

One day my lover comes to me
and says that she is going.
I hear winds
descending high ridges, ravens
spreading enormous wings
on the cracked limbs of pinyons--
when she repeats the syllables
of my name, a stone clatters
down a canyon's empty throat.

When she has gone I go out
to see the mountains to the south,
the Ortiz, Sandias, the far heavens
of Manzanos trembling above deserts
I've never walked. The features
of her face become a sky streaked
with rain--her arms, the falling
of dry grass in autumn.
A winter of snow on northern meadows
assumes the slope of her
back and shoulders.

I cannot hold my death
like a small yellow bird
in my palm. It has the depth of many
ranges running toward the sun,
the sadness of twelve shades
against the wounded sky.
It flies away from me
as I walk toward it.

Once, behind a nightclub I saw
two lovers struggle and couldn't tell
if it was pain or pleasure.
I am born in a moment of separation
with storms around my head
and lightning in my mouth,
with a dozen darkening ridges
and a separate birth on each
black peak.

A WISH FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

In the east, three ravens
rise over desert floors,
climbing into Tsankawi wash,
the only movement in a daylong silence
of juniper and stone. Prophets
of other centuries foresaw
death, the undoing of nations
or the birth of a new god
when they stood in a sacred spot
and read flights of birds
like passages in a holy book.
Now, ten years to a new millennium,
the only prophecy I have
is that these birds will soon vanish
above the University of California's
secret city of research
hidden beneath the mesas of Los Alamos.

Past the National Laboratory,
at Valle Grande a volcano collapsed
into its empty center
where C de Baca's holsteins
now graze the green caldera
without sinking. Ash filled
the sky and fell like hot snow
to make Tsankawi's tufa cliffs,
and when the Anasazi slept
in their homes inside the cliffs,
they felt the soft heat
still radiating from walls.
The rooms they dug stare
across the canyon like empty eyes,
entrances to the cooling body
of another earth, waiting
beneath the broken mask of this one.

When the oily shadows of things
slide out from under crusts
and darken the canyon floor,

I climb a high ledge, close my eyes
in a round room shaped by ancient hands
and know how it is to sleep
in the heart's chamber, inside
the catastrophe of blood
and breath. Three shapes rise
from my dream's darkest corner
as if they were always there
chanting low songs I never heard.
Crawling out through a navel of light
they unfold huge wings, black feathers
sweeping air, and lift into a new sky,
their flight a migration spiral
I trace with my finger in air,
winding tighter and tighter
until finding its end in its center.

Four

AFTER VAN GOGH'S CROWS

In Nebraska my grandfather and I hauled
the last hay in before it rained, jarring
slowly home in ruts behind his horses.
Wheat ran to the sun, blue storms
bellowed up from horizons, and heat trembled
on the edge of each leaf. Crows stirred
inside fields, lifted above shattered
surfaces of grain and flapped into sky.
His eyes measured the wheat, discovering
black wings buried in the gold.
In the field where he died,

Van Gogh painted the last picture
of his life. I am drawn to wounds
opened in canvas where sun pours through,
greens and blues deepen, shimmer to their darkest
shade and verge toward the blackness
of crows. They fall from storms,
smudge the sky with their wings, then settle
onto the shaking fingers of wheat.
Sometimes I think I see them shiver
at the field's fringe and believe it's his
hand trembling. He darkened toward home,

turning his face from me. His hands
held the horses' thick reins. Muscles worked
along the length of his arms, cords straining
to the tiny filaments of his fingers.
Each movement of wrist, stroke of knuckle
drove the wagon deeper into the landscape
of his life, wearing gashes in his good
dirt. Greens, reds grew black; the storm drew
near. He reached for his gun and whispered
Stay here, disappearing into wheat, and the crows
were lifted, poised between two darks.

PSALM FOR THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

I.

Late August I hear cicadas in the deepest part of groves, their voices swelling from inside cottonwoods, drawing out long strands of day, stitching them into silence. They can't be seen

anywhere in leaves, and so I picture them with faces, cracked and very old, gathered in wheelchairs near warm patches of light that fall through the windows of their homes.

This is a story I've heard. They were people once before they lost their bodies and became the voices I hear in trees. Thick-skinned and Germanic, they stuck close to the earth,

planted groves around their houses and held on through the long night of giving birth, the night when neighbors saw their windows lit with low uncertain lights, felt the air clench like bedsheets

in the grip of a woman's labor, and never heard the cries they kept between their teeth. Come morning, they carried a tiny bundle to the grove, and then, the story goes, the first small voice

began. Today, we drive from my grandmother's funeral to the house where my mother was born, passing abandoned farms, collapsing sheds, empty husks of houses where sunflowers push bright

heads through the bones of porches. Unhinged Grandmother's door leans open, and I believe she sees us from trees. Stepping through the gauze of her rooms, we listen at broken windows.

II.

The land pushes away
and we are above it, becoming small,

becoming a rush of wind and sound
that dissipates into nothing,
leaving a trail of vapor
across the fish-eye lens of sky.
Degrees of separation,
a series of brief shots through portholes:
first the gridwork of streets,
then the fringe of country
rising, swallowing the place
we came from, finally the horizon
draws its circle closed.
One geometry encompasses another,
the hollows and crevices of a hand tightening
on plow or gunbarrel or coffin
lost within the hollows and crevices
of a river valley. Beneath us,
the Platte's frayed channels braid
between sandbars, threads of our pasts
twisting into the quick shadow
of this flight. Seen again,
they are filaments of sky, cracks
in the world's old face where infinity
glories through. I don't know how
to fuse a progression from one
way of seeing to another. My parents' bodies
recede like islands into the curvature
of the Midwest. In a room five miles below,
my grandfather leans on his wife's empty chair,
lifts a hand he's not sure is his
and touches fingers that can't close
to the shadows of willows
trembling on the glass of his window.

III.

I want to wake the years
before my birth, or wake myself
where I sleep in my ancestors'
eyes, to rise and circulate
like currents through a dawning
winter sky, entering the childhood
groves of my grandfather
so near the century's dawn
light is not used to being seen.

rings the bells of trees, and my soul
contracts and pulls free
inside its sheath of skin,
withdraws from the ports of exchange--
fingertips, eyes and lips--
migrating up interior valleys
until it reaches a white sea
of drifts shifting across plains.
There, it wanders beyond sensation,
unmoored from the body's
differentiations of pleasure or pain.
Empty, I rise from my bed.

*

At 4 a.m. the river
cracks and steams.
Drunks with beards of ice
stumble and lie down
under bridges. Their eyelids
freeze shut.

Offices and banks
crawl into their vaults
and lock themselves
in drawers. The interstate
conducts currents of darkness
between the coasts.

Past the smoking mill
the last house in town
falls into its emptiness
like a face turned inward,
a stranger staring back
into its own vacant rooms.

*

Dawn winds erase the world's
brightening shapes, lift creek beds
and quiet hollows, haul them up howling
into air. The winds tilt them, twist them
and break them loose into a rioting

of earth and sky. Rivers, a valley, even
my own fields and the rooms of my house
surge through the glazed windows
of my eyes. I am lying in my bed
and the faces of my children lean in
so near their breath is on my cheek.
I am moving through the sky toward country
where I no longer know myself, circling
the edge of some interior plain
older than the origins of my blood,
where voices stronger than family
are calling out my true name.