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### Walking Two Landscapes| Poems

Greg Glazner

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WALKING TWO LANDSCAPES

poems by

Greg Glazner

B.A., Hardin-Simmons University, 1981

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1984

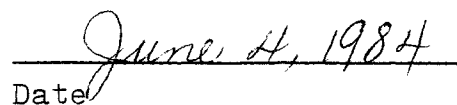
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## Acknowledgements

Poetry: "The Valley" and "New Stars"

Portland Review: "Listening for Nothing as a Boy" and  
"Meditation in Late August Drought"

Willow Springs: "After Sunset"

SOUTH



## A Rural Anatomy of the Soul

"it is the settled conviction that nature is in fact  
 much simpler and barer than it appears to us in experience."  
 --Iredell Jenkins, from "The Postulate  
 of an Impoverished Reality"

Waist-deep in a weed field cleared  
 of the last squat mesquite and post-oak,  
 even the wrist-thick stumps grubbed out,  
 home for August drought  
 on snake-crushed, pump-jacked land,  
 along a string of steel coyote traps I first saw it,  
 gray motion, rushing out of its wake  
 along the terrace, low shouldered,  
 wolf-faced. With every colt that disappeared, every calf,  
 a local myth was building.  
 I'd been half afraid to walk the land,  
 something running loose out there, hunger  
 way past anybody's knowing or control. I waited out  
 the leaps and headlong thrashing, wanting its  
 ripped anatomy, and sighted it in the crosshairs--  
 the impossible long fur in gray mats,  
 ears raised suddenly as it slowed, nosing lightfooted  
 and ghostly past a carcass, head turned  
 to face the full stench of my scent. I fired  
 and saw it jolt, acres of gold heat rolling on every side,  
 and lost it in the high grass.  
 And after an hour of circling, imagined anyway  
 what I had come for, ants ticking  
 in the bloodstream, hard cells  
 in the flesh, in the shelled bodies  
 the shattered particles of longing and fear.  
 I abandoned it for dead, found shade  
 in an empty workshack, and slept.

(stanza break)

And face to the floor, I dreamed,  
 my black, imprinted absence laboring  
 out from under me, wing-spread  
 and enormous, despising the million  
 quiverings of shined hair,  
 my blazed breathing, the random churning  
 as I fell along the hysterical lossway.  
 It struck, fed until it had  
 its picked simplicity,  
 and collapsed back under me,  
 fleshless, under clean bones.  
 Then an old woodscent in the blackness,  
 sand-grit, the violent  
 disembodied flight of memory,  
 and I was lost over the dirt roads  
 years back, into someone's farmhouse.  
 The weight of my limbs was pressing me,  
 ravelled curtains above me thick with gold light,  
 clothes laid out at the foot of the bed.  
 There was the smell of death,  
 I dressed and cracked the great, brass-knobbed door--  
 the worn, gray hush of Sunday dress,  
 the farmed out, drought-drawn faces softened with grief,  
 a big hand motioning. The heavy door opened  
 into a reverance beyond me,  
 meat laid out on the oak table,  
 host of the flesh, flight bones of the hunter.  
 I laid a pale sliver cold  
 and limber as my death across my tongue,  
 my body suddenly whitened and frail,  
 and rose into a huge, weeping woman's arms  
 beside the window, the grief at her face  
 unspeakable, dead vines woven into the iron  
 foliage of the railings, all of that flat distance  
 drawing me into the emptied field, death risen into wonder,  
 a whirlwind passing over, lifting cotton bolls, oil cans,  
 dust.

(stanza break)

The eyes open,  
the old faces vaporize, the workshack  
empties itself into the day,  
fieldbirds winding-in the distance  
over weeds and one long roil of phone lines,  
wasps climbing into the chinks of light.  
The floorboards groan as I stand,  
a loose nail rolls, rust-shagged  
red as cedar, the whole shack  
sags its rotten wood, turning its architecture loose.  
Some unnamable smell clings  
like wet sawdust to my shirt,  
clings even as I walk home by black wire, steel posts,  
opening the gate, creaking out a question, what  
have I known outside desire, a few head of slaughter-cattle  
nosing along the fence.  
I stand and let the stiff grass blow through,  
a seam rippling in the distance, wind-flaw  
or hidden animal passing.  
What have I despised, gut-shot  
and breathing the risen bloodscent,  
the hard need hot in its belly,  
the ants rising with their husks of food,  
the butcherbird settling,  
piercing a beetle to the post, leaving it,  
as I sit in droughtgrass loud for miles  
beyond me, over fear rooted out  
and passing dead as understanding,  
over the steel sickness of the terminal mind,  
the hot wind in hard gusts now,  
the land teeming on its own conditions  
even as it parches, even as it rots,  
as the posts shake,  
as red sand grinds the sky,  
as the fence rocks in waves,  
as the field blown with loose dirt and locust hulls  
lets go into the storm.

## After Sunset

The snow crunches underfoot,  
ankle-deep and furrowed  
on the plowed land,  
no other sound  
as I cross tracks  
and imagine deer running  
toward the thicket  
where the church once stood.

Between stars and on blue  
snow, along the drifted edge  
of memory, the light  
tints like old glass. Years  
catch in the clear spaces.

I stood in this field  
as a boy, and the sky  
was a huge arch  
hollowed out and abandoned  
by wind, full of blue light  
like Sundays in the wooden  
balcony. Something pure  
dissolved where it touched  
my hands, the steam  
of my breath. I saw it  
fall for years, through miles  
of air, between the last  
stars as they showed, through  
Christ crucified in stained-  
glass, always shining  
and going out, hidden  
like the shape of clouds  
passing under the dark sky.

(new stanza)

At the center  
of the frozen pond,  
snow lies in the shape  
of an hourglass.  
I think of snow  
falling equally among  
the houses and the hidden  
deer, the buck standing, two doe  
on their folded legs,  
and a fawn trotting near them,  
all of them watching  
the snow fall, knowing it  
by the cold feel  
of their coats, and I think  
of how it buries everything  
except its own  
shape on the ice, of these  
white rows and how the earth  
is opened  
to sow the wheat  
and receive those who eat it.

I stand at the edge  
of my shadow, breath  
freezing in my beard. Still  
in the fields, at the center  
of the frozen pond, snow  
is whiter than the moon,  
something irregular as snow  
falling into it.  
I watch the dim  
sparkle of the drifts,  
not one thing fixed  
against the cold  
and flawed light. An owl

circles into the stars,  
its image distorted  
on the white fields. The wings,  
wide and deliberate  
on the ice, beat  
like something fallen  
trying to fly  
with a body of snow.

Listening for Nothing as a Boy

While cattle cars and flatcars  
ran repeating themselves out of town,  
into the dark farmland,  
I would wait, until the clatter  
rolled back like rain  
and finally lost itself in wind.

There, it became a thing  
of my own making, lost  
as the shape it took  
along the long curve  
at the edge of town,  
though it seemed to echo back  
when the flagchain rang  
the schoolyard pole at random.

I would close my eyes in bed  
and become my father  
under the railroad bridge at night,  
where as a boy he dropped his line  
between stars and huge catfish  
he never caught, and watched the trains  
pass over, and saw the brakeman  
in his frame of light, writing  
the day's work in the logbook, smoking  
as he watched the stars sharpen  
out of town, feeling himself pulled  
through the rich, black middle of the land.

A Couple Walking Through Mission Hills Apartment Complex  
Abilene, Texas

What counts about them isn't how I  
feel, but how, when you picked up this page  
half out of boredom, hard-eyed or generous  
these lovers became you and me  
embracing, silver cans scattered in the gutters,  
new cars sliding by, memory flaming forward  
base of the skull toward the face,  
flames all along out arms. Poor-eyed, solemn,  
we're slumped together in the courtyard,  
me already leaving, stunted mesquites,  
grass worn to nothing from the summer  
ball games, brittle in the heat. We know  
what it is we want, gold all around the walks  
as clothes wash and charcoal  
whitens, kids from every building  
churning in the smokey grass. How purely  
it dissolves. Out of the bad jobs and daily  
motion, it is the love of longing  
binding us--both of us drenched in the restaurant's  
grease, another day's petty incidents  
seeping out of our hands where we touch.  
I'm here, leaving but not gone, and even  
as I tell you this, the low sun setting everything  
afire, I know it's nothing of my life  
you would have come here for,  
but maybe some agonized drift  
of tenderness, like the one  
we wander into by mistake  
beside the laundry. Look there now,  
aren't the ruffled sparrows still scattering  
over us in the gusts of red sand,



our hands relaxed and smelling of soap,  
memory gathering us in, touching everything off  
piece by piece like so many brilliant leaves?

NORTH

## The Valley

begins against the  
confines of the skin. The snow  
falls through falling light.

The mind, when crows swirl  
in the snowfall, turns like a caged wren.

The air flakes like soft  
ash, it spins the high, black forms,  
frees them into white.

--

Splitting a thick pine log, the fire  
blazes, two days since your death.

Daylight, through falling  
snow, through the window, falls  
gray. Children wave

as if to swim the air, voices  
blurred in the wind. Flames

reflected in each pane  
swirl and rinse their glass arms. Minutes  
splinter in the room.

--

In a hall dingy with old light,  
you're talking to someone

younger, who speaks  
with my voice. You joke that you're not  
writing, couldn't scratch

your name in the sand with a sharp  
stick. You both laugh. The sound rings

(stanza break)

flat against the bare walls.  
Leaving, you drag a stiff leg,  
huff through your single

lung, swimming your years, the air  
thick as if with snow or dust.

--

Emptiness, we say,  
forgetting the fine, white ash,  
the intricate dance

of shadows when the mother  
calls at dusk. Someone sings

a deserted town to life  
with grief, claims only  
to weave splintered wood

with sounds a little warmer  
than wind. He isn't telling

everything. What shacks  
could ring with words, lean and fall  
and go on ringing?

--

In a faint, blue arc, somewhere  
a powerline breaks. The room

goes dark. The pages,  
pale and flawless as in  
memory, wash their words

in the moonlight, and the valley  
finds all its registers,

(stanza break)

a dog catching the wind  
in its throat, bone-white  
wind chimes flailing as if sound

were marrow, the loose  
doorjamb singing, singing all night.

--in memory of Richard Hugo

Under the Orange Street Bridge

somebody lights up a smoke  
and starts to mutter. The rain blows,  
he takes something off his shoulder,  
crushed oil cloth or trash bag  
holding what he owns, and leaves it,  
the cigarette reddening  
and his voice picking up.  
A few grunted notes rise  
over the sound of rain  
and he bends over the river  
shaking out his hair, one sun-ridden day  
of loose grass, sand, live black specks  
dropping into his reflection, gone.  
He coughs or laughs,  
his blackened face broken underneath  
by rock, from above  
by blunted rain, tosses in the butt  
and watches himself there,  
carrying nothing and his features erased.  
All around him, big drops swollen up  
on the pigeon-streaked, rusted beams  
plink and come clean in the black water.

A Short Hike Under Moving Shadows

I ease across the first  
dry rocks, where old roots  
dip into the river, gesturing  
in the uneven current, and slip in  
up to my knees, the edges  
of my loose shirt translucent  
in the sunlight. The absolute  
clearness of the water disappears  
where I stand, the shadows it leaves  
change shape on the smoothed rocks,  
and the current circles a new way  
without admitting me.

Across it a few yellow leaves  
scatter on a short trail, even this  
a chasm of shadow, chasm  
of light. The huge birches shine.  
The shadows ripple all over me.  
Whatever I'm looking for seems  
hidden under all the surfaces.

A seed's white sail lights up  
as it drifts by, the kind  
Jesse once showed me.  
The light I remember  
is as brilliant as this.

                  He's five,  
and I'm trying to read  
on the front steps. He sits  
down beside me and says,  
"Look at this," holding out  
a chuted seed. "Wanna see it fly?"

(no stanza break)

He ungrips it and grins--"There  
it goes." He points at a moth  
and tells me their wings  
make them fly. They have magic  
powder on their wings.  
I believe him. I ask him  
what magic this light has,  
and he just smiles.  
He doesn't understand. He runs  
into the yard and finds  
the bud of a wild daisy  
and brings it to me. He says,  
"Look what's in here," and pries it  
open to the yellow heart.

I walk through slices of yellow light, the maples  
already turning, a leaf rocking  
through the air beside me. The weeds  
shine, and the bushes, and it isn't  
enough, isn't what I'm looking for.  
The bees, lost somewhere  
in the wildflowers, hum. The crows  
call out in their baffling  
language. I look up and watch wind  
move the shined limbs, chunks  
of sky opening through the leaves  
and hanging moss, and branches simmering  
where a gold-bellied squirrel  
darts out of the light.





## November

Weeks ago the last flutter  
of red, now rain  
has stopped falling

from the knuckled oak  
budded out with gray light  
where the water hangs.

Smoke rises from the houses,  
unravelling where no wind  
takes hold or breaks away.

Past the mist,  
still, like shadow,  
something dark falls empty

on the footbridge  
in the late, clear light  
you have imagined.

The first wind rising in the bone,  
the hunger where the red pith  
stars settling to nothing,

calls you without reason  
along this fresh rot of needles.  
The curled limbs of diseased pines

never speak the names  
of magpies, the startle  
of white-patched wings

(new stanza)

always before the voice  
from high branches. This air,  
heavy with water, seems

to surface just above you.  
It was the same at night  
when lamplight fell

from a window  
through the thin hedge,  
yellow in the fluid air.

Overhead, the bird  
drops its hard voice  
and rings beyond itself,

beyond you, the sound  
sharp as the thought of light  
defining trees and long shadows.

## Obstructed View

It is huge and vacant  
yet the trout flares up suddenly,  
whips its tail, vanishes  
below the swirled surface, water pouring  
over boulders, over green shadows  
through which something must eventually  
rise without warning, as now,  
yards of still air below the bridge  
break in the clamor  
of a jay's wings, the bird  
circling out of sight, girders of shadow  
rushing over him as he flutters,  
and takes hold somewhere below us.  
A thrashing on the surface, the white spray,  
by the time we see it, lost in the falling lint  
of cottonwoods. Some small body  
slides against the bottom--fish, dropped rock--  
glare streaming across the wide current  
which defies us.

It is the mind stuttering even  
at its own designs, and I remember  
circling an icy runway once at night,  
the city shining like jeweled metal,  
each stud and sliver fitted  
and polished over, the whole of it  
shapeless as a flung handful of coins. Later,  
crawling through traffic, we passed  
along our private strands of meaning,  
this bridge across a frozen river, 5th Street,  
our porchlight glaring on the bricks.  
Then the yellow kitchen wall where I leaned

against you, your warm hands  
on the small of my back,  
everything little and dark tangled  
in your hair, in our breathing,  
the glittering whole of it still lit  
in our minds, as one at a time,  
across the shined miles of pavement, the houselights  
began to go out.

TWO LANDSCAPES

## River Scene on a Morning Without Fog

We lean on the bridge-rail,  
 wax-wings churning deep  
 along the river, over old tires  
 and newspapers and the gray water.  
 We listen, a distant car, wings,  
 the river moving, the birds gliding  
 through a plane of light. Dazzling and tremendous,  
 Whitman said, how quick the sunrise  
would kill me, and we stand not  
 saying a word, as if the heart didn't shine  
 and take wing also.

Behind us, the precise  
 footfalls of hard-soled shoes, and for a minute,  
 they're walking into the south  
 a year ago, a couple passing through the slums  
 without speaking, clicking their shoes  
 between the gallery and the motel room,  
 Munch's dissolving landscapes, the cathedrals  
 by Monet, Rothko's huge chambers  
 of ochre light lodged behind their teeth.  
 The blacks stop talking, turn toward them,  
 then lean back into their language,  
 fluent in every joint of their bodies,  
 and the wax-wings turn abruptly,  
 lighting in a single birch. A hiker  
 sleeps on his pack below them, ravel-shirted,  
 undisturbed, as if he had dreamed  
 the tree, the birds, the rust-eaten sign  
 laid out beside him, which says Cafe,  
 the plane of light tilting into the river.  
 He turns over, yawns, stretches his arms,  
 birds flashing from limb to limb in his sleep.  
 Then the sound of something very soft and light  
 beating into a hundred pieces, and they rise,  
 ragged as flames letting go of their branches.

## A Seine

Wind back and forth  
   in the last cypress leaves  
 letting its own shape go,  
  
 lifting a few seed pods, old paper  
 alive in the shined cat's eyes,  
   settling  
 through husks of dead grass,  
 is dustlit and empty of intent. And just keeps  
 sifting the bare hedges and limbs,  
  
 touching them from every side,  
   for as long  
 as it can touch them, the way I do  
 when I remember anything,  
  
 berries ripe in late August,  
 the tolling bell of a Baptist church.  
  
 Then my uncle's arms are around me again,  
  
 his eyes glazed a last time in the sunlight,  
 his young daughters in the shade, counting the hard  
 mesquite beans,  
   heat drenching everything.

And though I know the reason, I'm not considering  
 why he looks us each in the eye with such  
 purpose,  
   even as I grin and turn my head  
 to watch anything else, the reeling of flies,  
 ants groping in the cracked walk,  
  
 I remember damp stone out back of the farmhouse,

(new stanza)



my voice falling, blurry,  
 two bright coins dropping into the well.  
 The black water ripples,

is smooth,

I hear the shuffling of my own shoes  
 and he's hugging us like always, stooped  
 over us on my grandparents' concrete porch.

\*

And years earlier, my mother wakes us hours  
 before dawn, spreads a blanket on the lawn and we all  
 watch thousands of meteors  
 fall across the fixed stars  
 of 1966, silent fireworks, I tell myself.

Even then, I know there's more to it than the white  
 flaming and going out,

or the way a low one

streaks below the horizon,

and for minutes sears some

black, imagined underside of the past.

And though I don't think of how they'll  
 vanish in the clean, dawn light,

and all day long,

invisibly, burn themselves out like faces  
 disintegrating as they touch the blank light of day,

I shield my eyes, stars  
 falling a hundred times a second, grin  
 when I see what I'm doing,

and look down

to see what faint, electric flashes  
 might light up across our faces.

\*

Watching fog settle into traffic,  
 trying to recall the features of a certain  
 gray-haired man,

I'm telling myself  
 a lost face won't spread like smoke  
 into old light, or eyes sink like iron  
 wafers into cloudy water,

as if I could  
 peel off this soot-colored winter sunlight  
 and see by some human lustering,

as if a sentimental lie  
 were better than to touch the truth  
 however gently.

And those Leonid meteors,  
 burned out or whirling years away  
 over nothing but a little loose dust,

for no good reason,  
 light up anyway, my hands tingling  
 as I remember.

\*

Thin tines grating across the lawn,  
 the dusty leaf-smell rising, the rake  
 is big as I am,

and Mr. Sims turns a long  
 polished rock over and over in his hands,  
 watching me work from his chair. He's 82.

His wife died six months ago,  
 sand beginning to gather in the empty feeders  
 wind-rocked in his oaks. When he leans up

to write my check, nothing shows in his face,  
 though I'm sure he's sad to his thin

bones. He tears it out so slowly I can

hear each strand of paper break,

and puts it crimped and fluttering into my hand.

\*

A little glint in his eyes, lips pressed together,  
 he's telling me it's the skin we're born with,  
it's our own shape gone slack and white,

though his lips don't move. And though I'm listening,  
 there's some other sense still hoping to be  
 cut loose, if just for an instant,

like so much

breath in winter.

I remember leaves spilling  
 into the gray river a few weeks ago,  
 the water wind-roughed and murky,

and notice a dark shape below the surface,  
 a pair of jeans hooked

on a submerged branch, the waist  
 wide-open to the current, a pocket wrong-side out,  
 ballooned like a small, white lung.

Below,

bleached legs shifting like the body  
 of a huge, sleeping fish.

\*

Some nights I wake up suddenly,  
 wind outside like running water, the room cold,  
 a cube of moonlight fluid with gray clouds,

and know the lax, heavy feel  
 of the body sleeping in its skin,  
 how patient it is while it waits,

forget,

it says to soothe me, cool shapes  
drifting over as they change.

Even now, listening to the blue  
chamber of a fluorescent lamp  
humming back all the years I can remember,

I know it has its own, cold designs,

I know

how completely it owns me,

my hands

white on the desk, face lit in the black pane,  
frost all around it sharp with the geometry of its blooms.

\*

Sometimes, maples holding nothing but a little wind,

And I admire the way they have no use  
for the past, and pass under them  
full of the hard, useless truth,

and sometimes, mornings when I walk with my wife  
in the cold, wearing the coat my uncle left me,  
the heavy collar buttoned all the way,

I feel the heat welling into an old shape,  
all the creases of warmth  
pressing me through my sleeves.

I know the way the weight  
gathered along his joints

as he crooked his arms

to fumble with the black buttons

or reached

down into the frost for the morning paper,

I hear

everything with clarity, her breathing in her scarf,  
the swishing layers of all our clothes.

His oldest girl was five. Sometimes I tighten up  
and feel even in my gloves the criminal smoothness  
of what's rubbed numb and ordinary in my hands.

\*

And when I think of what is lost  
and hold it with the hands  
I'm allowed to touch things with,

I feel all its sides,  
the brief, irrational crackling

rising off my skin

as I smooth the cat's white fur back,  
slow along the small ribs, the rounded  
muscles of her haunches, and rub her thin ears  
in my fingers.

Even now, wind outside  
shifting gently through the brittle leaves,  
another face lights itself,

a few scraps of newsprint  
trembling in the fence

the way they have a dozen times  
when George Pate next door,  
stepping out to feed the squirrels,

uncrumples one  
and looks it over hard, as if to find  
under the ripped voice shaking with words  
his wife's name written there.

I've seen him tuck one in his pocket,  
loss wrinkled in his hands, wind in his jacket,  
pull out a black nut and offer it for minutes,

(stanza break)

as if anymore, it was that task or nothing,  
to hold it out gently in the crust of his skin.

And when the squirrel takes it and is gone, I've seen him  
watch the bare fence, letting the breeze  
touch him through his clothes,

and I can tell by his eyes  
he's thinking of nothing,

light falling in the dark rings  
of the wood,

as he takes a long draw on his pipe,  
tasting the smoke in his breath  
a long time before he lets it go.

## Walking Two Landscapes

for Ann

1

I step out into the cold air  
and watch chunks of snow  
glint and drip from the pines.  
I pick up a last birch leaf--  
it's ice-cruste'd,  
red-ribbed--  
everywhere woodsmoke dissolving in clear light,  
and knock two more sticks of wood together,  
ice shattering in the sharp air.

The dry weeds, sunbleached, stiff,  
resonate over an inch of snow.  
Magpies settle  
onto the fencerow, and call out,  
and I know nothing to answer them.  
They pace the rails, cackling,  
glancing sidelong at me, and fly.  
Flashes of my face  
scatter in their black eyes.

2

Sweltering one summer in the Texas heat,  
I gnashed my Baptist faith  
until it snapped like a tether,  
and walked the flat streets emptied.  
Pecan trees waved the leaves  
they might hold five more months,  
and the thick skin of paint  
cracked and scaled from the houses.  
Wysteria blooms draped in clusters  
from the fences, like blue  
grapes I wanted to consume.  
Know only the blooming when they fall,  
I thought, smooth-faced and nineteen,

the wind already rushing past me  
 carrying all the years I'd live.

3

Under small, sharp edged bits of light  
 which might have gone out centuries ago,  
 or which already have exploded  
 into novas our children  
 will live too soon to see,  
 we walk our frozen path to the mountain,  
 certain, for this night,  
 of the gentleness of stars,  
 as their gauzed light  
 drifts onto us, and rises again,  
 ghostly, in snowlight.

And under rough maples full of stars,  
 through crusted layers  
 where everything we love scars  
 its names across us  
 the way I cut mine in live oak,  
for always, with my first lover's,  
 afraid, even then, of the day I'd be a liar--  
 we cut the old words a new way,  
 and sheets of thin light press into us,  
 and even the chill voice rattling the weeds,  
 rising, as if hearing our words,  
 to tell us These you will  
abandon, or die from,  
 pushes us closer.

A horse loose from the stall  
 climbs ahead of us, head down,  
 black coat shined silver,  
 and trots into the clearing,



the night flowing perfectly  
into the tatters of his mane.  
He stands and looks  
without desire,  
without knowing what he sees,

and disappears into the trees again.  
We glimpse the white ankles,  
a piece of his back, and once,  
his whole broad head, the night air  
silvered in his breath. For minutes,  
the low branches rustle and break.

4

When it is silent  
and the tall grass has given up  
each sliver of warmth,  
we stop, our breath lighting up,  
the smell of pine sap  
cutting the cold air,  
and watch a few clouds drift over.

They ooze from their linked shapes,  
slow, thick, as if they too had flowed  
from a split in the crusted wood,  
shadowing us as they pass  
under the new moon,  
now white-edged, blooming out of themselves,  
now lungshaped and warm.

## New Stars

A wasp drifts against the high window,  
its flight a loose scrollwork, the wing-hum wavering  
over me in the dark yard, filling the pane  
as if glass ringing with praise  
would melt, or enough singing transfigure  
an ordinary room, its nightstand and closed book,  
the small lamp that blinds each  
segment of the eyes. Still,  
out of the useless thrumming,  
the sound goes up, from arclight  
into the thick air  
along the black rim of mountains  
where the slow, unrisen moon  
smears the low clouds.

Once, rising  
early from a frame house on the plains,  
a month of sandstorms already ground into the teeth  
of the picket fence, I stood on the porch and listened,  
the house creaking in the wind as always,  
as it had the night my father lost his brother.  
He had put down the phone without speaking,  
holding some other voice back in his breath,  
as if what that voice wanted to sing was too  
bitter to flow across the tongue.  
And listening to the wooden porch wear down in the wind,  
I understood for the first time  
something was settling into us, a constant  
silt in the veins my father couldn't stop,  
and I knew we would be filled completely.  
I waited, the dark pouring in from the south  
across silos and tin roofs, resinous as a low  
wail bowed across the guy wires,  
until the air crumbled into the first  
dust of ordinary light.

(new stanza)

And years later, along the snaked  
turns of a logging road,  
in a sweep of the headlights,  
I saw a badger's eyes smoulder  
from a crushed skull, blind with the fear  
of nothing living. A hundred elk  
turned their coal-eyed stares  
back up the mountain, and ran  
hip-deep in snow, the young  
calling out behind them  
in high-pitched, swanlike voices.

Now the lit end of a cigarette  
wavering across the road,  
the cadences of words  
and a single firefly,  
light, nothing,  
higher light,  
drifting out of the known, almost inaudible pitch  
of bones wearing in their case of flesh,  
into the dark sky.

And as if someone else  
were looking through me, I forget  
what a star is, and see the huge  
black bodies of horses  
stacked to the cloudbanks, the sky dotted  
with the silver light of their eyes,  
and the indifferent way the grasses  
shift in the wind begins to sicken me.  
I think instead of how my grandfather's  
cigar-end reddened when we'd stop laughing  
and lean back in our chairs,  
as an insect disappears  
into that black mass where I  
suddenly want to climb,  
the clouds still drifting as a few old eyes  
close, and new ones open overhead.

(new stanza)

Another voice seeps through me  
steeped in bits of gnashed teeth and salt water,  
the few bars my uncle hummed  
as he plowed the dust of a drought-crumbled  
field of the 1950's, my great-grandmother's  
gravelly voice as she sat alone in her den, sewing gray  
stuffed animals before Christmas, calling each of us  
by name. It is a voice useless to bring rain  
or give the dead their old eyes back,  
and I sing with it often, bitter tasting and strong,  
and it wakes the sky. The horses shift  
all night making room for us, the farthest stars  
glittering like dust in their bodies, and all the dust  
in my bloodstream aches. Nothing I can say  
will stop them, not these words,  
not the ones I'll praise them with  
when I breathe out a last warmed  
scrap of the sky, and lie down  
filled among them, as someone,  
maybe my son, turns out the light  
and notices the clear black sky, the stars.