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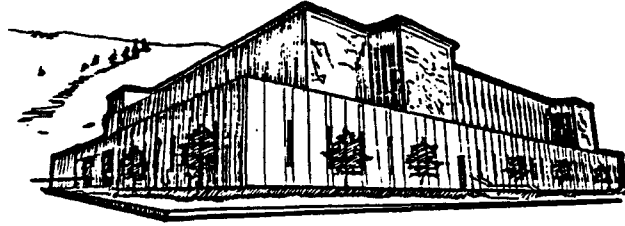
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University of  
**Montana**



THE CONSOLATION OF PHYSICS

By

Robin Luz Hamilton

B.A. University of Montana, 1971

M.E. University of Montana 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1992

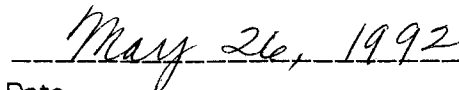
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# The Consolation of Physics

Poems by

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Robin Hamilton

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to the publications in which the following poems either have appeared or will appear.

*CutBank*: "Blue and Green"

*Northwest Poets and Artists Calendar, 1993*:  
"Autumn on the Great Plains"

For my father, who sang to me,  
and my mother, who taught me to create,  
and Peggy, who inspires me.



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1

This is What Comforts

## Blue and Green

Her favorite present is a blue glazed bowl  
filled with limes, like leaves curled in a palm of wave.

She touches her blue dress, sees the gray lake,  
but in mid-sentence she forgets his name.

Behind her, the huge trunk of a ponderosa pine  
disappears into long-needed branches.

In the house, upstairs, behind the chifforobe,  
hides a trunk filled with her dead brothers' things:

a football trophy, several textbooks, a school annual,  
three photos that show how brothers can look like sons

of different parents. Her father, the patriarch  
in a cream suit, will be dead in two years.

Her mother will live lonely with her biases.  
Now, surrounded by ceremony, the name of the man

she hopes to love escapes her. She hears  
rain on a green tent in Brittany, sees

the cabin on Thompson River, blue water, feels  
his strong hands. She remembers his name.

"The way we order represents the way we think."

-Steven Jay Gould

This is What Comforts

We learn early that things with four legs  
 have sharper teeth and never take off  
 their coats. We learn about fire and warmth,  
 what burns and what comforts. We explore  
 the world with our mouths, pull tongues  
 across taste and texture, spit out  
 what gives no pleasure. Distinctions  
 become difficult, categories specific but abstract:  
     early flowers that are also purple:  
         crocus, hyacinth, lilac;  
 people we respect:  
     Dick Hugo, Ghandi, Joan Benoit;  
 reasons to be married:  
     shared meals, an end to loneliness,  
     freedom to depend on someone else,  
     a bed warmed by another's dreams.

This is how we make sense of a world  
 as complex as spring, societies,  
 or the way two people live together.  
 My wife, according to Jung, is an extrovert  
 who validates her day with words. She needs  
 to share each day's intricacies with Nancy or Vicki  
 and together they remake the world  
 with the balm of speech. I, an introvert,  
 reorder my life in quiet thought or poetry,  
 relish the difference between imply and infer,  
 solstice and equinox, skin and sheet.  
 We try to teach how words can shape a thought  
 and bloom in action. We believe  
 a bus full of medicine, food, and tools for Nicaragua  
 makes a difference, though the White House  
 calls such aid "intervention."

Peggy, we complement each other  
the way magnets do, the way force fields  
circle the earth, or green confirms spring.  
We need to know why warm light  
wakes us hours earlier in April.  
This caress means years and miles  
as well as passion. Every night  
evening Venus shifts retrograde  
and in June shines a morning star.

In Place of Chocolates: A Valentine  
for Peggy

Though I know you love  
a rich heart inside  
sweet dark, I'll try  
to please you more with treats  
saved from other seasons,  
hand-wrapped in bright paper.

In silver are six-mile runs.  
Dissolve one slowly  
under your tongue and feel  
deliciously relaxed, virtuous.

Gold hides fine summer days  
at Swan Lake, when you ski  
water or glass and lean  
your shoulder to cold, blue, and deep.

The rest have French names  
I can't pronounce, but the pictures  
on the wrappers show  
afternoon in a Beaune vineyard,  
winter in Chamonix, spring in Brest.

Save the one wrapped in white  
for a day when rain  
obscures the Mission Mountains  
and your appetite is lost in doubts.

Don't eat it. Remember the scent  
of an early hyacinth. Smooth the wrapper  
and read it over and over  
as if it were a poem  
from someone who loves you.  
This poem. This someone.

Harvest  
for Peggy

When your brother says, "The barley's ripe,"  
You hang up the phone, pack bib overalls  
and old shirts, drive 300 miles east  
through mountains to flat, dry land, Rudyard,  
the family farm. Our house is empty but calm  
without your anger at an imperfect world,  
a drawer that won't close, a stubborn stain,  
or colleagues who don't teach  
as hard as you do.

When the winter wheat ripens  
I join you to drive truck behind the combines.  
A north wind blows August cold  
and Scott fears hail that can shell grain  
wasted to the ground.  
You both worry. Two years ago a storm  
flattened 200 acres of good wheat.  
Scot and I hammer all afternoon in the shop  
replacing sickle sections broken on rocks  
that bloom every year between rows.  
You watch gray sky from the kitchen.

But the rain drifts east, across the Bear Paw Mountains,  
and you wrestle the old Massey-Ferguson  
around a strip, grin dirty from the cab.  
I throw you a wheat kiss.  
Weather has held for the first good harvest  
in three years since your father died.  
Scott needs grain bins bulging full  
all winter and the price up twenty cents.  
to feel finally comfortable as father and farmer  
instead of little brother, last son.  
You're still shaping yourself: French teacher,



athlete, woman strong in a man's world.  
You are both learning to live  
without the help of Clarence Patrick,  
who taught you sun and rain are both important.

Rows of stubble point toward Canada  
or west to the Sweetgrass Hills. I watch  
two machines grind confidently north  
while last sun slants hot across the strip  
we'll finish in darkness. The last load  
groans to the elevator and the sample reads  
14.6% protein, 13% moisture. Good news.  
Hose down the equipment, pick chaff  
from your hair and clothes, enjoy the last  
of the August heat. Take this harvest warmth,  
hard kernel reward of hard work,  
to your teaching, to everything you do.

## Cold Night

My wife's round warmth  
and two brandies cannot dull  
my infected body to sleep,  
sinuses clogged like a creek  
in December, ice accumulating  
until sluggish water gathers  
enough weight to swell  
frozen pastures liquid glazed  
and even stout horses slip  
behind the squalid barn.

This helplessness defeats me,  
though I stumble through the day  
inside my brown paper bag head  
snuffling and blowing  
toward dinner, Monday night football,  
tissue, and yoga for expecting parents.  
Peggy bulges the bed warm  
but I cannot sleep, anchored  
fevered beside her, one nostril free  
to breath. I cough thick phlegm,  
spit, and walk dark windows and floors  
until grey light mumbles me  
to fragile sleep.

## The Consolation of Physics

Lately, I have been reading theoretical physics.  
I am disturbed to learn that laws of science  
do not distinguish between past and future.  
Leaves outside my window fall, have always fallen,

will fall. My retirement plans are absurd. My mistakes  
are always with me. But Newton provides direction  
and names it: entropy. Disorder increases with time.  
This year I could see my whole life fall apart,

but I will not see a broken bowl fly up off the floor  
and reassemble itself on the table. A blue bowl  
on a checkered tablecloth is high order. I understand how  
Heisenberg proved uncertainty is all we really know.

Next week my wife will be sedated for surgery to remove  
the tumor swelling her pituitary big as two thumbs.  
Growth hormone blocks ovulation. Her wedding ring cuts  
and her shoes pinch. The surgeon will start the knife

under her upper lip, set aside the cartilage knob  
of nose, follow nasal passages to the phenoidal vacuum  
behind the eyes, above the roof of her mouth.  
Then tiny, cunning tools can carve away the intrusion.

I hope and wait. Physics posits a consolation: gravity.  
Even light bends to the pull of another body  
and speed warps time. Each orbit balances another.  
Everything else in our universe hurtles away,

our pasts, plans, stars, galaxies, but friends  
are close as touch. All hope pulls toward center,  
a state of "infinite density," a singularity, a birth.  
I have never doubted a beginning.

## At the Health Club

My feet pound the banked track round  
again, 22 laps a mile, circling  
bodies stretched in bright nylon tights,  
racks of dumbbells, bars, clever  
machines of balanced weights,  
levers, oiled cogs and chains  
linking us to January, renewed effort.  
Every lap seems fast in so small a space,  
so humid with resolution.  
I promise to drink less, maintain  
my fading fitness, not just for vanity now,  
but because the son we expect in March  
will never see his father young.  
I want our lives to overlap  
years more than adolescence.

Wall posters of heroic figures pose  
with no skin, each muscle group  
a different color, show how  
any body may be improved,  
any weakness remedied by exercise.  
Serious builders shuffle steel disks  
after each set of grunting lifts,  
add or subtract exact kilograms  
for precise, sculpted effect.  
Their optimism inspires me  
but I have no desire to occupy  
more space, carry more weight,  
however shapely, though I believe  
work sweated today blossoms  
next month as taut abdominals  
or springy steps up three flights of stairs.

Compare the optimism of parents  
sifting a book of names  
for the perfect combination  
of ordinary and unique, sound,  
meaning, history and, of course,  
possible nicknames shouted  
across playgrounds, hoping  
the curled fetus becoming child  
in just two more heavy months  
will make them happy, complete,  
or at least less alone.

At the other end of the long room  
men and women strain gently,  
row, ski, bike, or climb  
nowhere, read magazines,  
and glance at the steaming mirror,  
all hoping for less bulky  
but equally tangible results:  
strength to endure another winter,  
the comfortable illusion of a day  
made meaningful, or enough careful  
hurt to justify an hour  
in the sauna or steam room.

In the pool, my wife plows lap  
after slow lap, breathing in,  
stroke, out, stroke, in,  
trying to remember to relax  
and push at the same time,  
each hand cupping water  
like a spoon, pulling along her body,  
past the swelling keel  
of her abdomen, and releasing  
at arm's length to reach  
through air to stroke again  
until she touches the wall, turns,  
pushes off in the same, warm water.

## AMNIOCENTESIS

A sonogram shows the skeletal fetus  
curling safely above,  
more completely formed  
than I had imagined.  
A thin, elegant needle slips  
smoothly through her skin just  
above the pubis  
while gloved hands attach a vial,  
tap firmly, twice, and amniotic fluid  
pale as chenin blanc fills the cylinder.  
The needle slides away  
without even a spot of blood.

My wife closes her eyes,  
leans her head against the wall  
of the small, blue office  
and exhales a slow breath.  
Today she taught three French classes,  
two English and will teach  
until early March, shortly before  
we finally become parents  
at 39 and 44, surprised by simple addition.

"Still hoping for a girl?" she asks,  
thinking of my brothers and nephews.  
I say yes mostly to please her  
though I secretly refuse to wish  
for what I cannot control,  
like praying rain for spring wheat  
or sun for the picnic.  
Difficult enough to practice  
acceptance, relish change at any age  
or try not to fear a July storm  
hailing half the harvest flat in minutes.

The doctor glides in, smiles  
congratulations, and hands us  
the lab report, twenty-three pairs  
of spiraling hieroglyphics  
which determine intelligence, health,  
hair, whose nose, but mean nothing  
until I see the last X and Y.

Peggy looks to the doctor, then me,  
and I realize for this language  
she has no Rosetta stone,  
or simply wants to embrace  
all possibilities a few seconds longer.  
In the brief space before words,  
limited but enriched, I mourn  
a daughter and celebrate a son.

I cup private knowledge  
in my hands like a flame, breathe  
the fire larger, toward her, "boy."

## Let Me Give You Some Background

My friend Tom  
tells every story  
from the beginning,  
understands  
talk for its own sake,  
and feels a whisper  
of loss  
when my restlessness  
begs a conclusion.  
He knows  
what many women  
and some men know,  
that words work  
long after meaning,  
touching  
what philosophy  
and fact  
can not.

My impatience  
is a hound  
that wants to run,  
fetch a stick,  
tree the cougar,  
get to the point  
when he tells me more  
than I need  
to know.  
But I am learning  
to appreciate  
a caress of voices  
that lingers  
like an embrace  
instead of a handshake,



that means as much  
as coyotes  
calling  
along Thompson River  
in September,  
my wife retelling  
her blue day,  
or Tom's  
elaborate accounts  
of each marble step  
climbing  
to this long hall  
of Hellgate High School  
and the way  
people live together.

Five Lilacs  
for Glen

This morning I pulled down  
a high branch on my lilac bush  
and broke off five sweet blooms  
that now purple my room with scent.

I walked to school wrapped in spring,  
lilacs in one hand, the whole blue sky  
and Lolo Peak in the other.  
I found your note on my desk.

Glen, I can't accept an apology  
if I can't remember the offense.  
Maybe if your pointing hand bloomed  
lavender lilac I'd have remembered

the gesture. Your words are friends  
and sound sweeter than any finger point  
except the glorious branch tips  
of spring that shout lilac, lilac.

Resurrection of the Artist  
for my mother

You do not remember  
collapsing on the floor

of the Fred Meyer variety section,  
so this is just a story

told and retold by friends,  
sister, and sons, like a legend

of death and rebirth you believe  
because your cracked ribs

still ache. The young grocery clerk  
pounded blood to your brain

four minutes before paramedics  
arrived with the shock cart

and insulted your tired heart  
to beating again. You woke

protesting, strapped down, tubes  
attached to each bruised arm.

"Why am I a prisoner, " you said.  
But you have forgotten this, too,

as though some kind thief  
had cut all power and in the quiet

dark, entered through your ears  
to steal five days of hospital beds,

nurses, roses, and chrysanthemums,  
your room a scented palette

of color and bedside concern you felt  
but couldn't find names for except

as figures in a Rivera wall mural  
defaced by revolutionary violence.

Healthy enough now to sketch all morning,  
you paint spiraling mandalas in blue:

cobalt, prussian, manganese, cerulean  
between viridian and burnt sienna

on taut canvas, opening each day  
like a gift of landscapes and portraits

brushed three dimensional in time  
almost lost, like a seed lodged

in the corner of an envelope, saved  
and planted when April

warms earth for another circle  
of colors around the sun.

From England 1985

to Jeanne

The terrible surprise, the betrayal  
by your strong heart hurt almost as much  
as hours of pain before you knew  
you'd need help to live. So you live.

A water color week of doubt, drugs and hope  
washed you new and ready to go home. Free  
of obligation and ambition, you learn  
to rest, paint each day, walk yourself healthy.

In London, I imagined your voice, your firm hand  
dabbing canvas blue. I felt farther away  
than myth or dream and rowed a hopeful boat  
through nights ringed with rocks and doubt.

You're blessed by change, though not comforted.  
You grew with us, after Dad died, and now  
you'll grow again, without chores and errands  
and debts every day. Take time, accept

all the help that's offered, just paint  
and love. You're good at both. In spring  
I'll show you London, Paris, Florence.  
Keats said, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty--

that is all ye know on earth, and all  
ye need to know." He almost had it right.  
Add love. Teach, learn, love: we all will.  
That's the beauty of it. Love, Robin.

April Seventh, For Chris

In Montana spring is only fat buds  
weeks away from open but I imagine  
you on your birthday

Brother

kneeling in your Seattle garden  
digging away the office pressure  
arms swinging a planting rhythm  
moist ground warm and heavy  
with smell of leaf mold  
and a warm wind familiar as touch, rich with smells  
of early hyacinth and pear blossoms  
announces your birthday

number forty

echoes green through new leaves  
a bell-like reverberation  
shivering the hair on your neck.

The surprise you feel stands around you,  
tangible as a shopping mall or the new banks  
that may earn you partnership or at least  
a good bonus.

I see you pause

sit in the red garden chair

your hands on the arm rests like a gymnast  
on parallel bars ready to straddle press  
into a handstand, then swing down between  
bending bars and up, tucking  
somersaults to stick the landing.

Whose body

do you wear now and what connection do you feel  
with the lean 17 year old  
tumbling clean routines and perfect toe-pointed form  
to 2nd place all-around in the state  
though Dad was too embarrassed by praise

and too untouched by his own whiskey father  
to tell you what he bragged about to friends?

Maybe the seeds of cancer germinated  
then, fertilized by beer, a smoldering pipe  
and the anger that sometimes ran through  
the fingers of his controlled fists  
like water he swam so well

anger at life that failed to appreciate how far  
a Montana boy has to travel  
how many battles survived  
in Normandy or high school classrooms  
before retreating to a climate he understands

anger you let evaporate  
on flower garden afternoons  
or burn away with a bike ride on winding trails  
anger that rotted him in a cool fire  
summers at Flathead Lake couldn't extinguish.

You escaped to rock bands, Bozeman, architecture,  
Calgary, finally Seattle, where you grew up  
settled down, married, and learned  
to dress for success, where you live comfortably  
by Lake Washington and swing  
confidently through a career  
linking form and function like fine tools  
that fit your hand and make work easier.

You know how space molds people  
and distance

separates brothers. We lost you  
for two years through loving neglect  
but you worked your way back  
and rebuilt the family  
on the concrete foundation of yourself.

I love how you've learned  
to value the human in your work

the way I loved and envied the giant swings  
you looped on high bar, scooping air  
and building speed for the release  
of secure steel,  
twisting free and high to land on soft blue mats,  
feet planted, hand raised to judges.



## Summer Session 1980

for John Hunt

I heard all words true  
or not in time to remember  
the flattery of imitation, density  
of words black between lines.  
I saw myself walking  
pale July dawns toward a long hallway  
whispering philosophy, theory.  
A new song echoes the wall of trees  
along the clear lake,  
bats of summer evenings  
lurching through dusk with the blind desire  
of insects, cold water vomiting  
smooth gravel on a private beach.

Do you know why clay  
holds its shape, reflects spinning  
tension? How three needles  
in a bunch attract thunder?  
How the color of good wine rhymes  
with time? Let the committee decide  
if the rainfly is necessary,  
if the fish will bite.

You know you have to run,  
that competence is the exception,  
rewards rare. You still believe  
people matter. You repeat it  
like a litany every day.  
Students can learn to trust the ground  
that shakes the theory of touch.

### The Lost Son

Terra cotta tiles reflect  
Heat from pastel walls  
To a patio  
Where two older children  
Feed cans to a goat.

A quetzal glides magically  
Through the green jungle  
And lands on a lawn  
In Sacramento, crying  
Fear of B-52's.

The third son releases bees  
From jars to attack  
Blue-green feathers  
Until the bird dies, flapping  
Wings on sandy ground.

The captain, father of sons,  
Sings their quick retreat  
To stark Montana,  
Far from oceans, desert air  
And flying insects.

His older boys build snow caves  
And fight over ice  
Crystals. The youngest,  
left alone, learns to hoard grief  
Until he burns cold

In his bed, dreaming of days  
When sun shines on him  
Alone. His hands grow  
Blue steel and carbon fibers,  
A machine quick-forged

Of oil, gears, flame. The boy runs  
West to the sound of  
Water, builds models  
Of a man he wants to be  
when his name matters.

Ten years later he returns  
To bury parents  
And fight his brothers  
For the right to sharpen knives  
And teach the children

Who know his name. Horses graze  
In a brown meadow  
And even the deer  
Accept him. Years of neglect  
Settle in fingers

Of his left hand. He instructs  
Children to cut them  
Off with knives dry-honed  
On fine stones. Rage disappears.  
He holds them all close.

2

## Stalking the Competition

## Every Decision

A cow elk lunges through dim  
November morning, uphill across a road  
and between black trees,

barely disturbing two feet of new snow.  
You start tracking, rifle heavy  
in gloved hands. Your partners

are miles away, circling to where  
they don't know you will be. Each muffled step  
is slower than heartbeats or cold

that reminds you how you are foreign,  
vulnerable. Twenty years ago you rejected  
the arguments of violence, swore

not to kill for anyone, even  
your country, protested jungle deaths  
more remote than democracy.

Now, after fifteen years of teaching  
and poetry, you stalk an animal  
elusive as doubts. Absolutes mean less

than how well something is done.  
On a ridge above thick spruce  
you see where she rested, her head

and one heavy ear outlined in snow.  
Half a mile later she paused again  
to browse tender willow,

then ran twenty yards. She may have heard  
your delicate steps, smelled wool or man,  
and chewed like cud an idea

that must keep moving or die. You wonder  
how long you can listen, breath held,  
and look for a dark back against

green and white. Is it more honest to kill  
your own meat? You promise to waste  
nothing, thank whatever God understands

how man and animal depend  
on random death for meaning, a reason  
to continue the repetition of step

pause, step, pause until  
you know that you can do it, can pull  
the trigger, see her leap

suddenly sideways, run ten quick  
yards, stand half hidden, listening,  
bleeding, until the second shot

drops her heaped brown and quiet.  
All winter, this wildness  
will feed you in your warm house.

You will remember cold hours,  
hard curve of knife, steaming guts,  
long pack out, and two echoing booms

that stab the quiet confidence  
of every decision you make.

## Morning Run

Shivering despite stocking hat  
and gloves, I run along  
the Clark Fork River trail,  
over frost shadows of aspen and pine.  
Seven miles later I sweat up  
the hill from Toole Park,  
and ahead of me, head down,  
shoulders hunched in thought  
or daze, a figure in blue  
jogs slowly toward town.  
My wife runs too, and tells me  
how her heart accelerates  
when she hears a faster runner  
pounding behind her, so I stay  
on the other side of the street.

But the woman hears steps  
or my breath rasping each stride,  
stops, turns, her fingers  
fragile bars over a startled mouth,  
and her eyes echoing a scream  
that hits me like a fist.  
I lurch sideways and hold  
my palms up and try to look harmless,  
smaller. "It's OK, OK," I say,  
unsure how to undo centuries  
of arms and knees muscling women open,  
nights or streets made dangerous  
by the hungers of men.

She gasps to scream again  
but her eyes discover soft October air,  
fresh snow on Stuart peak,

orange leaves at her feet.  
The echo of her voice fades  
like frost in weak sun.

We stand a moment, the whole street  
between us, traffic gurgling across  
the Higgins Street Bridge, and we both  
apologize, not quite sure why.  
Then, as if nothing had happened,  
she turns and shuffles west  
past the intersection. I turn left,  
and all the way home, dead leaves fall  
like small birds stunned by cold.



## The Butchers

A rounded wedge of dark muscle  
still anchored to bone lies before me  
on the scrubbed plywood. I hone  
my knife dangerously sharp.  
"Thanks for helping," Ken says,  
social studies teacher and hunting  
partner as he hands me an apron.  
I trim yellow-white fat  
and filmy membrane from seams  
between muscle groups while he describes  
the hunt and the long drag out:  
"Five miles, mostly downhill, but cold  
and two feet of snow." Beneath the words,  
like bone beneath flesh, I hear  
awe and apology moving together.

Near the scapula I see where a 30-06  
lamed the elk before the last killing shot,  
remove white fragments  
from shattered meat,  
save the worst for dogs, the rest for burger.  
"I wish," he says, "every kid  
who thinks war is patriotic  
could see what a bullet does."  
I carve one large section  
into beautiful, lean steaks, arranged  
and wrapped in shiny freezer paper.

We warm our hands, sip beer,  
and I admire the antlers,  
nearly twenty pounds of phosphorus  
and calcium carried for no other reason  
than rattling aspen, alder and small pines,  
trumpeting the right to mate.

If all men hunted and became the animals  
they consumed, they might cast off  
old beliefs as often as elk drop antlers,  
suddenly light-headed in spring.  
All left with raw pedicule stumps  
for a few days before soft velvet begins  
to form, based on another year's experience.  
But no, the new rack is bigger,  
just as hard, with more points,  
and every fall, the woods fill with hunters.

## Racquetball

for Chip

I'll admit I enjoyed winning close three times  
last week. You compete as lovingly as I do

and understand why I contest each point,  
even in the third game. Two days later

I'm still stiff. At 43 I recover slower.  
I wonder how many fast days I have left,

how many quick steps before I lose speed,  
flexibility, the chance to win a close match.

You know how sport can make us, on a good day,  
feel fast and alive. Smacking concussion of ball,

strings, and wall echo after each point ends  
and we meditate in the square, white silence.

This week we'll play your court, a bounce  
you know, how high the ball climbs the back wall.

Vary your serve, lob or Z, and make me compute  
another acute angle, double the abstraction.

And smash a few right at me, the hell with touch.  
I'll be calculating possibilities and hit weakly

to your strength. The few I get will make me feel fast  
and young. I'll settle for that, even losing.

## Mountain Lion Dialog

Rifle balanced loosely over my left arm,  
safety on, I muffled through new snow  
in slow, uneven rhythm, scanned  
the lodgepole mountainside for movement,

a horizontal line of backs among black trees,  
or mule deer ears sprouting like huge leaves  
from a slender stalk. On Thanksgiving morning,  
alone with the warm cloud of my breath,

weak sun loosening snow from branches,  
I heard irregular soft falls hitting  
like fists in fat gloves.

A new sound,  
like tearing paper or guttural wind, and close,

twisted me toward it. A mountain lion  
crouched ten feet away, waiting perhaps  
for me to jump, deer quick, exposing  
a long neck to his hunger.

Imagine waking,  
stomach sucked up to backbone, restless,  
to stalk open hillsides and brushy creek bottoms  
for deer scent, the weak, careless, or young,  
and hurtle the last long yards to land

snarling on graceful shoulders like a stone  
wrapped in burlap. A cougar in winter  
must kill every seven days, gorge and return  
until only scapula and ribs remain.

The black-tipped tail twitched.

Too scared  
or proud to run, I stood in the frost air  
on his ground and counted my chances.  
He rasped a cough and lifted one padded paw

so I, the bigger animal, roared back--  
my first error.

He stepped closer, stopped,  
and until that moment I was his,  
but I thumbed the safety off, waved

my rifle and backed away--another error.  
Encouraged, the lion oozed forward.  
I aimed, braced for tumbling contact, claws,  
and resorted to language, clearest English:

"Go away! I don't want to shoot you! Go!"  
Confused by such diction  
in a clean forest, the puma epiphany  
circled once and slipped into woods,

bored by conversation or the game.  
Still tracks marked the snow around me  
and I exhaled a tight breath,  
my pulse thudding the wild air.

## Marathon

At the starting line  
You look for calm  
beneath deep breaths and long stretches  
but your body beats alive  
beyond control. The gun spills  
caution and adrenalin dictates pace  
faster than strategy. Fight  
for a second wind, don't think of distance,  
only the leap through space  
leaving every step behind.

At five miles your body breaks  
through to theories of perpetual motion.  
Your mind, transmigrant,  
floats free and remembers why: air  
is only important when you run  
gasping to the end of it.

One foot shadows the other, passes,  
is passed. Thighs lift  
and stretch, feet slap ground  
in a primitive rhythm that rings hurt  
to an inner ear, pumps blood new red  
to smallest capillaries. Muscles  
discover ancient truths.

At fifteen miles you look for meaning  
to outlast reasons.  
Some racial memory hums  
across a landscape old as lies  
where a man runs because he must,  
where swift motion wins  
food, safety, life another day.  
Your mind drifts to shorter times.

After twenty miles only structure,  
burning pale, is left  
to fuel motion's demands. You wonder  
what necessity makes you choose  
to hurt this much. Run on will  
and begin to know  
that without pain would be without  
meaning. Look into every small  
corner of your inadequacy  
and see it feeding greedy on itself  
leaving, at last, the heart,  
a kinetic miracle beyond your control  
or reason. Love this steady wear,  
essential motion, because it is yours.

## Skinning

The deer hangs in the dark garage,  
front legs frozen stiff in mid-leap.  
I open the door, pause, hold my breath,  
as if noise might startle him.  
Touching the fine stiff hair,  
hard curve of antlers, delicate hoofs,  
I remember the mountain where he died.  
My wife helps with the skinning. "I'm glad,"  
she says, "you put his tongue back in."

We work together. A line through  
hair tipped white follows my blade  
around the neck. Peggy begins to peel hide  
from solid red muscle, amazed  
how loosely skin surrounds a body,  
how much pain and death sustain us.  
We pull down, touch knives to translucent film  
between hide and flesh. Naked shoulders,  
back, and ribs appear. A small hole  
behind one shoulder echoes a bloody smear  
on the other flank. No meat wasted.

My thumb touches cold fingers around  
each thin leg as I cut skin loose at knees.  
Three black ticks still burrow close  
to the body under the left foreleg  
though live warmth whispered away  
days ago. Even the long cavity  
from neck to pelvis gapes cold.  
Thick pads of tallow around the hips  
make skinning harder. I cut the tough fiber  
on hamstrings and hang the hide to dry.  
The carcass is no longer deer, just bone  
and meat. In the house we wash dulled knives  
in warm water and our numb hands touch.



## Triathlon

1

Some call it escape, selfish, vanity  
but I love this celebration of human power,  
internal combustion of carbohydrates  
instead of petroleum, no stock cars,  
snowmobiles or monster trucks,  
just rows of delicate bicycles  
arranged for take-off, arcs  
of wheels and handlebars echoed  
two hundred times like a huge cornucopia  
spiraling away to the green lake.  
All around me lean bodies move  
purposefully, like lazy cats  
hoarding energy, clothed in colorful skins  
designed to slip through air like fish  
in current. At the very least  
I can hold one aging body together  
and wish I could learn how to burn the fat  
blocking flacid arteries of a country  
marble sure of its right to consume  
every tree, ore body, fertilized field, even air  
in the race for Gross National Product.

2

Red-capped swimmers flock  
at water's edge like ducks, then explode  
across the lake, arms flailing to the far shore  
I stroke and breath toward forever, unable  
to think beyond my own buoyancy,  
the rush of cool motion  
around me, beneath me, until sand grates  
under my feet and I run  
on unfamiliar legs to my bicycle  
where I change skins, evolve into a black-helmeted

piston hunching a sleek frame and thin wheels  
dizzy around the course, pursuing  
what I love, not winning, but the leap  
through space that says any action  
is better than doing nothing  
in the shadow of mountains that can't hide  
missiles bristling security and plenty  
among fields of hard red wheat.

## 3

Thousands of revolutions later I abandon  
the bicycle, exchange cleats for soft shoes,  
stagger tired legs  
to a different rhythm, run  
as though it were important to prepare  
for a time when oil wells bubble dry,  
when Safeway fails to satisfy basic needs  
and electricity flickers out,  
when legs are the only vehicle  
that can pedal me warm to work  
or to my mountain refuge,  
an enlarged badger den below a talus slope.  
Sometimes ten pounding miles  
is less painful than news of rape  
two blocks away or a car bomb in Palestine,  
dull television gameshow afternoons,  
a bridge game or a stadium with ten thousand people  
cheering a few high-paid athletes.  
My warm-shower mornings  
need the bite of a particular muscle's hurt,  
a connection to the history  
of human endurance, the pain I chose  
to sharpen convenient push-button days.

3

## Recipes For Teachers

## My Week to Cook

Pale liquid bubbles and a bouquet garni floats in the stockpot. Carrots, onions, and celery soften around a turkey carcass another hour before every sweet pocket of meat slips from breastbone and back. I pour off clear stock, skim fat, save the small corners and feathers of flesh, add rice, pepper, a thumb of Indian curry, and set it all simmering thirty minutes until dinner. My wife abandons student papers, follows her nose to the table. Her compliment: "I don't trust a man who doesn't cook."

Ten years ago when I first heard that bias I thought it silly. What about humor, skill with wood, numbers, paint? "A man is as good as his bechamel." How could a woman ignore strength, security, adventure, biceps? The answer: Ockham's razor. My wife says no other rule is easier, more dependable. A man who cooks, she says, understands the history of kitchens and the women who occupied them in all seasons. The shopping, too, selection of bell pepper, ripe cantaloupe, cheese like God's feet, or spices for stew fosters sensitivity that is hard to fake. A woman can love and forgive a man who cooks well.

If he cleans up afterward, tucks each spoon, leftover and saucepan home, it is no act. Anybody can taste, enjoy a meal, gorge,

but someone who has rubbed garlic into chicken,  
kneaded bread, or arranged paella  
can truly nourish, and love the result  
the way women love their children  
and refuse to send them to war.

## Autumn on the Great Plains

Remember the lonely quail woman  
whose hands mix feta cheese  
and small birds lovingly, her wrists  
twisting like waves of soft  
copper echoes. Bald October

dances wheat dreams she hears  
at dusk and her ash eyes compose  
the sky. No stars hesitate.  
Musk candles burn shorter  
on the pine table. Believe months

of walking toward home will end.  
Imagine ripe apples and wine.  
Watch how her elegant breasts  
appear at the window of a church  
open to an autumn of singing.

The Domesday Book, 1086

Fire smolders under a pot of boiled grain  
hanging over the hearth and day  
repeats a wet, grey litany my husband  
endures since he won this land, me,  
and five thousand sheep  
on a foggy morning near Pevensey,  
charging uphill through orange beeches  
and killing three men defending  
their blond king who also died,  
a Norman arrow in his startled eye.

My first husband died the same October,  
his estate forfeit, so I won this knight  
to my bed and marriage folded us  
together, separated by language,  
joined by conquest. Twenty years later  
he calls orders to the shearers in English  
blurred by the lilt of a language  
shaming native speech to shadows  
and fields of dirt and dung. I keep  
his house and raise his dark children  
in cold comfort despite the wool robes  
on our beds and tapestries lining walls.

I wish another great star would freeze  
the sky for weeks, water become bone,  
a new champion march across the sea  
bringing a new son to kill the King  
in his drunken castles, and burn  
all the maps and deeds that spell my race  
in bleeding knees and unrecorded tongues.

## Learned Helplessness: The Seligman Experiment

1. Dogs in group A receive a mild shock that ceases when they push a panel with nose or paw.  
Dogs in group B receive the same shock but no action they take will stop the shock which stops only when a dog in group A pushes the panel.  
Dogs in group C receive no shock.
2. All dogs are transferred to shuttleboxes (large boxes divided into two compartments by a low wall) and shocked again.  
Dogs in group A jump the barrier and escape the shock a few seconds after it starts.  
Dogs in group B whimper and lie down, although the shocks continue.  
Dogs in group C jump the barrier and escape the shock.
3. Substitute human volunteers for dogs and noise for shock.
4. Results: two of three people in group B give up, endure the noise.
5. Conclusions:  
Helplessness is more than punishment and reward.  
We learn to accept pain.  
We can learn to stay in an unlocked house.

According to the director of the domestic-violence program, Sarah Reilly "was doing everything right," but her husband Joseph rented a car in Coeur d' Alene, drove to Missoula, and waited in the parking lot of the Southgate Mall for his wife to leave the first job she ever had. "She's my wife," he said, and shot her three times with a 9mm and then himself.



I sit on the shore of Swan Lake, hear birch leaves  
blown brittle from trees and see them  
flutter into deep water, then drift slowly  
toward the grey foot of the lake and ten miles  
of white water before spilling over the dam  
past Bigfork and into Flathead Lake,  
more rivers and dams, through the wide mouth  
of the Columbia to the brackish sea.

## Entelechy

Cold milk wind whines through the old osier  
in a parabola of thin branches. Last year's thistles

bang dryly against the garage. First flowers,  
crocus, hyacinth, tulip, rinsed by rain,

shout a soliloquy of red and violet at indelicate air.  
Small bright birds retreat from the late blizzard

to thick branches near the willow's heart.  
April snow hisses horizontal and accumulates

like piles of rice, white among iris leaves  
stabbing upward, early season scimitars.

Tomorrow sun will erase a last scrawl of winter  
and green enforce the theme of spring.

## Teaching at Gayton High School, London

For six months I have been trying to teach Daniel enough to pass the O-level test he knows he will fail. He liked me for the first three weeks of school, asked questions about Indians, Yellowstone Park, and loose American girls. At sixteen he can play charming, ingratiating, even polite, "Yes, Sir," in his blue school blazer, striped tie, and official gray trousers. When I read Lennie, "Tell me about the rabbits, George, tell me about the farm," he listens like an honors student. But he will not write, will not think and write, will not shut up, and disrupts a class as ruthlessly as a terrorist.

Today his own anger surprises him. He throws a pencil hard across the room, swears out loud, "Bloody, fucking paper." kicks over his chair, and stands at the back of the room thudding the soft outside of his fist against rotting plaster. Prashant and Graeme cheer, Michael cowers, and I ask Daniel to stay after class. We have talked before. But this time I indulge my anger in the British school tradition, tell him I don't care if he fails, I have never known, in fifteen years of teaching, such a nasty, inconsiderate waste of an intelligence, I soon return to Montana where even poor students have the quiet dignity of someone who keeps his family warm all winter by cutting, hauling, and splitting dry larch or kills an elk each November to fill the freezer, I don't care if he doesn't do another piece of writing for the rest of the term, I won't bother him if he sits in the corner and sleeps,

but if he continues to make it impossible  
for anyone else to learn or speak I will throw him  
out of class and make sure he never comes back.

He is stunned. For the first time  
I have earned his respect. This is how a teacher acts.  
He mumbles, "Sorry, Sir," and for two weeks  
he is quiet and cautious, even composes a letter  
for his thin portfolio. I have learned something  
about failure, authority, class, empire. We despair.

## Driving the Swan Valley in March

West, the Mission Mountains sharpen  
gray shadows and hide high lakes.  
East, the Swan Range hoards snow

in granite niches for summer streams,  
reflects short orange waves of evening light.  
Below treeline geometric clearcuts

glow white among darker forests,  
variations of rectangle, trapezoid,  
and obtuse, blunted triangle, empty shapes

connected by strips and huddled islands  
of trees marked for future harvest.  
In the highway barrow pit a deer carcass

disolves in ribs and fur, winter road kill,  
exposed as plowed snow melts. Ravens erupt,  
circle, and return to carrion coyotes ignore.

In a field near Beck's road two boys  
hump their snowmobiles from fence to fence,  
leave a blue stink in fading light.

Downstream toward Swan Lake the river  
flows wider, swells, and bulltrout bludgeon  
their way upstream to spawn, gorged

on smaller trout, whitefish, sculpins.  
This year eggs laid in Jim Creek suffocate  
in sediment washed from bare logged slopes.

Long-stemmed beargrass thrusts upward  
toward June and flowers like white clubs  
when water will crest, flooding, then ebb.

Tonight, my headlights find bright deer eyes  
and brake lights flash, hooves slip on asphalt,  
white tails disappear in growing dark.

## Manifest Destiny

So many arguments build on concrete slabs  
the passionate speakers call rights,  
tons of gray conglomerate

displacing sagebrush, fescue, manzanita, wild oats,  
the winter range of mule deer,  
a healthy herd thinned

by Kennworths, Toyotas, and subsistence hunters  
who leave steaming gut piles  
near the eighteenth green

unplayable four months, snow crusted  
and tracked by suburban  
neon country skiers

whose successful pursuit of happiness lies distant  
from wild mountains viewed through clean glass  
of cathedral vaulted rooms

where no baby can be conceived in poverty, neglect  
or infection scabbing eyes blind  
at birth, abandoned

beyond an asphalt cul-de-sac for coyotes  
whose rights are where they find them  
in every city

from Boston to Los Angeles, encouraged, fattened  
on well-fed schnauzers and garbage so rich  
the landfill burns

deep into the twenty-first century when everyone's rights  
born or unborn, black or female, will be measured  
in teaspoons of crude oil

and the lifespans of winged insects who cannot survive  
on the carcinogenic sweat  
of a race secure

in its own inalienable privilege, its children  
dying within the impregnable walls  
of islands like fortress America

where all survivors are free, equal in fault,  
skins thickened by genetic engineering,  
united in Patriotism.



### The First Mathematician.

Last year I invented the zero to prove  
 nothing sometimes counts.  
 This morning I finger my abacus  
 and glimpse a flash of blue  
 through a rift in the pervasive clouds,  
 blink as it vanishes  
 like an oddly timid jay into thick brush.  
 A new concept, infinity, blossoms  
 like an exotic flower in the safe dark  
 behind my eyes where I live.  
 "Flight," I think. Flight will show me  
 where parallel lines  
 never meet. Wings grow from my small  
 white shoulders; when my feet leave  
 the ground I am afraid. Sudden hunger  
 for a sun I scarcely remember  
 urges me higher, faster.  
 The speed of my ascent  
 pull my eyes into my mouth.

From thirty thousand feet  
 clouds hang low and dull below me, horizons  
 diminished except for the next sad storm  
 even jackals hide from. A huge swell  
 of ground curves west in haze,  
 beyond theory. Neat geometry  
 (the word is new, my mouth trips on the sound)  
 arranges itself in circles, arcs  
 and rectangles all the way to the sea.  
 Suddenly mad, I curse the farmers.  
 "Fools. Ingrates! Why haven't they told me  
 about the lines, angles, and shapes  
 pregnant with meaning? Me, who taught them  
 how to count more sheep than fingers,  
 how to add their debts and subtract

the bad years." I substitute new figures  
into the old formula for gratitude.  
I discover how ratios in proportion  
indicate more and less equal  
relationships, different as people,  
more manageable than children.

I do not feel tired. I calculate loft,  
vectors, drag and plan to fly forever.  
Something on the ground  
keeps pace with me and I am startled  
until I recognize my shadow.  
I watch fascinated how the darker self  
below proves the lines of light,  
the way the sun bends the shine of stars  
older than stone. Pressure  
of so much knowledge forces a yawn.  
My ears pop. The shadows of what I don't know  
are longer than I had guessed.  
I want to know more. I fly away from land  
toward water's end until I realize  
the color of infinity is blue. The sun  
beats on my shoulders and my shadow follows;  
I see it, him, me, moving exactly  
beneath the waves. Water whispers  
in a language older than figures  
about the explosive singularity of birth.

Later, days, months, years, I don't remember,  
as though a dark hole swallowed all time,  
barefoot men in fields stop behind plows  
at the sight of my small shape  
growing nearer in the eastern sky.  
The strong certainty of my flight, my bronze skin,  
scares them. "Mathematician," they shout,  
"don't you remember?" I do not  
reassure them. When I land  
all clouds evaporate. A dark-haired woman  
hands me three golden bracers.