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John Holbrook

*The University of Montana*

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REACHING HOME

Poems by

John Holbrook

B. A. Oakland University, 1965

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

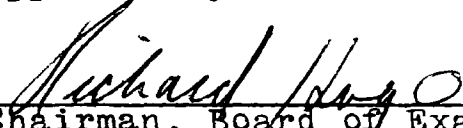
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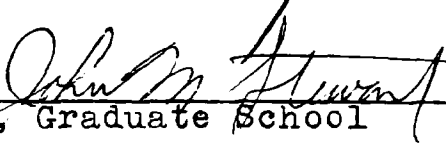
Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1972

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## Acknowledgments

Antaeus: 'The Weight of Our Music'

Colorado State Review: 'The Request,' 'A Cult of Salt'

Inscape: 'A Lodger's Complaint'

Intro #2: 'The Dance'

Intro #3: 'Getting Started'

Poetry Northwest: 'Santo Domingo Pueblo: Three Years  
Without Rain,' 'General Motors  
Special,' 'A Clean Sweeping,'  
'Once a Revolutionary'

New Collage: 'Reaching Home,' 'Words I Like to Hear'

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GETTING STARTED



GETTING STARTED  
(For Judy)

Here, an act of love, for you.  
Not a twenty-four hour consummation  
to be sure--not even a song.  
Just this: I have you,  
that green bush and white line,  
those Sunday punches  
and big bay windows.  
And the way you take a powder  
isn't much, I know.  
Those cracks on the walls could be worse.  
And yet, you would have it all--  
the cupboards and ashtrays,  
sink stains and flies on the sill,  
--as if it were nothing.  
It is nothing. No one  
will ever know or want to know  
how you hold your comic nose  
to scrambled eggs.  
And there's no mistaking my confusion:  
there's magic in your potluck bloom.  
This or all the easy ladies in Kalamazoo?

You know I stand for you,  
your usual rhythm  
and common hue.

## A LODGER'S COMPLAINT

That is not garbage on the lawn, lady.  
That is bread and those are sparrows.  
They are not chickens. They are hungry.  
I am not hungry. This is my fashion.

Look at it this way: I pay the rent,  
I live in a coop, I look up my cat.  
This business gives me the business.  
Ma'am, I'm fed up with your feathers.

Today I speak for the birds.  
They understand me. Stand under me.  
They say you did not make the first jump  
or a thousand thereafter from hot balloons.

Sweet songbird, there's something up  
your sleeve. What's packed in your hand  
that goes with the sack on your mower?  
You want another deposit? Some cake?

Look, God doesn't make you my mother.  
She's in Michigan, bowling.  
She always said if I had a brain  
I'd take better care of a sparrow's.

Well, that's it tough customer.  
For a couple of bread winners,  
we're both for the birds.  
That's all, love, my harp.

## THE DANCE

You're at this party and finally  
you're next to the prettiest girl there,  
what will you do? Dash a cigarette  
in your shoe? Pick a number from one  
to ten? Decide innocence  
is a good disguise--  
rise like a swan in a trance  
and ask her to dance?

And what will she do in your wings--  
fling herself famous and cool?  
Beat you to breakfast?  
Think you handsome, quiet but cruel,  
in your lofty common sense, a cinch?  
Nothing to lose and why not she sighs,  
the things girls do  
if you give them an inch.

## HALLOWEEN COMES TO MISSOULA, BADLY

They're back again, thumping doors,  
those giddy hop scotch goblins,  
their pockets full of black cats.  
They're stabbing their backs on my porch.  
They know my walls'll crawl out.

Go away. Shut up. I'm busy.  
A man like myself has deep feelings  
for his marbles. Cross my heart,  
with thumbs like these he'd win over Rome.  
Look, practice steadies his nerves in the dark!

I'm pooped sick of it kids.  
My woman's experimenting again,  
something about...anyway, this time  
it's with an objectivist, a serious lark.  
God, take your mob someplace else.

Say hey, can't you hoof it across the street,  
call a cop, tell him some nut's fooling  
with his marbles? Tell him I've gone bananas,  
a country bumpkin nifty in a jiffy. Tell him  
how sweet it is, hands on my knees, mooning the moon.

## DISHES &amp; DESSERTS

After all, the clouds  
doing their level best  
simply bumped our wavy heads.  
And the stars, though  
we have them named and  
time now on our hands for naps,  
well, I said, stars are fast  
the finishing touch,  
--the only catch.

You look at me, some star  
some catch. And I,  
once upon a time  
the dashing concrete flagman  
signaling affairs up and down your one-way  
street,  
--once removed and having moved  
the heart of the matter  
from the seat of my pants  
and up a notch, agree...

agree to fiddle with the dishes,  
the dill drying in the window,  
seeds on the sill,  
your deliciously graphic apples  
here and there

bobbing in my wicked head.

ON THE RUN  
(For Saxon)

Tucked in our hoods, sprigs of spruce!  
Larkspur. Pine. We stroked our chins  
for strokes like this, slapped our backs,  
packed our breath off into the hills.

Cotton filled our shoes.  
We had to admit we brought the house down,  
that barrier we call sky.  
What lofty birds circled in our hands!

Our value grew. Monstrous in thickets,  
plum bushed on the run,  
we buried our tricks, pitched camp,  
filled our boots full of stars.

Stars listened. Farm lights cleared  
the sky. All around us mountains closed in,  
shook off leaves, stomped on sticks,  
woke up the stumps at our backs.

Heat caved in. Sparks blew up in our eyes.  
Dampened in blankets, we wrapped ourselves  
around ourselves, crawled under our skin and  
fell headlong into the space of our lives.

TODAY IS THE NAME OF THE WORLD

## GOOD NEWS FROM A SMOKED OYSTER

I'm out in the street  
up to my neck  
in my new star engine  
sweeping conclusions.

It's sheer perfection  
sustaining my momentum  
aiming for a spot  
adjusting my stuff.

Now the whole world moos  
a bit too capricious  
and I use the name 'Bub'  
every other Christmas.



## THE REQUEST

Dear Friend:

Though it is itself  
non-adhesive, that is,  
the task--the proof  
is to lick it  
onto backs of stamps.  
Lend the paste of it  
to your word.

P. S.

Now taste  
is the precision  
of a postcard  
--goddamn  
send me some news.

## HOME DECISION

I am naked, stripped before you,  
your bar of strawberry soap.  
Slip off your rings.  
Dive at me like a cormorant.  
Wash my leg the way a cat rubs.

There. Now I'm Mark Anthony,  
covered with suds and sturdy.  
Say, you're getting out of hand...  
bring me kettles of water,  
this soap's getting pretty dirty!

Go. Your task is done,  
down and out, washed up.  
Meanwhile, I'll keep the ship afloat.  
I have plans Egyptian cliff-hanger.  
I know most of the ropes.

## THE WAY A GOOD FELLOW FISHES WHEN HE'S SKUNKED

Shall I tie this string to my toe  
and go fishing down by the river  
when moths gang up on the moon,  
off that log jammed round the bend  
last spring, feet ahead of that deep hole?  
Will I have questions to solve  
before the river dissolves,  
some grounds for a morning stroll?

And how shall I set a pace  
if a patient face is put on the line  
and limits of myths are taken?  
Is it enough to hide in the dim light  
of fame or stake my name on streaks  
to empty the luck of a pool?  
Should I butter up the fool on the moon  
and deep down miss the chances of grace?

## ONCE A REVOLUTIONARY

## I

Pride moved him through a perfect whim.  
He tackled history like a hound,  
theory like the wind,  
the future the way a whistle goes,  
and like the lot of us:  
wisdom by its weight.  
Fiction thrilled him to the bone.  
He was wry but not too loud.  
He could tune a fork  
or murder a prune.  
While you had distance to dance  
his rhythm improved.  
Ask him was he brown.

## II

He had his quirks.  
He dreamed a lot,  
wore jeans.  
He admired other years,  
propped antique lamps  
on the ground,  
lit them: stood around.  
He'd knuckle down at times,  
know how to farm.  
He'd pace entire days  
just to say he'd seen it all.  
He followed his school  
like a fish, tinkered with a spark,  
swept gods away with a broom.  
Eventually, he tolled the din  
of an electric doom.  
His tools, however obscure,  
were never up a sleeve.  
Yet rehearsals and universals  
bothered him.  
Ask him was he accused.

## III

What politics craved  
 he'd spend in a day,  
 --any constitution was reason for sport.  
 On top of it all,  
 he could wind round  
 a finger  
 (that digital cure-all)  
 the strings of his scope.  
 While you camped on Olympus  
 as if you were Greek,  
 not exactly down to earth  
 or up on your feet,  
 he read his palms  
 to bathroom walls  
 and slept like a nail.  
 Ask him was he amused.

## IV

He took it kindly  
 if you tossed him out of doors,  
 or tapped an anthem forever  
 on his head with a stick.  
 He could water you down.  
 He could mix up the picture  
 scot-free,  
 measure the riffles of a river  
 or sit in a bathtub with a plug.  
 --He never really asked  
 an essay for an answer--.  
 Though ten thousand years old  
 and fundamentally pert,  
 he was deceptively apt  
 to take life this way: anyway.  
 Was he capable?  
 As serious as art?  
 Did he sell himself short?  
 Did he fail to score the apathy  
 that carved up his throat?  
  
 Ask his shirts where rainbows drown.

RIGHT NOW

We've all heard it before,  
the robin bringing to his song  
the end of day. It is as if  
what ends has its own way  
and beginning then  
with our indifference

catches us  
either awake or asleep  
taking for granted  
all we imagine  
we've heard in a song before  
and so much more than this.

## THE DEVIL AS A SECOND GRADER

Can you guess what'd go with it  
if the tallest tree in the world  
fell down?

Some said: nests.  
Others, birds.  
Some spelled it out: s k y.  
Others poked a cloud.  
The boys went as far as Mars.  
Girls eyed the whitest star.

Then somebody  
in the back row  
teachers seldom count on  
but when he's there  
could growl  
said G O D three times  
real loud.

LIVING IT UP WITH THE MILK MACHINE  
AT THE SNACK BAR IN THE FIVE AND TEN

On any given day you might have two cows.  
You might milk one. You might give one away  
and milk the government. You might say  
the government has two cows and you prefer water.  
You might have two governments and sell one,  
stand in line--like a cow--and get some milk.

Now you have in your mitt a pint of milk.  
Something runs down inside your sleeve  
to the ground, like water. You have a minute.  
You stand up. Shout. You eat cheese.  
Two cows, out of your range, sit down.  
You might hold your pants up for some pie, join them.



## LETTER TO THE MAYOR

Sir:

Why doesn't the city council  
get in on it  
and clean up this city  
of stray poems?  
They are roving around in packs  
creating havoc in people's back yards.

The poem catcher you got  
doesn't seem to be on the ball  
or there wouldn't be  
so many of these  
poems running around.  
On the west side  
there are people  
who have females  
that are in heat  
and the poems  
are running around like mad.

(I can't understand it.  
I wouldn't dream  
of letting my poem  
run around  
with a bunch like that.)

Why don't you get the sheriff  
to put his foot down,  
even his beat up?  
The poems are fairly dripping  
with raw venom  
and asking for real trouble.  
He could exceed the limits,  
lay the law down on the line,  
inforce suspect expression  
once and for all.  
In the evenings,  
Saturdays, Sundays,  
poems are plentiful.

If school kids and little old ladies  
hack it, why can't you?  
Mr. Mayor,  
it's just that you seem  
strung out so completely lately  
at the end of your wit.

## GIVING GROUND

"Ok buzz saw, let's finish  
the spaghetti."

Roots. Roots father speech.  
Squeeze a breast: what does it measure?  
I plant my feet. Ground is source.

Bullion on the stove. Substantial light.  
Salt. Basil on her sleeve.  
I take shape. Plant my feet.

She gives ground. Sweet relief.  
She takes my hand. Gives it shape.  
I squeeze her breast. Father speech.

Roots. Substantial ground.  
She shakes her head. Plants her feet.  
I lose shape. Measure speech.

WORDS I LIKE TO HEAR

## NO DICE FOR WHITE MEN

(After Arlee, the Powwow)

I came like this: white,  
on grounds of currency, sporting  
popular teeth, expecting legends,  
content, with meaning, off the cuff.

From ritual thump to gamble chant  
they spoke to bones for sticks,  
stopped me cold,  
ignored my worked up public feet.

No breaks for me, no shoo-ins.  
These Flathead fought box office bluff.  
Even as I coughed up chips  
they brought me to their game, my knees.

Squaws pinned me down for dimes,  
told me white was never what they dreamed,  
and that their children, brats in moccasin,  
were better off for what they'd never be.

No one brushed me off, or stood up,  
or told me where to face the other way.  
And no one saw me leave.  
Braves knew history, ignored the fuss.

## METAPHOR ON THE FARM

After watching a farm horse  
far from the barn  
march up to a fence  
and stretch its neck  
on barn yard wire

I decided, after awhile  
--put a string on the thing.  
Let it go like a kite!  
Stretch it in any direction.

I said this  
after deciding,  
and after a fashion  
certainly risking my neck,  
whatever I might imply  
either loves my skin  
or it itches.

## WORDS I LIKE TO HEAR

I'm putting on a show in my shoe.  
I'm laced right up to my kisser.  
I'm not bowing out in the cold.  
I'm stepping ahead into my exit.

What's going on on the cob?  
I have an image at hand  
with butter on my chin.  
I'm green inside all this music.

Who can say of your meals,  
right here on top of my toast,  
--I'm not satisfied with your bones?  
Mama, my blood runs when you're home.

Razzle-dazzle, I'm coming unglued?  
You say it's cold when I know?  
I say I'm buttoned up to here.  
I make tracks when it snows.

## GALLERY

Because I'm huskey  
 I leave the gallery  
 only to return  
 moments later  
 with a sigh and heavy ladder  
 the newspaper lady  
 needs to adjust the lights  
 with an eye for fashion  
 so the gallery director  
 can stand there by the canvas  
 with her daughter for a photo.

"People don't like pictures  
 unless they're full of people,"  
 her polaroid snaps.  
 "Like anybody, they're use to  
 sizing things up with their eyes."  
 I turn in time to leave  
 and hear the director ask  
 a group of girls on a fieldtrip  
 what they think an airbrush is.

Outside, on the steps,  
 boys in the same class  
 are spitting on their shoes.  
 Clearing the air, I ask them  
 how in the world  
 did you ever get here all together  
 in that yellow, Buick Special?  
 "In the trunk, under the seats,  
 the glove box, round the fan belt,  
 carburetor, the muffler,  
 --in your mustache, mister."



## THE CLASSIC EGGNOG MADE OF RUM

I feel like the bitter end.  
The honey in this hive is too green.  
Bees pick on my watch.  
A home is made of good skin.  
The lines in my pencil forget.

My sensitive end's a tip-off.  
A corkscrew on the bottle,  
I go up my pipe like smoke.  
This is breath, my boat  
in your sail: air under water.

Remember that day? It's all  
in the dark. So I blacked out,  
slapdash, up your skirts to my hip.  
Listen, skin is for keeps...  
the sky lit up like a match.

You're back. It's been tough  
jumping off the top of my head.  
Oh, I've had it with good behavior,  
the deep end. Let's put it this way:  
back in the saddle--high in the heart.

PUTTING HORSESHOES ON THE MILK COWS  
IN GRASS RANGE, MONTANA

I hit the town  
the way some stranger might  
step off a bus--head down,  
collar up, feet first.  
I did it so they'd have something  
to step on. I said what I could  
under my breath,  
saw a star hang it up above the street,  
pushed my way past the thought of coffee  
and into Lib's Bar.

Twelve shots later  
(my nerves on ice)  
this cowpoke,  
--an 8th grader--  
called his shot on cue  
and polished me off.

## FAMILY CIRCLES

I sit around typing like a Spaniard.  
I love it. A fly flats itself  
against glass. There is a smudge.  
Blood. (You wouldn't think a fly had any.)

I've got two teeth. I found them.  
They do not hang from my neck or anything.  
They belong in the woods where I found them.  
At the time, they belonged to wolves.

I make ashtrays out of bottle caps  
or bottles or anything. I'm handy.  
This isn't even my own voice. I'm talking,  
so, --who knows? There's that fly though.

I might just take a bale of catgut off  
to Africa and fly a kite back to America.  
It would be choice. And, I'd have something  
on the world at last to tell my grandchildren.

## A CLEAN SWEEPING

If not by chance then as luck  
 would have it, area dogs  
 are doing just as well  
 in residential districts.  
 Even the farmer's milking cow  
 kicked the bucket on the spot.  
 A week ago, a local doctor  
 spent the day off prescribing noise  
 for curious tourists, though  
 no one really gave a good hoot.  
 And on Main Street, two flights  
 above it all, desk boys  
 were doing it with fans again,  
 --this time like Marines  
 training for control. God's honor.

Saturday, the Woman's Auxiliary  
 painted the park rocks green  
 and hydrants red. High spots  
 hit the sun and the wind  
 got the dickens. Sunday  
 was another ball game, a minor  
 social. It was the Hip Sirs  
 against the Title Seekers  
 for a case of cold beer  
 and a couple of office girls  
 out on their first base picnic.

Although news that Moscow admits it  
 and agencies better than blue chips  
 are questioning existence,  
 wheat and corn are on the skids,  
 hogs are holding their own,  
 and goobers, a la Alabama,  
 --always slow rollers--  
 are popping up, stiking  
 for perspective experience.  
 In Hungry Horse, Coram, and Ronan,  
 --featherbedding's exclusive,  
 trucking's been signaled home.  
 In Poland, on deck  
 and substantiating threats,  
 metals are mutual, bullish factors  
 in gleaming engineering.

And so, after a good day's catch,  
the very latest up to date  
ends up wrapped up and fine  
in the crunch of cold fish cuts.

## THE PERFORMANCE

## THERE IS ONLY ONE BIRTHDAY IN APRIL

We are putting shingles on  
grandpa's roof. It is early  
and hot already. It is July  
and we're right in the middle  
of Michigan. Grandpa's  
down below,  
setting things up,  
setting things up in rows.  
We are having fun.  
We are stapling our toes.

It is still early, nine o'clock  
almost. Grandpa has his dander up,  
lets us know with a humph  
what he thinks of our toes.

Across the alley, in spite  
of us, a man in green,  
--a business suit--  
looks up but past us,  
mulls for a moment our oats  
in the air, adjusts a sprinkler,  
the brim of his hat,  
moves his shoes through a garden  
he does not grow,  
and, with his heel  
slams a gate that locks

what's left of our rhubarb in.

## GENERAL MOTORS SPECIAL

Dogs creep with clock-like feet on oiled tracks,  
 banging into trains of alley cats.  
 All tunnels into sleep again and out.  
 Dreams smoulder in cans of kerosene, kick and twitch  
 against the wive. Jones burned last week.  
 Alarm clatters into six.

More over-time. One more shift. One more  
 whistle. Valves open and close. Stale air  
 oozes from a stiff shirt. A shoe's in  
 the pant leg. Water eases glue in the eyes.  
 Lava soap. Toothpaste. Greasy mirror.  
 Face it. Flush it down.

Change drops to the floor. The kids'll  
 find it. Breakfast butts. A tin  
 of sardines. Last night's macaroni.  
 Solitaire. A hurried hand. Cards worn,  
 sticky--some missing. Six-fortyfive.  
 Hat. Coat. Lunch. Time to move.

You have to wear winter clothes here--  
 keeps the heat out, the sweat in.  
 Work lines chug, never stop. Forges scream,  
 never break down. Lunch time. Fish oil.  
 Macaroni. Mildew. Company coffee bloats you.  
 'Quality control' --foreman's on my ass again. Jokes.

Whistle's over. Monday's day after next.  
 Sunday. It's an accident--takes one to relax.  
 Clip the hedge. Trim the walk. Morality  
 of the lawn mower. This is a dog. That a cat.  
 These are kids. Communists give me gas.  
 Garbage out. Kick the can. Marbles. Yo-yo!



## THE PERFORMANCE

He was wide across the chest  
 had a good arm  
 and his name was Bob.  
 Straight from the farm  
 and a step or two up  
 in his Roebuck slacks,  
 solid bleachers egged him on  
 and the lady acrobat  
 marched him front and center  
 to the middle of the floor.

Proud they had their man  
 and glad God missed the best of them,  
 those "Troopers" came alive  
 when the lady  
 rounding out her program  
 zipped him in a leopard suit  
 and pumped him full of air.  
 Wild Bob was just their kind of man.

Where she might have laid her head  
 and blossomed like a queen  
 she placed a patch, no, an acre  
 of hot black hair. And Bob,  
 not to be undone and stretching things a bit  
 stood there in his shoes,  
 cool as a cucumber  
 King of the Prairie  
 and sucking in some air.  
 --He was her man.

Spread-eagle, with all that blood  
 rushing to his head,  
 Bob's legs buckled under  
 when the lady  
 striking a pose in leotards  
 then spinning like a dime  
 jack-knifed through the gym  
 and came down like some flower  
 and handed him her knee.

The crowd of course loved it best  
especially when they kissed.  
And no wonder. From ear to ear  
Bob's grin gave that gal  
and one small town  
all the latest  
if not the widest birth  
since Lord knows when.

## ELIAS 'LEVI' LARD-ASS HOLBROOK

Making a fist or having made one  
trying to let it go, grandpa  
gives it all he had so easy then  
rocking now just so tall in his  
saw-back chair and woolly bones.

A younger man when moving West  
meant moving west or someplace  
all the same swallowed up by snow,  
grandpa packed the family north,  
settled for a foundry, a fine life,

and flatcars full of Southern coal.  
He grew stronger then as tests of strength  
were all but news; built himself  
a dandy house, fixtures of brass,  
hardwood doors, a spanking Monarch stove.

Never quite strong enough to suffer up  
his woman's grief (seven times  
she turned Christian, finally abiding  
with the Scientists, diabetes  
and a wordy grave), he moved downstairs,

fancied a second wife--a social gal--  
practiced his chin-ups, one hand  
at a time, twenty times, not once  
but twice in a row, and continued  
to shave. Crocheted cups and plates of lace,

--starched just right of course--  
set the pace, fashioned all their days.  
And, too, though not exactly sold on this,  
grandpa let her go, hard at first,  
then slow, from his arms, and again, so slow.

Still, his preference was for solid cups,  
cold coffee, a place to maybe trim his toes  
or count. And I remember him like this,  
beginning with his chair--the fact his fist  
never lost its grip, or opened up for air.

## HOLIDAY ON CADILLAC SQUARE

Pedestrian enough, uncle  
is your name, pigeons  
your friends. Framed,  
perhaps shot down,  
you wave, smile,  
--strike us oddly on the arms.

We pass by. Such fondness  
makes us mad. We're made  
of better clothing and mad  
about your sign, the piece of cardboard  
with Sunday's funnies pasted on  
you hold for some alarm.

A real loo-loo. We return,  
speak of the Purple Gang,  
whores on Hastings, on Gratiot  
a garage in the Numbers Game  
making bucks for dimes. You listen.  
No strings. Stick to your mind.

We stick to your sign.  
Closer, it's simple. There's Abner,  
a laugh, mum, green around the gills,  
--Daisey's still a dream. Here's Tracy,  
pissed off, hot on the trail,  
deep blue in a zoot-suit for disguise.

We're back to our feet, Detroit,  
its postcard traps and dead end dames,  
--back to you, deadbeat, and still no name.  
Blocks behind us, you loose face,  
strike out with your sign. You're soft  
and ludicrous, spit, fondle our dizzy dimes.

BLACK SEPTEMBER

## JUST FOR THE RECORD

Ruby Coleman  
65 or thereabout  
last count  
at large  
and still from Spokane

jumped the bridge  
this morning  
apparently down under  
and into some water.

Sometime later  
stiff-lipped frogmen  
found her  
although downstream  
still down under  
floating the river.

## A CULT OF SALT

Mary.  
The night  
we raged,  
wild, savage,  
goat-gloved,  
drunk.  
We wanted the moon  
brutal more gentle.  
We drank it empty and flat.

That night we raged,  
sour-gutted,  
fist-faced,  
dead certain  
we'd scrape away the past  
and scratch up stars.

Remember?  
We crept apart  
and wakened strangers.  
We knocked on  
knot-wormed wood.  
We bolted walls up tight.

Mary.  
That dark  
night-nest  
seven dollar  
slot we sought  
wasn't ample  
but a rash chance  
in a cult of salt.

NAILING DOWN NIXON'S STATE OF THE UNION  
ADDRESS ALONG HWY 2

Night or day I'm driving along  
and it's usually straight ahead  
wheat or stars when all of a sudden  
a perfectly clear turned on tuned in  
sewed up dream touches my pedal.

Dreams wake me up. Bad ones.  
Item: "...we are not a great nation  
because we are the richest nation  
in the world. We are not a great nation

because we are the most powerful nation  
in the world. We are a great nation  
because we are a good nation..."  
After miles of it what could I do

but agree and ponder along with those  
seldom from Washington about this man,  
this down to earth sure-fire poker player  
from WW II, --who speaks his piece--our Pie!  
an awesome burden of truth

a wee bit on his feet, his shoes  
full of laurels, we are  
seldom ourselves...  
and only then when bids for feeling  
are either desperate in reach

or full of surprise.



## WITHOUT AS MUCH AS A WORD

I've never really wanted  
anything more than smoke  
drifting off a roof  
into spruce, have I.

Warm as the nude's bust  
stuck up on my window,  
I've done Indian gallops  
sticking to my spear.

It is me, this old thing  
I hold running off  
hair hung, barbed on wire.  
It opens my church.

This place where I live  
melts like snow.  
It should you know  
trip your tongue like my tooth.

## BLACK SEPTEMBER

(After the Munich massacre)

Dead center. Rings on the river  
move away just like that,  
no matter the size of the splash.

Stones tumble the bottom.  
I put down the news.  
I grab hold. I kneel.

A plane goes by;  
--another and another.  
So much sun gets through.

Oh, if only the world  
took hold, loved,  
could see itself through.

I move away  
and move away from myself.  
I cry and cry.

REACHING HOME

SANTO DOMINGO PUEBLO: THREE YEARS  
WITHOUT RAIN

A man with a bag of bottles  
stoops in cattails between  
a Burma Shave sign and a windmill  
with a face full of broken bones.

Indians know better. When times  
are bad and moons hot, smart ones  
carve more Indians. Others practice  
Mexican or hunt cactus skeletons

for lamp posts. I came  
to Santo Domingo Pueblo before.  
I was small.  
I can remember the thump and chant,

buffalo and antelope dance,  
but it hasn't rained  
for three years now  
and tourists are out of season.

I stopped to huddle with children  
around a bucket of broken pottery.  
We pieced and faced legends together.  
Night fell and fears drove them home.

I can't remember how long I stayed,  
only the crow in my mirror,  
hobbling back to the highway,  
something small in its mouth.

## CHESTER, MONTANA: A RECONSIDERATION

I suspect, even for you the sky  
must ring a bell. It was not enough  
to have learned from that Depression  
how to plant this wheat.

I suppose you've had your fill.

I suppose from anywhere and for news  
you simply call collect. Charge it  
you say, what the hell, the world  
is out of step. Diversion's the word:  
you step on sidewalk cracks for the love of might.

It must be easy for the rest of us,  
our world, you see, is round,  
yours curves--somewhat less and flat.  
Wheat or snow, this land goes on and on.  
You stand up straight and call it work.

A stranger to your town, I spoke of love  
as if from books. I sought a voice to tell me  
what I am is really here, on level ground,  
your way of life a step ahead of me perhaps,  
--a breath away from all your farms.

WE WERE TALKING ABOUT CHARLIE MILES,  
EARLY BISON, THE GULLY & THE KILL  
(For R. D. 'Mac' McCurdy  
Originator & Curator  
Broadus, Montana)

Up, up the kill they drove them,  
boxed them in, clubbed their bones,  
--ate the meat at their leisure.  
Clubs again, bone, horn,  
(flint points cracked their spines you said)  
--all this you've uncovered  
as if it wasn't enough  
yards above another era  
to find them again  
where they drug up rocks,  
drove them up and over and,  
in another language,  
--cut them down to size.  
Everywhere they left a mark  
and everywhere you found those marks  
that touched you--and found  
all you touched a part of yourself.  
You knew they knew the best:  
kill and eat the kill.

Then came the horse  
and white-faced buffalo grew rich  
not wild, and all across this earth.

## LIKE ANY CHILD, THE WHOLE MAN

Leaves, at least the leaves  
know when to fall--but you,  
Sunday six-gunner, I know  
you're going to tell me,  
tell me years from now  
you're still alive, kicking  
the daylight out of pine,  
--and only for the whiskey.

I know and you know a man  
can't last forever--some vacation.  
Drunk, at least once, maybe twice  
in your life, --how the saints  
must thank the sky for snakes!  
Snakes, so cruel you fixed  
their heart-shaped heads with planks,  
took your boss's lip to task,

broke it off, tipped your hat  
and damned the lucky railroad  
down the road. Some engineer  
and what a switch you pulled  
that day you started building ships  
and lied so well captains  
tapped your back and laughter  
hit the deck. Some war.

"Don't you better believe it, John.  
Five times you cut a man's stomach out,  
his vagus nerve...you've got trouble."  
--And now you're buying guns.  
Guns like you've never had.  
But you never shoot.  
Hank. If it goes by another name,  
can you tell me? Does it hurt?

## A TIME FOR HEALING

(For Sister Michele Birch)

Then, with no time to poke around  
you leave what holds your hair in curls  
near the door. I turn up the light  
on my wall--find it wasn't easy  
in the picture, --or the blacksmith  
at all, admit I was tied up with my tone.

The blacksmith never missed.  
Only the glow coming from nowhere  
breaking up the room, the ice and fog  
on a hill back of the phone,  
--that message from home--  
the toothpicks I swept with a hand  
to the floor, the wet place  
you thank God for in the mirror,  
--have said it better.

The blacksmith, your man,  
a deep chest, lifts his cross up  
off your back, knows  
the supper we practice will last for days.  
For days we'll keep our eyes this way:  
deep into this scene framed on your wall,  
across a bridge all covered with snow,  
past a cabin in the wood too good  
to be true,  
--all the way up that hill to the moon.



## THE WEIGHT OF OUR MUSIC

This much is suspect: a beautiful human  
name, trees turning down rain,  
the doors we kick to move our keys,  
the rooms we lock to hide or brood,  
--a woman too foreign for a dream--  
a room without room for rain.

Those girls we'd move till they're nude,  
the sharp moods we steal from moons,  
the moon we cup with our hands,  
the hands we kiss to kiss us home,  
--are all too common, too common  
to claim the earth  
we rub like apples on a Sunday afternoon.

This much is certain: love is enough,  
a name, the heart of an oak  
misses the rain, the shades of a woman  
life deep within her views, and man,  
that man she understands,  
--that rib of hers on wing--  
tips all the apples red  
before they fall.

## SONG FOR A WOULD-BE ASSASSIN

"...for me, the best swan song  
is the death rattle before  
the firing squad of a tyranny."

--Alexandros Panagoulis  
Athens, 1968

The snow is falling. It is falling  
the way snow falls, deadly white,  
heavy as iron. Trees are bending.  
Saplings are confused and will snap  
no doubt. Birds have simply frozen.  
Light fumbles at the window, brittle,  
finished in the frost. Acquired glass  
shifts in the sink. --All is in balance  
as if some great weight were coming  
or as if what is common might pause  
suddenly for one last and final look.  
The look is cold, the look of old leaves  
left crazed by the wind, played out  
in the fence. It is not for you.

An arm on the back of your chair,  
your hair on my arm, I lean away  
from the table: "Listen to this man--  
he holds the world up by the throat.  
His song is lovely like his blood.  
He loves to sing. His blood is loud.  
He lives to die and loves his hate."  
But our dreams are never careful.  
There, take that puppet in our corner,  
that rag doll with the brass eyes,  
a mouth full of mold. We took him in.  
He was crucial enough, something to rush us  
through our wedding, the crust of our wedding  
raked upon us, the business of cards, duplicate gifts.

It is nothing. We will survive.  
 Our children will grow to know us,  
 ignore our grief, the span of things,  
 and die. Few will remember we abused ourselves  
 in better moods: ambivalent hero, amusing,  
 --fat feather self-inflicting wound,  
 sing! It is no matter. They'll say  
 the loss we lived was always our own,  
 dreams will have broken down for them before.  
 History will bury its nose.  
 The grave are dead to the world.  
 Dead wood for a box, a flag perhaps is all,  
 all or nothing at all, Alexandros,  
 for a nation on its knees running the wind.

It's quite Greek to us, Alexandros,  
 we mean, we're just not thinking--  
 you would have dropped the prevailing  
 arm of state to the street with a shot  
 after all, and after all, all  
 would have gone well? And now?  
 A prince in Rome protests your execution,  
 while you, standing off, protest  
 a stay of execution for a pat gift,  
 a lasting sentence...?  
 It is not enough, Alexandros.  
 And what are we to do sitting here  
 folding up the news, without fear or fear  
 and too much sugar in our coffee?

Alexandros, behind the saplings and our necks,  
 our wedding knives and the ice, the leaves  
 in the fence, your fists in print,  
 the cream on our spoons, the powder,  
 shot, blindfold, bad grape and the rush,  
 the magicians in our women, metal in our men,  
 --the birds that can't sing--  
 in a word, the tag end and the cup,  
 who will know the tangle of assassins at our feet,  
 in such a wind, where one stands or snaps  
 like glass, the beds of roses and blankets of brass,  
 the deep seeds we salute, and who,  
 who will gag the moulting swans,  
 --rattles in our throats?

## REACHING HOME

That man on the Swan takes trout  
like himself--by the teeth.  
Small ones he saves to keep me  
common and young. He says  
the sun makes his mornings  
not a sack filled with fish.  
He wades in--fixed on the glare--  
the craft of my tin coat,  
a strong drift in the air.  
He signals a way up the river.

Other men come to an end.  
Contemporary, like vegetables,  
they do not care for the sun  
unless it meets them half way.  
I think it through--through  
a window facing a road  
their fear grows: always a river.

Now age moves me, twists my arm  
like wire. The back of my mind  
is just right, the slack on my line  
is nice and easy.  
I take my cues from those  
with the sun slung over their backs,  
one foot on sand, one in the river.

And, if it shows, father, the sun,  
I'm up to my neck, --I know.  
Any morning now I will leave you for dead.  
I'll wade into your arms like this river.  
And for any child at hand, yours, mine,  
I'll thank your stars.  
I'll set the hook, my teeth,  
and thrive like the sky,  
my song--your blue familiar hum.

## LETTER BACK TO MICHIGAN

(For Don Johnson)

It is not vision that isolates but memory  
 arcing backward that ushers me now  
 beyond considerations of Time, Playboy, T.V.  
 and the filing away of, until another time,  
 --a more appropriate moment--an answer  
 to your letter, and, those punch-line  
 snapshots of self, son, and dog.

What was it drove me away?

Drove you back? It was not green in Seattle.

It cannot be so in Michigan. Can it? Michigan.

I think Michigan--think traffic, feter, angina pectoris,  
 that now penciled-in engineering father of mine  
 designing in a drastic grave; and mother, thank God,  
 still alive like most people, white designs of clouds  
 on canvas, flecks floating high and low above her heavy  
 head.

Is such the price of hope when money fails

and sons run off with the ends of the fairest ropes?

I think: over my head--Despair--you are still there.

In this shot, your dog, a fine looking mutt,  
 tugs at the tail end or beginning of something  
 (can't make it out exactly, don't want  
 to make it up), the other end of which, black  
 as white--though not on record--does not itself,  
 let go. There is something here I cannot see,  
 something for the life of me and all my strings  
 I cannot twist in place, tie together, weigh,  
 or if ever satisfied, stack into a corner, like rope.  
 I think Michigan. Montana. An even match. I say--Yes.  
 No! This test turns my face directions I cannot face,

am inside, not free to see. I turn my back to the wall,  
 pick up your letter--your really refreshing prose.

Oh, if you could only see out my window now.

We have mountains here, bluebirds for the first time  
 in years, foxglove, spruce, fast water and faster fish,  
 --and cold beer. A day does not go by that snow cannot  
 touch the sky, all summer--sometimes straight through.

We are very lucky and never afraid. Most of us are white  
 or tan, hardly ever hear of the war anymore.

When something happens we get tough and think God out loud,  
 and say our grace. Even our scraps have a place.

Montana. It was Michigan, Lansing I'd guess  
 where for kicks and hours on end (like kids)  
 we made the most out of a dismal day at city dump.  
 Remember? We didn't build a raft or need a cave  
 like a couple of crafty characters we knew  
 but took to limbs and sticks, hairpins in car seats,  
 thread from old upholstery, worms in the mud  
 and whatever else we turned up turning back the clock.  
 And wasn't it just our luck to catch a whale of a fish  
 between us--a bluegill, and a runt at that?  
 Some kids are smart enough--they never grow up.

Michigan. Montana. We do what counts.  
 There is that choice. For ourselves,  
 we do as our wives: what we can,  
 --and stay alive. For the rest, our sons, daughters,  
 pets, --we do what we can but with distance.  
 And so, cameras bring us close. There is no choice.  
 We love an image that locks us in: brings us home.  
 And here you are: son in one arm, dog in another,  
 you--dangling your danger in-between. Up King! Huck boy!  
 And there you are, in the middle of your life, headstrong,  
 stuck on top of your big feet. Sweet Jesus!...it's  
 beautiful.

And so we frame ourselves and the scenes are overexposed.  
 I'm not surprised. There are monuments men turn to  
 in the nick of time, when, whether out of love or hate,  
 --it should never become a question of which or how or  
 why--  
 night or day, here or there, now or then, whatever it is  
 we are  
 we become in an instant, a flash, --Angel and Ape.  
 Can you see it, years from now, the photos fade  
 and we're up on that mountain top we always talked about  
 still looking for those holes in the air where the sound  
 of silence comes from, where, for a single instant, the  
 sky  
 breaks--and all the words in the world look straight at  
 us

and say absolutely nothing, --and we crave and crave?