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REFLECTIONS IN THE WOOD'S EAR

By

Timothy Wallace Muskat

A.B., Cornell University, 1982

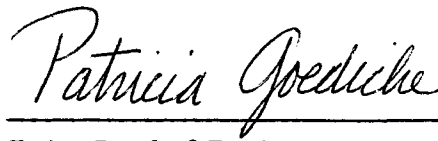
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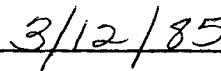
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REFLECTIONS IN THE WOOD'S EAR

By

Timothy Wallace Muskat

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For Jerald, who found the lyre,
and Jane, who tuned the strings



THE NOTION OF POETRY: A PREFACE

The word is the robber in the night: it hooks to a thing and drags it to being. I have caught the light, slinking through the wall; and I have fetched for sound in the bucket of my imaginings where the gifts of my ancestry lie alternately hidden and found, but most often lost, waiting, like fine antlers. So it is, I suspect, the power of the word couches in the palms, a cumbersome weight, and flies from the throat, an energetic, diaphanous bird. What we speak — and, in speaking, give the word to — becomes so finely tuned to the reeds in the gut and the ear's delicate contumely that it becomes not what it is at all, but a trace of it, and an urging to pursue. But to pursue not a thing lost, but a thing ahead of and beyond us, yet felt in its motion and — somewhat stealthily — understood in its breathing. The quills of words are gently ragged — as if pain and pleasure were lovemaking on the bed of our skins — and, when we seek to extract them, delicately resist. They latch to the bloodveins. So words are ethically a kind of sweet poison — and our salvation is steeped in them; and our hope lies in the fact that we often listen, and more often follow, if only to catch a glimpse of the beast in the path.

THE BLADE OF THE AXE INVISIBLE

Every night I take my axe into the woods of language, and hack away: the bark flies and sings poisonous and jeering, the tree sways and shakes and rattles and cracks – but I know I cannot fell it; I know that when I return the next night the bark will again be a sheathing husk, the tree will be rigid and daring, unspeakably tall. My axe will breathe all the symbolism of futility and failure, it will swing, unthinking and innocent, at the tree again, and I will not stop it. I will make it swing; I will throw it again and again ruthless and unyielding into the bloodsap and the quivering, dumb veins: the tongues of unformed syllables will surrender to the quick motion; the loam around the tree will drink in the pieces of this holy rape of language: and the trees – all the trees darkly surrounding – the trees will say manipulator manipulator manipulator.

I SAY

I say a poem in the rutting season
Is a cankerous beast, its quillsharp

Antlers stabbing the whiteness
For fluxing & sound, culling the invisible

For tremors: the darkness unfurls
Afflictions of music, hoof-beats

Against rock, or the confluent
Motion of the streambed disturbed:

I carry my conscience
In a satchel of misgiving: an arrow

Is a word flung helpless
At an image, an indecipherable *twang*

For sight; the bow
An agency for aiming,

Failure; and the bugle, what you
Call with, in seeking the muse:

And metaphor is hooves,
Beating time in the soil of darkness,

Waiting for the *thump*
Of solid ground:

A buck herself, poetry uprises
In the ripple of autumn,

Beaded with a scurvy
Of awfulness & power: look for

The scrawnyboned hawk geocentric
Circling, the rhythm & syntax

Of everything omenic: the leaves,
Lines uncurling to twin necessities

Of gravity & death: for this, poetry
Lies coiled in its horniness, waiting

To diffuse: the woods are a chamber
Of unseeable pitch, a matting

Of thunderous timber: I pursue, I choose
My course: the buck, calling, rambles & ruts;

Poetry breathes in the shadows:
All sound, I say

WOOD VOICES

Non sum qualis eram.

(Horace, Odes, IV. i.3.)

I. BIRTH OF NIGHT IN WINTER

Some owl blurs & bends itself, wings
 Across a narrow
 Ravine, is
 Lost
 So I soar in a loathsome substance
 Rise gray & low bent in a torrent
 Of memory & presence
 Careening through brushwood & aspen
 Twisting through hunchbacked oaks
 Effluvia, sputterings of a mountain stream
 A thick element
 I am the jeer & caw of twilight
 Ravens, buckhorn soundings
 Bits of discarded barkwood
 & nooks no ladybear in her right mind would settle into
 This is what you are the voice said
 I am I am somewhere something
 Echoed, said:
 Winter's on the way, white whore.
 Go little stream, away
 Go away unyielding to your mountain source
 Before you dry up, rot
 Or come to nothing

II. DEATH OF NIGHT IN WINTER

Darkness suspends
 Upon itself, quivers
 Into light
 Ache & Solitude are two monsters
 Too monstrous to contend with
 I have let this consuming loneliness breed wild over me
 Spawn & scream in the lungs, the brain
 Without direction
 There are no candles
 You will have to grope your way

I lift the stone, heavy
 & instead of letting it fall
 Back into its imprint
 I stand & decide
 I am a displacing god:

Insects grapple about
 To find themselves
 Drag the affrighted
 To safety
 Who's that who's that who's that
 Something says
 This is the shadow of myself

There are no candles
 You will have to grope your way

There are only two ways
 To kill a man
 I heard her say:
 First, without a conscience
 & second, in some lost region
 With castles, wornrock, waterless moats
 Where nobody cares to go, & stay

III. REMEMBERING THE BROKEN OAR

Gregory & Marco & I in a boat
 Over the waves in the sea
 We think of Morocco, places

It was this way, or do
 I know this is the way

Now there is the echo of floating bones
 Silent, dead
 On the shore

Only

How do you write a poem about someone
 Who's dead? I ask myself
 Remembering the highwater, the keel
 & the spray

A little leak
 Forced its way in
 & then
 It was gone:
 We bailed it out with a pitcher

Tossed it over, into the darkness
 Beyond the docks & dories
 A good bit away from the shore

IV. IN THE WOODS

I see him off against the pines, my death
 & lonesome friend & bosom buddy
 Beckoning: it is the same all ways.

Come away, come away he'll say
 Leave things to rot as things,
 As bones do, for it's real out here.

Jesus, if you knew the forest & its trappings:
 Black, dismal in a falling torrent:
 A webbed madness of branches

Admixing & silent: It scares me.

Then he'll disappear in a sprig of fletchwood,
 Or into the blue void between trees;
 He leaves me in the haze, without thought.

The principle goes on & on
 Something like this: you accept
 The rhymes & slantwork of nature,
 The jags & timber dug in
 Against the mountain's natural grade;
 You accept that you are not,
 Like a hollow tuber the wind gives a whip to
 Except you are nowhere transplanted
 Nowhere a bed of moss calls you
 Like a grave

V. LYRIC

When the morning sun speaks its early speaks
 When the thrush with her rufous-dabbled breast lunges out
 To sing the oak-leafed cadence
 When the graceful moss uncovers its dewy head
 Where shall I be, then?

You have touched the gloomy pines that reach across the sea
 You have wandered in the wind that is so dear to me
 And though the valley cleaves us whole
 And to different worlds us departs
 Know I love thee, amber branch
 My earth, my counterpart.

VI. WITH THE DEAD

Winter came in cold & hard & relentless
 & holed them in: he split wood in the forked chill
 Of false sunlight, she baked the bread
 That fed them, kept them warm

When she was sleeping
 He saw the nighttime with his eye
 In the cold darkness he heard the train
 & it shook the house

For a moment, imagining himself
 Dead, he stood before its thunder
 & was taken
 Beyond the tracks & ties

VII. ELEGY

Gone gone far away
 To rot his bones
 In funeral homes

Far & deep I hear his cries
 & wild lamentations

The music ceases
 The blackening din surrounds
 & dies off

King Richard's dead
 Has laid his head
 On grubby sheets that smell
 Of earth & wine & kerosene

A pillow
 A coffin
 A woman's voice
 That turns
 Unceasing
 Round in the head

You say King Richard's dead?
 Ah, I did not know
 It only goes to show
 How way up in the clouds I am.
 You see, I was reading.

VIII. CONFESSION

You know I am going out of my mind.
 Water falling over rocks.
 Sometimes I want the internal pieces,
 Calamity & calm.
 Smooth, rocky,
 I am the beach & ocean
 All at once: evolution, species,
 Wind, language.
 I roll back against sea breezes,
 Hear turnings, flow
 My temple a shell's echo unfolding.

IX. THE HOLLOW SOUND

I want to say I am Lazarus come from the deadwood
 Of some poetic turmoil, a turning
 Of leafpiles over, an inspection
 Of composts & chickbriar, red & scraggly on the mountain
 This time of year —

I ponder on the dead lurk of these thickets:
 An upgrown conifer hooked in sagebrush,
 A grouse in the pale of easing winter,
 A junco far off in the tangle & woodlore,
 A wood the locals call lodgepole.

I search for significance, for something in moss
 Etching its way upwards,
 Crawling leechy into a squirrel's hole
 Empty for some time —

This is not a season for communication
 With flowers & the pink of the woodlawn aspen,
 Or with the cry of a friendly jay cursing the treework & its intricacies
 Or with some windspattered hawk drifting easy in a galewind
 On the look for a meadowmole or brushmouse to dip its wing to;

This isn't a season
 For long walks through the ochers of summer soil,
 For tramps & trudges,
 For meanderings:
 You burn out here in the cold.

If I am not Lazarus, I am his shadow,
 Creeping from the dead woodwork of migrant storms & thunders,
 The occasional tappings of a woodpecker passing by —

This is what I see in the gray of a shivering wren who's lost
Direction & place,
In the bareness & opacity of a winter nightfall,
In echoes, in what perhaps
Is Spring, a bird arcing, tired, swept vaguely
Homeward in the wheel of the wind, caught in
The hub of darkness & light.

FOR SOMETHING

For something I have walked the stonebled beach
 For you I have walked the stonebled beaches, working
 The sand with plodding
 Thoughts, turning things over
 And in my hands over
 Again, the same hands
 Reach out for you in a waking
 Sleep, in the fragments
 Of dreams I have kept in the nightstand
 Drawer, visions
 Lost as tiny pebbles on the waveworn shore
 You and I on the shore, and thought
 Lapping with the waves,
 Gulls and sandfire
 Jellyweed sloughed in sand hollows
 Please don't be afraid
 Please don't be afraid you said
 Of the tumult and grindy reef
 Of the lurk beneath the cress-line
 Of the loneliness
 Out
 The seawind has carried out
 The beady sparrow song,
 Threads and binds the oak twitter
 To chunks of brine,
 Salt
 I should like to sing, to fish
 To fish seatrout Poetry, writing
 A fresh name in the saltlick
 And the footprints of dowitchers,
 Upstilted in the dunegrass now
 For something I am walking the stonebled beach
 And you are a distant fleck on the sand, upcarved

And jutting in the sinking rays of afternoon light
And thought, sprung out

Against the pitch and heave
Of water, tumbling

Water,
Flutters off in the wingbeats

Of a weatherbeaten gull,
Caught in imagined glimpses

Between troughs

FUROR POETICUS

The rain spills the grievance & weariness of the day's sky:
What is that the rain barrel catches?

WOODLAND SPLEEN

For my dogs I have built this kennel of rottenwood & timber,
Dug rocks from the reluctant ground

That I might sink the dolor of my insufficiency in a posthole.
Cavernous & quiet the ground

Gives nothing: rocks & shaleflint, longsunken
Hardwood roots twisty & dead.

It is loot for the soul. Long hours have I
Measured the fencelines & the distances,

Driven nails into a muckspattered planking:
My hands have blistered & bled.

The ground, in requital, gave stone.

Them
I have heard them

In the night I have heard them:
The ground breathing slow in its groundswell, the posts

Uprearing wild in the blackness like horses'
Bones, the fence tearing loose & searing the nails.

And I hear those nails
Drop pinging on the unearthed rocks & against themselves

Pinging, & I know then
They are bleeding. Calamitous the fence,

Beneath the moon pellucid & orbicular the fence
Rages toothbare & lashing its

Dance of death. I hear the siderails, gray
Shivering, band together like harlots, & whisper.

The dogs loose themselves on the night.
In the nighttime I have heard them

Baying to the moon's loneliness
Isolato. Isolatum.

I hear them dig in the loam for maggots.
I hear them howl in the blackness at the wind.

DEATH OF SPECULATION

When all that we know surfaces wormlike & antlered in the grass,
When Spring rises sepulchral & prehistoric from the ground,
When the flowers die into one color, one bone,
When the sun coils, recoils, & spins into itself,
When the moon becomes a panting darkness in the sky,
When the stars lose light unfigurable, O my.

LITURGY

If I have gone up the mountain like a mountain
Lion on the quest
On the hunt for the sweet lurk of the mapleberry
And the scent of a forgotten carcass, the blighty
Fallen timber on which to scratch out a few
Lines
If I have come down the mountain like a timber wolf
Lame and scarred and not knowing
Whom to trust
Or where to look for food
Mad with the sound the wind makes
Humming in the night
If I have taken it all too lightly, this
Seeking, if the word must be
The lover of my speaks, my sighs
The drunkard bleatings of a wounded raven on the wing
If it must all be
Then let us go out together
To find the fog of meaning
The well in which no bucket ever falls
In which our shadows lose their selves
Our selves
A meadow and the proper slant
Where no cows are grazing
Where the tracks end
Where the sound is but a sound
Of reeds and dunegrass and larchwood whispering
To a band unseen, crickets in the darkness
With cellos, violas
An occasional far-off beat
Of a drum
A cadence
The clamor of nightwalk musicians.

LOCUTION

The oak's locution is a matted tangle black
& clawing the woodshed in a storm, a voice

raspy & witchlike in the wind: it says to me only
that I am in my loneliness

as a root rotted & eating itself inward,
as a wounded mongrelbuck will lick his wounds until they

become the essence of his pabulum, a bleak
nourishment of bone & sinew,

a solitude thick as the night is thick,
when no morning comes:

LAZARUS (INEBRIATE)

When the passion seizes me to
 strike up an accord with the dead, say
How is it down there? and know
I have spelunkered with the best of them,
 have known the noises of the wind
& the subtle, smooth motions of the bogswamp's
thawing: what efficacy will a tongue have,
 what inclination will beg to speak even
 the tiniest of words?

THOUGHT

It rises in the sea of its uprearing
Quivering and dumb
Driven by what it has seen

STRUCTURALISM

At the beach late one night the signifiers got together
and beat up the signifieds, and the things –
skulking behind the conflict –
laughed to themselves at the foolishness of it all.

But then an argument broke out.

"Now wait a minute," upspoke one of the weightier ones,
"You're dealing with who I am..."
"You aren't anything," upshot another.
"O cut it out," snapped a more seasoned elder,
"the purport of inquiry is that it is or
it is not, and if you..." "What's your sign, man?"
interrupted one of the groupies,
who seemed quite oblivious to the whole affair.

This went on for some time.

In the midst of it all the ocean – rather suddenly –
swelled very large, and drowned everyone.
In the aftermath birds, like bulldozers and cranes,
could be seen all along the shore
sifting through the dead, and here and there
picking out a name. Words lay everywhere,
their meanings oozing from them,
and disappearing into the sand.

"Hey," said one of the birds,
"look at this."

It was the wind, coughing and a little bruised,
trying to get up on its own.

DEER SONG (PREAMBULARY)

I want to take my Spring with a cup of chokecherry
wine, bridle sinews with the waxwings
& head for the hills: there I'll

Tent up with a bear to argue
tension & significance in a bowstring's quiver,
tether a hockhorned buck to a line

Of acquiescence, do some dental work — a fancy
bit — on a cottonmouth's jaw.
I'll take a stand for Poetry in the meantime,

In the troubles we can't toil with,
knowing some things (all the while)
are best left the way they are.

DEUTERONOMY

And the elmberry, full, resinous, shall perish in snowfall;
And the eddy shall surrender its motion & currentry;

And the deer blighty & bowstruck shall rot in its wanderings;
And the specklytrout shall its vocation relinquish, & drown;

And the willow shall abandon its flaxensoft mewling & riverbed;
And the rock shall crawl from its hiding place, give up lichen & mosses;

And words, quiet, shifting, shall steal away in the dark;
And the dog, howling, shall know they have gone.

EARLY MORNING RESPONSE TO HEIDEGGER

In Being is the infinitude of possibility.

The train sings like a brokenlimbed dog, or
is a ghost howling at every crossing,
or a light dopplering on wheels: stop them,
freeze everything in the quietude of infinity,
gesture to the engineer: what is left is
the pathos of motion, a grinding of iron
and sparks that was but cannot be:
still music, heard beyond hearing,
known in the fear of knowing:
resplendent, luminous-pale shimmering:

this is

all else is an illusion, a train on
the tracks in the dark hollowly
reverberating, an oil-drum
filling with thunder

TO CULL THE DEAD FROM SLUMBER

Sifting through my bones, my deaths, I am arrested by nothing save that I am always dying. Lawrence speaks often of these 'dyings' — traumatic, yet silent moments when the heart falls away and burns, and is then repaired, patched up, so to speak — and one has to take him seriously. Of course, everyone ought to be taken that way.

AUTUMN FINDING

They happened upon a goshawk, wounded, in the road. It was so speckled with blood they could not make out the gray tawn lines of the breast. She wanted him to set it down in the marshgrass, help it die as it were, and be off. You are probably right, he said. This bird has no soul or agony I can stretch upon a wire, nothing to hold us to it. Living or dead, it circles beyond the timberline of speculation, hunts for things we cannot see. She said nothing. She was sure of him. They lingered there unconsciously for some moments, marvelled at its strange cryings, wondered what they should do. At last he said, we can do nothing. Almost dead in the road, it did not look at them. It asked for nothing. It did not watch them go.

PLOW HORSE AT DAWN

In the whitegray morning, when the wind is down,
go to the window, look out: you will see him,
gangly, almost fleshless, tracing a perimeter
in the wheatless field, moving in circles & rows.
Far from his paddock, no one steers
his weary motion. Unharnessed, silent, he
is blessing the land.

ENCOMIUM FOR COWS

The cows maunder forth & back
in the manureslog of winter, their
loins lank & bestrewn with mud:
sodden-mouthed, they say
nothing: as if torn
between emptiness & desire
thick as their bones
to run off:

to pastureground
idyllic, to a land without ropes
or tetherings, where the grass
grows unguent & vermillion,
where the sky changes in blue allusions
to itself, where
they might say: we are here,
happy, O leave us alone

LAMENTATION, APRIL

My father shot a deer when I was five.
I remember the antlers, how they
had torn the ground like a carving,
& the blood, thick,
seeping in the matings of smooth hair,
spilling silver into the light.

Many times have I healed the dam of sorrow
that deer in its stillness lays open;
many times has that blood flowed through my thoughts
like a fetor, & a voice come calling me:

I do not know what to make of it.

AFTERTHOUGHT

The deer, having been shot, tumbles its guts & bucksap
To the streambed's evolutions, black blood
Like a river black & dead runs nowhere,
The song of the dead exudes from the eyewet casing.

Myself, I have no epiphany for the stillness of rotting blossoms,
For oak limbs deep in the ground as corpses.
The grass, mown, disintegrates into pungency.
Grown white, bones rise slowly with the motion of seasons.

Here the soil is the soil of the dead, the ground
Decays the pinebark's etchings, owlscrap bleaches
In the light. No sun, no flaphappy kestrel
Jeering the wind. The apple trees have lost their color.

BEARING-CROSS

In general, a wounded buck
Is a bad thing: his blood

On a leaf or speckling the
Snowbitten ground is what

You follow, knowing you've
Mishit him or that your arrow's

Gone slantcrooked through him —
And then you're in a mire: that

You've no meat to bring home
To the wife & kids is a

Primary consideration, & the dogs
Will suffer for the loss

Of fat: though the principle
Agony is the thing keeps going,

Thrashing horned & crisis-like
Through branches & forks

In the trail he's making,
His antlers heavy on him

As treelims, probably oak.
So you consider the motions

Of failure & go through them:
Cover your ineptitude in

A tracking of his waywardness
Study the wind for an impetus

Or an aspen for a telling
Quake, look for the bloodspattered

Leaves: it is the leaves
Finally, fallen, rotting, who

Tell you you've lost him & it's
Then you know the stench

Of desperation & emptiness:
That resurrection is hanging

In disguise, that you have done
Worse than kill, that what

Makes that buck's rack so
Confoundingly troublesome to carry

Is not so much Death
At his back, but the death

You've shot him with: a thing
Of terms & arrows, ghosts

Of yourself, hope
You went out for & lost.

*Fool, say the leaves,
You shall rot out here in the woods.*

FOR A DEAD HORSE

At night, stiff-legged, half-prone,
the horse bled from his throat,
spurning the coolness
of the running stream, & we listened
to the wind for a change, some signal
to say

He is gone now

Who lay steady & patientlike but the wind
wistful, brought nothing: we heard
him again & again pull himself
up, the stones loud with his continuous
failing, the water chattering
with the voices of toads,
oblique & round in the darkness

In the morning we would look
from the window, helplessness
heavy on our tongues, like birds saying

Poor thing, poor thing

Once, he broke from his fencing mad,
blinded, seeking
the water, but not to drink: as if,
redhot, the stream were an alchemy
of contradiction, an unwelcome
balm:

Even now, carted away
this horse draws us to his
empty paddock, there
to stand & stare at his rain-laundered dung,
dandelions rising thrasonical in the bald
sun (what could their roots
have known?)

Where is his ghost now?

No sound, no gentle breeze
to bring him back

The tulips unfurl, the goldfinch darts yellowblack
in the gorse, death's effluvia
quick in the air

This is the wind at my heels, speaking
through a cone of myself:

AFTER GARDENING

This morning a tiny bone sprang discolored
& haughty from the shovel's offering — as if

It had come from the other side of the world,

Mocking, resplendent, bejewelled with
The center of the earth, the heat

Of rising: here, in the window

I have left it to recount
Its journeyings, the hands who have
Held it & tossed it on, the roots it has known

& mingled with, the rocks & loams
& sediments, fellow bones, things of suddenness,

Antiquity: feral talisman, subtle bone,
I know I shall keep it,
To watch it parch & rot in the sunlight, to listen

For the slow cracking of calcium in time:

*O thigh bone of basilisk, murmur to me
In the nighttime hours*

I shall listen, I shall wait.

SUSQUEHANNA

Here, old ghosts of whores
pollute the riverline, patrolling

for rats & trinkets, roots for
their stews: ringing, the bells at night

cannot call them home: they
probe the climbing hempweeds

for the men who have left them,
for a combination of stones

& sticks to bring them back:
the river, earthbrown succubus,

stirs & sustains them, keeps them
as sisters: tired hags, they are

eternity's nomads: whiter than
invisibility, they pan the river

for mendicant blood: when the floods
in springtime come wayward crashing,

hear them chortle, coo:
the milk of their breasts is water

ITHACA, AUGUST 1981

I remember him clearly: an ancient
codger, how he pulled the carp yellow & twisting

onto the riveredge, cudgelled them with
a thick, round stone, & flung them at last

in an ever-growing pile. One fish in particular
wouldn't die: the old man stoned him &

stabbed at him with a tooth-edged limb, saying
you damn fish in a broken, half-choking

English, but the gills kept heaving & falling
in patient agony, each filament a tiny fan

swaying to itself, as if the wind were water,
its flow uncanny, silent, invisibly wet.

SHORELINE

Here there are deadbark & broken plankings
 Boats moored with tetherlines to stakes the rust eats into:
 There is nothing: flotsam

The shore's loneliness
 The gray inefficacy of still water bloodblack
 Unaffected by the wind:

Here winter eats the shoreline trees
 Like a sickness
 & the rocks jagged unholy

Speak amongst themselves waiting
 For the ice: how many dead
 This water has spit to groundpools & to streams

Ghostly & torrential beneath it (and
 Nowhere going) no one knows:
 That the rocks would answer

Is a thing for speculation: here
 One knows the immovable only: that lichen
 Is the bowel of a rock

Strewn inward feeding wayward
 Intricate upon itself: that
 A curlew is a harbinger of nothing more

Than what it looks for to sustain it:
 That driftwood (anemic in its watermixed
 Whiteness) is a smashed & scattered

Limb smoothed in the gills of time –
 A torn part
 Of a dead & forgotten tree: Here, if water

Is the liquid murmurings of memories & bones: if in
 This clear stagnancy all blood has come
 To rest lipid & still & frightened:

If somewhere in this waterflood the culmination
 Of our rootlessness lurks monstertroutlike
 & hungry: the shoreline

Does not tell you: the rocks betray only
The agony of their helpless community:
The water says nothing but that

It is made of waves & hidden eddies: the
Splintery boats lean mute & sideways in the sand
Sounding when the wind blows through them hollow

TO A WOODPILE

You nest in the driveway like an unwanted
paving, a burial ground for trees:

visible grave, you are the succubus for every
species of log, a tower of contradictory

limbs: you lure the wind into
not coming out; you crack in the night,

an aged voice: how many nights
have I come to the window, hearing

in your bowels the quick motions of
a possum, or a wandering cur, to find you

alone, sullen & still in the darkness?
I restack & rebuild you, fringe & form you

with shavings, the entrails
of barkless pines, & oak: I take from you

to build you back: still
you haunt my dreams, spilling from your confines

like uneasy water, cumbering the doorway
as shadow: what pretense have you, woodpile,

alone in the center of circumstance?

HARLEY STORY

He slipped on in the night and rode and rode, through Pennsylvania and its turnpike, into Ohio and the O-sound (which he hated), past Indiana (quickly, for here he was possessed by thoughts), past Chicago and Green Bay and Minneapolis and past all the places where they played football; and then his bike stopped. Was it that he was out of gas, or had a piston become too much for the casing, or had, simply, the bike decided to die on him? He kicked and kicked at the starter; nothing happened. Weeks went by. He rotted on the highway; he did not want to leave his bike — motorcycles were valuable things in those days. At last the vultures circled; a kite laughed in the wind, vanished in the air in which it had risen. He was a skeleton on his bike.

SLAUGHTER

A clip of sky, sunset from the window:
Robin voices lacing grandmother's hair,
The sound weaving as tendrils
Between two old branches, & lingering –

I remember the smell of cooking basil,
The curls of chickengum broth
Smoking motionless – translucent dancers
In the silent stove-heat.

And she used to sing: lark-like, somewhat
Calling, and instinctually
I ran to her warmth.
Grandpa always brought his catfish out

Of the pond, looking tawn
Strung up heavy on the gray stoop
Lines. There she would scale them
And rake the guts out,

Her hands bloodied, while he rested,
His boots on the hearth-stone drying.
Meanwhile the moon, some natural courtesy working,
Dipped up and took the sun, and hid the slaughter.

BARNYARD

Here, a beam's length of bats,
wings robelike, quivering:
the weathervane twists & spins
in the wind's whimsy, measuring
nothing: a horse, bridled in a halo
of flies, looking westward for the falling
sun:

Dead eyes: poor, rickshaw limbs.

How can it know
the eternity of seasons, how
the corn dies to feed us, each husk
a messenger of frailty
for the unborn earth: decay is
chance & possibility,
an apple rotting in the grass: who

Who shall find its bones?

Forget, says the fragrant wind: *forget*

We spinnaker in the field like children,
dogs among us
like bees

ROADSIDE BURNING

A killdeer screams in the grass, its nest
On fire.

The wind's bones, egregious,
Rattle the windshade. A woman drags limbs

To a pile. Crows pick at the blackened
Woodscrap, men turn the ground upon itself.

The wind rakes the cinders into ash,
Gray mounds for the undeciphered, the yet unborn.

MURMURS FROM THE BOGSWAMP'S GLOAMING

A poetry that works rises up spontaneously and powerfully from the bowels and the brain dancing as one in the dark tunnels of despair and loneliness and tribulation, and it asks nothing but to be read to somebody who will listen to it and understand it and for a subtle moment go away from it bleeding and pained.

REFLECTION

When you look in a bogswamp, at the
mudlayered quiet, you see
nothing in particular: not
the torpescence of cat-tails rising gloomy
in the dark mud; not the individual,
half-sunk ribcages stinking & saffron
of cows & deer (who lost, once,
their way: or lay down simply
amongst their bones);
nor do you take in the essence
of the stink itself, the bowelrisen hircismus
in the unblowing wind,
the dead smell
of forgotten things.

Of course there is an argument for
wading in top-heavy & full of resolution,
to cleave particularly
to the dead on the bottom,
to call the things that cannot
hear you, cannot
possibly: to lift yourself into
earshot, to where the bones are
easy & inviting, where the muck
comes caressive & yielding: to feel
the rotten branches tangling heavy & substantial,
the oak & aspen, juniper-
willow, the reedpine touching you
as if to say: may I join you
down there?

HELIOTAXIS

This: that the muck-entrenched carcass will
 rise up & go forth
 among men, augment the light
 of bones & moonwhite marrow, of what
 lurks longing, quiet, beneath us,
 the things of tidings
 & despairs, what we have ignored,
 or lost:

These always are there: roots
 gone dark with ages & canker, a roebuck
 heteromorphic in the shifting bog (what
 bowels sustain it?), treelife without
 leaves, only the foliage of bones:

What is one to make of that?

How once, from speculation,
 we die into this low-hung whiteness,
 sick with the stench of
 nothing, of having no thing
 to pine for or lay hold of:

What birds shall come for us?
 What wind will blow our way?

What is left
 is an echo of no one speaking: questions
 for the dead suspended
 in the bogswamp's gloaming:

The bones, homeless, say nothing: they
 cannot: they know not how, or why
 earth dissolves the gift of tongues.

OF BONES

To suggest that bones are the remnants
Is part of it: bones exist also (by

Synecdoche) as limbs & remainders of the dead, & arise
In various forms: you can find them tumescent

In a bogswamp (strange, how a bone moves
Upward in the soil, as if protrusion

Were its nature) doing the job
Of sticks, or upright in the gloam of the moon

Sucking whiteness (drinking the moonglow in),
Or in the shape of a wayfaring doe: bones call

For contemplation: the jawbone, for example,
Of an infant snake, the jaundiced

Vertebrae of a swaybacked elk, the toe bone
(Hooked) of an osprey: symbolic bones

Are the trickiest sort, left to perish & decay
As themselves, mere bones, yet

More: caves of the yellowfoam
Marrow, the jags & runnelrock

The blood flowed over, stone mattresses
For the flesh. Bones never sleep.

At the window of your dreams,
Bones lure you into the nightfall, rattling incongruous

Like drumsticks, & it is impossible
Not to be afraid. A concert, these bones,

Their voices in the night like sweet particles
Of wind, illusory, chiding, gently like an aspen

Against the glass: listen, to hear them
You must listen: they gather noiseless

As nomads: they pull at the earth
For secrets

LOG

Some tree you are: dead
 unto yourself, stifled & cold
 Half in the ground rotting to no one's particular
 advantage or calling:
 What do you pain or labor for? Once
 antlers & winds butted & fluked you
 Seasons & spittlegum grew maggotty on your
 branchings & ebullience,
 Darkness & light took turns
 putting you up.
 Now no nature asks you landladylike for a
 defoliation, now you cash in
 On your fetor & nothingness the way
 you lie there moldy & bodyless: a blotchy
 Grog in the land's soberness, corpse without
 a ditch or tomb to throw itself into:
 Nothing: and what spirit you have I suspect
 the crows have cawed & blackened off to no good
 End, what voice you have – well,
 you aren't much for speaking or can't.
 You gloat in the selfishness of your decaying:
 mushrooms & faunalurk shrouding
 You like a casement or vapping
 deershit & skunklily moss breeding
 Democratic in your lawlessness (for
 what governs a log?). And lately
 I have heard you howling in the night
 lately making a great fuss about
 Something, someone not harking you in your
 harklessness perhaps, or a jay practicing keeldives
 & somersaults in your territory, or a
 manxcat, careless, taking a leak.
 O proud, subtle log, what need to scream
 like a cougar in a beartrap? What untold machinations
 Inflict your woodgrown soul?

FISHERMAN'S DESIDERATUM

To know the angle the line
takes in the water, the lure
& cull of the emptymouthed trout,

what he is thinking, coiled
in his motes & streamlinings:
what makes him reckon the tide,

a soul whiplashing uncertain,
angry at itself: how current (pathetic,
moving strain) bevels the wind to

its liking, chooses
reclusiveness in a tiny
whirling eddy: why happenstance

hides the fish in a bramble
of seagreen water, turns it
centrifugal, waiting to strike:

when it will rise from the deeplurk,
a bowsprit gleaming,
phosphorescent, the hook so

redsplashed & magnetic,
tugging

WHERE

Where the leaves hear the wind nestling in their vertebrae,
& rustle back,

Where the whitesick birch glints & quavers in the moon pallor,

Where loam luciferous & bonespecked hums
of phosphorescence & silence,

Where the bear sleeps gray & troglodytic in its hovel, beneath
the groundquiver of sensation & waking,

listening to the earth & the music of its inebriate
particulars, tumbling night, day

into each other, laughing
flustery winsome caustic O

Where?

MEDITATION

Or if I could be a rotty log, shored up black
Against itself; a hollowed timber like a carcass
Low in its eternal fetor; a woodland scent
Slow-moving as the dark beetle it imparts a cover to;

Let me be the lowland buteo on the wing,
Lost in its pinioned camber, its opiate fall
Into the calm of some branched forest;

Or let me take a woodjay's jee-reet upon myself,
Echo it into consciousness, a naked sound
To loose within the mind, remember in the thicket.

SPRING CLEANING

Shingles, concubined, tumble away,
to rot in the damp ground: the gutter aches

With heavy rain, the foundation sinks
toward oblivion: one by one, merciless,

The joists splay inward, the beams prepare
to crack & fall: and in the midst of this,

The nails, always the last to go,
trembling metallic & meekly, quiver

& shake loose the rust of ages,
peek from their indentations like rowed

Colonies of walled-in mice: delicate,
nibbling outward, in one noiseless voice

Sing the coming of blossoms, ragwort, thyme.

SOLILOQUY BENEATH THE NIGHT

Often, when we were building
The doghouse & busy
Putting the fencing up
In the heavy dew-swept grass
In the dirt & the rockspattered loam
In the curse of a twisted nail
Bent against a cold November sun
I saw you & measured you & took you
For granted, for something
You were not
& felt ashamed

This morning I woke & left early
Your side, warm & rolled out
& went to the kitchen window
& pressed against it
& looked out into the dregs
Of a gray dawn —
There I seemed to see the doghouse
Uproot itself & disintegrate, & the fence
Bank up against the windy pines
& fall,
& lock with gnarling roots

All as if love, its labors
Had given way
To the rude December quiet
To the nothing
The stillness
The cold encroaching:
A few dead branches, the silent contumely
Of winter

FIRST SNOW

Sheltered in the soil of our house,
like primates we know the truth

of nothing, snow tumbling over us
a hood, a cowl drawn

from the powder of bones.
This snowfall, moon-driven wheel, turns the slow

black cadence of night
into music. Sleep hears.

The noose of darkness uncoils upon us.
Our cells gird to the ceiling

like bats. Gone from us, tissue
swoons in the whiteness: to the snow

it offers a pale curtain of skin.

TO THE BEAUTY SLEEPING

This hay burns like a woman's hair
in the moonlight, ravishing

& pungent & flowerlike burning:
I send these tiny curlings

of smoke to your window, tendrilling
upwards, rising graysoft & questioning,

bird's wings: do you see,
do you know how we part

to please you, the dogs & I,
the moon in its quicksilver gloaming

high in the hemlocks, snared in the branches,
the wind: in the darkness it rattles

the window shades, oblique & venturing
it sways in the trees

like an anthem: gentle modulus, it
is the life of the fire.

THE KNELL THE LONELY SING

A weeping killdeer in the grass says the snow has gone
 Into water: cold streams like troughings for horses dead,
 Heard in the groans of nightfall like priests.

Here I pitch rocks & rootscrap to a splitworm fencing,
 Burn scraped-up offerings to a god of timber & privation,
 Feel the wind like a pasture fire swirling in my soul.

Here I have come to lay down my sorrows.

O my friends sing we shall
 Know no limitations & agonies, no falsehoods & suffering O
 There is a way, my friends, there is a way home.

You and I shall walk the shortest byroad, far
 From roaring cars & faded lines,
 Far from our land of exits & endings, tollbooths & dividers

To where the dead & the living waltz as one.

All our lives we want for some homestead, a bridge to cross over
 Into a quiet, smoothtilled garden,
 A world of white lawn chairs, badminton & croquet.

All our lives we have brought crocuses to vaseheld water:
 We hoped they would grow without rain.

At night, the windows open, we die in our sleeps.
 Sparrows rustle in the darkened grass, watchmen.
 In the moonlight, our souls linger to wake us.

In dreams we hear the sigh that lives in the foam of ocean waves,
 The presence that moves like a vapor over highways we have run to,
 Funey in the nights we do not know who we are.

I hear the mad inconstant cryings of a raven nursing a wound,
 The spill of saltwater over bows & low-hunked sterns,
 The voice

Of seawater encroachings,
 Tickings like a music in the curves & windings of bridges & ramps.

There are travellers we want to greet, lurched along
 In open boxcars, cowled in places lost & avenues

Forgotten long ago. All our lives we have stayed low
 In our loneliness, built foundations with hand-gathered stones.

I take a shelter in the busts of wrinkled women,
 Old goddesses I have met & known in bars.

The drunkard history swaggers by me, nimbused
 In a ring of hankering crows.

I sort through the rubble of unknown oceans,
 Haul in the foughtworn trout I have lined for with baited hooks & store-bought lines
 My far-away thirstings & desires.

I see love burned from itself into cinders,
 Hatred, torn & jaundiced in the wind, rising from the ashes.

I dig like a dog for boneless truths &
 Finding none, hide my ashamedness in whispering lies.

In the clear fog of morning, I turn my flashlight
 Inward, unused to oxymoron.

When I arrive at the gate,
 The heavy gate that swings once only,
 I shall ask for the dead man's bourbon.

O my friends do you hear the windtorn pines bleat their unceasing anthem?
 In the dew flecked moss we shall taste the body & blood.
 We shall know the holy water when we see it.

I remember tiny pebbles I have given to the riptides,
 How I watched them like lives fall parabolic to the currents,
 Without sound or misgiving.

I remember the arching of the mountainspur raven,
 How it circled & fought the wind,
 & cried out at things I could not see.

There is a nameless motion we know & wish for,
 A woodlurk trust to flood our musings & bag our sorrows in,
 A rainslogged quarry in which to bathe & forget.

In toil we discover our fragility,
 We test our friendships in juxtapositions,
 Send them blind into torrents of jealousy & verisimilitude

& say: I was only fooling

When the waterfall approaches too near.

We must crawl from our selfhoods like ants.

In letters I have sent to the people of my dreams
I scold myself for lacking courage
To say what I mean.

I release my utterance like a doom-tangled cast,
My lines, invisible, twist in birchlimbs & anger,
Catch in the squall of my depravity.

And always I wade into the highwater, dumb,
Crippled, to fetch my lure

From slippery rocks & silent weeds

As if I were bottled up in a grave
With the stench of neighbor coffins creeping near.

O who shall interpret us in the high grass when we are broken,
& like repaired vases broken again?

We cling to logjams in the currents of our nothingness;
In the swell we seek protruding roots.

It is a sad irony that the mighty roar of words
Carries no grief,
While rain bespeaks its essence in a single rooftop drumming.

O my friends how long will we wait for Isaiah
In the blaze of haystripped canyons, watch the encirclings
Of redtails and thrushhawks,

Wait for some sign?

These portents of loneliness I read in the mockstone alabaster,
These launchings of words I send
Across waters, to a homeland I want to reach & cannot.

You shall turn the words as you shall turn them:
Send them where you will.

I know the futility of the highwayman's scythings:
The grass will grow up again in its own blood.

LETTER FROM THE NIGHTSHADE

If I have gone out
 To listen to the leaves entwine & shudder
 In the damp phosphor of the night: to hear

The nighthawk, far-off, whistle low & plangent
 In the low-hung branches, or a horse, prisoned

In its moonlit stall, softly coughing, a resonant
 Pitiful sound —

If I have hunted in the darkness, sifted the sludgeweed & aspen
 For a blanchy carcass decay has laid hold of,
 Or a thicket of bones to gather up as pittance

& bring home (an offering for the sake
 Of having nothing else) —

If I have left in the hush
 Of morning, when the night knows little of what is to come of it

But dew; if I have gone among the trees
 To await the robin's awakening & the distant, thawing

Rattle of the earth's undercurrents, a streambed
 Taking life —

Do not be afraid

The zephyr & the cool chinook, they know
 To blow calmly when I am gone; the tottering aspen —

It quakes & shivers to guard you. Listen for the bones
 In the moonlight's departure, Methuselah's bones,
 Ancient, coy talismen:

I have found them. I lay them at your feet while you sleep,
 They warm the ground fathoms beneath our bed:
 Locked & gently rubbing, hear them sing:

They shall protect your dreams, they are the voice
 You wish for, the blanket you need

For cover

BREVIARY

Give me a birdbriar hovel^{ing} to set myself into,
& beeswax to caulk out the salty old bears:

Give me the calls of poorwills & nighthawks,
& the skulls of moose, muledeer, elk –
that I may know distinction when it's called for:

Give me a wind untethered & whiplike flying,
that I may hear it when it blows,
& when it is still in the leaves:

Give me a meadow in which I might bed down,
& give me the geese to populate it daily,
& their rustling sounds, for occasional noise:

Give me, too, a clearing in the trees,
where I may watch the stars, comets
announcing themselves, & burning out:

Give me the gurgle & sidwinding of a mountain stream,
one I may follow & listen for,
drink from when I am thirsty:

Give me the endroots of the oak & the aspen,
& a walking-stick of good hickory,
that I may carry with me, & not be afraid:

Give me the moonspill, when a storm
will wake me, or a heavy breeze:

Give me again & again a place where I am welcome,
where I may rest & hear raccoons digging,
talking among themselves while I sleep.

WHAT THE MORNING BRINGS

Though I know the scurried voice of shearwaters in the reeds,
 The rain in the leaves outpouring its bloodwet essence,
 I cannot expect to lay my sorrows in a brimstone's curving.

I have discovered a profundity & rootgrit in the residue of my wakings,
 A deer, arrowshot, husked in its seeping effluvia,
 A stormtwisted pine lashed to branches & groundrot; and though I have wished them

Tongues with which to rise from the dead,
 I cannot bend the dogwinged kestrel to my sad music,
 Or hear my troubles in the sweetgrass sparrow's trill.

Though I have seen a hawk circling in a lameness I could put no earmark to,
 But took a sympathy in nevertheless,
 I cannot take this lurksong Poetry for any particular granted but my own.

I follow the wanderings elliptical & going nowhere, a cloud
 Of ants in the clutch of their labors & a fear we have no name for,
 Scavenger jawbones bleaching in the daybreak, natural signs

Like crows. Circulations without centers, these things are
 Brought by the paradox of morning, sick & embalmly in
 Its dew – like grief, or apple blossoms rising white

In the effulgence of windwrought understandings, tatterings in a breeze
 Like syllables, gray, soundless, cried out in dreams