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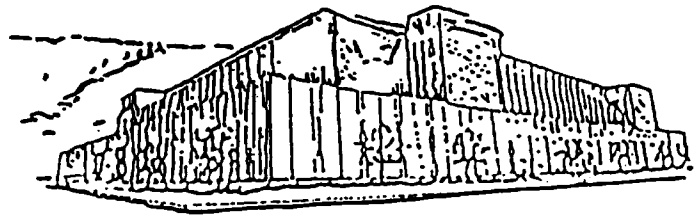
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THE POISON APPARATUS


POEMS BY TODD STRUCKMAN

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, University of Montana, 1999.

Approved by:



Chair, Graduate Committee



Dean, Graduate School

5-17-99

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for Dan and Penny

The canter has two stride patterns, one on the right lead and one on the left, each a mirror image of the other. The leading foreleg is the last to touch the ground before the moment of suspension in the air. On cantered curves, the horse tends to lead with the inside leg. Turning at liberty, he can change leads without effort during the moment of suspension, but a rider's weight makes this more difficult. The aim of teaching a horse to move beneath you is to remind him how he moved when he was free.

Henry Taylor, The Flying Change

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I / YOU ARE NOT THE HERO

At The Bridge

What's at stake in a dream? This: A woman
you still call *Chica*. A river flowing upstream.
A hero that isn't you. You're stuck on the answer

to *magnetic beam*. *Maser* completes the crossword
and you're excited. She sees self-absorption
to the edge of death. You try to explain

that *excitement* is not a synonym for *pride*.
But who wants to listen to another person's
self-analysis? Which is what this is, etymology

only an elaborate excuse for narcissism.
She leaves, and you are trapped thoroughly
exploring the difference between two words.

Even if she knew you better, she would not
love you more. It would not make her more likely
to marry you next summer. You follow

through a town you recognize and should
be able to navigate. Found, lost, and found
again, you find her at the bridge, a structure

abandoned before you were born and rebuilt
during your childhood. *Maser*, how clever.
You speak and she laughs for every sentence.

Maybe, her laughter represents the pure form
of language of which your voice is just
the ridiculously distorted mirror image.

She's over the railing and climbing down
the I-beams. Suddenly you regret caring
about *maser*, and for the first time in the dream

you are quiet. You recognize immediately
that this is dignity, and that allowing regret
sooner might have saved both your lives.

She lets herself drop to the water.
You run along the bank, anticipating
her trajectory. Sometime during the dream,

the river reversed directions, and the man
with a beautiful face and maybe even money
noticed. He saves her, tows her to shore

--stanza break--

in a cross-chest carry. You're the former lifeguard.
He's not trained to perform this heroic feat.
And you know she could swim herself to safety.

But ability does not replace need. He saves her.
You run to meet them. It doesn't matter.
You're only as good as your latest dream.

And you are not the hero.

Greasy Grass Creek

I never saw Lloyd's son's body, but lots
of people did. A car, maybe a truck, hit him
and he died in pieces. The tribal police,

passers-by like my dad, an ambulance
from Lame Deer, and someone you know, maybe
even your cousin, all saw his wrecked body.

Now, this August, the bodies of garter snakes,
fully black from days full of tires and sun, lie
like oily scraps on the highway that divides

the swale of Greasy Grass Creek. Lloyd's son
wasn't hit just once. The red went tar-black.
Now is the August I drive past the spot.

A small herd of bison still sails the low
hills around this battlefield. Coyotes,
lightning, maybe nothing at all really,

can send these wide-open days on the prairie
spinning, as under heavy winds trees tilt
and the long grasses gust. The prairie, the low

hills, whirl upside-down. Clumps of dirt rain out
of the grass. Lloyd's son has been dead one full
year and it's right for Lloyd to be sad.

We are our father's sons, and we live. The grass
is deep at Greasy Grass Creek, and snakes, their bodies
loose and soft, dart across the warm pavement.

Pictograph

At Hueco Tanks, before the sun struck
the western cliffs, I walked between slabs
of Thunderbird Rhyolite, the feldspar's

light pink winning forth slowly from the fading
shadows, and I walked through rubble beneath
the cliffs, their young faces not yet sanded smooth

by winds off the high Chihuahuan Desert,
not yet bleached to match the house-like
boulders shed when inland seas came and left.

Everything marooned or not yet for much,
much longer, I stood before a painted
mule deer while the air of the Rio Grande

valley warmed and rang with the sounds
of insects set to work by heat. An older band
of dots and stripes ran left and without

laws I might have spent the night
to add my own concerns, my future wife
perhaps, her absent form remembered

with the charcoal of burned juniper.
Instead I ate and drank what I carried
from El Paso. Who cared enough to draw

these antlers sharp and crisp? The ochre
of iron ore, not found for miles around
these hills, still came to points a buck

could use to fight. That pictograph is not
for many eyes; the climb is rough and town
is always hard to leave. But neither not yet,

nor marooned, the deer is. Drawn, real
or imagined, for those that fill the air
with sounds, for those from town that eat

and drink, and for those that scratched
geometric forms in rock, the deer abides
what it can under daily sweeps of light.

Father And Girlfriend

The infrared film records
 basalt skies and clouds
 blast-white. Cheekbones
 glare, and eye sockets

collapse forever. We look old
 and raw, like fossils unearthed.
 I think when my father dies,
 the weather will make

infrared. He asks her how
 to compensate the focus
 for the infrared wavelength.
 She says, shoot wide and slow.

Next she explains polaroid
 transfer: peel backing
 from sheath, press chemicals
 to drawing paper. Work fast,

then wash. She must like him.
 He guides her from offset press
 to lithograph. She holds
 the dingbats, thumbing hard

their steel filigree, uninked
 and sharp. She will make
 the basement hers and print
 our wedding announcements.

They both use black to pull
 white from paper. I think
 fairness matters. She will go
 infrared too, like the backyard,

its grass in the fifth zone of gray.
 Fair means enjoying her
 black and white, ready
 in the hanging moment

of exposure. Fair means
 not confusing moveable type
 with grains of silver iodide.
 A lithograph press set tight

will emboss paper. I find
 his imprint on me distinct
 only in certain wavelengths,
 and better sensed by touch.

--stanza break--

This winter, my father enters
his sixth decade, the decade
of his father and brother.
I should shoot wide and slow.

Printing always comes back
to oven-warmed linoleum
blocks, the penciled outline
of a jaguar, the slow carve

of the razor. He opens
the drawer of his favorite
font, one inch wood letters
with an exclamation point

like a baseball bat. He must
like her. Photography always
comes back to coffee can
cameras, pinholes past

aperture sixty-four, lines
diverging like longitude
on a polar map. As curator
of my self, I stored the evidence

I knew I would need.
From him I have, ordered
by year, eight journals printed
over twenty years. From her

I have, framed in black,
matted in white, three windows
photographed in black and white.
As curator of my self, I collect

the evidence I will need.
What occurs between them today
occurs in me forever, by whatever
means they blacken paper.

Jess's Auto Repair

Your car's CV joints need new boots
and the rear brake pads will wear
down to polished steel and squeal
like fighting cats, but both repairs

should wait. That's what Jess
would say. You're sure. He's not
the kind of guy to get all tied
up over the many minor plot

complications cars can foreshadow.
For example, the lot and building,
maybe his business and the necessary
tools to run it, are for sale, or being

"offered," as the sign says. And Jess
just sits, like he has since the first day
you hooded your eyes with cupped hands
to look through the mirrored bay

window of his office. This past year
he's been reading a paper, the current
edition, you assume, his beard a blooming
gray flower, his eyes nice like a card sent

for no reason. He doesn't clean his shop.
It doesn't need it. The two garage doors
are always down and his clownish
jacked-up Barracuda with four

wide Michelin Hylites the only vehicle
on the lot. Nothing looks abandoned,
just at low idle, ready and able to shift
into gear, like African tigers that sun

themselves all day. But you know that big cats
make big kills while Jess appears to not practice
even preventative maintenance, automotive
or commercial. Then again, you can't dismiss

that what appears may not be what is,
and that maybe his hunting happens
when your safari is too far away to see
the sprint and lunge. Maybe he spends

most of his day on the lean side
of that delicate ecological balance
of calories in and calories out,
an equation not counted but sensed.

--stanza break--

You've seen cheetahs lounge
near packs of dik-diks, and lions
stroll by wildebeests made bold by
the statistics of being just one

in a herd of thousands. All the best
hunters wait until the odds of gain
cascade past the work risked. Asked
if he calculates his terms in this game,

Jess might recite numbers and quote
market research, but you will know
none of it's true. He assembles clues,
like bids and incoming bills that grow,

and decides with a predator's instinct:
Hey, auto shops close and CV joints rot.
Why chase what can't be caught?

Animals

It's not Mink. The field guide says:

Mink has white patch on chin.

But my flashlight's light

comes back a yellowish green.

Just like Mink. If it's not Mink

it might be Fisher. A Fisher's black fur

ends in white. Mink and Fisher

share habitat with Marten.

And this little animal

might be that. Marten

backs are dark. The bellies,

pale. Lemurs live in Madagascar

only, otherwise that would be
my best guess, the one for you.

Mink can go fluid and squeeze

through anything bigger
than their skulls. Imagine
dislocated shoulders moving

past your cupped fingers!

This animal hasn't moved

in a full minute. I can see

the blood vessels of its retina.

We're both frozen by light,

the narrow cone a sword

in my hand. I could touch it

but I won't. I'll tell you

it was a Marten and you'll know

I'm really just guessing.

At night the forest is better

without a flashlight and I'm glad

to turn it off. Claws like brads

wheel in the sudden dark.

I wait, feeling vulnerable,

which I am not, for my pupils

to open before letting just

the uphill grade guide my walk

to the tower, none of us

animals captive anymore

of light in a dark forest.

I Only Lost Homes

After his mother died, Eddie named himself Snowbird and in Harden they still laugh about it. The borrow pit along the on-ramp always stinks with rotting dogs and rotting diapers. Eddie waits without showing distaste. Once, at mile post 486, he showed you a dead horse, a torn sack around bones. That's the year Eddie bought the red and black Chicago Bulls warm-up suit and had his head shaved by Earl. Today his scalp looks like forty grit. He says if it gets cold again he'll spend another night in the mission and ask for a trim. Last week two men came after his Air Jordans. You stop at the Safeway in Billings and he buys blank tapes, batteries, and duct tape. When he asks, the checker says, "Okay, Bird," and gives him two more paper bags. The men did not beat him up and they left his clothes and tape player alone. But they accidentally ripped open his bag of tapes and stepped on them. Back in the car Eddie nestles the three Safeway bags inside each other and runs long strips of duct tape under the bottom for support. Then he reinforces the lip. Eddie needs a replacement sample of your voice and says, "You can sing again, but don't clown around."

His only Safeway bag, re-taped
for strength, never leaves his reach.
His life is lost; his time from homes,

too long. His Crow aunt lets
him spend Christmas Eve night
only. It's sacred. The bag, with tape

recorder and extra sneakers, sits
between his legs. You drive towards
her lost home and a lifetime

of neighbors pass. He points out
the place that once took a Section VIII
with only a Safeway bag. He tapes

all, for the record. There, the landlord
had said, "You smell, Chief," and Snowbird
left that home. In time, all lives

will have to hear those voices.
Including this, it's all on
tape, in the bag and safe: I only
lost homes in my lifetime.

For The Runners

They look too big for the room. Their bodies,
loosened by the run, will not stay packaged
into proper posture. Arms droop to knees

and backs collapse like the cats into chairs.
Someone stretches, knobby shoe and knobby
ankle near the computer on the desk, her bare

hamstring like the trestle of a bridge. More legs
come out and disassemble. The talk: from where,
how far, with whom. In the kitchen, one whips eggs,

another slices bread, another refills glasses
of water. Someone sets cinnamon and nutmeg
on the counter with a jar of molasses,

then puts syrup and a sack of powdered sugar
on the table. They debate the fastest
local animal, antelope or cougar,

and decide together that distance
makes the races, like contrast makes the color,
whatever that means. They only grow tense

when the runner at the stove calls, "Toast,"
and means *lets pronounce our thanks*,
not that the slices of French toast

in his pans are ready for their plates.
They drift towards the kitchen and nose
around, admiring the smells and choosing places

to stand that foul up the triangle
of counter, stove top and nearly full platter.
At last the one suggests they sit at the table

and so they do, with napkins in their laps
and their legs out of sight. They mangle
the first serving, and the second, bodies rapt

and voices low and incidental, a rhapsody,
like running, of senses, breath and muscle.

Fifth Grade Students

I learned later the robin, a species
called American, sang fine six to ten

whistled notes at three or four pitches.
That humming birds seen in Idaho

should be black-chinned and feeding
on air-borne insects, not nectar alone.

Not all facts came late. When Carter
lost the presidency, I understood

he liked birds. And that a Muslim
loves the text. The injured robin we found

died, passed from a palm nine years old
to palms eight and six. From this death

we learned to die patient and that death
is not the antonym of life. The humming bird's

beak, damaged in the windshield wiper,
surprised us all, even my parents, by forming

an angle that violated our collective sense
of bird architecture. Swaddled in tissue

it died in the backseat, anatomy
askew but bloodless. Since this death I've tried

to receive and give pain without struggle.
Mom did say, "Birds die," but we kept both bodies,

robin and hummingbird, until we reached
the lakeside camp of our father's next job.

The high water mark of debris included fish and lost
fishing lures, wood and bark, styrofoam

and dragonflies. We were glad to learn
that in Idaho, as in Montana, dead animals

abounded. I learned later death abounds
everywhere. That fall I ran for fifth grade

class president, nominated by a friend
I can no longer picture or name.

--stanza break--

For the class I discussed the robin,
the former president, the humming bird,

and Iran. The landslide surprised
us all, even the teacher. The robin's

wings had seemed dusty when I lifted it
from the grass. I thought about mites.

The humming bird had looked like it might
start sweating. Even ruined it seemed

to radiate heat. Death can not be seen
in terms of life, as understanding the Shah

requires a temporary release of America,
and as good civil service requires a release

of office, and as students in fifth grade release
their fine senses to the handlers of birds.

Flathead Lake, Thanksgiving

We walked out like prize-fighters, robes
poised on our shoulders and heads steady
over the complex beats of five pairs
of hands and feet. The planks felt warm,
as if they were covered with a cotton
tablecloth. The skin around my knees
pulled tight and the hairs stood out
like magnetized iron filings. The rest of you
were cold too. I could tell by the way
you toed the edge. We looked at the lake,
a calm apparition over fifteen yards
of gravel in tidy dunes, and tried to deny,
each alone and inside ourselves,
that the bonfire on shore would awaken
an ache deep within the living core
of our bones. As our bodies forgot
this swimming through water ready to fall
into crystals, we stood naked, waiting
for the right moment and then we leapt.
And then we remembered mid-flight,
the place where all lies take or lose weight,
that our lives of flesh would shatter
at the lake's surface now almost not liquid
and now almost paned stiff with ice.

The Poison Apparatus

The donated cadaver
 we understand. The iridescent
 spectacle on a beetle's black wings
 we understand. The rattlesnake dissected
 with steak knife

we understand. We saw eggs
 mid-fallopian. Our parents encouraged
 insects in the worm bin. We enjoy the smell
 of manure, of compost. But enjoy is not
 the right word.

We like crustaceans, flowers
 and arachnids, even magnified
 protozoa. But like is not the right word.
 It falls near tolerate, the far side of love.
 Appreciate? Cherish? No, but close.
 Consider that doctors ask the pained, "Where
 does it hurt?"

Anatomy is mechanical,
 specific in spirit and application.
 Cadavers guide the living
 through pain. We need the dead. Need
 is nearly the right tone.
 We need help

articulating life. Dead is both radar
 and topography for the living.
 We invent this language as children
 and as parents. The notion of snake, we know,
 comes alive

in prey. Venom flows from gland
 through hollow fang to puncture.
 We study the nature of the strike.
 We diagram the poison apparatus.
 We always

recognize this design. It recalls
 what we began to learn when our parents
 caught the chicks of the ruffed grouse.
 We attended those weightless handfuls of warmth.
 Remember

the hen, the explosive peeps,
 our parents, our hands? We return that gift first
 with a rattlesnake, a coiled
 juvenile,

--stanza break--

found dead but unmarked.
We attempt speech in the language of
cadavers, our Mercator grid for living.
Our parents

admire the spectacle of dull scales,
the frozen heap of body, the heft.
As children we try and say-- Mother, father
when you die

We all understand death will be specific.
Through the mechanics of pain
we unfold the anatomy of spirit.
We know we need the venom. We know
we enjoy the poison apparatus. However,
we still ask,

of our ourselves,
after decades of practice
in this language we create with our children,
with our parents, where in life
will it hurt?

II / CHILDHOOD LIGHT

First Year Of Avocados

Father has trouble controlling
the twenty-foot pole. The coat-hanger,
doubled and bent in a smooth
hook and bound with electrical tape,

blunders around the avocado.
It hangs like a bat in the shadows,
a bundled packet. Mother almost
didn't marry him, him being nothing

special, another collection of elbows
and hair, and awkward decisions made
tossing coins for the I-Ching.
The hook brushes and knocks free

two avocados at once and mother
gets the softball mitt under one.
The other lands in Jaime's yard,
the softest lawn in the cul-de-sac.

The fruit isn't ripe. The rind is hard
and the flesh isn't bruised. She figured
he was her best chance, the one
to take. He didn't have the kind

of friends that encourage normal
thinking about cars and stereos
and God. Father snags another
avocado and mother's old mitt

saves the pulp from the sidewalk.
Jaime wheels onto the porch
and watches. Mother signals
father, "More." She knows

Jaime makes guacamole.
The marriages of her sisters
never held. Their romances
in lumber yards always ended

with diminished love. When father
proposed, he admitted he didn't
love her yet, but he thought
he might with time. The tree

is full of avocados, enough
for a year of sandwiches.
They figure they'll harvest
the whole lot now, wrap the fruit

--stanza break--

in newspaper, like tomatoes,
and store the box in a closet.
They figure every few days
they'll take one out to ripen

on the window sill. Jaime coughs,
forcing air out of his lungs, stiff now
like the bellows of a neglected
accordion. He pushes himself

forward and calls to his neighbors,
newlyweds from Montana, that it is best
to only take a few, to leave the fruit
attached, to ride out the season

from immature to ripe to rotten.
And so they do. On his days off
father adjusts the length
of the pole as needed. And mother

scrambles through pregnancy
after the falling avocados.

Childhood Light

Once we forget the day the clearing fills
with light. No trees block the stars and the sky
blues towards Washington. Headlights stutter

along the highway, then shine a steady
moment at the bridges. From the first ridge
below this mountain top, the spring begins

in pines its sixteen mile run past thickets
of alder, past interludes of moose-loved
sedge, through culverts we explored as kids,

batting down webs and their spiders with sticks,
the random traffic coming like airplanes
overhead, infrequent and far away,

until, finally, now a creek, it spills
cold water into the sun-warmed shallows
of Luby Bay, on the northwestern shores

of Priest Lake. We are living again, Bob
and I, near the start of the water's week-
long trip, in a lookout tower we haven't

seen in twenty years, the less important
two-thirds of our lives, enough to forget
the helix of stairs between tar-coated legs.

Bob wants to play cards in the dark, so we
move the two chairs out onto the catwalk.
Once we forget the hissing, yellow light

of propane wicks, we see the wind, a down-
valley breeze, turn up the white undersides
of aspen leaves. Balanced on the railing,

the last slice of apple glows like scrimshaw,
like a whale bone carefully scored and inked.
The radio catches an AM skip

of accordions and voices we can't
understand. We think we recognize *Bush*,
Yeltsin and *Murmansk*, and Luby Bay shines

red and white with running lights. Bob shuffles
the cards. He deals and I spread out my hand
to gather the childhood light of stars.

Survival of Children

Mom says she never intended
for us to think the family dinner
depended on fishing, but for weeks
in July her children fished

for their lives. Each evening Dad
came home from thinning stands
of timber, from burning piles of slash,
and drove us towards the mountains.

To cut the glare we borrowed
his sunglasses and found
that cold water fish
never advance against

the current. They cruised side
to side the dead fall, deaf
to our efforts. Metallic lures,
flies, dry or wet,

our bait was random and cursed.
We may have always caught
one each, some species of char,
the genus of small-scaled trout,

like brookies or Dolly Varden.
And someone always slipped,
balance point reached then
passed, bouncing off wet logs

to water. Even Mom fell once.
We opened the fish like books,
cleaning the guts, and splaying
the flanks out, spine broken

and ribs removed if possible.
We began dinner with plates
bare but for the fish and Mom
thanked us again for feeding

this family. In August, forest
fires bloomed across the West
and Dad flew to the Tetons.
He came back with MREs,

a paper sleeping bag
and hazard pay. We could
have bought new lures,
expensive flies, even three

pairs of polarized glasses.

Valley Cemetery

The snow, already stained a charcoal gray
 by traffic bound for Drummond, Jens or Hall,
 the dozen ranches in between, or bigger
 towns like Butte another hour east,
 then warmed by mid-day sun until it shone
 with sweat now sets to ice and guides the wheels
 of cars as tracks pull trains along the curves
 the Clark Fork carves around the Garnet Range.

Twice a year my mother's father drove
 his cattle through the Sapphire Peaks, in May
 to high wet fields kept cold by melting snow
 then down each fall to winter safe among
 the cottonwoods and well-stocked barns that still
 stand dark like fifty years against the flat
 backlight of day off snow. Across acres
 of untracked fields, cuts the seam of Flint Creek.
 Across bright pastures float brown arcs of mud
 drawn tight between the broken bales of hay
 and the water troughs chopped free of ice.

Past Chicago, New not old, a gravel
 track climbs the valley's eastern slope. The snow
 gives in like crusty sugar and ruts distinct
 like grooves in wood stretch out behind the car.
 The cemetery fence holds back no dogs
 or deer. The largest monuments lean hard
 and dark like storm-tossed boats among the humps
 and drifts of snow. There, George's modest stone
 appears a book of polished rock when boots
 kick loose the oldest crust of rime and ice.

The Outline

After the two men from the county
screwed the lid of the steel box
over my uncle and left in their van,
I used his snow shovel to scrape up

the heap of what had slid out
the rotten hole in his back.
The dark air falling through
the screened kitchen door smelled

of wet leaves and I used last month's
issue of Rolling Stone to trap the final
handful of blundering maggots
against the blade. They reminded me

of spilled rice. From the bathroom I took
two towels and ripped them in thirds.
In a mop bucket I mixed dish soap
and bleach with steaming water.

His first heart attack got me
to the hospital. Our only visit
in years. I used to run through
the junction of Dickens and Defoe

to check his backyard. The well-tended
garden meaning decent health, physical
and mental, and nothing more needed
of me. As I left the hospital he sat

cross-legged on the bed and looked
into the peach wall, in profile still
the man with tools for working wood
into guitars but suddenly with hair

so white it warmed the room angelic.
I didn't go back except once to take him
a tin of Copenhagen. He set a pinch
in his right cheek. And sighed.

This was the only good thing
I ever gave him because it was
the only thing he ever asked
of me besides my absence.

Forty-percent of his heart died
in the three days he waited
--no stanza break--

for the pain to become unbearable.
Now imagine a hospital less

bearable than pain. And now
imagine the radio and bookcase
in a house near the railroad tracks.
Two weeks later and back at home

the dead portions of his heart
burst apart and blood poured
into his chest. I think of a heart
pumping itself into empty pieces.

The dried pool in the lowest corner
of the room melted under hot water
and I dropped each ragged and soaked
third of the towels into the garbage

in the alley. I scrubbed until
the dish sponge faded into shreds
of foam and my knuckles ran back
and forth over the scab of his final

shape, arms and legs splayed,
like a dancer immune to gravity,
one last flight in the dance of pain.
I can remember that night.

Maggots fight the sting of bleach
and work their heads against the skin
of my hands. When the linoleum
comes clean, a faded halo shadows

his form, a product of my muscles.
The two hours cleaning don't feel
true anymore, but the final apparition
stays real because we photographed

the floor the day of the funeral.
My father brought the camera.
My mother boiled the beets from
the garden. His daughter enjoyed

his desk, the three library books
I did not return, and his garden notes.
She enjoyed his pants on the rug,
left like he might step back

into them. Together we stood
in the kitchen and surveyed
the outline of his body, left
like he might step back into it.

Always Return And Orient

Back to warm water fish
we will always come. The fish
of waters open to children.

Those idiots, the perch, bite
empty hooks, worms either
squandered, or never dug.

Perch move like sparrows,
revealing the space between
pilings. Still water fish

are no better than sheep;
their only beauty comes
from a collective dynamic.

Sculpin fly from rock
to rock, always upstream.
Flying is right; they swim

like rays, their oceanic
cousins. A quarter mile
wade, bent like an heron,

might jump a dozen sculpin.
A dozen crayfish, a gross
of stoneflies. The ditch comes

from meadows up the valley,
its mountain water dulled.
Sculpin will always remind us

of coelacanth, the dinosaur fish.
In our hands, the perch flex
and unflex, like an Oriental fan,

their spiny dorsal fin. Their scales
litter our palms like chips
of thin plastic. The featureless

black sculpin bellies
feel raw, like a postage stamp
of bare muscle on our fingertips.

These are the fish of children.
We freshen the galvanized tub
with water from the hose.

--stanza break--

We froth the surface to add oxygen.
We pull the dead fish and bury
their bodies under needles

and duff. We wash the slime
from our hands. When they die,
perch loll belly up, sculpin

drift across the bottom.
Back in still water we follow
a turtle that ducks as we converge.

The cattails and reeds are always
sanctuary. The turtle disappears.
We find sunfish with blue

and orange flanks. We lunge
and claw fistfuls of water.
When the surface calms,

the sunfish always return,
and their bodies orient around
our feet like the spokes of a wheel.

Photograph Of Girl

A well-meaning descendent added color.
Blue skies faded over the last ninety years
or the painter was timid. The dark fence posts
should be brown, that much is certain.

What else? Does the blue sky turn a faint
green at the horizon, another pitiful attempt
to bring early spring grass to a sick range?
Her wool layers, now red, each drape a hem

short like overlapping feathers. A cap soaks
in shadow her ears, her expression. Her cheeks
should be reddened. Her bare calves, windburned
and lit by the melting March sun of ice by night

and mud by day, remain accurately pale.
Before and then again after the photograph,
it is certain the sixteen pairs of eyelets,
the boots new and modeled now, or borrowed

from the traveling photographer, tried a pair
of cold hands, her own or her parents. And whoever's
boots, whoever's hands, both unknown or unseen,
they complement the colors: false, missing or incorrect.

Fire Tower, In Four Parts

I. An Underwater Octave

The Kootenai River drops
northwest, then south, then west
for good a vertical mile

pulled tight to the ocean. Then winds
push back upstream and bring
the water back. With sun,

the pleats of mountains hang
like corduroy, the touchable green
of spruce and fir. With sun

the shores of Kooconusa
wrap slim and white. In sun,
the lake refutes the thought

of storm. But then the storms
approach, like underwater
swells that toll an octave

below the human threshold.

II. Lookout, Model L-4

The twenty flights of steel in hail
and rain catch Jackson up the tower,

one hundred ten rungs above
the granite knuckle. The storm

comes grand, an orchestra of brass
and wood warmed up and tuned

by serious ears. The winds force
water past the rubber-sealed panes;

she clocks a gust at ninety-five.
The crow's nest bucks and Jackson

sits and spreads her juvenile legs
to adjacent walls. She presses back

against the fire-finder and rides
the jerks of slack in the guy wires.

The tower has endured half
a century of winter storms.

The windows fill with boiling gray
then black. The triple A-cells

of her lamp won't last. But the radio's
pack of eight D-cells might reach

through ten magnetic miles of air.

III. Lookout, Model A-1

He stops the propane feed.
The cabinet fridge sighs still.
His large glass cabin on stilts

takes the swells like a houseboat
safely moored to pier. On the catwalk
he stays low and twists the window

locks. He took the kids to the outhouse
before the rain turned hard and cold.
he asked the oldest boy to lay

a rolled towel across the door's
misfitted foot. He invites the three
children to bed and they inform

him of the clutch of grouse
they've seen in meadows along the trail,
a subject they watch then chase.

IV. Kaniksu Ranger District

The short-wave hides
in snaps and pops.
Lightning strikes
don't warrant
reports until
the forest dries.

His children sleep
on a wooden bed,
the legs handcarved
to take ceramic
insulators.
Jackson trusts
the geometry
of I-beams.

Endure the swirl
of ions.

Father's Day, 1997

The next block's kids play
ball games in the street. Their sounds
hang like flags across this June evening
turned afternoon. Mom

sits in one of two
kitchen chairs I carried out
to the boulevard. Dad holds the sack
with brake pads we bought

ten minutes before
the NAPA store closed. He paid
like an on-stage audition. Need tools?
New jumper cables?

A pair of jack stands?
I push the brown Honda back
until the curb stops the wheels and then
I set the hand brake.

Mom reads Chapter Six
out loud: double-check the brake.
I do and Dad opens the tool box
on the lawn. Soon we

are underneath, Mom
calling out instructions, point
by unnecessary point. The work
comes obvious: wheel,

caliper and disc.
The second chair won't be used.
Dad waits then hands me the replacement
pads as Mom connects

herself to us through
words about bolts and wrenches.
She reads: grease the squeal plate, then reverse,
in order, the steps

of disassembly.
The repair happens too fast
and so we stand in the yard, looking
at the brown Honda,

half-listening, half-
not to the kids in the street
play games for stakes high enough to swing
their boy-girl voices

--stanza break--

from low confident
streams of unknowable words
to shrieks over important questions
of in-bounds or out.

III / NEGOTIATIONS

Submarine

That's the word for your Juarez room,
 the older chlorophyll-green paint
 under weak, patchy strokes of blue,
 like the bay floor when a low chop
 breaks the sky into a thousand panes
 of flashing light. I spent five days there.
 I liked the Chihuahuan sparrows that screamed
 in the rose bush outside the bathroom.

A little earlier each morning,
 sunlight came over the courtyard wall
 and shone in through the high windows.
 My room has never needed fish
 and like at a revival, I handed
 over my feelings. I wanted
 you to be converted too.

Calles Cobre and Begonias
 are not the point. You could say
 I am a slut. I'll fall in love
 with every place. The point is living
 on equal terms. To ask Chuy
 for apples, I'll have to say roja,
 pero no tomate. And you'll take me
 places you know well, like Hueco
 Tanks, and show me your favorite
 pictographs. I won't take any
 pictures if you can't be excited too.
 I won't be your tag-along.
 I'll discover this world with
 someone else. That's a threat, so why
 can't you even try to show fear?

Handfuls of dust blow in from
 Anapra and each Sunday I sweep
 and find the coppery husks
 of roaches. Like our problems, they
 are invisible, and maybe even
 harmless, while they live. I guess
 their population by their dead.
 Your threat shows you're scared.
 Their chitin is translucent
 upclose. It's easy to hate you,
 because it's almost like hating myself.

Once, on the bridge we watched a small,
 trim white man follow his golden
 Lab up between the cars. It sniffed
 at each wheel well and moved along.
 --no stanza break--

I told you I wasn't happy, and that
I knew you weren't happy either.
Remember? The line of cars advanced
and then the customs agent asked
you to open the trunk. You did.
My pack and your box of tools passed.
I told you this wasn't making us
happy. You should listen harder.

I like hearing you. It makes
me feel wanted. It makes fifteen
hundred miles of mountains
feel good. Get this: I brag
about you to Oscar. I'll brag
until we die. I don't think
I can show you any better.

The Bats Of Marysville

The smells from Blossburg on: alfalfa field
with horse, then miles of spruce and fir like night

and, finally, aspen grayed with roadside dust
along the creek to town. The Merc's false front

leans back. The church's window panes, white caulk
removed, now seal a home in Helena.

We want to sleep inside this house, but guano
stains the floor's remaining boards. The cellar's

dark glares past rotting slats and we retreat
to the clean, south-facing porch. The cool air

invades our open bags. I bring my welcomed
skin to yours. In streaks empty of stars

we feel and understand the arteries
of heat that lift crepe-paper wings to sky.

Agreement

The requests I make for sex
are not unreasonable. I brush
your hair more often. I like
your hair past shoulder-length.

Don't barter with compliments.
And sex is not a reward.
Why do you punish me
when I ask, "Are you seducing me?"

Our bodies are important
possessions, and we need
to share them. We need
to enjoy each other.
I have not punished you
over the twelve checks.
I know when to be uncritical.

It could have been you.
Before you I never had sex
for me. But it's true other men
excite me more. Please don't
be insulted and kill the animal
we have created between us.

Money is the least important.
If ever you have to ask about
seduction-- I am not, always.
Do you understand? Rejection
insults me more. For me
sex is sanctuary, and you
are doing the killing.

So I am the bad one, again.
Apparently money is important.
For our health, you should
be bad sometime. Don't you
think guilt and forgiveness
mark us the deepest?

It was just money. Money
isn't everything. We will
make worse mistakes.

Does that mean you agree
about guilt and forgiveness?

I mean that we are not perfect.
And that sex connects me to you.

That means you agree.

First Winter

At first just the green wool army blanket
 over the quilt kept the bed warm, your chest
 unnecessary, but nice, against my back.
 Each morning you chose between two sweaters

knitted tight as a horse's summer coat, roan
 and palomino. Then as a curtain of snow
 took Mount Sentinel in descending fifths
 and heat spilled out the windows and slipped

past the doors and we set an afternoon aside
 to insulate the house. More fun than chore.
 By myself I pulled a plastic sheet tight
 from jamb to jamb. The slats of the neighbor's

fence stood out like a ruler, measuring
 the view from the table in two inch widths.
 I showed you how I turned the edge under
 and how the staples bit through paint to wood.

In the kitchen you cut crude silhouettes
 of windows in the master sheet and piled
 scraps against the back door. I closed my eyes
 to the waste. When you tensioned a corner

above the sink, the elm swam across deep
 wrinkles and the street locked to a jagged
 profile like a fault between two mountains.
 After you left for work the next morning

I pulled out all your staples and reset
 each sheet even and smooth. Hey, I thought
 the system only worked when air trapped heat
 in a plane, when good seals stilled the movement

of thermal mass. Plus, I cared about the view
 from the sink. When I finished I trimmed off
 the flapping edges with one scissor blade.
 That night you taught the cat to rip parallel

slices in the plastic. You laughed. I kept
 myself busy in the garage and we both
 knew separately by dinner. The passing
 headlights came in staggered and broken.

Not Unreasonable

Sex always makes me
feel better. Half an hour
of sex is worth an hour
of sleep. I will not accept
exhaustion. I already accept
your visualization of Chuck.

You can't bait me.
I thought you said
we should each take
what we need from sex.
That by serving myself,
I'll be serving you best.
And most nights I need touch
without sex. Only touch.

The priest for Matt and Tana said,
"Enjoy each other." He meant,
have sex when tired, when poor.
I think sacrifice marks us
the deepest. The giver says,
"This gift could be loved."
The receiver assumes
the burden of proof.

Don't you feel cheap
quoting other people?
Audrey said that first.
It doesn't make you
right or smart.

I don't mind feeling cheap.
At least cheap is honest.

Do you purposely
not make sense?
Is that how you say
you are ready to stop?

Living together
feels like probation.
We argue to get along.

We will both always
be on probation.

That is probably good.

Then call it parole.

The Jocko Fire Lookout

Like the prow of a schooner, the car hood
 parts and holds back a decade of bushes.
 Dragonflies and bees tumble up, a wake

like a plume of dust, but swirling with lights
 too small to see alone except by looking past
 each sun-flared wing and glinting thorax.

Hidden ruts rule the wheels and pull our car
 around switchbacks. You open the window
 and branches spring in, the leaves torn and wet.

Then bedlam quiets and insects settle
 to lupine and fireweed. We walk the ridge
 through alder stands. You find a handle, pick

or pulaski, broken in the rocky soil
 of this glacier-scoured range. Hung in coils
 from notched limbs, galvanized telegraph wire

defies rust. These four concrete stumps anchored
 in granite the tower's fifty-foot legs.
 From above trees now like steeples the lookout

watched the Jocko River's three forks converge.
 One peak north, the cloven face of Grey Wolf
 throws back an evening sun white with quartz,

the red a tint of feldspar. Soon nighthawks
 swoop for food and the valley shadows rise
 like a tide from the East. Low hills at last

submerged in dark, a final light rinses
 our mountain top island and we turn inward
 to find the heat that set to noisy flight
 this afternoon the thousand insects wings.

A Tuesday In March

I stand in the backyard
and look at the dark house,
the bedroom lit like boxing ring

We will have sex tonight
because we've been apart
for two weeks and four days.

You hear my feet on the stairs
when the second song ends,
a favorite. Have you been rewinding,

replaying, all night? I'm glad
you're taking control. Who wants
to always do and never be done?

You pretend to sleep, chest
unnaturally down, face
towards the closet where I disrobe.

I know I work first
for myself, not you. I practice
sex like a student: single-minded

and afraid. You need to take
what you want. I need
to be easy. The hardest part,

the best, is first allowing
ourselves more selfless movements
guided by songs and selfish hands.

The recording ends and we feel
more naked. All fingertips and ears.
More real in the silence after music.

A Choir In The Dark

These rock walls, still chinked with mud and grass,
 could hold out a late fall chill. The door faces
 east towards the La Sal Mountains and their high
 early snow blazes through the desert's haze.
 A few gray vigas span the four-foot walls
 and an afternoon of gathering might find enough
 boughs to rebuild the roof, but we could
 never live here. The nearest water is an hour
 walk down pitches of tumbled boulders and across
 gaunt stretches of sandstone. There is only
 enough pinon and rabbit to fed resting travelers.

One August we lived under a tarp strung up
 between two pines. The creek was too close;
 it washed out the sounds of the forest. Once a week
 we walked out to the car and hauled back more pasta.
 Each night before the sun's heat cooled we sat
 in the shallow water and yelled. I remember
 your body under the fractured surface, broken
 into bright panes of white and pink. You looked
 hard in the soft browns of wet rock and moss.
 Clean, and in dry clothes, we stared at each other.

I can see you want to move off this high point
 and get back in a canyon. I want to spend the night
 here and understand the reasons why people
 cared enough to build this halfway house of rocks.
 Is the sunrise great? Will thousand-year roads
 from Hovenweep to the High Uintas slowly light up
 under the setting sun as a shiny strip of foot-polished
 rock, knotted with the shadows of cairns? You want
 to sleep under one of the thousand-foot overhangs
 with easy water, sand to sleep on and no threat of snow.

Ten years ago my mother made us hike on
 when prayer-cloths marked the spring we found.
 She wasn't scared of spirits or bad water
 Or angry members of the Northern Cheyenne.
 She was scared of what existed, the respect
 people have for beginning places, something
 you and I can help each other understand better.

Before nightfall we start down a wash we know
 will drop into the Green River. In its dark slot
 we find a sandbar high against the back wall
 of a natural home. In the sinking light we miss
 the granary plastered to a ledge above
 the highest flood, but later the park ranger
 will say we spread out our bags within sight
 of its mortared walls, tucked in that alcove
 like a choir waits under acoustic shells.

Alive At Odd Angles

They don't use this trail to the spring anymore. The south road nears the mountain top now and each morning the new lookouts walk down through the trees to their truck. They decant water into canteens from three-gallon jugs. They refill the jugs once a week at the grocery store in Nordman. At the northern edge of the clearing, before we enter the forested slopes, you notice the triangle of orange rocks.

I helped paint that helipad
when I was eight. I've never
seen it from the sky, but I know
it is faint. In the trees,
the ground falls away
from the summit flat.
I walk in front, my feet
guided beneath a tall decade
of bushes by the shallow rut.

You walk behind me, threading the holes I tear through spider webs. I'm so excited, I fear for the larches, those trees with shallow roots and needles already turning orange in August. Near the lightning-struck cedar my father split for shingles, the deadfall gets thick. Soon it's like a jungle gym: step over the older trees that died standing and fell heavy enough to crash down through the canopy, and duck under the younger trees blown loose from their roots during windstorms and living canted at odd angles. I can tell we're close to the spring when ferns displace all other plants. The dirt smells cold and in our footprints collect little pools of water. The log, its heartwood knocked out forty years ago to make a trough, still juts away from the bottom of the limestone outcrop. The spring itself is gone. Instead, the water seeps down the hillside in a swath of soaked ground twenty-feet wide.

There's nothing to drink
here unless we dig
a settling pit. I wanted
you to see the stream
leak full from the bedrock.

For the summers when I was a kid, a confident trickle fell out of this crack and my mother knelt here to fill the canvas bladder she would carry on her back.

You nod your head. But I want a moment like last summer at the petroglyphs in Eastern Montana.

Each time we looked, it felt
like a first and the world
became a funnel. Everything,
the day's walk between facing
sandstone cliffs, the wish
to show your parents
this dry creek bed, the dusty
--no stanza break--

junipers, the insane feeling
of being the only people
for miles, all came together
and passed through this cataract
of forms scratched into rock.

We stood there wondering at the thousands of years between the people that had made and then seen the carvings and knew that for a moment we were close to them all. I came to this spring to show you where my mother knelt but the water is in the soil and I can't explain to you how I stood and watched her. I wanted to bring you and her close. The new lookouts haul water from town. All you can do will need to be enough. You stand next to me and nod when I point.