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FIRE IN THE BUSHES

By

Patrick Todd

B.A., University of Montana, 1966

Presented in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1977

Approved by:

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I

## BLOOD ROSES

Day and night now  
cities are pummeled by thunder of cars  
Fire orange glows in windows  
And red alarm boxes burn  
Chinese doors  
into buildings and posts  
One night like this in San Diego  
I curled up  
in a crowded flop house  
where a drunk...hands  
turned to rubber...rolled a smoke  
at the bottom of a pond

There is hunger so deep  
in this country  
millions of suburban wives see eye  
to eye with thieves and tramps  
Somehow the sadness  
of everything  
narrows to sale of tickets  
And inside the national anthem

forty drums roll...I can't go home  
Tonight alarm boxes gleam  
the enamel hour  
glass on the spider's belly  
It is the red of beacons and terror  
of the assaulted nurse  
Thunder of engines  
swells the moon to four  
thousand sails of the wicked mother of ice  
consumed in blood of the rose



## FURNACE TENDERS

Morning in the brick changehouse  
Forty men pull on dries  
Squeak and slam of lockers  
First whistle  
Then the long slow trek across the yard  
Fourteen furnaces big as houses  
and four stories up  
Have to knock  
the floors out of furnace  
number five  
Only three foot ceilings inside  
so we break and shovel on our backs  
Fierce burning of the eyes...  
sweat and cough  
Two hour stretches  
we shovel dry chunks of zinc  
out the port hole doors

\*\*

Feed floor first thing  
Dump in sacks of arsenic  
Run down to the next floor  
Long iron bar breaks up zinc inside  
the orange blast  
Plastic face mask  
Leather gloves up to the elbows  
and canvas apron to ward off the heat  
Ten minutes facing off that fire  
and you run outside for three  
Ten more...and back out  
Chunks broken down  
Foreman in the shack

Sweep up zinc dust that floats  
like water on the steel floor  
Take five      Once a boy  
caught his broom in the conveyor  
The foreman found him...arm...shoulder  
and head crushed to pulp

\*\*

Hook up your coat anywhere  
in the zinc leach...  
The next morning it hangs in shreds  
Thirty years in the roasters  
and dry rasping  
breaks in the lungs  
Some get milk leg  
The skin bags paste white and men sit out  
half their shifts on the benches  
One guy...ten kids...  
endless payments  
and pictures of Christ  
all over the house...pushes the bar  
into the face of a routine  
orange blast and forgets  
Forgets he grabbed the guard loop  
and his hand's exposed  
Caught between  
the bar and a steel beam  
the bones mash like a bag of peanuts  
Morley dies and the guy without  
a hand gets his soft job

## TIGER IN THE FLOWERS

Finally sleep comes in a tunnel  
of sand     A red bird flies  
between hay bales  
and ticks a wall of ice lit up by the moon  
Deep in pine woods the village  
rack where eyes shine  
thru holes  
in the executioner's hood  
I envy the idiot whose dreams  
fill with flower fields

Or the monk after years  
on a mountain  
dreaming of dolphins  
soaring over long grasses  
In his best dream  
a snowy crane stands inside the sea  
Three hundred years

still as a flower...  
Two feathers drift away  
and enormous wings lift a white coffin  
from the ocean floor  
Suddenly Buddha  
bends to see the tiger  
sleeping in the lilies  
Christ wakes alone in the desert  
of a new planet

## COUNTRY WEDDING

All nervous in country lace the bride  
rode down the mountain with her father...  
wagon reins springing easy in the early sun  
Fifty mums banked the church walls white  
Thick cream candles  
The groom sat mute for the stiff picture  
Both hands closed big as hammers

Women owned this time round the holy cake  
The old fathers...faces puffed red  
from years of whiskey and the blazing wheat  
waited out weddings like a funeral  
Even the sleepy minister hated circles  
of screaming kids and spotted  
a yellow toy he'd love to crush

Gone the bride in white lace  
whose wedding moon lit up a long lazy s  
of geese over McGuinnigan's pond  
Now the farmers' sons grow mean in town  
a boy beat a hole in a boxcar  
with a hundred pound furnace iron  
Gone...twenty horses steaming in the barn

## LINES FOR MY FIRST WIFE

Too many hassles  
with the wrong women I've said Christ  
I need to be alone awhile  
Now alone in the cabin  
thoughts of my first wife return  
Never forget our short  
time together  
I just get that place by the creek  
She comes over and we lug the bed into the bedroom  
When she slips her sweater off  
her tits fall  
soft in the gentle light

In our secret marriage  
we move slow...  
awkward...afraid and together  
like two shy animals  
Then the whole sky roars down at once  
Her mother...no...maybe my brother's frenzied  
talk with her father  
That terrible grief of her  
leaving pregnant  
with another man's child is certain

Some meely arthritic doctor  
in Havre injects  
the womb for a hundred dollars  
and has each girl run up and down stairs  
till the fetus falls in a swoosh  
She left her ring  
on my desk in the empty house  
I learned the road outside  
the door goes  
either way with new snow  
Last night in a dream she sat on the edge  
of my bed and leaves this  
long hunger to see her again

## THE BLACK FISH

Once more the body folds down its heavy skin  
The war grows and anger rages in people  
I saw a man strong arm his sullen  
wife as if he wrestled a deer into the trunk  
A new nun here keeps three messenger  
boys on the run And there are pimps  
who hold back their girls'  
money for one more exhausting trick  
There are men who sleep in doorways out of the snow  
And snow buries the soldier's face like a stump

The graves are filled with bright bones  
Bones slip fifty feet thru coal drifts  
for a three second swim in molten lava  
There are bones thin enough to open every lock  
And bones swivel water inside your  
grandmother's knee Bones my friend sift flour  
and lace a million war crosses on the green hills

It's not the gold scorpion...blood kernel  
For every calf trembling by the fence  
And every mother humming over a blue crib...  
machine guns open fire in the long grass  
Tonight the welder's bead burns ice blue dots

on target screens And smoke  
rolls from the dikes a tornado of locusts  
The blackfish...locked months in an Arctic  
shelf...slowly lifts in the new heat  
swirls out to the rocks  
and wolfs mussels down like crackers  
Thousands of people swarm Cambodian roads  
till the dark fish of Pisces slumps over the world  
and the northern lights swing black

## LAST CLIMB UP LU MOUNTAIN

Walking along the stream road  
Li Po sees thirty  
flutes glitter spruce chandles of ice  
Bright roils of fresh water ride  
muffled under the crust  
And climbing up

Lu Mountain in new frost  
his feet click the stones hollow  
Three crows whak up  
from a bush and yellow leaves  
drift to the snow

The same climb his last  
spring out his soul  
body leaps a hundred feet in thin air  
Ten whole seconds a fallen pine  
is a black stick  
floating the cold white road

## SLAUGHTERHOUSE

Once a farm girl wore red to the dance  
The next morning her grandmother told  
how spiders gleam in the eyes of roosters

At the new dome slaughterhouse  
giant fans roar millions of feathers up in smoke  
Dock trays of liver heap like squid

The last truck pulls out  
All thru the night four thousand hens  
thunder like snow in their cages



## POEM FOR LEONARD BIG ARM

Stone cold and older  
than the town this building waits  
its last drama of the crane and ball  
A sweet nun walks up  
and the rickety hall creaks  
like a storm ship  
"I just need a meal" I tell her  
and sight of her rubber  
apron reminds me  
of the Army and long racks of seeping mops  
Once in an ocean of men in white  
t shirts I laid my rifle

on the grass convinced  
yelling kill at the air bordered  
on the insane  
That whole year went wrong  
Wrong girls Wrong  
time to burn my back crisp as lobster  
on a Santa Cruz beach  
Further south I was amazed

how match box houses  
lined the shore the length of the sea  
No wonder Leonard Big Arm  
picked up his check  
stone drunk after the sale  
of tribal land Stone drunk  
he drove his brand new Chevy right thru  
the display doors...the stunned  
salesman fumbling  
frantic for the dial 0

## THREE POEMS FOR ANIMALS

I love the loon...solitary egret  
 Driving my old truck down the single road  
 suddenly I see a heron weave  
 over the slough like a giant sting ray  
 There is another thing  
 Hummingbirds ride nuzzled inside  
 the down of distant geese

\*\*

Something mixes the sacred  
 and sentimental in a sudden amazing fluff  
 A caterpillar hurries over the road  
 Aphids swell to clear  
 sunny grapes under the sidewalk  
 And the strangest creatures live inside the house  
 Still as a rock a huge black beetle  
 is a hole in the tub

\*\*

The light snaps out  
 A bright pen and all the glass  
 in the room disappears  
 Only this big soft chair rises to meet the dark  
 It's a bear Dark and magnificent  
 a zoo bear...neglected all day  
 for years...wanders into the night

When man slowly kills every animal  
 the timid turn into stones  
 and lay in one spot for a thousand years  
 Lynx and jackals turn into daggers  
 Rising out of the grass  
 they tik across the rocks

## RIDGE RUNNER

One morning he's spotted  
three miles from town  
and by evening twenty more up the draw  
Quick as a fox he runs forever  
to warn deer  
of fire or new hunters  
One couple claims his heinous  
scream split the moon  
half a mile down from the cabin  
Not one word

to another human in years...  
Then two fires  
under the foreman's truck  
and inside the cab of a new loader  
burnt to a crisp  
Five men go out the next

morning with rifles  
Hair...dry matted wax  
Not four teeth in his whole head  
And both eyes  
stare up shocked wild  
in the bushes  
Knees and shoulders stick out  
hard as a goat's...tied and shivering  
in back of Merle's pickup

II

## CHRISTMAS EVE IN MEDFORD

Down from the Medford depot  
neon over The Salvation Army hums  
fire red in the dark  
I shower and bunk near men  
twice my age  
and barely choke down  
thick gruel served from a big steel bowl  
Can't say two words where winos  
bald as angels

line up for cake  
and Christmas hymns crackle  
over a blue radio  
One A.M. I wake to the whitest man  
in the world snoring  
under his sheet

Then dress and hurry thru whirling  
snow for the night express  
to San Francisco  
Gold morning sun brings warm  
relief on Noe Street  
A little altar lit up with candles  
Mexican lace and blood red poinsettias  
...a small miracle

## PIGEONS IN THE GHOST TOWER

No priest founded this small town  
 Money from the east  
 raised Hotel and depot  
 along the sleepy  
 Clarkfork...paneled the bank  
 mahogany and burned grapes around copper cages  
 What could be more innocent than  
 Worden and Higgins  
 posed with store goods  
 laid out for the stiff picture?  
 Missoula means "chilly waters of surprise"  
 and more than once  
 a fire haired whore chased

some logger off her porch  
 with a butcher knife  
 In '63 four road agents hung like socks  
 from a cottonwood and the timid  
 priest settled three  
 blocks back  
 from the town center  
 and painted his steeple soft gold  
 Now the mills lay off half their men  
 pigeons dot the ghost

depot tower forlorn as the parked  
 engines     On the tower  
 only one pigeon now  
 Wait...another one lands on the east  
 face upper right hand window  
 Three more drop

to nothing in the rocks

A strange new guy in town walks  
into the Mercantile  
holding his bedroll close in both arms  
He might just as well lay down in the shirts  
piled stark white  
and useless as the icy sheets  
This winter nothing  
short of war in Cambodia  
will open up the mills full swing

## BREAD SOUP

Most come here from oily  
shacks edging the mill  
From wino's mud black sleep or two  
days hitching the plains  
Meg scrapes the gold jelly from canned  
turkey into a giant simmering pot  
Adds a loaf of bread  
...salt...pepper  
and hand full of rubbery celery  
A boy waits in front

of me with his mother  
Shoulders bulge four sweaters  
and his boots flop  
open the size of small boats  
In front of them an old man with hands  
big as the boy's head  
holds a grocery

bag filled with a blanket  
After the lines go home  
only blades of scum ring the empty pot  
On the street...skinny white  
chair legs stick out  
from junk heaped  
on an old blue flatbed  
Cold wind...ice...flap of oily tarp  
Sudden sparks of snow rattle  
leaves on the black maple



## BILLY

Bright as tree bulbs the red  
velvet fantails zoom  
thru rows of bubbles...thru long green  
lettuce bushes...in and out  
of holes in the rock  
Every Saturday Billy stands  
for hours...hands folded big as a ball...  
giant shoulders stooped over the colored tanks  
And dead perfect the part in his hair  
plastered wet by his auntie  
Red fish zooming  
and zooming Most people  
look away from Billy  
but fish eyes stare straight out  
sideways...same as a chicken's or eyes  
of a bike chain

Slow as brooms his big  
shoes shuffle over to another tank  
Moonfish drift up pale balloons  
No...he likes the red  
ones zooming  
and shuffles back to the first tank  
Fantails quick as sparks and beautiful sky  
blue rocks on the bottom  
This is the same  
feeling he loves in church  
When everyone sings  
Billy cries inside and the whole  
room fills up with light

One time he saw the kids hitting  
A boy fell and blood  
under the bars made Billy

run away to his auntie...away from kids  
at the school hitting  
In another tank  
black lizard fish creep along  
the rocks with rubbery feet  
And the moray eel...alone in his hole...  
breathes in and out like a soft

vacuum cleaner hose  
Billy's shoes shuffle out the glass door  
Past the hydrant yellow as a crayon  
and snow heaped like brown  
sugar on the corner  
The boys kept hitting  
One fell Then the terrible screaming  
All night the orange tubes hummed  
in back of his static radio  
Now he's learned  
to turn it on...most nights  
Billy lays awake where no one knows  
Eyes wide as a fishes  
he watches the tubes  
glow inside the wooden box  
And drifting away the bright fish  
come back humming  
inside the warm green water

## BLACK CHRISTMAS

It's a dark Christ hangs  
on a bunker wall  
Wind roars down giant blizzard wheels  
and whole companies huddle  
in dead mens' blankets  
When the storm lifts at Gumrak  
the moon grows huge  
and terrible to a man  
hiding in the belly of a dead mule

Two soldiers ride up  
Long boots squeak the icy saddles  
and rifles riddle the mule  
like a hay bale  
The black lily of a gramophone wails  
hymns in the warehouse hospital  
Three villages grow

forests of wood crosses  
and each tractor  
and cannon in a drift  
monument this miserable Christmas  
January comes and von Paulus won't budge  
to enemy offers  
Russian tanks roll "geese  
on water" and Hitler's Sixth Army  
is butchered in the snow

## CHRISTMAS 1973

Morning...the bar jams hungry  
eyes of friends  
with news of the explosion  
After tons of water...firemen find bread  
smashed all over one wall of the grocery  
...bright pools of pop  
ridiculous antlers  
Just down from the fire  
a woman picks up a pin from the rug  
stops and reads the news for two hours  
The whole morning  
she moves from her bed

to the table...up the stairs  
now back to the table  
This Christmas her father  
sweeps and sweeps the porch while her two  
sons string lights in windows  
of an old hearse  
When I wake to the stained  
ceiling I like to think  
champagne splashed those brown rings

by the bulb      Once a bride's  
garter laced the doorknob  
Really the old man's sink leaks upstairs  
till a big swill bubbled my wallpaper  
When my grandfather's store  
burned in the first  
depression he stirred a glass  
of water a whole year  
to come down      Some kid locked  
three hours in an old car never forgets  
the smell of cushions

## WHITE SIOUX

Dust rolls and the terrible  
clatter of hooves  
thunders blue stone of the highway  
Sun blazes silk flames  
of the mare's haunches  
and her eyes swell with terror of the yellow  
pickup roaring in from behind  
All night the moon burns  
the tin barn

where her rope cuts drain  
hot sap in the straw  
Not one mile of these plains unfenced  
the last antelope  
soar smoke white ghosts  
over the far rocks

The last Sioux  
deranged from white man's wine  
brood in rows of silver trailers  
Now the only prayer  
chants rise odd and mournful  
from single river shacks  
The heart of the Sioux nation bleeds  
its raw meat on the block

## THE NUNS AT FT. BELNAP

Back up thru this old history  
book and there's  
little sections on the missions  
Here's a tale of some nun trapping beaver  
And here...three Ursulines  
scalped...the truth  
known their necks slit  
like chickens  
down by a lonely stream  
At Ft. Belnap nuns hauled their own  
milk from the barn

and this painting  
with a purple sky shows one sister  
hammering a charred wagon  
In the dim photo  
on the next page  
thirty nuns squint in the bright snow  
Every single nun smiling  
must be a Christmas  
gathering at the priest's home

In our school one old mean  
nun always sat knitting  
at the other end of the lunchroom  
There should be a picture of her dragging  
Albert Koonig from the big  
steel kitchen  
for drawing a man with a cock  
for a nose Or the last  
picnic with Father Bailey roaring up  
the bank with no fish...his whiskey face  
scarlet as the falling sun

## BLOOD ON THE SPIDER'S BELLY

Of a thousand tattoos  
only the small yellow butterfly  
wants to float off the skin  
It is the same as three  
brass bells disappearing across the ocean  
Or the old Italian spraying his crates  
of peppers that glow  
red as Mexican lanterns

Steady as a torch the tattoo  
man burns the ink in  
till a blood rose  
swells the girl's breast for a week  
And all for the walrus  
madam who watches from a soft

hill of pillows on the sofa  
Home...the sailor tosses his shirt down  
and two hearts slow  
purple above the combine  
Some people die easy as sleep  
The little tattoo man  
wants to live forever in one body  
like the spider





## NIGHT FREIGHT

Under the boarded depot tower  
line poles buzz hot  
in the storm  
and the night diesel thunders to a stop  
Rain drums the tin awning  
The pigeon shit  
streams like paint  
Fifty yards down twenty boxcars  
slam twenty more and more thunder  
rumbles the girders

A brakeman walks over  
His rubber hood glistens in the dark  
Ten cars in Bill and I find  
a door open  
to the extra caboose  
Hot beans in a can  
Little table with seats and electric lamp  
We dry our clothes over the stove

then sit back reading  
old newspapers all the way to Reno  
After one night in flaming  
casinos Bill and I  
hear stories of freight lurching on her climb  
Two heads crushed by a load of pipe  
This time on the night  
freight only this endless wall of snow  
We huddle like sheep in bedrolls  
On the steel floor...  
slow blue flame of the sterno

## NO PLACE TO STAND

September...cold...downtown  
 Santa Rosa I lay out a sheet of plywood  
 under frames of a new bank  
 and find two boards to lay my head on  
 An hour I wake cold  
 check three churches and walk  
 to the other end of town  
 Tonight suburban  
 houses are tombs of red stone  
 No people Lizards scurry thick basement rugs  
 and rumble inside the tin furnace  
 The next street ends

in a little circle  
 Not one niche of bushes to crawl into  
 I try a car Locked The next two locked  
 Tall yellow grass opens white  
 under the half moon  
 Two hours half asleep here  
 and I shudder back into the night  
 About three some grocer  
 works early inside  
 his giant store and turns away

seeing so much hair at the window  
 Someone else left an old  
 panel in the lot  
 with a brown plastic couch in back  
 I climb over the front seat and set five cans  
 of oil on the floor  
 I curl in Really sleep this time  
 This time friends and I creak  
 thru an old mansion  
 The fog rolls in thick as bushes  
 under the sea

## CATTLE ARENA

What can I say to my old aunt  
in Fargo...enraged  
with her own pain and fear the country's  
turned fascist? No money or jobs  
thousands stare out  
dark buildings without hope  
Black people line up  
for the Hearst Food in Oakland  
How many more wait out the seventies for soup?  
Millions of ghosts file into the soap

white gas house...shower  
then drift from the planet in a silky  
blue haze The same skinny  
secretary looks up  
from a million desks  
and here in the stone block cattle arena  
students gaze dull as the cows

Who will save the people  
in another world  
war vicious with hounds?  
Priests run out on churches by the hundreds  
Even a minister shot himself here  
last week In the pit  
of the darkest dream  
the dog black swastika spins to a stop  
and ninety boots clap the pavement

## DRIVING THRU AN ICE STORM

This giant street in Buffalo  
runs a blind trestle into the storm  
Somewhere in the wilderness  
a red car thunders  
over a clearing  
The coffin...dug up and hauled  
to an old house on the other side of town  
is filled with sand  
Where do people find space

in modern labyrinths of cement?  
Over and over the timid  
banker dreams of feathers  
and knives      Then one Saturday at the dump  
he finds crows nesting in a caved  
beauty parlor hood

Returning to a strange  
house tonight I love knowing somewhere  
...Norway or Wales...a man  
comes home after pitching  
bales all day in the blazing sun  
He dunks his head  
and arms into a wash tub  
and rolls back in grass  
utterly whipped to the ground

## FIRST TRAIN

I can't remember getting on  
Must've been terrified of the engine  
big as an airplane  
Must've known the little  
blonde Dianne who helped  
with the puzzle of the cow and stood stark  
naked spread eagle in the window  
would be gone forever  
My first train clicked  
on and on     Huge steel teeth  
shimmied on the floor  
between cars and the doors slammed  
like refrigerators

Next to the sterling bowl  
and pitcher...bright  
yellow butter cubes showed the ghost  
profile of a Milwaukee indian  
The train clicked on  
rocked and steamed thru snowy mountains  
And outside the dark sleeper  
red eyes of bears  
gleamed in caves...the moon

rolled cold behind the clouds  
and a million pine  
swam past the window  
Somewhere else a thousand black rocks  
roared down a cliff and the ghost  
rode away on his horse  
No wonder depot  
blacktop just hosed down  
and steaming fresh still brings warm relief  
There's some old sadness of war  
when the maroon dot  
of a caboose drops out of sight

## FIRST FREIGHT OUT

August in the noon heat  
I wake to drum  
of boxcars clicking along the tracks  
Outside two hundred miles  
of wheat weaves her  
secret oceans of gold  
And right at home a little black  
man sleeps sprawled at the other end  
of the car     Who is he...

rising when the train slows?  
He lays out a few  
clothes that fold into his sack perfect  
boxcar     boxcar     boxcar  
Careful as ice he  
slides his bottle of wine in...

and ties a quick knot  
Alone as the buddha  
or any monk he drops from the door  
so easy he floats to the ground  
PASCO...the sign reads  
Here a thousand billion stars  
sprinkle out the nights

## ST. THERESE OF THE ROSES

In the photo of you standing  
beside the white cross  
your eyes shine dark and lucid as a wounded  
animal's Friends find you dead  
and the air smells rose  
heavy as if a big  
tomb makes space for everyone  
in your room Or four  
gold birds fly up in the total dark  
Down and out this spring

I find you again in a beautiful  
old Spanish church  
in Santa Barbara  
I lay down on the floor with memories  
horrible as the dry grotesque  
ghost hooked to a meter  
in the airport  
parking lot of New Delhi

Still there's no real harm  
sleeping alone here  
The cop for this quiet neighborhood  
probably dozes off himself  
somewhere out of sight  
Both hands folded on my chest  
I see your statue lift in the warm shadows  
Thirty yellow vigil candles  
weave and flicker  
a thousand tiny ghosts or friends





## SOUTH END WRECKING

After five long months of snow  
and winds from the north  
what a relief to work again on soft ground  
Early this morning  
I split some larch clean  
to the honey glow  
of pitch      Fresh as coffee  
Fresh as bright shafts of new straw  
On the road to town  
water runs  
all along the cliffs

I stop at South End Wrecking  
and four boys stand over  
a mechanic cleaning lifters in a big can  
At first no one moves  
absorbed in a world  
ancient as working the first  
crude wheels or pulling dead weight  
of a kill over rolling logs

Gas and oil smell so old  
Old tires      A big rubber hammer  
Everything here  
is dug from the ground  
On the way home purple willows lace the slough  
There's no one else on this single road  
And that old clapboard house  
on the cliff...  
See how quiet now  
on the high salmon colored stone

## IN MEMORY OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Each spring this rich black sod  
 Smell of creosote rises from old timbers  
 where twenty hogs snort  
 and steam over a huge trough  
 Suddenly a sail  
 Sail or burst of swallows  
 Your spirit soars...even in the last poems  
 You visit Pound and you're stunned by the scream  
 of another patient  
 Arms up...naked with a hardon  
 in the highest window  
 Like a great sea slug his  
 balls white hard against the cold glass  
 I see in your photo

terror and sternness of an age  
 There's sadness of love  
 in your old eyes  
 After three strokes you show  
 the slow and weighted peace of the turtle  
 Your neck has the folds  
 of a turtle's neck  
 Even that funny round straw hat

and the turtle's deep  
 internal need to be alone  
 I love the old woman in A Widow's Lament  
 She wants to sink into the marsh  
 where her husband  
 waits under the blossoms

All thru your poems  
 cold white blossoms toss and swing  
 in the wind      Spring!

You can't wait to see the naked  
thighs of the police sargeant's pregnant wife  
Big white moons!  
Ah the full white belly of April!  
You love tough old husks  
of corn in spirit of Breughel  
Chickens...plums...weeds  
Once you kept a sleepy horse two whole  
weeks in an abandoned garage

## DINNER AT THE MISSION

Looking back most remember the odd  
The retarded girl in yellow  
who played for years  
by a stump full of moss  
The fairy tale rag picker or giant bald guy  
who pulls his body thru the pool  
hall on a tiny cart  
In this town everyone  
turns away from the guy with forty  
rubbery tumors and one ear

an inch below the other  
Whatever happened  
to the spooky sisters who dragged  
their ghosts down the street  
after an icy fix?  
Sweet Jimmy (shoe shine) is gone  
And the guy who pawed thru trash bins

with a handy salad tweezers  
Now it's mainly broken  
down faces of winos that haunt the rich  
Look up from the news before dinner  
at the Mission and three  
drag queens float  
by to strike the world blind  
The tall skinny one's  
afro glows pink as cotton candy

## SQUAW PEAK

All over town this morning  
rows of maples bloom mint flame  
Loggers in the woods  
slosh ankle deep in run off  
And beside the roaring stream at Greenough  
...two girls...dozing in the sun  
almost glow on the bright  
grass Days like this  
people surrender loneliness the way

children wake to snow  
on a ship deck  
New sun is the joy in Brahms  
Or a soldier running all night thru pine  
finds a hay barn  
at the end of a clearing  
Down this skinny path

...crab grass...carrot weed  
bone grass and wild  
rose in less than a week  
This is a day Squaw Peak looms clear  
blue over the north valley  
Suddenly a stone  
black beetle shines purple  
rain in the twigs

## MICHAEL GRIPPING SATAN'S HAIR

All old schools have  
 the same smell  
 Food from the big kitchen and wood  
 floors lit with fresh wax  
 When I was a kid  
 the desks were bolted to flat skis  
 Chalk dust stained the blackboards endless  
 blizzards and my first grade  
 teacher used a rubber hose  
 Mornings she folded  
 down map size pictures of Adam and Eve  
 Christ wept in the suffering

garden and Joseph stood tall  
 and beautiful in his bright colored coat  
 Thieves from the bushes  
 attacked and left him in the sand  
 God and evil planted  
 deep in our tiny hearts  
 I remember ball coat book cup  
 and words about Dick and Jane

Mostly they played  
 on grandfather's little white farm  
 New car Brand new barn  
 and the whole family  
 happy together with perfect hair  
 Our fathers drove old beaters to the smelter  
 Abandoned mothers drew

monthly welfare and Bonnie  
 Dashner got knocked up in eighth grade  
 One indian kid lived

alone with an old old man  
No wonder the giant  
pictures filled with pain  
In the best one St. Michael leans down  
raising a sword for the big swath...  
Satan's hair locked  
firm in his other hand

## WILLOWS OVER THE BARN

In every old farm house  
this fluorescent oil on velvet  
Here the wife made  
tulips from egg cartons and laid a snow  
flake doily under the glass  
table top Crocheting  
thru fear of night  
storms she drifted away sprawled

on the purple sofa  
In her dream a light switch  
drops open its black  
door and the willow grove whirls  
over the barn

Where does her husband  
go beyond his  
routine check of the cows?  
Only half awake when he returns  
she sees his sleeves  
rise soft as billowed curtains  
weaving from side to side



## HOME FROM MILLTOWN

Three A.M. in a cheap room  
I thumb thru an ancient  
'58 Post to a photo of two men running  
an empty stretcher from a burning cab  
Once a friend driving  
in New York  
had a snub nose pistol  
pressed to his neck  
Another time a guy opened the car  
door stark naked No wonder  
cabbies love that rare

day of nothing  
but yakity women and the routine  
nurse Driving cab  
in Missoula I remember  
the whole town  
covered with ice at four in the morning  
And the last man in the world

waiting for a ride  
to the mill  
I listened to one sob story after another  
while old people counted each coin  
out careful as diamonds  
One night for pure  
animal gluttony  
a fat woman sucked down pizza  
all the way from  
Milltown to her tiny house

## THREE TOWNS ON THE PLAINS

Six months old and she lays here  
with her legs folded  
Her eyes nod off a long terrible sleep  
Six months...three boys break  
her down with sticks  
and she already  
owns one spot behind these funky motel cabins  
No one will touch her again  
She'll never toss her head or run  
In Babb someone will come out  
and shoot'r...or she'll  
die in the brutal winter  
Last year snow buried a road grader  
in two hours      Sounds funny to think of it  
left running and only  
the exhaust hole found smoking  
from the bank      A man  
was killed this spring  
when someone drove over and over  
him with a pickup

\*\*

One car pulls in at Loma  
where the grocer  
stares at nothing from the door  
His thick hands grip the cup and thermos  
Each night he locks the bar  
he must hate  
the doorbell tinkle  
Must hope some boy will hammer  
the screen      Not with questions for a room

but news of violence down the road  
 or a burning farm  
 Just passing thru most talk

of love for simple things  
 Crows work the slough toward evening  
 It would be fun to raise cows  
 People leave these booths  
 old and brown...punctured by the owner's  
 mean son If on the road  
 sign Lewis points  
 to some event it's miles  
 past Loma where the orange canyon breaks  
 and whirlwinds drift on the stone

\*\*

With craggy white peaks...  
 lakes and little green farms  
 west of here...people  
 in Nashua dream of moving from the plains  
 One young teacher from New York  
 goes west again this year  
 Someone threw a bucket  
 of red paint on his old car  
 Someone else heaped horseshit on his  
 front porch Centuries  
 of ice turn this ground  
 to rock hard gumbo  
 I remember the same torn buildings  
 in west Texas Same dry wind  
 The same skinny sandpiper weave odd designs  
 around the purple sage  
 Tonight...wind wants to tear  
 the roof off this old farm house  
 Up at three it's lonely  
 as hell the only lights  
 in the distance twinkle above the dam

## ROOM AT FLATHEAD

Up the creaky stairs  
a bulb hangs from a cord in the dark hall  
Steam heat rattles marbles  
thru the pipes      And this blue  
chenille spread looks  
odd where both  
faucets rust the sink  
The last roomers were probably winos  
trading bed and floor till some  
farmer's fence went up

Who could be sadder  
than women left in old hotels?  
Frayed coat      Pink necklace  
coiled in the glass  
Once a lady and I got a room in San Diego  
No windows      Ceiling high as a hand  
ball court and nothing

but a cot we hugged on  
thru the night  
Morning on our way out...jukebox  
blaring...I glimpsed someone's aunt  
sleeping on a bar stool  
Red hair fried to steel wool  
Left arm out to anyone...  
Her neck hung limp  
as jelly thru the Sunday songs

## GOING HOME IN EKALAKA

Alone again in a little town  
I open a door to the gym where a janitor  
works the north bleachers  
Radio going Slow knock of broom  
A cold wind jiggles  
the last blades  
of light on the ceiling  
Only a few years ago the grocery here  
roared up like wheat while firemen fumbled  
with snarled hose  
A girl sobbed by a car

and the crowd stood helpless  
as if watching  
executions four centuries back  
Weekends a teacher hunts  
fossils under shale drifts and only a few  
bones are missing from the duck  
billed dinosaur  
in basement of the school

On my way home  
to the yellow motel I watch  
a man lift from a tub  
of acid...a radiator clean as a dry  
beehive He studies it  
solid...understood

and useful as a gun or good plough  
No wonder St. Anthony's  
face shines soft  
as a child's in the brick church  
Dark hair rings his head like balled cotton

Whoever formed his dull gaze  
forgot how each autumn  
the humble saint watched  
thousands of olive leaves flow into one  
And the salmon runs  
glitter flames in the sea

## SAINT FRANCIS

At dusk mile long clouds  
 stream orange above the sun going down  
 Purple drifts over the mountains  
 far as the sea  
 After all is said and done...  
 all passion for wives  
 and lovers gone  
 ...no one...not even a room this time  
 Only this walk along the road  
 ..yellow trees...sky...  
 the bright cold grass  
 Tonight under giant ponderosa

slow blue flames rise  
 from blackberries  
 and the whole bush flares up blazing white  
 On the climb like this to La Verna  
 a hundred birds  
 swarmed Saint Francis  
 And the next morning Leo peeked  
 around the secret hut

to see his brother soar  
 high as the trees  
 High in the Sistine Chapel  
 fury of brushes lifted God and creation  
 on the ceiling In the basement  
 Michelangelo chiseled  
 ripples of silk in marble  
 There's no holy word for compulsion  
 to be alone In the far woods only this  
 steady light gleaming  
 in oil of the burro's eye