

2003

## A Ring in the Air

Joe Powell  
*false*

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# A RING IN AIR

Joe Powell







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2003  
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*The Edge City Review:* "The Pecking Order" & "Tooth And Claw"

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*Snowy Egret:* "The Weasel"

*The South Florida Review:* "Sheep"

*Trestle Creek Review:* "The Rancher's Daughter"

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*Drawings by Cindy Krieble*



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2003

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### HORSES IN SUMMER RAIN

Head to tail, they stand in the fields  
scratching each other's backs with their teeth,  
digging deep, entirely within themselves,  
switching flies from each other's eyes.

A stony gloom sifts down from the mountains  
and the sky roils, the way these horses  
seem coiled and taut, yet easy in their motion,  
like world-class athletes idling before a race.

As we walk by pushing a wheelbarrow  
or scythe thistles at the pond's edge  
a distant envy holds our gaze.  
We wonder that it is they see and smell

when the sky is as thick as grass.  
They lift their tails and prance, snort and buck,  
shake their heads at the ground, and run.  
Round and round they go, as the first drops

appaloosa their backs. Through our windows  
we can almost smell the earth's trembling eagerness.  
Our skins can hardly contain us  
as we think of all we've left, out in the rain.

### **HOMESTEAD ON DRY CREEK**

The yard is rusted shut  
as grass plows up machinery. Trees lean  
over deaths of boys whose work died too.  
Rocks are stubborn here and talkative.

A hayrake paws the air as hope did once. A doll  
is hanging in the milkshed by her hair.  
God is busy. The couple died two years ago.  
She of a heart attack, and he of grief.

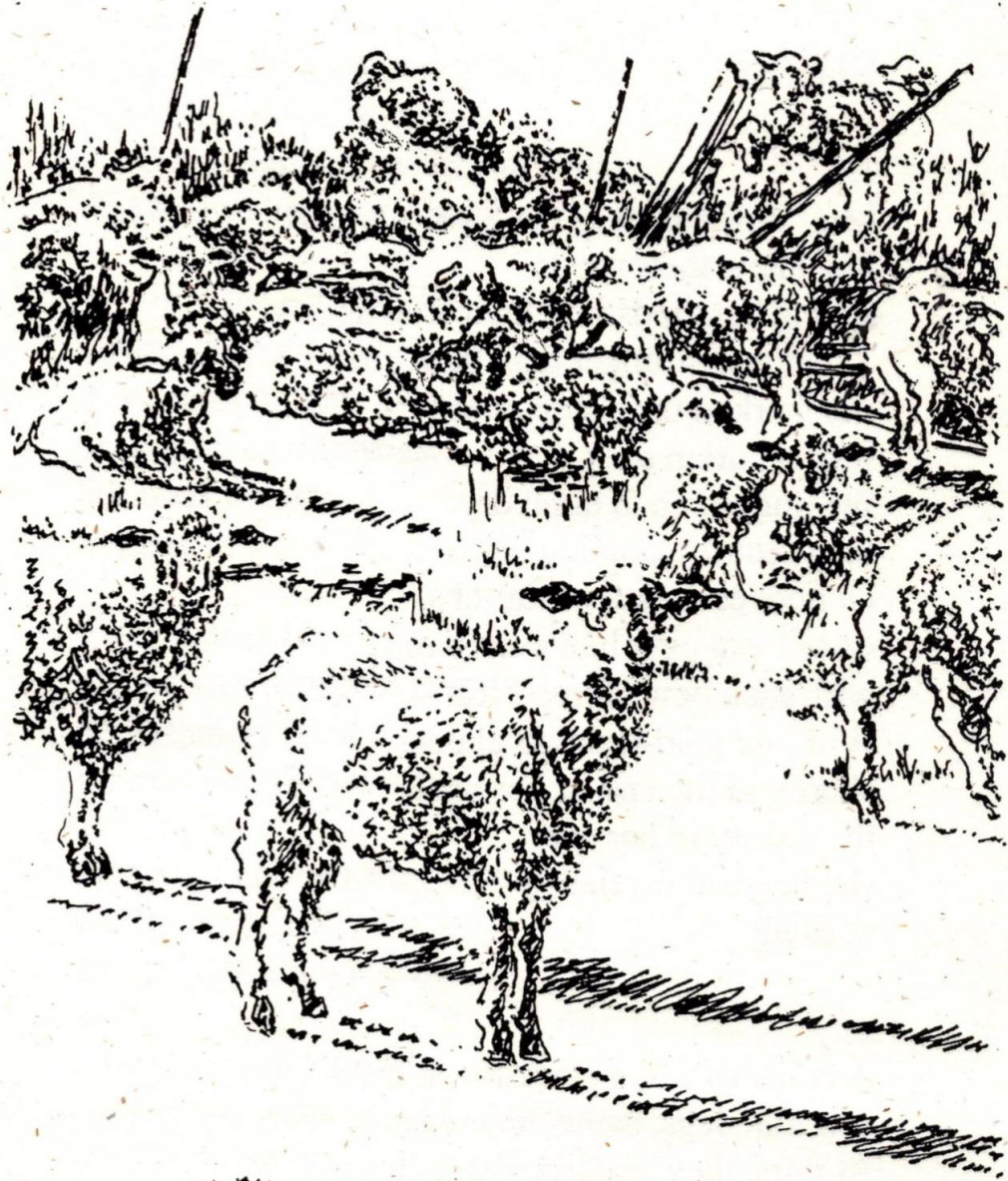
Was it loneliness or no one  
left to hurt? Once tough as nails, words  
now let their pictures slide and smokeless  
yellow squares arrange the rooms.

A plywood painting of green chickens  
chasing worms keeps a window shut,  
her signature scribbled behind the worm.  
Did idleness feather out her platitudes

or was it art the children loved?  
Their cast-off junk filled the henhouse.  
He hid his harness in the milkroom vat,  
covered with plywood. For whom?

A woodchuck barks behind the woodstack  
as if he knows, then dives for cover.  
In this barn and house each footstep ekes out a little echo.  
The worm outruns the chickens and a name.





CK/90

## SHEEP

1.

Mrs. Williams was the town's expert.  
She knew their needs,  
swung hundreds into their first noises.  
Taller and stronger than most men,  
she worked the sheep over:  
with a burlap sack,  
she hugged each lamb dry  
then sent it wobbling back  
on hooves as soft as thumbs,  
its tail wagging like a limp rope  
with each bewildered bleat.  
With her gold-rimmed glasses  
sliding to the end of her nose,  
the red sty in her eye  
she laughed carelessly  
at us all.

2.

A collar of fur, a sleek black head  
and lithe legs, some are elegant.  
At fairs, they're carded and cleaned,  
chewing the afternoon away  
in indolent ease.  
They are insomnia's numbers

or the part of the nativity scene  
that barely sees over the straw,  
sinless as angelhair.

They heard God cry as a child—  
their bleat does more than ask,  
it's the resignation after suffering  
that knows help can't help.

3.

Others, horned and ragged,  
dirty curls in their eyes,  
drag grass and thistles,  
but walk smugly  
in front of a brown, oily stain.

Their ancient eyes  
blurt a vast reptilian emptiness:



nourishment or nerves,  
the rest simply happens.

One after another they would  
die forever: cliffs, trucks,  
the panting slaughterline.

Parchment and meat,  
they're the testament of hard use—  
300 skins for one Gutenberg Bible.

Paschal as doorposts,  
the animals of sacrifice  
for Greeks, Hebrews, and geeks.

The cords of their necks  
became the fiddlestrings on which  
our knives sought to save us.

4.  
Every fall, flocks of hundreds  
come out of the mountains  
to graze our frosted hayfields.

Mornings when a grief revisits  
and a cold blade slides under my skin,  
I see them move like a slow disease,  
a leprosy across the land.

Others, when the mind is comfortable  
as piano keys in its plain box—  
they are the earth's blessing,  
a field of wool in a land of snow.

5.  
Last night, I thought again of Mrs. Williams  
who has long since moved away  
and now must be very old or dead.  
There is a kind of country mother wit  
that orders with a deft priority—  
when the honest knives are unsheathed  
it doesn't flinch, holds  
steady the heart and liver pan.

This morning the sun rose  
like a red eye, unblinking,

above the uses  
and noise of this world,  
to shine in spite of  
how we feel  
or what we know  
or might do  
with that knowledge.  
I felt again that burlap warmth,  
her jiggling laugh in the spring mud,  
and love come running  
like a lamb to milk.

## LOCAL MYTHOLOGIES

Bennett, kicked in the head by a horse,  
bleeding, dazed, leaned into himself  
like shade from a noontime desert tree.  
Then found a Kotex bandage and a splash  
of blood-stanching horse-powder,  
clamped his hat back on to finish branding.  
Hog-Raising Red, a bachelor, lived with a swarm  
of dogs, chickens roosting on his bedposts,  
snow drifting through seams in walls.  
His hogs were game and wily as his tongue.  
Merjerrison who while digging a trench  
swung a pick through his foot and shoe,  
said, "Well, guess I'm done for the day,"  
then hobbled back to an Epsom bath,  
gauze, tape, and work at 6 a.m.

Who to tell the old stories of nerve, sinew,  
the raw ignorances of survival? Of feats  
so foolish they modified a paradigm  
decades out of date? In this windblown  
desert ranch-land where seeds and cattle  
must be coddled into growth, some men  
dreamed voyageur vistas of self-reliance  
until they were all purpose and hard use  
like calluses on a heel. I still see Groger  
walking railroad tracks,  
a sack of stolen chickens on his back,  
nothing larger on his mind than the drink

these chickens earned. And the Basque shepherd  
whose flocks returned in fall wool-heavy and hale  
his hair grown clear through his longjohns.  
His hut on wheels reeked of loneliness.  
Summer nights with his dogs, he heard the bells  
of sheep tinkling backwards into a youth  
gone wrong, lean soups, straps and boots,  
the rich vestments and candles burning  
through midnight vigils and processions of the dead.

New houses turn their backs to the road, the town,  
and admire the silence waving from bucolic wheat.  
Meat is cellophaned; animals have rights  
they wished they had: freedom to graze  
green pastures, day-long leisure,  
sex so natural anyone can watch,  
a romp when weather darkens.

And weather always darkens when stories  
find their endings. The last page turns over  
and lives we've loved hover in air a while,  
part of a book that won't begin again  
because the language changes, becomes parables  
they couldn't understand.  
How fragile each state is. The past dies fast.  
New stories buzz along the wires  
and dead men hold their tongues.

## **MABLE'S CAFE**

At Mable's the clock is a green cup  
with plastic silver steam  
and mocks the time that's never right.  
Old men like these restaurants  
with baseball trophies on a shelf,  
the bar and swivel stools worn smooth,  
pie-slices spinning in a lighted case,  
temptations still to be touched.  
A cigarette burning in an ashtray  
and red half-lips smudged on cups  
are forms of faith each day denies.

They read the signs for benefits and horse-shows,  
customers-of-the-month taped to the milk machine.  
Even dusty antlers on the wall  
are stories they remember.  
They know where they belong—without a word  
eggs are made the way they like them,  
coffee cups are never cold.  
Waitresses tease and dote like wives did once.

Knobby knuckles are stiff and can't  
curve through cup-handles; they see  
a world that's magnified—not by hope,  
desire, the wages of accomplishment,  
but glass, ground down and thick  
as foreign speech. Bent over steam, small talk,  
their old selves come and go  
like news of friends who died.

They like waitresses old enough to take a bawdy joke,  
call them “honey,” who know  
what dreams become, what lies attend them still,  
yet laugh, not because they're paid to,  
but they've seen enough of pity,  
the trembling cups these men drink from.  
Their “honey” is a form of grace  
modified and blessed by a look  
passing across a face.  
When a man leaves, he waves a finger in farewell  
as if to catch a last minute like a ring in air.

## **THE PECKING ORDER**

The turkey hen was calm and gentle from  
the egg. She didn't scratch and scabble  
for food or peck the combs and rumps  
of younger chicks or the tom she came with.

But soon the others saw in her compliance  
a weakness their boredom eyed with a kind of zest—  
just passing by they'd take a peck this once,  
then again, again, until her tail



was bloody, her wing-bone joints were sores.  
And through it all, though bigger, she humped  
and bore it like a saint, a Roman leper,  
an odd child. Sometimes, she'd trot away

and settle in a corner, her tail to the walls  
but then they'd peck the knob above her nose  
until it was as red as a cherry. She'd let  
one chicken roost on top of her. I suppose

it was because her wings and back were given  
some respite. I finally put her in  
a Pet-Porter inside the chicken house  
until she healed, yet she grimly paced

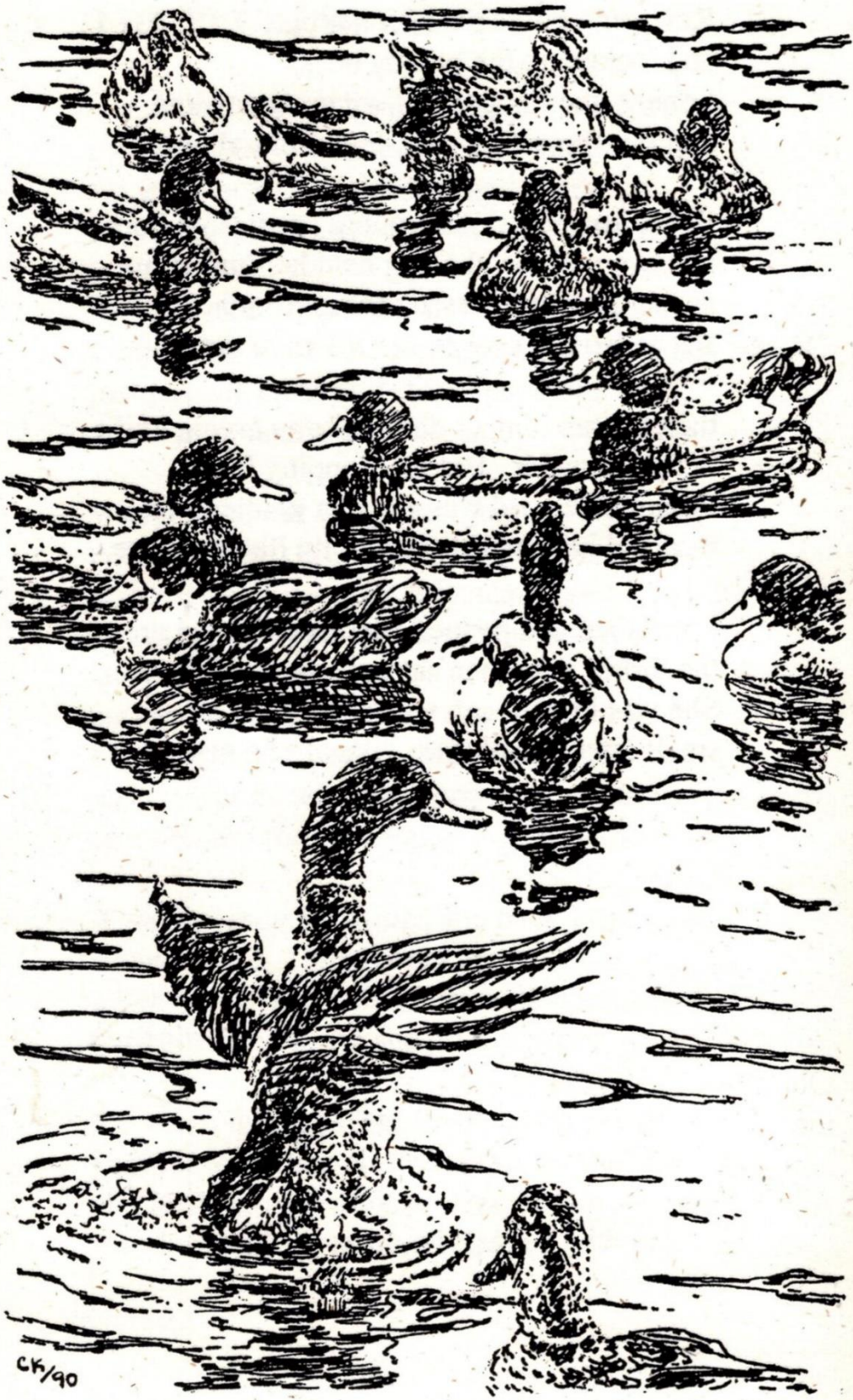
the wired door as if the cruel confinement  
kept her from herself. Three times she was caged  
and healed, and within a week or two  
the chickens' faces were splashed with red.

Reversing my logic, I let her out  
and locked up the bloody beaks.  
Lonely, she flapped her wings, squawked,  
and ran across the head-high field of grass

like a frenzied child running away from home.  
For two months, the dog held her hunger in  
as the chickens passed inches from her nose—  
she rolled her eyes to see if I were watching

then lay her hunger down like a carving knife  
before a prayer. But the flapping flurry  
through the field was a vision granted life;  
it seized her smell-bound brain like a sneeze.

I punished and penned her, plucked and dressed  
the turkey who then sat accusingly in the pan.  
She was hard to eat, to look at, but I ate—  
small bites, small bites, like all the rest.



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## DUCKS ON THE POND

Twelve from the first, they skittered and whirled,  
all antique jabs at flicking shrimp, winged  
water beetles, snails, larvae creeping through  
islands of pond scum. They raced across water  
like ardor engined until the hen squawks a warning  
and they water-run in a welter of obedience to the source  
like the far end of the Big Bang Theory—  
sizzling s's, particles whizzing back.  
Domestic as lawn ornaments they fall in line  
as the hawk-eyed shadow, the striding hat, passes.

The next morning, nine.  
Was it the laggards that lost, or the good ones  
who came first to the call, but were left  
when the hen went out to defend or find the dawdlers?  
Yet no grief seems to ruffle these scampering whizballs  
who paddle and peep, scud and splash,  
though the neck-feathers, the hen's worry, rises.

Seven, four, finally three.  
How do they behold this diminishment,  
this rapid-fire wreckage, so the corn stays sweet,  
love green, and the fall flock swings South?

Our losses leave us less and less  
until we squint at all ambition  
and grief, love's shadow, casts a moonlit  
pallor across the valley  
and rainy nights rain inward too.

Even duckling down left on the water  
can float far into the future.

We hear the frogs chant *to cease, to cease*,  
in choruses as if they knew these nights  
that followed forward through our days—  
yearning's the prelude to the ear  
and sound a symptom of the sense.  
Despite our sure conclusions, we want  
the bullfrogs to belch out their swollen,  
sex-mad songs, belch out a primal frenzy, full-throated,  
as if the bodiless feather were a froth  
and the heron humped in shadows, a shadow too.

We praise the survivors: the hen  
faithful for a season, as they come and go  
on drafts of air and eagerness; the tadpoles  
squiggling toward legs and a useless tail.  
We praise and louder praise  
because of what we know.

## **THE BULL**

1.  
When the milk tapered off  
and our milkcow roved the fences  
or escaped down the lane,  
we knew it was time.  
In heat, she couldn't be herded,  
even to grain and the barn.  
She'd run down the road,  
udder flopping  
like a half-full floursack.

So we went to the neighbor's bull.  
She took all the right turns  
with a wave of an arm.

The bull stood glassily beside her  
until a shock went through him,  
a low grunt as if lifting a great weight.

When he jumped up  
she stumbled forward  
and his lunge missed,  
went over her back  
and sperm shot into the air  
ten or twelve feet,  
landing on my brother's boot,  
the fence, and my shirt.  
The cow scabbled to her feet,  
stood dazed and meek,  
then limped toward the gate.

2.



At ten, I thought only of my Catholic mother.  
This was God's criticism  
and I shouldn't have liked watching.  
If the cow was hurt,  
it was my fault.

Guilt simmers in the heat  
of silence like a happy virus.  
The green of summer was a blur,  
the blacktop bubbled blackly  
as we all plodded home.

3.  
Now, it's the bull that interests me.  
That one pure image  
starting his body like an engine,  
a spark blooming into fire,  
his weight pulled like boxcars  
behind that vision.

Afterwards, that evening,  
he lay under cottonwoods,  
his head up, still,  
chewing and chewing  
the flavor out of the day.

I want a vision  
that makes my whole body listen,  
whose very failure is success,  
a consummation so thorough  
self-reproach is only a passing  
cloud-shadow across the valley floor.

I want to sit  
in some shade and watch the mountains  
put resolute arms around the valley,  
the hawks, small dark crosses,  
patch holes in the empty sky.

And the heat at the center  
of any moment, that hell which is  
heaven's shadow, will warm outwards and glow,  
a campfire built in the mountainous dark.

## **THE RANCHER'S DAUGHTER**

On winter nights, quieted by snow,  
when the others had made their loud excuses  
she was the one to pull on her boots  
and go with him to feed the animals.  
The pathway was slippery  
and their boot-sounds, heavy then soft,  
made the dark seem closer.

He flicked on a high dim light  
that warms haybales, the rails of the manger,  
the line of slick black noses, their steam.  
Together, they popped the wires  
and the bales fanned, releasing summer:  
alfalfa, blue grass, must, heat.  
It was a clean, safe smell that mingled  
with smells of cattle and horses.

As they were about to leave,  
he lightly put his hand on her shoulder,  
“Listen,” he said, and flicked the switch.  
In the dark, he led her to a bale of straw  
where they sat and listened: Fifty heads  
munching together, the sound swelling and rising  
as if this were a conclusion to all their labors,  
as if the barn were alive, murmuring to itself,  
and that deep silence often between them was satisfied.

This is what she most vividly remembers  
after that other silence claimed him years ago:  
his hand lightly touching her shoulder in the dark,  
“Listen,” he says again, “isn't that something.”

## **RURAL REFLECTIONS**

Herding cows: the one with the roving eye  
will find a hole in the fence.

A dog who chases cows in his spare time  
has to find a new home or a mound of grass.

Even without reason, a lonely goat will panic.

Bailing-wire and a hammer can fix most things.

There's nothing more permanent  
than a temporary solution that works.

A horse that shies from water  
must be patted and talked through it.

A sparrow who chooses a large, downy  
white chicken feather for its nest  
will have it stolen before it gets home.

For twenty years fenceposts hold up the wire;  
wire holds up fenceposts for the next twenty.

Any change in the field—  
the flapping wing of a plastic dam,  
a bag snagged in a willow—  
and the cows and horses quiver and snort.

When a boy wants to save the turkey,  
his father says, "Now son, animals aren't like people."

**"How Do We Get This Darkness Open?"**  
—Evan, after the lights went out

His net poised in the flower garden,  
his body still as statuary,  
I ask what he is doing there.  
"Listening," he says. "To what?" "The whisper,  
the whisper of butterflies flying."  
With a red net and black rubber boots,  
he's a nude naturalist at five  
whose first word was a clear *Bird*.  
Now he's also hunting language.

When he sees the half mid-day moon,  
("Hey, what happened to the part out of it?")  
Or says during an inner-ear  
infection, "I have a bird in my ears"  
or leads a friend to the raspberries  
("These are our strawberry trees") or asks  
"How do you know that for?" we put  
the moon back in the sky, explain  
the canes, his strange whistling ears.

Yet we're amateurs at seeing  
what he sees and don't really wish  
the world its accuracy, its perfect  
tenses, dead stars, wingless horses.  
How enclosed and dark the literal is,  
a candle afraid of its own shadows.  
How predictable our faultless syntax  
hopping along like a city sparrow  
for a bread crumb, an old fry.

When, oh when, in the mind's green  
neon did that bright café close?  
When did the teapot fall from the clouds,  
the angels park on a pinhead?  
After lunch, he plays with his dogs,  
the old one and the puppy,  
his scepter, a tube from paper towels.  
Kicking his heels, he marches and chants:  
"I am the King of the Jungle of dogs."

## **THE WEASEL**

I was crossing the creek's plank  
to fish the other side of the foamy pool,  
when he popped up and stood his ground  
like some grim gatekeeper of his side of the world.  
Brown beady snake-eyes glared through  
the wooden shiver of my footprints.  
He stood straighter the closer I came.  
A slinky brawler, a muscled *f*.  
No "Shoo" or whistle impressed him,



the flex of his mouth set for neither humor nor wonder,  
but the throats of chickens & rabbits,  
his tail as still as a lizard's.

When I stroked his head  
with the tip of the fishing pole,  
scratched the yellow map of Florida under his chin,  
I felt the cold rhythm of his heart,  
the ice at the end of his gaze.  
He didn't move, even as I flicked  
his tail from side to side,  
or jousted his belly. He swayed  
but arched back into his stiff stare.

What did he see, crossing there?  
Some vole-thief with a foot in his field,  
some clumsy wizard with a worthless wand?

Finally, like a peevish god  
I stamped the plank.  
He bounced and scuttled for his house  
in the concrete rip-rap. But as I fished,  
he bobbed back, stared down more hisses  
and whistles, then retreated calmly  
as if to say: *You are a mountain of nothing,  
look how fast you disappear.*



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## **ROOSTER MORNING**

You were sleeping when I went out.  
The dove's call fermented hollow spaces  
in the creekside shade. No wind  
turned the leaves of the cottonwoods.  
Faithfully, dust accepted each footprint.  
I walked to the barn to feed the chickens,  
the sun on my arms and face,  
hot the green smell of grass,  
the first grasshoppers spread their new wings.

When I let the chickens out, the red rooster  
chased the yellow one around the yard,  
the gelding stood in the sun reflected off the white barn  
flexing his spotted penis, the end fluted  
like the neck feathers of the roosters.  
Birds trailed their names through the sky  
like thoughts their scent of feeling,  
yet no word felt its innerness surge.  
The morning was full of readiness, a ripe fruitfulness.  
I rode the surf of my blood all the way back.

You were still sleeping.  
The noise I made could have knocked  
Aphrodite off her pedestal.  
I climbed naked into the sheets  
and curved into your curves.  
Even the fly banging his eyes against the windowpane  
knew we were going to tie a ribbon on the toe of death.

## **THE CARNELIAN ARROWHEAD**

When the garden dirt washed off,  
the orange agate light  
bled toward gilded edges  
like some folk painting  
of a swaddled Christchild.  
The polished swirls  
sleek and watery at the neck  
suggested one who loved

the stone as much as the shape it took.  
And I loved thinking of the hand  
that had chipped it so it hovered  
above the table on a thin  
invisible seam,  
the edges catching light,  
casting an arrow shadow  
the craftsman shaped a thousand years ago.

When it slipped through my mother-in-law's  
fingers and hit the tile floor,  
it was only the treachery of too much care,  
the way caution can freeze us  
into stumblebums, five thumbs and thick feet,  
the way love can strangle what it loves.  
I couldn't hide my look of stunned surprise.

After ten years, what I remember most  
is her old hands rising to her temples,  
a helpless horror flashing across her face  
as her fists shook slightly, opened  
and held her head like an injured knee.

Hers is a deliberately selfless soul,  
whose kindness is quietly thorough  
and reads the signals in a scene,  
so all feel, in company, free to be themselves,  
a gift much like the hunter's gift for stone.

She glued the tip back on  
and the light is much the same.  
Now along the glossy scar  
I feel her hands aligning edges  
and that seam on which  
so much time balances.

## **TOOTH AND CLAW**

My son's whimpering noises brought me here,  
a netherworld of glow-in-the-dark snow,  
of stars, drifting whales, birds, and bears.  
His mallard clock is ticking now and now.

His pursued breathing's sharp as tiny ax-blows,  
his fists are curled up tight, his teeth on edge.  
My hand drifts across his sleeping brow.  
He moans, as if to check a lion's rage,

a bare-toothed zebra's charging. Nothing's there.  
When I wake him from the beasts he's seen,  
he quivers like a fish to sudden air,  
clutching my arms. *It's just a bad dream.*

A drip of sweat trickles down his temple  
as animals resume their fuzzy forms  
in heaps around his head and along the wall:  
claws retract, hooves dissolve, and teeth transform.

The walls repair, the sky's a canopy,  
the earth is solid as a floor and carpeted.  
We hug. He's glad to be this very boy—  
the jungle, veld, and forest all contained

within a strip of celluloid or constricted  
to shapes that cannot scratch or howl or blow.  
He stretches back into his bed. He kicks  
his covers off, glad for the fake stars, warm snow.

## TWINS

The Angus cow paced our fenceline,  
a network of uncrossable boundaries,  
lay down, got up, and paced again.  
Finally, her trouble gathered me in.  
When she lay in a ditch I went  
to be what little human help can be.  
The wind had icy fingers and the lower fields  
streamed with run-off, the first meadowlarks  
sprang from my steps, were whisked away  
like shouts from a train.

On her side, she moaned,  
and pushed the forehooves out.

They rested on the other side like a wet finger  
gauging the wind. She got up, walked around,  
lay down again. The head came next,  
wrapped in its salmon-egg sack.  
She heaved and he flopped onto the grass.  
Her tongue, a rough towel, searched  
until his sacked nose burst a blast of warm breath.

A thin rain began to spot my jacket  
and a double rainbow arched over the north.  
An ominous day for birthing, I thought.  
When I looked back, two more feet  
and then the other body slid out,  
a pink waterballoon rolled from a bucket.  
Again she stood up, but a strange alchemy,  
black magic, steamed and bubbled around her.

When the first calf bawled and bumbled over,  
she backed up, smelled him, let him nurse.  
When the other struggled to her feet  
the cow charged and pitched her into the air,  
her bones thumping softly on the damp ground,  
a sticky clicking of mucous. She struggled up  
but the cow drove her again into the ground.  
With my hat, I slapped the cow on the nose.  
Elastic as a pair of shorts, the calf stretched  
and wobbled onto her feet, but the cow  
circled, head down, determined.

Primogeniture is ancient as milk.  
I thought of Greek children  
abandoned on mountainsides, Ibo tossed  
into Evil Forests, abortions,  
fewer mouths to feed, pain or bad luck purged.  
Third-born myself, I hauled the newest calf  
over the fence, called the owner.  
He threw her into the back of his pickup,  
said, "Some cows kill them both,"  
waved his glove and drove into the late dusk.

I walked back under a few dim stars, squalls of rain,  
the wind's edge keener, groping.  
The herd of Angus disappeared into the dark  
but a weary bellow came forward, restive  
or relieved of the weight of its spring burdens.  
A dog barked to mark his place in the world.



I followed my cordial lights toward home,  
crossing fences as I found them.

I still hear the wet clack of skin and bones,  
see those black legs tumbling through air,  
the cow's angry confusion and betrayal,  
the calf's dizzy struggle to stand against all odds,  
all pity, that green and rainbowed field.  
I see her standing in the face of a mother-fury,  
taking it, again and again,  
and the fierce beauty that is our life.



