

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Eric Wayne Dickey for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 14, 2009.

Title: Freeway: Poems.

Abstract approved:

Karen E. Holmberg

This collection of poems focuses on a range of content. They pose many questions that consider issues surrounding driving, cars and independence, as well as masculinity, fatherhood, domesticity and parental identity. The collection consists of three parts, *Freeway, Menace, and Control*. *Freeway* contains poems on driving and cars, some of which are in alternate voices. *Menace* contains poems of distrust and doubt and harbors an element of deception. *Control* includes poems about accepting one's parental obligations to family and to the world itself, and acknowledges one's legacy to the future.

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Freeway: Poems

by
Eric Wayne Dickey

A THESIS

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Chair of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Eric Wayne Dickey, Author

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Earlier versions of several of these poems appeared previously in:

Verseweavers 2004. "Weekends Around the House." Oregon State Poetry Association fourth place winner for new writers.

International Poetry Review, Fall, 2004. "The Kind of Mind I Want" and "Paint."

Blue Collar Review, Spring 2004. "The Tree Climber's Husband." Third Place winner in their annual competition.

dedicated

to the memory
of my brother,
James David Dickey

who, like my father,
still teaches me how
to be a father

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FREEWAY: POEMS

PART ONE: FREEWAY

Powerslide

On snowy days, I like to power slide into the driveway.
Even when cars are parked on the narrow street

and children play between them, throwing snowballs
from behind the bumpers. Christmas. Nighttime.

I come racing in my VW white as snow.
My lights cut under and I see the children's feet

between the cars. I don't slow, instead
I speed up through the cars and darting snowballs,

jerk the brake, and turn the steering wheel just enough
to tease the car into a slide. The crunch of snow

beneath the tires, the sound of snowballs pelting the car.
I stop perfectly and pull straight into the driveway.

Isn't this how we all want to arrive in the world?

The Kind of Mind I Want

I saw a Bigfoot at the base of St. Helen's
long after the eruption. I was hiking

down a trail thinking about lava
when I happened upon

a big hairy man, kneeling
over a creek cupping water with his hands.

Sunlight glistened,
drops spilled down his hairy chin.

He saw me and the wild look in my eyes,
I was scared and out of breath.

That's the kind of mind I want:
the man-seeing-Bigfoot mind.

A staunch skeptic turned suddenly.
The clarity and zeal that must follow!

Before the story gets on the wire
and circles the world, before I'm some freak show

on the nightly news or David Letterman.
I want this kind of mind when the story is fresh

and I am still out of breath.
I want you to be the first I tell.

Freeway

A motorcycle weaves through the maze
of cars and trucks, white-lining.
It must be going a buck ten.

A few miles up, traffic thickens
and we stop at a pillar of yellow fire:
the motorcycle, a burning pile of broken glass

and crumpled metal. Such a small wreck
bringing long-haul trucks to a stand still.
Sirens wail, lights flash,

traffic backed up for miles.
Police cars, fire engines, tow trucks
jag the crash scene chaos.

Paramedics bag the remains with a snow shovel
and I wonder if that's the kind of mind I want.
To white-line it at twice the speed limit.

No fear of being scraped off the pavement.
Oh, to have a motorcycle mind
change me into a pillar of fire.

Horsepower

Looking back,
you would have slept with more guys,
and tried being with a girl or two.
A burning-of-the-bra ceremony, definitely.
Maybe even a silver Mustang instead of
this tan Camry.

You would have
tried heroin, too, if it were legal.
Although, it seemed scary and your mother
would have turned her back
on you.

Now you never
will, because your heart
started roiling in your chest.
The girl in the rearview mirror
looked strangely unfamiliar.
The reflection of her brow
was no longer yours.

Your foot slipped
from the brake pedal. The car lunged
forward into the intersection.
You didn't care.

A rusty truck
honked and swerved around you.
Waving an arm, yelling,
"Watch what you're doing,
you dumb bitch!"
The traffic light changed, too.
maybe.

Cadillac Rodeo

I'm the guy that won the car at the auction.
Called it *the dead guy's Cadillac*—

metallic blue convertible, white top
and leather, chrome-spoked wheels.

People whistled when I rolled by. Top down,
I'd wave my cowboy hat in the air.

I fastened a steer horn to the hood
and really started pulling in the chicks.

They caressed my balding head the way
they did the leather, skewing my glasses.

I started to feel kinda guilty, wondering
if I was just reaping what I couldn't sow.

After the girls burned one-too-many butts
in the upholstery, black smoke started pouring

from under the hood, and the engine started knocking;
it was the dead guy rattling the driveshaft.

The car shivered like an old bronco—
nothing but skin and bones.

I retired the stud, filled it with bullet holes
and bottle caps, and let it rust in the pasture.

I Saw Your Blue Taurus

When I rounded the corner,
a blue Taurus just like yours
pulled into the parking spot
next to my stomach.

The left tire stopped inches
from the curb of my tongue.
My words wanted to climb in
as if it were you

and your blue Taurus
coming to take me to the Dog's Head
rocks of the Lamoille River
to make our minds green with the forest.

Our lives are like the water
Squeezed through narrow rocks.
The gushing sound, always there.
We can't talk over it,

just listen to each other's faces.
The language of moon and leaf,
our caregiver.
Your blue Taurus knows the way.

Biking to Work

Biker's high
kicking in.

Wheels spin
freely.

I float on the road.
Giant gyroscope.

The crank stops squeaking,
rusted hubs silver over,

my worries disappear.
The bike and I are one.

Up ahead, crows gather
'round a fresh road kill.

I roll by
as in dream.

The crows jump
out of my way.

Their black feathers
reflect the sun,

throwing gold coins
at my eyes.

Idiot Drivers

I can hear them
for miles up the road:
the whiz of the tires
deepens in and out of my ears.

I like to watch the idiots
drive by. Sometimes Larry joins me.
We sit out on the porch.
The wife brings us a couple of beers.

Shoot, I can tell by the sound
of the engine
what kind of car
and who's driving—
this town ain't that big.

Heck, we heard Chuck
Tinsdale driving with someone.
Larry said it sounded like
his secretary, Betty Hines—
driving home to his wife no less.

I seen a couple of wrecks,
too. One was real bad.
See them white crosses?
The side view mirror
damn near hit the house
way up here off the road.

At night, as I drift to sleep,
I can still hear the cars.
There's Tinsdale again,
I say to my wife.
Or, *where's Larry going?*

Or, I don't know who that is.
Sounds like a Chevy.
Damn teenagers.
They're the ones to watch for,
turn you into a cross.

Laundry, Accident

Today I fell on the threshold
of an open door.

I carried laundry, dry from the line.
I had taken a deep breath

through my nose with eyes closed
to smell the laundry

That's when I fell,
crossing through the door

from the backyard,
backward on my ass.

I remembered the last time I fell.
I was running between the rows

of a hazelnut orchard.
The nuts were ripe on the ground:

the tip of the hard shells
pricked my knees and hands as I tumbled.

There had been a crash
just beyond the trees;

I ran to help and fell.
The laundry lying on the ground

reminded me of the crash,
too: strewn.

The Tree Climber's Husband

Dusk brims over the horizon
during her long drive home.

When she drops her gear on the porch,
spurs and lanyards clang like giant keys.

He waits until her boots are off
before opening the door.

Carefully, they only let lips touch,
her clothes are thick with poison

oak oils. He helps her undress,
slides her pants from her legs.

Her arms spread like branches
as he lifts her shirt and reveals her armpits—

unshaven after a week of fieldwork—
hidden like the nests of voles and owls.

Her socks, still wet from sweat.
Her fingernails, dirty with the forest,

dig in his back. Her hair smells of fir and fern.
She wraps her limbs around him

and holds the underbrush aside
guiding him through the lower canopy.

Her ankles lock as she readies
for the long drive home and the dusk

brimming over.

After You Left

I stopped exercising and riding my bike.
Instead, I drove to work every day.
I stopped eating oatmeal,
only eggs over easy and buttered toast
for breakfast. Hamburgers
and French fries for lunch,
and a strict liquid diet for dinner.

I drank lots of coffee and beer,
smoked cigarettes and cigars,
went to bars and flirted with women.
And I admit, the scent of an unfamiliar
perfume behind an ear tickled my nose.

I didn't do laundry, make the bed,
or open the curtains. I let the dishes stack up,
didn't recycle, sweep the house, or even take out
the garbage. I forgot to feed the dog
on occasion. She now looks at me
with drooping ears and licks at my feet.
The cat hisses at me when I walk by
and hasn't been around much.

I hardly brushed my teeth or showered,
stopped flossing altogether,
and stayed up late watching TV
and eating chocolate ice cream.

I took your advice after you left
and really let myself go to hell.

Funeral

I looked back
to see what I had hit.

A cat bounced
from one side of the road

to the other
like a rubber ball.

I stopped the car to move it
from the road.

As I approached,
it slowed to a quiver.

I nudged it with my foot
and heard its final knell,

a gurgling meow.
Cautiously, I picked it up

by its tail,
felt its lifeless weight,

and cradled it in my arm.
Its head swung over my elbow

and bled on my sleeve.
I laid it down in the tall weeds,

its paws still twitching
like in its catching-a-mouse dream.

PART TWO: MENACE

A Picnic in the Park

This poem is trying to give you a wedgie.
It reaches for the back of your pants.
Look at you squirm as it grabs your underwear.

The poem makes you angry and you try to spin
out of its grasp. One or two other poems move in.
And before you know it, the wedgie has been executed.

You are embarrassed and everyone is laughing.
The poem puts its arm on your shoulder
like an older brother. It wants you to see the humor

and forgive its vulgar display of affection. *Let's go play
catch.* A Frisbee floats on a cloud longer than usual.
Look at you, waiting to catch it, fixing your pants.

Mindcrime

Last night
beneath a buzzing streetlamp
frantic with mosquitoes,
light cut the dark
on the chalk-marked
sidewalk
and a crime scene
was foretold:

the children,
dreading tomorrow's ride
in the school bus belly,
tossed pebbles,
skipped inside the outlines,
and balanced on one leg.

Their shadows
grew short and long
in the street light
as they celebrated the death
of someone who bumped his head
went to bed and didn't get up
in the morning.

The Alphabet Murder

A saw the perp flee the scene.
 B ran down the block after the deed was done.
 C was thrown to the ground but couldn't see the face.

D thinks addiction drove the killer;
 E claims it was a crime of emotion.
 F says *fuck it, let's go bowling.*
 G says *the goon had it coming.*

H doesn't know how anybody could do this.
 I do not cast blame.
 J, aloof and mum.
 K kicks it in the shadows with
 L leaning against a wall.

M, *move aside, move aside.*
 N, snaps pictures of the scene.
 O, *sweet Jesus!*
 P, the police arrive
 Q, *Quick, somebody call an ambulance!*
 R, the siren wails.

S, hides in the gathering crowd.
 T, everyone whispers a Hail Mary to themselves.
 U is in utter disbelief. Between,
 V, shards of glass from
 W, a broken window,
 Y languishes.
 Z, broken and lifeless.

Socratea exorrhiza

I'd like to read in the headlines
that a group of walking trees
attacked the logging mill
just outside Emmett, Idaho.

The camp, having ceased production,
was unoccupied by people
but the trees were victorious anyway.

There was an ongoing stand-off
with the National Guard.
The trees held out long enough
to machinate complex strategies
building an impregnable fortress
equipped with abatis, catapults
snares and snags.

When I look at trees,
I see a forest army
sweeping across the country side,
charging over hillcrests
wielding big sticks, and
through their ruffled voices
I hear them cry out their battle names,
their green hair waving in the wind.

Watermelon

If I drop it now.
It would explode on the pavement.
Leaving red chunks.
And green rinds.
Broken.
Not cut.
Like on a plate.
In brisk even wedges.
Bleeding life juices.
Into a mouth.
That crushes it into juice.
The tongue working around.
The mouth organizing seeds.
Spits them on the lawn.
With a momentous energy.
Where they will remain.
From afternoon sun through dusk.
Into a night of raining meteors.
Mid-August.
Watermelon seeds.
Under the glistening stars.
This thing that I carry.

The Clothes are Coming Off

I used to smoke a lot of pot. I liked the names of the different strains: Fuckers, Train Wreck, Blueberry, G-13, Time Warp, Purple Koosh, Big Sur Holy Bud – that was my favorite! On that one, I not only met God, we were high school buddies who gave each other charlie horses and swapped stories about chicks. He liked to leg wrestle and could pin me in a microsecond.

Skunk bud so aromatic I now like the smell of skunk when I pass a dead one on the highway. While some roll their windows up, making faces, I roll my window down and stick my head out taking in the sweetness in long slow pulls of air, holding it all in.

Whenever I got high with a girl, the clothes would come off and we'd have sex. Smoke another joint and do it again, sometimes all afternoon.

Oh those days, that good pot, those fun names: Northern Lights, Humble Bud, Strawberry Cough, Grape, Virginia Creeper, Matanuska Thunderfuck.

I'll Never See You Again

Sheep bleat
and run
in a frenzy
towards me.
They see
I bring
them treats
of bread ends.
Crowding one another,
pressing
against barbed wire,
they clamber
for a taste
other than grass.
Their musk
tickles my nose.
Wide black
eyelids
hardly blink.
Black nimble lips
grip and tug
at these few crusts.
Long yellow teeth
tell of the hardship
of eating
off the ground.
I'd hate to
get my finger
caught in there.
The last few crumbs
I toss to the ones
in the back
to make sure
they get some.

Why am I telling you this?
You'll think
it means something else
and I'll never
see you again
anyway.

Smoke Detector and Other Short Poems

clothes left in the dryer
keep falling from my arms
one after the other

I scramble to scoop you back into me

we were high
on Mount Constitution

a boy yelled "Ravage!"
atop the tower

when you cried later that night
I knew it was over

crows seem to be everywhere lately
even challenging my dog

if I threw my arms up and screamed
would you have stayed?

that last morning
you left the sugar out

every time I see an ant
in the kitchen
I think of you

I crush it
and hold my thumb
under the faucet

standing on a kitchen chair
in my underpants
trying to stop
the low-battery warning beep
of the smoke detector

at 3:23 a.m.
I still ache for you

Recipe for Heart

ingredients:

crackers

parsley

heart

Preheat oven to 450 degrees Fahrenheit.

directions:

cut heart out

place on butcher block

make thin shallow slits

around the entire heart

tips for cutting slits:

cut parallel lines 1 to 2 cm apart

dragging a serrated knife over heart

apply little pressure,

let gravity do work,

let knife play

Trim corners and fry up separately for the dog.

Take a piece of string and bind the heart

perpendicular to the slits.

Arrange slits like an accordion.

Cinch tight. Save juices.

Place heart on center rack in preheated oven for three minutes.

Remove from oven and put directly on serving plate.

Cut off the string and dispose of it.

Garnish with sprigs of parsley and saved juices.

Carve heart with a steak knife

like the one you found in the garage

when you moved in together.

Serve with crackers.

Trash Comes Calling

You've been off coke for three weeks now
and managed to get a job across town

folding boxes for apples and pears. You take
the number three to work, or the eight

if you can make it, be fifteen minutes early.
The girl you quit coke with left you.

She didn't come home after work,
you knew she fell off the wagon.

That was when you started noticing the trash
strewn on the streets and sidewalks,

piled up at the curb: bottle caps, cigarette
butts, plastic bags, broken glass, crushed cans,

little pieces of paper paint your landscape.
Despite a week of windstorms, the 7-11

big gulp cup remains at the bus stop
with unwavering integrity.

When you left your apartment this morning,
a blue straw was on your front door step.

Five Quiet Squirrel Disquisitions

1. I travel the highways of trees.
Branches dart like lightning;
I leap from strike to strike.
2. A man writes in his book
sitting beneath my sycamore.
I watch his thoughts scuttle like ants
and caterpillars across the page.
3. Raccoons sneak in the doggy door at night.
They wash their hands in the dog dish
and eat the food. And so they go,
from house to house.
4. Dawn light shines through shutters.
Lines of shadow on the bed.
A woman sleeps with her mouth open.
She wakes with a fright
when I claw up the wall.
5. This maple is not her tree.
The carved heart has a P and a K.
But does that really matter?

Thanksgiving

At the grocery store, the Butterball
looked like a Jesus.

I didn't tell my family
when I brought the Jesus bird home.

I baked it in the oven's gas chamber.
Basting it now and then.

They ate it. Said it was the best ever,
smiling with flesh between their teeth.

I made soup stock out of the carcass.
Jesus stock, as I now call it in the freezer.

The cleaned bones of his body
could be used as musical instruments.

Sucking on the drumstick,
Uncle Bill could thump on Jesus' skin

absorbed now into our own bodies.
Eventually he would suck the marrow out.

But for now, the Detroit Lions are playing,
Aunt Trudy's skirt clip is undone,

as is tradition, and the cheers and spirit of the game
are easier for us, easier than this.

Paint

a woman is breaking
her husband

she paints him
into a corner

now he says
he likes the color

he brushes some paint
on a wall

says the color
makes her eyes shine

he paints some more
around her

she coos
and he is now broken

they drop to the floor
on the drop cloth

moans and grunts echo
through their house

the brushes begin to harden
the paint starts to swirl

the painting will have to wait
for now

The Presentation

a woman draws arrows on a flipchart
talking at the front of the room

she draws quickly, leaving the arrows incomplete,
lines and dashes with sloppy triangles

the woman is pretty and talks fast
her breasts shake as she moves

she draws more arrows
that begin to swim and swarm

like sperm
I start to get an erection

I'm in love with her now
but I know I can't have her

not here, not like this
I'm a married man, for crying out loud

but I'm drawn, moth like,
to her flickering beauty

she talks about how we can blow
job satisfaction

I can't believe she said those words
looking right at me, no less

she follows the buttons down my shirt
with her eyes and stops at my belt

I start to resist
how am I going to tell my wife

who will surely take the kids
and move in with her mother

I will have to eat dinners alone
while my children sleep in strange beds

the woman knows I can't live like that,

not without my children

she draws her attention to somebody else
and I sigh in my chair

after she finishes her talk
we all applaud and I walk up to her

looking into her eyes, I shake her hand
saying, *thank you for that fabulous presentation*

I Think I'll Grow Into a Mean Old Man

I'll curse at children and at the neighbors
who say, "Have a nice day."

When I grimace, bark will grow on my face,
knuckles of branches on my fingers,
gnarls of roots on my feet.

The spaces between my teeth will grow
long. I'll chew with my mouth open
and won't wipe my chin until I'm done.

Nurses will handle me with rubber gloves.
I'll threaten them with my life, *Cut it out*
or else I'm gonna kick-off! call them all bitches.

I'll shrivel up like dried fruit,
grow transparent exposing my pit—
it'll mold over white and rot in my core.

In the end, I will know love: my grandson,
who looks up to me, will lift my head from the bed
and rearrange my pillows.

PART THREE: CONTROL

Taking Control

Somebody is always driving me,
either to work or to the 7-11.

Arlen and Virginia.
My cousin's boyfriend, Danny.

The tow truck guy, Dwayne.
Uncle Bill. Sweet Jenny.

But lately I can't see them.
I mean I hear them talk about things

like the snow storm of '92,
or about the time they swerved

and hit the deer anyway. But I'm alone
in the car. Where are they?

The steering wheel turns with the road,
the pedals move up and down,

and the automatic seatbelt keeps me safe
and secure while the car is in motion.

I start to feel sick to my stomach.
Then fear blows out the window.

Why shouldn't I just sit back
and enjoy the snow rushing by?

St. John's Wort

I buried my friends alive in the garden.
Soon enough, their noses were covered over.

I couldn't understand what they were saying
as their mouths filled with dirt.

I was the only one left talking,
leaning on the shovel, whistling a sigh of relief

as my dear wife brought me a glass of lemonade.
God damn do I love her! *Honey*, she said,

there's a bag of compost in the trunk.
A fifty-pounder. My back tensed as I picked it up.

Rising to the occasion, I grunted like a man,
plopped it down just where she wanted it.

I went to work on the front flowerbed
where the St. John's Wort was taking over.

I ripped it out until my fingertips hurt. An endless
web of roots, it sent runners under the foundation

all the way to the back of the house.
I stuffed the yard debris bin full

and jumped up and down in it to make room
for more wort, smashing it down in the noon day sun.

I'm a frickin' human-powered compactor,
swatting at insects just like King Kong.

Across the street, I saw my old friend Bill
covered with dirt, staring at me with that blank face

of the dead. I yelled at him from atop the wort bin,
I said, *Hey Bill! This is incredible.*

Studies with Knife in Mouth**I.**

Holding the fork in my left
and the knife in my right,

I get confused—am I a lefty-
or a righty? So, I switch

hands, put the steak knife in my left.
But I thought it still held the fork

and raised my hand faster
to my mouth making up lost time.

I jerked it away as the knife
tip stabbed my top lip.

II.

The knife flashes
in the kitchen light

when I pull it out
of the silverware drawer.

I cut soft butter. The knife
scrapes crunchy toast.

I put my lips together to lick
the butter from the blade.

The tip of my tongue
follows the serrated edge.

III.

I use a fork tine
as a toothpick.

Too thick.
I grab the steak knife.

I can feel the cold metal tip
at my gums,

between my teeth,
scraping enamel.

IV.

Camping, forgot my fork.
Only a knife to cook with,

to eat with.
A pocket knife, no less.

Not too much pressure,
else it'll fold on my fingers.

In the middle of wilderness.
So quiet, the forest listens

to me eating an apple
with the knife.

I bring a piece to my mouth,
spread my lips extra wide

to avoid the sharp blade.
Take the apple with my teeth.

Going to D.C.**I.**

A child is lying on the driveway,
a red clay, dirt driveway.
His face is in a puddle.

Rain and more rain on the way,
the puddle is filling fast.
Where are his parents?

I tell the kid to get up
but he can't hear me
so I pull him up by his shirt.

When I pull him up, another two
appear face down in the water.
I am the lifeguard of the puddles.

II.

I hurry to the station,
running along the platform
trying to stop children from jumping

into the paths of trains.
I duck down to look through
the legs of the adults standing there.

Reaching between, I grab
for the children before they fall.
My hands are full and I can't let go.

More kids keep coming.
I'm trapped. Trains coming, too.
I am the conductor on the platform.

III.

A classroom of kids climbs on tanks
and jeeps like jungle gyms
at the Capital Building.

Parents smile and take pictures
of soldiers standing guard,
headstones in a graveyard.

I pluck the children like apples
and tuck them into my pockets
before they fall from the turrets.

The recruits start to point at me.
I am not afraid. Brazen,
I am a thief in their orchard.

Dad's Last Punt

So drunk,
you had somebody drive you home
from the office.

I heard mom
say thank you and the sound of a car door shut.

You stumbled
into the backyard and

grabbed that ball
from me, spinning it in your hands,
feeling for the lace,

fingers yellow
from cigarettes telling me to go long.

Punting
in dress shoes isn't easy
especially when all hopped up.

Your leg was in the air,
higher than a father's should go.

You grimaced
as your ass hit the ground, got right back up.

But Dad, boy
did that ball fly!

It crested the roof
of the house and caught daylight's
last glimmer.

Even the dog
perked her ears.

And there I was,
in the middle of the yard,

looking up at the sky
waiting to cradle the ball as it hit
my chest.

Upon Receiving the News of My Grandfather's Passing

Lightning broke into my house, pried open a window
and stole my shadow right out from under me.

It froze like a dog with one bent forepaw
and retreated the same way it came in.

Shifting its head side to side, snarling at me
and the phony light from my desk lamp,

it shook the shadow of the ceiling fan in its teeth
and crept down the street stealing more.

Tomorrow, the sun will emerge again.
But the oak will lie broken at my feet.

There's a liberty to being like lightning.
It can strike at night and growl with a deep roll

into somebody's stomach. Wouldn't matter whose.
It could surprise them in the flash of a mirror.

The Old Man from Kabul

Neighbor, death is near
and so I've come to apologize
for my misgivings.

I know it is late but
the silence of stars
keeps me from sleep

and our dogma dictates
that we share our transgressions
in times of death.

Neighbor, I am sorry
I spoke ill of you
in the past.

I hope you can find
forgiveness in your heart –
if it has any hope left –

for I wore what my father
willed me, old uniforms
that never fit quite right.

Neighbor, I am sorry.
I cannot remember
why I cursed your name

in the dark. The memories
of our disagreements
are like abandoned pilings

of a broken pier
marching into shallow water.
Neighbor, I am sorry.

I lie awake at night.
My gut wretches
with fear, I grind my teeth

and worry I will not
spend my final days in joy.
Where is your son?

Where is your water pitcher?
Let me fill it for you.
Where is the smell

of fresh bread
that once wafted through
the streets into our homes?

Now, only sounds of
sorrow and distant battles
drift through our windows.

Neighbor, I cannot look
at you. Tears cut trails
through the dust on my face.

Flies dance like dervishes
around our lips.
The air is a noose.

Where is the laughter
we once breathed?
I want my wife back.

She is alive but
lacks the will to live,
sobbing night and day.

My house is full of holes.
My feet are cracked
and full of glass shards.

My ox was eaten
by soldiers. The cart
that once carried my family

is splintered behind
my home. Now it is firewood.
Shall I warm your house with it?

Neighbor, forgive me.
Death is near
and I cannot sleep.

Weekends Around the House

1. Inferno

Frost was on my breath when I hauled in wood
from the shed — logs once chopped into a pile
shaped like some forgotten red butte. I stood

outside in the weather for a long while
and took in the quiet, foggy morning.
I went back to rekindle my mild fire.

A brown recluse shifted, ready to spring
from an old scrap of oak I angled through
the iron doors of the wood stove. Guarding

its silken sack from the flames, it grew
frantic, beyond hope. The fire fried it:
eight legs like fuses, sizzle, pop, it flew

with a rush up the chimney as spirit.
I closed the doors and turned up the dampers
then grabbed my coffee cup to refill it.

2. Purgatory

Water sound changes as the tub fills up,
from that shallow slap against the cold tile
to that echo in the throat, the low thud.

This is when the demons came through the stile,
told that Texas woman, *save your children,*
tuck them to bed, sing to them for a while.

We looked in vain for ways to comprehend.
For weeks, the news showed their family picture.
Should she be boiled in blood to help us mend?

We are all just fish. Everything quivers
in the current. Ripples on the surface
are marked like a target. In the center,

a hook and line from nowhere seduce
our own doubt. I step into the bathtub,
lean back, close my eyes, my muscles go loose.

3. Paradise

This time I am not in my alone dream
where the marbled earth is only meadow,
the one where I see the very first tree

sprout through the tall weeds swaying to and fro.
A living dream, I'm awake: The sun, high.
Blue jeans, tennis shoes. I'm going to mow

the lawn. I hear Jenny clatter dishes;
humming that Nina Simone tune she loves,
as the spigot in the kitchen hisses.

I hear birds fluttering—a flight of doves,
their wings helping to keep the coals aflame.
I slide my fingers into grass-stained gloves,

pull the cord just once, and follow the square
pattern; mowing over rotten apples,
releasing a scent that teases the air.

When I Talk about Love, I Ask Questions

Are you going to drink your tea?
Is this your water glass?
Did you have a good day?
Isn't she a sweet dog?
Have you seen the news?
Did you put gas in the car?
Was it raining when you left?
What would you like for breakfast?
Have you seen the cat?
Will you caress my hair?
Did you like your lunch?
Do you want a cookie?
What's that perfume you like?
Want me to rub your shoulders?
Are the kids asleep?
How's your sister?
Let me get your glasses for you, where are they?
I'm going to the store, do you want anything special?
Will our son learn to let go?
When will you be home?
Can I have kiss?
Can I take your car?
Did he quit smoking?
Do you want to ride bikes to the market?
Can I jump in the shower with you?
Do you want to take a nap with me?
What would you like for dinner?
Did you have a nice birthday?
Did you plant those flowers?

Lost at Sea

The beach fence creaks in the wind:
an invisible boat moored to a pier.

My son plays in the sand.
On which plank does he walk?

Real, meta or both?
Beach grass bends time beneath his feet.

His footfalls tune the creaking fence,
playing songs of departure and embrace.

Furtive time, apple love, sweet life:
I sweat like a deckhand

drinking the last of my water, frantically
waving my shirt over a ghostly new sea.

Carry me, water, float me out,
don't leave me to bloat in a flooded attic.

Return me to the blue abyss,
recycle me over a lost forest,

churn me back to debris.

Easy to Love You

What do the pine boughs say?
That's easy enough, they say, *I love you*.

What does the crunching gravel say?
That's easy, it says *I love you*, too.

In fact, the whole earth says *I love you*. We can put words in-

to the mouths of gravel,
but we always turn around

at the end of the road:
Our headlights search the night,

waving around long white
carrots at the stars.

A soldier says to his enemy,
I love you, with bullets.

I care about you enough, he says,
to end your suffering.

The dead soldier says *thank you*,
I love you, too; his family does not.

Firing a gun is a long road,
full of blind corner and potholes.

Wars come and go, soldiers live and die.
And we keep making more of them

every time we have sex.
We open our legs, and set them free.

Face on the Floor

When I lean over to pick up toys,
my notebook falls from my shirt.

Loose papers fan out
across the hardwood

and I think about my son's face
in the pages on the floor.

You think I would learn,
but I have no other pockets.

When the loose pages scatter,
I think of my son, face down.

I quickly pick them up,
and shuffle the whole mess back

into my breast pocket
fighting back the horrible image.

I return to picking up the house—
Legos, books, blocks, cars,

(my back grows stiff
picking up all this stuff);

thinking about dinner, the bills,
the war thirteen years from now.

Pretzel Legs

My legs were a braided pretzel,
and life ran amok in the streets.

A dog tried to take a bite of me
before its leash jerked it away.

I unbraided my legs and
stretched like a runner.

People called for me to hurry.
Around me, the world

cast an uneasy eye
and started like buffalo

through open prairie—
houses, cars, trees, people,

honking horns, diesel exhaust,
clouds, wind: everything running!