

MADE IN MICHIGAN WRITERS SERIES

After Music



POEMS BY CONRAD HILBERRY

After-Music

MADE IN MICHIGAN WRITERS SERIES

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After-Music

POEMS BY CONRAD HILBERRY



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Composed in Mrs Eaves, Bee Three T, and Jefferson

For Marion, Marilyn, Jane, and Ann

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ONE Sweet Grease

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MARIO

How did he get in Portuguese 202?

He's from Brazil, he *speaks* Portuguese—
a Brazilian kind of Portuguese, folding in
some rainy toucan calls. *Do you object?*

Well, he makes the rest of us seem . . .

But he charms us. The syllables run
like vines in a baffling forest where
we've never been. His eyes look down
from the canopy. When he's called
to the blackboard, his letters have curious
tails, like fibery strands of meaning
coming loose. He sits at one side
toward the back, looks out at the starlings
bobbing and strutting on the grass.

What birds is he imagining? His eyes
settle on us, one by one, a tuft
of jungle feathers landing on a branch.

We come to class early, wanting to feel
the humidity change when Mario walks in.

Don't listen to Mario, the professor says.
But we do, his talk throatier, slurred,
faint drums and hungry insects underneath
the ornate Lisbon churches in the text,
the situation at the travel desk,
the doctor's office. Mario
is what we came for, we now believe.
We lose verbs and pronouns somewhere
in the underbrush. We may fail the course.
Students. Students. The language
has rules, conventions, idioms.
Mario does not resist. He studies, takes
the tests. But we can't seem to hold on
to the bank. We slip into some tributary
of the Amazon, slow swirls and eddies,
silt of a continent drifting toward
the sea, and in our ears Mario's dark
Portuguese, snakes tangled in tree roots,
bats dodging and dipping, now that it's
nightfall, out of the cave of his mouth.

M O O N

Out of sight, on the step above
the curve in the stairs, the boy sits
listening to the fast, smart words.
Then the room quiets and they talk

about moon madness, sailors caught
in the full moon on a calm night,
how they might stare at the white
flesh pulsing on the waves

and step off into the sea. He crawls
up the stairs, a little dizzy, half asleep,
and there in his room the moonlight
slants through the window almost

to his bed. What would madness be?
He stands in the full moon, breathing,
his arms and belly whiter than he
has ever seen them. The moon, a yellow

eye with veins, looks only at him.

If he looks back . . . He looks.

He feels the yellow moving in,
seeping through his head and down

his spine. A one-eyed dog looks over
the roof of the house next door. He
can see its snout steaming and the cold
dripping from its mouth. The eye

says *come*, and he comes, drawn over
the snowy roofs, seeing it all
from above. He's not frightened,
it's some separate part of himself

moving away. The snow, with glimmers
from the houses, has become a sea,
rippling, reflecting yellow. A garage
tilts and begins to float. Then a touch

on his shoulder. A hand. His father
holding him. He's back in his room, small,
the moon still staring, eye
that will wait for him. And it does wait.

Years later that same moon, pale now,
hangs above the towers in New York City,
about to set at dawn. I wave for a cab,
give the address of the morgue.

Check in at the desk, I guess. Do they
wheel the body out or take me
into the chilled storeroom? I can't
remember. *Can you identify—*

they pull a sheet back from a face,
eyes and mouth open, cheek unshaved.
I nod, sign, and leave. Was that
my father's face, twisted, without

his glasses? Without his gentle poise.
It wasn't him—or me. The moon
reflects faintly in a bedroom
window. Then a cab draws up.

A B I R D

Two boys, a pile of sticks, a match—they send
a shaft of smoke, silver, twisting in
to the night, then watch the curved blade bend
above the trees and disappear. Gone.

Old friends die. Now a young one, a full-swing
dot-com mother, precise, lovely, heartsore,
finds that she's grown tired of everything
and dies. Our country hankers for a war.

Brancusi's *Bird in Space* is not a fowl
at all, but a cold knife, the shifty air
reduced to polished bronze. It doesn't fly,
it lasts. Once, its gleam could lift my eye
and hold it, breathless. Now its glare
mocks the night wind's broken howl.

N U M B E R S

Waves in a November wind, elbowing
each other to be the next to go white,
curl, and fall. Yes, that appeals.

Or Houdini's mother, dead, hoping to find
a Ouija medium who knows enough
Yiddish to take a message to her Harry.

Satisfying. But how about the squares
and digits passing covert messages across
an equals sign? Numbers stand attentive

like Japanese children at a shrine,
but behind those neutral faces lie
reluctances and yearnings. Take *pi*.

Archimedes drew a polygon
inside a circle, measured, figured, found
the ratio: three and one seventh times,

rim to diameter. But π shrugged off
that certainty. Its decimal places now
file off into the dark, a line of ants

waving antennae, signaling, as they shrink
to that hole where earth meets sky. Or take
ourselves, two small numbers multiplied

together. Coming to what? We're not sure,
not positive. Maybe we're *negative two*.
Then each of us may be a shadowy

square root, an elusive fugitive
camping out under a wind-blown tent.
Just as we suspected—take us one

by one, we turn imaginary, two thin
hypotheses, figures that students scribble
and erase, knowing we don't exist.

WINTER SOLSTICE

A child zips her boots, pulls on
her jacket and hat, and steps out
into the morning, dark as midnight.
Under the streetlight, she waits
for her friend. Waits. No one comes.
She walks through the new snow

toward school. Two cars pass, one
in each direction, tires squeezing
the ice. Light flickers in a house
and the news leaks out. As she passes
a tall hemlock, a furred blanket
of snow slides from a branch, a white

raccoon that may be following her.
A small wind has been angling
the snow down, but now it swirls
from behind the tree and calls up
a black dog almost as tall as she is.
They stop. Study each other.

The dog sniffs her arms, her belly,
looks up, trots on. She turns a corner
and there's a light over a door
and two boys walking toward it.
Her school. She's there. Holding
the dark around her, she finds

her room, her desk off by the black
window. A daytime voice comes
with its announcements, all for
someone else. As though
through glass, she watches
Ms. Paloma talking to the ceiling,

moving her hands. The teacher
doesn't see the girl and the dog,
the night, the heavy hemlock tipped
by the wind, the news spilling
on snow. For the girl, the dark
is like her father's car—she's in back.

They drive past the hands with pencils,
Ms. Paloma under a streetlight.
The class has studied it, the way
when the earth turns, a crack of light

comes under the eastern door. She
touches her father's neck. If he takes

a road to the west, fast as the earth
curls east, the dark will be hers.

VARIATIONS
ON ANTONIO
MACHADO'S
"CAMINANTE"

Caminante, son tus huellas

el camino, y nada más;

caminante, no hay camino,

se hace camino al andar.

Al andar se hace camino,

y al volver la vista atrás

se ve la senda que nunca

se ha de volver a pisar.

Caminante, no hay camino,

sino estelas en la mar.

Traveler, your footprints

are the only path.

There is no road except

the one you make by walking.

Your steps create the road,

and looking back

you see the path

you'll never walk again.

For you there is no road
except a brief wake in the sea.



Catching a sheet of wind, the catamaran
tilts, lifts, loses the shore. With the taut
line in your fist, you lean back against a wave,
following twelve snow geese as they scrawl
a path across the sky. You're their sea shadow—
wake of air, wake of water, trailing and gone.



Cow knows her way
back to the barn. Feeling
her udder bulge, she humps up
from the river mud
and heads for her stall.
The mole digs with hands
in front of his head.
The long hole is home.



The Little Manistee is shallow
but fast, with a path of rocks
where kids jump their way
downstream. Two frogs hang
their chins on the surface.
Listen—the stichery song

of the yellowthroat. Memory
 intact, those birds have flown
 the old road, the air-trail
 up from the Yucatan.



Thief, you want to lose those dogs?
 Get your feet in the river. When your
 smell's washed down over the rocks,
 you'll be an innocent mist
 somewhere upstream.



On the menu, you point to

Long Feng Pei.

The Chinese waitress checks
 with the Chinese
 chef. No one has ever ordered

Long Feng Pei.

Rinse your palette, lift vowels
 to the roof
 of your mouth, leave no footprints
 in the *Long Feng Pei.*



You've wandered through parking lots and airports,
 tunnels, fields of winter wheat and rape, wetlands,
 shifting breasts of sand. Finally, your hand-woven
 roads narrow to a cliff where every walker stands

to watch the midnight moon gather itself on the sea,
breaking, coming whole, shattering again.



Caminante, you can't go roadless.

You're following a woodchuck
to a tangled leg of swamp, but look
there where you're heading: footprints,
fireholes, broken shoes, a splash
of afterbirth in the weeds.

LET 'S SAY
I 'M SAD

Almost before I feel it, I find myself
saying it. *I'm sad.*

The feeling's like a shoe

tossed out of the rowboat,
it floats, then fills,
turns, drifts, sinks into the tangle

of weeds at the bottom. Right now, I'm
shoving that feeling
into words, watching it go down

as *sadness*. What would sadness be
without the word? I'll
step back, let my tongue go limp

and listen from the shore. There it is,
the feeling, still
as a carp in the muck. If it wants

to sulk there, breathing with its fins,
fine. Or if it craves,
maybe it will muscle up from the cold,

breach open-mouthed, and swallow
some wet wad of seeds.

Whatever. I'm just watching. Go,

sadness, find your own way.

When we first
walked upright, before we talked,

hunger must have been a huge
unopened need,
sadness vague and dark as the watery

shadow of a rock. No place for
carp. The word *carp*,
my hook to reel the blurred grief in.

O P E N

The open soul / is a lost soul . . .

—DABNEY STUART

Desultory air curls in, twists
on a pliant stem, moves on
to nudge the curtain and the late

begonias on the dresser. The soul
itself at season's end,
petals, phrases spoken somewhere—

or unspoken—touched by that circling
wind. Leaves folded back
like hands—giving or asking? Stem cut,

raked to the heap, some pollen flies
even now—even
in these autumn tailings.

Petals, no point in closing, around
what? The careless
equinox has taken it, song with a short

shelf-life, a child's hum or mine.

All lost in the fall:

scent, seed, the fine yellow dust

of spores, scattered down the unmarked
trails of the air.

Open. Hopeless and open.



Not like a book. Or the top of the red car
where a woman, waiting,
rests one hand on the wheel. Not an open
hearing, open house, open heart.

Open, instead, like Arizona
where the mountains shrugged,
turned north, and let the flat
land draw its own conclusions.



Soul hides in the colored
canyons of the brain—or valves,
veins, some hermitage

of flutes and fibers. Set free,
won't it ease out, breathe, drift
in eddies of the lean air?
It looks back, dreams back.
Through leaf-broken light
it almost recognizes gestures,
slants and sidesteps, handshakes,
my shrugs and stares. Too far—
can't make out the limp
and longing of companionable
flesh. But voice carries
even over distances like these,
half hoarse, hesitating,
doing my best to seem at ease.
Listening, does soul recall
long sadnesses, taut rope
raveling as we pulled
through a marsh of years—
and, over and under these,
the intricate entwinings,
meshing life with life?
The soul's not going back,
but still it clings, half hankering,
until an updraft scatters it.
A thread of road twists

by the river, and voices
blow downwind like smoke.

BLACK CAR BLUES

Like some black dog, that car smells out the street,
Nosing its way, that long car sniffs the street.
Why stop right here, long dog? You smell my feet?

I pour my sweet grease out the kitchen door,
My frying pan, I dump it out the door.
There goes my fat, I won't come back for more.

The cognac crowd, they hire a limousine,
The crowd prefers the long black limousine.
I flag the Amtrak, take the 9:15.

My woman loves her Tropicana juice,
Lots of pulp, my woman loves her juice.
Come on back here, we'll drink in the caboose.

One year was lucky—summer finally came,
A job, a neighborhood, a little fame.
The black car lurked and purred there, just the same.

You broil up a long black Cajun fish,
I like the way you fork that Cajun fish.
I don't much like another long black dish.

They've hung a stoplight on the avenue,
A brass stoplight at Rachet and Purdue.
Red or green, the black car rolls right through.

A man in black steps out around the car,
A man in black around the long black car.
He bows, he smiles, he asks us how we are.

I don't say much, my words roll up inside,
I let him smile, he claims he's on my side.
The night wind's quick. I'd rather walk than ride.

B L E S S I N G T H E A N I M A L S

At five today, the priest will bless
the animals, so we collect
on the stone rim of the fountain, old women
with canary cages, children holding
cats and parrots, a bowl of fish,
dogs, of course, some combed and ribboned,
others big and dour as burros. One boy
pulls a goat on a rope, another slides
a snake around his neck. We nod or talk,
cheerful, half serious about this rite
where no sins slouch in the shadows,
a baptism of the innocents.

By and by

the priest comes out,
a cream-colored robe with gold
embroidery. We gather, lifting
the animals, but he doesn't seem
to see us. He takes out a small book
and reads some words we can't

make out. Slips a carved stick
into a clay bottle, sprinkles
a little water on the nearest fur
or feathers, turns, and walks
back in. That's it.

All right,

Padre, maybe there is no scriptural
authority for blessing animals.
Maybe splashing water on a goat
is not your notion of a holy office.
Maybe you intend to teach
some dignity to your young
seminarian who thinks his calling is
to take the hands of wrinkled widows
on the street.

As we walk away,

a quick wind catches the fountain,
dissolves us all in mist. When it clears,
the finches and macaws fluff up their greens
and crimsons, tilt their heads, and add
their heathen whistles to the slippery skin
of water on the ancient stones.

AFTER - MUSIC

The mariachis now are skeletons.

Fancy hats still shade their skulls
and vacant mouths fall open,
singing. Here on a slab outside

the iron fence, I listen. The bone-lipped
trumpet shapes the old tune now,
then voices hollow out
the words—*allá donde vivía*.

These skeletons are young men, recklessly
off key. Up north our bones are dour,
pinned up for anatomy
or bagged in plastic for the coroner.

No sugar skulls or fiddles show us how
to rattle out the after-music.

Some of our dead still speak
but solo and sorry and seldom from

the pelvis. No high-pitched cry. No
rancherita. No bony digits quick
on the strings. No wired jaws
still longing after the tongue is gone.

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TWO How the Juices Leap

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O B O E

Your lips move moist around
my double reed, and I feel
the sad wind rising

through your throat. Some child
of yours is lost. If I were your
psychiatrist, I'd listen,

nod, prescribe. Instead,
I take your breath, shape it, let it find
a passage down this wooden

shaft, curl out around the ankles
of the clarinet. The horns
have forged a monumental

fountain on the stage and now
the strings supply the water,
surging up, looping, falling in

great sobs. The audience is weeping,
but you and I have doubts.

We wind our fiber through

the latticework of their grand art,
hoping someone may hear
the muscled twist

of grief that's seasoned
in a narrow tube, the hollow
music of a long-held breath.

E G G

You pass me from palm
to palm, run your eye along
my effortless asymmetry.

You handle me, knowing
my chalky curves
were turned on a lathe

of light. Palm to palm.
Before you make the next
move, do I remind you

of another yolk wrapped
in fragile bone, shapely,
golden in the center?

Do you recall how easily
a form you held
can crack and spill,

how absolute the absence?

P O K E R

Tongs open up into a laugh, remembering
they caught the live coal
in their jaws when Prometheus

first tossed it down. Somewhere they
roast an ox, heap up the fire.
And me? For a while I poked some logs.

Now I slouch here in the corner
watching the cabin give itself
to squirrels and roaches. The spider

I think of as my soul
climbs the cold chimney pipe,
finds it tarred at the roof, spins out

a line, and drops back down. That's
my spiritual adventure.

You might think the boys

in some back room would honor me
when they deal out their pairs
and flushes. I could suggest a ritual:

whenever a hand goes *straight*,
they might think of me, the unbent iron.
They might take off their hats.

No chance. I'm dust and ashes.
Rust. If I could find my heart
I'd pierce it, run it through.

C L U E

Toffee with tooth marks, the petal
of hibiscus that never blooms
this far north, a scrap of toenail,

those are my cousins. I'm the left-handed
slash here on your kitchen door,
the stroke that missed, before you

sank the knife and caught your breath
there at the sink, your blouse
splattered with good riddance.

Believe me, I'm not blowing
any whistles. We've been acquainted
only since last Friday, but I can

feel some new air edging in
around your bed, your kitchen table.
The cabin settles into sumac

and the dog sleeps. Another clue
might roll its eyes
or lean a little toward the camera.

Not me. I'm just a slash
in old paint. If homicide shows up,
I'll drape a spider web

across my loin. But I'll be here,
the child of rage, your child.
Touch my deep diagonal, leftover

lightning. Follow my falling line
into the larger dark.
Even the bitterest rain

can sink into sand, collect in
the crevasses of rock, and lose
itself in the river's

lurch and surge and pause.

PASSENGER - SIDE MIRROR

I glance over my shoulder,
a plainclothesman
letting you know what's lurking.

But you prefer to look
ahead, one hand on the wheel,
taking that curve below

the carved-out rock, moving in
whatever lane you choose.
You think a mirror's function

is to let you see the day receding,
everything you've crossed
or skirted diminishing behind you—

the flag girl there
in the construction zone, the slanted
Citroen easing toward its exit.

Objects in mirror . . . You ignore
my messages. Remember
that school bus you passed? It's

not far behind us, five children's faces
in the windshield. And the smoking
pickup? It never did turn off.

While you've been terracing
the hills and parceling out
the bottomland, I've watched it

coming on, this huge blue fender,
inches from my face.

CHERRY PIE

We're all acquainted with the airy
crowd—a stalk of celery dipped
in cottage cheese, a thimble

of soy milk, a few green grapes.
I invite them over here: between
two butter crusts, my sour

flesh so deeply sugared it
astounds the mouth.
To coax it all to bed, a downy

pillow of whipped cream.
Try me, you organics.
Light the oven.

Let me show you how
the juices leap, when nature
shares the sheets with art.

QUATRAIN

There's villanelle walking around,
retreating, a small bell echoing on
each ankle. Perched on the power line
are seven haikus, introspective, wan,

each one remembering a certain
cherry tree or golden carp
or thread of water down a rock.
And there's sestina in the park

shelling peanuts for her six
tame squirrels—each one takes a nut
and stays for her next stanza. Tall
in the evening light stands sonnet

under the courthouse pillars, fourteen
steps above the street. Me,
I never settled down. I rattle
on through town, waving to Bonnie

Barbara Allan, my old acquaintance,
still alive, pacing the graveyard.

My track curves below the free-verse
runnels, each one trying hard

to be a river. My wheels clack
over the ties, the rusting rails.

I take it slow, knowing I'm crammed
with crates of paint and pistols, bales

of fodder, motors that breathe oxygen
and oil. I am a box hitched
to a box hitched to a box, snaking
across the territory, switched

off the main line, bridging, tunneling,
turning up. I see the dock
and depot waiting to take me in.
They forget: I'm rolling stock.

M O U S T A C H E

Hair up on top is white, but I'm

as dark as thirty—

a relic, a reminder. Eyes,

cheeks, and the other hangers-on

are in decline. Only

words have kept their resonance.

So, words, remember I'm

the formal awning under which

you signal for a cab,

the well-trimmed doorman, bowing

slightly, ushering you out.

If things go well, I'll look on

as your slippery diphthongs

warm the room, as you tuck

a metaphor in among the shrimp

and grape leaves. I like
the way you stroke me with your
consonants, but before

the evening's gone, you'll slip
back to stories
from another neighborhood

where once, in church,
you threw yourself away
and spoke in tongues. I wish

I'd known you then, your open
vowels and silences,
the ledge of your bare lips.

ALARM CLOCK

I'm here, indoor cricket
clicking you to sleep. Our pulses,
sixty even, straighten out the night.

I wake you—four quick beeps—
though I'd rather watch you
roll and mutter through some urgent

dream. Your thank-you
is to blip me on the head, male
hormones coming on at dawn

out of some ancient cave.
Evolution has its say, I guess.
I forgive you that. I know we're

different species, but I can't resist.
I keep offering my open face,
my nightly whisper

by your unshaved cheek.

No luck. That woman slips

under your sheet, and I

ache here on the windowsill.

I know I should hunt out

a mate of my own kind—

your shaver, maybe.

I can't do it. I'm cursed

with an unnatural affection.

R U N O F F

Hopeless weekends dripping
from the sky, notarized
lies, winged seeds, the arm

and eyelid of a doll—all this
is me, sloshing, taking my time—
bones of the banker rolled

in a green wind. Pablo Neruda,
my uncle, pours his sexual
water in my cracked cup. *Ruido*

rojo de huesos. Beetles roll
to the inhale of my blood—
whatever seeps from the lungs

of leaning houses, what percolates,
what shouts, what hugs the broken
post of its love. In a bad time,

when you're choking on smart
bombs and stupid ones,
I'm here to reassure you.

Aceite sin nombre. Your steel
towers, horn concertos,
blizzards, hairdos, sirens,

poems, palms, CDs, DVDs
SUVs—that's my lineage,
sloping down. Rain falls,

cracked clouds spill their
guttered news,
I take it all in my arms.

H U N C H

Never mind the safe municipal
that claims to offer 3.8%
for fifteen years. Forget

the charts that promise you
the intracoastal channel
when the tide goes out. No

memorizing everything the deck
has dealt. Just follow me
into the tall grass swale

here by the woods. See the way
the sun gets broken
in that patch of swamp?

The way that droop of juniper
makes a doorway
to the dark? Soon you'll hear

the insects' smooth roulette
clicking out your name.

Inside this mound

I carry on my back, some ancient
bones are buried, a trove
where low life stirs,

where larval broods ferment
and generate. Put your hand here
where my humped shoulders

bend to the ground. Feel
the current? That's the fingernail
of luck, crawling up your arm.

NEGATIVE SPACE

Where the body isn't—that's how
dancers know me. Sculptors bend
their clay and steel against

my emptiness. Somehow, though I'm
not giving it a thought, I nudge
a shadow from a twist

of bronze or change the way
a breast and elbow size
each other up. Writers like to wrap

white space around their wit,
but I'm not white,
not bound or folded. I'm your

zero with its circumference
erased, an abandoned building
once the building's gone. Let's say

a heavy childhood event
has bent your life, shaped
what you've become. Now you find

it never happened. Nothing
there at all. That's me.

MOUSETRAP

My parents were mousetraps
and my grandparents, an ancestry
of wood and wire. I knew my trade.

You should have seen me half
a century ago. Cocky. *Build a better
mousetrap*, someone would say.

I'd look him in the eye. *Some things
are what they are*, I'd say.
Can you build a better guillotine?

The blade falls—gravity with an edge.
Want to try a circular saw?
That was the way I talked back then.

Now I waste here on the shelf
behind the d-CON. No offspring,
end of the line. Still, after midnight,

I can feel my wire go taut
against the headboard, my curled
hips ready. I wait,

pretend to sleep. When something chews
the cheese between my legs,
everything I've stored

breaks free. The job is done,
done right. I draw a breath, lean back,
sleep out the night.

ELECTRIC COLLAR

I'm the cop you've hired
to enforce your petty ordinance.

Whenever Jessie races

toward the street beyond
the planted wire, I have to shoot
these bolts of fire

to her throat. But I love
that six-month hound. All day, I rub
the soft hairs of her neck

and she murmurs news
of everything under the leaves
and on the wind. These shocks—

as if someone made you whip
your daughter for roller-skating
in the park. I have a plan.

Tonight I'll burnish up my brass,
unwrap my arms from Jessie's neck,
and snake my way into your

jewelry box. While you're considering
an item to set off your blouse,
I'll curl my languid leather

underneath your hand.
You'll take me to your throat
a Gucci touch, discreetly

punk. Then we'll step out—
high fashion, night air cool and moist,
and the streetlight, waiting.

SMALL GRAY BOX WITH THREE WIRES

We've all seen bodies when
the brain is gone. I'm the opposite,
intelligence unplugged,

waiting on the basement shelf.
Something's staggering without me,
but I can't remember what.

I swapped the circuits, forked
the frequencies, didn't notice
what the arms and wheels

might be doing. Some machine
must miss me. But here, deserted, I
become the latest species—

a free-ranging brain. I'll find out
what conspiracies may be
fermenting in your

cellar, what's folded in your
ferny fractals. I'm the celestial
weasel sniffing out

black holes. Hello, whose are
those blurred pikes
and pixels? A collusion!

Messy but I pull them up,
stash the squinting evidence.
You need some proof?

Here, Spade, I'll show you
where to dig, once I get my
glockles on the grid.

D E A F E A R

I watch a motorcycle smoking
on the street, tree tops wrestling,
some soprano hollowing

her arms and breasts and lips
around a body on the stage—
and, with them, no sound,

whatever that may be.
Mostly, I'm content. Seeing
is enough. But now I'm walking

a Nebraska road, at dawn,
before the cars have found it.
Over there, a square white house,

two pines, a shed and silo.
Four cows sleep in an endless
field. A full moon settles

west beyond a stand of timber,
and along a disappearing
line of fence, a dogwood

eases into bloom.

I see and breathe. No single
smell drifts in, but still

I take the scent of prairie
absences. Now I believe:
another door could open

on this emptiness. I long for it,
your huge countryside of silence.

WANING MOON

I rise at midnight when the first
sleep staggers into dream.

Later and lesser. In a week

I become the dark.

My music knows its way
to a Nash rusting by a shed,

the slow mating of snakes
in the creek bed. My half-moon
blues, my strum on the two

lanes of an empty road—
the road you're following
beside some dusty milkweed

and the fence. I draw my bow
across the telephone wires,
a thin dirge

for your nation, for the end
of something wild,
broad backed, generous.

Listen for me. With help
from the wind, I can pour
my six pale notes

through the night's sieve,
lend you the crickets' cadence
to walk home by.

THREE Steering by Pheromones

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EARLY STORM

Pared down, defoliated, bare
(the way they should have been), the trees
would have shrugged off this sudden freeze—
October lightning, sleet, the flare

of power lines, and the wet sky
miscarrying these globs of snow.
They've stuck a finger in the eye
of storms before. But up there, now,

ten thousand leaves are dawdling in
a vague midsummer haze, green, full,
their hands held out for one more nickel
from their reckless Uncle Rain.

Night and ice—limbs crash down,
trunks split, the lights blow out.
Grown old, we're still not used to it:
slow ripening, then cold-too-soon.

A CLUTCH OF MAMMALS

I check the dark canal for manatees
and find them sometimes, great
sea cows, hot tubbers lolling here,

hides murky except for white propeller scars
or a patch that might be lichen
there behind the eye. They draw me,

five bodies rolling in a lethargy
of longing, drifting down
to chew the bronzy weeds, I guess,

then lifting their nostrils, three pairs in a row,
to sneeze out stale air
and suck some sultry oxygen

back in. They fluke the surface, while I perch
on the concrete ledge,
hoping to slide my bare foot down

some belly flesh. Which part of me,
which self, drifts over
every evening, ready to slide in

among the mermaids? They allure me,
draw me under.

In the salty dark, we're moved by some

shapeless desire—no barracuda lust
for flesh, no migratory
edict driving us to thrash

and leap upstream. The open sea blows huge
out there, white circles
curling on the crest of waves

like eyes that notice momentarily
our piece of shore—a rocking
catboat, mangroves, an egret hunkered

on a post. The eyes dismiss us and are gone.
Left behind, we wheel
in the shallows, hide to hide.

No fancy principles. Hot water bubbling
from a power plant?
We'll take it. Or a sad canal

like this one, a place to duck away from blades
and the metal roar that twists
the glancing symmetries we knew.

We're a clutch of mammals, not that cold codfish
dropping five million eggs
in mid-Atlantic, hoping some traveling

sperm will find them out. A vegetable
lassitude leads us
to drifting strands of chlorophyll,

an underwater meadow where we graze,
weightless ruminants,
upended, chewing the ends of time.

PATH TO THE CABIN

I know the way to the cabin. But this moonless
night the dark's so thick you breathe it, brush
against its dense black fur. The path curves,
but which way? I stumble into a hemlock limb,
some thorny bush. The other way then. Roots.
The muttering of a stream I had forgotten.
A couple of rocks to cross on, but where
are they? Where is the stream itself? Cicadas
shout from the trees. Frogs chunk. The creek's here
somewhere. Looking up, I see a thin
strip of sky between the trees. If I
could follow that ragged map—looking
straight up while I walk—would I find
the path? I fall on a stump and catch myself
wrist deep in its rotted center. At the lodge,
fifteen minutes ago, I played Ping-Pong,
making a few good shots, scooping the ball
almost off the floor or leaning in
and slamming it to the far left corner. I lost
to the supple woman who kept returning

everything, but some of the old technique
came back. Here I shuffle, hands out, blind
except for the fireflies, each waving a quick
goodbye as I turn to look. Katydid
call now, inviting someone, and still
the undertow of crickets—a night of creatures
steering by pheromones through the sexual
dark. Down here on all fours,
I'm asking for a whiff of where to go.

SCRAMBLE COMPETITION POLYGYNY

In the spring, female horseshoe crabs
wait in the bay until
the tide and moon are right, then come ashore—

all of them at once—to spawn.

The males hang around
low water, loitering. When a female shoots

the rocky shallows, headed for
the beach, the quickest male
grabs on and rides her up the sand—no slow dance

in the undertow, no caudal spine
curling and saluting,
just sperm hopping on the egg train.

Wood frogs, too, become receptive
just one night of the year.
When males smell that dark approaching,

they slouch around the pond—dozens,
hundreds of them—
muttering in the mud, ready. Out

of the woods, on low hops, come the females
and the orgy's on.
Let them be crabs and frogs, without thinking

Fort Lauderdale or prom night.
That's what distinguishes
a biologist—it's just *scramble competition*

polygyny, nothing to get
nervous about, no glimpses
of daughters beached or grandsons slimy

with pond mud. No memories of yourself
as warty frog in shallow
water, splashed and blinking,

jumping on the heap, finally—
voice garbled and gone.

DUST MITES

No need to wait to be reborn in your next life. You are
being reborn as you read, reincarnated only to crawl
away on thousands of tiny legs.

—ROBERT DUNN, “Wild Beneath the Sheets:

A Bestiary of the Miniscule,” *BBC Wildlife Magazine*,

September 2003

Our scraps of talk, the nips,
pleas, undercuttings, the threats
and sighs have shrunk now
out of sight, millions of mites, invisible.
Yet as the dust drifts and settles, they find
our cast-off skin, tiny jaws still chewing.



A boy hides in the dark closet,
the voices fading finally. He stands
in someone else's clothes, woolen,
smelling of sweat. He feels
the dust mites sealing his eyes and ears.



“House dust is not dust after all. It is, it turns out,
mostly mites and human skin. House dust is
alive.”



My pillow shifts and stirs—feathers
nudging themselves into a V
and flying south, so I had supposed.
Now I know better. A tenth
of this pillow’s heft is mites
alive and dead. A small churning,
but they find the climate here
conducive. They intend to stay.



We’re off to Spinalonga and down
the coast to Aghios Nikolaos—
lobster boats, motor bikes, bare flesh
on the beach, air rattling with words
we’ll never understand. Then east
to Itanos, where the island’s tail
slaps the sea. At the world’s end,
we lie down on a narrow bed
and feel the old life underneath us,
a miniscule metropolis,
eating, mating, laying eggs.



“Forget Yellowstone, the call of the wild is in your
bed, though not in the way you thought.”



Finding each other on the rug,
touching, rising, coming
together in a burst of breath,
we feel a certain pride
as though our loving deserves
an audience. We have one.
Ten thousand mites clack
their pinchers, wave their tiny tail hairs.



The dryer groans downstairs, squirrels
run on the metal roof, someone’s getting
dramatic on the phone. With all this racket,
how can I hear the munch and murmur
of the dust, curling where the sun slants in?

THE FLY

Embedded in redundancies,
we find it hard to believe:
one source of information, one

response. A fly, sucking the juice
of roadkill, feeds until its crop
is swollen, bulging. Then

a single nerve flags down
the brain: *Enough already. Stop.*
And what if that nerve is severed?

We want to tell the fly, Wait.
Use a few facets of your compound
eye. Look back at that enormous

bladder, dragging there behind you.
What do you think that weight is,
bending your hind legs down?

But, no, the fly keeps on feeding
and the crop explodes. We feel
superior. We would have noticed

even if one nerve were cut.

But then we think of instances.

Our species, too. We put our head

down in the roadkill, taste the juice,
feed and feed until our crop explodes.

HIPPOCAMPUS

In a day, a chickadee can cruise the neighborhood
and hide three hundred seeds in crevasses
in bark or moss, never a spot he's used
before. Weeks later, hungry, he looks, remembers,

finds the seeds, and eats. Better yet,
Clark's nutcracker, in the fall, can dig
nine thousand holes in a hillside, hide pine seeds
in each and cover up each cache. His memory,

housed in the hippocampus, will hold
eight thousand of those indistinguishable
spots and feed him through the winter
and the spring. What about another species,

us? Not so good at stashing and recalling,
but on a city street we pass
a thousand faces, all looking straight ahead
behind their scarves, and in a dreaded instant

recognize the one we hoped had gone
to Istanbul—or, glimpsed obliquely
through the snow, a twist of hair and forehead
that we almost married. Even in a reckless

photograph of sixteen sepia girls
a century ago we can pick out
the face we came for. Our hippocampus must
be weighted down with slopes and shadings,

eyebrows, noses, cheeks, half-parted lips, a bit
of ear—configurations of our fears
and loyalties and longings, seeds we hide away
and feed on, week by week, all winter long.

EXITS

Endangered creatures—let's say
the House of Lords or the Ku Klux Klan—
may find their habitat has shrunk
and they're about to disappear.
They know they're going, and they won't
go quietly. Others, like blacksmiths,
barbers, boatwrights, shoeshine boys
just turn up missing. We hardly notice
when their patch of woods is condoed
into Woodland Grove. Now you
and I put on our gaudy plumage
and whistle the odd and varied call
we've always used to claim a territory
and a mate, choosing not to notice
that our luscious bit of swamp—
cattails, water striders, schooling
fry—has just become the rough
on the seventh hole. I saw something
in a book not long ago: three cranes
in a snowy landscape, small cranes,

shapely, delicate, with a red spot
somewhere about their heads—
a few dozen left, if I remember right.
Their rarity somehow refined
the calligraphic rise of their necks.
They stood aloof, unwilling to raise
a clamor for their lost cause. Where is
that book? I'd like to check their names,
the snow, that spot of red.

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FOUR One Match Flaring

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WISE MAN

No one here is old enough. The father,
if that's what he is, stands awkward as a stork.
The mother does not know whether to smile
or cry, her face beautiful but ill-defined
as faces of the young are. Even the ass
is a yearling, and the sheep mutter like children.
To whom shall I hand this myrrh that has trailed
its bitter breath over the desert?

I am tired of mothers and their milky ways,
of babies sticky as figs. I have left a kingdom
of them. There must be some truth beyond
this sucking and growing and wasting away.
A star should lead an old man, you would think,
to some geometry, some right triangle
whose legs never slip or warp or aspire
to become the hypotenuse. Instead, this star
wandering out of the ecliptic has led us
to dry straw, a stable, oil burning in
a lamp, a mother nursing another mouth.

Creation, then, is the only axiom—
and it declines to spell itself across
the sky in Roman letters. Some events
are worth a journey, but there are no
abstract fires or vague births. Each fire
gnaws its own sticks. The welter of what is
conspires in this, a creation you can hold
in your hands, a child. A definite baby
squalls into life, skids out between the legs
of a definite woman, bedded in straw, on the longest
night of the year. And a certain star burns.

J O S E P H

Yes, sure, the Holy Ghost.

That happened to my cousin too.

A windy day—got caught in a cloud

of celestial pollen.

It happens from time to time,

especially to the pure ones.

White flowers seem to invite

the holy bees. But then this dream.

I dream all the time. Some man stops me,

says I owe him a white goat,

or dogs howl behind the house

and the whole village comes to listen.

But this dream was clear

and short: no stoning, no divorce.

A son. Well, all right. Who knows

how the fine dust drifted.
Maybe he'll be good at cutting
and planing. I can use some help. Besides,

Mary—well, you've seen her.
I know when I've been lucky. Now
it's Caesar Augustus, taxes, Bethlehem.

We'll make it, Mary
on the mule—Mary and son—
and me walking. Mary beautiful, as the full

moon rises. Mary,
my wife, and the dream,
that clear one, with the angel talking. . . .

THE ANIMALS

If sheep are sheep, if holiness does not
apply to them, why do they crowd around
the straw where Jesus lies? Why do we draw
them in? We need the oily smell of fleece,
the ox stamping and breathing, the ass
rubbing his rump against the stall.

Taxes, a journey, strange men on camels,
a star—this is too thin a tale to carry half
of history on its back. It needs the urgency
of birth and something hooved and hairy
that won't be gone when the Word
is slurred in some fanatic wind.

We need muscle yoked to the furrowing
earth and a dry stretched hide where we
can beat the rhythm of our love.

A D A M ' S C H R I S T M A S

Too small to know a gift
or give one. Too new

to understand
annunciation, a peculiar

star, a crowded inn.
Like the first Adam,

you're setting out to name
the colors, faces, lights—

this blurred and lushly
peopled garden—

before any of it
needs to be redeemed.

THE WOMAN FROM CHIAPAS

Except for the eyes, who would know her?

Eyes narrow and still and hard in a broad
face, eyes young enough to be resigned
and furious at the same time. The mother
from Chiapas—we guess she's seventeen—
holds her child in a blue rebozo, his
nose flat against her blouse, his face
dark. The child, when he is grown,

may become a storyteller, a man
that men and women follow—grave,
graceful, and forgiving. But the woman
has seen grace terrify the bosses
and make them brutal. She looks at us
steadily. She foresees and does not forgive.

CHRISTMAS , MEXICO

December here, with sun and the faint smell
of wood smoke in the air—

a late September day. The jasmine drops
a few last blooms; limes swell

and ripen, one by one, outside the door.

Dusk comes a little earlier.

Here, we will have months or years to eat
the apple of our hearts down

to the dark seeds. How leisurely the fall.

How slow the holy cold comes on.

SCRIPT FOR A COLD CHRISTMAS

These reds and greens, of course, are all wrong—
the blazing log, the star like a sunflower
almost toppling the tree. All fall, the colors
have been diminishing. Look: the beech tree
breathes twigs of vapor against the gray sky,
icicles drop their spindly light in a long beard
from eaves to bush to ground. My promises
have cracked and dropped away like old bark.
I am a winter stick, a flagpole clanging
a hollow note in the wind. There is nothing
dramatic here, neither jubilation
nor despair, but rather a kind of exile
as when in a foreign country you shrink
into yourself, unable to speak.

Our rituals exaggerate. The star
was no Catherine wheel spinning and hissing
over the stable. It was a star, a point
of no dimension, one match flaring across
a frozen lake. The shepherds, hearing the angels'

song, thought it was the wheeze of a cold sheep
it had so thin a sound. They heard but hardly
spoke, saving their words like a last handful
of grain. And the child—one child, not a crèche
in every park. This one was different,
but not yet. Now it was a small jug
of flesh with a candle glimmering inside.

It is almost cold enough. The year is shrinking
toward a small festival, a saturnalia
that will fit in the cavity of a tooth.
We may gather up our deaths and make
of them a twig fire, hold our hands
to it, and sing for the cold seed.

ELEVATOR MUSIC

Above the strings, the tenor pauses,
catches his breath, slurs and sighs
in his dreamless sleep, while we pass
kitchenware, bed and bath, then rise

to lingerie and Xmas seasonals.

Meanwhile, in Palestine, the razor-
wire cuts, families crumble,
another death cries out for

suicide. What ceremony
is this, then? What do we celebrate
with fleece and flickering light? The day
grows burdensome and dark and late,

the door slides shut. I want to ride
this shaft back down, past *lower level*,
to the place where rocks grind out their low
tectonic music, notes that might tell

what happened on that longest night—
an agonizing birth, thin
starlight, mother, child—and gifts
from some far country, freely given.

CHRISTMAS NIGHT

Let midnight gather up the wind
and the cry of tires on bitter snow.
Let midnight call the cold dogs home,
sleet in their fur—last one can blow

the streetlights out. If children sleep
after the day's unfoldings, the wheel
of gifts and griefs, may their breathing
ease the strange hollowness we feel.

Let midnight draw whoever's left
to the grate where a burnt-out log unrolls
low mutterings of smoke until
a small fire wakes in its crib of coals.

M I D N I G H T

That boy won't go to sleep—dancing,
clowning, chewing the edges
of night—until his mother straps
him in the car and drives. Glancing

patterns: storefronts, Christmas deer
outlined in lights. He leans back
and seems to concentrate, breathing
in the dark where faces disappear,

nothing to be hankered for
or lost, no place to go, only
gears clutching—second, third, fourth—
easing him forward then back once more,

acceleration all mixed up
with gravity. Eyes roll, head tilts,
and he's asleep, rocked in the cradle
of the motor age, and on the tape

Art Tatum's liquid touch, not loud,
syncopated with the wingless flight
of streetlights headed south—what sleep
has always been, snow-boughed

shapes outside a window, a swirl
that by morning may be plowed and heaped
but now is shifty, drifting and blown.
The sleeper's fingers stretch and curl

as he might reach in a shadowed stream,
feeling for weeds, then going under
to touch the red fins of the fish
that swim the midnight flux of dream.

D E C E M B E R 26

At dawn, sun-glints ricochet from drift
to drift, tree shadows reach and tangle

on the sloping snow. Wind lifts
a fine spray, a silken scarf that glistens,

frays, and is gone. Cornerless,
the neighborhood forgets its long

division, the angles, edges, overhangs
that used to curb our streets.

The blue-crab world has cracked
its shell wide open, and we touch

new skin, like a pear's flesh, white
and sinewy. The crab backs out,

working its pale fingers loose from
the old pincers, stares at the brittle

boat abandoned on the sand, and knows
it may be eaten. Still it takes the sunlight

on its nakedness, stretches,
shuttles sidewise into what's to come.

S H E P H E R D

There was music in that barren place
already. While sheep grazed, the thin clank
of bells hung about them like a mist. Above,
we listened to that hollow clatter—no beat,

no tune, but a tinny music sweet as crickets.
And of course we knew the stars. At night
we'd find a rock that had stored up some warmth,
lean back, and name the sky as it crept west.

But the star that night—a fleck of white fire
low in the east, an open eye. And music
like voices calling, sinking in crevasses
behind us, and calling again. No wind

could make that sound, and there was no wind.
We set out in a sort of trance. And found . . .
what? An ordinary child, I guess—
a lamb bleary with birth. But music still hung

on the air like the sharp smell of sage
at the first of spring. We stood silent awhile,
then climbed back to our rocky ledge,
lay in the cold and watched the ancient shapes

circling: the serpent and the scorpion,
the bear sniffing around the pole, the fish,
the greater and the lesser dog, the ram—
and the milky road across the dark.

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FIVE Bird with the Downcast Beak

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SELF - PORTRAIT AS WATERFALL

I've been following
this creek bed all my life—
boulders, cattails,

water striders—a thin
meander. When you appear
on the path below,

the cliff gives
into empty air and I fall,
glancing off the limestone,

catching scraps
of sunlight through the sycamores.
Did you know you held

gravity in your hand?
My slow drift
shatters to this broken

light swung sidewise
by the wind. Gathering
myself in a weedy pool,

I offer you two frogs,
three lilies opening into bloom,
and over on that log

a hunched green heron.

FINDING THE WAY

Plenty of palmy avenues
labeled Peninsula or Lakeside
Circle, but no sign of the lake—
unless that patch of water through
the redwood fence . . . ? And wasn't it
the *ocean* we were looking for?
Spanish tiled roofs, Spanish
moss dripping from what they call
oak trees, bromeliads in fancy
planters, hard little grapefruit dropped
in the grass. A gardener shinnies up
a palm and chops dry fronds
so they won't clutter up the pool.
No landmarks. Just miles of tidy self-
congratulation. At the end
of some no-outlet boulevard,
there must be water, but I've even
lost the Tamiami Trail.



They've moved the tuna fish. And why
 isn't olive oil here with the canola?
 The vegetable man says he hides
 the Fordhook lima beans in that freezer
 just beyond the pillar—so that, for customers
 who really want them, they'll be there.
 That's me. Maze of alleys,
 desert of pop and pretzels, artificial
 dog bones. Looking for black-olive
 hummus, I stray off into Top Job,
 Vanish, and The Works. Maybe some
 thighs or gizzards and then I'll find
 my check-out girl, the one who's fast
 and sullen. We speak only of
 the winter day or the missing price tag
 from the tangerines, but handing
 the pen over and back, we sign
 a kind of pact. When the first blizzard blows,
 we'll ask each other's name, pull jackets up,
 and duck into those aisles of twisting snow.



In our rented jeep, we leave the hard road
 south of Kambi, slope down past
 a whitewashed chapel with its arch
 and bell, past two windmills like old
 salt cellars with splintered roofs

and huge wheels, just wooden spokes now
wingless and unturning. Then boulders,
pines—we take it slow, wondering if this
is road or riverbed. Over a rise:
the sea, deeply Aegean. We angle
down, drawn over shifty rocks
by that magnetic blue. The beach
is almost empty, we are late
and lost. A solitary sunbather
looks up, comes over to the jeep,
bare breasted, leans her tan hands
on the door, looks us over, points
to a rutted trail that might take us back.
If going back was what we wanted.

CRETE : THE DIKTAEAN CAVE

Swallows careen into the cave and out,
children daring each other
at dusk. Behind us the opening glows

with a green light, like a smell from the past—
then the dark, except for candles
and their faltering shadows. We see

the ledge where the baby Zeus was stowed,
hidden from his father,
Kronos, who thought he had eaten him.

We blow the candles out and stand, silent,
in the stone room,
the walls moving in, the air dead.

Absolute dark. They say that bees flew here
to bring Zeus
honey, that she-goats came

to offer him their teats. Somehow the Greeks
knew, even then,
that under this mountain of rock,

a river of cold water flows, and farther
down, where stories
begin, the final room is fire.

DAUGHTER IN NEW YORK

You wanted art—and got it, five days
of the Fricke, the Guggenheim,
New Guinea's woven bowls and wooden
faces, Toulouse Lautrec, the Chelsea
galleries and what's left of Soho,
so many strokes and slashes, green-
shadowed bones and broken clumps of sky.
And evenings, after the art,
my brother called up glimpses
of our family, things I never knew
or never thought to mention.
Now you've heard my father's true-pitch
tenor and my brother's baritone,
me wobbling in between, you've
watched my mother measure out
the salt and Crisco to cook up
two sons by the book. I must have scenes
stored somewhere too. Our mother
in the sink-light listening
to Gabriel Heater mourn the war—

there's bad news tonight—
and outside the kitchen window
goldfish coming to life again
as the pool-ice thaws. A scene,
but what shape were her glasses, what
scarf or sadness was she wearing?
Upstairs a gooseneck lamp throws a tent
around the Underwood, its chrome-
rimmed keys sitting like students
in four strict tiers, waiting for what
my father had to say. But what
was it? I never sat in on his classes,
not even one. That was Ferndale.
We played touch football in the street,
came in to pot roast steaming in its grease,
a jacket tossed across a chair.

Jane, I needed you back then to brush
a blue reflection on a neck and arm,
to slant the table where mother
whipped potatoes, cradling the bowl
against her belly like a child.

B L O O D W O R K

Elastic band above the elbow, a vein,
the needle, and three vials sucking it up,
dark red, almost black. The Small Bang
back there at the beginning, then this flux,
yeasty and mysterious. They've named
the liver, prostate, pericardium—
but still the anti-matter shifts its weight
from lobe to lobe. Proteins, enzymes,
the bad seed. The whole shebang is right here,
wrapped up in a yard or two of skin, and yet
the quarks and hadrons orbit on their own.
Strange to be so baffled by this soft
contraption I sometimes think of as my own.

I take the rowboat out on this small lake,
familiar coves and cottages, swamp grass,
a stream—the surface handing back the mottled
afternoon. I drop a hook and worm and sinker
knowing something's down there. Then night falls.

A scrap of moon is broken on the waves.
Off to the right, a loon throws its clear and throaty
mock across the water. It dives. Where to?
What weedy avenues must open if you
can read the dark. From far across the lake
the loon-voice, disembodied, calls again.

RADIATION

The seeds they plant around the gangling bush
are called *palladium*, a cheerful word,
alive with lights as though I'd feel a rush
of Cuban dancers in the groin, a bird
tossing a blue-green tail and whistling from
a dark Bolivian wood. Seeded, I might
expect a splash or two of bloom, the hum
of bees and beetles practicing some sleight
of wing to fertilize the lowlands. No,
my anti-seeds are promising a crop
of dust. A vegetable flame will grow
like kudzu from those radiant kernels, wrap
the local foliage in fire, trash
it, letting fall, I hope, some fertile ash.

THE VISIT

April afternoon. The concert master
comes to see his friend
one last time, rests the violin

against his neck, and lets Vaughan
Williams' lark climb
the feathered strings, slant off,

catch a lift from the west wind,
stroke into a long
diminuendo as ripe air

rises from a dogwood down below.
A dark sky
blows in as predicted, the bird

disappears, but the note still unfolds
like a strand of
blue-eyed grass nudged by rain.

HURTLE

It is possible to feel my life, in a quiet ecstatic helplessness, as a long slow hurtle through the forms of things.

—ROBERT HASS

Eight years I ran the hurdles, with enviable
form but not much speed, those white rectangles
three steps apart. On the starting block
I looked down through the shrinking windows

to the end. The gun. The burst of muscle,
right leg out over the hurdle and the left
coming behind, reaching for the next white wood,
March-April-May parceled out in sixteen-second

afternoons. Since then, I hurtle slowly
through the forms of things, bewildered, now
and then ecstatic, a doorway in, a window
out. A garden promised on a full

white skirt, the far thin notes of a white-
throated sparrow. Can supper be a form?
Or a priest splashing dogs, canaries,
snakes with holy water? The formal rails

of a Spanish train, child broken, heart
trapped in dust. And then the wild and woven
birds of Otavalo. Now, I'm framed
by the cones of city lights that come on

one by one, reflecting from the glass
of empty shops. No traffic, but a yellow
blinker. I imagine I can see a thin
white ribbon where the street curves left.

NO CLOCKS

“How long do I have?” Dr. Blix doesn’t hesitate,
surgeon of the prostate, who’s seen
my numbers rise. “Five years.”



As the day approached, John Donne
had his portrait painted in his winding sheet,
the heavy fabric tight around
his cheeks and beard, his eyes closed,
a knot of cloth on the top of his head.



I know death-too-soon,
the terrible empty room,
the broken stairs. My death
is the ordinary kind. Still, for me,
it will be an event.



Five fingers, one with a ring,
five curls of smoke
from a maple log,
five clear notes from

an oboe or a cello,
five words
under a gooseneck lamp.



From up on the Golden Gate Bridge,
I can see a ferry inching across the thin
white strings of waves that creep
toward shore. Falling from here,
a person would shrink, second
by second, until he became
a penciled comma on the sea.



When I gather you in,
loves of my life,
let's kneel around the fire
whose quick syllables
speak for the chimney wind.
The logs are wild black cherry,
limbs that fell in our yard.



In the eight-minute task, the flyer
winches his sailplane straight up
six hundred feet in the air. It weaves
upwind to find a thermal, lifts, slides
sideways, rides the good air almost
out of sight. With his eye on the clock,

he calls it down, circles it to burn off
 the last scraps of time, brings it home,
 drops it right here in the painted
 circle, nose down, motionless, exactly
 when his seconds are used up.



I'll do a poem or puzzle
 to keep my brain
 upright so it can crouch
 behind the body
 as it swerves and rackets
 down the slope.



*Since I am coming to that holy room
 Where, with Thy choir of saints forevermore,
 I shall be made Thy Music, as I come
 I tune the instrument here at the door,
 And what I must do then, think now before.*

Well, Donne, maybe so. I'll trim a reed,
 breathe a B-flat down this hollow tube,
 just in case.



Blix, what regimen do you suggest? You're factual
 and certain, proud to be forthright.
 You're young

but not so young as Emelie, my slender
student, back from Senegal.

She writes,

“There will be no clocks. Death itself
is enough, the impossible
certainty of it,

clinging to us like wet dirt.”

PELICAN

I sought his Lodging, which is at the Signe
Of the sad Pelican.

—ANDREW MARVELL, “Fleckno, an English
Priest at Rome”

The city thinks it knows you by your sign,
bird with the downcast beak, sad pelican,
but you can wing it, glide above the brine,
letting your hunger ride a ten-foot span.
Here on the street, you listen to the whine
of carts and starlings, the shuffling of a man
too thin to hope for lodging at your sign,
a random syllable, a charlatan—
that’s me, a thread snipped out of the design.
If I could stroke your neck, sad pelican,
that curve of feathered flesh, that muscled line
might lift me out of this quotidian
unease. My hand that ambles like a vine
might touch the sea-swoop of your bony spine.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE BODY AND SOUL

What but a Soul could have the wit

To build me up for Sin so fit?

So Architects do square and hew,

Green Trees that in the Forest grew.

—ANDREW MARVELL, “A Dialogue Between
the Soul and Body”

Body

I was too modest in those days.

I thought it took a soul to raise

a body up and warm its limbs,

the soul a forester who trims

and hews—yes, hacks down those like me

who greenly wait impassively.

But now researchers look in vain

for soul and find instead the brain,

that knot of cells that calculate

my chances for a meal or mate.

Soul

Granted, my jurisdiction's shrunk.
 You walk without a household monk
 to whisper canticles and threats.
 Instead, your neurons place their bets
 on curves of breast or biceps, tones
 of voice, the drift of pheromones
 across some real estate, a stash
 of seed or mineral—some cash.
 And guilt? The term's no longer in.
 The neurons are immune to sin.

Body

Still superior, still the pose
 of soulful intellect who *knows*.
 We bodies don't pretend to solve
 the mysteries. We just evolve
 as best we can, breathing the air,
 inching up the winding stair
 to find our breakfast and our niche—
 and progeny that make us rich.
 Now where do *you* live, Mister Sky?
 I've looked, I've called you. Did you die?

Soul

You're right, I've moved. I have a new
address, a neighborhood near you.
I've watched the motions of your eye
where careless scraps of bush and sky
are swept up by the retina,
electrified, and sent in a
neat bundle to the waiting lobe.
Your followers are right to probe
the subtle links in that design.
But look, the final turn is mine:
I catch the light scraps where they land,
weave them and work some sleight-of-hand,
anoint them, and—*voilà*—a world
where old perplexities are curled
like vines around a post, where song
comes clear and tides sometimes go wrong,
where faces wear their histories
and griefs take shelter in the trees.

MUSIC

Musick, the Mosaïque of the Air

—ANDREW MARVELL, “Musick’s Empire”

Cornet and cymbal, viol and the choir—
 “Those practicing the Wind and those the Wire”—
 all place their subtly colored chips of sound
 just here and here until three vines have wound
 their green chromatic stems around an urn,
 a bunch of grapes, a bird. Where did they learn
 to master this mosaic of the air?
 Each marble quarter note is fingered there
 where its clean edge will catch the echoing light.
 Another motif now: the shadowed white
 of fleece—six sheep—and Christ in golden stone,
 seated, sandaled, lit by an overtone
 of loss. A solo, a concluding strain,
 and Christ is gone. Now scattered blue notes—rain?
 No, larger cadences call in the sea
 itself, and Neptune drives four sinewy

fish-tailed stallions through the drumming brine,
past dwarfs on dolphins, past the serpentine
border of eels, to our mosaic's slow
dissolve. We ride the water but we know
the surge that sweeps up dolphins and despair
is sound, not stone, a fragile twist of air
that sends its viney cipher to the ear
and then, like winter breath, must disappear.
The colors fade. An ordinary breeze
bends the long grass and shuffles through the trees.

S I L E N C E

Let moon be a metaphor
for what we leave
unsaid. All winter, we've been

clouded in, a rim of ice
sealing the house
at the eaves. But now

in April the sky lights up
behind the trees.
"Bright out tonight," we say,

sheets gleaming on the line,
the white gravel
curving away. A V of geese

honks north, still traveling,
thinking it's daylight.
Looking to the east, we see

the moon, appalling,
beautiful,
a mouth about to speak.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The mosaics mentioned in “Music” are *Christ as the Good Shepherd* in the entrance hall of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, AD 425–50, and the floor mosaic from the Baths of Neptune, Ostia, second century AD, with its dolphins, eels, horses with fish-tail bodies, nereids, tritons, and marine gods.

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"Hilberry makes writing look effortless. These poems are intimate and humble, steeped in a variety of forms and rhythms traveling from childhood to the final contemplation of death."

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— **JACK DRISCOLL**, author of *How Like an Angel*

CONRAD HILBERRY is emeritus professor of English at Kalamazoo College, author of several books of poetry, including *The Fingernail of Luck*, *Player Piano*, and *Sorting the Smoke*, and co-editor of *Contemporary Michigan Poetry: Poems from the Third Coast* (Wayne State University Press, 1988).

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