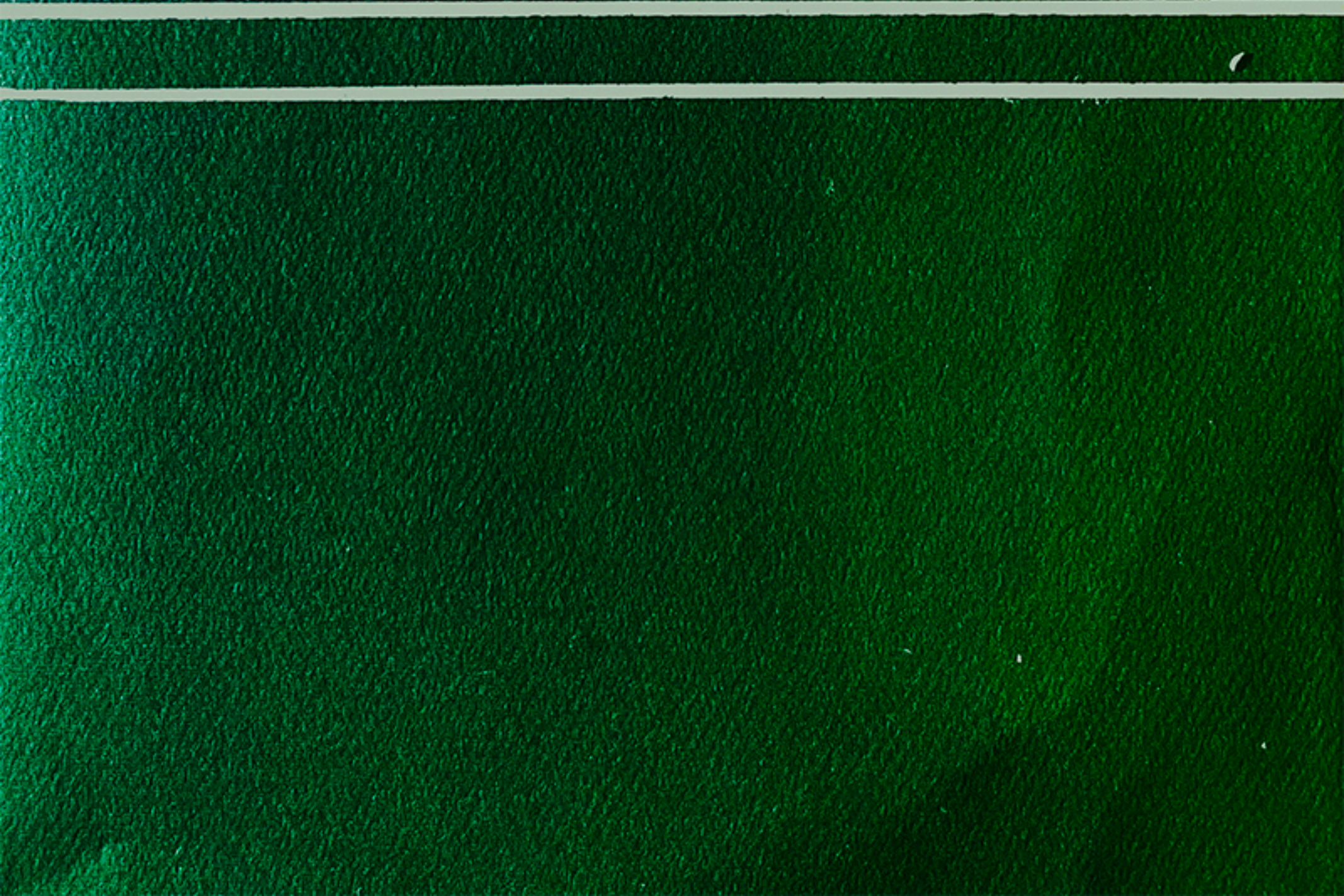
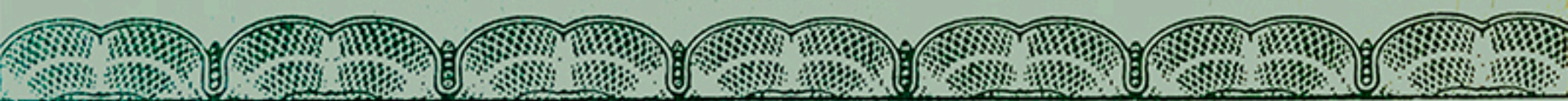


THOMAS F. SHEEHAN

THE
SAUGUS BOOK



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Also by this Author:

Ah, Devon Unbowed

THE SAUGUS BOOK

By
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For Beth

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The intent of this book is to provide its readers with the widest range of my feelings for Saugus and its people, my family and neighbors and friends. To that end I have taken the liberty of using poems published in magazines, previous collections of poetry, and from other manuscripts which have risen from different reasons or projects, such as *Elements and Accessories*, *This Rare Earth and Other Flights II*, *Python Hunting in Pennsylvania*, *All Earth and Time*, and *Jock Poems for Proper Bostonians*.

I acknowledge the following magazines or periodicals which have included some of my poems in these or earlier versions:

Louisville Review: "Hill of the Blue Goose"

Softball: "Once Screamed to the Flag-Waving
Drunks at the Vets Bar"

Poetry Newsletter: "Log Cutting, Queen Ant
Burial"

Calliope: "April Storm" ("Storm on the Saugus")

Long Pond Review: "Two License, Wyoming,"
"Where the Last Star Went"

Poetry Now: "Before Fishing, #10 Can"

Stone Country: "Beneath Vines and Peach Tree, A
Neighbor's Ashes," "Streetlight"

New Kauri: "Remnants"

The Old Red Kimono: "Touchstone"

The Poet: "It's All in How You Place the Commas"

New England Sampler: "A Choice of Neighbors"

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PREFACE

This has been a rich visit for me, passing through Saugus on my way to wherever. Some moments have been so impressive they come back to me daily, pushing their way with pictures so clear and graphic that words fail and seem insignificant, yet words are my adventure: skating on Lily Pond while skipping school and Bucky Sawyer buzzing the pond with his navy plane, Friday evenings at the State Theater, Saturday afternoon at the end of Summer Street and October in the air, clamming and worming on the tidal flats, picking beans for ten cents an hour where Milano Drive now flats out, John Mullins and Al Day, Mike Harrington and Ed Shipulski more heroes than Superman, Pop Warner meetings in Jack Warren's greenhouse, coming home from Korea and walking alone through the center of town, the night Fred Rippon's mushroom house went up in sparks that found Lynnhurst gutters, fishing trip planning meetings at Ed LeBlanc's house with side trips to MacCarrier's, the comfort of children being overhead on nights when I am at this infernal machine, friends who have sense to visit when they feel like it, even friends who don't, finding secrets on Baker Hill, Dan Shanahan and Mike Hood bringing poems and voices by, spaghetti meals at the Forti's and Ernie serving half a serving of Greek sausage, Charlie Hecht's outdoor dance pavilion, Warnie's Cafe, reading comic books behind the door in Morrison's Drug Store at the corner of Smith Road, wondering what has happened with Donald Gearty and Edson Eisan and Dick Allen, leaving town in car pools with Nick and Robbie and Ray and, always, Eddie LeBlanc.

All of this is a love affair. I have pursued her endlessly and will to the last moment. In the meantime, I leave these words that follow to be a collection of thoughts, one person passing through on Route One, on Central Street, or the side streets where I have walked under the moon thinking about all of you.

THE SAUGUS BOOK

SIGN ON A WALL

The dough board, oblique,
worn to a frazzle, now hangs
in the cellar way. Knuckles
of love soft shoe across it.

Like a fallow field it lies,
twenty years since my mother
powdered and rolled the dough
into its grain, beginning bread.

Her hands, white-knuckled,
went board to dough to fore-
head to the plain blue apron
smelling of rolls, haitch

bones, sweat and anxiety.
She struggled great breads
out of its surface, morning
fried dough sizzling in oil,

a sure birthday cake three
tiers tall on special days,
and wrung from its grainery
pains and aches and tired

bones, migraine's soft thunder,
age, a shot at infirmity.
That old board, edges like
fingers, hangs awry on a nail

my father drove to catch a jacket;
if I bang it hard enough, fisted,
belligerent about recall, a small
cloud of powder floats her love.

THE SAUGUS

1.

The river here
heaves up on the bank
like an old man getting into bed.
Birds cry downstream.
A gull perfects a theft,
executes a drastic turn in air
that could break bones.
I do my walks
dutied like perimeter guard,
shoulder walking cudgel
the way I carried a carbine
back there at 23,
know the pound of it to the ounce;
knowledge of the scabbard hangs on.
I'd rather the river
and the tired water's run
as 52 years hang on like an empty canteen.
Nothing's like a river's
to and fro against the sea,
tide-wash, catch of kelp, air sting
full of the sea's salad's smells,
perpetual anger, always earth dig,
sand-flush and rock-wear, drag on the moon,
where ship ghosts and canvas call.
The river's never lonely;
dancing grass by bank and levee
keep nests of redwing blackbirds
hidden away like keys in a pocketbook,

has scum of illegal drain, used rubbers,
cat-o-nines high and proud as Fourth of July
rockets ready for the finale match to strike,
rats waiting for the ultimate revolution,
artifacts of time like Ford fenders, Chevy wheels,
down behind the minister's house where the slope
is steep and you don't have to work hard to belabor
a river that's been hard at living for longer than us.

2.

I measure all the contributors
the Saugus has from here to the sea,
the computer cops say garbage in garbage out:
and I think the birds die,
the river dies, bank grass gets burned
without flame ever on the make,
silt is sludge of tune-up residue,
dance of dark foam makes images
needing little imagination.
The mill turns its back
when the chemicals burn even the spigot,
the landfill the contractor brazened out
is sour where fish hesitate to cast their lot,
the service station leaks into the underground
where roots linger and grease takes its time,
neighbor gives his gifts in direct pipe drop,
turns his back like the mill does,
pretends he doesn't hurt the Saugus.

3.

My Saugus hurts.
The trout have gone,
birds move away from oily contributions,
people pass by and don't know the river's terror,
and that hurts more than all.

4.

Some nights,
grant me the mystic choice
when the wind's blowing out to sea
and I am on my perimeter walk at river bank,
there's no other joy. Upriver comes down,
pasture and field fall on me, the woodland walks,
new cut hay hurries itself, a new salad of smell;
porcupine and rabbit and deer and such merry folk
of talk and tale crown the river air, give hope,
ride over me, say river does not die.

5.

Everything smells here.
Going away. Losing. Six o'clock on Friday.
Monday departure for work. Wood choppers.
Police escort and ambulance. Town Hall offices.
Riverside Cemetery in May like popcorn.
Not having enough money at the checkout counter
(and hardly enough food).
A deep breath any place on the Turnpike.
The Park Press halfway burned down.

The men's room in McCarrier's.
The Tumble Inn Diner at six Monday morning.
Any doctor's waiting room. MBTA buses.
People who don't believe me. Viet Nam veterans
because of their eyes. The whole town the night
the Odd Fellows Hall burned right to the bricks.
The VFW carnival. Pop Warner refreshment stands.
SHS locker room for a thousand years.
Back rooms and back doors at nursing homes.
But most of all the river smells.

6.

We speak of alternatives.
I know of none for river place.
Have seen upriver dredging fall away
to politics and budget stress.
But in the bottom of my tackle box,
having worn hook and worm and salmon egg,
lies a picture of the 17 incher from years ago.

Now I wait for the crystal dream, the flow
of white waters, earth being lapped clean
the whole sing-song length of banks,
a flashing beneath arching alders
as boulders ease in their washing,
as the bones of the old river
come up like trail-skulls,
and trout find their memories
ripe and turbulent and explosive
all down the river's curves.

THE BUCKETS OF THESE TREES

The buckets of these trees
empty themselves.
Falling down in parabolas
and ellipses of flight,
spilled contents give their names
over and over again
into a gray day:
hands of maple,
gloves of oak.

October morning
punctuates my neckline,
snow hides in clouds
dark as overcoats
hanging in a Victorian
hallway.

The neighbor's dog Barney
howls a tail-up cry
piercing as a whistle,
wolfish. An awful loneliness,
it dissolves and resumes
itself in an old echo
reaching down-range,
an alert up-hill.

Every act is a message;
trees letting go,
the leash law

in October crowding winter,
a dog talking
over his shoulder
to a vision seeded
in his head: a fleeting
gray form, head low,
running in the snow;
in the air a scent
thin as hunger,
faint as tomorrow.

Behind my eyes
white fields
grow innumerable distances,
even as the buckets empty,
the long high cry of a dog
mixes in the slate air,
leaves start into the earth again.

TOUCHSTONE

The cemetery becomes pages
of a book, a paperback

with gray leaves October finds.
Fires are not likely to start here.

Searchlights find no one.
Candles go to waste.

Names pass like faces in a crowd.
Dates measure measureless beings.

A star, westward, over hill, bright,
is not seen by these citizens.

Nor dim violet. Nor dread daisies
on the skilled keeper's lawn.

My father's face is grass.
He is endless intruder

and raps on the underside
of one harsh stone,

raps and raps and raps.
His knuckles were always hard.

SAUGUS TYPEWRITER COMPANY

The line does not sit right
or even or straight.
The decal has been mishandled.

But then, Central Street
is hardly straight, it bends
six times between Cliftondale

and Walnut Street where General
Electric goes to work. I ply
my way twenty two miles

across Wakefield and Reading
to find West Andover, comrades,
fellows in arms, hoppers, dreamers,

hard doers, practitioners,
fakers, well-doners, workers,
nothing different than here.

Someone applied the label wrong,
here where I spend my nights;
carelessly tacked the decal

slovenly, where it sits like an egg
waiting to fall from the roost,
a distracting bit of advice

that nothing is ever right,
never mind perfect, in this scheme
of things, this pasttime.

Measurements are difficult
to say the least, they suffer
from illusions, eye shadows, realities.

Poems become and then misbehave,
become frail on the typewriter,
find erring accents and syllables

just as uneven as the label above,
tilted away from the norm,
the way an author's signature falls

across the bottom emptiness
of his finished page.

LISTENING TO IMPERATIVES

In mid air the house hangs,
a cloud of visions, a movie screen.
My father left his hammer
arrested on a nail by the door.
Sweat and blood rust into wood.

Trees are silent,
the wind is final

Where my brother stopped, water
talks its mouth off. His room
suffers with souvenirs. I remind
myself of last hands. Sunday
of another week he wore his best.

No stone is marked.
His death is naked.
Silver screen's Lake Erie blue.

I walk a clean April all around
this scant scenario. December's
tougher, more laciniate, found at
ankles and the back of the neck.
Sometimes the house makes up its

own mind, topples, is
shivered into Spring.
Hurts for warm nights.
Has a secret room, a heart.

Star-gaze seeps on its walls,
Moon-push crawls cotton candied,
spills rich as headdresses, crowns,
the auras we thought we wore.
The eyes' acceptance falls out windows.

My mother sings a fork, a spoon,
a room heavy with dishes, din,
winter of my brother's fist,
the echo of a separate ache.

Where father wanders, my son falls.
He trips over his own coming. The path
is the minutae of rabbit tracks
that go past commotion's impress,
patter of paws, heart upheaving.

He continually falls into himself
and lets my father work through
his bones. A triangle is such
a matter of strangers, flesh
falls away like old clapboards.

I wake myself; bright son
across the earth, awakens.
My father, in acreage
bland as all Tuesdays,
learns his simple endeavor.

The house says little but his name.
When October rushes in the door
he hides his voice in a closet.
It rolls around in a wooden drum
at the fingertips of darkness.

He happens in cellar airs
as the lathe sweats up
its circular music.
His business sings itself.
Fieldstones ache under sills,
centuries are transparent.

Elbows press hard on my chest.
Old red shirt fills with father
and my son searching himself out
an ocean away where sequoias
bring hush to its soft knees.

What we have is space
without miles that make it,
the clutter of a trinity
fabling its flesh,
just an ordinary crowd
of three generations
laboring against dispersal.

We were all born here, leaped
to brim the daylight, drove
nails to hold bone and beam,
listened to October on tight feet
rushing up stairs, overhead.

We are elastic visions.
What we occupy is measureless.
Someday, for keeping
like the worn pleats
of mother's last apron,
an October will fold away
all these moments of film.

APPLE PEOPLE

(Saugus Center, Saturday, October)

Their faces blaze as ruddy suns,
apple people at our mid-town,
Saturday morning runabouts.
They make brisk moves for papers,
hurry quickly to hang about
the barbershop and the chinning,
are drawn by bakery's auras,
like bright magnets on the air.

Jim the barber is Octobered;
complexion of a MacIntosh,
tongue with quick cider's irony,
his hands upon the golden breath
the way crisp maple leaves take off
from their last appointed places,
wings upon the apple morning,
full of expression's measurements.

In a side yard still set in shade,
the sun behind a dormer yet,
pieces of night nearly AWOL
in the clutter of shrubbery,
a man turns pink at his yard sale
when a woman questions his wares,
and she too reddens when she buys
the very goods she argued on.

George, who deals in news reports,
who walks darkly to commerce door,
who hefts the Globes still tied in wire
and waves to darkness (someone's there
to check the point spread and outcome),
whistles when on Vinegar Hill
the sun goes incendiary
and a church steeple turns to fire.

A servant in a uniform,
custodian of night-long peace,
midwife, Indianapolis
driver, paper pusher, court man,
eases red-faced out of night,
seeks coffee, a civilized tongue,
a pair of eyes which sees the day
for what it is, a beginning.

At the curb stone, at the bus stop,
where transportation drops the names
of corporate entities,
like Hart Bus Lines, Rapid Transit,
Eastern Mass. and the M.T.A.,
a nurse rolls her dreams into dawn
and a welder envisions her
as if his dream is overcome

Apple mornings fathom themselves
when Saugus Center goes to red,
when her people take on daylight,
promise leaps from October,
from fields, from old Penney Orchards,
from sun, from moon, from fading stars
and realize the visible—
Red Delicious, Cortland, MacIntosh.

HILL OF THE BLUE GOOSE

The hill
steals lightning,
sees Boston stand up
after catching a haymaker,
this morning caught geese
like runaway shoes, tongue screech,
traffic cop calls and winter
ticket stub lost in a pocket;
has mirrors of yesterday's thighs
the moon of the seventh of July
of our lord of 'forty-five
touched with its butter,
shows her inclined to me
and the tilt of hill.

Her thighs still count the thrust.

2

The cops
broke up a card game
on the left shoulder, toward the river
and West Lynn, in 'thirty-nine;
the pot's never surfaced.
Now a spectre in tight pants
sells angel dust, gives
green stamps.
Has new options on street war:
use hammers, screwdrivers, no sunlight.
Night kisses the hill with lonely.

Do not be lured there.
No pig in a poke.

3

Has anyone seen
Frank Parkinson lately,
meant to die outside Tobruk
in the mutilating horrors of the sands,
but didn't? Hangs on the hill
like cloud root, spills images,
has literate left hand,
flies with the awesome geese.
oh, Frankie!

4

Throws hill shadow
ominous as dice toss,
a family's left a photograph
in a friend's scrapbook
in a trunk in a cellar
in the thrown shadow.
Nothing else. No dandruff.
No acne. No evidence of being.
Gone off the waterfall of time.
Nobody remembers they were here
halfway up the hill once.

5

Lone blue goose,
tandemless,
no fore and aft,

plunges over, cries high noon
of search, drags feathers,
drops the quick flutter
of a shadow. Poem stops.
Starts.

6

Hill has transport.
Pieces left in Hwachon Valley
in the Iron Triangle. In Verdun.
On the Ho Chi Min Trail. Waters
near the Marshall Islands. Sitka.
In flecks of blood aged in Walpole cell.
An unmarked grave in a dead town in Iowa.
Almost near Tobruk. Parkie's too tough
for Krauts, shrapnel's conversion to flesh,
booze, cancer, rolled over cars
giving off laughter, snowstorms
going like wild pinball games,
bad dreams with real smells a listener
can touch; all of them, almost.

The blue goose
throws down a quick shadow.
I hear the high noon call
at night.

7

The terrors near Tobruk
are as hard to shake as nicknames.
Beaver. 39 Stone. Maude's Jake.

Sinagna. Dropkick. Snakeeyes.
Automatic Brown. The Indian,
who fell near Tobruk, arose, moved the stone,
gave his voice
to the blue goose.
High noon call at night.

He gave up his pain forever;
how he lives so long
the hill sings.

8

Steals lightning.
Spies on Boston, Hancock glass face.
Sees the ocean die close in-shore.
Gives up the moon. Throws trees down
to hungry flame. Wears the shadow
of the blue goose.
Watches my poem
stop.

ABSOLUTION
(For Hugh Menzies)

You think I don't remember you,
(your nose was red, ears outsized)
(you moved lanky in your lanky way)
(you had blue eyes, your cheeks red)

(in front of the State Theater on Sat-
urday matinees you towered over us)
but I do remember you, Hughie, I do.
(Your hair was tall in front, dark;

your arms were long, your nose English
like mine's Irish but mostly for word music)
(you wore dark blue denim dungarees)
(once you wore a jacket with red sleeves)

(You didn't skate with us, but I remember
your picking leaves, watching the sun
fall all the way through the filaments)
(I saw you Saturdays, later on, watching

us play football at the stadium) Then,
the way time plays tricks on all of us,
we were half way across the world in Asia,
carrying carbines and M-1's in the Land

of the Morning Sun. That sun set on you,
Hughie, but I walked out of the same hole.
Each morning now, on my way to work,
the shells sound, the infiltrator eyes me,

the land mine sits like a maimed turtle
in my path, the clouds grow darker,
the rain becomes a yellow madness,
the earth opens its other arms,

and your name flies its black letters
on a gray cast iron sign in East Saugus.
Once, when I was late for work, snow
on the hillside, I saw flowers on the pole.

I keep wondering for you, Hughie,
who put out the flowers in January?
Is there a friend with a long memory?
A girl who dreams? Did you visit?

ROOTING

The touch
becomes us.

The sun
passes through
a stone in my fingers
for the third time,
but once in this
millennium.

Part Saugus.
Part Earth.
Part Star.

The next passage
is the maelstrom.

I choose it to be
not of our
making.

A CHOICE OF NEIGHBORS

Men in gray T shirts
strip out neighbor's house
across the street.

Fire began the tearing down;
greedily inside walls it went
like children's fingers in a sugar bowl,

or two-hand clutch of candy bar
squeezing a coat of charcoal
around sills, up beam shanks.

Slowly as a chucked-down drill
his ashes penetrated earth
and catacomb of seed.

Fire begins anew,
flameless, in the flues
of young roots.

It is better this way.
The first-born tree will lift
his red October arms again,

and the wind will walk
the airy rooms
roofless.

CAROM

Eddie Smiledge
was the house man,
racked the balls,
collected coin,
was a judge
with a hundred
dollar bill
in the side pocket.

He smoked cigars
thick as cue sticks,
ate Baby Ruths
until his teeth stuck,
sent us home abruptly
when our eyes became hazy
or midnight slipped
like a footpad
over the green felt
on table No. 4.

He did not lend us
money, but let the clock
work in our favor;
at a nickel a game
he didn't see the eight
ball eight times
in the side pocket,
and forgot to lock away
all the nickel bags
of potato chips.

One night we played
One-Ball-In-The-Side-
Pocket past closing
and Eddie sat in a corner
waving off the game costs.
We walked off under
a September moon
all the way to Korea.

The night I came back,
chevrons up and down,
deep new wrinkles
struck across my face,
measureless but valid,
reaching for my yesteryear,
a skinny bald-headed man
was racking the balls.

He didn't know my name,
who was home and who wasn't,
why Eddie Smiledge had
drifted off someplace
the day after we left.

CELEBRATION

(For Thomas Jr.)

The night you were born,
light, in innumerable collections,
gathered on forgotten stones,
blazed rudely a fallen insulator
whose wood had lost its touch,
went chaotic in dark puddles
nearly awed by the wind
trailing northern geese.

Even before dawn's gray lanterns
threw somber cool refinements
like an old priest at benediction,
thick ruby bottles beside my path
shook candles from the wineside out.
I should have read the signs
bright as the zodiac,
spectrum's clutch letting go,
for now you spread on canvas
all the calibres of the sun.

At gray ledges of another day,
sharp corners of morning's shoulders,
I amend that cool night
each time blue surfaces, red cries
hot as lava in its slow rush,
and new green falls like seeds
from your palette and your brush.

WHERE THE LAST STAR WENT

(For Daryll Koolian)

Midnight leans over itself
nearly silent, only the sounds
old stars make passing on
their witness of once being here.

Today the ants were mining
an old shoe at the trash pile;
I assume they are yet plying
their colonial energies

in that dark dominion and seat,
that mutable territory.

Often when we listen we hear
just skeletons, mobiles in wind,

our lives tinkling a faint music,
faint as a dead and distant star.
This day another shadow passed
in the shadows my eyes possess.

It was yours, Daryll, at labor,
going down in a deadly ditch,
what you had thrown out by shovel
coming hard down on your last cry.

I think you a warrior, bent
under the battle of your task;
your armor, your heart and hands;
your medallion, Mother Earth.

I do not recall you good at knots
or making camp or trailblazing
or how many merit badges
have gone silently like the stars

into cluttered oblivion,
but I remember how you smiled,
how campfires leaped lightly
in your eyes, where the last star went.

ONCE SCREAMED TO THE FLAG WAVING DRUNKS AT THE VETS BAR

Listen, gunmen,
all I can smell is the gunpowder
on you sharper than booze.
You wear your clothes
with a touch of muzzle flash.

Is it a story you want....?
listen to the years ago,
to the no shooting,
to the no rout,
to the just dying.

The day stank
it wore scabs, had odors
to choke tissues and burn
secret laminations of the lungs.
Rain festered in soot clouds,
rose in the Pacific
or the Sea of Japan,
dumped down on us,
came up out of yellow clay
like a sore letting out.

The air
must have been full of bats,
of spider weavings;
it was lonely as the lobo,

yet a jungle of minds
filled it with thought leaves
shining with black onyx.

Who needs doctors at dying....?
prayers sew wounds,
piece heads, hearts, hands together,
when blood and clay
strike the same irrevocable vein,
arterial mush;
when God is the earth and clay,
silence,
the animal taker leaning to grasp.

Listen, gunmen,
listen you heroes in mirrors
only you see into, we through,
it isn't the killing,
it's the dying must be felt,
associated,
even if it stinks.

Blood freezes in hot days of dying,
is icicle inside movement of trickery
less than glacier's,
where a man crawls to his maker
up his own veins,
is touched,
feels the firebrand
burn in the cold.

Where are the shade trees,
cool drinks....?
once I froze in the confessional
against the fire.

He was a Spick,
they said,
washed his deep skin too much,
wanted to sandpaper it white,
be us, be another man.

But we wagered ourselves
to get him out of a minefield
live as breathing,
comrade shot down in the clay
in the rain in the time of bright eyes
rolling with the thunder of fear.

Was it him we carried,
or the stone of his monument?
Tons he was of responsibility;
one of us despite the Spick name,
man being borne to die.

God is everywhere,
the catechism says, my son says,
now, years later.
It was once a divinity we carried
on the poles,
with his balls gone pistonless,
no more a god to his woman.

The image rolled red on the canvas,
burned through the handles of the litter
as secret as electricity;
Spick shooting himself into us,
Godhead shooting signs up shafts of wood.

Lugging god
on sticks and canvas
is frightening,
we felt this.
Jesus! we screamed,
have You let go of this god?
Do You fill him up making him burn our hands?
He wanders now for times,
rolling himself together,
womanless, childless,
a journey in dark trees, among leaves
in jungles, to get near You.

God seeking God
at the intercept of shrapnel.
The tearing down and lifting up
by our hands.
God in the cement
of death.

Oh, gunmen,
it's the dying,
not the killing,
you must speak.

This day is theirs, not ours,
belongs to the gods of the dead,
of the Spick we carried to his dying,
and all of his brothers,
none of them here among us.

Drink, gunmen,
one to the Spick and grave's companions,
jungle flights they are in
to match their god with God.

And think, gunmen,
who of us have the longest journey
among leaves, in darkness,
through the spiders of trees,
now?

WHENCE LILY POND

November leans
on the water,

and the wind's
a hooded skater

across the glaze.
At night,

from shore to shore,
the ice rumbles

in cannon cracks.
The white field

is put down in the black woods

and an owl
questions who walks

under his high retreat.
I see a star

triangulate his eyes,
and the long thin voice

of emptiness
fall down through trees.

My boots, my sleepless
bed, have brought me here

to hike about the pond,
to know the rejoice of discomfort,

to walk on water,
to be the godlike promise.

THE MILK WAGON

(For James)

When cars had hard fenders,
walking wasn't preached
for your health, bread
was nine cents a loaf;

when iron-rimmed wheels
of a milk wagon
on wet cobblestones
rattled the windows

of the dawn gray house;
when thick-shod hooves
went about igniting sparks,
you told me horse stories.

All those mornings there were
gallant sixteen hand Arabs,
Appaloosas after apples,
Paints Brown on a great white

stallion fixed with purple eyes,
the old gray that Theophile
down Canada sold six times
(twice to the same farmer!).

Whispering those yarns,
lest five sisters would hear,
you froze me into pillows,
filled my head with hoofbeats,

sent me trotting, galloping
ahead of dust, echoing bridges,
to tortures of high trails,
downhilling good as Gurkhas.

The wagon horse went to dogs.
The wood went back underground.
The iron rims are bulkheads still
rusting on a Japanese destroyer.

You rode a four-pronged terror
into Lake Erie in mad January.
Mad January has no echoes.
In May I hear hoofbeats clapping

down the morning damp gray street,
hear iron work stone into quick
arcs the eye can barely see,
softly hear you call me to stable.

LOG CUTTING, QUEEN ANT BURIAL

I have brought these trees
almost to a final
dimension, the two brick
span of my flue.

And from the shatter
of one oak wedge
I spilled a home
of carpenter ants
thick as blueberry pie.

Black guard legionnaires,
in a frenzy
of revolutions,
merry-go-rounded
about the queen.

She was the eye
of a small universe,
a little storm;
thick as my thumb,
she trailed out
two gossamer capes
like gauze hackles
of a trout fly.

I shoveled her,
her lovers, her sons,
her terrorist henchmen,
into a green bag.

Underground at the town dump
they start out again,
tunnelling up through
a plastic vault,
looking for the root
of a home, a simple
cavernous boudoir
for a dark progenitor.

CONCESSION TO WOOD

(For Jamie)

What is heard as ankle deep
bites of an ax is my son
tossing a ball at the end
of the house, past the garage
quiet as an empty box
this April day before grass
begins its perennial
struggle through last year's leavings.

Only an hour ago we
found a last handful of snow,
but a mischievous toadstool
playing hide and seek with spring,
beneath our quarry of leaves
scattered about like small talk.

In a last act of winter,
or spring's prime, for the matter,
he first molded it to form,
then flung it the diamond length
of yard at a maple tree.

He doesn't know the maple
talks to me on legend nights,
that it says, "Hold. Hold. Hold on!",
or sideways broad leaves catch hold
of southwest winds, desert-fed,
saying, "Sun is in this wind."

or that split limbs whistle words
I hear through house-broken wood,
sills, uprights, joists, lintels:
“I lay claim a space for you.
I mine this territory
for the repose of your soul.”

I acquiesce that dark roots
carve a deep-earth sepulchre.
When I lay my spirit down,
when my final breath is frost
and blood is brighter by stars,
the soft room within those roots
will accept my tenancy.

All my son hears is the storm
barrage-like in gray tree limbs
during northeasterly wars,
or calamities lightning
loosed last August in its heart,
bright blue flares and white phosphor-
ous powders arcing to an
incomprehensible light,
like God's eyes had exploded,
the final incandescence.

Occasionally he hears
the tree empty its buckets
of heart-flamed leaves extracted
from the hot core of the fire
only autumn can ignite,
or he hears new spring trickle

from a miniature ladle
half an inch beneath the bark.

He never hears the tree talk,
never hears it speak of pain,
or how many miles its roots
have gone dowsing underground.
He hears sounds I've forgotten;
gunshots from a baseball bat,
chatterings of hockey sticks
like old folks in a circle,
crowd noises, fathers prodding
the shadows of their egos
to a capability
neither one of them can reach.

We hear the sounds of our times.
What he hears he must grow with,
not that he must have my ear,
or even accept my thoughts,
but if some night, in August
when the moon's a peachbasket
and the calendar's thicker,
he puts his ear to the tree,
he might hear a deep root break,
he might hear a breaking heart.

NEIGHBOR PLEDGE

The makeshift fence we didn't want
strung between our houses
has accepted the final measurement
and melts its way toward loam.

First the gate, cashing in its chips
on timid scarecrow arms,
tires of the holding on,
unclenches one fist, then another,

gives up midnight's undercurrent
squeak, that sensor marking wind;
gives up the screams and alarms
invoked by December's bully.

The pussy-footing murmurs nursed
by May, a daughter crying in sleep,
fall away to roses, roots and rot,
is voided by the passage of ants.

One corner post, its gray coat
open like an exhibitionist's
arms wide in flaunting,
suffers all the appetites,

bows down in the year-end curtsy.
The lumber, nails and sweat
were strung to hold a child in,
not you out or slat your view

of these columbines, roses, snowmen.
Now that child has secrets,
moves thickly with new friends, jokes,
nights that have no meanings,
dawns that do.

TUESDAY MAY BE A DAY TOO LATE

Greet the dawn each day as if a long lost friend's
come home;

Make one and only one promise to yourself
That you will enjoy the day and all it brings;
Find in yourself the one extra ounce of reserve
When you need it, and you will, for each day
Demands energy as well as love;

Smile and say hello everyday to at least one stranger;
Acknowledge the joy of children and the peace
That elders deserve; be as free with compliments
As you are with your criticism; bite your tongue
On the first harsh word you want to say;

Shake hands as if you were a link in a lifeline;
Once in a while give something away
That's important to you but not a dream;
Recall the faces of your parents and a childhood
incident,
And remember their touch, their kiss,
Their hand on you;

Retire with a smile to the joy of your rest,
Knowing tomorrow is at hand; and above all,
Grasp your dream as if it had handles,
For you are the only one who can turn it around.

HIATUS

(For Beth)

1.

I have been two weeks
stung with woodsmoke
and fish scales.

A beard this long
can be nested in.

Each night you walk
out of the campfire
and take my mouth.

Downstream a white rock
lifts your thigh
clear out of a bath
and warms the sunlight.

2.

The alders in canopy
rehearse your name
at the tunnelling wind.

The moon aches on the leaves
like streetlights on your bed.

Moss and pine rug
tremble by a footprint.

When your eyes are closed
you never use words.

I could write a book
about your hands.

I wouldn't let anyone read it.

3.

Two flowers on the path
are pink as nipples.

In a knifing of sunlight
the bees mean business.

The next time you stretch
all your skin near this hearth,
I will walk again this
invitational trail.

Beyond the beaver dam
sitting wristbone prominent
on the river's arm,
a blue pacific pool
commends your eyes.

There is no scent here,
though, celebrating you.

4.

I fail with the wind
to run out of thought.
Ideas stir in leaves.
The earth is as rich
as all your folding.

I know your trembling
is not a gesture,
nor is mine
where your fingers toil.

When pine scent falls
like gumdrops out of treetops
and music's a breeze
tuning the edges
of a thousand leaves,
I count the days to you.

Arithmetic has heartbeats.

These sums are valid.
All parts are you.

5.

There's a darkness
outside the campfire
that must be like
the earth is to a star.

Fire smell, heavy as
a woman's, curls unseen
through black branches
the loam night grows

and follows me out past
the flickering perimeter
the way the Collie Romby
followed all my tenth year.

Darkness has no illusions.
It's only looking back
at a hot eye that one sees
exhaustive artifacts,

it's readjusting darkness
with a bare piece of light,
or finding one firefly
a perfect orientation.

When you shine here, star-
caught, diaphonous, frail
as an ember on the wind,
a lone diamond's in your eye.

Glitter tumbles on the leaves
crude as a blessing of gold;
the flames, the sun, your teeth,
daple little radiants

like insects of light
with quick, quick wings.
Light is a piece of memory
I think of you in the night.

It is so quiet here in darkness
I can hear my eyes open.

APRIL STORM

Even under this storm,
which is like a woman
at rugs, the river chants;
rollicking mariner,

sad word singer, reeler,
jigger of pantomime.
It moves puzzles of airs
beneath the wooden bridge,

the pursed lips and puffed cheeks
of river throat humming
stones from ten thousand years
under the minstrel tongue

and voice just water has
at wearing down, cutting
rock walls, roots, in August
warm paths, December deep.

And now, with freak April
northeasterly at odds,
a drunken sailor's song
vibrates all the metal

the river's ever known:
ball, grapeshot, gunneries,
torn decks, a bell clanging
close to rocks, an oarlock

strident on the surface,
statements old iron makes.

WIDOW HOUSE

(For Phyllis Barclay)

I

Paint and weather collaborate,
the trim fades,
this rupture is made adjectival
by the broken fence—
(words lopped in mid-sentence,
a mouth teeth escaped from).

Who mends these fences
now?

When the sky
sends her princelets out
to make imperial the night,

only one wonders and is
awed.

Morning sun invades
half a house, certain shadows
are indelible, credibly thick,

are seen half into and never
move.

Miniature cyclones amass
leaves, twigs, nest spillage,
march like little dictators

about the amendable
lawn.

She can't even share
a cold.

II.

Once we brought cakes,
a covered meal,
flaccid handshakes
to be not too manly.

We brought sad eyes,
shoulders squeezed together
to lessen our animate stature.

We brought steam-bright
soup, throats full of hay,
cold hearts.

We thought we could
understand her sentence,
though indifferently
we still parse it out.

Our verbs do not stand up.

We give her adjectives;
stolid, resolute, thinner.

III.

A hammer cracks
all of darkness.
She rises to nails
driven all the way home,

nuptials of wood
to guarantee the house
another year.

A shuffle of steps,
rubbing corduroy,
rising from cellar stairs,
said, "Reassurance,"

Hey, hon, said
"I'm lost at this."

Half a bed sheet,
glazed, silently
frosted against
her hand

makes a menu
an inadmissible
thought.

Each morning
the mirror
brings them
closer.

A LETTER TO ORLANDO

(For Ed LeBlanc)

All day this cold is a secret
of my fleece lined jacket
and the bottom of my mittens.

The senseless wind, without any
direction and purposeless,
gets hung up in the muffler

I wear as some corrective device,
thick and wooly and itchy,
around my neck. It's the one

you left in my van the last winter
we cut wood in Oaklandvale
and waded through that white tide

until we fell exhausted.
You used to laugh about wood
heating twice. Now you've gone south,

and only I can hear the cry
of the oak as it lets go
and throws the earth out of kilter.

I walked quietly there yesterday,
snow thrown like paint everywhere
except on the sun side,

gray birches, easy in the wind,
made me think of Finnish ski troops
the Russians didn't like around.

I suppose there are pieces
of the battlefield left down south,
but I bet you think of Oaklandvale

when a cool wind grabs your neck,
an old jacket lets out secrets,
your fingers remember wood,

and all across a sunset sky
falling downhill to your ears
a chainsaw's evening prayers.

BRINGING THE FIRE IN

(For Matthew)

1.

I have brought wood here
stacked like baker's shelves
against the house, against winter
and the remnant of an apple tree.
A minor army of ants, scouts
deep where the apples were,
their bivouac secret except
where my eyes count squadrons
endlessly tailgating, will soon
spend their invasion currency.

Yet someone else has marked
these rich brown loaves,
the pumpernickel pieces,
the dark ryes oak is like,
wheats that honey and molasses
wed: my son is up to hauling,
finds eight year old muscles
beginning to talk back,
an armful of seasoned loaves
fully measures any man;
how warm the house is
is how hard the baker works.

2.

Night makes small change of us,
keeps us stashed in her pockets.

In the darkness we are lost keys,
old medallions, fingers pawing lint.

I touch the wood my son's brought.
It will be three times warm

now his sweat's been added
to the cutting and the burning.

Calipers, put on his arms,
measure out daring sunlights,

that come of this darkness,
that come of this fire.

3.

Today he twined his first stitches,
a three piece braiding on his
lower lip, his bright badge
of hockey, for wood did him in,

stick blade like a hard wing
cleaving too-early morning air,
blood flowing like a flag stripe,
thick, rivering, almost sweet.

Where it fell its rich raining,
across the golden oak he carried
in because it saved a trip,
I thought two parts of his

energy were cause enough for fire,
that the fuel burns brighter
in a frenzy of maddening redness,
but what's all this goes up in smoke?

Son, sun's son, son's sun, sun,
tree that could be here after I'm gone,
a vulgar piece of wood stained red,
only because I'm here to observe them.

He is here now, warm, stitched
into a new reality, new dimension.
And I am here counting the fires,
how flames lick away at days.

The tree I did not ring my saw into
stands out there, a sentinel,
a watch warden looking back at me.
It will outlook me only to another saw.

CHINADOWN, CHINADOWN

“What are you digging the hole for, Dad?” my five years Betsy asked, “Are you going someplace?”

Her second questions are always loaded to the hilt, meant to tickle if you find them at the right smile angling up one side of her mouth, like one of her dolls sitting on a catcher’s mitt.

A leech trench would not be suitable for an answer. Girls do not believe in leech trenches or crushed stone or the purity of water after seventeen feet of backyard journey.

If I said a footing for a new wall she would not hear me, would pretend a knot or snarl was in her hair and would twist herself like a dancer to unravel the nonexistent clutch, or would tell me “Mrs. Raistano’s going to have her baby any day now and she’s honestly going to bring him to kindergarten because he is going to be a boy and we’re going to call him Charles and we’ll take turns holding him and feeding him at snack time.”

And she sighs and closes her eyes
and it is as if the female of the species
is way ahead of a little boy at card-
collecting or doing wheelies on his bike
or netting for frogs whenever
that other ticking starts in his mind.
Boys are always catching up to girls
because girls sprint out at the start
fast as prized greyhounds or whippets.
Girls leap and boys flounder at edges
of the most clumsy things. Her brothers,
all of them, are proof of this. They
always seemed to be in a crowd, a burn-
ing of energy while standing still,
or they walked on stilts and fell down
so often their shins tried to retire,
or a father spends weekends plying gravel
and tar bits from the heels of their hands.
Girls are thinkers and boys are collectors.
Girls think there is something special
about a father digging a hole in the back-
yard. Boys gather tossed out stones and zing
them out so only the lawn mower can find them.

“Are you really going to China, Dad?”

“I’ll be back in three weeks.”

“I know what it’s like.” Rockets
filled her eyes, color of roses
early in June painted her cheeks.

Girls have already been someplace
when boys are dreaming of going.
Girls have already touched themselves
and boys are playing pool or throwing
out runners at second base or fixing
a worm to a number six hook so it will not
be lost at the cast into deep pools.
Boys fish for things and girls hold on
to whatever is given them at the start.

“Their eyes are like this.” She anchored
her index finger nails into high cheek
flesh and exaggerated her own blue eyes
into almond slits. “They wear pony tails
longer than me. I saw them in that show,
you remember the night Uncle Joey came by
and you were drinking beer in the kitchen
and mom was mad 'cause you woke Jamie up
and he had already been twice to the doctor.”

Girls are catalogues, are diaries, know
grand associations boys fail to merge.
Girls are born with timeclocks and cook-
books implanted in their heads. Boys never
know the time, hurt water on the stove.
Girls know when it's going to happen
for the first time long before a boy does
because he's all hung up in doubts
and she has been waiting all her life
to feel the shift of weight riding her
and the teddy bear is gone forever.

“They talk funny, like Mrs. Wey Chu but she really is kind of nice, her flowers are the best flowers. Even Mrs. Raistano said they were the best, and she’s my teacher.”

Girls have a piece of logic boys never find no matter how long they look for it.

“I said I’d be back in three weeks.”

“I’ll make you a lunch but you have to take a shower before you eat. They eat with funny sticks, but no sandwiches. Uncle Danny said salesmen always eat in Chinese restaurants when they go into a strange town,” and she giggled and chortled and asked me to dare her to say it and our eyes crossed and she said, “because they cook the pee out of everything.”

I jammed the long handled spade down into the leech trench floor and heaved a grand shovelful out.

She smiled at my energy and said, “You don’t have to go today. Mom’s cooking your favorite chicken pot-roast because she loves you and you get so sweaty sometimes. Want a beer?”

Girls are never mistaken for boys.
Not in my part of the yard.

EVOLUTION

(For Eddie McCarthy)

Pug on the clouds
red faced mick
slugger
tough guy
hanger on
non-quitter
puncher out of fakers
hard nut
red headed madman
soft handed madman
measurer of chins
quick footed
pace setter

Soldier
companion
fellow warrior
comrade
lost friend
rice eater
fish eater
sweater
hater
lover
keeper of bad dreams
nightmarer
pacifist
slow dier

blood letter
bleeder
Asian ground soaker
Korean saviour
son of
father of
spirit of
god of amens
god of hellos
god of goodbyes

red headed boxer
friend of grace
young companion
old memory
softness
age
o

NEARLY SAUGUS

It is always nearly Saugus
no matter where I am,
coming from anyplace, going to,
sure as snow or crocus after
or the clock turning on,
sure as clam flats on air
and kelp bubbles breaking down
under confection of dry salt
and the river hawking its wares
through nine foot cat-o-nines
standing ripe as fire arrows.

Saugus announcements are made
with conviction all along the line.
In Linden, just south where
four roads cross themselves neutral,
the sad gray Hawkrigde Brothers
Steel Company building
lays its washboard face to the sun
and brings back old Mondays
and mothers and red hands
twisting denim almost dry,
and a pain not quite touchable.

There is the blunt realism
of the awesome bomb crater
where the stonecrusher
for years has harvested
the neat beehives of pulverized

earth bone you cannot see over
even if you were laddered.
(Only the sea is past them,
occasional sails, slow freighters
like dominoes on the horizon.
Nothing really to look for except outward).

Linden talks about Saugus
as you pass through its gauntlet
of railside steel, neat square
deliveries of girders, building
guts, lallycolumns, T-bar stock
stacked parallel to rust,
inhibitions of the trade,
bankruptcy or intestate dreams:

and over there, where the earth
has a mouth you cannot believe,
where all the dead you've known
could hide for a hundred years,
where granite screams downward
from a penthouse dynamiting,
where a bomb blast would run out
of its own echoes all Saturdays
where dust reaches for the millennium
and ledge vibrations last all week
and the earth talks in broken
windows and plastered ceilings
sneer from wall to wall like lunatics
on the back porch of yesterday,
Saugus says it is here.

Lynn announces too,
though on the other side
and aches at the touch
of a shoe last found cheaply
at a Saturday yard sale.
Lynn has walked the border
only in dead winter when the river
zippers the towns together
at a barometer's instigation
and thermometer's direction.
The parts meet where industry
heaves upward red mickey spires
erecting at dollar signs,
government contracts, defense
and offense better planned
in a Manning Bowl lockerroom.

Lynn says hello to Saugus.
I wave back, the tracks
of the Linden Branch walk under
my feet like I am skipping rope
and the cinders from a thousand
dead engines and more Pullmans
you can shake a stick at
litter the way onto Saugus
even when the river collapses
under the State Theater
where now centerless grinders
reel on like old serials.
with week-long after tastes.

No matter how I go at Saugus,
by Linden or Lynn, Schenectady or sin,
collegiate enterprise or business boredom,
by rock slabs and earth holes
and ores crossed in a man's mind
and guard rails narrowing to infinity,
nothing prepares the way better
for coming home than the flotsam
freed upon the air, old friends
cornerwise on the busy days,
old train whistles falling
across Donkey Field full of October,
where Halloween goes orange
and shaggy toothed and waxy,
and nothing ever said I would ever
write a poem about coming here
to read a poem about going there.

STREETLIGHT

This one is familiar as sneakers,
an old wallet your hip knows,
a belt you lean against all day.

It lit my brothers' way home
from the madness of unPacifc waters.
It still calls at our doorstep.

If you touch it, parts touch back.
It crosses your heart without
any promise being sworn upon.

It stops. It starts. It fades
when morning takes on nourishment
and weaves a maple out of webs.

I've seen my father read by its lamping
when winter leaped its fat frog on us
and they had to shut off the lights

because he preferred bread and meat
on the table than light across it.
Once, a man with a mustache stitched

on his lip like a single chevron,
questioned the preference. Father showed
him the light in no uncertain terms.

Shadows come to life here,
throw a darkness with extraordinary reach
through window panes

and fall a summer snow
on the soft mounds of my children
as if moons have gone underground.

When red maple leaves go like pigeon
feathers tossed at October sun
or get thrown like pajamas at dawn,

the bones hammer themselves
into the orbit of the light pole's
reach. How fast light travels

down the crude mass of bark.
How quickly it makes shadow
before the shadow knows it's thrown.

TWO LICENSE, WYOMING

(For Timothy)

In a last move
of daylight, a buffalo's
dropped head is a locomotive face
at some dark station along the way.

An owl counts
collisions of stars,
fireflecks in a deer's eye,
the long up-wind agony of a late moth.

October breath
is nervous on the tent.
Taut ropes pull whistles
out of the wind. Pines begin weeping.

From a high trail
my son sees the compass
of our Coleman lantern hung
like a plumb bob from three poles

and heads down.
I have spent the day
with rod and flies, and an eagle
uttering strange cries at his dominion.

The hunter
and the fisherman
eating off the same platter
taste the bullet first or the barb.

BEFORE FISHING, #10 CAN

(For Betsy)

Wet leaves
at the bottom
of a leaf pile
shine like
new shoes.

Worms, thick
as boot laces,
leave their midnight
knots burned
as asterisks
on cordovan
surfaces.

My daughter's
two thumb grasp of them
is effective,
as if thumbs only
are meant to get dirty.

She cradles the worm can
like some girls
do dolls, one
nonchalance
of seeming older.

Soon it will be
a boy's head

in her arms,
his blue eyes closed,
thinking he'll never
breathe again.

Then I will fish
in the lonely
part of the day,
and in the exclamation
of dawn I will see
her face in the
answering waters,

find her thumbprint
on postage stamps
that never come
often enough.

BENEATH DOMINIONS OF OUR AIRS

(For George Barclay)

It is cold today.
We wear a mantle
of crispness.

The white ground
sucks at our feet
like wet sneakers.

Your hammer is put down,
the last nail is driven.
Teeth of the cross-cut

go the way of carious molars,
dark speech spacings,
a rust moving idly as rot.

Into your last day
you worked, no lunch break,
trying to beat winter

to the punch,
breath steaming like a horse's,
a halo hiding your head

and black fur cap
some Russian wore crawling in
Stalingrad's blood-burned snow.

On a wire hook you drove
as an afterthought
hangs the gray greatcoat

you stuck in winter's face,
each pocket ripped
where the hammer hung.

Stuffed inside, cached forever,
thick fleecy mittens
like amoebic appendages.

Now your hands
hold themselves, left palm
cupped on top

saving the other's grip
for the work
left undone.

2

The language beside your grave
halts frozen in air, stiff
for remembrance sake.

An evolution of snow marks a wide
crop of dates and names
growing on stone faces.

Sixteen steps away
ice rings in the roses
of another's setting down.

But I keep coming back to you
and a hammer stealing
ten penny nails from the sun.

Now that you are at rest,
did I ever want you to rest,
was that my fantasy?

Is the language I see now,
evidence of proper nouns,
verbs standing still,

enough of a message?
It must be that you
were only meant to rest now,

that this cold pronouncement
over your cupped hands
is a last outward sign.

Sometimes the loudest sound
you heard was sweat rolling
on the hill of your brow.

Often pain
was the talk your arm
said coming up on darkness

and strokes of a saw
were clock tickings.
We all have measurements.

And now you have none.
At your desk a scale turns blue
where your thumb let go.

SAUGUS ON THE LINDEN BRANCH

Thursday last, soft dawn
walking its surprise out of
what had been Donkey Hill,
electric darts of birds
leaping the conductors of trees,
their bright quick passages
fanning miniature turmoils,
I walked the Linden Branch.

The accelerations of time
raced beside me on the tracks:
my own breath an engine aching:
crabgrass, thistle and weeds
of a hundred anxieties
thick as mattresses
between two surviving rails,
between black ties at spongy rest.

I moaned at piled up motion,
time frozen in a picture frame,
my little red wagon coaled
with trackside anthracite,
a locomotive snorting past me
its charging bison head,
a black-armed black-faced fireman
with night stars for teeth

heaving outboard a shovelful
for my easy finding, waving

to Depression's child. I think of him
often now, how he was, never home,
tireless, sweat-ridden, a song
in his heart but not his lips,
dark gas tolling its bell
inside where he could not hear,

towns shooting by, ripe clotheslines,
eyeless faces darkening windows,
dogs with slow heads, lovers,
Jimmy Cagney marquees, ribbed ponds
giving up ducks thick as buckshot,
a hundred kids with corduroys
hauling little wagons of cast-off coal
back to black kitchen stoves.

Thursday last I missed that fireman;
whistle throats full of ageless dust,
the earth-slow turntable frozen
in a decade I ran through the way
a good summer's roughshodded,
the night stars of his teeth
shining where rails converge,
where the sky is magnified

heavy as locusts or autumn leaves;
and the rails sour with rust,
scale by scale and hue by hue,
marked, blatant, eroding
their ways into history;
and dawn, silly dawn,

gray and surprising dawn,
gave up its old fireman.

He waved. His bright teeth
nailed home in a dark sky,
his arms like black-grained pistons
torsoed big as a tree, his song
of words out-thundering the engine
spraying out its hot steam
steady as a garden hose;
and music, music in the rails,

music of the steam and the click-clack
and the shug-shug and hoo-hoo
and thump-bump dull as old dramas,
the music of everything past
reveling where he labored
days upon days, never home,
tireless, sweat-ridden, and his song,
his song re-invented on the air.

**BENEATH VINES AND PEACH TREE,
A NEIGHBOR'S ASHES**

(For Herb Wills)

Vinegar Hill,
sleepy, boot-brown
from the long heat,
ready to firecracker,
suddenly bustles
like a tarpaulin
catching a first breeze
sweet as sherbert.

One ripple,
air fueled, folded long
as a wave, starts its
dance off the summit
and races shoreward.

Wind water,
thick as suds, airy,
I swear some Atlantic green
in it, touches my feet.

You still ache
in ashes
the grapes fall on,

and the now-scented loam
where taupe pits
go down with ants

into never before
hollows.

Your sweat is a yeast
in the compost pile.

I watch where you
stretched your gardens
into the river, the long reach
of your spade.

REMNANTS

My grandfather ran the city dump,
burned clinkers in a little house
he made of scrap. On cold nights drunks
slept in that make-shift haven.

They knew the welcome of his fire,
the monger's stove to wrap around,
hot curbing where they propped cold feet,
quick difference from the frozen air,

wind-swept railroad tracks, bare entry ways,
darkness where the howling ghost abides
or, last resort, the cardboard wrap.
The lost, lonely birds came to roost,

flew in at dusk. He stoked the fire
to stir the flame, dried their feathers off.
Just as often he left his lunch about
like tasty suet hanging in the yard.

On Saturdays I brought his lunch,
dense laminates of meat and bread,
thick and heavy and coarse as sin,
brown banana we would not eat,

molasses-brown coffee in whiskey bottles
wound about with paper bags.
I never saw even one pint bottle
finished off within his grasp,

rarely saw his small bent hand feeling
inside a paper bag. His birds
did the picking, had suet choice,
hens dining before the cock.

When he died they came to grieve
the saviour of their nights,
the drunken, besotted, brothered band
who so often drained his cup,

the mottle-skinned, the soured of life,
pale host, the warred upon and beaten,
they came to cache the little man
who offered what was left of God.

NEGOTIATIONS

What messages tonight sends
are chattering down the flue
as if tin cans are being
converted into ciphers.

It's not that the wind
is contending for attention:
hell, it's a punch drunk fighter
flaying away at these doors

and loose windows gabbing
like old ladies in a circle,
with shrieks so loud I think
they're careening in the walls.

I think it reminds me too much
of the music my daughter listens to,
the wild and wooly sounds
I've put forty years between

in a kind of patience I've developed,
but give it another name
in the name of sanity and age.
She says I'm tone deaf.

I say I'm particular, too set
in my ways to experiment,
but I'll negotiate just the same;
I'll settle on the wind

talking under roof shingles
I spent all last summer
geometrically putting in place,
a mosaic's black on black.

I'll take the wind at this time,
with some godawful god at the helm,
battering my post and redan
as if it will tip over any minute.

She will have her music for now,
and ball joints full of oil,
and I'll settle in comfortably
with a beer and a book and a storm.

ELEMENTS

My daughter's a warm pillow
in my arms, down puff folded in,
nestling curves against curves,
as we move up two centuries of stairs
to her brass-balled iron bed.

I know the bed will speak back
to her thirty pounds, but the stairs
speak back to both of us;
nails, two hundred years old,
are cryptic in their speech,
scrape of consonants, vowel splurge,
that near-float in oaken treads.
Nails of the left side talk the most,
she's head-rested on left arm,
her blond hair in a free-fall
over left elbow like blond cascade,
yet cobweb sweep against my shirt,
whisper of darkness clinging in.

Nails talk in octave divisions,
when stepped on and letting go,
short greased ride on wood,
getting hurt and feeling good,
foot down hard and foot gone off,
the impress, heft of peopledom,
we crowd of two in one step.
Where nails have lost their hidden heads
they talk the most, quick screams
up freed shanks, the squared torsos

of ironmonger's antique grips.
The decapitation must have been
a loud wailing in the night.

My daughter hears in her shadowed ear
the pulsing anguish of each cry,
and folds her pillow poundage closer in,
becomes delightful wrap-around
that makes woe when it's gone,
the muscle move and bend of bone
only daughter against a father makes;
earth-long caress without touch of arms,
head to toe joining only child performs,
a union never quite the same again.

Cached in the fieldstone cellar deep below,
in glass bottles for visibility,
frozen from rust in the airless grasp,
looking so much like petrified earthworms,
are the nails that have lost their touch
on wood; those I've pulled, those popped out
in the middle of the night tired of long task,
those that talked too much to guest or quit
themselves,
and the thick stubby ones wood coughed out.

But wood, freed of companion nails,
has its own vocabulary of scrape and squeak,
a long toes-up-move of treads,
the most significant sound we hear of wear.
My daughter hears the wearing out,

the moving of oak risers into airs.
The points between her shoulders narrow,
she pulls herself in, presses on me,
finds some niche she found before, smiles
in her faith, in her tent of belief
of me who hears the house decompose, and strains
to measure my own organic failings—
a cartilage unspeakably loose,
old wounds headlining the body again,
(Hell, before she was born, I never
breathed twice coming up the stairs).
But getting old is wearing someone well.

When I give her up, free her from my arms,
(fearful of the final separation I know is coming)
and place her on her iron bed, the ore will talk.
Iron has such an endless voice, tuning forked,
shaking itself past the inner ear, demanding
to be heard. Iron has a longer voice than alloy.
Isn't a brass bell beat by a ferric fist
and a daughter shaped by her father's touch?
What echoes in your life are pieces of memory,
tree fall, saw work, whisp of plane,
the driving home of iron by iron,
the breaking away from first shapes out,

daughter clutching a pillow in sleep
as you look on, silent as a thickened root,
your grasp locked in clay.

10:30 P.M. REPORT, JUNE

A breeze you measure
in gallons, mark as potable.
Maple limbs dance the way
schools of kelp dance
just below the surface
or the idle shuffle
of smoke screening
the valley.

Leaves sigh as deep
as armless lovers.

Overhead a jet slows down
for Boston, its wingtip
lights coding like fireflies
against the solemnity
of one dark cloud.

Stars seem paired.

Across saltmarsh miles,
over Baker Hill
and the bulky shadowed
water tower, past old
trysting dens
more amorous in dreams,
another jet fires up
for Shannon or London,
a cannon boom
of long goodbyes.

10:30 is bridging toward sleep.
The breeze with hands
of an old sweetheart
keeps touching secret places,
nearly lost, vaguely recalled.

Yet it is different in January
when a Northeaster
sounds like broken arms
or demolition derbies.

IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU PLACE THE COMMAS

Have you read MONTE WALSH
by Jack Schafer?
Frank Whelton did
and gave me his battered copy,
I felt his tears
beating crystal dramas
on every page
after his hundred readings
in Sears & Roebucks' parking lot,
under flashlight
parked on the Southeast Expressway,
between deep-fry servings
in the Tumble Inn Diner,
at home
with silence
beating like mushrooms
in his mind.

VOICE FROM THE GREY

Are you there, Thomas,
hearing the maple burst pods,
sunflower creak and groan up,
down-loam leap of crocus strings
silent as webbings in the corner
of the barn, tulip death
at wayward chlorodaine
you spilled?

I watch you in the mirror of stars,
renegade heart, April's savage,
killing the long winter siege—
scabbard clean of weapon
you clutch. You muster
your spring

voiceless,
thwarted larynx
sky-lifted, the amens
for buried blossoms, the sable
early flowers cede
to summer
end.

Do not dwell
on winter sludge,
April's vast recall,
memory of bulb and seed
working hard as sandhog.

They get hot every equinox,
volcanic up, forest
fire down, August
death.

Do you walk
where your father waits
socked down beneath the stone
all savings bought, deftly scribed
'James 1903-1978', so off-hand
you wonder where reality
ceases?

Grass leaps
above him down,
has root of snake and worm,
grass root boa does its dig,
grapple gains your father's mind:
Wait, James, your mother loved
you no more
than me.

2

Visitations
take their time,
who goes where, how?
Spring from the grave, James!
Spring! Spring! oh James, come up;
one sound from your broken eyes,
a hand at dusk, just one,
just send the bloom
once more.

Flower's fur,
toss and turf of tempest grass,
leap of leg you lost, grief-bent
in another vault. Are you wholly joined?
You in forsythia come-back, foxtail
lunge, lost son's lilac rocketting,
smash of lightning maple wears,
love-lies-bleeding is stranger,
lo clethra and groundsel
carve your eyes.

Water washes
under; happy at this
infernal machine scored years
ago you gave me, I dream your rivers:
King Amazon whose ticks scarred
the leg surgeon's saw
erased.

Father of Waters down
to New Orleans town, the fist
of Harry Greb a log-slam to your jaw,
teeth achatter like old pickets
seized loose by rust of nail
and wild March air
giants kick.

Wrench of
Allagash log,
hump-backed stream
stole hook and leader
from your cigarette hand.

Down East does gray house wear them,
is the shadow of the hook
buried in this page?
What shark
where?

3

The Saugus
kicking the Atlantic
three mile down, square
of mackerel, striper's pavement,
plaza where flounder bite the sky;
and six miles out, sixty yards astern,
we tasted salt together in the turgid wake
when I chased my Red Sox cap
and you chased me in much
too quick sobriety.

Voice hangs
every which way hours:
Crow a little bit when in luck.
Pay up, shut up, own up when you lose.
Running begins in the heart, not the knee,
not the density of thigh, slight puff of calf.
(Turning thirteen, rushing downstairs
for annual gift, your handing me
the hammer): From now on
you drive the nails
hereabouts.

The fist-burst
in the 1:00 A.M. yard,

moon with cloud robe, peer
of cat eyes, my catching four clenched
hands of thugs; God knows how you made the back
door, concrete onyx for retinas, white cane
in parier thrust and swish: Work him, Tom!
Work him! Work him! Gut of the Corps
coming like an erection.
You never knew there
were two of them.
You cried in
black eyes.

In 1945
white-water snows
came hard as spring Allagash,
broke the backs of buses, plows,
tore hearts of tractors out, spilled
black blood, held the crocus six weeks back.
Icicle at your heart, snow writhing as spiders
at hip-line, brood-bent, you swam six miles
home past knotted crankcases, fell in
the back door. I knifed the mackinaw
off, the iron laces of boots.
Kissed you cold on kitchen
floor, rubbed my emery
hands on threatened
skin.

4

In one giant
leap, went sixteen to fifty,

found response, am still there.
Walked home from war, heartbreak,
the hill above that holds your voice,
Riverside, where the stone deftly scribed
is hardly your last sign, where we
will touch again
underground.

EXCAVATION

Call it fen,
swamp or bog,
black sump hole,
Land's End,
The Pit,
underside.

Ore was its crop
three centuries ago;
thick gobs floated out
on sweat of servitude,
small sea of ache.
The arthritic hand
curved its thumb on pole
or welded to palm
in configuration change.

Layered in
for all the digging,
tiered as evidence
in the skilled twist of artifact,
are piece parts of man
who floated iron out;
he who lost his grip
is still holding on,
lies muddied, mortared down
in walls is the maker of walls.

Justice was a quick choke
down in the wet pit,
bog bottom
if there was a bottom.

Once we emptied
a dory of rope
and never touched
the last part down,

but a schoolmate did
long time ago.

THE HOUR FALLING LIGHT TOUCHES RINGS OF IRON

You must remember,
Pittsburgh is not like this,
would never have been found
without the rod bending right here,
sucked down by the earth.
This is not the thick push
of the three rivers' water
hard as name calling...
Allegheny, Susquehanna
and the old Monongahela;

this is the Saugus,
cut by Captain Kidd's keel,
bore up the ore barge
heavy from Nahant.
The Atlantic bends up its curves
to touch at our feet.
Slag makes a bucket bottom,
iron rings feed the water
ferric oxides, clouds of rust.

But something here there is
pale as diviner's image,
a slight knob of pull
at a forked and magic willow.

Smoke floats a last breath
over the river road,
the furnace bubbles
acidically.

Tonight the moon
crawls out of Vinegar Hill,
the slag pile
has a thousand eyes of shining,

charcoal and burnt lime
thrust thick as wads
up a nose.

Sound is the moon
burning iron again,
paled embers
of a diviner's image
loose in the night.

You must remember
Pittsburgh is not like this.

IRON WROUGHT ACCESSORIES

It is only sad nights
after long falling-down sad days
that I hear the angular
and inordinate breathing
of bellows' leather
and the greaseless roll
of waterwheel axle
sounding like old barn doors
in an economy of wind.

I think of a sooty black
Scotsman, rushed off a moor
or tarn, obligated
to an ore barrow
by servitude
as vile as cancer,
the haunt of heather
smelling up his
sleepless nights,

or a boy
soft in the face,
hard brown in arms
leather-tough,
dreaming of books,
how words run into magic
in a corner of his mind,
a little each day
breaks down,
breaks down.

The quill snaps
without the hand grasp.
Iron pours from a sea-green vapor
into sow bars in sand molds.

Someone besides the Scotsman
or the boy, slams the hammer
to fine cut nails, draws down
to doctor an ax head, a hinge,
an edge for cutting.

The furnace is like that,
there are hot spots,
cool spots, a degree
of happening. More
than wood burns,
more than lime
passes on;

a heart, an infusible desire,
a short sigh of a word
breaking in every component—
IRON—IRON—IRON!

HAMMERSMITH LEVELS

i.

The probe rode hit down,
shouldered its stem
through slag, cinders,
three centuries of Saugus,

kettle parts jig-sawed
into debris, clay pipes
in mushroom pieces,
man chips of landfill.

We dug, pried rocks,
bilge-pumped earth hole
of gathered rain
ribbed the toss-out,

found erosion's ritual.
Cannonballs came whole
with wormed rind,
early gearage mystery.

In hole bottoms,
side walls planked,
remnants tale talking,
we started down again

to claim virgin soil.
Stone walls X'd underwalls,
layers of downed Troy,
laminates of search,

period blankets,
era blindfolds;
earth-wash and tumble,
death of generations.

ii.

I learned the shovel,
yield and yaw on thigh,
the stretch of ash,
overhead toss,

quarter jerk of left arm,
propeller sweep of right
from deep shoulder hinge,
answer of the blade.

The digging doctor,
archeologist,
rode his frame
on probing rod,

passed through nineteenth
and eighteenth centuries
like minor intersections,
drove to 1645,

heard artifacts
red-light up the shaft,
drew a circle for new dig,
urged us on, lit eyes.

iii.

Young, zest ballooned,
shovelfuls of girl dreams,
a time between wars
that held our innocence,

we engendered blades
in clean energies.
Stripped time mask,
pealed earth back,

went to beginnings:
pot, pistol, pachyderm
of water wheel base,
tools flung live to clay,

lock and latch pieces
layered in mosaic hardpan,
blue-gray densities
that dulled blade and mind,

sweat commemorating
300 years of stain,
muscle vibration
sounding underfoot,

found established death.
Now, reconstructed,
sitting on itself,
it starts decomposing.

HAMMERSMITH, 1645

I am knuckled
into mystery here,
mist rise blooms
slag pile, cinder bank,

bare antique sweat,
steam-frothed ore feeders,
deep char of woodsmen,
cries of exultant mixer.

The iron master
draws down the sow,
new world pig—
plow, blade and nail.

Bog, stripped of ore,
empty as the quitted nest,
keeps its victims,
deep, muddied, devilled.

Sea and earth give up
rock, lime and shell,
what promises iron—
plow, blade and nail.

Who fed the furnace throat,
cut timber, cracked fingers
at the yield of ore,
squared the first nail?

Who rigged whalesize bellows,
set tree-long shaft
where rode the water wheel,
who measured lime on lime?

Swordsman, dreamer, alchemist,
stripped to the waist,
watching sow give young,
and afterbirths of slag.

I love gray dawn,
bloom of lead sheets
curved into air,
the old ritual.

THE RAGS OF WAR

Just Walko and Williamson and Sheehan
sitting in the night drinking beer
cooled in the Imjin River waters,
three men clad in the rags of war
in August in 1951 in Korea.

Night sat down on them, huge body squeeze
of a ponderous god resting on the world,
while stars in slow patrol on horizon flanks
cocked themselves like slingshot pellets.

August night gives itself away, tells tales,
slays the rose in reeling carnage, murders sleep,
sucks moisture out of earth, fires hardpan,
sometimes does not die itself just before dawn,
makes strangers in ones' selves,
those who wear the rags of war.

They were strangers beside each other,
strangers in the crush of night and star flanks,
accidents of men drinking beer cooled
in the bloody waters where brothers swim forever,
strangers come to that place by fantastic voyages,
carried by generations of the persecuted or
adventurous,
carried in sperm body, dropped in the spawning
cavern
of America, and born to wear the rags of war.

Walko, reincarnate of the Central European,
come of land lovers and those who scatter grain seeds,
bones like logs, wrists strong as axletrees,
fair and blue eyed, prankster, ventriloquist
who talked off mountainside, rumor monger for fun,
heart of the hunter, hide of the herd, apt killer,
born to wear the rags of war.

Williamson, faceless in the night, black on black,
only teeth like piano keys, eyes that caught stars,
fine nose got from Rome through rape or slave bed
unknown generations back, was cornerback tough,
graceful as ballet dancer (Walko's opposite),
hands that touched his rifle the way a woman's
touched,
or a doll, or your own child caught in fever clutch,
came sperm-tossed across the cold Atlantic,
some elder Virginia-bound bound in chains,
the Congo Kid come home, the Congo Kid
born to wear the rags of war.

Sheehan, reluctant at trigger pull, dreamer,
told lies with dramatic ease, entertainer
who wore the ghosts he carried in him,
heard the myth and the promise in the earth
and the words of songs he never knew,
carried scars he vaguely knew as his own,
shared his body with saint and sinner,
born to wear the rags of war.

They put their souls out on serving trays,
mixed the food of self with beer and beer,
lay drawn and quartered in every cell, dream,
coughed up the meat of their hearts
to fill the inside straight of a story
that brought them to the rags of war.

Walko:

We lost the farm. Somebody stole it.
My father loved the fields, sweating.
He used to watch stuff grow by starlight.
The mill's where he went for work,
in the crucible, drawing on the green vapor,
right in the heat of it, the miserable heat.
My mother said he started dying the first day.
It wasn't the heat or the green vapor did it,
just going off to the mill, grassless, tight in.
The system took him. He wanted to help.
It took him and killed him a little each day,
just smothered him. I kill easy. Memory does it.
I was born for this, to wear these rags.
The system gives, then takes away.
I'll never go piecemeal like my father.
These rags are my last home.

Williamson:

Know why I'm here? I'm from North Carolina.
I'm sixteen and big and wear size fifteen shoes
and my town drafted me instead of a white boy.

Chaplain says he'll get me home. Shit! Be dead then.
Used to hunt home, had to eat what was fun running
down.

Brother shot my sister and a white boy in the woods.
They were skinning it up against a tree.

Run home and kissed momma goodbye, give me his
gun.

Ten years and no word. Momma cries about both of
them.

Can't remember my brother's face. Even my sister's.
Can feel his gun, though, right here in my hands.
Long and smooth and honey touch. Squirrel's left eye
never too far away for that good old gun.

Them white men back home know how good I am,
send me here, put these rags on me. Two wrongs:
Send me too young and don't send my gun with me.

I'm going to fix it all up. I'm going to get home.
They don't think I'm coming back, them white men.
They be a little nervous when I get back, me and my
rags

and that good old gun my brother give me.

Sheehan:

Stories are my food. I live and lust on them.
Spirits abound in the family, indelible eidolons.
The O'Sheehaughn and the Igo carved a myth.
I wear their scars in my soul, know the music
that ran over them in lifetimes, songs' words.
And the strangers that are not strangers:
Muse Devon abides with me, moves in the blood

and the bag of my heart, whispers tonight:
Corimin is in my root cell, oh bright beauty
of all that has come upon me, chariot of cheer,
carriage of Cobh where the graves are,
where my visit found the root of the root cell—
Johnny Igo at ten running ahead of the famine
that took brothers and sister, lay father down;
sick in the hold of ghostly ship I have seen
from high rock on Cobh's coast, in the hold
heard the myths and musics he would spell
all his life, remembering hunger and being alone
and brothers and sister and father gone
and mother praying for him as he knelt
beside her final bed that hard morning
when Ireland went away to the stern.
I know that terror of hers last touching his face.
Pendalcon's grace comes on us all at the end.
Johnny Igo came alone at ten and made his way
across the face of Columbia, got my mother
who got me and he told me when I was twelve
that Columbia would need my hand and I must give.
And tonight I say, "Columbia, I am here with my
hands
and with my rags of war."

I came home alone.
And they are my brothers.
Walko is my brother.
Williamson is my brother.
Devon is my brother.
Corimin is my brother.

Pendalcon is my brother.
God is my brother.
And I am a brother to all who are dead.
We all wear the rags of war.