SAVING LIVES:
A COLLECTION
OF POEMS

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PREFACE

In their introduction to The Existential Imagination, Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian attempt to treat the primary dilemma of the modern man. Confronting the idea of the subjectivity of truth, they state that "the true hero of our time is the man who can accept absolute responsibility."[1] Accordingly, if the search for truth and knowledge is internal, subjective, then "nothing can be certain except the individual's certainty of his own response."[2] What they are working toward is the idea that when the human sensibility perceives the chaos, the Conradian "horror" lurking beneath the veneer of our social existence, nothing has any ultimate value except the self. Thus, the search for external order and meaning takes us nowhere; order is created, rather arbitrarily, from the disorder of human experience; and in the final analysis the world is a plane of despair on which "objects may be meaningless and reason absurd."[3]

At least in part, most of the poems in Saving Lives deal with this existential dilemma. I intend for the title of the collection to reflect this concern, albeit with more optimism than the bulk of the poetry actually contains. In other words, what I generally see in the world is what I ultimately wish for these poems to convey--an urge toward

survival and adaptation. David Wagoner addresses the situation this way in "Staying Alive":

> Staying alive in the woods is a matter of calming down
> At first and deciding whether to wait for rescue,
> Trusting to others,
> Or simply to start walking and walking in one direction
> Till you come out--or something happens to stop you.
>
> By far the safer choice
> Is to settle down where you are, and try to make a
> living
> Off the land, camping near water, away from shadows.[4]

Of course, as my poems indicate, the process of living offers us a multitude of possibilities (both good and bad) and demands varied responses. Those means which sustain one person probably will not work for others and might, in fact, repel or even harm others. In many cases, too, there develops a kind of Joycean "paralysis," or a total, self-destructive urge, an inability to live which might draw the characters "to suicide or some form of death-in-life, or perhaps to a perception of the problem without any possibility of resolution."[5] Strangely, despite all the beauty and affirmation I might otherwise see in the world, I have chosen these paralyzed situations and these damned, terrified people as the subjects of Saving Lives.

Believing, as Theodore Roethke did, that "To go forward (as spiritual man) it is necessary first to go back,"[6] I have begun this collection with a section entitled "Going Home." I am aware that, since these poems were not written to conform to any specific thematic grouping, the arrange-

ment is rather arbitrary. There are similarities and connections, to be sure; but some poems in one section might operate equally well in another. Nevertheless, these pieces in "Going Home" do represent, in one way or another,--and no matter how obliquely--many of the aspects of my life which I have come to consider my "shaping factors." "Adam's Dream" serves well to initiate my treatment of these formative influences. It is a poem in which I have tried to envision anew one of the principal myths of all cultures: the creation of humankind. Here, also, I am trying to establish a pattern for an objective rendering of the conflict that will emerge as more or less central in Saving Lives. For "Adam's Dream" implies that male-female relationships, although undeniably creative, are laden with dangers, fears, and uncertainties. Thus, when the dream comes to life, the dream comes to an end, and the world is truly re-created.

My observations have convinced me that most people cope with their lives by allying themselves with others, usually in a sexual relationship. In the formation of any relationship or association something must be lost (although something new is usually created), either through force or in willing surrender. In "Magic, I," one of a pair of poems I have attempted which use the magician as my motif (the other being slighter and therefore excluded from this collection), I pursue the idea that the archetypal assistant, far from being the vacuous tinsel she portrays, is in fact

the controlling agent. The man-magician, instead of dominating the action as we expect, becomes the victim. As in "Adam's Dream," this man has taken another person into his life and, in so doing, has surrendered his destiny into her hands, both literally and metaphorically. Even the familiar milieu of the stage drifts beyond his power once he becomes dependent upon someone else.

"Aubade: Going to Sleep" is a brief poem which merely hints at the darker side of a relationship. Such an implication is intended in the title, a reversal of the usual expectations of the aubade tradition: going to sleep instead of waking. The Smoky Mountain setting, with its unseasonal cold and its shadows, insinuates that something ominous is operating, something beyond the control of the lovers, that will doom what they have made. Their lives, it seems to me, are not yet lost, but most assuredly will be. Similarly, in "Waterfall," the lovers have the moment and each other, but the situation is unsettled. The woman has been crying. The dreamer, the barrel-rider, feels the cold before he falls and sees the woman from a clearer distance. In spite of the poem's optimistic upturn--"That it is warm even in these mountains"--the reader shares the man's new knowledge of possible separation. The end of his dreamride, in contrast to the calm of the lake and despite his awakening on the platform beside her, brings a pain sharper than any broken ribs.

The next four poems take the issue forward in time.

The separation has already occurred and the narrator--who is essentially the same man in each of these four poems--is speaking from the knowledge of his experience. "Poem for Young Men" offers a warning. It is a cry that rises from the harshness of his reality. He is alone and damaged; he wishes to share what he knows. In "Psychotic, Waking" his language has turned to despair and self-deprecation as he finds himself inadequate to stave off, alone, the horrors of his world. In other words--and within the context of the existential problem--he has become a "man who must live within the shadow of death, or else perish from boredom"[7] and terror. He has depended totally upon another for his support, and when the props are gone he finds that he cannot survive on his own. His is no new situation; it borders on the cliché. But for him it is unique and terrifying, and as a result his perceptions become so distorted--sounds and sights magnified and unreal--that even the most familiar environment has turned alien and threatening. "Giving Away the Cat" explains his situation. "On Hearing That My First Wife Has Become a Stewardess" presents his almost bitter rationalization of his condition. He interprets her departure as something sexual; he sees her motives as petty at best, hollow and selfish at worst. He is attempting to salvage his sanity by strengthening his position on some vague moral grounds: she will never be able to satisfy herself because her dreams, although attainable, have no real value and will lead nowhere, regardless of her freedom and

means to go everywhere.

Beginning with "Rain in Cedar Mountain," this first section takes a sudden turn. The setting, again in the Smoky Mountains , indicates that there is something ominous at work. The persona is again unsettled; he sees some deliberate, threatening force behind the mechanics of the universe. The rain is predictably regular. Mist shrouds everything, on the highway and in the valley. One more time, it seems as if an unknown evil must befall him. Likewise, in "In Pursuit," even the beast who operates in obedience to his instincts can fall prey to his own hunting. Here the dog succumbs (with a kind of poetic justice) to the wiles of the rabbit. What is building up in these poems, therefore, is an attitude that the universe is unilaterally hostile or, at the very best, indifferent.

If the world is indeed uncaring, and if the forces that operate above and/or behind it are malevolent or capricious, then the problem is insurmountable. What, then, is man to do? "Spring, Saturday Suburbia, 1975" documents a few of the most commonly accepted methods of coping with the environment. In this poem the narrator, with a hint of disdain and condescension, views his immediate world one spring afternoon. One neighbor imposes order upon his lands; another buttresses the fortress of his hedges. The world is alive and creating. But the narrator interprets all of its components as matters only to be scorned. Children's voices are intrusive; the mating dogs are barely more

than curiosities; the primal energies of the squirrels are observed dispassionately. Although the neighbors have--perhaps without thinking--chosen accepted means for structuring their lives, the narrator is no better off, and possibly is worse off, for he is withdrawn, isolated, entrenched behind his essentially clinical viewpoint, and lacking sufficient passion to feel even as much as do the dogs and the squirrels. Denying everything, he has left himself nothing.

Turning back again, the poems reach into memory, first toying with Freudian father-conflict ("Father's Knife") and the fear of castration, then considering the disillusion that comes when the strength of religion--here, Christianity--fails (in "The Man from the Cave"). In "To My Student Who Wears God on a Chain" I attempt to dramatize the negative, if not condescending, attitude that results from this disillusionment, although I do try to undercut the seriousness of the subject by adding hints of sexuality. But in the following poem, "Exile," I have tried, through the use of an objective, third-person narrator, to present an objective rendering of this narrator (that is, the narrator of "Father's Knife" and "To My Student Who Wears God on a Chain") as he might see himself in clearer moments. Without being directly called a failure, he is portrayed as a paragon of defeat, the isolated and unsuccessful artist. Then, in "The Reunion," I turn back to the past one more time to reinforce the separation of the son from the father.

The sanctuaries of youth have been supplanted by the wife, who clearly indicates her dominant position with the blasting of the car's horn. The father knows the truth: it is one of the many wars he has lived through. In one quick shot she embodies the reality of "Adam's Dream" and the magician's master.

"For Stephanie, My Niece, Age 3" is a prayer-poem, as I see it. Here I wish for her to enjoy the successes that I have not had and for her to be uplifted by whatever knowledge and skill she can glean from me. I wish also that she recognize that life is a series of games, with the rules and reasons not always fixed and identifiable. Perhaps here I outstep the poem; but my intentions were that she should know, without too much pain, what I have had to learn piecemeal. As in "An Open Poem to the Son I Do Not Have," I want to tell someone what I believe to be the hard truth. In my niece I have seen the vehicle for the further communication of this truth, in a different voice, should I fail.

Throughout all the rambling of this first section of poems--and, granted, it is a section of loose parts--I have tried to reach backwards and with honesty into those elements which, I believe, have shaped me and my poetry. At times, the narrator of these poems seems to be me; at times, he is an observer, a created self who sees and speaks for me. In any event, I freely admit to the autobiographical aspects of these poems. They are, in no small fashion, part

of my journey home. And in the title poem for this section, "Going Home," a poem distilled from many memories, I try to hit at two major themes which I hope have unified the loose marriage of the preceding eighteen poems: that there was a time of certainty and security in my life, and that time has clearly passed, as it apparently must for everyone; and that the ways of the world are such that fortune ("the cold hard turning of the wheel") unfolds our lives absolutely, and beyond our control.

If our lives are beyond our control, I believe nevertheless that there are those parts of it which we can mold on our own. In the second section of this collection, "Waiting to Leave," I try in a few of the poems to show other aspects of my heritage. "Banjo" and "Carrying Rocks," for examples, are poems of the South and the land. They are places I can never leave. On the other hand, "Cold Language in Fiji" and "Beyond the Breakers" portray people who find themselves in situations--again, beyond their control, apparently--from which they would prefer to escape. Perhaps it is our way of life that I am criticizing here, for the thrust of "Banjo" is toward a more primitive, basic existence, and "Carrying Rocks" speaks out for independence and freedom of choice and action. Nevertheless, in "Night Music" I try to observe that the world "out there"--whether a world of real things or a world of dreams--is a hostile world, a place in which living creatures kill other living creatures, often without warning and always without explana-

tion. Yet it is a world with its own peculiar order.

If we can interpret that order, and if we can adapt it to our purposes, or else adapt ourselves and our needs to it, then perhaps we can live more harmoniously, not only with other humans but also with all other living beings. On at least one level, "The View from the Forest" attempts to dramatize such a problem. Echoing Wallace Stevens (in what I hope is not too heavy-handed a fashion), this poem, the most ambitious of my early works, tries to establish a link between the ways of the "real" world and the power of imagination, at the same time stressing the belief, as I stated above, that there is a natural arrangement of matters in our non-human environment. What I hope for in this poem is some kind of revelation that, since man is supposedly the only rational, thinking organism on this planet, he possesses a power to alter that should be tempered by the ability and willingness to adapt. Of course, on other levels the poem deals with the "relativity" of all human endeavors and the belief that, ultimately, all things have no value in themselves. And, in some strange way, I see the poem as bearing an optimistic statement: there <u>is</u> an order (the imagery of concentric circles, for example), and the human imagination can indeed alter the perception, if not the reality of the world.

The remaining eight poems in this second section are concerned with various individuals in specific situations, except for "The Calm of a Dream" in which the situation is

kept deliberately vague in an attempt to create instead a state of mind. But the commonality of these poems rests on a single factor: each of the characters is on the verge of some kind of change or departure. Walking along some type of "edge" (a term I long ago borrowed from Roethke and which I generally employ to denote the state of mind that is created when the consciousness is unsettled), these people are prepared to leave, or are ripe to leave, either on a physical journey or on some voyage to (or toward) mental discovery. Their worlds, although perhaps settled in a conventional sense, are tottering. "Her Love in Winter Woods," for example, places a lonely woman in an isolated setting, in a potentially hostile environment, from which she sends out signals to anyone--her dream, her lover, anyone--in the hope that she might be rescued. Clark, the man in "Going Places," in spite of his constant, habitual motion, is obviously going nowhere. The narrator of "The Dance" (with its ominous epigraph from Julius Caesar) seems to see in the object of his venom some trait or characteristic that he himself may bear. In "Memo to Myself," one of the few successful poems that survive from my divorce, the narrator considers--and then discards, in a way that I still find to be optimistic--various methods of suicide. Through a survey of certain means for death, he nonetheless finds reason to remain alive. And in "Waiting to Leave," a blank verse piece, I consider a man who is about to depart on some journey. I am attempting to search beneath his conscious

level to discover what has brought him to where he is. As Clinton Keeler accurately points out, this poem is, in some small way, a kind of homage to Richard Wilbur's "Walking to Sleep" in that I try to probe along that vague "line between waking and sleeping."[8] Even here, in a poem where the interest is different from those poems that deal expressly or secondarily with existential questions, the issue still intrudes, for this man is tightroping some kind of brink in a world he cannot control (as we see in "The voices, hard and polished in the air,/Announcing the arrivals"), a world which frightens and threatens him (the "sweaty wrists" and the lynx), a world which he cannot understand (the things he feels are of "another world").

In spite of the fact that it embodies the major concerns of this collection, and although its twenty poems account for much of the collection's length, the third section, "Saving Lives," somehow requires less discussion than the two preceding sections. Here at least there is a more overt thematic unity, for each of these poems deals with a character who is searching for, or who has already discovered, some means of survival, a way to save his or her life at whatever cost. In some poems, the method is through imagination and creation ("2 A. M., incense, a quart of gin, my dog with a bone"); in others, the means are conventional, ranging from decorum (as in "The Kid Who Delivered the Flowers") to religion, or the cry for religion (as in "Priest, Priest"); and in others, the manner is deadly (as

in "Walpurgis" and "The Man Who Understands Women").

This last, "deadly" category is the one that interests me the most. What I have come to believe is that, for whatever reason, some people best cope with their world by infringing (whether they can help it or not) upon the lives of others. In these mostly recent poems, I am trying to understand better, by dramatizing, the workings of the mentality that we most generally call psychotic. "Walpurgis" first opened me to this subject, for I could not understand what would cause a person to commit murder, much less cause a man to murder his son. Accordingly, I tried to enter that consciousness, by re-creating it, in order to determine what reasons there were, if any. From that beginning, and several years later, I stumbled upon a character--actually a composite of several real people--who has, at least for a while, become central in my writing: the mass murderer, the "Codger," who because of some vague, obscure burning has the urge, compulsion, or necessity to kill and kill again. As far as I can determine, his actions are his means of relating to his environment and to other people; he is often created by forces beyond his control (as in "Magic, I"); he is reacting to his life and surroundings in the way that he knows best, with violence, and the reasons that he believes are the causes of his actions may not, in fact, be the true reasons. He cannot escape; he is waiting to leave for nowhere. He often thinks that he understands both himself and others. However, as I describe

and probe him in "The Man Who Understands Women" (by alternating the objective narrator's perceptions, in the odd-numbered sections, with the killer's voice, in the even-numbered ones), it is revealed that he knows much less than he realizes or would be willing to accept; he certainly understands women no more than he knows himself. He is almost a terrified beast, a sub-human at times, who howls when he is not prowling bars. But at the base of all that he does rests the urge or instinct to survive. Thus, at the end of the poem, he waits, primitive, like a hunter, for "the creation of the earth." In other words, like the rest of the characters in this section (although he certainly is the extreme), he is living and coping as best he can.

Occasionally I stray from this idea and the characters who dramatize it. In one of my own favorite poems, "The True Text of a Last Letter Found by the Woman of the Brujo, Jose Ortiz," I reach out for the mysticism (which I will discuss later) which often sustains me. In this poem--one that I feel is essential to this collection--I create a final message, a letter (which is the poem) left by the brujo to be found by his woman. This magic man, a sorcerer, has powers which allow him to transcend at will the natural world which confines, and actually defines, the rest of us. However, in spite of his strengths--perhaps he is merely tired--he finds the "real" world, the natural, human world, oppressive. He does state that the rational urge has destroyed wonder, rather like the theme of Poe's "Sonnet--to

Science." So for his own reasons he decides to leave, vanishing "into air." And his final, cryptic message to his woman and, through her, to us implies that, although he is nowhere to be found, he is in fact everywhere: "Right as the rain you cradle in your hand." Because he is not bound by natural laws, the brujo has a choice, and he saves his life by disappearing, by becoming something else.

In the final two poems in this collection, I attempt to unite the loose ends that I have dangled. "Turning Thirty in Stillwater, Oklahoma" is a fairly accurate response I made to a period when I, too, was trying to salvage the best things that I could from the edges of my life. The characters I allude to in this poem exhibit the range of the characters in the other poems, from the violent to the lost to the violated. In the end, however, it points me homeward, to the "forests and mountains" of the Southeast.

The title poem of this collection, "Saving Lives," is far more optimistic than the vision I have exhibited in the other poems. It is here that I profess, concisely, my faith in the natural way of things. By incorporating the four classical elements--the order here is fire, water, air, and earth--I hope to stress the point that there is some immutable order to this universe. This is a belief that I feel but cannot articulate clearly outside of the boundaries of this poem. In the end, I know, the universe will win. But the losing is a process in which we, like the characters in Hemingway's best work, can find some manner of triumph. All

that we need to do is to "Move deliberately/There."

Thus far I have attempted to provide some sketchy meaning for most of the fifty-three poems in this collection. George Garrett once told me that after the writing of the poems was completed, the most fun would come from arranging a collection. I do not find that to be the case; the process of arrangement is hard work for me, trying to place ideas into groups and groups into sequence. Writing about the poems creates yet another level of labor, for having said the things once, in one way, I find it painful to say them again in a different, expanded fashion. To speak of influences and to try to place, even vaguely, my writing into the context of a tradition creates another problem for me.

Agreeing with Theodore Roethke, I believe that "most knowledge of technique is acquired obliquely."[9] Also, like Jim Peterson, I generally feel that "the poet's view of his poem is from the inside out" and that "due to faulty memory or wishful thinking I am often something of a liar."[10] Nevertheless, as I review the shape and progress of my writing, from the adolescent droolings to the recent psychotic probings, I find that my influences--those of which I am aware--are many and varied.

I do believe that, overall, my poetry is more formal and traditional than it is not. As an example I point to the blank verse of "Waiting to Leave." Early, I immersed myself in Poe, was force-fed Longfellow, and rhapsodized

with Shelley. Through the process of memorization and repetition, I suppose that their sense of rhythm--although both then and now I totally discount Longfellow--managed to seep into my style. Thus, when I came to Eliot, I had sufficient traditional experience to allow me to learn from him how to modify and control the rhythm and flow of the line. Now I can summarize my style fairly simply: although my tendency is toward free verse, I am fully conscious of my use of rhythm. My lines are formed largely of anapests (I respond to the sense of motion, or flow, that the anapest imparts to a line) and iambs (which I find to be closest to natural speech patterns); and my poems usually contain three or four stresses in each line. Generally, my poems do not rhyme; but occasionally I do use rhyme (as I do in "Banjo," for example, rhyming the first strong stress in the second line of each stanza with the last word in the fourth line of each stanza), particularly when I wish to link or emphasize certain sounds or ideas embodied in the words. Beyond these generalizations, it is hard for me to say where and when I learned anything about metrical technique, or from whom.

When I discovered Whitman, I suppose that I was no different from most people in my glorying in the free verse line. Without knowing what I was doing, I imitated, inept as an ape. I had yet to learn, in my adolescence, about the union of form and content. But after high school and through college I wrote and wrote, reading all the while in

those people to whom I then looked for my "models" (I lack the best word): e. e. cummings, Wallace Stevens (who taught me, among other things, about the use of color and gaudy language), and T. S. Eliot. And later, in graduate school for the first time, having waited longer than most, I discovered the beauty and grace of Robert Frost, Theodore Roethke, and James Dickey (who learned from Roethke, as I did, of the dynamics of the anapest).

Now I read widely from the contemporary poets, mostly the Americans, sampling much and discarding most. I feel a deep kinship with Wendell Berry and his knowledge that from the land we all take our lives, like it or not. W. S. Merwin showed me the power of the "imaginative leap," the vast connections that the mind and eye can make when given the freedom to operate. Like Dickey and Roethke, he underscores my belief that there is a unity around us and, perhaps, above us, that all things connect and somehow form a whole. (In this respect I also read Richard Hugo, one of Roethke's students, whose poetry presents much of the vastness and grandeur of this world and whose use of the long, slow line deeply interests me.) From Greg Kuzma I have learned how to create a "quick-take" and exit gracefully, not without the taste of the pun. From George Garrett I have learned the importance of wit and humor; in both his life and his writing he has clearly showed me that self-consciousness and too much seriousness are the true murderers of art and passion.

To select the major forces behind my writing--and I suppose that such forces could, in fact, be called the aspects of my "tradition"--I must remain with Frost, Eliot, and Roethke (in fact, "Below the Cliff" is a piece in which I thankfully echo him). Perhaps they taught me the same things: that language can be colloquial or conversational and yet be poetic; that rhythm can be regular and still not become intrusive; that the image is the essence of the poem, but that it is not the whole of the poem; that the stuff of poetry is the world around us, whether dream or real, and not necessarily the realm of the ideal; that real people must inhabit real poems; and that the accumulation of images, the juxtaposing of image against image, will, like cinema, manipulate the audience and produce predictable and desired effects.

My existential tendencies notwithstanding, I feel that it is appropriate to call myself mystical. Perhaps I mean romantic. At any rate, I generally believe that there are some truths that we can know intuitively; and I believe that there is probably more to this universe than we can perceive through the senses. Therefore, I constantly discover strange kinships everywhere, both in and out of the world of literature. Walt Whitman shows me this in many ways: "I see in them and myself the same old law."[12] Wordsworth and Emerson add respectability to such a faith; and, for me, this faith adds a deeper meaning to the natural world. In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard quotes

Huston Smith: "In nature the emphasis is in what is rather than what ought to be."[12] Like her, I "learn this lesson in a new way every day."[13] But my belief in wider possibilities allows me to marvel also at things that might be (just as I do in "The True Text of a Last Letter Found by the Woman of the Brujo, Jose Ortiz"). And these possibilities add manifold dimensions to my poetry, just as Roethke did when he showed me that the urge for life pervades all things in this world, both the animate and the inanimate.

For a long period in my life I read intensively about Zen and eastern mysticism, finding strength and order in the delight amid chaos when I could create no order on my own. This study led me outside, certainly, to the natural world, but it also took me to other books with a greater receptiveness. In the often derided series by Carlos Casteneda, I discovered a wondrous ingenuousness that coincided with my own. From him I learned, among many other things, two important lessons: that a warrior must live deliberately (hence, the last two lines of "Saving Lives"), learning "to balance the terror of being a man with the wonder of being a man"[14]; and that "seeing" is a difficult process predicated upon the belief that on this earth there is indeed the possibility of a reality different from the one which we have been acculturated to believe is "normal" (Casteneda devotes almost the whole of his second book, A Separate Reality, to this premise).[15]

In many ways, I see my writing as an attempt to come

to grips with this possibility, for to do so, I feel, is again to echo Annie Dillard: "my God what a world. There is no accounting for one second of it."[16] And bearing in mind William Faulkner's admonition that

> any writer is a congenital liar incapable of telling the truth, and so even he can never say how much he embroidered, imagined anything because he simply could not take any fact he saw and let it alone[18]

I hope that in some way Saving Lives is a successful accounting for my small part of this world.

Many of the people to whom I am indebted--teachers, writers, friends--have already been mentioned in this preface; but there are some thanks that need to be spread out again, and some to be offered for the first time. First, I would like to acknowledge the following publications in which many of these poems initially appeared: Poetry Northwest ("Adam's Dream," "An Open Poem to the Son I Do Not Have," "Walpurgis"), Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards: Best Poems of 1976 ("Adam's Dream," reprinted from Poetry Northwest), Kudzu ("Waterfall," "To My Student Who Wears God on a Chain," "Cold Language in Fiji"), Intro/4 ("Father's Knife," "The Man from the Cave," "Kismet," "The Kid Who Delivered the Flowers"), Intro/5 ("The Reunion"), The New Orleans Review ("Going Home"), Sam Houston Literary Review ("Banjo," "Carrying Rocks," "Night Music"), Yearbook of Modern Poetry--1976 ("Beyond the Breakers"), St. Andrews Review ("The View from the Forest"), South Dakota Review ("On Hearing That My First Wife Has Become a Stewardess,"

"Going Places"), Mississippi Review ("The Dance"), Southern Poetry Review ("Taking Pictures"), Cimarron Review ("Waiting to Leave"), Southern Review ("2 A. M., incense, a quart of gin, my dog with a bone").

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and who gives it all meaning. These poems are for them.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian, eds., The Existential Imagination (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1963), p. 11.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., p. 10.

[4]David Wagoner, Collected Poems, 1956-1976 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 54.

[5]Karl and Hamalian, p. 18.

[6]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., ed., Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 142.

[7]Karl and Hamalian, p. 27.

[8]Clinton C. Keeler, "Foreword," Cimarron Review, XLIX (July, 1978), p. 3.

[9]Ralph J. Mills, Jr., ed., On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 50.

[10]James E. Peterson, Jr., "Separations" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1978), pp. 1-2.

[11]James E. Miller, Jr., ed., Whitman's "Song of Myself": Origin, Growth, Meaning (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1964), p. 21.

[12]Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1974), p. 244.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Carlos Casteneda, Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 315.

[15]Carlos Casteneda, A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1971).

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CHAPTER I

GOING HOME

ADAM'S DREAM

In the last male hour
Warm with the change of his sleep
She came from outside his mind

In a birth he could not have known.
Around him were shapes he had named:
Solid tree, quick deer, trusting sheep.

Yet this was something more,
Sliding down the curve of his back,
A hand that wasn't his on his side.

Before this soft light turned the earth
He had lain in his dreams without fear.
But the terror that rests in us now

Sprang then for the first time in him.
The forest floor rolled with a heat
He sensed, but without name or form,

And the sun framed the world new again.
And the garden he lived in had died.

MAGIC, I

She's only the magician's helper
But her sequins outshine his black aspect
So in time she forgets that her duty
Is to stand by his side and distract--

Her hands show his tricks in the air,
Then she touches his arm and he's gone
As she captures the stage for her own.
She moves toward the audience, smiling,

Her mouth full of diamonds and pearls;
And she spreads out her fingers displaying
Poker chips, quarters, and balls,
And a tiny black smudge on her thumb.

AUBADE: GOING TO SLEEP

Before the sun brings shadows
We slide easy into long delayed drowsing,
Though light enough to feel
Another's touch, safe in the warmth
The two of us, and blankets, can create.
New day, we know, and we invent
Our own summer in this Smoky
Mountain cabin, never seeing clearly
Our breath hanging like clouds
In the soft steady dark we have made.

WATERFALL

for Phillip and Sharon

Georgia mountains, they say, are cold even in late spring.

Standing together, we are looking out,
Looking down from the platform,
Our hands touching the rail. We are not afraid.
This height is good, and from here we watch the falls
As the water crashes from ledge to ledge,
Kicking up sprays to make rainbows.
The wind brings a clean mountain mist back
Into her face.
Smiling, she wipes her cheek with the back
Of her hand.
No tears this time, she says, just water.
To speak to her I must out-roar the water.
I lean close, shouting into her ear,
And her hair smells like our campfire.
The smell is good to me. We are alive together.
And it is warm even in these mountains.

The same mist sprinkles dots onto my glasses
And blurs her from my sight.
I reach for her, but she has moved away.
I feel myself moving too, inside a barrel,
And I hear someone announce

That I am going over the falls.
"The first man ever to bounce from ledge to ledge."
I tumble down like water, with the water.
"He will float downstream to the lake."
I look through my peephole toward the observation deck.
The world is spinning by, but I see her up there,
With him, touching the rail.
He is talking into her ear.
I shout to her, but the water shouts louder.
Suddenly I jerk over the final crest,
Down onto the final ledge.
"Downhill all the way, now."
All the way into the lake,
Beyond where water slaps into shallow pools of foam.
Things will be smooth there.
But the drop is sharp.
I feel my ribs crack at impact, and water rushes in
Through the fractured staves.
The roaring drowns my screams as I stand beside her
And I know again

That it is warm even in these mountains.

POEM FOR YOUNG MEN

They come in a wind
Spiral
Whirl of other scents

From inside bottles or lamps
Hear our wishes
Anticipate lies
Know fantasies
Keep them
Inside their shirts
With hidden smoother motion

Turn a high-pitched phrase

But lord
The edges they conceal
Flash beyond the vision
Of light

The wound is low
Deep
Felt only long after
And for ages

PSYCHOTIC, WAKING

The shaking grips my hand
An aging friend
I have lately come
To fear

The bottles gone
Dry
Butt after butt burned
Finger close

Excess caffein
The drained cup showing
A stranger's face

A drunken moth
Too close
A beast

Car tires roll so near
My head rattles
With the knowledge of
Dice

GIVING AWAY THE CAT

I slam her silent,
Spinning into the den that lacks
The lion. Vacancy on the shelf
He ate from. No restless cries at night.

Who could miss his turn-about, that pesky
In and out? No need to watch my step
On a porch free of gutted birds and toads,
Headless snakes. One less maw to fill.

And now that the body does not wrap
Spineless against my ankle, calf tickled
By his tail, the small cold pads
Clawless on my naked feet,

I press my eyes and hear her car, no longer
Mine, purr distant down the street.

ON HEARING THAT MY FIRST WIFE HAS BECOME A STEWARDESS

Now that she has her wings, clouds
And sky must seem more real, more
Like untravelled places and sun-tanned
Men she should reach for
Than hard ideas, than the colder
Snows and ice of unexpected southern
Winters. Holding such a short skirt
Down against the airport winds, she climbs
The loading ramp, right hand on top
Of her head, being certain of her cap.
The smile precise, words even more
Prepared, she nods, politely fends, performs
As trained. So well, she knows;
So well the rows of riders love her, satisfied.
But does she dare to serve the dreams
She used to dream? (How soft the air
Can be, yet blast a building down.)
And will the roar and thrust of jets now take her
Up, high and hard, and speed her off again
To other concrete, squealing rubber, landing,
Landing home, of many homes, home free?

AN OPEN POEM TO THE SON I DO NOT HAVE

I understand.
And when you say
You believe in the efficacy of war,
Or do not believe in war,
You will still be my flesh.
I will not turn on you
To rip you, smiling, into useless parts.
And if you one day say to me
You want to be a poet
I will tell you
That to write great poems
You must embrace the dark
And fear the dark;
I will say you must know
The terror of what you cannot see
And love the unseen.

And hurt. I wish you
Not to feel the pain of things
That hurt us all,
And that you know
All our agonies, aching until places
Where your blood does not flow
Are bleeding.
For if you live,

If you must live and die
To write, then you will
Hurt, hurt deeply, and fail
If you do not
Feel the failure of us all.

RAIN IN CEDAR MOUNTAIN

Throughout this small valley
Along the borders of the slopes
The tops of cedars fade
As it grows dark, again,
Before the sun goes down.
Every day this week
At almost three
The rains have come to me.
Today's the same:
Mist thickens
On the highway from Brevard
Melting up the hills
Until the peaks
Are covered too--
Or else the valley
Fills above my head
So I can't see
Through the white
To those deep gray clouds
And jagged margins
Cut by trees
And mountains.

IN PURSUIT

A snap said "Go"
And so he ran
Blind into the places where he lived.
He felt the hot breath at heel

And turned sharp right into the brush;
But the thing behind
Was far beyond the asking
And went straight off at the edge.

Safe, he climbed out head-first slowly,
Glad to feel the firm of earth
Beneath light brown feet
Best made for jumping.

SPRING, SATURDAY SUBURBIA, 1975

The frenzied coupling of dogs, tireless wasps
Chewing out the flat gray stuff of nests,
Squirrels running like cats on fire
Through oak and pine.

It is that time and I have been watching it come.

Next door, the neighbor is mowing his lawn
As the one behind plays hero, slashing his boxwood
Into flat and square defenses.
Again, the mockingbirds drag sticks and string
To hang their home inside my chimney top.
The lucky male swings over one hind leg
And the dogs cling and watch, end to end, primeval.

The laugh of a child, then two, or more,
Comes lightly on a wind that smells of dogwood
Until the smoke of charcoal claims the air.
Stubborn wasps hum and dodge my hand.
And the dogs drop apart, fall flat,
Tongue-tired and empty on the ground.

For it is that time, again,
And I have been watching it come.

FATHER'S KNIFE

The bell rang twice, rang once, rang twice.
Rang once. He looked around.
No one cared to answer in his stead.
(He would if still a man.)
Hung up again. Hung up on.
Dead--phones and men, all.

Ancient too. How many years ago
did he cease birthdays, yet still
labor under the consciousness of age?
As a function of time.
Time passing. Time in motion
while the body stops but still ages.

He dares not answer--rang twice, rang
once, rang twice. Rang once. Hung
again. Each ring simultaneously sounding
with the painful void there
between atrophied thighs. Rang twice,
rang once too much.

THE MAN FROM THE CAVE

We knew that man--
he sold us fruit
for laughter
when we were young
and for sale:
he knew us then.

I felt once
that if he should go
the whole of earth
would swallow god,
spit out the core,
and man would stand alone.

Yet when they closed him up
there was no dark,
although an invisible hand
plucked the sun from the sky
and placed it also in the pit
before they rolled the stone
to conceal the womb of the world.

TO MY STUDENT WHO WEARS GOD ON A CHAIN

Keep your eyes open. The pull
Of ancient wood and nails won't do
Much longer. As the class demands
Ideas, I see your smile come
And go, your forehead clench,
Unclench, relax. Relax. How
Tired you must now be, gold
Chain catching the light; silver
Ring, my glance. Can your long hair
Hide the light for me? for you?
Coming to peace is long, and
You must know: such a hanging weight
Pulls us all head-first down.

EXILE

The windows are solid brick.
The only door no longer swings,
Board-and-nailed tight as pressed eyes.
The air inside has grown thick,
Inhaled again and again, alive with the wings
He hears when he speaks to himself,
The wrinkled papers, the desk he abhors,
Or the crush of unwritten books that lie
Exploded over the bed and floor.
He adds a modest volume to the sagging shelf.

THE REUNION

My father sat across from me,
telling ageless tales of war
and love;
I threw stones at a tree.

He went beside me down the slope
to the edge of the lake.
The grass was cool and wet, at first,
bathing my bare feet.
Then scattered bits of slate
cut hard. I winced
but tried to walk
as if I did not feel the pain.

Up on the hill
my wife waited in the car.
She blew the horn.
I hurried, leaving him behind
again.
The car rolled loudly
up the gravel road.
I waved to his back.

Clutching his cat,
he climbed the concrete steps

up to his door,

back into all his wars.

FOR STEPHANIE, MY NIECE, AGE 3

Unknowing, you have taken more
Than my name. I tell myself,
As I too often tell my friends,
What a poet you will be;
And how, though new to speech,
You have captured now
The names and moves of chess.

All those games
Will be easy, later, for your
Having learned them early.
I tell your mother
Of my second-hand pride.
She tells me
With her face how it feels.
Ah, I know

Her smile; we have this
In common, growing up with it.
And your sister, yes,
You can move for her
Until she learns to do it
For herself. And I.

With no more than words,

Wish you this,
Give you this poem,
A small piece for knowing
Proper gambits, middle-game,
End-game strategy: Make

Better songs and moves for me,
Using more than the world
Allows women: hands and eyes
Without shame, take
This pen from my hand,
Re-write my name again.

GOING HOME

Down the road, lying with my face
Pressed into my father's lap, the wheel
He held claiming most of the space.
But I squeezed in, bending up
My knees, with the rest of my form
On the seat and in my mother's
Lap, not comfortable, but warm.
And they would sing together
Old songs. And I still can feel
Their soft strong hands on me again
And the cold hard turning of the wheel.

CHAPTER II

WAITING TO LEAVE

BANJO

All in the fingers, the fingers
And the ears. The hands are there,
But the source of the sound
Is what he hears.

The weight of the evening comes down.
In the night he will know them,--
His fingers on the strings--
Dark shapes in flight.

On the porch, nodding to the sounds
That he brings from deep within
The banjo and himself,
His body sings.

It is a song that he knows well.
It is the land he brings with him
To the porch, and gives back out
With his hands.

CARRYING ROCKS

They must be moved
If I am to clear the field
For plowing. The hidden ones
Must be found to save the blades
From the sharp crash
That brings sudden fire and frees the gears
To fly without resistance
From the grip of the earth.

So I lift and stack them, not
Needing new chimneys, wanting
No neatly edged paths, throwing
No stones: I make mounds
For which no one should
Remember me. A heavy rain
May gracelessly reduce my works
To formless groups. But I
Can put them back, or I
Can leave them as they fall, pretending
I never knew they fell, after all.

COLD LANGUAGE IN FIJI

Castaways do not know
What goes on here.
I sing. I dance
With bare-breasted women
Who wear long grass
Skirts and necklaces
Of shell and pearl.
(The women do not know
The worth of pearl.)
Castaways hope for ships
Because they do not wish
To die unknown
In the middle of the sea.
But I--I am safely here,
Unwilling to accept
The cold, clean deck and cabin
Holding me for home.

BEYOND THE BREAKERS

When the waves come in
They rip up the sand
And toss it toward the rows
Of houses hung on sticks.

Miles away, he settles
His hips into cushions,
Leans his head against
The back of the chair,
And dreams of women
Floating on rafts, their hair
Hanging in the water,
Their voices calling a name
That he faintly hears
Above the television's roar
And the songs of his wife.

NIGHT MUSIC

Angry birds clatter at the wind.
Their nests are barely strong enough.
Lizards knotted beneath the trees
Wait, restless, for the naked young to fall.

Blind fish slap in shallow rivers
Ebbing from caves, jerking gracelessly uphill.
The water courts itself to its source
To spawn stagnant pools, deep and black
With algae, twisted with snakes like hair.

Where the moon was is a hole
That the sky is falling through
And there's no end to the untied things
Being freely, wildly sucked away
Completing a circle drawn upon itself.

THE VIEW FROM THE FOREST

I. Darkness.

Proposition.
Consider that
although it is daylight here
it is dark other places.
Or also that
it can be dark
when daylight.

Night is a natural state.
It is cooler. Men become bolder,
assume their id. Breathe while
holding their breath.

Proposition.
Accept that
light consumes much energy
unwasted by the dark.
And that night allows time
for the release of much more
to be used again.
Then the hunt is on.

Yellow eyes blaze back

into the fire
to protest its disrupting
the order of things.
This is not truth
but the way that
truth is conceived. Hence,
the white man's encampment
is a violation
only of a conception,

and the dark engulfs the flame
as the panther would the hunter
given time and place.

II. Rhythms.

Marie Antoinette provided disruption,
for which she was sharply disrupted
in return. And it was a very bad year
for red wines.

Had her head been tossed
into the center of the fountain
at Versailles, the impact
would have forced
concentric waves
to radiate outward to the rim

from an imprecise point.
But blood would have spread
in spurts without purpose.

The head at the bottom of the pool is
a sea urchin. Cut it anywhere,
through the vertical center,
and the resulting halves
will be the same,

a sameness as if it were
a reflection in the water;
but the reflection is of the matter
found between the spines.
A sameness that rushes
upward to strike the eye

in the same wavelength motion
that the invisible scream
from her husband's mouth
flew on, pulsating currents
to the ear of the man
who had pulled the rope.

Sand sifts through the constriction,
falling and piling:
A mountain inside glass,

a cone to be inverted
to keep the sun in motion;
To keep it in its arc,
its circle, its circles
as it pours out warmth

that falls in waves,
warmth that weaves,
warmth that can be appreciated
only at precise distances.

This becomes, thus,
not truth
but the way that truth is conceived.
Then the hunt is on. But
success comes only at night
when a scream in the jungle heat
disrupts every conception,

when the heads that burn on stakes
cry out for water
to cool their crowns.

III. Chiaroscuro.

She is weaving her body
in and out of the shadows,

moving to the soundless rhythm
inherited and unheard.

As she nods forward
dark hair falls
from draperies behind her,
splashes onto her shoulders,
framing her face.
In such a position,
her eyes look upward,
doubly shadowed in the night,
while her head is tilted down.

She tries to smile,
but her lips are sewn together;
and lips are black
under so deep a sky,
in the state of shadow.
Thus, there are no teeth,

and only the eyes are white.
Although dulled by the dark,
they rest within graying bones,
they grasp at the little light
there is, standing out faintly
against the shadows.

She is the painting of truth
that is conceived
and slowly constructed
in the shadow of the dark.
In such a pose
she has become
what the artist sees;
but she is more than that
when seated in the shadow.

She is a photograph
that moves, faded
not into yellow
but into the dark;
she is
an oil that has refused
to be finally framed.

MOVING: ALONG THE EDGES

What the stereo pushes out I understand
At other levels. I dim the lights.
We hear, between the chords,

The neighbor's white cat stalk
Along the rim of my roof. My dog
Feels the quiet feet and snaps

Awake. Where the moon should hang
The jagged outline of her teeth
Closes full and hard on the space

That swallows my breath. Easy rest
Comes slow tonight; and with the rug
Now gone, this heavy sleeping bag

Cannot comfort us against the concrete
Floor as I feel this sanctuary
Near its end. So I hold my hands

Tight across my arms, feeling muscles
Flex and slack at their own will
For a change. Then Cathy kills the lights. The cat

Hits the top of the wall. My lungs

Go empty. The winter sky bares
Constellations we have never seen,

As my dog sleeps again, in spite of
Her hard brick bed, cold air,
Vague light, and piercing human sounds,
This last vacant night in my house.

HER LOVE IN WINTER WOODS

It wasn't anyone she knew--
A face, a hand in the crowd,
Trapped elevator smiles.

And there were certain limits
To how much she could do
And be herself. Still,

She kept the fire going
For him, burned coal, burned
Out black smoke. And

From a distance, when you remembered
What to look for in the morning,
You could see, clearly

Above her hand-rough cabin,
Large flakes of soot falling
Like dark stars through sheltering trees.

GOING PLACES

Clark drives slowly across town,
Things on his mind:
The banks close at six,
Cashing a check, buying beer,
Late Friday afternoon.

A strange kind of paradox,
Smiling to himself,
About the way leaves scatter
In the wind through trees
Like fear-driven sheep falling
Hardyesque into the winter sea.

With enough to drink, he says,
Life can be lived eventually.
He holds his hands stiffly,
Letting the car drive itself.

Leaves in a whirlwind,
Children in a storm,
Losing the race with himself,
Having lost the time to win.

So he keeps on driving, drinking
From a sweating can,

Until at six the shades come down,

Announcing the closing,

Locking up the money, ending the week.

THE CALM OF A DREAM

What ramparts he had long maintained
Are down. He kicks loose stone
Against the crumbled walls, makes a sound
No one should know. Lacking pride and fear
He might return to walk once more
Along the edge of sadness, to pull
From rocks and trees the terrible song
He's heard before, yet dared not ask
To hear again. The falling of early snow
Can make his footsteps quiet, soft
At any time he needs, change the world
To the slow calm of a dream, but for the sound
Of armies pressing hard across the ford
Of deep waters he never hoped to cross.

THE DANCE

"It uses an enforced ceremony"

So I shake your hand.

And when you come to me
Telling of the things
Which wreck your life
I smile, I understand.

You have a cat.
I have a cat.

The metaphors for life are
Plentiful
As insects in a swamp.
And we agree.

But when you go back slowly
To your wife
And cat
I see the holes you leave
Clearly--
They are filled in (by air)

With blinding speed, leaving

Me dizzy and sick, reeling
From the predictable perfume
Of the thick, decaying air
You exhaled.

I shake your absent hand.

MEMO TO MYSELF

There are many things to consider:

How tightly to turn the stick, twisting the rope;
The type of knot that's strongest;
The proper beam;
How best to avoid intrusion.

What better way to let myself go?
Can I sit, pipe-smoking in a velvet chair,
Loose-jointed fingers smoothing my dog's ear,
Pretending you are reading in another room?
Can I ignore the television's failing, as one
By one the channels I receive are gone?

By now I am used to waking hazily when the bottles
I caress slip from my lap, spilling
Capsules that rattle madly across the tile.

Shall I hold my arms against my chest forever
Dreaming of horses, soft beds, and summer?

There are movies I recall too clearly, where conflicts
Resolve themselves, with quiet music, hand-holding at sunrise.

And I must consider these things.

TAKING PICTURES

The lens has lost its focus. The eye
Cannot find the point to hold,
The proper range.

Someone has stripped the Chagall
From the sun-bleached wall, leaving
Its shadow behind.

The wallet space cries out
For a face.

The memory has no image to hang
Its frame around; too long used
To its center, it freezes forever
On the air.

WAITING TO LEAVE

Even when the owls retreat to their nests
You cannot sleep. And like the hunting eyes
Of foxes, you stare too long into the dark
So that in time you know you are alone.
What can be felt is of another world:

The burn of feline eyes into your back,
Silent feet on straw, the wind at peace
With the trees. It is a world resting tonight,
Except for you. Dreaming awake, you feel
Your hand on the suitcase grip, the crush and pull

Of strangers running to distant gates,
The voices, hard and polished in the air,
Announcing the arrivals. Then you tilt
Your head back, bracing underneath your neck
With sweaty wrists, and stare: the ceiling rolls

In nightmare visions. Smoke rings from distant fires
Curl and twist together. Trouble is brewing
On the prairie. The deer watch motionless as trees.
The lynx stands sudden guard beside her kill.
And then your woman turns her back to you.

Her breathing holds the silence on its edge.

And there the foxes sit. Their eyes stare back,
Then wink, then fade away, running at the sound
Of twigs that snap to footsteps not your own.
You know you can't return before you've gone.

CHAPTER III

SAVING LIVES

2 A. M., incense, a quart of gin, my dog with a bone

for Jim Peterson

Outside, the rain has finally begun to end.
The quiet here among these books
Has all the elements, I know,

Of murders in the dark:
Of blood, and gagging on that blood.
I stroke his fur, I feel his breath

Move the hair on my hand.
I light a candle against the dark.
But he hears things I cannot hear.

So I invent. I invent madmen
Walking just beyond our sight,
Leaning, listening outside the door,

Scentless so he cannot know they move
Within the circle of our life.
The ice rattles against my glass.

The flame dances. He stops to hear.
And when he does
All breathing in this room

Jerks to an end. I take a drink.

The candle steadies.

The bone snaps between his teeth.

LAMENT OF THE YOUNG GIRL'S LOVER

She made the turn unseeing
Her eyes sinister gems
Nailed to trees

She did not come

The cheese went stale
Mice stole the bread
Left me crumbs

What her naked hands felt
Was cold

When the fire died
I left the screen in the corner
Cursing the coals

The ice of my breath
Stings my beard to white

And now at night
When the roads go
Silent and empty to the hills
She hammers me into dreaming

My own wheels blind

Beyond control

NOT ABOUT TREES

1. The Source.

The elm gives shade, but not enough,
And eyes closed I hear
The songs of absent wrens, still air,
Heat. The dream is waterfalls,
The soft gray hiss of narrow streams,
A dog's cool nose against my hand.

I see myself on fire, turning back,
Reborn in the eye of a horse.
A yellow fly at rest, wings flat, drinks
Calmly from my wrist.

Burning for meat, I will run,
When my legs are strong again,
To overtake the deer, to roll
Doglike, marking the kill as my own.

2. Obelisk.

Snags, they are called. Of the three in this cove
I choose the left one for my rest.
What hangs there when my back is turned?
Without leaves, how can it move with the wind?

The water blows with small waves
From across the lake.
I had another dream here once. The largest bird
Took roost over my head, his shadow
Becoming the sky; catfish rose
Like slow blue corpses,
Their fins and whiskers carving the surface;
The thunder was kind, as the rain
Rinsed away the smell and stain of bream and bait.

And when I rocked back my head and spoke
Small drops soothed my tongue like ice
On a burn that will not heal.

KISMET

A. Dropping into the web, a sharp end to that
drift beyond hours

while in the mind still
clinging to that moment

when through the clouds
all the sun shone

penetrating darkness
(as if it were water

rolled back by a prayer
at the desert's edge)

and repelling alien force
with the light of heaven's design.

B. But in the present ragged black--
hanging on with bloody hands

to the broken thread,
straining toward the concentric center

where lingering formless
on a rock in the sea

resides the shape that
must be assumed:

eight legs to stand with
and curse god from.

PRIEST, PRIEST

Sunlight keeps her awake; the blinds
Can't be pulled tight enough.

Her robe and gown fall in uneven folds
That shade her bare feet in the morning.

There is nothing to do Saturdays.

So she sits at the table, the stove
Cold, coffee from the night before
Stale in the pot. Since her husband

Took the dog, the scalloped mattress
Of the double bed is large enough for her.
She wears no curlers, combs her hair
Only before work. Yellow newspapers
Overflow the porch. The mail
Blooms from the box.
And she hums a song
She never knew the words to.

What is it? What is it? The phone
Is frozen in its cradle. The child she loved
Is gone, is far too gone. And at night
The lights go off as she watches the TV die.

BELOW THE CLIFF

Here ivy tendrils hang through air
And attach themselves in lower places
To damp rocks. Some throw air-roots
Into the bank, or wrap around
Rhododendron branches, growing
Long and thin in the small light
That filters down through the shrubs.

And in spite of the water
That drifts into our eyes
We can see to move
Across the foot of the falls,
Rock to rock, leaving our prints
Flat in the moss and algae, wet and shining
In the afternoon.

And so many voices
On the other bank, calling me,
Calling, as reaching out one hand,
The other behind for balance, I
Leap, only slightly safe, to arms
That are safety, wanting to give me
My balance, on the bank.

SPEAKING TERMS

A strange and early fall, pushing toward winter
And remaining warm. The yellow-
Jackets have returned, like the flies
That never seem to go away.
We take our time
About life, sensitive
To the subtle changes
Of light and air, feeling
Before instruments can
The fragile
Cool
Withdrawing.

What has come to mean truth
Is the unexpected
Or the unexplained. We can accept
Late-evening sunlight now,
Rivers flowing uphill,
A daytime moon,
And children born
Lacking hands or eyes.

ONE LAST BEACH POEM

1. Beaufort to Hunting Island.

From the tavern balcony I see no waves,
Just a rusty-red barge moving without a wake
Through the salty harbor waters that almost reach the highway
And its edge of oyster-tabby buildings at high tide.

The water is the town, feeding itself
With what shrimp and crab the one-boat families
Can haul from the sea, inlets, and waterways,
As the sun draws those in turn who bring
The money. Although the trawlers lure the sharks,
The beaches, jetties, and parks are packed
With crowds who swim, or walk,
Or sleep, or look for shells, unmindful
That their bodies burn in sandy heat
As they worship the method of their lives.

Cold bridges hurl to random islands, and we follow.

2. Intercoastal Ride.

Heading out through the long grasses,
The tides at their fullest; the clouds, thick and dark;
Black, sunless water in the channel broken by the wind

Into erratic curls of gray, edging and rolling;
One sailboat turning hard in the distance;
Two gulls hitting the water, then rising from sight.

He drives the boat, and I watch where we have been.
The rolling white-topped legs of water
Spread wide in the "Y" of our wake.

Everything else is flat. The birds
Know it, skimming their endless beaks along
The surface, making their own tiny rippling waves
That cross and cross. Sculptured freshly
By the forces of tide and wind,
Trees on the edges of bare islands hang
To the remnants of shore, their fingers of root
Desperate for life. And minnows flash silver
In the sudden breaking of water and sparks of sun.

3. The Broken Gull.

Down the shore, south, past the sleepers and the waders,
Beyond the surfcasters with their cut
Shrimp and few whiting in battered bait pails,
A recent trail of cans and cups confirms
That men have come here before.

Today only my dog and I have drifted this far.

The old palmetto trees are fallen to the tides
And their broken stumps rise like thick gray heads
From the two-tiered beach being cut and pulled away
By normal wind and water. And to this place the bird

Has come to hide his death, his wing

Stretching in the sand, useless as a sheet of paper
Against the northing breeze. Seeing us,
He flies one-winged nowhere, then falls
Like wood, sitting calm, head stiff, eyes still
And watching me, until the longest wave reaches
Him, pushing the trailing wing, dragging loose feathers
Back with the foam. But he remains erect, steady
Against the breakers, flies again, sits until we pass,
Waiting for the highest tide he has known.

THE KID WHO DELIVERED THE FLOWERS

Everyone jumped, turned toward the sound.
At the second knock, Aunt Chrissie
managed to rise, aiming well, to open the door.

He was, perhaps, fifteen--one sixth what grandfather was--
and looked his age. Blue cap
tilted to a side, coat half-buttoned,

hand still poised as if to strike again,
he shuffled nervously in the silence
Chrissie's age gave her the right to impose

upon him too. Inside, in that moment in the hall,
he became a member of our group.
But as he turned to leave, having lingered

to collect his tip, the silence ended;
and even the dullest there understood
that his sympathy stopped where the highway began.

OLD MAN WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

He waves his oldest flag in the dark,
The threads of its edges catching only
The wind he makes for himself,
Black veins snaking around the spots on hands
For years he pocket-hid, making small
Music with a little loose change,
From the open-eyed children
He never held on his knees.

ON THE EDGE IN ST. LOUIS

The airport motel rattles like rain. Hot
Missouri eases through the hole
The air conditioner ought to fill. Whiskey flows.

Over Kansas hangs a twisted slice of moon.
There, here, and in Iowa, it is easy now
To understand why a man kills for no good
Reason. How much corn, how many acres
Of plowed and unplowed fields can any living
Thing abide? And for how long?

Belly up, the road turns and bends back
On itself. Through the black Midwestern
Night the lights of a distant truck bounce
Across a sea of wheat. I squint myself
Into another time; on the ridges of squared
Windcut bluffs stand, poised, miles of Indians.

Being here, I know why they died
For Montana, Dakota, Wyoming.

The plane turns to me; the truck of dreams
Freezes on the slope. Jet-roar burns the air
Like dry ice. I doze, wake, doze, tossing
In the heat that nightfall cannot soothe.

WALPURGIS

New York Times: "Pasadena, Tex., Nov. 5, 1974. The police filed murder charges today against the father of an 8-year-old boy who was poisoned on halloween by a candy straw filled with cyanide."

Rain holds the goblins close to home.
The town's afire with porchlights.
Businessman militia watch the streets
To keep the ghosts unharmed.

But CPA's and slow police alike
Can't deny my mood. The taste
Of candy's all I need. And now
I'm older in the night. Clowns

And bedsheets scream; I hand out
Tribute into orange bags; I close
The door. The faintest smile I know
Comes to my face. What witches

Coldly wait to fly you off tonight
To darker candy moons, my son, my son.

THE TRUE TEXT OF A LAST LETTER FOUND BY THE WOMAN OF THE BRUJO, JOSE ORTIZ

While you are reading this page
I am watching you. Lighting a cigar,
The lieutenant is skillfully saying,
"The circumstances surrounding his
Disappearance are unusual,
But no indications of foul play
Have been found." In this detective age
We have left ourselves few mysteries
To love; so he, of course, is right,
And he spins his hat on a finger.
A man can still decide things, though;
To go or to become is one of them.
So in the storm that kept you home last night
I made my move. "This letter," he is saying,
"Is not the message of a suicide."
And he shoves the paper in his trenchcoat pocket.
Somehow I'm certain you will understand.
"The painful fact is, Miss, he's left you
Cold; he's vanished into air." Right again--
Right as the rain you cradle in your hand.

THE DEMON WILDERNESS

Were there wings enough, we all
Could fly for light. But grounded
Here in shade, we make our lives
The best we can, taking vague shapes

From the limbs of dying trees, muffled
Tongues from wind, breath from the motion
Of owls, hands and legs from our own
Shadows. And we sing our hymns of praise

In footsteps soft in moss,
And in thunder through the leaves.

KNIFE

The edge turns to me once again.
On the closer wall the dull blade of shadow
Stalks its ghostly victim's heart. The hall light
Jumps from the polished side, hanging
Constantine's cross above my head. But what

I can believe is not so slight. The rain
Drowns out my hunter's song. I know
That what I have conquered will vanquish me
In time. But the point means nothing;
The edge is all that counts, until

The lucky twist of my hand shows my face
Grinning up from the tempered steel,
And the mimes I perform bring my rage
To rest, knife on the table; yet I feel
Some ancient thrust; hands at my sides,

Yet my arms move, making other shadows
That razor tendon, vein, and bone.
They say that Geronimo, who held his soul
From mirrors, wearing feathers and a bow
Posed for cameras just before he died.

CODGER

Moves across the lawn like slow, cold
Winter. Holds his jacket at the waistline
With the knives of his fingers. Sees
The children like his wives pulling men
Down to their shoulders, blankets
Undisturbed by sun and eyes. Hears Good Humor
Ringing through the park, ice-cream,
Marijuana--makes no difference--all blows
Cold or smoke that burns his hands, makes
Him shake, shivers from the jungle war.
But not that old, not time, just watches
Cyclists, joggers cut his milieu, he humming
Battle Hymn, bold bright star a-shining,
Old Glory frayed yet waving, over,
And over, land of the free, to bike, to run,
Make winter out of spring, the cold
Of steel like mother in his hand, sing
Out, sing crack of fire, and whistle
Damn her loud throughout the land.

THE PRIVATE MINER SPEAKS AT LAST

On this long Thursday he fills his bin
With pile on pile of coal, fat-lighter,
Summer-dried oak and pine. "These hills,"

He says, "these hills provide the fuel
For all my fires." And he takes his pick,
Axe, and shovel, stalking the deepening path
Across the hogback, down to the valley
Where he has overturned the lode
That burns each time, for him, at night:

And, still, this night he unrolls his bag
Before the fire, atop the dust-brown
Bearskin that shows a stitch-line
Hiding his knife's signature. Glass-eyed,
It stares like he does. He hears

The snow drift against his door, filling in
The v's of his roof-joints. He rolls
Himself into the bag. He blows the lamp
To dark. "Amen," he breathes; "such winters
Come too scarce for random lifetimes,
And stay too long to turn us warm again."

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTANDS WOMEN

for Penny

1.

Only he knows where his hands
Should rest. He learns the truth
In dreams, asleep and awake.
Music fills the minutes of his life,
And lights and movies turn in colors
Inside his eyes. He sees, and feels,
And moves to what he knows.

2.

She swirls toward me in a world
Of lilac, or jasmine. "I saw you
From across the room," she says;
"Your face reminded me of--but your eyes
Are wilder." Later, at my house,
Over coffee and cigarettes, she admits
Her lie. "It was just your hair,
The way it fell around your face
In that dim light." Something holds
Me together again, through one more night.

3

He heard what she said. Even in the bar,
Above the noise, the music, he knew;

Through the smoke he saw. Even before,
He saw and knew. "Your lipstick," he said,
"Tastes like the finest Portuguese wine.
Your perfume would make honey
For kings." He held his glass
Before his face, watching her slowly roll
Through his fingers with the melting ice.

4.

Once in the Southwest I saw a cloud
Like a V slice in zig-zag lines
From Perkins to Tulsa. It sucked
Power poles and cars and mobile homes
Like paper cups and straws, up and out
Of sight. She was like that.
I grabbed my hat and ran, hard,
Until I reached my house, and nineteen.

5.

Only he knows where his hands
Will rest, yet he says that he has made
Few choices other than going home.
In Florida, he sees her forehead curls
Blown back against her pink scarf,
Long hair and silk dulled by her damp skin
Shining against both colors. Waves
Pull at his feet, but he feels

Only her fingers along his spine.

6.

Whatever I come to, say
I have come from this:
These floors do not belong
To me; these walls bear prints
I did not frame; carpets,
Shelves, and hallways
Smell only of her. I am a ghost
Denting just one pillow,
Bending half a sheet, burning
An extra light when she beats
Me to sleep again. The spirit
No longer can move me.

7.

He knows his loving doesn't spin the world:
Can use his hands, braced heavy
On his elbows; run his tongue
Here and there, given the limits
Of bed and reach; mouth soft words
Onto her face and neck; but only one thing
At a time. Can feel body against skin,
A hand, a leg, a chest. Yet whirls
Bar to bar, drink on drink, shirt
Sleeves table-worn, dirt-patched,

Driving steady to tell himself and them
The world turns, and turns, by God, to him.

8.

A ghost, she wanders through my rooms
Before I've moved out. I hear her
Breathing, and even when I run
Her short nails still reach my back,
Tracing their practiced ways
Until I bleed again. She pulls me
Down, over and over, holds me hard
Against her chest, and will not
Scare, in night or day. She hides
My bottle, warms my pillow
Before I reach the bed, folds
Back the sheets. And every morning
The soap displays small hairs
I never left. When the sun goes down
Across the porch, her eyes catch
The last light, hanging like fire
Above the tops of Spanish bayonets.

9.

Who needs an angel? Who can make
Their wings safe from fire? The ends
Of their lashes hard like stone?

When the tongues of sunlight turn to them
Who licks the edges cool?

He sees the ocean roll its lips
Back on itself. He envies the froth
That bubbles. He lusts for the curl
Forming. He tastes the salt of the shore

On his tongue. Slight, but he knows
So much of the taste that he feels it
Even in its absence. His hands
Fly beyond his ken, birds

Hunting a place to live, rest,
And raise their kind.

10.
It's a different one each night
And a new way each time.
I've read all the books, tried
All the angles, know all the moves.
But still I recall those long
Afternoons at the beach, staring
At the tides as she sat behind,
Her feet on the back of my chair,
Her toes on my shoulder and twisting
In my hair, writing secret signs

Only I understood. Even a fine
First wife fades away some time,
And when the spaces are filled
I can hear the waves above the other
Voices. O it moves me like the wind
Bends the palms. Yet I cannot love
More than my surface can feel.
Nor do I dare. Gypsy Lady with olive
Eyes, it is a universe of terrible
Limits. Touch me, taste me,
Take me, where and how I live.

11.
Night comes in like the fear
Before battle. Where do his hands go--
This time?

A line of trees hides taller hills.
Behind his back cradled in his lap?

He marks their foreheads with lipstick,
X's their wrists with blood he draws
From his own.

They cannot catch him now.

The hills stand up like dragons.

There are no trees.

Barely visible his thumb runs
Along the blade. His pockets rattle
With stolen bones dried to dice.

The moon goes round. The beasts come searching.
His hands snap out.
Trees and hills fall again.
He howls, cups his mouth with blood,

And rocks back on his haunches, resting
As he waits for the creation of the earth.

TURNING THIRTY IN STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA

Over the level, unbroken horizon, the sun
Springs as sudden as the eye,
Capturing again the same long vision
Of this land without hills, these unvaried
Low trees and incidental crests
That rise only when the sight grows dull.
True, the weather here goes like old leaves--
The locals would know, if they had trees.
But the mind blinks, and the snow is gone
Before the sunlight; no one knows;
The sense lacks change.
We roll together the sheets. Too long I will
Recall her face these endless spring nights
In this world where knives replace watch-
Chains; and guns, coherent argument. I toss
The ball of linens into the clouds of dust
I've gathered softly in each bedroom corner.
This land will kill us all before age does.
My urge for gun and knife grows giant.
I dream of barroom fights, the blood
Of strangers dotted on my mud-caked shoes.
From down the street the faintest bluegrass
Banjo comes to me. The neighbors' son
Bicycles, tireless, past my window. I was nine.
And whoever could have thought that trick

Would roll me dumb and stunned to here?
The evening settles in like bad strangers--
Tired light, a breeze dropping from the west.
This clay and dust will hide our graves
From our children, who will defend our names
With their lives, with their fists and plows,
While dreaming of forests and mountains.

SAVING LIVES

1.

If you can put out the fire
Soon enough, enough will remain
To build from again: your burns
Will heal in time, the stone front
Steps will stand as good as new,
And from the ash, between the char
And smoking timbers, small shoots
Of green will rise and stretch.

2.

When you see the arms go under
Dive in without thought or pause.
Grab what you can reach, rock the body
Back, crook your arm about the neck,
Tilting the head, and swim a one-
Hand stroke up for the sun.

3.

When the breathing jerks hard
And stops mid-swallow, snap him
Up erect, and turn his back
To you. Wrap your arms
Around him, stretching yourself
As far as you can, and squeeze

Sharply several times. Hug him,
Madly. Love him alive.

4.

As soon as you feel the urge
Creep up, open your eyes to
Sustain it. See the skyline broken
By gray rectangles. See the clouds
Rising from the land like ancient
Dinosaurs. See the water stopped
And thick. Then close your eyes
As tightly as you can. Smell
Fresh-turned earth after a light
Summer rain. Feel soft flowers
Brush your hand. Move deliberately
There.

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