

"Father? Our Dreams..."

Winter breath and wail of earth,
my chest stock-full of grief;
Our future, shared only in plans,
merely intention-deep:
A holy hope for a righteous home,
a true wife –
we both believed.

"Father...?"

Before his bones
 fall asleep,
will he call on me?

A nervous child,
 spread fingers raised;
will I be found worthy?

"Goodbye"

Father,

Thank you for life.

Thank you for dreams,
for courage and hope,
and for my worn-in baseball and mitt,
and for all our hours together in the backyard.
Remember me catching pop flies better than anyone else's kid?

Thank you for your loyalty,
for choosing Mom as my mother,
and for all the hot meals after the long toils of your day,
and those rides to school every cold morning.

Always, since I was fifteen,
I think of you when I hear Bob Dylan sing.
And when someone mentions one of your favorite old movies,
it's like I'm back in the family room again,
close with you on a cozy Sunday afternoon.

But now the leaves above are spent,
your grass-stained shoes are retired
– remember teaching me to care for our lawn and our neighbors? –
and my kids are running up on the sidewalk.

A decade ago, you took me to the big downtown in our search for my next favorite guitar,
and just a few seasons past Mom and I were helping you pick out a headstone and grave.

This time – any time – is too soon and short.

Thank you for being here.

"I Thought I'd Be Happy Once I Retired"

Dead birds cover my lawn.
I haven't seen my neighbors in weeks.

I walked around my house last night
with the gas can.

I guess I'm thankful it wasn't empty at the end.

I found a letter in my mailbox today,
so someone wrote to me.
I'm sure it was full of lies,
so I just left it there and set the whole thing on fire.

I left the gas can in the ashes.

I still hate waking up,
and I still hate soggy cereal.

A Heart to Rest Upon

A heart –
upon which to rest;
that I may take my own up again,
renewed.

If not,
then a battle against an enemy seen,
to forge my soul
and create of it a weapon against death.

If neither,
then a brother amidst faceless struggle,
another to strain alongside;
he an embodied reminder of some Life beyond us.

For I expect,
until I learn to accept to gaze above and release my grip:
these desert nights will deepen and shed more heat, growing beyond their bounds,
and our silent shadows will lengthen, blanketing more hard, empty ground.

A Wager – Yet Greater

A wager against sin and sorrow,
yet greater –
a hope for love forever,
once won.

Absolved

Looking up,
(into the glowing clouds before the sun)
all doubts and fears
and wounds and wears

are absorbed

and absolved.

Aging

Many doors
are closing
behind me.

Doors I never opened –
they are painful to leave behind.

But haunting,

haunting are the doors I have nailed shut
with soft voices still behind them.

And Again, It Shall Come

(the image that goes along with the poem)

Looking over a harvested field at the end of winter
– some snow remains (just patches) and is melting;
the air is chilled but the sunlight is warm;
trees are bare and not yet budding;
the sky is blue with scattered, thin, airy clouds – wispy.

(the poem)

And again, it shall come...
And again, it shall come...
And again, we shall grow.

Assembly Line Summer

Ten-hour shifts, filling up my summer with sweat:
Oh, I remember those nights.

I carried steel, and grew up without gaining wisdom.
Oh, I learned a lot.

Do you know the strain of muscles against your shirt,
or the shriveling and shivering of your soul under fluorescent lights?
I have felt both, while watching freight trains disappear into darkness.

Do you know the weight of exhaustion, borne before work even begins?
I remember counting days, and sleeping in despair.

Do you know what death looks like on a living face?
I have seen it, and I know their names.

I have learned where the barely-living and the lonely stand before their shifts,
and I have seen them shuffle over unswept floors, with bowing backs,
to line up at the punch-out clock at night's end.

I have learned the hopeless weight of my lunchbox,
both empty and full, in my small and calloused hands,
and I have grown to ignore the rain on my walk home.

I have learned, at the end of my day,
to stand in my shower, numb,
without caring if I come out clean.

I have stood naked
before my death.

Autumn

When colors fail
to turn in the autumn,
When our habits shrink
and coalesce;
When the last door out
requires loss
of the idols we adore:
I promise we'll be grateful
if we choose good hope
this fall;
for the dimmest lamps burn strongest
when no other lamps
stand at all.

Bare and Blue Slate Sky

The bare and blue slate sky
yawns heavily on the flattop homes,

and chalk puffs of clouds rest lazily
above amber yards of clay.

Bare Trees

Bare trees
Cut flat against gray winter night
Black static thunder.

Beautiful Mornings

In the beautiful mornings
I cry.

None of the joyous colors will last;
all will decay
and be torn away by wind.

Such it has been every year of my life.

Before Marriage

Unto home
I walk with ragged shirt,
virgin eyes,
and bruised chest.

My skin is cooled
by the glowing, westbound wind.

I have kept myself
and laid my life aside
to slay our enemies;
I have been allowed
to take my life up again,
for you.

When I lay it down
before your heart and choice,
it will be final unto death;
so that we may both
ultimately arise,
whole,
healed,
and one.

Big Poofy Slippers

My dad bought us both
a pair of big, poofy slippers.

Today, I dropped a chef's knife on one of mine
while cooking for myself;
it was flayed wide open.

I could no longer wear it,
and without it, my skin was cold
against the stone floor.

I was afraid of going back to Dad,
for the slipper was a gift from him.

So I asked Mom to patch it,
and she said she would help me.

She brought me back to Dad
– which I was afraid of,
since the slipper was a gift from him –
and he gently looked me in the eye,
then sewed my slipper back together.

Now,
it is whole and stronger,
and my feet are warm,
and I know:
Dad loves Mom
and Dad loves me.

Biking

I sweat.
I swallow.
The air billows over me,
and my thighs strain and burn
under September sun.

We are miles away,
and alone until the horizon;
we are like scuff marks against Earth,
pushing answers into our bones.

Black Trees

Trees,
stark
like black ink against the night,
carved by wind,
bare,
with gaping branches
grasping at the sky...

Such are my thoughts,
 dear love,
for you.

Blood – Thick

Blood, thick with iron,
heavy and raw with salt;
Dreams, hopes, stuck with rust –
can we dare to meet again?

My empty hands
brush your face...
(I can feel you in my heart.)

Blue Walls

If I wake up
and my walls are still blue with night,
I keep away from my windows:

Something is coming,
and I do not want it to find me
when it comes in the dark.

Bright Grace

Growing older, I've awoken
to hot terrors all around,
and the bright grace
I knew when younger
is less easily found.

I've learned:
the realm of my heart
is treacherous ground:
a battlefield
of aches,
sunken bullets,
and bones,
covered with half-light dust –
the decay of my soul.

I've learned:
every idol dies,
and we cling
to their bleach-white bones.

So now,
woman,
I pant with tortured lung,
bearing wounds I no longer want,
and I begin to rest my starving eyes upon you,
and turn back
to ask:

If I peel away my dying shirt
and the sweat stays
like stubborn waste;
if I am speckled brown
with muddy earth,
with soil stamped in my face;
if I come again
(but cold and broken-limbed,)
will you still remember us
and care
to bear my name?

Burial

Your body, in church one more time,
is surrounded by your friends, many new to our eyes;
would we have come together apart from your death?

Your casket comes forward with latches finally taut,
and catches colored sunlight, steps from baptism's font;
like the stone saints, you're alive in love, but cold to our touch.

Our cars snake through town and around the graves;
your plot is fresh: no granite, no name.
We take turns shoveling earth,
our muscles singing hymns,
giving praise.

Butterfly

Oh, my sticky, selfish heart,
Oh, your beautiful smile;

I shall not close my hands,
I shall not close my hands,

I shall not close my hands
upon your beating wings.

Carb Death

Every thought has failed.
Breakfast was too much.

Cocoa Sweat

Poverty of man
turns rich soil dark,
and I bake in earthly labor,
turning cocoa with sweat –
trial stuck, pasted,
compressed against skin.
My days peel off,
tender to your glance.

Dear, good friend,
woman become sister,
I pine for hope,
and rest beside you.

Salt the night
with your kiss,
and draw moonglow close
with touch of feather-heart.

Coffee & Confession

Tips of flesh,
fresh with wind-nipped
burn, coil around
coal-dark heat
in cup, while
naked sun sinks
over blue crystal
streets, sides piled
rough with slush
of travel-beaten
Heaven's dust.

Bright flakes
fall from pregnant
dark like inverted
sparks, as soul
floats stark
above blackened
shame, buoyed by
invading grace;
whose mood is
matched by glowing
moon, swimming in
stars, and blessed
with solitude.

Coyote Bones

I awake to empty fields,
and coyote bones
on my doorstep.

The trees,
like the dead,
are silent.

My strength
weeps out
from shattered limbs,
and my breaths
heave
in flattened gasps,
dusty and yellow.

I count days,
like poundings
against my skull,
bright and sharp.

I thirst
for dew
or rain,
but my flesh
is a stranger
to hope.

Dad (After Your Funeral)

Your sandals I've become familiar with,
even after having them for just a week.
Your bike squeaks when I pump the brakes;
I'm not sure if I'll keep it.

Are you above, within, around me?
How is it that I am so sure of your hearing?
I wasn't taught this,
but I know it, and it's alive in my bones.

At the auction, I saw your housecleaner.
She mentioned your long goodbye
before your final trip west:
after the hug you gave her, she didn't expect you to return.

I wonder about your old neighbors, if they're expecting anything.
I know tools and tips were shared among all of you freely,
but were there any sort of debts left unpaid?

As for me, I'm still not used to seeing the sunrise from your living room
without smelling your cinnamon pancakes and splattering bacon,
and I'm still waiting for you to call me to table.

Dead Skin

I count the white peels of his face.
A flap of dead skin for every day,
maybe every week – Maybe,
every year.

He must tolerate pain slowly.

And when he calls me Brother,
I listen, as Skeptic.
When this frayed dog shares his bone with me,

I shudder.

I am surely looking for a constraint,
another responsibility, so I do not have to face this one.

Hovering in the gray,
facing a broad-shouldered choice,

I fall

with eyes open.

Dear Creator

Dear Creator,

I'm starting to see
how all lights
point back to You.

Dear Sister, Friend,

Dear Sister, Friend,

Today I thought of you.

I gaze over the budding field
beyond my yard's edge,
and stretching back over the grass,
recall your scent.

Before me is a flowering tree,
pure in its blossoming,
and beyond my vision your face rises;
your name follows.

As you stand – gracious –
in my imagination,
the hearty soil grows richer underneath
and the colorful birdsongs multiply.

Behind, in the house, the wide boards of soft wood floors
bend gently below your feet;
but it is my chest
that aches and creaks.

Have you heard my home shift
from brick house to my heart?
And there is room,
new,
for another.

So tomorrow I shall present open palms,
and ask for you
in entirety.

For as the robin bares its breast to ascend
and bluejay shocks earthly neighbor with heavenly hue,
so I hear from my bones drumming
for self-sacrifice that fills the womb,
and transforms full woman
into mother.

Dear Sister, Friend,
2024-06-28

Deep July

Staying awake for the darkness and heat;
 tying memories together like beads on a string;
I watch sweet blood flood your cheeks –
 on a deep July night
 we promise everything.

Despair

I rode my bike to the hilltop,
then threw it over the precipice.

Why?

Why do I want
every good thing

to die?

Dreams of Motherhood

Dreams of motherhood, family of ten;
Twenty-six, twenty-eight,
twenty never again.

Dreams Were Still Sweet to Carry

I was young,

Days were bright and bonfires hot,

I danced and dove deeply into blessed life.

Dreams
were still sweet to carry.

Dreams, Spoken

I have spoken my dream,
I have named my hope.

Now upon the words
and wings of wiser
I must wait,

and yield to sleep.

Edging Homeward

I am edging homeward by grace;

I am slipping with raucous pleasure to Hell;

I am shyly accepting Hope;

I am gleefully slitting Hope's throat with habit.

I am polishing

quiet, dusty dreams;

I am grinding diamonds

against death.

I give myself in

to myself and what I suffer;

I fold, collapse,

and I am waste.

I give myself up

to this othersome joy

I know only by fearful awe;

I am filled, centered,

and held.

From here I depart,

always to the same;

To here I return,

always more,

always changed.

End of Town

Dad bought me a guitar when I was fourteen,
and with it gave me my dreams.
I am often surprised when looking back on those years,
because their ways are so strange now.

It used to feel like there was some good
above and beyond me, waiting to be grown into.
Now I am covered by clouds silent, without wind or rain.

So I often walk to the town's edge,
where most of the roads turn into dirt and dust.
The few sidewalks we have end here,
in useless and unwanted lines.

I think about walking further,
past the city sign and into the fields.

I doubt I would return.

Ending

The water is draining from the lake.
The wind-waves and sun-lines look unchanged,
but of them
there are less.

At the certain end,
(with wind and sun forever strong)
I wonder if there will be
a single comprehending crest and dazzling glisten,
if the whole lake,
now so small,
will let itself be changed
and become
entirely and purely
motion and glow.

Enfold Me

(a prayer)

Enfold me
until I am known
and purged of impurity, doubt;
until I have harvested
all potential within;
until my heart
is full and hot
and oversaturated
and flowing over

back

for you

.

Enter

Here, our stories begin before our births,
Here, we learn bird songs with our first words,
Here, there's always room on a mother's warm lap.

The seasons we know just by our weather,
the longer shadows on the river,
and new colors in the heather.
Calendars on paper?
Not even for keeping records.

Our mortician and midwives always keep busy –
church bells sing, endlessly ringing;
our days are aging well, like wine.

Every neighborhood is claimed –
sidewalks re-marked with child's chalk after each rain.
Yet our front doors swing freely:
the only boundaries are fields of grain.

So enter in, and welcome to town:
on a worn kitchen counter lay your elbows down.
Come, share your neighbor's joy.

Exit

The ground in the town square
no longer freezes,
except after a burial.
We don't bother with headstones anymore.

We count the stars above us,
just pins of light,
dead, without pattern or motion.
They are unworthy of names.

From crooked, rotting porches,
mothers with thin dresses
call children to bed.
The screen doors always slam.

Young women,
whom we once called maidens,
have forgotten their mirrors,
and no longer long for new names.

With overgrown limbs and hair,
boys stumble down thistle-filled tracks,
rattling rocks in their empty beers.
They whistle for mutts, and beat them.

Most of our mothers have other kids,
but we haven't heard the words "brother" or "sister"
for many years.

Fathers are not even a memory,
but just a petrified dream.

Infants wail in the black night.
Soon, we hope to forget the sound of crying.

Family Reunions

I do not remember the mornings,
but I can go back to the nights:
 I was in bed,
 ready for sleep,
 and young;
 a boy.

I opened my eyes, and saw my father.
I think he was quiet,
 perhaps asleep.

As I laid still, my blood was warm,
and it moved through my heart.
Its founts were the day's joys,
each amplified by promises of cousins,
 of grandparents,
 of my father's siblings;
 all animated by my father's presence and love.

I was a child then,
and I am learning
 to be young
 again.

Father Is Dying

Father is dying.

I count the growing spaces between his breaths,
and weigh the quivering beats of his heart.

Yet,
Father is growing young again;

I see sparks in his eyes
like diamonds on the lake,
and I hear ancient joy in his voice
– thunder over tidal waves.

And,
I wait:

Ere his leave, will he look upon his only son
and finally speak his full, true name?

Father's Shadow

Time, leading ever westward,
leaves behind what I don't seem to need:

my father's shadow, like his pocket watch,

is now mine for keeps.

Fatigue, Raw

Every door is difficult to close,
and the floor is covered
with the dust of my flesh.

My eyes ache,
my mouth is raw,
and I swell with fatigue.

Final Winter

There will be a final winter,
and it will end.

Following it shall be
the eternal
blossoming spring.

First, the Acorns Fell

First, the acorns fell.

Soon after, a twinge entered the trees.

Now, the leaves shiver and fly
in the white north wind.

Forever Winter

Tonight,
the air is ice,
and the doors have forgotten how to latch.

I don't think we're coming home,
and I don't think we're waking up.

Friend (Departure)

May your departure bring tears to these hearts,
May your death be easy and sweet,
May the saints rejoice to see you,
And may they pave the way with roses at your feet.

Step in, step forward,
Step in, step forward,
Step in, step forward...

Friends, Like Sparks

Friends, like sparks on the knife,
flashing brightly; but they leave
and leave me dulled
– I have no peace at night.

How many months
of waking up empty must I take
before my dreams come back to life?

Surely, hope isn't killed from above?

Frosted Blue

Frosted blue ice-cut sky
Hazy street in sunset light
Crisp leaves dead but with color alive
Cover the soil in which you lie.

Gold Resurrection

Will you unearth it with me,
 what I've come to find –
what has been buried
 through apathy, regrets; in short, wasted time?
No matter how coal-black
 that dead weight may appear,
I know we can bring it back to gold
 by shared blood and hot tears:

for a dream across generations,
 neglected, forgotten, unsung,
may become tarnished, rusted, and withered,
 but not yet undone;
for the threads of redemption
 never leave our hands.

Golden Embers Alive

We rise like ashes of bonfire
on summer's trailing edge,
(we are golden embers alive)
into the towering depths
of liquid heaven above
we sink,
we are poured out
over aching woods and crumbling leaves.

We are homebound,
meant for rest in dusty origin,
living now with eternal flame
immanent in our blood.

Goodbye Weekend

Goodbye weekend:
I'm gonna miss your relaxed days,
and the time I could sit back and
waste away.

I will remember the sunshine,
and the threat of rain;
I see the streets of downtown,
and I know I won't feel the same.

I choked on humid air,
and picked up the phone;
I called all my friends
– nothing but dial tones.

So I lit my fires,
and stayed outside;
I quenched desires
by burning time.

I walked through fields,
and biked down hills,
climbed up trees,
and stayed off pills.

If this is goodbye,
I'm content to go.
Will I make it through tomorrow's week?
I don't know.

Grandpa

Grandpa,

What did you know at my age?

What did you love and hold dearly to
as your youth waned?

Please,
answer ...

Great Dove

I remember Saturdays
before you,
good and filled
– but not fecund like this.

This evening glows with life,
and your deep rose-heart blossoms
under the falling sun.

Our chests are crossed with charcoal
– remnants from last night's fire –
and memories of taste and sweat
stay with and guide me.

I suffer you slowly, joyfully,
dancing with your heart (I'm barely tethered);
we will, soon enough,
rest,
one and content.

I watch as you lay,
back to ground,
with heart clamoring for home,
and I catch echoes of ancestors
through my quivering bones;
from the rumble of soil –
Nature's dream, growling from the earth
– to the surface of our skin,
the Great Dove's grace impels us to newness,
and He warmly thrusts His way
into our small home.

Have You Fled?

Friend,

Where your beauty leads me,
I do not know.

Do you wait?

Are you filled?

Have you fled, like me,
from darkness and ugliness
to the realm of repair?

Waves break heavy,
and I want you here.

Heavy Dreams

I wake on hardwood floor
with a black ache in my side.

The sun dapples the pine like glowing paint,
and I hear moaning ghosts, and crying birds.

Through the busted kitchen window,
a knife-wind slits my cheeks;
quickly, my heavy dreams leave me,
scattered and blown apart by the morning light.

Hope Against the Fire

Strive to the river,
while water yet remains;

Cleave to the soil,
while grace still invests our names;

Hope against the fire
born of rejection untamed;

Life, new, will come in painful birth,
wrought by the close of this age.

Hopes Unmet

Hopes:

all unmet,
though replaced.

Friends:

all temporary,
though effecting permanent change.

What does not decay

is only that which
we do not create.

Horror

The horror of the past:

So much forever decided,
by so little
so quickly.

I Am Empty

I am empty,
unless filled with grace ...

Just shuffling dust,
until I return to the same.

I Fear Not Loss

I fear not loss,
but gain.

I laid in the earthy wheat;
hungry and naked I lay,
waiting in shriveled, busy bones.

. . .

Today, I saw the hawks overhead,
and still I wait.

I see the words approaching
and I hold my breath;
lest they enter and fill me,
and I must rise changed.

I Have Seen the Stars

I have seen the stars
turn dull and flat before sinking,
and felt the heavens chill
and become black.

Somehow, here in our land,
the massive freight trains
no longer rumble or make a sound,
while they used to howl over our streets.

And every night for a year,
I have sat on my porch
and felt the heat slowly escape;
and each morning it returns,

while I have seen our faces –
like weathered stone –
turn hard and chiseled
toward neighbor and friend.

There is a pale twinge
in the birds and air
that came down
from the sky.

It Never Rains in Spain

It never rains in Spain,
though the clouds stay all day;
and wherever it is, I'm sure the sun still bakes.

This tin rooftop,
hot as rocks,
is keeping me awake;
forever parched and coughing blood,
I wake up late.

Here, time just doesn't fade,
even under the dark ghosts that some call shade;
I count my minutes like links in a rusted chain,
and feel my hours, like water drops,
evaporating to waste.

Joys – Bottles Smashed

Fresh joys break over us like wine
gushing forth from bottles smashed –

drenching our souls, quenching ever-long hope –
the kaleidoscope of shattered glass soaking up
all dancing rays of summer's mosaic sun.

Judgement

In a moment,
the light disappeared
as stars were wiped from the sky.

Our faces met the ground
after our knees.

All breath left our lungs.

We are not worthy.
We are not worthy.
We have wasted our days.

Kitchen Rags

Friend, Dear Friend,

I am sorry.

Were I able to mend
our hearts like kitchen rags,

I would gently
stitch us together.

Knives

My words were like knives
across my tongue,
hot and sharp
as they left.

Yet, my desires for you remain;
but I have been waiting
– for a word of permission from the dark heavens –
for so long
that they seem dead.

Mama (Neighbor)

Mother across the street,
neighbor of my house and home of my heart;
will you nurture me again,
though I have grown past childhood's end?

Mama (Old Photographs)

Mama,

Grandpa gave me some old photographs of you.
In them you are young,
and more beautiful than I've known.

The ones with your parents, our ancestors, surprised me:
their clothes are smooth, with polished buttons,
and no one is yet worn or dusty from farm work.

Near the end of this stack of photos
you are a child, standing in a white dress –
it is your First Communion.
After that, you are fifteen, smiling,
wearing your home team's colors and glowing,
blossoming in the full years of youth.

I wish you would come back.

Mama (Wife)

Mama, do I have a sister waiting, a woman in white?
Do I have muscle and love enough to serve?

My kitchen remains bare,
no matter the stacks of dishes, dirty or clean,
and my red Mustang is gathering dust, not miles.

I know the weather will be changing,
as spring comes again, with another full moon.
Yet I feel untouched and unreachable,
like the rusty weather vane atop my cold roof.

Will you remind me why I am seeking a friend,
why I should want a wife?
Outside, I see only bare, brittle branches,
and all my leaves are brown, scattered in the street.

I keep waking up later and later,
and I'm forgetting more of my reasons to rise.

Many Miles and Hours Apart

We are many miles and hours apart,
and tonight
my feet are bare against the boards.

I still have my old habits,
and I am gazing into the stars
as they gently appear,
like pinholes in the dusk.

Do you remember these little lights
before autumn, before summer?
May moon was rising,
and your skin was soft in its glow.

I took your hands in delight,
I touched your lips with trust,
and in that amber field
below the swelling moonlit clouds:

I lowered myself upon my knee,
and waited upon your word.

Memories

I do not want
your boxes of old photographs,
or the lists of our ancestors.

I do not want
the old cards and gifts you've saved
from so many holidays.

Keep your heirloom rocking chair,
or throw it away –
I do not care.

Time has moved on,
and these things are behind me.

I do not want
memories which I cannot deny,
of when we used to love
and be happy.

Missing Father

Father went away.

Now, what remains?

Not much.

Just some yellow photographs,

and a body

cold to the touch.

Moonlight

3 A.M.

Train horn.

Birds singing from the trees,
and moonlight on my bedsheets,
almost in my eyes.

I can wait for morning
– like this –
for a long time.

I can wait like this, comfortably,
dreaming of all beyond me.

Moonrise Summer

Stars pop out
above moonrise,
and I lay back,
on grass
in July heat;
arms released,
spread in surrender.

The clouds of ravens
spread with wonder over sunrise;
wings of summer
beat mystic joy
into my trembling heart,
weak with wonder.

Nearly Empty, and Almost Home

I have never run out of fuel, though I have come close.

There was one night, with the frost working in from the windows' edges,
that the needle was nearly resting on the orange peg.

I was still miles from home,
and I decided to turn off the headlights
to drive by the moon's glow.

There was only the creak of the frame against the cold,
the shuddering of the suspension as the truck crested our Wisconsin hills,
and the alternating roar and rumble of asphalt and gravel
as I crossed county lines.

Suddenly, somehow,
it all became a symphony for me,
and I stopped watching the fuel gauge.

I became warm, comforted by an incoming thought:
regardless if I pulled back up to our house,
I would, tonight, end up Home
– wherever on earth I happened to be.

Night

The water tower paint is peeling,
and sometimes we find the lead flakes on our lawns.
No one has been up there since I was born.
No one looks upon our town anymore.

Some days, around noon on the corner lot,
a young man is standing, staring straight up.
He wavers quietly in the wind,
like smoke too listless to rise.

He sees, in the blinding wash of the sun,
that our stars are lost.
Even in the blackness after dusk, they are gone,
and the moon we have forgotten.

All we know is Night,
always rising from the ground,
always swallowing the sun.

Old

I was born,
One dark winter morning,
There was no fire warm.

My sun is cold,
This cup is empty,
I have lost home.

Gravel roads,
Misty showers,
The days fall slow.

Swollen graves,
Yards without fences,
Front doors with no names.

What I have
Tears my skin;
What I want
Cannot be given.

Time winds down
To a dead man's crawl.

Old Man

Congratulations,
Old Man,
for finishing the stage.

Here are your roses,
your cashed-out dreams,
and your happy, tired family.

Now rest, be content,
and dream again – with hope.

On a Warm, Stolen Night

On a warm, stolen night, I drove through town alone,
playing music as I cruised by all my friends' old homes.
I counted broken street signs to the songs of my youth,
then laid out in my driveway 'till the sky above turned blue.

The dewy morning air was a sign of changing seasons;
I hardly wanted out, but I looked for a reason.
The winds were calmly changing, I knew what they would bring:
one more lonely summer, spent down at Mineral Springs.

So I sat on my father's porch, in the worst time of the year:
friends driving by, saying "What are you doing here?"
We vanish in our cars, past the return point of sane,
but we'll all grow up to be like our parents, every one of the same.

We live our clichés, and no one complains:
this town is a box – we're free only in name.
Midnight comes and goes, and we're still awake;
we have nothing to give, and there's nothing left to take.

Our Hometown
(All That Has Come, and All That Is To Be)

From my home to your post box
is a short and jolly jaunt,
a few dozen paces down the street
flanked by festive leaves on ancient trees,
and yards full of wildflowers and bees.

Our water tower reigns
like a plump contented king
who, every spring, renews his court
with scores of colorful birds that sing.

The schools are full of those who grow
and on ball fields the seeds of virtue sow,
whose names mark plaques,
the players and teams made State Champs.

On weekends, the restaurants are packed:
with work ended and assignments submitted,
couples long and newly smitten dance;
ladies in muslin dresses spin to entrance
young men, strong with calloused hands.

Every new house becomes a home
under the artful care of a warm woman
who was first her father's, then her husband's own –
her man who left Mom and Pop to cherish her, and her alone.

And strawberries in sunlight
follow supper in summer;
with dishes cleaned, drying in the breeze,
we stay up and out, joining stars glistening like the sea,
celebrating all that has come
and all that is to be.

**Our Parents,
Their House,
& Hospice**

Sister,

Friend,

For a while,

Goodbye.

I see the flower in your hair,
the curlers placed with care,
the skin tight against your bones.

Fifty years of growth,
then weeks to dust, your body is smote:
a mountain crumbling hard from its peak.

Just last week you nearly danced over these polished oak floors,
Father gliding your chair through wide-open doors;
now the clock strikes softly, its low weights almost stilled.

The diamond moon rests above your head,
painting with stars silver light upon your bed;
you are silent, awaiting something greater than sleep.

Yet I see your chest swell with life:
a gentle rise, smaller every time;
will you speak to us again, in these rooms where we were raised?

Us – your brothers, sisters – fill the halls,
scattered, bunched, ragged, like leaves in the fall;
we hold our breaths, trying to hold the wind under our wings.

We brought you home for your last days,
and now make plans to carry your body out for the grave;
one more time, you will leave,
while Mom and Dad remain.

Outskirts

I have gazed through these windows for many years,
and have never seen the trees bare past spring.

I have gathered flowers from the outskirts
since we were carried by our mothers,
and their scents always accompany me home.

Yet, the morning dew has now lost its sweetness,
and the trill of birdsongs has been halved.
The rail yard is choked with weeds, the boxcars are nearly empty,
and smoke perpetually covers the horizon.

In every sunrise, I wonder if our rows of tombstones have grown.

Owls and Moon

Familiar sun glances
 across deep summer sky,
 and rests gently
 on our golden home.

Soon we will be bathed,
 all faces bright,
 in bonfire's amber glow.

As we soak in the nectar of night,
 and embers dance before our eyes:

Dad,
 will you share
 the telling with me,
 again?

How the owls and the moon
 bear witness to,
 and rejoice in,
 another day fully lived?

Will you recall for me our holidays,
 traveling by gravel and sunsets
 to Mama's parent's farm?

I was small,
 and I remember pulling in near midnight,
 and being greeted with coffee and cards.

Now older, with aching in my bones,
 I desire to know at depths too great to forget,
if these memories of good nights and homes
 will blend their edges together,
 becoming dappled panoramas,
 living,
 and dependable as stone.

For I have decided:

 I do not wish to disappear.
I want to stay, mixed,
 living in our hot laughter, quiet joy, and somber tears;

I want to be fixed,
and have my place be permanent at home,
and age well with like blood and bones;
to swing, freely like a strong and simple leaf,
on our great family tree,
firmly rooted to the branch above;
and with the owls and moon,
to be bathed in the gentle,
golden setting sun.

Pancakes

Forgive him, LORD, for he loves your creation
– even if it's just the pancakes.

Paper Airplane Plans

My paper airplane plans are not safe
from the fireplace,
bonfires,
or cliff-bound gusts of winds,

and my holidays
– once so treasured –
now clink like an empty,
chipped glass.

Plans

Plans my father made
lie before me,
wrapped in fear
and covered in dust.

They speak my name.

Yet, I have made my own choices,
and much rests in the light.

But I do not know many of my sins
before the taste of bad blood
from my swollen tongue.

May you, friend,
move ahead with clear sight.
May you ease into life
and rest gently
at its end.

Please, Come Deeper

Please,
come deeper with me.

I cannot turn back without dying,
and the way forward is strange.

Post-Sunset

I waver on my concrete steps.

I stare straight up.

My horizon is my roofline,

My sky is filled with trees,

And straight ahead is the endless depth of stars.

The flesh of my feet hasn't felt the earth for a week.

Now I wish to leave it,

Falling straight up,

And dissolving like smoke.

Poverty

Video Games

I'm leaving my video games
to my little brother if I die;
I put a post-it on the Xbox.

Does the thing even work?

Religion

I walked by the church,
and almost tried looking up at the steeples.

They used to remind me of something.

Lost

Yesterday:
I swept the acorns from the yard,
and I found the keys I lost
last winter.

That tired, dirty snow
was too much for digging.

Where did that car go?

Expiration

The orange juice tastes bad,
but the expiration date isn't until next week.

Should I put the cap back on?
Should I put it back in the fridge?

Where's Mom?

TV

My boss is calling.

I guess he wants something.

What's on the next channel?

Gym (...or not)

Is the gym still shut down?

Why am I asking?

The sunrise bites hard.

I have holes in my curtains and they taunt me —
still, in bed, on the floor.

Today feels like yesterday.

Today feels like an endless drag on a stale, stiff cigarette.

life **ugh.**

why?

Prairie and Woods, November

Trees are bare ...
Nests are empty ...
Brown leaves lie crumpled on the ground.

Tracks are old ...
Grass is tall ...
Reeds rustle as tails flitter and hide.

Promise

The ground is warm,
 though far below our touch.
The nests, empty until spring,
 remain stable in their slender branches.

Our garden,
 though bare and brown, is full...
and will soon come to life.

Purity

Your damp feet rest on wet earth,
as the wind soaks the trees;
Moonlight's been a stranger
since you've risen from your knees.

So draw in cold breath,
and remember when it was that you began to see:
when you were aching, seeking, digging into grace –
always skinning your knees.

So enter again,
and move past wondrous sunrise warmth;
you must open your eyes, fully,
to see stars in the dark.

And fear not strange suffering,
for only through such can you know:
the gold that loss and leaving bring,
the good weight of a purified soul.

Red Trees

Part I

First, the acorns fell.

The red trees are dancing in the wind,
and bunches of leaves are running over the lawns.

In photographs, my young father
and his siblings would scatter over these sidewalks,
running out of church with arms wild
and smiles wide.

Today, I am passing through these neighborhoods,
cold to my eyes but colorful in my memories.
These streets, in years decades apart,
are where my father and I were both children.

When I was growing up,
he would take me up here on visits to his mom and dad;
it was just him and I.

I remember our Sunday mornings,
first in the pews and then around the kitchen table,
enjoying the best pancakes I have ever known.

I remember the books he read to me
in the room he and his brother shared;
I would fall asleep in the top bunk.

I remember our Saturday summer nights,
racing together on our bikes to beat the sunset home,
coasting and sweating on hills, coming back from the lake.

I remember our trips up here on Friday mornings,
especially when I got to skip class —
driving under glowing clouds,
nearly bouncing on the radio waves of 60's pop,
stopping at gas stations bordering wheat fields
and walking out with salty snacks under the rising sun.

And I remember, just before one Thanksgiving,
Grandmother's car accident.

I remember Dad's halves of the anxious phone calls
being relayed cross-country through our living room,
and seeing Grandma together during her final weeks
in the nursing home, on her back in bed, bitter
and immobile in her neck brace.

I remember seeing the trees bare in town
for the first time at her December funeral,
and all the cars lined up like pebbles around the block.

I remember Dad lending me a tie,
seeing my cousins in their dress clothes,
and feeling strange in a familiar place
as we processed in for Mass.

I remember that the eulogies were long
and that the homily was quick,
and that I heard many new stories after her burial.
That is the end of my childhood memories.

Red Trees

Part II

*First, the acorns fell.
Soon after, a twinge entered the trees.*

I do not see the colorful leaves that cover the trees lining the avenue. Rather, as I walk past Dad's childhood home, I see just the gray branches underneath, as if naked skeletons, without leaf or blossom.

Dad and his friends grew up on this block. Here they wrote skid marks on the sidewalks with their bikes, earned scuffed knees and bruises with their dares, and played many raucous games across the lawns.

Their siblings were close too, and their entire families became close, weaving themselves together with school, sports, jobs, and hobbies.

Today, not one of the kids still lives in town.

Gradually or suddenly, each one of them left as they grew up. According to the stories, they went away to explore colleges, careers, and universities, and it seems they chose the best wives, husbands, and jobs that the foreign lands could produce.

They have transplanted their roots.

I have seen them come back here, to their original hometown, but only for moments. They have been gathered together like flashing but fading leaves in small cyclones by weddings, funerals, class reunions — things they enjoy or are still bigger than themselves.

After being blown briefly together, they again settle apart.

And so I wonder, as my feet brush through crumpled leaves and acorns plunk on roofs around me, about each of them — but especially Dad. What was he like at my age after leaving, shortly before he met Mom? Why didn't he or any of his siblings marry a childhood friend?

And what did each of them, and Grandma and Grandpa, think about Mom when they met? What were the stories Dad shared with them before? Did he take her home for dinner?

And I wonder why, when Dad and his siblings were seemingly so close to their parents, did they choose to live so far apart and away? What light in distant stars called them from home's warm-fire hearth?

I look to what they left behind: these pockmarked streets and now-strange houses, the barren fields where the Catholic school used to be; and the zig-zags of all their lives around me paint no discernible arcs or great blossoms of spirit.

So drawn forward by aches, but with no guide for where the good future truly lies, I come back to these scenes and paths, worn-in, then forsaken by my ancestors.

I pause.

The crumpled leaves rustle past the skeleton trees, and I listen for truth in the cold wind.

It is silent.

Red Trees

Part III

*First, the acorns fell.
Soon after, a twinge entered the trees.
Now, the leaves shiver and fly
in the white north wind.*

The dry, sunburnt leaves crackle as they are blown away, and I am ready to be taken with them; standing in the sharp, steady wind, I feel a subtle yearning within me — almost like a free-fall.

I am waiting at Grandma's grave, and Grandpa's is just a few feet to the left. The ground is not yet hard from frost, and it's clear that the grass is done growing until spring.

I am waiting for my father.

The last time we were together, here, we were burying Grandpa's remains. I remember Dad placing us behind most of my cousins around the grave, and the scent of snowcrab blossoms soaking the air.

I remember the feel of the soil as I shuffled my feet when the priest invited us grandkids to step up and bless the casket with holy water; and I remember him outwaiting our prolonged, silent hesitation.

I remember going back to the old house, and watching my father and his siblings around the kitchen table split up and share Grandpa's final possessions, now theirs.

I remember being back home, and for months finding the beers we took from Grandpa's basement scattered around the house, nearly-empty bottles keeping company with disarrayed books, food wrappers, and the greasy TV remote.

I remember the unsettled silence in the rooms, stark against the colorful jumble of storytelling I heard in our extended family, and I waited — I waited for a renewal of tale-telling from Dad.

In silent waiting I received only silence.

So today, alone amidst the splintered acorns and beaten leaves, I wish for Dad and I to be back together, and for us to revisit the places he shared with me when I was small.

I wish to hear the full truths of all those tales I heard years ago, so their memories may come to fulfillment.

I wish to hear stories yet unknown told in bare nakedness, without gloss or restraint, so I may gain answers to all the questions I know now that I didn't know before.

I wish for a renewed bestowal of my name, life, and purpose, and for these to be given together. For as the years have passed since childhood, it feels as if I've been walking deeper into a continually darkening night, in which the streetlamps are gradually extinguished as the road signs are taken away.

And remaining and smoldering in my chest is the black fear that the voids carved by my desires and longings will continue groaning and growing within me, and never be filled.

And I have remained, and remain, myself — surrounded, unknown, and abandoned.

Remains

It was the final sunrise
before our world shriveled,
crumpled,
and died.

Though the sky is perpetually gray,
and my bones are tired beneath the sheets,

I remain grateful
for my memories.

Rise (I Hope We Dance)

We stepped from hope
into dance
when we wed.
I remember how
brush and glance
turned
to taste and touch,
how our great oak floors
turned
warm under the quiet morning sun;
and how we learned
to dance together,
the flesh of our feet
wearing the wood,
my hands guiding your curves;

We turned
about the spirit
keeping us
and
kept between us.

All our steps were new
and grounded,
planted in trust,
and planted in surrender.
We grew
together.

Until you
turned

inward
and
away.

Now,
the clocks tick
without mercy.

Now, the spirit moans,
 and my hands are torn open;
Now my feet are flayed,
 numb on oak floor rotten;
Now I taste
 and caress
 naught.

...

To sweep the desert
 bare with holy wind
 until it be free of sand,
to wander outside your cold house
 until you walk out again,
to dance with you on repeat
 on fields of deep cool grass;

I have fought,
I have endured,
and I hope,
 yet –

Even if your freedom
 were again uncovered,
even if you breathed
 open warm air again,
even if you heard your heart
 beat in time with nature's song

– I wonder if you
 would rise,
 release yourself,
and step from stillborn rooms
 into hot windy light,
and again
 join
 our dance.

Seven

Seven days I have bartered
for release
of my soul.

Seven years I have borne hatred
for others,
their fears,
and their objects of fear.

Seven hours I have knelt upon stone,
filled, before the altar,
by the desire to be empty,
and free of my sinful blood.

Sheltered by Snow

Today I am sheltered by snow.

I wait, pressed against the window
to know of the cold,
and yearn stiffly,
my heart taut
against hope for you.

Do you remember my dreams?
Do our shared nights bear weight
in your soul?

I often walk through flowering fields,
gathering the sweetest lilies;
but all of good earth and hearth
turns soon to dust,
scattered by the wind.

Silent Birds

I still gaze
into the emerging stars
at dusk.

I used to wait
(do I still wish?)
for your womanly voice
as I began my walks home.

I no longer laugh among our friends,
but with my hands clasped,
just wait for
the end.

And the sight of silent birds
with wide black wings
is no longer unwelcome,
nor a surprise.

My skies are filled,
while the chair beside me
remains bare.

Silent Retreat

I laid on the bed. The double window was directly in front of me, and the sunlight was spread across the wall to my right. It was a small room, wide enough for a desk, radiator, and suitcase along one side, and the same desk plus a bed along another.

The upper branches of the large oak were only a few yards outside the window. I saw the golden leaves flutter in the wind and catch the sun on their faces. I heard nothing, however; the windows were shut.

As I readied myself for sleep, I finally understood my persistent question: Is this how I choose to live my life, separated from and closed to God's love, while witness to and curator of his works? Will I not risk the divine wind to cast itself upon my skin as well? Will I not chance its sharp winter breeze upon my unfattened flesh?

This love, from a distance, is beautiful. It is more beautiful as one approaches, yet terrible — for the Kingdom of Heaven admits no sin.

Slothful

TICK

Vacant days swallowing chance,

TOCK

TICK

nights coming hungry;

TOCK

TICK

dry wood

TOCK

TICK

unattended

TOCK

TICK

turns damp

TOCK

TICK

under fumbling

TOCK

TICK

sweaty

TOCK

TICK

cold hands.

Small Land of Deep Hope

These nights are precious.
These are days of which we will sing.

These are warm-blooded ghost evenings
of shadow trees and sunken lanes,
of quiet leaves and walnut-buried homes.

From here spring moments
in which memories are quickly born,
and friendships immediately forged.

This is where and when we learn to sing
with our capillaries pulsing
full of bright-edged spirit,
our lungs drenched in gold breath.

This is where we shall labor,
and where our bones will rest
until we are clean.

This little earth is ours:

a Small Land
of Deep Hope.

Snowswept

Wind-caressed and snowswept;
spoken in wonder, your name awakens hunger
in the caverns of my chest.

I am wandering, stuck-bent homebound,
gently aching south now,
feeling tug of memories anchored in warmer days.

With my fiddle-neck rent, and heartstrings bent in wreck,
desires within my skin burn, and
I am yearning for repair.

Your face my fiery center seeks
as I shuffle snow with slow, plodding feet;
I keep my head turned sideways:

Every lawn white with sun-dappled space,
every door like a portal of grace,
draws me a rough sketch of your upcoming abode.

Upon sight I'll know your home,
so I'm bracing for the unveiling of this unknown:

If my hopes – warm, steady, unseen like covered bones –
will be met when spoken;
or if the real luster I perceive,
a glowing edge that gives me to dream,
is only a dead trick – empty and cold –
a mere taunt of fool's gold.

Sod Bunker

I sweep the hearth of dust and ash,
while you uncover the kettle
and struggle to light the stove.

Constantly, the wind is howling outside.
It rips the earth, lifts it, and carries it away,
leaving us with less –
when we already have nothing.

Dead dirt covers all,
and it's a rare blessing
to see even a sliver of sunlight.
I don't know how long it's been
since we let the children play outside.

Across the room,
the baby's breaths are loud, strained,
and ignored.
I can't think of anything to do,
other than to keep waiting;

I try not to wonder about it.
I try not to wonder about anything.

Softball and My Sister

I was twenty years old. Not old enough to drink, halfway through college, and as I saw it, halfway between the life I grew up in and one I didn't yet know.

This summer I was in a softball league with old friends. Two of them played baseball in high school and were our team's strongest players. Their dad was our coach.

He was like an oak tree: sturdy, dependable, and not liable to move anywhere fast. He was deliberate with his actions, spoke confidently and humbly with a rough voice, and looked at you directly.

We were sharing the bench early one evening, the rest of the team on the field. I had my face in the sun and cleats scraping the dugout sand when he asked me a question. "Joe, you have a sister, don't you?"

Suddenly, I did. Brought forth by the certainty in his voice came my sister, fully known in just a moment. She was young, beautiful, and fully a woman, with a radiant, open face and bright eyes, whose long blonde hair was like that of my mother in her graduation photos.

Here was blood of my blood, incarnate in the female form, reflective of the same goodness inside of me. She gave shape to our inner light in ways I could not, our differences illuminating a greater whole. I was affirmed by her, as she was by me. We were within each other, honored by each other, and a great love lay between us. I was proud to stand beside her at family gatherings and amongst friends.

In another moment this vision was gone.

I must live in the truth, and in truth, I have no sister.

Some Times

Some times

it seems to me
that the only worthy response
I can give back to Life

is silence.

Spare Me

Spare me;
for I am unworthy,
and my shoes are broken,
and my feet are soiled.

Spark

(to the tune of "Funeral Singers")

Spark when naked,
as you turn out the light;
a snapping of wrists,
your bones go into mine.

And all the night
bears down so heavy;
a lead blanket,
a weight, warm and ready.

So much death, so much to spare,
and the little ones,
with brown teddy bears.

Take me over,
Take me over,

I know not, for what I wish,
Was there a line off-key, a cue I missed?

Now you sing,
Now you sing,

from below our feet,
from underneath.

Take my hand,
hold your breath,
resurface in shame, valium and mist.

I know not,
not what I miss.

Spindle Trees

Spindle trees,
pale black
against willow cloud,
prick
evening breeze
with budding tips.

Stars Bleed Sorrow

(with an illustration of the railroad tracks, water tower, moon and stars)

The stars bleed sorrow
onto the yearning tracks,
onto the rails bracing together
before the deep,
hungry void.

Summer

A wreck of summer,

Transformed by a mysterious fall,

Born anew in a glorious winter.

Summer (Childhood)

Sun rising upon pillows of birdsong,
Breezes dancing soft as I'm under blankets warm,
Mornings of cereal boxes filled heavy with treasure,
Bright radiant days stacked tall above our reach.

Summer (Family Breakfast)

Flapjacks hot on Sunday morning,
back-porch griddle steaming in the sun,
sizzling plates packed to overflowing,
our home filled with milk and honey,
and the laughter of many little ones.

Summer Unending

Wedding bells yearning,
stuck in summer unending;
heat waves are cresting,
but never arising are their falls.

On your back in bed,
fever of one-oh-three,
and sounds from your sister's white-dress jubilation
rise and your crumple your sheets –
can you wait anymore,
can you take another sidekick day?

Invitations come,
purple bows and lace,
some have a "plus one",
and your body keeps saying,
 "It's getting late",
 "You'll be a dead-end in history".

And despite your desires,
to your friends you remain a mystery,
for all you know is a suppressed, vacant listening;
the moments come,
the moments leave for you to speak.

So you write it down,
in ink you drown;
but happiness mocks you
from graffitied and empty sheets:

All the true, good stories you've written
are merely dreams and wishes;
speed bumps are the lonely weekends
on the way to wasted years.

Swans Etch Heaven

Swans etch heaven
across marbled glass,

writing your name by wingtip
into ruby-blue sky.

The Last Summer

I lived for one entire summer
on a single-speed bike;
my friends were the coffee-ground kids,
our territory was moonlight.

We had this plan, a script at night,
to take our Huffy's and search for our lives all around;
but you find out how dead everything is
when ten minutes takes you to both sides of town.

We'd ride to the abandoned granary,
the highest point in this half of the state;
until the demolition crew followed us,
and we learned that some things can never be saved.

And when the command of the darkness slides from your tongue,
and nothing you do is ever enough;
there's a cry you can't quite hear, a hunger you just can't feel,
a black fate deep in your gut.

So if you catch us riding with death in our eyes,
we're headed to that old sacred spot –
to stand in line, and wait our turn,
beside a bulldozer in a bare parking lot.

Thin is Our Air

Thin is our air,
and pale the sky.

I stand on front stoop,
tongue cleaved to flesh,
and shiver softly
with hollow head.

Friend,
If the sun returns hot
to crash in dry tempest,
know that I have left early,
with only dust behind.

For though I am a mere pilgrim
to these streets,
all is familiar:

I know the decay of man
steeped in wealth,
and the blessed scent
of dark soil turned rich;

I have heard the screaming void
of raped autumn nights,
and the quiet hope
of gentle open evenings;

I have felt the heat
of crackling wreckage,
and the soft bed of prairie
wet with evening dew;

I know the ends of our idols
and the joy of their burials.

So if wind quits
and earth turns bare and burned,
you can walk by my door
without a knock
and follow on the hard trail
from cement to stone and dirt.

Later, if by ditch
you find me,
rouse me without restraint;
for my dreams I have woken into,
and I know our justice is late.

Thirty-one and Thirty-three

Thirty-one and thirty-three,
with way more kids than realized dreams:
did you imagine we'd be running barefoot
and climbing trees?

We're still too poor for television,
but now I know we're richer for it:
we spent the summer playing outside,
and again, this year, the house is staying white.

The front steps bear ten years of footprints:
can you feel the boards bending, wearing thin?
The house is being worn out,
our home is being worn in.

And every ball and glove is marked with sweat stains,
practically etched with each kid's name.
Remember pop flies in late July
soaring, catching sunlight?

Tonight, Mama, your dress is fragrant
as Margaret dances on the pavement:
she wanted to try it on,
she wanted to try it on outside.

"Oh, Frank!" she calls,
as she waltzes back through the halls:
she's dreaming of the night
Prince Charming will carry her back inside.

And in the kitchen the tea kettle is singing;
on your skin, sunlight from stained glass is twinkling;
we laugh, the screen door swinging,

and give a twirl and rock-step on the porch
like two sparks rising from a torch –
our evening is young and begging
to be filled with life.

Toil, Without Treasure

Toil, without treasure,
is time
without life.

Tonight, Thunder

Tonight I expect thunder,
and lightning to strike earth.

We stand on hollow ground,
and night has just begun.

The sky is black above curling smoke,
 our photographs are glowing red,
 and our chests burn with questions:
Answers will come,
 but will we have remained?

For I hear fire trucks three blocks away,
 and their engines growl
 and loose bare-backed shiver moans over the streets.

Take hold, dear brothers and sisters,
 and stay close, faithful wives,

For our ground is opening in wild labor,
 and hot tears are being called forth from our eyes.

The first trumpet has sounded,
 while we were numb and sinking.

Now, there is no more room for sleep.
 Now, the final curtains open.

Soon enough, the Good Man will rise through this,
 though His children yet shiver in their blood.

Travel – Letters Home

(early November)

Dear Sister,

Last night I was holding the phone,
and had even put in quarters while waiting for the train.
I suppose you already know that I didn't call...
I'm still not sure what I'd say to Dad.

I've gone north, and Canada is so close;
it used to seem impossibly far away to me as a child.

You can have my room if you want
(if Mom and Dad will let you).
How long do you think I'd have to be gone
before they put away my wrestling trophies?
I never actually won a tournament match
– they were just for participation.

I'm sorry if I made you cry by leaving,
like the time I went to Boy Scout camp.
I didn't go just to hurt you,
though I'm sure it feels that way.

(late November)

I'm on my way west now, and I've had to buy warmer clothes.
Did you know they make woolen hats with sun-brims and knit gloves without fingertips?
I hadn't seen such things until New York,
where I also saw people sleeping on the sidewalks.

I heard that Maine has a beautiful autumn,
but I was late.
The brackish rivers were filled with leaves,
and the trees looked like brittle spindles.

(December)

What do you think middle age will be like?
I miss our mornings and evening conversations together,
but in the quiet, away from home,
I feel a little less constrained...
I think I've been keeping my life selfish and small.

Today seems like a Saturday.
There's a bird on the streetlamp on the corner ahead of me,
and the sun is making its slow rising,
and I think I'm on my way back.

Life is going to be different.

Twisted Tree

Under twisted tree

I sat

and wept,

for I woke early

amidst birdsong

and lilies;

and now, in evening's heat,

my face is caked in dust,

with the earth buried in ash.

Home

is below us.

Us

The children are gone.
I never wanted them,
until you and I met.

Now I miss them,
their contagious and merry laughs,
and the rumble they made
when running through our house.

Sometimes our feet would find their toys in the bedsheets,
and I would smile sleepily, rolling over to put them on the nightstand.
You'd softly kiss my shoulder.

Then there were the Saturday mornings
when we'd shuffle out of the bedroom
and find the kitchen a mess
from their spilled milk and cereal.
We'd step over their Lego cities in the living room
and tousle their hair and fix the curtains,
the rascals playing in the warm squares of the rising sun.

Having ice cream at the park was always a delightful mess.
I'd chuckle for the kids coming later,
who would find the monkey bars and swings sticky with chocolate.
You would always look so cute,
corralling our little ones to have them help wipe off some of their work.

As they grew up,
we'd take them all around town –
to where we met, where we had our dates,
and where their grandparents lived.
"Our bones go back here a long time," we'd say,
visiting the graves of our ancestors.
You'd have them take turns with the holy water,
sprinkling the stones.

And years later, as we helped the kids find jobs, schools, and spouses,
you'd cry tears of joy and sorrow as they moved up and away.
On cold nights I felt your warm heart pound heavily
behind our closed door.

Now the yard looks empty without them,
and the kitchen is too quiet without their voices.
Is the garage finally big enough,
without all their bikes?

The sparkle in your smile hasn't changed since our first date,
but now a somber blue ache lives beneath it.

I am grateful for you.
I am grateful for us.

Weak

I am growing fat,
with my body soft and spirit weak.

Not yet numb to pain,
I feel I am only a question unasked,
or a worry unspoken,
or merely a nuisance ignored.

What I Seek

What I seek I do not know;
for, having consumed all I see,
I still starve.

When We Met

Ten years without rain;
then thunder, a flood,
and your name forever changed.

Why

Did you name me before my birth?

Why did no more follow –
was I not worth the pain?

Would you give me back
so you could get back
comfort, ease,
and "love" without sacrifice?

Mother, Father,
Do you know why?

Mom, Dad,

Why am I?

Woman (Abandoned)

I've been sleeping below streetlamps,
 reclined in my passenger seat,
and spitting out days
 like the seeds piled around my pedals.

Rosco hides from the sun in the footwell,
 his tail rarely thumping.
He's been slowly dying,
 for months.

We're stuck in some skidmark town,
 by circumstance.
I left Angie, my wife,
 by choice.

Judging by the bottles and cans,
 I've been gone for weeks.

I don't have any photographs of her,
 except the one already taped to the dash.
Despite digging through memories on repeat,
 I haven't found any treasure.

I've started praying again –
 if yelling at the clouds,
 and wanting somebody to hear,
 counts.

I don't miss her.
But I miss the nights
when heartbeats marked our time.

She never satisfied me.

I've been looking for my mother
 in every other woman's eyes.

Woman (Back Home)

It started raining last night,
before I made it home.
The shutters were still open,
and I saw you through the windows,
lit by the reading lamp;
and the ring you gave me was slick around my finger,
and I was soaked.

I was expecting I'd have to knock,
just as when I was a child,
for night had come early with the rainclouds,
and I was feeling small and young again,
having skipped over the puddles on my way home.

Yet, you came to the door before me,
and held it open as I walked up.
I could see you smiling gently through the glass,
framed by the reflected streetlamps.
All light was yellow and warm,
and the breeze around me was soft amidst the rain.

Then I shivered as my heart stopped,
and my knees trembled as it began again, double-quick,
and I was suddenly afraid:
 I feared this was only a dream, an abundant mist,
 and that I was about to wake up and away from us.

And wake up I did,
and you and the rain and the warm summer lights remained,
and I was changed –

no more thought I gave to the key I accidentally left behind on my way out,
or to the deadbolt I used to turn in the dark,
or even to my name as it was before;

For now I know:
 the house is ours,
 and together, we each belong to the other.

Woman (Like the Moon)

(to be set to music)

[verse]

Seeking hard-earned consolation;
 stuck in place: lead weight, heavy resignation.
Anxious, burning days of tribulation;
 junk heart – termination.

[chorus]

If I drown –
 Will you give me rise from under?
Oh woman, like the moon –
 Will you lead me back through beauty?

[verse]

Broken hopes, bitter anticipation;
 last chance, missed dance; twitching hesitation.
Steel eyes, self-centered determination;
 hard-morning examination.

[chorus]

Can I pull through
 dark hours of heavy thunder?
Only when lightning strikes
 do I know my heart.

[chorus]

Blest are you –
 and I wish I could be gentle;
Pray for me –
 at the hour of separation:

Take me through your heart
 to the one you love.

Woman (Memories)

Woman,

my heart bleeds

slowly into my chest,

when I open memories

of your scent.

Woman (Our Brick House)

Woman,

I desire;

To build you a brick house
with wide wooden steps
coming up from the lawn;

To lean a broom on the front porch,
and with you wait while we let friends,
like leaves,
gather.

We'll bunch them around bonfires
on crisp autumn nights,
and the sounds of our stories and songs
will rise and scatter like fireflies.

And below the hymns of shooting stars,
our little ones will gently run about,
before falling asleep in our arms.

Woman,

I desire;

To wake by your side
with windows open wide
on dewy mornings of robin blue-egg sky;
to see your eyes softly glowing like coals
as we waltz into our kitchen white and bright with sun;

To call our children down with laughter,
and to feel their pant-leg tuggings
as we flip the flapjacks and skim off the cream;
to have the table set happily, messily,
by the youngest three;

To repair busted bikes and kiss bruised knees,
and all together count goslings in the spring;
to play hop-scotch on the sidewalk and "catch" down the street.

Woman,

I desire;

To build you a red brick house,
lasting for generations to pass on;
to build a heritage of stories and songs;
and to engrave our names on the pillars
of many beating hearts.

Woodlands Without Color

When the woodlands have kept their leaves
and quickly lost their color,
When your voice echoes back clear
and without joy,
When your days are filled
with a vibrant exchange of gifts
and you yet feel life winding
down inside your chest;

Remember
to set aside pleasures;
to feel the solid dirt below you
which will accept you;
to wait for Him, immediately;
to stand with calloused hands
unclenched.

When the sun breaks
through your eastern window,
will you open it,
remove the screen,
and again take breath
from the hands of our maker?

Young Woman (Release)

Young woman,
with whom I will
gladly share my name:
I am a faulty wire hot with current,
yearning for release.

For my dreams have been pent up for ages,
and my hands I have just untied.

I imagine you a gentle safeguard
for my heart's hopes,
and a mighty sail
for its desires yet untried.

Youth

I wonder,
resting in the home of another –
for what am I made,
and whom will I be called to love?

fragments

Now I was back, at my apartment,
and could hear only my refrigerator hum
and the floorboards above me creak from my upstairs neighbor;
just shallow sighs from cold machines and familiar strangers.

shallow sighs
familiar strangers

I woke from wish
to reality
when we wed.

hearts torn like rags
left to waste;

If I toil and sweat,
will my hopes
rise up again?

What comes from above
first abides within.

Slow dancing under stars,
and breaking little hearts.

Growing old,
and filling your heart until
it's big enough to break.

Trading dreams like kisses,
your skin soft under moon glow.

Slow dancing under stars,
as heat finds its way back home;
May moon rising,
trading kisses beneath its glow.

Do you wait?
Are you filled?
Have you fled from darkness and ugliness to the realm of repair?

I could not fully restrain trial for you,
and I'm learning to dive into hope.

Waves break heavy,
and I want you here:
not to ease pain,
but to share joy.

I want you, no less,
for all the trials in my life,
for the immersion in struggle.

A black hole within your body;
does anyone ever feel the life go?

Blackest is the cloudless sky,
purified for the dawn.

I can still taste my regrets, made at every single turn;
Fate and I never got along, one of us had to burn.

Questions cut through my mind and leave me in ruins:
You stayed with me through the winter, why'd you go in June?
A deck of fifty-one is left lying on my floor –
You left said we'd meet again, but not through which door.

Dry ash, bare chest, and your hair matted, damp
– you've been trivialized by compromise.

Now you are tarnished, unsure, unsteady,
with feet frail
and a beat behind.

It's time to be honest;
I'm tired of staying clean.

I had whiskey in the morning
because I'm tired of my white teeth;
and every time I look in the mirror
I start feeling like I want to see someone bleed.

Ugliness bears forth,
and drags face.

I have bad blood,
hot from swollen tongue,
soaking my teeth.

Do you weep hot tears
for your brother's empty veins?

White-ice wind
snaps against skin
and whips blue-vein blood
into heat.

Dappled sky at sunrise,
your heart knocking slowly
against my ribs.

We consecrate the day
by sweat, gift, and sacrifice.

Rejection of the mystical and mythical.

My desire no longer lives,
but it has not left my chest.

Look:
Silver bells,
silent on the sleight,
nearly shrouded by the snow.

There's a hidden river in the valley masked by trees
where your name still echoes over living things.

I remain in the open prairie
beneath the dark heavens,
yearning yet,
in stillness and silence.

I have come, now, for a small proposal:
just an evening of your life,
and openness to going deeper, further,
if there leads the light.

Heading westward into the wind
to slow the sinking of the sun.

Ravens
are no longer
a surprise.

(addressed to One above)
Raise our eyes to raise our spirits;
Into depths yet dark plunge my yearning, moaning heart.

Seven-howl moan
Seven-howl moon

Fears,
just anchors upon the heart.

Snowfeather.
Winterfeather.
Wintersong.

I expect to see bright blossoms soon,
but I have been expecting such things
for a long time.

I wish for a clearing of the weeds,
a harvest of truth.

I wish for the vines around my heart to be loosened and/or healed,
whose seeds were aimlessly sown decades ago.

Neither the ground, the absent, nor the dead speak,
but yet I have come back to this town – the origin of my origin [my father's hometown].
I have come back to the homes, sidewalks, and fields abandoned by my ancestors.

I wait to receive what should have been given;
I wait like a cold match amidst damp leaves.

Remember snow forts with plywood and two-by-fours?
A Christmas tree from our backyard?
And the neighbor's hill,
perfect for all our sleds?

Beside the dusty grain bins, busted trucks rust –
a scattering of pale and dented shells.
Their headlights are home to sickly mice,
waiting out a dry winter in shattered and cracked glass.

The moon rose, the streetlights glowed, the clocks were stopped;
The air was loaded with silence, and you're down to the rocks;
Your shoes are stained with mud, your word doesn't amount to much;
To the wind, they'll throw what they cannot carry out.

You've dealt with dreams, with pleasure, with pain;
You've taken your cards, we have all done the same;
The difference is not in the silver or the sin;
And it's known: you can close your eyes only once.

Now I'm too old for dreaming, too old for staining glass;
I know what's to lose, and the dice have already been cast;
But you brought back a change we thought we'd never see again;
I pray, there's one more ticket, for the train.

Some would say, they welcomed your years,
For a bet, a laugh, a reason other than tears.
But what have you to bargain, what again may be sweet?
Salvage the bones, lock-up what used to be home.

The habits we've built
 turn into lead weights
upon our chests.

Being blessed means being bloodied.

Days disappear
like sand dispersing
in a stream.

Face the wind with jagged teeth.
("jagged" applies to either the wind or the teeth)

Dark bones shaking
under fragile skin.

Dark bones shiver
under fragile skin.

Two, now one,
sweet bones of each other's bones.

Time has made trails in my face.

Stars dance
over a pale moonscape.

Rest, ye weary traveler,
upon the edge of night.

July swelter and hopes unbroken
bear down like stillborn chains.

Waves break heavy,
and I want you here.

Is it pain enough to quit?
Have you been filled enough to give?

Restless winds inside your head,
dreams better left unsaid;
Do you dare bring it up if you fear bringing it to life?

Killing time before an answer can be lived,
days until you'll take a step again;
You have her number, but do you have her heart?

I thirst for your beauty,
and I wonder how you will change
as we move further in and farther up.

To the heights you are called –
Father's last words
as daylight falls:
"Goodnight, sweet daughter,
and we'll see you in the sunrise."

We remain young
when gazed upon
by the eyes of love.

Knuckles cracked from the cold,
dripping blood in the snow –
yes, this is music drawn by love's bow.

Dead leaves are pounded into the dirty ground;
She shakes her dress, pulls her ribbons out,
and her tears on his collar turn into stains.

She says, "Scratch out the space between our names."

I'm going back to the land
that holds the bones of my father.

Freight train wind

Headwind Nebraska
(Overcome)

Can stars re-emerge,
once drowned in the dark?

The moon above our heads,
the fields beyond our arms,

Tapping the stars in the night.

Fellowship
Abundance

Marriage of Love and Truth.

Maturity
Purity
Innocence

My bones ache
to wake at your side.

My bones hum,
still warm from the sunrise.

When our fields were rich,
When our hearts were heavy with hope,

Though it be late of day
in a land oft covered
by hard snow and frost

I wonder about the seasons
turning over and over our earth:
Will we let them lay down dark,
fresh soil upon our souls?

What will be born
of the struggle we have long shouldered
with our nearly-clotted blood?

Who will take up the torch,
and whom do we carry it for?

May the match not be lit
to be quenched
with just a hiss.

When Heaven is drawn from images
of the life you let pass;
Can you face your sins, faults, and weaknesses,
and the good you should've let yourself have?

It seems I was known,
and this I never knew.

Yet, far north, past the front line,
I am told the sun is rising late,
and that falling leaves
are catching its light.

Here, I have seen the sinking sun
paint a single tree in fire.

Let this desire flow from my heart
like a river of wind through the trees.

Hollow-hearted and open to light.

Remember when we talked,
about God, life, and death?
When it begins, how it should end, and what comes next?

The coal hits fire, as the engine heads for death;
The oven burns red, as the metal bleeds the rest;
The foreman shuts his eyes, he knows what comes next.

The thunder rolls heavy, with fury it stamps the ground;
Three dogs are howling, deep inside the town;
The sky, it hums, as it's sinking down.

There's a hollow in the ground, and ten hands on the track;
There's a howl coming closer, and many hands on the track;
There's a darkness on the silver, a glint from which you can't look back.

Resting in heat,
gazing into the liquid heavens above,
watching galaxies pulse like hot-blooded dreams.

The abundant fulfillment
of all our desires.

A yearning, burning, surging desire,
drawing us together to the heights.

The Aches
Dry Aches
Old Aches
Red Aches

The Roses
Red Roses
Dry Roses

Dry Bones
Earth Bones