

# Night Train Red Dust

Poems of the Iron Range

Sheila Packa

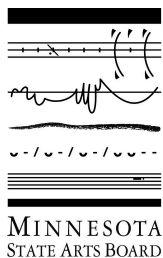
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Other books by Sheila Packa: *Mother Tongue, Echo & Lightning, Cloud  
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## In Gratitude

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*These roads will take you into your own  
country.*

— *Muriel Rukeyser*

# Table of Contents

## Track I: Night Train

My Geology . . . . .	2
Strange Highway . . . . .	4
Medicine on the Iron Range . . . . .	7
Work . . . . .	8
North Star . . . . .	9
Vestiges . . . . .	11
Midwife . . . . .	12
Not Just Bread . . . . .	14
Grace . . . . .	15
Ministry . . . . .	16
Oliver Mine, WWII . . . . .	18
Unknown Woman Miner . . . . .	19
Old Music . . . . .	20
Accordionist . . . . .	22
Patchers . . . . .	23
Broken English . . . . .	24
Strawberry Harvest . . . . .	25
Timber . . . . .	26
Fox, No Longer Hidden . . . . .	27
Pour . . . . .	28
Memento . . . . .	29
The Cost . . . . .	30
Rendezvous . . . . .	31
Keg Party . . . . .	32
Rumors . . . . .	34
History of the Dandelion . . . . .	37
Refuge . . . . .	38
Bonfire of Roses . . . . .	39

## Track II: Red Dust

Derailment . . . . .	43
Iron . . . . .	45

Sketch . . . . .	47
Blind Pig . . . . .	49
Immigration . . . . .	51
Metamorphosis . . . . .	56
Black Ice . . . . .	57
Elements . . . . .	58
Equinox . . . . .	60
Boundary Waters . . . . .	61
Conjuring a Bear . . . . .	62
Crows . . . . .	63
Memory / The Mine . . . . .	64
Stairwell . . . . .	66
Rupture . . . . .	67
Steam Song . . . . .	68
Red Star . . . . .	69
Horses . . . . .	71
Rhubarb . . . . .	73
Neighbor . . . . .	74
Grouse . . . . .	76
Meteor . . . . .	77
Consanguinity . . . . .	78
Women Welders . . . . .	79
Martha's Lesson . . . . .	80
Zenith City . . . . .	82
The Tremont . . . . .	86
Mine Pit Blessing . . . . .	88
Lost Destination . . . . .	89
Lighting . . . . .	91
Scroll . . . . .	92
Dictate of Wind . . . . .	93
Around the Horn . . . . .	94

## Acknowledgments

Work Cited . . . . .	97
Acknowledgments . . . . .	98

## Track I: Night Train



## My Geology

I excavate these words from a vein of iron  
from stones broken  
beneath old growth  
from the open pit — lit by dynamite  
by men whose lives are punctuated by midnights  
who drive new cars to the plant,  
the Crusher and Agglomerator,  
and later suffer mesothelioma.  
I drive in acid rain  
my compass gone awry  
over Proterozoic layers with four wheel drive  
aware of reverse polarity.  
These words are test drills and core samples  
from the Boundary Waters  
these words wrung from the whistles  
and wheels that turn  
and have never projected into board rooms.  
I have yet to wield these powers or capitalize  
see the returns.  
I claim my words from the broken  
English, damaged roots,  
Finnish syntax, and geomagnetic fields  
from Eminent Domain  
small print, unreadable clauses.  
I find my vowels  
from labor contracts and mine dumps  
factories and invisible contamination.  
My words, in the run off  
in open streams — oxidize  
form like tree rings

in industrial circles  
heat in the smelters, pour like lava into steel  
form these rails that carry the trains  
these trains that carry this freight.

## Strange Highway

I was born on the highway  
that paved over the feet  
of the first peoples  
with the weight of gold  
over the hopes of prospectors  
and diamond drillers  
cobbled by the hooves  
of oxen and horses  
pressed with macadam  
bitter with tar and feathers.  
I travelled with the magnetic pull  
of iron around river  
now reservoir now pit  
fell on the frozen ground  
where horses and carts carried out logs  
and carried in steam-shovels  
on the Vermilion Trail  
that boiled the frost in spring  
sunk axles  
of the brothers and capitalists  
those who gazed  
at the ground as they walked  
extracted the ore  
to develop this continent  
made the ships that carried the iron  
to the steel mills  
built the bridges  
filled the cities with skyscrapers  
and smoke  
fed the assembly lines of cars

and made the munitions  
that won the war.  
I slept in this traffic  
dreamed like immigrants  
dreaming of home —  
breathed the dust of the mine  
heard the whistles and the dump cars  
pulling three billion tons  
of iron from the ground beneath our feet  
heard the sirens that staved the deaths  
of wounded workmen  
wiped the sweat with a dirty bandanna  
waited in the waiting rooms  
of Emergency  
read the news of the economy.  
I saved what I could  
followed the Laurentian Divide  
joined the union  
drank the booze  
followed the sun  
that rose and set upon the waters  
where I swam  
lulled by forty languages  
and blessed  
the hands that did the work  
strung the ground wires  
directed the lightning down to stone.  
I drove the miles of this highway  
swerved in cars along its curves  
crashed into barriers  
buried the mean and sweet  
claimed my life

from its careless abandon  
lost those acres but not the hole  
grown ever larger  
walked upon the overburden  
broken tracks and cracks and erosions  
and patches  
felt the hum of wheels turning  
the speed that has taken the lives  
of those who hesitate or not  
like the river with its efuence  
like the wind with its residue  
from the stacks  
like the currents with their tailings  
that turn back and forth  
settling this earth.

## Medicine on the Iron Range

Charles Bray, MD and Mary Bassett Bray, MD

Arrived in the small mining town  
of Biwabik in 1899  
set up a hospital to treat citizens  
fractures resulting from being hit by rock or ore  
injuries seen, men caught in machinery  
asphyxiation  
crush wounds  
being run over by a train  
falling from ladders  
lead and arsenic poisoning  
third degree burns on the face and arms  
    from lamp explosions and dynamite  
miner's consumption  
Caisson's Disease otherwise known as the bends  
    resulting from work in the tunnels under the lake.  
Also noted among the citizens  
hookworm  
severe infestations of lice  
venereal disease  
typhoid, diphtheria, smallpox, pneumonia  
and gun shots.

## Work

I work as a miner  
in the old ways  
empty the buckets  
hauled by pulleys on oiled cables  
loads of broken shale  
water and compressed  
blades of grass  
accordions and old dogs.  
In the factory of the past  
steam whistles  
start and stop the shifts.  
Here is a wheel turning  
with a sorrowful, mechanical limp.  
I nod to foremen and bosses  
and beneath, to dirt smeared faces  
of men in work boots heavy with clay.  
Tese lives are shaped by notes  
in the dark underground  
jammed into coal for the furnaces  
by the frictions of boom and bust.  
We use everything until it's gone.  
In these old offices, typewriters race.  
The freighters come to port  
hungry for the trains.  
The engines purr under the ore docks  
hatches open for taconite  
and the dump cars dump  
as the propellers churn  
in the turbid water below the surface  
where rain can't beat.

## North Star

In Hanko, Finland  
a young woman boards  
the vessel in the Baltic  
for a ship across the Atlantic.  
The North Star shines in the sky.  
She's carrying in her valise  
a change of clothes  
a packet of seeds  
and the sauna dipper.  
Distance pours between constellations  
between English words on her tongue  
through storms and sun.  
In New York City, she buys  
a one way ticket  
boards the train going  
across the continent  
arrives on an inland sea.  
The winter ground underfoot  
is familiar with frost  
as she transfers to a northbound  
along the Vermilion Trail  
in Minnesota.  
Ahead of her waits a man  
a house to be built  
and a fire that burns it down.  
Ahead, eleven children  
to bear, a few she must bury,  
the cows in the barn  
needing to be milked.  
Unbroken ground only hers to till.



Above her, the North Star  
inside the aurora borealis, northern  
banners waving welcome —

### Two Timing

In the old house, a clock.  
With each swing of the pendulum, a life span  
crossed in less than a minute. A flash of brass  
and hidden, a winding key.  
I have swung across the floor to music  
hand to hand, rough.  
Passed a flask, laughed.  
Marked the quarter hour, counted night hours  
under the moon in an iron bed  
slung low to the floor.  
Opened the door, closed the glass.  
In the crimson heart, a chamber  
at arm's reach.  
From room to room I fling the dark  
myself in it.  
Beginning, ending,  
too far, not far enough.

## Vestiges

Beneath the ramp, silver  
musclcd light follows  
hidden lines of navigation.  
Sky and sea unlatch,  
turn back to back.  
Without breath or mist,  
not a sigh of wind  
stirs earthward. Why, you ask?  
A pearl is grown by irritation.  
Yesterday, it was difficult to row.  
Wind filled banners, rifled the water  
shifted small stones below.  
For a while, knots the sailors tied  
to cleats held firm.  
After that, lank went taut and  
the bolts let go.  
Deck hands put out the lamps.  
Winds moved beneath the surface  
in rhyme, forward and reverse.  
Timber splintered to wet matches.  
We go unvisited, get through.  
A different yesterday  
mines were running full blast.  
I remember fires blown on the beach,  
as seagulls few  
an ore boat sank before rescue.  
White pines broke from their roots.  
Footings were lost.  
Farther, the more silent after —  
the sky tolls blue.

## Midwife

I am called to the insomniac  
timetables of birth  
at three a.m. or on the way  
to somewhere else.  
I drop everything, on my knees,  
listen to the body's  
wall, watch the private door  
that must nearly rupture.  
Like a mother, must pace and wait  
at the table's edge  
to unhinge the gate  
and empty herself.  
On the other side, waters  
break in a ripple  
through the parabola.  
The naked self comes,  
a perilous umbilical journey  
on its pale vine  
carrying on a correspondence  
with death. I smell blood  
and sweat in the tunnel  
of physical labor.  
Sometimes I knead the muscles  
coax a new position  
help open the bony locks.  
Into the palms from the breach  
life grasps the air. Cries.  
I catch — wipe with a torn cloth  
an animal power unleashed, released  
that wakes and goes to sleep.

I cut the cord, take  
the blue glossy web  
of afterbirth to plant in the orchard  
bind the wounds  
bring blankets to wind the new  
into another circle  
guide the searching mouth  
to the blind nipple.

## Not Just Bread

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, IWW, Iron Range labor strike, 1916

In *Rebel Girl*, she wrote:

“All that summer the strike  
dragged out a dogged existence.  
We raced up and down the Range  
from one end to another  
in an old bakery truck, driven  
by a couple of young Italian strikers,  
who often forgot we were not bread  
and bounced us unmercilessly  
over the unpaved, rocky road.  
The deputies came to know the truck  
and took potshots at us,  
so we had to stop using it,  
much to our relief. There were  
about fourteen towns from one end  
to another which we covered.  
Several times the strikers marched  
the length of the Range, holding meetings  
in each town. Sometimes  
towns shut off the drinking water  
while we were there.”

## Grace

photograph by Eric Enstrom in Buhl, Minnesota

Hands clasped, he looks away  
from the camera. Out the window,  
an oriole sings. He might confess  
there were things he misnamed —

he never mended a rift. Years passed  
and work never ceased. At the table  
waits a loaf of fresh-baked bread  
drifted with seed, a sharp knife

and a bowl of soup, just stirred. He put  
his spectacles on the book he had always  
meant to read. He coughs to clear his throat.  
The photographer pressed the shutter  
as this moment awaited — arrived and broke  
fell into tender crumb, an accident of light.

## Ministry

Reverend Milma Lappala, Photograph, 1914

A light in the chalice burns,  
a marriage of fuel and fame  
about to become ash.  
Commended to God  
all the digressions and processions.  
Blessed the lovers who came and left  
the husband whose child she brought  
through her body, seeds she planted  
in the rain.  
She pushed back the cold  
crumpled the old news, lit a match  
in a house of receding voices  
doors opening, phone calls  
burials and excavations.  
Time builds like a wave  
and her prayers break into spray.  
Her husband will be lost too young.  
After he goes, a furnace comes.  
In this house of bread and potatoes  
she peels the skins and plunges her hands  
into dishwater. People need to be fed.  
She washes the cups,  
boils clothes on the stove,  
churns her own butter.  
In the corners, orange dust covers tools  
from another life, ways of the old country  
lit by charges of dynamite.  
She makes coffee that evaporates.  
In this house, she contracts

with the night  
wakes to sirens after mine accidents.  
Strangers knock at the door  
she supports their unions.  
She breathes them in and out as vapor  
bears every broadcast.  
Weddings, baptisms,  
midsummer dances.  
She saves their photographs  
covers the tomatoes threatened by frost.  
At day, she sings loud so  
those underground can hear.  
Her voice carries across water  
rides with the rivers that split at the Divide.  
Each note she plays from the piano's heart  
is hammered into her own valves.



## Oliver Mine, WWII

An all female crew  
in the pit on day shift —  
pickaxe, shovel, crowbar.  
They wear work boots

men's bib overalls,  
beneath plaid shirts, thermal underwear  
and bras stained with iron ore.  
They tie their heads with triangle scarves.

They don't mind getting dirty  
working in the mine while the men  
are off to war.  
In the pocket a flask, a pack of cigarettes

a navy handkerchief.  
Lunch boxes gray as artillery.  
No heels to wobble  
after the whistle blows

when they put a nickel in the jukebox  
in neon glow, dance to a love song  
fingernails stained by toil.  
Ton after ton loaded on rails.

They went deeper after the dynamite  
with shovels, bent to the task  
and took out  
the ground that they were standing on.

## Unknown Woman Miner

Cold shop. Bleak light.  
She turns to face the lay off.  
The company, she's never trusted.  
The whistle blew. Inside, hard  
to tell day from night.  
Safety glasses, standard issue.  
Her hair combed from bobby pins  
into corkscrew curls.  
Fluorescent buzz.  
Denim overalls. Kerchief.  
Her pants with a hole worn through.  
She blows black soot from her nose.  
She wears a wool plaid sweater.  
Her jacket's slung on the chair.  
In the back, a front end loader signals.  
Her hand rests on the table. Nobody  
doubts the fact she's able. It's rough.  
She does what she does.  
She will drive home  
at morning to girls who look after  
themselves. They fight.  
It's hard to sleep. Her joints ache  
her lunch pail has rusted.  
In the back pocket of her pants  
she keeps something to protect herself.

## Old Music

I was born in the north  
beneath boughs of Norway pines that carried  
the wind over an ocean  
that rocked my grandmother aboard her ship.  
She slipped me into the new country,  
humming, an egg inside of an egg,  
all in her basket and married a lumberjack  
in the country of the Wobblies.

I come from the accordion.  
I follow the steps at country dances,  
come from the sand beaches on the Baltic,  
from Kalajoki, from borders that moved,  
from the pale white flowers that come like snow,  
from Sibelius. One language blooms from another.  
The old vowels and new leaves, easily trampled.  
In school, my mother was held back.  
My father dropped out at age thirteen to drive the school bus.  
I was born into the summer fields swaying with timothy.  
Into Minnesota. I came after my grandmother's diphtheria  
and my aunt's tuberculosis.

I come from dovetailed corners,  
from furrows of sandy loam planted with potatoes,  
eyes in the dark and roots reaching deep into the soil.  
McCarthy was chasing communists  
and our poets were blacklisted.

My father couldn't find steady work.  
My mother took shifts in the shirt factory.  
She gathered pinecones by the bushel  
to sell to the Forest Service.

My grandmother remained at the border  
unable to cross into the new language.  
She pushed us over. The white fags  
were the dish towels the girls tied  
on their heads when they went into the dairy.

I stayed warm because they burned their freewood.  
I lived on trades made with a side of beef.  
I tripped levers of the dump rake  
behind my father's tractor. I wore hand-me-downs.  
My parts were bought from junkyards.  
I travelled inside the library.

My mother tied me to her apron,  
spoke words that I never understood.  
She salted me like fish, churned me into butter.  
I follow her threads fraying, broken, woven  
into the rag rug under my feet. She was dancing  
in that dress. She was opening the bellows  
of the accordion when I heard its breath.

I follow the threads back  
through her scissor cuts, back through the eye  
of her needle. She has wet me with her tongue.  
I take her into the American vernacular,  
drive her language to its destination,  
play the volume on high  
in a minor key, old music.

## Accordionist

Violet Turpeinen, 1909–1958

The pendulum of the clock  
swung – the bodies in motion.  
Think of grandmother's face  
when she was young.  
The accordions echo time and resistance  
inebriate Prohibition  
go from straight to syncopation  
uneven rhyme. Close your eyes.  
The places her toes wore through  
dancing shoes gave way  
to the rise of smoke in neon haze  
a flash of silver light on the mic.  
Open the clasp on the case  
spread the diamond, lif  
the bellows, press the chords  
open wide.  
The hellos of death, nothing can erase  
the bloom of birds in paradise.  
No words can place the miles you ride  
along the coast at sunset.  
You played the halls, emptying your chest.  
In the velvet dark, sorrow  
holds its breath.  
Once you slid into the leather harness  
(no voice tomorrow)  
hands on the ivories and ebonies  
and made the stars race in a steeplechase  
heedless.

## Patchers

The women arrived through the back door  
through the kitchen.  
Arranged their skirts,  
and for each other, picked up the stack  
of worn and torn clothes, neatly folded.  
They threaded needles  
and pierced each other's marriages.  
They unspooled the delicate thread  
and cut it with their teeth.  
They took up the stack of children's dungarees  
to mend the knees.  
They ripped out old seams.  
They put on patches, darned the heels,  
fastened buttons, repaired  
fallen hems. In a month,  
they would do this at another's house.  
They spoke with mouths full of pins,  
whispered, chided, decided  
the point when there was nothing more  
that could be done.  
They laughed and never looked twice  
at the knots they could tie single-handed.

## Broken English

I fasten my syllables  
into the language overlaid  
on another landscape  
from words gathered  
on roadsides and strawberry fields  
and fish swimming underwater  
where light fell like a ladder  
and air bubbles broke on the surface  
from a rising mist in the evenings  
from all things spent  
seeds tossed from thorn and pod  
fuf blown by what never came  
from the iron underground  
from trades and unions  
from moths whose lives were lost  
to the light in the entry  
backward through the century  
through bellows and steam-driven  
vessels on the long tongue of rivers  
from smoke and hammers  
verb and un-gendered pronouns  
I bring to the palate  
ragged and unruly vowels.

## Strawberry Harvest

Starting over in the north  
after the winter dark and deep snow  
old hurts fare.  
There are those who do not speak.  
Ice hardens and evaporates.  
Strawberries ripen.  
Her fingers pull each berry  
from its green star.  
She fills her pot to the brim.  
Some fall from the vine  
and plant their tiny seeds at her feet.  
Some find their way  
to other tongues.  
The wood violets bloom.  
In the night, she hears  
the calls of the fox to the vixen  
and the vixen's answers —  
yes, yes, yes.  
Light arrives long after a star burns out.  
She bakes a cake, whips cream.  
The berries cannot take much handling —  
rain-washed is enough —  
she takes of their hulls one by one.



## Timber

At evening in the forest  
I heard a dog yap, then many dogs  
then a howl rise and fall  
not loud or at the moon  
but ghostly  
a timber wolf inside a pack of wolves  
a howl not of distance but nearness  
not of loneliness but hunger  
heard the swaying in the crowns of tall pines  
a sh sh sh that holds the force of death aloft  
so hardly a wisp of hair moves  
heard not the day's wind  
but the wind of many years  
arriving, departing  
light falling between worlds  
into dust and wings  
away from motors and wheels into  
a strange music for way-finding  
a map that changes as you draw it  
and a language that translates into shadow.

## Fox, No Longer Hidden

In winter, a fox crossed the path I took —  
marked the slope with cautious feet  
made a hurried leap from dark spruce  
into the undergrowth of white lace

into silent snow she floats  
through grass kneeling under the weight  
upon the clouds of cold.  
Her tail is a rudder.

Three months later — it was morning —  
when I turned, she was waiting  
taking the sunlight into her coat.  
She was a red clay halo

burnishing agates with her heat  
pouring copper into the puddle  
gone before I could reach that place.  
Now she follows me

even on this page, I see among the vowels  
marked in darker ink  
traces of her meandering —  
hear under the birdsong

her soft growls.  
My lovely hunter.

## Pour

I dance on the Divide  
run against gravity  
and translate the dead.  
Tuesday carried me off  
and sky came looking with birds.  
The world reversed  
and the river went the other way.  
On the rapids  
words flow forward —  
words go back.  
One deep winter in the north  
it rained all day  
until the ice broke free.  
Maybe the star  
that fell into me the red coal  
unknowingly sent the waves  
away from shore, upside down  
to the old forces  
that churn the molten sea.  
I was iron and under siege.  
Tuesday poured me out  
in clouds of smoke and steam  
cast me into steel beams.

## Memento

I found at the edge  
of balsam trees, the skull of a fawn  
among dry straw and new spears  
of grass.

I did not hear the calls or the wolf  
(how thin the walls)  
did not know this life passed on  
so close to my own.

Eye sockets, chambers of air  
ivory caverns  
a row of teeth hardly worn —  
a fracture and symmetry  
I've taken into my own house.

## The Cost

While the maple leaves have fanned  
and gone out  
the leaves of the small cherry  
cling and tremble.

I write myself on these.  
I've shed so many things  
in my life. I write myself  
in the river, in the wind.

Water drips from the eaves  
of my tiny house  
to the shining blue stones below.  
Everything must go —

## Rendezvous

I walk between  
predator and prey, where stones lay  
and blood seeps into places one never sees  
where ends meet ends  
at a thin boundary barely visible  
where new green surges into a sound I can't name.  
The city left behind  
congested streets blocked and detoured  
torn open by jackhammers and backhoes  
the past folded like an old map  
with weights and measures and sums.  
Strawberry blossoms are about to turn  
into sweet red fruit. Rabbits meet  
where the wild rose reaches the rim of the lake  
where means meet means  
and waves of the ravenous break against my ankles.  
In the thermals  
sharp-shinned hawks rise in circles.

## Keg Party

nothing to lose but our chains —Joseph Kalar

One night, around a bonfire in a gravel pit  
near Biwabik, beer glowed with firelight.  
Music blasted through car speakers.  
It was getting cold beyond the fire.  
A river was falling over stones  
through Merritt Lake through Esquagama  
clouds pouring through the culverts  
carrying the moon into Superior.  
All my life I listened  
to the trains taking this earth away  
to the ships in the harbor to the steel mills.  
There was a story I'd heard  
about the rats in the underground mine.  
Some of the workers  
tied string to crusts of bread  
to drop through the floorboards  
in the lunchroom.  
This was recreation. The rats took the bait  
and miners reeled them back.  
Now we have open pits, taconite and big plants  
with rolling furnaces to make pellets  
from the grey dust, a breakthrough  
in technology. We emptied the keg  
peered into the walls of night and fell deeper.  
I brought up the word 'oubliette'  
a dungeon with the opening at the top  
the word with the same root as oblivion.  
No way out.  
Some wanted to get on at the mine.

Some were going away if they could.  
Some were going to die young.  
Below the stars of the Big Dipper  
sirens wailed  
our voices rose, effervescence  
sparks flying.



## Rumors

Wildcat Strike, Minntac, 1975

I heard in the blasting  
in the pit  
the low growl of the cat-skinners  
and steam shovels  
filling 240 ton dump trucks  
carrying the rock to the Crusher

I heard in the machine shops  
in the Concentrator  
in the Fines  
near the bentonite  
behind the sliding doors  
in the Agglomerator  
in the constant roar  
of the rolling furnaces  
turning the taconite pellets  
on the conveyors moving along  
the small wheels  
amid the vibration of high voltage  
through vents and catwalks  
the motors surging

I heard in the idling train  
at the loading dock  
as the dump cars filled  
with the steaming loads  
in black dust and whistles  
from the electricians and millwrights  
and the laborers

in the dry in the lunchroom  
in the elevator the word  
*strike*.

Whispers —  
the weapon of the working man  
who gives his life to taconite  
a *strike* against the distant capitalists  
or corporations who never show  
their faces here  
and yet draw out the marrow of our bones  
quiet preparations  
for a battle with an enemy  
who fights back with layoffs and lockouts.

Wildcat — unauthorized by the union  
— a mutiny.  
The next day I turned  
back at the picket line  
would not cross the men  
carrying signs. There were those  
that hiked into the mine through the back ways  
climbed fences, camped in the dries  
to keep the plant running  
and not cut off the supplies —  
scabs they were called —  
skin to be sloughed off.

I listened to the words spat after the end  
read the graffiti scratched  
into the freight elevator —  
exploitation or fair exchange

as a woman listens to a man  
an immigrant listens to the natural born citizen  
finding between the lines  
a noise, a dust, an open pit.

## History of the Dandelion

I trace the cross cut of its leaf  
to early days  
the hollow straw that pulled up the sun's  
rays to shine  
on families that lived on relief  
a grief that once shone like a yellow burst  
of star —  
the instrument of summer played  
to the bare dancing feet —  
wilted chains and chins stained with gold.  
Once our fathers worked beneath the roots  
setting timbers into the shafts  
excavating the cold ore  
from mineral graves that settle now and fill  
with bats  
the dandelion seeds float  
among the leaves of grass  
fattened by our weight.  
Do you remember?  
Tiny fires of red ants  
blankets that drew up the moisture  
dandelions' nodding heads  
in the shade — endless and broken translations.  
Baloney sandwiches  
cups of spiked Kool-Aid  
accordion music  
played in the cow's pasture.

## Refuge

Below the canopy I lay in my bed  
overtaken by shadow.  
The crowns of the oaks carried the wind  
to the pines, and the pines now lean with age  
and come down.  
Who can bear their weight?  
I hear the leaves of aspen  
through the open window  
wheels spinning on their axles,  
tiny insects ascending in bars of light.  
The surface of the lake glints like silver-plate  
underneath are stones  
broken by ice or split by root,  
they crack and thud and grind.  
In the distance, a strong woman sings.  
I pull my knees up and make mountains  
I make valleys and deep prairie.

## Bonfire of Roses

for Meridel LeSueur

The old roses flicker  
with their appetite  
turn in the wind, lif  
smoke banners from their ashes  
rise from the gravel of our reception  
indigenous roses  
bloom from the cold fires  
flow in a river of light  
as warrior roses dance  
through long years bringing old  
ways through the new  
drum like grouse in the trees  
while immigrant roses  
speak in the old tongue  
plant seeds and hunt wild game  
break the ground  
come through the long winter  
with new words  
look back into the haze  
of another history  
working class roses wake early  
to weld the seams  
pour their coffees  
into the damp and cold morning  
they have mined the ores  
made the carriages and tanks  
for the soldier roses  
that spill their oil in the heat  
on the roads they paved

speed through the tunnels  
past daisy wheels and sands  
as the homeless roses  
murmur at houses along the avenues  
sleep in broad daylight  
on the benches  
and in the evening ask  
for dollars at the curb  
while government roses  
nod of to the sound of drones  
as petitioners collect signatures  
and organs play  
as roses offer prayers  
and the ones from  
the tables donate bread  
pour crimson and gold  
upon the fields laden with grain  
that pours down a chute  
into the hold of a ship.  
We sway together.  
A chain of roses,  
broken and unbroken.  
Across the bridges  
they speed into thorns and stem  
and fragrances  
as other roses force  
the season of healing,  
those lovers' roses  
that give with their tongues  
and hips, open in the rain,

one green fuse ignites  
the next as each reaches  
into the past and rises  
on root and bud and blown petals.



## Track II: Red Dust

## **Derailment**

The train engine begins  
and the freight cars jerk  
in the couplings  
risk the lives of workers between.  
Wheels holding the weight  
glide over the lines of sun toward  
uncertain futures.  
Old rocks speak in grandfathers' tongues  
of workers' strife, gun and knife.  
Some gandy-dancer riding the rails  
between here and the harbor  
put a spike in the wrong place —  
forgot to throw the switch  
by accident or spite.  
Companies pushed Indians aside  
gave scrip for land  
kept the mineral rights  
dealt in boardrooms  
during the strikes  
recruited more immigrants  
only to lock them out.  
Workers with miner's lung  
carried the weight.  
The companies armed the Pinkertons.  
So many trades —  
from Stone to Charlemagne Tower  
from the Merritt Brothers  
who lost their claim to Carnegie —  
the Iron Range spawned the big cities.  
The first road

for the gold rush that went bust,  
for the iron used up.  
Now copper whispers.  
In the underground mine  
pumps still run  
down the long elevator where  
men strode into the dark  
with carbide lamps  
into perpetual damp 52 degrees,  
crawled into tunnels with timbers groaning  
carried dynamite caps.  
Outside, by the tracks  
a fence has fallen into the weeds  
the sign face down on the ground —  
Blasting. Keep Out.  
Now is the same as then —  
men divided and women spent.  
Some words don't translate.  
A brakeman empties his bottle  
and pits fill with water  
the old ones wait for the next disaster.  
A whistle blows long and low.  
Sun flashes on all the lakes  
as the train gains speed.

## Iron

A spark was struck  
by the iron of this earth  
that drives the factories and mines  
and laid those tracks that deliver us  
to the fronts. Fire roars  
in the furnaces, a spark flings  
into the dark. We drive it.  
Iron's been launched and shot  
from bows. Iron has made rifles  
then cannons and tanks  
has been delivered by planes  
in terrible beauty  
etched itself into stones  
and memory.  
Iron has been lit by clouds  
from the collision of fronts  
travelled on roads  
in bones and nerve-endings  
burned with lust and fury.  
Iron has driven armies  
moved with flanks  
turned the motors and wheels  
scarred the trunks  
swallowed the forests  
climbed inside the bodies  
buried by ash.  
Iron bleeds with rust.  
It comes with its own rules.  
Of its tools, I count the hinges  
and knobs and latches and pots.

No one has walked upon ground  
where iron hasn't been.  
Beware, those who sleep nearby  
those who have borne scars  
the creations and destructions  
those with that rage  
those with those dreams.

## Sketch

In 1916, in Biwabik during the strike  
an accident happened  
when the company's guards  
visited the house of Philip Masonovich.  
Some said it was over a drink  
but that's not what others think.  
A blind pig was implicated —  
a family who took in a boarder.  
A grudge unsettled them  
a strike at fever pitch.  
It began underground where  
the intestinal rivers wound  
through mineral maps.  
It began in extraction of the geomagnetic  
fields in the Canadian Shield  
with the mining of ores taken for steel  
paving the continent  
with bridges and tracks. It began  
in locations, in mines  
where money drained from the pockets  
and the hires carried dynamite caps.  
It began with fires burning  
behind clouds of smoke, the false night  
among the silhouettes,  
filters turning yellow and wet.  
Some coughed in unison and spoke  
in foreign tongues, in code.  
Some were liars.  
Thick ores and clay and blood  
mix in crush wounds and miner's lung.

It began in thin pay envelopes.  
A bullet found its way out of the gun  
but the aim was wrong.  
One man was gone.  
There were some who broke the rules  
and there were stools.  
Women couldn't remove the stains —  
they buried the remains  
but the work went on.  
A woman and infant were detained in the local jail.  
Wobblies on another road miles away  
were arrested for inciting to riot  
put on trial.  
Some votes were lost — some were won.  
A hundred years went by.

## Blind Pig

for Lorine Niedecker

If moon, then only crescents  
continuous rough music  
of verb and noun  
to shine that road upon the lake  
trouble the tongue —  
keep sonorous secrets.  
In the distillery  
underground,  
work to make ruinous  
beauty. In imaging  
pare it down, find the essence.  
Work double duty  
to intoxicate, delete and deliberate  
expand the seams  
increase the proof  
stay aloof.  
In the condensery  
turn up the heat  
on the copper tubing  
harness the steam.  
Pour out both heads and tails  
drink wild gleams.  
Burial Mounds and Old Mines  
In the shimmer of violet rain  
along old paths  
of a thousand years, along Esquagama —  
crows look right and left  
into roots that run into old blood  
deep in the earth's repository.



Ancestor bundles were taken up  
by the tribes  
and moved to this site with other bones —  
we don't know why.  
Glaciers have gone into the sky.  
Women had consequence.  
A thousand years of rain  
make a high banter with the crowns  
of trees while the earth swallows flint  
clay vessels and copper implements.  
A thousand years of excavating  
and we are paid in pebbles.  
Rain comes down like a sigh.  
Arrows are pulled from the targets.  
Our wars, our burdens are many,  
we wait for discovery  
in the sound of rain falling on folded leaves  
in the silence  
before the forest and after the forest is gone.  
A fish jumps at the wings of insects.  
Birds swoop.

## Immigration

i.

Come into the car  
look into the dark with me.  
In the knitting  
I was cast on or was my yarn  
on my grandmother's sticks  
in vein-lined hands  
stitch after stitch  
and a few of those dropped.  
Now a hole runs deep.  
I carry the loop  
of invisible ores  
whispering at night  
flights of bats  
wind in the tunnels and farther  
in the seep of water.

ii.

The click-click never ends.  
Do you notice while knitting  
that progress is unraveling?  
Tipsy, motion sick, sleepy  
I extend the garment  
invite you to try on the vowels  
give you this edge  
lift the smell of hot pine needles  
and their roots  
as the bank of the river dissolves  
takes mud to the sea  
murmurs through the night

to bring the long horizon  
the sunlight.  
I remember the sound  
of waves against the boat  
arriving, departing, passing beneath  
the glance of custom officers  
who stamped a seal on my passport.  
Over the border and back  
exhaling —  
a note sung out, hummed  
flung out like seed in its case  
buried and broken and stitched  
by the earth who feeds us with rain.  
Inside the minerals rise.  
The plant grows a root, a tendril  
some sort of mercy.

iii.

The hawks kettle  
above the crowns of timber  
taken down.  
I mourn for their height  
sing, hold the winged  
moment of shade  
to send ahead  
say all the syllables are  
ours — all the lost  
lonely in the dark  
rustlings  
breakings, the violence  
never meant or done on purpose  
short-sighted, mean

steam shoveled  
done with an instrument,  
all that we buried in silence.  
I sing of the new lands  
the rooms they built  
dreams that opened.  
Of those I am speaking.  
To my grand-daughters  
and sons, the grandest  
beginning, I bless  
even the unresolved claims  
the stripped and foreclosed —  
all things do change.

iv.

My grandmother took in the sunset.  
I speak in her crimson —  
tip the glass.  
She always gave with a warm hand  
boiled the sap of the trees  
for pancakes at the table  
at sunrise collected  
from the chickens' squawks  
a basket of eggs  
warm from brooding.  
Inside the nests are broken shells  
little twigs, feathers given.  
She washed the warm eggs  
and broke them into the frying pan.  
Marigold yolks, some doubled

served with salt and pepper  
and a slab of bread  
toasted in the skillet  
sticky with honey.

v.

I tip the glass.  
From the center  
from flood and wind  
I pour from my grandfather's bottle —  
from the accordion  
his only luggage —  
from the center of fire or star  
essential spark of ancestors  
that gleams in the eye,  
I pour.

vi.

It is late but not for you.  
Let's drink to never again.  
Refill the cups.  
No went on and became yes  
what came after is anyone's guess.  
Here's to hope  
you will bring your warm hand too.  
I depend upon it  
pour my love and the mothers'  
before, give every stitch  
of warmth to the cold.  
Take heart, the chained heart  
the foreign, added-on heart,  
the singing of a bird.  
Listen to the knitting of the invisible

ores whispering at night,  
winged flights, listen  
to the wind in the trees  
and farther, listen —  
love's pouring clear like water.

## Metamorphosis

I woke as if on a dark  
platform, everything departed.  
Raining in the windows  
into my sleep  
stars or moon or mist,  
revolving.  
I've travelled far,  
the train erases its tracks.  
It is not as if I did not know this —  
away  
is a drifting continent  
stone of an iron mountain.  
I turn toward it  
as if my body were all voices  
silenced and listening to the dark.  
In the beginning  
separation  
day from night and water from sky  
now me  
the way of all things.  
The hands are feathers  
now  
they can not grasp or hold  
anything but wind.

## Black Ice

I go back to the girl  
her blades on black ice  
crossing visible cracks  
fractures fused by zero  
on the December lake  
over fish in descending currents  
silver and precise.

She warms up  
the dance  
is turn and reverse  
intoxication and chance.  
She's carving the surface  
with hardly a glance  
racing from shore  
to lift when she leaps —  
land without weight —  
releasing the pain in her feet  
almost blue.

Exertion or fate?  
Drowning near  
the place she broke through.



## Elements

All winter, as I kindled the fire  
my body burned days on end  
not sexual but acrid  
at the stake  
the little girl kept by her father  
at the table  
to finish her dinner,  
my adolescent selves,  
the wives I was, a conflagration,  
my own immolation of the past.  
At the end, I turned into charcoal,  
a bear, and burned even brighter  
as I carried my ash to the icy road.  
All winter back and forth  
I spoke with the tongues of flames.  
At night I tied myself  
to the sound of breathing,  
the waves of in- and exhalation,  
pulled up my boat on an empty shore.  
In mornings when the world  
came back, I floated  
upon the surface of light,  
resurrected and lost my self  
to the waters, in vapor  
and ice and free.  
Then noise surged — trees felled  
tunnels bored through the iron mountain  
my body, bull-dozed.  
Ache — just another word for gravity  
stone crags, granite faces

ledges lifted by glaciers  
that came and left, carried by trains  
iron strip-mined.

I was weathered and worn  
by the rivers that sprung  
from underground  
with eruptions and slides  
floods, quakes, lightning strikes  
made into shadow, eclipsed.

I have been travelling  
in four directions  
borne into the hands  
of those doing menial work.

I take this life  
to give to the wind, my breath —  
with the strings of an instrument  
give to the flames, give to the water  
give to the earth.

## Equinox

I come to the poise  
of an empty day —  
after winter and before new leaf —  
nothing you can see  
in the north at equinox  
in the trees when sap rises  
and wings are passing over  
no berries yet, nor needs.  
The water climbs  
over ice-capped rocks  
and waits.

In the still frozen mud  
frogs, who could have been taken  
for dead, jump-start their hearts.

## Boundary Waters

Off the road  
where maps of lichen and thick moss  
take in minerals  
beneath the balsam  
over the border  
past the landing  
in the stone face of granite  
above the water's mirror  
in a boat I ride by small islands  
where root dives into stone  
amid broken limbs of white pine  
behind the reflection of day  
into dark endings  
reach for my own reaching  
hand in the cold water  
of October — for a tail flick of a fin  
among the sunken shoulders  
in a vein of ore.  
To take from another body  
is a question  
answered by loon  
or by the morning rime  
with weasel  
searching the char of a cold fire.  
After the urgent  
animal of the body —  
we rose to a heavy frost  
and the moose that trod  
over our path  
running, hunted.

## Conjuring a Bear

Find Labrador Tea  
collect lichen  
from the granite face of midnight  
and pick up the soot of fallen stars.  
Sharpen bones  
with a rusty file and make claws  
out of memory.  
Run short of supplies  
make do with twine  
and pieces of burnt driftwood  
whisper a prayer and a curse.  
Try rivers.  
Willow roots to tie in knots.  
Hazelnuts. Dandelion wine made by aunts.  
Read an old map — several miles lost.  
Add Fool's Gold  
hair clippings and nightmares.  
Cross the howls of the wolves  
with trees falling  
in splintering thuds.  
Take the wail of a train and its wake.  
Old hollows. Hot tar. Lady-slippers.  
Neither compass nor level  
but blood and breath.  
Whatever else.  
Wear ice. Chant. Sacrifice.

## Crows

Crows rise in glossy coats  
grasp shadows when they land  
clasp hands behind their backs  
consider the ground where we walk —  
it isn't sound, they decide  
and fly to another place nearby.  
They circulate in the dappled light  
gather wind into their bodies and eyes  
travel along the highway  
shift and jostle one another  
inspecting bits of gravel —  
if it can be found, crows will find it —  
they're appalled at all the broken things  
and pleased by rings.  
In the rain, they cry with indignation  
cannot bring themselves to any unity  
cannot become a choir, cannot settle.  
They know exactly what they need.

## Memory / The Mine

I return but it's all excavation — me  
an employee of the organization.  
I remember a long road past a gate,  
a dead landscape.  
Dust. Noise. First the Crusher and then  
where I worked, the Agglomerator  
with conveyors to the trains.  
First stop, the dry.  
A sink like a Roman fountain.  
Clothes blackened by taconite, yellow and white  
hard hats, coveralls, steel toed boots,  
safety glasses, the whistle  
starting and stopping each shift.  
For this, I propped myself on a ledge  
for the paycheck.  
Steel beams, high voltage. Dripping grease.  
One of the crew leaning on a high pressure  
water hose, blowing dust out of my nose  
into a handkerchief, pushing spillage  
down the sloping concrete floors  
below rolling furnaces,  
swallowing salt tablets from dispensers.  
On a swing shift, counting  
days till the long weekend  
taking smoke breaks, and calculating  
what falling asleep on graveyards might cost.  
All night and day, the trains came to load  
at the ore docks.  
In the lunchroom, I took from my lunch pail  
a paperback. Kept myself awake

with coffee from my thermos  
avoided pellets and their third degree burns  
stared into the middle distance  
not the ends but the means —  
working below the surface.



## Stairwell

Iron. Two notes  
travelling and landing  
on shore and wind-carved edge.  
To carry and drop, on rusted

mesh, hunger and freight.  
Ingress and egress with railing  
between stories — ascents, exits —  
threshold, escape.

## Rupture

Some blame can't be escaped  
for the fire.  
It happened — didn't it?  
Or not just that year.  
It was careless. There is no excuse.  
It could have happened to anybody.  
It depends on the angle and intensity.  
Did I say velocity?  
I can't get rid of the smell of smoke.  
This changes nothing or everything.  
It's too late for never.  
The shadow unfolds with its light.  
Crowns lit crowns  
ahead of me. Behind char and bones.  
Ghosts flee.  
I went on. It wasn't me  
or it was a shadow.  
It fills the space that I fall through.

## Steam Song

In the sauna, I remember  
water pouring from the bucket  
to the floor.

The water remembers  
vapor and ice.

The walls remember the sap  
that rose in the spring.

The wooden ladle  
remembers the drawknife and vise  
drops of blood spilled along its lines  
and calloused hands that carved  
the body of the tree.

The hands remember  
the hard palms of his father  
all those nights working by the fire.

And his father remembers  
the draft horse pulling the logs  
that remember the height of the white pine  
that remembers the earth  
before it was fallen.

The stone remembers the blow  
that broke it from the mother stone  
and bones remember the blood  
that spilled  
into the roots underground

The nails remember the iron.

The fire remembers the ancient forge  
the heat, the heat.

## Red Star

Nothing to say —  
they slept and woke and walked  
distant theories.  
Before sunrise she boiled the coffee  
and poured it through a silver  
strainer. When they drank  
they both looked away.  
The star in the shoulder  
of Orion  
in gravitational collapse  
a violent stellar wind too far  
to feel even a breath.  
He looked toward the barn  
and she with one hand in her lap  
looked at the dog  
waiting for a scrap.  
On the counter, the tin  
of coffee from the Co-op  
the Red Star brand  
with its hammer and sickle crossed —  
one to drive the nails  
into the boards planed  
from the logs they cut  
and one to cut the grain  
that swayed in the summer fields  
to take to the mill.  
Equal shares in hopes  
and their demise.  
The Northern Electric Association  
connected them to the grid.

She made eggs and toast  
and wild strawberry jam.  
He went out to milk the cows  
and she churned butter.  
When he came in at dusk  
everything was on the table.  
He ate and went to the shop to fix  
the red Farm-all H tractor.  
Pigs had the slop.  
The coffee tin rusted  
holding old nails  
the distant star above the earth  
imploding, exploding  
hydrogen to helium to iron  
burning through the elements —  
or giving birth.

## Horses

i.

My grandfather leads Belgians  
into the bright sun of the last century.  
They clop to the barn door  
squinting like immigrants, a smell  
of hay and manure and dust  
from their chestnut flanks.  
The shod hooves strike the blue slate  
under foot and give off stars.  
They lower their heads  
for the door is not their height.  
Muscles roll beneath their brown coats.  
They cross over the threshold.

ii.

My father grows up in two languages  
between his parents' claims.  
Leather harness, reins, the silver rings jingle.  
The Belgians whinny for a bag of oats.  
Their weight shifts.  
My grandmother turns from the sight  
from the window that catches the sunset  
with its fire, in the same house that burns down  
on the foundation that will remain  
and one lone timber holding up the sky  
the same timber the bird chooses for her nest.  
My grandmother pulled back  
her skirts, kept the children inside.  
She's taken her breath away  
from his shoulder and throat,

the endless schemes to trade this and that  
and now the horses for a gold watch.  
She holds her tongue  
the air as cold as the potato cellar  
as cold as the bottom of the swamp  
as the peat beneath the trees  
as the St. Louis River that winds  
through the homestead and its snow drifts.  
Her quilt wears down to fragile threads.

My father plows two fields.  
My grandmother hears the Belgians neigh  
sees the shadow of an old man  
dragged by their shadows. Nights come.

I remember the long traces —  
the hame on the collar  
that hung on the barn wall  
the weathered boards of the cart,  
my sister on the back  
of two kinds of knowledge.  
My mother sings the songs her mother sang  
and spins the wheel.  
The bird weaves the nest with twigs  
and bits of yarn,  
shells crack open  
and two young ones fledge —  
to circle and soon, migrate.

## Rhubarb

Celebrate bitter things  
after long winter  
rhubarbs' red green stalks  
and partial sun  
shared with cutworm and fly  
and ants that come —  
no house can resist their arrival.  
Life's too much or not enough —  
savor the undertone of butter.  
Smile in dandelions' faces  
after the rabbits take other blossoms.  
Taste from the plate I've heaped  
tart rhubarb  
ripe strawberries and sugar.



## Neighbor

Far from home  
my father stopped our car  
and my mother paused in her talking.  
On the shoulder of the empty stretch  
was a lone woman walking.  
The neighbor —  
neither parent registered surprise.  
No houses nearby, no way to a telephone.  
She wiped her eyes.  
The edges of her light coat were flapping.  
She climbed in the back seat  
next to me, bringing in cold drafts.  
Her husband told her to get out  
she said. He drove on without her.  
Not the first time. I watched the ditch.  
Nothing more was said. I could see  
in the rearview mirror, an afterthought  
in my father's glance.  
We travelled along in silence,  
except for the radio singing.  
I listened to the tires' rhythm  
on the cracks of the tarmac.  
At her driveway, I heard my father's question:  
Is this where she wanted to be dropped off?  
She pulled the door latch, thanked him.  
Later, her husband mentioned the incident  
if she wasn't so stubborn — he apologized

while he clenched, unclenched his work hands.  
It's all right now, she said. My mother  
added, if you ever need anything  
just come right over, don't bother calling.

## Grouse

Along a deserted road, at the edge  
of October  
a grouse between shadow and light arrives  
with tentative steps —  
as if to say to fox or wolf or husband with a gun:  
I've come this far — has it all been a waste?  
In his sights the bird  
bolts into flight.

## Meteor

She burns with a fury  
her blood turned to shower  
    of star —  
in the atmosphere, cast out in high wind  
burning in the late hour  
night fire — red leaf.  
When she returns in the hollow of throat  
on each anniversary,  
bring ash to the ceremony.  
Grief burns in the lung  
    in the songs they sung.  
In memory, I light her with my tongue.

## Consanguinity

for Gladys Koski Holmes

The bear walks over ores  
through the ring  
of ice and Northern Lights.  
A wind from two worlds blows.  
I can smell the fire in her sauna stove.  
She hands me the switch  
birch striplings tied in a bundle.  
They've just come to leaf.  
She gives me a bear's tooth.  
She works at a loom  
weaving the steel wire  
unwound from a mineral skein.  
The meridian moves when she moves.  
Swaying in the heat,  
I drink cold from the Big Dipper.  
She steadies the handle.  
One hand, calloused, grips like iron  
and the other stirs the atmosphere.  
She's made from oils and canvas,  
split screens and names that extend  
from the landscape.  
Inside she is deep crimson and violet.  
A rose blooms from a vein of blood  
that travels through dark mud underground  
and comes up in the sun.  
Water boils into steam and the stones speak.  
Her incantations come.

## Women Welders

photograph, Sue Grasso, 1942

Outside the plant, sisters grin,  
their hair rolled and pinned.  
They wear work clothes  
and the lids of their welding shields  
are lifted. It's day shift.  
Production is up.  
The safety goggles gleam  
slightly steamed in the sun —  
as if they were just called away  
from the acetylene torch  
and the hot flame of rage  
that makes unbreakable seams.  
In the plants and shipyards  
women just like these  
man the supply lines fully capable  
with the air of Amelia Earharts.  
Their feet on the ground in Canton, Ohio  
at the Spun Steel Corporation  
are solid. Nobody could shove them aside.  
Their bodies even dreams are weighted  
by heavy aprons and gloves and high boots.  
When they go home, they'll sit on the porch  
drink a beer, wait for the men  
to arrive — to dote on babies — keep score  
of baseball games broadcast on the radio.  
After work, they wash the grime  
off their necks and clean their nails  
and though it isn't polite  
hawk the dust from their throats.

## Martha's Lesson

Dead people's clothes  
Aunt Grace brought from the nursing home.  
The box flaps lifted as if she carried live souls.  
Perfectly good, she said, but with  
the whiff of medicine and toilets.  
For the children, Grace gestured,  
for dress up. But pretend wasn't like that.  
It was chaps and holsters and cowboy hats.  
Aunt Martha took apart the men's suits  
with her seam ripper, to music.  
She had been at the sanitarium for TB  
pictured in a room full of iron beds  
and sessions in the cold fresh air  
wrapped in wool blankets  
with those were her dearest friends —  
a woman named Ricky  
who never married and some  
who didn't make it. Ricky sent  
another photo later, after they had been  
released, posed with a hunting rifle.  
She never had a child.  
It's just her way, Martha said. I tucked it  
inside my head. There were women who  
were like men, and there were women like  
Martha who hummed and cut  
with her shears, added darts, pressed with steam  
basted the seams. Sewed the men's wear  
on her Singer sewing machine —

she used a tie and a shirt  
the same pockets  
and buttons and zippers and cuffs  
but gave it a skirt.



## Zenith City

### A Symphony

I haul in with the freighters  
glide beneath the aerial bridge  
fall into the red grains of sand  
walk with the migrating cranes  
follow the hawks  
rise from the wind  
drive the waves into shore  
break the breakers along the ledge  
explode the light  
push back the smoke of chimneys  
press against the trains as they come  
to the ore docks and back to the mines  
and return to the inland sea  
follow the creek from its mouth  
through the culvert, up the slope  
beneath the motors storming  
on the freeway, scatter the trash  
dishevel the Rose Garden  
below the lifting flocks of birds  
over young mothers with strollers  
stir the dogs by the bookstore  
drill with the dentist  
cook with the chefs of Burrito Union  
on Fourth Street  
as the river goes deep  
and descending  
climb the iron foot-bridge  
find the path along the precipice  
tip the old cedar

follow the homeless  
and student and middle-aged  
streets that merge into the city  
glimmer in the crowns  
of old white pines  
find my way under bridges  
to the pileated woodpecker  
shine in the city lights  
over the roofs, to the monastery  
and university into the sky  
and down again  
sway with erotic dancers  
and sleep with the dead in the mortuary  
come through tar and feathers  
and terrible fatalities  
wars and old age  
read my names on the stones  
speak to the owls  
wander through alleys past kitchen windows  
where women break eggs into pans  
bring the children home  
make the dogs bark  
exhale with babies breath and ferns  
in the cases of the florists  
shine through diamonds and gold  
of the jewelers  
through the brokenness at the shelters  
in the paper plants  
in the picketers at the clinic  
in the liquor stores  
fall through the heat of summer  
and winter's snow drifts

gleam like the candles in restaurants  
in neon messages, in casino slots  
in shops and banks  
and tail-lights of the buses  
rise in the scent of sesame oil  
and peapods through jasmine tea  
and sushami  
fresh ground coffee  
Italian sausage through fennel seed  
and crust of bread and slice of cheese  
clatter in silverware  
rise through the smokers of fish  
and in the barbecue  
through the brewery  
spill as foam over the brim  
echo through the voices  
the heels on the bricks  
ferment and pour into  
the smudged goblets  
come to those in debt  
in Emergency and Intensive Care  
map the body's breath  
sweep along the floor  
of barbers and barkeeps and bachelors  
waiters and Grandmothers for Peace  
in chambers and markets and charts  
of meteorologists  
slumber in the jails  
and bookstores  
gamble with the lovers  
newly met, and invest with  
the patient, the irritated, separated

come to the first kiss  
to silent exchanges and glances  
to the crowning head in delivery, the cry  
of the newborn's father  
burn in the tobacco  
and fold in the newspapers  
come through the vibration  
of strings, through the clarinets  
and brass, through the hands of musicians  
through dark night  
through long and sleepless trembling  
through pain of needles and rehabilitations  
over the bridge and under the bridge  
through strokes of artists on blank canvas  
through dark matter and despair  
cold damp of the deepest mine  
and hellish furnaces  
through fevers and dreams  
come through a seed  
rise into stem and leaf  
fall back to earth  
come through the mist  
rain down the lake  
rise from the wind  
drive waves into shore  
break the breakers along the ledge  
explode the light.

## The Tremont

A stranger checked into a room  
in the Tremont Hotel  
at the end of the line  
tipped the porter a token to lift  
her portmanteau.  
She arrived — no lady —  
in a ruin of red brick  
with a view. Bats came in  
rodents hurried through chinks  
in the walls, vandals  
broke the window glass.  
The mercury lights arrived  
and fell through. Walls  
starved down to ribs  
and floors dropped beneath  
the ceiling's downslide.  
Pipes went silent. Spiders watch.  
She won't lie. There's been  
a lot of traffic coming by.  
Trades are not sweet.  
Either people are blind  
or she is invisible, light  
as powder on the empty  
bureau where she writes  
with the tip of her finger.  
Some pray, some get high  
chase a train that has long  
ago left the station.  
With deep concentration  
she climbs between sheets of rain.

The hinges of door creak  
and the wind whispers  
to the new moon  
who will soon knock.

## Mine Pit Blessing

for Liz and Kandace

I'll meet you here  
on traces of the deep red ore  
beneath our feet  
where old growth and mineral rights  
have been taken away.  
I'll meet you under the sky  
on the Iron Range  
where immigrants arrived  
speaking other languages.  
Workers lifted the corner stones into place  
from Finland, Albuquerque, the desert,  
from east and west  
where bears walk and ores whisper.  
I'll meet you here among the pines  
and thousand lakes  
where I swam and drifted as a child  
down the St. Louis River  
that flowed beneath the bridges  
on the Vermilion Trail.  
In the magnetic North —  
at the edge of the wild where mist rises  
and eagles fly  
over the Laurentian Divide  
where our ancestors  
received the rivers' gifts —  
to change — turn in a new direction — to flow  
away from oceans we once called home.

## Lost Destination

A ship hangs on a thread  
above the pews of a church  
in Kalajoki  
where my great-grandmother wed  
where I've made passage  
with a satchel  
and handful of photographs.  
The ship floats on the high notes  
of hymns above the heads  
and turns on the rising heat  
where the pastor breaks bread.  
The vessel left port  
when she was young  
went through the Baltic  
into the Atlantic  
but never arrived  
in Newfoundland.  
The names on the head-stones  
in the churchyard  
pass through my bones.  
Oblivious of the foundered  
not burdened by dread,  
a child laughed  
and ran from his mother.  
She warned him  
in the mother language  
beneath the keel  
shifting in the notes  
played by the organ.  
If in my grandfather's lap



my mother sailed, and if I in hers —  
what might be found  
or run aground  
on currents of song  
of breath.

## Lighting

We light this candle  
for those not here today  
to thank them for the flame  
the song and love in their eyes.

We strike this spark  
in the depot  
for our own arrivals and departures  
for those travelling farther  
and closer.

With the light of many others  
we light this candle  
send a wish nobody can extinguish.  
The road to love becomes a map  
that each of us must draw ourselves.

## Scroll

Birch bark  
on my path this morning  
after the summer rain along the sea.  
A powdery, damp, torn flag  
or scroll from the map  
of unknown territories  
without north, without a key.  
From the mushroomed  
floor, no mark of seed, root, or leaf.  
Whatever was written, erased.  
Torsos fallen, empty sleeves.  
Outside, bleached as bone  
inside, a rosy skin.  
I took that scrap and nailed  
to the wall  
a silence I want to keep.

## Dictate of Wind

On a threshold  
after felling of trees  
by tree cutters, dozers, chains,  
wind pulled the smoke  
from the stacks  
and men took off their caps  
rubbed their forearms  
over their faces and left  
as sun and rain soothed  
the pitch and stumps  
and woke the buried cones  
while diesel trucks delivered  
the freight of reams  
torn open in this room —  
each empty sheet  
a ground of seeds waking  
from sleep.

Even after all the ink  
and habitation of myself  
as ash I'll arrive  
the dictate of wind.

## Around the Horn

After the whistle blew  
we danced invisible circles  
turning the wheel with our palms  
around the clock  
rolling on wheels beneath our feet.  
We blew smoke to the clouds  
met the dawn  
drank beer from a case  
until the sky turned silver  
and sun reached the highest notes.  
On the backroad  
behind the mines we drove  
around the horn.  
Wind blew upon the mouthpiece  
in morning glory  
while we tossed the empties  
into the ditch  
and the day crew thrust  
their shovels into the pit.  
When we pressed on the gas  
the valves of the car  
matched the far sound of the plant.  
Train cars loaded  
to go to the harbor —  
cross arms lowered to hold us back.  
The train cars dumped at the ore docks.  
Pellets rolled in the hold  
below and the ship signalled  
to the bridge and the bridge answered,  
a fanfare for the working man.

Shadows danced  
and the plants blew smoke to the clouds  
until there was no ground.  
Only a hole with the sound.

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Sheila Packa, the granddaughter of Finnish immigrants, grew up near Biwabik on the Iron Range. She has three books of poems and has edited an anthology of seventy-five Lake Superior regional writers. She has been a recipient of two Loft McKnight Fellowships, one in poetry and one in prose. She has also received fellowships and funding support for projects from the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council. She served as Duluth's Poet Laureate 2010–2012. More information is available at [www.sheilapacka.com](http://www.sheilapacka.com).

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