

unrequired poetry

(bpb, caeb, eb, ag)

march 2006

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Part I

CarolAnn

hoar frost clinging to last life beneath

dawn-brushed silver sky, we look
 from these well-trod discontented drifts
 as though morning would alleviate
 need — to build a fire,
 splintered wood scraping abused leather gloves,
 numb hands fumbling the match,
 smoke and ash and blinking coals,
 and this is life — the cracking
 and bleeding of your calloused hands
 exposed to that dry cold.

raw wind and the sight of frost in morning
 steals my breath away.

sunrise 7:48 a.m.

belly-lit clouds
 rolling over-and-back, they are
 oceans, escaping
 swept out over Nebraska
 (no doubt regretting it,
 now)
 turn my car down the highway
 past bare frozen fields,
 sky's tide rising in the rear
 -view mirrors.

this one goes out to
 tomorrow.

1.

wind chases its tail,
 twisting white devils out across
 the buried road. we stand
 at heather's favorite
 snow place, warm among pines
 our family planted
 fifteen years ago, and listen
 to cattle call within a quarter mile,
 soundings of lost geese.

2.

dog shoulders trails in snow
 with old bear grace,
 eyes grandmother patient.
 she has never let a north
 wind pass without meeting it
 head on.

kneel in a drift of snow,

kneecaps numb, palms
 damp and itching under ice
 crystal-matted gloves.
 lap like dogs at field-blown
 powder, mouth wide, nose wet,
 half-frozen. leave behind
 impressions of your laughing face,
 lips parted, for the wind to steal.

icy dew at two a.m.—

you are on your knees,
convulsions hidden by draped shadow
and my jacket on your back.

(those last two beers were a mistake.)

flowing from this near-darkness
breezes wake my tired mind;
I think of the last
two hours— you
crumpled on the bathroom floor
a red streak in that pale room
murmuring “I hate myself”.

I sat on my knees and looked
up to sky-blue hand towels
embroidered with
(what I think are)
irises,
as though praying at an
altar.

you are folded,
draped
like a lone moth, silent,
wings crepe-paper shadows
clinging, light-thirsty,
to the pale wall

in on yourself.

reaching after
you i think
this time i might catch
hold—
but in a whisper of
feathers like
undecided breezes, you
escape my fingertips.

half past one

a.m., house creaks with
small wakefulnesses—
cellar spiders navigating
stolen webs
in concrete corners, always dark;
drunken moths
dash themselves against the lights and
drape their folded wings on walls.
all move under silences
flung heavily into the air,
heedless of the disembodied
whispers in the hall.

(in their lives)
sleep and wake are just the same.

somewhere within an arm's reach
i can feel ghosts in motion,
glinting shadows reaching forward
toward memories i cannot see.
windows trick reflections, wonder
why i am afraid,
and wait quietly as yesterday
walks resolutely by.

salvage

the barn has already forgotten
 itself, leaning back on the wind
 with crooked old knees. at
 the sight of a hammer it
 looks like it might
 disentangle itself, crack knuckles,
 pop joints, and collapse in a
 heap of gray splinter-back boards
 save us imminent days of crouching on
 a soft-spotted roof, tossing shingles
 into piles below.

(no such luck.)

exhaustion of framework belies
 strength of lumber, beauty of floorboards
 and beams somehow clear to my
 father, who eyes rafters as though he could
 scare out their secrets, runs his hands
 over doorframes with the hope of a healer.

(he swears they don't cut boards
 like they used to.)

with a crowbar in hand, he
 tells us their fortunes—walls as yet
 to be built, generations of stubborn
 reliability yet to be gleaned. we
 prop up ladders and
 shimmy, wielding hammers, over holes
 in the hayloft floor, pulling nails
 like weeds from the walls as
 we go. scrape-knuckled and small hands
 swallowed whole by old work
 gloves, my sister and i fetch and carry,
 catch the weight
 of a bitter-edged board angled down
 by our brother
 through a narrow window
 toward the truck-bed below.

(an assembly line on the cusp of disaster
 but we're all stronger than we look.)

by the welcome end of afternoon,
 full harvest of splinters in the palms of
 our hands, we will gather ourselves up again
 and drive home in a communion of
 earned sweat
 and dust.

the lullaby-makers of my child

-hood sleep were miniscule
 madmen, disturbers of the peace.
 they sang back to the wind, to the
 whispers of a house that makes it's own
 ghosts, bends stairs under absent
 feet and dreams of evicting
 the bats from its walls.

this can never be done—the bats were here
 for as long as the house had a soul.
 some thirty or fifty years ago, their forefathers
 built in these recesses a city, conceived
 in sleep-chasers' dreams of escape
 from the sunlight, dedicated to the eating
 of insects and rearing of young.
 ill-will is powerless against animal instinct.

any number of failures to block holes in
 the attic and eaves, by which bats
 escape nightly like shadows given teeth,
 would prove to most men the futility
 of fighting unexpected house-guests very long.
 (even my parents, after a decade's war effort,
 resigned themselves when we found an escape route
 out of the basement—thereby
 explaining those nights when the bats come
 upstairs, all scared as hell to find themselves there.)

there is nothing to do but to watch.
 when, past sunset, dusk-webbed wings take to
 sky, they move sometimes like leaves
 in october, self-propelled
 reflection of the shape of a draft—
 or defiance thereof. we call them dreamers,
 for they seem to fly quietly as kites
 (that devour prey with a nightmare efficiency).

their dignity is no less variable than ours.
 in the walls around our beds the clawing,
 scraping wings, shrill voices might mean anything
 —a squabble, a scramble for space enough
 to hang one's feet in that crowded tenement,
 a fight broken out over lost bets, or the
 drinking songs of local ne'er-do-wells
 corrupting youth and rousing
 respectable neighborhoods.

we expect nothing, are suspicious of everything,
 but are never afraid anymore.
 we listen a moment, turn over, and sleep;
 our dreams would be haunted without them.

Dear —

I know I've owed you a letter so long you could
hold the spaces in my promises in your open
hands and watch the light filter
through that silence.

I want to make it up to you, but know
it was expected. What
can I say that hasn't been written
ten thousand times before?

By night I watch this town for hours,
grey dreamcatcher trees bent over parking
lots, blind lights and buildings that never
wait for anything.
Rooms reflect in naked windows,
empty but for
me; time goes crooked on wrecked hinges.
All of this you know.

Your hands in mine could light
this place like sun's rays striking snow,
but truth is some days
I still know I can't get
far enough away.

i have shed you like an
outgrown skin,
a brittle, dried-out shell;
the most impersonal goodbye,
but why should i call you back?
cicadas leave their
skins behind,
clinging hollow to the trees—
schoolchildren find them, keep them,
or crush them in their hands.

to the cicada
this is nothing.

cigarette voice, you still call
after midnight,
waiting on train yards and leaves
to watch fall in
gutters, pre-dawn,
exhausted with walking.

(wind picks up, but my back's
turned. men have always believed
i would save them.)

Drag bare feet through sun-warmed gravel,
shifting the impressions left
behind by passing cars—
altering memories in the mind of a country
road. Clouds drift by like children's
daydreams, on the run,
and words are vacant
shells that cannot hold
the sound of a
bumblebee
inspecting my hand, or the way
moments
fold in on themselves.

joshua

we gather bumblebees like gold
from the air, small
jars crowding kitchen tables,
vessels of ill-planned alien invasion
—pride of your wide eyes
for a quarter of an hour.

“caught a bug,” you say, and prod
leaves and twigs all day
for more: grasshoppers like runaway
trains, careening through the roses;
moths at rest on
hollyhocks, color of wind-blown
milkweed floss.
evening closes on a hunt for emeralds
sparking
in the grass.

(while you sleep i slide again
out screen door into
backyard dry with indiana summer,
watch our captives stumble
into freedom
as i unscrew punctured lids.
they’ll be new dreams for you
in the morning.)

Relay for Life

millions of moths swirl in
stadium lights, 'til
we lose sight of them
among the stars.
we wave our hands as
though to leave
trails in the air, fingerprinting
memories that trip out of
our mouths.

a tall girl in a
cowboy hat, green blanket
'round her shoulders,
stands looking at one
lit name, a long time in
the dark,
alone.

Part II

multiple inputs

absentmindedness

A human is an animal whose mind can wander.
Presence is not strictly enforced
By hunger or fear,
So absence
Visits
And leaves
Us bumping into tables,
Forgetting the keys to the car,
And proving theorems while we miss the exit.

alan grow

harvested cornfields tear

bare feet and open the sky
is full of stars
like holes in the
floor of heaven's
a far sight from
here i come, there
i go but for the
grace of merciful
god damn she moves
like a river winding
down the mountains
rise up like a cavalry surging
over the plains drove
women mad with wind
blowing flags in your
hands up where i
can see 'em motherfucker
that was one
bad
trip.

bpb + caeb

like whiskey off an
 hour's back; like
 minutes stand on their
 haunches, tasting the air;
 like the seconds as they
 whicker past, tiny hairs
 brushing against your
 hand as you set clocks, their faces gone
 blank with too much time; like
 the soft slide of pendulum
 between midnights, slick as fish
 in a moon-waxed sea
 where nets don't reach —

 like so you move
 always away from me
 out of touch, out of
 sight
 even beyond the hopeless
 grasp of memory
 'til you are not
 even an absence
 though i miss you
 still.

bpb + caeb + eb

pebble in your pocket
 from a driveway in nebraska
 reminds you some days
 of small things left unresolved.
 found feathers dusty as rain
 dances that never brought down
 lightening, moldy bread
 plastic-wrapped on
 countertops and
 waiting. wine gone
 vinegar sour, the
 materials of an
 unshared communion,
 the broken nest
 in april,
 the spring
 day lilac-scent missing
 knitted cuff of the second mitten,
 and her hand in yours (it was
 august).

 they gather weight like
 freezing fog, shaken off by
 northern winds—
 caught at rest in folds of jacket.

 perhaps they are not
 so small after all.

caeb + eb + bpb

jewel-toned, drunk,
we are the people you envy
in your most honest moments
torn
on the self-conscious barbed
wire of a night without
convictions or
conventions
and the ill-advised adoption
of flawed systems

on a fritz
shock without a live switch
is nothing at all—
you dream of memories you've
borrowed—

you are my favorite example
of what i will never become.

eb + caeb

flamingoes cannot maintain their hue

if they eat too

little algae—

they walk dull and listless

wishing for fusion with light

we all dream big, in a way

trapped in sleep-immobile

grasping at the colors we envy

as though they were not too

oil-slick for our fingertips,

dreams spiraling in whirligig

acid trips and sunday

mornings

our mothers would never approve.

so we are lost, swirling around

in giant vats of color

coated in fresh layers, swathed

and content finally

in our rainbow-brightness

and our self-assurance,

we hope.

caeb + eb

turtle

Once there was a turtle.
 It didn't really hurtle.
 Being but a turtle.
 It only sort of
 sat there.

In a torpor.
 Like a frisbee,
 only kind of bigger.
 And with legs. Short ones.
 Then it bit me.

fish

fish are rageful,
 bidding
 their quiet yellow
 flickering time a
 fin's ripple away from
 vengeance
 restrained only by
 fingertips of false seaweed reaching
 up and up through fresh
 water
 and the filter hums,
 menacing in one corner.
 jagged blue aquarium rocks
 wait to drink
 your blood.

caeb + bpb

pigeons

i always talk as if i have
the potential to be such an alcoholic

pigeons are not to be trusted
with their freaky flitty feathers
and watches in their long
coats—really, fucking black market
salesmen pigeons

we could talk about the definition
of a word like genuine
but they wouldn't understand and
nor would you

people are only honest when
they have something to gain

because currently,
i'm lying to you
(and the pigeons)

eb + caeb

toad

toad on a light fixture
 too warty to overheat,
 bring to me thy magic herb,
 apply it to my feet.

mix it with a melody,
 swap it for a salve,
 stir it with a willow-twigg
 and uncensored deprav(ity).

my aches are running deep
 too appropriate! too moral!
 banish them with drunkenness
 and wild-grown fresh-picked sorrel.

in payment i will free you from
 your fluorescent perch,
 forever for to wander
 on a light-blinded search.

i shall not ask you twice
 you are worth naught to me:
 had you evolved a little less
 i'd toss you in the sea.

if this you will not grant me
 you'll make yourself a fool—
 hear that? it's opportunity
 so be cool toad. be cool.

eb + caeb

weasel

i sing the weasel
 electric, the wires hooked
 up to his brain hum with
 the weasel joy, hum with
 the love of the weasel
 life

i sing the weasel
 hypothermic and enlarged with
 possibility, the weasel
 explosive and joyous, enraged or enlightened
 by turns so spontaneous,
 encompassing, shrill, &
 devastating—

the great weasel voices spin out on
 the air, and i sing
 i sing joy & love
 i sing the WEASEL
 i sing life,
 the weasel triumphant
 the weasel unholy, mortal, more
 boundless than flesh and fur
 know.

i sing the weasel in spiraling joy,
 cacophonous weasel triumphant.

caeb + bpb

Part III

brennen

fiction, most entirely

so we stand there
 demolished by the dawn
 and we think
 this is a sublime moment,
 this one lasts

pale and bleary eyed
 but aware in the chill
 wet breeze that kicked up
 just before the sunrise to
 pull the cheap tobacco smell
 away from our jackets and make
 us taste the new season
 growing green or dying off
 for all the difference that should make
 right now it isn't much

fatigue coursing through us
 (water through one beat up running shoe)
 ask us our names and if we even hear you
 we'll start
 and still make sure you spoke before we answer

but we're seeing things anyway
 because we've got no other choice
 distractions ceased to signify
 three counties back

some fool paid two point four million dollars
 for the manuscript of *on the road*
 i read kerouac once and didn't like it much
 but i could see sometimes what he was reaching for

sure as hell we're beat
 right now; if this isn't
 that exalted state of exhaustion
 that produces visions
 nothing ever was

and we might wake that blanketrolled
 shape in the back seat
 but her face asleep is enough that we speak low
 and careful

none of the people i've ever loved
 — who listened,
 stretched out on kansas driveways
 while lightning played the sky for crazy;
 said just hold it in as long as you can;
 knew i wasn't saved;
 spoke and struck me ringing silent;

played three-a.m. piano into my voicemail;
waited 'til somehow i could move —
are here right now

but communion comes where it will
and with whom.

tuesday, april 15, 2003

weeks go by
scatter moments in my memory
like sparks burn holes in paper

we walk circles in a parking lot
at sunset in front of the stadium
brick underfoot, breathing in all
the coming chill of one last snow

guitars peal and ring
clatter crash and soar

i wake and outside
new leaves uncurl on the tree
diesel smoke hovers
up from some four-hundred miles south

my feet slide into the dry leather
of worn sandals waiting by the bed;
ball *thwaps* into the glove
my hand numbs instantly;
plectrum hits the strings just right
for two seconds that ringing sound is mine

monday, january 6, 2003

you could learn a lot splitting firewood
although i'm not sure that i ever did
things about balance, heft, and precision
how to lift and carry and stack
how to read the grain of a log
the qualities of wood
and by extension of trees:
endless variation in cottonwood, ash,
maple, mulberry, walnut, and cedar
wet, green, dry, rotten, punky, rock hard,
straightgrained, gnarled, knotted, bug-eaten, and just flat
stubborn
all transmitted in the shock that runs up the handle
the resounding crack, chunk, thud,
the ringing denial of a piece so hard
something really should have shattered.
things about patience.
i don't think i ever paid the attention
these things were due
still, trying to show heather how
(swing the maul high from the center of your body,
space your hands well apart on the handle,
then bring them together at the end as you start the down-
swing
let gravity do the work
it's simple, but trying to explain
makes it complicated)
it seems like i must
have learned something.

there's nothing that dictates

the universe has to be aesthetically pleasing

nothing says all of this
is supposed to be beautiful
or even especially pleasant

the music of the spheres
might well be kind of
a grating dull roar
or the sound of your
fingernails on an authentic
slate chalkboard

and if it is,
well then all your trying
to see a world that's not ugly
comes to jack squat

you could believe
everything's in harmony
or god is in his heaven
and this fallen world
will be redeemed
or progress is inevitable;
that evolution is going
to lift us up by our bootstraps;
or all we've got to do,
really, is be objective
and let a sensawunda
gloss neatly over things

but sooner or later
you might also note the
very real possibility
that it's just ugly
or even worse
that it's not much of anything

don't worry,
knowing you like i do
i'm pretty sure it'll pass.

from thursday, october 16, 2003

october has its own light
people keep writing these things
because they are true
it contains cold, silver, purple
the remaining green, made deeper
and it fills the wind
which falls into waves and vortices
water motion and oceanshine a thousand miles
from any sea

it curves the sky differently,
makes much of streetlamps and plane surfaces
makes shadow less a master
of its own fate
it is a month of eclipse illumination
and maddened insects dying while
pelts thicken and grain rattles,
even in lincoln you
can hear harvest noises if you try.

there is not going to be a perfect answer

there will not be perfect moments*

you will not achieve stasis 'til the

universe itself has ceased

its chain of motion, string of

explosions, the muffled thud of

vacuum being repeatedly abhorred

until white noise has claimed

the heavens and

all the spheres play is static.

* there will be moments so perfect

that eternity burns holes in causality

sunspots on your jaded retina

you will plummet standing motionless

into places shaped like hope

and absolute knowledge

the words, the wine,

the shutter shaped eternity before you come

escape the place behind your

tongue like torn

the static in the sheets a thousand

miles high don't let it slide

it's here and gone, but zeno

wasn't so far wrong

between here and there, in this place

there's infinity.

thursday, december 25, 2003

outside, cold and mostly dry
dirty snow just left in ditches
piles and skiffs beneath trees
and logpile shadows
woodsmoke drifting

in here, general disarray
scattered paper, boxes, blankets
clothing, food
my empty wineglass by the keyboard

today i read:
old mail from friends,
papers i found stacked on my bedroom floor
from the first few years of college,
the part of *guns, germs, and steel*
about the invention of writing,
gary snyder from a thin paperback
i bought for my sister

sometimes i see myself in perfect relief
earnest hopes and efforts to impress
self-assurance falling into pieces
toy alphabets on notebook covers
strange ideas never quite fit
everything just kind of
overthought
underknown.

life so generally full
of chances to learn
it's amazing
what you can let yourself forget.

monday, january 5, 2004
origin

i stood with my sister
where two fencelines meet
near the top of a low rise
and we discussed
whether we were at or
near the geometric center
of the section.

we could see the houses
of most our neighbors -
each with its driveway
shelterbelt and outbuildings
in varying stages of disrepair
the church on the corner,
its former parsonage next door
now a rental
where a good friend once lived
until he up and moved to colorado.

like many places in this country
the low hills here are gridded out,
a fiction of squares
made imperfectly real
in the roads they built
ditches dug and trees grown old,
creosoted posts and poles,
barbed wire and electric lines.

(raggedly cartesian, maybe
i would rather use polar coordinates:
pick a direction, and tell me
how far you want to go)

snake not biting tail

different, this time
the new year an artificial division,
sure, but natural too after all
we swing around this
great godgifting blaze of
cosmic fire and in our falling,
cycles get to be implicit
it must really be in the marrow of the universe,
not a closed loop but a waveform
and here we are written in blood and bone
turnings figured in the tides and seasons,
sundowns and shifting starlight

gave us birth
the wavefront of all creation.

you have to choose, she said

will the world live, or will you unmake it?

you have the means in your hands

we will wait

so he looked at what they had placed in his palm:

a vast dark shape, expanding constantly

so that he could feel nothingness being created at its edges,

new vacuum and elementary particles

rustling against his fingers so that

cupping the universe in his hand

was like holding a restive hedgehog,

and when he looked deep inside –

faint whorls and splotches of light,

billions of suns birthing and dying

trillions of living beings following in their wake

sweet christ on a cross, he thought,

and then one of the others,

stocky and dark skinned, tossed him something

else: a wreath of sorts, woven out of canes

from some bush or diminutive tree

later that night, driving home

with a dried out crown of thorns

rattling on his dash

he admitted to himself how easy it would have been

to just set the universe on the ground

and stomp once, hard.

monday, january 19, 2004

Girl,

I saw *Big Fish* tonight. I enjoyed it, a lot.
You were right, Helena Bonham Carter is sort
of wonderful. It seems odd that I had never
noticed that before.

I wrote the eleventh page of a letter to
you today and realized that I had said almost
exactly nothing I wanted to say, and had
said it in almost exactly the way I had wanted
not to say it.

I doubt you are surprised.

I remain, as ever,

Brennen

january 29, 2004

it's 2:34 in the afternoon
fat flakes are still falling,
the snow piled up all night
long and on through the morning
classes at the university
canceled and here i am in
my basement, nursing a cold
and trying to capture that
old sense of childhood's satisfaction
in solitude

like anywhere i dwell very long,
this place is a mess
books everywhere
some of which i've even read
in the next room, 37 empty beer
bottles and the glass remnants of a
former occupant's cheap liquor collection
i meant to recycle all that stuff.

the first bit of *the blank slate*
has served to convince me that i'm
not an empiricist in the lockean
sense – obviously the human mind
has structure, the brain a physical shape
which can't just arise from stuff
recorded on a blank substrate and
forming these neat, somehow functional
networks of pure associations between
raw data

granted that would be pretty cool.

late the day we went through grandma's stuff
i went for a walk with joshua.
we played on the swings and
looked at bugs and dried up worms
on the margins of a shallow concrete
drainage channel with some
mud in the center

there were a spider, a two segmented
beetle, and a centipede (or is that
kind a millipede?) all moving sluggish
from the cold. the centipede looked
out of sync, jittery - but it must have been
60 degrees out, which is why i guess
you could see bugs at all

"i found something", josh said every time.

later after i explained it would be
kind of mean to stomp all the bugs and got
him moving the other direction, we sat on this
concrete slope - kind of a spillway for the
drain system i guess - and joshua made
rocket noises; i think we were on a saturn V
making for escape velocity.

later

the day is ended
sometime past and i
with heavy soul and
eyelids weary, turning
am to my blankets dark
the shape of dreams
more even than i want
to feel above or
below the quiet
of neurons weaving
their own slow accord
with nature and
nature's god

tuesday, february 10, 2004

footing on the bridge
 is treacherous - today's thaw left snowmelt
 for sundown to turn glassy slick
 i walk with my hands in pockets despite
 the singular likelihood of a fall
 feeling buttoned down and streamlined
 observe: i know where i am going

 self deception is slippery too
 like the kind of textured glass blocks
 they sometimes build walls out of,
 allowing light to pass while
 signifying little
 - the stairwells in the last place i lived
 were full of those

 now the elements of my daily transit
 are the dessicated brown of last summer's
 tomato plants in the snow,

 shoes hanging from the utility line
 across the street, a moment's walk
 from the blue house where small brown children
 lived (the very smallest occasionally asked me
 questions, the only one of which
 i ever understood was
 what are you doing?
 i didn't have a good answer)

 the place where it is fastest to cross
 10th street, from alley to sidestreet
 where the no-crossing sign is posted

 this footbridge,
 the concrete and chainlink curve
 over a yard full of huge steel
 structural elements, connected in
 some vital way to the rails
 where pass megatons of coal
 piled in open topped cars

 returning in the hours after midnight,
 the church on the corner and
 the two halves of the neon cross on its steeple
 installed days (or was it weeks?) apart
 two different shades of electrified white

 the moon, strange striations of cloud like the spokes
 of a great wheel
 clouds of steam pouring
 from the campus physical plant in the middle distance

while the tracks and their red signal lights
vanish at a horizon otherwise lost and
the tracks of a single rabbit disappear into the
level whiteness.

2004/2/15/face.png

sunday, february 15, ca. 255 kelvin

coming home in
bonebiting cold and
my hands are shaking from the chill
gripping the wheel, my whole body is still tense
long after something like rage has burnt itself out
the knowledge of evil is a taste of ashes in my mouth,
and a universe indifferent the bank sign flashing 0 degrees

when i get in, the smell of chicken and potatoes
from the pot downstairs fills the hallway
jae is awake, grafting little wire and moss
trees to landscaping models

there are the sounds of early morning
that quality to voices and movements,
coats rustling in the predawn stillness
the sense of dark seeping back out of the world soon

but not yet
and i will sleep before it is gone.

monday, february 16, 2004

i suddenly felt deeply
awkward, and left as soon as i could,
but the awkwardness lingered
and became a kind of general malaise
until every possibility
started to seem
exhausted, every groove
and pattern worn past
smoothness to gritty,
wearying familiarity.

tuesday, march 23, 2004
 reading alan watts on an airplane

there's always that moment right at takeoff when
 no matter how jaded i get about this
 i think *we're flying*
 and just for a second it possesses
 the kind of wonder that used to inhere
 in all manner of departures and beginnings.

(your seat cushion may be used as
 a flotation device in the event of
 a water landing,
 should the hand of god pluck us
 gentle from the sky and erase our
 tremendous debt to inertia
 lowering us to quiet repose in some stream or pond)

the skinny guy in the other aisle seat
 is reading a novel with a glowing recommendation
 from rush limbaugh displayed prominently on its cover;
 i am hard pressed to think of a better reason
 not to read a book

my paperback is about zen buddhism
 a topic on which more bullshit has been written
 than even rush has produced in the whole of
 his sorry, spite-filled career.

i read, string words together in my head
 try to imagine erasing the false boundary between
 my self and
 the world

eventually the sky over pittsburgh is full of snow
 suddenly visible as we fall through a ceiling
 of undifferentiated cloud

later, backward bound for nebraska
 milwaukee through the window is a wide blanket
 of bright golden threads
 ribbons and pools of light in the jet dark
 lake michigan an abrupt knife-edge of blackness
 at its only visible boundary

in omaha the ground is newly white,
 my brain refusing until there is no alternative
 to accept that it snowed here too
 the roads are as slick and black as obsidian
 and i drive an hour home with both hands on the wheel.

monday, april 19, 2004

yesterday the wind came into town and
filled the air with dust and the debris of
trashcans overturned, their contents exploding
into flight

it seemed all at once ridiculous, out of proportion
and yet totally normal, the background noise of a life
i'm only half aware of moving in

it came with the first tornado watch of the season,
the deep-shaded greens and grays you only see during
storm times.

wednesday, june 23, 2004

Kenneth Rexroth, *The Dragon and the Unicorn*:

We think of time as serial
And atomic, the expression
By mechanical means of a
Philosophical notion,
Regular divisibility
With a least common divisor
Of motion by motion, so
Many ticks to a century.
Such a thing does not exist.
Actually, the concept
Of time arose from the weaving
Together of the great organic
Cycles of the universe . . .

a tiny shop, in the afternoon
while the hungarians argue
politics i watch people passing
on the street, clean sunlight on the
narrow floor, the precise motion of
watchsmith's tools.

when i was a child
the small perfections of timekeeping
mechanisms were fascinating,
like the broken radios and minor appliances
i pried apart. repair was always
hopeless, as doomed a prospect as
the wild animals i tried to rescue
from countless deaths. my successes were
meager: a single speaker wire
soldered into place, one rabbit
who took to formula and eyedroppers.

it has been years since i wore a watch
out of fascination or habit
these past few weeks it has been almost
necessary, navigating the channels and chutes
of this vast system for moving
homo sapiens sapiens
over a complex curved surface
whose topography the species renders
ever more complicated in its efforts to level.

the lifeblood of cities and towns
is channeled by the necessary illusion
of absolute, interlocking time
mass transit, the daily mail

metered utilities and trucks full of produce
all determined by the measured flow of entropy
(unwinding springs, tiny thrumming crystals
some isotope's decay: we keep order by
observing order's own slow death)
through the vast lattice they continually nourish —
it's as if civilization were underwritten by timex,
or sustained by a billion little flames kindled
from the sacred fire of some naval observatory.

all this, and yet
the experience of time
remains organic
like the city for all of its
deceptive steel, concrete and brick
the content and duration of any moment
is no more constrained and regular
than that of a street corner
or an open door.

sunday, july 4, 2004
bohemia

in prague, we stay at a baptist seminary:
simple buildings, cobbled courtyards, a fountain, trees
all around and a stream below the kitchen window

the old city is full of tourist economy
much of it is beautiful despite this
and the bloody conflicted history of all
the saints and kings
whose memory is perpetuated in so much stone

some of it is beautiful because of these things
regardless, the street vendors
sell postcards and dashed-off paintings
of nearly empty squares and bridges —
the muddled, slowly churning presence of
humanity considered as usual
a distraction

the cathedral is an immensity of the kind
that train stations and skyscrapers only aspire to
awesome in the original sense
in the space of ten minutes i understand the reformation
and catholicism both so much better

i also realize that i feel more reverence
in a tiny wooden church barely a century old
and unlikely to last another
than surrounded by this vast, deliberate
magnificence and all its strange accretions

perhaps it is only a function of tainted sound
and lighting – distractions again
here, people point and talk
(we listen to a spanish tour guide
“is fourteen catorce?”)
and there is the constant flicker of flash photography

still i could stay an hour, or a day.
something in all this structure draws
me and holds my mind, usually so inconstant

another day, we leave prague behind to find
an ossuary chapel decorated in strings of human skulls
we buy tickets at the door
“you are entering a pious space.
please conserve respekt for the dead.”
on one wall a patron’s coat of arms
has been rendered in bone;
in the lower right quadrant a bone raven
is pecking the nonexistent eye

out of a "turkish" skull
wearing a bone head dress.

afterwards we wind further into the
countryside to a little bluegrass festival
where to our great fortune
the rain has killed the electronics
and the music proceeds with no amplification at all,
czechs singing "rollin' in my sweet baby's arms"
everyone wants to get themselves a little authenticity

later
around the kitchen table
we talk late over salted cheese
and coffee mugs full of beer
about governments & education,
oilfields & empires,
the things of the world

the next morning i wake up
and it is the fourth of july.

justify yourself

*a manifesto or a
meditation, an open question
many hopes seeking alignment*

if it appalls you to think of life
as a market economy
think instead of a system of balances
in which the cost of any valued thing
is closer to that exacted by gravity
than the kind negotiated in
'legal tender for all debts,
public and private'

because the truth is not
that you get what you pay for
but that someone pays
for what you get

x billion years of evolution
grinding, chaotic, inconceivably wasteful,
possibility hoarding its tiny victories
over time and organic decay

the accretion of civilization:
the blood of countless martyrs
nourishing, somehow, the growth
of all this fragile complexity
on the improbable substrate of human biology

colonial economy's mass murders
imprisonments and slaveries
broken hopes and all the sold out
countless migrant dreams
later wars and genocides
industries and overflows, those dark
satanic mills

near the end of another bloodsoaked century
i am born and pass through
fields, towns, pages,
classrooms, cities, constant reverie
a moment or two of awareness
and the company of some few beloved
and at the end of a day
neither heroic nor timeless
no more evil than most
there is not the weight of
years gone, nor
the presence of all those
unlamented dead

but only the dusty lamp
and a sheet of paper on
a rickety table

and this is as good a place to start
as any. beginnings are nearly always a function
of imagination in the same way that names
and numbers and all the forms of the visible
universe are only parts of some whole we apprehend
but a little.

wednesday, september 8, 2004
spider sex

across the windowpane
 at the end of the hall
 an orb spider has spread her web

 last night it was a perfection marred
 only by small doomed bugs thrashing
 tonight she is gone and the web is empty,
 ominously unstrung

 until molly looks in another corner of
 the window and sees three shapes moving
 one is our fat-bodied spider
 dangling from a thick rope of web
 the others are smaller, faster-seeming
 more sinister in their arachniform twitching

 hands and faces close to the glass
 we stand peering into the holes our shadows
 make in its reflection
 and watch as one small spider
 repeatedly approaches the larger
 legs flailing, draws closer and closer only
 to be flung – or leap? – inches across the window
 faster than our eyes can follow

 (the other seems to hang back, waiting for some
 opportunity)

 this has the weird patterning of something inevitable,
 a function of the little mechanism that is a spider
 it's almost programmed,
 is like small birds opening their mouths
 when a shadow appears over the nest
 or leaves turning to follow the sun
 is like the negotiation of some protocol
 for passing sealed messages between hostile courts
 or signals across a noisy wire
 and yet, the logic of evolution
 suggests that between

 these 16 legs engaged
 in what first looked like predation, then sex
 (and likely partakes of both)
 and the choreography of human love
 there must be some connection
 perhaps distant, but inescapably real:
 inescapably difficult to reconcile with what
 we would like to believe

 we have been taught to fear determinism and

the understanding of our lives as simple processes:
 we must be more than
 branching conditional statements
 expressed as a physical frame:
 we have been taught that we should know ourselves
 as fearfully and wonderfully made
 golden threads of possibility running
 through the stone matrix of reality
 fluid unpredictably, ultimately the expression of
 the susceptibility of god and all
 the work of his hands
 to hope

surely then, that which grows and holds
 between children and parents, comrades, friends and lovers
 must somehow be more than variations on a theme
 that equally contains the flickering automatic
 interaction of spiders —
 some kind of sterile madness
 seems to lie that way,
 comedic or tragic
 in equal proportion to the scale
 on which it is believed

and yet what is this fear
 to the experience of love?
 subjectivity, just so long
 as its memory does not fade or break
 denies or renders fear irrelevant
 — and may leave us free
 to see ourselves and wonder

we could admit
 that human love is never pure
 if it is real
 never an abstraction
 there is always something
 to drive and conduct its ordered pulses
 heat, food, sex, memory
 two people in some room
 silence and something
 pulls through the
 intervening space
 like gravity or a zone of lower pressure
 begging for release in collapse

how unlike the unthought need to spin or
 hang waiting in moonlight or
 grapple with an intruder, a mate,
 are the things we feel
 between one another?

(and even so, these startful
small manylegged things
with their ancient shape
burned as a warning somewhere
deep inside the mechanisms of
our own involuntary motions
— their dance or combat or
courtship is something more
or other
than a static routine running in an
endless loop on the circuitry
of the universe

whatever life is, we can recognize
that there is life here
however alien its aspect)

direction as well as magnitude

we are all of us the sum
of our longings

and our longings are best
expressed not as scalar quantities,
but as vectors

like arrows on a gridded page
(momentum or acceleration)
need and hope and want
hunger thirst and lust.

a bright shape stretches, twists
hurls itself against these walls
(these boundaries and markers)
thrashes, turns from side to side
quivers and holds expectant still
waiting for action
impatient leaps away from us
and dances back calling
follow!

this is your soul
the nervous twitching beast
that lives in your stomach,
darts about your chest,
pulls on your fingers and toes
whispers wild goose madness in your ears

let's go!
get going
gone!

saturday, september 25, 2004

time is like some slow drug:
 you don't realize how much you've had
 until the delirium kicks in,
 or the tremors

you've been awake too long,
 but you don't dare sleep:
 she's there and waiting
 for you to say something
 that will justify all
 those miles.

sunday, october 24, 2004

somewhere in a subdivision of hell
 sisyphus walks eternally behind his mower
 the wheels slipping on the wet slope
 of some indifferent minor deity's little
 patch of green; after every pass the
 bag is full and by the time he returns
 from emptying it into the truck
 the grass is tall again and a fresh
 layer of dead leaves has fallen.

monday, november 22, 2004

we're as new on this surface
 as frost on some november window,
 strange as well as lost to this territory
 the horizons of years and
 long slow motions we can just now begin to see
 and deep enough in time, there's no terrible
 permanence to the things we lay down
 our ink, our brick and steel,
 our tracks and furrows, grooves and channels
 our ways and means becoming
 (the wreckage of our bodies
 and so much pain besides):
 silence after a while.

tuesday, december 7, 2004
parking ticket lady

i know hate is just no good
but goddamn, parking ticket lady
in your little white pseudo-jeep
with the flashing orange lights on top

in the five minutes after i noticed the
damp square of parking ticket paper
in the frost on my window,
goddamn did i ever hate you

oh, until i had stared at it long enough,
(trying to figure out what snivelling, prissy
little regulation i had brushed against)
all i really felt was contempt
but then i noticed the little checkmark
by 'expired registration'
and the '\$100' circled, one column over

and then i hated you
because i do not have one hundred dollars
i do not even have the ten
you would have stolen, for some lesser offense
than being a target of opportunity with
my plates 7 days out of date

and let's be honest
parking ticket lady,
goddamn would it still
feel good to say 'fuck you'
once, decisively
and then slash the tires on
your little fucking buggy,
and smash the windows into so many
little crystal pieces on the
ground (like hail, or fresh
sleet) and, in some world
where you are not the apparatus
of the authority and the bloody
cutting edges that move just below
the collective delusion that this society
gives a good god damn
to care nothing at all.

this is the undertow
 can you feel it? it's a current
 made of money solvent in ethanol and
 nicotine, its channels are city statutes
 and posted regulations, closed circuit television
 lotteries, mass mail, the debt you own and
 the three credit card applications
 every
 fucking
 day
 it moves the limbs and mouths of
 cops (nervous, angry, bored and righteous),
 psychologists, preachers,
 insurance companies

— but nevermind. there is no sense
 in which i am really poor. i only wonder this:
 a parking ticket, one too many beers before
 the drive home, a dead alternator two
 weeks before payday, a bounced check —
 how many people ride this ragged edge
 where checks and balances become
 a thousand cuts, bleeding already from
 their addictions and boneweary,
 scrambling but also waiting
 for some final blow? how many people
 fall down where we don't notice,
 can't see, won't hear,
 never will?

anyway, parking ticket lady
 i don't hate you any more
 a month or two ago, i might have
 taken your job — or one no better
 and lord knows i am not unlikely
 to get that far again
 but i do wonder
 why you all can't find something better,
 somehow.

december 12, 2004

this december sunday, the shoddy walls
of a huge apartment that i think never would
feel very much like home
rattle in a cold wind

not very far to the north of here
bland and unremarkable housing
gives way to the more subtle constructions
of this america – fields, fencelines,
shelterbelts and groves
gravel county roads and state highways
narrow in the headlights

(drive past the edges of your cities and towns
and out into the twilight middle winter world:
can you tell how much our peoples' coming
has altered this landscape?
how extensive the projects of agriculture
and mass transit have broken and recast
older living patterns?)

all these no less the products of industry
but spread across far more ground
hewn closer to the underlying shape.

the underneath bleeds always through
the over top: though it may be hard to notice
no matter how we push and pull the world
beginnings are important
and transformation will always
lie uneasy with our expectations.

this is what drives my hopes and fears:
i fear that my failures and weaknesses
are the stuff of permanence
but i hope for a world where the reality
i sometimes apprehend bleeds through
all the things our misunderstanding
has ever built.

friday, december 17, 2004

a reflection on the thursday night bar scene in
lincoln nebraska and my place therein, with con-
sequences attendant

self-destruction is kind of a misnomer
because for most of us it carries at least the strong
delusion of being a group activity

i have the best friends in the world
(like opus said, clear eyed and aware
opening a fabricated christmas present
from his lost mother)
but sometimes what you need is exactly
what you can't ask your friends for

some of us just don't have the funds
to cover badly needed reality checks.

for many school-aged children

in the united states,

it might be that

there is a practical necessity

of choosing between nihilism

and total surrender

since the system as we know it

is all that exists or can exist

(we are not so much told

as given to understand in the

manner we are shown that water

is wet or air transparent)

rebellion except in the total sense

becomes impossible and

constructive dissent

the province of fantasy.

monday, august 8, 2005

i: punditry

the ability of this civilization
to reproduce the components of its
material culture and the routines
of their operation on a grand scale
may have temporarily obscured
the ultimate locality and specificity
of real things,
but it has hardly erased them.

despite the well-traveled observations
of well-paid idiots
the world still
is not flat.

ii: attitude

the city is a complex machine
full of levers, springs, inclined planes
wedges, wheels, and screws
a landscape of directed motion and channeled energy
it runs ragged and loud
waste heat is everywhere,
a river of shit moves beneath
every street.

the city is an organism
composed at the cellular level of
gasoline engines and beating hearts.

the city is a cancer of the town,
the town is a mutant village,
the village held still
too long.

the city is only a mass of networks and junctions
only a convention for describing density
a mass of conventions
in motion and frustrated stasis
and has a fractal quality:
similarity at all levels,
endless variation.

iii: anyway

it is summer just east of the rockies
and we have rented half of a house
one low hill away from the two-lane road
to boulder

west of us there is a fence and on
the other side of that a lot of grass
and rocks and coyotes
also there are trees,
and mountain lions
if the previous tenants are to be believed

we have escaped denver, where it is obvious
that colorado is not california or new york
but just the same is starting
to choke on people and cars –
the mass psychoses of traffic jams
and subdivisions are entrenched and thriving:
internal combustion, here as elsewhere
feels something like a bad drug experience
only more mundane

these houses full of commuter consumers
and their entertainment
are surrounded by little green perfect lawns kept
that way by poor mexicans and the white kids
who barely made it out of high school
(not to mention the overburdened western water supply
and a lot of 2-cycle engines)

while boxy vehicles sold on the twin premises that
square things are more useful
and minivans just aren't cool
squat in every driveway at \$2.48 a gallon
(which is either too damn much or nowhere
near enough – i can't make up my mind)

it is like that special kind of nightmare
which is made up of endless repetition
driven not by fear but sheer boredom

honestly i don't know where the things i hate
leave off into the ones i love
you walk into any decent store, books or hardware
or groceries, and what is there that didn't come in
on rock-bottom wages and petroleum?

hell, i'm likely writing this on coal-fired power
or maybe hydroelectric from some big river-killing dam
and it's something close to slave labor
that built the whirring box i'm writing with

busy as it is blowing the world wide open,
the most democratic technological revolution
in history – brought to you in part by the
united states military-industrial complex
and the people's republic of china

you hardly need to work at
complacency in the face of this
it's too big to see up close
and if you slip on the way to
a better perspective
you risk becoming that humorless bastard
you encounter sooner or later at every
coffeeshop or hipster party
who doesn't condone wal-mart and won't
watch television, which are the
basic facts you know about him ten
minutes into any conversation

i'm afraid i've almost been that guy
a time or two
but mostly i've just wanted to throw a
keg-cup full of pabst blue ribbon
in his face and see if irony is
soluble in beer.

friday, october 14, 2005

i like places that are wasted
a little by the rip & shuffle
slap and stutter
of time like some old man who
makes unconscious art out of
his small domain
the beat tools in their
customary shadows,
some place once a farm
with now just the fences and
the token livestock
the tractor giving up
a rusty ghost, though
it'll run until
a month or a year after
the old man dies
time like that,
or like the house where
i live with the yard
they must have landscaped
once going quietly to
hell and seed and
a tangle of tall brown
grass and the bees
going dormant for the
winter under one eve,
one plugged up rain gutter
like the cheap bright
colored buddhist prayer flags
unravelling their beautiful
cliche in the wind by
our front door
or like gary indiana
through some train window
warehouse kansas city from
the backseat of some wallowing
detroit boat.

friday, december 2, 2005

outside a snow is falling
into oblivion and dripping
from the last leaves, becoming
a thin quiet stream at the place where a rainspout
just beside the sleeping bees
should connect the gutter to the ground
and i imagine the sound
of it is something like that of silence
in my headphones, a low rustle or tiny
click – like turntable noises or the
end of a tape.