

# Meltwater

by

## Craig Evenson

915 5<sup>th</sup> Street East  
Northfield, Minnesota 55057

[margaret4486@gmail.com](mailto:margaret4486@gmail.com)

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Vernal

Math of tilt.  
Tender angles  
open, close,  
fuse and smolder  
toward split  
into clear heart's energy,  
a slow commotion  
singing in villages  
of delirious gods  
who live inside two walls  
and don't notice your dog  
spilling a great flower-full of water  
on the dirt floor.  
They leave their houses and gardens  
to addicts and maniacs,  
would mulch you like a stump for your dullness  
as easily as they part their wings,  
beaten into the teeth of order  
by echoes  
in their hollow bones.

## Playground Legend

Mad rain and the mud  
ran from the thing of armor  
drawing its crenellate tail up  
the grayed green slope.  
Crawling obscurity  
terrestrial cloud  
hovered in the valley of the shadow  
of the monkey bars to nudge and swallow  
a sodden duckling;  
plodded uninvited into the deep grass  
settled its pebbled legs  
into the earth  
of the brooding larks.

August

dropped songs  
mulched in sharp shadows  
changed angles  
of crows' voices  
farther off than their feathers

treetops paw  
the sunned grass  
the season of pause  
the end of a suspended breath  
before the steady inhalation of green

swallowtail, sunflower  
monarch, oxeye, coneflower,  
maple, oak, sumac, pause,  
before the orderly forgetting of names

## August

Since the world's not going to stop dying soon  
there are bills, poems,  
parents' albums and letters.  
If not children, something else  
will drag us into the dimming future.  
The cicadas,  
an animal that, after years in the ground,  
unburies itself to die,  
have begun their keening,  
their corpses here and there  
buried in light and air, defining  
in their time above ground  
the season of summer stopping  
to look at what's been done again.  
The robins remain unconcerned  
and the crows rustle,  
druids in the dark canopy  
sometimes flying a short span  
to another branch  
as if to evade the cicadas' auroglyphs  
cutting into heavy air  
while a swallowtail,  
brief life,  
suns itself,  
out-quieting death  
on a maple leaf.



Grackles

Spring-sprung

shackled            sun-spun grackles grazing

together           intent

                 four

                 black blazes

         slangy neighborhood

                 gang swagger

strut            check            hop

                 strike

light

flit

                 lit birds

From the Parking Lot

Sunrise.

The string of water  
at the pasture's edge  
came out of the darkness,  
a fatted marsh  
of melted snow.

It returns  
with the unrippled interest  
of a gracious host—  
ecstatic barrel roll,  
stretched extremities,  
earth-echoed whispers of commotion  
through the hollow bones  
of the first goose  
out of the sky.

## Crow and Sky

Having bathed in the brook  
the crow in the oak has selected for his folded  
    elegance  
a bare, golden limb with a view  
on the field where he will nab  
young rabbits, mice, nip the odd  
    pheasant nest,  
each flight  
feather patiently taken  
into the bill amid the trill of insects,  
the whispered thrill of a warm breath  
of sky, eye deep in feathers,  
the smart zip, hook, and catch  
of barbules up the shaft, eyes  
averted, eyes shut maybe dreaming  
of his own perfect blackness

until each barb of every feather  
is ready as a wedding suit. Fresh,  
wanting to be held, he turns  
    his eyes out,  
gives a lusty shout, and hurtles  
to his beloved.

## Doppler Incident

I read and feel whiter  
page by orderly page,  
nudge into days  
without tendencies,  
over smothered edges  
of sudden juts  
into the cup and shell  
of the breath of earth,  
rigid distance  
bereft of dread

now unfettered  
by a snap of the eyes:  
snapped and slanted trunks of trees  
piles of night and light heaped  
one onto the other and back  
white trunks and limbs tossed  
into Chinese characters  
needled and razored through  
to liquid sky limit  
of lily pads unscarred  
by sparks thrown off the gray lake  
before the grinding wind  
speeding on feathered bits  
breaking on strands of moments like igloos

## Tonight the Snow is Not Falling

it's dropping  
too sharp for thought  
as if that were its unfortunate job:  
slice to mist  
every word  
but the ones that can walk  
on its edge,  
the dangerous way everything happens,  
each flake a straight trail  
intersected a thousand quiet times  
endowing the dark  
intricate nights  
of unleaved branches  
saying each needle  
each note of birdsong,  
the ache of existence,  
my frozen hands  
on the shovel's handle.

## Thaw

In the next room they're  
talking about the world.  
In back the bench  
and branches are piled with fresh snow.  
Even the twigs hold their share.  
A nuthatch climbs, all intent,  
around the conked trunk of an ash tree.  
Spring is coming  
as surely as the end of the world.  
We feel its appetite from a thousand miles,  
its songful breath veiling the tinnitus of winter.

The wet heavy snow  
smiles even as it melts,  
flows gleefully along the curb,  
falling into the storm drain,  
heading home with a howl.

Winter poems ,  
laid out like birds  
poorly preserved in darkness  
and house-cracking order,  
walk their legs upon the earth  
remember  
how it is coming  
into the room  
they've spent months  
making for it,  
relieved now  
of everything  
water is not.

## Prayers

Sharp as glass,  
a stone enclosing  
a hammering heart,  
Maze wants nothing but  
to sink her teeth into the autumn  
fat of this grazing groundhog,  
face bowed in attendance,  
lost in thoughtlessness  
of silent incisors  
a feast  
of forgetting  
to look up  
forgetting  
that almost every day  
of this exquisite August pause  
we've sent him trundling for the raspberry patch  
    until a wind imprints the creek  
twinkling the cottonwood leaves  
fills with our scent  
and he freezes  
looks usward for a held breath  
remembers!  
shatters himself and the dog  
into a run for the thicket.

## Easter Storm

All day the wind wore white.

If birds had beliefs they wouldn't

Believe their eyes and ears,  
their steady streams of meaning.

They'd spend days thinking twice about who.  
They'd sharpen their beaks, gather thorns,

find their rest in a wing and a prayer,  
the restless uninfected moving

through weather and loss  
on quick wings and a song.



## Wolf Flow

Stops for a whisper  
body swap  
paws on spruce toes,  
then up against  
the frenzied gravity  
of blackflies and mosquitoes  
in and out  
the double lariat  
song of the white throat,  
pouring up moss-  
pocked rock  
into the high culture  
of blueberries.

## Inevitability

Outside the house  
the light is laid  
in bricks across the grass.

Damselflies,  
farfetched as the rest of it,  
warm their wings.

Depths of leaves  
sunstruck at various depths,  
of the day,

fading now  
and then drawn  
by the reach  
of heedless shadows

which, as the light grows old,  
grow outlandish  
pulling the day back down  
to black and restful rubble  
where damselflies sleep brickwinged  
where we hang our heads  
fold our arms  
around wind stilts

outcrops in darkness and sound  
with skin to fill  
handfuls of loamy night  
to empty into the next implausible light.

## Nightgale

The gull broken as only  
a closely made thing can be  
drags a crippled wing  
like a sodden suitcase  
away from a man handling a huge kite  
over a bikini girl  
tips its head at whirling shades  
sheen of sea and sky  
its alphabet and origin  
form in flux  
from artisan of flight and light  
to beach rubbish  
tucks into the nest  
of the night's racked babel  
of pure possibility  
turned articulate breeze  
murmuring non-repentance

## As Only the Dead

Think of the language of Earth  
as tactile memes  
for every pulse  
from acorn to bulldozer.

How it can't hear  
us die through cities  
because, apart  
from the occasional attack  
incurred while mowing or golfing,  
who dies to ground anymore?

And how it hears at night  
when the dog comes back from dark  
with a beeping baby rabbit,  
his instincts so strange to him  
he can't think what to make  
of the thing that belongs in his mouth,  
he drops it in the grass.

## Fairytale

They were sometimes separated  
by their separate failings;  
apart from the general wilt and crumble  
twined in vacant transactions  
overseen by chopped smiles,  
the towering, weeping weight of what  
had been unthought.

But long before the happy families  
discharged therefrom had cleared,  
revealing snapped roots, dry clods  
like arms and clots,  
they loved each other  
for what each other loved,  
kept house at the tower's foot,  
the voices within thin and shrill.

She

She slit her eyes  
broke open a poem  
laid her finger on a word.

She cut it out,  
framed and hung it.

She took it room to room,  
a bare nail in each.

There had never been anything  
like the breath of the word  
at the head of her narrow bed.

Whenever anyone said it  
she was bound tighter,  
flowering according  
to the system of law  
issuing therefrom.

Her friends took note  
cut up their books  
framed words,  
short words people had to use,  
drove nails  
into sheetrock and paneling  
carted them anxiously  
up and down stairs  
in such numbers  
they had no choice  
but to be heard  
in their dreams.

When they re-formed  
in ways never before recorded—  
there had never been such access to excess—  
they burned their cuttings  
called her a witch  
and vowed  
to never say her word.  
This, too, organized her beauty

## Waiting

elbow in elbow  
pushing twin strollers  
with your dozens  
of different expensive purses  
explosive prayers  
shoes  
don't get me started on tattoos  
I can't see  
black abaya floating through  
the revolving door  
shopping bags  
bugs in scrubs and suits  
and diers hunched and shuffling  
canes walkers  
language and luggage on wheels  
U.S. Minnesota and Mayo flags  
high rolling  
the way you all swing your arms  
or don't especially  
if you're holding a paper cup  
or a phone  
or flowers  
and there's one without

one foot past the other  
into the future  
where it all might happen  
only the watcher is present  
where it does  
thinking nicely  
that what you are thinking  
can never be as important to you  
as my sitting here  
looking at it  
through the window  
of the Kahler Motel might be  
to where we are both together going

Lydia

She has carefully washed her face and dressed for the day. She is attentive while I check her arithmetic for neatly labeled solutions, probably telling her to show her work because that's what I say to everyone. She has a large python that she brought to school once. She stands up straight at the corner of my desk cleared off for her work. The rest is covered with stories read and unread, worksheets, notes from parents chameleoned in unopened mail from school supply companies. Even this mess would have to grow to dimensions attributable solely to mental illness before I'd be able to hide inside from the danger of doing. Or I would have to shrink. There is a good chance I was thinking about dreaming beneath the shell of the dirty spoon when she took my glasses. I paused while she cleaned them with a tissue and the stillness swelled, cracking a brittle fastness, until twin pools of polished air fell like geese on my eyes.



## Tinnitus

I suppose this devilish breedle  
rising through my feet,  
into the lake of my body,  
held within its shores of flesh,  
washing around it organ islands,  
screaming through the narrows of my neck,  
churning the pond of my head,  
could be an elemental lament,  
punishment for thinking  
I wouldn't mind deafness,  
so seeming much  
of sound, byproduct.

Like a Twilight Zone episode  
where the character  
is granted a carelessly stipulated wish,  
I never imagined it would make me deaf  
to its absence.

“That’s Funny”

will hold, for life in general,  
the way an appended amen suspends  
a second thought,  
but won’t explain  
how it moves in oceans

oceans, since nothing is seen  
to enclose them,  
defined by the things fallen  
into them  
and how they sink,  
no place but down  
to bear themselves  
and whatever they hold in their teeth

how, exactly,  
we breathe ourselves into our sins  
until we float.

## Sunday at the Farm

I forget how old I was  
when I saw my grandpa's rifle  
leaning in a corner of the entryway,  
sat down on a stool, settled my head on the end.

But I remember well  
the excitement of the void,  
the wormhole, the All;  
still, waiting, my own,  
the kiss of my thumb and the pointer- polished trigger,  
the gentle pressure,  
anticipating the triumphant click,  
another secret to keep  
when, for no reason—  
I recall well the missing reason—  
I turned it around, wormholed the icebox,  
and they came running  
from the dining room.

Later, decades, someone said the blood drained from my face,  
but I don't think it did.

.

## Mere Choice

The wrong path looked fine  
so I chose it and found  
that it stopped  
at a broken mill.

It was an optimistic choice  
presuming a measure of life in the cards,

more steps  
ending at endless dead-ends,  
one of the beauties  
and mercies of life:  
the potential to annihilate by mere choice  
all infinitudes  
in favor of all others,  
to sit down on the warm ruins  
and study the reflective face of the river,  
becoming and becoming again  
and again.

## Alumni Bulletin

Here you are  
three years before vandals  
pitched your darkness  
from its cave,  
silk shirt  
straight, shiny hair,  
Wonder Bread teeth

in an empty mouth  
of dead grass,  
empty threat  
threaded into unfed branches,  
pink mouth  
set to swallow  
the world  
one word  
at a time.

Now,  
quaintly  
patient  
for what  
to say  
in narrowing time,  
fresh days  
squeezed around  
wet weight  
of accrued neglect.

Owled

Clean dishes and bedding  
for what

I've hidden

where I find myself,  
a cat in the woodpile,

there the handhold required  
your one tearless eye  
to claim victory

in the absence of a stream  
to bear away the drainage

Numbly humming  
Nina Simone

the sun

the woolen drawl  
from something  
you've long  
been tempted  
to cross the center line  
into

you can't see the stars anymore  
not even here  
you should write a poem about that

## Dog Box

I breathe the day's last lie,  
come sweating to bed,  
inebriated  
by something that comes  
from changing back  
into something  
clean and fitting,  
the unimportant way I'm known  
that gives me room  
to wake up on the cold spot  
where the dog leaked  
in her sleep.

Room to crawl inside her box  
let it attach the welcoming scent  
the funky dog softness  
let it turn my sickness three circles  
curl me into a crescent  
an open door  
an Ellis Island if you like  
for any dream  
but mostly the ones from which I wake  
with room to feel the fading grip  
of coming back to life

Riptide, Valentine's Day

The last piece put you  
on the wrong end  
of an Impala,  
us at the wrong end  
of a minister.

But that's another puzzle.

A perfectly godless story  
you might say:

the painstaking descent  
through inebriate orbits  
of bits of a smashed sister planet  
in a tangled strand  
of a dark second  
spilled inside the lids  
of our eyes.

Then the platitude blown  
with nothing to do  
but cut along  
its dreamy passage  
through lungs and heart  
to hold them, somehow,  
from breaching the bones:

"You may not feel him, but he's here."  
"What?" says our deaf mother.  
"What! sitting up  
to the straw between my ribs,

driven up  
a razored throat of ocean  
through a ceiling of salt  
to the heaving beach  
aproned to an oceanfront  
Fortress of Solitude  
inert at the skirt of eternity  
every action and inaction  
a puzzle and piece composed of diminishing



puzzles and pieces  
fueled by the futility

of the puzzle and piece  
of the pathological puzzler himself,  
of whom I observe  
with an anguished rise  
and fall and rise of ribs,  
and in opposition  
to the grave's frozen roses,  
"So what."

## Fetish

The foot  
nicely hung  
from its slung leg,  
imperial heel, toes teasing hardwood,  
inward arc of instep swelling  
to outward arc of heel  
and the bunion  
forming the bottom  
of the hourglass of the great toe,  
pale and smooth  
as mother-of-pearl,  
dangling in fact  
but, in effect, sculpture.

## Castaway

One palm on my freckled forehead  
the other on the dog  
whose contentment I trust.

Now and then he moves his head  
adjusts a leg  
runs his tongue wetly  
along the roof of his mouth  
so I know he's made himself  
again as comfortable

as the sleepy socks drooping from their drawer  
as the bird droppings, very badge of contentment  
on the arms of the chair we share  
in a landscape of clothing, books, bags.

We could be flotsam  
flung from the sea.

There! Looking out  
from a lobster  
or a shoe  
my favorite pen!  
Mightier than a horde  
of Dutch boys' fingers  
stuck into the holes  
sunk into the day  
by thoughts of its lostness.

If I died now—this again—  
the EMTs might say "he was ready,"  
when clearly I'm not  
or maybe I'm wrong,  
all this nothing done.

Shifting my gaze out the window  
I think I'd rather  
let the assortment of greens  
through the leaves of the oak tree  
grow wilder for another weekend

if it weren't for the neighbors  
and their windows.

Besides, the cat would like to be excused.  
I set my foot on the floor.  
The small dog  
of the buckled gums  
and bad manners  
cracks an eye.

wondering

if the boxes and shoes  
and litter of papers on the floor  
are metaphor or reflection  
of an idle mind  
reclining in its skull

if the milk in my bowl  
is metaphor  
for the circular light  
it reflects

when the kitten jumps into my lap  
a purring furnace  
morphing me  
into the guy who's late for work again.

Still

Without the thrashing snake  
it is till:  
a cross, i,  
a pair of trainless rails  
a vacant trail  
an empty aisle  
an empty i'll.

Still, till  
does not become  
still till  
after the thrashing snake.

Detaching the snake and cross  
leaves those of Christian tilt  
mortally ill.

## Northern Religion

God is merely the angle,  
merely the nook  
you would have to be an angel to see

and I'm more nearly  
a howling bear,  
lean-eyed, hidden  
like prayer in fragile light,  
denied a den of chalky feathers,  
a pair of pretty arms,

because I won't talk  
about my day  
with my mouth full  
of moonlight.

## Open River

The way thumb and index  
extend pen to paper  
weighing the nib  
exposes my skin,  
written in sunlight and stitches.

Cradled in muscle and vein,  
slanted across a tapering void,  
conspiring the breakup  
of winter ice.

The greasy middle  
the grainy edge  
of what moves  
into and out  
of my fingertips,  
each the end of its own soft curve  
touching back.



## Shared Space

You met Orion at the door  
his composure, as always, intact.  
Sat awhile, then brought me, caught deep  
in a dream of trees  
one wholesome fact:  
Rigel and Betelgeuse  
the brightest of the fold  
and without distraction went to sleep  
your chair pushed up to the threshold  
window slid to showcase  
the leaves eating the light  
that wears them for breakfast,  
a marriage made in space.

## Natural Causes

In dusty houses  
with sallow shades  
floating ghostly  
past books, pictures  
broken furniture  
unconnected  
disengaged  
functional rubble  
of teeth, knees, hips  
skipping the charters to Branson,  
afternoon performances  
of Hamlet

writing in their journals  
how the view from the end of the road  
mirrors the view from the beginning:  
a thoughtless line  
vining to mind,  
a heart of treetops,  
vanishing unsurprised  
through the floorboards.

Photograph From My Mother's House

3 stretched M's for birds  
the sky washed  
blushing and blue

a girl, a curtain  
a gray gravel road  
in early summer

illegible presence  
curious blur  
trusting ghost  
of your dying

who believes in the living  
you see through the frame  
what the evident-when-developed  
photo-bomber will jellyfish out of  
90 years hence

into the back of a shiny black car  
sky an unwashed white  
i-less dot  
    we listened while you slept  
in the back  
of a mind  
rolling slowly  
    with what you kept of the world  
to keep from slipping  
on the white road  
of powdered bone

negative of a clear December night  
bucking off the windows

## Affair

Playdate planned,  
you drank a glass of filtered water,  
“dead” they call it  
because of a chemical imbalance,  
raised a smile  
to the woman who gave you sons  
now grown and gone.  
The yellow lab got all the strokes,  
an honest evasion,  
sufficient provision against suspicion.

Did you feel a tingle, unlocking  
The SUV waiting in the driveway

did you buckle up?

to bear you to the shooting range

signal lane changes?  
take note of the caution  
on the side-view mirror?  
pause after you took your  
foot off the brake  
to feel yourself breathing?  
its mathematics?  
its perfection?

before you stepped out of the vehicle  
but not the parking lot?

## Breathing

Extreme ahead of his time,  
the old naturalist climbs a far-flung fir  
flexing like a runner's lung,  
the howl and spike ripping clouds  
to busty shreds mid-gallop,  
slapped hard alive  
by the squall's studded paw

and deaf to the winter  
wren working  
its lungs in the roots  
of a fallen poplar,  
dispatching into  
the storm an unpunishable  
trill and chant  
apart from the raging  
insignificance  
of the moment,  
apart from the mercenary germ  
burning it back  
to dirt and trees.

## Gyotaku

We needed another fish, so one, a pretty  
pumpkinseed, was scooped from the aquarium  
and left in an empty sink until it stopped  
flopping and gulping. Taken up, wiped dry  
brushed with ink, pressed onto a white t-shirt  
rinsed off, passed around, scales, tail,  
gills, all around the eye, inked  
over a different color, sometimes a florid  
combination: orange ventral, green  
dorsal, a yellow crescent over the gills,  
covered with a paper towel,  
pressed hard every inch  
for a detailed print minus the eye,  
indicated by a vacant circle  
as if eaten out by a scavenger.  
When it was over, someone, in casual  
hope or slender regret, dropped it back  
into the tank where it filled itself with air,  
woke, and swam, indistinguishable  
from the other fish until it died.

Goose

I bought him a hamburger  
and had him euthanized  
he didn't like the first needle  
in his leg  
lifted his head  
knew enough  
to buck and whine

to the one who took you  
from eight days wasting  
in a cage you apologized  
he said it's ok  
before you could believe it or not  
the bomb to your heart went off

Hawk

Patience spilled  
from a ghost hole

Feathers edge-up  
now folded and gone  
from the tsunami of my sight

behind leprous leaves  
rotting stoppers  
sunk into the sky

poised to break over  
the freshly cut grass  
and my father's body



## Bench

I loaded into the truck  
from the end of a driveway  
because it was free

set it in the yard,  
a seat for the sun

for the leaves'  
sharp shadows

the hidden whip  
of the cardinal

the parasitic silence  
inside the trees

and, from the brush pile,  
the rasp of the wren  
spending its penny lungs

the Delphic lichen  
rivaling the spaces  
between the leaves  
in its shades  
from gray to green:

marks that things made  
will degrade  
into meaning,  
hearable

as when my dying  
wakes early  
to talk a little.  
And because it's not talking to me  
and I get to forget each word  
I listen and hear my part,  
expendable element  
whose absence claps  
into a fresh perfection.

Fox

On nights when I fail  
to grow soft paws for sleeping  
I drop my bones  
in a gully and wait—  
the rhythmic snap of her approach—  
to be bowed one piece at a time  
over the path and touched  
to the crescent tips of the careless tongues  
    of her hungry young,  
held in the new light  
of their teeth, and given down  
to the warm, dark dens of their bellies  
till morning  
springs rabbits  
from the brush  
of my tail.

## Sleep Song

Her abrupt heft,  
plump on the quilt,  
(but deft in the dark)  
under which  
we expect to embark  
upon sleep  
beats all  
like a heavy heart  
an essential part  
escaped the skin,  
spent and purring  
beneath my chin.

Cat at 4 A.M.

Self-swallowing sky in mute  
black flower, swimmers bracing  
to break the trembling waves  
a brace and hover  
in the perfect pause  
of placed charges,  
suspended in a caught end breath

skyless fliers  
skyless rain

a flash of scorched orchids  
in beds of broken glass,  
the glazed eye of a sharded horse,

a final evasion:  
hoarse crunch of boots on glass,  
breath released,  
oceans collapse,  
I fly into orbit  
on the cold, hard, moon of her nose.

## Town Birds

Clamor behind the green  
restaurant dumpster  
aflutter and flagrant  
in their gray aprons  
and warm plume  
of fries, cigarettes,  
and grilled buns.  
They flock on the steps  
heads on quick swivels  
amid the not disagreeable flies,  
light price for the luxury  
of loud laughter

and the mute passerby  
skimming the waves  
over the sidewalk  
en route  
to a clean library bay  
where she bends  
hidden, unharried  
her long neck,  
poised over suspended words,  
bare feet sunk  
in the cold carpet.

## The Bird Outside the Library

I'd like to see a ballerina  
with all her muscle control  
lie so serenely splashed  
as this bird corpse  
this motorcycle wreck  
rained from the sky  
down a metal pipe  
into the street,  
the kind of thing you might sit on a porch  
and drink your tea away for a month  
while it evaporates  
back up through the leaves.

Ok, Thirty Minutes Then

At last I'm ready to dispose  
of this snarling body  
of staring details  
which, till now, have been coddled into line.  
Then I'll be able to enjoy the cat

who's just jumped  
onto the back of the chair  
and draped himself  
across my neck  
like one of those hideous stoles  
mostly old ladies  
used to wear to church,  
glass eyes and bared teeth  
looking for a phantom foot to chew off,  
in Dantesque distress  
for the coming  
of merciful moths.    Except

the cat is heaving his belly  
on the back of my neck,  
pushing his slitted eyes  
and wet mouth behind my ear,  
purring furiously,  
not at all like a detail.

## Breaking the Picture Plane

When the rain stops, the leaves, though suspended on their stems,  
are as still as Durer's hare, his piece of turf,  
revealed, only by the occasional drip from  
a leaf above causing one to bounce on its  
stem, to exist in this dimension.

Catbird, cardinal, chickadee, crow, silent  
as the drinking earth, the fresh light; as the  
leaves are still.

Was a time I'd have left the house for the  
trees, in a state of mild panic at missing  
whatever would happen next and how. And  
there was a dog named Jack who was  
eventually struck by a car near the  
cemetery, and had his hip fixed with screws.

Now I read poetry and look at the window  
for who I am until the puppy, fat as a monk,  
sets to barking back the world.



## Cave Hills

Here, where you came  
to quench your affliction  
--there were many—  
for taloned birds,  
we were eels  
in runnels  
of slicked down sunlight  
sliding past hoary pine  
and prickly pear,  
sparks of laughter  
arcing the unwilling  
lawn chair,  
shade,  
eddy,  
you,  
brooding the ocean.

## Feather

In the perfect middle of nowhere  
insects sing in the middle distance.  
I'm in the shade.  
The birds across the ravine are in the sun.  
Later, it will be hot.

I pick things up. Broken bits.  
Put them on a rock  
where they seem okay.

I watch the birds.  
They don't mind being seen  
but they don't sit still for it either.

Something flutters close by  
but I hold still.  
If I stay long enough  
like this  
I'll see something marvelous I suppose,  
something that will kill me,  
make it harder to earn a living.

I'd like to see a cougar  
but I don't have to.

I've got a good spot on the edge  
next to a yellow flower.

There may be ghosts  
but I don't believe there's an afterlife to speak of  
unless I'm looking at it.

Dropped off a cliff  
would be a good afterlife  
if you could get it;  
a way to be sure  
that what you don't understand  
still makes sense,  
to say that endlessly.

I move with the shade

wishing for a long tail  
to brush away late waking flies  
when a long primary feather  
falls out of the sky  
from where I climb down  
to shake it from a branch  
to pick it up.

## Last September

It wasn't the sun-pinked trunks  
of the pine trees  
or my still stride,  
outside-in as  
the glade's golden white  
through a hollow trunk.  
This is no impression. It happened  
as surely as the leaves turned the colors of spring  
warblers, earth-tilted  
into sudden contentment:  
the purred question  
of the barred owl  
hung motionless  
mustered nothing  
from the deep seeing crows  
who dropped their bodies  
out of darkness,  
supplanted danger with light  
as in pictures that,  
from time to time, include us.

## A Family Reunion

“If we’re lucky,  
until we walk around the block,  
look out the window,  
see  
the last heart breakingly  
beguiling thing  
we are capable of seeing:  
the new to the world squirrel,  
four feet trampolining off the earth,  
running the rise  
to the base of a great tree,  
rolling down. Twice.  
Or two crows beak to beak,  
on a power line  
carved into the sunrise,”  
I answer unhelpfully and 5 years late  
to my mother’s question:  
How long must we live?

Again. Until our lives shrink so tightly  
around our memories  
they burst out  
and disintegrate like old manuscripts:  
out of inertia,  
into the bright heat  
at the splice of erasure and untakeable happiness where,  
our blessings having returned themselves,  
we arrive.

## Recompense

As we shared  
our disappointment  
in the movie

a deer appeared  
in the headlights.

Not the hypnotized idiom,  
but fully functional,

unable to imagine  
the way things die,

not transfixed  
the way I was

by the stilled, strobed  
deer-shaped cavity,

how its gravity  
crushed the day,

eyeing life  
on the other side

## Good Friday

But I'm still the same brute  
who sinned in his sleep last night,  
who decades ago  
stuck alone with God,  
left town

for a row of red deities  
in Red Rover formation,  
old bottles of perfume  
and liquor on a canon wall.

It was exciting,  
the best I recall  
before the fog slipped in  
all fuzzy feet and Cheshire grin.

Now here's an old dog  
tired from his morning excursion.  
The pictures on the wall are framed.  
I can move them where I please.  
They don't look back.

I wonder what we'd be doing  
in the desert today  
comes back the reflection  
something had to happen

that's how the dinosaurs  
and Bible got here.

I don't know anything about absolution.  
That's Something's job.  
Call it Carrie Fisher.

I know a little bit about second thoughts.  
It's better to be someone else's.

## Black Hole

It escapes with a crunch  
our home-bound headlights  
into the out-bound.

Is it the same deer  
that swallowed the day a year ago  
in this very same spot?

Frenetic squad car lights  
frisk every fold of April 8  
whose whetted night  
discloses no doubt  
of death's intelligence

in the sprawled body,  
skin split neatly  
along the backbone  
the way winter and spring  
fall apart at the equator,

or whether the corpse  
collapsed or exploded into being,  
its seasons emerging  
into the pool of light spilled  
from a gently bent SUV,  
into the earth  
from which they leapt  
an eternal moment ago.

No doubt in the thud of a period  
suggesting an unseen sentence.



## Planting

The leaves of the birthday oak,  
finally and finely tanned,  
crowd toward the garage  
where, in older age,  
I'll watch the squirrels  
from this window and chair,  
envy, between chapters, naps,  
and trips to the john,  
their careless collection  
of acorns dropped  
on the black beach of its roof.

This year made a single green acorn,  
the first,  
whose pleasure's been squirreled  
in a furrow, poised to sprout,  
as some say  
certain images from life may do  
at the moment of our dying.

## World Made Innuendo

A little snow  
a little gray  
don't hurt  
the way snowdrop, bloodroot, Siberian squill,  
open for business,  
grackles working on their nests,  
on the tomes of their brief lives,  
the Pollacked egg swirling down the drain  
of the left nest, rescued  
into a rodent's mouth,  
hurt:  
suggestions of the unslowable insoluble.

So yeah,  
I like a little snow  
speaking only of itself.

It's the greens and flowers disembarking,  
the endless writing of names  
making of sense  
in the river's ripples and glints,  
the friendly exchange of space  
between leaves and air,  
the steady demolition of the lock that worked  
by not existing,  
that secured  
it all from  
mute ruin  
that advises us to despise  
the horizon.