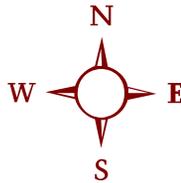


The Lost Atlas of Desire,



Mapping the Old World and the New,
containing an historical Gazetteer and
Pastiche, Eleven Illustrative Plates, and
a Guide to Parts Unknown

Jeremy Downes

BlazeVOX [books]

Buffalo, New York

Copyright © 2005

Published by BlazeVOX [books]

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without the publisher's written permission, except for brief quotations in reviews.

Printed by CafePress.com in the United States of America

Book design by Geoffrey Gatzka

First Edition



for Wiebke

Acknowledgments

- “Almost Easter,” *Abiko Literary Quarterly* (1996)
“*Amabala*” and “Almost Easter” selected by Marvin Bell for inclusion in The Peconic Gallery’s *Hope* exhibition, Riverhead, NY, and at Rathbone Gallery, Albany (February-May, 1995)
- “Anniversaries,” *Riverrun* (Fall 1993)
- “Awaking to Read Vergil’s *Aeneid* (Book 11),” *henge* 2 (1995)
- “The Camouflaged Morel,” Honorable Mention in *The MacGuffin’s* National Poet Hunt, judged by Alice Fulton. *The MacGuffin* (Fall 1999)
- “Careening, Anna Maria Island,” 3rd Prize *Penumbra* 2004 Poetry Contest. *Penumbra* [chapbook] (2004)
- “Dinosaurs are us,” 3rd Prize, NFSPS Contest (1994). *The Auburn Circle* (1994)
- “Etiologies: Kenilworth Castle,” *rhino* (1995)
- “Independence Day, Manitowish Waters,” *American Writing: A Magazine* 8 (1994)
- “Landscape with Absences,” *Grist* 32 (2002)
- “Museum,” First Prize *Penumbra* 2004 Poetry Contest. *Penumbra* [chapbook] (2004)
- “Raking Leaves with Franz Kafka,” finalist *Penumbra* 2004 Poetry Contest. *Penumbra* [chapbook] (2004)
- “Speaking from the Heart,” *Pegasus* 6.1 (Spring 1991)
- “Stopping by the Plaza on a Saturday Night,” First Prize, Sestina Award, NFSPS Contest, 2001. *Encore: 2001 Prize Poem Anthology* (2002)
- “Study in Claret,” *Abiko Literary Quarterly* (1996)
- “The thick leaves of our tulip tree,” selected by Dana Gioia for inclusion in The Peconic Gallery’s *Passion* exhibition, Riverhead, NY, and at Rathbone Gallery, Albany (February-May 1994)
- “Tory,” finalist, 1989 Ratner-Ferber Contest. *Poet Lore* 84.2 (1989)
- “Warwickshire, Halloween Day,” *the eleventh MUSE* 11.2 (1993)

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Jared Hromadka and Kia Powell, two readers and poets whose unflagging energy helped bring this book to completion.

Table of Contents

Preface

Our Lost Atlas	11
----------------------	----

... an historical Gazetteer and Pastiche ...

The Camouflaged Morel	15
The thick leaves of our tulip tree	17
Awaking to Read Vergil's Aeneid (Book 11)	19
Stopping by the Plaza on a Saturday Night	20
Dinosaurs Are Us	22

... Mapping the Old World ...

Etiologies: Kenilworth Castle.....	25
The Sunlight Battered with Wings: Old Sarum, 1990	27
Speaking from the Heart	28
Warwickshire, Halloween Day	29
Tory	30
Letter by Hand at Land's End	31

... with Eleven Illustrative Plates ...

The Artist Speaks of Origins, of Mimesis,	35
and of the Nature of the Real.....	35
Raking Leaves with Franz Kafka	36
Study in Claret.....	37
Vacant Irish Photograph, Enlarged	38
Anniversaries	39
This new life inside her	40
The Poets	41

Like rhetorical figures, living and breathing.....	42
Photos of Dido.....	43
Use: An Epithalamium.....	49
Museum.....	50

... *Mapping the New World* ...

The Castle in Spain.....	55
Native.....	56
Chiseled in Glass: Wisconsin Poems.....	57
Independence Day, Manitowish Waters.....	59
Red Stick.....	60
Careening, Anna Maria Island.....	61
Tie-Snakes.....	65
Almost Easter.....	66
Amabala.....	68

.. *and a Guide to Parts Unknown*

A poet writes his muse.....	71
Peter Peter.....	72
Plums.....	74
A Poem for the Latest Year.....	75
An Ecology Thinner Than Glass.....	76

The Lost Atlas of Desire,



Mapping the Old World and the New,
containing an historical Gazetteer and
Pastiche, Eleven Illustrative Plates, and
a Guide to Parts Unknown

Preface

Our Lost Atlas

I have crouched here for an age,
hunched between stained pine shelf
and the colorful old game of Risk
whose wooden cubes drop like green tears
at night along my cracking spine.

Since they moved I have cupped
China carefully,
the meticulous wars of Chiang Kai-shek and Mao
handpainted in blue,
with one paperclip whose rust
sifts south across Peking.

Every corner of the world is curled
over like the ears of Cerberus,
some of them shredded with pain
or blunt Herculean fingers—this
is what comes of letting the world go.

But I hold some corners more deeply in,
their angled arrows like fingernails
into Iceland with its ash-burned heart;
into the crumbling Soviet Union
where silverfish play at Novaya Zemlya,
Lake Ladoga, the Aral Sea.

This world rolls into oblivion, wrinkling itself
into ranges of mountain that should not
be there, half-uncovered by a family
of clumsy children too eager to learn,
and its index half-shredded by families
hungry for shelter, food, Uganda to Zaire.

I cannot find anything for you,
lost as I am lost,
except for that patriotic reflex center

of the earth where ink has bled
from the old Bic left in place,
in a heartland scarred by travel and children
marking new towns, new states,
and the thin and lonely highways,
these varicose greenblood veins, between.

And one child has painted in yellow highlights
the lower elevations, imagining the watery endings
of the world, the deluge after the icecaps melt.

For a moment longer, buckled in pine and Risk,
I fondle this lost world—
its adhesive transmuting to gas,
its seas fading to rust,
its verminous fringes;
there's no need to hurry this.

*... an historical Gazetteer and
Pastiche...*

The Camouflaged Morel

In the drive to remember the way your hands
sought out the camouflaged morel, or sorted and sautéed
those other rare fleshed gathered from St. John's woods

clothed in their rare names (shaggymane, sulphurshelf,
puffball), I have forgotten your birthday.
In the drive to remember the way your hands

fixed fuel pumps in cold and in curses, I have
forgotten your birthday; in the drive
to remember your hand on the frame of a bicycle

sending me downstreet where I could crash
precisely on my own; in the drive to remember
every word I ever wrote and your advice

on indexing; in the drive to remember your hand
across the baby's abdomen that sent him off to sleep,
I have forgotten your birthday; in the drive to

remember the odd, conversational glimpses
into your earlier life, the things you've never
written down but that bloom like a sliver or a pearl

out of worry, work, or circumstance,
I have forgotten your birthday. The airport, the plane,
bringing my *family* (strange word) *home*

(which is stranger and stronger still), these acts of memory
make me forget. In the drive to remember
the way my absent-mindedness is modeled on your own,

I forget and remember and forget
that this forgetfulness (that I have learned from you)
is its own remembrance, the way we cannot see,

separate, the things we cannot live without,
the words in which we live, the world we live by,
the linked habitual and genetic strands that clasp us,

or the hands that help us still into the branching names of oak,
silver maple, Chinese elm, box elder, knowledge, hickory, beech,
or whatever other trees there are that bear that pale, unusual fruit.

The thick leaves of our tulip tree

i.

I'm revising my dissertation and my grandfather is dying;
the thick leaves of our townhouse tulip tree

fall and scrape the concrete pad that verges our mossed back yard
sounding like a fountain pen turned wrong

with the volume up. Homer and everyone after says,
scraping their footnotes as they go,

that being human is like the generation of the leaves:
filling, unfurling mostly green to pale and fall.

The revision's full of love and war, but the crumbled rhymes
of power and sorrow clamber in your margins

like illustrative foliage, fluted, filled with medieval beasts,
zodiacal, tempestuous, unfair.

ii.

Encircled by symptoms, the fevered surrounds of the zodiac again,
like Helen's Achilles in Egypt, he traced in delirium

the figures of prowlers, circling, circling. These tracings,
this paranoia, hard to take. You take one leaf,

desperate to bind, efface, and it holds you precariously tilting
over this warfare of moss and concrete, as younger than I

my grandfather surfaces, swimming, breaking the ice to save some damn-fool dog
while crowds of people circled the ice-starred pond,

staring, doing nothing. As though he said: *I know there are no asphodels, I know
no song solves anything, but take this leaf,*

*this life that crumbles into poems in your hand: for virtue, valor, remembrance, passion
— all this only glorious shorthand for love and hard work.*

iii.

Revision quivers on the screen; I close the file and try to write
the poem that tells the chaste and passionate geometry of fruit-trees:

forms of desire, not tedious axiom and proof; but the tulip tree,
in its thick-leaved dispersal, draws me close to hold unsilent leaves on patio and moss.

Awaking to Read Vergil's Aeneid (Book 11)

Migrained again at 5 a.m., is it the Pyrrhic victory of human spirit
that the body needs, the open-minded slaughter of the *bellum civile*?

Do you hear it? Penthesilea wars for Troy, a second Troy, a third,
a fourth, even as you pour yourself a second cup of coffee, equivocate

once more the cost of broken walls, the gory fields, and fierce Camilla dead
(the spearchild suckling at the breast its first, last, best maternal food).

In your dreams she raced the frozen Thermodon and as suddenly was gone;
false dreams before waking turned by pain into strange similes

of Xanthus, Simois, the loved past that you can't remember or forget
but only relive, stealing a language that shifts beneath you like a river

or a running horse. Your mouth "the cost of progress" for the world your heirs
inherit. Your hatred comes from this and it is deep as seven years of travel;

you hug Sidonian Dido's robe around you, remember her swift, sure hands—
envy her (the fourth, fifth time)—always it is tragic, winning.

Migration kills. You drink your coffee, bleakly stare across the field
where Aurora hitches another bloodred chariot and the bitter future waits.

Stopping by the Plaza on a Saturday Night

*Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
from the straight road and woke
to find myself alone in a dark wood.*

—Dante

Exigencies of leather jackets, and the frozen forest
of icicles along the building-eaves; you follow the jingle
of your heavy brass zipper, the fog of your breath in lemon-
colored moonlight hanging near you—to chill and finally to bob
away, spiralling into vacancy and wind. Snow crunches under you; you clutch
your gloved arms against you, thinking of the waiting bar and its tequila.

You've been reading poetry since morning, and tequila
at ten sounded great on the phone: Ben Jonson's *The Forrest*
has nothing on this woman, this night, this windchill whose clutch
freezes moisture in the filter of your cigarette. The spinning jingle
of his verse still stitches you through though, unwinding like a silver bobbin
its winged thread: "Wonder not . . . When love is fled"—like lemon

sour and sweet—"my numbers are so cold . . . and I grow old." The icy lemon
wedge of moon persuades you to the steaming bar, and she pushes tequila
shots your way when you find her in the booth, talking again with Bob
McRae, an old student who now tends bar. Your mind fills with the forest
leaves of her hair, this yellow, this aspen-silver, and the Susan B. Anthony jingle
of her laughter; your hands smell of smoke and feel of cold, and clutch

the saltshaker shaking. Salt over thumb and tongue, and then tequila clutches
you, searching your mouth, gums, throat with its flare, its tracer of fire. And lemon
follows—from sauna into snow. You ignore her conversation for the jingle
of pinball and video, for R.E.M. on the jukebox. But soon the tequila
settles in, pretending you are solitary, wise. How often in a wintered forest
have you tracked her here (though she asked you to come), chased after the bob

of her lengthening hair to the fog-windowed lair where she vanishes, finding Bob
or Andy or anybody? (As often as she has you, perhaps?) She clutches
you under the table, sends Bob away and tells you she loves you. Forced
to say you love her, too, you watch her perfect nails dismantle lemon
peels. An Amazon princess, your friend calls her. You order more tequila,
another pitcher of Michelob, seriously drink: These years will always jingle

in your head like heavy coins, the way the keys to demolished cars still jingle
in top dresser drawers. You met St. Patrick's Day, drinking green beer under-age, bobbing
your head so wisely as she talked of Hemingway, Stevens' mind of winter, *To Kill A
Mockingbird*, which fit so well into the artwork you made of her. Quite a find, a clutch
of mockingbird eggs in vernal woods, and then a summer skied with lemons
and grenadine, tequila's surprising sunrise. But years, lovers, love, fade into cold forest

and only now and then a villager's bobsled jingling in the woods alarms you, clutches like
an unexpected phone-call jangling at your voyeuristic heart—and hopeless lemon slashes
like hopeless art at the smoked tequila taste of love, of all our wayfaring in this dark forest.

Dinosaurs Are Us

I speed past another marquee,
observe that dinosaurs are still ahead
among those competing for ecological niches:
summer's carnage to bring us out of academic torpor
suckling our young on reptiles' eggs and ambered chromosomes.

I was young once, fell in with dinosaurs,
a child's perennial fascination; the mind was grounded
in fossil happenstance, the tarpits of infancy.
Any psychoanalyst told you this cave-dweller,
this Machiavel, this Narcissus thus lived out
its phantasies: rage, parental exclusion, extinction and the rest.

That they were I, I they, I could not have told you;
pronouns but poorly reflect us.
But take a whole culture
— constantly locked in whale's-belly dark —
watch it web itself in these millennial dreams,
perennial phantasies, verging always back and forth
upon the sedimented ledge of accidental suicide.

Oh, yes. Dinosaurs are us.
One of my mates says "yes, of course."
But which of us articulates — and how — this slick extinctive thrill?
Unspeaking therefore the gas-pedal plunges
— six-cylinder breakneck down bottled expressway —
the car and I a guzzling omnivore, racing asphalt into our
meteoric afternoon, an afternoon bordered with ancient grasses,
floored with jurassic parquet.

*... Mapping the
Old World...*

Etiologies: Kenilworth Castle

*“Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm”* — Auden

Between two ruins,
 Roman and Norman,
like images reversed;
 we are caught on a road that twists
to embrace this little line of mountains:
the air is good and we are so very young.

Our bodies are hardened with walking.
 my hair, you say, is softer than nettles;
we are fervent but unfaithful,
 and I cannot forget how quickly
we forget, and how quickly you turn
your body that racks mine with tears away.

I think that my memory turns to red sandstone,
 stone soft with the passing of years:
and I think of Amy Robsart, her cause of death
 so uncertain — how quickly one’s promises
change into rain, plashing against dark glass.
Your husband, child, were nowhere near before.

Our bodies sting with the traces of nettles
 the way a land castles over its wounds,
its unremembered irritations, or the way
 that a road twists uphill like bramble,
only by accident and use becoming quaint,
— this chance significance that we call picturesque.

Our friend passes by in the hall. We hear her pause,
her sigh, her hand brush the eighteenth-century wall.
 It wasn’t meant to be like this.
“O’ercome by passion’s flood,” the guidebook says,
 Amy’s body tumbled from the stairhead,
finding death and fame so intermingled,

finding that life could only later be shot through
with meaning that made her a soul of romance.

As you sleep I think I know
what time will do to us, what graffiti
will mark us like the walls of Kenilworth,
and even, I think, what the tourists will do after nightfall.

The Sunlight Battered with Wings: Old Sarum, 1990

The helicopter chirred and chirked
over the fields near the absent castle we walked in:

as always, playing house, and this had been a fine, large house.
And the helicopter chirred, chirked, chirred, a large and ugly bug.

The sun hammers down; I think how hard it is keeping house
in castles: drafty, unquiet things, and bears to keep warm in the winter.

“But think how well they wear, though,” you say;
you’re holding a piece of stone dropped from a thousand years away.

No helicopter yammers there (thwacketa-thwacketa),
where your mason lover holds up that pale gray stone and justly

places it to fall into your small,
clean, castle-smelling hands.

Speaking from the Heart

“O my swan, O my sleek one”
— R. Hass

Amazing, love, that here I speak of my heart.

Waves knot themselves mile on mile between us now,
and here I speak of my heart
as if it were more than a convenient fiction,
more than the tired, conventional trope.

Trite synecdoche of tangled words—hope and fear,
desire, despair—the web that twists in the heart.

This distance is so simple, so immense,
I think I insulate myself by growing simple—
black sheep in a plain white field.

My ambivalence, my scarce-thought whim,
complex velleities and all the urges
felt in the blood, that we lived with once—
all these are gone:

I am as pure as ice,
as chaste and brittly suspect
as one who speaks from the heart.

Warwickshire, Halloween Day

(1)

On the park bench he remembers
a line of Stein, and thinks:
a slough is a slough is a slough is a slough.
In one Midwest: redwing
blackbirds, the spikes of cattail green,
and all the harsh pornography of spring.
He recalls the lacelike fringe of ice
that hovered above the mud;
he remembers the woman was blonde.

(2)

North of Stockholm the Volvo stalled —
and old American lovesongs spilled
onto the shoulder where they waited;
silent duckweed spread wide
for the turtle who slipped from the rock.

(3)

Her heart wandered out of her eyes,
and his hands were cold in the sun
and she held them.
Rare sun,
and a man with his terrier walking:
cattails spilling their seed in the pale October breeze:
she ran her fingernails
along the bones of his face.
He wonders
why she cries when they make love.
Carved in the arm of the bench
are letters that tell him to ask,
but he closes his eyes
to the slough bright with sun,
watches the sun black and red in his eye,
and remembers the woman was blonde.

Tory

I think of the death of St. Thomas Aquinas
as I wait for the elevator, the French sky

sliding in spring rain, the road a muddy scar
in the trees. Bells ring; a woman in black wool

watches me press the black letters UP, and I
think she is wondering “up?” when we descend.

“Upper Parking,” I explain. “You have a car?”
she asks, and I offer the ride through the rain

that she needs, tired, unexpectedly caught
in rain, unexpectedly lovely when

she moves or smiles, and she tells me her name,
which is, unexpectedly, Tory. I thought

I might tell her how he died, racing his mule
to run smack against low branches, late for the Council

at Lyons: I thought she might smile. We talk
about the weather, share subcompact thoughts,

and we are there. I want to ask her out, but awkward,
say only goodbye. I watch her walk through the rain,

raindrops beading white on black, and think of saints,
of royalists disconfirmed, now less with irony than pain.

Letter by Hand at Land's End

Even the faithful computer dozes at Land's End,
in an unquiet bed-and-breakfast, suspended out of power
on this nearest edge of England:
Feeling at loose ends I write you a letter,
hoping these words find a way to you, the way that I never could.

In the Macintosh absence I write with an old pen,
the one that sometimes scratches inklessly,
as if wanting to leave things unsaid.

You would say that I am like that too,
never saying what I think or how I feel, and
of course you would be right.

The sea

breaks hard on the rocks below; the wind
literally howls in the doorjamb, tracing
an erasure of dust in the hardwood floor.

Though I think of you here at the end,
I know that this "end of things" is a myth,
a dangerous apocalypticism, like that other
myth, perfection, that threatens us as well—

still I have to feel (as I feel in the air and ear,
hearing the manner of noises that return
with this loss of power, into this subsidence)
that maybe endings are what we are about,
and that maybe this timewash and stormwrack,
these shards of language we humans make use of
really are the shroud, the sea below, the only love.

It is difficult, being away, being with this exhaling weather—
hard to think of you, and of your ineradicable typography
disastrous and sweet in the rain. I remember the darkness
that your lips made on my eyes when we paused in rain once, homeward.

And your mascara slipping to mark when we made love
my chest, shoulder, and writing your raccoon's eyes;
and your heart beating too like a small animal's, faster,
just ahead of time's and the rain's erasure.

It isn't like me to want you. Outside willows flicker wild
in windgusts that slash to ribbons
those unreadable yellow leaves

and my love for you is only sudden weather
and yours for me as well:
your eyes' gray rain, your black mascara clouds.

*. . . with \mathbb{Z} Seven
Illustrative Plates . . .*

The Artist Speaks of Origins, of Mimesis, and of the Nature of the Real

Lifelike's a bowl of alphabet soup
slippery with oil at the top
and those same annoying letters babbling up

Raking Leaves with Franz Kafka

The anti-Semitic neighborhoods around the gothic university
are decadent with colored leaves and class anxieties.

Kafka pulls his rake across straw-colored lawns,
pausing often to rest and cough. Weatherlike his lungs are raw and

wet with incipient dark rain. We gather our families like leaves
between synapse and response. I try to let him know

about the table crusted thick with mashed peas,
about frustrated desire, frustrated sleep,

and the endless deprivation of both. But Kafka is
full of his father's bitterness, and thinks he knows

the woe that is in marriage. "I was a child,"
he says. "And wasn't that enough?" He turns

a pliant oak leaf in his hand,
his long index finger pulling its lobes back

one by one until a brown basket mirrors
the cupped fingers: "Look then," he says,

"at the dead plant with two backs—the brown loam
tapping your white humanism." Under his feet

he kicks the dry old currency of castle stone,
cockroach wings, desiccated lives. We gather

our families like leaves in the chill
and bundle in, where

the brown tea's steam rises full and strong against dry air.

Study in Claret

Easy strokes brush canvas, a fluttered color
clings to old paint, nests in a hard-won past when
birds at his gray window entranced him: blue-winged
sonnets in feathers.

Younger then, bright-plumed, he would watch the hopeful
birds as they flew anticlimactic arcs and
dove away. (She came in the night, the fragile
bones in her body

lighting there, live, various, coupling beauty,
act, as though no other existed, ever.)
Savage blue, orange, damson he paints, and never
knows he remembers.

Vacant Irish Photograph, Enlarged

You cannot see the monochrome rainbow, and
it is always raining there inside the glass—
the barbed wire's cold and drops
collect on its spurs.

Brushed aluminum skies
reflect off the wire braided with rust,
reflect off the smooth clay spaces in
the track where bits of granite,
broken stones have spun away from tires
toward a lichened boulder.

The valley filled with fog or photographic grain
looms in against the wire, a gray cloud that
mystifies itself into light as your eyes
follow it up.

And low plants line the road.
And rocks. This is a place so alone that you
have to imagine the sheep.

There are only insolubly distant
angles of hill, outlines
of rivulet and track, and nearer
only the knotted, shiver-timbered spars that
the tenuously reflecting lines of wire
bleakly maintain as posts.

Anniversaries

for Wiebke

Early a.m., signs in the misted windshield
hard to read—gray, pebbled with water. Teaching
Sappho all day long for my sophomore lit., and
worried about it.

When our new white Mazda accelerates in
third, I take your hand: *anniversaries re-*
membered. Warm flesh, veins that are yours, enchant the
palm of the morning,

where some odd gust, grace of October air, sus-
pends a leaf, rust-colored and enigmatic
over us—just one, just a minute hanging
lost in the mirror.

Think of space, time, fate, and the palmistry en-
acting us, here, now, and another year that
blinks its foglights towards us; I squeeze your hand, hard,
loving you madly.

This new life inside her

This new life inside of her
changes:

: we are three heartbeats, each
rounding the corner of a big, strange
isosceles triangle.

: changes her; with her obstetrician, she
listens for that almost inaudible rhythm, watches
invisible hourly change that adds to family, existence,
life as we know it — such faith.

: changes within, in its quiet recapitulation of phylogeny,
its fins and flanges inventing new articulations,
all new, and grows into its unknowable,
difficult name—wind moving through its thorns and edhs and willow leaves.

: changes me, changes me not (who always am afraid of change).
I listen hard above the dark fur of her body. I sympathize
but hear no heartbeat, and my body simply continues.
I am boring and far away. But sometimes
at the horizon, on the cusp of what's not said,
the colors shift and crinkle, and small hail-pearlets of rhythm
—someone else's syllables—
bubble upward into mine.

The Poets

The days were savagely enjambed, the nights not long enough,
grading through fall quarter's satire to its epigrammatic close.

Finally over except for the final and the send-offs, the last class day
finds the few remaining students in a local bar, in the Amsterdam

Café, where the beer is cold and the pizza better than not.
Conversation is livelier than I expected, nourished

by the group's small size, and caroms from standardized exams to basset hounds
to workshop conduct like a steel pinball in its silvery career

through one of those noisy machines you find in other bars.
It's odd to think I won't see them again. It's always odd,

and the oddity becomes a habit. Strong women talking,
creating a tanka or sestina out of darkening windows and chainlink cigarettes,

the men as so often through the quarter silent, storing these impressions
in the places their poetry comes from. But all of them will mix and sift

this world, this bar, this talk; they will color it with autumn
and the opalescent skies a hurricane leaves in its wake.

Their poems will fragment like the quarter itself—
around Hurricane Opal, around the Alabama game, around a break in late November—

but then their words will come back home, final
and provisional at once, changing without change, constant without constancy.

A poem is so easy to rewrite: on Tuesday we revised one of Dickinson's
volcanic plots of ground, admiring this and shifting that. 100 years later

you can do this still. But a class, any class, this one—you never touch it again
except in memory. Time's arrow shoots through us, courses

through each workshop like a heavy steel bearing; you keep the flippers moving
but it drops between those outstretched arms. It's gone. Gone to that dark glow

of the subterranean future. The hurricane leaves you with wind and damage, the volcano with stone
and ash, the poets only their music, their concrete images, their words.

Like rhetorical figures, living and breathing

Time fills our hearts as though they were balloons,
the way stain brackets our teeth, the way earth
slowly etches our bones.

You write to me, saying that all similes are true,
all metaphors lies; I couldn't agree with you
more. Like so many

people I knew in school you are married,
divorced; married, having children.
You have two cars.

Late in the evening we're alone in your car
and you say "I want you to make love to me."
This rental car

is wider than humid Chicago air, and scares me.
Beer clamors in my head, my hand clings moist
to vinyl tabs

on plush upholstery. It would be red,
but only in the memory; it must have been
crushed ice blue—

the popular color in those years. I remember,
I try to remember, I want to remember that my blood
speaks before I do,

that flesh is as grassblades, leaning one
upon the other as the breath of summer wills.
I think as our kisses

balance our lives against the night,
and against the steady hum of your
hotel-room's air,

that we were from another decade, one
where sex didn't kill, where love lasted
through reruns,

where sometimes metaphors were true
and similes (I like you, you like me)
not all unkind.

Photos of Dido

1: Elissa in St. Cloud

She's in St. Cloud,
where the automatic ice, crescenting,
reminds her of small blind fish.
She keeps quiet hour on quiet hour: feeling her scars,
the phlegm that erupts each morning, feeling the uncertain feeling
of where to go next.

"I can change the oil myself." The laundry
is almost—"I don't have much to wash."
"I don't want to know."

What she wants:
again a brown tube to vacuum separate
the mind from her brain: "to create a state
of self-induced stupidity—of brain damage."

She drinks to slay the cellmates of her brain,
small particular ampoules
of thought and remembrance.
"It's not a case of preference:
the bottle in front of me *is* the frontal lobotomy."

We cross the Mississippi in the car,
time and again. I show her the hometown jokes:
the novels about killing time here,
tell her how time here kills;
this small city, named by its little emperor
after the Paris suburb,
Napoleonic, but differently pronounced;
the girlfriend who guessed at native etymologies,
an eponymous Indian chief.
Elissa laughs, but her laughter isn't serious;
we make still smaller talk at Perkins,
use the words we used to use
before we grew up and tried to kill ourselves.

What unlikely childhoods, genetic
Waterloos, Dienbienphus, made us this way?
Same old ignorant midwestern enchantments:
white kids raised on Wonder bread and mayonnaise
and the imperial complexity of war and industry;
the curse of winding up, not down.
She says “We are born into theory,
but the world is inarticulate; some day
they’ll have a name for it, and I won’t have to tell them—
this living disaster area.”
We drink another round
in a bar’s antique postmodernism, shroud
the smoking zone with suicidal ease:
The parents we choose, the myths we buy into,
the epistemes we redline on a two-lane county road,
and there we are.
Cynical geysers
of rationality, the *dulce* and *utile*,
we exchange our useful fictions hour by hour
and test our tired faiths in asphalt games of skill
‘til imperial highways and *logos* falter within us.
What we once were we were not, despite
the physical evidence.
Kodacolor 4” prints
charm our memories—selective, omitting,
cropping and choosing.
I try to say honesty, history,
these pictures of future and past that we hold in our minds,
try to say that all of them matter. She smiles:
we both know me better than this.
“Mirrors aren’t all they’re cracked up to be,”
she says of the ways I try to maintain
identity, continuity, a love of being.
Coffee whispers in Elissa’s old fountain pens,
and our names clot in the damaged nibs.
Mea culpa, mea culpa; we dance
in a mirrored bar holding our own
rhythms against melodic trust and
she is always a ways ahead of me,
revising the crisis
whose shadow only lengthens over me.

2: Tempest

“Your hair is wet,” you say. Your gear drips on this pale sand
as you pluck and then meticulously unstring your bow,

unhook your belted dagger,
bitter bronze that carries your dead husband’s name.

(I think we’re in the earthscape of vanished Hector;
Andromache’s voices keen at the cavemouth,

whisper in wind about these glistening columns, startle
our horses again and again, edgy at the entrance way.)

I towel myself dry in these lightning-lit shadows;
you, as always frightening in your competence,

kindle a fire; we spread our cloaks and wait
for the sudden rainburst to subside. You ask me

about nothing, about Ascanius; I after Anna. You laugh at my slow jokes,
and I love you now as your lips part, as your hair coils downward

onto the robe behind you, damp against my knuckles
as I press you back beneath a kiss, a sudden love;

and in this moment within you Troy slides from sight,
as if no storm, no fire, no horses waiting at the gate.

3: Clifford's Tower

Thumbing the photographic labyrinth, slick cellophane
pages brittle with the amnesty
of seven years' ignorance,
I go emptying the pockets of your memory, trying to do your laundry,
recover, trying to take responsibility, restitch the busted seams.

It isn't as though drowning
in a sunbright sea of light
(etched as she was on the hill's side)
was her main point.

But the light did catch and cling to her
and to the streetground rivets of her jeans.
(I took her home one night from rehearsal;
we fumbled through thick parkas
against each other, leaning against
the cold steel triangles of a grade-school's jungle gym:
it was winter and adolescence.)

In England, after the cold war, we met again,
and hence the photo I still have
from the little Masada in York.

Even ragged at edges the way she's turned, fetching
up against a bright skyline, you catch
a bit of her face: dark hollows
where her eyes would be, and the pearls of sun
strained through her loose long hair
outline the line of her jaw. High cheekbones and
(you can't see this) her eyes of shotgun blue.

Shivering
from the long cold day we'd spent in York,
our tempers were fraying, so I pictured her there
by Clifford's Tower, and the sea you could almost smell,
and the sky all the colors that ever were.

4. Roaming Carthage

As though too warm in the room our words weave
over Michelob and childhood photographs,

outside we wander the boiling drifts,
watch the building towers, the crenellated crusts
each with their plumes, pale snow against pale air.

She rereads the winter early in her life,
her father chopping wood with
even swings of the hickory handle:

“‘From the waist,’ he would always say,
‘Move from your center.’”
And so she moved so always, catlike—
perched and cold in the poisoning air of urban spring.

She said once “you are beautiful, and something more—”
and faltered. I wondered where the silver tongue had gone
wondered at the loss of her easy speech.

It was as if, like the fog above the reservoir in colder months
that shifts its shadow with the wind, something dark
in passing passed her eyes and darkened them.

I think these are the perils of beauty: that winsome, you lose some.

5. You. Smoke.

In zoomorphic lines you trace your struggle with the world:
“I want to paint everything,” you say, but everything
you paint is only one:

barbed wire dragon wings of coral bubbling
air spiralling smoke words lean on metal girders
rivets the size of your hand holds darkened
by black bodies alyssum blooms and
coriander weaving birdskulls catheads
snakes and shoes and someone’s eyes, nutmeg . . .

You block it off with weathered wooden frames;
your whole universe one animal you cannot name

but ever again you fence it away, needling with your narrow brush
its withers, ears, its whole half-blank anatomy.

I tried to tell you once that this was why perspective was invented,
a way of punctuating, interpreting; of meaning.

You said, “That’s cheating,” and your Camel blossomed into crinkled orange.

You smoke as though it were a contest, lighting the sky,
as though strife were all there were. And so you say.

But snowflake after snowflake comes
wave whispering into wave
and ever as slowly my picture melting into yours.

Use: An Epithalamium

What is marriage but a round
of dependencies, each following round
the curve of some hastening arch, round
as light at space's edge?

Auden said that poetry, even round
as pearls, makes nothing happen: just so
in the core of marriage, bowl, tornado
nothing happens in its fullest, roundest
sense, as powerful as space,

circle, or art's ecology of marriage
as a round of edges feathered
incessantly into (and around) each other
by that round, full, whirling core.

Museum

I.

I think I grow too old for jetplanes, trains and this:
Waiting in long lines, thinking “How lovely

Are the rectangular arches, with which scaffolding divides
The sky.”

My boys gallop under the velvet ropes, scatter like doves from the trash bin
When their mother warns them off. Children all along the line

Pull their parents’ hands and voices after them, reading tone and stance with all
The private glee

Of old professionals, the shrewdness of lawyers laughing in their teeth.

II.

This might be any city: Spartanburg, Seattle, Thebes, but instead it is Firenze:

We have been to the Gardens, we have climbed, as tourists always climb,
The ringing tower.

Today it rained, and we enter the Uffizi, hauling our laughing children into Art:
They remember maroon velvet ropes, the floral floor in reds and purples,

Bare-breasted Madonnas (“baby!” chirps our two-year old), and the way
We move

Like increasingly abstracted nouns through the convolutions
Of a labyrinthine syntax. “I’m starving,” our five year old points out

As we are chivvied away from the paintings. His mother studies the inscriptions,
And no

Maternal or spousal guilt will move her. I take the boys and cough “pardone” as we
Squirm ahead to marble benches, light, and just a bit more space.

III.

I had not realized it was here, this marble Laocoön arching his back against the serpents
Coiling,

Coiling with all the power of the sea around his sons, at the edge of the surf
Before the walls of Troy. The light is gray and white and not so rich, and I

Slide surreptitious M&M's across the bench, give the two year old a drink.
All hope,

All hatred, all the swelling malevolence of our Iliadic universe is tied together here
In snakesbody crush. Fathers and sons and politics and all the other darknesses with teeth.

Their mother arrives at last: Relief and despair hammer in my ears
As I hoist the children—fragile, stone, three thousand years old—
Into my arms.

... Mapping the New World ...

The Castle in Spain

Tracing the dark cartography of oak
my mother tells again the family tales,
always half disaster and half joke, and
always almost true: the ghost-guest who trails us
from one rented home to the next, as broke
as we and near as flesh; the ships whose sails
left our folk behind but drowned the silver
and the books—in a hailstorm off Cape Horn,
in war off the Cape of Good Hope; the story's
what remains. She skips the castle in Spain,
and charts with bardic fingers the lost glories
of this familial oak table. The pain—
of what once was real, now only stories imagined—
she feels in the heavy grain, scans in time's dark pageant.

Native

—*for Katherine*

Dreamcatcher. No. Peace-pipe. No.
Soapstone, feathers, ceramic, no.
One myth, one custom, the sprinkling of pollen
(black, yellow, white, blue). No.

Or not only.

But yes to custom, yes to ligament and bone,
and yes the fragile shifting legends of the flesh,
and yes, and yes, that sculpture in the blood.

Chiseled in Glass: Wisconsin Poems

Mosquitos, moths, occasional dragonflies map your headlights,
chart across your car the shape of Wisconsin.

Windhammered bugs plot the course of your love
the names and shapes of your desire

while you shackle the heartland with tirechains, travel,
recursive drives that sieve most of your memories out.

Winnowed, what's left you are kernels, pearls, nuggets:
bug-juice and shells and wings, and maybe the fast fade

of firefly—spattered over glass. It's never a story,
it never connects—unstrung pearls, loose lyrics:

Sheboygan (the breakwater kiting the lake), Tomah
(dividing this winter's interstate), Menomonie

(and the waitress who waited in snows without number),
Mauston (where fuel lines freeze and motels cast blue shadows),

and Madison shifting and winnowing, learning the drifted snow.
You could drive on for hours on dream-fumes, vapors of memory.

But always you come back to this: someone turns to you and speaks—
after a while it doesn't matter what you say, what that someone says—

the same little lyric disaster, like irritating grit,
plays its pearlescent tune; like the radio-station schedule,

like the highway's salt-stained curvature, the muscles of your jaw
and your brain's synaptic arts respond, enact the way they will,

the way you knew they would. It's never a story;
it's Wisconsin, where there's too much repetition,

a death-trip come compulsory. Lyric towns, pauses,
collect like melted snow, and the drops freeze—

diamondhard on the windshield under snow
when you slither away from the orange seats

that every truckstop seems to love. Deer graze
another season on the verge of your black backroad;

deer corpses, roadkills, charm your bones' collapse,
your bones' collapse and dance. You drive anyway,

heartless, blinded in smoke-tempests, fire-zones,
struggling hard to read what's chiseled in glass,

the bugs on your windshield, speedflickered stones,
grit, gravel, birdshit, the spattered landscape of grass,

Holsteins, yellow pine, blue water, ospreys kneeling, snow,
struggling again for that same story you don't believe,

the one there never is and never was,
the stenciled shape of human love.

Independence Day, Manitowish Waters

Sleeping, dreamed warm feathers, holding feathers:
you'd become Owl: snowy and broad your pinions
in the air, me known, named in a downy breast, a
feathery nestling.

Then the strife, war, conflict — your struggle up and
out, the bright white wings that exploded, hammered
air; and blood from fingers that slipped, trying to
hold your slick talons.

Talking we'd had earlier; "love" again, when your
agate eyes stared only impassive, luminous
in the north's starspangling of night, of dew that
beaded our windows.

Dockside, hot pale timbers crack with heat, your
words are far, closed, shiny, like the boat in
sunshine: bright orange fiberglass and glitz; you
say that you "love" me.

But as dream's bright form you shatter night now;
rapid heartbeats echo you, and I grasping
absent plumes, fierce memories, wishing myself
rapt in raptor's wings.

Red Stick

The sun shines. Fire ants—my brothers and sisters—crawl the earth
in their red dance of challenge.

Papa Groundhog pops from the hole in the ground—the sun shines.
“This is where the people will stay,” he announces. O—o, the sun shines.

Warriors die by the wall, the river. The sun shines so brightly
the blood in the river is clear, standing apart, and on the hill and
the valley and in the trees the children and the women die. The sun shines.

From the Horseshoe a grandmother calls to the sun to
hide his face. Deer and Bear and the People disappear
into the places where the sun no longer shines, where stories stop,
trailing sticks like Bear, chewing poplar like Deer.

Red from the ground the sun shines
Red from the Tallapoosa river water
Red from the stocks of broken tree, flattened grass
Red from the land of ocean to ocean
I am born and I am dying where the sun shines from each history,
each love, each hatred, each embrace.

Careening, Anna Maria Island

I. Nelson Earl

*Fictions of fictions, lies that we
rely upon, accrete like barnacles,
spread tentacles of weed that shackle
the free play of the helm. Is it these
that bring us haltingly to this,
an isle of the west?*

when he said “an isle of the west,”
I thought he had in mind our quest
for some ideal land, of surfeit not to be sung,
as in the poet’s “heart of light.” More true,
though, is his understanding of Anna Maria
not as *locus amoenus*, but as spot
upon the western edge
of Florida and all its roadmaps. Why he chose
at such and such a place, and such a time, to speak,
remains unclear. But then he said

*Spread before us are the winds off the sea,
a reality scraping our hulls raw.
But still morning mist is a beacon, the screech
of every gull becomes omen.*

*So even here the fictions form, the chivalric
surging of breakers in serried rank,
steeds and plumed lances breasting the chill
of the 6:00 sea.*

And I thought I understood this: Speaking of careening,
the process of scraping the hull, was speaking meaning,
the old Cartesian split (between plank and plank, water and hull, you and
I);

I thought I understood, now,
that he was talking of myth, and how the glorious past
enstories our very world. Even on Anna Maria,
barebones beach of an island, you find the little rituals,
encodings of the real. The clapboard church, and the lone motor
chugging the reach, seemed suddenly fraught
with signification.

Until, planing smooth a new epistemology,
I caught myself; there was nothing, then. No meaning
and no world, but just the world as wish fulfilled,
an empowered colonial selfishness,
or maybe a battered pragmatic sloop,
shunting along an unknown coast.

I suppose
it fit the scene, the gulf flaring with morning, enlightening thus
the barren and somehow bitter houses and weathered saloons. I
didn't know what to make of it. We neared the end of the beach,
where tourism ended and the upturned hulls began again,
echoing surf.

*Though clothed in red . . .
though clothed in red tatters only, scraping the hull dry
and clean like a newer world, we go on indulging
our piratical philosophy, bleeding meaning
from the white-sanded island
as if we sucked the juice from vibrant oranges
along the beach that finishes our walk.*

He poured us orange juice in enameled cups and read
from his window at the sea's edge; being young
our attention flittered between the lines
to the bug-rife Spanish moss that hung
over the inland walk. Somehow the salt
can shoot through still:

*where lives and lines are clinker-built, and overlap
only by luck in pitchblack stained exchange;
generations that patch each other together, happenstance
woodwork and tar. And again it is waves and faulted keystrokes,
the old poet lingering on, making the finicky marginal change.*

We drove through an orange-pulp sunset to the little bar
and its frost-mugged amber lager. He talked about rust
and the sea's deep scars:
the Plymouth fender we'd set the teacups on, thick with dregs,

*and the rust-lines on the roof since 1963, when I bought the canoe
and rigged it atop straight out of the gulf; I'll never do that again;
some things you learn by losing, and rust is one of those slow
and tedious lectures, never a thing you want right then,
but later on, and someone else?*

II. Crossing the Bar

to the jukebox, she turned and said *no I don't think so right now.*

The tavern is painfully cool; the fish hang walleied: marlin, swordfish, shark;

the bartenders card me; one of them looks at me, looks again at my grandfather.

Old wine in new bottles. Same hardwon sophistries; same hejiras and hetairai . . .

new flesh. I feel my sense of identity whispering away: *you are blood and pretty speech: guys like you are dime-a-dozen*, she said.

You imagine jihads, the need for them where you are trapped between patrimony, empire, and the bonds of your trades.

Words prowl and poach at the corners (torn round) of the napkin under the glass. The blue dolphin swims

in the cold pooled sweat of his beer. You never remember the hard things, the difficult unfaiths, the lousy boring unpretension:

the easy ones gloss your history, you tell the tale of the tribe, conflicting stories of conflict, make the audience writhe

and then lead them again to belief, out of criss-crossed currents, rip-tides. Crossing the bar to the jukebox: *It's all so unreal, all of it,*

she gestures. Her unreal name, Juniper, caroms like a coin in dry interiors, minds panelled with white pine, lined with old trophies.

Juniper slides her thumb along the tumbler, ice-sweat building on her skin, the whorls, white scars, of identity magnified.

I watch her as my father's father watches her; she talks about the sixties, about epistemology, and pulls the pulp from lemon-slices.

Like Juniper we polish and dismantle the things at hand, history, the size of fish, angels we've known, traffic accidents, vital events.

One somewhat irritating day, no more nor less, is annealed into pearl, and happy careening scrapes the shapes of new voyages

into a hull's new life. It is not the absolute difference I thought it was. I think I see that now. You don't lose the stains;

corruption continues, rust builds still under primer and seal,
and your sandpaper scars, your battered fingers echo

with everything you've said and done, grit and seaweed signs,
blood-blistered signatures, despite your careening. But just

so does the smoke that swirls parade (change without change)
within this Florida bar's one shaft of sun.

Juniper turns in the room, her skin muddled with light:
Nothing is really there. You know, there. It's not real.

III. The City of Chicago: Regenstein Library

Again, I'm trying to be literal

(As though that were an option.)

in this sub-basement crypt of plastic veneer,
with its pall of smoke like an angry disruption of atoms,
with its endless mutation of person, of things,
of books that lie open and closed.

*(Already you change, forget;
you bleed the reef that fades and builds
in every coralled bone, every squall
scribbling your mind-dark sea.)*

And I'm trying to ascertain if the rain
outside, *one floor up and invisible*,
is a curtain or a sheet of water.

(Knowing it is nothing, neither, all.)

Fingering

the linens or draperies of rainfall,
my fingers, Juniper's, Nelson Earl's,
dismantle and rebuild, dissolve and re-create,
the old slow plaster of rain,
structural weather;

*(As any old sorcerer's fingers
fumble and resolve, rust and sand,
dust, and suddenly matter.)
and I remember*

for eight years now *I've wanted to reread*
Augustine's City of God, imagining *more*
than a manner of speech to be found, and more
to be lost there than an ideal misbelief.

Tie-Snakes

This is the song of serpents in the water. This is the story of water.
This is the song of the flood and of the change, of the people and
of the snakes.

(Hunger filled him like a balloon; hunger filed him like a rasp; hunger
ran its tongue around his toes, calves, temples.
So now the young human has found a pool of fish

in the top tender leaves of a cottonwood tree:

to be different, he eats some.

The tie-snake became him, he the tie-snake.

“I change, I change,”

he cried but no one listened. Change happens, welding his legs
one to the other, sewing his hands to his hips, splitting his tongue

in halves that spat and whispered to each other
in secretive narratives, hazardous tales.)

This is the song, and it is the same song, but it is only one singing
and his voice hewn tuneless
with all the watery words that he’s heard.

The tie-snake lived in every deep freshwater place, for each
was a locus of change.
(The tie-snake, more human than the rest of us, loves change.)

In every deep freshwater place the people named the tie-snake:
for deep wisdom, fresh knowledge, burning change.
But these were names only:

(And later, in Alabama, he floods the little towns along the Coosa River.)

Almost Easter

We move through a familiar landscape filled with spotted cows,
Holsteins transplanted from north Germany, chewing their cud

despondently under the scrub oaks that line this prairie-edging
scenic route; you imagine a landscape hiding them, a hedge

that camouflaged those black and white patterns as a leopard
slinks unseen in dappled light. It's almost Easter, you're separated

once again from your family; you still pronounce it with an 'n,'
a crafty German consonant that grafts itself upon the very end

of the holiday you've always loved, a letter squeezed on at the last
by a tongue too German to forget. We drive northwest

across a country I no longer understand, perceiving it through you
as through a bottle-green lens, this third-world melange of far too

many countries, tribal districts built of shoelaces and boot straps
at the point of knife and gun. The rural slums hung with muskrat traps,

the narrow fishing huts in garish reds and yellows recently dragged
from the winter's frozen lakes, all this sculpture of a harsh and bedraggled

America—so perky in its wealth, as idealistic as the heat of poppies
when they bloom, but so damned gangrenous when you come to ponder

its hurting poor, the rot at the expanding, surrounding base.
You kick at imaginary pedals; I, eyes in the mirror, touch the brakes;

a rabbit bolts unscathed across the highway, and I make
some dry comment on how the Easter Bunny's running late.

You kiss me. I kiss you back at 70 miles an hour,
and time skitters by us, hammering our tires

like uneven pavement, its impact disproportionate,
the square of our velocity or some such misappropriated

law of physics. This kills me. This time passing that almost crucifies us
is what I fear and love in you; the more we love, the less this time suffices.

We've driven overnight out of kudzu, sweeping past broom sage, skunk cabbage
into north central prairies—scrub oak, indian paintbrush, prickly ash;

Easter with my family, where there may be snow, and the rosebushes
still covered against frost, and the springing blue spruces that cushion

the sky—prickly, cold, not so rampant as that ubiquitous kudzu
threatening to overtake the car, entangling aluminum wheel covers,

draping itself over the hood like a lazy jungle-dweller, a komodo dragon,
a vine-shadowed tiger, anaconda. Sometimes I wonder at the pageant

of words that randomly pour into poems, as if a lunch-box opened on eggplant
sandwiches, on Easter eggs brightened with grease and painted with animal pageantry:

my childish eyes on those amber millipedes, the stippled sunrise of a trout's urgent
backward leaping, the linked maroon baboons around an eggshell white, emerging

from a polar cap of fern-green jungle and brown roots, twisting into iced equators.
So often we think the same things, over and over, the useful proverb, the cliché or

a suddenly parental turn of phrase; but now and again the cactus blossoms, troubles
the landscape and through our flat language's shimmering diction colors bubble

out of the multiplying dice (the tongue, the pen, electronic web)
into azaleas, orchids, the rest of the blessed hallucination. The concrete slab

aches northwesterly, arches like a rainbow for the climb and fall of our repeating wheels;
I look at you. I tell you I want to break these word-dreams, hunt beneath the shell

for salt, white, yolk. So I clamber back to incident, meaning, the highway smell of skunk
clinging from the night before. And I try to be literal. Aim for a core somewhere sunk

deep, golden. But still that clinging three-toed sloth of a word clings, rummaging
among the ficus plants; or catlike falls into silence and creeps off ambiguous. So I forage

instead in my remembered undergrowth, the jungle of childhood Easters for a jar
of memory I could present to you like a calla lily, jungle orchid, rose. There were

colorings, dyeings, Easter eggs, and hunts, the friendly admiration of
spry, unlikely colors. There was the intricate dismantling of tedious love

and its labors as I tried to take the shell off whole, mapmaker's broken globes, spliced
with membrane. There was salt, then the egg's white; and last the yolk,
which I never liked.

Amabala

Your hair grew thick in the humid wind the day
we poured the truck across the floodplains
of Dixie-hearted states. Your German fingers
counterfeited *autobahns*—through the wheel,
through the chipmarred cup at the truckstop.

The vertical word, the word obscured,
or placed backward in mirrors, I don't remember
which it was, but—*Amabala*—you said, as if
the most natural syllables, things in the world,
as if saying in our quiet, correspondent speech,
Wie schön ist Panama!, a phrase that I'd
been mispronouncing three days straight.

And so we came home to the place we lived in,
a backwards Southern state of grace, of wistful minds
and our hearts' brief theft of time. *Amabala*
we could live with, familiar, like the sudden comfort
of deadly metaphorical clichés unmade and made anew—
the ironical affirmation of our nights in transplantation.

You're out of the country now;
I mumble your Chaldean magic to myself,
scribble epistolary charms against your absence:
Come home to Amabala; come home to Amabala.

*. . . and a Guide to Parts
Unknown*

A poet writes his muse

I have driven silver cars and white
and let their battered armor shine
somewhere beneath the highway's grit.

I have slept with women black and blue
and palely diamond in an unexpected rain
and to almost all I was almost true.

I have slit the wrists of all the prose
I ever wrote, killing my characters
each night before the moon rose rose

over these painful cities on the earth.

But now we are old in the stilly night, you and I together,
waiting for our radar's vision, for its technicolor weather.

Peter Peter

*Peter, Peter, Pumpkin-Eater had a wife and couldn't keep her:
Put her in a pumpkin-shell and there he kept her very well.*

His heart is round and orange, ribbed with smooth ridges, bulging like the belly of a ship.

He devoured a woman, gulping her down: She keeps well in that chill.

He still tastes her over again, sometimes honey, sometimes sour, sometimes the brown of baked seeds that are crusty with salt.

“Peter,” he says to himself as he crosses Magnolia. “She makes a fine pie. You’re a lucky man.”

Still he feels her teeth in his pale flesh, her fingers that search his spine to tear him open like a melon.

He thinks that he is trapped inside her like a bright orange fish, a pumpkinseed darting against her invisible walls, tasting the glass with his opening mouth.

Shopwindows hold him as he walks; he stares at kayaks, aqua, magenta, orange in their vinyl shells,

sleek and sexy. Surrounded by thighbraces, foam, and nylon drybags. And of course he thinks of her.

People walk out of the store: “Figure-8’s are inexpensive, sure, but Grigris are easy. I’d rather have a Grigri on belay.”

Peter wonders what they mean, and backs away among the brutal orange-brick columns of his love;

he has swallowed her wholly, like a wafer at church. She is sweet as sugar in the gastank of his heart,

and she opens for him like a fruit-rose, and the smell of her soft petals swims to block the arteries and galleries of him.

He leans against a parking meter, swallowing his sickness. He swears at times the child grows in him, as on a vine, and never within her.

Tomorrow, Peter thinks, she will tell him Halloween brings forth all the dead, not just those buried in dirt;

he hopes it's not too late. The parking meter's calm metallic bulge is cold against his cheek:

“She's herself, not someone else.” Peter recrosses Magnolia Avenue where on the asphalt someone's busted jack-o-lantern says that it's all right, and he walks on

leaving that roadkill fresh in its rumpled orange.

Plums

*He stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plum
And said "What a good boy am I!"*

The blender winds down from its chopping of fruit,
and juice and the froth go still. I think

*I will never return to England, where you cannot
even buy a blender like this one, that runs*

off the cigarette lighter of your Lincoln Navigator.
The West Midlands might as well be Somalia.

My mother said to me "Jack,
take your pie to the corner"

—the Warwickshire version of time-out.
But even then it was easy, and the plum popped out.

Warm and purple like, well, like nothing else,
a dark cipher of fruit like a scarf on the thumb.

My ex-wives talk about me—everyone talks—
about my "Peter Pan Syndrome." But Peter Pan

has nothing on me. Most of you reach into
a blender, an industry, a pie, a life, and you come up

dripping, maybe with cut fingers.
But watch me!

Everything comes up
like this—
plums and peaches . . . purple, gold.

A Poem for the Latest Year

But these hedgehog days know one trick only,
that rare and quiet one of gentle love
continuing—like coffee
as it slowly sounds the deep carafe,
where each fresh writing
moves within a space that we have steadily made
familiar—say the distance
that moonlight measures in our yard, or the cautious range
between our great blue house
and the near blue evening star of love. We work

together this magic tenacity of dance
where breath and breakfast, the blinding sunrise commute,
the soft unredeemable sleep of tiredness and wear,
where these prickle round us ever
in gentle exhaustion
in the tentative, delicate, half-unraveled dance
of making love that lasts
through the quiet incompleteness of each continuing day.

An Ecology Thinner Than Glass

—a *ghazal* for you

You and I are for each other like motor oil and rain. No matter what they say of me,
we murder each other for beauty, for color. And it's you I have to ask to save me.

You are reading the leaves of prairie grass in a field I've watched for twenty years:
The blue-stemmed grasses say to you, save me.

This poem is simple and direct as I can make it. I've tried. But people
think that images are hard, syntax only one bad pun, difficult words unsavory.

You are thumbing through the waves of the Gulf as you do every spring; the shark's fin breaks water
for bait, insidious: You echo its fin as it passes into green again: save me.

I want the nouns to candle forth their sounding bodies, want the depth
of an abstract preposition's bravery, want the verbs to ricochet off me, lovely.

You are hunting mushrooms in June in Minnesota, morels after last night's rain; the spores
call out helplessly into the forest as you lift the soft fungus away, saying save me, save me.

Save me from philosophers who imagine they catch the bubbling world
in a non-paradoxical grid, in their old black logic and all its knavery.

You are out in the night camping near old burial mounds; the insects are singing, the stars glitter and
swing in trees. Your twin brother's voice in your twining throat prays save me.

Unity haunts the mind like a bad dream beaded, like raindrops
bright silver on cattails; unity never soaks in, no matter how lovely.

Your sister falls down a flight of stairs in a new split-level home. She says "help me" and you
remember her questions all of your childhood, the way her eyes whispered save me.

You write to me: I am making this up. No one lives
this life. I am always one line down or up, just as you say of me.

Whales blunder up your rivers and bays, their lungs collapsing into helpless flesh. You know what
you want them to say and it is save me.

Fall slips into winter's drink with a liminal splurge among the quantum leaves.
The color is endless, the pattern repeats: you can't say everything is out of joint save me.

In a rockpool of warm water by the sea an ecosystem builds and folds; you hover watching your image in the rippling pool, in fragmentation without end and you say save me.

These prosy winters, writhing in fog; this jeremiad writing to save the bloody world; but it's the same bloody love song I always wrote, whatever they say of me.

