

Seeing
in the Dark

Poems

by

Matthew Brennan



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For My Father
and My Son

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Seeing
in the
Dark

In the Midnight Darkness

The wind rolls in like the cold Pacific surf
And carries with it the muffled cry, far
Off, of a child lost in the midnight darkness.

Its voice, the dull knife of guilt, cuts
Me off--so long ago abandoned, like photos
Of the dead dumped in a basement,

The face stays hidden: It is trapped,
Sunk in muddy waters, waiting for me to learn again
How to see in the dark, how to hear under water.

Reading the News: May 6, 1991

Today the *Tribune-Star's* "Birthdays" blazes in black and white: "Willie Mays is sixty." Amazed, all I can think is how twenty-five years ago, in another state, another body, I watched him hold the center: from dimly lit bleachers, I caught his profile, my Polaroid's flash fixing him forever in a ghostly glow that seemed otherworldly even then, his greatness blurred already on memory's print, except for one phenomenal hit; I recall a home run launched beyond the clock on top of the scoreboard at Sportsman's Park, a homer whose arc--in my mind--has risen higher and higher like stars, and only now has grounded--its loose seams glaring, like a whiffed change-up in the catcher's web.

On Deck
(for my younger brother Mike)

In '68, when the Cards clinched in mid-September,
everyone slumped but Maxvill, who, frayed
to a lightweight by the St. Louis heat,
sailed home with the run that won the pennant.

To get bleacher seats for Game Six--if
the Series would last that long--you camped
out on the stadium grounds, like a dock urchin
yearning to be a deckhand. That night, rain

fell like confetti from houeroofs into
dreams, white splinters of tickets warming the air
of a downtown parade. Then two weeks later, the Cards
perched with three wins--we were there, lifting

our faces in the October light of our first
World Series: Washburn cruised through two, then got
blown overboard; Cepeda, Brock, and Maris drowned;
and while I watched Jim Northrup's hips and bat

swivel like a jib-wing swatting a belt-high
breeze, you stood stuck in line--to get us souvenirs--
as if stranded on the infield, waiting,
like Maxvill, for your turn at bat.

Sailing in Long Island Sound

Waiting for wind,
we remember
the first time: the smooth
glide across cold

Foamy water
that glinted on
mainsails, jib-wings, gulls,
and freighters far

Off in cool mist.
Now, when we move,
we hug the shore, look
inland, and stay

close to sand, where
wind is soft, but
steady, a pilot
light, not a blaze.

Still, some days, in
spurts, the wind can
whip speed through our shirts
and skip the boat
through waves like stones.

Spring Fever

Out of nowhere--the stink of spring wafts northward
Again, the first waking breath of a hungover drunk.
In the mind, this blurred dawn melts snowbanks,
Swells curbsides and sewers, and merges
Beer cans, dog shit, half-rotted butts.
With each throb of thought, another lawn defrosts,
Like ground beef forgotten in the kitchen sink.

And any second, once more, you'll recall
A rainy cold night twelve springs ago
When you lived your life as someone else,
When you first felt the virus of love
As moon-flash flooded your veins
And bloomed the blood-hot, unquenchable rush
That somehow, like the sun, always comes back.

Winter Light

Twelve years ago this month
I rode a Greyhound to see you
in cold Minnesota
to see if your torch still burned blue.

I entered Chicago
in snow and dark at ten to two
and thought I saw the ghost
of your ex-lover in a queue
buying the new *Playboy*
for his porno letters to you.

The bus began again
but in flurries of wind and snow
I saw his blank face grin
and watched you watch his dagger grow
till it was long enough
to slice me length-wise head to toe.

I slept through Wisconsin
but woke to see the sun near Eau
Claire gush fire on white bluffs
that held the melting river's flow.

Noon Glare

By rays sharper than the sharpest angle
Of cut glass in a jeweler's shop, noon glare
Refracts the traffic lights. No dew-drops
Moisten front lawns, no shadows cool front stoops;
Now, beams strip the neighborhood bare, and blister
Drab clapboards, arid rose beds, and asphalt drives.
You watch exhaust filter into the haze
That hangs there like sauna steam; you daydream:
You think of the dusk breeze in the park, and recall
The lust, last fall, that flushed her cheeks pink.

But autumn has its dullness, too, you remember,
For even in its dying, bleeding prism,
The sun can splash on any windshield
Sunshine, blinding as daybreak in Sahara glares.

In the Luxemburg Gardens at Twilight
(after John Singer Sargent)

In the Luxemburg Gardens at twilight,
Everything is blurred: the sun, with the throng
Of vendors, grandmothers, and beggars,
Is gone; its last light, like these infatuated stragglers,
Merges into the brown background, the bed
Where urges sleep while we work at blackboards,
Cash registers, and kitchen sinks--they lurk
There till this time between daylight and dark,
When the pond's opaque and the air is still,
When all's possible and nothing's quite numb.

Now, something flutters, a warm charge of lust,
And you turn, look into the far distance,
And start to imagine what must be her flesh
The instant the cold full moon meets your eye.

Dover in December
(An American's Dream of a Married
Christmas in Calais)

I

Last autumn was the wettest in English history
since 1727 when Fielding wrote his comedy,
Love in Several Masques, in which he tried "to laugh
mankind out of their favourite follies and vices."
After the lonely Thanksgiving in a Chinese restaurant,
the sky trembled, swelling solid, ripe and black
as gargantuan cherry clusters, ever-ready
to rupture its bowels or, if constipated,
to belly-out guffaws of thunderstorms and fire.

II

Then December fell and winter with it.
The first day, "the cold was invigorating":
the frost that iced the green grass and stripped trees
and the steel-blue sky streaked with frozen clouds
ground tranquility with blood and bone-marrow;
through the brisk air glided white pigeons and black ravens,
and, opposite the setting sun, a ghost-like moon,
conforming to her image, rose in the east.

III

Nightfall swallowed the landscape
and the sun-filtered mist, blackening eyes
with anxiety about frostbite and lost limbs,

while the wind swept over the sill
fanning curtains and turning pink flesh blue.
Rustling fully-clothed, plus Shetland sweater
and stocking cap, shrouded in Edinburgh blankets,
the shape shivered into sleep.

IV

It was just before Christmas, southeast of London:
He climbed to the roof of Dover Castle, where,
from a tower, he watched sunlight refracted by clouds
land on the Channel and blur the fusion of sky and sea.
The past was lost in the present till, like the Celts,
he caught, beyond the edge of a dry white crag,
Scandinavian vessels veer in and out of the harbor:
Next week, he mused, his prow, too, maneuvering whitecaps,
would come in her port in Calais, early Christmas morning.

Moscow Arms

Those nights at Moscow Arms, where we'd escape
Mid-December like an open freezer,
Our wine glasses reflected the glitter
Of the fire; chandeliers inflamed your eyes,
And the rug, bear-black, caressed like cat's-fur
Our cold feet entwined below inlaid oak.
Then, one night, crossing the square on the way
Back to our bed, we saw the moonlight flare
Through frost on St. Matthew's stained glass;
refracted,
Like a refrigerator bulb, it exposed
A bag lady crouching by a cat's bowl
As if caught grazing on the czar's garbage.

The Day the Honeymoon Ended

All week, at dusk, we'd cruise along
The lakeshore drive, watching waves guide
Last gulcs of light into final darkness.
At sundown, the red disk would sprawl
In the bay like a great sperm whale
No human ever saw before, till now,
Gashed by harpoons and axes. Later,
Light would glint like blood glimpsed through glass.

But the last night, we veered away
From asphalt onto an inroad
Between trees so thick and wild they
Shut out the moon and stars; enfolded--
By darkness of bark three centuries old--
We knew we were lost: the radio
Sputtered and cracked; then, a voice,
Muttering, "Elvis is dead."

And so we drove on, silent,
Huddled like crewmates cut loose on a raft,
Unsure where we were, or where we were
Going, just that somewhere in the blackness
Ahead, if we only could get there,
Someone right now was playing
"Heartbreak Hotel."

The First Anniversary

The sun is falling in the west tonight
like Lucifer, lightning-struck, whirling down
with wings blazing the flames of Turner's boats.

It's middle November; all's tinged with prune
color or bruised brown, except the stark trees
rattling in the wind like broken bones.

Adam limps by on blistered heels, and tries
to forget the strain rutabagas make
on his back; flint bits scrape his soles like claws.

Cold air hits his face, near gnarled oaks;
he sniffs leaves heaped at his feet, and recalls
trimming, with Eve, the lush hedges that looked

always ripening--but now no light spills
through the woods; it's gone, expunging past
pleasure so all that remains are the peels

of what is gone, the scars of quarrels, lost
promises. Now dark, what lies ahead scares
him: Eve gray, scaly; he, limp with thick waist.

Yet, eyes closed, he imagines the desire
her flesh will kindle, just as long ago,
when the moon sets, shadows lengthen, and stars

sprout from the sky like seed from the furrow.

So now, two hours gone, I wonder,
was it, after all, only hunger?

To Grandfather: 18 February 1978
(for JIS, 1902-1980)

Your birthday has rolled round
Again; fresh snow is falling
In drifts on the frozen ground
And on streets where cars and trucks are stalling;
You watch how the clouds, like a ceiling, repel
The black smoke the neighborhood chimneys expel.

For once you'll celebrate
Inside, in warmth, immune to
The hospitals' phone calls late
At night that take you from a song or blue
Story to the stage where, masked, you play the role
Of a faith healer making marred bodies whole.

You glance down at your hand
Holding back the white curtain
And wonder at the command
Of life it has--ability certain
To go soon, to wither like a painter's eye
For color, a pianist's feel for the keys.

The only hardness of
Your fingers, thicker than broom
Handles when you wear your gloves,
Is the control that coaxed jazz from ballroom
Pianos five decades ago
In inns like the Cora, near Southampton Row.

But I know everything
Has limits, even the smoke
Whirling like a kite on string:
You prove it's not the hardship of our yoke
That counts, not that smoke can't rise any higher:
No, what matters most is the heat of the fire.

The White Seeds

Saturdays, before Dad would mow the grass,
We would run through the ragged yard, still wet
With morning mist, picking up rocks, tree limbs,
And neighbors' trash; and then, we would all get

Long sticks and, swinging them like saw-toothed scythes,
Cut off the heads of dandelions, both
The bright, wheat-ripe scalps and those ghost-white ones
That got windswept and scattered, like frayed cloth

Tossed from a truck cab, westbound in Texas.
Last week, my son and I played catch at Flott
Park, in a field of weeds flowering in dirt
The color of an asphalt parking lot.

Once, when Dan lobbed the ball deep, I dropped back
And bobbled it till it rolled past a dead
Tree, stopping among rotting dandelions.
Then wind blew and once more I saw the seeds

Floating through green branches above our lawn;
Once more it was May when we breathed the gray
Smoke of grass-cutting, when no one knew life
Could end, even while watching white seeds float away.

The Vasectomy

After hearing for years "it's nothing,"
just a snip or two, like trimming
nosehairs or clipping coupons
in the Sunday paper, here
you are, your feet in straps,
your green gown yanked above
your hairy lap, and a stern nurse--
Wilkinson in hand--coming
to shear, like a lamb, your wilting
cock and balls. You'd rather
be out, but each razor scrape
routes your manhood, your vitals
retracting like turtles scared by
a John Deere tractor, and all
you can think is how red
your face is, how red your blood
might be. Then, before you know
it, the surgeon's pulled black thread
like drawstring through your sack,
but leaves a hole there that won't close
for weeks, a hole whose absence
"is nothing."

*To My Son, Dan, on His First Reading
to Us Before Bed
(after Michael Dennis Browne)*

You, who loved to hear
Sibilants and stops
Scratch inside your ear like spilled
Blocks, now you can read too;
And when you're alone some winter night,
When the winds' whirling won't let you sleep
And you want to write down the sounds you hold inside,
You will have this block to build upon.

What We Can Count On

A bird is singing in the early darkness
On an evening when no sun set
Beneath a blank, existential sky.
It's as if it knows what it can count on:

That magnolia blossoms--their purple petals
Budding like the insides of a woman opening in love--
Will crumple and turn away the first cold night in May
Or will flare a little longer, only to wilt
In despair some sultry night in June
When no one can stand the husk they're stuck in.

It's as if it knows the mouths it sings for
Will one day face the same threshold:
Either believe the brief flowering is all we live for,
Or else sing, full-throated, though unseen and unheard,
Knowing the song, alone, can almost fill the empty branches.

A Woman Fishing
(for Louise Simon)

Another day is ending in northern Minnesota,
Where a widow, alone in a lifeboat, is
Drifting, far from shore, on the still waters of a deep lake.

Soon, the woman's dark form becomes a silhouette
Against the amber of the far distance
That gleams with the last light of the buried sun.

As if she waited all day for this one
Moment, when the day is dead but the long night
Is not yet born, and the ghost-like moon is not awake,

Now, for a few seconds only, she feels again
The glow of her husband, the single being
Whose life she's loved for fifty years, whose pole

She now holds like a blind woman's white cane,
Casting into that cold, endless darkness.

*Anniversary of the End
of a Honeymoon*

Late this morning, rain jack-knifed through the screens like an eighteen-wheel semi spinning into dark storefront windows. Toward noon, sky turned black as skid marks, and trees flailed their limbs like scared Sioux running in front of gunfire. They made me think of our move from the Fair Oaks apartment, the place we stayed the first months of our fair-weather marriage: looking that last time through the foyer door, I saw two men across the street cut down the elm that died the summer we met, and farther west, a thunderhead was mounting-- a promise of the future, the cavalry hiding behind huge rocks, just over the next rise.

Breaches

The day they married
They thought love would outlast,
By far, the clothes they
Wore.

 Today, the thighs
Of his seersucker slacks
Succumbed, finally, to friction
That's torn open twin
Holes the size of the missing
Ring he still feels for,
As if to finger the lost
limb in an empty pants leg.

A Divorcee's Revenge

Hearing your poisoned voice again today
Makes me think of the great Christian martyrs
Like Agatha who, when ripped from sackcloth
And sandals like leftovers from Glad Wrap,
Then raped, raped again, and finally rolled
Over forty feet of burning coals and gravel,
Never once lost her smile--not until blisters
Blurred what had been her lips. And I as well
Won't budge: you hate my "Goddamned guts" for what
I've got and won't give up--our kids, my neck.
But now I've cut the wires, to keep my cool,
And love all the wide world that is not you.

Hunters in the Snow:
A Prospect Poem

Tonight, the coldest night of the year, is
Too cold even for snow; everything's still;
Clouds, dense and low, cover stars like the ice
On Lake Calhoun, which lies below this hill.
Two years ago, like *Hunters in the Snow*,
The view from this spot made me warm with love
For winter, since the far distance would grow
More clear, more real--not less--each time we drove
By and saw ourselves reflected in some
Old couple ice skating hand in hand, or
Just walking, planning for the night to come.
But this scene now lacks what I'm looking for:
Like Breughel's hunters, I've come back again,
Hoping to find it's here where you have been.

*My Grandmother Revisits South
St. Louis and Remembers Her Father's
Death*

"When we left in '22, they were trimming
The long, wet hedgerows, green with spring,
A black man on either side. Two maids

Shook dust from Persian rugs, arms
Flapping goodbye like funeral flags.
Otherwise, no wind. The day stood still.

Today, I'm back, to look for roots.
The elms that edged the walk are gone--
Not even stumps--and new shrubs, transplants,

Line the front facade where Daddy's lovely
Rhododendrons were. Flowerpots on the porch
Look nice, but odd, like those neighbors

At his wake whose faces have changed
Past recognition.

Ready now

To leave again, I happen to catch the oak

In back, the tree I'd watch from bed
On nights, like this, when the air'd blow
So cold I wouldn't want to go to sleep.

Knowing that something more than summer'd
Left, I would stare at the widow's
Moon, which glowed so dimly, but glowed

On old oak leaves that clinged to green."

St. Louis

1

Like tomatoes on a withered stalk
The city of red brick and Bavarian beer,
Of flaring gaslights and botanical gardens,
Rots. At nightfall, bag ladies
Scour alleys for scraps unpawed by dogs
And dumped here to stink like sick men's puke.

2

The city belongs in the mind
Of someone betrayed, of some despairing mother
Who dreams of a dry, sloping field,
A place where a farmhand, bored and tired,
Maneuvers a combine so that he cuts
Corners on three wheels, just
Managing to stay seated above
The savage flash of revolving blades.

Sky Lights

When my grandmother died, sky--
white as if embalmed--buried
roads and parking lots with snow.
The next day, though, as we drove
to her grave in north St. Louis
the sun penetrated ice like light
pulsing through glass tubes.

I remembered then a hot June night,
months before: late, I'd walked
by a huge house lit from rathskeller
to rafters, Mozart thundering
through its open door, while above
stars splintered like bones withdrawing
into the cold folds of earth.

*Lines Written a Few Blocks From
the Painesdale, Mich., Copper Mines*

A ghost town of shacks almost buried in snow--
Except for rusted mine shafts marking drifts
Where cleft ground has closed up, like flesh, again.

Long ago, in woods cooled by northern stars,
Ancients mined, nearby, at Minong Ridge--but
Vanished.

 Now, just hatchets in shallow pits,
Scars
The cold, white landscape can't reclaim.

Driving to Duluth

Aunt Dale's telegram came right to the point--
"Dan is dying. Hurry"--so I left
work before three, got gas, and headed
for 35 North, the long road to Duluth.

Not far from the city limits, the sun
sank into trees through which it shed
on a sheet-white pasture
the faint glints of evening
like a squinting eye going blind.

Suddenly it was dark; stars bloomed
and the silence of wilderness
swelled to the pitch of sleep until
the flicker

 of city lights focused:
but just then, too, in the rearview
mirror, I glimpsed the moon setting,
and wished I'd waited till morning.

The Last Goodbye

There are moments in our lives when the earth stops spinning:
Like that cold morning when, naked, you thrust
head-first into the world's glare and, blinking,
recoiled as if lightning-struck by what you saw.
Or like that first night you woke from a dream
euphoric that a force out of nowhere
shot through your flesh, immersed
you in sap of dizzying warmth.

Or now as you walk away from her deathbed,
knowing you'll never see her again--a shock
like the instant when crossing six parallel tracks
you look left into the blinding beams of
avalanching iron and realize, in a second,
your life will be over, snuffed out
like a match-flame in a hurricane.

Postcards From Rome

A year ago today I got a postcard from Rome
Where my mother had gone for the long winter.
The air there, she thought, would salve her lungs,
Relieve her breathing the way the warmth of Claude's
Distant, glowing skies once revived her view of life
When her hand flourished brushes, not trembled with butts.
Now, she writes only of the "coals of fire in my lungs."
She says nothing of the Piazza di Spagna pictured here,
Nothing of the squat copper Fiats flooding the square,
Nothing of Bernini's flowing water-and-stone fountain,
Nothing of these white, endless steps spiraling skyward
Where the twin spires of Trinita dei Monti reach the clouds.

She also says nothing of an adjacent house
Whose back balcony hangs above this frozen scene,
The same balcony where Keats, not twenty-six,
But already leading a "posthumous existence,"
Scrawled the last of his brilliant letters--
No mention of sightseeing, just "an awkward bow."
It must have been like this even then:
I don't know why Keats really came here,
Just that, like my mother, he stayed a while
In this place of no change, then died, his lungs
All gone, sponged into the glimmering air
Like a damp canvas hung out to dry.

White

Those nights that followed
his mother's death in a North Dakota tavern,
while winds howled in his eaves
and black herons circled above the back lot,
he prowled the first floor and stared
into the blinding patio floodlights for hours;
he'd sip tumblers of Scotch and milk until
he blotted out that bright morning
she gave him away for good,
and for nothing. But then, when darkness
dropped, at last he'd see
the white mist of sleep from the river
rise, like a nurse poised above
an injured boy's bed.

*The Old Man Raking Leaves
Before Sunrise*

The old man raking leaves before sunrise
Wears a white smock and his dead wife's white gloves.
Each morning, while the neighbors are still sleeping,
He quietly removes each leaf from his plot
Like a nurse plucking lice eggs from a child's scalp.
He wears the gloves only in darkness, and stays
Inside all day while gardens rot, rooks gather and go,
And the next generation of leaves buries the ground.

The old man raking leaves before sunrise
Denies that fall has come, and winter is coming:
Like a Soviet scholar revising history,
He denies that when the long night ends, the sun
Will hang lower in the sky, its light
Yellowed, like paper in old books.

Homesick

They forecast, this gray morning,
that March will come straddling the back
of a beastly Arctic blast so cold
they've already closed the schools,
all week, in the rural north. No one,
they warn, should dare leave home.

Last night, a storm swept into
my blood and made my head swim
like a dog clawing through floodsludge:
all I could see was the one woman, across
town, who could wake up the self that still sleeps
in backwaters of a marriage long gone under.

But she as well wrestles with changing
weather; her own maelstrom divorce
has shipwrecked her soul, a lifeboat
lost, offshore, in a blinding typhoon:
all she can see is a door
blown open on a lighthouse that's dark,

a home where no one lives and no one belongs.

The Blue Angel

Walking tonight after dusk
I watched, above the flat
Mown fields, rows of old oaks,
And ragged yards of one-story
Shacks sway-backed on slabs,

A navy skirt of sky slip
Over the shimmering strip
Of the horizon's thighs,
A dancer who smiles, dips
Forward, then spins

Her blonde body out of sight.

The Jogger

From Cunningham Library's third-floor windows,
I gaze at the frayed skyline of this crumpled,
But cozy rivertown. Beyond, coal-black
Smokestacks mottle brick buildings, and look like
Moles rooting in a burned sunbather's back.

Eye-level, bunches of plump pigeons cluster
In rings rounding toward a full, open dumpster;
They scavenge there for dinner while my own
Insides cringe; but looking away I catch
Light flashing between walls on lawns just mown;

Distant clouds darken, and before long dusk
Will settle in like dust in a closed attic.
Still, in the late-afternoon air, something
Goes to sleep, wakens, or just now returns
The wish to know what growth the past might bring

While light flows in the road where traffic's stopped;
It blazes on windshields, hubcaps, and chrome;
Farther out, it softens, and in its glow
A woman's jogging west, toward me--as if
I'm sending forth the light, no matter what she knows.

On Raglan Road Again

Something in the air last night caused me
to sense the past. Four drinks at Simrell's bar,
the slow drive wending home, the twilit sky
that seemed to hold things still, both close and far
away, all made my blood and breathing stop--

I hung suspended like a hawk, wind-lifted;
a rim of vanished light glimmered around
the rooftops, and above, out of sight, rifts
of stars, like memories, waited to be found.
But my mind stayed blind, blissful as a sop.

Re-Membrance

There are places we've been and people we've known
That we never see again, like thoughts we have
But forget to write down. Or like the time,
Holding hands, we got lost on a highway
That had no exits, and drove all the way
To Brownsburg, Indiana, a ghost town
With no trees, no hint of human value,
Except that there, in a twenty-buck motel,
We first French-kissed as our bodies combined.

Still, sometimes, when we are least aware,
When we've been walking alone, in the dark,
Saddened, down some empty, rainy street,
We'll remember; suddenly, we'll see a lost face again
Shining before our eyes like rain
Lit up by a streetlamp we never saw before,
Though it has always been there
Glowing all night
While we close our eyes and fall asleep.

A Siren

Each night before dawn when watch springs stop working,
For a second or two the heart seems to skip,
Brain blanks out, and dreams, like dandelions,
Turn to seeds: darkness
Vaster than bluffs above the Missouri River
Blinds you with the deaths of those gone before--
Great-grandfathers snowbound in western Ireland,
Great-uncles plastered to wet trenches in Flanders,
Fathers gutted from lungfuls of exhaust--
And, especially, those lucky few, worn out by age,
Who re-lived their lives in last hours of sleep
As if floating downstream watching stars fade
And then, simply, woke up dead

Just as you now are re-dying your death
Till the blare of a siren seeps into your ear
And you wake up wondering whose life is being saved.

Hope

Suddenly, my son and niece laughing
from another room: a car's high beams bobbing
through light rain and sleet on a dark
road, past midnight, far from home.

*Watching Rain From an Old House
Next to a Cemetery*

Late March, the red clay starts to soften up, seduced
by steady rain that, all day, has massaged
the porch roof's shingles, stiff, brown yards,
even plots across the road, where, next to cluttered,
crooked stones, grass blades
quiver, like hair between a woman's legs
when deep inside she quickens, quenched
at last after a long, dry winter.

Two Hawks
(for Nancy and Tim)

Turning to the east, their uplifted wings
Gleam like grease on fire when the full moon flings

Its diamond-white light onto the dark sea
Of an October midnight, in a sky

So cold no other living thing's around.
Only the gaze of their topaz eyes binds

The birds together. They've flown now for days
Winding like a river above hills, grass,

Woods, farms. Sometimes, they veer apart for hours,
Sometimes weeks. But they both know that the force

Of flight will always draw them back each fall
When they form dark spots against the pure gold

Of the harvest moon; and when it is glowing
With the faith of a river that can flow

Into the rocks of a winter landscape,
They'll believe even change won't change their shape.

Extra Innings: A Wedding Poem
(for Pam and Pete)

The ones who last come early. You can spot them even in the third or fourth, the bleachers puffed up like a dance floor when the band starts to play slow enough the drunks can lean close and shuffle till the Exit signs shine clear. Ones who last stay seated, marking scorecards, mindful of records, memories, anniversaries, while the fashionably late leap and scream when the slugger on the program pokes one out, stroking a fat curve like carving turkey. The ones come early already saw him hack the ball that way in batting practice. What they stay for is more, and less: the bunt between the chalk and grass, the hit and run, the double-switch that gets the new leftfielder a chance to get on, bottom of the ninth, the chance to craft a way to win; like ones long-married, the ones who will last came early and in between the thrills of b.p. homers, they'd planned ahead, adding vertical lines to scorecard grids, hoping for extra innings when only those who last can see their team come back, and believe it was meant to be.

The Beauty of Illness: A Family Vacation Up in Michigan, 1984

A cool September morning, and we're strolling
The shoreline of Lake Superior, headed east
To Point Abbaye, where the lake juts
Outward and rumbles far away, out of sight.
Today, cold and misty, the gray sky
Descends like a shield of fog. We're walking to
A point we can't see: seven months ago,
Pneumonia, like fog filling this bay,
Swelled my wife's lungs, shutting the air out.

As we near the Point, a gull pivots
From a rock, glides, and then veers
Vertically, and disappears.

In Kansas, 1944,

A heat wave is burning the year's crops like fall leaves,
While a soldier with pneumonia, his fever
Breaking in a dusty airbase infirmary,
Wakes suddenly from a ten-day coma
To see, through the August haze, a plane from beyond
Penetrate the clouds and then scoot
By his window.

Forty years later,

This man is my father, sleepless for a week,
And nursing my mother in her deathbed,
Where, in her last lucid moment,
She plans the landscape she wants to paint
And then asks, still wanting to live,

"Do you think I'm going to die?"

The waves

Roll in like outreaching arms, and I think
Of that painting, surely her masterpiece,
Brilliant in her mind's eye like day
Glinting through icy glass . . .

Now, we stand on the gull's rock, the last
Fragment of land until, they say,
You touch the green Canadian coast.
In the distance, light starts to bleed
Through the fog, and on the horizon
A freighter appears, then blurs
Like breath blown into mist.
But the water is calm now,
Its surface reflecting the blossoming light,
And I realize how happy I am
That we are still here.

A Woman's Dream

Last night, sometime before three,
I dreamed I woke up and saw him
Looming in my bedroom doorway, as if
I still slept in my stepfather's house.
He blocked the light from the hall behind,
His cold eyes glaring, blue pilot lights
Collecting the quick strike of a match.
What seemed all night, he stood there,
Immovable, forgetting the gaps between his hands
Showed sperm staining his still half-cocked crotch.

Though Mom never believed me, he had come
To twist, again, my linguistic neck, to crack
The spine of words I'd delivered
Like a naked pulp of flesh yet to suck
Its first breath, like the child God snatched
Back when "Dad" decked me, while Mom worked
Nightshift at Pam's Family Restaurant. Now,
I started stammering to the shadow: all the while,
He smirked and leered, his ears plugged,
And his alcoholic teeth sparkling
Like ice cubes in an empty glass.

But when I really woke, he was gone,
And where he'd intruded his gross hulk,
Dawn lightly grazed the door and glowed
Like the faithful gesture of a lover
Just coming to bed, after a dark night
Of fighting, tears, and finally, forgiveness.

A Prelude to Dawn Light

Late last night, I got lost
In darkness--like the long night
I camped on a sandbar
By the Gasconade River
And listened for hours to its flow
Drown out cries from the forest,
While the moon foundered, then sank
Below huge trees that loomed above
Me, blacker and blacker, till I slept.

Last night, again, I was trapped,
This time in a house with bamboo walls,
But no windows, and no doors,
Just slits like gapped bicuspid
That let the darkness in
When wind blew through like breath.
Here, out of shadows, stepped
An old woman in a shiny white gown.
Calmly, without a word, she refused
To come with me, and the next thing I knew

I was crossing a river, wide
And dry as the stretch Moses strolled through,
When, out of nowhere, flooding from
The left appeared a tidal wave ten feet
High: I froze, and the instant
I tried to rush ahead, the waves
Rose up between me and the stars--

I

Woke up, unsure where I was,
Until I saw, as if for the first time,
Sky, like the shadow of an X-ray,
Whitened with dawn light
And spotted only by the moon,
Which waned, benignly, in the west.

Resurrection

My job these days is to cut lumber
at the Ace Hardware store. Often, too,
I do the inventory. It's then
when the past can come back, and I
need to go home, build a small fire,
and watch the logs go up in smoke,
dead trees transformed into something else.
In Nam, my job was to bring back
the bodies on flatbed trucks, stacked
in rows like cords of wood. Sometimes,
if a mine blew up in a muddy
rice field where five men had
crouched in soupy water, blood would
flood them like a bouillabaisse--we'd
fish out what we could. But once
when a ship got bombed off harbor
in waves clear as a bathroom mirror, I went
down to count the dead, then sent them
upwards, one by one, like balloons
let go, allowed at last to rise
in the light like motes of yellow dust.

Seeing in the Dark

Below my father's house, lies a river valley
where the Mississippi rolls, lifting mist
in the morning till sunlight consumes it,
slowly, the way dogs dally round dishes
when watched. At night, barge-warnings
echo up the bluff and die at our doorstep.
Sometimes, if the moon strikes you right,
and the cold air smells clean, the night pulls
you inward before you can stop
and, as you're swallowed, turns
you inside out--there

in darkness

blindness becomes sight, and you see
how the world looks to those dying,
before first dawn light, when the moon
is glowing like a darkroom lamp
and the landscape is a negative,
unprinted, waiting for
immersion.

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