The Invisible Wedding

Poems by Richard Robbins
The Invisible Wedding
We wait
for what we have never known,
   to return to us.

—Brewster Ghiselin

A Breakthrough Book
No. 44
The Invisible Wedding
Poems by
Richard Robbins

University of Missouri Press
Columbia, 1984
For first printing separately some of the poems in this
collection, and for later granting permission to reprint
those poems here, the author thanks the editors of the
following publications: Carolina Quarterly, "For My
Grandfather," "Li"; Chariton Review, "A Compass for My
Daughter"; College English, "Museums" (Copyright 1982
by NCTE in College English); Corona, "Samaras";
CutBank, "Whatever You Say, Wherever You Are";
GiltEdge, New Series, "Raking in November"; Intro 10,
"Silhouettes"; Kansas Quarterly, "Swainson’s Hawk"
(Copyright 1983 by Kansas Quarterly, volume 15.2,
spring issue); The Nation, "The Gift," "Assurances,
"Crossover" (Copyright 1980, 1982 by The Nation
magazine, The Nation Associates, Inc.); The North
American Review, "Coming Home," "Returning to the
Middle" (Copyright © 1978, 1982 by the University of
Northern Iowa); Poetry Northwest, "The Well," "The
Patron of the Garden"; Quarterly West, "Report to a
Friend North," "Leaping the Chasm at Stand Rock,
Wisconsin Dells, 1887," "First Day over 60", April 1980";
Scratchgravel Hills, "The Invisible Wedding"; The Seattle
Review, "Rehabilitated to Hills"; The Slackwater Review,
"The Carpet"; Suisun Valley Review, "Getting in Shape";
Tellus, "Virtue," "At the Petroglyphs"; The Threepenny
Review, "Time after Time"; Uzzano, "Toward New
Weather."

Several of the poems in The Invisible Wedding were
reprinted in these publications: Anthology of Magazine
editions); Borrowed Times; Rain in the Forest, Light in the
Trees: Contemporary Poetry from the Northwest; Toward New
Weather (a chapbook); Where We Are: The Montana Poets
Anthology.
for Candace
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Climbing the Nine Hills
Whaleships in Winter Quarters at Herschel Island

From a painting by John Bertonchini

If I skate out of white, even my voice fades. I can't remember the cave where the sound of me tripled into bats hanging in dark upper cracks, hanging onto phrases each would repeat to me forever. I come home out of range of myself. Across a frozen body, blue and blue valleys wind into blue and give up their blue to sky. Here is the unforgivable deceit: the lie of charcoal roofs, that lives go on beneath the smoke and recreation. I have skated away and am missing.

Northwest of light, perfect color of discovered stone. Beyond being empty, the hand. I could die now, easily enough. Away from the actual, the mad dog, shipboard crucifixions, away from innings of misery on ice, cold star even years ago just a hand's length too far away to reach. The day lights its blurred candle in the south. I am missing and am missing the chimes morning and recollection become. Time after time, the smokehouse gives way to receding land. A dark chapel opens, the hidden heartlocked music waiting to begin.
At Hoover Dam

A boy is as young as ten feathers
that wouldn't burn,
as the chopping of wood
spring mornings, the gaze five miles
out of Boulder City falling
long and down. Over drowned sage,
over hill cuts tracking
the dream of hands—the secret den
already filled—water there
backed up far to the north,
and in the scream of gorge, in desert blue
lifting, a river went on
changed though still the motion
of a century's snow,
what the mountain chose to lay down.

Though he died there, though that storm
on another lake turned owls
loose at noon, the heart draws in
its flurry of doves, its black fire.
Draws, though a hill sags
at the marriage of waters in all places
raining, though a woman closes
on her garden of flint,
though earth, fern, the split rock
of green lines, though the boy
saw stars with his name,
wakes to find the city gone.

You do not dream the passion of trout,
short breaths of cedar.
The woman who loves counts lines in the eyes
of another, and you are
the one familiar to a sunken road,
to bad light honest for its fault.
If trees blow away,
folded ground. If elk vanish, whistles
gone the way of song
and those who brought you here. Nothing
matters like a road. No one cares
the sky died overnight
responsible for sin. Here,
a blast of magpies. Grin of concrete
four wars out of tune. Out that spillway
the tumble rush the boy
heard faintly, the wailing now, a praise
of things about to disappear.
Report to a Friend North

In Ocotillo Wells, wind
comes down the slope
with trains. Mail is all
we get here, the uncoupling
of a car. You ask if we
grow tired of the orange groves
far as our horizon. Friend,
we die for their
blossoming. We shiver nights
to keep the smudge
pots lit, curse the devil
frost that burns
this valley scent away.

A spiny shrub, tangle of
wooden bone, names
this town. Pheasant
brood there, far from
dogs or the stone of a boy.
The day I came back, Emory
died before my eyes. Fog
burned off near
dawn, heat went over
ninety while Mother cried
there are no children
who return only for a death.

I am staying here, her last
son, until the fruit
rots or she comes away
of her own. These
clouds make no promise
for rain. Coyotes range
our grove at the edge of hills. 
And you, friend—From you 
I need more news 
than I could send. Stars 
here trail smoke 
this cooling night between 
the ridges. They decide 
with me an hour, then go.
Climbing the Nine Hills

A hundred thousand times the treasure loses meaning, you move out on the great road: guarding your loss, choosing not to pursue.

In a high meadow poverty and wrens, a horse and its natural pact with fields. The way a new shoot spreads, a way of watching the field fill out.

Seven days again, return. Riches of the old life down below, before a highway moved you. These hills bear the memory of thunder if you listen. Over stumps and deadfall, into the perfect pitch of chert, the same thoughts travel: I carry the best of you away, you carry the heart of me through stone.
Knowing

We would throw stones and break what we could not understand. It was a part of us, that restless, manual cruelty from some dark tree in a vanished forest.
—Loren Eiseley

All those years away from the healthy routine: not a week gone before I would choke, or nearly so, at dinner, before beams in the ceiling would give up their sky-hold, rain-grudge. Weekly the deaths in flowerbed and habit. We came to expect that perverse grace of change. Pitching our lives against each modulating dusk, it was a part of us, this breaking.

The green house, a one-time garden, the hill. Bulb after defeated bulb, windows that wouldn't see in. I was a fist, a broken knuckle in my chair. After our street, that browning lawn in my eyes and echoing like temper, a landscape composed inside me: rage-oak by bitter-hawthorn, pine after pine materializing revenge. Home was a hand on those trees and the knowing.
Jealousy

At the jealous baptism, you see the half-life of your relations in every eye. The eyes betray them. Wind is what you can’t trust, wind nor wood which like the eyes learns how to grow, down and up. In the belly a resentment launches ships toward archipelagoes you must sail round. At the jealous baptism, water means the deepest north, where friends lie down, become a vast ice, fix your worst fears into white.

There are no wives. There is no love or aim. But you live husband to a vigil, a guard where the forked roads meet. Whatever comes—thunder, a friend—you will test its faith against your own. It will fail, it has always failed: in a green light the world could never trust you, just as you could never trust the world. Stand, then, at this road forever. It is an outpost of the new life. At the jealous baptism, you sealed this, while the rain flew down in signs.
The Symbolists

came blue, birdlike, to a shore darkened
by the breathing of the dead. Their one pulse
flaps its forty-four wings: opening,
closing suddenly as the last note
of a warble that seemed to begin
hours before, that seemed to be endless.

Into a violet eternity
lost singing blazes the fliers’ trail.
They glide over it, alert
to the ominous. They shape their bodies
to receive the wish of air, desire
of feathers, the bird behind the bird in the hand.

Religiously, they fear the green obvious.
This flag is the raised wing of their vicar.
A Death in the Family

Inside the paper house, those flat hats mourn a passing of black. We aren’t aware of ourselves. Clouds on the ceiling trace the weight each shoulder will bear, each heart will live for. We don’t know what survives, but on goes the breath and its companion, on the pulse, off the sad shawls and song that takes the bite out of our drink, off the dirt between two fingers, ash blessing our foreheads, off one life, on with our lives.

It happens in autumn. Leaves from the back elms pile on a garden fiery in its ruin. But it could happen months before, in summer. It might have happened that last April: a color left the house then, and we felt emptier. We aren’t sure if our presence now is timely or late. Are we years beyond a fact? When was the first note of that last song struck? Whose hand is this touching another, and why the sudden quiet?

How we have fooled ourselves into loving.
Saturday in Midwinter

The house still too cold, on and off. Lifetimes from now I might wonder for the second time why, for instance, the overhead lights always dim, or seem to dim, after illness. Or why it's the gentle knees that give out, are the last to recover. Six hundred miles from here, on the Washington coast, a wave from ten times that distance away spends its message on the beach. Boulders, in their fashion, say nothing. Hemlocks rising up a creek bed make no special move in return. Nothing is out of order. On the Washington coast, as here, the stories are telling themselves. The sick man's sky moves slowly over us. Rain falls for the first time in a month. When I walk from one window to the next, I watch not only the second lawn without snow, not only the lilac half-heartedly dormant, but a second sky: a walking man's gray barely more than two arms' lengths above me. It might serve the view to have a healthy fern near the window, to take note in seeing it of my chest clearing or eyes obeying their focus. But I won't lie. Here, as at the other pane of glass, I have to lean sometimes, the house propping me up as the rain falls, necessary, and the west grows whiter with latecoming clouds of snow.
Rehabilitated to Hills

Through the light snow, through fog and stiff air,
I see the faraway timber of windbreaks
give way like ships in a strait, falling back
as if on a dull tide. I see wrinkled
fields, a hawk again—and to the flat past
behind my car come these distant ghosts
too solid or wide to be trees. Before
I know it, I am driving through foreground
blur on the blue hump of a whale. The hills
come at me in every shape: battleship,
jellyfish, torpedo. To the south looms
a future of elevation and pattern

lost. I will sail earnestly past the Eros
Data Center near Baltic, South Dakota,
courageously past Spink, intellect
honored for Sioux City and beyond—all the way
to the spiritual bluffs east of Omaha.
Holy Saturday

Down to the city under earth,
past well-bed, walls shored against earth,
down into coal sky and quartz rose, to the dead-end alley full of shoes. Down darkly into catacombs, a saint's breath burned over and over again on the torch, down the silent tower under wide rivers moving, down bones below this compass of birds, a wide sky settling in the ribs.

No one dreams a country under earth, rock in perpetual rain. In a last hour, where wind leaves, where the bed we lie in hardens from its headboard down, light may draw us onward, into trees. Weight we carry falls there, wide sky closing over us like storm. Ears and blood down fossil come to root in a bee-reed candle, thumbed with fire.

Where in that cave did the ash we threw there rise? Where south or north the swaddled robe, heart-cage broken, feet and bellyside templed with our oil? In this city under earth, down thunder cloud and valley, our hands are giving us away. Down stiff wrist comes earth quaking, the black of olive in our palms.

All morning, low sky and half light, the quartz raining. Come midnight freeze or seed pod breaking open into heat, we go waiting under dark. Down to the city in the country under earth, forsaking our shoes,
bathing the feet of old strangers, down
a season always doubt. Tomorrow, when the someday fire
down well shaft falls, the tongue will come upon
a word, that tower speak
our silence one within my city skin, a raw stem
cut suddenly to air.
Swainson's Hawk

On a Sunday like this, a front moving in,
prairie grass bent to its toes
in the velocity of air, some fields being tilled,
some snow melting fast on the north-facing
    coulee-sides,
the wind does the hawk's flying for it.

Gophers are out. The prairie dogs are out.
I fly north in my steel
to the Fort Peck where feathers burn in drought.
Prairie dogs pop up from rye grass
on the shoulder of the road,

and the swainson's hawk is hovering.
A tall shadow closes over another.
I fly north in my steel toward burning color,
dust storm, alkali. The space between us is more
than wheat turned to wheatgrass turned to ruin.

The wind does the hawk's flying for it.
African Proverb at the Crossing

_The path has crossed the river,_
and here, where a flaxen garden sways
the way the water sways, each side
a tilted bank of blue star-flowers,

_The river has crossed the path._
Every thing grows up or away. July sun
burning at your wrist, the damp ground
steaming, neither you nor a fern could ask

_Which is the elder_
and hope to know. In the cedar live
the first voices, fashioned after crow sound,
wild dog. If you hear the wind say

_We made the path and found the river,_
believe it, believe that they live still
in the memory of bark, a sky always
leaving to return. If your heart closes

_The river is from long ago,_
and you can learn, if you wait here longer,
the time of your only mind.
Rest, then. Nothing has ever been written. At night,

_from the center of the universe,_
stars arc down to join you. Listen
to the beasts: you don’t concern them.
They might as easily stare you down as run.
Christmas Eve

Began blue over the near hill, cold
from the clear night storms had left them.
They brought mums to Holy Cross, and in their own steam
knelt at the Mulica graves, last
leaves of poplar rusted beside them.
It was clouding. Began to snow on the way
back to fasting and the midnight Mass.
Grandma rubbed and rubbed her bad hands.

South always came blue, even in rain.
Even if the ocean turned winter
for a morning, south came always blue, better
late than never. We were a family
by then. Los Angeles our dead uncles, a green home
left behind. That new house on the hill
kept quiet about the history of grass—
the field we filled—but some of us
could hear it, rolled on without knowing
toward the wave-sliced cliff where the story
told itself. Christmas Eve we spent alone
without cousins. It darkened early.
When I was young I looked for the comet,
but I saw only stars, and each one
was brighter, each one red and blue
if you stared. I never knew to ask

about Pocatello. They might not have talked.
After all, it was the future coming: my loud
cousins, the immortal ham,
what was left of us for beginning again.
A Ghost in Each Hand

. . . as of a single world
In which he is and as and is are one.
—Wallace Stevens
Rollins

Love apples near a ruined highway, branches
signs a better man could read. Love the six-dollar
school, open for weddings, love crocus
and paintbrush, the view of islands and the Swan Range
past the waves, past a dream of men for fish.
Lakes go on, turning themselves over
under moon, stars that don’t come back. Each year
it’s you returned to stone, to the high water
Flathead with one good eye on dawn,
with granite feathers unruffling the storm.
He’s never lost count of fish or dreams.
He drowned a class that signed its year beneath
his crows.

Rollins translates home for those of poor
background. Grass throws off the color
childhood should be, the one you missed but one
you know could never happen. All come here
late. Some retire to the bay. Those you love
spend summers trolling, dragging green
for salmon, waiting out a north wind stirring lives up
right on time. Once rain falls, remorse is spent.
You learned this from the Indian. He matured
here, long before he placed his mark on rock.
Much later, he earned the painting
of his face. There were no apples then,
and signs then traveled over water, through other
honest trees. Long ago, before all resorts.
Eddie Henning drew me in the first grade, my ear pressed flat to black and one eye straining to watch sideways out the window where a robin flew. Eddie was never good at outline. His hand shook. If he were center during recess, he'd blow our last-ditch Statue of Liberty. He'd hike into the shrub—they'd call a safety. Here, his pencil tickled my ear, snagged at hair on the long circuit of my head. I didn’t hate him. I hated explaining my crooked shadow, glued over pink and restless for the edge of a white cardboard frame.

Grandma hung it in my room above the dresser. Sometimes I surprised myself, another me in the dusk of that room, looking left and jittery toward a window on a day when there were breezes and a bird flew sideways and it was hot. Sometime around then I felt the first angel tap my shoulder as I fell asleep. I told Sister, and the next week Glenda swore her family went to every Mass. I hated her. She was a liar, and she was rich. She was a Busy Bee in reading, but with God's help Glenda flunked religion.

The Baldwin Dam cracked in spring. Frank Salazar, house drowned in the basin, moved away. We watched families on the news that night
crowd around their chimneys, the flare
a helicopter made on water
rushing over lawns. I noticed Eddie's house, his
Chinese elm slumped toward the driveway.
A dog whined in the leaves. It jumped
toward its shadow. I imagined Eddie then
on the second story, gathering in his arms
a jumpy ukulele, his rocking frog.
If he stuffed the silhouette I drew him
in his pocket, then I was there when he showed
at last at the window, flew calm as a wren
toward the fireman's raft, toward second grade,
what twins always know about themselves for good
past baptism. Shock of the ghost in each hand.
Leaping the Chasm at Stand Rock,  
Wisconsin Dells, 1887

From a photograph by Henry Hamilton Bennett

No one dared you but the breeze said  
century’s end, said what-the-hell, and you leaped  
in your best clothes toward a sandstone  
mushroom, giant rook. Midair, your new wife screamed,  
an oriole ducked away. Somewhere in the brush  
Bennett got the perfect shot, froze you  
at that same apex where your mind blanked, stalled  
between gone and future, everything but yourself  
taking account of you—foolish hawk.

Only your arms blurred. Bennett joked about that  
later, called it fisticuffs with sky,  
with the jack pine you might have landed in.  
You remembered different. Having jumped,  
you split in two and saw your first half overshoot,  
smash face-down in shale. The arms  
remaining reached for this as much as for  
the rock-pie target, the perfect lark.

Bennett got rich, we’ll presume. And let’s say  
you got rich by 1900, not from royalties  
nor leaping hoodoos, but from the mercantile  
in Portage, from three kids who helped and that wife  
who never screamed again. She never stopped  
loving you. Even that Sunday when you told your oldest  
to jump. He didn’t, and she didn’t understand. It wasn’t murder or the fun  
you had in mind. It wasn’t flying. You knew  
your boy needed sky under him, push-  
turned-to-pull in midair, that empty moment,  
the grab of a moment for the man.
Toward New Weather

Bad times: drought, Egil’s dog had mange, the white lilies fell like hair around our house. Crows gave us up, let the corn dwarfs holler on their own for hail, dull wind. It’s the kitchen, midnight, Father says *Leave it all* and feels the last scotch burn. Lost calves low far away. The mountain cries for snow, drawing sheets of lightning to its back. Father dreams the green of moss on northern shingles, coiling dust between his fingers. The rest of us wonder from our corners of the evening, this table. The next thing he says will be *Move,* and it will be Pocatello then, bench land and always rain, alfalfa that swallows the cows.

This is our second pestilence. When Mother died the dying lilac bloomed for days before a hot wind browned the flowers, spread them over the field. Everything goes wrong then. For some reason Kansas burns, a well bottoms out. Father laughs, leaves the sky to itself. We drive west,

and now he is singing. Now he is singing

*If a person don’t have but two teeth*
*they look better if they’re close together.*
Praise the snail, sailing across the walk
on her own sea, bobbing. The tenth part
of a blossom in her jaw, she fans
her head, sweeping in this rain
while the shell deflects like a prow.
Genuflecting before cracks, she then moves
on: to the new stalk of begonia, smooth
enough to climb, to the kinked neck
of her mate, to their sea-fight consuming them
both in foam, to the slowest navy setting forth . . .

The moon sets early with its tide, and I have
no place here. The leaves rattle like gulls
preening at once. My walk become windswept:
I am the giant here, reeling among those
slower then me, surer than the march
of my locked knees in the lines they draw
and leave. Stooping, I offer a finger
to the snail. When it hesitates, I lay
a leaf-carpet down for it to mount,
a wax ocean to sail. I raise her then,
high into first light, buoyed on her rainbow,
the green host. Later, the blood shakes with its gift.
Coming Home

Something of a morning turns you pilgrim,
light rises from the gloss
off your desk. Out there, dawn is never
slow in coming: saws begin their seesaw whine,
lifted to the ocean of the air.
A song you’ve never heard before, these limbs
scrubbing themselves in breeze,
hammering oil drums, that finch just back
from its nomad winter. Something comes with you
out of sleep, the weak hours—light
slants hard across your desk.

And the window opens when it warms.
And next door, the porch lamp goes out before
a woman parts her drapes. Even with the first
passing siren, those near or finally dead,
you are drawn out to the conference
of it all: a shadow on the lawn, high blue
washed across with clouds.

Your home becomes the house
of a day’s first steps. When you walk out, take on
the cold—still in the air—like a jacket
you might buy, you make this pilgrimage
to whatever comes next. Your saint
lies at the far end of shrubbery, a shrine
in the web. At its edge spins the patron
of your morning, preparing
the death of a fly.

Walking away, something is left
behind you, wind through the lines of that home.
In the long weave toward evening
you have made a thousand journeys, and at the inn
where you are lodged, a waiting room
to once more make your own. Wind through an opening in glass, shuffled papers on the desk where light fails—letters bearing home like ships that script you’re never sure belongs to you.
For My Grandfather

Autumn light, light of afternoon, the crows you blessed last winter cross the yellow corn rows homes have made of air. Inside, a wall, here and there your furniture in company with leaves. You’d expect your rug to turn, domestic lawn, to red and gold October. The trout you’re cooking, kitchen yellow as the flame, gives off all memory of weed, the lake in summer, a hard green light down thirty feet where fish swim and swim.

Coming into the world, fraternal, your twin left all his air to you. Paired up for those months, you swam the first dark waters mindful of another heart, the way of touching men are born with. You never found him again. Stars turned over over London, Pocatello. Now, when you fish you troll for green light left behind you, gone down lines the sun gives water in supreme control of itself. It’s the light where autumn comes from,

filling up your home, where the twin still turns your colors, year after yellow year.
A Glider Takes Off from the Cliff

Wind blew away before you knew the space behind it. A far hill crowded sky that night, and stars, stars named only by the foolish, whined in their narrow routes. Mother didn’t hate you, nor the cauldron of ash turned over at your birth. Low light meant the first fire loosed upon the mountain, and when she looked she saw her own smoke, gone before she ever knew your name.

Head-stained or dead, you lost all companions. Gulls flew away because they knew the walk of dying, because ghosts meant a thing unfinished, haze in the air means lame. The cat you found wasn’t born then. The elm you pruned turned its best thoughts down. Somewhere grew a heart you could live with, but for now you heard none, walked dizzy in the leaves: afraid to pray, afraid of remaining the same.

Give yourself time and a day unwinds, the line of snow peas burning past a lawn. Your walk brought the stone to life. The palm took dove after dove for keeps, while children—too late to go home—lay down in their shadow and slept. Give yourself days and the gulls die young. A glider takes off from the cliff and skies rush forward to meet him, a wave forms his deepest dream. Stars too foolish to name resemble beach at night, and red tide, deeper than wings, looks forward to the glider’s drop, fall toward a wave of the moon.

You thought yourself well then. Sunflowers threw the first light of morning. Corn turned in on their eternities of silk. If the hill sank
you wouldn't have noticed, nor the ridge
turned suddenly to fire. Out of ash
it wasn't prayer that saved you. Not midnight
thrush, not tar or music, not the river
full of voices three months past the freeze.
You were not you. You were all
you ever remembered. At the same cliff, bunch grass
rallied in a wind. Grass was different before.
Now it holds. Gulls tilt out, and the ocean holds.
Getting in Shape

_Friendship is opposition._
—Nietzsche

And I am growing to love the aching knees and sore curve of ribs. I befriend the muscle of hungry spirit each time I stretch, then jog, each time I curry favor with this troubled breath.

Every heel-shock shouts the earth's redundant love. I pound back its welcome: heartily at first, then tenderly as foam weights, then slow, then nearly not at all. Winded, my heart applauds my stopping. The sky reels like blood. As I lie here, a lawn grows into my willing pores, aims for the light beyond chest-heaves. Our loves are similarly crossed.
March

Sculling a thin lake
Cold with trout, last month I walked
Here: a narrow sky.

Snow fell bending north and once,
For an hour, vertically,
Soft without its crutch.
I swept an icy path clean,
Boots scuffing the lake—

Watched that dying world change once
Into the living middle

I walked then, row now,
Atmospheres above, below,
Breathed on and breathing.

Gulls veer away from rising
Fish yet meet at the first kiss

Of air. Each bank takes
Or sends its small tide and wind.
North to south, driftwood

Accomplishes a new life
Between the others: oars pulled

To lead me backward
Past the regret of muscle,
Heart, impulse, mind. Here

Water makes way for me. Air
Makes way. My wet hand. This boat.
Virtue

The place for a man of the mean:
not Montana, but this coast, these
domesticated hills and one open
compass point, the empty west.

We came to bury extremes: 43 below
in Butte, the shift handle
snapping when my friend forced it into reverse.
I drove another road full-speed and frightened,
quiet in my own strain of metal.

Here, the North Pacific Drift stalls cold,
stalls warm. My wife and I
call the sea birds Japanese and welcome
any small shift of current. When it rains,

the horizon disappears. What I live for
is a kind a gray I found out back
one dusk in March, there at the line of tree shadow
broken up and scattering in weed.
The color stays with me,

colors my choice of moves:
it's a starting point, a place where I rest.
East of Arcata

Limber as redwoods there, fog off the coast
brushing low ferns and sloping up with ground
to alder, bear tracks dusted with snow,
each moment of time is a mountain.

Memory parts the hair tangled by sleep,
a clear-cut parts the south-facing rise and you
look into it: more light there than ever
among the new berries, rotting stumps. This

was a moment of plain lines and shadow
behind you. An eagle circled its refusal
of dark. You did not live to climb or cross
but to be the mountain that was your time

there, the half-beat of your heart grown resolute
and willing as stone to let all lives flourish.
Marriage in Winter
Living Near the Refuge

Remove not the old landmark; and enter not into the field of the fatherless.
—Proverbs 23:10

The scarecrow never knew clouds from the next criminal bird. We forgave it. The sun that time of year sprawled out below a thunderhead, turned its thoughts beyond Japan. One day I wanted a heron for a pet, but there were bass to fake with rubber worms. There were cows long gone in alfalfa, and Ninepipe fat with weed, with coots I was afraid I’d look like.

Jackie was some bird, you’d say. All bones, you said, so thin he blew away. He did not. I knew they found him in Post Creek, just below the dam. Belly-up and shining like some perch we’d filled with air. The scarecrow couldn’t help being dumb: I tore its legs off and plowed the spinach under.

I got whipped. I tracked deer that morning at Ninepipe, and the shore was like a boy. It held and let go, held and blew away.

July dried up our ponds. A marsh hawk died in midair, and for weeks its ghost drew circles on our field. I didn’t care. Mother knew songs to bring rain, and she sang them, though the tree line stayed scorched as before. I fished above the dam, where bass had run to—saw a bear rip a root from stone, chasing down a scent. I had to grow up somehow. A tree was ageless. Rocks can never live until you skip them. I forgive you, Father.
Whatever You Say, Wherever You Are

For Rick Heilman

Birch and maple bow, giving themselves back to the ground this autumn, and every walk through leaves begins the clatter of all that lies detached. Something from a river in that noise: the voice calls, coming at you in water bending speech around the rock.

I hear you tonight in the scuff of heels. Whatever you say, I risk believing: the room you sit in now, the gold decor and light, children, a young wife, anything. Whatever you say follows like a bell ringing itself. Bell of autumn walking,
bell of incense and our First Communion, bells of longing—the bell these fourteen years.
I sit down at the bank and your words catch current in the stream. My feet stalled, I wonder at my trust of shoes,
their ever-walking toward, a dream of meeting you
some Sunday at the store. You'd buy your smokes, turn, walk out, and there we would be, agape:
longest gone of friends. But all the leaves are fire now, candles burning low and rising as our voices rise. The prayer of priests here drowns out whispers in the fresco, breath of saints. This Mass they celebrate for children lost at night, carried with the fish to sea.
The Well

The more we draw from it, the more red silt comes up suspended in our drink. The sun, soon enough, will not shine through our water, and as light catches, turns onto itself by the inner swirling of flecks, we know this lies in the nature of something else, some failing we have overlooked.

Our birds leave us, circle for an entire morning before heading north, toward rain. Expecting calamity in their departure—movement of earth, a seven-year drought—the young ones whisper among themselves about escape to the mountain, living high at the snow line, in caves.

Each day crust grows thicker inside the bucket, until at last a woman draws her full issue of mud, skeleton, and the purple eye of carp. Some take then to packing the ooze in presses reserved for wine. Drops fall slow and blue with lead. Others, knowing their task, tie rope, carve blocks, climb down into the well.

All winter we line the earthen walls, drink what little snow heaven sends us. By spring the level rising pure from thaw, and those who have not died from poison flesh or lead sing orisons of thanks—draw freely from the well. Some still blame demons, though we know better: as birds return, dip wings, they too seem changed.
Museums

After jade the color of my eyes, stone
elephants and medieval prayer
in wood and oil, we step outside,
hunch our backs through the Japanese garden
blooming something all the time, rest
on an arched bridge above
lily and carp, the faces we own today
giving themselves back to water.
On the way to Natural History
you stop. Down a lane the chalk
body of a man on pavement, the crime
we don’t reconstruct. We walk on instead.
The ocean’s not far, and its wind
comes with us, through eucalyptus, over lawn
the color of someone else’s
envy. Everyone’s guilty but the orchestra.
They haven’t played since June.

It’s a scene from our past: the wattled
hut and clay jug, fire handed down
since you or I was born. In the tanks
our same dream under glass. The lantern fish,
blinded by its own light,
moves green, dark, moves green and away.
Five miles down, we’d leave too,
swim to be always leaving, pass what we found
out our gills.
It’s dark after the blue whale.
We drive south toward where those lights
thin. Down the coast without
moon or star, down a line
of breath between what rises,
what falls down into sea. Sculpture
hasn’t failed us. This night,
endlessly autumn, opens up.
That voice we hear is water. Your heart
is what came this far.
Marriage in Winter

This is not sadness, it is a lake.
Holes in the ice are not
crying but the fish’s eye on weather, an early
death. Sparrows love you
when you dump your trash. A cougar
seen three years before returns:
it doesn’t love you, but loud summer’s
gone and you’re the only one
who draws the animals out. This is not friendship,
it is blood. Murder won’t belong
while the tenth-year freeze
goes on and no one can drown until April.

Set-lines hedge against not sleeping. Snow blind
at a Z of shuffled boots, a path
leading north beyond the islands, you Our Father
the cutthroat, pray the whitefish smoked
before the animals know. Later,
come to table, this evening lifts from the same range
where winter rose, sent out
talk and breeze over the waves. You’ll auger
new holes soon. You’ll sadden other lives
for hunger and still remain
blameless as weed, a blameless fox,
crosser of the ice.

You will not be less alone. You won’t be
lonely, because sadness
is not this lake, even if you are widowed,
even if you are matched. When your wife arrives
she finds you groom to more
than your simple wedding. You point out to her
the tracks of morning drinkers at the holes,
low-slung clouds on that irrelevant peninsula. You tell her you could love each other. By dinner, she believes. Both of you believe in snapped air, the largest raven of the season. Winter does not part,

it is a marriage.
This lake is not land, it is a going on and on.
Assurances

The bad ground flowers once the house turns home. Twice a day, it's lovely when the finches bare their heads. Winter gave our skin back, winter raised these rocks to light. Our yard has memory. Yards resemble lakes at high water, and they recall the gestures of weather, the home like an island at their shore.

We shouldn't forget ourselves. A crow won't pretend to have a name, an elm more dignity than shape. We till sorrow into earth but bad ground's home for only wind to move on.

We shouldn't hope for home. You died once. I carried your ashes past the farthest of your journeys, sent you on your way. When I died, someone said my name and not a breath faltered. Not breath of wind, which changed my shape. Not trees, which turn ash to their color. I was a day's hurricane away from you. You were the expanse I flew through.

We never met. We meet now only where our deaths cross, and that is good: never did our names burn lovelier than eyes.
A Motive for Minnesota

That which is clean at 21 below,
what the lark sparrow stays for, what a hare
hears browsing the white field, the blurred yard.
Why we go outdoors to shovel or walk
or shop, our list of needs never too long
to keep us longer inside. Why I don’t
close the curtains at night, leave the tap
dripping in defense against a freeze. Why
it’s hard to read, easy to cook but not
to drink, wind from the north slicing two ways
at the angle of our house.

All too hard
to explain, but not to point at: chaos
of window ice, order of drifted snow.
How many nights have I not slept until
I felt my own heat growing, beyond at last
some inner solstice I dreaded
ever coming. How I’d have to give up
to the motion of twin seasons, integrity
of both homes: shamed and graced
by how I had constructed them.

Better this definition of January sun
viewed through millions of miles of dry cold,
two panes of streaked glass, a screen, lenses of
doubtful prescription, through God-given
but God-damned eyes.

It’s only fair life here
is an imperfect mix of tone and austere
romance. This is why we toast,
as to a Chinese moon, these coldest days
our future will be occupied with
recalling. Days when the stars seemed closer
than the sun. Proposing our love
for the cosmos, we drink or do not drink.
Living by the Red River

Near one of your rivers, out the window of a room startled warm by a growing sun in February, I can see the twisting you looked down on, drunk at least that once, slung over a bridge support, steel, as the Red pushed on, fluid under its ice.

The same raven scouts these bank-stands of willow bush and elm. The same bird washed up from a few blocks away, the freight yard. Though I was younger then and didn't yet hurt, both of us eventually grew in and out of a hate by this river, by my river. Someone inside us dove in, suffering the death face up and drifting, sky washing over us, fish finning in and out of our half-opened hands—leaves delivering, laying on, the quiet mail of the drowned.

The Midwest sea took you in like a welcome, distant relation. Walking the islands of Ohio or Fargo seemed different after that, seems different now after washing up on the shores of my lake, now your Midwest sea. I can just breathe, thanks to you. I can almost make out the sparrows at 30 below, and the young girl hurrying past, crying to feed them. You're there, invisible, at flood stage again. The raven ferries its blackness between depot and river. And you go down to the water, leaving us only to return: drowning, coming back again day after day shining from another world.
First Day over 60°, April 1980

No love on a day like this is to scorn
the green just beginning to rumor
through the lawn, the awkward aim for sky
our apple graft is making. Juncoes
come and go thanklessly, which is good. Their
complacence is a kind of love that won't choose
us over the scattering of wild seed,
the crumbs of park bench or trash bin.
On a day like this, no love means to love
unevenly, to not embrace it all.

So you are the bridge by which I come to love
the deaths of friends, leaf-rot, armies, marigolds,
myself. These lawns hopscotch down our street
and whisper to their homes the new law.
I begin with loving you: not less
but by opening my arms around you,
turning the palms out toward whatever else.
Days like this I could hold you all, forgive
the hell in me, welcoming any light
my own darkness had refused. I could believe
I'd improve on grace, and continue. Well
into days below zero, I'd go on.
Leaf rollers cling to the tree, their spun silk
the death of an orchard. With a dog
it's bones, it's the man or grass dogs scratch
their backs with. Birds cling best because they hold
to what is airy. Over years and years
they hollowed out themselves, clung more
to what was hardly there, flying higher,
still bound to the earth for food.

Water clings to itself. Watch the hesitation
at a tap, its rise past the rim of a bowl.
Should the rivers dry out, you'd find water
clinging elsewhere: in a lake, a cloud, in these
veins. Fire, likewise, to its wood. To its
oxygen, to the fire that came before.
If a man is full of fire, we say his temper
is from the past and knows no end. If a man
is gloomy, he has the moon inside him,
and like all satellites, all moons
cling to their sun.

Thus the green shade to shrubbery,
the twist of smoke out chimneys, pipes,
the orbit of a trout and angler: focused
in the fly. Thus men to women,
and back again, and both of them to a family,
sanctified or not by the quality
with which they cling. So the ship over crest
and trough. So the man to his troubles,
the cling of cancer to its source.
There is even interchange in wind,
wind which blows always toward some particular
somewhere, like time passing clinging to nothing
but what is put in front of it, which is
everything, really: like a sail, like a tree.
The Patron of the Garden

There seemed always the fleas, Mister Dog's maybe, come to lay eggs in his shirt. He remembers pumping water, the chick chick of a small bird, gliding to nest in his pocket. Where this all started, he can't be sure: the air steps aside when he walks now, earth goes thanks-please-thanks with each new squeak of a heel. Their green tips creased, his onions salute him. Mushrooms bow down. When neighbors call, they find him kneeling in tomato vines, two worms inching up his arm.

Years ago, he thought he died. He woke to find his wife gone, her half of sheet smoothed down and pillow fluffed. In that purple light he could not feel his thinking, could only rise, forgetting everything as it came: floor, light on wood, teeth along his coated tongue. He ran through alders in the fog toward where he thought he left something. At the creek, a trout still kicked. Leaves sang hallelujahs to its gutting, fell and snagged their edges in his hair.

He can hear his thinking now. He can recall. He can weed his rows of carrots and feed the village children when they come. One day, a prelate's carriage draws up, dusty cassocks grow into their shadows. When they bless him in a rain of holy water, make him saint, he bows, turns back upon his onions, and spits into a furrow. Until his death, he never tires of the leaching salt, modesty of tubers, or the three-sided wondering of crows.
Returning to the Middle

It was long after you died.
I brought you back here, stooped down
and left your ashes in the lake.
They spread out like a cloud
the day after rain, wading out toward the middle

with each new boat wake
or whisper of storm crashing on the shore.
You would have loved that March,
that one bright afternoon. We were alone,

there were cutthroat snatching flies,
and all I could think of
turned blue in my memory, even the voice
you saved to break the most fragile

of silences. Blue lake, blue sky—
fish blurring blue and you talking
one day trolling for salmon,
talking as our boat

strayed toward the middle
about leaving each other by illness
or circumstance: being sad about that,
not wanting to be wrongly sad.

We never came near catching our limit.
If it was a day like many others,
we passed the cliff paintings
on the way back to camp. Easing the boat

close to the granite wall,
we counted ocher bison for the hundredth time,
the thirty or so red strokes
without clear reference. The one eye this painted man
faces east forever
is returning forever to the lake.
His gaze left what you left, turns out
toward a small branch and drift of weed:

the feeding and draining river made visible.
Samaras

A month-long snow under grosbeaks feasting in our elm. What they don't get hangs on or falls, June wings, to our yard. What falls fills the cup of tulip, cave of iris, nooks among the marigold leaves, any daylight broken through our elm and falling to grass. In the wine glass left out in rain, a paper-covered seed bulges and sprouts. And the huge-billed birds—they gorge themselves profanely on these wafers that will save no one, but could, that do answer hunger, then greed, and keep on falling from the tree. In the wineglass, rain disappears, a root fails its ground. When seeds fly, we can see wind.
The Invisible Wedding

After the lake dropped, well past the songs
rain whispered on a last day of grief,
we went down, down to the creek bed, where clouds
retire. What did we care for stiff wings
dragonflies had left, or for stone
washed over, the memory of sumac. Our sky
was narrower then. Your hand swept the gorge
and its roiling poplars. I fished
until I forgot beginning, and we slept there
on a dry bank that wouldn't stop its talk:
the creek full of names, that bank
which in our dream we took the shape of.

Dreams don't retire from the light we see,
from the shuffling of rock-flakes loosened
as we sashay down a grade. We owned
a farm here before any other white.
We grew anything edible, and this gorge
spread flat toward the south, giving space
for the vines, shade for the cluster
of peas. In our dream, we lose it all.
Green rises up, and keys fly away
with the candles. The sod house flowers:
thistles and chamomile. There are no clouds
to speak of. We are not supposed to reget.

What did we care for animals passing through
that night. The hare fed, drinking near
our sleep. Flies hatched over and over again
from sand, and the owl cooled down by gliding
through the tunnel over creek. We were
not there. On the last day of grief, we turned
invisible to all but those like us.
We were histories, re-arrived too late.
It was all we could do to sweep our hands
forever. To fish, to always forget
the beginning. We didn’t care to regret. We were
here. Something was going on. We didn’t know.
And there was no one watching,
Neither did Aminadab appear;
The siege was being raised,
And the horsemen,
At the sight of the waters, were riding down.

—St. John of the Cross
At the Petroglyphs

It is all still here,
all the markings long as pipes,
what is left of the man, his boat
running out of dye.
Tide pulls in and out, it could be
years you’ve been here.
In tamarack that hawk is shuffling
in the dark. Its head crowns the tree.
When it flies the sky goes
with it, and holes where stars were
stare you down to size.

This is how you’ll remember:
a dot bears east. A cliff
you thought your own
tumbles into dusk, into
the water. When rain comes
you will return here, arms full
of gifts, the one preened feather
tender to the stone.
What Should Not Matter

The bee at impact
on your windshield, its stinger
left a good three inches
behind it, and the bee's
flying, held back by ligaments
of gut that trail the bee
in its plunge to leave the glass.
Somewhere near the wiper blade
it dies, wings in a windy
hallelujah. It finds
a lean-to there. Emptied
of itself, an ugly road
behind it, the whole life's exposed
at fifty-five.

It shouldn't matter either
that you killed two pheasant,
November 1965. Or that a cow
sings, homes break down, or that you lose
your voice one Sunday
when your head is wrong, and a
mirror you look in
gives away the world. What matters
is your mattering,
the state of the state of
this heart. You let a cat come in,
let it live until it
leaves you, name it with a word
that still means gone.

When you die, let there be
questions: Did the wood speak. Did
a cottonwood bow down
in the deepest dream and walk.
Was an owl there. Would a river trust you.
Driving, you let
the world come clean. What should
not matter: that it dies. In the best
of times you can remember
this, follow
your own deaths back
along the road you've dragged them.
Your voice
will have not been lost.
Crossover

In the year of the comet, light
fell through our windows blue
as the palest sky, shafts of light
all our wondering had
turned toward: those disappearances
of dust and smoke
finally made clear, columns of white
two flies would angle through, the grace
light brought in which invisible
wishes, lost objects found themselves,
were seen for the first time
as real, able to
reflect, breathable as air.

All those years we slept
with curtains open to a sky
revolving in our dream.
In the midst of downed stars, a crowd
scene unlike anything
we would have ever imagined,
the comet—the idea
of it fixed as perennial
blooming—slept with us too,
and we were alone with ourselves
and with what comes
from far away to touch us. Dying
or alive, we’d be touched.

That first night, caskets
opened at a trace
of the comet’s tail. We saw graveyards
shift the angle of
their slopes as bodies, new dead
and old, rose
in single acts of upheaval.
The year the comet
crossed our sky, lilies closed,
evening and morning. We
burned candles hoping night
would bring in all its fears, this
one fear, to join us in the world.

We were not denied. Stars
went away, returned with weather.
Years of horse or dragon
turned and we grew timely, old as
animals we’d passed through.
If none of us would ever again see
the comet, we thought that
fitting. Once in our lives, afraid
for the world, for ourselves
and the life we’d made, we had
had our chance to be human.
The Carpet

Sleeping on my chest, the boy with four names, and I, half-awake, accept the weight with each exhalation, letting the twenty pounds down into my ribs as if my heart were suddenly enlarged. Inside this dream, we swim among our seven names, and I, for a while, am his father. Then a foam-warm wave like breathing, one wave after another, and I am following him over coral eyes open, interested, looking up from the green below. We are marooned, desperate for each other's company, jealous of the other's woman not yet here swimming—I have stabbed him three times out of honor, he has killed me three times and made me over again from kelp, spit, sunlight, salt air. Half-awake on a bleak island, the background of leaves familiar as certain faces. We fish and hunt and look to the sky for the strayings of land birds. We are marooned: he on an enemy that loves him like a son, I on a son with the face of this stranger, warm cheek to my breastbone, ear to the fatherly sea.
Raking in November

Every year, the sore arm and gathering
the fallen in piles. Sky doesn't move us
to remember spring or clouds blacker
than elm bark, soil we turned for the first time
just starting out, the beginning of life
beyond the lawn. We go about our odd
preparations: I, with the leaves, you
with the bulbs that will remember snowfall
but never turning, these months under
cold overcast and trees letting the light
back in. When we were young, November
meant refuge from the north. Now, we rake the weeks
away, and fog's the warmest breath we have.

There's no incinerator for these leaves:
for outdated maps—the thing you think of first—
for the roads they mean losing color,
always running out toward some edge where air,
where the rest of the world, refuses
imitation. Falling—we haven't seen them fall
so much as gather. Gathering,
I perform a justice death can't do enough of.
It's my task, I think. My composting,
dealing another year some good. But leaves
would do that anyway. That I feel I need
to help is my confession
of mistake. I rake to remember. We prepare,
and sore arm and bad knee bend for winter
that will come next month, comes years
from now, if we're lucky, when one of us
goes down before the other to the whispering
grass, where road turns dirt and opens.
A Compass for My Daughter

North is where the shadow of the sky retreats. North is a way back to Grandfather, to night animals we miss but are afraid to befriend again. You’ll see long clouds moving down someday. Remember then, it will be time.

Everywhere, always, welcome the gift of rain. Rain comes from where the streams have gone. It is never not at home. When you’re sick, remember the circle of water, red message at dusk. Look west: everything returns.

Southern luster of feathers, the light in your skin. The living turn there and come to rest. Fire is its color. Color is its real name. Yellow direction, warmest wind, the child you once were. South.

Face east in your heart and you’ll begin all journeys new. I bring you this far
so I can leave you.
So I can tell you our bodies are clocks
and compasses—we have it in us
to know the time to
turn and point away.
Face east
in your heart and my leaving
signals return. Leaving is
all around us. Dying, too. Lives
move from room to room,
and they turn,
and they change
courses, drown, and are revived
at sea, on land,
in whatever air they breathe.

Your mother and I love you. You are
the beach. We are the next lonely wave.
Time after Time

Grieving, God-stricken
quiet as the land killing itself off
for fall, we know how slowly
rain and the sons of leaves or hills
come down to a stumbling creek
to make their peace. A man
might die here, his broken bones
the mark this trip had left him.
He might bathe, cold water
flooding all his wounds, and never
return. At dusk we make particular
descent toward pools
each of us knows to be
our own. Three of us will be eaten
on the way. A fourth may drown,
get lost, or go insane when cottonwood
start speaking and a wind
blows his own voice miles north.

We can never be united again.
Here, where a boot-print means
I've acted, where my breath leaves
the only will I'll write, I go down,
losing my balance on the flaked
granite of this trail, green
as the evening shade I set out in,
wishing I were somewhere, nowhere
like this place: where the sound ahead
is not me, but larger, and what
I must bend to, time after time.
March Day on a North County Marsh

From a pen-and-ink sketch by J. Dawson

Beyond the common dowitcher and whimbrel
lies a world come to its end in wet air
alive over the marsh, in yards of tall
waves jarring the near beach. Birds dip for shrimp
all morning as if their beaks, half-submerged,
could read the secret life. An avocet
wades until its three colors double, startle
two birds apart. One flies like a soul

through water deeper than what is here.
And the teal, pipit, and rail wade—all fly
low over water clouded by tide,
nervous feet. There is plenty to live on,
enough to fear. Under the flooded sand
a hundred wings practice the close of winter.
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Form 194A
The poems in *The Invisible Wedding* consider the moment when routine disintegrates, when the outer environment declares itself and we are forced to organize an inner response. In these poems of discovery, Robbins is concerned less with arriving at answers or a fixed stance than with bringing thought, feeling, and action into harmonious movement. In Robbins's words, "When we allow for the weddings, the reconciliations, we have attained ourselves momentarily. We are ready for the opening of the road, the red message at dusk. A river would trust us."

"Robbins faces up to some of the most difficult aspects of spiritual and psychological growth, often by acts of discovery in a still-raw wilderness, by reenactments of rites of passage in his own life as it relates to other living things."—David Wagoner.

Richard Robbins is Instructor of English at Oregon State University in Corvallis. His poetry has appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, including *Nation, North American Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

See inside back cover for other Breakthrough Books.

A Breakthrough Book Number 44

**University of Missouri Press**
P.O. Box 7088
Columbia, Missouri 65205–7088