This Waking Unafraid
Also by David Swanger

Poetry
1977  *Lemming Song*
1978  *The Shape of Waters*
1981  *Inside the Horse*
1994  *Family*

Criticism
1974  *The Poem as Process*
1990  *Essays in Aesthetic Education*
This Waking
Unafraid

poems by

David Swanger

University of Missouri Press
Columbia and London
For Lynn
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This Waking Unafraid
SCAR

The truth is never enough
but I'll tell it anyway:
this scar was once a blue
bird with a forked tail,
applied by the staccato
prick of a tattooist's
electric needle behind
the dusty glass off Broad
Street in Newark, N.J.,
on a day when peace marchers
and pickpockets shuffled
toward police barriers.

This blue bird with its
forked tail was the reason
you left me and my biceps,
my upper arm flexor which
made the bird fly or hover
and stoop from the flesh-
colored sky my arms supported
above your body before
you enrolled in Language
Studies at Princeton, where
your maiden name could speak
after its pronounced silence.

This reason was the abrasive
wheel in the doctor's office
among the aquariums full of dying
fish where my skin was flayed
(having found an ad, “Tattoos
Removed,” in the Yellow Pages),
Scar

flying off me like soft sparks, blood, ink and flesh into the air; I left with a clumsy bandage and the old man’s promise there would be no evidence of all these fallen feathers.

The scar is because I’m black the doctor said to my white face while his fish watched. “Black people form more keloid tissue; it’s not my fault.” OK, I don’t mind being black, but this is a big scar, something like a blue bird with a forked tail, and my biceps makes the scar fly toward an apparition of a pale bird just visible inside the shape of itself.

Which is why I probably am too hard on both of us, creating these collisions now, like the bird who comes down the chimney into our lives and bangs its life out against the window even though we try to save it, and tells us something as we pick up the weightless body, the irrational broken neck and the single bead of blood losing its luster.
LONGER

for Lauren

It is the beginning of that long, soft silence when the household sleeps. My daughter should be in her bed, but instead she asks me why she must die, and what there is after death. The girl glistens, a rosy dolphin riding swells of seamless health and youth, yet she worries. She stays awake into the night like an astronomer captive to his cold telescope.

If sleep has its opposite, it is not waking, but the imagination.

I can't answer questions like hers, but I can make up the necessary stories. Two hundred years ago in Italy, the voices of boys were so pure the music maestros of the cities preserved the dazzle of this sound by creating choirs of castrati, and penned operas for the smooth-jawed sopranos these boys grew up to be.

In wide-windowed Venice there seemed no end to the glorious singing, as if birds from heaven had chosen to alight and stay forever joyful in the porticos and gilded arches.

My daughter thinks this has nothing to do with death, although it is
very cruel, the razor the old guys
inflicted upon those boys, the abortion
of nature in the lives of so many
who had been innocently harvesting
olives, singing for no particular
reason, for no imaginable audience,
certainly not for the desiccated
aesthetes overdressed in brocade
and velvet who changed everything
so swiftly and irrevocably. Don’t
get me wrong, I tell my daughter,
I’m not for gelding singers to save
their voices: the idea is to sing,
very beautifully, a little longer.
SOMETHING ABOUT LOVE

Every boy needs a pony;
I got mine at thirty-two,
a copper-colored mare I
was too heavy to ride, so

I used her to pack lunches
and an occasional child
along the road's edge
where asphalt crumbles.

She was best at standing,
burnished and consequential,
in the field which became
sorrel under the sun.

My neighbor, a man whose
fear kept him home, indoors
and loveless, watched the pony
from his careful distance.

But in the mornings I began
to find remains of picnics
consumed by starlight: carrot
tops, surfeits of shining

oats scattered in small radii
among the bent grasses, and
then a kerchief he had used
to bring her these delicacies.

Once, when the howling
of random dogs woke me
early, I saw my neighbor's
shadow disappear in the edge
of the meadow where light had not yet begun, and I called foolishly toward his shyness, the space he left behind.

In time the pony fattened as if to founder, so I visited my neighbor in his reluctant sitting room to tell him no more feasts in the night for my poor pony who will be brought to her knees unless he stops plying her with food.

He said yes and meant no, and didn’t stop, but was instead more elusive and insistent, bringing pendulous loads of molasses-sweet grain to the pony who slept standing, and opened her eyes to find him kneeling before her, spreading the kerchief he never again left behind. I saw them each night in my sleep and moved asleep toward my wife’s haunch.

I gave my neighbor my pony; it was the only thing to do, and it says something about love which is dangerous.
MIDDLE-CLASS METAPHYSICS

My neighbor gets ideas to go with the new things he buys. Let's have a satellite TV club he says. We can all compare each other's programs. I don't join; but now he wants to hold a party where he'll show pictures of us as children, blown up onto a large screen. We are to ask our mothers for old photos; he will do the rest. My mother forages and sends a chronology of good news. These artifacts show there was never a time before me. In the beginning was not nothing, but me, surrounded by satellites, parents with slim arms, the next door girl holding my hand, the dogs who appear in picture after picture, yawning their irrepressible love. If I am not the hero of my own life, I am at least its voyeur; I can put these pictures in any order, starting taller than my uncles or, midstream, holding a wagon's handle, wearing the first sneakers of spring; or, tender as a mound
of tapioca, wailing against loss
in a flowered field, aged very new.
Remember the persistent dream
of childhood, that our lives were
movies, adventures we watched from
safe seats? Don’t ask me why the front
row, to which we ran, sloshing sodas,
from which we stared up, neckached
and blinking, was safe. I guess
we could close our eyes during scary
parts and knew endings were only
the space between double features.

I haven’t changed though the story
has. I’m Icarus and Brueghel both,
falling and watching my fall, knowing
the speck against the sky defines
the sky: in the beginning was not

the word but the speck which names
the word after itself while
floating across a bright screen
like the bug that amazingly walks
on water, going nowhere except back

and forth, causing ripples to happen
and disappear one after the other
like the kisses of shy cowboys.
Oh my neighbors, let us gather
in wonder at how our lives fill the sky.
THESE HEARTS WE WOULD NAME OUR OWN

for Max

I.

They gave me clothes of paper, green as a pond in late spring just beginning to turn green, and stood me at the bed’s end between your mother’s legs, silent witness to your task, the first thing you had to learn, breathing.

II.

This is a hard school, the quietly furious lessons of life and death taught to us by small creatures: shiners, week-old snakelings, meadow mouse, the possum turning circles on the road looking for the car-killed missing center of her life.

There are happy endings, complete with slobber, as when we returned the possum to the scrub of her birth; she knew home was on the way and salivated with desire the deeper we went into the forest’s knees.

And there are mornings we don’t want to wake because something bright has died in the night; belly-up fish float like petals, the snake, thin
These Hearts We Would Name Our Own

as your finger, won’t unwind its sleep.
If I’m gone early, you write to me,
“A tragedy happened, Scooter is dead.”

III.
At a wedding, the bride and groom
shoot arrows toward the moon. Since
we don’t find the fallen shafts, we
can believe anything. No we can’t.
Love is a weapon, that’s clear,
a barb whose longing requires
flight stolen from birds. Birds
cross the blood moon because they
have to, just as I, my son, must
learn with you the reasons for all
these hearts we would name our own.
The aunts, splendid, pale
and ample in their bathing suits,
unfurled tablecloths, challa, melons,
seltzer water in blue bottles, and
honeyed cakes and other cakes.

After the required hour everyone
but Grandpa waded, stirring silt
around our ankles, enjoying mud.
Then, as if called by voices beyond
us, the old man rose, his belly taut,
trunks reaching his knees, his shins
white as fish, and walked without
watching the ground toward water.

We parted to let him pass, we receded
onto the beach; he prowed outward
and swam. He remembered, he stroked
and roiled and spumed his way away
then back to us, his shorebound spawn.
BAR MITZVAH BOY'S LAMENT

I'd rather be sent into wildness
to eat roots and berries than be
here at the Cantor's house where
everything smells of schmaltz.

We sit at this table, hidden under
linoleum cloth, a small, bored man
and smaller boy, bored, tormented
by vowels and signs spread across
the sticky surface of an afternoon
when all the blond boys of the world
are outside, profane and rivalrous.
My voice can't make these sounds,

my tongue will not roll its "r" even
on the first word, Baruch; I am
an infidel brought into the temple
of tight shoes. On the day of my

Bar Mitzvah I will climb a tree as
the relatives gather below, but they
will harvest and cart me to synagogue
where I will be surrounded by the

strange breath of old men and ancient
words. When it's over, my cracked
song, everyone will rejoice in me and
gift me with fountain pens so I may

grow pale into my days, study Torah
and write with one pen after another.
LAUNDRY

Already gone, he decides to leave her and goes to inhabit several cold holes, foetal on someone’s linoleum, having crossed the line, his sleep afloat on vodka.

He dreams of the house floating in her hair, of the children bursting the surface with their new anger; the silence is now everywhere. Even the car muffles its old valves, runs ghostly on liquid tires through pools of dark. His clothes grow rank but the laundromat terrifies him, that bright haven of heartbreak, fluorescent clamor, silent souls athwart amid the hot circles, churn and swish, tumble; everyone quick with the machines, then waiting inside themselves for their tighter skins, darting looks at each other, at him, in case someone tries to steal a sweater, take a washer out of turn. He sits and absorbs the astringent odor of bleach and is cleansed in some way but lacks the courage to do his laundry. He is back now, on her doorstep, pillowcase in hand, everything brought to her candid and dirty. He knows it’s very early, and birds think night is the absence of light.
HOW DOES MUSIC MEASURE TIME?

All I know is that in England I lived next to a Kuwaiti who had a car and a carpet. The rest of us were socialists by conviction, lazy by inclination, genteelly poor, hardly oblivious to superior conditions for seduction that wealth could create. Each weekend I lay, disgruntled celibate, while “Bolero” beat against the wall, da DA DA dum, and imagined my Kuwaiti neighbor, having brought her back to his room by car, her bare feet on the woven roses, he insistent amorous because I was, and the musical seduction inevitable. Through the thin wall I never heard them call to one another, only the other massive melody.

This morning you appear on the balcony, your breasts shining, your hair, after a shower, diffident as a thicket of sweetbriar. There is music again; Strauss’ “Acceleration Waltz” lingers and then takes a graceful step; circling any possibility of disarray, the notes measure a certain distance and allow only the briefest touch before they arc outward as before. It is nice not to think, for we have loved each other hard and now can love each other easy. As the waltz spins we become something like the white shoulders of egrets when they hold their wings out to the sun; we are beyond what we have left and not.
COW TIPPING

There is always plenty to be sad about—unsprung oil, guns left on coffee tables, too much or too little sex, newspapers, the air.

It is time to remember cow tipping, always in summer after the calves are old enough, their clod-eyed mothers waxing ample in retirement.

The nights as new as paint just opened, the flowers no longer tense with obligation; a few bats noisier than their reputation, the abutment of creatures awake and asleep, some vivid, mosquitos, others taken on faith, the foxes. The less light the better, not that cows know anything or dream even of grass; they simply stop where they are in the massive quiet, their flesh. We push one cow after another with predictable results: they fall.

Imagine the resurrected morning when hindquarters are shoved skyward; a strained kneeling and then each cow rises without wonder or grudge, and it all begins again, the chewing, the piss and amble of cows. This never happened and it happens now, the birds flying from nowhere.
TWO FACES

What does it mean if a man wears a mask on the back of his head? It means he lives in a hard-trod clearing where everything is known—the way his children play at games which will later become work, the way his able wife’s work defines the clearing as safe, a bowl carved out of the forest and filled by sunlight or covered in the curve of dark sky at night while a fire grooms its fine fur.

It means the man must sometimes leave this place and enter the forest, hunched on his heels, wearing his mask on the back of his head. Among the immensities of leaf and shadow are the furious flowers, the sharp drops of water and the tiger. The man knows the tiger’s knives wait for him, and he makes sure his mask sits on the back of his head like a second face always smiling over his shoulder as if fear is an illusion.

The mask watches the tiger who follows the man who faces the tiger who will only kill if he can find unwary prey. The man gathers magic as he walks in the forest and places magic in the sack he carries away from death, keeping his painted eye on death all the way out towards the clearing where he can see his wife with her back to him, his children chasing each other in brief, shrill wars, the fire sleeping until he will wake it in his need.
He doesn't mind that his hair is a beach losing its long battle with the tide; or that the vertebrae of his lower back grind toward shriek like frayed wires between poles waiting for the indifferent wind.

He wonders how he knew so little, he buying one car after another, good deals; he getting degrees and jobs, an office with a view of people coming to ask his permission, his wife tentative and tender.

There was so much to control, he kept a calendar, he compiled a vita, he built a house around the dimensions of his knees, the stack of his wife's crockery, the years his children would require those bathrooms.

He didn't wonder and he didn't wait, and when his daughter scratched the latest car he was proud to be moderately mad. Before his wife went shopping she asked him what he'd like to eat that week, not much meat.

Half his life was things to do; and done, checked off. He looks now at the grid of days, the pages of months, and writes in nothing although nothing has changed; he buys bottles of White-Out in case he makes a mistake.

In the wide space of night, he watches the trajectories of planes so distant they make no sound, so sure amid the web of radar it would appear there are no people in the sky, only the blind lights, each blinking desperately at the tip of its wing.
SYCAMORES

I've planted sycamores, 
trunks the width of candles, 
leaves which have no past 
wave like handkerchiefs.

Soon I will be a rusted blade, 
my children careful of me as 
I grow smaller and more lethal.

What sudden difference does 
anything make, arriving or 
disappearing? The good 
green of saplings is slow, 
and we hear loss in the forest 
years after a tree hits the ground.
THE LIMITATIONS OF LIGHT

Isn’t it marvelous the way fast film stops the world’s heave, as if we wrestle and pin the huge shoulders of the present tense against the seamless future, and rise from this combat clutching our trophy, emblems of light.

Einstein did this too, tugging the ambiguous ends of his mustache, then devising $E = mc^2$, which means we can never catch up with light, or that if we could we’d be sorry as statues whose pigeon-stained immortality is nothing more than watching forever one’s failure to change.

Suddenly light seems less blessed, and Keats can have his urnful. And when we dream that life is not life at all, but intervals fixed on film like leaves drowned in shallow puddles, glossy and unable to move their windy histories, we remember not to trust anything but words, the slightly fey paper flowers we continuously invent and abandon to their vigilance in the dry corners of dark drawers until we come to them moist and needy; and they, when our hope touches them, blush like someone who has waited all evening by the punch bowl for this dance.
TWO STORIES

She found herself inside an elephant! It was just the thing! No one here strained for a view of her inner self. She took off her clothes slowly, without reason for haste, and let herself be swayed from the curved ribs on the left to the curved ribs on the right. "He's walking," she thought, "across the roof of the world like a patient star." And she was right; so large and so much less aroused was the elephant than the man she had left, she was finally out of reach.

The man she had left found a big gun! It was just the thing! No one here asked him what he would do with a gun. He put the gun on slowly, without reason for haste, and let himself be praised by the curved words of other men and some women. "I'm walking," he thought, "where men have always stalked whatever they wished." And he was right; so unseeing of so much was the black hole of the gun, and so great was his longing for the woman who had left, that nothing was out of reach.
HANDS

These are the hands of the unemployed, lined up for jobs they won't get: most are black, some are white; they gather around illegal fires in wire trash cans;

they advance towards a concrete building where they will be given forms to complete,

proving they are unqualified because they are so many—think of what the hand is, a trellis leaning on nothing except the vine of what it does, unless there is nothing to do, and the hand becomes a cage, pacing inside of itself.
WHAT THE WING SAYS

The wing says, "I am the space behind you, a dent in the fender, hands you remember for the way they touched you. You can look back and song will still throb. I am air moving ahead, the outermost edge of desire, the ripple of departure and arrival. But

I will speak more plainly: you think you are the middle of your life, your own fulcrum, your years poised like reckonings in the balance. This is not so: dismiss the grocer of your soul. Nothing important can be weighed, which is why I am the silver river of your mornings and the silver lake curled around your dark dreams. I am not wax nor tricks stolen from birds.

I know you despair at noon, when sky overflows with the present tense, and at night as you lie among those you have wronged; I know you have failed in what matters most, and use your groin to forget. Does the future move in only one direction? Think how roots find their way, how hair spreads on the pillow, how watercolors give birth to light. Think how dangerous I am, because of what I offer you."
IN THIS WORLD

She tells him to live in the present:
"What matters is now," so now he
and she take each other on the slatted
shadows laid across the bed and then
she tells him she was thinking all
the while about the other woman, his
great march across smoking fields
when he left in a storm of truth after
those many lies defined the firmament
(stars might as well be lies; we surely
don't see them for what they are,
pure burning death, winking death).
He buckles himself to the lunge and
tremor of the world where there is much
to love, and enough work for many
lives; he wishes he could go back to '61
and sit-in a Woolworth's in Alabama
next to a black man heavy with restraint
while teen-age segregationists pour
mustard down his collar, and on the hair
of the man beside him. "Stay here," he tells
himself, "this is where your life is, she is
in the bed with you all night." Yes, turned
away from the light he shines on himself
in the indifferent hour, her hip is his,
her breath is the lone word sounded on
an entire continent. With his tentative
fingers he explores the bones of her face.
Not far from here a mother lost a child;
In This World

not far from here a dog runs from streetlight to streetlight looking for the voice and hand it knows; sirens gut the night as if it were a fish. "This is your life," he tells himself while silently the trees move.
DISPENSABLE

There is this dilemma: If the lifeboat can stay afloat with no more than six, and somehow nine find themselves elbow to knee, who leaves or is tossed by some consensus into the marble heart of the abiding sea?

Suppose the lifeboat contains you and your sparrowy mother, four humans, strangers to you, a flightless bird, a boar and a half-grown elk? This is not seminar! Oh what a squeal and squawk and surprised bellow, as easy ethics leave a quiet aftermath, the soft tongues of waves against the lightened boat which dreams of rescue. Your mother is glad she fed you liver as a child, and that your buckled back helped unshoulder the elk over the gunwale.

The others talk of rifles they have at home and how they teach their children to hunt in whirring meadows or in sudden places where the forest admits light. The sun recedes by hot inches into the horizon, sliding toward countries beneath the sea. You hold your mother’s skull and sleep the only sleep left to you. A cannon fires across the water and bodies rise, but you can’t tell if these swollen islands advance because they have reason, or if they merely drift as you do now, without consequence or shadow.
HERO

He waits for a burning house
in which someone old sits unwilling or unable
to move. He is passing by not quite aimless, alert
yet unready. It could be a forgotten pot on the stove,
a clogged chimney: danger does not always look

like itself. Should he intrude? Reptilian
smoke glides toward him; the door chafes against
its manacles, the porch unbuckles its windows and
he enters like an uncertain lover who would cough
when most of all he wants silence. He sees a man

in a chair holding the arms, staring like marble
Lincoln in his monument. As he approaches, the man
topples; smoke wraps its body around theirs.
He hears how quickly people gather on the lawn.
A certain flame stretches its blond finger toward

him. This is the beckoning. He might be Adam
lying on a chapel ceiling. He didn’t know heroism
would be so insistent, so easy when it arrives.
He tightens his grip on absent light and crawls
toward small shadows which might be angels.
KNOB PINES

Insufficient, like all apologies, they are the arms of the starved dead, stiff extrusions from shallow graves. The loggers clear-cut first, then planted these excuses and left.

We watch the knob pines wave; even the fog moving inland is enough to make them sway: their defeated roots gnarl around too little clay, and they fall, unhonored, into boneyards of themselves, making a low, tangled sky, the last landscape of snakes. Heavy with their resinous cones, the knob pines hold each other and conspire; their only wish is fire.

If fire were to rise from the crotch of the hill; if fire were to suck life out of air like a slow, red mouth; if fire unsprung these cones into glowing seed; the dead could rise after.

We make large, decisive noises against the resurrection of these trees, and listen, at noon, to their silence.
PRACTICE: FATHER AND SON

The ball leaps toward my chest, misses and takes a shot at my chin, leaving heat.

Dusk is a long inning, but darkness finally rolls up, a low car with a quiet motor.

We can stop. I have fielded everything you hit, but I ache with a kind of desire I will learn is permanent; and my gloved hand holds its sting.
ELISSA PLAYS THE PIANO

She can no more sit down
than birdsong: she stands
at the looming piano; her
thin fingers collect flying
motes of time and knot them
into something that beats
like a healthy heart.

She is born severally,
each birth a certainty that
although the air means no harm
it drifts and our lives drift
back and forth in their harbor,
until some purposive spirit
takes charge, the way ribs
tell the heart they will hold
and make known its longing,
that the shape they give this
urgent, blind susurration
is the small girl who stands
at a large piano, her hands
causing more music than she knows.
THE AUNTS

While their husbands become mustaches and desks,
the aunts become themselves.
After weddings they hoist their legs onto coffee tables and take bites of this or that, grazing among the leftovers.

They can read the future in the veins of their legs; they will outlive their husbands. They take a weight off their feet and applaud their reputations: they are exactly what they were meant to be, these limousines.

Even as girls they were aunts, deciding where the sofa should go and whom to invite; and now they make unmistakable gestures under the drapery of their flesh, welcoming nieces into the ornate frame, the image carefully tinted by hand.
SHE MARRIES A VIOLINIST

Her mother boils the telephone in tears; her father floats silently over the pages of his novel. They regret her piano lessons.

He doesn’t have a steady job; his violin reclines in its velvet mooring while she packs and unpacks the huge dusk of concert halls.

Her parents drive love like a heavy car; she plays the backseat game and says what is almost on the tip of her tongue:

“I love you both” means “My violinist is a darkened boat, and I am what I have become, a duet polishing the hard lake of departure.”
A MINER DESCRIBES HIS DEATH

This long day when I have worked
as hard as I can work, I work one hour
more until my great weariness becomes
a mist of dusted light swirling toward me.

I see what I have been unable to remember:
the footbridge leading to the colliery;
how, in the mines, we boys crawled naked,
and the men blew out our candles for a prank,
leaving us digging in the dark; and how
at night our skins washed white.

It was strange to come out of the mine
into whatever the air had become that day—
thinned by rain or heavy with smoke—
and, in a way, to prefer the world below.
Faces layer the air now; your pale eyes
shine like the brave birds we took with us.

My enfeebled present is nothing compared
to these images; they rise like the coming-to-be
of shapes on silver paper. I was shown once
how this can happen in an unnaturally dark room.
I realize what Death is, a tiredness and
luminous outline, a marvelous cloud of love.
THE PAST

Think of it as scrimshaw,
the tooth of a vulnerable giant
adored and embellished by the same
hand which killed it—all that blood
sheening the surface as far as you can see.

Think of it as a sack of rags
ticking in the attic like a bomb,
a soft duffle in the corner, filled with
your cast-off skins unraveling imperceptibly
as they hold each other and whisper in the dark.

Think of it as a sand track
up a long slope, the kind of hill
you hardly notice until your breath
shortens and your thighs tighten against
their purchase in the indifference of lost footprints.

Think of it as your mother,
someone full of stories and baked goods
who tells you she forgives you no matter what,
while you forgive nothing you have done, and you
lash your tail like a cat trapped in her endless lap.

Think of it as irrevocably within
yourself, the meal you didn’t taste
but know you have eaten, or the meal
which rises in your gorge the rest of your life,
when the table is empty, when all that remains are
the containers of several shapes; open, ingenious mouths.
MATINEE

Before we had failed
at anything, the question
of heroes was real, and
we debated whether it was
better to ride a white
horse like Hopalong or
a paint like Tom Mix.
Our bicycles, tethered
outside the theater, always
were there when we emerged
blinking, recovering from
the single tongueless kiss
Hoppy or Tom had to give her
before his shining departure.

We have littered the prairie
with dissatisfied wives,
our sunsets are florid with
effort and whatever we ride
chafes us. Instead of trees,
the way is marked by stop signs.
We keep a distance between us
in the large dark of matinees
where air has a problem
breathing, and our feet stick
to apologies spilled days ago.
Our heroes have become younger
than we. They kiss expertly
in technicolor and like us
do not believe in themselves.
ENDING IT

The best collar frays
in time; if my mother
were here, she would cut
it off, turn it inside-
out, and sew it back on;
and what is over could
crouch unseen and forgotten,
a weightless riding.

If you were here, and not
at the far end of my useless
lie, I would take love off
like a thin refusal, and show
you the ragged edges, the
thread-bare excuses I make
for my absence; and naked
from the waist up, I'd

try to be impartial: clearly
one of us must leave, but
how can I go outside like this?
THE HEART’S EDUCATION

He tells his heart stories;
it cries at the sad parts,
how it is staked in a garden
trying to speak to ripening
versions of itself, a harvest
of red hearts, all hanging
like caught fish: the sun points
its big finger at his heart.

He sets his heart afloat
in the cold ribs of the sea:
this too is a lesson in distance,
how the buoys recede like voices,
and the shore becomes unnecessary
while his heart paddles toward
something like itself, turtle-shaped
and wide-eyed and almost obsolete.

He brings his heart into night
where it grips the arms of his chair,
trying to get hold of itself despite
the improbability of happy endings
and the sunset he witnessed,
that huge bruise on the horizon’s
forehead, the leaves entering
the forest on their knees.

He shows his heart its hydraulic
limits, the weight it can lift
and how it must live by a kind
of harmless burning: he holds
his heart in his hands the way
a fakir holds a coal, ignoring
the complex detonations of flesh,
his heart’s bright teeth.
DINNER WITH JERRY

isn’t easy. One restaurant uses lard; another displays tumescent strawberries from sterilized fields. The last is a place with no light, no meat, no fish, nothing that will kill us except our conversation. Jerry says every bay in America is absence disguised as life.

Jerry says that in the Chesapeake, oysters glow like lost flashlights; in tide-swollen Maine coves, lobsters snort lines of lead through the delicate fibrillation of their gills. And the Ontario papers publish a fish list undreamt by the supple wrist of Izaak Walton: cod, safe once a week; pike, once a month; salmon, never. Shrimp, lethal angels.

Jerry doesn’t say this, but we’ve finally become what Plato told us we were, men of metal—bronze, silver and gold. The story was to make people content, and still does. Poised on toxic terrace, we watch our lawns achieve perfection, ourselves become heavy and magnetic. We scan this menu, midlife men anxious for the waitress whose long dark hair whorls into itself like a shell.

for Jerry Vizenor
PHOTOGRAPH

All the Jews are in the photograph,  
a curled and jaundiced leaf blown into  
the dry gutter by the windstorm which blows  
rain back into the clouds, cities back into their alleys,  
desire into the open mouth of long, mysterious histories.

All the Jews in the photograph are old;  
all the Jews in the photograph are not so old.  
The children stand next to the worn coats of their  
fathers, the wide skirts of their mothers: they entrust  
their smallness to the world where their parents walk.

In the photograph everyone is breathing,  
but there is no intimate, aromatic breath to be seen.  
The breath of the Jews in the photograph is like snow  
which comes from darkness and disappears into light,  
changing everything, as when dark changes into a voice.

The breath of the Jews in the photograph is a silence  
which is not silence, an unscrolling of commandments  
we can not easily obey. And not in the photograph at all,  
rounding a distant corner in the iron heaviness of its breath  
comes a train, right on schedule, turning the air into ashes.
THIS WAKING UNAFRAID

Walking in the shadow of the hawk’s torment, a swarm of starlings, morbid thoughts do not unsettle me, nor does a sudden mystery, the squirrel’s perfect corpse lying in the path. Lately my death comes to me like a warm season, causing calm to bloom, causing me to open the fist in which I’ve held my life. Not that all your elegance and the surging we make have become less; if anything, our equipoise, hard earned and honed, is beyond account. I don’t understand it, this ability to sleep through the night, this waking unafraid as if everything important doesn’t matter and what’s unfinished can be left whole.
OEDIPUS IRVINGTON

Waverly 6-2829: sing this
to the tune of "The Blue Danube"
and you will know how
to call Grandma and Grandpa,
and you will never forget
the phone number of the cleanest
house in the world, in Irvington,
New Jersey, where you are left
to be admired and fed sweets
while your mother gives birth
to someone you will ignore as you
ignore your father except that he
brings you toys, or forgets the toy
he was supposed to bring; but Mom
loves you: you try to be bad as hard
as you have tried anything—harder—
still she thinks you are wonderful,
and this goes on for years, forever;
your life is a silver screen on which
you win Oscar after Oscar, but now
you want to retire from the movies
and it’s as if you’re in the Mob;
there is no leaving with your shoes
on: you’ll have to wear cement
galoshes to break this contract
which stipulates only success,
excellence, hazel-flecked eyes the girls
love of course—your mother’s eyes.
BIRTHDAY

The child's birthday is lethal, one more sign that their history together accretes even while he is there yet not there. If only life were a fiction of thorns upon which he could himself bleed into roses. He spawns no color; and his wife, already pale, knows nothing of this, knows something of his absence.

There are good words which are nails, correct thoughts which are hammers; with these he builds a house called honor. And does the house become a cage; and does the cage become as empty as any cage crowded with loss? Would he gnaw off his hand, let the fingers fall and wither their own clench? Her hands shape small cups of devotion from which he could drink. He should take this communion; her gesture breaks his heart. He looks for a way out. He wishes for the oblivion of otters who drift horizontally, grooming each other's splendid fur on a world of sway and sea food. But the sun beats water into guilt and no sky can compass regret.
OXFORD

We come through the scalloped stone steps worn away by so many heavy with learning and piety, and out into the motors and metal air which surround the Bodellian like a soiled curtain; and we drift toward the only green, the old common where long-horned, curly cattle hold their hugeness as if it were ordinary to graze here for a thousand years, since wolves.

There is a thickly thatched stone barn, the roof at once sliding down and solid; and the farmer, red, robust, a Mellors with his braces on, takes us into the kind of confidence we offer strangers who are truly strange and soon to depart. His magic is such that bulls low to him when he calls. He tells us of barn owls under the thatch, and we climb into the dark to see them. The moons of their faces watch us ascend.

The male owl unscrolls one wing, written upon delicately, and with this wing he shields his mate from us. Their clutch of owlets hisses at us, a sound wind draws from sharp grasses. The owlets condemn us. Righteous and robed, they are a committee, and we descend the ladder afraid. Since it's Oxford, I think of Thomas More at study, climbing a ladder to the highest of shelves, and what he saw there before he turned.
I am the microphone after the sweat,
I am the stain of power misspent,
the silent coves where promises thicken
to sludge; I am inexorable torpor,
the spirit overwhelmed and shrunk.

Imagine the most complex problem
of all, let’s say a rain forest, or food,
or the true believers of a bad book.

Here are the answers: drive any-
where and feel free; eat ice, what’s
frozen can’t hurt you; go to school.

I could say more, but I don’t want to.
I am the prophet of less: a single feather
bespeaks the bird and a sigh suffices
for love. It’s come to this: believe me,
you don’t have to run to find cover.
LOVER

I.

He is the boy in the cemetery,
tombstones frothed by summer dew,
in the family's four-door Chevy,
his knees praying against the plastic
weave of the seat covers, his pants
socked around his ankles; and he
is trying to do it, and he has vowed
to do it, and she is willing to do it.

His inability to perform this particular
is the beginning: her moonlight satin,
her ingenuous kindness is the beginning
of the taking, of what he will become
as he disappoints himself, as women
comfort him in places where urgency
is an uneasy beast amidst emblems
of quietude, the persistence of dying.

II.

He is with his first great love, the keeping
of the many casts, the lust and caring.
Who cares to know their neuroses? Impossible
is an abstraction from another country; and
they will travel everywhere without passports.

The motor scooter skids on grass, on the banks
of the Charles River. They drift and fall unhurt,
then begin to assemble what they have scattered:
her shoe, his wallet and its contents. She finds
among the papers one folded flat with a typed
list, a letter to himself which she reads while he rights the stunned machine. He has named all the women chronologically; she does not see herself as memorable among these; this is his strategy of estrangement, this dozen, surrounded each by a halo of white, spaced on the paper like echoes trapped in ice. There is no undoing this beginning: they will marry and be brief, migratory in their ways, trying always to revise the page already written, the unblinking names.

III.

Divorced, he is predatory and inexhaustible; impressive at seduction, he climbs a watchtower in Marblehead, Massachusetts, spews Arnold above the ocean’s stones: “Ah love, let us be true to one another . . .” and this is the brag of an image so prevalent the women ask each other, “Did he take you there, did he recite poetry?” His friend’s wife, wary of contagion, guards her husband unsuccessfully against him. Always now he aims toward the sea, that other cemetery, that innumerable cause of weather which sallies, or gusts, or rambles toward the dark room where he houses himself. One morning he is so conclusively fragmented in the single chair he keeps, that if he gets up he knows he will disperse. Hours later he finds himself, like an undelivered letter, still in this chair, buried by the dazzling torpor, his loneliness.
He is about to meet someone undiminished and faithful; he will see his thought as if for the first time, as if it were a ring he had worn, then lost, then found, detained behind familiarity for years.

IV.

The minister forgets to marry them. They wander the aisles of the Unitarian Church reading signs.

They are figures in a composition as varnished as a painting by van Eyck. Their small dog’s glad bark gives him courage. He telephones and awakens the minister from a Saturday nap; he arrives garbed in quotations. They are married; they go that night to a movie, Satyricon. She deserves better; she doesn’t complain; she brings luminosity and calm and an absence of doubt: he will betray her.

V.

Possession and loss are the same to him; knowing the worth of nothing he is ready, like the weather, to undress in the hurricane he causes, barely taking time to shout “Watch out!” after it is certainly far too late to avoid the velocity of lies which uproot a life or two, her life and his, unclasping their history, as terror makes her beauty finally a fact; finally he wants to contain the weeping, his thronged undoings; and even so, the broken promise enjambed, surged against pilings of the dock: he is no healer, even now.
VI.

There is no curfew except
his wish for a happy ending.

In this he is as callow as ever,
ready to watch his life, ensconced

in the first row, the screen taking
hold of a flicker, making it into

a bright something released.
Will she lead him hard from

this theater, as Plato would
have unticketed philosophers

storm all such theaters and
wrench the rapt into their lives?

She undresses as if alone but leaves
open the door so even he may see
the oceanic insurgency of her loveliness.
MISTAKE

Send me to bed without my supper,
cause me to sleep on burlap sacks,
bring such a wind as I have never
known, one that lifts the roof from
painted dreams: I would wake feverish
on a road of no lullabies. Only the cat
should love me; what does she know?
As soon as I left you, I regretted it,
the rain into which you ran cared more
for you than I, the moon’s teeth were
less than the huge bite I took from
your life; yes, as if what we have given
each other isn’t already devoured. Now
I know why lovers don’t shake hands
to show they carry no weapons; we are
armed and dangerous. There should be
a warrant out for the brutal gang of my
deceptions. And we never suffer enough
to be wise. What is this now, wisdom?
I won’t kid you again, even you, a true
believer in the best. I rant for gun control.
The clouds come on, faster than they seem;
suddenly it’s winter. There is no winter
like a stiff leaving, vessels locked in ice.
Do dogs listen to us because we are
the alpha wolf they never knew, because
we changed the circle their eyes made
outside the fire’s circle? We understood
their indecision: were they to eat of us,
hanging around our neophyte domesticity,
or did they want to eat with us,
almost invited by the bones we tossed?

Who knows how it happened? It’s like falling
in love for life. We realize later how
many years this has been going on, how many
times beyond counting we have faced night
and warmed each other. Most of the talk
we have together is commonplace and under­
stood; our life together is so far from wild
we endanger nothing by impulse or intent.

Quail and fat geese parade before us
unafraid; we would no sooner crush their
necks than return to the sooty fire and raw
bones of our history. Moving toward the future
we know what is at both ends of the leash, not
so much ourselves, gestures no longer needed,
but the idea that some corners of the kingdom
are peaceable, not at war nor to be.
IN THE CEMETERY WITH LYNN

It's strange that I've never seen the graves of my grandparents, Rachel and Abraham, finally blind in their nineties in New Jersey, and here I am in California in a scant two-acre cemetery full of local Jews since 1873, the sky edged by redwoods and two fur-barked palm trees risen in the shadows. Lots of these Jews came from where you might imagine, Poland mostly, but also Russia and Hungary; and they say so on the factual stones joining this tundra.

I like the paired graves, husband and the wife who usually died before him; the headstones are husband and wife, shoulder to shoulder, reading in bed, settling into the mattress which settles beneath them: Max and Sophia, Mordecai and Flora. Max, Mordecai, your women slept alert, waiting for you to come to bed, knowing it was a matter of time. I turn to Lynn and we regret our decision to be cremated; maybe it's better to hold to our bones if we know they won't be lonely.

There are the usual tragedies: Solomon killed at twenty-two in Korea and buried by Uncle Joe; infants' tombs the size of flower boxes; women felled by life in the middle of their lives, their kitchens warm from the oven, the children never playing the same after this. We are older than many buried here and we walk among the dead.
In the Cemetery with Lynn

with the wary calm of survivors: we are not unglad to be alive, and death must be hard; yet this afterward of some sunlight among friends is not so awful. And to be a Jew means you can tell old jokes almost forever. Morris, born in Russia, dead in another country, sits us down at the table of his grave. His manners aren’t so good, and he kvetches, and he tells us, and he means it, “God made me, and God don’t make no junk.”
STYLE

*for Elissa*

There are so many rules
it takes good luck to live
long enough to break them.

To undo the manifestos
profoundly requires, I guess,
more than longevity: style

is the ultimate morality
of the mind, says Whitehead,
as if the mind were a rector

standing austere at the door,
or elegant on the chair's edge
overhearing this conversation

between you and me. I hope
you will not listen to teachers
who say never paint in black.

Paint in black, bathe in black,
wear black at your wedding,
something so moral it resonates

you into Gothic thunder and
everyone blinks, and cannot
believe anything they knew

before. Send them into the cave
of their hearts, my heart, send
them into the deep deep dark.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


Faced Night and Warmed Each Other” also appeared. “Knob Pines” was reprinted in The Mother Earth News. “Oxford” won the Foley Award of America magazine. “Two Faces” was part of Broadside Series II, Moving Parts Press.

I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Arts for its support, and to Jonathan Holden, whose acuity and candor were helpful in editing this book. Lynn Lundstrom Swanger reviewed drafts of virtually all these poems, improving them with her insight and wisdom.
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BOOKS MAY BE RECALLED BEFORE THEIR DUE DATES

Form 104
With an unusual blend of playful language, absurdist humor, and striking parables of contemporary life, David Swanger passes on to us the hard and wonderful lessons of life and death, magic and pain. By exploring the divergent outlooks of men and women, considering the possibility of honesty in love, and sometimes drawing upon his Jewish ancestry, Swanger captures something about what it means to be human. The maturity of his voice permits him to treat the most serious of themes without appearing to take himself too seriously, enabling him to create a quiet grandeur from a simple moment, as in "Patriarch at the Lake":

After the required hour everyone but Grandpa waded, stirring silt around our ankles, enjoying mud. Then, as if called by voices beyond us, the old man rose, his belly taut, trunks reaching his knees, his shins white as fish, and walked without watching the ground toward water.

We parted to let him pass, we receded onto the beach; he prowed outward and swam. He remembered, he stroked and roiled and spumed his way away then back to us, his shorebound spawn.

Often provocative and occasionally outrageous, these poems inevitably make thematic connections that jolt the reader into viewing the ordinary in a new way.

About the Author

David Swanger is the author of numerous books, including The Shape of Waters and Inside the Horse. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry and the Foley Award, Swanger is Professor of Creative Writing and Education at the University of California at Santa Cruz.