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THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

POEMS BY

PETER COOLEY

A BREAKTHROUGH BOOK

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI PRESS

THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

AND SO IT WAS I ENTERED THE BROKEN WORLD
TO TRACE THE VISIONARY COMPANY OF LOVE, ITS VOICE
AN INSTANT IN THE WIND (I KNOW NOT WHITHER HURLED)
BUT NOT FOR LONG TO HOLD EACH DESPERATE CHOICE.

HART CRANE

NACRE VOIT.

RIMBAUD

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A BREAKTHROUGH BOOK
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI PRESS
COLUMBIA

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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

J87127

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Contents

The Way Back

- The Way Back, 10
- Blood Relics, 11
- Birthmark, 14
- The Listening Chamber, 15
- Children's Stories, 16
- Grandmother Poem, 16

Raising Peter

- Fitting, 18
- Possessed, 19
- The Man Who Dreams Me, 20
- Measures, 21
- The Barber, 22
- Narcissus, 23
- The Man Who Closes Himself, 24
- Raising Peter, 28

Confessions

- Sunday Thaw, 30
- The Last of the Crusades, 31
- Food, 31
- Tell Me, 32
- The Confession, 33
- Water-Walk, 34
- The Cat, 36
- Packer City Poem, 37
- Bed & Bored, 37
- For My Son, 38
- Returning from the Shopping
Center to the Suburbs, 39
- Solstice, 39
- While Waiting in Line, 40

The Angel Eater

- Fast, 42
- Confections, 43

Body Language, 44
Motes, 45
Poem for Reading into Many Levels, 46
Contacts, 46
Digging Heaven, 47
Angel, 49
Photographing Angels, 50
The Angel Eater, 51
St. Peter Martyr Receives the Stigmata
on the Stairs of the College of
Creative Communication Building, 52

Alternatives

Alternatives, 54
Foreshortening Dark, 55
This, 57
Tracks, 57
The Hands, 58
Vanishing Point, 59
Aladdin, 60

The Company of Strangers

Winter Light, 62
Shadow, 65
Hydra, 67
December Night, 68
The Last Muse, 69
Visits, 70
Waiting in the Suburbs
for the Sonic Booms, 71
Nightrunner, 72
Squaw Winter, 75
Mirror, 76
Icarus, 77
Composition, 78

THE WAY BACK

The Way Back

The way back is angular, marble,
sunlight turning a frieze to motion,
the horses' hooves, the charioteer,
anticipation of pure ascent.

Vertigo. You steady on gravity
to grasp a doorknob rounded
into a snowball under your palm
which continues withering, tinier

like a boutonniere drying,
frailty releasing its years.

Wriggling, it pins you, wriggling.
Then stretches wounds to the light

flickering till you see into them,
steam rising from the silver
around the table, posed in hands
the surgeon lays on flesh, a dance.

Always its faces are snowcapped,
birthmarked, scarring a map
you are climbing, up, up sheer mountains
through fog, the road ahead dissolving.

You turn to it and turn back—
with the gestures of a spider
flattening, it takes any door,
the kiss of that spider a blackout,
his sting a last mass for your name.

Blood Relics

I

A day I had placed in the world
returns as if someone had troweled
backwards into my skull where I turn
the faucet to cold & freeze
beside piss blackening the drains
with flies at the Vic Theatre men's room.

II

A whole field opens down
my eyes & I am lying here, naked,
she beside me, bodies tucked
in sweat, the wind-hot grasses
tossing about us their small flies
swarming around us in a tent,
a shimmering net of death-juice,
& wind-beats like the flutter of love
stretching its delicate wing & tentative
before the final pounding down.

III

Beside me, the curbstone & evening,
she turns her eyes, pulling the bones
behind flesh-masks to ask me,
"What is the ant? Is he my sister?"
stirring the ant hill with a stick,
"Does his house have many rooms?"
Till I tell my daughter, let's grow smaller
together over his castle, hold our breath
out of his domain & listen:
the *shau shau shau* of black troop feet
shunting eternity in these grains
down their suck-hole to the dark.

IV

You were a long time dying
from the child you shrank into
your china doll insides, Grandma.

Now, propped here, you wear that girl
across your skin you kept alive,
a violet pall. I'm seventeen.
My aunts and uncles, toys you squeezed
or dropped, are at my tight sleeves, swarming.
Not one cared when your breath quit.
You had so many years before.
At ten you should have been
my taffy-colored mutt, my baby cousin,
Louise, they shut in the state hospital.

V

Mother,
that was the summer
I began to die.
Admit I was quiet about it.
The doctor laughed you took me to.
Under these eaves I lay
with hornets at my window,
dreaming the swarming of a lust
you never guessed would drive
a thirteen-year-old sick
from tearing at his body
till he could fall in love
with death & feel it stinging
out of himself each night
growing harder, longer.

VI

The face of the woman clears
suddenly before my poetry class
on Emily Dickinson's death fly
at the mental hospital & says,
taking the poem into her voice
as if coming from some place
she had walked before,
"I feel this. This moves me."

VII

I hold your skull to the light,
the moon, at night walking you,
daughter, little death kit, I see clear
through to the other side in the soft
nuzzling we go to, you & I
in time to my humming this song;
where I will lie down with others
& leave you to your life framing
the accident I came for, leaving my own.

VIII

I cup the water into my hands
at the faucet of the theater,
I bathe my eyes, my ears,
my nose & lips, I annoint my head
in the holy tongues of memories
walking backwards out of themselves,
holding my life against this mirror
crying like one of the women I call up
until I shake down to my feet
dancing the blessing, the blessing.

IX

And I leave memory & this poem
under my feet, going out the door
of the Vic, sweat, popcorn, the sunlight
splicing my eyes with the street of people
running to take up life again,
our benediction, one foot at a time.

Birthmark

By first light the roses
shake as if startled
to be stared at, awake.

They tilt their necks
toward me, bowsprits
on virgins or swans
erected in bas-relief,
gestures a mute
assumes from the dark.

Approaching, I rip one
off: soft, red wings
separate my hands; I warm
to them, a tiny flame.

Now they are wind
kissing my face, each bone

claiming its scarlets;
this scald spot Persia,
Japan a volcano

my jaw rocks shut.
I fist my eyes, turn
inside to distances

ahead. It's still alive
there, gaze fixed over my life,
the future, & the old scar,

lifted to light, here
is blood wet, this dream
I've always just begun.

The Listening Chamber

Not this moon, which is your father,
this tree your mother, barren of wings,
nor the sheer face of rain which is always that
and the attic, an afternoon you're still filling
with the girl from downstairs, bonier than you thought.

Now even these like the rest go down,
dragging a shadow, balloons of skulls,
limp as if called to sleep. They shape
the hollows of the earth. They never were.

Words they cut in you like granite
never took. You never swam the bag
of waters, your mother and her screams.
It stills, a shine like statues danced
in ice. This is not you the father rocks,
his shoulder muscles initials raised from wood
for girls you chased the long hairs of a dream.
They woke. They break like flies to other lives.

Wizardry could steady this or nothing
else. Now snow revolves us through a glass,
landscapes dissolving in a globe.
Here a river, each white house
immaculate in shadow. At every window
no one to turn away. They are inside, carving
the center of our life. They have nothing
to do with us we can help. Let them
get on with it, the eating of our lives.

Children's Stories

The wolf bares fangs around a kid
on p. 3 tonight in that book holding
the attic still above my head. I'm home.
To my father's drone squaring the ceiling
(It's in a green box, near the bottom)
& April breaking here at "murder city,"
Detroit, whose suburbs' swell ought to be fenced,
my father says, & wire-barbed to keep them,
the teen gangs, hoodlums, Southerners'
kids ("white and colored, I'm not prejudiced")
out, who steal his neighbors blind. On shrubs
holding whites of eyes, buds break the dark
over this lawn Dad keeps out at an arm's length
lifting a switch. He lifts; an oasis rises,
lit like noon. "Well, time for bed." I nod.
My daughters sleep behind these walls & just today
I saw the wolf's jaws never close
at the plaza buying my six-year-old
her own. Something else I caught too late.

Grandmother Poem

There is a place in the afternoon
you begin burning, finally.
I see you, blazing like this beach
my shadow follows in a white light
so hot I can't stop.

Old woman,
your heart turned over too fast
for your children, flying in, late
to their hometown, wiring everyone
not to.

Grandma, I can't stand still . . .
I didn't know a single cousin
at that ceremony face to face
or you, invisible, I hadn't seen
your eight years in the home.

You must be blinding by this time.

RAISING PETER

Fitting

Before the mirror making faces
to wake myself up
as someone, I take on
the face of the hawk
descending, his testicles slung
snow apples, his face a knife
sprung into wrinkling blood of mouse,
lizard, & prairie hen I strut in
riding his spurs. I appear dog-jawed
in the head of Menominee dancing this room
naked as forests until they fell
together like arrowheads, I assume
the countenance of the king
wasp high-stepping up his harem
jabbing his scepter through wives,
daughters, concubines, grandmothers, & those newly born
to eternal life as wolves, salmon, sparrows
& some child of the suburbs pausing
outside this window like the sun.
I shave, I shower, I brush
my teeth & hair, I put on
the sackcloth of the body
they call my name, continuing:
In which of your disappearances,
shadow, do I go on?
Try me, I come alive.

Possessed

You knock on your life with a fist.
It doesn't give, not a crack. Has the door
turned to anthracite? Not good wood anymore.

You resolve to get your life clean,
a dish washed of its appetite. You stare
down the rim of yourself to the depths.
Nothing in sight is lifting its dark lid
starry enough. So you redefine your life:
A heart. It should open & shut
stone valves with the turn of your wishes
to blood. Good luck? You get a pulse in your wrist.

You take your life in your hands; you say
"Look, I'll give you a fair shake; where's mine?"
His shoulders rattle like a glass doll.

You stand him up & slip inside.
This is the best of the lot,
you think, winding him up & yet
why is his skin like ice & then
you're on the run, already sweating
your whole future, lying around you
like a field of snow or the childhood
of your friends, white, wholly imaginable,
impossible, & not your own.

The Man Who Dreams Me

He is someone who hangs on my roof
late at night, washing it in stars,
rain, fireflies, or he appears
all at once to take me in hand
stepping off a curb as if one
blind or very old. Evenings
he floats in eyes of the woman
who stares into mine, then smiles,
waves & disappears; later, clear
sexual water in her brain he swims,
inland, sowing her isles of sleep.
Sometimes crossing a street I'll feel
a blade through my shoulders & turn
to a window stamped with his laugh
like the moon breaking into a mirror.
"Why here?" I think, but the earth
skims my feet off its surface,
till I look down sides of a pit
where I draw up his face for a drink.
When we meet it is brief & in alleys
to hand me compass, map, the supply
of sleep, a talisman dipped in blood.
He gives me my name to repeat, my litany:
I am the wind; fill in this, blank; stop . . .
& my assignment: *where you go is nowhere*
you aren't until it sings to you: no,
Knock on sleep & I ask, "Why not?"
"why not," I always ask.

Measures

Moments like days when the body is someone else
blazing at the end of a field, blue & wild
like sheets of tin, shaken, you want to lie down
finally. You want to say, *let me*
let you to every length which still resists
the armature of dark. You want
to be laid out in little rings of flesh, a figure
cut out of the air, you want to drink
rivers from your skull which you can eat
sitting down at your own table, the betrayed.

Then for your heart
to stop this beating in your mouth,
every flail a sentence you don't need
if you can break your words on silence,
like ice on teeth of the drowned.

You kneel here in this naked air
praying for the double to die, a werewolf
staked in the coherence of your bones before he folds
your self into the body which floats back—
now like a kite struck down by rain; or is it fire
which pulls at the string in your hand
before the world turns around in the wind
and you come down?

The Barber

"Peter, you have been very bad," he whispers smiling the length of his mouth. "Lie back under this." I try to shake my head; he lays a warm cloth over my breath.

I nod. I nod. A sheet swims up my ankles and my knees, dampens my thighs' insides, both arms playing out into its grip. "Peter?" The ceiling tilts, his razor dims in mist.

Straps take my limbs, I wear the night like sweat or stars glistening, glistening extremities naked before the mirrors of his face, this single beam between the eyes.

"Fine, just fine, lie still. Stop that." Cold metal instruments assume my spine, my neck, they find the sutures ready, tunnel in. And now the pain lifts off my head:

his nightmare runs to its bottom in a bowl the let blood deepens, stirs. I start to scream *You've touched the wound, now it will talk, it's clear.* As if it were. Or enough. Or could.

Narcissus

Days like this I want to ride out
along edges of my body like a night
at the extremities, face a kind of pure wound
open to a tunnel at both ends.

All along the road this afternoon
housewives are coiffed & stopped,
lifting snow like wheat they garnered once
without a man. If I had edges. Superfluous, erect,
my breath passes, carrying the thaw
openly, a sort of March itself.

Today, if I could, to ride out
extremities in motion, a quick night
farther than the limits which can taste
like orchards abutting on the sea.

But there are streets which hold up
rivers every time I stop before one,
another Peter. Extremities. The housewives prop
over their shovels, snow is piled
tidal reefs on either side: to watch me stoop,
making the way repeatedly a pilgrimage
to the same shrine, a hall of mirrors,
each stop a little death & melting
before the next reflecting.

Night, the extremities of body.

To enter myself there, ring by ring,
like an ax at the edge of a forest.

The Man Who Closes Himself

You don't find him in crowds,
the man who closes himself.
He doesn't need hiding
where it's so dark
with the fires, the keys
and the spiral where each step
will never rise.

* * *

He has learned to go
through doors nailed shut,
the man who closes himself,
and felt his body sprayed
into the grains of the wood.
He has carried his doors
until he will drop.

* * *

He has hands,
he has feet,
he has a head,
it isn't easy
and then the torque of the wind
is never the same
at any minute.

* * *

He knows corridors,
the man who closes himself,
and mirrors, the floors
where his face will go on walking
after he's gone.
Mirrors that are reflections
of all his keys.

* * *

He wakes
to find himself
in the mouth of the sun

falling
without his moving
into that sun.

* * *

He finds himself
in the bark of a tree
where he can hide
with the hollow inside.
All night he will walk
in that tree's circle, unable
to rise through the tree
in the way of the moon.

* * *

He has seen his other
watching in doorways,
approaching in smoke,
a light growing closer
under his skin.
For the man who closes himself
the other is skin.

* * *

For the man who closes himself
what is the sun?
what are the trees?
what are the zones of the wind?
what would it be
to sow himself
starting from the center.
He knows this much
it's his own way.

* * *

For his wife
there is nothing left
except in silence

beyond the words.
In bed she moves
under his hands like water,
water that will not rise
to drown him
but in minutes.

* * *

Even the laughter
of his small daughter
is too loud, too hard
and cannot touch him
going around.

* * *

He would like to get away
from all this, to go
to the edge of the field
where he could lie
with the fireflies
of snow that would come down
to light his eyes.
These eyes that want to go
beyond the edge of the field.

* * *

He wants the light
to go out
in the back of his head,
that has been burning
for so long now.
But he has no words,
the man who closes himself,
to hold that light.

* * *

He would like to walk
in the poem, to talk
in it, to hear the light
lifting his body off
as he spoke his way, the earth,
the water, fire
rising out of his breath.
But the words turn him here.

* * *

There is the spiral,
there are the mirrors,
there is still the wind.
He crosses these, always alone,
the man who closes himself,
wanting to be
with none of these, to be
wherever they take him
to make his way.
The reason he's going
is still
to be made up.

—after Guillevic

Raising Peter

The day its lips moving
to the day a monotony
androgynous one body

manipulating itself
with light. Now it divides
against my window twins

at the edge of morning
approaching their steps
heavier each foot

hollowing the small rooms
under my eyes. These are the thieves
come to revive me. Obedient

I rise kneel. Under the sign
of the cross I assume
this man's this woman's

hands. Touch by touch
they graft their blessings
to me like a skin. Unclean.

Unclean. They stand back I pretend
bewilderment that I live
to take on their kingdom

again: scaled lids
splaying my sight my tongue
exiled to ride out

leprous my right arm
a sack of flesh in my left.
All this colony untouchable

in my head my body
ordinary as anyone
or yours to face them

Today & Today who shout
Resurrected the future is yours
it's just begun.

CONFESSIONS

Sunday Thaw

March. The day is sugar; neighbor,
pour it out. Nothing moves in the nothing
between us of this city: factories,
static, the sediment a winter come down
to harden us in love at last,
a kind of fracture, or the river tanning
leather on another of its skins.

Would I speak to you again if you would?
Sure, but you won't, we don't worry.
While winter's here a distance snows
our properties like figures sealed
in glass you'll shake down soon
until they're clear: grandma, t.v., portable
Jesuses in concrete for the birds,
offspring sweet & crystalline
as heads on semen, beer, & I'll walk out
by myself, wave, keep walking.

The Last of the Crusades

Endless. The fields are left to smoke
never the same way. Another life ago
my hull thrust up this shore,
took on the country like a wound,
duties, marching & vigilance.
The point of blood? Not victory
nor to lie down as if a wind in ruins
& the dead ink we issued for the world.
Rather, say like this hush together, walking
its city streets: as if each step could raze
a future underfoot & ours because
surrendered, I've been loving you so long.

Food

All morning I watch the factories
lay out their smoke. Our window shapes them:
a unicorn, two unicorns, some cavern,
a gibbet hung with thieves. *All right, right
now*, I say & come to take your soup
deep enough to miss the snow
beginning. You will? So in each other,
then, we lie down for an hour;
finished, I watch it falling through the curtains,
humped like bread. When I come out,
naked, I walk the house, touching
each wall, furniture, caves of the doors.
Every one glistens & stops turning
for a minute, melting, wet,
before it settles in my hand like glass.

Tell Me

How long will I keep it up,
cupping my mouth to yours, slipping
words here, stones which a man
might pass for coin if the darkness
lay itself out to him.

Or take into his mouth since stone
goes down like bread. Then lift a nave
around it, poems, relics, anything
probably ghostly at center.

Or speak to with echoes as women
might try in a seashell,
that sea-filled spiral they call
father-confessor, love,
coiling his voice so nameless
that deeply he'll self-resurrect
like a crank, some long-distance threat.

Love, tell me. No, listen,
let your pulse go out
like a red star caught on the naked eye
toward dreams. Start again you say?
Even the first line? Which image?
The title. Put you to sleep
when what you had in mind
was sex. *From the beginning.*

The Confession

You have just come in the door
from having one,
the first time you tell me
with any priest in eight years
we've been married.

The storm door holds you,
closing yourself against it,
that wind where green shoots lift
my bed of crocus laid out
toward this first warm night all year.

Today at work all afternoon
it was spring in people's heads
till they would talk of nothing else
but a typist who lost touch, quit,
after the boss got her down.

I would never ask
did you tell him about those years,
the others between us
blown off like seeds across the lawn.
I nod. Sure, the kids went to sleep easily.

Water-Walk

Here is the night you would like to die in,
a shape it assumes, sheer air
parting your body, the features
piece by piece given back. So this dog
at the gate is happy as you are
to surrender him that, though speechless
while you cross. Now as if his first chance
for darkness were here, emotion
is nothing, an angel standing
beside you, a pillar of light
thrown like a voice on the water
you both take. What had he been
earlier, old shade, you took him for
an enemy & not this distance
from yourself? Where you had known him
only complicate, not to be reckoned with
unless in glass or sealed
dances in your bones,
now he is yours, other, & you are so clear
together in smoke these plains lift
from the shore like tricks of mirrors
you scarcely speak. Your feet touch down
again & again affirming the obvious: his
is your walk so long as you take it

this lightly (once, which was not enough,
you had your faith in mothers, fathers,
others, yourself, demons, the usual
sluice in heaven we name our loss
or growing up) & now as you touch ground
you ask the fields, the afternoons,
the rest of a life you catch reflections of
across the angel's wings: is it possible you,
rejecting even yourself at last,
can walk dry land with him
inside you & come on love,
a last alternative or miracle
you look into clearly as these waters
& call someone else.

The Cat

She has chosen me, alone
among the four men in this room
filming on her eye; I swim here,
focus in each dark stone she taunts
our women with. And now she arches,
catapults my lap: its touch repulses,
pins her down. My fingers start their climb
into her tail, her haunches, neck,
up bristles, take the suck of breath
against mine, getting ready.

No,
if we continued, traded faces,
bitch, sister, moon-queen, slit,
let our bones snow into one face
on the moon, we'd call that myth
our love & not these parts
& privacies we play with, wouldn't we?
Which is why I lay you
on the floor quietly to take up
another of your lives
quite accidentally.

Packer City Poem

Nothing is getting up now in my life
like lawns of the neighbors at evening
shaved flanks bared to the stars,
the factories' tentacles of smoke.
If I watered you could you develop,
I ask Ennui, putting it to her
limply. Even her boobies are bored,
padded, cold. Help, help, I'm up the middle
of middle america & can't break out
a cheer announces from my throat.
Linemen flake the t.v.'s grin
like autumn leaves; wiser, birds V
in mid-July for winter camp & beer
freezing here in June. And now a lady
pares her next door hedge with frost
on nails & stacked-up hair. Dogsleds,
a snowmobile, one of your miracles, quick,
angel. Summer, I winter here,
I diet on rich air. Angel, another year?

Bed & Bored

We should meet again in another life
another house, you & I, start over
as lovers star-crossed, or like stars fall
on each other to put out the dark.

We should take it out of our hide,
our love for them, murder both in the night
2 carved up, 2 people skinned
of their children, getting through to bone again.

Lady, everywhere I put my foot down
is "father" in this house, "mother"
is the name of another mine, call it
dynamite if they met. They won't. Admit it.

Or say this: suppose we went down together
naked to that other place, the fire
pricking our loins, you'd get me up
to check if the kids had been burned yet.

For My Son

In this small room the world
you call yours before dawn,
rising dark like a wife
buried, children in the city
with their own, you find their names,
father, mother, come back
for the last time, dying.

Your eyes finger edges, a bowl
where soup chills, or the spaniel
sleeping white in his shadow,
passing nights with a ghost
the late show throws to the floor.

If you were dead I could speak
with you finally, imagining
as if you were. And you'd hear me
like my daughters, wouldn't you, dying here
to make it up, my son, you
never born, you, a voice
I press to the window, your frost
a mouth against mine this morning
vanishing the next breath.

Returning from the Shopping Center to the Suburbs

I drive with the brights on
like antlers to the dark. It's hard
to get ahead these days; you know,
while your soul keeps panting up behind you,
licking your collar of its salt.

Tonight again I do it: drop the wheel
& pull my eyes into a fist: I see them,
God, I swear it, I can taste the roots,
that sweet bone marrow of the stars.

I start to die, right here & get reborn
before the car I'm facing now head-on
swerves on its horn out of the road.

Cooley, you're not even high & yet
you know it: I'm among the chosen. Like
those stars I'm going to live forever, listener,
not that you asked. And while we're at it:
how do you get through your life?

Solstice

Behind my eyelid the days pile up,
Peter winding himself or memory
entering sleep on a spool as leaves
under pressure might hollow a grave.

The sparrows know this, crossing my eye
like dark winds on a flight back
again this morning. Now they scatter
the mind as if it were seed.

When they wake next where will I be
shaking the dust like sunlight
out of their wings? We're in no hurry.

While Waiting in Line

I

The stare of the check-out girl is heavy,
lidded with violet. Violet shimmers in the floor,
shoulders through aisles of cellophane like ice
around a doll's face, pickups, over the walls
hanging their carols on me, wreath by wreath
until the ceiling, a glare against my own.

I move up, one. Keeper of the mysteries,
the till of Xmas, what have I brought her to itemize
I can't count yet? I finger my small change.

II

There is a man at the end of my body
nobody today is going to touch
except you, lady. But not here, waiting for a bus,
shoved in this crowd of Saturday shoppers
where I could lie down, back against the wall
the store puts to the street, another mannequin,
& who would shake the tin cup in my voice?
Lady Poverty, open the beggar's palm
wider, colder, at the end of some blue field
put out my eyes just one more time.

III

I stand at the edge of town with snow
drifting back at me over roofs in smoke,
a face surrendering to sleep, a child's face.
This could be anywhere, couldn't it, sparrow,
in the Midwest? You hold the scene in place
around your voice. No, I have to go home now.
I must be dying I am so happy.

THE ANGEL EATER

Fast

Imagine a table absolutely empty.
Imagine the room now, whiter than paper
on walls, in the floor, lifting a ceiling
(empty your head, think of nothing, of zero)
white as the moon. Now we are home.
It's dinner time, your chair (I prefer
to stand) is right here. Sit.
Let me lay out your place.
Here we are: utensils like water,
the fork, two spoons, the vaporous
knife where nothing is spread
like a jam that tastes very good.
Wait, your attention has wandered:
now follow this line, be simple about it;
nothing easy is done except daily & painfully
& you're a novice. Listen. Imagine
the sea, like a ribbon of ice, swirling
as you start to eat around you, beyond view,
necessary, a black mass, quite precise
in being out of sight. What? No, no,
I didn't forget it. This food, even the plate
we wait for (almost forever)
unless the angel sends it; as just now
I make him do it, like a white flame
here he is, right on this page,
invisible. The rest is up to you.

Confections

Walking through the city you might
come up against somebody, letting it
get in a backpocket, between elbows
so intimate, with such privilege,
you can hardly speak. This is the first
angel. The next is the killer, a loser
in his style, peering between the palms
skyscrapers always are lifting as if caught
by the whole city in chagrin. One night,
late, he got a good run, had the skyline,
stripped it to the dark. 3-6 are miscellaneous,
though criminal in glances: bellboys, doctors, dockmen,
the waitress with her long hair running
in a net since she has yielded
to nimbus principles of order long ago
in order to hold down her own. That leaves—
but in her sleeves are flounces
you should mistake for wings I must
point out. Now #7: Suspicious,
meticulous, he pauses in a window,
posing questions the glass can never frame
reflecting our eyes, disquieted,
at so much stillness in the limbs
strewn around the mannequin himself.

Stare. This angel is the last to take you.
But even when you wrestle him to air
& lose him & his blessing, call that grace
which snaps off like a light leaving you both
luck as a torso without wings,
a store window the stairway where you were.

Body Language

I call the angel out of the mirror
with a shrug, tossing my head, one hip
forward a half-step, the kind of look
you aim through the room at a girl
you're going to get. Miracle? Miracles,
she's here, you're in the mirror
there, anywhere. Could it matter?

She's yours so long as she can do
with you what she pleases, erect
or on the knees or legs drawn up
flat on your back, yelping, tongue out
on all fours. Jesus, never again,
you swear, but all at once she's done
the whole day with color standing up
like fire you walk through, her beside you
then overhead, the light continuous
in breaking, wave on wave . . .

until you're blessed, forehead, chest,
breastbones, where she signs herself
again, again, her light coming down
to the light which blooms where the light
enters, the light in your hands.

Motes

Between walls, waking in the dark
at arm's length, I look down them almost
a gun sight, now a candle
wavering before the statue of a saint.
Mirrors? a flash storm landing on these walls
like the teeth on dice? No, his shadow,
7th skin around mind putting on
my clothes, shining: the redneck, greaser
double-agent angel who never wakes
a wife, my wallet folding down like blood
within his bright insides.

He bristles,
separates my rib, steps out,
spins smiles like a hoop of fire
around our ankles till we're flush.
He tilts my jawbone, crawls back in.

And now I've seen myself
naked for him I go out
to the day, dark, but squinting at it,
expecting it to stare back or what
or to take me up, embarrassed,
like the whole face of the stars.

Poem for Reading into Many Levels

Our bodies assume a terrible weight
like an allegory of the fall: medieval
beasts cut out of wood or metal tangle
everywhere together in horror & superfluous
as if they trimmed a bishop's chair. Now
we are demons, love; look, fangs, some crenellations,
you've got straw blooming in your ears,
broccoli or hair. See this tongue:
a blazon, say "ah"—let me read yours.
Oh, Jesus, not resurrection yet. Your palm,
please. The zodiac? A Taurus. Stop.
High jinks descriptions just won't make it
even worse. Love is no dove to lug around
inside you all day; yes, it's heavy
stuff, so when I start to fall at night
on you, it's all the way to hell
& the last judgment we're raising up:
these angels which fly by us, waving
gleefully are what you dreamed: duck-
billed, squawking platypi, furry-feathery,
horn-billed gargoyles, lady. It's that deep.

Contacts

After midnight, wife & children
sleeping & the moon a wafer
threading between clouds, I go downstairs,
my ribs whitewashing walls like any wrath's
or break-in artist's. I reach the phone,
lift the chilled receiver, dial number
after number pulled at random from the book.
They think I'm some kook, pervert,
wrong number, teenager, dragging them out
of sleep to hear this quickened, moist,
red beating of my heart as I breathe down
their ears, their wild "Hello," "Hellos,"
the numinous "fuck yous," screams & yawns
exhaled like rooms of orgiastic smoke
or fumes dividing on a dove & olive branch
& still the angel hasn't answered yet.

Digging Heaven

I

Sure my wife's asleep,
my daughters are, the neighbors under lids
of skin or a good drunk, I steal outside,
lifting the flagstone of the terrace up
inch by cubic inch, like unmuzzling a whale.
I suck my breath in, light a match. Shh. Now.
Look how my eyes, my feet flare past it,
down the tunnel where the distance could be
anywhere tomorrow can climb. Well, here
I go, spade on my toes, the thresholds quivering
rainbows, one a minute, I'd say or else
I'm shoving that myth about China into something
moat-sized, mole-hilled, landmined & a ditch
which heaven must be, a chickweed bed,
if I can grip what's decent for a grave
& drill it, dredging somehow deeper
where a madman, soldier, poet would lie down.

II

Hours. Who's to say this rare air of cavern
I'm digging isn't another grotesquerie
of angels, poured like wax into my ear
instead of vision? Wait, though, I'm kicking stone,
proverbial reality, noon-white I'm digging out
now, both paws in here like a cat
working his claws around this rat's tail
of darkness I'm lugging for its tip,
got it, both hands, shadows drop, a water,
lifting the thigh bone of my grandmother
which I toss into the air to flutter
as if she were a hummingbird on wing.

III

Years? There's no count here
where I come every night, sometimes on my belly
or sideways to crawl along the ground. I've got
a maiden aunt's ankle, the ribs of cousins
twice-removed, the almost ice-translucent skull
of Grandpa Cooley, a devil or a werewolf's grin.

But for Christ's sake

I've got just so many years
to go yet before I get to Adam
& the angel's shape of Paradise,
that most nights I know I'll never make it
even when the angels swoop down
to help me dig. Then sometimes I forget
to worry, I think "To Hell with it" like now
or "I've done *my* part," leaning the shovel on a wall,
listening to the dark. That wall is what I have.

Angel

She tells me every night she's had it
standing up against a door
buckling with ice, behind a bar
or drive-in, swimming that blue light
the manager sweats at 3 A.M.
She says it's tough on them
if they're too slow & shakes herself
another double in the mirrors
before she pours me one. I never ask
for names, they tear past, cellophane
wind sucks out a window of my car:
parents, foster-parents, Lenny,
an abortion in Gary or Juarez, a sister
married in Idaho, the one with red hair
who "goes up like a Zippo lighter,
the one—" Or why if they beat her
or insist on dressing like a girl
or make her bark or crawl she doesn't
spit on them, charge two bucks extra,
swear to give it up, skip town.
No more than 22, 5'3"
"stacked like this since I was ten,"
she wants me lately till they close
to listen—my sister, myself
turned inside out. Ok by me.

Photographing Angels

I

Salt on the tail. It nails them,
brings out their true colors.
Now I know what Jacob meant:
"Level" is a negative concept.

II

The Leica rings my neck
like a crucifix Wisconsin shines in,
her atoms burbling on the lens.
Steady. December spills its incarnations.

III

Tracking, I approach him slowly
where he turns, faces, russet feathers
exploding, nimbus & his wings
a torch parade just lit. Blackout.

Now he sprints, I pan the snow,
the nothing he disappears in, striking
his sister, mid-air a white fire
I'm zooming, squinting that maxim
"Light itself can be a subject."

IV Coda: at *Ideal Photo*

I peel their wrappers like the skins
oranges turn, taking the blame, the prints,
into my hands. They're all alike
again: one half the moon's reverse face
in its blackness, then a clean slate
chalked, *tabula rasa*, on the other.
Look, the whole world, I tell the clerk,
must be full of nothing else or nothing.

The Angel Eater

Sometimes I feel her pressing
against my breath like hunger
for sex, a dozen reefers, an oxygen mask
threatening final immersion in giddy dreams.
It's that funky, that eschatological
like a whalebone's tail. Where does this start?
So when she comes, I try to sit down
or keep a face at least as droll
as an epitaph on stone. I open wide,
hoping the funnel effect will draw her in.
She nibbles, my lip quivers like a fly
breasting a wave of azure or the sun
when they cross somewhere, a perfect arc
out of everybody's sight. Now she grips,
I pull, she bites down & the whole line
goes out, spiraling, whining the luminousness
of what I'm pulling on, feet braced,
hands strapped against the map-capped
air while I suck her in, whirling, whirling.
And when she goes down, all the way
like a sulky wine, the thrust of a sauce
that drives like a good lay, deeper & deeper,
there is an explosion in heaven reaching
down to my bowels which shakes them
like a reed & a voice somewhere starts out
walking, crying in tongues
"Peter," "Peter," for the first time always,
always for the first time in my life.

**St. Peter Martyr Receives
The Stigmata on the Stairs of the
College of Creative Communication Building**

Putting my life on the line like this
day by day (yes, it's sick) has got me
wondering about the dynamics of our relationship,
angel. Not what they'd call exercising
"good taste" at the university or any church
would write in canon law this way
you want to play it: an appearance
at any hour, anywhere. Like yesterday
first in the john (at home, thank God
& thank the Virgin I was only shaving),
then later running up stairs, late
to teach my class: a rustle like a bat;
you float there, right overhead, a cobweb
burning with that light you want to drop
in long threads spun into my hands.
Are you a spider? A werewolf? You know
I need that stuff like crazy,
like a bear needs honey paws, a fish
rock bottoms, like a man who needs a fix
I'll do anything to get it. Angel, come down,
come down, sew me that stitch of heaven
in my palm. I'll put your name in lights,
kid, white paper. Be vain, you'll have men,
thousands, imagining, desiring you, every inch.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternatives

You would sleep with the moon
if she would listen. Make the move.
You need it that much.

You would fall through grass
that it take on, naked,
the garment of flesh. And fall away.

You would lie with the oak
if it should come down & bear you
nut-brown daughters in spring.

You would ask the river
to take you into her mouth
be she the vessel & current of hope.

You would put it to the mosquito
if you could pin her down
with a line on this white sheet.

Then there's the desire
to throw yourself into valleys, to root
among meadows at night. To climb

ladders of azure, the moist wind
undoing salmon, rabbits, a fly
in fine hair of its kiss. Or even

to lie like a dog on the side
of some hill, raising a whelp
in the bitch, the moon, to go down

among the possibles, spilling yourself
in every seed that lifts its head
to ask & aren't I Lord the world

*& aren't I & aren't I as long
as I go on laying myself down
longing to burst through my skin
the wild cry of your blossoming?*

Foreshortening Dark

I

Summer, some evenings, a man wants to lay himself out,
edges to the sky; scutter, a sail there, perpendicular
to all desire, washing the sun. Or steady his life
mythic & definite, plinth for a god.

All at once

his future is beginning, blooming through his head as if
she's walking down his rib, bone-dark like stars.

Already, long fields of him are off & running, compass
to every distance on his map. Grasses take up
first names under his hands: leaning, they whisper
Let us live forever: now the small birds cry
Pray for us, spokes of the sun. The oak, the turtle,
worms, line up to chant: *tender your blessings, lord,*
that we survive. What is he making at arm's length?
he asks the fable a man's life
comes down to, not his Lady, now called "Fate"
who walks out of his side one night to show
how she can open for him, still water to lie down.
What question? We pull a curtain on the scene.

II

Sometimes, the sky turning, unexpected, grey
an instant, I turn from my work & tender, mute,
the question stutters back: Why is this mine? Because
the place is not, nor am I any but a claiming of
what others had. And suddenly what I had been
afraid of, why my life had seemed like chapters
filling daily with another, one I kept
inventing out of water, a character in prose:
this & all stone wrappings fall away. I hear the sun
begin to turn through me, my hardened lock, & suddenly
the bearings spring; I walk a night of which
each instant lit is different, falling aside the man

on the horizon, continuous, a picture, where like inks,
I had deposited myself for years & just
in the interest of this other, one who is, of course,
the Foreshadower, my only answerer, who says:

*And wouldn't you like to lay your body wherever
you could? And couldn't you sleep in the ghost
of your other forever?*

This

Summer is over. It puts its face
to the window, saying touch me
touch me not, then running
into the morning, a first frost
grass is praying out like beads.

All day it wanders in false skirts,
priests like women are clouds
we lower our eyes to, their whites
making all our gestures a haze.

Over. A rain at the window
its sharp breath knocking or silver
ringing where it is faceless,
a prayer wheel turning the night
which lifts up a cup of the stars.

My mouth comes down on this hard,
black wafer, the first black snow.

Tracks

Midnight. The words start out, walking
from the poem I've been writing.
It snows. They go like snowflakes
to some point of silence
beyond this window, ridges of the road,
snow's been piling all day.

Now they're running, their boots
like the thunder of nails
building a house. It snows.
Their faces are hard & sheer
ice bent into this.

So hard

I can't tell if you're still here
(it snows) since I've started to say it:
everywhere we are is snow.
The page is coming toward you, quickly
under a noon sun. It could melt.

The Hands

They aren't my friends.
Had I imagined it otherwise?
But not as women dividing myself
between them, their white mounds
gripping the life lines,
flickering on & off.
Or if I sleep
robed priests who bear me,
a box of something unclean,
standing up to call itself
the sacred. Not nurses
softly lifting my skin, my bone,
who wheel me, bound,
for solitary at last.
Nor figures who keep
the lids of tombs, breathing
silence out of a king, his queen,
with me, their last bastard,
inheriting calmness, its touch,
the blessing, a grace of numbness,
its quick clutch.
Tonight these fingers buttress
the light over my head.
Is it to darkness
they pray for another life,
severing wrists, my body
strewn like a salt,
such myths, any resurrection?
They could kill a man.

Vanishing Point

He hears the summer at a distance
arrange itself inside him:
there, the sky recedes, heat lightening
strikes the last frost out of his gums.

Here, someone is lining the trees up
row to row, a theater of echoes,
moss the ants parade or now crickets
his limbs, their strings in this air
an architecture off-stage
amazing to even the stones.

Later there will be rain
peeling the night back through his faces,
graftings, while the birds come down
to plant the small black fruit of his eyes.

Tell him: some morning he'll rise,
a tiny god shaking the lights
their disciples off his skin, all miracles
this ambiguous, naked
to find himself ready
already, masked, moving out.

Aladdin

At the edge of this page tonight
I hear the rain falling, the dark
rising like a mammoth from dust
or Atlantis tipping its warm breath
in profile a minute here
at my knuckles, a second coming.
I rub: the page erases slowly
any trace of Peter. I rub:
flames stretch into my hands
until I stand up, cupping them
at the window, its lantern of stars,
& that darkness taking me, cold,
across its own. And then I wake
at the edge of this paper, definite
as sculpture turning or knowing
I'm no one or else mad
or my poem crawling the page
a hole in the air, a reflection
stars throw, leaning in
at the window, obeisant as cattle
witnessing this birth, dead stars,
or only ink blotting the page
& the poem on the wing rising
over the city, darkening already
the edge of another life.

THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

Winter Light

In Memory: R.R.

We hear the music raging
Under the lids we have closed.
—Donald Justice, "For the Suicides of 1962"

Outside my window the hard ground
holds a sparrow to its bones
again today, January 8th.
One-legged he takes the snow, the fog,
sprigs of juniper I laid out
after Christmas, their crushed black stalks,
stiff, upright against the sun,
that vestment he casts off.

Your last letter was one sheet, torn,
spoke of settling in, wife & children—
suddenly then, how a family of deer,
surprised at the edge of your yard,
broke, a white field opening, opening.

You had your demons, they had you.
You were proud of them like sons
who reflected your eyes, the pool clearer
each year, the surface deeper, gleaming.
They gave you visions you were a river
of blue sperm, coming forever.
Later you told me nothing they said—
why did I ask?—could be repeated.

I heard your voice today
standing beside me on the lawn
that summer you drove in suddenly
on the way to a new life & laughed,
my wife laughed, I did, pouring the wine
over my poem I stole your favorite image for:
the white stone from *Revelation*.

"All poets are brothers," you quoted
from Logan repeatedly. I give it back:
We looked enough alike to be each other
or *Double, why did you do it?*

New snow in the hospital yard
raises the ground up leavened bread
for angels you carved, thrown back
or belly-flat fronting the cold
that afternoon you ran past
the sleeping guard. Angel against angel
against angel. You lie down. You lie.

Over your name the mass is lifted
over the blessings my mouth closes
too quickly the stained glass
light exposes bones the grey stripped
shaking of branches in fog.

I kneel

the altar rail is wind the priest
dips a wafer into his cup
& I go down on it the fog
entering my ribs. Now I am fog entirely.

In bed I pull the dark up
around my nakedness, my body curling
like Jarrell's ball turret gunner.

I let myself feel myself
thinner, rolling out of myself
through cold air, falling through colder.

I give up my legs, my arms,
my extremities, I anoint myself nothing.
I shatter black water.

Driving the shoreline home tonight
Lake Michigan scatters, breaks
wave after wave, I watch a cold sun
burn off fog, the whitecaps fall back
washing through sumac, sugar maple,
torches there in fall. Between seasons now
all my words blow past us, spoken
in the winter light. The ground is breaking up.
Even you are getting tired of my song.

Shadow

Cold, he watches for me, cold
from the bottom of the ocean
I'm facing, my face his
sunken in his vision, certain
I know the moment he'll swim up
to be the blackout in my eyes.
Noon. He must be squinting, too.

He lies on the horizon mornings
before I'm up, the sea, the sky
seamless at all his joints.
I step into the light, shivering
under his touch, in love
with pain & none to call his own
our 33 years together.

X-ray of my breath, fleshless,
the last in a blurring of negatives
under-exposed, black froth
fog spills on my window nights,
he is burning now, midmorning
like I will, entering the fire.
I turn, the sun hands me his ashes.

4 P.M. Children & the aged,
slide out of hiding, maggots
sectioning the beach, its flesh;
they stare at us, magi without stars.
Beside me he is tall & growing
taller, till I want to call him
Father, look up, take his hand.

Shades drawn against the undertow,
at midnight lovers coil theirs,
darkness laid on dark. Awake,

beside my woman he's invisible,
one elbow propped to smoke.
I work the pillow up, up,
into his breath as if the last.

Afterimage, my image, finally
after the light, the last wave
beating my eyelids, their undersides,
had gone out, we lay all night
under my blindness, a thin sheet
between us called the world.
Now the edge of sleep, you are leaving.

If I could fold myself into you,
if I could hear you call me
Son, Double, Friend, shake you
turning a corner, give you a name,
papers to cross borders, mine—
but your dark web tightropes, answers,
maintaining balance, intricate balance.

Hydra

When twilight comes down,
putting her cheek, the right side
to the window, then the left

a gasflame turning it
higher, bubbling Vesuvius
under Pompeii, her last minutes

swelling this room, my mind
scatters, like ashes at sea
becoming my body, while I stand still

or try to. Item: this yard,
a hollow inside my eyes
the snow fills, its dead roots

rivets; item: the street,
the 4, 5, 6 litany of houses
reflecting my stare, a granite

obliqueness; beyond, bare trees,
another item. Where they stop
looking back, factories,

my horizon, making the sky up
in the face of its god. *This I repeat
politely is where I live,*

taking her heads through my hands
smile on smile, turning them
at the neck, snapping it

fast. Well then, I pray
over each, darkness flowing out
like blood, taking us in his jaws.

December Night

The trees have gone out, one by one
between the features of your face
turning toward me, their branches clouds
blown into darkness now, great mother.

What prayer do you ask I lay out
beside you, the hollows of your voice,
my silence cradled in each branch
dying finally with your breath?

Again tonight I come to you
no one, walking the cold field
ghostly in its flaming, casting
my spoor, a shadow of myself.

At either hand your shadow runs.
Everywhere I turn you swell.

The sun is an oven, it purifies
nothing, has nothing for us.

I touch you, touch. Now you are moving
under my fingers frozen like wind
without direction, the full moon
rising beneath your eyes. A hiss,
the sun is white ash, wet. Your flesh
washes, climbing me, each wave
taking me higher, riding, deeper
to the horizon, faster, we race
past trees, between trees, trees.
The sun is another country. Trees.

I put my lips to your open palms,
faster, I stretch out my limbs, my breath.

A second has passed.

The Last Muse

You come in, closing the morning
after you, sheathed in black, stiffly
or naked up to the waist at my desk.
I never ask why not or turn back

writing this. You stand behind me,
priestess of nothing; you sing
the lost continent, now a Pleide
to surface, nubile at last

in your sheer air, a stripper's expanse.
Cleavage, cleavage. Images
spin from me, the night opens
uterine in your song, swelling
till they're born out, year by year
of pressure, ink. I bear down;
you bear down, wizening.
Decades. We're still at it, lady.

Lady, I'm facing you, finally
for that last line our poem tilts up,
a chalice, Medusa, at the reader's lips.
You take my hand, chill, smooth.

This is what you write.

Visits

You rock your porch
knitting it almost
tangent to ours
even more down & out
you are probably eighty
never married at least
certain to be deaf
though I would never dare
speak or have your eyes
catch mine fastened
to your hands like this
rolling their bones,
small, wiry animals
while your windows lift
half-lidded in their frames
for motes of dust
or gnats so some say
god himself walks in & out
& others your old beau
& others you've been missing
now for years.

Waiting in the Suburbs for the Sonic Booms

Sundays I squat the front porch
watching the crab grass ripple
up my neighbors' eyes.
Home from church, they scrub
& shampoo cars, the hedges glisten
reflecting their features in the shears.
They have a polish for the sky
they will invent for Christ's sake
given time. Hours; I'm sitting here
to figure it: Do they occupy themselves
completely, like houses of the poor
they whittle from their minds?

Their lives escape them
quietly, I think, like mine
in pews or bathrooms, suddenly
we hear the distance washing toward us like a voice
somebody never mentioned & busy ourselves
or like this poem disappearing through your eyes.

Nightrunner

He has a pact with the air
Keep me, awhile yet, balanced
on your nether edge. Distance peels back,
congeals, becomes his mouth:
stones, their sisters
the slugs; this is the first step—
here his jaws pull flat.
Now the street tensed like a muscle.

He gives his legs to the moon,
bending where she will have him,
swimming in the shadows' flow
backward, shedding his bones & fur
as an animal clawing through her,
rising deeper than he came.

Past traffic lights pulsing
their night positions like a heartbeat
at attention, a planet cooling
to fireflies, he gallops on,
saddled in the wind, its froth
lashing whips, his reins.

Dropping, an arc, he swings down
angles of worms, the mushrooms
another age stilled—ferns, poppies
dusting themselves with their heavens,
cousins. They assume chambers of his ears,
pedestals, Latin names.

The roe, the roebuck, rabbits,
a bear whose side is a tulip,
or wound reddening under his eyelid
shear past, enter his rooms.

Is he a museum? Count him.
Or say, a landscape of relics—
here a saint, there a saint
its hand through a skull with his name.

Then he shoots out his hand
grazing the quivering wall,
that shoulder which runs beside him
till the breath swells under his palm
like a hill, a village, raised there
in the thigh of the night, its beast.

Sometimes, right angles
to the gravel, he goes down,
his seed taking the cleavage
earth lays under his feet,
stunned an instant, quickened,
in a fetus's white sleep.

Where spiders walk the trees
weaving rain before it falls,
the albatross comes down
with polar dreams which he runs on,
still-motion, sleep-walking,
his mummy's lips unwind:

Running
I am a mouth drawn up
from drowning on another mouth
or wound I call the night
beyond myself,
his voice the black light
around a match that flickers,
reeling
in a harness of this phantom pain
strapped like sweat
which he calls *Father*
to carry on his back.

Squaw Winter

I am walking, cold,
down the logging road
the saplings with my boots.
It is late October,
Northern Wisconsin,
and already the last tourists
have dimmed their lights for Chicago
with leaves they paid for,
gossip of weather, the feathers
Indians kept on display
until this chill. Today
they are packing for Florida,
their winter dugouts,
shaking from frost last night,
a window over the windows
thickening with our blood.
I am the last man alive,
I think, walking here
past the victory garden
run to seed and barbed wire,
a widow's legacy
to lumbering men who gave up
wood for pulp.
Each step is so quiet
I call myself my last name
while the frost warms,
ice like sudden rain
lifting a last color
from the birches, all the maples
flaming, from the air.
This is the still world
whose glass wall shatters
and goes on standing
every fall for me
and for him, somewhere up there,
that old bald eagle
who knows these trees are his.
I count on that
though I haven't seen him
once this year.

Mirror

Mother-of-pearl, mother-of-pearl,
your face is the moon's, an oval
the fog dreams in, a crystal ball
reflecting the sea floor. Mother,
I have held my life up to you, a stranger
to the company of your saints; the gnats
of summer, the winter's spindrift
flakes falling like stars
on the window facing you,
that eye at the end of your smile.
The world is a trinket, a tiny god.
You play with it. You eat it piece by piece
after giving birth.

Talisman, lady,
you give back myself to myself—
I turn away. I carry your features like wax
over mine, taking the shape of my name
till others answer him. *Peter, Peter.*
A death mask, aging in preparation.

How shall I presume this morning
to face you, the crumbs at your table
reminders of what I have laid out
this year, last: here a child, drowning
in his own breath, there my shadow
a young man gave you to reverse.

They glitter, prisms like little flames.
They splutter, reaching, reaching at the light.

Mother, you hold me up too dark . . .

This morning

the window is sheeted with ice
like muslin, a hole torn out of it
for a face, a rent in the wind.

What body have you raised to carry me?
That hole for a face. What cold?

Icarus

Here I stand at the outskirts of winter
touched by nothing but snow, myself
& the blue field tipped to catch a shadow
from an afternoon still falling
through beeches, feathered in quiet.

Landing with your story for support
you came early to flatness like this
wherever your feet touched down. The facts
were boring, of course, & then mythic
only in falling from you, an interest

for someone later: this sky pressing my head
a reminder how little light you faced
to read the air; how it divided under you
like a woman as you took her, naturally
& clumsy & finally were lost to it

entirely, the wings burning off as any body
might; how had you lived you would want nothing
but the impossible in every minute:
to be forgotten, living in yourself
as a tree within its rings, standing like these

across my eyes, wind turning us to sticks
blazing at their skin. What do you care now
how anybody sees you but the earth
speaking every time your foot comes down
here, inside mine, & now someone sees trees

filling with wings, or nothing, an edge of winter
burning, a giant bird. Or that the black flames lift
to take the sky. Or that I come down hard
suddenly, no one to tell me from the ground
turning, to make clear how empty the sky is.

Composition

I have watched from this chair all afternoon
alone, while snow traces features of hills
I'd never noticed, watching the light fall,
get up, fall, pulling the dark after it.

No one is here. No one inhabits me
but my poem, images that stumble, rise
to take the air, refusing measure, lines
refusing breath. Tangible as angels.

The house is still, my wife & children gone
till dinner. No one. The quiet almost breaks
it is so fine, this paper always blank
where I sit, shaking, shaking words like bells
in the company of strangers, myself.

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