

The lakes we are in

by

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A thesis presented for the B.A. degree
with honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Spring 2011

Readers: Keith Taylor and Jessica Young

[Type text]

This thesis is dedicated to Miss Jessica Young. We were pioneers together, and she helped me more than she could ever fathom.

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Acknowledgements

Thousands of thanks to my two excellent readers, Keith Taylor and Jessica Young.

And a thank you, as well, to my sisters Emily and Amy.

[Type text]

Abstract

The lakes we are in is a project centered on the idea of experience; specifically, experiences in different places and in different ways. Experiences of loss, defeat, sweetness, the nostalgia of open fields and times of harvest. The poems form a sprawling spiderweb of an idea, a web of the sort one would find in a cellar behind the dusty jars of beets.

The web is created through the use of four sections; each section arcs from one place to another, and each poem within the section arcs to those that follow it. In other words, the ideas used in the first section metastasize to the second section, and so on. Overall, the project directs the reader to a place generated by each individual poem, a place very gradually built from words and sounds.

The ideas encompassed by *The lakes we are in* travel along the same current. Beginning with a door to the inner savagery of we, it flows towards acceptance, veers toward downfalls, and concludes with what is both sad and real. Furthermore, it attempts to capture every emotion that results from such a sail.

Remember that what has been written cannot be undone. Like bicycles and needles, this work might leave a mark.

[Type text]

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[Type text]

One Walking in Open wood to hunt a Nightengales nest—I popt unawares on an old Fox & her young Cubs that were playing about she saw me & instantly approached towards me growling like an agry dog I had no stick & tryd all I could to fright her by imitating the bark of a fox hound which only irritated her the more & if I had not retreated a few paces back she would have seized me when I set up a haloo she started

John Clare

[Type text]

On the banks

When I was twenty, I was paid to destroy beaver dams. A summertime job for the National Park Service—long and guilty trips by canoe over the stones of the Catgut River. The dams themselves were nearly impossible to break, to decreate. The beavers used a glue they'd made of leaves and muck they must have dug for beside the water. It was painful to imagine their clawed little paws scooping out the greenish stuff and taking it back to their dam, only so someone like me would come along with boots and a hacksaw and reduce their dome to ruin. Each time I finished a heap, I would suck my blisters and watch for dark shapes under water, the blurred forms of the evicted tenants. I always imagined the beavers waiting til I was gone and scuttling to shore, quiet, blinking, a family watching their home drift down the river.

[Type text]

The possums

They came one night when I was in my bed, hobbled in with spiked grins to slip among my quilts. They were adolescents, their snarls grating my ears as they bickered, their gnarled hands getting tangled in my hair like they meant to style it. My bed felt like a slumber party, one where I was a lumbering oaf next to my slight companions, the girl who'd had her growth spurt years in advance. My new friends and I partied hard—night music of crickets, winds, passing cars that left sighing sounds behind that forced the mammals to stiffen up in fear and darkness. Between untangling the knots that grew between rough tails and tasting the mouthful of dead frog that someone brought in at midnight, I began to wonder if the possums had intentions different than mine. As I, their host, began to fall asleep in my bed, their endless parade over my limbs and face never settled. Sleep had nearly taken me, and still the party raged. The moon was bright, my breaths were low and deep, and my tiresome companions chatted til dawn, when they crept back out the window to sleep off their revelry and dream their wild dreams.

[Type text]

Fists

I wish I could
fight you. Pull
over the car. Pull
off the road.
Open the windows wide so
the oldies leap out onto the pavement
like a jerking staccato.

And my fists would
sing harmony to your punches.

Afterwards,
when that tooth of yours is gone,
applesauce pit in its place,
And when my brow is
wrinkled silver with a row
of catgut stitches on my scalp,
afterwards,
our voices will be pianissimo
and delicate.

We'll listen in for the portmanteau
of the train and traffic, and we'll
look to the measure of road
up ahead.

[Type text]

I know things, and

I know the winter's stillness that settles, ghostlike,
between jagged skeleton trees and the
threads of woolen coats worn year after year.

Warped, I climb a mountain
to describe the glasslike pain that creeps in through
veins and cells, bold as a
peacock's feathers in a fury of love.

We'll always feel this suffering, annual, deepbone
chill that aches and aches 'til we're so raw that everything hurts--
the bear trapped in the chest and the tiny pebble skittering across the bedroom floor.
Even the kindnesses of others.

The horror comes from non-escape. From
knowing the wind will knock
at the door, moving in, here to stay for
months and months. The
thickest scarf couldn't keep it out, no amount
of down. We'll be packed among the
ice, praying for a glimpse of sun.

[Type text]

Years are fast

The hunt is never over, the horse is
never spent. And though the grass
is trampled, it will grow for
other chases. The hounds will start
their frantic

sprint toward nothing. We'll blindly follow,
to and fro like trapped wolves,
scratching the gray of our
heads and hoping to hear a
cry of victory.

[Type text]

Regret

One day you will sing
a song of reason,
regret darting between
your blueish notes,
and your voice will build
false homes that crumble.

Tunes that build homes of wet
steel, warmth that skips away
like your panting breath
on a winter night,
melodies thin with knobby knees
that knock in time to
your song, your sharp
song that leaps out of your
throat—a startled frog, a shock E—
—lectric, the barb of the wire
that encircles your mind,
binding tightly to your unrest.

[Type text]

We are snowglobes

Knees, thin necks, bodies built
of clutters of hair and the delicate
fans of eyelashes. Under clothes
and hair pomade we are
seeds, sprouts, veins and cells, the
rumblings of a voicebox
wired straight to some bloodlit
center—a room of sighs—
a chamber of lambs' fleece
bunched around glass beads,
scars of kindergarten bike accidents
and wrinkled middle-aged
thunderstorms. It is these
silent caches that we hide
and keep hidden, away from
words and light—away
from the bayonettes that
some keep
in their
skulls.

[Type text]

Huddle or build

Some people
have spiders inside.
Some have bears, or
lizards that drop their
tails with the slightest
shift of ground.

All feed off
compulsion, bathe
in puddles
of audacity,
huddle from
the anger that
builds thickly in the lungs.

These zoos claw
our throats on the way
up, pant in our
darkest corners,
leaving furred
circles and spitspots
behind on the floor.
They leave their
sign, they break
their paths in.

[Type text]

Adaptation

Ma always said she couldn't trust him with that thing on his head-- my brother, in his coonskin cap. She said it reminded her too much of the real thing. *Me, too*, I thought. My brother had a wicked face that grinned beneath the same stiff fur I seen out by the woodpile. They were everywhere, the coons—lithe hands in bowls of cat food on the porch, whole families curled and dead on M-10 in summertime heat. I seen enough to know that they were never up to good, and I worried my brother'd adopt their snarling ways, their varmint stink. I worried they'd come late one night, the coons—smell out my brother and take him out, out—the waters and the wild, fresh fish raw in the mouth, the ways of animals, once so foreign, now clinging to his skin, lost and forever.

[Type text]

Nestle, feed

Eventually you must
stop pounding the piano's deep chords,
stop your fistfights and whisky bottles
lined up like loose teeth on the windowsill.

You've shaken hands with the rawmeat
feel of factory work, men and metal,
Thursday night bowling league of cursing and smoke.

Drop your hand, let go. Fill your palm
with seed, dried berries, the
delicate wings of moths.

Offer it to the sparrow caged between
your ribs, button-eyed and
swaying in heat, peeping gently
in response to thuds and booms that
shake its nest from outside.

[Type text]

Stick together, wait

My grandma remembers the hundred-year storm. November winds sharp as lightening bolts; the cattle plodded to the woods in dense knots for shelter from the snows. *Ox-cold blood. Silence. Cracked.* All these words my grandma says, her eyes on the trees in the yard. She remembers when their tops stuck out of the snow like the stems of carrots, proof of something deep that slept below the ground. She says that when the storm hit, folks scurried like pantry mice, families ripe with quilts heading for their white church surrounded by thickbodied oaks. Their own homes weren't built for weather like that, their own lives not built for that kind of resistance. *Better to hide*, she says. Better to huddle, better to cower, better to swarm. Warmth comes in number, and winter is uncaring.

[Type text]

Innate

Grow, fur, grow--
 cover my face with an ivy
 of animal hide.

Grow, teeth, grow--
 give me fierce, give me
 serration, give me the daggers
 animals hide deep
 for when the growl
 rears to strike.

 Grow, world, grow,
 know that we are all of us
 like hawks poised on branches,
 like the short fuse of dynamite, like the
 metal rail a bullet glides
 straight to the heart--
 unexpected, brutal.

Our claws grow long;
 we hold unseenities
 dripping blood and
 the dark heat
 of instinct.

[Type text]

Pleasure

I want to turn
you loose in the woods,
one inkthick night, and
send the hounds after you. The
thorns will tear at your skin,
claws of dark.

Their spotted pain will be like
raindrops on a roof when
held to the storm of
jaws and foaming
teeth that await your
throat.

Torn down, ripped
Like thin paper. Silver
shards of pain in
your vision. Flesh swept like
cloth from your skull.
Your brain would spill
on the roots of trees, moss
of sponges. All you
were, every
boneword and breath and
recollection,
smeared on the
leaves and eaten
by flies.

I would thank the stars, I would
feel the hardness of
a smile curling on my face.

[Type text]

Pursuit

They follow the scent of our wildness
and our pawprints packed in snow--

The hounds, chasing after.
They howl with excitement caught
in their throats like
stubborn chicken bones

We lose footholds in these maples,
panting for the safety
of a barn lit from outside

The only colors here
the little pelts
that run alongside
and the stop sign
waiting at the end of the road,
past the pain in our ribs
and the jagged treeline

We've always been pursued
like this, always by hounds
or in snow or
under the brightness
of the sun. We know
these thirsty yowls

And we know
that all we can do
is look ahead to the

[Type text]

hills we must run, hills
with trees and stones
and the hounds at our heels

[Type text]

Two

[Type text]

I know dark clouds will hover o'er me,
I know my pathway is rough and steep
But golden fields lie out before me,
Where weary eyes no more will weep.
I'm going home to see my father,
I'm going home, no more to roam,
I am just going over Jordan,
I am just going over home.

traditional folk song

[Type text]

Ruin

In the recast moon of our melding, in
deep streets that shone like foil, crumpled, wetted

by spring rain, our train fell off the tracks. No
longer did I hear the daffodils soft

in your throat. My brick wall, you tore the cloth
from my eyes. I fell on the ice of your

insults, and the world became all slivers
and wisps, feathers with nails that loomed beneath

their delicate spines and fins. And now we
are but relics, the vacant bones of saints.

[Type text]

Fibers

Solid are the roots that creep from
this treestump, in the field, though they
have no head on their broad
shoulders, sawed off at the
sixty-year neck. Plowboys counted
rings, missing the ancient wood, gone

to the sawmill, rings like rope
that snakes through the tight haybails, like
the cotton threads wrapped in
tandem to form my hat
that cools, sodden in summertime
heat. No shade now, only roots bent

holy angles, holy
curves wound around cracked heirlooms.

[Type text]

Dough of mine

I.

Come home, late at night. Count your tips, swat
the thousand-insect swarm beneath the bulb, flickering
cloud from broken screens and porch trips in the darkness.

II.

Pour salt into handfuls of flour. Square grains,
burrowing deep into white, following the
ancient run of tunnel and search,
same as your grandpa, his shadow in the mines. Same as
you in years and ticks, lead in your legs,
behind your eyes. Weight you were born with,
weight you were strapped to.

III.

Add in the egg. You might've found it in the fridge
behind the empty mustard jar, or taken
it from a neighbor's nest.
It's wrong, Lord knows, but nothing's right. No
kin or blood in these hills anymore. Just vinyl siding,
Ford trucks, white shirts untouched by the constant dinge that
rings the tubs in years of baths and worry.

IV.

Pour in some water, stream from rusted tap,
from wells dug decades back and sunk
in pits of minerals.
The land round here is pockmarked hills,
neighbors next door really miles away, a valley

[Type text]

in between. A distance farther than
the K-Mart, the payroll, the vacation
to Florida. Always farther than you thought.

V.

Stir it all together, roll it smooth as the
skin on your mother's belly. Stamp out shapes,
one by one. Lid of a mason jar, factory of flour and
filmy glass, fingerprints. Never mind your hands leave
a little gray behind. Never mind that the bank called or
you've slipped again or your back feels broken, just broken.
Better to peel back the layers of biscuit,
one by one, tanned by oven heat,
counting your perpetuations.

[Type text]

Pausing

There is sweat in the floorboards,
there is strain in our hands,
there is the brine of effort painted sweet
on old wagons winding down our street.
Experience is a grain
of sugar, an unexpected
both held and savored. What are we
if not revelers around maypoles
of open eyes and hourglasses?
Who are we if not sponges of remember
and sigh, of need and search? We
work and try, lose keys,
skip stones, learn to dive in our
lakes and stay there without
a thought of shore.

[Type text]

Hearing things

Some nights, I drive home with the gas light on, past boarded houses and stores with music playing in the dark, earless and unheard. The kitchen's cold; the mouse zigzags to its hidden gap just as I've traveled home to mine. Biscuits on a plate. Water, tasting of pennies, poured in a jam jar. Moths slapping the screen in the softness of the hour, molded from moon and muted starry colors. Noises all around. Even the ones I can't hear I see, out the window or beyond the porch. Other counties, other highways, other yards, other rooms. The heartbeat, syncopated. The cinderblock and stillness.

[Type text]

Longer dark

Silence now, as we leave behind rosy
bar lights, the roar of rough voices sodden
with whisky. Inside, we basked in sherry
beams, our lips shining like cocktail cherries.

But here the winter muffles the evening,
muting zing with blue-gray blankets, cold hands
clapped over our mouths and ears. I feel like
we've shaken hands with the moon, agreeing
to her silver code of shadows, thoughts with-
held in warm coats like caves filled with firelight.

Quietly, we walk. Quietly, the night grows up around us.

[Type text]

The power of the wind

My own mother is graying now,
skinny limbs and knickknacks,
a daffodil planted alongside
the cracked cellar doors
of a farmhouse one century
old. Walls lean—odd angles—
and sometimes I fear the wind will
blow them over like
the carcass of the lightning tree
in the front yard. My own
mother is transient, nomad
of back-forty woods.

Houses crumble and lurch, growing
empty-eyed with darkened
windows; my own mother will one
day go off, wind seed,
swallowed by the hills.

[Type text]

The biscuit eaters

My family has always been biscuit eaters. Each one round and baked, dark with blackstrap molasses or dry as a summertime well, crushed in our pockets or wrapped in a nest of oily paper. Nights, my mother bakes them, flour in her hair and in swirls that shift with the drone of local radio and the snores coming from the back room. I've always loved the taste of those biscuits, the way each layer collapses on my tongue like a crumpled receipt. But with every bite my eyes seem to grow more heavy, thoughts of college and clean finger-nails slipping away, stained by exhaust and sunsets going black. My father eats his biscuits nearly asleep, staining them with the gray filth that's always gloved his hands. I watch this happen in the porchlight, half a biscuit in my palm, fighting the urge to cram it in my mouth and doze on threadbare sheets forever.

[Type text]

Foreseeing the future

I.

The knowing, the fearing,
the swallowing.

II.

What we cannot change—
when acceptance is the largest
pill to swallow, rather than
the fact itself.

III.

Realizing that circles
widen and bend, voices
fall and fail, lives crack and
stutter though they seemed
staunch as gravestones.

IV. Over the hill is
a tree filled with birds' nests or
the tiny smoldering fire of
sun on a monarch's wings, just
learning their flutter.

V.

Look now, look. Adjust your gaze
for the window. Shorten your
eyes to spy on

[Type text]

what comes before the image,
what sits on the glass.

[Type text]

Cheating

Here is a bullet
shot into the sky by
a triumphant
pistol

Here is a bullet
whizzing back to
earth faster and faster
toward

[Type text]

The women, the edge of the bed

The men are handsome as tom turkeys, full bearded
in neon light, They have pumpkin headed
children and wives sitting
at home aching to be
touched.

Their women have voices
lonely as crow caws, released only
under cover of
darkness and down pillows. They've
birthed children with
strong brown necks, ones
who have learned to tie
shoes and carry wood
for the fire.

Children knowing soil, soft spots
of deer, knowing strength of
bailing twine and how to scare
skeletal coyote
haunting fields at night.

Harvests are over, cheeks begin to
hollow. Corn, trampled into
cracked stalks in the rain.

The farmers sit at the bar; women, the
edge of the bed; children.
bales of hay and dust.

[Type text]

All carrying seeds that lay, still and forgotten,
piled in caches beneath
layers of cloth.

[Type text]

Hard to come by

The birds tuck their twig feet into
down that's like cattail fur,
a creamy pillow kept underneath the feathers
for crisp months of shiver and gray.

For the times when the wind has claws
that scratch at every surface
between the woven and the stuffed,
between what's built and what merely appears

in the morning, Mars on the dawn.
The cold is gnawing, a mouth to match those claws,
a mouth of silver that pours over everything.

Consider that bird on the low branch
of wind-weaving trees, consider
the claw that must be sacrificed
to keep its brother warm.

Wait through dark winter, drenched in
patience. Be alternately pained and glowed
in switch and trade.

There is sacrifice; there is the stiffness
of dawn. And, more than anything,
there is relief.

[Type text]

The end of winter

The farmers are restless—
snapping branches,
a layer of ice in the washbowl,
fall-plowed fields iced
in thick ridges.

The sleep of farmers
is short and
thin-edged, their
appetites dimmed
by stewed apples
and the last
of the potatoes.

Each hint of spring
marks rose in their
cheeks, sends their hands
scrabbling for the whetstone
and the scythe, for the tall
boots and straw hats.

The throats of birds
lose their rust in song
from the barn rafters—
signs the rivers
will swell soon, signs the
fields will stubble and dirt
will slip into farmers' palms.

[Type text]

Signs the plowmen's
faces will brighten like dawn
to move and breathe
in open spaces.

[Type text]

The way, the center

The way we settle grains on the dark floor of barns,
to let the wind brush hull from kernel,
the way the sweetest notes on violin
must be wound the tightest.

This core is hard to come by,
the hope is hardly kept,
the mountain top is singing--
though its tune is distant,
the fireworks are ending--
though we know they'll end in brilliance.

It is the sweat that makes their while have worth,
the very effort of endurance,
the tedium of wait
and anticipation's tremble.

These things are stewed together—planted—held,
and the harsher things accepted
with an end of honey near.

[Type text]

Three

[Type text]

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades.

John Keats

[Type text]

Attacks

You find them in the darker days of winter—those swarms of crows in the sky like pepper. Their calls wake us in the morning against the pink of dawn, sharp stones that strike our ears. Their squawks increase as the sun climbs, peaking at midday when we throw bread to them off the roof. Then their winding flights turn into jets—black, bulletlike. Precise. The crows become warbirds. Their helmets, black feathers. Their beaks, bayonettes. The bread, swallowed dry. And, after those, only frantic wingflaps and thin bodies, stuttered yelps from throats always unceasing, always harsh.

[Type text]

The deer paths

Wind skips between the cornstalks, rattling them
like soldiers' bones standing
stiff in the soil beyond the line of trees.

The deer pass here. They pick quietly
between the branches and the hopeful
silk tassels hanging from corn.

My father shoots at them,
startling each to deep hoof prints and
snorts, flashes of stuttered white
pursued.

How many decades have their narrow paths
creaked around the farm, past the edge of the fence
and between the saplings?
They own them more than we do.

The wind that shakes the wooden slats
or tips the fence toward ground knows
this power, and the wind knows it is unwoundable,
with no body to hunt.

The earth, it is both breeze and blood.
Crumbling our buildings, unwilling
to relent. It continues
on—timid hooves, the iron
breath of storms, the

[Type text]

daunting power of
roots beneath the ground—to crush,
tip, nudge through paths in yards. To
show it is here to stay.

[Type text]

Fields of heat

Six months
past the ice and clouds,
the burns will come.

They'll crack
the soil, grow
from the woody stems
of plants.

The plants
punch out the ground,
swallowing the sunlight
and wrapping its pepper
in lithe green arms,
squeezing
til the poisons run toward
the fruits in
sparks of sweet
or singe, odd tastes of
unexpected force.

It has always
been like this—
fires burning, blazing
in extremes.
Tastes that come braying
after these hot summer
periods—draught

[Type text]

and desperation,
running our tongues
through with
swords.

Intensity, unfound in
our words and fences, even those
put up in passion's haste.

This green intensity,
perfect and particular—
the reason
why we wear our
hands thin on
wooden handles, the
reason we let soil
stick to the oil
on our foreheads—

An anointment of
effort, an affirmation
of something
no one else
ever touches.

[Type text]

Through

Thistledown and looseleaf.
Leaves, hair curled like a crooked finger.

We build our nests for the winter,
knowing full well
we are not bears or fattened
squirrels with eyes shut for months
against the kind of desperation
that comes only with cold—

We must leave our nests,
we must find patches for the gaps
of our clothes,
furs and pelts stripped from
the backs of animals.

In other words, we must wander
to survive; stumble, bundle, strive.
Not conquer but make do.

[Type text]

Winter

Bless the bones broken by winter,
bless the blisters round with brine

and the crackles from the frost
here to stay. The cold is clear;

we're pained knowing its causes
and its metastasis, knowing symptoms.

Our suffering is teacher, a cup of cold soup
that's lost its blurring steam.

Ice comes to box our ears, fight us on
a four-month playground.

We stand with flowers planted in rows
in our minds, soil packed into our lungs.

[Type text]

February, mountainside

Our faces turn pink
where the wind has
razed them. Our
hands stiffen to
oatstraws that crack
the thin ice
of mornings.

Mornings when
the wood won't light, when
frost has settled lace
onto the windows.

Windows we can
look through, barely, wool-
breath in thick clouds like
bison on the edge
of land.

Lands here are
close, mountains held
like hands praying,
haired in white
birches that
sigh and bend.

Bend to bow, bend
to bear the
weights of acorn-

[Type text]

headed squirrels,
ripe with love
for coming babies
wrapped in
the warm thought
of springtime.

[Type text]

Sometimes I

Wait for luck to be my silver bullet,
tucking acorns and
the knobs of chestnuts
into my pockets, quietly--
seeds of my guilt, missing
the glory of treehood for the
sake of my well-being.

Magpie tendencies bring me to
caves of lost barrettes and beads, things I've
found and held, wondering if their
futures will put wings on my
feet or bind my tongue
with mossy curses.

My room is filling, my pockets fat as
chipmunk cheeks. I worry that the sinister
pyrite from under the couch will cancel out the
peacock feather that peeked its emerald eye
out from under the sidewalk leaves, gathered
against the coming cold of fall.

It's too hard to tell anymore. Too hard
to give anything up and risk a luckless state.
All remains in wait.

[Type text]

*Strange sights**Dedicated to my sisters, Amy and Emily*

Possums are mostly blind,
 though they have
 some secret sense
 of sight
 that gives them leeway
 in the dark, a skill
 of thick-nosed blundering,
 velvet earflaps, and the
 kind of fearlessness
 that can leave
 them splayed across
 nighttime highways.

Their telltale gleam
 creeping from the
 sumac trees, often too
 calmly noticed
 for the wheels to turn, for the
 driver to do
 much but wince
 and leave a grinning
 corpse behind.

The wet
 fur matted
 on the yellow stripe.
 That ephemeral gleam—
 so odd in sightless

[Type text]

eyes—its
sudden expiration,
a glance
like a butterfly
netted in chaos.

[Type text]

Summer runs

It hesitates and stalls, a tease, unwinding
grapevine fingers from the latest roses, freeing
the stars to begin their winter march across the sky.
It feels like regret when summer goes.

Trying to trap this breeze in the glass
sigh of a bell jar would fail, bees' clover and
deep woods pine smell lost to the sickly
scent of decay. Some hand unseen brushes

leaves by the flock in a waltz to the
ground, and all the moths begin their slow ramble
toward death in icy fields. The sun stays
to watch the world curl to sleep, dry, with eyes

that lack their simmer, turned to slabs of
marble when the harvest has come in.

[Type text]

The mice

Here is where they skittered
through the flour, here
are their pawprints.

Here is where
paused for crumbs,
where they washed
whiskers in silence
and combed
the dust from
their fur.

And here is where
the hearts stopped
their tiny beatings,
slight hums
too soft for our ears,
halted with a
crack
that made their
brothers leap in fear
and run along
the counter.

Away from the
dead, tail limp.

Away from

[Type text]

an immensity
they never grow used to—
great death
in so small a thing.

[Type text]

Certainties

The mousetraps began as once-in-a-whiles, snaps that woke us to crouch beside the fridge with foggy eyes and drag the closed jaw out by a tail. Once winter set in, though, the traps went off all the time, a tapdance of death and tiny squeals that scattered around the house like echoes in a cave. The garbage grew plump with bloody tissue pouches, satisfied as a harvest cat, but still the mice persisted in their stupid nibbling, in their crushed skulls with bulging liquid eyes. Those mice were merely searching for softer times, the way we all were in our scarves and down jackets. The sad part was the difference between them and us-- our pursuits ended in tea and warm beds; theirs ended in broken little necks, pitiable and infinite.

[Type text]

Henhouse slaughter

It was as though they knew
the day had come.
Mechanical red combs
teetering on
thin snap-able twig necks
so slight they
seemed already severed.

The gleam in their
black pebble eyes betrayed
a sad wisdom
of the axe, sleek in the
woodpile, soon to
have a bloody steel glaze
to add a new
but stricken dimension
to something they'd
always known was dull.

[Type text]

Loss.

There are
many games
we play, and
many we know
we've won.

The fox knows
which he's
lost.

Because of
the color of
wheat. Because
there is a gun
on my father's
mantle.

[Type text]

Four

[Type text]

It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened—Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to *make* so many. Jim said the moon could a *laid* them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.

Mark Twain

[Type text]

Recollection

Memory is a broad plain;
skies, pelagic
gutteral ships and breezes
blowing for decades

Through this lens
a boy, freckled, dandelion-
blond. We've taken
photos of him, trapped
him in marble's bubbled glass

Dunes rise up like skyscrapers
around him, shielded by the
grasses, misted with salt. He's
in a place, he is
the place. He'll sprout
umbrellas when clouds
shift and swim, sunbathing
women and gulls
fighting for fries dotting
his skin like constellations.

He's chained to sea, strapped
to tide and rush and
urchin ashore on stone.

He's strung on a red kite,
flown high behind
our eyes.

[Type text]

Flatland

My grandmother
lived on the
plains,
back then.

The land was
so flat
that it
still muted
her eyes. Blue.

She used
to say
that when the circus
came to her
prairie town
they'd watch it
arrive
for miles.

They'd watch
until
the dust gathered on the
tops of their
cracked shoes
in little piles
like anthills.

The only
hills around.

[Type text]

Path, old river

My family owns land
beside the river,
beside fronds and cattails
nodding with wind.

At dawn the river
holds fast to fleeting sun-stains
on water, the trickle of
a rooster's call fading beyond,
sighing down in pockets of mud
and rotting leaves.

A monastery, a moment
between woods and houses. Filled
brimful with mornings, reeds,
the snap of my brothers' whips from branches,
snarls from warring raccoons ,
belches of pull and crawl.

The river comes no closer,
sets back on sunken heels, unowned,
old man beside a fire,
centuries wise.

[Type text]

Sweetness

Pried from the old jaws of
coal mines, my grandfather
stuffed his pockets with buttermilk
biscuits and came North by foot
and boxcar. He left behind the redbuds,
the twang of train and the hush of
the stoney creek on Sundays. Left his
mother, left his aunts, left the gravel of
men's voices rising from
far-off lanterns.

The North, he said, was nickels and windows,
stiff collars, bootblack, spittle
frozen onto streetbricks.
A heartbeat that pulsed with newspapers,
pounded with bigcity move and stomp.

My grandfather said he could feel
it-- the land had lost whatever sweetness
once gleamed from its
hills and birds, from the river
still singing beside the alleyway.

[Type text]

Kin

My father's father was
a gravedigger. He scraped the dirt
from under his birdclaw finger
nails every night to a
symphony of crickets and rocking
chairs, the stones of the dead like an
audience asleep on
the hill beyond his windowpanes.

He was said to have loved turning
over earth, loved the lone
ceremony of the shovel and
the damp smell of cemetery
violets mutely trampled
underfoot. Through him my father
learned a certain reverence for
decay, for fading. He learned the same dirgewalk
and he grew the same shadows
beneath his eyes. Everyone thought

My father would don the same gray
uniform and prune the same
roses that grew wild on
the edge of the land. But my father
picked the roses instead. He'd learned
to see the glimmers in that night.

[Type text]

What they thought they knew

There are stars too far to see
in the cold gears and points of space;
crisp leaves are like green ribbons

in books, marking great depths below.
One can search for something, frantic,
only to find it's more a place

than a person or a thing,
a noun but one unheld, a
spot on the map right on the fold.

What's hidden could be clutched or
slid beneath the mattress
in the cleanest corner of the mind.

But flowers wilt, all pretty things
bleed. There is a reason for the
glass of museums, why diamonds

in earth shimmy to miss
the miner's pick.

[Type text]

Skim or dig

The guttered water
pouring from the roof
is clear and liquid.

It has a
purpose here, a somewhat
history, a line
to other lines.

The shingle stream is
a million snowflakes,
heartbreakingly frail
in their geometry. It
is everything winter,
everything spring. It
ends in little seas
of salt and sidewalk
chalk, drowned
mittens once
swallowed
by cold.

The water is
a mass of sights and sighs,
undistinguishable,
made equal
by the sun.

[Type text]

Chop and split

The axe swings wide,
cold tongue that slips
between the wooded years

The halves are sprung and
fly apart—suddenly brothers.
Same age and stature, having
felt matched droughts
and the zapped lightening bolts
severing clouds in summer.

Unwhole, unholy. Phantoms of
the thud and crack,
fractions of rained decades,
treehouses, birds' claws.

The axe swings wide
and heartless,
cutting at a dusty
marrow past, now ground
to sawdust on the floor.

[Type text]

Light in coming

Dawn, and a cold
bone-cracking and
creaking like
straight-rail birch trees.

Here a cloud
of breath, here the
dots of stars. The only
things white at five
a.m. in January.

The crows call out,
black against the sky. A
fox trots across the
road—little
scratches and
a perked figure
hurrying to its den.

Other sounds now—
the world wakes—
calves, lowing
on the hillside.
Stirrings from a mouse's
nest. A clang—my
mother's oatmeal.

Louder now, the
silence, in the way

[Type text]

winds seem stronger
after weeks of calmer days.

Then the sun rising--
the sounds gaining form.
There is something
missing in their
shapes, something
lacking in them
now that they're
defined. In the
darkness they were
grown in mind;
in light
those figures shrivel.

[Type text]

Waning

I know no sadder thing than time.
Abandonment of age, decay.

Fledging birds
leaping from the nest like
roman candles, firecrackers of
bone and beak.

Time is legs
once plump as bread loaves crumbling in-
to brittle stilts. A thief,
a jester, a poet, a nun.

More brutal than a dulled
axe swung too wide, the minutes past
are gone as smoke cinders.

[Type text]

Dimnation

In the dusty haylofts of our youths
we saw crowns on the wooden beams and
every strand of straw seemed gilded.
The air itself was holy; pink
to gold to the round and grape-
dusty purple of late and
tired evening. As we
grew the gold went tarnished,
the sights seemed to dull
to gray as though a
lamp had been dimmed;
the hays' summer
sweetness wept
fast from the
bales. We
knew that
we'd
lost.

[Type text]

End notes

The epigraph for *One* was written by John Clare in his journals, dated 1865.

The epigraph for *Two* is a verse from *Wayfaring Stranger*, a traditional American folk song.

The epigraph for *Three* is lines from the poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, written by John Keats in 1819.

The epigraph for *Four* is an excerpt from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, published in 1885.

[Type text]