

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

IN A VALLEY

Adam Pellegrini, Master of Fine Arts, 2011

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In a Valley collects poems united by a consistent tension in voice, as the poet attempts to balance two competing impulses towards “meaning”—through musicality and through statement. By integrating these elements, the writer searches for a distinctive voice within the many spheres of influence—of his predecessors, teachers, peers, and of his unique experience. Though the poems collected here do contain a few similar strains in subject and method, each of the three sections centers, instead, around a different activity: longing, worry, and pursuit.

IN A VALLEY

by

Adam Pellegrini

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A Voice (Lonesome)

In the mud I wait all night, the stinking trench I dug today.
Fasted hard, no eggs or water lilies, the stuff you pass
in sunny parks & smell, sure, but never look on or count.
I do. & if I reach a number I can't name—hasn't
happened yet. Have no hair for breeze. Plucked each:
one hundred five thousand seven hundred forty four.
Rolled them in paper bark I peeled, then buried. Sometimes
the skin, if I'm too long in shallows, hangs that way,
loose bark you can't help but pull. Burns the same, too,
all smoke & ember. Brings us back to smelling, or waiting—
both? All night I wait & sniff, but only dandelions,
goose dung come down the hill with breeze, & musk—
the worst. Met a fox once who thought my toes were eggs.
One million two hundred thousand seven hundred forty four
hairs on a fox. I keep them by a tree I know. Sometimes
I climb there. Good hunting, always squirrels up top.
You just need shake & whole nests of young can fall
one hundred eighty nine feet down from a good branch.

I fell once, myself. Wish I could say limbs only bend
& shake a bit like trees do when you're pitched upon them.
Not like glass, the bones, either. For glass you need sand & fire,
twenty-four hundred degrees. You need movement, turning so
the bulb won't sag to one side, blowing gently from afar.
A little like glass, I suppose—bubble of breath in the chest.
Bones won't burst like new glass bursts, though, if left
in cool overnight. There's night again, & waiting.
& air. Mud, too, sort of—sand is like mud sometimes,
or do I mean silt? Never burned silt. Not burning these
sleeping eggs, either, not yet. Waiting for frogs
that are eggs now. All night. Takes long, I know.
There's night again. Things asleep all around us—

Wait. I didn't mean I burst too. I don't. Like sky bursts
in hot season's clothes for a stretch of weeks. Or frogs
burst tiny & mute in shallows from ten thousand eggs
in one big rupture across days, one thundercloud for weeks.
Or guns at night. In mornings during pheasant season.
Cold out then. Water's a shock, a loud noise on skin.
Guns at night, though—the worst. Never like that.
More like window glass on cement divider. Skull
on window glass—bone *shatters* when pressed too hard.
Burst implies outward motion from a central event—

noise spreading from gun barrels, tadpoles spreading
from ripe frogspawn, lightning from a struggle of charges
air conducts between positive clouds, negative earth—

WAIT. I only mean to say I *won't*. Many things
I will & have—not *have* as in *possess*, but *have* as in
I can't or won't tell you when. So many things
I have or will, but this I won't, I promise. In parks
where you stroll & smell of soap in fresh grass,
three hundred blades per square inch, I promise,
hear mallards with heads even greener, iridescent.
I don't come when you drop torn bread for drakes
shuffling to greet you, though I'm hungry, & ducks
on land have one less defense. I wait till night
for ducks to sleep. No one ever misses a duck.
Not like those nasty swans you see go smoothly by.
I know you'd miss them, you keep count of their couples,
name them, project a bit, I'm sure. Never miss a duck, I'll bet,
though they're friendly. What will *swans* eat? Duckweed, for one.
But not the bread from your hands, not the way you want,
at least, without some hand too. I'd *never*, I promise.
But swans have no teeth, you say, are like infants—
infants with twenty four thousand feathers, I'd reply.

I wait. In parks with sun & smells & children
all gone by night. Paddle boats docked. Parking lots dark.
Entrance chained. No way in but by foot. No way out
but by foot. Long trek to town with most houses dark
by 11:33, latest. TV at night through windows. Sometimes
I watch late when a person sleeps through till morning,
their screen broadcasting blue & ticklish. I draft songs
to fill the mouths I can't hear—*do fa Do, do fa Do do fa Do*
ray so Ray, ray so Ray ray so Ray—on up the scale
one step at a time. If the characters yell, I add dissonance—
te fa La, te fa La te fa La. Proportions in a major scale—
whole whole half whole whole half whole. Pythagoras
saw similar tones between planets: Earth—*whole*—moon,
moon—*half*—Mercury, Mercury—*half*—Venus,
Venus—*one & a half*—sun, & so on up a blues-like
pattern ending at fixed stars where Earth resolves...

I counted each, you know, or tried: ten thousand million
two hundred twenty thousand five hundred seventy: one galaxy.
Took six months, each clear night, but then I saw they'd shifted
so I'd counted many twice, had to shift, too, or give up.
I don't give up, you see. Once, I fought so long,

a croc had me by torso & spun like an outboard propeller;
kept hitting my feet on a sunken log I knew, used to lie upon
in sun a few miles from here. Water's surprisingly clear before
wet season loosens all the mud from hills & fields into
tributaries. Two hundred twenty five thousand six hundred
forty four scales on a croc's ventral trunk alone.
Stacked them on my favorite rock as Celts did
to mark their graves, or Buddhists do sometimes by rivers,

glued them down with pastes of marrow softened
above low flames at night's end when some noises start
& all the people, I know, will soon return & want
to walk without burning. I damp the heat with my belly
& suffer through. My needs are selfish, endless, I know,
not perfect yet. So I wait. Practice waiting. Practice wanting.
You believe in death, yes?—*Wait*, I only mean to come
to some common terms here. What you believe, I'll believe,
I promise. *Tell me*: out of time & space, what numbers
are there? What people, things? Where can a body hide?

Here's what I want: your hands your feet your cheeks
now, your back your calves your toes, not eggs, your joints
your bones, *now*, your muscle, all thirty six in your face,
your hairs, each one, your skin your blood your nails, *now*,
not for any reason but to keep you here for good, I promise,
your back your toes, *said that*, your lashes lips your marrow
your tendons knuckles ankles cartilage your knees
your viruses infections germs your neurons synapses
your hormones regrets amours memories your chemicals
& so on & so on up & down the tones of your body,
even those low notes you make as you walk in grass
on sunny days, awhile since rain has swelled
the dirt, & smell of green & wash the blue
& lean against a stone & read & feel my mud
between your toes, my clouds, my rays, my breeze
I've weighed, I wait, the earth I've dug & leaked,
you stroll on sinking down the water's shore in air
& never notice trunks or spawn or dead right there.

I

Husking Avocados to the Grateful Dead

The green pulp is soft as a line of notes,
of which three are happening at once:
music humming from speakers,
the hum you offer back,
& how it all seems in your head
like a single, perfect pitch.

There is discord in the avocado, too.
As you run a knife across its equator
& twist it in half—around the nut-like,
brown middle, a rich green tone, ripe
as spring foliage, with exception—
the dark cloud tie-dying one whole side.

How easily happiness comes
when pushing lime, salt, & garlic
under the back of a spoon
into a sunlit bay,
that sort of opaque green.

& how easily happiness goes
between pitch, rising in octaves
to harmonize with itself—
even if you split the pad of your index
dicing cilantro, even if half the opened fruit
is black, there is still this music,
melody in a mode of uplift.

It makes you soft, makes you small,
makes you empty yourself all afternoon
singing that line, *this is all a dream we dreamed.*

Picking Strawberries

When the fruit stays on its stem
in dirt & sun so long
dense with sugar, pigment dark

as a basin of blood, it takes on
the look of everything soft—
seat cushions, clouds, cheeks.

You'd almost never guess
the heavy red of mid-August
first juttred green from June vines.

It was so when the two of you
on a whim driving back roads,
sun on her arm out the window,

saw a plywood sign painted crudely,
arrow & berries, but didn't figure this—
bent after an hour in heat,

still parting stalks & leaves to find
the perfect morsels, just swirling
into maturity, past pale, but still firm.

You felt the plastic basket heavy
on one arm, noticed how the rows
stretched on, offering new plants

possibly not picked over these last two
lovely weekends. Then, you looked
to her forehead, saw too much sun,

looked to ground dry where shade cloth
gave over to dust at your feet,
wondered how they kept the beds

tucked in water. Looked up the aisle
leading back to your car & AC,
then to her basket, closer than yours

to completing the challenge: first to reach
the brim with only the finest berries.
In short, you began to settle.

First, a bit too dusty, then
a small gash; finally, you plucked
your first past prime. Red stained

your chin as you mouthed it, all lips,
stained your wrist as you wiped.
But how it moved through you,

sweat & soot, burst of nectar
barely feigning solid form,
a tongue dissolving sweetly yours.

Going Back

Rain seems drawn in diagonal, cartoon lines
if one stares long enough at a point in air
instead of tracking drops. Body's a blur, too,
when taken up in single moments—

you hit by bike sat & dwelled over
you not hit by bike, rubbing his bloody knee.

As now, *you parked in front of childhood house*
plays with you climbing low dogwood
& you skinning elbow on driveway
like two dolls. Never an impressive

imagination, & so this *you* has
you picking through lavender for Easter eggs
jump kick like an action figure
you running lawn circles barefoot,

then has them whisper threatening quips
out of breath & continue their battle midair,
ribs crushed between forefinger & thumb.

More of *you* join in, a million or so
riot in the rain, sopping, swearing oaths
of vengeance, somersaulting to perch atop
the horse chestnut tree, the basketball hoop

(especially *you who dreamed of dunking*
in gym class) only to emerge again
swinging some new weapon.

Until spiny air calls this *you* back,
& the million bodies fall limp.

Again a plot you didn't invent: after *you*
drives into the unzipped sleeping bag, afternoon,
they all stand & waltz stiffly. Tchaikovsky's on
the radio, wreaths & rain changing over to snow.

Such awful new brown shutters on the second floor,
& someone's basketball left out cold with dimples.

Snowfall in New York

—when DC should blizzard too. So far, a few flakes
like so many business men have plunged by.

The ground should all be white like baking soda,
whose uses are innumerable: mix a paste with epoxy

to stop the window's leaks forever, or scrub
empty every pore in your face, waiting

for the upstate world you once knew:
snowy lashes, raw hands, snow & honey in a cup.

Today, DC's a bubble in the mid-Atlantic,
the coast up to Connecticut insulated by whole feet.

In southern New York, a hundred miles
outside the city, where you were a boy in winter,

they're lifting heavy squares from walkways,
straining to make piles. Road crews stop for coffee

between shifts, dogs bite snowballs midair,
the village stores run out of milk, bread, & eggs.

But here, the streets keep dry, clouds are spent.
Interns & legal aids call home to Carolina or Jersey.

You tell your father use the blower, save his back
as sirens round your block for who knows what.

Same sirens every day, noise the same direction.
Constant problems: muggings, car windows,

fires, break-ins, stray bullets. Nice to visit Virginia's
woods & stars for the weekend, where no one

asks for money; but now, you can't even do that—
an hour in all directions, the snow's up to six inches.

Seems a government technology keeping schools
& offices open, no other reasonable answer...

Near Lake George, New York, where your father was a boy
in winter, you're sure they've seen their share of storm today.

You've listened to so many stories over the years about snow
drifting off the lake, sitting heavy on their back porch

or piling against the barn where your grandmother kept a studio
that faced the old Sagamore Hotel—a word designating

distinction for Mohicans—where all the city industrialists
with mansions along “Millionaire’s Row”

on the lake’s west shore would come to spa.
Your grandmother painted sun on the hills & water

in morning, but never those houses or that Victorian resort
splayed out on a wide green island just across the lake.

Your father would wake some mornings in his room
built off the kitchen with snow on his bed,

no heat when they first moved in from Jersey,
just a wood stove, gaps in windows.

On your wall, you look sometimes & study her strokes,
some of them flaked off now, 50 years since

she flew to Arizona &, looking out over a canyon,
had a vision, it seems, of pines reaching up

to touch the ancient cliff dwellings on a far ridge.
Hard to make out, from her boxy strokes, the ledges

natives built their homes into, but easier to see her point:
the gap of air, of time & culture all muddying the scene,

or protecting it? You look out your window at a man
who’s shouting at some *white mother fucker to get off*

his block, stop *testing* him, though he’s alone on the street.
These moments are rare in your neighborhood, where

rows of homes that 30 years ago housed the working class
now start at a million, if off-street parking is available.

You won't tell your parents about this man, who you think
you've seen before in the park around the corner.

This time of year, your father would sometimes go down
to watch the ice boats sail racing across the wintered lake;

or later, with friends some school days, fish-tail around
the slick back roads of Bolton Landing,

with one of the few cops in town, also the gym coach,
trying to keep up. In either story, it seems

escape is possible—it won't snow here, & yet
the snow won't let you leave, or maybe there's

something else keeping you? The times when
a blizzard did block you in? When you labored to reach

the Korean grocers to buy the last ripe avocado,
your sneakers soaked, how pines in the park

shrugged softly under their weight? Or in spring,
on fragrant walks down to the Capitol—

how the gardens come up in such neat colors,
such exotic hedges trimmed by landscapers

who nod & go on in Spanish as you pass?
Maybe you belong somewhere else, in a cabin

by an upstate lake with the snow coming down on hills.
Or maybe that snow should visit here more often.

Mohican translates to *people of the waters that are never still*,
& it's true, their tribe migrated to so many places

in the time since settlers found the Hudson River Valley,
centuries before your ancestors arrived in Manhattan.

Maybe nowhere is home to anyone anymore.
Or maybe it's some other word than home.

Apology

Two men are chasing my girlfriend
down a street that moves when I reach
to touch it. The thing about touch

is that though you feel the sidewalk
through your socks, there's always
a thin energy separating skin
from cotton from cement.

Because atoms can't meet,

they can lie in bed together
all afternoon listening to music,
then finish the last ten cans in the pack,
twirling & dipping in the kitchen,

but will always want to take in more—
a gulp of whiskey, a large cheese pie,
the tender mollusk in her mouth.

Maybe the street, like we two atoms,
has to calm itself back in place
after each step tries to collide with it.

With no shame, wandering back
with our food, she peels a sticker
from a stranger's bumper while
the owner & his friend watch
drunk from their porch.

Meanwhile, I litter the garden
with all I drank tonight
& want her back, how it curves
to say she's excited. Too quiet.

& then the melody of my name
called out above a clatter of boots.
I can't move, though my hands
want contact with whatever
she's running from. I can't.
Though later I'll say I tried.

On Love & Poetry

I

Something you never see in real life:
the image of a heart, not the bruised-fruit organ,
but the twin-humped, rose-red, balanced-on-a-tip
symbol above nutrition labels claiming extra iron.

From the train, a silhouette of two needs: one,
eyes closed, the other facing away, tipped
in opposite directions, balanced on a kiss—shape
that flutters about the skulls of smitten cartoons,

but never graces trains passing station ends,
behind escalators. I have seen a dozen teens
sprint back there yelling *fuck & him & up*,
have seen sleepers & millers-about, but mostly figures

waiting, each station a new stasis to pull into:
women with strollers, old men in full-brimmed hats,
business folk with clothes that fit, all waiting
to pass onto another station you left stops ago.

II

You there, tell them to wait, all day if they must.
It's lovely somewhere down that passage,
something trapped in the Metro you don't see,
but feel at times flirt down your neck, press

your jaw corners. You who I could love on a deck
overlooking pond water, big pines, down of darkness.
Where we could fume like wine bottles, leaking
from our mouths in the cool, geese asleep.

But never in the hollowed city I've dug for you here,
never with such an audience streaming by, incredulous.
I say *love* & they shutter at my cliché. You may think
of this later in the shower, or dropping your keys

by the back door. Not fair. You decide when we part.
I have no photo to put to no words about your life.
I picture you outside a reading or in your front yard
picking mint in a summer storm, but it isn't you.

You're somewhere, some time I can only guess.
I'm streaming below the streets where basil
won't grow & birds sometimes are trapped,
flap about screaming. This isn't the love I mean,

the heart with wings, the eastern bluebird
bright on gray walls of your brain matter.
There is no water here, but the rain tracked in
on windows, sometimes puddling near rails.

Picture for me our reflection in that water
as we look down to count the rats, a game
we'd make of standing still together. They'd sip
slowly from our image, love, so used to the sight.

III

Right now, come in, steep your tea, warm your socks:
find me here, waiting to realize what I mean by love:
the couple who woke bare this morning & fucked again,
showered for work, still embracing, post-coital as I passed

pulling into Shaw/Howard. This is love. I feel it so, at least.
Or serendipity: I noticed their heads made the symbol
for what they did. Isn't love mostly chance, a thing we feel
in moments we can't predict? There I go again. At least

know there is distance here, too, even with so little space
between their bodies. They'll stand, board the next train.
He'll get off in two stops, Mount Vernon/Convention Center.
She'll stay, ride down to L'Enfant & transfer,

watching for lights that mark track changes
in the stream of black between stations. He'll watch
a woman's ass in black elastic fabric who turns into
Starbucks & consider getting coffee before work.

She'll think of a high school boyfriend when someone
nearby mentions the Braves, whose games
they drank through together that whole summer—
I'm projecting. But isn't love mostly projection?

In that way, I love you: your hair, your scent,
your opinions. How, together, we notice where
the homeless sleep, plan to travel, turn off the news
together: city's fires, strikes, gunshots, poor.

Together we read the couple in the Metro.
We read the boys with blood on their shoes,
the old men dying for the past, the mothers
scolding their young, or being scolded.

We love dumb movies. You read poetry, I am poetry.
You correct me when I explain our plot, how we met,
to friends on the back deck of your Aunt's cottage
in the Catskills, when we finally get away for real—

we'll drink shitty upstate wine, discuss tannins.
I'll hold your hair as the sun sets, puking out pink.
I'm sorry. I've made you a poem, too, one I can
revise later. Not fair. I decide how we part.

II

Dawn Fire at Smithsonian Storage Complex

Real smoke, not truck exhaust or some shear slip
 silky from a row house chimney
 not even white biceps of factory stacks
real smoke is ash petals cupping summer

not the smoke of campfires, sticks cracking in heat,
 that lives in hair for days

nor the smoke of hickory chips coloring venison
 or dancing off leaf piles in backyards

nor Marlboros basking in a Jeep's interior
 or the cough you swallow deeply from a lit joint

 real smoke is heavy
 yet rises in seizures
you can't see because you're in it

it starts to lean its massive head as light breaks
 over trees with a slight wind
it fattens, gobbling what's beneath by the ton

the portrait of a scream, black bear embalmed alive,
 grotesque face carved again each moment
 wincing & eating itself

that you see on your walk to the train
 this is not real smoke, smells too much
of burnt humidifiers, bottled cleaner,
 old tarps, paint cans

real smoke smells of real bodies
 you can't remember

it speaks in shade, a list of names
 phantom, black orchid,
 room of empty shoes
it punctuates history books & museums

in photographs, whole populations ablaze
 who found real smoke
doesn't take our loved ones, it becomes them

Mother in Backyard

Where once hung a swing in pointillist June,
truck wheel slung from oak bow, poison veins
all wrapped around trunk, this fable made:
boy climbs highest branch, bark makes throne,

decrees feather storm in a field across the street.
Still worth it then to taste the giant world,
lull it under the tongue. Distant rumble of dirt bike
in a bed for creeks wakes the sleeping water.

But boy caught in tent cocoon can't help
until someone paints him wings, floats
him over quilted hills, squares of crops,
needle-point crosses. From up high

he could cancel clouds, count strawberries,
carrot stems, sage for that night's soup.
Could escape ears of long dead pressed to roots
beneath the lawn, out of view, wanting a drink.

First fat drops. He lands on tiptoes, slinks
onto porch. Smell of dog's musk in new puddles,
thick heat. The garden in pungent colors,
fence posts holding chicken wire & vines

around her rump as she bends to meet soil
in rain, humming softly, digging.

Suzanne

We'll call her that, as in the song
we've heard tonight ring off
the amphitheater's curved awning.

Look for her feet bare beside
lanes of highway, facing
concert traffic from a gurney edge—
toes that sing trust in parking area grass
stuck with midnight's condensation;
see, her sandals have fled somewhere
across glass-dewed pavement.

The road is a cake for Suzanne
we eat one yard at a time,
red line of candles passing slowly
enough to count. & orange light
like honey drunk from trucks
packed with equipment
& more light, but not Suzanne.

She shows you where to look—
at the garbage of her body,
at the vase of her body
trying to keep its dark flowers.

There are heroes in the seaweed,
& there are bombs in heaven.
There is a black four door
against the rutted divider.

Yes, there is a body, Suzanne,
but we can only see its feet.
There is no perfect touch, we know.
The steering wheel shudders in the backseat.
The dashboard is a river we can cross.

In a Valley

“The restraining bend produces a ‘flower structure’ which is a series of vertical faults of compressional duplexes that are subparallel to the parent fault.”

—Terry Engelder
The Geometry of Strike-Slip Faulting

It hits somewhat
like an orogeny,
an uplift,
overthrust
the strata
of the brain,
a familiar
pressure.
The basement
plate, core self,
is compacted
from all sides
causing a fold.
The center
plunges, raising
margins, split
along faults,
up ramps,
to distant peaks.
It’s not your fault.
You are a sheet
of medial sediment,
compressed.
Everywhere,
the surface
keeps rupturing
in escarpment
streaks, corrugated
like corduroy.
You sit,
bending quietly
on the school bus
each morning,
tucked in
a hooded jacket,

in the updraft
of voices
rising with each stop.
Fields & homes
& trees elongate
in lateral lines,
accelerating
the trend.
Like your father,
sitting with a cigarette
in his green plastic chair
in the back yard.

Puffballs

Spores like tiny birthday balloons
swarm our chests in first cold

of the year. Wet bark chips
by the dogwood just sprouted

clumps of big toes we pluck
& pitch at one another, watch

for green explosions. The orchard
of the world just sprung its crystal fruit

of new breasts. We'll take any object
we can fondle behind our backs—

horse chestnut, green walnut,
anything dredged heavy from a creek.

Just before supper, rhododendron
shivers behind the rim where

I practice long jump shots alone.
There arrives a thing in the leaves,

crouched in darkness, waiting. Possibly
a bear this time of year, when hunger happens.

They're known to spill in rolling musk
through neighborhoods on garbage night.

You'll read next day's paper:
Bear Found Sleeping in Doorway,

Bear Climbs Tree Behind Bank.
This bear who knows what suffers

to feed it: how sharply thorns
want their berries, how rainbow trout

will bolt from a bulky shadow, how a cat
claws the nose unless one bites down hard—

the branches shake again, now fiercely.
I let the ball bounce & freeze

until the sensor scanning from the garage
loses me. I move an arm to see again,

just as the boy whose laugh soon puckers
steps out. He takes an ugly shot,

both hands above his head in a kind of chuck.
Out spotting windows for some curved figure

to appear towel-less, reeking of soap,
dripping as colors on eyelids before sleep,

brightest shapes that stay when light goes out.
Early autumn dark, some parents are too drunk.

Scenes from Church Camp

I. *ABOUT LEAVING, I REMEMBER*

—cashing all my tickets,
all the Nerds, Rolos, Warheads
I could pocket from the camp store,
then being chased by a wasp, then,
one boy wanting to throw a Frisbee
just as my parents arrived, so they
were impressed I'd made friends I hadn't—
probably a picture of us somewhere.

I remember a man from the special needs bunk
screaming in a bathroom of the main hall,
door open, as a donkey does when threatened,
cracking, desperate voice, as counselors
tried to pull his pants up.

All parents had to sign their children out
at the main desk, & so we carried my bag
through the choir of families just meeting,
with boys & girls leaning to leave
like a coffee hour after extended service.

I don't remember seeing the girls there
who rubbed themselves with poison ivy,
which didn't grow on their city block,
to see what happens; nor, as we walked
passing the lake, any giant snapper
come popping up to wave from shore.

Leaving is always so distinct:
the bodies out in orange paddleboats
for one more trip could be your body,
the empty park grills & picnic benches
could welcome you with dinner,
the trail running up a grassy hill
to bunks could lead you off to sleep.

What you leave, always, are possibilities,
no matter how much you wished for home
all week with the certainty you'd stay,
unless you foraged & ate some poison.

II. *WHEN YOU BREAK OPEN A FIREFLY*

—the baked light gets
on your hands, your jeans,

the corners of your mouth
you rub, stuck with ice cream.

Here's where it ends—the deer trail
leading to the fort you've built

at the back edge of the field,
where you pee on budding

forsythia, where dusk finds you
in dirty socks, & your counselor lights

mortars he bought in PA. At home,
village cops would trace the smoke,

come & ticket your neighbors. If you let
your prisoners go, twitching little lights

in a jar, it's clear: they'd spark the air
all at once, draw attention to your hideout.

Now is for fingers pinching whatever glows
in such small bodies, light you can only spread thin

on leaves, can't put out in time before they
come picking through the bushes for their ball.

III. *THE GIRLS' BUNK*

Most nights that week, after lights out, I'd hear
the *thump thump* of feet drumming ground,
as if the sky had finally arrived, landing
in successive bits behind the south cabins.

Older boys' bodies fell the eight feet just fine,
each frame that bent to fit through half-windows
in moonlight could've landed from the roof,
from the treetops, it seemed, to take off towards

some sweet image, pursue the faintest odor,
manically stalk & bound through brush,
chest-high, shin-deep, thick as shit—

slick with sweat, I'd rise to watch
from my window their bodies run in pale light
safely with the promise they'd teased into me,
not to tell—asking what parts I'd seen,
how my mother was shaped; at night
they each sprang towards a damp hope,
keeping them awake, & me too
tied to Earth until, finally, quiet.

IV. SWIMMING LESSONS

Shallow ponds were fine, but in most lakes
there were: snapping turtles big as sandboxes,
spirits of the drowned with long arms

that could pull you in, & sharks
who swam up rivers & were caught
forever, hungry, one assumed.

Just me who had to stay & practice mornings
with a counselor while the others trekked
to tie-dye T-shirts or learn to roll out pizza dough.

Dipping under was not a thing of skill,
as she demonstrated, of knowing how
to hold breath deeply, squeeze the nose

if necessary. I'd swum since I was small
at the local high school Saturday nights,
had mastered can openers & atomic bombs,

had dived until my ears hurt, racing to touch bottom.
The lake was different, it had no bottom,
at least that I could see. It wasn't like praying:

I couldn't just close my eyes & sink
as at dinner to my father's voice, thankful for macaroni.
Or Sundays, as the congregation parroted our minister

so loudly their voices happened in my head. Easy
during worship to drop a bible or kick your sister,
no one would hear. Or to mess the words—

our Father who farts in Heaven—though one
should probably apologize, kneeling before bed.
Under water in that lake, there was no sound at all.

V. WAKING UP

That night, my turn to sleep out back
with a friend I got to choose
in a covered wagon replica,
set with frames & mattresses
that they forgot to screen. Mosquitoes found us
easily, so we were forced to shrink into
our sleeping bags, though it was hot, July.

So many firsts. As I was led out
with my bedding just at dark,
flashlights of female counselors
appeared atop the hill; they'd detoured
on their way back from the bathrooms,
assisting a man older than them
who mostly squeaked & moaned.

I shook his hand at their request,
learned his name, face, mostly in darkness.
Never touched someone like that before,
could only think of his contagion.

But it was good to sleep out there,
away from the group of older boys
who labeled me terms I'd never heard:
faggot, homo, queer. I spent that week
alone or with a boy my age, also from upstate.
We went everywhere together—it was him
I chose to pioneer with me that night,
not helping my case at all.

From my wagon bed, late, the yelling started.
I could see from the open canvas flap
two counselors back from some rendezvous,
acting a little like that man I'd met:
unsteady, one kicking at the other's door,
shouting *fffock*, not pronouncing it quite right.
My parents never drank too much, did scold me
sometimes, never badly. I woke that night
feeling like I must have broken something.

VI. *PILLOW FIGHT*

It is too hot where the windows swelled all day
& so, just this once, we can sleep under sky.

There are blankets instead of grass. There is an old elm
in the distance watching in new horror.

Everyone get it out now so we can all go to sleep.
Five minutes to tell an old story of anger: the whistle sounds.

First boy crests another atop the skull, spins him,
but the boy hits back from under the attic stairwell,
from beyond the bluff overlooking town, from his bed,
wherever he is, he hits back.

Go, flail until we say stop.
Five minutes to get it out.

Soon an antique silence in their walloped ears, scalps glow
with nuclear heat. They hit hard here, slip flashlights
into pillowcases, so the boy must hit harder. Their shadows,
if they had, would curse them out, ashamed.

Don't let your cheekbones stop you. Only a minute left.
Stand & let your shoulders take the weight.

VII. *BACK IN THE WOODS*

There was sky between me & those fish,
so I couldn't see them that far out. Clouds
crouched on the water, sky blue heavy
on that hidden pond like a fat skin:
so much weight, miles of vapor resting on
rocks, mud, my head, such light.

Near shore, sunnies looked up & pondered
what I was—dark form bending through reeds
for frogs & newts, scooping them up,
raising them to heaven. The kind of heaven
you dream about & wish you'd never slept.

My friend loaned me his pole, with an old brown lure
tied snug by his dad, three big hooks. It wasn't enough
to cast rubber, I realized. Nor to stomp
the mud & grass, break twigs from my way,
swing a switch at the thicket to clear a path.
Not enough to single out the amphibious population
to be gored & flung to the shallow middle
of tomorrow, as I'd watched the older boys do
at the lake—reeled back by the bottom lip, cheek or neck
until limp, when the smallmouths would lose interest.

Never enough. The little crowd of slimy carcasses
I'd gathered trying for the bass I so wanted to outmatch,
who turned their heads in sheer urbanity
& sank down to mourn in the cool depths.

Then I swung too high & caught a tree, left a frog
hanging, new point in a constellation of green,
had to stop, break my line & head back.
Almost lunch. Counselors would be counting heads.

New idea: how to fish for squirrels.

Old idea: how to wrench
the very angels from their lofts,
strip their tenderloins,
eat them fried or just broiled
with a little salad, some fruit.

VIII. *LEAVING FOREVER*

Still you looked around at roads, hills,
buildings you knew, the chapel where
you all filed each night after supper,
realized you wouldn't see it again,
no matter how your parents tried persuading,

& pictured yourself wading in the lake
mornings after loons had disappeared,
mist sifted off, smell of trees in sun.

That ride home you wouldn't cry, but would
at least complain until your mother
turned around, apologized for everything,
said they wouldn't make you go again next year.

Truth is, leaving, you still felt such possibility
fat in leaves swelled with light & memory.

That was enough, then, & still now all
you could expect. An apology & a promise.

As if the Burglar Actually

—without stepping on the crocuses closed for night,
tiptoes over garden bricks set diagonally like saw teeth,
over rabbits panting after burying their love.

As if his tall figure actually jars an old latch
on that double-paned window set in the cellar's wall
& slits the perimeter where paint's sealed the crack.

As if he climbs in unassailed by growl or bark
& only the basement stair's 3rd rung gives a shriek.
This night, more moans from mortar foundation.

Every crawling thing behind the walls is talking.
The family, like always, has slipped under their pulp
yawned their tired mandibles, closed their wings.

& the boy, full of oak & thoughts of old growth,
like always, lies flat in his room & watches the face
peel in paint above his head, refracted headlights

mime symbols on his dresser. Hearing that fatal
hallway *creak*, as if his end were really here,
he drifts off, again, as if forever.

III

Dusk

We won't give up
bouncing like pets in the back yard,
a box with its lid removed,
pines on three sides & the brick house.

A single window shines from above.
Getting hard to make out faces.
Shapes in the garden lining the house,
lining the stone retaining wall—

rhubarb legs, the holly bear's belly,
high fronds of ornamental grass
like a crowd of heads, & the sound
of insects cutting holes.

Across a dim landscape of clouds,
bats swoop at a football, a Frisbee,
a sneaker, all tossed straight up.
They're hunting what's bigger than them.

Light's gone, just the sound of feet.
As if the afternoon has been turned off.

Beach Walk Late with Baby Dolphins & Boats

after Whistler's *Nocturne: Blue & Silver—Bognor*

Ocean has a volume
& a lip to crinkle
against shore. World's
many tones slashed
by triangular sails.
No streaks of light,
strips or lines. No light
that funnels into
or out of the far city
he forgot to paint.
The only yellow
dots the boats,
& some white
specks night sky,

a painting of light's edges
the city down coast sucks in.
No stars in the ocean, even,
just a dark film

& two figures, still,
not leaping.

There we are.

We saw the small bodies
arc up all day in sync,
threading waves,
chasing each other,
diving when tour boats
crashed through.

Day was feverish,
jellies kept us from
wading above our knees,
novels led us down
long plotlines in sand.

But now it's night,
cool enough for sleeves,
seems all children are asleep,
though we know better—

behind us, bright
spinning rides, fair music.

Whistler forgot
our boardwalk, or maybe
he thinks it's later, after
everything's shut down.
Maybe dawn's about
to break the layers
of shade into color.

Then why are we here,
to watch for dolphins so late?
To hook a bluefish
from the just-blue seascape?

The ships creak
away down coast,
their sails of some light
biting even lighter sky.

Our bodies are dark
clouds, beached
in the grainy air
sand keeps,

clouds like ships
pulling a heavy hook.

All children are asleep.
We wade the shore,
muck of land's flesh,
darkest blue pulling
away from where light
laps on our gums.

Should he let us go?

Hosta Bed & Sprinkler

Trickle step from leaf to brawny leaf
on down to mulch rich with roasted leaves
like coffee ground to soil, down

into the choked patchwork of tubes
like straws that stretch from every
leaf-bearing being to suck up water,

steam it back out through broad faces
you can smell on a warm spring day,
can stand in waft of on your walk

to the store to buy milk & croissants,
other necessities. Hostas beneath
the elm all tipped toward the sun

& breathing, some a solid green,
some with moving spots of light
the tree above affords. There are no deer

in the city to creep through in evening
& blight these broad leaves back to stalks.
There are no voles to squirm around

the buried jungle gym of roots & chew
a stream through each plant's belly.
Soil ends two feet down on an older sidewalk.

A stone-cement exoskeleton girds
the garden's waist to give its fruit lift & poise
as you pass regarding the healthy colors,

striations of white & yellow over green.
Hostas seem happy here, such shade, water,
admiration, all they need. No matter the air

tastes like hot pavement, each stalk still leans
its harness of purple bells for whatever
happens by, each day this week more in bloom.

Home for the Weekend

South down 94 towards New Jersey, past
the jockey hollow & looping white fences
where, by mid-morning, horses will canter in circles;

past the garden center, where even from the car
you spot colors: Koi wait by pond's edges
to flash at scattered pellets when children come;

right on West street, left on Sandfordville, a shortcut
you learned delivering deli subs one summer,
right down Covered Bridge, left on Blooms Corners;

past the dairy, still open weekends with its outdoor brick oven,
wheels of cheese stacked, one black bull—
you smell mud, wet hide, meadow flowers, bread baking;

two more miles, same road, past woods still undeveloped,
houses whose owners have fought for years
in Village Hall, in local papers, to keep the land bucolic;

then left on Prices Switch just past a fawn crushed
in the grassy triangle for yield signs, that time of year,
where this road splits into the bent elbow of another;

right again onto 94, past the display of oaken bears
near roadside, chain-sawed by the man
you parked & watched one afternoon tiptoe

with motor growling above his head, etching the body
of what might have been a person
until his saw turned delicately into its blank face

& the snout clearly protruded, smiling a bit, but like
an animal. No show this morning, but the bears stand
the same, on hind legs, paws raised as if about to shove.

On for miles. Old farm houses peer out
from just before the rising ridge line,
this stretch of valley always noisy in summer

when corn mutters, tractors chug, road crews hammer.
Still quiet in April, only crows
talk from telephone wires, a few cars pass.

Mostly the valley yawns the whole ride there,
like you remember it,
save for a few new gaudy tracts of housing.

Finally, left just past the first major light
after the Hess station,
into the dewy asphalt lot of Saxony Bakery,

from which your father would return early
some Saturdays with a white box,
unannounced, before you even stretched your neck,

sat up in bed—same order, always,
two powdered crawlers, two crumb cakes,
two fruit Danishes, two Boston cream, enough

for two mornings of cartoons washed down with 2%.
& now your turn at surprise,
gone first thing to *have the car looked at*, really

to fill an old order, find your way by memory.
But what you find are parking lines faded,
grass spraying from asphalt, windows empty.

Nothing left but to drive home hungry, turn down
the first interesting street, Sand Hill
or Maple Grange, & follow it, open windows

eating the hum, reek, bouquet of spring
just as on the drive there,
not less or more vibrant, pungent, harmonic,

nothing really new. Lawn mowers will be out soon,
when last night's shower dries off.
Water will rise with the scent of what it left—

grass, pavement, detergent—but will always
return to earth in some form.
You'll find your way, or you won't.

Adirondack Anaconda

You can try to ignore it,
the thick rope sliding through leaves
& acorns at the backs of your feet.

Up Panther Mountain, which hosts
no real panthers & qualifies
as a long hill. In afternoon shade,

composure of trees, sound amplifies,
& your car parked an hour back.

Unlike small animals,
we're not so equipped
to be hunted:

a rabbit can jab left, then right
until its brown back finds cover.
Though first it will freeze at hawk's cry.

Best not to pause. The noise
will only start again when you move.

Moreover, who keeps still when the threat
is only sound? This deep in any woods,
you can feel you're nowhere,

like you could be mauled, stung,
crushed, & who would know?
Like you could be strangled, not by a snake.

Easy to stop,
let that nothing
find you here.

Instead, lift the feet
a bit higher. Keep moving.

The Poet Dreams of His Father

—whose hair is black as a river
& messed as if by wind;

whose body has all its quirks:
the emptied top gums,
the hatchet bite at one thumb's base,
but is not the body;

who stands & looks
from gravel & docks
at the Hudson wrestling itself,
but not at our 24-footer
hitched to the truck,
mast fastened with blue rope.

He's been sitting again,
for how long, the way he does,
watching the ground,
bottles, batteries, & lighters
washed around his feet.

I find myself here, at times,
hands between knees,
elbows to thighs, leaned
until the head is parallel
with ankles, watching
nothing change. At times,

I find myself here
watching my father.

In a moment, he may see me
& turn away from that river,
explain how some old sloop
out 50 yards is tacking into wind.

We've come here,
finally, so he'll teach me
the proper knots,
when to let out sails,
port from starboard.

He turns as if to ask for help.

But this is my dream,
I ask instead.

No matter,
same question either way:
how to make it out?

Despite the canvas clouds
& the cold everywhere,
he begins in a voice
deep & low as ever
that is not his voice,
so far as I can tell.