



## PORCH OF JUDGMENT

by

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Table of Contents

House Built On A Hairpin Curve	1
Sarah's Triumvirate	2
A Quote From The Son	8
The Devil In The Wedding House	10
There All Along	11
Saint Vincent de Paul	12
A Kidnapping In Central Standard Time	13
Hamlet In Tahlequah	15
Dominion	18
The Anniversary	20
A Letter From Margaret To Her Sister	21
The Struggles Of Shrimp And Squirrel	23
The Monarch Of Meritocracy	25
Mercy	28
Charity	29
From A Ditch In The Road	30
Twelve Years For Grave Robbing	32
More Body Than Mind	33
Child Creator	34
The Judge On The Subject Of His Wife	35
Good Neighbors	36
Death Wish	37
Deuteragonist	38
One And The Same	39
No Accident	40
Church Of The Old Woman	41
Itinerant Preacher In Rural Wisconsin	42

A Lutheran Minister's Impromptu Sermon	43
Wire Mother	45
August, 1966	47
Caretaker	48
Thief	49
The Injury	50
Winners	51
No Trespassing, 1937	53
Beautifully Executed, Lovingly Served	54
Dorothy's Breakfast Barn	55
A Family History	56
Aaron, Indiana County, Pennsylvania	57
A Drowning On A National Wild And Scenic River	61
Forsythia Forsythe	63

## House Built On A Hairpin Curve

I remember thinking--on the carpet, where it is cool,  
so I pulled the sheet off the sofa, got a pillow from upstairs  
and was asleep within a half hour, dreaming  
of someone I loved years ago, our souls flowing together in a kind of  
aching peacefulness. I wanted it to go on,  
but I had to show my ticket to a man who said the scissors  
in my suitcase were too big to take on the plane.  
"How do I know you won't cut the thread of life?" he asked.  
"Mom, Mom, are you O.K.?" My son had come downstairs.  
I sat up and saw the front window above the sofa shattered  
and the wall on the other side demolished.  
We could look through the dining room into the backyard.  
The yard was lit like a stage in a dark theater.  
A pickup truck sailed over my head on its path through the house.  
If you are in the way of 100 bullets and they do not strike,  
this is fate. But what fate? My son can't answer this question.  
He asks: Why don't you just live?

## Sarah's Triumvirate

Like the Winchester heiress of San Jose,  
with superstitions similar, Sarah strove to accommodate  
the commands of her clairvoyant, Monique of Monte Cristo  
her Christian upbringing, and Dr. Webb Dando.

First and foremost, Sarah sought advice from Monique.  
A new name and hair color will attract your spiritual equal to you, said Monique.  
Sarah chose the name Mary.  
And for her hair, the red of the exposed heart of Jesus.

Mary found it natural God should guide her along  
in her Metropolitan Nash, as if with the pinkie of his right hand.  
Sometimes he warned her not to take the Nash for a spin.  
Monique decided Mary should reclaim the name Sarah.

That night Sarah prayed to know more clearly  
what God and Monique wanted.  
Like Sarah Winchester, she asked for signs.  
Was it God's voice telling her all men are alike?

She asked for a man with his soul and the body of Delphicus,  
but would her classicism appear as paganism?  
The next morning a young mechanic offered himself  
as a chauffeur. When at last Buzz carried Sarah in his arms

to her lone Eastlake twin, she felt old, young, pedastaled.  
The bed might be a sickbed and Buzz, with his black hair, white teeth,  
and strong back, her gentleman caretaker.  
When she felt his arms gather her skirt close about her thighs,

as he began to lift her feet from the floor,  
her bed was the first bed of young-man-slightly-older-woman-love.  
To be uplifted so!  
And when Buzz kissed her forehead, and Sarah took his fingers between hers,

and whispered, "You have a feel for the occasion  
that is unerring, Darling," and Buzz said, no, he did not care for herring,  
and smiled and kissed her on the lips,  
then quickly left the house and she lay there alone with herself,

Sarah knocked on Mission oak  
before turning out the light,  
before pulling the sheet up over her head like a mask,  
before dreaming of Sarah Winchester.

the Indians  
have rifles now Winchesters  
the noise is unbearable  
I cover my ears the Indian I fear  
has lifted my petticoats  
he is untying  
my bloomers  
I can't move my hands  
away from my ears  
my arms are leaden  
my feet are unearthed  
the house will be built he says  
built with our blood  
and stained with our blood  
I can't look

Sleep, advised Monique of Monte Cristo,  
sleep and dream.

when you manufacture guns  
it isn't easy to forget  
how many you've killed  
how many spirits lie in ambush  
each night knowing  
I exist here at Llanda Villa  
they would poison my food  
except the dead-end staircases and odd doorways  
keep them confused  
and who would protect me  
from the Indians we killed  
Our Father Who Art In Heaven H.B.T.N.  
after he had softened in his tiredness

I remembered only his scowl  
when he smiled and spoke nicely I couldn't forget  
who had taught me to hold a grudge  
Llanda Villa will replace my child I told myself  
and I gave in  
as I would have to my daughter  
if she had lived  
with a whole new display of difficult traits  
who would hate me  
or hate my company  
just as Father  
was oppressive and nerve-racking  
and there I would be  
because you know what they say  
once a mother always

My namesake is not a pleasant woman.  
"But you will learn from her mistakes," Monique told Sarah.  
Lately Monique seemed sloppy in her advice. Worse than sloppy--batty.  
Have I dared doubt her judgment? I've been obeying her for years.

Even so the erosion of Monique's hints, suggestions, imperatives,  
directives, ideas about hair, nails, and clothes had begun.  
Suddenly, it was as if the aging psychic's rhinestones  
had shriveled in their metallic cavities.

Sarah was sad to see her dwindle so forlornly,  
but the world of independent thinking had its moments.  
Liquid soaps are all the same, Sarah concluded after several testings.  
She managed to miff two neighbor women, a store clerk, and a foreign

exchange student with her rigidity.  
Offending others, Sarah learned with the help of Dr. Webb Dando,  
was only one of the risks you take  
when you form thoughts about the world.

We were driving through Harlem, Sarah told Webb,  
the driver a young man, full of funambulist machismo, his rearview  
mirror missing, actually, my rearview mirror,  
we had taken the Nash, and I sat in the back seat remembering

when I was 12 I had wanted to help people.  
Since my family said I was selfish, the cure then would be to help others,  
but my parents thought weaving pot holders for the elderly  
was a waste of time, as if my parents' battling, even in letters, wasn't.

For my mother, men were interchangeably faulty,  
and I guess she didn't like herself well enough to live alone.  
As Dr. Dando jotted notes, Sarah watched his face,  
the most soulful she had seen, though she hated the word soulful

and had argued about it with a divorced magician.  
When my mother said I would take a back seat to a man's work  
I didn't believe her. You know the actress  
who never married, but had one affair after another?

Webb smiled. "Sarah, there are many actresses of that stripe."  
Anyway, she, they, make it seem easy and reasonable.  
Webb looked up from his notes.  
Her attraction to Dr. Dando was clichéd, but wasn't

the flirtation with Buzz a cliché?  
Wasn't her parents' marriage one horrible cliché?  
She would have to find a pedant willing to discuss  
aspects of the cliché in life and art, then she would ask Buzz,

then she would form her opinion.  
But there was still last night's dream.  
The snake's job was to lie coiled  
beside the record player until I placed his head on Sarah Vaughan,

but the snake, as I was about to do so, the snake  
opened his jaws wide, a scare tactic, and I had to thump him  
on the head, a disciplinary measure.  
He began to uncoil and leave the stereo. I heard three eggs hatch

in the next room, and within seconds, snakes had scattered  
throughout the house. I thought, I can't live with the certainty  
of surprise, from now on never knowing where or when  
they'll show up. Webb loved dreams like this.

It gave him a chance to talk archetypically.  
Monique had wondered if his approach might be too clinical.

But what did Monique know? What did anyone know?  
“You have repressed anger that is beginning to assert itself,” he said.

There were times when she wanted to slap the Dandoisms  
right out of Webb. But who was she to question the doctor  
Monique had tearfully recommended at their farewell seance?  
Maybe in a casual setting Webb would relax and reveal himself

as the admired healer he was. Over a plate of radiatore  
she would tell him about the Winchester dreams  
and how God had been dogging her since she was 6.  
If I can plink off God, maybe the feeling of awaiting punishment will go away.

“Would you like to have dinner?” she asked.  
There was a tremendous pause as Webb cast his eyes downward.  
Was he on the verge of a long-winded Webbism?  
Sarah, I've been aware for a while now that you've fast developed

an affection for me. It's understandable, this fondness,  
but who's to say if it's only your wish for a father slash lover.  
True, I care for you in a paternalistic sense,  
but even on that scale, I do not love you.

Therefore I'm afraid the Italian dinner you have in mind  
would be inappropriate.  
Trying to sound unfazed by his refusal of her,  
Sarah congratulated Webb on his psychic abilities--he compared

favorably with Monique.  
The look Webb gave, chilling as it was, did not prepare her  
for the way he slowly and deliberately spoke:  
You are still consulting the manicurist from North Dakota, then.

Webb's eyes looked ambitious, that was all.  
Sarah saw him at home reading the newspaper ambitiously,  
ambitiously sorting through mail.  
At a party, chatting with a colleague ambitiously, ambitiously keeping notes.

Then she remembered she had tried to tease Webb about  
his cello playing--the look he gave her.  
Webb is a man who takes himself very seriously, who has  
one of the largest mustaches on earth, yet sees nothing amusing in this.

Sarah knew one other man with a mustache bigger than Webb's, and this particular man reveled in the absurdity of it, sporting his mustache through three wars. She remembered his eyes when he returned from the last war.

They were yellow, as if he'd kept them open year upon year and the dust and fumes and heat had changed their color.

And then she remembered her mother telling everyone she'd had the time of her life when Sarah's father was away.

## A Quote From The Son

She was a streamlined woman--first thing I noticed  
when we saw her and the little boy walking, that and her hair  
drifting across her face as she turned to look at the cars.  
The sight meant one thing to me and something else to Ruth  
who stopped and offered Samaritan limousine service  
because no one should walk that close to the road with a child.

"Daughter, how far can we carry you?"--  
trying to convert her into family before we'd said hello.  
The woman stuck the kid up front with Ruth, and climbed in back with me.  
She looked at me sideways with her head tilted. I looked straight at her.  
One leg was spread out on the seat and I was about to put my hand  
where she wanted me to but Ruth stopped the van, casting her

from the temple with the first stone, and we were pulled over by the cops  
for taking the kid. I honestly think my mother forgot him,  
then after he'd been alone with us for 30 seconds he asked  
if we knew where we were going and Ruth announced he was a child  
sent from God for her to raise. She felt guilty for the grace  
she had already received by having him in the van.

The next morning there was talk in the paper about whether  
Ruth was a good woman or a nut case. As for me, just my name and age,  
which I'm big for. Ruth says if I'd grown up in Pap's time  
I'd have been out three years ago, I'd have hit the road  
instead of slouching in her back seat  
acting like I know everything. I can't help if I disagree with her.

That kid was just a blues young'un, no holier than I am,  
and the kid's mom no sluttier than any girl at school.  
If we'd passed them by, all our lives would be steady still.

I wouldn't have blasphemed the way I did.

I guess it was part of me becoming a man.  
They expected a verse to show how I'd been raised.

I told them something I'd saved up for a while:  
"Elvira Gulch," I said, "for 23 years I've been dying to tell you what I think of you  
and now, being a Christian woman, I can't say it."  
"What in heaven's name, Son, do you mean?" She stood next to the reporter.  
"Goddamn us all to hell, Ruth, I don't know."  
My mother looked ill, like she was dying of something from the old days.

That kind of sick.  
And I felt a genuine happiness for us both.

## The Devil In The Wedding House

From my marriage bed I am remembering his fork,  
saluting the infant snake, as the devil shuffled past  
the silver-wrapped gifts on the library table.

In the kitchen, guests had gathered,  
eating, drinking, and when the devil entered,  
waving his fork, the best man held a clove of garlic to warn him away.

The devil bellowed and gestured, then shuffled the narrow  
length of the house to the porch and out into the yard.  
A half hour later, the judge arrived.

We had crossed the threshold knowing  
men and women die sometimes in their homes, and what is there  
to do but make new life in place of the old,

or make beauty of a given life?  
We lie side-by-side in a house we bought in April though the victim  
hung in the basement shower in November.

The dried snake we found beneath the rug in a still, slithering ease,  
hangs by its tail on a little nail in the hall.  
As the devil left, he drove his fork into the wet ground.

A worm curled around the shock of grass.  
I watched him wipe the prong with one finger,  
and fling the creature back to earth.

It seems far-fetched, on a mild night and on my wedding night,  
something otherworldly should take place.  
I can barely remember God.

## There All Along

Thirty years ago they asked if I was dead and before  
I could answer they said I was and set out to prove it by example.  
The young mother shot when she surprised an intruder,  
opening the door one Saturday, going straight up the stairs  
knowing she had been robbed, knowing I had broken and entered,  
calling who's there, is anyone there, seeking me on the stairs  
right as I took aim. She knew I lived.

## Saint Vincent de Paul

Before I sleep I ask who can survive the dark  
and when I'm up I figure I can last through a day like yesterday.

She wanted a quarter and I gave her the one from the lot on Wabasha.  
She went in and tried to buy a doll while I waited with the little girl.

We watched her talk to the lady and pretty soon she came out  
and wanted me to try. Maybe they do hate her, she's black, so I go in.

I got the money, give me the blame doll. The clerk pointed.  
That woman out there's give me more grief than I can count, letting her kid

tear around the store, begging change off my customers.  
It's nobody's doll till after Christmas.

She folded a ugly green sweater so she wouldn't have to look at me.  
On the street I gave back the money hoping for a smoke but she was out

so I scrounged a couple stubs caught between the bricks.  
I thought I was through with kids. The little girl looked at me like

I was going on a long journey. It was all down from there,  
thinking about the attic. I'd wrap up in the insulation and listen for steps.

My brothers and sisters, whoever let me out couldn't be looked at directly.  
Everyone had to see how sorry I was.

And I could never be sorry enough.

## A Kidnapping In Central Standard Time

You make me happy when skies are gray.  
You'll never know dear how much I love you.

Please don't take my sunshine away.  
My mother sang this song to me in the cradle.

Ain't that nice.  
You do think it's nice. A teeny-tiny part of you does.

She holds her fingers to measure one-sixteenth of an inch,  
then uses the one-sixteenth to pull at the drawstring

on her scoop-neck blouse.  
My name is blank, your name must be...

There are porcelain knobs still on the doors.  
The walls look like paper birch, pattern after

authentic pattern, stained and peeling.  
A bird's nest in the ceiling fixture, a wasp's nest

in the sunniest corner of the room.  
Morning, in the sunshine of your love.

He watches her play an imaginary guitar,  
smiling crazily to prove he is crazy,

pulling a knife out of his boot.  
The knife slides across the linoleum floor, copied from a 1940's original.

You got a knife now.  
Go ahead and stab me, Baby.

I turn off the TV.  
A farmhouse in the sun becomes a gas station in snow.

He said he had a knife and I had a junk car  
but it didn't matter as long as I kept my eyes to the front

and took him where he wanted.  
I remember thinking, I'm still the driver; he is only a passenger.

Once he was only a baby who crawled around on knees padded with fat  
like the baby fat knees of my daughter.

Are you in withdrawal? He didn't answer.  
I'm a nurse. I want you to know, if you're hurting--

I can handle it.  
You can probably handle anything.

I don't need no pep talk from no goddamned nurse.  
I shifted the stone around on my ring finger

pressing it into the steering wheel.  
The night had a plastic beat up look.

At least I knew the road, knew where he wanted out,  
and when we got there he was gone from the car

as if he were nothing.  
I drove a little farther before I turned on the radio.

Every kind of music rolled in and out, purity  
from every time and place,

smooth and steady under my hand.

## Hamlet In Tahlequah

We were a lot alike, the same clothes, same music.  
We knew about a bluegrass singer with a voice

like a shot through the heart no one else had heard of.  
I had a homemade tape and we'd listen in my room.

She lived with her grandparents and I lived with my dad.  
I remember when we first met in class she looked at me kind of stunned,

"Wouldn't you rather live with your mom?"  
A long time ago I decided not to lie about my mom.

She's a drunk and that's what I tell people.  
"Oh. Well, I'd rather live with my mom," she said.

I got the idea this was impossible.  
She was stuck driving her grandparents around--

hard to do and keep up with school and her boyfriend.  
I was surprised when she said she went to motels with him.

She had a sweet voice and it didn't mix with the details.  
She showed me blue marks on her back I assume were bite marks.

She said she deserved them. I started to think she shouldn't  
go into education. Teaching kids after a night of God knows what.

Her grandparents would forget if they had given her money  
and she'd use it to her advantage. I guess I could understand. She did a lot for them.

Halfway through the semester we were partners  
in a scene from Shakespeare, rehearsing in my room

for the second or third time when we came to the line--  
"is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

to wash it white as snow"--meaning her hand,  
the hand of Claudius. She threw the script on the bed

and covered her eyes, pulling her hands down the side of her face.  
"Do you think it's possible to be born without a conscience?"

"Are you pregnant?" It was the only way I saw things going.  
"I wish. It would be a lot easier."

I sat there for a second, not knowing what to think, then she blurted out,  
"I put poison in my dad's beans last year and he died."

I looked around the room, afraid to keep staring.  
"His girlfriend was there when he started to get sick.

She kept asking why I wasn't upset. His mouth was foaming and everything."  
There's a wallpaper border near the ceiling. I kept looking.

My jewelry box caught my eye too. My dad gave it to me when I was 7.  
I use it for earrings I keep meaning to fix.

She said she felt guilty. I sort of snapped to and said a person  
without a conscience wouldn't feel guilty.

Then I asked, "Did you hate him?"  
"No, I just wanted live with my mom. I really needed my mother."

Her mother had a boyfriend and didn't want her around.  
She tried to make it sound like something else but that was basically it.

She used barium acetate from the school lab, stored  
in an empty bottle of vanilla, and waited till her dad ordered take-out.

She didn't get drunk and go at him with a knife,  
just waited for him to order Mexican food.

I struggled for three days, skipping school  
and hanging around the house in pajamas. She had always been nice

and wasn't jealous, maybe because I didn't have a mom  
and never stood in her way. I thought about my dad's objective

view of fairness, apart from police work  
and apart from me. I saw him for himself, probably for the first time.

What would he say about her now?  
He had only met her once, in his uniform.

It was never a secret, who she was talking to.

## Dominion

In the half of the shell that had not fallen away,  
angled like the palmiers in the bakery,

they could see the skinned elbow of the wing.  
It showed enough blood to attract ants,

the ants, smaller than anything about the bird,  
with its heart looming.

The husband turned to his wife. "I should kill it."  
With his foot held above the heartbeat,

as if he were taking a step,  
the husband hesitated.

The wife used the toe of her sandal  
to scrape the bird from the sidewalk to the grass.

She swiveled the ball of her foot  
hard into the ground.

After they heard the crunching shell,  
the wife pressed her foot further into the grass.

The husband pulled her away  
from where she stooped to look.

He felt ill, suddenly, and said so.  
"Maybe I was wrong," the wife said.

The husband replied, "To be eaten slowly  
by ants, no matter what size you are,

no matter how young and pink,  
can't be pleasant." They laughed.

The wife pushed the husband forward and fell against him.  
He leaned back his head and laughed.

The wife gave him another push,  
then ran ahead and grabbed his hand.

He tripped and fell against her.  
She pretended to fall, then fell.

Walking towards the bakery, they talked of business  
and how much work to expect in the next few months;

of the 15-year mortgage instead of 30;  
of how old their first child would be

when the second was born.

## The Anniversary

It began as a six month vow, a grave promise to myself not to.  
And since my first experience was one of curiosity  
and my curiosity was satisfied,  
the absence seemed natural.

I wore baby powder and white shirtwaists.  
And the empty gold locket with my initial  
that once held my father's picture.

In class, I cradled the locket, moving the heart  
back and forth on its chain.

It occurred to me in Economics, my whole true being  
could forever replace the absence there.

A place for purity to live forever.

Gradually, I was becoming more so.

I was becoming gradually pure. Again.

I marked my progress on a calendar--  
a red X in the corner of each day.

But for all the days I've marked,  
my purity began in the aftermath.

It was as if someone else were being kissed,  
someone else were being touched,

but then I felt myself dissolve and I was afraid  
I couldn't live normally again.

I held his hand to my chest  
so I could feel my heart beat through him.

He had everything.

## A Letter From Margaret To Her Sister

In the future, please express yourself directly.  
Tell me why I bother--needle--why I needle you so.

The yearbooks, the vacation slides,  
the pictures we aren't even in, all the boxes you wanted,

have vanished. It pains me to tell you  
the family memorabilia have been stolen.

They needed money so they took my jewelry.  
They wanted a history so they took the photograph of Grandfather

standing alongside his first car.  
The car resembles a carriage--how can it not?

Even the words "car" and "carriage"..  
Forgive my digression. Language was a subject I loved

and you didn't. Forgive me.  
You are holding this letter, hoping to read my answers

for the horror of what happened. They've taken  
our battleground. There is no record now

of you and me side-by-side in peach-colored dresses,  
no proof I kept my hair neater than yours,

combed throughout grade school, no physical evidence  
I am older than you and may die first.

Would you like me to? Should I have walked in on the burglary?  
Used my best courtroom voice to persuade them

to drop your framed reading list with the twenty  
gold stickers, one for each book you finished

thirty summers ago--*Clean Clarence; Harry The Wild West Horse;*  
*Wanted...A Brother.*

Surely they'd have shot me before I opened my mouth.  
That's the way people without backgrounds operate.

You must be getting a sense now, of how it feels  
to have come out of nowhere.

## The Struggles Of Shrimp And Squirrel

The shrimp hiding behind the coral is hiding  
to avoid her neighbor.  
It seems the neighbor is desperate  
to talk the shrimp's ear off about his divorce.  
"I can't live without her.  
It drives me crazy to see her with him.  
I want to kill him."  
That's what he said yesterday.  
"Fred, Fred..." said the shrimp, her voice trailing.  
She wanted to say, "Fred, you love Edith too much,"  
but instead she said, her voice trailing, "Fred..."

The banded shrimp sighs behind the coral.  
It is not a proud day in the life of the shrimp.  
And not a happy day in the life of the shrimp when  
she hears how Fred shot himself  
after trying to shoot the boyfriend.  
It did not please the shrimp when Edith said,  
in her Norwegian accent, "I vill not give up  
this car because Fred blew his brains out  
all over the seat."

The squirrel has scratched and snagged the Ralph Lauren towel  
to the point where it is just now  
barely habitable for her babies.  
To be born as cast-offs in a stranger's sauna.  
The squirrel thinks of the line by Blake,  
borrowed by Agatha Christie, then set to music  
in the movie version from 1970:  
Some are born to sweet delight,  
Some are born to endless night.

The squirrel keeps one eye on her children  
and one eye on the cage  
where mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers,  
aunts, uncles, and cousins, starved one by one.  
Someone found it amusing to build the trap  
into a replica of the pavilion at Schloss Sans Souci,  
Potsdam, East Germany.  
To die architecturally.  
To die amidst the carved acanthus.  
To die with some pattern in mind.  
It is how many would like to live.

## The Monarch Of Meritocracy

"It is no good as a desk chair so  
I allow office visitors to sit in it--  
mostly aspirant reviewers  
and poor poets who come  
to sell their pathetic wares.  
Occupying this chair is their little  
moment of glory. They have no  
conception how ridiculous  
they look. It is sitting thus  
they learn that the *Literary  
Review* pays \$9 per poem. Rather  
too much in my opinion."

--Auberon Waugh

I don't know when I discovered I'm not creative--  
or if I discovered it.

Others, usually, whisper to one  
in no uncertain terms,  
and if one persists, others  
begin to shout one has no talent.

Talent. I think of Ted Mack.  
I remember believing as a child  
that, as an adult, I could summon the word "one"  
and it would seem quite natural.

I've been saving pretentiousness for the occasion  
when it would appear as something else.

A world of merit determined by me.  
One seeks to control oneself  
before branching out.  
Someone wants what you have,  
or wants to protect what they have from you.  
In the stock pot of life everything

is reduced to these simple  
dynamics [Gk(dunamis=power)], this essence.

For example, not too long ago  
I noticed a pregnant woman with tired feet  
sitting at one of fifteen empty tables outside a café.  
She placed her feet on the chair beside her,  
turning her body sideways so that her back rested  
against a concrete wall. The woman stared ahead not seeing,  
thinking I guess, of blue and pink, green and yellow,  
"Let Me Call You Sweetheart", the first song  
she learned as a child, background music  
for her new affection--pastels--when (there is a when)  
a man coming directly from the tobacco shop  
set a grocery bag on the chair opposite her feet.

The man ordered a sandwich indoors, returned to the table  
where he had set his bag, stood in front of the chair  
where the woman had placed her feet, and said,  
"Excuse me, I would like to sit down."

The woman frowned, lifted her feet, and left.  
I watched the man's hidden smile, the modest  
turn of his head, saw him shift  
joyfully on his cast iron throne.

There were whole undivided minutes before  
he took the first bite of his sandwich.

I imagine he chewed in time to this chant:  
Imadehermoveherfeet, Imadehermoveherfeet, Imadehermoveherfeet...

The man was a novice, obviously,  
and overcome with headiness.

One couldn't trust his judgment.  
In fact, he is the kind of man who would take his life  
and the life of an expectant mother,  
rather unexpectedly.

I decided to sever my ties with him.  
Dismissing him was simple enough.

But making arrangements for my safety--  
I heard a cab driver say if someone  
is determined to kill you, they will.

I had two choices:

1. Snuff my subordinate before he snuffs me.
2. Exile him to England.

He is now installed behind a desk,  
which everyone keeps the hell away from,

in Britain.

The name of the town escapes me.

That is, I try to forget daily.

This very fact causes me to remember,

nearly every day, and to remember

(it was my failing to have fired him myself)

I have an enemy in the U.K.

## Mercy

If I sound cold, you weren't there for 11 years  
through all the operations and just the day-in day-out care.  
Sometimes we put ourselves first to put others first,  
and I couldn't watch her anymore, and if I couldn't watch her  
she couldn't very well live.

We'd be in the truck together and I'd forget for a minute  
or maybe just think, stopped at a red light, about if  
she'd been born whole like my other girl, and then  
I'd look over and see the only child with eyes like mine  
unable to talk or walk or lift a spoon to her mouth.

The other kids need a full-time dad. My sons said the best  
I could do would have to be good enough, and they loved her  
like I loved her. My other girl hasn't left her room.  
I admit she hasn't eaten. She won't look at me and won't speak.  
You should've prayed for strength was the last thing she said.

I did pray for strength. I needed it when I opened  
the truck door and saw the child in the same position  
as when I set her in there alive. It was all I could do  
not to climb in. This is it, I said, she wasn't your fault,  
she wasn't her fault. She was just born.

## Charity

I want to see a show of gratitude.  
Either she doesn't realize, or worse doesn't care, how much  
we spend to come here each spring, but then she couldn't.  
She leaves a mess everywhere. I've closed the door to their room  
because I can't stand underclothes lying around.  
When my son asked her to clean up I heard her say she loves chaos.  
Her hair is proof there's no such thing as messy beauty.  
She reminds me of the children we used to take in.  
I don't think it helped them to live for two months the way  
we lived. In August they would quietly leave the house and the silence  
went on, but I wanted them to come, just as I wanted  
to weave the blankets, thinking of the babies sleeping, the hospital babies.  
Eventually I quit weaving, though the nightmare didn't stop.  
At least once a month when I finished a blanket I had to prove it  
to a man dressed like a factory foreman in the style of 1910.  
Someone in the background would take the blanket carefully,  
very slowly, as if I couldn't be trusted.

From A Ditch In The Road

Most of the people think I'm foolish and I guess I am.  
A fool for those people. Foolishness is a blessing

because it makes others thankful. Thank God I'm not him,  
yelling from a ditch at the corner of 105 and 421,

strip mall in back, car dealer across the way,  
not that bad yet, haven't lost it to that extent,

not out there shouting to everybody, hollering  
up to the mountain. The mountains don't hear.

They've shut down after hearing too much.  
I only preach to the fool. God likes to hear what he said

in ancient times so he can think once again  
he was right.

I was a southpaw but I changed that lifestyle.  
It didn't do me good to go against the grain.

I was the clown who'd rile you at the carnival,  
talk about your fat or your bald head or your screaming kids

and get you mad enough to try and dunk me,  
only it was rigged. All day long I could rail at guys

throwing speedballs and I remained completely dry.  
Because if I'd fallen from my high cage, struck down

by a hotshot pitcher, I'd be baptized in the name  
of the ordinary man who threw the ball, and what God  
had in mind for me was bigger than the carnival, bigger

than seeing all those people and knowing what he hated

about each one. Every day I fight myself  
to tell what God wants to hear.

## Twelve Years For Grave Robbing

I brought him inside and gave him comfort.  
He was as real in that box as he ever was.  
I dreamed about him every night begging me to help.  
His voice in my dreams and then the graveyard.  
No one should be cold even there.  
A man who's dead still has feelings somewhere,  
and I think he was trying to say  
he shouldn't have died. It's really why I'm here...  
to think about their idea of good behavior.  
I was good the night I brought him in from the cold,  
and put his ashes by the fire, and then  
sitting there with him saying I was sorry.

## More Body Than Mind

I ran over a boy in the park when he crawled onto the sidewalk.  
A mother stopped me. I shook when she talked.  
If you can't control yourself on a bike you shouldn't be riding.  
O.K., I said I won't but he was in the way.  
He can't help it she said he's a baby. You are older and bigger.  
I am not big I am little. I rode my bicycle  
into the creek after she said I shouldn't ride at all.  
I saw her face in the trees. Her arm reached out.  
She wasn't big enough to reach her arm far enough.

## Child Creator

In the hollows of her palms she gave him  
a turquoise egg for the space where his short strand  
of intestine left a cavity, though she had to misshape  
his heart in giving the gift. This is you, she said softly,  
turning the marbled figure to face the window  
and the desert beyond.

He wasn't ashamed because he knew nothing about  
where he was, how he got there, or who made him so  
lifelike and incomplete.

## The Judge On The Subject Of His Wife

Call it adolescent rebellion.  
I guess we've both got some of that. She didn't want to  
    can vegetables for a living. I can't say I blame her,  
and then after a while she didn't want to do the other  
    for a living either. I was lonely.  
After a few visits she became as steady as my wife had been.  
    She served her time and meanwhile I retired.  
We got married in the summer of my 70th year, outdoors,  
    a different kind of wedding than the first.  
My wife had been a typical homemaker and I missed her.  
    That's why I started going to Becky.  
In the beginning I felt I should ask forgiveness, only  
    it wasn't God I asked, at least not your typical God.  
He had a woman's face. I don't know if he was my wife  
    or my mother.

## Good Neighbors

We had to shoot the dogs. First thing he told me  
when I pulled up. We thought you were in there,  
the second one said. Then she come over.  
I seen your hat hanging in your truck. We thought you was  
sleeping it off. She kind of smiled like maybe I'd laugh.

Them dogs is my life.

We had no choice. They were jumping this high--  
all we saw was teeth and fire in back of the teeth.  
They thought you was in there, she said.  
They wouldn't quit, it was a pack mentality, the second one said.

Got to feel like they're somebody running around with their  
noise and lights. It was a mentality all right, I said, it was some kind  
of mentality.

We try to do the job best way we know how.  
If they'd been in a pen--

Out here they don't need no pen. I grabbed the shovel.  
One I buried in her yard. She didn't say nothing when I  
started to dig.

## Death Wish

God sews seeds of forgetfulness into his fruits  
of knowledge, entire tables and graphs disappearing

from my desk, as it were. And recently I've stumbled  
in front of a class of 500, trying to recuperate

with a worn-out joke about age, the province of only one.  
Usually a girl in front, her legs crossed at the ankles,

will prod me, as she would an insect to get him moving again.  
I'm able to go on about the psychology of the demigod

and how the world seems to have a tremendous amount  
of space for such people, illustrating with my own examples--

a rich aunt, and a long-gone Boy Scout leader,  
both from mid-1940, both dead; then I move into contemporary

radio personalities, one in particular who describes  
for the listening audience what he has seen in his new issue of *Playboy*.

And then I lecture about how French Pussy taught me  
everything I know of context, digging out an old copy of Burpee's,

revealing the essential "Willow" printed below.  
Her legs tighten at the knees.

One student has a gun in an ankle holster, sitting  
every Monday-Wednesday-Friday in the same seat, same hour.

He is predictable. I make another joke about sex and age.  
So shoot me, I say, and everyone laughs.

## Deuteragonist

I drove into town on a July day and saw an old woman  
in a navy blue raincoat walking from the drugstore to the Post Office,  
herself the lifelong answer to a crossword: Another "agonist."  
The woman was my preoccupied and befuddled mother.

Although she greeted three people on the way to the bank,  
it was left to me, her first born, "son of the right hand",  
to park the car and chase after her, the only errand that day--  
remove the knife from my mother's back.

"You were born for a reason, Son," she said.  
But at my age, driving into town, looking for her, is the knife  
there or not there, and if it is, having to park and run across the street  
to pull the knife out, not just in winter, but summer too...

I could spend my time beginning to truly educate myself, and then how long  
before the knife would altogether--reach for it and it is gone,  
a phantom weapon, like a pain.  
In the West, we leave town on our elbows, a spectacle in daylight.

I slump from the driver's seat and crawl across the square,  
waddling on my arms' knees through four commercial blocks;  
by sundown I've pulled myself to the edge of the plain,  
a desert of its own; my house in the distance there waiting for me,

a spirit patient among the pillars, waiting on the porch of judgment.

## One And The Same

She came to me across the parking lot like a fairy  
in a dream, a vision I prayed for that whole time.

I bought some of her things, for a school trip, she said.  
Then I told her to follow and when I turned

I heard her steps behind, chasing me back into myself.  
I was scared at the sound of her shoes.

I had her there, on a dirty scrap of carpet  
in the back of the van. She acted like the others,  
except she talked. I thought you were nice, I thought  
you were normal, why did God do this?

Because you are beautiful.

## No Accident

I don't think it was a mistake she followed me  
into the next aisle. I saw a jar of mustard made with wine.

I turned. Lady, I almost said, woman.  
She looked away. I think she pushed the cart with her eyes

all the way to the end of the aisle and into the next  
where I brushed against her. I could see by her shoulders,

she wore a wool coat, she cried into the sleeve, she wanted love.  
When she left the store carrying the bag in both arms,

I came up fast at the alley, the street lamp burned out,  
and put my arms around from behind, let me take it from you,

then up against the wall, the bag crashing by the dumpster  
in the dark. I pushed up to her. Your life, I said,

you call it a life, your life is a weak lie.  
To say she kissed back is a lie too, but she didn't

not kiss. She didn't scream or kick or cry.  
Just do it fast she said, and I said, anything I do

I do in my own time and everything I do is right  
and don't worry because I will never be finished with you.

She cried into the sleeve of her coat.  
I let her go.

## Church Of The Old Woman

My father worked as a cook specializing in breakfast.  
People say he worried about money for quite some time

before he shot my mother and then himself.  
Maybe he thought they would find us sooner than they did,

though probably he didn't give a thought for us at all.  
I had to climb over their bodies in the front room.

I ate potato chips from a bag left open on the couch.  
I drank water from the toilet, living this way for three weeks

while my sister starved in her crib, too young to crawl.  
I was 18 months old and could walk, and police said that's what saved me,

saved for a reason I have yet to know.  
When I was 5 or 6 an old woman stood at the foot of my bed

calling me the name I was given as a baby.  
I recognized her from a picture my aunt showed later.

This was your grandmother, she said, see the resemblance.  
There is a difference between the story they tell you,

something bad you went through before you could remember,  
and the story you know--I met my grandmother

when she was already a ghost.

## Itinerant Preacher In Rural Wisconsin

I was beaten that night.  
The rope I wear as a belt was used as a noose until I lay unconscious.

One of the women gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation,  
leaning over me like a protective bough.

I sucked her breast as if I were an infant renewed.  
The crowd laughed--He's joined the human race--.

Gradually I remembered myself. When I first walked in  
only one man didn't laugh or yell. I put my hand on his shoulder

and he followed me to the stage.  
The motherly one rose from the floor, asking for \$20.

The other woman wept, reaching for my hand.  
I turned to the man who had followed. What do you think, friend?

Will you escort this poor prisoner to safety?  
I tried to stand and walk to the door but managed only to crawl,

then stood too soon and fell.  
Finally I got outside and aimed for the trees.

If I had remained, kept to my camp.  
If they had come to me and I had suffered them.

## A Lutheran Minister's Impromptu Sermon

He has his place, she has her place, you have your place.  
And to find that place we suffer a wound.

On my pastoral walk last Sunday I heard the snake's  
dry pilgrimage through brittle leaves and watched him

emerge punctured across the center of his body.  
In a sense, everyone in this church has lain with me

as I lay with our choir director.  
I hear men clearing their throats and the ladies gasping.

You must be thinking, surely he cannot accuse us of his trespass.  
The Lone Ranger died last week, or rather, the actor who played The Lone Ranger.

He had once said the role made him a better person.  
In other words, wearing the mask of the righteous

he became righteous.  
Ministering to the congregation's needs,

I became a minister.  
Ministering to my own needs, I became

a fornicator, an adulterer.  
Unlike the actor who kept his mask on, I am taking mine off this morning.

So tied was he to a single role, he wanted us to ask ourselves,  
even after his death, Who was that masked man?

As I leave this church, the woman you thought you knew  
waits for me in the wilderness.

We will abide as sinners returning to the garden, willing  
to get behind the yoke and give it another push.

Every congregation is a new wilderness, and oftentimes a harsh one.  
I do not want you to suffer the anxiety of asking yourselves

who I was, after my farewell.  
Shifting through the leaves on a Sunday morning,

I was a serpent of God.

## Wire Mother

Infant monkeys raised with only  
a wire mother did not become  
attracted to and did not spend  
time in contact with it, but would  
huddle in the corner of the cage.

### Social Development

--Maccoby

I wouldn't paint solid oak the color of snow  
so they fired me, snow sifting into the open boxcars,

my foot on the brake, waiting at the light.  
I took another job working alone in the empty rooms,

window sills and bookcases and mantels and moldings  
and a spindle stairway, wood already ruined,

so I clean-coated the whole empty place.  
And over the course of those five days I thought about her.

A lace curtain belled out into the parlor  
only the windows were bare and open, nothing lingered,

and I remembered we used to have lace, the pattern it made  
when she watched me on the porch, like a veil, shifting when she shifted.

After I got her inside she'd lean there.  
Her breath from the wine smelled like warm toast.

She wanted me inside with her but I stayed outdoors,  
breathing the cold air, waiting until the black stars

were white again, until I was finally ready to move her upstairs.  
I was 10. I had my first cigarettes watching the stars turn,

knowing we were there because God believed in me enough  
to let her hand slip from the wheel.

August, 1966

It was a commercial flight and I asked the guy up front  
if he'd make an announcement--returning servicemen, one on crutches,  
no sleep, would anyone give up their seats.  
The one on crutches, he had to stand; I stood, all three of us stood.  
The other passengers ate and drank like we weren't there.  
When I got to Kansas City my daughter said my eyes were yellow.  
In the car I turned around and smacked her legs.  
I've forgotten now what it was she did.

## Caretaker

It's no way to treat a dying man, making him  
go back over what he's ashamed of,

so I can't call my daughter much of a nurse.  
When you were 7, she says, keeping watch over the still,

what year was that?  
Not a good start is all I'll say.

She's like a genie bottled up in my past.  
Everything between 1950 and now, then everything before 1949.

I can't tell you about my birth because I wasn't there.  
Your laugh is getting worse, she says.

What about my cough?  
Your laugh and your cough sound the same.

My mother was a pretty woman but it didn't do her good,  
and I can't say it's done you any good either.

A pretty woman for a mother doesn't help a child.  
How do you know what helps? You left when I was a month old.

I left at two weeks, a correction I keep under my hat.  
Two weeks in the summer 50 years ago, unaccounted for.

I live there as much as I can now.

## Thief

Shortly after I built the cross,  
sanded it, stained it, and stood the cross out front  
for all to see, or at least anyone making their way  
past the new church, I yearned for it back, don't ask me why.

A lady planted a white vine at the base  
I was careful to unwind.

Once I got the structure out of the hole  
the flowers trailed along the ground with nowhere to go.

I guess I'm as fickle as the thief  
who fries bacon in the house he robs.

One day he wants diamonds and the next  
to play guitar and sing.

You see how a thing is put together  
and the following step takes it apart.

There's no beauty in agony.

## The Injury

My memory of my father is that he sat in the parlor  
and by the time I got home I knew he had sat through the afternoon

watching one or two titles lit by the sun about to set.  
He arranged his books and rearranged, read and reread.

We whispered to visitors about the pain he was in as we led them  
to the kitchen, the only warm place, with the stove going.

My uncles, when they came in from the fields,  
went to the kitchen and stayed. They put off going upstairs

where the glass of water they took to bed would freeze by morning.  
We managed not to say what we wondered, if maybe his temperament

was suited more to read and have one drink a night  
instead of the life my uncles led. The vet probably could've maneuvered the leg

back into the socket, though at the time, before the '20s,  
it seemed nothing could be done, the thigh bone jammed

through the pelvis, one leg four inches shorter than the other.  
Whatever his pleasure, I don't doubt but that he paid for it,

and I suppose to our mind, that made his pastime acceptable.  
You're in school, he would say, but I couldn't divide

my time equally even if I'd wanted to. There were crops and milking  
and no break from either. You asked was it a happy home.

Even being used to it, I can't say it wasn't hard.  
I suppose we were all happier in summer.

## Winners

My mother cut the toile at a certain passage so the rump of an ungulate would appear in a corner of the pillow--a message to my father.

She doesn't understand why money would be our reward since all is vanity, cash, dirty. On Wednesday night, hours before the black scarf

hung on the tavern door, while he was bedridden, sleeping and sleeping, my sister held his hand for a long time.

"Here," she said, "you hold Dad's hand for a while." I knew she would ask. And I did, I held the old man's hand.

When I was 10, he came for me with his arm raised and all I could do was pray, lock my fingers in front of my face

and not look up. Naturally, he wouldn't pay for tap shoes. We used the forks and spoons from a drawer in his workbench.

After dancing the noise from the spoons we went on to the forks, the only music the music of our shoes on the basement floor.

Strapped to our soles with black tape, the curlicued handles flattened more and more, twelve spoons over two winters, a spectrum

of copper and silver around the worn holes. I held a spoon to my eye as a monocle, catching sight of my sister's brilliant feet.

In the coffin-box-for-silver he found no pattern left, no utensil fit for a human mouth. We were sent to bed in the afternoon damned

to a hell of waiting and knowing. "I don't care about that silver," he said, "your mother does."

To think of her ironing, mending, cooking, feeding the baby grateful we'd found amusement downstairs.

"They should've just bought us the shoes."  
"You don't have any talent anyway," I said.

Two hours before he died he sat upright and announced the winning number to my sister.

I understand now how you can hate the look on a face and not hate the face.

I did not have to turn away or leave the room,  
no expression, no guesswork to be done.

No Trespassing, 1937

He laughed and offered 200 Philistine foreskins  
for my daughter's hand. It's not her hand he wants. I know what he wants.

If you don't get off my property and stay off--  
I paused. Once and for all. I looked him right in the eye.

He came back the next night, true to everything  
I've known about him since grade school. I can't tell you how much

I wanted to see blood leave his body. Yes, even when  
I remembered him skinny and freckled, pissing into every gopher hole

he could find. He was ignorant of their way, how they keep  
one door for display while the true entrance lies hidden,

a thing I thought about as I set up the sign he'd torn down the week before.  
There'd be a hole at the seat of his trouble, heart, brain, groin.

My gun suspended with twine, triggered when he yanked the board from the tree.  
From inside the house I'd hear the shot and have the answer

when she looked up from her embroidery, startled.  
Delivered into mine hand.

## Beautifully Executed, Lovingly Served

An unbalanced final dinner lacking in a representative  
from fruits and vegetables due to illness.

Or a pyramid of the four food groups arriving  
on a stainless cart, the half ham, hot dog in color,  
its white bone stylized and gleaming; two eggs  
lean together, pristine, composed, the ladies of the group.

Grain, bread, prison food for centuries,  
doling out discipline along with water, a disciple's choice  
in the cell of his making. Cottage cheese, curds read  
through mesh, a future told. Do we have a vision  
of our last meal, granite name cards balanced  
in our hands, moss eating the words?

## Dorothy's Breakfast Barn

If I want to keep behind the register wearing sunglasses and nothing else,  
it's my business. I heard someone say she's like God, parked there taking money.

I have only the one eye--they know that much, most of them.  
They'll say all kinds of things, but that was a good one. Like God.

The curtains are open all the time with the sun blasting in, lighting up  
bottles of syrup on the back counter brown-gold, her hair in June 1971.

When I saw her in her casket two and a half months later  
her hair was yellow from the outdoors.

It was always my belief a fortunate, pretty girl like mine would be  
happy in life but she picked the ones who couldn't do her any good.

I still know their faces when they come in.  
Five or 10 years after I would've thrown them out.

I don't budge now.  
They were the only friends my daughter had.

I stopped puzzling over her life a long time ago.  
Her reasons died with her--that came to me one day as I stared into the sun.

And any reason I had to put a bullet in my head  
and draw the misfortune to keep living

has been kneaded and prodded like a bum lump of dough  
that will never rise no matter what.

The morning I opened this place for the first time again  
I remembered something I overheard a customer say.

A blind dog isn't the end of the world.

## A Family History

"You were the loveliest girl I ever knew."

In response to his letter, I wrote back in longhand on a yellow legal pad to tell him the loveliest girl he had ever known

was killed on horseback during a training session last July. I had the inclination to write everything and so I started with the story

of my mother's sister, age 8 in 1942, carried from the pasture to the house where she died 15 minutes later--a kick to the jaw, by which horse we never knew.

Our grandfather sold them all. It is easy to blame a horse. They aren't creatures of deep feeling as those of us who love them will tell you.

The spectacle of my own sister's death--a lightening bolt at the peak of one last jump, a fountain of dust shooting six feet

into the air as she and the horse fell--was an act of completion, a vibrant indifference. She was, in an instant, transcendent and then abandoned.

It is troubling to know the horse is now fed and cared for by a young woman, offering in hand, stopping on her way from work or school,

who believes the animal shows signs of grieving. On the day our grandfather died, the horse he had purchased the spring before

refused to let him ride. By afternoon he had fallen from the hay wagon, sudden and complete heart failure. Ahead of the rest of us, at dawn,

his horse had accepted the departure.

Aaron,  
Indiana County, Pennsylvania

One night when I was 4 she woke us up, said you and Traci  
get your stuff, put it in a box, we're leaving. I sat in the back of the car staring

at this toy I had, this red and white checkered elephant.  
He was sticking out the top of the box and I just sat there in the dark staring.

We moved about 20 miles away and she met Dick,  
that's what I always call him. Once they were fighting at the table

and he took his end, knocked it up like this in the air.  
The food went flying, me and Traci ran upstairs crying.

My mum must've talked to him 'cause he came up later to apologize  
but I knew then I hated him, it didn't matter what he said.

My dad always liked to hear trash about Dick  
but it was his fault, my dad's, he cheated on my mum. By the time I knew

she was already my step mum and I liked her.  
I mean I admired what she put up with. One time she got mad, shoved

the heel of her boot through the windshield,  
made a big jagged cut all the way across. I liked that he had to fix it.

When I laughed he said it just meant less for me.  
I wasn't getting nothing from him anyhow except at Christmas.

He was a big Santa Claus then. He'd pass out condoms to me and my friends,  
but I'd already lost it when I was 12. It was really more Traci's idea.

We went out for pizza, this girl and Traci and me, and she was hinting at it, so we came back to the house and my mum and Dick were watching TV downstairs,

so we went on up and played Truth or Dare. She dared me to kiss her first and then I think she dared me to do something else.

Traci couldn't leave 'cause they would've known something, me and the girl alone in the room, but so long as we were all there together...

so we did it that way, Traci on the edge of the bed listening to tapes, whales or some nature shit. I took a shower after, I don't know why,

needed to I guess. It was really more Traci's idea. Guys flocked to her. We fought all the time. Once I kicked her between the legs.

She grinned, then beat me to a pulp, well, not a pulp, but we came away from our battles bloody. Nobody understood how I could love my sister so much.

She hated Dick even more than I did I think. She told me the other night I didn't know everything about him.

She went to live with my dad her sophomore year, then Dick and my mum called him names when she came back pregnant at Thanksgiving,

said it was his fault 'cause she was living with him. That's one thing my mum regrets to this day, not helping her more.

She asked me not too long ago what she did wrong and I told her some people have a tolerance and some don't.

That's where Traci's weak. She can't tolerate it. I went with her to one of the meetings. Myself I don't have that problem.

I've done my share, but Traci's done everything. I started smoking weed when I was 10 cause she brought some back from my dad's.

Their parents were growers, where she got it. I remember some girls saying they wouldn't go out with me 'cause I smoked.

I liked older girls anyway. At 16, I had a girlfriend who was 24. The first time I met her my friend's mum said your cousin's moved back,

go over and see her, so we did and played basketball for a while.  
I was all sweaty after the game and she said I smelled like hay.

She wasn't no farm girl, how would she know, she didn't smell like nothing.  
When I told her that she sprayed her T-shirt with perfume

and it was the best thing I ever smelled, ain't smelled nothing like it since.  
The rest of them passed out and we did it that night.

I was always over there with my friends. It was a warm place to drink.  
We'd go over, punch holes in the wall. I'd ignore her till I wanted to.

She just put up with it. I'd go over after school, come home, eat,  
go again after dinner. She had other guys but she said she loved just me,

wanted to take care of me. She couldn't take care of herself,  
couldn't take care of her own kids. She lost them 'cause of us.

My mum wanted to haul her in for rape, but I said naw, don't do that.  
One of the other guys wanted to duke it out. I said you can have her.

I'd lose anyway. I was king of the losers. That's what I called myself.  
Right after I graduated, I packed up my stuff and moved to Pittsburgh,

to live with my dad, started as a roofer with him, and I met  
somebody even older. She was 38 and her husband left her

'cause she had cancer. Maybe she'd live a while. It depended  
on a special diet. She had high hopes for a road trip too.

I would drive. I made that clear. If I couldn't drive

there wouldn't be no trip. Normally I drive like a maniac  
but for the most part I minded myself except on a few straight-aways

in the middle of the night. She was asleep so what did she know?  
She slept a lot, but when she didn't sleep she talked.

We had to go Amarillo to Albuquerque, Flagstaff to Kingman  
to Needles and into Barstow. Without side trips. Her family

never left the main highway in the four or five times they made the trip.

She had a memory for every mean thing her dad said  
when he was back from the war, and every bad thing her mum said  
when he was there, and I heard about it the whole way.

She'd try to get me to let her in on all my unhappiness  
but what good would that do? She pestered me real bad

one day after lunch leaving Tucumcari, and I gave in, told her I used to  
cut myself in my room when I was 12. My mum asked about

the smiley face I burned into my arm. There's no goodness  
left in the world I said and my mum asked if I remembered

the time when I was 6 and the mailman brought our groceries.  
I did, and my mum said do you remember why?

We dropped them on the sidewalk. The bag broke.  
Yes, and he gathered them up and carried them to the door.

My mum said it was the nicest thing anyone ever done for her.  
I finished telling the story and I pulled out everything, it was a true

performance, we were poor, single mum, couldn't afford medicine,  
and I looked over and she was asleep.

I finished the story the way it was, then switched a few things  
to make the story sadder, then happier, keeping up

a steady mumble, no other car in sight. For once it was just  
me and my life and the road.

## A Drowning On A National Wild And Scenic River

When you are 16 you can't live  
your own life until everything changes  
the way it did on the river.

I was no longer my father's daughter  
exactly as before because John and I  
made love every night we slept under the stars.

More and more beautiful every night and morning,  
better, wiser; I was reckless and scared  
and John, my true one, made me safe

when snakes hung from vines as if they owned  
the world, when the river ran green to white,  
and the current pulled me toward punishment.

I saw Daddy's face, and Mother's, more knowledge  
than sight. My last thought was love.

They've got a group down there claiming it's natural,  
a girl wedged eight feet under in a funnel of boulders, her body

so whipped by the current her family wouldn't know her.  
"Preserving its dead until the time is right...the river knows

when to let go"--patience I don't have.  
I don't have patience for making nature into God.

To work hard for years, work long hours while she grew.  
God gave me money for a reason and the reason is water divides

when man makes his demand, which he can and does  
if he has money enough. To bury my daughter

in the dry earth of summer, to stand over a grave  
and ask forgiveness in the place her grandparents also lie dead,

to look past the gates and see four horses run,  
running close and fast, as they will.

Forsythia Forsythe

The human hand cannot apply equal pressure at all times.  
That's what my quilt book said.

But the fox couldn't apply equal pressure either  
so he had met his match.

He didn't have a broken hip, he hadn't lost his bifocals,  
but he wasn't thinking straight.

After biting and scratching over and over, he ran to the smokehouse  
while I was down in the dirt moaning about my hip.

He must've wanted to teach me a lesson because as soon  
as he reached the smokehouse I saw him run to the barn,

go past the shed, and then he was at me again.  
Lucky I got hold of him right before my glasses were gone.

By then the sun was down.  
When the sun sets behind the daffodils they start to look like

yellow curtains. The sight of a flower makes me want to live  
one more day and then another.

I had his neck good and tight. As the night wore on  
I eased a little when he rested, but when I felt him tense

and heard him hiss, I tightened up because  
it has been my dream to die under my blankets.

I held on and thought about anyone I'd ever had a feeling for.  
By morning when the birds started I knew him pretty well.

I knew he'd bite again if I didn't keep my grip tight  
and my arm straight. I can't say I surrendered to the incarnation

since the man who brings my paper killed the fox with 12 blows,  
one for every hour I held him off, and I was glad to see it done.

Forgive me Jesus, if that was you.

The following poems from PORCH OF JUDGMENT have appeared in these journals:

CRAZYHORSE, spring 2000

“No Accident”

THE GEORGIA REVIEW, spring 1991

“A Letter From Margaret To Her Sister”

THE IOWA REVIEW, vol. 22/1, 1992; HARD CHOICES, An IOWA REVIEW Reader

“Dominion”

“A Family History” and “The Injury” (forthcoming in 2003)

THE KENYON REVIEW, winter 1991

“The Monarch of Meritocracy”

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW, spring 1991; summer 2001

“Sarah’s Triumvirate”

“House Built On A Hairpin Curve”

THE OHIO REVIEW, no. 61, 2000

“Forsythia Forsythe”

POETRY NORTHWEST, winter 2001-2002

“Good Neighbors”

“12 Years for Grave Robbing”

