



home trees

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where BIRDS fare well

Swallow on telephone lines,
Doves in the underbrush,
Hawks in ruins and cathedral rafters,
Crows on the shoulders of fallen soldiers,
Peacocks on staircases,
Canaries in the offices of motel managers,
Parrots in rich women's kitchens,
Whip poor wills sobbing
in the branches of trees
on long summer nights.

Sparrows on rooftops, in hedges and haylofts,
Eagles ensconced atop immaculate mountains,
Hérons in marshes,
Swans in canals and in fountains,
Skylarks sing into the sun,
Owls in cemeteries,
And cuckoos in the heads
of young
men.

now then

Upon completing our educations
we planned to be cowboys
or at least the sidekicks of ones.
Everywhere I went I took pictures
with my head.

Blackberries by the roadbed.

Uncle in the garden.

I remember the boardwalk splintering
and the mirror in the barber shop breaking
and people yelling and jumping
into the river.

The car had stalled on a hill and started
rolling backwards.

I smoothed my fringe, and the mountain
in the tomato patch
grew and grew.

a melting pot

My mother's father didn't come over on the Titanic. A bad-tempered violent man, he lost his ticket in a pub fight. Or so I am told. He took his coffee with whiskey in it. Once he named a calf after me. Two years later he slaughtered it. I was one of his pallbearers.

My father's father was a diabetic most of his life. I remember watching him pinch a skinny shoulder and slipping the needle in. He was sweet by nature. A neighbor's son ran wild with a Model T once and killed my grandfather's favorite riding horse, a saddlebred stallion. Grandpa paid to fix the broken ca. I remember when I was a boy and dropped by toothbrush into the toilet, he picked it out for me and washed it off. I dreamed of him once bursting into a fountain, his life shooting out all the holes he'd made.

In 1959 my mother is driving home late from her waitressing job. A stag bolts from the roadside into her beams. That night I hear voices, see a deer hung from an apple tree by the heels. Bread knife in hand, I see my father make the downward incision. The great heart tumbles onto the fallen fruit.

My father and mother's first baby was sick, and the two stayed together until she died. My mother went a little mad, in advance of the loss. My father went out, for a drink, or a dance. Sometimes he came home drunk and the two of them shouted. One time he hit her, and I hugged her leg on a bunched up carpet and cried.

My father told my mother that her mother was an imbecile, but that is not how I remember her. I see my grandmother's hands zipping open pale skin, and with one hand pulling the unborn egg into the light. Inside the hen the shell was still soft.

On television men are spading up other men from a California peach orchard. My mother says my uncle John was one of the dead, he had left home and lost touch.

Two thousand miles away my father stirs his ice. He is looking at album with women and girls in it. Their names are Grace and Ruth and Rose and Mary. more beautiful than any I have seen, the way the light and shadow plays on their faces, the rosy cheek turned bronze, their hopes and smiles, gone into time. Someone ought to tell the story, says my father. Somehow it ought to be all gotten down.

A dozen families flee from famine to drought and depression to Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio. The branches of the trees intertwine in the pure product of our broken household, the girl upstairs, coughing in her sleep, the woman fretting to put things right, the man slipping through the boards like spilled water.

My mother's father, deep into Michigan, who married old and knew no more about Jesus than his druid roots, beats his daughters and sets them howling. Deep into summer they hack the milkweeds, head upon head. Something happened, I don't know what. My mother grew up anxious, as if she had a long head start on the sick child inside her.

My father's mother is on a nursing home bed in Milwaukee with a stroke. She is 85, I am 24. When she sees me, she thinks I am my cousin, my uncle, my father. How are my children? The poor sick girl? The boy who went away to seminary? In my grandmother's heart I live freely and all at once through four and five generations.

My cousins drive me to my motel room. They talk about senility, psychosis, the stroke. I half listen. My grandmother is right in ways I will have trouble remembering. We swirl together in a pot of blood, bodies passing through one another, forward, backward into time. I will not see her alive again.

rachel the student

In the lab there was a cat.
Its head was shaved bare,
and sticking out of a wad of putty
was a wire.
When the cat saw Rachel come in, it jumped.
But it didn't land on all fours,
as most cats do.
It hit a cabinet drawer and fell on its side.
And Rachel wants to know what good is a cat
like that.

Every day she bikes by the cancer hospital,
chain grease blackening her pant legs.
Today she looked and a face in a window
was looking out at her,
then pulled the drapes shut.

A big exam is on the way
and she's missed her period
and her neighbor upstairs plays the saxophone
late at night,
and nothing she says makes any difference.
I don't understand it,
she starts crying one day,
why do people want to be mothers.

the clarinet is a difficult instrument

I was eating minestrone
when I heard something fall
outside my apartment window.
Too dark to see much
but a pair of hairy arms slam shut
a window on the third floor
of the building opposite mine.

In the morning all I found
was a bent clarinet on cement,
dented horn and pawn shop sticker
saying nine dollars.

It reminded me of the French explorer
Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac.
He too had dreams, set sail
up the St. Lawrence, looking for China,
and wound up settling in Detroit instead.

not far from the beach at plum island

Here the ocean makes its ocean-sound,
like the sound of a freight train at night
or the sound the freeway makes
outside my window in Minneapolis.

My friend Dirk calls such talk
Blasphemy. Oceans, highways trains
are not the same.
One is the original and it deserves credit --
too much attention is wasted on helicopters
while dragonflies flit quietly by.
And history, all it talks about
are the boatloads of people
who crisscrossed the waters,
never a mention of the other debris.

Dear friends, who wouldn't want to live
in a world like, original and clean,
set sail on the sturdiest twig we can find?
Instead I brush the sand from my pants --
on the ground is one of those plastic collars
six-packs come in --
seagulls strangle in them sometimes.
Like a fifty-cent saint I stuff it
in my pocket and head for the car.

perspective

There are no fields
Between the plane
And the ground below.
The farmlands look like
Band-Aids, and the little car
On the long skinny highway
Down there looks
Foolproof as a bead
On an abacus wire,
Undeviating
As a button on a thread.

Actually, someone
Full-sized is inside,
And he has to steer
Or he'll go in the ditch.
He could hit his head.
Or worse, miss
His appointment
In a room in one of
The buildings along-
Side the road.

mescal makes steamBoat run with the dogs

Yanked off the porch, I follow the pack
to the high fields,
leaping over fallen trees,
splashing through ditches,
fur catching brambles.
Four feet times six dogs spin across gravel,
and me on two legs behind.

Razor, the sloe-eyed coyote,
falls back from the others to counsel me:
Speed it up, will you, you'll make us all late.

Up hills, down hills, vaulting gullies,
alongside rims of cottonwood groves,
brown ribs flare open, then close.
The air frosts up,
pink gums flail the cornstalk rows.

We come to a resting place atop a dry terrace,
chins on our forearms.
First the wind paws our hairs, then sleep.
Except Razor doesn't sleep,
and neither does Snakeface.
Snarling, insults, teeth.

I stand with a stick, I say, "Stop!"
Only Razor looks in my face and says No,
you stop.
Everyone agrees, takes off downhill,
leaving me standing
upright.

three dogs

The dog marooned on the expressway island
is trying to make the most of
his one remaining advantage,
being alive.
No way to an exit ramp,
it's rush hour, dusk,
he's tired of standing still

Three-legged dog
hops from the
gate to the
door then back
to the gate

The dog on the carpet is twitching her way
through the usual dream.
She's running through cattails and thickets
and swamp,
and the fox she is almost on top of escapes.
She circles her own scent,
aware that somewhere behind her
and watching and laughing
the two brown beads.

accident

This coffee cup broken on the floor
will never be whole again.
Such a small thing,
still all this pain in your eyes.
Tell me, how can I make it right?

Before I met you I
was hollow, too,
and every little tap
resounded for hours.

Now see how easy I shrug off
disaster. You are
my coffee. I stir,
I cool you with my breath.

home trees

My hometown was Amherst, Ohio. Ham, little town, hurst, in the woods.
It was a quarry town. "Amherst, Sandstone Center of the World."
When the quarries were young, trees grew high and thin from their floors.
Twenty years later, the quarries are deep with spring and rainwater.
What's left of the tree trunks are all rotten now.
And still the water trickles upwards.

When I was little I would walk the lake Erie bluffs with my friends,
and the bushes beside me came up to my shoulders. Twenty years later,
I'm smaller than ever, the bushes are trees, and I'm thrown in their
shadows.

When my mother remarried, we moved to nearby Vermilion,
"Named for the Red Clay Used by Indians to Make Pots."
My stepfather Dick's dad had bought land there, planted poplar trees
alongside the creek bank, the site of the home we would build
years later.
The poplar is favored for its rapid growth, grows straight and tall,
makes an excellent windbreak, and in summer its leaves turn upward
and shimmer like dimes.

They don't live long. Twenty years later they are all chopped down
and taking their place beside the house is the languorous sweep
of a willow tree's arms.
Dick says the arms are too heavy, may break off in a thunderstorm,
crash through the roof, so he's making plans to chainsaw it down
in the summer or fall.

Rachel and I made a trip that year to Amherst and Vermilion,
and I showed her the house I grew up in.
Back then there were dozens of cherry trees, apples trees, peach trees.
The orchards are gone now, their places are taken by split level homes
of middle managers at the Ford Plant in nearby Lorain,
"Best Location in the Nation."

And Rachel and I find a place on the bluffs to make love
and nap in the shade of two telephone poles.

DRY wash

The natives of this place know something
about dirt, about skin, can recognize
the different cries of animals
in the hills.

Sometimes I think they dream us up,
and we are the death they invented
for themselves
and ruffle about themselves when they sleep.

At night the trout are in the brook
in the unrippled, unflashing waters.
A paper box careens down the wash
like a ghost.
In the dream I am dreaming is a seed,
anxious for the first
slow tickle of rain.

in praise of granite

"My incense rises heavenward to thee"
-- Inscribed on Thoreau's chimney

The beer cans say they've been at it all summer,
The high school kids, parked on land that isn't their own,
Getting high and sliding their fingers in and out
Of one another's underpants.
Forty-eight years ago three bank robbers took
This quarry road, smashed through that gate,
And planted two sticks of dynamite under the safe
That lies in a heap this fine spring day
Like a four-legged corpse with a horrible wound.
Back in Cambridge, Ray looks at the picture
For the thousandth time, a Chinese print of a dragonfly
Lighting on a bamboo frond; it's almost invisible.
A few blocks away, I'm sitting on a granite curb
In front of an Episcopal abbey.
Someone is behind me, a monk with Japanese eyes.
Do you want to make a meditation, he asks.
In Concord, several kids have fun
Breaking bottles on the one stone left from the shed
On Walden Pond, dense granite it was.
Lying on our backs in the rear of Dirk's pick-up,
Ray and I watch as the wires loop from pole to pole,
The sudden explosions of treetops above us.

the audience

Sometimes I played out in back of the meat mart,
hoping maybe the Polanskys would see me,
let me into the pool,
let me ride the horses,
or let me watch Steve's go-kart.

One day I opened a drum by the rendering plant.
Inside were the eyes of a hundred head of cattle,
some looking this way,
some looking that,
and that, and that, and that, and that,
each one the size of my fist.

Today Steve Polansky still works at the meat mart.
He and his brothers run it now,
hauling the sides of animals on hooks
up and down the sawdust floors.

But with me it was different.
I am an actress,
and I live for my audience.

in the corner panel of the saints constantina and anne

[Attributed to mouldy rye.]

The first thing that always goes out are the lights.
Smothered by bells, they cry out, then go out.
The next things that go are the sleepers.

Look at the woman who dreamed of white lights
while the town she grew up in
is burning behind her.
Crazy, she knows she is in the wrong picture,
using up space,
in the way.

Why did it happen?
Who lit the fire?
The whole town collapses
like a scorpion dancing,
then touching its tail to its lips.

The moon is delighted, is yellow
as pee, steps forward and backward
in the flickering shadows.
The crackling houses bloom into the flower of fire.

happiness

When someone is next to the person she loves,
the water in her cells laps at its thousands
of beaches, pebbles and rock
and sharp discs of light
breathe from the pores of her cheeks.

A whirlpool springs from a cloud to the west,
by an island egg in a happy sea,
a sparrow hawk flies off toward
a bank of violet mountains.

It lights on a limb of a tall green tree,
the stars alight in her branches.

my gun shoots black holes

"If we can travel indefinitely outward
from a given point, we also travel infinitely
into that point, never reaching center."
- Rutherford

Imagine a bullet that swallows its gun
that sucks up assassins
and targets at will:
the more it absorbs,
the smaller it
gets.

Trees shoot into the bullet, streets tear free
from their beds and jump into it,
thunderheads condense and pour
into the bullet, and the bullet
shrinks down to
the dot of
an eye.

Finally the whole planet is clawing its way
into this particle of dust and the flaps
of the universe come undone and fly
into the thing that is now
so small that everything's
died and gone
into it.

It moves in trillions now. Nonillions now.
Quindecillions. Vigintillions.

And life goes on
under our red roof
with no one the wiser.
I ask for the horseradish.
You pass it my way. And we
look at one another, traveling.

shame

It's shameful seeing fields I can't identify.
It's ice, or something,
a tangle that affects me.
I see zinnias and fall flowers with chew-marks
of frost on them,
a white mat of fur that I lay on
and stroked with one hand.

I noticed it first on a window frosted over,
and later a figure on a patch of linoleum,
and later out of a hatch in my eye
where a while ago a painting had been:
there were haystacks and sheep in it,
and the distant figures of men
caught in the motion
of lifting something long.

I can tell by the quit it must be winter.
And how it affects me, I want
to write everyone I know,
or have them come visit me.

one day over lunch

I am in a restaurant
unwrapping a napkin
when for no reason at all
the people at their tables change.
No longer diners perusing menus
or sipping coffee,
they are infant monsters
a monograph of freaks
cyclops baby, girl with no brain,
hour-old faces that didn't quite
make it, dry eyes crossed
with familiarity
with death.

I wish I could salve this feeling
like I butter a roll,
this bitterness is not a face you make
its roots punch through you
and grab onto the heart.

Sweet scrambled families
put together, taken apart,
some set aside and some discarded,
while the rest of the village,
well-issued and well-nourished
with all the right parts
in all the right places
peruse their menus
like passengers on a runaway train,
their eyes on the scenery
ride innocently over
the rust-red tracks.

Ice water.

my Bicycle

I set aside this perfect day to be with my bicycle.
Beautifully red, she's been mine
for three years.
I have just bought a pair of blue handlegrips.

Now for our free pirouettes in the sun.
There is no joy like this one.
Down a smooth hill
and into the wind, the low sound of whistling
in her spokes – I close my eyes
and trace a shiver down my spine.

Now we rest in the shade of a tree,
and my lovely bicycle, anxious
to please me,
guides herself in small circles.

Here, the figure eight.
Here, quick brakes!
I'm so proud, I applaud,
and my bicycle wheels sheepishly toward me,
sets her handlebar in my lap.

I stroke her saddle,
I murmur kind words.
When she stands before me,
her chain sags irresistibly,
her bearings rattle deep in her hind parts.

I mount her,
and we ride.

