

TO SAY WE ARE DYING IS NOT ENOUGH

Poems by

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In memory of my mother and father

"Sweet grim people, some days it hurts, this way
we ought to feel and cannot, this volume of grief
that crawls down the ages dissonant in its demand."

Richard Hugo

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I.

THE LESSON

Father, I have learned
sadness in the eyes
of children is prophecy.
They watch the dim spark
at the center of each star
and know, even in that stillness,
to say we are dying is not enough.

Tonight, nearly fifteen years
since the horrible ceremony
of your passing, I come
to offer this final sacrament
of ancient bone evolving new skin.

THE INHERITANCE
Russel M. Butts

I was eight when my uncle died.
A year later, my parents and I
buried the family dog in our back yard,
by a patch of lilies-of-the-valley.
I was always conscious
of stepping over those bones,
but it was not for ten years,
the day I found my father fallen
on the floor, too weak
to climb into his bed,
that I was finally afraid.

I watched him at the hospital,
his frail body curled
like a fetus, and realized
he was going back, and I wanted
to take hold of those shrunken hands
and lead him there myself.

When his breath left him, my mother's eyes shut.
The geography of her life became
a small, hard planet spinning inside her.
Galaxies collapsed, worlds were thrown
from their arcs, her hands went limp,
stars exploded, constellations were rearranged
and I understood, I was now the man she loved.

SILVER LAKE

The first time I saw it, I was
five years old, and everyday
there the sun exploded
into bright red strawberries
mother fed us with sweet milk,
while father swam the cool morning.

Afternoons, I would walk along
the shore, stop and bend to the glitter
of the lake, as he stood, just
close enough, in the white sand.

Our summer trips to the cottage
always began with a slow drive
in uncle's '49 gray Pontiac.
Year after year, at the end
of vacation, he returned
to bring us home. We went,
not sure that's what we wanted.

I live in a city I didn't know
about then. My father and uncle
are both dead. Mother writes
often from the nursing home,
and I remember the shine of trout
beneath rippling pools.

THE CREEK

I remember it more clean.
Sound beneath its surface
is the same as summer evenings
twenty years ago. Then, children
and Negroes fished beside lanterns,
and insects swirled in yellow light.
Afternoons, when bass leapt
the cerulean air, their wakes shone
like silver rings. Sunfish shivered
irredescent in my hand. Here
is the water grandfather cast
father and my uncles, demanding
"Swim. Swim." Just now, two boys
walk along the bank. My own youth
surges with their movement,
and the creek runs clean again.
They crouch under a stone bridge.
Their small voices swim
low echoes into the unsure dark.

WHAT WE DID WRONG, 1956

What we thought we did wrong was lust
for the new bodies of the older girls.
We delighted in a child's tests of cruelty.
Tearing things apart made us whole.
The Jewish junkman suspected this,
and drove his old gray daily by us
in silence. The time he left his wagon
unattended, we set fire to the oily rags
piled up in it. When he came screaming
down the road, the air blackened
with our laughter. We laughed at the
yellow-eyed Negro who chased us epileptic
through the town's main street,
on Saturday afternoons when we were twelve.
And we made the alcoholic Indian dance
around the flagpole, in front
of the post office, until the night
he was run over dead by a drunken
traveling salesman on 490. Twenty-five years
later, I see those older girls young
and feel again that dumb ache
after a madness none of us understood.

PHOTOGRAPH OF GREAT UNCLE GEORGE
(circa 1900)

Great Uncle George, brother
to my mother's father,
sits in a rocking chair
on the front porch
of a country house,
bought and paid for
by honest labor
on the Barge Canal.
Some thirty-five years
earlier, the war he moved
from county after county
to avoid fighting in
ended. The photograph is old.
Weather might not be this gray.
His pose could be awkward,
but he smiles. Large.
Bearded. His hat and suit
are pictured black.
There are over eighty years
between that face and mine.
I look closer
for some family resemblance.
Those dark, bewildered eyes,
they are also my own!
The instant of the shutter's click,
perhaps he thought how,
like the light which sometimes
captures us,
we fade and go out.

THE CANAL

My daughter and I sit on a bank
by the canal where, a hundred years
ago, my great uncle drove barge.
We have walked through tall grass,
weed and disordered wood to come here.
Together, we select small, flat stones
to skip across the dark water.
For awhile, we watch their brief lives
leap and disappear. Then we make a game.
I toss a stone that creates a ring
over the surface. She tries to throw
hers within its center. She notices
the circles cross one another.
I am reminded of cells in the body,
and how each precisely duplicates
its elements. We rise and return
to the dense, difficult path. Beneath
our concentric circles, stones sink
like the dead into their graves.

SON, WHO IS ENLISTING, SAYS GOODBYE TO HIS FATHER

Already he imagines himself
a soldier coming home,
a war won, the once unimportant
streets decorated with his name,
a girl waiting, and the town famous.
The year they took German
out of the schools, the father
enlisted. That same week - armistice.
Seventeen last month,
secretly he isn't sure.
It's 1960. There is no war.
He wonders why he's here
at this drugstore/bus stop.
Was it the girl who turned
away too quick, or a town
so small, you can't find
it on a map? His father
stands in the morning
of the place and asks,
"Are you sure?" The hands
of the town hall clock
say seven-thirty, but that
clock's been stopped since
early summer. He draws
his coat against October chill
and fear of the time he doesn't know.

AT CATE FARM CEMETERY

In rich, full scent of summer sting,
the names of children are ruined
signatures of black slate. Born:
A winter nearly one hundred and fifty years
ago. Buried: By the next spring's thaw.
Everything around us lives. Tall grass
rustles in afternoon wind. Small holes
of bone are filled and give themselves
to the bright flower. The year before
my own birth, there had been another child.
Male. Born dead. Growing up, he was
my perfect brother. We played games
meant for the dead, and living. Once,
in a dream, we argued, but I woke
not remembering anything about it.
Sometimes, I imagined names for him,
but each one dropped from my tongue.
This long time later, in a rural
New England grave yard, I think of him
again - he who felt that first moment
the spirit and flesh of his life,
and held it.

THE VISIT

Eighteen years since I left,
and in the town they still call me
by my dead father's name. Here you're known
as one familiar thing until you die,
or move away. This autumn afternoon,
I walk across rusted railroad tracks
beside the deserted plant my father
cleaned the machines of for thirty years.
The line re-routed, the factory moved south
and with it, the town's commerce.
I wonder what it is that doesn't change,
and think how we often return
to the wrong old ways. These streets are named
for exactly what or where they are:
Maple, Lake, North, Elm. Mine
was Clay, the neutrality of a simple life.
Children then were bored and willing
to do anything to get out. Strange,
how I'm the one who's gone and now
come back. I hear my father's voice
and turn toward the creek lined with willows
we fished from all my childhood. The creek
is polluted, overwhelmed by whatever the town
can't live with, and looking into those
murky waters, I know we must be what we have been
and more.

THE REUNION

for my mother, Ruth

At this point, off the main highway,
is the road winding into a town
I once called home. The driver
shifts gears, and the Trailways bus moves
slowly up an icy incline. How many
winters has it been? From the crest
of the last hill, before the town
flattens out to a small block
of shops and one gas station, I can see
the stone church steeple and recall
Sunday Masses I served as altarboy,
and that cubicle with its sliding door
where I confessed, again and again,
the weakness of my boyhood flesh.
I'm returning now, with sins I can whisper
to no one. It's Christmas Day.
The bus door opens. My widowed mother
stands, waiting. How wonderful
the pure white of her hair against
this gray December sky! We embrace
and, for a moment, I hold all I was
certain I had lost in my young years.
Since then, I've learned the safety
of solitude, and know how to leave
some things behind. Yet mother, I swear,
in your comfort nothing fails me.

THE FUNERAL

Father has been buried here
half my life. Next to him
is a grave for me. At his other side
my mother lies this morning,
beneath incense and Latin chants.
In this Catholic cemetery
named St. Francis, I think
of parochial school. Counting beads
gave children license to be
cruel as thorns, and faith
that weddings, eating flesh,
and funerals were, after all,
the same. There are no saints.
The last angel has flown into
a dark eye, and will not return.
It begins to rain. Mother, we look
at your grave and see an end.
My daughter has your jewelry.
The ceremony isn't right. There
should be a way to keep you
out of death. A photograph
of you and father shows
what your life was like.
In 1942 you wore a beaded dress,
and smiled. Father stood
beside an elm, and knew this day
was good. Next autumn
you were married, two years
before my birth. You held
those events as sacraments,
even after death and loss.
Now, in an uneventful town,
left smaller by your leaving,
the rain comes harder as we move
away and home, wherever that may be.

STANLEY

I stand at the edge of the beach
gulls breed here in the sand,
small holes dug in the sand
in their winged nests
side upon side
and imagine the
living within, the
warm body, how the
I carry it to the water,
how quiet the sea

II.

Along the shore
with its almost white

ENTERING MY 35th YEAR

I stand at the shore and watch
gulls break the ocean surface.
Small holes open and close
in their wake, like heartbeats.
I pick up a large stone
and imagine the centuries
living within its hard,
worn body, now heavy in my palm.
I carry it to you and say,
"How quiet the sea is."
"The tide is out," you reply.
I toss the stone back
to its silent life.

SEA OTTERS CLIMBING ROCKS AT PESCADERO POINT

Along the Monterey coast,
past rough-hewn hill and pine,
we stop at Pescadero Point,
place of abalone and crab.
Several yards away,
a large rock formation
juts out of the ocean,
where pelicans gather around sea otters
whose wet, brown fur shines
like satin in the distance.
Tense with the instincts of doing,
they climb as waves dive
beneath them like giant fish,
turn toward shore and suddenly
lay patterns of white foam,
like delicate lace, over the sand.
Sounds of water, wind, and the loud
barking of seals muffle our voices.
I think how different the struggles
of these creatures' lives,
then sure as the pulsing of my own blood,
feel the ocean's swell and hear
the cry rising from within it.

THE NEIGHBOR

After a supper of fresh vegetables,
(this countryside's rain, breath and soil),
I walk to the porch, where the summer dusk
clings like a huge moth to the screen door.

Near the mailbox on a wooden post, its flag up,
a kitten, struck by one of the few cars
to drive past here, lies dead.

The mongrel, chained to a side of the house
opposite, quiets its incessant barking
as two children approach.

I overhear the boy, around age twelve;
"You know, it's in the Bible.
If someone hits you, you hit them back.
If someone cuts off your arm,
you do it to them. And if a girl
kisses you, you do it back, only better."

There is a pause, until his companion,
a girl perhaps two years younger,
finally asks, "What do you mean?"
"You kiss her tits."

Here, the gentle breasts of fertile hills
are caressed each day by men and women
who till their fields, and tonight,
like them, I feel the elements
of water, air and land move within me,
to live, die, then live again.

A 1970 blue Ford pick-up pulls into
the driveway the children have just entered.
The dog barks a greeting.
I leave the porch and cross the road
to tell the farmer about his kitten.

THE DRIVE
for Mara Nicole Kuzmak

The light in your father's eyes belongs to you.
The gentle touch of your mother is yours to keep.
I traveled with the man who now looks over you,
knowing your soft beauty is everything the wind
had whispered through the pines years before,
when the long road was the only thing to follow,
and the moon was light captured in the headlights of a '55 Ford,
yet the dusty trail they laid before them was a promise
that seemed impossible to hold as mist, but the drive
forward was a way to go about it all -
one American town after another, then cities of indecision,
until finally the road arrived at a white clapboard house,
a field, mountains beyond and a woman with a voice like that wind.
Now there is a place of beginning and end, and the sure sound
of a motor running lulls you to sleep as I hold
your newborn body carefully in my arms
and the wry smile of your father greets me.
Years from now, you might read this poem,
watch him climb into some old rig;
see your mother's kind face turn as the engine starts.

ON A SUMMER EVENING, UNDER A FULL MOON, I THINK OF AN OLD FRIEND

"ha! never make light of
a cup of wine-
it can pour out
our whole lives!"
Po Chu-i

A breeze wafts through
the screened doors,
and I walk to the porch.
Insects listen
for the secrets of green leaves.
I think of hours
of conversation, long
years ago, and drinking
the wines you know so well.
How young students come
to your gift, like fawns
to clear water!
The sky is certain as death.
Tonight, the same moon
is a perfect circle
to us both. My cup glows
in its cold light.
Your friend, these miles away,
drinks and remembers.

(for William Kemmett)

TRAVELING OHIO

"Whatever moon and rain may be
the hearts of men are merciless."

James Wright

Horses graze near silos full of wheat.
You can see bad weather twenty miles away.
Farmers watch the dark sky and believe
in the sure chance of rain.
This bus hurries through the Ohio Valley.
Holsteins return from the fields
like sad, tired women.
Those clouds are in heaven, but hell
smoulders in the grim eyes of the man
seated across from me.
Tonight, there will be a new moon.

AT MARBLEHEAD HARBOR

Mid-afternoon, a fisherman returns,
aching arms and four hundred-
fifty pounds of cod and blue
shimmering in green nets.
With a scaling knife, he slits
along the gills of one,
then the full length
of its underbelly. He removes
the entrails, tosses them
to the sea and gathering gulls,
the carcass into a large bucket
which overflows with blood,
as that procedure is repeated.

Is this how we die, a hand
larger than our lives
reaching down and inside us?

Three kids dive from the pier,
and the harbor master, old
and more angry at their youth
than recklessness, tells them
they can't swim here.

THE WALK

I walk down a country road
to the General Store.
The bitter January air
strikes my face, and ice snaps
under my feet like small bones.
Cars rush by. The road continues on.
The wind keeps up a steady assault.
I reach the store, make a few purchases
and start back, along a different path.

VERMONT WINTER POEM
for Tom Absher

Sunlight washes the horizon
until dark haze of mountain,
hill and cloud takes on a single glow.
From beneath my cabin window, footprints
of an unknown animal lead
across a snow-covered field,
to the edge of a pine forest.
In this windless moment,
held by still branches
and my own quiet recollection,
the silence of afternoon air
becomes sound traveling
the road I cannot see.

THE VACANT LOT ON JEFFERSON AVENUE

The gray and green shingled house
is gone. Gone the magnolia tree
that spread its soft petals
where the dog ran in summer.
Remember the joy in that place.
Remember, too, pain so real
it made us weep honest tears.
We believed in spirits, certain
they were good in some way we wanted.
Poverty taught us need, and care.
Those years were passion, or its lack.
What vague hopes we had then return,
today, in winter. If I stand here
long enough, will I see again
the rooms we once moved through?
On a nearby maple branch, two sparrows
perch, swell and flutter.

THE HOUSE AT SKUNK HOLLOW

You walk across an icy path of stone.
This small house of your friends
and their children was once a parsonage.
Its church is gone, but the grave yard
next to the new county road marks
the names of that congregation.
The preacher who lived here lived badly -
bottle of gin and mad sermons. You believe
the somber heaving of the organ
is what drove him to frenzy. A hard
March wind drives through the birches.
Somehow, cruel days make you think,
"Lord, I was good." Now, a child's
laughter plays you toward kindness.

FROM THE CABIN AT OTTER LAKE

Across the frozen lake,
slight wind and evening glare.
The house on the opposite bank
disappears. Tomorrow, it rises
like light. That old man
wearing a red shirt lives alone
in a gray shack. When he dies
the wood he has cut will become rock.
The lost echo of the saw's drone
will return to the lake.
There are many ways to love.
An armful of ash
along the path to the woodpile
is one.

THE WIND COMES FROM OVER THE HILLS
after a poem by Kenji Miazawa

Now,
from the north, from the northwest,
the wind comes from over the hills,
brushes my coat stiff with winter,
chills my bare forehead and eyelids.
Rustling the rows of tall pine that stand stubbornly,
pushing the snow pilings from each branch,
the wind comes from over the hills.
Because of hard work,
the cut pine, dried,
promised a warm winter,
but by mid-afternoon
a blown-open shed door
and three feet of pummeling snow
made some logs wet and useless,
and though they danced like children
the fierce storm yesterday
felled one branch after another.
Where I stand, driving sheets of snow
cold as if death
hovered over the fallen limbs.
Having gone through all this
which we had not expected, against all odds
suffering the most possible,
now, again against all odds,
because of the good roof we built in autumn
and in other careful repairs,
the shed still stands today.
And I had expected this,
and to tell you that soon all will be well,
I looked for you, but you were gone.
The snow came harder
until it filled my eyes.
There was no sign of clearing.
Finally, like a lunatic
I ran out in the snow,
telephoned the weather station,
went from field to hill, crying for you
until hoarse
in the terrible blizzard,
I went home late at night.
I did not sleep.

THE WIND COMES FROM OVER THE HILLS

But now, look,
this morning the east, the golden branch, rises,
the clouds, the woods, shoot up,
the long wires speak,
the gray mist falls away.
The tall pine hold.
They are alive, still.
They are perfect sentinels.
All stand strong.
At their tips, which pointed bravely in the storm,
large white caps glisten
and above the silent crystal edge reflecting the sun
two blackhawks glide.
We must pray like children,
we must pray, and that is not enough.
If it shifts again,
it will settle again.
If, as it has,
it can survive onslaught like this,
we can be certain now
of enough cords this winter.
From the rows of gentle, blue, glowing mountains,
a gust sweeps across the valley,
makes the birch trees shudder.
Now, the freshness of new snow.
Now, the invisible movement of earth.
In the field, at the good shed
creaking like spring ice,
we must pray, like our parents before us,
we must pray,
and that is not enough.

III.

THE SOURCE

Across the valley
the blue haze of mountains
shapes itself into clouds

I pick up earth
stone
twig

and watch
the substance of air
fall to light
between my fingers.

SLOW BURN IN A LONG FIELD

We have not seen
each other in weeks.
Fireflies light the field
with their incandescent glow,
blinking on and off
like tiny lanterns.
Clouds drift overhead.
The electric smell
of rain is in the air.

There will be
no stars tonight,
only the blinking
of tiny lanterns
and the slow, steady burn
of longing.

THE LOTUS
from Navaho myth

You are held between
the petals of the flower
growing from the thighs
of the woman you love.
Now, all around you
her body burns.
The hollows of your bones
fill with the ashes
of your own flesh.
Your breath boils.
Your shadow darkens.
This is where your life
begins again.

REFLECTIONS FROM A NORTH WINDOW

This morning,
at the north window,
there is a strong rush of wind
and light passing
through glass.

I remember
a different time,
and not
at this same window
waiting for your arrival,
while the moon passed
through the night sky,
then suddenly
lowered itself
to an earth
lying wide around.

WALKING ACROSS THE PUBLIC GARDENS AT NIGHT
variations from the Japanese

It is evening at the public gardens.
A thin old woman in rags
feeds park pigeons.
At the pond, grass drinks.

The black cape of night
folds over me.
There is a dim haze
around the moon and birds
weaving through clouds.

Wind moves the heavy pine branches.
Wet grass sways in shadow.
The air is filled
with birdsong and animal sound.

My lover's door opens.

POEM WRITTEN BEFORE A DEEP-SEA FISHING CRUISE OUT OF
GLOUCESTER HARBOR, SEPTEMBER 6, 1981

It is not yet first light.
At the harbor, in a restaurant,
we eat breakfast and drink coffee,
both of us caught by that strange
calm felt only through a terrible
panic of loss. Outside, always,
the water waits.

I remember the afternoon
your entire body lay open to me,
at once dark and full of light
as the sea itself.

At this moment before dawn,
I want simply, with no pain,
to reach beyond the shadow
of your face, and swim with
cusk, cod and blue to a region
we can call "home", and a way
between the first gulp and final
gasp that demands nothing
of this world, or any other,
where the difficult flesh my
life defends will leave you
whole and forgiven.

ON THE PATH OF THE HORSE AT TOPSFIELD

Mark this spot.
Ahead, twenty miles of trail
and ways to go wrong,
berries wild with red
and a horse's hoofprints
on a path of soft ground.
Rhododendron leaves swell
with summer haze, and you think
of passion. All day,
animals who never hear
the hunter's gun watch,
as you walk. A young rabbit
comes to you, bold.
You've said the word "love",
now believe it, in a place
where it is unnecessary
to say anything.
Across the marsh, dark birds
ride thermals into clear air.
A final branch drops, and tracks
of that invisible horse
guide you, in silence,
through the last stand of pine.

NIGHT DRIVING OUT OF MAINE

Dusk. Queene Anne's Lace glows white
at the edge of a mist-filled meadow.
It's August and rain. We pass occasional
farmhouses. I look out at the darkening
sky and continuous line of road and field,
and want to know the families and friends
behind the warm yellow light of their windows.

It's quiet now, in some mysterious way
I don't understand. I do think the need
to be alone and be with someone is the same.
The woman I have joined on this drive
turns toward me, and the distance ahead
is welcome as a lover's kiss.

THE RETURN

I.

Once, we woke to see morning
slant across the edge of field,
by a section of fence the drunk neighbor
had torn down. Through the window,
a fallen tree lay in front of maples.
In a shadow beside the wood-burning stove,
two cats licked each other clean.
How many now, the meetings nearly every season?
That August in Wiscasset, we stood on a shoreline
and named as our own the stilled wreckage
of four-mast schooners at the harbor.

II.

Past those places of the body
years of loving learn, we find afternoon's
blue air and shocking light. The day
is cradled in our arms like a bright child.
It is with that child's eye I watch
you rise naked from our sleep, a dream
of innocence, and we are permanent.

IV.

THE ISLAND

The vessel that carried us here
lies wrecked and nameless
on a forgotten shore.
We have come so far inland,
the ocean is a rumor
brought to us by the distant
wail of loons.
Even the children
know something is wrong;
sleep fitfully at night
and argue in their play.
The old men stand
away from us and mutter.
The women have become barren,
and the young speak only
of the hunt for the sea.
In the evening we warm ourselves
by a small fire and talk
of a place we can't remember.
It's always been this way -
the wrong words
turning in our heads
like dark waves,
and the quick moon
plunging through our eyes.
Now, we who were abandoned
by that strange chance
we'll never lose our fear of,
imitate the laughter of crazy birds
and raise our arms, senseless
to the chilling wind.

Manhattan, November, 1980 - January, 1981

THE ROOM

"-Death waits
outside our room, our life..."

Bill Knott

Next to the chic restaurants
and elegant shops catering
to bourgeois tourists,
is a mission with a red & blue
neon cross, which flashes:

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Somehow, this seems right to me.
There is a steady clapping
of hooves, and a large, gray
cat leaps through my open
third-story window, then back
to the fire-escape. I go
to the window, close it, and look
out at the empty street.

WASHINGTON-JEFFERSON HOTEL

A group gathers on the street
and into the still, warm air
of this crazed October night,
sings a-capello:
"You just call on me brother,
When you need a hand,
We all need somebody to lean on."
I imagine their sleek dance,
hear the voices of women,
begin to look out the window,
but no, I'll remember them
just this way -
sultry, dark-eyed, soft
flowered dresses.

WAITING FOR THE NUMBER ONE TRAIN AT 137th STREET
(or, The Most Amazing Thing I Saw Today In New York City,
for Michael Brownstein)

Hundreds of people shoving themselves
out of the number one local train
which mysteriously became an express
somewhere between 59th and 72nd Streets
and now those in the crowd, many of them
blocks away from their destinations,
huddle together on the stairway
leading toward the toll booth
to pick up transfers for the downtown local
back to wherever it was they had wanted to go
in the first place, and for a moment
the three tracks - downtown local
nearest the platform, uptown local
extremely opposite, and express line
right in the middle, are all clearly
visible and empty of any moving thing
in the twenty degree weather,
and nobody leaped
or killed anyone.

THE EDGE

At this edge of the lower East Side,
few people walk the streets late at night.
Last month, a madman with a machine-gun
went beserk, only blocks from here.
I've been told New York City has so much
input, you can't possibly sort it all out.
Tonight, I wonder about the lives
I have lived in other places, and what good
the sorting out of things did or did not do.

THE REWARD

The bar had old wood floors
and a band playing "Folsom Prison Blues."
A young woman with a full figure,
red silk western shirt, silver-piping,
high-fashion jeans, hand-tooled boots,
white stetson hat and a glass of beer,
sat next to me. She straddled
her bar stool as if it were a wild horse,
and bounced up and down to the music.
A man and woman at the table in front of me
talked excitedly, as the woman aimed
her Minolta camera at first
one patron, then another, snapped
a photograph and smiled self-consciously,
as if the camera had lenses, front and back.
About eleven o'clock, a short, stocky man
with gleaming, straight black hair,
dark, lidded eyes and a worn top-coat
entered the bar. He was
in his late forties, and newspaper
stuck through the split uppers of his battered shoes.
He shuffled down the long hallway
between the bar and the stage,
shaking people's hands and smiling.
The woman with the Minolta
pointed it at him and he stopped,
cocked his head, grinned, shifted
his weight from one foot to the other,
took out a cigarette, assumed
an elegant pose, held it for a moment,
then walked directly past her companion,
to the self-conscious photographer
and kissed her bewildered mouth,
long and hard.

THE HALL

for James

I am still a member of the organization
located at the same place
from which I have been removed
as a member. I have been
in a position to see
but, in the case of the
from which I have been removed

V.

and go to the office of the
The company, I have been removed
longer than I have been removed
picks up a member of the
at his home, and I have been
"Yes, I have been removed
He says the company is
and he is a member of the
I am sorry that member is
the full member of the
no longer a member of the
between the company and the
On the 1st of May, I received
a letter from the company
of a member of the company
I am sorry that member is
He is a member of the company
People are still in the
later, he is a member of the
about the company and the
I want to see the company
that I am a member of the
than the company is a member of the
then the company is a member of the
as a member of the company

THE BALANCE
for James De Crescentis

I am visiting someone in an apartment,
located around the corner
from a long row of broken-down tenements.
At either end of that block
is a liquor store. We have little money
but, in celebration of my return
from New York City to Boston,
we roll two dollars worth of pennies,
and go to one of the liquor stores to buy beer.
The gaunt, black cashier taps his jeweled,
long-nailed fingers on the counter suspiciously,
picks up a roll, balances it
in his slender palm and says,
"Man, there ain't no fifty cent in here."
He opens the roll, counts the pennies
and he's right - forty-eight.
I envy this ability to know
the full measure of a thing by its weight,
no more - no less.
Between us, we have two pennies.
On the way back, I notice
a disheveled figure sprawled across the steps
of a boarded-up brick building.
I'm told he lives there, has for years.
He's luckier than most.
People give him things, take care of him.
Later, we drink beer and talk
about women we thought loved us once.
I want to say something is terrible and wrong,
that there's more to this evening
than our carefully measured desperation,
then realize, I am at peace
in a friend's home.

THE LAST HOLD

We found him sweeping the streets
of a downtown Italian market,
and drove him home with us,
to the side of a dirt road.
He had been the city's favorite derelict -
fifty-six years old, unkempt gray hair,
beard, a paralyzed hand, and he wore
the same pair of pants
throughout the year I knew him.
His name was James, he would insist,
and if you called him Jimmy
he wouldn't speak to you for a week.
When he got angry, he waved his bad hand.
He told us "Romance deferred
sickens the heart," and declared
the greatest day in American history
was when "the lights went out
in New York City and youth directed
traffic with their white handkerchiefs."
Once he tried to burn down a field,
but again and again the wind
put out the matchflame. He slept
with the dogs, who knew him best,
and often woke, cried with them
in the darkness, and recalled a time
when, living in a Catholic workers' home,
he entered a cathedral in a drunken rage,
removed the icons he discovered there,
and threw them over a cliff. After he moved
away, I stood alone in the empty room
that had been his, and felt a constriction
at the base of my skull, where something had
reached up to take one last desperate hold.

YOUNG DEER IN TOLEDO

A young deer stands
at the edge of a roadside
clearing on a postcard.
This morning, outside Toledo,
a truck overturned
on the highway.
Its cab lay twisted
like the carcass
of a broken animal.
The eyes of that deer
are startled by what
some primal sense warned
long ago was coming:
Arrow. Bullet.
Photograph. Glass.
Progress.
I turn over the postcard,
read many whitetail
run here, and want
that grace.

PLUM ISLAND

The marsh scatters
Canada geese into the wind.
Deer with unique tails
feed near a cluster of trees.
Purple loosestrife waves
a crane to a small pond.
The defeated Indian,
destroyed by elements and time
centuries ago, is gone.
What is shaped by wind,
and settled in the soft earth
of the marsh, appears
in tourists' photographs.

FISH-HAWK

Before storm, talons poised,
it hovers in the grayish sky,
its life a lust to kill.
The ocean is purple fire.
The orange eye of the hawk
is a sun. Seeing movement
in the water, its wings
are spread a full five feet.
The loud, musical chirping
of its voice sings fish
oblivious to death. The
osprey hurries, like a lover,
to the gleaming, wet flesh.
I, too, have known that flight,
sink and heave. Watching now,
and listening, I think of the
night a hooked claw will plunge
again into the darkness,
but retrieve nothing -
that song a cry
after the lost body of the sea.

THE RIVER

The water is clear and cool.
The stones are various
in New England summer.
Soon the ocean air will form
its wall around us,
so we stop and rest
near the river's edge.
Current swirls up
from beneath large
rocks, creating
colorful patterns along
their dark sides.
On the ground between us,
marble and stone lie fused
by the incredible heat of one age
passing onto another.
Our lives swell with the river.
We turn and go on.
The rocks and stones,
in any arrangement
their world holds
them to, remain.

ON THE MOUNTAIN AT SAND LAKE

Two thousand feet up, and the mountain
in fog. We walk out in the damp
winter air. The people I am visiting
say the man down the road shoots
the dogs of the neighbors nearby,
for wandering onto his property.
Inside their house, small children
play games and make colors dance across
big white sheets of paper. The man
owns a trailer with torn curtains,
a worthless plot of land, and a rifle.
There's no livestock to protect.
I listen as the children argue
over a crayon. I think I understand
the fear of the man who shoots dogs.
My friend and I begin to talk,
and shiver in the gray cold.

TWO POEMS FOR RICHARD HUGO

I. MONTANA RESCUE MISSION

If we sang the hymns and prayed, we ate
the poor meal. At night, women rose in our sleep
like angels of childhood, children laughed,
and money blessed our palms. When we woke,
no women floated through the dank stench
of rotting mattresses. If children laughed,
they gnashed their teeth and jeered. Any brand
of cigarette was a currency we could believe.
Mornings in the tan air and dust, we sat looking
at the earth which bore us, and tried to think
of simple ways to save our lives. In that alley
behind the blue stucco mission, we knew "Eternity Now"
said there was no hope. Wind from the plains
swirled heat over our failures, and each day
lingered homeless. If mountains mattered,
they pointed a permanent direction to a heaven
we couldn't see. When we sang, our voices cracked.
When we prayed, we didn't mean it.

II. BELIEVING IT IS SO

Believe in a voice of stone,
then listen for its one true sound,
echo of water. Names are what we live by.
Call the world forever.
Believe this is so because
you have made certain it will go on.
Remember the woman who haunts the river?
The sand in your throat is her last song,
and trout run every spring. Summer
in Montana you were dying. I could not
see you. I turned east like a plains Indian
hunting mystic truth. Missoula to Billings
I wandered telling sacred skies "It's wrong."
Black nights on the prairie, unseen and evil
creatures made their terrible noises. Antelope
soared over fields at dawn, horses
raced through mountain wind, and mothers
fed their sons. We need a spirit
water won't offend, and a covenant:
Be kind. Live your life as if it were
a promise you had to keep, or die.