

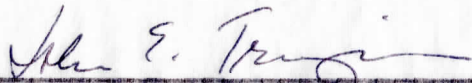
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## WAKING UNDER SNOW

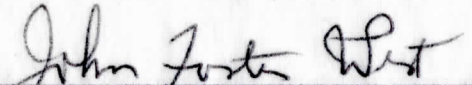
By

R. T. Smith

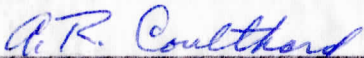
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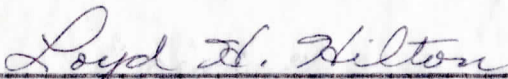
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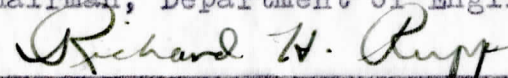
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WAKING UNDER SNOW

BY

R. T. Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Appalachian State University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts in the  
Department of English

Boone, North Carolina

September, 1975

## ABSTRACT

WAKING UNDER SNOW by R. T. Smith is an eighty-page volume of poetry, both lyrical and narrative. Its express purpose is to attempt to capture the dramatic elements of the history of the author's imagination in believable characters, voices and incidents and to infuse these characters, voices and incidents with an energy reflects the author's belief that vital energies in art can refurbish the life energies of modern society. The violence in the poems is seen as cathartic, for it is during the unpredictable emergencies of existence that a human is most spontaneously himself. Most of the poems follow an open form that proceeds through quanta of voice energy, though some few follow traditional metrical and/or rhyme schemes. The lyrical poems attempt to capture some of the various moods of the author, but the narrative poems attempt to reflect the texture of life in the modern South.

Most of these poems are collected in a volume, WAKING UNDER SNOW, published by the Cold Mountain Press in April, 1975.

RTS

## WAKING UNDER SNOW IN LINVILLE GORGE

In total frozen blackness I have zipped  
myself up in this blood-red rip-stop cocoon  
beside winter's river in this rocky crotch  
between the mountains.

I have drawn my knees and elbows in,  
lost the darkening shapes around me,  
and folded into the rosin of my dreams

to be surprised on waking  
to the beatitude of the softest ritual celebration.  
Pelted into renewed virginity,  
I awake in the crystal vortex of this star  
to see this rolling dune of white ice dust  
fill the blown-glass decanter of the Gorge.

The rocks and river are skinned in thin quartz snow,  
but clashing waters lick familiar surfaces  
free of the white shadow,  
as I crack the pearl-pure shell of wind-welded flakes,  
spreading myself free of this synthetic placenta  
to step forth into a Chinese silk scroll painting.

A fire will fight against starting  
in this wild cold wonderful hell  
where icicles drip like foil tinsel  
and wind can conjure whirling eddies of frenzied flakes.

Here, in the crystal ball of morning,  
I stare at humps of damp white  
coating unhatched particulars of day  
in mound-rounded aliases, all  
indifferent to my feeble fire-making.

A white sun sheds sidereal comfort  
onto snowy surf of overhead clouds  
where climbing peaks etch jagged whiteness on whiteness  
and three black birds fly slowly, weighted down,  
having absorbed the whole of night.

Snow for coffee melts in my silver pot  
where black conquers white:  
the melting begins to trickle into liquid knives of the river.  
I squat and hear heavy clumps thudding to the ground  
from their night pine perches off in shadowy woods.  
Snow slashes across my eyes

to exorcise remains of primal night.

The snow catches sun in a blazing light-circus.

The silver fire of the river flashes  
bright and holy as stars in my eyes.

I inhale glassy frost breath

and remember: It is Christmas,

and I have not seen a man in three days.

LYING IN A HAMMOCK JUST SOUTH OF ATLANTA AND READING  
JAMES WRIGHT'S POETRY

"I have wasted my life."

Pendulum pull of hammock sway,

I am tangled in the net texture  
of college texts and woven words  
and reading myself into summer.

Even the gunfire growl of sudden thunder  
sows no threat.

But what else?

I could thump a melon to test its pulp,  
find a technicolor Braves' double-header,  
tip a tall cool one  
to feel the gold fall through my throat,  
or settle for the sweaty martyrdom of sex.

But,

Updike was a summa at Harvard.

Byron swam the Hellespont.

Donne orated his own funeral sermon,

yes and

Flannery wrote WISE BLOOD to the doomed peacock call  
not a hundred miles from here.

But what else?

The Primative Baptist Church across town  
tolls its single bell for me.

They would dip me like a mad dog  
in the shallow pool behind the pulpit,  
slip their collar of thorns around my neck  
and toast me in the Light of the Lamb.

Black men in their gold caddies with their white angels  
call me to wear white at midnight  
and burn pine crosses.

Religion is everywhere.

Yes, James Wright,  
we have spilled our lives in metaphor,  
have never killed in holy crusades  
nor been saved for the lager streets of gold,  
the Angel double-headers,  
that great parade of whitewashed saints.



We are only damp soil beneath sod

where melons rot in Georgia sun.

We beg the scimitar sweep of a Barlow hawkbill,

swift as a sonnet,

heavy as a cross.

## CHRYSLIS

Mating season: I dive into the hedge beneath the window  
Where the widow sheds her slacks and blouses  
To the tune of breezes and eyes on gin Friday nights.  
I listen to the jazz raging from the phone.  
Her body like an amber dream,  
Striped with sharp blade strips of the blinds.  
But I am looking.  
She could jerk once on that noose of the blinds  
And murder vision and urge.  
She could flip one switch and rush my sight,  
Her floating image, in darkness.  
But she does not.  
So again I watch her taut widow-flesh parade  
Sly behind the walls of doors between us  
And feel the line of fate that ties me to her  
And allows the wind of want to drag me here every  
seventh day.

Tonight I feel my fate like footsteps on the stair  
In an old ghost story, drawing closer,  
The noose pulling tighter.

Her body and the gypsy-flowing hair  
Tugging at the skein to reel me in.  
Managing the steps like an obstacle course,  
I reel at my end until the first door is faced.  
The golden-eyed doorbell glares at me, dares my finger,  
Stares me into ringing.

In the red, lacy web of negligee she cracks the door.  
Only the chain on the jamb and  
The cat behind my tongue can save me now,  
But the shackle snaps at its weakest link,  
The bolt, on the pluck of her invitation,  
And God, she is right; I do need a drink,  
A river to gather my stumble.

Really, it's easy.

Foxy-eyed and blood-blushed on lips and nails,  
She has been waiting in her web, in her thicket lair.

Later, we lie like pastry in our sweaty syrup,  
She breathing fire while I lie still to race after my  
breath.

Coiled around each other like snakes weary from  
striking,  
We lie in edgy afterglow, burnished with the fires of  
Pan.

Beneath the wet slash of sex I have been saved and lost,  
Seeking in a dusty room in another man's bed,  
Though he in satin and pine entertains no jealousy,  
Seeking the shadow of my virginity,  
Whose memory is past recalling,  
And knowing that Sunday will bring a God of wrath  
And his shears to snip this wayward strand,  
This wayward umbilical running me in games above my  
head.  
I last to like it in my body, in my tubes of nerves  
and blood.

But Sunday comes too soon for expectation.  
Right-angled in the pew, I feel  
The canine faces of age-pinked old women  
Staring hymns through me from behind net veils,  
Their last webs before satin sleep.  
Lilies at the altar like pointed claw-brands burn with  
hellheat.  
Nodding no more to dead wooden words of the sermon,  
I am alert to the fierce fox eyes of the pastor,  
Austere in black and anger.  
I am drowning in the dismal, baptismal pool behind the  
pulpit,

Seeing the lambs swim in the crystal lamplight of the

Lamb

While on satyr hooves, <sup>I</sup> sink to cauterizing blasts.

Save me under water.

Hold me under water.

Save me under light.

The cross hanging like a weapon,

A catapult above the choir,

Voices gnashing my ears to repent -

I want to bolt like lightning

From the red pew to which I am nailed

Through the chancery,

Away from the noose and the thorny hedge,

Out to the river to be cleansed,

Submerged in the sea of Love.

I feel spikes biting sores in my veins,

Vinegar on the tongue . . . .

I run through the night and weeks,

All the way to Asia, to this hole for foxes and pieces

of men

Lashing projectiles into the cope of dark against their

own lacks.

Through mine fields and palm leaves I stalk  
With a hot iron staff to spit hate  
At my confusion guised in enemy colors.  
Out here I find the bright God of that terror  
And that woman's lust  
In bamboo groves and dead glades of shell passage.  
That God and that woman and that me  
In the hedge, in the bed, in the burning pew,  
And pin them to the horizon with flashes from my weapon,  
Driving wooden stakes and silver bullets  
Through the hearts of cocoons I have shed  
To hide from the river in this final swamp,  
This dazzling hell of a liturgy.

LOT

I

Street doors rising on dusk,  
Dust rising to meet a red moon,  
Three strangers, flight folded beneath capes,  
Slide in muffled brightness to the door of Lot.  
News and Warning are the bread they bring  
To break bread behind shutters.  
Suspicion rakes Sodom's whisper way  
Until questioning sounds on cedar,  
Demanding the son of Haran, blood of Noah,  
To reveal guest faces,  
Cast into the street three dark aliens.  
Sodomites rail to riot  
While Lot offers virgin daughters  
To vigilantes in the yard  
As fodder to save the strangers.  
But angels' anger blasts blind  
The battering neighbors' ram,  
As preface to lust's wages and hate's wages  
To come on the trail of Lot's earned warning.

## II

Beneath the morning scarlet sun, mist falls as  
Dust rises to powder the fleeing clan's feet  
Beneath the beacon caution of supernatural favor.  
Over the wind-ripe hill  
A cloudburst of brimstone like Revelation,  
A stone-shattering sin-bake  
Biting off evil tusks and teeth  
and melting Sodom's bone.  
Now flood and fire has the seed survived,  
Though the anxious wife pivots to delight eyes  
In God's glory and etch flames in her pupils.  
It is sad, and too sad to mourn.  
No man may stay wed to a pillar of tears.  
The clan marches across sand flats  
Toward Zoar, city of rude zealots,  
Detours on vote, Lot and a brace of maiden daughters,  
To sweep south to empty mountains -  
There to make retreat and thanks.

## III

Before the burning bush, before the briared cross,  
The seed's journey stutters to be cast



In proper furrows, lest seed's cycle and sight of  
birth end.

Widower Lot pines among ferns and oats,  
Watching the moon like a bowl  
Spill the sugar of his wife's folly.  
He waits on the ridge peak  
Until stars twirl by and over the ocean  
Before crouching in the cave with two sly daughters,  
Silent until now,  
Wishing night into day for more mourning.  
Yet, cowed in the mouth of the cave's yawn,  
Sisters plot the surge of the race,  
Growth of the stalk.  
Crouched around secret solemn fires of vice,  
They conspire as a coven of two  
to save the name and spread the tribe.

#### IV

Lot comes in sonless at night  
To wink in his wine and slumber by fire,  
But two witch-sisters' working tongues  
Have lain a bed of embers,

Wine of appetite, for their sire  
That his progeny may roam known  
From dune to polished dune.  
Under an eastern sky,  
The elder curls into nakedness behind the wine spell  
To steal seed from her father's rising want,  
To wand sons and grandsons in one bloody sigh,  
To bake life in her furrow.  
Waking to stalagmites of calcite  
Dripping timelessly in the cavern,  
Only a vague memory of a dream haunts,  
Protects Lot from fangs of knowing.  
His mourning weakens.  
The sun sets earlier still,  
The wine bowl calls, lulling Lot to the cave's mouth  
And moist blankets of unnatural mixing.  
The second night,  
The second daughter,  
The second moan in moonlight,  
The liquor having wove its work  
On the loom of the father's brainpan.  
Blood and juices pound into morning,  
And waking is not where sleeping was not.

No ruse may spin forever.  
No rose may bloom in darkness.  
The color of two sisters' will  
Rises to surface in Lot's face -  
Red to his daughter's naked loins,  
For he is cursed and blest with venom-lipped sirens.

V

Into the crags and stems he flees,  
Ranting and tearing hair,  
Fearing the eye of God's ire,  
Begging precipice or beast talons.  
Behind, the seed is safe in living tombs,  
Conspired and coaxed into proliferation,  
Sealed in sister-calyx, glowing in wet dark.  
His demented screams offer  
Only dull lullaby sounds  
Beneath a schist sky  
Where the only angels are kin and conspiring.

## YONOSA HOUSE

She stroked molten tones  
from the heart-carved maple dulcimer.

My grandma did.

She sat like a sack of bones  
withered within coarse skin,  
rocking to snake or corn  
tune of rippling seasons.

She sang the old songs.

Her old woman's Tuscarora uncut hair  
hung like waxed flax ready to spin  
til she wove it into night braids,  
and two tight-knotted ropes strong as hemp  
lay like lanyards on her shoulders.

On my young mind she wove  
the myths of the race  
in fevered patterns, feathered colors:  
sound of snow, kiss of rock,  
the feel of bruised birch-bark.

Her knotted hands showing slow blue rivers

jumped and jerked through cornbread-frying,  
pressed fern patterns on butter pats,  
brewed sassafras tea in the hearth.  
She wore her lore and old age hearty.

They buried Yonosa in a doeskin skirt,  
beads and braids, featherless,  
like a small bird with cut wings.  
I cut hearts on her coffin lid,  
maple like the dulcimer.

The mountain was holy enough for Yonosa.  
She sank like a root to be red Georgia clay.  
No Baptist churchyard caught her bones.

I hear her chant in the song of the thrush.

## SKINNY DIPPING

As boys we peeled away from porches,  
sifted in silence through the woods,  
trees and ferns still as if hexed.

Our shadows swimming in summer dark,  
we reached the branch without a word.  
The willow shaped the wind with dancing hair.

My brother Bud and I - non-swimmers -  
lay on the bank where the fellows stripped,  
shedding clothes like wrinkled shucks.

Magnolia blossoms floated waxy  
as bodies rose in muted light.  
Waving arms like wings,  
they dove, naked, from the rocks.

Pale white boys like planks  
sailed slow motion into arcs,  
forever floating like feathers,  
but finally breaking water to a target of ripples,  
each sailing a wet moon shoreward.

Frightened, fingers in earth like roots,  
I stared from the mud to the grave  
where my comrades buried their bodies in night  
making love to their slim reflections,

until they broke the calm to surface  
and see the moon slipping into clouds.

My brother lay, a fern like a birthmark  
gracing his cheek. He could not see  
through the dark of his blindness  
silhouettes stealing to the air to drop again.

A tangled oak like a tutor bowed approval  
as we threaded our way home  
in pairs through the fields,  
born of the forest, barefooted,  
dew slicking the sawgrass cool,  
Bud's hand beaded with dew in mine, tightly.  
Wonder filled our eyes.  
Our eyes.

A hand in mine still grips at silence;  
unseeing eyes blink on other shores,

wind over water in August,  
a fern bowing in shallows.  
A shadow fills my mind - swimming,  
slick and climbing through time as if  
time were still liquid on a summer night  
and filled with flexing bodies.  
My eyes cannot even see it.



TRIAL BY FIRE

To prepare for more pews and prayers  
Bibleway Baptist Church is burning down  
the frame house next door, since  
the ancient couple has died.

"Could've been dead a week fore we found out."

The wrathful fires rise in an orange  
and blue tornado of heat light.

"Had no business livin there with no phone, anyhow."

Like the God-given spark in Moses' shrub,  
the fire feeds on itself, scorching  
the ground to bare black holiness.

"Too bad about the old missus.

She used to come to services... but he was a devil."

Like tongues of the apocalyptic beast, sharp  
flames disapprove the tale of illicit love.

"An them livin right next to the church.

Ought to been ashamed."

"Ought not to been allowed."

Smoke clouds the night like a swarm of locusts.

"Reckon they're seein more fire now than we are."

"I reckon so. Serve em right."

Soon a concrete sanctuary will climb where only  
the black mass of a stubborn chimney now  
defies the pure fire of Baptist gasoline  
that withers even nearby lilies  
whose color bows to a brighter ecclesiastical hue.  
"More folks here than the Great Klan Rally of fifty-four."  
More folks than Easter Sunday morning.  
The flames abate, the torture done.  
The house is charred to bones, and  
the crowd approves and doffs their caps,  
as Preacher Burns in his red shirt sings out for joy:  
"Brothers, let us pray."  
Brothers.

## THE RAIN

Once on Cantrell Creek Trail in the Uwharries  
We were pelted by rain for days, soaked  
From our socks to the books in our packs. Our worries  
Swarmed like flies about the corpse of a goat.

New tents solved nothing, frail nylon against cold  
Nails of rain. The river, almost alive  
With dead fish, discovered new paths, the old  
Ones being full. We walked, hoping to survive

By the conjuring power of sheer motion.  
This in Transylvania County, and vampires  
Splashed through my imagination. No such notion,  
However, occurred to Bud. He built fires

And cursed our luck. He does not believe  
In omens like the cow bones we found  
On the path at night. I grieved  
For the owner, while the only other sound

Was the rain. Coming down. A swinging bridge  
Swayed across the river, and prints

Of horses' hooves showed the way, over the ridge  
To a huge wet lodge. We squinted

Through the wall of water, unbelieving,  
At the Black Forest-styled cabin. We  
Were too tired to comprehend relief.  
The bare plank porch sagged, but freed

Us from the flood. We strung our hammocks  
Like nets to roll with the storm that rocked  
The lodge. In the attic we cooked  
On the backpacker's stove and, at dark, locked

Ourselves in dry chains of sleep. I dreamed  
Of water, the ark and us, two of a kind - poets -  
Beneath the haunting eaves that seemed  
To creak in my sleep. I could not throw

Off the idea that vampires swept the air ~~abo~~  
Above my sleep, and late (an hour before  
Dawn) bats thrashed the sooty attic; their lair  
*Was in* the charred chimney stones. I swore

For the truth of myths, and even Bud awoke and ran

Down the stairs, waving his hands above  
His head to scatter Eumenides like black gloves  
With rat eyes. In the dark we wove

A frenzy on the steps, chased to a cave  
Of rain, but we found our courage on the perch,  
Where we sat, not nearly so brave  
As before the storm. We lit a broom for a torch

Until dawn swelled up in the east  
Hinging the horizon with dry light.  
The rain withdrew itself like a beast  
Frightened by the retreat of night.

We gathered our gear quickly and more quickly left,  
Looking over strapped shoulders at the rotten  
Pillars of the porch, attic spaces where bats cleft  
Our dreams. That rain, I have not forgotten.

BARN-FIRE

A skin of dust frosts still things.

In the still brown yard  
a dust-scrimed heifer  
standing still and dumb,  
licking the cream-coated crank  
of a wooden ice-cream freezer.

Within the barn  
dust of hay slings falling motes  
in the stream of butterlight  
that falls through the loft.  
Sarah and the Wallace boy,  
Aaron, stir dust and sound.

Like a sweet prayer  
the hay beneath Sarah's shoulder blades  
whispers while young Aaron  
discovers blades and whispers.  
Finding what he knew not of,  
he arches, aches into adulthood.

Sarah, teeth cutting her lower lip,  
her legs falling about his waist  
like a python casting coils,  
presses eyes closed and sees.  
Sees the fire-red blood on hay  
and the candy-sweet pain of Aaron's pleasure.

Aaron knows the push of seas  
and an ancient army crushed between tides.  
Knowing the soon of his quickest urge,  
he calls the future into "now."  
And he is lit like a barn-fire  
singing flames amid the hay

and fearing the soon, the rain,  
the ever-awesome fall of water  
that coaxes secret babes from the river  
to direct flames, floods and dreams  
of famine and its dust of stillness.  
All this, one farm, one afternoon.

## THE RUINS OF MERCY

The walls think it was a bomb,  
but it was only time  
and a pig-iron ball and chain  
pendulum swinging into destruction.

As I move among oak roots,  
seeking a room lost in crumbling brick,  
the sun breaks through time  
to build the hospital in my mind and eye.

Mercy Hospital the nuns called it,  
gliding down white halls in snide white,  
as I, only protestant in the boys' ward,  
cringed around my appendix,

the knot of anger clamped tight.  
Because my mother was Catholic  
they rushed me here from school when  
the softball game discovered

the possibility of pain kneeling within.



The ambulance was a red light  
through my attack, but the medics  
were not nuns. I had not seen nuns

until the room, clean and chrome  
as a kitchen, flew down the elevator  
and swallowed me. They starched me  
in an apron and sheets, moving pale

like wax dolls frowning beneath wimples.  
Chalk-drinking is an art  
not known to nine-year-olds,  
yet I learned, choking. The doctor

with his forehead's silver eye  
like a purified cyclops  
chased my mother - yes  
she was there - from the room

waving charts and holiness.  
Death was the saint I knew  
I sought in the room of pain.  
While Catholic boys hid rheumy eyes

behind crosses and Saint Christophers,  
crossless, I feared the vampire  
of death only slightly less  
than the sisters gliding like stiff gulls

and pressing exotic prayers  
through the fog of my hurting.

It took two young nuns, but they won:  
holy fingers held me still and flat, as

through a veil of fear, the needle  
crept beneath my skin, leaving sleep  
and numbing my sins. I quaked to  
sedative sleep beneath the wooden crucifix

and unwelcome song of the priest.  
Sleep was sheer salvation and brought  
red eyes and silver. A red light  
burned in the corner, shaping the room

in a thin blood aura. And late  
at night, exactly at midnight,  
a bed slapped the floor above,  
and the ceiling fell in a rain of plaster.

The shattered white shards of Mercy  
spilled down through the fierce red eye,  
and I saw the face of what  
my nine years took for God.

Nuns flying like demons floated through debris,  
wheeling shaking boys weighted by their crosses  
and genuflecting madly in the rubble.  
Death fell from the cracked sky

In Mercy Hospital and cured  
the ache in my guts to the tune  
of a greater fear than I knew.  
Death sowed life in my guts.

Weeds choke the doorway ruin and ivy  
remembers the shape of red brick walls.  
The sun breaks through a tattered oak  
and sprays a cross of light.

Red eyes of the maple leaves blink  
at the huge fossil hulk where I nearly died  
at nine at midnight, rootless in the dark  
and discovering the fierce face of God.

## FIRE TOWER

I

In the land of kudzu and copperheads  
I have flown my Japanese silver stallion  
Up gravel and shining shale  
To seek the bright swaying fire tower.

I have felt the wizard within me  
Wringing the throttle for speed  
With his sallow yellow wrists,  
His wraith-like inner visage.

Down the lane of crazy druid maples  
Not yet tuned with the shade of spring,  
I have felt the trollish engine  
Roaring between my loins for peaks

And rammed the whining clutch  
To catch a smoother gear for height.  
For this is the magic my bones must seek.  
For this is the mystery my blood must find.

The pivot of the planet, the fulcrum of the heart,  
Demands a wild Valkyrie's song, song of a girl  
Whose hot blue eyes are the blades of swords,  
A girl whose songs and silences eclipse both moon and  
star.

From atop the steel-ribbed Orphic web  
Of the dying forestry service  
I have seen the sun like a hero's golden medal  
Drop seering from a silver island cloud,

Ripping holy cirrus in the frenzy  
Of its earth-bound blazing plunge.  
The mountains in their blue-ridged bowl  
Grasped upward for a falling saw-toothed sun.

And the moon like the polished pearl of Merlin cruised  
Passive over the cannibal feast of fire on fire.  
From my cycle I saw wheels in the sky  
Spinning alchemy of night's dark kiln.

II

You came to me from a lonely alp,

Valhalla of the South, where you rode sweat-streaked  
Stallions, broke them, controlled their surge.  
You came to me to climb and kindle,  
To scorch the forge of Vulcan's fires,  
To kiss and touch the stars to flames.

Today we walked over sliding slate  
To this vine-tangled altar beneath the sky,  
And from our wind-swayed, cable-haltered loft  
We scan earth's rusty jewels below.

The sun pulls sweat like dirty pearls  
From the suit of skin that binds our hearts.  
We peel our shirts like withered husks,  
I, in khaki, a soldier of silence,  
You in the blue of mountains or seas.

Breath like needles in the lungs  
Haunts our climb, the price we pay.  
A gown of wind surrounds our heads.  
Your blond hair untwines through burst braids  
To know the wizard squall and its pull.

Your one gold tooth flashes minted smiles  
As your lips coin the spray of bowing flowers  
Dancing their dithyramb and nodding us on.

Yes, and yes again,

We glisten and strain up Fire Tower Trail  
To find this moment like a silver bell  
Waiting to be coaxed to molten music.

Morning glories choke the ghosts of lookouts  
In the ruined ranger hut below.  
Huckleberries charm snake doctors with pollen  
As the world pretends to dusk and waits.

### III

We shall smash with a crow-bar, breach the lock  
To touch the allure beyond the hinge.  
In the narrow fire-watch shack like a turret  
At this wand's crown that waves night to now  
Like the words of a mandarin sorcerer  
Who whistles and sings with gales of golden wind.

We will burst into the dust of the past

Where a green cane chair in a cobweb glaze  
Will watch us weave our love, our sacred lore,  
Like angels buckled in thunderclouds.

Gust-cracked panes and the broken desk  
Will stare as we explode hills to embers,  
As we quake and sway, lie and glow,  
While worlds struggle to break their knots,

Not knowing it is we and solar motion  
That let them live in the necklace of stillness  
To rest in soured sweetness of heated juices,  
Not knowing we shape their aura like colts in summer  
rain.

We are the nucleus of a living fire, a world gone mad  
With love and golden blood of magicians.



## EDROW WINGO'S INSIGHT

With teacups tilted and eyes wide  
we pity our hostess, Mrs. Wingo,  
a widow blessed with prophecies she can't control.  
Eyes burnt cinder cold, fire-haired,  
three years blind and twelve years old,  
Edrow waits at the garden window,  
scowling Bible-black rivers of fire.  
A whisper of bees swarms through his wisdom.  
He waits for the vision of wings, salvation.  
He growls like a Blake-bright tiger:  
"Trumpets cried, 'Awake, ye righteous pilots;  
wash His temple, purge His name  
of the pus and harlot poison.'"   
We reach for snuff tins, Winstons, sugar,  
and feel the fist of pity tighten.  
"This temple is swirled in smoke.  
Your hearts are melted in venom.  
Ye foul and sicken wantons . . . ."  
Edrow stands and leans to the window,  
stiff as an effigy, his fingers spread  
like spiders pressing the panes.

"Your glassy Babels of infidel steel,  
your brittle bones stiff as cane,  
will die in darkness  
strangled with coils of silver flames. . . ."  
Swift as a sparrow the widow flies:  
"Simon, you take Edra up t'bed."  
The servant glides upstairs with the savant.  
"He's done tired hisself. He's nearly dead."

Rattle of teacups and sterile smiles.  
"Now y'all don't pay Edra no mind.  
Ever since he misplaced his seein' - he's blind -  
he's been sayin' this foolish craziness.  
Like the fella says, I guess,  
we cain't blame them what's lost control.  
He jus' sits by the winder frame  
chewin' his lip an' scoldin',  
lookin' bitter as birch bark an' sayin' scripture.  
He makes a lot of it up, ya know. . .  
Edra never was one fer readin' the Good Book.  
One mornin' he jus' took up.  
Like as not we'll never know why.  
He don't mean no harm, you'll find.  
Don't b'lieve hafe what he says. Thinks he kin fly.

Don't pay him no mind."

His curse climbs down the stairs like a sloth.

"I have no need of the naked sun,  
neither of the moon to shine in me,  
for God's Lake of Grace,  
a wind of wisdom does lighten me,  
and the Lamb is the Light thereof.  
I, his annointed prophet, spangled,  
await the wings of Isaiah's angels,  
the seraphic chariot to rescue me  
from this mangling whip of darkness.  
Hallowed be Thy name!"

The silence we call "an angel passes,"  
like the sound of a dead owl's feather  
in a dusty attic, falling.

The stutter of chatter resumes  
around the minister's tattered wife.

"These honey cakes are divine."

"Did you know that Rumford Lyons  
makes wine in his cellar?"

Mrs. Wingo smiles and pours the tea.

The thrash of wings outside

SUMMER STARES LIKE A BARBED-WIRE FENCE

Climb, twine or hover  
- ailanthus or foxglove,  
catalpa or magnolia -  
the air is heavy with waiting,  
sticky with sap  
and slick seeds floating.  
The spermy haze,  
oozing like a pod,  
tenses like a taut dulcimer string,  
waits to drop, solemn.  
Rainless clouds flex overhead,  
shadowing the valley's spine;  
a brown-shucked cornfield  
stands like hound bristles.  
Odor of creosote and dung  
engulfs - anticipating  
    the gull wind of the gulf,  
    rain chilly as a butcher's dagger,  
the twanging of that high,  
    rudely foreign

strident string:

Avatar of thunderstorm and

thump of sudden

hailstones.

## WINTER SONG

Sleeves of fog ghost this wood  
and loom like carrion birds  
with blood in the eye, blood on the wing.  
Birch and alder bow  
with night's damp weight.  
Raw scalp locks of moss drape limbs,  
and mud clogs root knots.  
Laurel boughs twist and clench,  
gagging the forest throat  
with winter's withering secret.  
Weeds blow sour brown  
and matted fur freezes  
in the curled bowels of the wood.  
The thicket breathes heavy and fetid  
with the sleep of stalking  
and awaits the thaw  
and ritual flow of spring blood.  
January tolls sinister and dreams  
of the chase in April,  
the lance in May,  
the carcass in July.

Beneath the brambled pulse  
death ripens in a hollow fruit.  
Snow hangs dense and vast in clouds.  
The softness will not fall.

## RURAL WINTER

The gorge is choked  
with coal smoke fog.  
Crows whisper calls  
through tuned strings of dusk.  
Clods of rusty clay  
stumble into an open grave.  
A hand-planed pine box  
disappears in red mud rain.  
A taut thread on the loom  
of life frays and snaps.  
Night crawls over  
the split rail fence  
on the rim of the ridge and  
finishes filling the raw dead hole.  
Rough tombstones slant in dark  
against the diving angle of crows.  
A distant cow bell  
punctures cold silence  
in the tone of winter.  
Tolling.  
Tolling.



## NOVICE WITH ROSARY

Taut coils of your twisted hair unbraiding:  
Opiate of thick dusk in August rain:  
The tight walls sigh their sweet humidity  
And a light gust tinkles delicate glass chimes.  
We quote Blake aloud and chew pulpy melon sections  
Until music swoons upward to mute incense  
Of damp honeysuckle, laurel, azalea, mum:  
A nunnery of flowers eager for summer.

A monk hooded in his somber shadows,  
I kneel by the bed as if for vespers  
And tell my beads in museum dark  
On the knotty necklace of your spine.  
Flesh to flesh, we cool the needle eye of gulf wind.  
The rain tumbles down in a dust of heavy feathers.

AN OPEN LETTER TO JAMES DICKEY

"One night I thirsted like a prince  
Then like a king  
Then like an empire like a world  
On fire."

- James Dickey

Yes, we can still see, for beauty is not blinding,  
Nor is eloquence so stunning as to leave us stammering,  
Searching throats for our tongues  
In the face of the word wizard's poems.  
We saw you perform at the women's school,  
Your wild wit primed for such cosmic comedy,  
Your sunglass mirrors collecting  
Our eyes like zoo specimens  
And shining to conceal your blood-lined orbs.  
But enough is enough.  
As our solar system swirls toward Hercules  
What we need is no white Dionysus or campus Pan,  
Joking and spending among stars and space men.  
What this era craves is an oracle of verse,  
Twin-fisted, granted,  
But breathing crucial sagas through real anger.

True, your heart has pumped  
Hero's blood through wars and worse,  
Through raging rivers of applause  
And owl kings who roost on Jerico's walls,  
But such hero's blood is thinned by repetition.  
The age demands a thicker sort.  
Hemingway has hunted himself to death,  
And Fitzgerald is static and wax at the Smithsonian.  
Others have whored their pens to impotence.  
In arid times like these  
We want to hear fire-- vital and fine--  
Not to be Emmett Kelly-ed into forgetting.  
What we wanted to see from you. . .  
What you now need to re-discover. . .  
What we all ask from the alchemist of coke ads  
And the buck dance. . .  
Is just a little  
Deliverance.

THE BREAKING OF THE WATER

Belly like a pod, plush with his seed,  
she lay naked as a sweating kettle,  
searching in her blood for the bold cadence  
to tug life, a child like a bullet,  
from the calyx of a folded lotus.

Under sixty watts he smoked and stared  
at rain running like sweat beads down glass  
and breaking like glass on the ledge.  
Her breathing was an engine in the half-dark.  
Her shape was the ripe bulk straining  
to split the meniscus with birth's early dew.

(Fractured nights and days on the verge of tears,  
he had suffered sullen exile,  
a monk in his own castle.) The rain ceased.  
(Saw-toothed edges of words she had endured  
in this congealed state of renewed chastity  
that shaped her monthly blood to waxy life.)

When the water broke like a slit balloon,  
she arched for joy. He carried her to the car.

In the waiting room he smoked under neon,  
until a white-clad orderly brought the news:  
stillborn.

He crushed his smoke on the green-tinted glass  
and ran into the rain looking for God.

RUBY

Ruby,  
a beautiful woman  
gone mad as the ravens,  
rides blond and nude  
on her huge bay mare  
through flames of wheat,  
the amber of meadows,  
to a sun-glazed lake  
where ripples, waiting,  
stare at her shadow, its madness.  
Her thighs tight as petals  
on the wet red flanks,  
she flies herself like a shredded flag.  
Raving wind sparks in her hair.  
She lights dark fires with her eyes.

Scarlet birds orbit  
in the wake of her rush.  
Ruby bites her tongue till it tears  
and red drops fall on her breast like roses.  
Wild as a hun, wild as a beast,

she burns in the meadow,  
the widow of madness  
in her nightmare race with pain  
Till water parts in a swallowing rip  
and the waves catch her flame  
on slick liquid rocks  
as she dives to a depth  
where no sun ignites  
and drowns with fierce embers  
in the death of the day.

## IN YOUR PLACE

Since you curled like a fist  
into your schist-silver shell  
and stuffed your misty nightgowns  
and make-up mirror of frowns  
into the red Samsonite bag,  
I have found another lover  
whose fear cannot claw or mark me.  
Pull back the covers and hear  
a silent whimper in the dark.  
Snap on the stark light bulb  
and see the spreading stain.  
This wounded rabbit from the rain  
I found bleeding slow and jerking  
in the new-mown Queen Anne's lace.  
Now her pain has taken your place,  
twitching between slick sheets.  
So I smoke in the dark and stare  
at my proxy coney, saved from the snare  
and brought to this bier where I weep.  
I know the knife of your leaving



as she knows the petals of her lesion.

I will not sleep till she is ribbed in death.

I have learned the lesson you taught so well,

the hunter's frightened cry ~~that~~

that even hunters must die.

AWAITING THE CEDAR ISLAND FERRY

Because my muse is silent,  
I am stunned by the music  
of sand at Atlantic dusk.  
I stand alone on the red beach  
which folds the sun on roasted foam  
and miss the sound of my voice.

Slanted against the stunted wharf,  
the rusted hull of a cargo barge  
leans west into summer sunset.  
Gulls swoop above the wreck  
forming clouds of winged remarks.  
Soar. They soar.  
The sun drops sullenly,  
leaving only the grounded hulk,  
growling wreckage of green surf,  
and the poem I cannot touch.

PASTERNAK'S LEGACY

(for Alexandre Solzenhitsyn)

I sit on the terrace  
of Heinrich Böll's black oak cottage  
and stare at the River Rhine,  
a ribbon of foil on night,  
and think, "Volga, Volga!"  
Transparent memory of vodka and comrades.

Choked on my raw Cyrillic runes of love,  
they exile me like Trotsky,  
my absent sons like axes in my brain.

Like Zeus, who swallowed his progeny,  
I have ingested my ancestry,  
consumed Mother Russia.

I, like Tolstoi, contain my country.  
Like Dostoevski in the bloody pulse of  
Nevski Prospect, I know lamplight, snow,  
dejection. With Chekhov's cherry trees,  
my nation shakes

with each sharp chop at her guts.

The ax falls within me.

I become an ax of love.

Volga, I am Soviet.

Volga, I am dying . . .

No. We shall survive.

HEATHER ROSS MILLER READING

Wooden mythic mask at her throat,  
her white gates of teeth  
bared to spit poetry,  
heathen fires spark behind her eyes  
as she growls raw grit of grainy wolf fantasy.  
Her hair twisted too tight  
into a noose at her neck,  
she chokes herself around a poem  
in tongue-tearing implosion.  
She clenches the room about her.  
No briefcase can contain her anger  
as she steps, Alice-dimpled, to the mirror of her songs  
and rasps behind her squint,  
"I have no shame."

BELLS FOR JOHN CROWE RANSOM

"How do you account for the bells? How?"

"A child has drowned seeking love in a lake.  
Kelp held her tightly."

"How do you account for those bells? How?"

"Two become one. It is the marriage hymn.  
Rings will bind them tightly."

"How do you account for those bells? How?"

"A poet has died. Fires toll his passing.  
Death surrounds him tightly.  
The bells will ring him down."

His ashes lie chilly in their Grecian urn.  
His ice-white hair has curled up in smoke.  
The fugitive poet has come home to death,  
Shedding his years like a dancer's veils,  
Musing, marking time, mingling with the great dead.  
He completes his brown study.

## THE COFFEE CHEWERS

Arranged at the counter,  
solitary on pew-like stools,  
they count the morning,  
peering through tinted cataracts  
at tainted newspaper columns  
punctuated with palsied twitch.  
Synod of old men mourning age.  
Papers rattle like fall leaf specimens;  
dishes rattle like anatomy class skeletons;  
ice clacks in glasses like crystals in beakers.  
Chewing the cud from lethe's cup,  
trying to forget the benediction of lecture halls,  
stretching caffeine and wafers of toast  
and the winter morning  
to intrude on afternoon library prayers:  
the old men spend unholy stares  
on want ads, lost and found.  
Perhaps professors emeritus  
lost with old maps of the mind,  
those dog-eared yellowed notes on Keats.  
The radio spatters breakfast static to the masses,

while freshmen covet the back of the news.  
Sipping java memories from the saucer,  
they straighten thin strips of ties  
knotted tight like nooses about their necks,  
run knobby fingers over pink crowns,  
rub gnarled knuckles across hollow sockets,  
and stretch in awkward jerks  
to vanish like ghosts to an unheard introit,  
leaving only traces -  
a spoon stained brown and distorting with its curves,  
three nickels  
and an empty cup.



MUSE

Night sky is the darkest jade.

Constellations etch their strained calligraphy  
across the wrist of the sky.

Winter is the season of knives.

The moon is an eye blinded by cold.

The forest a portcullis of frost,  
a thicket of icy chandeliers  
hanging silver like frozen genitals.

There is something flying.

There is death.

Dawn, the golden butcher,  
rakes the sky in cinders.

The hollow bones of redwing crows

DUINO

"Every angel is terrible."

Stone angels

of these parapets

of these turrets

of this gothic castle

sigh and rasp.

Cold water trickling

to thin ice and

the wind is a demon.

Blood rides the wind

like a hun and

tapers gutter

night's harsh elegy.

A quill scratches

and stops and

the man in mittens,

hair wet and salty,

pauses to bring light

to his pipe

to bring light

like pauses

lighting the rock chamy

Rilke pauses

lighting rock chamber

of marsh shadows.

Rilke brings the light.

The winds refuse to notice

and rush like

silver assassins

seeking a broken

castle

castle without the light.

Rilke brings the light.

STOIC

Scarecrow of stitched scars  
and motley - tattered harlequin,  
why the twisted jester smirk?  
You are too crude to clown.  
There you stand, a trellis of thorns,  
cruciform parody parching in the sun.  
Skies do not crack and spit,  
nor does the mountain quake.  
Heat only fades your uniform of fear  
until even outlaw crows  
crack their jokes and gambol as  
they strop their beaks on the wind.  
What subtle barbs of humor  
can broken button-eyes catch?  
What puzzles or runic puns  
can wooden fingers clutch?  
    Straw man,  
    straw man,  
    what golden mystery  
is leaping out your arms and legs?

## DECISIVE

My chessmen, traitors, rattle in their box  
as you shrug victory away.

The white queen you handled  
so well lies askew with pawns.

The clock of myself ticks off ire  
I cannot decide to express, while  
your shark-toothed smile reminds me  
of your inexperience, your precosity.

"I've been lucky": words you shape,  
but your eyefire betrays the bite  
behind the fractured syllables:

"Males must, like weak kings, fall."  
So you stand there pouring  
an expensive snifter of brandy  
to annoint your sharp tongue.

Standing - you with your Amazon politics,  
I with my broken necessities.

## FOSSIL

Etched in my plasma,  
your skeleton imprint  
twists at night,  
trying to strip off my bones and words  
like a queen snake in summer shedding scales.  
It glides through the garden  
and annuls silence like a peacock cry,  
phantoms across the bridge  
to the island where  
dead boats lie docked,  
and casts a silver net  
to catch my incubi.  
Before morning crows alarm  
this sly eidolon shape  
slides back into my body and sleeps,  
curled like an embryo,  
thriving on my marrow,  
petrified,  
living.

CAESAREAN

Once a month,  
cyclic as menstruation,  
a poem floats down the cool fallopian  
of my mind's tube,  
polishing itself on coral reef  
I cannot control  
and sweating forth in blood  
that is neither my color  
nor the color of my dreams.

On pale sheets  
I catch the flow.  
It streams, takes shape  
that is its own and fluid.

The words find a pattern  
like a pint of blood  
collecting the shape  
of a thin glass jar.

Once a month,  
late at night,  
when the clouds are lost  
in the warp and woof of wind  
and the house is as silent  
as a case of knives in velvet,  
I let it flow.

NAOMI MACALLISTER

My eyes are gone.

I am an old woman.

My eyes are gone.

These old stones of vision  
are purged of images.

I see by touch analogy  
and the mottled inner lens of memory.

This valley is kiln and crucible.

I have seen night swallow day,  
hawk and fox devour chicken and rabbit,  
father, husband, two sons  
parch and wither at hoe and plow.

Now I see no more.

Night is flat and cold.

Day is quick and huge.

This shuck mattress sighs and pouts  
as I shift my clay-colored body  
and twist my brittle bones.

I am an old woman.

This valley will outlive me.

I have seen all and am ready



to see the jackel chariot of death  
baring his social smile within my dead eyes.  
I have seen it all  
a hundred times.

## HARVEST

Gathering windfalls  
among orchard sawgrass  
I catch the quick flash  
of sun on polished bone.  
The horse's skull,  
vine-anchored to earth  
and half buried,  
stares back through  
clay-clogged sockets.  
The bloodless brain,  
rotted to sod,  
coaxes soil-clamped jaws  
to speak broken words.

Spoiled apples fall, but I am frozen  
by the ghostly stallion glare.  
The touched skull is warm,  
but cold un-eyed holes watch  
as apples glow in sunset,  
polished blood-red.  
Among the winesaps in my basket,  
the demon smiles all the way home.

OFF-BEAT

I wait within to be what I am -  
raw red meat and ghost-white marrow  
driven from daysparkle to daysparkle  
of sun-sprayed mica-light.  
Blood-red rivers run in my eyes  
under cold thinness of skin,  
all pushed by a four-chambered muscle misfiring.

"Dysrhythmic valve sequence,"  
the Atlanta doctor said:  
"coronary incident: minor."  
But sudden drama disassembles to daily task,  
barbells clinking orchestration in chimed  
percussion to counter my panting; my life  
stretching like cheap taffy  
pulled                    and pulled.

Nights, I chant into darkness  
feeling the death that slowly circles in my streams.  
Sour blood pulses        pauses        pulses.  
Atonal pain catches me in mid-thought

and steals my thoughts to a dull chamber  
where I lie within what I must become.

Unsteady thumping of a flat drum solo in my flesh  
drowns subtle rhythms within my frame.

The weights rise and fall        fall  
like a pump pumping the off-beat out.

Sneakers provide percussion on morning roads  
to chase the health I crave,  
crawling to steal more years    or pages  
into my off-key chamber suite.

How does it feel        to know that death  
will drive me deeper within myself  
than I wish or dare to go?

I hear the clang of dumb-bell songs,  
slap of rubber on rain-skinned streets,  
silence of a beat that is not there,  
an answer that sparkles within itself.

The problem of meaning fades.

The question of reason is lost.

I can only dance to the music that plays,

the darkened dervish whirl,  
and try to last it out,  
the harsh flat tune of fear  
that all men hear beneath their ribs,  
that all men hate and need.

## NIGHTMARE

Light grew angry in the heat  
and flashed. My bones  
caught fire in the storm.  
I glowed inside the flames  
I sired. My heart was burning  
white.

I scanned the skies  
for silver wires of thunderbolts,  
their blazing knives.

My dreams  
were shaped like broken dice.  
The slash, the growl, the  
nightmare blast of summer  
thunderstorm.

I woke to stains  
of smoke across dilated  
eyes - begging the dark for  
light. It came.

I cringed  
to find the fire. I broke.

## SHIDONI SUNRISE

Dawn sucks the stars back in  
from Tesuque desert sky.  
Hawk night steals her chilly wings  
into a roasting quicksilver sun.  
Cacti stand like sundial blades  
marking the rise of tequila fire.  
Yucca grasps its claw roots  
sinking in the sand for the ghostly moisture.  
A late owl swoops toward his cave,  
lizard blood from damp talons  
dripping on his shadow.  
The teeth of summer grind quietly.

## GOD'S HERMITS

In the pocket of the cloister  
Monks swarm in umber,  
Cowed and scowling vespers,  
Staring at a rusting relic  
To rattle wooden fossil beads  
Loud as Halloween noise-makers.  
Beneath coarse woolen hoods  
Their amber eyes, astigmatised,  
Twist light behind cracked spectacles.  
Bearded, fasting, knees rubbed to scabs,  
In secret they conjure angelic succubi.

In the nave they thaw their guilt  
Scourging ascetic flesh until  
Raw welts rise like Grace  
On red skin. Beneath the stars  
God's hermits grind their shins to cinders  
Behind the iron icon's haloed smile.  
De Sade would have been proud;  
The Inquisition would have cringed.  
The Angelus tolls at dawn.



WAKING UNDER SUN

This morning of my Easter exile  
the lake catches fire with the sun.  
Rippled reflection snares a solo crow blazing.  
"Craw, craw, craw," the fire bird cries.  
Blue Ridge peaks hang duned with snow  
in my memory like lodestones calling.

I step from the net of my nylon hammock  
to the shore where silver water  
tastes the twisted weeds and slaps.  
A lost tourist prying day open  
like a stubborn hickory nut, I yawn for coffee.  
Morning flexes itself, a golden muscle,  
through my unfocused image stretching.

All lakes lead to the sun,  
the yellow spar of light that scorches.  
I learn from the light in its context.  
Barbs of waves in the water  
furl and fist in the wind,  
looping mountains on the lake:

Swanless, wakeless, green as lynx eyes.

My eyes uncrust to the spangle and roll  
of wet fire, a sea of blazing sparks  
leaping. Ever the sun,  
God's own god,  
braids coiled around his crown.

My waking goes unnoticed by crows  
or the oaks they sway with their perching,  
and the flat stretch of yellow sky  
unwinds its binding threads.  
Staring at the solar star's gold skin,  
I remember the crisp rattle  
of a mountain stream on brittle sticks,  
a masked coon scratching bark,  
and the baying of beagles in the moon.

My knife's silver edge splays venison,  
sawing strips from the hart to hang like tongues  
over a blistering fire of withered sticks,  
and the Ra-faced sun cooks shadows  
on the lake as cool as foil.

Afternoon brings its rain like silver blood  
clicking on summer leaves.

A thin lake falls from the cloud-masked sun,  
and lightning jags mountains in the sky,  
to the west, in the dusk, on the breeze.

In the east, a lone star rises.

Somewhere wise men see stars in the mountains  
where deer like shadows sip from a still stream  
and amulets of mica preserve this light.