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The Wilderness Experience. [Original writing]

Chamlee, Kenneth Dixon, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1993

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THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

by

Kenneth Dixon Chamlee

**A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Greensboro
1993**

Approved by



**Professor Fred Chappell
Dissertation Advisor**

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CHAMLEE, KENNETH DIXON, Ph.D. *The Wilderness Experience*. (1993)
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This creative dissertation in poetry explores the physical, psychic, and emotional wildernesses that people may blunder into, be forced into, or choose to inhabit. Section One, *The Logic of The Lost*, explores differences in perceptions, those of memory and immediate experience. These differences may be harmless, amusing, or costly, and they may persist or evolve. These poems move toward feelings that are not fully resolved, either for the narrator or the character involved.

Section Two, *The Mirror of Deceit*, explores the ironies inherent in teaching and writing poetry. Each can be approached with passion or dread, each is a form of artistry, each produces distractions, deceptions, and failures.

Section Three, *Out of Darkness*, begins with poems that echo the "lost" and "deceived" voices of the earlier sections by exploring the public and private darkneses people may endure. But it turns, mid-section, toward poems that find points of equilibrium or moments of recognition and resolution.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Without the faith, support, and enduring patience of my wife, Priscilla, this project would never have come to completion. I dedicate this book to her, and to my son, Andrew.

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"The Wilderness Experience" -- *Coraddi*

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"*Fantasia* Afterthought" -- *Chiaroscuro*

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ONE

THE LOGIC OF THE LOST

THE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

for David

Somewhere below the mountain's summit,
the trail we followed from the valley
is gone. Wide as a boulevard
beside our morning camp, it narrowed
away from the river, collapsed to a suggestion
of ferns, and now has disappeared
beneath stump-spill and jackstraw trees.
The last blaze mark was an hour ago,
and as we scan the cryptic woods
the light drops across our packs
in a fading slant: we are lost.

When the Puritans gazed at Plymouth's beach
from the prow of their worn ship, they
did not know a sea of trees
stretched before them as vast as the ocean
behind; they knew only their fears:
beasts and devils, unimaginable
darkness. They hacked the wilderness
into graveyards and clearings, pushed it back
with scaffolds and cabins, each acre
of ragged stumps a sanctuary.

In the deep shade of rhododendrons,
I recall how every season someone
veers from a mountain trail and dies,
someone who did not expect to, and I
begin to understand the Puritans.

I see myself in black clothes,
swinging an axe against the wall
of woods around me, wanting it down,
wanting it gone, wanting to be back
at the river beside a dwindling fire,
not pulling myself through heath-hells
and rough gullies choked with roots.

With the logic of the lost, we pull
toward the trailhead, hand over hand,
the hardest way, the only way
back to what we think we know.

THE BROWN MOUNTAIN LIGHTS

The overlook is quiet; people whisper
inside cars. Some stand stiff-armed
beside their trucks, hands deep
in pockets, shoulders hunched.
As another car swings closer,
its headlight novas into double suns.
A cloudless, white-breath night.

Behind the watchers, the Parkway
trails into the immense night,
a black gap narrowing in a blacker treeline.
It takes minutes to see that.

Two miles east, above the dark hump
of Brown Mountain, a yellow spot ignites,
then wanes. Another rolls and bumps
while flashing, then shoots skyward.
White sparks flare, shift, and fade slowly,
dim to bright to dim again, vanish.

The Lights tumble until morning, playing
to empty overlooks and solemn, steady trees.
They grant nothing to science or legend:
nothing to locomotives left trackless
on the mountainside a hundred years ago, nothing
to cars driving on roads that were never built,

nothing to glimmering quarts of incandescent moonshine,
brewed in silver boilers above campfires
that glow on the smokeless green hills.

SCENIC PHOTOGRAPHER'S FIELD TEST

28mm

Trees bend over backwards, looking sharp from leaves
to humped roots. A flat, blue sky with a twist of polarizer
makes clouds snap out of it, unmoored above the distant lake.

50mm

As much as the eye sees.
The waterfall blurs to cream
when shot slow. Stop it down
but keep steady, steady.

200mm

On the far
side of the
meadow, one
ox-eye daisy
twists through
a slot in
a gray
split-rail
fence.

ROCK IN YOUR SHOE

You know how it goes. Late or eager, hustling along a clear sidewalk and, Wow! A sudden gouge like stepping barefoot on jacks, and you stop for a second, shake your foot, walk on and three steps later, Ouch! At the ball of your foot now, so you limp slightly, putting weight on the other leg, hitching along, but the rock keeps moving around. You change strides, shift weight to the outside, inside, from heel to toe, toe to heel, try to walk without touching the ground, try everything except the obvious, taking the dumb shoe off.

No. You cannot take off your shoes in public. Walking out of the house barefoot is fine, but once in shoes and socks you are committed-- the principle being you don't want anyone to notice you or turn you a side glance. On a picnic, where a cool, amber river tempts you into trying its smooth stones, OK. But on the street? Taking off your shoes is, after all, the first act of intimacy: easing out of a day's wear as you get comfortable at home, or wresting them still tied to get your pants off quicker. What might people see as they read you like a sentence out of context:

Has this man embarked on a sudden amour,
but missing his partner and his geographical mind?
Is he an eccentric, stopping to count his corns
or stash a quarter? A street person who found
a pair of cast-offs in a smelly dumpster?
Think about it. You don't want people to see you
standing with one foot in hand like a numeral four,
bent over, fumbling with a sock
so thin your pink flesh meshes against the fabric
like a child's face pressed to a screen door.
What if you lost your balance and landed heavily,
splayed on the sidewalk with your coat rumpled
and one preposterous shoe beside the curb?

No, it is better, much better, to limp on,
to hobble toward privacy, so now at your desk,
in a stairwell, or on a rare elevator
ride alone, you slip off the shoe and shake it,
expecting a broken marble or a bottlecap
to clatter out, but you see and hear nothing.
You ease your foot back in, test the weight,
stride off victorious, then jerk up short. Damn!
Still there? "Are you all right?" someone asks.
Now you've drawn attention, but you wave them away
and, not caring, sit down on the floor where you are
and rip off the shoe and the sock. Understanding
that things never fall out the first time, you
braille-read your foot, turning the sock inside
out while dreading that thin, acrid odor

like fresh asphalt--and then you've got it--the pearl
of your displeasure, rolling it between
thumb and middle finger, not believing.
A white stone, small and smooth as a B.B.
You know how it goes.

HORMONE POEM

Coed tackle football was forbidden
 in the seventh grade, but when Mr. Darlington
 stepped inside for a soda, someone whistled --
 and the rules changed.

One dusty afternoon

a deflected pass surprised my awkward hands,
 and all the yelling faces turned toward me.
 I bolted and lunged, twisting to escape
 the knot of howling tacklers that rode me down.
 Schoolyard rules were lax; a play ended
 when someone else had the ball, so I
 was face up in the dirt, still stiff-arming
 when my right hand locked on Elizabeth Saíd's
 left breast. The scrabbling horde meant nothing to me
 now, as my eyes marvelled at my hand, collapsed
 on its soft cargo, and at Elizabeth,
 who looked as if she were being vaccinated.
 And in the split second I left it there
 longer than was needed to pull it away,
 my mind quickened:

She was half-Iranian,
 olive-skinned, with long, ebony hair
 that kept her face in shadow, and three brothers
 in high school who tormented her, even
 more than the blondes who hated her for turning
 our pimpled, moonstruck faces away from them.
 I loved her rich, Arabic contempt so much

I smiled--

and Elizabeth's eyes widened, glowing,
like lumps of gray charcoal when the ash
is stirred. Terrified, immobile, my hand
became a branding iron, a five-point
American star burning through her sweater,
and I knew her dark, turbaned brothers, each
with a gold tooth set in a maniacal smile,
would fall on me after school, the eldest
drawing a jeweled scimitar from his caftan --
a swift, retributive stroke -- my pale hand
nailed to the schoolhouse door.

The forgotten ball

was torn away, and the clot of tacklers dissolved.
Elizabeth backed up quickly, leaving me
with my hand extended like a plea, scowling
at me with a brick-colored face, shouting,
"Next time, American boy, you'd better *ask*."

MODERN LOVE POEM, or NUNS FRET NOT

Safe sex? You have to be kidding.
 For starters: lies, haste, miscalculation.
 Fear. Jeopardy. Unplanned parenthood.
 Child support, non-support. Not to mention
 gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia,
 herpes simplex II.

AIDS.

And even condoms won't protect you
 from guilt or gossip, reputations to shun
 or live up to, co-workers who hate you.

Say you are discreet and go to a lovers' lane.
 There's carbon monoxide and hook-handed
 serial killers tapping on the fender.

And what if you weave your way into the inextricable
 fabric of a frayed mind? First, the phone calls:
 "I woke up. You weren't here. I hate that."
 Then your pet rabbit gets boiled.

But even if it goes well, long term,
 there is the burden to perform, the fear
 of inadequacy, the embarrassment of failure.

Safe sex? I don't think so. And if
 you are not convinced by now

that abstinence makes the heart grow fonder,
then we need to talk. Say,
what are you doing this Friday night?

CONVENTION

The young delegate
in the throbbing hotel bar
wasn't lonely, but something
in his voice tickled
down her back.

The proposal cracked
inside her mouth like ice.
She wished he, too,
had thought to remove
his name badge, but he kept his
eyes tabled on the stained napkins
while she perused his lips and
imagined how he would
speak to her thighs.

She pictured a wordless conferral
of her key and an observed retreat,
but deep in purse-clutter,
her groping fingers
closed on her daughter's hairbrush.
She jerked as if burned, then
touched it, thought,
and palmed it like a talisman.

HARMONICA SOLO AT THE LONGEST STOPLIGHT IN TOWN

A long-haired boy, propped on a trash can
at the corner, was playing to nobody
I could see. Hands cupped, fingers waving
through tremolos, he wheezed a raucous melody,
breathing music in and out,
boot tapping and head rocking time.

Oblivious to me, the sun, and God knows
any green going to yellow, he blew
a song light as a bubble, and lucent
with trains, false lovers, bad luck and booze.

I leaned out to yell, "That's pretty good,"
but a horn blared behind me: "For Chrissakes,
buddy. Are you gonna sit there all day?"

THE GOLDEN RULE

Late night, this county blacktop
winds like a boa constrictor. Chosen from dim memory
in hopes of saving minutes, this old road
coils and releases as paired reflectors drift
the center line like yellow eyes skimming for prey.
And flaring with a conspiratorial glow,

the warning light I've been ignoring
now insists. Under the hood, with a slapped flashlight
draining to amber, I find a split hose dripping green.
After peeling maps from a roll of tape long melted,
I wrap the tube and recall why I always carry
black tape and these jugs of musty water.

One night over thirty years ago, coming up
a mountain road in Uncle Frank's old Packard,
the radiator hose blew with the soft whoosh
of a stage whisper, misting the windshield
as we braked near a timely pulloff
overhung with limbs that scraped our roof.

"Get down that hill, boy, and see
if you can find us a bottle to fill." Sliding
through wet kudzu and briars, I dropped into
thick shadows thrown by the headlights levelled
above, groping the ditch with wet sleeves
and cuffs, an unformed fear rising

toward expression when, "I found one.
It's a square bottle, Uncle Frank." "Thank God
for the littering drunks," he roared. "You can always
count on them. Now fill it up in that branch
and get back here." Three times cars swung past us
in the curve, their meteoric lights skipping off

the Packard's chrome and scrambling the shadows
around me. And each time, while I held the bottle
flat in that smelly stream, Uncle Frank swore
and kicked the gravel. "Nobody helps you any more,"
he yelled down to me at last. "People
just don't care." And suddenly I was thinking

about spiders, round and hairy as coconuts,
spiders with night vision and a taste for the unexpected.
"Good grief, boy, you didn't half fill this thing,"
he said when, breathless, I handed him the bottle.
As he poured the murky water, I stared
at his gum-and-shoelace patchwork on the hose.

"Nice, huh?" he laughed. "You do what you can
to get home, son. That's what you have to do." Three more times
I swallowed hard and filled the drunkard's gift.
"Probably Johnnie Walker Red," he said as we pulled away,
and reading my face, "the bottle. Probably scotch.
Maybe some cheap bourbon." He fiddled with the radio,

cursed Elvis Presley, swore Mantle was the best that ever was. And working a full pack of Juicy Fruit, he talked about his apple trees and growing up poor with five brothers and Grandma.

Two miles from town,
a car pulled to the roadside leaned heavily
into its own red exhaust. A woman standing

beside a flat raised one hand to screen her eyes as Uncle Frank coasted over. In the next breath three things happened at once: I started rolling down the window; the woman, a young black, stepped smiling toward the car; and Uncle Frank stomped the accelerator so hard my head

hit the seat with an audible thwap. Gravel pinged off the other car; our tires screeched as we veered nearly to the opposite ditch, then swung back to our lane, straightened, and took off.

For a minute I could
not speak or turn. Shame ignited inside me
and scorched me like a rash. I knew

Uncle Frank was not a man to be insolent with, but I stared, hard, until he stopped working his gum and said, "What?" and then "*What?*" "How could..." I tried but sucked the words back in, like when I would start to spit and my grandmother would look at me. "After what you..."

and my throat locked again, but now he knew.
"Look here, pup," he hissed. "Like as not, her old man
was laying in the back seat with a shotgun, ready
to blast your face into spaghetti if you so much
as sneezed. J'ever think about that?"

I turned to the window, eyes blurred

and stinging, my soundless throat a traitor.
We rode in silence until my street, when he
spoke again: "You are some piece of work, boy.
I would've never thought." But he couldn't leave it hard
and added, not angry, as we pulled into the drive,
"You don't ever stop, son. It might be a trap."

Back in my own time and car, hose mended
and coil refilled, I start again, and though I am displaced
and tardy, I will blunder my way home and make excuses,
knowing that tonight, on this and every road,
people are poised before an approaching blindness,
and no one ever knows what is coming.

DOWNTOWN SATURDAY MORNING, GREENVILLE, S.C.

Not having lived here for twenty years,
I feel displaced as I follow my wife on a tour
of the established jewelers, ones who refused
the malls and kept on here, with new storefronts,
angled parking, and crape myrtles shading
the sidewalk where I lean and wait.

A siren wails above the traffic
and an ambulance swings onto Main. It shrills
an absurd yodel, wavering and warbling as the choked
traffic pulls aside. Even the pedestrians stop--
as if walking might draw calamity
upon themselves. In these seconds

which paralyze sense and motion, I remember
how Main Street looked some thirty years ago: wider,
dirtier, buses fuming at the corners, no empty stores.
And every first Saturday at noon, the air raid siren
from atop the Poinsett Hotel would crank up slowly,
but in twenty seconds was a sheer, red wall

of noise, blasting at full pain, forcing
people to go indoors where they waited out what
my mother called, "The loudest three minutes
of your life." They stood, smiling or frowning
at the other sufferers, wondering what if this
were not a drill, as it always was,

as they always hoped it would be, as in
the last thirty seconds of that brain-numbing whine
they prayed, "Dear God, let this be a drill."
And one by one, without intending, they imagined
their families at home, their friends at work
or sunning at the lake, imagined themselves

incinerated where they stood, ready then
to drop down and cover their ears when the siren's pitch
fell suddenly to a draining hum, like switching off
some monstrous apparatus. People stepped out
of the stores and laughed, glancing at the sky,
and walked away to find their broken thoughts.

This remembrance breaks as well;
the ambulance is gone and the street surges with traffic,
jaywalkers, and people shifting packages on the run.
My wife returns from her errand and asks,
"What have you been daydreaming about?"
"Nothing," I reply, and mean it.

THE VOID

"A body found in a car that was discovered submerged in a pond may be that of a woman who has been missing for twelve years, authorities said today."

The Asheville Citizen-Times, 4-16-92

She wiped cereal from the baby's chin
and kissed her. Told her parents not to wait
up. She'd stop and get the milk and Winstons,
and Friday begin looking for her own place.

How that seared family must have mourned
and hated her. Their irresolute hearts, flaring
each hour with gossip and nightmare, burned
finally to impalpable ash, as honestly as dropping

an earring, or glancing at a frayed sleeve.
Five seconds of jolting bumps, a splash,
and then the black moment of weightless disbelief,
before the screams, the rush, the startled fish.

THE SLIPPING

Migration is a cumbersome word
for monarch butterflies slipping
through Tunnel Gap. Once he lay
a whole day counting them: a few

orange specks flickered
out of nothing, coasted the hanging
laurel, then dipped away
on Tiffany wings into the blue-

smoked valley. Barely a hundred,
in a day he did not mind wasting
then. He has heard old-timers say
that forty years ago the monarchs flew

massed in roiling cloudfire, burning toward
milkweed and the quivering
Mexican forests where they stay
the winter or die. And every fall he will do

the same, as if he too heard
their unanswerable call: he grabs his hiking
boots, camera, and drives the Parkway
to their crossing point. But what is true

slips between the seasons, and
nothing shames him into fleeing
the silent highways
of rutted air and age. And too

many days, like today, he drifts forward
without knowing why, yielding
merely to vague need, learning his way
as the monarchs straggle through.

FALLOUT SHELTER

For ten days we watched our neighbor
grappling with hard-cornered boxes,
pushing them through the tight hatch
sprouting in his backyard like a mushroom.

At night a bluish ray dazzled
the silver underleaves of his maple,
flaring up like a hole to the earth's center
as he sang above his clatter and drill-whine.

When the bulldozers had gouged a crater in his yard,
we assumed he was building a pool. But a crane
lifted a bus-sized drum over his house and eased it
to the workmen who leveled and braced it.

One evening, over the fence, he offered us
a tour. The earth above was still as red
and mounded as a grave, and at the bottom
of the ladder, looking past my hands

at an eight-by-ten of sky, I felt them
locked behind my head as I squatted
in a windowless corridor at school, waiting
under an incessant, strident bell.

A power cord ran from his basement. "Of course,
we'll use flashlights and candles, later on."

What about smoke, I asked, and he showed me
the ventilation crank. Bunks hinged to the curved walls

were leveled with chains. There were shelves of peaches,
canned tuna, and beans. Boxes of rice and instant
potatoes. Jug after jug of water. Two decks
of cards, a Parcheesi game, and a stack of Outdoor Life.

For days I drew pictures of submarines
and bathyscaphes, trying to keep myself from seeing
the Nevada desert lifted in a white bubble
which rippled the fusing sand, but every night

our neighbor bragged loudly to someone new,
about how he could have had a mountain cabin,
or a piece of chigger-infested lake frontage,
or even a remodeled kitchen for his wife,

and how he was smarter than that. When his company
had gone, he scanned the enclosing lawns, then
climbed down into the dark pool of his fears,
floating with his thoughts in the churned air.

STREET PREACHER

At the corner of North and Main, in the city
where I used to live, a street preacher
hounds the Saturday shoppers who duck around him,
grudging him room. For as long as I can remember,
some dismal herald from the seminary
has worked this corner, scribbling in the air
with a bony finger, punctuating scripture
with jabs and shouts, exhorting women as they
leave the lingerie shop, and raving at men
who wheel into the pharmacy to smoke.

At noon one Saturday some thirty years ago,
we surged from the dingy, downtown theater
where for six bottlecaps we had thrilled
to *The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold*.
Full of Raisinettes and soda, we shot
finger pistols at every passing car,
shouted and looped down the blinding sidewalk
until we bumped the preacher whose ruddy face
and eyes drawn to bullets lashed us back
against the curb-parked cars where he bound us
with a soulless cry: "The earth will swallow you up,
and your bodies burn in everlasting fire!"
For a moment, there was silence past all parents'
comprehension; we hung mid-breath, afraid
to laugh or cough, and then he turned to resume

his rant, and our knot untied itself, fraying
in every direction toward our waiting homes.

Today's preacher paces like the cougar
in the city zoo, treading his corner
in rhythmic, relentless sway, I cannot say
if it is heat or memory that spurs me
to ask him if this works, if he has ever saved
anyone, or knelt with the lost in earnest prayer.
But when I approach him, I am shocked to stillness--
he is old, someone's father, not a student
proselytizer. Caged behind his symbols and his anger,
he looks through me toward something
he can only hope for, not remember,
and he walks around me as if I am the air.

TWO
THE MIRROR OF DECEIT

THE MOCKINGBIRD AT THE WRITERS' CONFERENCE

The plagiarist solos every morning at sunrise,
and loudly. We hear him high on the cornice,
gray throat working a line
clear and extravagant, urging us
out of our spare and stifling rooms.

From the vast water oak by the library
he recites before the morning lecture--
a sonnet of tanager, thrush couplet,
the caustic free verse of squirrels.
We hate him for his casual mastery

of form, and for being
the spontaneous poet we all try to be--
each borrowed phrase raised and melded
into art, each silvery intonation
the music and the mirror of deceit.

FETISH

In the pen shop, he notes the Montblancs
and Cartiers are lounging without tops,
their broad nibs exposed and gleaming.
The jewelled Cross, with its sterling
glow, is shown in privacy.

All these lacquered shapes are easy
on the hands, and he feels he must touch
a tapered case or two. It is a harem, a clutch
of style and heft, with coarse or delicate
strokes to choose from--a tool to fit
each mood. Just the thing to sate a man
of whims. And now he must determine
his newest consort, refine
his propensity for slender lines,
and, above all, avoid extravagance.
He hovers, selects, then coaxes a performance.

AFTERNOON WRITING SESSION

Tensing for chipmunks, the cat
slopes from sofa to sill, hunching.
Her head bobs like a featherweight,
muzzle quivering into the screen.

Rain sweeps the street, whisk-silver,
unscrolling a breeze of wet wood
and grass that ruffles my cluttered
desk, raising the light fur on my arms.

THE FOSSIL POEM

Can any poem endure
like an ant in amber, coincidence
of heat and misfortune?

Can any thought insist
the way of a leaf
pressed to a forgotten riverbank?

Ideas are as fragile as atmospheres.

What abides must be etched
like ferns in anthracite,

compressed with such extremity
that the words fuse
into time.

CULTURAL LITERACY POEM

for E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

Everything you need
to know is
in this poem history science music
art politics sports economics
mathematics literature
there is more much
more how you say can a poem
do all that how
can it not.

*Be careful you
read this poem this poem
you become.*

Begin memorizing this
poem this symbol this
shared accumulation go
back now and
repeat
the first line you
should have started before
you even heard of it why
have you waited it
may already be
too late for you.

*Poets have always known
they were supposed to
know everything.*

SUMMERS OFF

The mothers at the pre-school nursery
are skeptical, their faces seek the mystery
of my Bermudas and Budweiser shirt:
Why doesn't this man work?
Bringing his son in at nine, and not
only picking him up early, but keeping him out
for movies and camping trips mid-week.

The truth is I am neither sick
nor indolent, but still not exactly what they see.
How could I say that yesterday, from breakfast until three,
I debated choosing "inflection" over "nuance,"
and once resolved, was elated with my choice.

Today I spoke to a mother with a puzzled look
and told her I was writing poems, a book.
"Oh," she said, "job hunting gives me a fit.
It's nice to have a hobby, isn't it?"

ODYSSEUS TEACHING AT THE JUNIOR COLLEGE

Yes, everyone knows the sirens did not come
to Odysseus; he sailed their ragged coast.
And their exquisiteness was not what drove
his fingers into the splinters of the mast.

But he is tired. And when she knocks and enters
his office, sweetly swinging, the legend turns
on him and smiles. Oh, the consternation
of a T-shirt! The panoply of tight blue jeans!

Her drop request seems suggestive. Reasons
swell up like pouts while her perfume
loosens his tie. He signs quickly,
thinking, *Take my good name.*

HELPFUL HINTS

Teacher, we don't need your helpful hints.
 Go to some dark closet, please, and stow them.
 It isn't like we don't have any sense.

Of why and what we do here's our defense:
 because we wrote it, it must be a poem.
 We just don't want your not-so-helpful hints

about language charged with meaning that's intense.
 Let's talk about these Masters: What do we owe them?
 It's not as though we haven't got the sense

to work with form, but structure's mere pretense,
 man. Save it for some foggy-forum
 you might read to. They'll *love* your helpful hints.

But they won't work for us. In fact, they're nonsense,
 if you can stand the truth. Why expose them?
 We're hurt you haven't shown the slightest sense

toward how we feel, and that much doubt imprints
 a gloomy picture in our minds. Love our poems
 as we do, but please, no more helpful hints.
 Geez, you'd think we didn't have a lick of sense!

THE POETRY WORKSHOP LOOKS FOR HALLEY'S COMET

I'll start. Look, there it is.

Where?

Right *there*. Plain as night.

I'm sorry. I don't . . .

See the tower? Look to the left
beyond that mountain and go up
maybe fifteen degrees. Got it?

What tower?

Christ. Clean your glasses.

And put down the binoculars
until you know what you're looking for.

I see it. I see it. Wow,
it's beautiful. It's
really moving.

That's an airplane.

My grandmother saw it the last time, you know
in 1910 her parents dragged her out
in the middle of the night she said it was like
a streak of fire, an omen, and she's right
think of all that happened after 1910: World War I,
World War II, the Depression, Vietnam makes you
wonder about the next seventy-six years.

OK, group. Has everyone
found it? Does anyone not see it?

I'm not sure. Maybe. Oh yes,
there it is, I think.

Concentrate. But
try not to look too hard.

You mean *that's* it? That
sorry little gray smear?

All right, anything else? Everyone
ready to move on? Why don't we
take a look at Cassiopeia
as long as we're here.

THE LAST CARPE DIEM POEM

How does one get the sun-resistant flocks
to move their minds toward even cool indifference?
Attempting, I usher them to page twenty.
"Not another *carpe diem* poem!"

And failing to seize yet another day,
they slump like rocks. The whining girls, their cotton
breasts billboarding the trifles of their age,
form coral pouts and eye the amber studs.

Oh, last night they proved their pleasures: a bag
of chips, a case of beer, and thou, and they
understand about sporting like amorous birds
of prey, but today their vegetable minds are withered,

and the youthful hue sits on their skin like makeup.
They stare, but do they see a man who stays
excited about the universe of words,
who fears they may not know that age is best

in which one is alive?

They stop by woods,
but thinking that the harness bells
have jangled out some music they should marry,
they step down, get lost, and drift away.

BRINGING A POEM TO THE TEACHER

Office hours are over, so I
hesitate, but wave her in. She slips me
her poem on a clipboard, like a chart,
and waits, clicking her nails
along the curved arm of my rocker.
A competency test, I think, a riddle
she wants me to solve but expects I cannot.
As she moves her rings from finger to finger,
I lift the scripted sheet
and find her more naked than knowing.

Look at this girl: her face is bright
as a scalpel. She is tan and thin,
but her poem is fat and old, and under
its pale skin festers a common revelation--
lost virginity, rejection, and despair.

This is what one never trains for:
conveying a placid deskside manner
with a tongue as sterile as gauze.
But the truth is what she wants me to find,
so I scrape off the swollen metaphors
and hold it to her, benign.

Immediately I know I have blundered: her face
confesses. The shock of my selfish insight
numbs her like an anesthetic bath.

"Of course, I'm only guessing," I say,
sponging equivocations to her red wound,
but she flicks her cobalt eyes to mine
and sees that I am lying.

So we sit,
silent as scrubbed tile, aware of both
our failures. And I wonder, can she accept
this bungled examination and try again,
or will she keep herself as close
as the blanched page now in hand,
adding poetry and me
to her list of heart's betrayals?

THE ENGLISH PROFESSOR'S FLAG FOOTBALL GAME

In junior high, so tenuous and spider-limbed
 they called him 'Web,' he stepped in front of a pass
 one day and, gone! This shocked the roughs, who ran him
 shouldered down the field like Stephen Dedalus.
 Hurroo! Hurroo! but in truth his laureled ride
 was mostly a jest to spite the other side.

Once he hooked an eight-iron to within
 a foot. Shanked the putt but it rimmed and dropped.
 In basketball, a big-lead substitution.
 Two years church-league baseball, then he stopped.
 Great moments in a non-athletic life.
 He watches games on TV with his wife.

So explain: age forty-one, his legs stiff
 as student prose, he's playing flag football
 with some friends, and with each clumsy shift
 and broken run, his agile mind is full
 of blood and leather; something he can't remember
 has set his aging face like Frank McComber's,

and its coppery smell clings, vexing him
 to knock the ruddy rector on his ass.
 The dentist aches, the lawyer thinks he's lame,
 and scornful mouths are baiting: "You want a chance
 at glory, Mr. College?" Lecture-steady,
 he calls the play long-dreamed: "Everybody

go long, and I will get it there." He takes
the snap, whirls and looks but no one's free.
So now he's sprinting like an egg on toothpicks,
running, running for his life is Mercury,
Atalanta, swift Camilla, for his life is flying,
speeding, skimming along the main with wings
the closing rout have stretched to trim,
but today, oh yes, today! They will not catch him!

THREE
OUT OF DARKNESS

THE RUB

"To die, to sleep--
To sleep--perchance to dream:
ay, there's the rub."

Hamlet, III.i.

The hour before
awakening
the eyes jerk like
cats beneath a
blanket, jumping
at what they can't
see, what taunts them
out of darkness.

THE LOGIC OF DREAMS

Reporters surround my bed, elbowing,
asking me how it feels to win
the National Poetry Contest,
noting my twisted pajamas
and fly-away hair.

Inside the rented cabin
the California blonde steps
into the shower with me. Her tan
melts and her hair streaks gray.
A nipple washes off,
the small pink cup of it
covers the drain, colors pooling.
I panic and lunge dripping
into a mirrored lobby.

At eight in the morning my students
yawn and flip lamely through their books.
I haven't shown up again.
At home, I sit at the night's edge
with my face in my hands.

WARNING

There are nights when you close the damper, thinking
the fire is dead. In the morning your dry mouth
is chalked with ash. Or maybe you've done nothing
wrong, and still a skunk bivouacs beneath
the plumbing of your new mountain home.
For months his legacy rises with the humidity,
waddling out of closets and the sofa's foam.
Ten years ago you could tell yourself these petty
griefs were nothing but beggar lice, but now
you're finding it harder to shrug and forget the burrs
that seem to stick to everything you know.
It's not the way you want to live, and there's
good reason to keep from keeping that list
you dearly love--of things gone wrong or missed.

TO A FRIEND NOT SEEN SINCE HER WEDDING

I see you pardoning your way past the white-haired
widows bunched together to cluck
over this week's symptoms. Six years
since cake and carnations, you stand here in church
wearing white again, the visitor's ribbon
a red wound on your breast, waiting for me
to ask or just acknowledge the shy likeness
pulling on one hand, the other hand nervous
and unringed. But I am counting my diplomas
as your face unveils mute history, degrees in pain.

You were my first friend to marry.
One year into college--I was scared
for you, scared for us all.
A quick kiss at the reception,
and I held you till you eased me away.

Outside, the widows in their oversized
Buicks are drifting away like icebergs
as I walk you to your car and kiss
your daughter, thinking the random past isn't worth
very much, and the awkward present no better,
and how we continually consign ourselves
to the future, embracing, then loosely holding hands,
making promises we don't intend to keep.

EXTEMPORE

In the lobby before the jazz concert, we see them.
Holding hands, my wife and I walk over
to this couple we'd rather not meet. It seems forever
since we saw him. Two years without a slim
syllable passing between us. He left his thin,
sensible, third wife to take this moon-faced lover
pressing to him, then quit his job, never
explaining why he shrugged off every friend
like a small doubt. We mumble a few vacuities,
wait, and when the doors open, flee
to our seats. The room darkens and the musicians breeze
on stage, each one turning his riffs with the ease
of an improvised life, moving quickly
through each set, just as seamless as you please.

CLEANING HOUSE -- A PARABLE

He took his friends, co-workers, and acquaintances,
put them all in one box, and drove down
to the flea market where he traded them
for some no-risk, no-load mutual funds.
He didn't want any return, just the space.

He took his job, reputation, health
and future plans and placed a classified ad:
"Encumbrances, 3/\$1.00. No haggling.
Take 'em or leave 'em."

He took his latest wife and child
and stood them out front for the big yard sale.
You couldn't get near the place. The toys
were gone in seconds; someone snapped up
their stainless for a song. The bed was sold
to an opportunist furnishing a motel.

When his house was echo-empty, he called
a paid consultant known for her vigorous advice.
She had a face shaped like a pie-graph
and legs as long as an actuarial curve,
and he said "Listen, hon, I'm starting over.
Just what does it take to be happy?"

BEDTIME STORIES

Our two-year-old stands between us
in our queen-sized bed. Giggling,
he binds the sheet to our hips
and claps his hands spastically,
starting them too close together,
whooping over and over, "Go 'way, Daddy. Shoo!"
Thinking he wants to wrestle, I spin
and growl and send him sprawling, but he
pummels me onto the floor, sobbing
"Go 'way!" again through flurried fists.

I am used to this. "He doesn't understand,"
she says, affecting sympathy from across the bed.
"Oh?" I reply, and get that look,
the same look she gave me the week before
when I brought home a story book,
not nursery rhymes or Dr. Seuss,
but myths and Shakespeare simplified.
"I know, I know. He is only two,"
I said, "but I will read them to him
until he learns to say them for himself."

I look at my son above me on the bed.
Caged in his mother's arms, he glares at me
with wet eyes and will not smile.
The ancient stories sink down on us
like collapsing sheets as I realize

that he already knows the bitter oracles,
the blinded kings, and tales
of poisoned princes' slow revenge.

FANTASIA AFTERTHOUGHT

Tottering on a balding hassock,
thick pencil for baton in hand, my son conducts
Dukas and Disney--"The Sorcerer's Apprentice."

His blue pajama sleeves
loose as pillowcases,
he steers Mickey toward the wizard's glowing
moon-starred hat and helps him
spark a broom to chores.

But the mouse drowns off, and soon dreams
he is commanding stars and seas: streaking comets,
oceans crashing at his cue. My son flails and rocks
through this cosmic whimsy,
embellishing the tale
with full-mouth fortes and heart-jolting leaps
above the hassock, shrill
warnings come to naught.

Meanwhile, the broom, hexed with the single-
mindedness of a child, fetches pail after pail
to the overfilled cistern. Swept from dreams to sense,
Mickey whirlpools toward his
rashdest blunder--taking
an axe to his helper. The splinters, like
lies, come back with their own
lives: keen, insistent.

My son conducts hugely, happily
lost in a myth of pure control, oblivious
to those dreams he will prod to life, then abandon,
to orders and endings
impossible to charm,
to gray wizards waiting to dash his work
to droplets and broom him
through the splintered air.

CRAWL SPACE

Something is walking above the sheetrock
ceiling of my apartment. Its steps
are too heavy for a squirrel

or a rat. Above the window
behind the barrister, where the eave
narrows to a wedge of heat and light

rising through the soffit,
the intruder circles and settles
its stiff fur against drywall.

I wait, then rap the ceiling
with a broom, and something pads away
across the dining room.

It is back in minutes. Standing
in a chair, I hear squeaks and chittering.
Whatever it is, it has given birth.

How is it I never heard
this feral mother, raccoon or possum,
scraping the insulation into a nest?

I did not hear her
numberless trips fetching leaves
and green sticks that would keep

the pink fiberglass from salting

the raw skin of her kits.

On either side of the pebbled ceiling,

we both are listening now.

Something has started

that wouldn't be heard before.

THE MAGICIAN ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

August. Puddles in the flooded meadow
 mirror the yielding sky. My son and I
 are wrapped in silent thought. In the dark curve
 before the river and the open road,
 a farm is disappearing behind nettles
 and bracken gone to seed: a crosscut saw
 nailed to a flaking barn, brown rabbits
 in a rotted hutch.

"Dad, will I learn
 magic at school? Or just the stuff I need?"
 As if magic weren't. I ask him why.
 "If I were magic, I'd make the river go over
 the bridge."

"Like the flood?"

"No, I want it
 to jump over like a rainbow. But when
 I say 'abracadabra,' nothing *happens*."

Already, words have failed him. He thinks power
 is in the utterance and the waving of hands.
 And why not? For six-and-a-half years one word
 would get him juice, tied shoes, eager parents
 game-splayed and smiling on the dirty carpet.
 Now, with the alphabet under his ingenuous cape,
 why shouldn't he expect the unexpected?
 How many cartoon chases seen that ended

in smashed, pan-shaped faces shaken off?
How many hounded ducks who sprinted up
floating ropes, and then beyond the ropes,
hauling themselves frantically through braided air?

My son is walking towards his lucky teacher
now, still holding my hand, but he lets go
and runs and shouts goodbye and this is not
a beginning I imagined, not an ending.
His unpracticed leaving makes me think
that desire and the right words might be enough
to pull white doves from the jacket I am wearing.
Returning home, I can raise that choking river
and pitch it toward the iridescent sky.

A MOTHER'S SECRET

She turns from sweeping the garage
to see her son running
along the garden's border wall

of railroad ties, swinging
a long stick and thrashing
each azalea and bleeding heart.

"Stop it!" she yells.

"Be careful!" But he cannot heed
what's said to him but once,

and warnings are his assurance
that she is watching and thinking
"How bravely he flies along the wall!"

There is a mother somewhere
whose son lost an eye
to stickplay, and now she understands

the impotence of mindful language,
and she chides or consoles herself
as she has come to weigh it.

The boyish daredevil is shouting
"Look!" but she shocks herself with
Get hurt! Not today, of course,

but later, at the right times,
just enough to keep him
cautious, yet still wanting to run.

THE PULL

In a hospital room my young son
watches me watch my father.

I smooth the white hair, spoon

applesauce and coax down
granulated pills. For an hour
my son is still and sound-

less as a prayer. He stares
at the bed, looking for
the old man in the overstuffed chair

who reads to him about buffalo.
The respirator whispers a soft
language we almost think we know,

telling us -- what? That we are
past the embarrassment of legs
thin and purple as weedstems, a catheter

that falls off, brown phlegm
that rises like a tide? My son
is restless now and ready. For him

the hours seem to pull everything
along, nothing stays. He turns
from the mirror and tugs my arm, singing

"Da-ad." And in that fluted syllable
I hear my life breaking
into bits of *have*, *had*, and *will*.

I touch what I am given
and what I must give up,
and even if I were to summon

a strength as resistless
as the striding minutes, I could
never pull from me all my selfishness.

Father and son, each frail
with years, drift beyond me
as they must, as each will.

'OH, BLESSED RAGE FOR ORDER'

I never saw my father shop for anything
except grass seed and groceries, maybe
a wrench or a box of nails. Still,

in the middle of washing a load of socks,
my mother would answer the door
and there would be a workman

with a washing machine strapped to a dolly.
She had learned not to say "There must be
some mistake," for there was never any mistake,

only socks dripping like clumps of wet bark
in a hastily-cleared sink. At supper
she would say into her peas, "The washer

was fine, dear." But he had heard
something in the grind of its gears
and bearings that argued past her.

He knew how long to expect a thing to last,
when he had gotten his money's worth,
and when to change. He was the same

with dying. I always thought he'd pass away
while sleeping, a shock--but no fuss. He could not
sue the time, though, and it troubled him.

Still, a month was all he spent on dying.
Time for whispered conversations with his wife,
friends' visits, blessings to his sons.

"No machines," he said, and later,
"No more food." We sat with him and waited.
He died with the preacher in the room.

We found a note in his tidy bureau
addressed to her. What to do
with all the bank accounts, how to

divest the stocks, when the car should go
for service, the kind of seed and lime
to buy for spring.

THE HOLDING MOMENT

At Wednesday chapel I'd slump beside my parents,
 and while the preacher droned of things beyond
 I would prop one ankle on a scrawny knee
 and drain my leg to feel what death felt like.
 When I was sure all sense had leaked away,
 I'd test it, fingernail or pencil stub,
 straight pin from the visitor's card,
 till by the altar call I knew simply
 pressure and no pain.

Clumping out

a cripple bound for Jesus, I stumbled once
 and Father grabbed my sinking elbow--"I'm dying,"
 I said, but seeing his uncertain face--
 "I mean, we're dying," and wanted to say more
 but my voice locked like the stiff silence
 of sentence prayers. "I know," he said, and held me.

Tonight a deadweight arm awakens me
 from restless sleep, and as I struggle to rise,
 life is chipping my bones into white slivers.
 The clock's red digits pulse the holding moment,
 clicking around the still seconds as father's
 IV monitor did for weeks and weeks,
 the family cramped and waiting while his heart,
 mired in a shallow vat, pumped thin blood
 to ballooning ankles. We touched his stained, papery
 wrists, brushed his lips with ice and heard him

whisper once, "You are all what's kept me here."
Through senseless nights we sat with him and hoped,
and though we wanted rage and light, we dragged
our numb arms to him, held him, and let go.

THE ARGUMENT

Whipping the kitchen door behind him,
he kicks through the garage and rips
the power mower into a roar. Shoving it
down the driveway's edge, he turns and scrapes curb
to the neighbor's boxwood hedge, spinning the mower there
as if swinging a rifle into a crowd of wives.

She has telephoned her mother by now,
and that simpering psychologist friend
who works three days at the free mania clinic.
Yes, she is sucking in advice and sympathy
from a twice-divorced fat woman with the
least-adjusted kid in seventh grade.

Pass after pass, he shaves the yard into a shrinking
box of grass. The first row of clippings
he rakes in slashes, tearing up rooted grass with the mown.
The next row is gathered with even strokes
as he moves in a flickering circle of light
screening down through the dappled trees.

He pauses and, turning toward the house,
rests his chin on hands cupped at the tip
of the rake, bouncing slightly on the spring-
steel tines. He looks for a long time, then turns
to the yard and begins raking slowly, almost
tenderly, as if drawing a brush through a woman's hair.

CHANGE OF SEASON

When I first knew her, she would gather her morning
hair in her lap like a glittering hearth,
picking and placing the stray coals
spilled from her knees. Standing,
she would twist and fan it across her back
like a lustrous, chestnut cape.

Forgive me. Today, as she is talking,
I have counted seven white hairs,
and am thinking this is what it is like to find
the first ice crystals on the bedroom window,
mid-October, knowing that leaves have settled
against the house, and few warm days are left,
and that soon we will walk to the frozen pond

arm in arm, and there recall what we
could not do all summer--make stones skip
three times to the distant bank. But now,
even with our gloved, clumsy hands, we can
sail smooth stones across the feathered ice
and watch them go, sensing how quickly
we slip from here to the other side.

IN CONCERT

In the open-air auditorium I drifted,
lulled by easy violins and flutes,
when I saw a black moth looping
the white shafts of spotlights, slow-spiraling

down, like a paper raven, keeping its course
with a circuit of minute tiltings. He was nothing
but motion against stillness, and I
was about to let him go his aimless way

when that clear moment turned to crystal.
For several timeless measures he whirled
synchronized with the swelling music:
pirouetting with the strings, gliding

easily over the reeds, a quick turn
timed to a flourish of tympani--it was
a ballet brief as a dream. I turned but
no one else had seen. The music rose

in crescendo and faded, and as the moth dipped
along the aisle I saw his wings were flecked
with sky and sun.

"Meaningless," my friends said,
as we talked later over coffee. "Pure coincidence,"

and I know they are right, but that moment
of random synergy has stayed with me, tasking me
with what I may have missed while stubbornly
attentive to other stages' light and music,

and it holds before me unscripted and unscored
a gift of chance coherence, where things
I thought of letting go might come together
in the fluid and harmonious air.