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The poems assembled here are the result of a strong dedication to the poetic line. Although most of them are written in the first person, they are autobiographical only in the vaguest sense: hardly any describe actual events, and while the various speakers must necessarily be emanations of myself, I myself am never the speaker. The poems are arranged thematically with no regard to the order in which they were written. The thesis title is taken from that of the earliest-written poem.

SCORPION

by

John Bradley Burkholder

A Thesis Submitted to
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Approved by

Robert Watson

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis 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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OCTOPUS

Mind, this glob hub,
 center of all space,
 in-drawing, swelling for the heave
 and surge, the gentle turmoil
 vague fingers herd
 through the roilsome sand.

Things touched exist,
 become through becoming known
 to the groping builders piecing
 together a universe,
 snaking to caress and clutch,
 create and strangle.

THE TOUCH

Who was it that touched me . . .
for I perceive that power has
gone forth from me.

Luke 8: 45, 46

Poison ivy is quick
to flare red in the fall:
red leaves among green
tickle the retina.
But spring through summer
it inches subtly
into tree-tops, green leaves
waving among green.

It seemed to be choking
the sycamore by the garden,
twisting up the trunk like a snake.
I touched its flesh
in two places with the saw
and shoved out a foot-long section
thicker than my arm.

Among the sycamore's,
its leaves parch brown
without first blazing red;
its juice dries harmless.
But red welts cover
my hand, demanding attention
like flaming leaves
early in the fall,
and the vine inches on.

HANDS

The hands, with pencil and pad, of a girl
can make you drunk

if she is pretty
and you are tired of the hard things
you surround yourself with and those faint bruises
no blue spots record of your fumbling
in the world of objects, if you are tired
of the incessant little chills and burns
of touching things cooler and warmer
than your hands, and if yours are hands aching
for a girl's,

and you watch her turn lightly
to go with your order, her soft hair
lifting from firm shoulders and falling
and lifting again as she walks, her skirt
shifting with each step, the backs
of her knees--perfect knees that could bend
and hold a man . . .

When she returns,
chilling her hand to hand you the mug,
you almost offer the cigarette you know
she would refuse or the chat she has
no time for, but instead you say "Thank you,"
smile to make her smile, and watch
her go again.

You drain the mug
fast as you can, watching her move
among the tables, your imagination busy
as those hands busy with pencil and pad
or someone's order or dirties. You are eager
to have her at your table again, to have her
speak a few words,

to have her . . .

"Yes,
please bring me another," you say, and repeat
the entire act, the watching, the drinking,
and again you repeat it, and again, and more
times, always to make her assured
you exist, to have her do something for you,
to nurture a dream of soft hands
the warmth of your own,

and to have her hand you
with sweet hands you would drink from
a frosted mug, colder and harder,
certainly, than a woman's breast, her breast,
but with the warmth of her fingers and palms
liquid on the glass.

And when she has said
"Last call," and then, "Goodnight,"
and somehow you are home and have fallen
into bed, your hands under your head
or at your sides, as your thoughts of her
slip away, probably you will not think
to call it her hand that covers your eyes
from that last bit of light with its tiny searing
you can never shut out without a hand,
or an elbow crooked for a hand, or a blanket
flung high for an elbow, or simply too much
to drink, and surely you will not think
to call it her hand that will lead you far
below dreams for a while to a perfect place
of nothing, and then let you go to surface
through dreams into aching and the fumbling of hands.

VOYAGE INTO STONE

Only the trappings change:
 here incense swabs the air
 and the pale light
 as they huddle at a tiny bowl,
 drawn to its fire, its smoke.

Call it a play staged
 at the spirit's request,
 a monument to an old trick.

They suck a sweet pain,
 Eden and apple
 again and again.

RETURN TO THE SCHOOLYARD

Here, we are forever grubs
with cherub faces, in clothes
drab and poor-looking,

and the scene is gray as an old
movie, built by us each
like a dream-scene, incomplete.

There, by the wall, the woman
stands watch as the boys turn
coats and caps backward,

making a fire engine
of the monkey bars, and the girls
jump rope or run playing tag.

Our shrieks, simple, wordless,
borne on an autumn breeze,
fall to us only, fall

dead to the weak shock
of the gloom-filling word.
A stock-still second. Forever

the play ends too soon:
small soles slap to the line
forming at the steps, march up,

away, past the double door
through the dim-lit hall
to the classroom, to crayons,

fat pencils and chalkboards,
to the sufferance of cramp desks
and the demonic books, away.

INNOCENCE

See how the wild mallards start
and drip away over the full trees,
and how the dragonflies hover and mate
as benign waterbugs play chase
in the reflected blossoms and lush grass
near the pond's edge: every bit
the scene that once had me mulling ways
to splash with girlfriends naked in it.

But now look, and that scene's sliced
by the snake's periscope closing in
on the pond's skinny tail, and reflection's mussed
by the surfacing turtle blinking in the sun
and drinking air through that iron grin
that could close for keeps on a toe, at least.

DAPHNE

The goatish piper's airy tune
brushes the valley's tender blades,
drives new sap through the trees' tough flesh
and swells the buds of the wild red rose.
Nymphs in the meadow hear and heed,
dancing unseen as the warm breeze blows.

Innocent Daphne, fated child,
closes her ears to the piper's song,
denies the course of nature's plan
and roams the woods and fields alone.
Stubborn, she spurns the call of spring;
shrinks from the world of flesh and bone.

Apollo, Cupid's godly mark,
eyes ambrosial fruit with lust
and heeds the call of Pan's wild reeds.
Snared by the girl's reluctant charms,
tangled hair and hidden breast,
he sprints to take her in his arms.

*

Her childish shriek has slowed to moan;
her blood has slowed to sullen sap.
Now Daphne's wooden thighs sway softly
but too late to that old tune;
her brittle fingers snap to grip,
but can't, the love she spurned too soon.

THE HOME FRONT

Over the clipped lawn, in the clean smell
of suburban success, what a mess
of a poet lugging sponge and pail
to the newish car haunts each kiss.

Without her I could be king of squalor
and happy pawn of verse, a rat
moving in some high, dusty corner
of a dusty building on a rancid street.

But her arms around me, I am prince
of her flesh and cuddle, and her subtle smell
whispers that woman full-time makes sense,
that the proper move is to marry the girl:
but conjugal flesh costs a pound and an ounce;
she will beat my verse with a skillet to fill.

WOMAN'S PLAN

A pretty face is not the thing:
she must have swung beguiling hips
to launch a thousand Grecian ships
and set the horsemen plundering.

*

Caesar followed Egypt's head
on walks beside the languid Nile,
and put aside ambition while
he had another hunger fed.

*

Since Dante only saw her twice
and mostly from behind, it's sure
the promise wasn't wholly pure
that led him over Satan's ice.

*

Napoleon took time from wars
when first he saw her turn to go:
he ordered that the ride be slow,
climbed in, and locked the carriage doors.

*

Now enter I to woman's plan:
God knows she's just an animal
that warms her feet with bushy tail,
but what the hell?--I'm only man.

IN A RENTED ROOM WITH BLUE WALLS

No voice would answer:
 there's only the whisper
 of steam in the pipes
 and the babble of water
 down the drain. Lips
 rub dry on the towel;
 then the undressing, the chill
 of floor, sheets and pillow,
 and the night snaps
 pitch-black over blue.

SKETCHES FOR A WINTER MORNING

a tiny room
room enough to live
room with cold beer
cold beans

*

cold crawls like sunrise
over the pillow
still scented by her hair

we love and do not love
who share this general plight

we come together
in a dance of dust

*

trucks growl and whine
beyond the window

beyond the trucks
trees bow to the wind
and a steeple pokes
above the trees

*

from room to room
I follow the sidewalk
around a corner

wind flings dust
into my eyes

*

this tiny room
where only words come
words on no breath
words silent

myself

THIS GENERAL PLIGHT

coitus captivus
 this heaving world dragging us
 by the flesh drags
 through its motions
 always
 always
 is not consciousness
 what heaves ribs drives heart
 is not consciousness the plight
 we share
 even now
 eyes flirting over breakfast
 taunting
 there is no way out there is no
 way out there is no way out

MIRE

1

Root and pith, leaf and bud
love the fertile dirt, their home.
Deft fingers probe into the mud
and rock and loam
as root provides for bud and leaf.

Till the sap has wasted in the stem
they suck life from what they love.

2

The wanton boar roots in the mire,
the wanton sow mires in the mud.
They grovel, matching leer with leer,
and mingle blood.
King and queen of their earthy realm,

they labor in desire for lard
and love their sausage, loin and ham.

3

After sufficient greens and ham,
man and woman cling and cleave,
evolved and elevate, at home,
and never rove
from domestic bed and cozy hearth.

They whisper of their souls' true love:
their souls, buried, wail through the earth.

DISMOUNT TO LOVE

1 bedroom

Now, no cry for warmth.
 Long-frozen to the pane, dust
 rides the last slow runnels across
 my sill and down.

2 porch

Here, the smell of new buds, new
 grass, and the glaze of sun on water
 thin on the street.
 To an early class, girls
 chatter in twos and threes or
 clop singly
 over the damp, beneath a sky
 new with singing, torn with wings.

IMPRESSIONS AT LINVILLE BOTTOM

On the hills, the wind
in the leaves: in the bottom,
still bright with dew,
my voice absurd
amid no others'.

*

On the hillside near
the barn, the cattle
nose one way:
too early for the flies;
to graze toward the shade.

*

A bumblebee raids
a clover blossom.
Can the clover know?
All eyes and ears
and paper and pen,
from beneath a tree
I raid the bumblebee.

*

The creek is low.
A crow has pressed
his hand into the mudbar.
No sign of the cloud
that will wash it away.

*

Its shape, the shape
of its retreat,
show me a snake
the shape of one thought.

*

Black on yellow,
blue on black,
butterflies flutter.
What is it about mud
at the water's edge
that warrants such bother?

*

Up the road from the bottom
I'm led by their jeers
and boing waves,
pleased to note
I concern them so,
those near-grown crows,
they up and leave.

LINVILLE BOTTOM

By Linville Creek the poplars have blazed and burned crisp.
Beneath them, gaunt milkweeds bleach and chafe away.
Across the creek, blond tufts of broomsedge beard
the rock-cropped slope. Mid-morning,
warmth brittle as ice on the first ice dawn
a day or a week away, my shadow sharp and cold,
I trail my walking stick slowly through burnt-out grass
in the flat open field.

The sun rides my back and shoulders light as skin.
Each puff breeze hauls waves of thin victims to the ground,
hauls the must smell. The scene is crumbling. Each fall,
its green gone mellow, corrupt,
Linville Bottom edges away from the sun, stealing
each cow and rabbit, stealing me from the primal source,
leaving before me, squat on the ground, a mockery of myself;
around that, a portrait of the sun.

RHEDDISH KNOB

1

From Rheddish Knob I can see
 the range's twisted spine sloping
 away, north and south, and,
 to the east, green ridges trailing

for miles to the broad, patched valley,
 its many greens laced with lank
 roads knit at prim towns,
 while to the west, mottled, the Alleghanays

roll and fade into the haze.
 Few come here. I've come
 building this peak step by step,
 each stone, tree and fern, to chill

in thin air where twisted oaks
 grope upward barely twenty feet.
 I take, almost, the eyes of the eagle
 hanging silent and still on the updraft,

and see the world take form beneath me,
 becoming a vast, single being
 spread outward from where I stand
 to the sky's circling, wispy edge.

It rings me, this scene I anchor, and slowly
 I spin, possessed and possessor, feeding
 on the wheeling face I've climbed to create,
 awesome and brutal, gentle, complete.

2

Descent is rapid through trees taller
 and taller down the warming slope
 to the paved road, its oak-lined banks
 jeweled with wildflowers. I hurry,
 clutching the fragile memory of a broad
 endless image.

But falling
 deeper through hills to the valley fenced
 into farms and masking with trees and knolls,
 houses and barns the visage seen
 from Rheddish Knob, I more and more
 can't picture the land's face,
 but its disjointed faces, familiar and mocking.

POEM IN NOVEMBER

In a park days from the ocean
a spring-run chokes on November's leaves,
oak, hickory and maple
all clumping like wet papers.
I've watched them collect for days,
watched the water lag and swell
but find its way.
The ocean sucks it on.

November finds me lifeless,
nearly, as the weak-pulsed turtle
hidden in the stream's bank,
and neither the russet snow of leaves
nor the girls laughing past me,
sleeveless despite the season, jar
my stupor. I drift
aimlessly as falling leaves.

The page is damp and limp
with the oil and sweat of a dumb hand
groping for an image,
for something to keep the stream flowing.
Each word comes with struggle,
like sweat; like water through meshed leaves.
But the words find a way.
What ocean sucks them on?

RHYMES FOR A CHILDREN'S BOOK
TO SHOW THEM THE MEANING OF STRENGTH

The strong can do what must be done
and still have time to play;
the weak are only good for fun;
no time for work have they.

*

The strong man helps you build a kite
and helps you fly it, too,
but doesn't make you fly it right
and wreck the fun for you.

*

The strong man takes you fishing
and helps you with your bait,
and when you're tired of fishing
he doesn't make you wait
so long while he's still fishing
that you start hating fishing.

*

If your principal is strong
he isn't mad if you've done wrong,
and never ever paddles you
unless you really force him to.

*

If your coach is really strong
you never hear him curse,
and if you lose he doesn't make
your workouts too much worse.

*

The strong man at the service station
helps keep you from harm
by checking underneath the hood
and making sure the tires are good
and feeling any parts he should--
but not your mother's arm.

*

The strong man maybe has a dog
but it doesn't bite,
and possibly he hates his wife
but you never hear them fight.

*

The strong man has a car with gas
and when it's time to mow the grass
but the mower's empty, gas-can too,
he drives his car to get some gas:
he never ever calls for you
and makes you think it might be fun
to ride your bike or walk or run
(although it's eight blocks if it's one)
and take his gas-can for some gas
and afterward to mow his grass.

*

The strongest boy's not the boy
who bats the ball the best,
or--in a few years--gets the girl,
or makes an A on the test:
the strongest boy's the boy who grows
and gets a car with gas,
and never tries to get small boys
to help him mow his grass.

BABY GROWN UP

I've known at all hours
a wailing mouth, ugly
with desire. Feed me, feed me!
Potato chips it rejects:
crackers, pretzels, cookies--
all too boring. Give it
pizza, thick crusted,
oozing tomato goo
from under thick skin
of hot cheese plastered
with meats, mushrooms, onions
and peppers sliced and diced,
the cheese drawing into threads
with each bite--threads
that snap or have to be broken
by hand as topping falls
over the edge. Scoop
it up, scoop it up!
Or feed it a sandwich, that mouth:
French or Italian bread
with three meats or more,
two cheeses at least,
lettuce, onions, pickles,
peppers, olives--whatever's
handy--and mayonnaise (only
a dab), mustard, and a bit
of French dressing. To wash
it down, cola's too sweet,
milk's too bland, but imported
beer's just the thing.
(Wine's for more delicate maws.)
And an hour later, perhaps
a malted, thick and almost
chewy, to stave off the wailing
for a while longer and to keep
a smile hung over the ugly.

NEW YEAR'S PARTY

This one, still a child, jams
a coke-bottle mortar into the snow.
Green, blue and red, the charges
chug one after one, scorching
the still air.

Half drunk, the bald one
warns him not to hit the cars,
explains range and windage, talks
of a mortar barrage on a French town
and V. E. Day in Paris, with drinking
and cheering and kissing French girls.

The celebrators ooh and ah at each burst.

Black ruins of powder pepper the snow
as the Roman candle dies. Small-arms
fire of squibs chatters briefly
from the neighbors' party; then faint bells
from the town below peal the hour.

Cheers, kisses. Toasts.

We have bombed the new year into being.

THE DEATH OF E. H. KIDD

When he fell onto the bed and blued
 and all the pounding on his heart
 wouldn't make it budge,
 he left his skin, and the room
 became form without mass:
 he could have rummaged through the dresser
 without pulling a drawer or moving
 a shirt, or stepped on the air
 up to the ceiling and through it
 all the way to heaven,
 and maybe he did.

But knowing
 he was curious and kind, and would want
 to see us through, I like
 to think he stayed at least
 for the funeral, and kept near his wife
 as the preacher did his best
 and the baritone moaned the hymn.

And after the chapel and the graveyard,
 when we streamed into his house for the feast
 the neighbors had brought dish
 by dish, it seemed the man
 might simply have been in some other
 room. The sofa he had spent
 his retirement ruining sat
 waiting, and his hat and cane
 were ready for a walk.

But sitting
 to eat I happened to see
 through the window the tree that would
 have been sawn had he lived
 another day, and suddenly
 sofa, hat and cane
 changed, and the bustle at the table
 as well: beneath the jeers
 of those leaves not wilting and not
 about to wilt, the house
 was riven from its owner; at the table,
 each swallow, every clink of a fork
 on a plate shook a fist
 at the smug face of God.

THE HAWK ON FIRE

(from Dylan Thomas'
"Over Sir John's Hill")

1

The sun, a seething boil
on the skyline, rages and sinks.
What follows, briefly, is the deep
purple-blue of dusk and,
from a ray we cannot see,
the phoenix glow of hawk
high over the west hill.

2

Soaring this side of sunset,
a hawk becomes more than a bird
hungry for careless sparrows,
we say, who see it loom,
a specter of fire before us
disturbing both night and day:
some call it death; some, God.

3

The speck of sun hangs
ruling with its fire the dusk
as we wrangle, eager and heedless
as sparrows, until the hawk
swoops into darkness and we
lurch into a still night
on the air-splitting whistle of wings.

WAKING ON THE WEST SIDE

(the place is America,
the year is 1969,
the speaker is 19 years old)

There's an old man with a sack
over his shoulder, and his work
is to snatch bad boys
as they lie asleep in bed:

that's what my grandmother said:
and you're very bad
if you say shut up or you don't want your coat
or you play where the cat

digs; and when I still had bars on my bed
and took a nap each afternoon,
I woke, once, and the sun
was low and I howled and screamed

until to make me hush
they raised the shade and showed me the bush
and not a man outside.
Such things we don't forget but

after a while never give a thought,
they become so much of us,
until a time like this afternoon
when I'd been asleep and the sun

was low and I opened my eyes at a scraping,
and on wagged all the unavoidable sin
like an old, marching man
on the other side of the window shade.

LATE SEPTEMBER, 1975

(Some months ago a commercial passenger flight crashed into a low mountain near Washington, D.C.. The government disclosed that the mountain covers an underground installation from which the nation is to be run in case of nuclear war.)

In the barn loft, among pine boughs
they buzz; in loose flocks they dip
and circle at the sun-peeled eave,
at the chimney top. In late September
wasps thaw at morning, chill at night,
and trail, in the afternoons, long legs
in idle panic. Now the queen burrows,
knowing well what the workers sense dimly,
to wait through the long nights, hidden.

Three quarters of the century are past:
we feel that some wheel grates over
a rough road, has ground the grist
of our wars, our booms and hard times;
we eat the dry bread of the past.
Three quarters of the year are past:
we tend our work, slowing little
to crane for the new colors, content
that the seasons' roll will not soothe
the rat's nerves or blind the hawk,
content that we will winter well,
sure of things staying intact, yet

we feel our time tired; we feel
vaguely, vaguely this new chill
we work hard to burn away.
There waits not far from the White House
beneath a low mountain a winter den
being readied, stocked for a rough season.
We idle, restless as the wasps, who watch.

ICBM

Here the warship perfected
clear out of the sea, sleek
as a fish but so much smarter,
with fire for a tail-fin and fire
on its mind, broods in the earth.

We'd gasp as if at a miracle
to see such a shoot break ground,
for when were the Elements ever
so mixed, so such beauty of science
in so many ways unveiled?

Maybe at the base of Everest
or near it or somewhere like it
some scroll could answer: I only
can guess, seeing history as gods,
that Zeus and Thor lie patient
as seeds at Christmas, with spring
at a fingertip, a messiah at hand.

JANUARY, 1977

Since the first fuel shortage I've worried
that this day would come, and never
believing I could do much to stop it
I've still tried as hard as the next man,
gone chilly from time to time
and driven less miles than I might have,
but today it's sweater weather
inside, and outside, the schools
are closed.

So early in the day,
their feet whirl at the peddles
driving them through air only children
can celebrate, with the fuel so low,
and though the school doors will open
when it thaws and things will go back
to normal as the shortage eases,
I wonder what the next one will bring.

*

I wonder, and I see the cities
soon burning like steamships
lost on the ocean, run out
of fuel and the food going fast,
and the schools closed till the summer
that will never really come, such urgency
will fill it, and I freeze thinking
how a generation with even a bit
less leisure for its learning
can take up the course its parents,
for all their expertise, couldn't hold,
who wouldn't believe not to stake
so much on what seemed so abundant.
And watching these cyclists celebrating
a treat, I can only think
of those cattle sure that they're called
to be fed, that are called to the barn
and shut in, and driven onto a truck.

*

In my mind I'm drawing plans
 for a house with thicker walls
 and more chimneys than a man
 would have dreamed of a few years back,
 and I'm setting this house on a tract
 covered with slow-burning hardwood
 and kept by a long, stout fence.
 Hogs will run wild, and guineas,
 and a cow will graze near the house,
 with springhouse and garden nearby.

But no--there aren't enough tracts
 and trees for us all. Someone
 would have my meat as soon
 as the times approved my set-up,
 and some desperate father would shoot me
 for those chimneys and walls, and who
 would stop him or make him pay
 but the next father by, for what law
 can survive the order it's built on?

*

When the ages change men tear down
 the world to try and get warm.
 The Coliseum built many
 a wall after Pisces rose back of
 the sun, and that age now settles
 like some stripped steamship crossing
 the skyline. If the stars move
 the world, we can only expect
 to end up a wreck, and what
 if they don't--what can we expect?
 And what can I do but do
 as the next man, wear sweaters indoors
 and drive no more than I have to,
 and wait for the thaw and then
 for the next fuel shortage, and watch?

SCORPION

In ten thousand years the Sierras
Will be dry and dead, home of the scorpion.

Gary Snyder

1

In dreams they come,
legion, huge
as men; scrape
the dry earth; tumble
tank-like over boulders,
stings high.

An age is past:
now is a slow age
of glacial rocks and spare trees,
seared dust and singed grass.
Amid men's ruins,
wind-swept bare, careful feet
in side-stepped circles dance:
stings poise, their curled shadows
stark upon the stone and dust.

2

This tiny, frantic thing found
beneath a stone must spawn no race.
Sting, scorpion;
kill if you can,
even as I close my hand and crush,
crush.

KNUCKLE-CRACKING

I'll have arthritis if I don't stop.
Where did I put that pruning saw?
I had it sharpened at the lawnmower shop--
did I pick it up? Just look at this window--
how do they hit it? I'd like to lop
off that limb where they nest so they'd go
away with their noise and God-awful crap.
I'll have arthritis if I don't stop.

I'll have arthritis if I don't stop.
Arthritic fingers can't hold a saw.
I read somewhere that it's nitrogen bubbles
bursting that cracks when you crack your knuckles.
I'd direct all the sawing from here at the window.
I'll have arthritis if I don't stop.

HYPOCHONDRIA

He wakes to a grave-like darkness,
the quiet broken only
by the long, low hiss
of sheet on shifting body
and the clock's tick surely
though immeasurably slowing, like a heart.
The pain is small, but snaps him alert.

Perhaps it is the dark and tick
or that what felt, linen
pillow and pain, smack
of hospital rooms and dying
that frees dark thoughts to wind
like snakes through his entrails and chill
to make the small hurt double, quadruple,

and perhaps a subtle repulsion
at both flesh and clock heart
help spur the sick notion
of disease, and the swelled hurt
is subconsciously cherished, part
of an ailing soul's macabre plan
to heal itself in the body's pain.

Here is an illness no cure
from the medicine chest will soothe,
nor is there comfort in prayer
and prayerful bargains. No use
counting backward by twos
from a hundred, or to whisper over and over
"I am not sick," for he will suffer

until, dimly, come forms
to the room, blotches of dresser
and chair, suggestion of door,
growing more and more real, like cancer,
until the night's gray corpse is buried
under the sun of another day
and a healed man goes tired and free.

HARDWOOD

More than myself, the space
 around me intrigues.
 Each day I devour a part,
 pacing over this bare floor.

Tasting defines;
 carving the meat bares
 the bone. Today's meat
 is the hard wood beneath me . . .

+

Through half of August I sweated
 like Lincoln, splitting the rails
 for this fence. They called it snake-rail,
 the old-timers.

All the chestnuts
 have been dead over fifty years,
 but in the highest Alleghanies, their wood
 is still hard.

The old man
 who drags them out, who hauls them,
 throws back his fat face,
 stuffing the money into a pocket
 of his Red Camel bibs, chuckling:

"I eat these trees, by God."

+

Squirrels rain hickory hulls
 through the damp branches.

I slip through the dawn mist,
 silent over the wet leaves.

Open sights draw a straight line:
 I feed on squirrel fed on hickory.

*

Early each spring thousands snake
 up Route Two-fifty to Monterey.
 Maple Sugar Festival time
 is big business. At the only hotel
 I eat a rainbow trout in the warmth
 of a wood-heater. At the cash register
 I reach for a bag of maple candy.
 "You visitors eat all our maple up,"
 the woman says. "We'd starve if you didn't."

*

Only fourteen,
 I stumbled through the clay ruts
 at Marcus Cox's sawmill,
 helping the sawyers load
 two thousand board feet of oak
 onto the flatbed truck.
 Straining, I swore at the splinters
 in my hands, at the bruised thumbs
 to come, the sweat; I swore
 at my father writing the check
 and saying that a bigger barn
 meant more work, more
 cattle, and more on the table.

The boards have long since grayed:
 feeding my father's cattle,
 I break open the second bale,
 cursing the hay for its sandbriars.
 Captive in a stall to himself,
 a steer curses briars
 the best he can, awaiting
 the slaughter.

*

. . . probably oak, but so stained
 by the years' hard soles and bare heels
 that I can recognize only this:

as much as a fence, a forest, a barn,
 or a squirrel, a steer, a bag of candy,
 it limits a space; it sustains me, this floor.