

## **ABSTRACT**

CROSS, SAMUEL HAROLD. *The Air Around a Dead Man*. (Under the direction of John Balaban.)

*The Air Around a Dead Man* is a collection of poetry.

**THE AIR AROUND A DEAD MAN**

by  
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## **Biography**

Samuel Cross grew up in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. He always dreamed of studying the creatures of the sea.

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## **Back at William Duffy's Farm**

The moon drops one or two feathers into the field,  
and now looks naked  
above the distant line of frayed pinetops.

The fallow clods say nothing,  
over and over; they are in their place,  
hiding grubs from our heavenly bodies.

And I'm alone, out  
in the sheer, clammy breath of the Piedmont,  
trying to milk the family farm  
for a few words worth saying.

## **Last Word**

To say something would have been  
soft. A cloud curved between  
the moon and nothing in particular.  
A tree dripped alone there.  
I'd seen the stars bruise the sky  
with their worthless blue slag,

but I'd never seen her cry;  
I'd never seen her ruined, bent  
over a wine glass in the breath-  
less lamplight. Some dog clicked  
his claws along the pavement, some  
bird flittered around in the tree

there, and I left. My tongue  
couldn't make sense of the sound  
in my throat. It was the red-  
hot blast of a train whistle  
in the vacuous, ink ocean  
of space. I couldn't kiss her  
goodbye.

## Letter From the Front Lines

Oh Dazy,  
last night I saw you shin up  
an icy trunk and sing spring into full flutter.  
I lied for hours without moving a lip  
and spilled the ink like a squid  
over clean spreads of buttercups and bright fescue.  
It all left in a baby's breath,  
and I was sipping coffee, reading the Times,  
when my black alarm clock crowed. A thousand  
people bled to death last night,  
while I was dreaming. Most of them were caught,  
front-page, in a wrecked passenger train. You know,  
you've probably heard before, this world  
is not for tender feet or growing bones;  
this world is where the wood hits flame,  
and what doesn't vanish,  
chars. But, Dazy,  
no song can be quite smothered,  
and if you were serious last night,  
under covers, I'll hose the spiders out  
of that empty cradle in the attic.  
I've always wanted to see myself  
on television--let alone in person.  
I can't be entirely delusional  
here. My parents were good Christians,  
kept their hands in the dirt. They knew  
that trains derail, clocks lose time,  
God can be a real goldbricker.  
But Dazy,

the answer seems apparent:  
when I see the shit in my backyard,  
the rotten food along my counter,  
dead mice behind the baseboards—  
all I've got is fertilizer. We've got  
to get back together, so we can grow  
a plant.

## **The Air Around a Dead Man**

He dreamt of the impossibly purple gown  
she had filled out that morning,  
while the bluebirds twittered in their rose limbs  
and lost the words they'd meant to sing her,  
while the clouds peeled back  
and dove behind a line of green pushpins  
he had first mistaken for a forest.  
He dreamt of her crescent  
eyes, suspended in the energy  
of some awful Aunt-Sally  
they'd both been burning nearly  
nine months now. A lanolin shock  
of hair smothered the right side  
of her mouth. There were caterpillars  
in his stomach when the moment melted,  
when the bluebirds shot from their wild rose,  
when the clouds bobbed back above the trees  
and strangled the life from the sun.

## **In the Failing Eyes of the Slain Knight**

*“Mony a one for him makes mane,  
But nane sall ken whar he is gane,”  
from “The Twa Corbies,” an ancient Scottish ballad.*

The crows cackle from their coal scissors.  
They’re spilling figs in the crab grass.

The red sugar and blue milk  
above the trees bleed down

their iridescent feathering. They’re caged  
in the fractal geometry of blossoming limbs,

panting between hot fingers of sunlight.  
They’ve hatched a plan for my last breath.

They’re going to make it ugly.

### **Something For the Boys (In Oakwood Cemetery)**

At the height of Autumn, we hit the boneyard,  
and I told her not to wear that skirt,

and I told her no one likes a tease,  
least of all the dead.

And it was cold, for Christ's sake,  
her lips were turning purple,

her legs were white as wedding cake,  
and her nose was wet and red.

She slapped me and cocked her eye,  
and I surrendered beneath my breath.

She tramped away on high heels  
into the field of blank, granite tablets,

begging the Army of the Unknown Dead  
to run their wormy sockets

right up her lily thighs.

## **Crosswalk Loverboy**

The leaves are eating me  
up inside whenever  
they whisper your

name—  
on the sidewalk,  
I shudder.

My scalloped fingernails  
dig for the pits of my pockets and  
scoop lint.

The light  
changes.  
Oh no,

I had my heart  
set on blue.

## **Sundown at a Public Pool**

Mosquitoes stick their thin syringes in  
whatever's warm and breathing. Silent men  
meander through the chirping afternoon.  
Winter gouged the sidewalk, and summer's strewn  
the rocky guts into the grass. The school  
across the street sits hollow. In the pool.,  
I'm swimming backward, watching cirri snail  
over the reddened sky. The water's stale,  
and below its dimpled skin, the city's just  
a dull, bluish grumbling. Black fence spires rust  
together in a rectangle, closing off  
the deck. I'm swimming sideways in the trough  
that leads into the deep end. An easy dime  
is caked in slime beside the filter. The climb  
down isn't worth ten cents today. Tonight,  
the brass church bells will ricochet and fight  
down every empty street, and I'll be home,  
asleep. The pool will shiver while the chrome  
exhausts cough and follow one another. The moon  
will wander the dirty clouds—a gold balloon  
praying for a pin.

## **The City's Just a Stack of Windows**

It's dark, but I can see  
a blue Buick Skylark tucked between  
limbless trees,  
two sweaty squirrels  
squirming in the front seat.  
A vulture in red rags  
kicks rocks into the street,  
and the clouds keep swimming.  
There's a dog in the dumpster  
laughing himself to sleep,  
  
and I'm the second-story mummy,  
taking my whiskey behind the curtains.

## **The Jolly Toper**

He only spoke in Slug,  
every word drooled  
from pink, pencil lips.

The bar was painted  
with his ashes; it was wrapped  
around his waist; he was lost  
in its perfume. Dim light peeled  
out of sockets in the ceiling,  
and somewhere, a door  
wheezed open, coughed closed.

Shadows chewed the fat  
inside his ears, and sung  
him to the edge of sleep,  
where, with ecstatic clarity,  
he saw himself,  
for the first and only time, right  
where he belonged.

## One Madman to Another

*“I went straight to the boudoir. She was sitting before her mirror, and on seeing me she leapt to her feet and retreated. I didn’t tell her I was the king of Spain.”*

--Askenty Ivanovich in Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman”

Before the coronation comes,  
Gogol, let’s gallop out  
with a tuft of yellow flowers  
and a dog-eared paper crown.

I bet our Sophie’s bathing  
with soap the shape of scallops.  
The spilling suds reflect her face  
a million tiny times. Besides,

it’s a shower of a sunset  
with white branches growing pink.  
Worms twist in green blades,  
and the crows are thawing out.

And, God! Just look at us.  
Our palace rots beneath our feet.  
The bathroom walls are bloody red,  
and neither one of us can sleep.

It isn’t right that any self-  
respecting mammal should survive  
for two weeks of every month  
on chicken broth and coffee.

So, here's your hat. Hitch the mule.  
Let's toss the briefcase in a ditch;  
it's one way of telling fate  
to go unravel someone else.

I bet by now she's drying off,  
and slipping in silk slippers.  
If we really run we could wait  
between the sheets for her goodnight.

### **Sixty-Some-Odd Years Ago**

The Arizona was made of popsicle sticks  
washed in red, white, and gray acrylic  
that bled on to a square of cerulean  
foam-board labeled, "Pacific Ocean."

Japanese hornets were impaled  
a hundred times across a half dome  
of papier-mâché. A few swarmed  
the deck of the Arizona and left it  
in anaphylactic shock. Green army men  
poured over paperclip railings  
and found themselves flailing  
amid crowns of black dorsal fins.

Plastic body parts were splashed  
with mercurochrome and scattered  
about the harbor. A circle of yellow  
construction paper hedged by an amber  
crust of mucilage hung  
just above the water. It was a clear day,  
and Roosevelt barked in a loop  
from a portable cassette player  
taped under the table. Oh,  
the infamy of it all.

## Venus Drowned

I sawed the spine of a dead mullet  
until its head became a spilt cup  
of scarlet, sopping into the splinters  
of the cutting board. The moon  
was a rotten orange, skulking in dirty clouds.

I watched Pop pull in a purple shark  
with a hook through its eye. He flipped it  
to the gulls that picnicked in the shadows.

I cast my line into the rippled ink,  
and waited for a rockfish

until the constellations dissolved  
into the first gray shedding of the sun,  
and the sand was strewn with empty shark skins.

I gave up and went to reel my rod, when  
a dead loggerhead,  
licked clean to the bone-white eyesockets,  
beached at my ankles.

Gulls flapped up laughing  
and looking for soft spots; a crab shuffled  
and clapped white claws; the moon  
was a plucked eye rolling into the dunes;

and we cut the lines;  
we walked away from that  
empty shell.

## **The Annunciation**

*"Thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee:  
blessed art thou among women." Luke 1:28*

When lightning struck  
between her legs,  
she lost her faith  
in Nothing. She grew an extra  
pair of eyes inside and wept  
until her skin stuck  
to the sheets. It seemed  
the sun no longer spun  
around the Earth, and all  
the clocks were striking zero.  
She went to close her window.

From the shadow of a palm,  
an angel with a mealy mouth told her  
all about her body, told her  
fear was just a phase, told her  
that her prayers were answered.

His wings shuddered  
in the dying moonlight,  
and he vanished.

When the sun began to spin  
again, she left for the hill-country of Judah,  
Judah meaning, "Thank God."

## The Flood

It's a shame I can't remember anymore  
how He landed Me  
in Silver Heights among those tender beds of blue  
irises the peach brick steps  
the thirsty nests of spiders buried  
in the hay among all  
the other animals' unthinking tongues  
forever stabbing at the Trough the Ruby  
instrumentation of every sunset  
never failed to escape me There

Before long it was hard  
to know what any one Word meant  
I did know that I was not Me  
but now married to the Maker  
through His warped kitchen panes  
the fluorescent hills palpitated  
and the clouds gave bad milk my brain began  
to wrench There like a stuck carp  
in a bed of chattering ice cubes It's a shame  
I can't remember anymore

how often I'd been called to scrub His tiled floors  
with ammonia to soak the smoke  
from His living room curtains to learn  
to cook His favorite casseroles I could not  
explain the dimensions of His three-throated Voice  
Resounding from the running rose

petals from the trimmed purple hedge  
from the worn timber that staked out His pastures  
in the fading light the Children  
looked mysterious they had my eyes  
but never knew what I was seeing  
There we sat listening to radio static  
and arranging plastic Moon-men in log cabins  
the girl and I would read Mademoiselle cover-to-cover  
sometimes and I think that made Him happy  
to see us together by the fireplace  
It's a shame I can't remember anymore

Outside diseased rainbows shivered  
in puddles left by the mammoth  
engines He had wrenched and saddled  
and sent coughing along the blue stretch  
of crushed granite leading into town  
on the first day They came for Me  
He almost cried There in the driveway  
while I was led into the White Wagon  
quietly the stainless rooster swiveled  
on our roof's peak the wind leapt  
and died It's a shame I can't  
remember anymore

how the Ghosts hovered  
about the steel tables at once  
arrayed with knives and little hacksaws  
they electrified my toes and left me in the dark  
There after some time I no longer noticed

them and grew very fond of the smell  
of sweat and parafin every morning  
I wore my lipstick to the operating room

in the same White Wagon  
the Ghosts mailed me back to Silver Heights brainless  
to post my diary on the refrigerator  
and nail-in the bed sheets their Medicine  
bottles let my eyes well up  
until I could fill a tub with my own salt  
water I felt fishy in the moonlight  
and then the Children found Me at the bottom  
of the Trough blowing bubbles through the wrinkled  
moonbeams quietly they'd never seen me  
naked but right There they knew  
I'd be gone again in the back  
of that sputtering White Wagon He pulled  
Me up from the Trough my red hair  
slick with algae It's a shame  
I can't remember  
anymore

*for my grandmother, Ruby Burkhart Tussey*

## **Back At the Old Farm**

A puzzle of sun pelts the lawn  
Like porcelain shards, the white afternoon  
Shimmers in the bean-pods.

A dead calf has made his bed  
Of dry mud and let the buzzards  
Peel him wide open

So all of August might see  
His scarlet wiring, the bleached  
Bars of his ribcage.

Wasps nest in the eaves  
Of the farmhouse, and along  
The chimney's painted-brick trunk.

Red clouds hunt  
Above the wind-ripped pine  
Limbs that fence the horizon.

Spiders in a rusted barrel  
Weave vines from dust and listen  
For a scream in the shadow.

No one is home, and the coughing  
Skeleton in the front window  
Prefers it that way.

## **Cabin Fever (In the Land of a Thousand Dances)**

It's snowing down Old

Kentucky, and I

wanna do the Duck,

I wanna Fly.

Mum and Dead are eye-deep

in some snowy rerun.

Mum's got the cat's tongue

lapping her knuckles.

Dead's beard sleeps on his shirt.

He thinks he's somewhere

else. I'm on our red

bathroom tile trying to remember

the Boney Maroney,

trying to remember

the Jerk.

If it's been five minutes,

it's been millennia since

the three of us said more

than a sentence that mattered.

The phone lines are all ice.

I would die for a dial tone—

or a little Wilson Pickett—

because it's hard to hum alone,

but I only get along

with the mirror—

and this red bathroom tile,

so slick I can

Shing-a-ling,

I can Boog-a-loo.

### **Family of Three**

I have one address, something like a glacier  
of brown, purple, and red brick spilt  
across wilted crab grass. Once,  
we watched a comet from a crimped  
coat-hanger antenna. Now, there are black  
holes in my yard; dead myrtles dry  
by the curb, waiting for garbage men. Buzzards  
chuckle and make their hungry rounds. They know  
Dad's got cancer. Of course, Mom's on the moon,  
dreaming of curtain rods and Marlon Brando.  
Under velvet constellations, the cat  
bats at baby birds still dressed in yolk.

Going home is the most advanced form  
of space travel, and God, I can't do it.

## **The Lounging Seasons**

Summer descends like a warm spider. I'm couched  
in my corner, head like an empty bucket, drinking  
Coke because I can't afford my water  
bill. Outdoors is nothing special: the kids squat  
in cool playpens with their pudding lips. Their friendless  
mothers grope themselves in the shade. Most men  
are home, hidden behind sheds, taking pot-  
shots at caterpillar cocoons. Hunks-of-junk  
snake around steeples and burger joints  
in muffled cacophony. From Winter to Spring, the deer  
eat bark and fuck beneath the ones and zeros  
that flutter in the phone lines. No one  
ever remembers Christmas, but later the sky drips  
and opens the rosebuds like a lit Menorah.

## **Christmas Eve In the Mirror**

Listening for the Lord's feet  
to crush the snow,  
as the clouds meet  
and mull about the glistening  
mouth of Heaven—

Oh, Happy Birthday,  
Lost Cause.

Our dormant tulip tree  
has its crooked antennae  
turned up to You. The three  
men on our mantle vie  
for the attention of  
Your infant eyes. Open up.

Surprise!

We had a few empty balloons  
in the cabinet above the microwave,  
and all afternoon I had to slave—

Oh. This is no surprise  
at all, is it?

I'm talking to myself.

## **Our Trashcan Is Full (And You Look Confused)**

The eggshells on top are an embarrassment.  
Your omelet was cold, and now you're reminded.

Those aren't my cigarettes.

I liked the cookies,  
of course,  
but I wasn't hungry,  
and we were out of plastic bags.

The cat killed that mole.

It's okay: I have plenty of pictures of my mother.

I told you those aren't my cigarettes.

Don't you think I've out grown the rubber snake?

That version of the Bible  
is meant for high-school dropouts.

That razor was for my face,  
not my wrists.

Seriously,  
I've stopped smoking.

## **Open Letter to a Dachshund**

Attn. Mr. Pickles:

I say to you now, you dog:  
the holes you dig will not get you  
any closer to China. Further,  
the grubs you grab within said holes  
have died inside, long before  
your sharp incisors bite their hulls.

Do not be surprised: the same applies  
to the frogs you've been trying to kiss.  
Their soft skin and opal eyes  
have been known to inflame your shameless loins.  
I've seen you lope and drool and whine  
in pursuit of some unholy coupling.

In fact, the neighbors caught you on tape.  
I was mortified to see you ruined  
by a hot, unwavering cloud of carnal  
lust for some muddy amphibian.  
It was undignified.

A tip: control  
yourself. The world is not your oyster,  
and the pound is now on speed dial.

For the Last Time,

Master Cross

## **Family Portrait**

Fingers curled around her neck  
like caterpillars in corn. Another hand slid  
around a revolver. The kid behind the door  
on the left licked his lips at the magazines  
under the bed. She stared  
into the wall. A puppet on television shrieked,  
“LET’S COUNT BACKWARD!

CINCO!

CUATRO!

TRES!

DOS!

UNO!”

Six small eyes,  
one smile,  
flash.

## **How I Learned to Add**

The green freckled pond-  
face sprinkled with water spiders  
rippled for no reason,  
if I watched it for too long through the dusty window.  
The floor-planks hid small, scratching feet.  
Grandma never mentioned  
the prescription bottles on the mantle,  
or the family portrait stuck to the wall  
above. She just sang Hank Williams  
and played accordion. For Christmas,  
she gave me a robot  
wrapped in a blue bow.  
Its nose blinked when something added up  
just right.

## **The Heart Does Not Forget**

This heart is a bloody imbroglio  
I've absently tied to my shirt-cuff.  
I wear it here for the red trail  
it spatters behind my boot-heel.

I'm never lost.

The idea came from my father  
who said I had no direction.  
Mother confirmed this and added  
that I ought to invest in a compass.

"I'll find a way,"

I said and noticed our green front lawn  
and all the green lawns beside us,  
and I thought of every green thing  
breathing under the yellow sun--

I should leave my trail in red,

it seemed, the color complement.  
Nothing bloody is ever forgotten  
in a neat, green and yellow world.  
Days later, I found this heart,

and stitched it to my cuff.

My parents have never forgiven  
the red mess I made of their carpet.  
Of course, at times, I think they forget,  
and with pointed smiles, they tell me  
  
they know exactly where I've been.

## **A Good Game**

I used to be a kid with visions.  
Dust spattered and defined the stairs  
to Heaven through the ceiling  
of my bedroom. God was always  
trying to pull me up there  
at night, and I didn't want to go.  
That was just cheating.  
I was five,  
and in the park, Mom and I  
would laugh like gulls  
at the ducks quack-quacking in lines  
along the bluish lake's edge,  
the squirrels chit-chattering  
from their twiggy nests,  
the chipmunks scuttling silently  
into the sneeze of the pine straw.  
Hissing asphalt snaked beneath  
the station wagon, and we never  
kept up with where it was going  
because the game was to watch  
it vanish, like every game we were playing  
then. My brother, the law-man,  
and I, the incontinent desperado.  
He'd hunt me down and string me up  
from the clothesline, and even  
in kindergarten, I knew how to die quietly.  
The blood that trickled from my nose  
was a little cold and tasted like vitamins.

I had it coming  
in the weakening sun, when I pointed the gun  
at my brother, just to hear the trigger click,  
and laughed until I fell out of the tree--  
"Now kill me!  
Let's play a good game,  
like where you die."

### **A Bright Day, With Birds**

We sat in fold-up chairs, eating cupcakes  
at my grandfather's funeral.

His beard was stiffer than his fingers.

My grandma wore pink flowers.

Her hair was black,  
like when they'd married.

Starlings smiled from the oak trees,  
and I remembered hearing once  
that they sometimes ate their dead  
like starving sailors. I thought  
about my grandfather cooked up  
with vegetables and beef broth.  
I considered life as a worm  
in a graveyard. The sky was blue  
with white ripples. The chairs were orange.

My uncle made the violin's bow  
dig, lift, and then lower;  
the marigolds had reverently sprang  
to attention. I could hear  
the cogs of a clock click.  
The moon was half full  
and high at exactly 3 p.m.

## **Nothing Changes but the Weather**

The water slid  
a jeweled tongue  
between the black sand  
and dim, aluminum stars.

Gulls roosted  
behind the dunes  
like shopping carts  
after-hours.

A few clouds came in  
bleeding.  
I saw more just drown  
out in the dark.

And it was over  
before a bell shakes a steeple.  
The sun and tide  
slithered in  
with what was left.

A million slivered clamshells  
stung my ears from the surf  
in a pulsing dirge that echoed  
from the emerald bilge below.

## **Room at the Inn**

I may have passed more manger scenes  
than street signs or broken bottles, and  
sometimes, a certain event doesn't die;  
it's just briefly submerged. Down  
below, it breeds alone, and blossoms,  
again, in a billion shades of cheap and  
chipped latex. Hardly alive,  
my '82 Gillig Phantom lumbers  
up the Indiana blacktop on bald tires.  
There's no sun to show me sky, and  
I think Abe Lincoln grew up near  
here, but there are no lights on now—  
just black trucks that howl with loads  
of caged chickens. Down-shifting,  
I've never felt so inarticulate,  
muttering with a prostitute on the CB,  
but she knows this seat is cold,  
and where we can find a room  
with a warm radiator. I'll be  
her Buffalo Bill, behind some plaid  
curtains, with clipped toenails  
and an empty case of beer;  
she'll be easy as leaves to Fall  
and I can hear the radiator release  
as my eyes shut. Sometimes  
a certain event is dead before  
you think to turn off the TV  
or grab a glass of water.

## **The Colors Outside**

### I. The Ocean

Splashing blond and blue,  
the whole sky is blue and white.  
With water, the sand is blond  
and stuck in my toes. The sun  
is blond and so heavy  
with lemonade and firecrackers,  
it's going to fall out of the blue.  
Before dark, I left a white  
pail on the dune  
to catch the sun-drops  
before they're all gone.

### II. The Cemetery

Thoroughly smug, and still  
as a dusty mason jar,  
the stones turn from gray  
to darker gray in the little mist.  
An assembly of supplicant palms  
and wet, black silk  
wind from left to center  
in the yard,  
which is full of all the gray  
rectangles and usually empty.  
Tea and toast will be served  
in the fellowship hall.

### III. The Body

Blonde and balanced above,  
how is her hair still parted?  
This afternoon drips in  
yellow beneath the curtains.  
The floorboards creak,  
and death doesn't seem bad,  
but the dying itself  
can't be fun, and it's the first  
and last thing on our mind,  
as we wash it all down  
with cold plums and cigarettes.

### IV. The Ocean (by Moonlight)

Everyone's a lunatic,  
gnashing teeth on dark sand,  
maddened by beauty,  
and dying to get at the heart  
of something. The moon  
bobs like a tired drunk  
on the old ocean,  
which has lost its color  
and doesn't much care  
where it went. her hair  
is no longer in my head;  
the blonde, washed away  
along with all the blue  
and white and gray.



## **Retired to the Sea**

The ocean was nice and I  
neverminded it  
when the tattered clouds  
swallowed my sun.  
Most days I don't remember,  
but I can feel them all  
hiding in my head  
like quiet crickets in wet straw.  
It's okay. I'm not cold  
in the sun; I'm not warm  
in the wind. I've seen  
fish bigger than me  
with mouths like the new moon  
gulping nothing. Down here  
they can trap anything  
with the right bait.

## On Reading Charlie Darwin

I like it  
here, among the serene drapery  
of my one window,  
still  
as a pickled egg,  
watching the clouds wriggle themselves  
loose  
like baby teeth. It's good  
to finally get high,  
and take-in the bird-brains  
trying to outwit the bug-brains,  
the inbred dandelions seeds  
weeping  
over the ditch grass,  
the speckled mushroom shafts  
suckling  
the darkest dirt. At times,  
I want to be an animal again,  
trembling  
on the jagged lip  
of some immeasurable jungle,  
wondering  
when I'll be eaten.

## **Senseless City Lights**

It's Saturday night on Sunday Street.

The old alien with shrunken skin  
has passed out in the garbage.

Smells like fruit cake.

The bunnies swish gold  
necklaces between bright buttons  
and satin bras. Every wolf wears  
his head on a swivel,  
and his hand in his pocket.

Smells like dog shit.

Streetlamps crane over the blacktop  
to dump dim orange across parked cars,  
and glass slivers glitter the gutter.

A vulture plucks Lemon's "Black Snake Moan"  
on the corner, collecting quarters  
to help himself sleep. In the park,  
hyenas with hungry lips pick apart  
a torn purse. Smells like lilies,  
and the constellations drip down  
their canvass, as if the dome of heaven  
had been slurred into existence.

## **Cold Black Snake**

I'd spent the day licking air  
and whipping leaves, hunting  
something soft to swallow. Fall  
had choked the trees until they dried  
up and shucked their scales  
across my back. And then, I saw  
some fur with two small, pink eyes  
sink into a dirty pit.

I thought I'd slip in to say hello,  
and we'd wind down the afternoon  
together. She was quick,  
but I was sharp, and soon enough,  
I lay alone. For 3 cold months,  
I prayed for frogs  
and rats to rain on men.

### **Just Before I Left Indianapolis**

Rocks flew from the end of my shoes  
to slap the black,  
turpentine telephone poles.

The anemic afternoon went gold and glossed  
the gleaming road before me.

Spiders perched in threaded pockets  
among azalea twigs, and I was home.

Throwing the back-gate latch,  
I found my brown dog dead,  
shot behind the ear.

He smelled like wet hair, and rubies  
beaded his buckled neck.

I was knocked off-  
kilter, in a flash of silent filmstrip  
the red blades bent reverent  
drips to the dirt.

Indianapolis fell over my shoulder  
like a spent popsicle stick;  
its sirens bayed in circles  
above burning neon slums. I smoked,  
thinking of a plastic bag  
and a shovel in the shed.

Gold air gave way to bronze  
before I calmed enough to see the down  
beaten about my yard  
like shards of a shattered cloud.  
And the ducks next door

marched beak-to-back  
like bleached goblins in parade,  
all barking together:  
they couldn't keep the secret.  
A long gun slouched  
by the screen door. I knew  
their orange toes had pulled the trigger--  
or had help from On-High.

I tucked my brown dog away  
near some hungry mushrooms.

When the sun swung back  
around, I wrapped an arrow  
in rags that dripped with kerosene.  
I shot flames and splintered  
an empty window next door.  
The ducks just bobbed,  
dumb as styrofoam, on dirty water,  
while orange flames infected the house. I smoked  
with a bowed back, and staggered  
down the road to school.

## **Fell Asleep Watching *Animal Planet***

She's got me

snarling, in the vacuum beneath the bedsheets,  
with a glowing coat-hanger

that sneezes

when it finds my ear, and my mind's now dashed  
and dripping from my nose:

I'm a splintered turtle,

a whale spewing red salt

water, a scorched vine.

God, this is not

your usual doctor-patient relationship

(heavy on the pill)

that blankets the twinkling guts

*of Good Housekeeping:*

I'm jackknifed

in the taxidermy and ruined pillars of my museum

mind, where, now, the emperor

penguin is unzipped by the razor-

slick claws of the leopard seal,

fire ants spill from elephant trunks to scorch

the worm-ridden reaches

of some Sunday-school heaven.

And the dinosaur skeletons dance

with my new bride and soon-to-be

walrus. She's never been more firm, now,

as she barks at our babies

about bowing their heads

and thanking the Lord for our meal.

## **I Scribbled This Lake in Science Class**

And insects ran like barefoot  
pickpockets in the lemon  
and vermilion leaves around. Blue-  
jays and starlings sat in the good seats  
to watch us ducking in the porcelain  
ripples of the water's teacup  
skin. Your eyes were diamond-studded,  
and we both had simple, clean smiles.

An asteroid the size of Alaska  
flipped toward us through the vacuum  
above. So far away, it was just  
a pencil's dot below a cream cloud.

## **With Sirens in the Distance**

My piebald mutt props  
on two paws  
and beams at the moon  
before he belts  
his operatic brainwaves  
into the periwinkle  
fog of Creation.

## **Planting the Hound of Hell**

I chained the mongrel to a sticky pine  
somewhere in my cerebellum. Blades  
of grass whipped like a serpent's tongue;  
black snowflakes peppered the scarlet sod.

There's a certain way to snap a spine  
that's as silent as when someone prays.  
Like this, I bent the mongrel's back among  
the hungry beetles and worms of God.

Hallelujah. The world went blue,  
and the main attraction at the zoo:  
a tuft of poppies in a pile of bones  
with saffron beams skating through.

## The Imperial Floorshow

*"Go on, tell me some more about that time  
when you were Queen of the Veiled Prophets' Ball,"  
Max Cady (played by Robert Mitchum) in Cape Fear (1962).*

When she was Queen of the Veiled Prophets' Ball  
her every step and stall

dressed-down the past.

Her eyes fell asleep in the news of next week;  
she swung to the beat of a bass-tom.

And the jelly-headed

men were stuck to their seats, drinking all  
the good wine,

smitten, each cast

with two buggering eyes and a sniveling beak,  
and a crummy suit

*the wife* had paid for on credit.

She wed her feet to the checkered tile,

candlelight

bleeding into the shadows.

The drum pawed

at her hips,

she let the fall like a feather. Outside, the night

stared sourly through the windows, as if to call

her out, into the cold,

where it might get a finger

on her, where it might

sink into her skin and linger

until daylight.

## Milt Jackson on Vibraphone

Not to brag

about this scag

but She's THE

distilled pan-

demonic brain stem

of Jeepers Creepers—cut and crossed

with one solid

speck

swept

from the filigreed intestines

of the Sphinx.

She'll spin white satin

slicker than snake-teeth

across every calico canyon

in your skull

until your pupils

spill pitch

and swamp the irises,

until your spine slithers

around your ribs, rhapsodic,

and resurrects every dead cell

in your toenails—

for three days, you'll just smirk,

sloe-eyed,

toothless,

pegged

to the white wall

of a white room

with Her,  
in a crushed velvet frame,  
while Dizzy and the Bird  
tunnel through  
Hallelujah on hi-fi  
atop the rockets and fuzz  
of Milt Jackson on vibraphone.

You'll be  
clean-headed, disembodied,  
bled dry, dissolved—  
and She'll die like a diamond  
crushed.

Of course, right

here you will remember  
you're alive. Here your heart  
will bruise your ribs. Here the black  
responds to white. Here your eyes  
will open lids on the plain  
paper world that's twice as simple  
since you left, and everything  
is warmer than before—and you  
bleed a bit below the wrist.