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## Hoarfrost

Mae Lynn Wallker  
*Old Dominion University*

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HOARFROST

by

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B.A. August 1994, Old Dominion University

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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## ABSTRACT

### HOARFROST.

Mae Lynn Walker  
Old Dominion University, 1997  
Director: Dr. Scott Cairns

Many of the poems in this collection reflect an engagement with an inherited literary tradition of ancient Greek, Latin, and Hebraic mythologies. The first section, entitled "Flint," deals with the ancient text of the Bible and with biblical and religious landscapes. The second section, "The Seven," based on Aeschylus' The Seven Against Thebes, explores the possibilities of the reinterpretation and elaboration of an ancient story in a contemporary context. While "The Seven" literally refers to the seven gates at Thebes, the number is random, and does in fact represent an infinite number of stories. The penultimate section, "Hoarfrost," explores the voices of women in both contemporary and mythological landscapes. Finally, "Scapes" is a section that confronts landscape in terms of attachment to place. According to traditions of poetics, many of the pieces are written in either blank verse or in some other measured form. All of the poems in Hoarfrost attend the details of image, voice, and music.

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## FLINT

*Nil posse creari de nilo.*  
*(Nothing can be created from nothing.)*  
—Lucretius

## Zipporah

*At a night encampment on the way,  
the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him.  
So Zipporah took a flint and cut off  
her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it,  
saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood  
to me!" And when He let him alone, she added,  
"A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."  
—Exodus 4.24 - 4.26*

Although he helped to gather up  
their things, her husband had begun  
the day without a word. He did

not speak to her as they set out  
along the desert trail. He'd brought  
a walking stick, but held it in

his arms as though it might have been  
a loaf of bread. She wanted talk  
about the wind that pelted them

with sand. She wants to ask about  
their distance from the camp ahead.  
Instead Zipporah bit the grains

of sand she trapped between her lips  
as if they were imperfect words  
and she could crush them with her teeth.

All day she ate imperfect words—  
by nightfall she was full of them  
and spit them out when God appeared.

# A Sailor Remembers Jonah

*The men said to one another, "Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.*

—Jonah 1.7

The crew stood up on deck and watched  
as Jonah thrashed within the waves.  
We saw him reeling in the darkness when

the monstrous fish that swallowed him  
came near. I spoke to Jonah once  
when he was still on board with us—

it seemed he carried burdens, words  
that came as whispers late at night,  
like, *Go at once to Nineveh.*

The fish's bowels were papered red  
with moist and heaving walls—or so  
I'm able to envision it.

A stomach weighted with debris  
is not unlike a person cursed  
with troubles that he hopes will pass

into perhaps the bloodstream, then  
the void that follows. Certainly  
no man escapes unlikeliness—

and such was Jonah's lot in flight  
from order when the whale appeared  
before him and drew back its jaws.



Requiem: An Observer Considers the Rough Passage

Head bowed, foot bound and unaware  
the young god parted flesh as though He were  
an iron-forged and driven spike  
bursting from His own skin,  
passing through air then flesh, then out.  
There was another man, the actual spike-driver  
who did not strain  
with the force it took to smash the starfish  
bones of hands now broken and loosening  
their grasp on the same air they were slipping into.  
There is a certain delicacy required of such passage.  
Exactly the pain is left—feels like a human  
body, broken flesh trembling like the surface  
of water broken by rough wind as it's sloughed off.  
I like to have things both ways.  
I like to think He traveled the surface of water,  
looked uneasily into the lights sparking  
quick peaks, for faces strange with grief.  
I like to think the journey was slow,  
but there are other considerations—the wreckage  
had been wind-swift, and so much chased after.

Jerusalem. Flower from His Grave

Above the flower, larger, in black ink  
and lightly smeared, the declaration that  
the flower had been cultivated at

His tomb, and not as was more likely true,  
a different lot within Jerusalem  
where goats were fattening upon the weeds

surrounding it. The cemetery grounds  
were tended though the marble cracked.  
Beside the iron gates a marketplace

had swelled with souvenirs on metal shop  
displays that turned and caught the light. The smells  
of frenzied afternoons, the close, dank sweat

appealed to those who bought. And this  
is where I measured things to be  
exactly as they ought to be. On one

display I found this token of His death—  
the flower pressed within a card,  
its edges glued—a body in white sheets.

## The Bomb Canyon

If I were going to leap in air  
I'd do it where the road between  
the cities forks—with Mecca north

and Jeddah west. I'd let this earth  
revolve away and land inside  
a house where bowls of figs unfold

on tables set for company,  
and apples dry on lighted stoops.  
I'd notice that all day the birds

were landing in the tree outside  
the kitchen window—shadows beat  
against the walls as if they were the ghosts

of women trapped inside this room.  
But then the earth won't spin away.  
In cotton thin as fronds from palms

the people squat alongside roads.  
The camels kneel into the backs  
of flatbed pickup trucks—all day

they stare into the traffic close  
behind, and blink at what they see.  
And maybe they are used to guns—

the guns are never holstered here.  
The soldiers guard the many gates  
with safeties always off. A group

of Western girls has gathered at  
a gate in nothing but bikini suits.  
The guards were trained to treat these girls

indifferently though it is hard.  
The people on the sidewalks start to rise,  
and shouting to the girls—the air

is rising as the people do.  
The guard is angered quickly in  
the rising air and joins in with

the crowd in shouting *whore!* in Arabic.  
because he does not know what else to do.  
He calls them other names as well.

The girls just laugh at all of them,  
their disregard for what they do  
not understand apparent in the air.

Unsure of who to shoot—the crowd  
advancing slowly or the girls?  
He shakes the gun above his head

in fury and confusion.  
Again the girls begin to laugh.  
They point at him in their strange way—

the center finger up. The guard  
is thinking that the girls should be  
engaged or married now, they're old enough.

Instead they linger at his gate  
in bathing suits no Saudi girl  
would ever own. Their legs—

an hour's worth of legs like these  
in Giza would be worth the pay.  
but here it's out of place and dangerous.

As well he's taken in their breasts.  
The soldier dreams of wealth. Within  
this sand-filled world it's difficult

to think of other things, and so it's gold.  
gold constantly, and legs. The girls  
are tired of their fun with Arab men

and move away. The men sink down  
again to sidewalks where they'll rest.  
The workers dig a shelter for the king

beside the high-rise where I live.  
The shelter is a canyon's width.  
So I imagine from my balcony

that Atlas has grown hungry from his load—  
and taken out a bite of earth.  
The canyon's deep enough into the sand

to fit all camels in the hole, and more.  
I think the camels should be saved—  
someone will have to take them out

of pickup trucks. The desert hedgehogs would  
do well, besides what choice is there?  
The radiation from the bombs

could kill them all. And what about  
red-bottomed monkeys in Taif,  
and those thin dogs that race the cars?

I hope a mosque or two will be in there,  
quasumi diamonds and King Fahd's bed  
which is the size of a pizzeria.

I hope they don't leave out the hospital,  
the staff, or the King's children—the daughters  
will be especially important in

this new underworld, and so the dress-  
makers will be included to ensure  
there is no shortage of material

to cover the women. Someone in charge  
of black dyes and an engineer to build  
an irrigation system for

an underground oasis—  
the whole city could be rebuilt under  
the city that's there now. This is the plan

as far as I can figure it.  
When construction began to slow down on  
the bomb-canyon because they had to keep

bringing in truckloads of foreign workers  
to pull quasumi diamonds out of it,  
the Minister of Foreign Affairs had

a vision of decline beneath  
the under-city. Gold became  
more important than water or

hospitals—he felt there would become  
a need to dig deeper, begin  
construction on another shelter and

he said that he could not foresee  
the end of this. He warned that we  
could eat the earth like apples.

The soldier on vacation visited  
Palamos where the movement of air  
was salient, as though dense with rain or

sand. The edges of the city  
were unloosing in the wind.  
The tonal margin between

the castanets and the emptiness that  
snapped in their wake was the slip of light from  
a doorway and the shadow uncast with

its unclosing—the tonic of  
sudden timbre as the performers plucked  
strings with their fingers, abandoning the

bow in free air. The fully dressed  
girls traveled from the mountains at Taif,  
where monkeys threw rocks at the car

in the dead heat of that day. They  
stopped at the intersection of  
Mecca and Jeddah, not sure wether to

continue, or in which direction to move  
after twisting the decline of  
the only road that stretched across

the country like a rubber band—  
connecting cities held all of us  
to its benthic deserts too tightly. In

Jeddah, I stood a long time at the sea,  
watching an Indian family splash  
in red-gold clothes. In the distance a tire

floated the swells and a bird perched  
on the tire, but I was still, thinking.  
I must have gone too far.

## Prayer

It is dawn in the desert.  
The cacti here are smooth.  
stand out like the moon  
on a grim night.  
A dark haired boy,  
wild with long hair.  
head bent forward,  
kneels on the shifting ground.  
His face touches the gnarls  
on the sides of both thumbs.

As I come closer, I hear him  
first as the wind,  
then chanting, the chanting  
low and loose, without breaking  
into solid rhythm.  
He sounds like ice cracking  
in a glass, water teeming  
over the cubes.

The wind moves swiftly,  
close to the ground.  
The tangled knot of a scrub  
bush rushes near to me.  
I see that it is as tall  
as I am. It dances in front of me,  
catching on an elbowed limb  
and twisting. For a moment  
it looks as though a rattler  
is there too, and then sand rushes over,  
the weed glides away.

I see my feet through the dust  
that settles there. I am  
becoming landscape, laudable  
and exemplary because of that.  
He is hymning and now rocking  
as though forced  
by gusts that swing  
and linger around the butte,  
wrapping like skin  
around something unaffected.



## THE SEVEN

*On the royal road to Thebes  
I had my luck, I met a lovely monster,  
and the story's this: I made the monster me.*  
—Stanley Kunitz

The First Gate to Thebes: Proitos

*Tydeus already thunders near the gate of Proitos...  
raving and gluttonous for battle,  
[he] bellows like a chimera in noonday clangor.  
—Seven Against Thebes*

The Shield of Tydeus

Diana at the crossways watched  
the fleet arrive at Ismenos.  
the seven disembark from ships  
among an entourage of men.

And while she stood directly in  
their path, Apollo's priest alone  
could see that Fate had blocked his way.  
He knelt before the goddess, kissed

each palm, and rising up, he backed away.  
The seven kings in pretense and in truth—  
all kneeling in a circle on the sand—  
were soldiers of old habit, trained from youth.

And when they knelt Diana disappeared  
into the forms of each of them  
and of the Ford at Ismenos.  
and of the city Thebes, and while

the dice was in the air she caught  
each toss and threw it down.  
And as the first king stood and held  
his shield above his head Diana met

an image of herself—above  
an iron moon and underneath  
a heaven filled with iron stars.

The Second Gate to Thebes: Elektra's Gate

*Kapaneus drew the lot for the gate of Elektra.  
A new breed of giant, larger than Tydeus,  
he boasts of something beyond the power of man...  
He bears, as his sign, a naked man  
armed with a flaming torch  
who is crying out in golden letters,  
"I shall burn the city."*

—Seven Against Thebes

Kapaneus, the Giant

Each one abiding her mirage,  
the shrine of Artemis so recently  
forsaken by its worshipers,  
the virgins stared into the flame

that had become the shore's landscape.  
The glimmer of the naked man  
who held a torch above his head  
had made them slowly back away.

but not without some measure  
of reluctant grace. The torch was fire  
enough—parading heat  
the burning distance from the ocean, through

the crowd that was transfixed within  
the vision of the flaxen man  
emblazoned on the giant's shield.  
Reflections of the giant pooled

in every sultry grain of sand  
and still the women did not flee.  
And though the giant's chest had barely cleared  
the dunes, his shadow inched along Elektra's gate.

The Third Gate to Thebes: Neistae

*The third lot leaped from the upturned  
brazen helmet in favor of Eteoklos,  
who is to hurl his squadron against the gate of Nēis.  
—Seven Against Thebes*

Eteoklos

In preparation all the soldiers fixed  
two iron whistles at the nostrils of  
his horse and then as though the Curse itself  
had been attached, the horses' breathing grew

more shrill and soon began to shriek.  
With voices newly formed the horses fell  
upon each other with their teeth.  
The army's din was heard inside

the gates as well as on the shore.  
In battle there are profits to be had—  
occasions both for weeping and for joy.  
An equal match of darkness stains

both sides—a symmetry as though  
a butterfly had taken up the Curse  
onto her wings in order that  
each powered canvas know the other side.

The Fourth Gate to Thebes: The Gate of Athena Onka

*Another, the fourth, stationed at the gate of Athena,  
comes forward with a shout, the huge  
aspect and frame of Hippomedon.*

*—Seven Against Thebes*

Hippomedon

The doorless entry faced the sea  
admitting shards of light off waves  
like fire along the ceiling. Now

Athena's priests were rushing in  
across the marble. Grains of sand  
were congregating in the hall.

The temple lay outside the city walls—  
the ocean close enough for those inside  
to hear the unremitting waves.

Conditions of existence will erode—  
the temple corners dull in wind,  
resolve to smoother edge.

The columns fashioned out of stone  
and neatly trimmed with ivy leaves  
are cracking at the temple's base.

A Maenad's song cut through the prayers.  
A warrior beckoned at the entranceway,  
held up an image of the Typhon's heads—

the hundred snakes with fire eyes.  
The congregation looked and did not move—  
they knelt upon a threshing floor.

The Fifth Gate to Thebes: The Northern Gate

*Stationed at the fifth, the Northern gate,  
beside the tomb of Amphion, of the race of Zeus.  
...the fair-faced whelp of Atalanta,  
his mother, huntress in the wilderness;  
he is a man with the beauty of a boy.  
—Seven Against Thebes*

The Maiden-faced Parthenopais Attacks

A wreath of hyacinth  
was laid across the marble lyre  
along the base of Amphion's  
eroding tomb—the scape where once

a king had played his lyre into the wind  
until the ocean waves caught up the song  
and thrashed a beat along the shore  
which caused the dunes to shift within

the dance, and falling from themselves  
the walls of Thebes had risen out of song.  
When Atalanta's son approached  
the Northern gate, confronted with the wreath,

with all his mother's grace  
he held the image of the Sphinx  
above his head as if she were  
no monster and as fair as he.

The Sixth Gate to Thebes: The Homoloid Gate

*I name the sixth.  
The most restrained in spirit and the best,  
the priest, strong Amphiaros,  
stationed at the Homoloid gate.  
—Seven Against Thebes*

Amphiaros, Priest of Apollo

The god appeared before his priest.  
His iron gown was hanging low  
about his feet, the sandals could

not hold his weight; his shoulders hunched  
beneath the smelt and chip of iron-work.  
Apollo's face was barely realized.

but then his eyes were truly glinting on  
the shield. The priest held up his own,  
of solid bronze—its circle free

from hot-pressed gods. In glowing light  
it fixed a mirror image of his foes,  
reflecting light and men and war.

### The Seventh Gate

*The seventh man at the seventh gate—I name him now:  
your own brother.*

*—Seven Against Thebes*

#### Fury's Promise to the Sons<sup>1</sup> of Oedipus

Apollo simply stopped his song,  
lay back against the beach and shut  
his eyes. The Fury stepped around

him on her way inside the gates.  
She found the brothers sprawled, near death,  
and knelt between the two, caressed

each brother's face, explained she did  
not lack compassion for the damned—  
since one had fought for Thebes against

its equal king, and one had led  
a foreign army to his home.  
And making sure they knew that each

would rule the plot that held his grave,  
she dropped the death coins to their lids.  
And each—unable to let go

the earth he clutched—could not remove  
the coins. And neither reached to hold  
his wounds, his brother, or the god.

---

<sup>1</sup>*Eteokles*, Theban captain at the 7th gate, and *Polyneices*, Argive captain at the 7th gate



## HOARFROST

*Surely these things lie on the knees of the gods.*

—Homer

Demeter In Unseasonable Shadow

I notice movements of the shade around  
the salted cliffs at northern beaches where  
the change of seasons is often late.

I name the undertones as best I can—

those constant servants of the brilliant ones.  
They are well-timed, though measured just below.

I know about the industry of shade—  
that Hades is concealed within the word.

But then, in chasing off these colder days,  
I find the darker gradients appealing  
in their anguished play. What artist doesn't  
bargain fair distinctions? Darkness renders shape—

an obscure virtue, yes. But still, such gloom  
refines the promise of its opposite—

I watch the shadows dance along the cliffs.  
It's there I see the goddess peering out.

## Jocasta Considers Drama

So one admires the plays of Sophocles—  
a man of some perception who portrayed  
my death as quite dramatic climax with

a hanging rope. He cast me as the wives  
of Oedipus and Laius, which I was.  
But Sophocles' production failed the love

I held for children I gave birth to, five—  
both sons and daughters—all were dear to me.  
I much prefer Euripides' account

because he hangs with life, not rope, and lets  
me live a while. And I was not so fond  
of knots that I would hurry any date

that made of me a newlywed in Hades' den.  
And so I did not die—as some would have  
it—in my marriage chamber room, strung up

like festive paper at a gathering,  
some well-intended ornament that fails  
to capture dignity with its grandeur.

I've tired of the orders of mens' rites.  
Their glory seems to always make the blood  
of women flow. And if I am to die

consider that I've stumbled on the earth  
and not above, where only once I dreamed.  
a bird—I might rise up in song and disappear.

## Hoarfrost

*1. Kore's Descent*

One day I walked a field,  
through rows—it's difficult to lose  
the path that way. It might have been

an olive grove, or fig or myrtle—grape  
perhaps. That day there was a thunderclap

and darkness and I fell but did  
not meet the earth. Instead I fell  
until the light was gone and Hades stood

in front of me. I crushed a sprig  
of mint between my palms and touched  
his face. I knew what skin I felt.

what god, his trade—I'd heard the talk.  
He browns the roots and steals all souls  
across the Lethe's shore that gleams

like polished boots. I looked—  
the river won't return my gaze.  
Reflections are confined to shades.

unbodied souls, the lot  
that clamors on the shore. I found  
we both were curious of death.

I tried to guess what state it was  
that Hades found their souls—affairs  
that otherwise do not concern

or interest me at all. Suppose  
one will consider that the weight  
of shades is like a butterfly's.

Bodily-migrated, panicked,  
and congregating on the shore  
they stumble into Charon's boat.

and often fall. The craft is calm.  
unballasted, receiving dead.  
it tilts but never spills a soul.

## 2. *Kore's Return*

I knew a scent that loves the spring  
but I've forgot exactly what.  
I'm sure it isn't staghorn fern

or rosemary or any herbs.  
but something that will grow in rows.  
The scent is more like asphodel.

or tulips bowing in the wind  
that do not spill their cups of air.  
The scent is corn before the stalks

are tall, and pollen-swollen buds  
on bud-capped trees, a hint of fruit  
though it's too soon for orchard crops

to pull the branch.  
In early spring I force the mint  
and leave the other herbs alone—

the mint has such a winter smell—  
the hoarfrost too, but it dissolves  
too soon to be depended on.

### The Cypress Copse

Nearby, the open, vapid eyes  
of the buck are full of its spent life.  
Like a bird whose call unspells  
before it into collapsing thicket air  
one leaf dropping close to her hair.  
Diana slouches on the rock.

### Lengths in a Weave

A woman poses.  
The blue swaying backdrop  
of Lakota corn  
is loud  
with its wind noises.  
On this dirt road  
one car passed  
forty frames before.  
The photographer tells her  
to move her legs  
this arm  
here.  
The starch  
in the Mexican blanket  
scratches her hips  
when she turns.  
A beetle moves toward her  
on the blanket.  
It's okay  
sweetheart.  
don't move.  
She remembers  
standing on the side  
of a bathtub.  
reaching for a moth.  
furious powder dropping like a child's blessing.  
The thinks:  
a woman without clothes  
is nude.  
A woman without clothes  
is a tiger moth  
slowly opening  
its wild wings.

Sincere<sup>2</sup>

—From *Sohni and the Herdsman* by Sheila Farr.

The night appeared in overlapping swells  
like petals from a purple iris—held  
before the eyes. She seized the cauldron

to her chest and wrapped thin arms around  
the vessel just as she will hold the man  
who waits across the shore. She felt the warmth

of sun surprisingly contained within.  
She stepped into the current—sediment  
escaped beneath her feet. Her buoyant legs

stretched out above the floor. One heel broke through  
the surface—moon-ringed, and falling away  
the ripples gaining headway on the shore.

And for a moment she imagined chains  
expanding from her skin and dropping off  
like silver bangles dropping from her arms.

One finger pushed against the pot then through.  
She floundered, reaching up against  
the tightening chains. The clay began to melt

to her and fall—the water strained, the walls  
collapsed, the clay resolved to paste—  
she faltered, understood

she's neither going on nor back across.

---

<sup>2</sup> In ancient Rome pottery could be made more cheaply by mixing inexpensive wax into the clay. When there was no wax mixed in with the clay, the potter etched *sincere* on the bottom, meaning *without wax*.



## The Mariner's House, Maine. 1870's

The woman in her widow's window  
watches like the gulls,  
the heavy flash of the lighthouse,  
the low black scarf of the cumulus.

She threads a needle  
through a cloth so it stays,  
and places the work at her feet.  
She lights his cigarette,  
holds her finger over the fire a moment  
and pulls it away admiring  
her appendage, the smoke  
that has been softly tied there.

From the top floor in her house  
she searches, the dusk horizon  
at the part of sea and sky,  
hoping for a flock to appear—  
the herald of incoming ships.

Outside the gulls still circle  
as the twilight catches in the panes.  
Behind her the pinks reflect  
a thoughtless notice, a slipping change.  
The gulls' squalls pelt the windows,  
reflect and follow after.

## Winter Waves

Three pelicans flew  
low over January  
breakers. Another

sovereign appeared near  
dark. plunged to whitecaps. touched. drew  
back—a lover's flight.

## Report to the Absentee

Yesterday the rain dripped  
through the filter of its clouds  
and I put on my shoes  
and I ran through it all  
until my legs shook  
and my feet became stupid  
on the road, unsure  
and nothing seemed secure.  
Later, sitting in my house,  
I felt the things around me  
growing heavy--my books,  
dishes, so that I wished  
I lived somewhere else,  
that I had a house to visit  
where things seem strange  
and uncomfortable  
and easy to throw away.  
Where nothing would matter to me  
so that I could leave it behind  
and not care.

Today, I'm not making any decisions  
about what happens to the drops  
after my shirt absorbs them,  
or what happens to the ducks  
drinking from the puddle  
I step around, when it becomes  
another hole in the road  
that I run until my legs jar.  
There won't be time enough  
in everything to watch  
for that evidence.  
So I hold my pattern  
of running and resting  
until I do nothing, nothing  
that matters to you.

## New World Dictionary

Though sometimes words remind me still of you—  
 a broth, thin soup, made by boiling meat—  
 I can define just one or maybe two.

A gypsy moth has wings, a cartwheel hue.  
 A right to sit, the space to sit in: seat.  
 These words remind me still of you.

Contort: twist out of shape. Decay: to rot.  
 The beech: a hardwood timber tree. See wheat—  
 a spoonful of rough words defining you.

I look up meanings under "love" for you  
 and see the term in tennis means defeat—  
 the definition which reminds me you

had tigers' eyes of yellow-brown, not blue.  
 To make the noise of goats or sheep: to bleat—  
 a hollow sound that I defined for you.

A tree-like grass with hollow stems: bamboo.  
 To fill, also to end, finish: complete.  
 Though sometimes words remind me still of you.  
 I will define just one or maybe two.

## Picasso's Women

—On a question of background in Picasso's *Three Women*

The beach ball *does* evoke the moon—  
 it's dappled surface pocked with shade  
 and tones of gray, surrounded  
 in a background undistinguished  
 by division—lines that represent  
 horizon or the chance meeting  
 of ocean and air above.

The angle of suspension is  
 unnatural, floating. The moon seems  
 futile as an ice cube  
 in the ocean's grip—a distended  
 melting into haze.  
 the appearance of belonging.

The moon becomes the moon-brought-down.

The circle drawn in heavy black  
 may seem enough division for  
 the setting that has blended all  
 its doubtful elements. The strokes  
 of painted greens and blues  
 depicting sky and ocean  
 are circular in motion,  
 an atmospheric gesture  
 portraying movement. It is the moon  
 that fades, becomes the demarcation  
 of atmosphere, a space of chill  
 water in a sweltering sea—  
 a jostling thread of salted passing.

## SCAPES

*For he has the territory of harmonicas, the acres of flutes,  
the meadows of clarinets, the domain of violins.*

—e.e. cummings

Prayer and Supplication: The Scout at Thebes

*This night there were seven...captains,  
they slit the throat of a bull, catching the blood  
in an inverted shield, bound with black iron.  
—Seven Against Thebes*

To *Dike*, personification of right and order:

*If you have seen the shield that caught the blood,  
and if you heard the cries of slaughtered bulls  
then raise the ocean's waves, create a flood,  
soothe Ares' rages, make him merciful.*

I'm watching this a distance from the shore.  
Just now the seven vowed to sack or die.  
If she has seen the warriors I abhor,  
then surely by her justice she'll deny

their courage, naming it more truly—fear.  
She'll cause the shield to crack and blood to fall  
into the sand. The men would drop their spears.  
Instead, the army's sounding trumpet-calls.

They pray to Ares' strife and Phobos' fears,  
to Enyo's frenzy—and each of them appears.

### Traveler's Discipline

The ocean must be near  
for there are fishing boats that rock  
and some have masts that rise and fade,  
but everything is neatly docked  
in fog.

A village should appear  
though it's obscured like all the rest.  
Descending gently from the train  
the travelers meet the raw address  
of wind.

An hour south of here  
we'd passed two landmarks of cement  
and stone on moss foreground. The heaps  
were spiraled, shaped like cones, intent  
on bleak

and shabby weather for  
their public grandeur. Plagued with trains  
and shuffling earth, the monuments  
were crumbling into what remains  
of realms

of possibility.  
Like music from a violin  
these artifacts collapse in air,  
not fit for bearing discipline.



Quiet City, For the Music Maker

Once again, the city of your music  
teems into my window—this time  
I stretch my legs in the furrows  
of the low notes. In yesterday's

city the stores selling bread advertised  
smells around my nose and the afternoon  
reflections of buildings were kissing  
purple into the streets. The first day

that was warm enough to open  
a window your sax was a crazy bridge  
bouncing around the skyline between  
buildings and I was on that bridge.

suspended between truck drivers  
who blow their smoky horns at any fist  
that pumps from a car. Some days you play  
a city that, for all its construction,

might never notice a blade of grass  
browning in the heat, or how  
the elephant trunks of its wires  
hum conversation between dead trees.

The building across from us is graying  
cinder block, holding up a fence  
like a batter's cage above its gutters.  
its roof, a place where clouds mingle

and can leave whenever they want.  
I have wondered if you've ever noticed  
that children are playing in the caged sky—  
their screams bouncing off the edges

of the clouds. I have wanted to thank  
you for these transformations. I can  
hardly hear the sidewalk's din—the all-day  
voices that shout out their escaping dreams.

### Return to Dollop's Mill

The spinning disk of slight, descending sun  
was like a potter's wheel and threw the clay  
and salted marsh into continued change.  
The lines of clouds were fingers folding up

the day in colors. Pampas grass was thin  
as soldiers standing to their knees in mud.  
Though broken up with shrubs, the water scribed  
the changing features of the sky onto

its surface page. The marsh was braiding-up  
the ocean's salt with silted run-off from  
the land nearby while gulls and egrets float.  
The light's reflections caused the whole

assembly's spinning—rather they  
created the impression of unrest  
among the birds, whose forms were statue-like.  
The sky's expiring pageantry had moved

its way across the water's edge, the grass  
was frozen in formation—but there's more.  
I had a purpose stopping here beside  
this marsh. I've been to see the cottage where

I tossed through nights as humid as hot swamps.  
and no one lives there now. I felt  
my absence bleaching out this place.  
which seemed too small, some years before.

for me to stay, though surely I belong  
here more than anywhere—on mornings when  
the sun unfolds horizon's lines  
and nothing struggles to connect.

### The Ticket-Taker Recognizes the Traveler

The traveler wants to be connected here.  
that's why he bothered making plans to come.  
Perhaps he'll go before it all comes clear.

I've seen this man before—it's been a year.  
I think. He's back. with bags, he wants to stay.  
The traveler said he felt connections here

To me. but he was drunk. He's drawing near.  
I wonder if he recognizes me?  
Perhaps he'll go before it all comes clear—

the afternoon. the pub. the way. my dear.  
we gulped down ale as if there were no cost.  
The traveler said he loved connections here.

and here. I don't do romance none. I sneer  
at those who do—but I recall the fog—  
I knew he'd go before it disappeared.

And I had so much fun—too much. I fear.  
And there he goes. with bags & all. the scum!  
The traveler must have some connections here.  
or why'd he bother making plans to come?

## The Merchant at Wicklow

The room was quiet.  
Its only occupant held a glass of dark wine  
in a disquieted hand and shifted.  
The red reflected on the shaking hand  
and in the dimming eyes of its holder.  
For a time the vintner loved  
peering down into the spyglass  
that stared back at him, and through—  
the feel of companionship in smooth fingers,  
the silence of the room in which  
a lover might dazzle the obvious.

## Recovering

I had heard about that cabin.  
It was secluded, so that  
you had to travel two dirt roads,  
the second one winding, with limbs  
that stretch, brushing red clay  
from the sides of the truck.

We went there because you couldn't  
hear the traffic, the coal trains at midnight,  
even though I secretly missed them.

We went because deer wander from the trees  
like ghosts and gaze at the people.

When I arrived, there was a fire glowing,  
spitting up light onto  
bearded, leathered and creased faces.

The second keg hadn't floated yet and  
I served myself, laughing with everyone  
else at the drunk, steering the yard,  
popping up stones on a motorcycle.

He circled the fire, the people standing  
near. I had blinked when he soared off,  
trying to guide himself around the well.

I watched as he wiped at the blood  
on his bare back, and then cocked his head  
to hoot at the undiluted moon.

I raised my eyes to meet that night,  
the burnishing, bright enough for the silver  
needles on the tops of the pines  
to also be stars in that sky.

## The Plant

Birds hang from strings in my house—  
taut and still as ground snow at dawn.  
Sometimes they sit higher  
above the convicted fish  
and the strings low like cows in a field,  
like a marijuana fog,  
dipping in a curve.  
It's not much of an interesting house,  
but almost like one I wanted to live in  
when I was young.  
The plant that lived through the suicide  
has become two-in-one.  
Each trunk rises gracefully  
from the earth, changing shapes  
like a snake broken by flora.  
The answer to the old man's gun  
is in the shoot half brown, half green.  
The bi-colored leaves gather  
like possessions piled by a raker,  
that week when no one came to see him,  
placed a name on each.  
He was not the only one to go.

## Desert Regiment

If the moon was in the sky that night,  
it lay like me—within the map  
of atmosphere that carves out objects

in relief. My cot was regulation  
three feet from the ground, enveloped  
in darkness and wind that carried sand

fine enough to settle in the creases  
of my already too-tightly-pressed lips.  
Sure enough the wind was swift—

on my stomach I saw a scorpion,  
wild shadow-lit legs sprawled far  
and pumping like a fiddle bow

as it neared. It danced crazily away  
with the next clamoring gust.  
The night was filled up with wind

and the wind with sand that rained into  
the twists of cartilage in my ears.  
Turning onto my back, I thought

about curling up my legs. I might  
have imagined the gelatinous ooze,  
the softness of womb-suspension

and the deafening travel of blood  
and food—the way some things are cared for.  
My shoulder blades arched against

the regulation canvas while the wind  
rushed under me, lifting me slightly up  
before forcing me back and down—

these tenuous pressures of atmosphere,  
holding a soldier in the middle  
of the desert between sleeping and waking.

imagining I floated like the moon.  
Surrounded by the sky, though barely  
in it. I was nowhere near the earth.



### The Sugar Shack

It was the kind of place where you notice things.  
I saw a spider. candy-apple red  
that raced. legs streaming across the hood  
of a Honda. scratched a mute blue  
from whipping pollen.  
When you lifted the hood.  
I saw that the belts were missing  
and that the brown husk of a corn stalk rose.  
dignified. into the engine.  
From where I stood at the hatchback  
I felt weeds as they shifted on my knees  
in the light wind.  
I tried to locate a cricket in front of a tire.  
Its regular creak and the echo of that creak  
on a brick behind it. in the grass.  
I stared at the place.  
avoided clapping my eyes  
on the people straddling lawn chairs  
and pine stumps. not far from us.  
I glanced once or twice in their direction.  
at the magnolia that shaded the group.  
I wanted to concentrate on the building.  
Most of the wood was long dead. collapsed  
into the grasses around it.  
Scorched some time ago into a woody slat  
was a sign. *Sugar Shack*.  
We had driven there. lug wrench. V belts.  
sockets. crashing in the truck bed.  
Dust blocked the rear view  
on the loose rock road.  
When we stepped out of the truck  
I smelled first the pungency of sodden wood  
like a warm animal.  
and then the syrup of marijuana smoke.  
the light wind and shade tree didn't disseminate  
between us and the other men.  
Someone passed behind us with a pit bull  
on a steel chain.  
I didn't turn to look at him until another car.  
tires spinning the dust into fog.  
stopped under a pine behind us.  
behind the man with the dog.

I saw that he arrived, unswerving,  
from the church he attended.  
tie and pants newly pressed.  
No one else that I could tell.  
including us, had been to church.  
That day, even before we left.  
I started praying for the dogs.  
I heard their shrill cries  
over the easy clicks of car repairs.  
The dust they kicked up was lime coating my tongue.

## Bootleg

There is a dead calf lying on  
its side next to the shed with the still  
in it. The calf is bloated almost

to cracking just like the tomatoes  
on your grandmother's farm that have split  
open and scabbed over—just

like the blueberries Creecy distills.  
He is smiling. For him, this is just  
as good for showing as shelves

bending with the weight of brandy  
and corn whiskey. I stare at the cow's  
open belly, entrails spilling

out, and the black-gold shells of turtles  
feeding inside. The familiar smells  
of dirt road and mossy wood

have changed into something like sour  
cream. Down at Creecy's the creek rolls  
faster, so that it sounds like rain.

It's enough to remind me  
of any summer noon when  
the gravel snaps as I walk

and the sun lies on the ground  
in leopard spots. On the way back  
to the highway a turtle struggles

across uneven red-clay gullies.  
There are wild mushrooms, but we don't  
pick them, even though they are purple.

and black feathers stretch  
under their caps like crow's down.  
A butterfly followed us part

of the way back up the hill.  
The tops of its wings were black.  
but the bottoms were blue

like the orbs levitating in that polished  
mason jar on the front seat. in  
three-day-old blueberry bootleg.

## The Fire Tower

A giant in the clearing leans  
its shingled back against the sky,  
a brittle-legged hut in air—  
some funny, earth-bound bird am I.

After Bob's Gun and Tackle Shop

The vinyl seat was hot like spittle grease.  
We poled the middle fork to reach the sound  
in South Eleven Point. And worked against  
the backspin finger funnels, stirring marsh  
and reed. The drop-in passage slipped like swamp.  
We caught few catfish, bluegills, rainbow trout  
that fought with meanness, scared. We'd sell the fish  
at Turkey Egg.

We knew of airy hope  
and things that lived away from places known  
to them. Not us. The other boats would flip  
their ripples round our craft. At nineteen, wrapped  
in homespun air, we drifted lacklust down  
the river, sure-enough in jeans, bare feet.  
We pitched in seats we'd bolted, wrenches popping.

We let this river break the path we'd hold,  
impassion dreams we'd drop  
like sweetly gathered hay. And not yet checked  
in life, consoled with pitched beer,  
we lost our dreams in lime, the colored drift,  
like smoke that morning, led us down the wake.

### The Dragonfly

On Saturday a dragonfly stopped by  
and landing on my shoulder there began  
to clean his thorny legs and rest a while.  
Its eyes were shiny as an oil pan

and seemed to overtake its head entire.  
I held a finger just above its two  
front legs and pulled it near. I did admire  
the fly too close and watched as it withdrew.

## Harvest

*What are you, in the shadow of trees  
Engaged up there with the light and the breeze?...  
You linger your little hour and are gone.*

—Robert Frost

A spider's web is swinging from the eave  
and rippling like a worn-through sheet against  
the structure of its circumstance, and wind.  
Mid-silver-air, a fly out-shakes with shade  
the flurry of a wing not caught in flight.  
The web is round—a house of time—a clock.

The darkness covers up from 3 o'clock  
to 8 o'clock. The structure of the eave  
above divides the web from dark to light.  
In darkness spider legs uncoil against  
a felt disturbance in the nest. In shade  
a shadow's tapered limbs outstretch, unwind.

and then are still except for gusts of wind  
that lift and drop the web-shaped clock.  
The fly in light, the spinner waits in shade  
provided by the afternoon, the eave,  
the schedule of design deep-laid against  
the fly. The fly cannot control its flight.

One wing entangled in a strand of light—  
a glistened struggle, silver creeping—winds.  
What matter if the fly intends against  
the schedule of its biologic lock?  
Shadows hang like tinsel from the eave,  
a spider lurks within the blush of shade.

Perhaps the fly foresaw its end in shade.  
The web's a cage of cycles clear and slight  
and pierced with moments like this one—an evening's  
newcomer to the threshold, a windfall  
of entanglement at 5 o'clock.  
The fly seduced by cleaving silk against



its spongy body segments and against  
its many spongy eyes now darked with shade.  
What ilk of matter binds one to the clock?  
The rush of everything to waste the light—  
appointments slated booked and billed unwind—  
an overhastiness replayed at eve.

Net-textured, sown against deficient light,  
a web of shaded hinges stretch in wind.  
A bell-clock strikes somewhere, foretelling eve.

## Fences

The steady, raspy breathing of my stride  
upon the trail head sounded off as though  
the path I hiked was paved haphazardly

with parchments where a scribe had once performed  
a jagged, branchy-looking script that fell  
in shadows at my feet. The forest's text

appearing marginless was not without  
its certain boundaries. I saw a branch  
that tangled up a maple's trunk and one

persimmon dripped from it like early dew.  
And just beyond the woods the buffalo—  
with massive necks bent toward the map of food.

they grazed with noses plodding through the grass  
and moss which brimmed with dew while hoofprints pressed  
relief-like in the travel-patterns of

their simple days. It's said that no one holds  
what won't be held, but there are other ways.  
A fence is stretched an acre's width across—

within the circus of its radius  
the herd is genuine: a calf trails near  
its mother; several bulls keep distant posts.

Conditions of existence satisfy  
all creatures differently and so we hunt  
our fences down and lean against their weights.

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