

FLIGHTS OF THE  
HARVEST-MARE

by  
Linda Bierds



Ahsahta Press

Boise State University  
Boise, Idaho

Some of these poems first appeared in the following magazines and anthologies: ***Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry, Backbone, Black Warrior Review, Chomo-Uri, Chowder Review, Cutbank, The Fiddlehead, Hudson Review, Jeopardy, Massachusetts Review, New Letters, Poetry Northwest, Porch, Quarterly West, Seattle Review, Swallow's Tale, Wind,*** and ***Xanadu.***

Editor for Ahsahta Press: Dale K. Boyer

Copyright © 1985 by Linda Biers

Second printing, August, 1986

ISBN 0-916272-27-3  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number:  
84-73272

*For Sydney*



# Contents

Introduction by *Pamela Stewart*

iii

## Part One

Guide in a Glowworm Cave	3
Saving	4
Mirror	6
Source	7
The Haunting	8
A Walk in Early Autumn	9
Lost	10
Fur Traders Descending the Missouri: 1845	12
Ritual for the Dead, Lake Sakami, Quebec, 1980	13
Grandson	14
Kinderspelen	15
The Poppies	16
One Hot Day in October	18

## Part Two

Tongue	21
Emanuela	22
Zuñi Potter: Drawing the Heartline	23
From the Great Depression	24
Believing	25
Mid-Plains Tornado	26
The Genius of Earlswood Asylum	27
The Bonecarver, John Eron, Marshalsea Prison, 1760	28
Touching the Elephant	30
At the Speed of Light	31
Dining in the Country	32
Tapir	33
Elegy for 41 Whales Beached in Florence, Oregon, June 1979	34

## Part Three

Philter	37
---------	----

Heat Wave	38
Lifting	39
After Hearing Ernest Gaines	40
Cactus, Blossoming Every Hundred Years	41
Dogsled Through the Trees	42
Cicadas	43
While You're Away	45
The Rickers	46
In Prague, In Montmartre	47
The Asparagus Pickers	48
Anesthesia	49
Open	51
Lesson: The Spider's Eighth Eye	52
Flights of the Harvest-Mare	54

# Introduction

From Oregon to South Africa, Italy to Brooklyn, the mid-west to Wales—in houses, fields, water, caverns, air, or within the borders of particular paintings or biography, Linda Bierds tells the stories of transformations. Often, she reinvents their rituals, and because the poems of *Flights of the Harvest-Mare* so deeply honour others' experiences as well as those of the poet, these occasions of the human spirit are specific and fully alive. Bierds' empathy of imagination rises vividly in a poem like "Lost," where the poet describes her dying mother speaking of her own mother's death. It's Brooklyn, 1922, and Bierds' mother is at the cinema, in between worlds. Ready for propitiation, she is compelled towards a close-up of the star:

*I just swelled from my seat like steam, pressing  
that face. Not a kiss, but smoke, like smoke, like  
my mouth was that cone of dusty air  
from projector to screen.*

Walking home, the ordinary evening becomes hallucinatory, and the poet's mother is suddenly emptied, lost. She falters until the fact of what's occurred

*. . . latched on, of course. Some  
finger of comprehension  
lifted its clear bone—*

*And gave me my grief, she said, and turned  
and homed us, one with the other.*

In telling her mother's story, the poet also relives and receives it.

"Lost" is indicative of a strategy dear to Bierds' poetic impulses: confluent episodes that become cyclical in their final emphasis. This is one way, along with her range of subjects, that Bierds cannily avoids static, over-personal, or sentimental gestures. Narrative or emotional situations become heightened by images that are not quite familiar but have their happy place in what's required to proceed towards resolution. With accurate perception, staggered and surprising, her rhythms carry a swift sluicing music to engage the reader, as here in the first half of one of Bierds' loveliest poems, "Zuñi Potter: Drawing the Heartline":

*Through the scratch strokes of piñon,  
arroyos, through the clamped earth  
waxed and swollen,  
coil to coil, paddle to anvil,*

the bowl on her palm-skin blossoms,  
the bowl on her lap  
blossoms, the lap blossoms

in its biscuit of bones.

Through repetitive syntax and the tension of sibilance and liquidity, these lines work as an incantation which both lulls and startles. One becomes part of the process of shaping the bowl and its significant decoration; the potter and the artifact are joined in a final perfect form. And so too is the reader, until the concluding image of release:

. . . she sketches an arrow,  
its round path nostril to heart.  
For the breath going in.  
For the breath going out.  
Wind to heartbeat. The blossoms of steam.

Without denying facts, without allowing memory and assessment to become simplistic, Bierds writes of what is mysterious and elemental, even holy. Such elusive states can be lovely, but they are often baffling, even, sometimes, monstrous. The power and threat in “Mid-Plains Tornado” is relentlessly physical:

Think of teeth being drilled, that enamel and blood  
burning circles inside your cheek. That’s like the fury.  
Only now it’s quail and axles, . . . .

It’s with you all morning. Something wet in the air.  
Sounds coming in at a slant, like stones  
clapped under water. And pigs, slow to the trough.

An ominous build-up, discomfort headed for pain, or worse. Not until the third and final stanza does the speaker really join the scene. To take this knowledge within her, she must break through the membrane of her own horror:

The last time, I walked a fresh path toward the river.  
Near the edge of a field I found our mare, pierced  
through the side by the head of her six-week foal.  
Her ribs, her great folds of shining skin  
closed over the skull. I watched them forever it seemed:  
eight legs, two necks, one astonished head curved  
back in a little rut of hail. And across the river  
slim as a road, a handful of thrushes set down  
in an oak tree, like a flurry of leaves



drawn back again.

And so Bierds resolves the indifferent brutality suffered by both the horses and herself by moving her perspective beyond, up to the birds so that she might accept a world that, in some form, will bear such violence again.

Bierds' poems clearly apprehend the nature of mystery; they offer a vivid suspension within a larger, inaccessible knowledge. What Bierds releases is momentarily certain, which is as certain as one can truly be. Hers is a forceful imagination, one which makes stunning connections, as in the poem "In Prague, In Montmartre." It's 1874, and two scientists in Prague are, just that moment, excitedly on the verge of a discovery in genetics:

Can it be these filaments, these  
couple-beads, distinguish us? Nostril? Nail?

Simultaneously, in Paris, Degas is backing away to regard a canvas where ballerinas ready themselves:

. . . the cumbersome, full  
bodies, the music, full, delayed but a moment  
like the dragged note of the milktrain,  
just passing—in Prague, in Montmartre—

Yes, he whispers, to no one.

The poem is about that instant, *is* that instant, when something becomes suddenly, perfectly clear. A difficult matter to describe, for once a poem's experience is resolved, one must begin all over again with the small, or large, knowledge of what has been tenuously gained.

The questing spirit which answers something in all of us is the concern of this book. Bierds' choices of who and what to write about, their diversity, bring this spirit alive. Remarkable in a first volume, we know the poems while the poet remains elusive. I find this refreshing and provocative in the wake of innumerable books where one knows all too much of the poet-as-person's daily habits and neuroses. ***Flights of the Harvest-Mare*** is a work of sustaining character; it explores far beyond a single dooryard and, in so doing, encounters deep and disturbing spirit and world.

*Pamela Stewart*  
St. Ives, Cornwall

*I am not one, as you think, but two.*

from Frazer's ***The Golden Bough***

## Part One



## Guide in a Glowworm Cave

Everyone has sung here: Dame Nellie Melba, Gracie Fields,  
the Vienna Boys Choir. All scuffling down the stairs  
just like you, with the river gnawing beneath the planks.  
Just look at this limestone cathedral, this organ,  
its smooth, white pipes. I swear when you sing  
those pipes will hum it back. And the Wedding  
Party. See how the bride kneels against the rail.  
Each year she bows a little lower, as water drips,  
and the priest slopes over his blessing.

I know you're cold, but those aren't icicles  
over our heads—they're roots. And this is their earth  
we are under. In time they will reach these planks.  
It will be like walking through a harp then,  
and then it will all close over.

But now to the boat. Don't make a sound.  
I'll pull us along by a rope on the ceiling,  
through these black tunnels of water . . . and there they are:  
a million tiny lights: a heaven, of course, the warm stars.

Sometimes at night when I bring the boat back  
I reach up and touch their foodlines, like eyelashes  
on my fingers, and I think of those worms reeling in,  
taking a crisp midge and my salt into their round mouths,  
and I sing out one sharp note and watch their lights  
sheathe over. It's beautiful then! That note  
humming around these walls, and just a hundred worms  
still glowing out the Dippers, the Milky Way,  
and so close I'm almost there.

# Saving

—*The six-year-old slipped through the  
well shaft in Frascati, 15 miles from Rome.*  
—AP

*Down through the top dirt, the stone pocks,  
loose roots and clam-earth, one hundred, tapering,  
two hundred feet, this child, Alfredo, falling,  
pin-hipped and silent, falling,  
lodging at last where the scratch-tube opens.*

And here, at that moment, the surface:  
cypress, bluewood, an acre of foxglove,  
one hencote, one lean-to, one woman  
turning, just turning.

You move your neck and your good arm,  
look up, look  
up, and there, everything, cypress and hencote,  
condensed to a star.

Alfredo, when the star blunts out it is evening.  
Now the other, far  
beyond . . . it is night.

\* \* \*

One day, then two.  
I read there are currents just under you,  
longer than Italy. I think  
of an hour-glass:  
the funnel from sky to earth,  
the waist where your body struggles,  
the funnel beneath you reopening,

how each of us, feeling this,  
waits with you.

\* \* \*

This morning, just after your death,  
I am climbing a hill to the city.  
Two people beside me are speaking of you,  
the unbearable rivers still sucking your heels.  
We must save him, one says. One  
closes his eyes as just for a moment  
the linked bones of your body rush under us.

\* \* \*

We will lift you.  
For motion, for the stratifications of light,  
we will give you our words, our  
ceremonies:  
One bell must pulse from its sleek dome.  
One woman, long watching, must sing.

# Mirror

Before the mirror, water gave it  
back, the brown surface of another's eye.

★

It is High South Africa, 1630.  
A rabble of sailors press down the Zambize.  
Now, strewn out through their empty camp:  
burlap, fig stones, and this—  
this oblong, black-backed glass.

★

Clear night. The first creep in  
from the bushwood, sifting.  
*This is my face*, one whispers. A flush  
like a thud in the brain. *This is my face*,  
*unrippled. Its pockets and stains. Its long*  
*surprise.*

A mynah calls in her seven voices:  
*Aye Aye Aye Aye . . .*

Something lifts up through the mangroves.  
Something sets in.



## Source

—All of the crimes were traced to the victim.  
—AP

What did you call to that day in the paddock,  
your child's brain clear of its judgement? He turned  
to whatever sin ignored you, saw you slim  
in your britches, saw your hand  
lift to your hat brim, the breast-hub lift,

and he rose from the calf at his knees—quickly—  
all in one motion—like steam through an opening  
window—then running, waving the iron, chased you  
fifty, a hundred, two hundred feet

and branded you high on the back-thigh:

the britches melting, the skin puckered and sucked,  
two worms of flame, the pain a fuchsia light  
in your eyes, a bell in your ears, and the mind  
turning. Already turning.

S with a little s inside. Double S. Circle Ss.  
A hiss on the back-thigh, you fingered  
and grew. Your children grew.  
Your body turned from its making, rested,  
husk-thin, drying, the S and little s  
less than a whisper.

What did you witness to start this again?  
Brief, something brief? A man lifting his hand  
in a wave? A cane lifted? Smoke curling up  
from a flannel sleeve?

You sit at the round table. Slowly you trace  
the small shape of your name. Write Ruth  
you are evil. Write Ruth your britches are  
candles. Source. Inciter.  
The pull and push of your long hand, the letters  
flames at your fingers.

# The Haunting

In the night you dream of ovens—  
flame vaults,  
piece by piece, snuffing me back.  
Without hands, now, without arms,  
I weave through your dreams like a salmon.  
If the moon is right I can watch you grieve for me.

Here in a field I rename the world:  
hawthorn, foxglove, leopardbane.  
If you hear me at all,  
I am only a pulse, a lapping of water.

Above us a plane carves random letters,  
crisp as porcelain.  
They initial us. They initial the meadow,  
the headwater, the salmon in its  
trough of eggs and gravel.

They are the smoke of your dreams.

# A Walk in Early Autumn

*—Near-death experiences are surprisingly  
similar: an unpleasant noise, a tunnel,  
a beckoning light . . . often a guide.*

It is evening and you will come  
no further with me than the first corner:  
The fog is too heavy; it appears to be raining.  
I watch you fade up the hill.

There is no water on this road;  
I touch my dry shoulders.  
Only the trees rain.

Near the ravine, blackberries pock the bushes.  
Their sparse fur captures the water, the early mold.  
Over-ripe, they collapse in my palm  
like warming igloos.

I touch my head;  
the only rain is falling from the fir branches.  
There are no circles in the puddles and  
there is no sound, just the tree rain  
and the stark ratchet of a crow.

A large dog has pressed through the hedge.  
It follows along the shoulder path,  
stopping when I stop. It does not  
enter the road. We travel together a mile,  
starting, stopping, like a small train.

When it spins back to the forest I watch  
its thin legs prance.

Look, here is the warm glow of the house.

# Lost

Once, not long from her own death, my mother spoke  
of her mother: moribund, so sharp with disease,  
a splinter, she said, day after day  
working down through the fleshy bed.

*I was just fourteen. I would sit, watching  
her parts, her wrists and renegade knuckles.*

It was Easter, 1922. In the late afternoon  
an aunt, chastened with Christ, came calling.  
And my mother, free in the dusk-light! Oh Brooklyn,  
your coupes and roadsters. Your fox-scarves!  
Down Fulton, down Bedford and Smith to  
the Brooklyn Strand, the cropped seats, ten seconds  
of twilight, of full night, a flicker, the beam  
and Talmadge's face flashed like the first sun.

*I just swelled from my seat like steam, pressing  
that face. Not a kiss, but smoke, like smoke, like  
my mouth was that cone of dusty air  
from projector to screen.*

My mother, half in the film, half in the cool  
night, walked along Smith Street, past stoops,  
past Christs and flannel rabbits dim  
in the storefronts. Then she turned full face  
to the street, saw the asphalt, the lamplights,  
saw the sleek-sided roadsters, and *lifted*,

lost, up from her shoulders, her chemise  
and long shoes. Lost, she faltered in  
terrible circles: the dumb body, its cloud of  
self, the stoops taking back their patterns,  
the white hands tapping, again and again,  
the hat-bud, the ears.

*Until something latched on, of course. Some  
finger of comprehension  
lifted its clear bone—*

*And gave me my grief, she said, and turned  
and homed us, one with the other.*

# Fur Traders Descending the Missouri: 1845

—from the painting by George Caleb Bingham

In the year this painting was lived,  
genre as it is, without  
innuendo,  
the snowmelt had lifted the river;  
the April buffaloes, long drowned in the flooding,  
were moving still, in the muscles,  
in the heartlobes of buzzards.

It is late afternoon, late August.  
We focus first on a fox, chained  
to the prowlift,  
and then, behind, on a Sioux-French  
boy, and then, behind,  
on the helmsman.  
The sense of peace is unending,  
the balance of harvest.  
Just off on the shoreline, the raptors,  
the foxes, the brushgrass and hunters  
take from each other.  
This is not a painting

of grief.  
This is not a painting that asks  
for our grief.  
A boy leans back toward his father.  
A fox watches its shadow.  
The fuchsia half-light moves with the river.

# Ritual for the Dead, Lake Sakami, Quebec, 1980

The moose has fallen smoothly, without sound,  
lifting her head only once  
from a tangle of sweet-grass and snow.  
Now the Cree lower their greased rifles.  
Kneeling against the cold, they open the stomach,  
the tendons and black muscles, and now  
two calves are peeled from the steaming womb:

    Their skulls are heavy. Their thin bodies  
    glisten. They lie in the snow  
    like the parallel arms of a child.

Slowly, two flaps of meat are sliced  
from the mother's flank. The mouths  
of the calves are opened. Now the salty flaps  
ooze in their jaws like tongues. And now,  
through the cold palms of the hunters,  
through their stroking, shivering voices,  
the dead throats are stirring,  
the stomachs and hearts are stirring,  
the brains are stirring  
as they glaze through the dim eyes:

*This is the promise of sunrise,  
    of harvest, of winter  
    cracking from our tight bellies.  
    This is the promise of blood.  
    Swallow.*

# Grandson

Your grandmother has not moved from her couch  
for twenty days. On a table near her arm are bottles  
of soft pills, and a cup of water, pierced  
by a curved glass straw. She rests in afghans  
she crocheted a decade earlier. Often now  
she thinks of birds weaving their own protections,  
from hair and string, from pale, curling roots.

You have met one another just twice before.  
Once she cut a slingshot from the branch  
of a plum tree, her loose dress curling  
past the knees of elastic stockings,  
her rough shoes heeling the trunk.  
And once, in the haze of a taffeta lampshade,  
she lowered her black hair.  
How it stretched down her back, wild and electric!

Now you bend to her hands, to the taut amber skin  
of her forehead. And now her breathing guides you  
as you nod by the window . . .  
the crickets are grinding,  
the plum tree shivers again.  
You are running down a country road,  
dormant muscles pumping, arms lifting—  
and you are racing through a prairie of wild grass.  
At your side a slim black horse gallops across your shadow.

You will run together: where barns are sloping,  
where fat cicadas are clicking like stars.



# Kinderspelen

—from the painting by Bruegel

As your peasants dance in their grave frenzies,  
your grim-eyed bridesmaids plant and glide,  
as your pipers stare out past their droning—

here, full reign through a township, two hundred  
children tumble their hoops, their jacks and nine-pins.  
With somber compulsion, they will play!  
Knuckles, leap-frog, Whom-shall-I-marry,  
the marriage—the mime—the Whitsun child-bride  
folded in silence. Two hundred children—  
elbow to thigh to stilt to pig-back to

this, high at the left and fading:  
A pasture. A river. A boy, naked,  
swims out from the jitter. A boy  
shinnies the crisp aspen. And

the courtyards are filling, the store-fronts  
and portals. Two boys push out from the bankside.  
Two girls twirl in their red skirts—twirl  
faster—and there, by the river, by the tops  
and pin-wheels, the skirts are lifting, the skirts  
are filling, the air is filling—  
now music, the voices—hoop-whistle, whinny—  
now the girls drop through the red billows:

One sun. *Another!*

# The Poppies

—after the painting by Monet

— *Whatever is made  
The object of your vision is so made  
Because another is looking at it too,  
A fraction of a second earlier.*  
Howard Nemerov

At last a fragile light, hazing the poplars  
and peaked red roofs. You roll from your cave of blankets,  
take tea and steaming ham—then off to the fields  
with little Jean dancing behind. How easily he forgives you,  
that blanketed back curved to the wall.

And here is Camille, lifting her arm  
to match a graceful stride.  
She is just descending a shallow hill blazing with poppies.  
Her open blue parasol slips from her shoulder  
and rests—there—where the white muscles of her upper arm  
meet and divide. As she walks you watch pale foptails  
lapping the hem of her skirt . . . and then at her elbow  
Jean with his red bouquet: How the stems are thick in his fists,  
how they drop now and then, a bead of milky sap.

All morning clouds interrupt the sun.  
You pause in this alternate light, think of Jean and Camille  
at the crest of the hill, think of slanting fields,  
of poppies bobbing like scarlet birds:

And there, at the crest of the hill, is another woman  
and another boy: The child's arms are empty.  
The woman scans the bending grass.

Now she draws from the folds of her skirt  
a sheathed blue umbrella.

Now the boy is filling his arms with flowers.

And Jean and Camille approach you, smelling of purslane  
and clover. Jean lifts his arms:

Your gifts, your poppies, come flaming.

# One Hot Day in October

You wait in a corner of the schoolyard,  
damp in your peppered cords.  
At last, down soft, sucking asphalt  
your father's car comes shimmering toward you.

You have never been swimming together  
and you sing down the country roads,  
past barns and withering pumpkins.  
His collar is open.  
His false teeth curve in his pocket  
like the hoof of a tiny horse.

You walk through madroña leaves to the harbor.

In the shadow of a huge stone  
you turn from each other.  
When you look again, his skin  
is the color of sliced pears.  
His bathing suit is deep  
blue wool, with a belt, and a buckle  
where a slim woman arcs in a swan dive.

He dives through the water.  
His hair flows from his head like kelp.  
He is turning. He is kicking  
and stroking with a smooth, terrible  
grace you have never seen.  
He is the sea for you.  
He is the pelican lurching  
through a long, white sky.  
You will swim in his wake forever.

## Part Two



# Tongue

*—I did not know that my fingers were spelling  
a word, or even that words existed.*

*—Helen Keller*

Imagine another,  
blind, deaf since birth.  
One, nearly two, she squats at the lip  
of a shallow pond. Above her,  
the day exchanges its sunlight, clouds.  
This she feels in blushes across her shoulders.

With a sleepwalker's grope  
she is reaching, patting the cold grasses,  
and now, from a tangle of water cardinals  
she has plucked a pond-snail. Moist and shell-less

it sucks across her palm.  
*Tongue*, she senses, the simile  
wordless, her fingers tracing the plump muscle,  
the curling tip.  
Someone approaches. To the bowl  
of her free hand, the name is spelled  
the tingling *sn* and *ail*.  
Again. Again.

And soon she will learn. The naming.  
The borders of self,  
other. But for now, propped in the musky  
shoregrass, it is tongue she senses,  
as if the snail, mute, in the lick  
of its earthy foot,  
contained a story. As if her hand  
received it.

# Emanuela

They prepare me, speaking in tongues.  
Mother. My father and brother.  
They sway. They churn from their soft shoes.

Still,  
like the boll I am waiting, like the husk  
curved to its blossom.

Now the bishop is chanting,  
pressing my temples. His forearms  
are stiff and glisten. His throat is  
stiff in its backlash of tendons.  
*Open* he calls, pressing my temples.  
*Receive* he is calling, pressing *Receive*  
I am rocking, his rake and shimmer,  
*Receive* I am rocking *Receive Receive*.  
And now at the heart-bone words are forming  
lo and sha lo and sha rising rising  
wind the hissle and long  
push break break SIA SIA SIA SIA  
*The gift* he is calling I do not  
know *Holy Holy* I do not know  
my parents are moving beside me like  
flames their beautiful arms  
lifting like flames their faces  
are wet they are candles beside me  
*Cristo Cristo* I know I know I  
know but the thousand words for song



## Zuñi Potter: Drawing the Heartline

Through the scratch-strokes of piñon, the hissing  
arroyos, through the clamped earth  
waxed and swollen,  
coil to coil, paddle to anvil,  
the bowl on her palm-skin blossoms,  
the bowl on her lap  
blossoms, the lap blossoms

in its biscuit of bones.  
Bract-flower, weightless, in the pock and shimmer  
of August, she slopes from the plumegrass like  
plumegrass. And the white skull  
bobbles and turns. The gingerroot fingers  
turn. Through the cocked mouth  
of a buck deer, she sketches an arrow,  
its round path nostril to heart.  
For the breath going in.  
For the breath going out.  
Wind to heartbeat. The blossoms of steam.

## From the Great Depression

It is a trick the poor pass down, this  
dipping of sweaters, until the wool itself  
sucks down through the sizes, and the children  
turn in the doorways, winter-ready in perfect fits.  
(But for the monograms, full and puckered, pinched  
over their hearts like the feet of crows. . . .)

And accepting this trick, a woman  
leans to a kettle. Steam  
curls past her shoulders, past  
the magazine snapshot of Christ  
tacked over the woodstove—the beautiful one,  
where he gazes far off to the left, like  
a soft-eyed Jack of Diamonds anyone might draw.  
First you are tired, she thinks, then  
the throat closes over. The membrane,  
gray as a kettle, grows, closes.  
The sound the dipthetic makes—the stridor—

is the sound of a cart over ice furrows,

the children tumbling out at the schoolyard, with  
the black germs of their laughter  
simply vapor on the snow.  
All winter, slumped in their perfect rows, they learn  
of the great repetitions of

peak and valley.  
And where is that time, that  
peak, the woman wonders. Blue gloves, a ballroom so warm  
the eyebrows glisten. She smiles. Sweaters wind  
through her arms like boneless swimmers.  
A society of grandparents honed down to  
initials!—with the names they insist on just  
vapor, a passage of breath:

*Willa, Louisa, Percival, Neville, Maud, Reginald, Rex.*

## Believing

His wife is dying, just over eighty, embolisms  
on the kidneys and the veins gone.  
All afternoon, driving home through the scrub oaks  
and derricks, he thought of  
trout, sluicing the flats, their tug  
and weave, the gulf salt wind firm  
on his back. Now, or an hour from now,  
the phone will ring and she will be dead.  
He leaves their small table. Outside,  
two boys slip a kayak  
through the blunt canal. "Stroke,"  
he calls to them, "stroke." They lower  
their two-palmed oars. There is silence,  
a wake, thin, like a rip on the water.  
He moves inside, pulls the phone to the door,  
walks back and stares down the bulkhead.  
The boys have slid from the channel  
to the lip of the coast. He turns  
to the house, turns back: Here  
is that firm wind, mullet scratching  
the slim canal, fresh night  
with its moon. Now a child is screaming across  
the yards: The dog is snapping.  
"Hug its neck," he shouts. Then again,  
"Hug its neck." And if he were closer  
he would shout it all:  
Hug its body—the fur and gristle,  
the flipping chin. Hug it high and tight  
through your arms. Until it stops hating.

## Mid-Plains Tornado

I've seen it drive straw straight through a fence post—  
sure as a needle in your arm—the straws all erect  
and rooted in the wood like quills.  
Think of teeth being drilled, that enamel and blood  
burning circles inside your cheek. That's like the fury.  
Only now it's quail and axles, the northeast bank  
of the Cedar River, every third cottonwood.

It's with you all morning. Something wet in the air.  
Sounds coming in at a slant, like stones  
clapped under water. And pigs, slow to the trough.  
One may rub against your leg, you turn with a kick  
and there it is, lurching down from a storm cloud:  
the shaft pulses toward you across the fields  
like a magician's finger.  
You say goodbye to it all then, in a flash over  
your shoulder, with the weathervane so still  
it seems painted on the sky.

The last time, I walked a fresh path toward the river.  
Near the edge of a field I found our mare, pierced  
through the side by the head of her six-week foal.  
Her ribs, her great folds of shining skin  
closed over the skull. I watched them forever it seemed:  
eight legs, two necks, one astonished head curved  
back in a little rut of hail. And across the river  
slim as a road, a handful of thrushes set down  
in an oak tree, like a flurry of leaves  
drawn back again.

# The Genius of Earlswood Asylum

*Darkness, black moth the light burns up in.*  
—Charles Wright

Sometimes in a great while, one  
who cannot feed himself, who cannot stop  
tapping, will take to his shoulder  
a violin, small curved beautiful body,  
and play.

It is not rote. It is proven,  
it is not rote.

One who cannot hold his  
*water*, draws cats. Sells cats to George  
the Fourth. *The Cat's*  
*Raphael*.

Here is your brain, dimpled with fact. Here  
are their brains—loam-globes, a groove  
for breathing, a groove for  
cats, for melody, for the square root  
of anything. The geniuses,  
the wizards of Earlswood

(blood drawing up from their fingers, their  
toes, drawing up to its blue fissure):

Pullen, Earwicker, Alburtus J, and one,  
this one, who takes to his center  
funerals, who gleans from a book he cannot  
read, the names, the ages, the mourners present  
for thirty-five, death-filled years.

*Out of the line of burials, he has not  
one idea, not one intelligible reply.*

White fingers, white toes, white  
star the dark sucks through.

## The Bonecarver, John Eron, Marshalsea Prison, 1760

Well some of us *are* bad. Just that. You look  
we are born. You look we are bad. Like pears  
flaring from green to liver.

This is our common yard: women, children,  
the lily debtors. This is where Clara  
waved her tapered feet. *For the King's peace.*

And for ours?

The irons went on—without pain—just cold,  
then warm, like the bellies of lizards.

This is our common grave. Each rainfall the bones  
push up, purple, white, and then in the sunlight—  
mist, and the fresh domes of turnips!

England. Where does it stop? What line  
do you cross to be out of England? One field  
and a field beyond just the same. When  
the keeper turned I would stroke Clara's thigh,  
the soft, bald landscape.  
Where does it stop? we

laughed. And now, with the others, in that  
dark earth where does she stop,  
the white lattice their legs make?

First there is rain, and the mist.  
There is yard, and a little dip, and then  
the grave. In this way, I gather the dead  
descending. And they rise to meet me, eager to be  
single! Clara, I say

here is a mink with a splinter of black bread,  
scratched to the bone with a latch-pin.  
And here, a game, the peg-holes, the absolute  
borders.

Clara, when the pegs jump how the mink  
shimmies and preens, how the fingers burn,

how the selves swell back through their patterns.  
And how we are all dancing, bone-tip to  
bone-tip, beast to prancing beast.

# Touching the Elephant

*—for my brother*

You have been inside so long the colors overwhelm you,  
and now the elephant is out—  
ambling past the hippos and secretary birds,  
then down the path toward the honking mules.  
All this motion, and these borders of color.

The guard is clipping the big-kneed legs for hoofing  
divots in the lawn. A crowd gathers.  
You keep shading your eyes with both hands.

Henry,  
I should have re-introduced you more slowly.  
Here are the first colors: ice,  
one slim section of the moon.  
And this is motion, this rain enlarging  
in the veins of leaves,

the heart of this animal.

We place our palms on the full stomach, the sparse  
sharp hairs. Flesh withdraws, then swells  
against us. I notice small pebbles and clots of dirt  
sprayed through the hairs for insulation.  
I notice your hands now, brailing across the hide.

A bland eye rolls.  
For a moment the trunk approaches your shoulder  
like the arm of an old friend.  
And the long breath that touches you  
is wind from a cave you remember.



# At the Speed of Light

Tourist-plump, the last Oregon dune buggy ambles  
off on its elephant wheels.

Blue sky eggs the wind on.  
All around us, sand curls into little tornadoes,

hisses, explodes, finally clings  
to the black rims of our sunglasses

like circles of infinitesimal stars.  
In love with this whiteness, you

clap your hands, tell me the image is lifting,  
like a light-strewn pigeon. Intact, you explain,

in a thousand years this hand-swing will break  
intact on another planet.

We walk, walk, past tangles of  
agate-bright lakes, small and deadly,

their jellied suck-hole shores trembling in the wind.  
And then there are only the hills, flat white,

planked at the mid-riff with shadows.  
Egypt, I laugh. Ancient Egypt!

And suddenly to each of us a woman  
is turning: her sun-blackened feet, her arms,

the brilliant turquoise vessels she  
carries—everything—breaking across us.

## Dining in the Country

One entire wall is wire mesh.  
Above our heads, two slow fans  
exchange the heat. Through mesh we watch  
a family of peacocks, and beyond  
a white bull nodding in slanted wheat.  
Your hands encircle your wine glass  
with full, blue-tunnelled veins:  
I remember how smooth they were,  
turning fish hooks and slices  
of balsa, on early April mornings.

This room is thick with the sounds  
of closing: fans winding down,  
peacocks pleading, like dancers  
trapped in their glittering costumes.

We walk into early evening,  
our feet sinking in cockleburrs  
and thick St. Augustine grass.  
How beautiful you are: your white  
hair and powdered shoes,  
your fine linen trousers.  
Now a peacock is spreading his train.  
Another, smaller, calls again,  
from the lowest branch of an oak.

# Tapir

Blacker still in this first light,  
flat-eyed, pungent,  
your trunk and mythic hocks shuddering toward me,  
you bring with you

Paraguay. Amazonas. Peru.  
That gross and temperate air, thick  
with papaya. One toucan  
lifting to flames. And again, below,  
through ripples of canebreak,  
one shadow, huge, centaurian:  
Pizarro on horseback, his dark plume nodding. . . .

And that is the way we blossom, two-legged,  
checkered in denim, bringing to you from our side  
buds we cannot imagine: pure sound, pure  
scent—the hipboot, the jawline  
gaining shape through a cluster of odors.

Grooming you, taking with toenail and burr,  
a little fig, a little green maté,  
I speak of the day, the sun's  
predictable arc,  
the flesh and the spirit,  
the abracadabra of stars. . . .  
Old beast, I must be the wind for you now,  
you are so silent under my hands.

# Elegy for 41 Whales Beached in Florence, Oregon June 1979

*—There was speculation that a parasite in the  
whales' ears may have upset their equilibrium  
and caused them to become disoriented.*  
—UPI

In the warm rods of your ears  
forty-one parasites hummed  
and you came rolling in  
like tarred pilings after a hurricane.  
What songs were they piping for you?  
What promises did you follow, past the coral  
and mussels, and out from the frothy hem  
of your world?

These are people.  
They dance around you now like hooked marlin.  
Some are weeping. Some are trying to pull you back.  
Some crouch above your blow-holes  
and drill their cigarettes into your skin.

All night your teeth are clicking.  
All along the beach you are clicking like wind-chimes.  
Is the song still piping for you?

This is sand. You cannot swim through it.  
These are trees. Those houses on the cliff  
are also trees. And the light that blinks  
from them now is made from water.  
We have a way of reworking the vital:

This is a pit. That was quicklime.  
And here is fire.

## Part Three



# Philter

With the mountains across her back and the wheel  
at her elbow, spinning wool browned from the stems  
of walnuts, she watched for her first season:  
breasts like the hubs of dogwood flowers, blood

that slipped down her banked thighs, cousins  
awakened and prodding, uncles and thin brothers  
strumming their songs in the buckling cabin.

She bled that fall in a pocket of oak leaves,  
squatting, staring. And the wheel, alone in its clearing,  
in its tufts of carded wool, threw the black  
sloped shadow of a bison.

There was wind and the great head lowered.  
*Now you begin.*

She lifted their jug from the pantry, dipped  
under her skirt with a dusty hand,  
swirled the sharp, clear blood deep  
in their whiskey. Humming, skimming the floor  
with her turning hem, she whittled a nail  
from her finger: It dropped through the jug  
like a closing eye.

And one of them followed, lugging his rifle,  
his heart-strings, his jug with the curling nail.  
One rocked in her shivering body.  
For her newness, for flesh like a white trout,  
for a sky where the old stars crackled,  
one of them whispered *My love My love*  
while her small heart opened and she  
turned her face to the long wall of the forest.

# Heat Wave

The killing sun is setting. We leave our withered  
horses, our windless, stone-dry wheat,  
to come to these lawns, these galleries,  
where Nick and Nora and stiff-legged Asta hang  
from the sky. Our children are slumped on the grass  
like empty jackets. A lung of cicadas  
rattles.

How green we are. How sun  
through the elm leaves greens us. How sun  
through the windows of celadon vases

greens us. The saxes and trumpets are bleating.  
The clays of a thousand years tremble,  
regather.

Oh Nora. Oh Nick with your whiskey,  
your ascot, your eye swelling now  
like the moon from a hundred miles:  
Give us your clear-headed glances.  
Skim over our bodies like rain.



# Lifting

Each evening near seven, a father lifts  
his son—at first without effort, the boy  
no more than a swaddle, a sharp interruption  
of sleep. Even later, eye to blue  
chirruping eye, the son is a bone farm,  
all gooseflesh and stubble.

Little by little, everyone grows. Riley  
and Junior. Ozzie and Dave. The green nations  
stir and toddle. And the son  
is still lifted, near middle-age,  
his rust-colored wing-tips scratching  
the floor, his chest pressed to its  
bagpipe's snort—then a kiss and a cuff  
and a walk with the moon to his own yard.

Year after year, the son fattens, the father  
stoops. One evening, just after seven,  
the son is not lifted. Hands knot  
at the small of his back, cork soles  
stretch and gape, but the son is not lifted.  
And where has the energy gone? In that  
brief span, nightfall to nightfall, where  
has it gone? There was sleep and brunch,  
a walk through the terrace, Hearts  
and a little chatter. In what  
form has the energy gone?  
On what spiked back has it lifted?

# After Hearing Ernest Gaines

—*When you quilt, a lot of times you say “Lord” as you quilt, just the needle going through, “Lord.” Well it looks like the needle is saying that.*

Nora Lee Contra, from the film  
***Quilts in Women’s Lives***

Near the end of the afternoon, he gave us  
this fragment: an aunt, crippled, had raised him.  
*Flat on her stomach, she slid*  
*through the garden, she slid through the thin*  
*house. And when they had sinned, she sent them—*  
Ernest, his cousins—to break down the switches  
for their own lashings.

Days later, when I take up the statement on quilting  
this aunt comes firmly back—nobody’s now, just  
one of a dozen, a hundred, who lived as they must have  
in Kansas, in the scrub pines of West Virginia.

I want her to sew. She sits at the wide table.  
The swatches are ready: the birthstar, the briar,  
the drowned son’s sleeve pinked and blocked.  
Notched deep in the cambric, the muse-voice,  
thin, coloratura, dips and whispers  
*Lord, whispers Lord. I turn*

and she’s gone, palming the garden. Someone has  
sinned; high in the hackberry, someone is  
breaking a slim branch. There is sunlight across  
her shoulders, and behind, on the thick wake  
of her hips. Now a child is waiting beside her,  
stooped for his small pardon. *I want you to*  
*sew!* But the switch-tip is dancing, the boy is  
yelping, is laughing, is rolling his back to  
the sweetgrass—and she is above him, stretched  
thin in her long arc: apron to shoulder to  
armpit, now mouth calling *Lord, your forgiveness,*  
calling *Lord, your forgiveness, calling We*  
*are your vessels, receive us.*

## Cactus, Blossoming Every Hundred Years

A man is kneeling in his canoe.  
Over the brittle side he lowers and retrieves and lowers  
a clothesline weighted by horseshoes:  
for weeks he has sounded the green harbor.  
On the shore a crowd cheers as its first bicycle  
jiggles along a rutted street. The high  
front wheel catches the sun and curls it  
out to the man, where he works with his salty line.

All day the wheel spins its yellow arc across the water.

And cheers follow the man, from the beach  
through the evergreens  
as he carries his boat upside down on his head.  
Where the sun crosses his body, his canoe,  
the shadow looks like a tomahawk  
and the man sees again one young Indian  
stooped over the spreading tapestry  
of his grandfather's skull.

Then the birds return and the distant, cheering voices.  
His house is white in an oval clearing.  
His wife and three young daughters are standing together  
in the deep mahogany odors of the parlor.  
Through the window sunlight warms their pinafores,  
their still, black shoes. They are watching a cactus  
in a pewter dish, where, for the first time in their lives,  
a single blossom lifts its yellow moon.

# Dogsled Through the Trees

They will all fit if they slide between one another's knees.  
First the man, then the woman, and finally the child,  
low slope of a wedge. The woman smooths a sealskin  
blanket across the child's lap and whispers:  
"Eskimos chew blubber and have teeth like stone."  
But the child is thinking of bear rugs, and searches  
the blanket for claws, and little marble eyes.

Nine white breaths pant up from the team  
of Malamutes, like smoke from an alley of fires.  
The animals feel their breast straps tighten, the stiffening tow.  
The man feels the Eskimo's knees against his shoulderblades  
and the firm saddle of the woman's back.

Now a quick whistle and the sled lurches forward—  
and then no sound, no gee or haw, only runners slicing the snow.  
Together the man and woman, and the small child,  
watch the galloping white rumps of the Malamutes.

Just as the team arcs toward the trees,  
a thought freezes in the man's mind,  
like a rabbit stunned in a snowy trail  
with nine jaws approaching:

"Everyone who carries my father's name is in this sled."

And then the thought is gone.

A crow is lifting from a branch above the sled,  
a glistening, black salute.  
The man curls his neck and glimpses the pale, flat claws  
and brief underbeak. And now the Eskimo's face  
on a sky the color of snow. The sharp bones curving  
like wings. The sharp, black eyes. There are the stone  
teeth, and the breath seeping between them is saying:

"Listen, now. Listen. You are almost here."

# Cicadas

1.

Each summer I stretched through the elm tree, tracing  
their song, shaking the limbs where they bucked  
and chattered, black in that heat  
as the black leaves.

I grew, caught only their hulls, dirt  
in the husk-beaks, bubbles of lid.

When I was young, I could not understand  
where the sound went.

2.

In the 1940's  
my uncle was a prisoner in the War.  
He lived on his chest and ate grass.  
For 38 months and 2 weeks  
he said nothing.  
When he came home the neighbors said  
Fighter. Said Fury. Said Johnny-the-Hero.

It wasn't that, he told me.

He told me the stars over there,  
the constellations, were  
clustered against the sea.  
Each night, when he looked in his one  
direction, there was land, then sea, and far  
at the end, he said, a little hoop to God.

3.

I grew. He died. One summer I sat  
in the moonlight and a brood was climbing,  
up through the garden, the elm tree, up  
from the roots they had sucked for thirteen

years. Clamped to the bark with their foreclaws,  
shivering, splitting at last  
through their crisp backs, they pushed

white for that midnight and silent, to their  
second lives.  
Not redemption. Not souls freed from the body-husk.  
Not even endurance.  
They just filled that tree to a white  
lung, squeezed out in silence  
my uncle's mute song:  
A thousand opening insects.  
Like ice-breath. Like steam.

## While You're Away

All year the house has thickened  
with neglect: gates scraping  
their patterns across the lawn,  
knots of bamboo blocking the sky.

I remember that first summer,  
the paths we etched through the garden,  
the cool, meticulous stones.

Like someone driven I spend these evenings  
chopping, clearing. When I sleep  
your fine, white body walks toward me.

# The Rickers

How does anything start? Here  
with the chatter of grackles, the rain-twitched  
pines, these stills at our elbows  
sucking and wheezing, we shovel a toast  
to Ahman, his thin fingers boiling metal,  
cooling the vapors to paint—

and paint black on the eyelids,  
Cleopatra goggled and grateful, *Al-kuhul, Ahman.*  
*For the eyes!*  
Friend we've been grateful since:

Through arrowhead, zeppelin, brigandine,  
spat, the slow puckers  
of flesh from bone:

Drip and hiss.

Drip and hiss.  
We are the rickers, the moonshine colts.  
Here, in this cool interference of rain,  
we sip, we sip, we sip, we whoop  
and the grackles break in their startled splendor,  
stroke in the black-winged  
splendor, shiver, dip, wink out for the instant  
*Al-kuhul, boys, al-kuhul! wink*  
*Drink to your warm-blooded hearts.*



## In Prague, In Montmartre

It is winter in Prague, 1874. On a glass slab,  
in a knuckle of sap, chromosomes slip  
into focus, for Strasburger, for Flemming,  
for the first time. Walther raises his head,  
feels in his spine the pull of the hours.  
Adolf lowers his head—now the heartrace  
thick in his throat: with slow strokes they are  
finding each other: helix to helix. Globe.

Just at these moments, in a room in Montmartre,  
Degas is tipping his small name to a green pitcher.  
And around it, in patches, ballerinas  
are drying: cumberbund, anklet, a brushstroke  
of shoe. The music has yet to begin.  
One woman is scratching her thick back, another  
her lip. Row after row, these dancers are clumped  
to the wall-rail, awkward, complete in their stillness.

The microscope leans from its thin light.  
Excited, now fumbling with joy, Adolf turns  
to his friend: Can it be these filaments, these  
couple-beads, distinguish us? Nostril? Nail?  
This alliance of globes—not fragments, globes?  
That the self blossoms from globes?

Degas steps from the canvas, the cumbersome, full  
bodies, the music, full, delayed but a moment,  
like the dragged note of the milktrain,  
just passing—in Prague, in Montmartre—

Yes, he whispers, to no one.

# The Asparagus Pickers

The path from the highway  
is darker than the fields, chickweed and sorrel  
snagging a little night, washing it back  
to our ankles and shins.  
Oh but the crops are clearing!  
A furlong before us, burning its dew,  
the long irrigation dolly steams over squat wheels,  
stretches its wand halfway across  
asparagus troughs. But then, like folly, like  
the end of a dream—not water, but a dozen  
harnesses sag from the wand: leather,  
full-length aprons, to ease

our backaches, our clamping thighs.  
Embarrassed, still strangers  
fresh in the season, we whisper our thanks to  
Apco, to Dunn, to the Yakima Ranches, and enter  
the aprons with shallow dives, slip feet  
to the booties. The great wand  
vibrates above us. The harnesses  
shudder. Our tanned hands, looped through  
the bodice straps, clutch and shudder. With  
a low-pitched moan we are lifted,  
a dozen strangers, a foot  
from the ground—and the moan echoes as down  
the field, eight, ten, eleven dollies  
puff and shudder, a hundred bodies, lighter  
than water, sway in the crop-steam—there,  
and there, as far as the level eye can see:  
the shimmering fingers of stalks, the bodies  
just over, silent, arboreal,  
all the quick joy lifting through.

# Anesthesia

—James Young Simpson, 1811-1870

Cows and children nudge in the streets.  
There is sunlight, wind. On the roofs the patterns  
of thatch and turquoise. And up through it all  
the snore of the weaver's shuttle.

Like the dreams you would give us.  
James, to sleep on command! To feel  
nothing. The tooth, the tumor extracted—there,  
just beyond, while the self sits on the tiled rooftops  
watching the children.

*This, you say, perhaps this.*  
Acetone, benzine, nitrate of oxide of ethel.  
It is evening again. Your students, Keith  
and Duncan, pay for their suppers with hearty sniffs:  
Together, with the motion of cellists, each of you  
raises an elbow, breathes from the sweet tumblers.  
*Keith's eyes grow bright, Duncan waltzes!*  
And, James, in a tangle of starched cuffs, you  
fall to the floor, one after one climb  
back to the table, pour chloroform, ether,

stumble, surface.  
*Plumbing sleep, you laugh. Plumbing*  
*death. What is there for me but this:*  
*Trial after trial, the wonderful If. . . .*

It is 1869. This morning, near death, you hear  
that across the cold Atlantic  
the last gold spike  
stitches the coast to coast railway.  
Propped high in your bed, you see for a moment  
two thin boys place their tongues  
to the humming track, laugh, watch at eye-level  
two lines, then one, then, halfway to Hannibal, a silver  
flame. Each rises, straddles  
a track beam, slips down as you watch, slips  
down and over the rail-line, smaller and smaller,

their tiny bodies bobbing like weights.  
You smile, close your eyes, and  
James, they are sunlight, they are steam.

# Open

Tonight in the clear winter you read  
from our table ***The Book of Dog Breeds***,  
say Afghan—and I'm off

climbing down from a ship in British  
Ceylon, a woman this time or thin man,  
abrupt in my jodhpurs. And behind  
in cages a cluster of afghans, their  
snouts and folk-hair, their billowing  
sea legs. Straining now at their leashes,  
wheezing, sluicing out through the guava  
and scrub—to gather . . . *leopards*.  
O those bone-less, long-haired bodies,  
black-lipped and yapping, lifting up  
through the screw pine like winter steam,  
those leopards, churned and climbing,  
that island sky, the harbor,

the book, the table, your mouth  
saying Bassett, saying Open, saying Pull  
from the awe of the eye.

## Lesson:

# The Spider's Eighth Eye

These three things then: They have eight eyes.  
They have memory. Their images do not overlap.

They leave the brood-cocoon when the last grains  
of yolk rattle in their pearly bellies.  
Each climbs a blade of grass, a twig,  
a splintering fence . . . anything sharp and solitary.  
Here they send a thread-hook for the wind.

The launch is terrifying: Whipped to a current.  
Gusted. Their legs sucked behind, at first,  
like so much hair. But somehow they shinney,  
and they ride those gossamer V's like arrowheads.

This process—the launch, the travel—this is  
called ballooning. Some balloon for days.  
They are often found in a ship's rigging,  
hundreds of miles from shore.  
Or matting an airplane windshield, like cloud-frays.  
Those who survive live their lives where the current  
drops them. They do not balloon again.

Now, finally, the eyes. They can not converge.  
One pair may see you—not as a face, exactly,  
but a pale avoidance—just as another sees  
the mantel tray, like a gold sun  
without heat or shadow.

The eighth eye is tucked below, and has a range  
no higher than your knee. It sees only floors,  
soil, crackles of plaster. It is the memory eye.  
Sometimes when a draft gusts under the door,  
or wind whisks the porch, the eighth eye remembers:  
It is all very fast—just a spark, in fact:

the wide rush of sea, perhaps a few whales below,  
like sun-spots. And then the great flapping  
net of a sail.

Of course, the wind should be very brisk.  
But since there is memory,  
this is how it must be.

# Flights of the Harvest-Mare

In Wales, just off from the Radnor Forest,  
in the Valley of the Wolves' Jaws,  
two women sit in the first sunlight. Far under  
their thighs, the globes of their heels, is a circle  
of carbon and ash. The women are old, and lean  
to each other, feel at their spines the camber and pock  
of the answering spine, feel at their palms

the bunch-grass, just over the strata, just  
over the ash, where

*nine men have emptied their pockets,  
have sliced from the forest the branches of nine  
trees. A fire is lighted.  
Through the loose lips of burlap bags,  
cakes are dropped, oat and brownmeal—*

*slowly, without sound—*

*as the losers who drop to their knees, having  
plucked from the sackcloths the pebbles,  
the welts of brownmeal.  
Shaking, alone in their thin lines, they will  
jump three times through the flames—the oldest,  
the weak, landing once, twice in the branch-plumes,  
giving up the eyebrows, the hairline, giving  
now the ear-flaps, as the great skulls stretch  
and plunge, over over over  
alive in the fire-skin!*

*This is the promise of harvest.*

★ ★ ★

The women lift to their strong shoes, walk  
out through the dropband, the steaming ewes. Smoothly,  
with the grace-stride of twins, they take  
from each other: balance, repair. . . .



But the mare is with us!—  
stiff in our clothing, stiff on our calves,  
and there,  
pinned stiff to the roofbeam: the nodding forelock,  
the dry shimmering body we drink to.

Locked high in the tapered pelvis, the lamb  
has buckled. And the women are singing,  
without hesitation, three strong chords  
to the churning dam. Just with the low notes,  
when the black ears wither and flap  
a hand is slipped through the lips of the vulva.  
Sucked to the wrist, the forearm, it nudges at last,  
deep in the birthpath, the skull and tangled  
hooves, circles the nape, the chest-bridge,  
pulls from the sucking, turns, pulls  
to that first sunlight, the muzzle, two small hooves  
like a diver.

And now, as the lamb stammers  
its first sound, she will drop her hand,  
will feel through her breasts, for an  
instant, the flow, the course and withdrawal

of song. *What we cannot control, we  
control, she will say.*

When very young, Linda Bierds moved with her family from her birthplace, Wilmington, Delaware, to Anchorage, Alaska, where she lived until she was seven years old. Since then, she has lived in Seattle, Washington. She earned a B.A. and an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Washington, and she now edits the publications of the Women's Information Center at that school. She also teaches poetry in the schools under the auspices of the Washington State Arts Commission. Her work as a docent at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo reflects her interest in animals, endangered species in particular. She has published poetry in over sixty magazines, including, most recently, **The New England Review**, **The Massachusetts Review**, and **The New Yorker**.



# Ahsahta Press

POETRY OF THE WEST

## MODERN

- \*Norman Macleod, *Selected Poems*
- Gwendolen Haste, *Selected Poems*
- \*Peggy Pond Church, *New & Selected Poems*
- Haniel Long, *My Seasons*
- H. L. Davis, *Selected Poems*
- \*Hildegard Flanner, *The Harkening Eye*
- Genevieve Taggard, *To the Natural World*
- Hazel Hall, *Selected Poems*
- Women Poems of the West: An Anthology*
- \*Thomas Hornsby Ferril, *Anvil of Roses*
- \*Judson Crews, *The Clock of Moss*

## CONTEMPORARY

- \*Marnie Walsh, *A Taste of the Knife*
- \*Robert Krieger, *Headlands, Rising*
- Richard Blessing, *Winter Constellations*
- \*Carolyn Wright, *Stealing the Children*
- Charley John Greasybear, *Songs*
- \*Conger Beasley, Jr. *Over DeSoto's Bones*
- \*Susan Strayer Deal, *No Moving Parts*
- \*Gretel Ehrlich, *To Touch the Water*
- \*Leo Romero, *Agua Negra*
- \*David Baker, *Laws of the Land*
- \*Richard Speakes, *Hannah's Travel*
- Dixie Partridge, *Deer in the Haystacks*
- Philip St. Clair, *At the Tent of Heaven*
- Susan Strayer Deal, *The Dark Is a Door*
- Linda Bierds, *Flights of the Harvest-Mare*
- Philip St. Clair, *Little-Dog-Of-Iron*
- Corrinne Hales, *Underground*

\*Selections from these volumes, read by their authors, are now available on *The Ahsahta Cassette Sampler*.

