WINTER CONSTELLATIONS

by

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For Edward J. Blessing and Richard P. Adams

“Now my son is another poet, fathers,
I can go on living. I was afraid once
Four loving fathers meeting together
Would be a cold day in hell.”

James Wright
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Introduction

Richard Blessing is a very gifted, deeply thoughtful, and increasingly skillful poet whose most apparent qualities are a firm control of diction, a rare ability to sing, a sense of humor which he sustains even in front of mirrors, and a persuasive amiability of tone and voice.

He is a man to listen to closely because he seems to me to be getting better in every way, every year, a rare characteristic in American poets of any age.

David Wagoner
University of Washington
May 12, 1977
Wishing West

An ambiance of amber light on snow,
goose-dappled dawn, pale stars above the sea—
I wish a west and west begins to grow.

I weave of rain a name and naming go
till crashing on the cloudspun cliffs I see
ripe ambiance of amber light on snow.

I whisper seaward rivers’ sunflecked flow,
say yes to deer until deer come to be
and wishing west find west begins to grow.

East of that west with wandering steps and slow
I drop redwood dominions tree by tree
deep valleys down from peaks of amber snow

and naming winds find hemlocks start to blow.
I shout bright myriad birds then set them free
and wishing west find west begins to grow.

I speak these geese and stars and find them so.
Here in Ohio’s twilight towns I see
an ambiance of amber light on snow
and wish a west and west begins to grow.
Father’s Song

Summers my long arm hummed your song:
Nobody loves you when you lose.
Good days I threw baseballs so fast
they could pass through shut windows
without disturbing glass.
Nobody loved me when I won.
You taught the only song I’ve known,
and no one hated you.
They never saw me, you said, when I asked.
Old artificer, father, coach.
you kept yourself the slickest trick of all.
Did you lie upside down on a wooden rack,
your skinny ankles taped.
and imitate a bat?
Did you blow pipe smoke out
till you turned blue
to float off as a cloud?
Did everyone see through
you then but me?
Father, these days I lose and lose
and you were right,
no one loves me.
Come back. Teach me that dipsy-doo,
your phantom double-play.
Make me invisible like you.
Letter from Seattle

Mother, salmon are lost by the thousands.
Sea birds turn like bells
in a steeple of winter. The rain
lies down with the snow, whispers
daughter, daughter, my only love.
Nothing endures. Not the naming of sorrows.
the stars falling from the bough of dark.
Blackberries tangle my yard like wire.
like the story of our lives. Geese
are fading in the sky. My astrologer
says I will not last, that my son
loves me, but is often afraid. I follow
myself wherever I’m going. Will you believe me
if I sign this

Always.
Seventieth Summer

That summer, his seventieth, he walked the edge of town in a suit of rain. He thought of his brother who was dead and of his brother who was dead. It was something heavy he carried like a star near his heart. Like a star and like shrapnel in the shape of a star. It was hard to have been the last for so long. His death kept breathing in him like a fingerless baby. He wanted to open his mouth and shout, to let it out in the woods where animals went along with their dying. The happiness of others grew behind him like a wall. He wanted to lay himself down at the gates like a siege. He wanted the city never to surrender.
To My Father

Father, it is your time for holding on,
that strategy of die-hard leaves in cold,
of pine-crossed stars that glint against the dawn.
The hardest is to see your son grows old.

Last night my son’s voice asked me, as I slept,
"Daddy, when I grow up, will you grow down?"
I answered with your voice. I woke and wept.
I grow both ways at once, father and son.

We reap the seeds of fruit that we have sown;
Father, all growing up is growing down.
The Winter Maker

He is seventy now, and blind.
He forgets he is the winter maker.
thinks he is old man, like any other.

He looks out at the stubbled snowfields
south of Buffalo and misses nothing much.
When light refuses to enter his eyes.

he chews it like shoe leather. spits it out
above the steeples and the ice-webbed trees.
He tells the story of his life backwards,
day by cold day, ugly as factory tools.
It is one of the ways he turns out winter.
He feels the winter map of his blood.

the winter chill along impassable arteries.
That is when sky opens its raw wound,
and blizzards lean hard from the north.

Cars drift aimless in snow. Heaters stall.
headlights fail. Then whichever way you walk
takes you in deeper than the nearest farm.
Boy Blessing

b. 9/11/68 d. 9/12/68

In the dark turning of the cycle
the cells ran through their ancient act.
Dividing, doubling, the quaint folk dance
of worm, of fish, of snake, of rat—
the slow progress of eons flying
like August birds in amber light.

Today we fold and put away
the practiced syllables of a name—
we do not spend them on this stone,
but we shall not take them out again.
Your Poem

Love, between your reaching life and mine all space closes by halves forever. You are the tortoise no strong man will catch, the angel vanishing at the eye’s quick edge. Today the stars cry out like blackening leaves; tomorrow are stillborn our miraculous children. I am afraid to taste the sound of your name, afraid of the light that rims your shadow. Love, there are those who arrive by saying good-bye. I will open the door if no one is home. If no one is home, I will walk in a little, leaving the dark in the way that I find it, leaving my kiss like a note on the table. Deeper and deeper I step into your absence like a silence on the roof in a season of rain.
To the Lady in the Expensive Coat,
Suede Boots

Supermarket. 1974

I eye you like champagne or caviar—
things tasteful people like. What is it
I want from you? Nothing like love.
The sun this northwest winter hangs
lacquered and white above the icy lakes,
more warm than you. Yet down these packaged aisles
I follow—what? I am like some constant priest
keeping a ritual his father’s father half believed.
It is not so fine a thing as lust. Adorned
and scented, you mock the fox, the seal,
the thrashing thicket and all that slippery play.
Something more sinister than play, is it the mask
beneath all masks I want, the mother’s face,
the bearded woman sleeping in my sleep?
To the Man in the Other Car,
Who Wanted to Fight

12/24/73

There are crazies out there. says my wife.
and it is true. What were you, brother?
The mistaken prescription? The dark pill?
The rusty blade in the Halloween apple?
The bullet sleeping careless in the empty gun?
Probably not so much. A flatter nose. At worst,
an eye closed. Or were you a present to myself,
a set of weights to make miracles ripple,
a male extension that would never fail.
the magic oyster to be opened, to be eaten,
preserve my body and soul until your coming again?
Brother, I have unmanned us both. I drive nowhere
back down these empty streets, a crazy,
out here, out there, looking for you.
Winter Luck

Someone has built a lodge by the river. Smoke rises against the rain. Someone has nailed a raven wing by wing to an aspen stump. It is a sign of nothing good: famine, more rain, the raven doesn't say. Someone has run the river into winter luck. Otter, muskrat, beaver, give birth to furry stones. Rain turns to smoke as it falls, lies down too black to rise. When salmon sail out, someone slams the future behind them. Fern is the tallest green for days.

At dusk the raven calls a council of shadows. He says nothing, like a sack of black feathers. Shadows know what to do. They deepen, surround the lodge. Someone dreams of a woman. Shadows eat her up. Someone dreams of a son, and shadows eat him up. When no one is left, his hair sits up in bed. Rain and night, those black, ravenous wings, hook bony claw and lip deep into lodge poles, break back the skins, teach anyone who's left to prey.
Another Birthday Poem

It is an island, this September
where alders let fall light down
among blue fern. I have come round
again. The day stops like footprints
waiting to be filled. This wind
is old roof and the house rises
above me one more time. Today
is the day of thresholds and latches.
Today is the day that keeps blessing
my name. Sky sharpens its colder edge
and the lake hides a deeper lake
elsewhere. Sun hangs fire in a stand
of fir. Today I turn with the earth,
the way it goes, as if it goes no way
at all. My seasons fall away. Tomorrow
is nothing but the earth’s turn.
The Rest of My Life

The river arrives
like a procession
of shadows. Snow
builds a cottage
of snow. Inside
a woman stares
in the long glass
of winter. Dusk
keeps taking her
in like a sleeve.
The rest of my life
blows in her room
like sheets of paper.
Her shadow listens
in glass, bends,
begin to write.
She writes the rest
of my life, day
after day. She writes
tomorrow from memory.
White wind hides pages
one by one. My life
is thin, is thinner.
Still her shadow
listens, bends, writes.
What she forgets
is what never happens.
What she remembers
arrives like a river
of shadows.
Lines for Her Leaving

Say she leaves you.
A thousand days and pain
is second-hand.
sentimental almost.
a father's grieving
for a child's lost ball.
Next the nostalgias,
the house where you grew up.
that sort of thing.
sadnesses sweet as birds
filling November's empty trees.
One day you'll wake up peaceful,
like a tiny village
with a famous cemetery.
It is winter. The tourists
have all gone home.
When you learn the language
you will find
there is no word there
that says her name.
This is your last house. How sad you are.
You have pressed out fresh darkness to hang in the closet,
stored your good hours in an air-tight vault.

Which room will gouge the last glass of your eyes?
Will you tumble like a pie tin to the kitchen linoleum?
Be found in the nude above the bathroom pool?

Maybe the den will smother you with flushed paper roses
or the stairs to your room will walk up your heart.
The bed you have dreamed on has been measuring your shadow.

It is sad when children laugh under windows, when trees on the lawn
bloom ruddy as lions.
It is sad to have come to the last house and know it.

The carpet will deepen like a pond filled with lilies
or your chair will drop you like a hangman’s trap.
What does it matter? You walk in and walk in and you never walk out.
The wives have all gone away.

Rain is falling
as we write this down.
How green October is!
How loudly snow rings
in the passes above Port Angeles!
The wives have all gone away.
They have left a million dishes
and ruby cigarette butts
and many used Kleenex
and a note saying
they have left no note.
They have taken the children
and something else that feels
like the air from our lungs.
They have gone all away.
Rain falls. We talk
to beautiful women.
They look like our wives
and we tell them this,
but when we have told them,
it is no longer true.
Too beautiful is less
with the children gone.
yes, and the something else,
not air we think.
but the cord of the spine
or the muscles of the thigh.
We write letters,
hoping to win them back.
We state the problem:
The wives have all gone away.
We offer amnesty:
Come back, come back.
It will all be different now.
We tie the letters
to the legs of birds
and they fly away
and the mountains receive them.
They do not return.
The beautiful women
look as if they know
and laughter, children’s laughter, corners in the wind.
More rain. More messages.
None of us knows how many
we are. The list goes on
for days and there is only
one name. again and again.
like the shades of October
or the sound the snow makes,
that huge bell-sound.
name and name and name
over green Port Angeles.
All love, we sign. All love.
What I Know by Heart

I know your address by heart.
I write Dear Occupant:

You said one day you'd walk into a mirror
until it pulled out like a train.
From your window rain is a heavy shadow:
like smoke from an engine miles ahead.

Must I learn the strategy of this light?
In bed I am out of place with myself,
like a snake curving on a rich carpet.
Even my voice brings death. And yours?

Yesterday a ghostly heron rose with a white cry
from a warped madrona. The lake was wilderness.
And I thought of you, writing this to me.
I thought of you, reading this in a rainy light.

Suppose we knew each other by heart.
Suppose each wrote the same words and read them:
Make your body like a rock.
Ten thousand things will break themselves on your life.
No shout will surprise you.

How our bodies would harden then.
You could sharpen my sword or bully a giant.
Together we could mark a trail.
We would be all the corners of the house.

Address unknown is what I know by heart.

Dear Occupant, I write. I am dying like a tree
from the inside out. When the water birds have flown
I am filled still with the white silence of their cries.
Raven

The raven lands in a book of shadows. The ice tree, the flower tree, are one to him. He feeds on shadow and shadow grows back. The nest he builds is a nest of shadow. It is dark and he wants it darker. He turns his head inside himself and likes it there. It is a secret too dark for the bright snowy owl. Raven folds feathers outside in, night-lands in a tree of black ice and flowers. Someone is thumbing pages to find him. The glare is blinding on morning snow.
Leaving

When you leave you carry yourself like a suitcase that matters. You listen to the locks changing behind you and say nothing has changed at all.

Isn’t this your season, a winter so exact
the wind warms up for days before it snows?
Isn’t this white sun the color scheme you choose.

the chill that wears you like a pony’s winter coat?
Think of the lives you’re burning to survive.
Think, when you cross that bridge, how gulls

are lining up to be gulls. I must take my life
more seriously is what you write, but how

Think how you tried to live without mistakes,
but sky is a mistake, and water. You fit the house

behind you when you left and not before.

Tomorrow’s another matter, a wrong so constant
you read it in the mirror right. Meanwhile, this snow

you think is air packs you like luggage to be carried on.
35th Birthday

Presidential age. Your wife’s still
with you, more and less. Your son
sings HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DADDY MONKEY,
cracks himself up. And the day is good,
gusts of sun and leaves. the air ringing
like a telephone. The way to work
is trying to be your friend. They’ve found
the girls somebody stashed alive
in the hills. People are nice, really.
the radio says. The lake fills
with light and your lungs are sails.
Every day should be like this,
italicized. nobody missing. love
coming in cards, unsigned, the wind
blowing smoky kisses. Don’t cry.
People are nice, alive, really, and well.
Blow out the candles, get your wish.
The cake you cut gets lighter every year.
your wife gives you her cheek, your son
his song and Happy Birthday’s happy
no matter whose. Nothing is changed.
Your only lasting present is your past.
Getting It Right

Rain again. You're home. This time you'll get it right. The mailbox where you mail your poems converts them into instant cash. No deposit, no return. Applause. Tomorrow when you make up friends, keep the prettiest one for your wife. She'll live to give you presents, apple dumpling, popcorn surprise. Think safe. Make all friends girls. No road leads into town. Home's an island and only you can swim. Dogs are licensed friendly and police will break the thumbs of anyone you say. By law the neighbors envy you. They never think Fat, lonely, bald. Nice people on the phone take blame for every failure in your life. The news is always good. All precincts in. You win, landslides of love like Valentines. Write your acceptance speech in lies, blue-black as rain. This time you'll get it right. What's right is what you want.
Bicentennial Poem

Most accidents happened in the home. This was looked into.
Accidents are seldom accidental. When our homes were gone,
we had the streets, but there was crime in the streets.
Already we had destroyed the woods to keep away the bears
and wild men who were rumored to live there. Where could we go?
Violence hung, heavy as rope, from elms in the park.
Wings circled our shadows with a meat-eating sound.
Our women began to claw themselves, their nails bleeding
with a polished gleam. Men sang to drown out screams.
Our children had been raised on this, like fine powder
whitening the milk. Bones tore from sockets, turned on bones
like clubs. Feet stood up for themselves on the toes of feet.
At last we said: Violence must be met with violence.
We learned the ropes. To save the circling birds,
whose purpose remains obscure to us, we killed our cattle,
hung them from the elms. We bound our women’s hands,
and still their nails gouged. We let the children starve,
pursued the look of their eyes turning in and in
until they reached some secret place we dared not follow.
Shall we forbid songs? Surely the reward for silence is enough.
These nights in a circle of light we cultivate lament.
The dark turns inside out. The faces of friends twist in fire.
Strangers are said to walk among us. Disguised as ourselves,
they speak our language, but a bit too well. When they smile
their teeth, their terrible teeth, are twined
with bloody fingers and with hair.
Passage

1
For miles the bones cry
the dry skulls mouthing
stay and stay
making the saddest sound.
Fingers rattle like sticks
in the spokes
of our careless wheels.

2
Crossing mountains at dusk
we see
the shapes of darker mountains.
We lie down in ourselves
and weep
remembering houses
and the shadows of houses.

3
Nightly the mountains sail out
like owls.
The stars are blue with snow.
We sleep in a circle of firelight
hearing
beyond the shaggy pelt of dark
the icy drum of the sea.

4
By day our fear spreads
like a bruise.
Over and over we count ourselves.
We are always one too many
or one too few.
When we look back.
the bones are sharpening the bones.
The Mailbox

Across the lake
from his mailbox
a mountain hangs like a bell.

Nothing is in the box
but notices
saying that books are overdue.

He has waited so long
for a phrase—
not his own.

but almost his own,
a broken silence
with the ring of the mountain.

with something of the lake,
that swimming light
still moving among trees.

the sound, say, of a wind
in earliest morning
filling the box

with most articulate love,
some shade of feeling
passing into speech.

response and more than response,
a surprise taken
and taken by.
It is possible.
or almost so.
He will never be sure.

Nothing is in the box.
There is only the earth
and its wide weather.

the mountain swaying like a bell,
the lake swimming
through the summer trees.
What She Thinks

She says she is thinking exactly nothing. Imagine that. At the end of Nebraska, say, a church. It is white and flat on the sky. You could walk to it for miles and not be close. Around it clouds and green corn kiss all day. The sun strikes noon each hour and the one tree's too far ahead, too far behind. These are arrangements, unarranged, meaning everything at once, arriving nowhere. This is what she thinks. When wind thickens, prairie bends, you trudge on, believing to the end the cut-out steeple's bell clangs invitation, not farewell. Nothing. She smiles. Exactly. Yet, behind her subtle veil may lie the corn-girl, that most earthiest bride, or only that woman she intends, immaculate and shorn, the promised nun.
The Children

in memory of Allison Krause,
Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer
and Bill Schroeder

At Hiroshima.
I have heard it said,
when the black rain ceased
an old man placed a sign
among the brutal, sudden flowers.
It read, “My children, where are you?”

My children, where are you?
I think it is a garden where they are.
Sundrops fangle with fire the patterned flowers,
the smoke of summer grazes like blue deer
and the air is alive with light and far-off bells.
By night the tireless stars go round upstairs
like a father putting a drowsy house to sleep.

My children, where are you?
Sometimes they seem much thinner than the wind,
a memory almost remembered by the very old,
a house at evening, say, seen once from a train.
Sometimes they touch me with their heavy eyes.
but when I turn, there is only twilight there.
Sometimes I hear the secret words of poems
whispering in drawers even a father cannot find.

My children, where are you?
I will be honest. I am at times afraid.
At times the children seem nowhere at all;
they were so little, and the world is wide.
It is as if the poem goes round and round,
the endless words circling to no good end
like ponies on an empty carousel.
It is as if a man has left a sign
for children the wind has blown away.
First Practices, Midget League

for Bill Titmus

Whistles can’t keep the sweep in bounds.
The boys bunch like dwarfed fruit, fall,
flash like frightened fish, minnow
and shadow, dimpling September’s pool.
What’s being but a tiny violence?
Noise trails the play like a gangling hound.
Find the center! The coach tries hard
Who’s the three back? Where’s the one hole?
The expensive mothers dream, waiting
for heroes, not telling all they know.
I know. I think, the three back is my son.
( Distinctions blur in distance and dim light.)
Small matter. Everyone’s in motion. I adopt
them all, decline all penalties, take every gain.
Games should run longer. No one should lose.
When someone breaks out, he should go all the way,
blazing like the sky these northern nights,
foxfire, flare, quick falling star, and gone.
Etrafon

for Jack Brown

Your doctor gives pills to make life flat.
That edge you've walked on widens to a field,
no corners and nowhere out of bounds.
It is what the sea would be if it were rock,
if it held nothing in its heavy waves,
if it moved by inches twice a day.
It is like the sudden peace a soldier makes
while his wound blossoms and the war goes on.
When messages arrive, they can't sneak up.
You see them coming miles away. The news
is never new, people are dying and you
don't care. Yesterday the sharp light
broke your skin. Today you pull it close.
your friend, a gray shawl that keeps you warm.
That test pattern you watch is what you are.
It never changes and you love that story
from surprise beginning to surprising end.
In-between's one note and you're the chorus,
Hallelujah in too many parts. all flat.
Hold on that note. Holding is keeping still.
La Push: Caitlin’s Story

The gulls cried guilty in the long rain.
That boat you worked on schemed to let you down,
and nothing in those Chinook you cleaned loved you.
Indian girls who handled men like knives
carved your name whore on driftwood gray as hate.
The dogs never got used to you. All summer
in your sleep your father’s women crept in
like tides. They looked like you. Whatever game
that was, you still are it. Those tin shacks
held out against the rain for years, enough
to keep you in, to keep me out. I can’t resist
what blades have cut in you, can’t tell the truth
or even tell a lie I don’t believe. I’d kill
them for you if I could—gulls, fish and women,
your old man too. I’d carve your name for good.
How loveless stories are, and dark. Just now,
just now, the sea goes pushing at our mouths.
Loboland: Gardiner Washington

What is it about wolves? This one’s almost white. One ear is gone.
Half his upper lip. Head like a bear
and two hands wide. The good eye glints through twisted wire, eight-fingered keeper.
through us all. Bison are painted on the shadow wall. Wolves bring the dark in close. My son hides his face against my hip. I’ve seen these wolves from there. How far do fathers grow?
The math’s too hard. I’ve known old men who’ve splintered like hollow bones.
I’m wolf myself some, lobo, dying out,
too mad to count. Halfway to Dungeness the howl in me gnaws loose for good,
pissing on fenceposts everywhere my turf, my turf, and gut you if you dare.
St. Peter’s Cemetery:
Bainbridge Island

Because the chief was “friend to whites,”
they named their city after him.

From his high grave now, through alderwood
and fir, across the Sound, tourists look back
at the Sea-First Bank. This burial ground
is small and will be smaller. Pigroot
and berry vine, the buttercups, crowd in.
Whole families are here. One child died
on Christmas Eve. A brother ten days later.
Most of the stones lie flat in earth,
the oldest family, named UNKNOWN.
I have been founding a city all my life.
I build it everywhere without a name.
Today I call the place after its many friends
Unknown Unknown Unknown.
Mercer Island

Indians thought the island sank each night. They are long dead, know better now.
Nothing could bring this island down, not Herfy's, MacDonald's, Fish-n-Chips, not Jack-in-the-Box, not Pizza Pete, not all the towering doctors' homes.
the Beautybark, the wood and glass.
The census shows no Indians. The island lifts a bridge to headlights and to stars.
And yet in dreams Wayne Hackett floats to me, drowned at age eight in Penobscot, Maine.
He plants his weedy kiss across my mouth.
Mornings the crabgrass crawls on real claws.
my porch is green with mysterious slime
My dog's fur is falling out. Skin shows through, scaly and gray. His eyes bulge, jaws seem shorter.
Somewhere my son has learned to swim.
Why does my wife wear dresses to the floor?
What is the song she sings at dusk?
These nights I fasten doors and windows close, sleep on my back, mouth shut, ear-plugs in place.
I never hear the Indians padding long canoes.
the water-sound of circles ring on ring above my roof.
Winter Constellations

Now the wintriest constellations
rattle their cold chains
against my roof.

This evening
I find all I have lost in the sky.

There is the basket I raised for my son
and there is the net of stars raining down.

There the bright cloud of his mother's hair
vanishes forever all night long.

North of Lake Washington my father climbs
ghostly in the hunting fields. His eyes
are hollows where nothing shines.

He says he has nothing to say to me.

Someone has carved a deer on the wall of moon.

This is the stippled history of desire.
This is winter and evening, framed by trees.

Tonight the Cascades circle like a well
where rings like water open out and out
until they break on that black rock of space
where the bound princess writhe in links of stars
and lures the sea-beast up from the sea.
Richard Blessing is currently an Associate Professor of English at the University of Washington, Seattle. He was born in Bradford, Pennsylvania on September 11, 1939 and was educated there, at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York (A.B.), where he also won football All-America honors as a quarterback, and at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana (M.A. and Ph.D.). His teaching experience includes work at Heidelberg College, Tiffin, Ohio, and at the University of New Orleans. In addition to poetry, he has published a number of articles and two books of criticism, Wallace Stevens’ “Whole Harmonium” (Syracuse University Press, 1970) and Theodore Roethke’s Dynamic Vision (Indiana University Press, 1974).
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