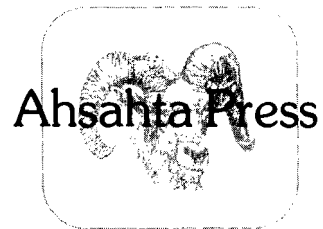


NO MOVING PARTS  
by  
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## Introduction

I first met Susan Strayer Deal several years ago in a workshop for poets that I was conducting in North Platte, Nebraska. I was much impressed with her poems from the onset, and now, reading the manuscript of her first collection, *No Moving Parts*, I continue to be impressed. The voice in the poems is distinctive and unique and haunting; it speaks from an environment—the sandhills, the prairie, the far-reaching countryside of western Nebraska—with an authority that is both warm and compelling. Each poem hurries down the page like a saddle pony on its way back to the barn.

The title poem typifies the pace and the tone of this collection. “Today I too am without/gears,” the poet writes, and before the reader can bat an eyelash he becomes a part of the movement: “When we reach the gate of/that open pasture, we/will climb it and keep/going.”

And we do. In the process we discover Susan Deal’s intense humility, her concern for the recurrence of life forms, her sympathy with all things living, her awareness of human mortality, and most especially her startling passion for life—startling because it consistently startles the poet herself, as if each day she views her world with a fresh set of eyes.

Her humility is evident in many of the poems. One of the most striking is “They Have Tried to Teach Me,” in which the poet, having served as student to such mentors as the night and the trees and red berries and blizzards and droughts, to “The spikes/of bird beaks driving/the lesson through,” admits that even so “the bones/are thick and I am dumb.” Her humility goes hand in fist with her persistence, so that at the end of the poem the student-teacher relationship goes on and on: “The/nights lean down around my/house, repeating all they’ve/taught before.”

The theme of repetition, of the recurrence of many things, including a variety of life forms, pervades these poems, is an on-going revelation that amazes and delights the poet—and, in turn, the reader. Susan Deal watches butterflies “pull open, pull closed/like new good lungs/above the flowers.” The movement, she says, is

More like a kiss,  
kissing and kissing  
the weeds and then  
the flowers. Breathing  
and breathing. Kissing.

Outside in my hungry,  
passionate garden,  
the lungs and lips  
of the butterflies open  
again and again.

The poet's general sympathy with others extends even to those "suicides/in another country,/standing on the knife/or stepping in the/oven. Always in/other towns dribbling/poison or monoxide." These unfortunates reach all the way to the United States, to the Midlands, to western Nebraska, to the sandhills, to Susan Deal, who writes,

I look to the open west,  
to a lonely stand of  
trees in sunset and  
in winter with grey  
around my throat and  
want very much to cry,  
where their faces bob  
up and down, like yellow  
lanterns to travelers  
in despair.

I am quoting quite a number of the poet's lines because they deserve it. They cannot be paraphrased. Susan Deal writes of the cottonwood and the wildflower, of the plow and the hawk, of corn and fence-post and cockleburr and coyote and sun and wind and grass, grass, grass, with a perception that is totally her own. When she finds herself in sympathy with a life force (in the following instance with a small raccoon caught in an iron trap, one of its legs half gnawed off), she says so with an arrangement of image and metaphor that calls the reader back time and again to contemplate the poem and its pathetic victim: "It touches your/face with a crooked/finger. Without/scratching, it leaves/a long scar, down/to the center of/your tongue."

Thus pain and its bedfellow, death, are facts, at times ugly, at times curious, but nearly always inevitable. The poet finds herself in various moods holding on, letting go, seeking whatever it is that lies beyond the



horizon. In "I Think It Wants Me," she says,

I have left my car  
at the edge of the world  
and I am walking. I am  
going into the river trees  
and disappear. There they  
are talking together about  
me. I can hear my name in  
the dusk. The first letter  
of my name is starting to  
form in the clouds. And I've  
got to go and see what it  
wants, before I drive myself  
any farther into this world.

In "I Am Five Hands," she writes, "If I stop and put/my hands away, the flowers/will go on growing/and running over/this hill, cantering/over this hill, without me." In "To Feel Is a Risk," she hangs on: "It is/easy to be lost in long,/wide, flat spaces. Sucking/the breath in and holding on./And not slip off on plains/dangerously deep and stars/bright and risky."

What finally strikes me most forcefully in Susan Deal's work is her incredible passion for life, a passion indicated in almost all of the poems, including those already quoted from. She "cut [her] center teeth" on the sky that looks down on the Nebraska sandhills, which means that her passion for life and her passion for place cannot be separated. "I still/like the taste of purple/wind in my mouth and/the aftertaste of sunflower," she says. "I bear the scars of/cockleburrs between my toes." Alone at dusk, looking at a windmill, she writes, "I am fixing the exact/intonation of the sound/in my wrist movements,/in the length of my bones." Watching a flock of sandhill cranes, she rises to join them, and "We are/thousands, here and/suddenly in the dying/prairie sky. Fields/moving, fluttering/with our bodies." The wind is "rounding us even/now," she says in yet another poem. "The wind lays its/blistered hands on us,/slapping us human." In "this/shorter place," as Susan Deal calls the sandhills, "We are taller . . . /in our own grass. . . . /We are full/of shorter pride here/and know our places."

At times the poet's passion for both life and place is almost more than she can bear, as she suggests in "It Will Take Me":

It will take me  
to pieces. To pieces.  
But I walk out  
into the night  
anyway.  
The stars have their  
knives out and the  
trees with sharp  
scalpels and the glow  
of the moon is  
a soft butchery.  
The vague bushes  
hold hammers to  
stun me with and  
an ether of lilacs  
to still me. And  
to love so much  
will take me to pieces.

No wonder then that Susan Deal cannot choose but return, again and again, to that place where she has spent most of her life. It is a place, she says, that "writes me in pen, deep as a/river or a wind erosion." This place has forced her to think "in wheat gold/and corn gold and brown sand/and grass." And she adds, "I come back to these colors/and this strong blue wind/around my hair."

Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, Susan Deal is a young poet who has returned to Lincoln, where she lives now with her husband, Steve. But not far away, to the west, is the land she is most familiar with, the land that she will probably never entirely move away from. In any case, the voice in her poems, I am convinced, will rise above and beyond all of those little barriers of fence-post and hedgerow and barbed wire imposed by so many of us little men and women.

*William Kloefkorn*  
Lincoln, Nebraska  
August, 1980

# Hawk At Sunset

On a fence post  
hawk with  
wings folded in  
place and round  
eyes, dark  
round eyes.  
The sun floats,  
like a soft orange  
pup! just  
right of center  
in the hawk's  
eyes, just right  
of center in  
the sky.

## The Wind Thickens

The wind thickens  
the bones inside us,  
filling the spaces  
of our marrow with  
clear lead.  
This hill we are  
enjoying with  
our bodies is  
going to plant  
us here, is  
going to make us just  
one more stone or boulder.  
We will not reach  
the top. Feel how  
our legs have decided  
they are marble.  
How our eyes want  
to go back home.  
How the sun is closing  
the door on us.  
The light, even, is  
copper and heavy on  
the sagging trees.  
And who will  
carry our dusk-heavy  
bodies home?

## While It Was Still

While it was still  
beautiful. I walked  
it out. Over the  
pastures still in summer  
dusk, stuffing my  
cheeks with purple,  
sucking the kernels of  
descending dark like  
a farmer sucks a  
kernel of corn.  
Worrying the orange sky  
with my eyes, I held  
the sun between my shoulders  
and walked it out, into  
the west where it buried  
its dropping head in a canyon  
of the sandhills, where all  
turned pink and brown and  
black. And there I stood,  
until I was a cavity, a  
black spot, the small, lost  
shape of my ancestor's soddie.  
All their griefs and joys  
painted on the rocks, called  
stars, in the sky.

## Farmer

He wears a straw  
cowboy hat, mashed  
down, stained  
brown from fingering  
the brim. Sometimes  
he takes it off with  
his right hand to  
smear the collected  
sweat away. Holding  
the brim like a  
handle, he passes his  
slow eyes over the  
rows of his corn and  
his pastures. On  
his forehead stretches  
a secret country.  
Hat-band wide, it circles  
his head like the  
North Pole. He  
keeps the strange white  
area covered in the  
presence of strangers.  
At night it is exposed to  
the summer moon, like the  
underbelly of a fish.  
And stars suck there and  
make it whiter while he  
sleeps. Marked by moon  
and sun and stars for his  
fields to know him by.

## Here the Mind Clutters

Here the mind clutters  
the scenery. There is  
no way to think.  
On the flat, long  
plains, a thought may  
startle up like a  
bird and fly off over the  
land and never come back.  
Or like a bird it may  
follow the plow, trying  
to find something to  
feast on in the soil.  
Though thinking here  
will always stay hungry.

Here the mind clutters  
the scenery. Rhetoric  
will not prevail. The  
dust and grasses are  
dumb to incantation.  
Living is not cerebral.  
There is only the magic  
of hunger. The feverish sun,  
the shells of old Depression  
barns, like grey fists,  
and land. Land of grasses  
and grasses. The mind  
rings only against the sky.  
Thought has no echo, no  
measure of itself. And  
thinking must always stay  
hungry.

## I Cut My Center Teeth

I cut my center teeth  
on this very same sky.  
Now nearly thirty I still  
like the taste of purple  
wind in my mouth and  
the aftertaste of sunflower.  
I bear the scars of  
cockleburrs between  
my toes and of course  
my pockets are still  
full of cottonwood balls.  
I look at it now  
through the notes of a  
meadowlark, and find  
the marks of my teeth,  
southwest, just above  
the river, looking like  
two clouds.



## Some Carry Around This

Some carry around this  
coal of sorrow.  
As children they were  
given the black gift  
because they saw a sparrow die  
and stopped childhood to wonder.  
Later some gathered  
it on the beaches  
of war when a country  
was blackened to death.  
Some pulled it out of  
the sky when no one  
would answer.  
It is used to warm  
the cold soul when  
deserted to meaning.  
Or to darken the  
pages of life with a scribble.  
If you have one you know  
what I'm talking about.  
If you have one you know  
you can not let the  
coal die out.

# I Think It Wants Me

I think it wants me.  
The horizon, with a  
blue tug, makes me  
walk in its direction.  
The bald face of the moon  
sits still and does not  
smile. Does not follow  
me with hidden eyes.  
It will be dark soon. The  
trees far away seek  
themselves out. Reach  
for each other. The  
blood in them turns all  
their branches black, reaching.  
I think it wants me.  
A hawk has circled as a  
sign. I have left my car  
at the edge of the world  
and I am walking. I am  
going into the river trees  
and disappear. There they  
are talking together about  
me. I can hear my name in  
the dusk. The first letter  
of my name is starting to  
form in the clouds. And I've  
got to go and see what it  
wants, before I drive myself  
any farther into this world.

## All the Time Trying

All the time trying  
to get in, to creep in  
under the door, looking  
for the little faults  
in the windows, a hole  
to squeeze yourself  
into, so that behind  
me, when I'm sitting  
in a chair, you'll crawl  
into my lap, winter, up  
my hair, winter, into  
my mouth, winter, and  
freeze my tongue.  
You've made the hair of  
the trees stiffen in  
grey strokes. They are  
shaking their splintered  
heads no. We are all tired  
of your hands wiping themselves  
all over us. We are tired  
of your bone-talk and  
no color. We are tired.  
I stand and shake my splintering  
head no, to loosen your fingers  
trapped in my hair.

## What Woman Where

What woman where  
has stirred the  
skies with her  
magic, has cast  
a spell over this  
white, utterly frozen  
town. Who has  
chanted snow  
down over and  
over for six months  
and keeps chanting.  
Keeps chanting  
beyond the pleas  
of sparrows  
and cracking trees,  
ignoring the shiver  
of our hurting eyes.  
Whose spell has  
silently gone  
beserk, repeating  
itself, on and on,  
in snow?

## We Have No Fat

We have no fat  
trees. They are  
lean. How in  
Kentucky, I was  
so surprised to  
see an oak as  
thick and tall  
as a barn. How  
I looked at it  
in disbelief and  
how they were  
neck deep in  
chain saws,  
cutting it down  
and how I would  
have taken all  
the saw dust  
like muscle and  
fat and patched it  
to our river trees  
and made them  
strong and fatter,  
against this cruellest  
wind.

## Plowing

The exact cut of  
the plow, the exact  
thickness of the  
pitted metal, that  
drives down, drives  
down a certain,  
qualified distance.  
That churns up black  
and moist. That  
turns over these  
globular balls of  
black, the moist  
balls that spread apart.  
That fall open and  
lushly in the moist  
sun, lushly.  
Everything's possible.  
Seagulls, solid in  
the sky, dip and wheel,  
white and black.  
Everything falls open.  
The catalyst sun.  
The blue power in the  
sky. The earth that opens,  
damp brown, black.  
And something inside  
too, moist and thick,  
crumbles, ready for  
everything possible.

## To Feel Is a Risk

To feel is a risk. With  
stars that pull the flesh  
off and the film of bright  
snow over the flat and  
rising ground. To look  
and look into this space  
and not see back. To feel  
is a sharp pain, like a  
hammer on a fingernail.  
Sucking the breath in and  
holding and holding on. Not  
slip off into darkness  
like a snowflake. It is  
easy to be lost in long,  
wide, flat spaces. Sucking  
the breath in and holding on.  
And not slip off on plains  
dangerously deep and stars  
bright and risky.

## The Picked Peony

The picked peony,  
very tall in a  
mason jar of  
water, lived for  
a long time.

It was as big  
as a small pink melon  
and absolutely  
sickened the kitchen  
air.

This morning, it  
had dropped itself  
completely in  
a pile. The green  
stem bent over  
as if looking  
for itself.



## You Begin to Believe

You begin to believe  
the heart stop of  
dusk when it pours  
over you full of  
shadows and the cracks  
in the sky are tight  
trees through which  
you are falling  
mind first.

Or the petals of  
birds are weaving  
their way down  
into the cracks that  
seem like trees. And  
the purples and  
the blues and the  
blacks come up and  
pull everything down  
to it. A long black  
embrace, a smothering  
kiss.

## Child-brained

Child-brained  
there is no notion  
of evil. Hills  
do not collide  
into each other  
or bomb or  
bayonet. And  
the sprinkle  
of loose fingers,  
those trees, have  
no commands.  
They lean their  
ears to life  
and synchronize.  
Now the man  
in the pick-up  
is clouded with  
thoughts of irrigation,  
reaping. There is  
nowhere for the land,  
knowing rape, to hide.  
Nothing, but stillness,  
to do.

## Fixing My Eyes On

Fixing my eyes on  
a windmill in  
dusk, turning the  
air to old purple,  
turning the air  
into haze and  
wildness. No one  
is here. Not cattle  
nor coyotes. No  
people. Just me.  
What is beautiful  
in dusk, stands up  
with arms raised,  
speaking in an  
ancient tongue.  
A tree far off,  
accidentally planted,  
on an empty hill,  
is slowly  
bowing to the metal  
words of the windmill.  
I am fixing the exact  
intonation of the sound  
in my wrist movements,  
in the length of my bones.  
Around me churns the  
melding color purple.  
The dusk floats like a film  
on the tank of still water  
and faintly, lightly, my face.

## No Moving Parts

No moving parts today  
in any direction.  
All is a piece of  
perpetual motion.  
The motion of full  
gorged trees and  
thick grasses  
and clouds ceaselessly  
moving without cogs,  
without wheels.  
Today I too am without  
gears. The heart  
pumping without beginning  
or end. Without stops  
or starts. And birds  
that are motorless,  
little brown bodies,  
high in the air.

No engine scares this  
place with noise and  
greaseless parts.  
No shifting of reluctant  
gears but smooth as  
waves oiled over and over.  
Ungauged we climb  
out of our thoughts  
and have nothing to measure.  
All runs with no effort.  
Pathless. Completely  
designed in our favor.  
Thinging itself, like  
blooming, everywhere.

We are not going  
to stop being as we are,  
or profound ourselves  
with thoughts that make  
pieces, that divide into  
functions and factors,  
into bellies and brains.  
When we reach the gate of  
that open pasture, we  
will climb it and keep  
going. Without moving parts.

## In the Fields At Dusk, a Dream

Only this heavy shape  
of tractor, a John Deere  
green, moving in the dusk.  
A little puff of soil trailing  
like a wake and behind  
the slow and graceful sweep  
of sea gulls that have  
drifted from the sea  
to follow the plow.  
Only shapes change. The  
soil goes on turning  
black down there. And the  
smell of plowed soil  
reaches, wave on wave,  
cueing the leaves on the  
cottonwood trees to open,  
spin silver in a trace of wind,  
stop and resume green.  
This is a dream I have  
dreamed over and over.  
The slow motion of man  
caressing the earth. Teams  
of horses and plows moving  
beside him in simultaneous  
time. The ghosts of all corn  
fields shimmering around us.  
Invisible ears of corn in their  
husks of dark green listening  
to the furrows turning deeply  
open, preparing their rows of  
perfect teeth.

## They Have Tried to Teach Me

They have tried  
to teach me,  
the nights that  
hang down low  
around my house.  
Night breath in  
my ear. They  
have tried to  
teach me, the  
crooked pencils  
of the trees and  
their little scrawls  
on plain blue sky.  
And I have watched,  
hungry, mind gobbling  
light, gobbling the  
gold dusk in the  
cracks of trees.  
And loved when the  
wind crackled my  
heart like a still  
leaf. They have  
tried to teach me,  
the red berries  
of chokecherries  
and the lips of roses  
pouting for my look,  
and the black skies  
like a closed book.  
And I have loved in  
the blizzards of mornings,  
in the droughts of  
afternoons, all things  
teaching by rote and  
spell, by motion and  
no motion, full color

and pale. The spikes  
of bird beaks driving  
the lesson through,  
impaling me to song.  
And I have waited for  
the blood to churn,  
the flash of flame,  
to burn in a bush  
of sudden fire. All  
those truths mastered  
piece by piece,  
like blades of grass,  
like atoms whirling  
in free space.

And still the bones  
are thick and I am dumb.  
The world grows out  
and out, ripples on  
and on into outer space  
but more obtuse.  
All springs before I  
have forgotten. All buds,  
all blooms. All winters,  
summers, falls.  
Utterly patient, they try  
again to teach me. The  
nights lean down around my  
house, repeating all they've  
taught before.



## To Think Of Nothing

To be a body in a certain space,  
to think of nothing, to halt  
ecstatically in air is harder  
than hanging a door or ripping  
out stitches. Harder than  
roofing the back side of a house.  
And maybe harder than coming to the  
bushes to pick gooseberries, those  
stabbing and clutching thorns.

To begin with you should not want it.  
It should be spontaneous combustion  
like old rags in the attic catching  
on fire, eventually burning the whole  
house down. And mostly it will happen  
out of doors, with ripe stars set deep  
in their black bush of sky and wind working  
the stems loose so they fall on either side.  
That's usually in September on a leaf-  
smoldering night. And it can happen.  
It can make you void.

Or it may be a field of corn with stalks  
rattling their soft corn teeth and making  
you listen. The green panting of the leaves  
and one bird, hawk or seagull, swimming  
above it like a drifting leaf. And suddenly  
you swim too, but you didn't think to swim  
there. It just happens.

Or maybe you are minding your own business,  
walking down the street and you see a  
motorcycle sliding into the metal of a truck.  
Blending but not blending their colors.  
And the rider is hurtled like a snapped  
bolt over the asphalt. His legs, as

they scissor to stand up or hold on,  
are like crossed t's with no vowels.  
The mind stops then like the traffic.  
All is holding its breath. Thought is  
that snapped bolt skittering across  
cement. And you have happened from  
the metal and the blood.

To think of nothing is to stop the flow.  
The great gush that once has opened can  
not be capped or channeled, carrying you  
to and fro into barns and cellars, into  
parades and palaces. That lifts you out  
over the roofs of houses like pieces of  
laundry in a tenement.

To think of nothing at the perfect time  
is to trap the self escaping into void.  
To cap and channel. Collect and cap the self  
you are losing like a potent gin. Not  
thinking too much of yourself, but a little,  
like a little sip, a little sip of thinking.  
Too much thought dilutes all meaning.  
You'll be immune to cornfields, hawks, and dying.  
And it will take more and more and more  
to make you sigh.

# I Am Five Hands

I am five hands  
and one shoulder  
here. A hill of  
wildflowers. I am  
grabbing and picking  
every one I can,  
but when I have  
nowhere to put  
them, no other shoulder  
to help carry my  
bursting bundle,  
I put them all  
in a tangled bunch  
on a rock that  
has to be someone's  
old altar, tombstone.  
My five hands are  
digging at the roots  
of something else.  
A little one with  
five white petals and  
a yellow with the  
underbelly of a bee.  
If I stop and put  
my hands away, the flowers  
will go on growing  
and running over  
this hill, cantering  
over this hill, without me.

## Places

There are places that I will not  
go back to, that have  
lost the sound of my  
footsteps. That have lost me  
or erased me or I was never  
written deep enough there.  
Places that I once threw  
my face at, where it was never  
caught or places that never  
grabbed my hand. Places that  
ignored me. I stamp with my  
hard feet a sound here. And  
grab hands with this place  
and show my face everywhere  
I go. This is a place  
I will go back to. A place that  
writes me in pen, deep as a  
river or a wind erosion.

## It Is True

It is true,  
this thin sky  
that the birds  
tear open in  
passing, where  
the sun leaks  
between the clouds,  
grey metal.

It is true,  
the stiff and cracking  
trees, the iron  
river. It is true  
in the white, black  
bleakness, the  
stiff arm pointing  
of a single tree  
up, up or at you.

At you.  
The wind, bitter white,  
sucking bones. Wind  
of hurtled stones,  
punching your form out  
of the spaces. It is true.

If you are coming  
from fullness or empty,  
the trees stand in their  
places to tell you and  
they tell you without talking,  
though they scream right  
up in your ear.  
They can not turn  
aside. They will not  
turn away, wherever you  
walk, around and around,

they are made of rings,  
thick as your life  
is or thin. They tell  
you.

The many voices  
in willows and cottonwoods,  
in grasses between  
the wheels of freight  
trains, are talking and  
to you. They keep talking  
when you walk one way or  
walk back. They are talking  
and their voices sit  
in your hair, waiting  
and for you.

I have filtered  
the fine dust of summer  
through corn shucks,  
the thick dry cotton of the  
autumn nights, raked in piles.  
The winter ice shards raked  
in piles. The birds and pods  
of spring pried open, and it  
is true. The pistils of flowers  
and shafts of feathers and  
the bones of fingers point  
at each other and back to you.

When the sky is black or white,  
it is not lying. Winter and  
summer stand you up and  
look at you. Your bones  
and vessels look at you.  
The clouds and deer and mountains  
look at you.  
It is punching you out of the  
empty, full spaces and  
it is true.

## When You Come In Again

When you come in again  
with night air on  
your breath and star  
odor, when you open  
the door to our house,  
they rush in with you,  
the black whispers.  
And the noises of  
dark crawl in  
your clothes.  
I turn rabid for  
the hands of night,  
its open kisses. The  
love without reason  
between us.  
Its dark face  
back of your eyes  
looking at me.  
And the smell of  
your hands, after  
handling starlight,  
are ginger and pepper,  
cinnamon and clove.

## They Are Always So

They are always so  
far away, suicides  
in another country,  
standing on the knife  
or stepping in the  
oven. Always in  
other towns dribbling  
poison or monoxide,  
taking lead, and poems  
are grotesquely full  
of them right up to  
the throat. The  
pathetic twisting  
hand. The last terrible  
flash in the dying  
eye. And I am not  
bothered or bewitched  
by their old voices  
in their poems, as  
others, though sometimes  
I look to the open west,  
to a lonely stand of  
trees in sunset and  
in winter with grey  
around my throat and  
want very much to cry,  
where their faces bob  
up and down, like yellow  
lanterns to travelers  
in despair.



## It Becomes Us So

It becomes us so,  
this mauve sky.  
It kisses the corners  
of our mauve and grey  
mouths. I at least  
can not go away again,  
not the way my flesh tones  
take on the color of prairie.  
I think now in wheat gold  
and corn gold and brown sand  
and grass. And counting  
the words to describe me,  
I come back to these colors  
and this strong blue wind  
around my hair.

## They Love Us

They love us.  
No matter where  
we sit, the  
cottonballs collect  
on our suntan lotioned  
skin like curious  
spiders. Or hail  
us up into looking  
at them or the  
sudden bird just  
then in the branches  
of the dying elm.  
Or the clouds, the  
tops of trees, the  
flying cotton.  
Things we wouldn't  
see beyond our  
furious sunning.

## We Will Suppose

We will suppose  
that it is stroking  
our lives, these  
clock hands that  
move without lubrication.  
That they are going  
in our direction.  
That they imply the  
right time. That  
even our hearts are  
synchronized to its  
stroking. And that  
in the end the  
pendulum descending  
will not cleave us  
in two, briskly,  
but will part us  
from our senses  
like wind parts grass,  
in a tender way.  
We pad the  
back and forths  
of time with  
our softest thoughts.  
We will suppose  
that we are moving  
in the same  
caressing way,  
as these soft  
clock hands.

## It Will Take Me

It will take me  
to pieces. To pieces.  
But I walk out  
into the night  
anyway.

The stars have their  
knives out and the  
trees with sharp  
scalpels and the glow  
of the moon is  
a soft butchery.

The vague bushes  
hold hammers to  
stun me with and  
an ether of lilacs  
to still me. And  
to love so much  
will take me to pieces.

## The Wind Blows Me To

The wind blows me to  
the hard bodies  
of trees. To  
the hard hills  
that in the south  
rise without me.

Blows me to  
myself, to the  
center, where  
someone sits  
with hard eyes  
watching.

Wind, I will  
not hold hands  
with you, though  
your hands are soft  
in my hair.

Wind, I will not  
struggle against  
your touching  
my fresh body  
over and over.

For a thing  
rises and rises  
through all layers  
of flesh to the top.  
The thing you have  
been searching for,  
peeling back,  
seducing.

## We Enter the Welcome

We enter the welcome  
of rain, of its slow  
fingers along our  
discovered flesh,  
of its pooling with our  
faces staring back. The  
rain that reminds us that  
today we are welcome.

And the hills sink  
color, wetter, darker  
brown and birds  
that fly in it are  
heavier. And  
we are plumper with rain.  
Inside the blood makes  
increasing circles,  
wider and wider. We  
embrace all like water.  
We enter the welcome  
of rain. Our expanding  
circles touching.

## Again and Again

Again and again  
to the window to  
watch the butterflies  
pull open, pull closed  
like new good lungs  
above the flowers.  
They synchronize here  
in a moment like  
bellows with all  
lungs and breathing  
things. The wings,  
pencil-point thin,  
vibratory and  
pulled open, wide  
as a petal and  
closed and open.  
More like a kiss,  
kissing and kissing  
the weeds and then  
the flowers. Breathing  
and breathing. Kissing.  
Outside in my hungry,  
passionate garden,  
the lungs and lips  
of the butterflies open  
again and again.

## Sandhill Cranes

The first flock of  
sandhill cranes are  
a moving finger  
on the horizon.  
We are moving  
on Interstate 80  
to meet them.  
Overhead the wings  
are pumping like  
heartbeats, heartbeats.  
Opened, closing.  
Closing we intersect  
and split into  
thousands. Everywhere  
they fly and settle.  
Everywhere we have  
collided. We are  
thousands, here and  
suddenly in the dying  
prairie sky. Fields  
moving, fluttering  
with our bodies.



## It Touches Your

It touches your  
face with a crooked  
finger. Without  
scratching, it leaves  
a long scar, down  
to the center of  
your tongue. There  
by the river, you  
had your first  
vision. Words blowing  
open and the world  
cut open and the  
entrails of stars  
hanging out. That  
small raccoon. The  
black iron trap.  
The half gnawed leg.

## Thick As a Man's Hand

Thick as a man's hand  
the bees swarmed over  
the road signs, the  
wrecked truck, over the  
white cells of their  
captivity. All shivering  
brown and the air specked  
brown and the driver's  
legs and arms thicker,  
dancing brown.  
And still out of the  
bee boxes pouring brown  
and the sound of brown  
in the green, hot-green air.  
He took one hundred and  
fifty stings trapped in  
the truck, until the men  
with insecticide leveled  
the brown number. Hard  
shriveled bodies, body  
on body in the long, still  
grass. And a honey-colored  
sun flung all over the sky.

## The Wind Lays Its Blistered Hands On Us

The wind lays its  
blistered hands on us.  
How it has touched  
everything for hours.  
How it is blistering  
itself against the trees,  
against the steel silos,  
slapping the water.  
Now it goes through  
that clump of woods,  
moaning, bumping against  
the limbs like something  
drunk, not knowing where  
to put its hands. Touching  
everything, hard and soft.  
Nebraska barns where the  
wind hollows, blows out  
in small pieces the form  
of barns, gullies the earth.  
The wind rounding us even  
now. The wind lays its  
blistered hands on us,  
slapping us human.

## To Get the Method

To get the method and  
the mood or stunned  
again. Or awed,  
over the tough ground  
he walks again for  
the fan to fire,  
for the spark to  
cling on the wick,  
for the collation  
of the trees and  
birds in a mural  
of sense. He walks  
and the sinewy hills  
give off dry dust  
and not vision.  
Not like yesterday  
when he walked here,  
the trees threw their  
palms open. The sky  
broke blue forever.  
And air touched him  
in a living part.  
Even the dull dead  
steer, tangled in  
brown hide, moved  
in a dance of atom  
parts. And was brown  
flame. But now the  
hills close down and  
will not let him  
enter. Will not let him  
know his flesh is  
dust and like the land  
will go on and on  
forever. Touched once

he must walk until  
he's touched again.  
In complete surrender  
to the land.

## During a Metaphysical Discussion With a Friend

It rises from  
the road like aroma.  
A cloud of dust  
behind a moving pick-up.  
Far away we watch  
it awakening  
an isolated lane.  
The sun hangs  
by a thread above  
the horizon. A  
flock of black birds  
churns through  
the sleeping air.  
How are we caught  
here so completely?  
Nailed to the  
pasture unable  
to break the spell  
of dusk. If we  
were field mice  
caught out so in the  
open, that hawk perched  
far to our left  
would sweep down and  
stun us. Drag us  
apart, piece by piece.  
As it is, it takes us  
a long time to shake  
loose what has caught us.  
The invisible beak  
drifts open with the  
appearance of the stars.

## When He Moved

When he moved  
in the dusk, the  
gold side of him  
was golder in caught  
sun. It drove  
him galloping straight  
to the end of the  
pasture, like a  
thing possessed.  
He charged at the  
sun as if in his  
rolling eyes he had  
caught sight or  
sense of Pegasus and  
must join him. And  
watching him, we  
were sure that the  
spooked horse would drive  
off the end of the  
earth and into sky.  
We held our breaths  
to see him, wishing  
he could. And in  
the night we searched  
the dot to dot stars.

## We Come Back To This

We come back to this  
shorter place. Out of  
a taller country.  
Out of tall gold palaces  
and galleries. We stand  
in the short thin  
grass of our yard  
and look and look  
at the leveling sky.  
We are taller here  
in our own grass.  
Taller when the sun measures us and  
stretches our bodies out  
and lays us at  
our feet. We are full  
of shorter pride here  
and know our places.  
Not amidst tapestries  
and statues, but  
between wind and  
unsculpted grasses.  
Not with murals and  
marbles, but here with  
wilderness and transitory  
art. The wind, for instance,  
this moment in the cottonwood,  
the sharp, clean silver leaves,  
the slash of cut blue sky.



## Dead and Stretched Out

Dead and stretched out  
there is still uncanny  
horror in the very  
length of him. Horror  
in the rattlesnake pattern  
of his head, down the  
flat body. In the trap-like  
set of the jaw, the hollow  
fangs inside the mouth.  
I think of how he'd coil  
on some smooth rock. The  
head erect. The tail  
dancing its cacophonous dry rattle  
of warning. The spring  
set for any slight motion.  
But with a sharp knife and  
strong pressure, the head  
and buttons come off. Defused  
the body is a pretty rope,  
a cowboy hatband. The ten  
buttons in our hands do not  
make the same sound. Hard as  
we try we can not put the same  
rhythmical horror in the  
interlocking pieces. It is  
as light in our hands as a  
locust shell, making only the  
sound of wind in stalks of corn.

## No Trains Here

No trains here.  
No trains to turn  
my bones to rails.  
Without them there is  
a pocket I keep reaching  
into, pulling out quiet.  
There are no rattling  
doors to remind me  
of cargo. No shifting,  
no thunderous yowling at the  
wet stars that glitter watery.  
Just leaves or bird wings  
that trace into my still fingers.  
Or grass that nods in its  
fast sleep. And with no  
trains, I am not reminded  
of places to go or passages  
that tunnel the dark. I  
do not think of directions  
and decisions or destinations.  
I am walking in my silence,  
pulling my thoughts, my paths  
behind me.

## I Am Stretched To My

I am stretched to my  
tiptoes, every muscle  
taut cord waiting  
for this bird, nervous on  
a wire, to take off.  
Even prepared, the  
flight of this bird  
will surprise me,  
as the black trees in  
dusk surprise me with  
their sudden sculpture,  
as windmills surprise  
me, churning old runes in  
prairie air. And now  
when a dull brown sparrow  
draws me up from myself,  
leaning and straining,  
wanting to fly.

## He Gives the Names

He gives the names  
that name these fishes.  
And how they swell  
silver and in long  
shapes. Glitter against  
the glass and  
dart past us.  
I think of holding  
them in my hands  
and the tremble  
of them. Or the feel  
of real speed. The  
soft water and  
the gravity of them.  
The images of our  
faces shimmer  
intangible and weightless.  
I repeat and repeat  
the names that name them  
under my breath  
like bubbles.

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