

NO MOVING PARTS
by
Susan Strayer Deal



Boise State University
Boise, Idaho

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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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