

THEORY OF TWILIGHT

by

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**Brushfire:** "Near Mina"  
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*For Catherine French*

*And in memory  
of  
Richard Short 1941-1980  
George Miller 1959-1986*



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NOTE: A centered asterisk indicates a poem has been broken mid-stanza.

# Introduction

The wildly androgynous Bengali saint, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, sat beneath the white gulchi trees of his Dakshineswar temple in our terrible time of the Kali Yuga and pronounced this modest story to his young disciples:

There was a firebird that lived so high in the ether that surrounds our planet that she is never permitted by her aspirations to touch the land. One late afternoon out of boredom the sun visited the firebird, impregnating her. Shortly afterward she produced a large buff egg which immediately began to plummet toward the earth. But because the firebird's element was so removed from us, and because the egg heated as it fell through our atmosphere, a young firebird hatched from the shell still miles from the ground. The young firebird tumbled in wonder for some while and then suddenly fledged, gained its wings and executed a perfect arc upward avoiding by seconds the snowy crags of one of the earth's tallest mountains.

This is my best recollection of what is obviously a story about spirituality but it is also a legend we might tell ourselves about inspiration in poetry. Didn't Rilke suggest that if you fell far enough you'd probably arrive in the land of the arisen? I believe the full courage of this aesthetic and its regard for experience is everywhere in Gary Short's remarkable first book of poems, *Theory of Twilight*. Take for example this passage from the title poem in the volume. This is an elegy for the poet's brother:

I took the card down and walked out  
    into the hallway's fallow light. My parents  
were coming toward me. Mother rushed the room,  
    but we held her back. I'm not sure why.  
She called out his name and her voice drifted  
  
    back thirty years—a mother's evening song,  
lilting across the deep-rutted road into the summer field,  
    calling him home.  
While my father entered the room, I held the pain-  
    keeping grief  
  
against her small shoulder until the door opened  
    and he took her in.  
A stunning sunset in Molleño, and I

was missing everyone I'd ever loved.  
The door opened on the last glimpse of my brother.

He was not as I had left him.  
His father had touched his eyes closed, mothered  
the shock of black hair from his forehead  
and made into prayer, finger by finger  
the hands.

In this poem of death and transfiguration the dead brother's physical hands are nearly muted alchemically into prayer or grace. In many of Short's harshest poems of childhood and life in Nevada there is always this plunging vertical emotion that exhausts both its momentum and its rhetoric and then some magical translation occurs that is against all theories of twilight and all experiences of any life that takes its phrasing from a sense of tragic barriers. So what I'm saying is that this is a heroic poetry but dedicated to ordinary lives in which, as the title of this poem indicates, "the mare must sleep standing":

On her way to the bus-stop, the neighbor girl  
carries North America in her hands  
a large map veined with river,  
blue threads glued to cardboard.  
When the mare was born glazed and still,  
the girl's father punched its chest, forced  
his own breath into the mouth and nostrils  
until the foal returned to life.

My breath makes a moon on the window.  
The horse marks new snow with hoofprints  
homing toward shelter.  
From the woodpile I'll bring pieces of pine  
dusted with snow. The wood will give  
warmth I need, the flame exactly blue.

There is something William Carlos Williams would think to praise in this book's saddest poems where the lost, the fallen, the young, and the vulnerable are all finding themselves shaped into hopeless ciphers finding hope. What we must mark about this work besides its grace and courage, its reckless sentiment becoming song, is its final refusal of solitude—that very solitude that accumulates poems, that paginates books and says to

you, reader: **Now we are two!** This book without the great wind of a Whitman or an Emerson is about union. That is the American theme and these poems are the falling birth of a very gifted and young American poet.

*Norman Dubie*  
Tempe, Arizona  
July, 1993

We learn as the thread plays out, that we belong  
less to what flatters us than to what scars.

—*Stanley Kunitz*

One



# Driving Highway 93: Nevada

Ritual of the wheel in my hands,  
the highway's long trance at the center of night,  
nothing but these miles  
& no swerving until

headlights,  
four bright lights—  
a car passing another,  
headlights brighter, larger  
& no place for me to go—  
I jerk hard right & floor it  
into the desert.

Mist of dust drifting white.

When the jarring stops,  
the shudder & stall of the car  
is my heart. In two streams of ghost light  
the red eyes of bored open-range cattle,  
dust settling calm on their backs.  
The cars I swerved to avoid  
become taillights,  
red eyes closing into night,

& the moon  
through black broken clouds  
is a mask

or a premonition

the way dust smells like rain  
before it rains.

## Letter from Alva Greer to His Sister, Joanna: 1867, Virginia City

This will be quickly told. You said you might come west if I wrote with recommendation. I wish you would not. One pair of sad eyes, those of my darling wife Edith, is ample weight for me to haul. I miss you. But I fear this land is not for one of your stripe. There is much space and it is filled with loneliness.

We have lost our dear one. Rachel preferred another place. She died January 9. I recall her playing the part of an angel. Holding her hands piously together and flying about the room. From our savings I had made a stone angel with the face of a child to mark her grave.

There is snow and chill underfoot. Edith reads the English poet Browning by lamplight. I cannot love her enough. I will go to teaching or take a position as secretary for one of the companies. My investments in the mines are as fallow as my fields in Iowa. I have made mistakes but I am not a bad man.

Today I visited the cemetery. It is outside of town on a hill barren of ore. But I have something more precious in the ground than silver. Snow was feathering down upon the white angel.

I do not think I will soon find the path homeward, I wish I could take wings and sail. I should like you to send a likeness for me to place on the wall. Attend to your schooling. May God grant you good things. This is my prayer. I am your brother, Alva

## A White Rock

I wondered about the moon  
& at the river a dead rabbit  
was spinning in an eddy, a strange furred fish  
with the curved back of a migrant. I saw  
my grandfather cuss his own body,  
throw his paralyzed arm against the wall,  
“You no good sonofafuck.”

I recall the thin hand on the face of his old watch  
lurching forward second by second.  
Each day from school I kicked a different rock—  
& stones gathered near the driveway—  
so many homecomings.  
I thought about the husband of the woman next door.  
He went away & never came back.

Later, on a night when the moon  
tired even Orion,  
I said three words  
to a girl in an asparagus field,  
& she pressed a white rock into my hand,  
closed my fingers tight around it. I wanted  
to bury the full unbalance of desire  
in the furrowed earth irrigated with moonlight.





## Two Poems About Wells, Nevada

1) A Poem Overheard in K.G.'s Bar

This is the only town I know  
where you can stand up to your ass in snow

& still  
have dust blow in your eye

2) A Poem Blown Away By the Wind

# Arizona

When the sparrow flies into the window  
it sounds like a worn hammerhead on piano wire.  
Then the bird lies a lost note  
on the pale-green patio.

The child who goes outside to find it  
already knows broken things.  
The neck limp, a bead eye, wary, blinks.  
The still-living bird, a small fist  
curled in sleep, is taken inside the house  
it tried to fly through  
and placed in a shoebox where rocks, pinecones,  
and a blue feather had been kept.

Where did it come from? the child asks,  
and mother takes the bird book from the shelf.  
On page 312 they find sage sparrow—  
white spot below the ear, a single brown mark  
on the clear breast. A song of four to seven notes,  
the third note highest.

The mother says the bird has come from winter  
in Arizona, and tomorrow they will see if it can fly.  
Shoebox by the bed, the child lies awake  
wondering what else will break against glass  
and thinks of Arizona as the place where pain comes from—  
small shadow over the earth  
to a backyard in Reno.





# Photograph

We didn't know, but now  
we can see a balance has tipped  
against him. And now that we see it,  
there will never be a time  
when we will not see it. His face  
an ill-fitting mask  
rising away from bone. As a result  
his dark brown eyes become a voice,  
a moment of recognition . . .

*It's come to this. I have  
a new language. In four months  
the doctors will open the book  
of my body, read its last pages.*

In this photograph, the clock  
is a remark on the wall.  
Outside, the sky falls like seconds,  
the rain a consecration. My brother's face  
will blur as he turns toward the window  
to look beyond the bare maple, beyond  
what he knows, what I do not know.

## Field of Vision

When I crawled up inside the attic  
where knowledge is antecedent  
to memory, I could hear—  
*We're waltzing in the wonder  
of why we're here*, my mother singing  
as she ironed my father's shirts.  
Earlier I had watched her  
spread one arm of his shirt,  
then the other, & fold the arms  
across the heart.

I balanced  
on dusty beams & inched closer,  
brushing past a crate of women's worn shoes  
& a box that held pictures  
of the girl who would be my mother,  
until I perched above her song, afraid  
of falling through.  
A bare bulb shaped yellow light  
all angle from the gable.

A pair of glasses  
in a cigar box, the loop of wire-rims  
too big over my ears, & then unfocused color—  
the pile of shoes blurred together.  
My eyes ached until I took the glasses off,  
worked my way back toward the opening  
above the hallway.

Still inside  
I closed the trapdoor & pulled the beaded chain  
shut into black. Huddled there  
in a hollow, I could not tell  
where one body ended & the deep water  
that joined me to my mother began.

## George Pascho Miller

The windows opened to seven sheep  
in my pasture yard, and black Bucephalus  
who stood horse-sure, quiet,  
in his I-will-be-here-forever stance.

Driving here  
east from Tonopah I could have been a headline  
in the **Lincoln County Record**; I barely dodged  
three midnight cattle on the open range.  
All April I taught in the rural county schools,  
staying in this two-room house without television  
or telephone.

Time slowed the way I like it.  
I had just written the line, *loving you*  
*would have been the dark remembering sun,*  
when I heard Williamson's truck  
scrape the gravel driveway. He came to the door  
and slow drawled, "Your father  
just got hold of me. I'm sorry. It's bad news.  
A friend of yours was killed last night."

I stepped out  
into the changed world; the black coat of the horse  
glinted and held sunlight  
as if there were no way not to be in this world.  
The afternoon calm gained a second wind. The sky,  
a clean Nevada blue, obscured nothing  
except the name of the lost.

My father, in his kindness, hadn't said—  
wanting me to hear it from him.  
In the ten minutes it took to get to Williamson's place,  
dust trailing behind us, I wondered what happened  
in the sudden night—a car wreck?  
or, this being America, a bullet?

A vesper sparrow  
flickered across the hood  
then rose and disappeared in a grace note.  
At the place where the bird was subtracted from air

\*

was a list of the names of friends alive,  
and next to it  
a list of the dead. I read the two columns,  
then realized I will lose everyone  
through death, theirs or mine.

I told Williamson  
I was tired of bouncing from town to town, I wanted  
to find a home, hang on to what I love.  
Then I made a crow lift up and fly  
from the dead rabbit in the road. In a daydream  
I took with my hand a fingerling trout  
trapped in a pocket of evaporating water  
and released it swimming into the river.

Which one was lost to me?  
I steadied myself and dialed, the receiver hard  
against my ear  
where a name would be.



Two



## The Mare Slept Standing

When she uncloses her black eyelids  
it is winter, the ground white as a Sunday shirt.  
The fallen leaves, remaining light  
against the body of a weathered Chevy truck.  
Two crows lift, a silence rising with them,  
they glide over the windbreak of cottonwoods  
into another color.

When someone dies,  
that person is everywhere & nowhere.  
Last night under a lean moon I crossed the pasture  
& heard the coyote's weirding cry.

On her way to the bus-stop, the neighbor girl  
carries North America in her hands  
a large map veined with river,  
blue threads glued to cardboard.  
When the mare was born glazed and still,  
the girl's father punched its chest, forced  
his own breath into the mouth & nostrils  
until the foal returned to life.

My breath makes a moon on the window.  
The mare marks new snow with hoofprints  
homing toward shelter.  
From the woodpile I'll bring pieces of pine  
dusted with snow. The wood will give  
warmth I need, the flame exactly blue.

# The Design of Pain

I don't know much more now than I did  
as a boy that summer

when I would ride my bicycle  
down the road to your house,  
past fields where fat crows  
settled in rows of cut alfalfa.

Although I can't recall your face,  
I hear your voice, your laugh  
when I told you I was 8 & 3/4.

My parents talked about you over dinner:  
city-girl, teacher, divorce, time-away.  
I listened, lifted my milk & drank.

You had a dollhouse  
with a granddaddy-longlegs  
in the small kitchen  
you wanted left alone.

We drew dragons in chalk  
on your cracked wooden porch,  
holding up pink, blue & yellow fingers,

but the pastel washed off too quickly.  
One accidental step lifting away  
our fragile stay against nothing.

Most of the people I have lied to  
I have loved. What am I  
to make of that?

Now when I am waiting  
for grief to ease  
or have hurt someone,  
I think of the chalk, your peeling porch  
& you.

You fixed a room in the dollhouse  
for a boy. A red book on the table,  
a ceramic cat on the foot of the bed.  
In the corner, a miniature baseball bat.

It was that boy, the dollhouse boy,  
who came to visit one day  
& stood on a dragon's yellow tail  
at the screendoor & heard  
you crying, the rattled heaving  
a body can make

knowing itself alive & caught  
in something too big to order  
or hold in the palm like a tiny chiffonnier.

The boy fled, jumped on his red Western Flyer  
& pedaled as fast as he could, away  
from what he had heard

& toward it.

# Ornament

*for Wally Cuchine*

The children chased tumbleweeds,  
blue variations over December snow.  
Against the bunkhouse buckaroos watched,  
drinking coffee splashed with Jack Daniels.  
Steam drifted whiskey on the wind  
as the rancher's kids hung silver bells on the thistles  
filigreed with ice.

In summer the tin roof on a shack in Unionville  
ripples like the snow peak three ranges east.  
On the desert the calves are dragged & branded,  
singed hide pungent as tarweed burning.  
Ray & Dallas look for stragglers along the railway bed  
leading to the old silver town.  
Their horses' hooves uncover oyster shells  
tossed from dining cars a century ago.  
The hot air blows a ghost rattle through vetch pods.  
Then out of dust whirling counter-sunwise, a tumbleweed  
& the broken clink of silver ornament,  
illusive & desirable, turns  
through sage across the white flats.

## Lines on an Autumn Night

I name the moon mine,  
and no one is here  
to argue. I listen to the cricket's trill,  
the moon in full bloom, my mind

noisy with the worst goodbyes.  
Outside the window of leaves, the wind  
flirts with the elm. No one  
can tell you how to live alone.

No one can tell you  
where to find the lost things—  
pens, wallets, promise rings.  
It's noisy all the time. The moon is mine.

# Near Mina

*for Roger Smith*

For now  
this is all there is—  
sky, sand & sun.

We travel on a road  
unfolding its reverie  
through small towns.

Thirty miles from  
a quiet place,  
a rundown bar,

a sign  
with a faded letter C  
advertising OLD BEER.

On the outskirts of town,  
a crop  
of abandoned cars.

In the distance clouds  
lower long ladders  
of rain.

Soon damp earth  
& sage  
will perfume the air.

200 miles  
to Las Vegas,  
& the hours

huddle together  
like cattle seeking solace  
from the rain.

# Dancing with the One-Armed Girl

Some of the Senior boys have yet to decide  
between Southeast Asia, Canada or prison. The gym  
is decorated with green & yellow crepe paper  
& a chipped wooden moon that needs paint.

When she asks me to dance I'm afraid of friends' laughter,  
but she is more sure than schoolboys are cruel.

I feel the pulse of the arm never found,  
never lost,

severed when the speedboat ran over her  
& reaching now from the bottom silt of Lake Tahoe.

If I can sense the phantom touch  
then she too can feel it & the moment

after, when the body  
began to remember itself. The arm

calling back for its body  
or perhaps another to hold

as it drifted deeper blues  
through lakewater.

Small fish swimming  
between fingers of an outstretched hand

like memory brushing against us,  
the way her hair touched my cheek.

The air in the gym was deep with currents,  
the back of her dress damp with sweat.

The lost arm remains  
holding to memory, knowing  
the slow dance of lower depths.

## Bare Trees

I stood in a light snow & looked into the grave.  
In the hole was a tangle of tendril-like roots  
that had been chopped with an ax.

The broken roots were ice.  
Very cold. Very strange.  
A nightmare nest of leeches,  
slick & transparent, they would try  
to wriggle their way into the coffin.

I was ten & thought,  
God, what a thing  
to have grandfather planted there.

Juxtaposed to my fear, the hush of snow  
was funereal. The glide of ritual  
the adults calmly joined.  
My aunt, her mascara thick as a '60's starlet,  
cried quietly as we turned to walk away  
out of the cold that pressed close & the wind  
mourning among old stones & bare trees.

Sometimes I'd sit with grandmother by the fire.  
Stars blurred in the four-paned window  
where snow sparked in each frame of sky,  
a winter scene sealed in a glass dome  
& set on a widow's mantel.

She often fell asleep while reading.  
Her face was still water,  
the white Bible in her lap  
slanting like a tombstone.  
The log would snap in the fireplace  
& sparks scatter red  
a moment. I would think about winter  
& what it buries.

## Toward Morning

The sky sleek as the coat of a blue roan  
in the moonquiet of two thousand stars  
falling on Fourth Street in Panaca.  
The smell of dust in October air.  
A horse whinnies, dreams she is the wind.  
On highway 319 a haytruck shifts toward Cedar City

and the night grows huge. I remember Basho,  
*Deep autumn,*  
*my neighbors,*  
*how do they live?—*

The high school basketball coach  
dreaming a six foot five transfer student;  
the county road supervisor, his stubbled face  
creased by the white sheet;  
the short-order cook at the Silver Cafe  
asleep with the smell of onions on her hand.

## Unionville Spring

To change the water's flow, we went out at night  
in her father's fields, moved tin aqueducts  
from trench to trench. Cattle lowed in the pasture,  
each of their solid shapes a darkness.  
In rubber boots we slogged through muck knee-deep.  
Trying to siphon a hose, I sucked too hard,  
swallowed thick water & felt the silt  
settle in my lungs. She heard me choke  
& shined the light.  
A large frog singled out in the beam,  
leaped into dark. She laughed when she knew  
I was all right. We fell into  
the irrigation ditch, rolling, we welcomed each other  
to good black mud.

What I hold to is night air  
on my skin, stars  
showing on the surface of the warm spring.  
Our boots stand next to our clothes on the white rock  
by the cutbank. When she dives into the pond  
the splash of her body is an ovation.  
I jump, scattering stars, to pull toward her.

## Rains

I watched Kate lift her skirt  
to cross the irrigation ditch  
that ran like a ragged shoelace  
from the pond down through pasture.  
There was disorder in the northern sky,  
an approaching hem of jagged rain  
& shaped clouds—one, an owl's mask,  
another, a broken tea cup.

Above us, a ribbon of linnets hung in the air  
gliding, gliding. I wanted a faith like that,  
but on the path to the pond  
we found one dead, fallen out of belief.

We picked blackberries on the way.  
The berries sweet, the stings of blood  
beading our wrists.  
At the pond, we heard the evening song, blackbird  
& rusty guttural of frog  
mimicked by cattle in the field.  
The air warm & musty like an old piano.

Two raindrops fell on the water & made a ring  
like moonlight pinging off the hood of my father's truck  
parked in front of the Double Hawk Tavern.  
I wondered if those raindrops fell all that way  
together, only to break apart near the end, or  
if they fell separately & then joined the same water.

This was before I learned the language of men  
& the crude ways they talk  
of women & work & what they have lost.  
The rain would come harder.  
We would turn to go back.  
She would lift her skirt to cross the ditch  
& I would feel raindrops  
falling on the linnets,  
wings bent toward flight.

# Theory of Twilight

My brother's angular shadow is imitated  
by my father's dark outline  
shimmering on the kitchen wall like water  
in the slanted light of a falling sun.  
My father slices peaches and gives me

a bowl of fleshy wedges  
the color of a sky I saw in Molleño,  
a fishing town in Peru.  
It was a sunset that remembered my brother.  
He thought the moment before death

must be like twilight, neither light or dark.  
In California the ocean  
was five miles from my brother's hospital bed,  
lulling him to sleep  
with a dream of waves he couldn't quite hear.

I'd walk the shoreline  
as he tossed, afternoons, drowsing.  
Kneeling, I freed the best shells  
from black sand for him  
and, back again, told

about clocking the sun as it sank into the sea.  
For a week I'd timed it—  
73 seconds from the moment  
the sun touched water  
until it disappeared completely.

My father rubs his knuckles  
as if smoothing them. He knows more about guilt  
than I do. I am neither a husband  
or a father. He is years sadder.  
While I was in Peru

looking out to sea, I saw my brother's paleness.  
He waited, palms-up, white  
and bride-like. His eyes rolled toward the ceiling,  
his last breath left,  
and a quiet assumed the room.

Taped to the wall,  
the card sent by Grandmother:  
a greeting card sunrise  
or sunset. 73 seconds  
from the moment.

I took the card down and walked out  
into the hallway's sallow light. My parents  
were coming toward me. Mother rushed the room,  
but we held her back. I'm not sure why.  
She called out his name and her voice drifted

back thirty years—a mother's evening song,  
lilting across the deep-rutted road into the summer field,  
calling him home.  
While my father entered the room, I held the pain—  
keeping grief

against her small shoulder until the door opened  
and he took her in.  
A stunning sunset in Molleño, and I  
was missing everyone I'd ever loved.  
The door opened on the last glimpse of my brother.

He was not as I had left him.  
His father had touched his eyes closed, mothered  
the shock of black hair from his forehead  
and made into prayer, finger by finger  
the hands.



Three



# Yes

I believe in a map I followed  
high into the Andes.  
I say yes to the A encyclopedia,  
yes to my mother who was too poor  
to buy a set but collected free samples  
of first volumes.  
So I learned the presidents  
whose names begin with "A"  
and when my teachers asked for reports,  
I said yes to the Adamses  
and to Chester Alan Arthur  
who came to office in 1881  
when James Garfield was shot  
by a disappointed office-seeker.  
There are some things to which  
I can't say no. I say yes, oh yes,  
to your kisses,  
yes to no, yes to rain,  
its repetition. I say yes  
to fallen leaves and the leaves  
yet to let go. I say yes  
to my student, Oudalay Phandonovoung, who told me  
after a bird had crapped on my head,  
that where he came from  
I'd be considered a lucky man.

## Sophal Niem and the Moon in the Bucket

When the moon was highest,  
her father would drop the family mirror  
into a bucket of water, where  
waves of light wobbled  
until the mirror claimed the moon's full attention  
& the reflection rippled white half a moment.  
Then the moon knitted together & settled,  
held still in the bucket.  
When Sophal & her brother bowed close  
to drink in the sight, they saw the bright moon  
& within it the tree that Buddah sat under.

Write about your most embarrassing moment—  
I give my Cambodian students  
the same assignment I have used  
for years in Nevada high schools.  
They ask,  
What does embarrassing mean?  
I tell them,  
It means a time when you were uncomfortable,  
a time when you felt everyone  
was watching you.

The moon above the prison camp  
illuminated men & women,  
cast their bound shadows  
& revealed the path  
when Sophal's family began walking  
away from the fields,  
past blindfolded skulls.  
Later they watched the full moon in the river,  
unable to cross, the bridge destroyed.  
Her father let down his shoulder board  
with the bucket swinging from one end.

At home I sit in a yellow circle of lamplight  
reading my students' papers.  
Sopha Niem tells about minefields  
on the Cambodian-Thai border  
& encountering robbers with rotten teeth.  
They raped her in front of her family.  
She watched her mother clench,  
raise her eyes above what was happening.  
Sopha writes, *I felt embarrassed.*  
*It was uncomfortable.*

Sopha's father went down to the river  
& returned with the bucket full.  
He unwrapped a bundle & took out the mirror,  
held it above the water & let it fall.  
The moon, complete in the sky,  
refused to hold the broken light  
reflecting into splintered bone  
on the water's smooth surface.

Her father reached for the mirror,  
his hand dripping, & smashed it on a rock,  
releasing the spirits of all the dead  
who had ever looked into the glass.  
Sopha found a piece,  
held it & felt a keen edge.  
She saw part of her face.  
She told herself, *I am the mirror, I am not.*

# Salt

*for Shaun Griffin*

In the coastal Peruvian town of Molleño,  
after the generator shuts down & the lights  
are off in the sea shack  
& the tide is right at night,  
we shoulder our fishing net to the dark shoreline.  
The sand, still warm with sun,  
coats my feet like white ash.

Into the sea we wade together,  
Manuel & Pedro in front of Lucho & me.  
I joke in broken Spanish  
about how often we seem to drag in nine fish—  
nine shinings in the grid of rope—  
three finger-sized anchovies, covina,  
& sandy moons of flounder.

The water settles calm around our chests.  
For a moment, the waves' repetition stops.  
We stand still with the water, the wet rope  
soaked & heavy on our shoulders.  
I look out to where the drowned are cradled,  
hold my breath & feel the ocean of my living blood.

Then the waves resume & we begin again.  
The two in front spread the net in the water  
while Lucho & I struggle for shore.  
We pull the guide ropes in, gripping tight  
to keep the rope from slipping.  
My hand cramps. In the night I can't see,  
not much. The shapes of men in near blue moonlight,  
sparks where the sand kicks up.

We work the net many times  
then build a fire with driftwood  
& cook the anchovies crackling in a pan over flame.  
We eat them hot & whole with warm beer,  
the oil pearling on our lips, our fingers.

After carrying the catch back to the sea shack,  
I lie down in my second summer of the year  
& feel sand coarse against my scalp.  
I can't read the constellations,  
the moon is backwards in the sky.

At daybreak, the fishermen outside push their carts  
stacked with fish. The wheels grinding to market.  
I wake to sand on my lips,  
brush the crusted salt from my arms.  
When I stand & step away from the yellowed sheet  
on the floor of splintered slats  
that is my bed, I step from  
a man's cast-off shape,  
the shed salt, life made crystalline.

# Silver

—Virginia City

1.

1858

Goldminers curse the bluish mud  
that clogs sluice boxes & rockers  
used to collect placer gold. They muck  
the blue stuff & toss it  
beneath scrub pine in Six Mile Canyon  
until they find the mud is silver rich.

2.

At night in the Crystal Bar  
they pay 15 , a long bit,  
for double-bock beer  
or lemonade with claret punch,  
& dance quadrilles to 6/8 time.

3.

They speak a language:  
drifts & spurs  
blackdamp upraise crosscut.

4.

An envelope of sun  
pales the old photograph of miners,  
shoulder to shoulder, stripped to the waist.  
Their eyes the speckles  
within white & blue-streaked quartz,  
light inside rock.

5.

A snapped cable. The elevator car fell  
three hundred feet, collapsed like cardboard.  
Fourteen men lost deep in the Yellowjacket Mine.  
Firemen flipped coins, fateful moons,  
to see who would go down.  
The wives stood in front of houses  
on the hillside & realized  
their worst, literal fear.  
They knew before they were told  
about fortune.

# Trajectory

You kneel  
and take the arrowhead  
from where it lies, from where  
it has been waiting,  
and lift it

into the present  
unresolved in arcing  
shafts of light. The obsidian  
is the blue-black  
of crow feathers.

You scrape the stone  
with a fingernail, work loose  
the rouge of old dust.  
And the tip you thought dulled  
cuts.

# Test

*"You people who live near Nevada Test Site are in a very real sense active participants in the Nation's atomic test program."*

*—Atomic Energy Booklet, page 2, March, 1957*

The sky brightens with a flash.

A rancher feels the earth shudder  
beneath his red roan.  
He shields his eyes—  
flesh is transparent,  
his hand a diagram of bones.  
*My God*, he whispers.

The mare shies,  
only the pressure of his boots  
urges her  
through Eagle Valley to a ridge where  
the only boundary  
is the sky.

In the sparse shade of a Joshua tree  
the pink clouds hover  
over the ranges of his retina.

He rubs his burning nostrils  
& tries to spit out the bitterness,

the metallic taste.

# Boundaries

Last night they watched a fish leap  
completely out of the water.  
For a moment  
it was suspended  
above its mirrored image,  
until it fell  
breaking the surface.

This morning the light is the softness  
of a sharp fingernail run down the spine.  
Beyond the motel window, the light  
remakes the trees that edge the lake.  
There are wakes on the water,  
Tahoe's cold glinting.

Asleep in the posture of dream,  
their bodies are boundaries.  
His breath warm on her neck, a shadow  
bends to the curve of her breast.  
The border of their bodies  
shape to one another.

Years ago, the first night,  
a new bath towel & the colors ran,  
tinged their bodies blue  
so that their flesh flared,  
a mackereled sunrise sky.

They have come to the stateline resort  
to try to reclaim something  
of that bluing flesh.

After showering he finds her  
nude, on the floor  
sketching herself in the full-mirrored  
closet door. "It's very pretty,"  
he says to her reflection.  
She frowns, "I try to see past  
the flaws, but it's difficult."

He reaches for her. She takes his hand  
& she rises to stand beside him.  
She tosses her pencilled self on the bed.

They hold each other, press together  
tight in the simple desire to fit.  
In the mirror there are still spaces between them,  
places where they don't touch,  
that they might rise above  
a moment before they descend  
& fall blue through themselves.

## On a Windy Afternoon

I stop for gas in Carlin.  
In the schoolyard students  
exercise in rows. Arms & legs  
scissoring into an X  
then closing to an I.

For someone it is laundry day.  
The breeze slips inside  
clothes on the line  
inspiring bodies of wind.  
Shirts wave to passersby,  
& crazy-legged pants try to run  
away.

In this town  
there's probably a meal cooking,  
a woman I could love, a bed  
I would find comfortable.

When the tank is filled,  
I drive for Battle Mountain.

# The Waiting

1.

The taillights far ahead recall the glow  
of cigarettes my father smoked in the dark  
those nights I stayed out late.  
I had a curfew of conscience; knew  
he couldn't sleep till I was home.  
It was late. I'd been drinking cheap red wine  
and when I reached the front door,  
I still held the rainbow barrette  
I'd taken from Charlene Moore's hair.  
My father's silhouette waited in the darkest corner.  
I ignored him. And he said nothing.  
The bedroom door creaked as I closed it.  
Minutes later, the door creaked again,  
a fan of light opening across the floor.  
He leaned over me,  
pulling blankets up under my chin.  
There was a hush  
as in the backseat of a car  
when a girl's bra unhooks.  
His breath tobacco-sweet, the stubble  
of his whiskers prickling  
as he kissed my cheek.

## 2.

My brother looked tiny in the hospital bed.  
Each day I took his hands they were colder.  
Thirteen years apart—when I was younger  
he seemed more father than brother.  
Now his face had thinned back  
to a sharply-chiseled teenager's,  
and the nurses thought I looked older than he did.  
We finally talked about growing up,  
the difference between the '50's and '60's.  
I told him about the night Dad tucked me in,  
kissed me goodnight. He wasn't surprised.  
Shortly before going away to college  
he and Jimmy Nielson drove to San Francisco  
in Nielson's red '56 T-Bird,  
returning home late and drunk.  
He slipped quickly to his room.  
Soon he realized Dad was standing by the bed.  
We laughed, thinking of our father as a specter  
who arrived on nights we drank too much.

### 3.

In my parents' house history is lost.  
In other homes after someone has passed on  
into darkness, there are little shrines—  
photographs of the dead on top of the television  
or on the shelf beside glass swans.  
Graduation pictures of my brother and me  
have been taken from the wall.  
It was a long time  
before my father looked directly at anyone.  
He won't talk about it.  
This morning I watched him  
put on his coat of silence  
and walk out to the woodpile,  
snow blossoming in his greying hair.  
He splits wood to exhaust himself;  
in this way my father teaches me  
the sorrow of pine, cedar, and oak.  
There is enough wood for three winters.  
Tonight we watch the 10:00 news on channel 2.  
My mother goes to bed; we watch the 11:00 news  
on channel 3.  
I say goodnight and go to my old room—  
the familiar quilt and reading lamp.  
In the hospital, my brother was so still  
I moved close to find a breath there.  
I kissed his pale cheek, touched  
my warm lips to his skin.  
Now my father sits alone by the fire,  
embers burning to white ash.  
If he looks out the window, he will see  
his own face looking in.  
He has lost his son in the night  
and he is waiting for him.



Gary Short lives in the shadow of an abandoned mill at American Flat, a few miles down a dirt road from Virginia City, Nevada. After graduating from California State University, Fresno, he studied at California State University, Sacramento, and Arizona State University. He worked as a high school teacher and as an artist-in-residence in Nevada schools. Short has been poetry editor for **Hayden's Ferry Review** and **Shankpainter**. A 1990-91 Writing Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, he is a 1993-95 Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford.



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