

JERUSALEM OF GRASS

by

David Axelrod



Ahsahta Press
Boise State University
Boise, Idaho

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the editors of the following publications in which some of these poems have appeared or are forthcoming (some in earlier versions or under different titles):

Calapooya Collage, Crab Creek Review, Cream City Review, Colorado Review, Cutbank, Hiram Poetry Review, Images, Kentucky Poetry Review, Laurel Review, Madison Review, Malahat Review, Mankato Poetry Review, Ohio Journal, Oregonian, Pikeville Review, Poetry Northwest, Poetry Now, Prism International, Publications of the Friends of the Ohio University Library, Seattle Review, Willow Springs, and Yarrow.

Editor for Ahsahta Press: Orvis Burmaster

Jerusalem of Grass is printed on acid-free text and cover papers.

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ISBN 0-916272-53-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number:
92-72095

Introduction

David Axelrod's fine, elegiac and lyrical poems express the sense of loss the contemporary mind must endure, unaccommodated, on the edge of betrayed Nature and nothing. Like Frost, he is "between the woods and frozen lake." Unlike Frost, he hasn't an owner of the woods, metaphysical or human, to complain about for having moved "his house" to town. Axelrod is alone in mind, vicarious and having trouble with his yearning. Love poems, poems of family and travel, always have animals and landscape hooked in the corner of his eye like a grapple. The lovely first poem of Jerusalem of Grass, finds him identifying his as yet unborn child, hence his own unestablished being, with that of

. . . the awkward
sway-backed colt that always stood
at the middle of the crowded mares,
answering to the others
with a fidelity to habit or need.

Axelrod focuses on the colt, safe in the maternal circle, the female principle, read anthropologically. But, American, Odyssean, he is transient: "fidelity to habit or need" is in question as, later, the poem ends with a cold image of vanishing:

The mares stopped and waited for the colt
to cross the ridge
before they descended
together with the sun
into the hoar-covered canyon below.

Awkward about becoming a father, and incapable of following the animals, or even naming them (who in another poem always "go on ahead" like his "parents/who hurried ahead of him/until they vanished laughing"), Axelrod writes in "The Changing Day" that he is

. . . no Adam naming a new world,
mapping out this mountainside
as though it were my home.
. . .
the changing day grows remote
and narrows like a gauntlet
at the canyon's rim above,
where snow devils toil
in a forest of stunted trees.

Pink skin, yellow-white hair, sickle
moons under claws the color
of human fingernails, hers is the body
every man wants to invade, crawl inside
and begin mutilating himself.

This is the sow albino bear a bow-hunter has killed without the slightest awareness of any correspondence between earth-mother and albino bear, when man could unselfconsciously know his own rebirth from the stomach of the bear he has killed, hacked open, and then crawled into for food and warmth. Axelrod makes one feel the loss of that connection. His bear is the female principle of nature that contemporary man can only invade, then mutilate himself. The albino bear has been killed as a trophy.

Robert Hass has written in one of his poems that all the old poems were about loss, and that so too are all the new ones. What is best about Axelrod's poetry is that the language and the yearning, un sentimentally realized, survive nostalgia. He is fishing the swamp, the one inside himself, ourselves, but the surface is frozen. Where Frost somewhat whines about his condition, if I hear his tone rightly, and moves on because he isn't ready yet for the "lovely, dark and deep," or because he's made promises (which I find intelligently misleading), and where Hemingway puts off until another day the existential attraction to oblivion in Nature, Axelrod loves enough to live with helplessness, knowing that he has kicked himself out of the garden with the rest of us. If he cannot "lie down with the animals", or "drift in solution" with Whitman, whether we take these as sleep or death images, he can at least witness the problem effectively as an American ranging here and there, looking at the ruins. Where much contemporary poetry is absorbed by in-town matters: lovers, families, politics, without the grand setting of man in nature, Axelrod tries to abide, even in a wonderful poem about a couple bussing through "the landscape of cornfields," which

deranges, blue flames leap from factories,
and in the dun-colored light, a river
finalizes its descent—channeled water
that burns weird reflections in cement

into Detroit, where

we will promise each other nothing,
not love, not even hope,
yet we lie welcome in the storm,
in each other's sticky arms,

In the spirit of an Isaiah, he implies that even the changes of day are remote for our species now. Nature is a gauntlet, not a garden. And toil, the old curse, goes on in Nature as if it were a disease picked up from man. So Axelrod is literally "stopped" by woods, water, mountains and animals, and though he tries for self-reflexive vision, Nature is a distorted mirror, whether by our destructive intrusion or because we can no longer feel ourselves part of it. He examines the urge that Eliade calls "the nostalgia for Paradise," but the eviction is pretty much complete. In "Cutthroat," Axelrod reminds me of Hemingway, where in "Big Two-Hearted River" Nick feels the pull of what is "lovely, dark and deep," the swamp that he must put off as the "tragic adventure" he will save for another day of fishing. Nick has returned, presumably from war, across burned land to the meadow by the river he has yet to cross. He does at the end of Part 1 attain a sleep that is a sort of extinction, but his "story" isn't over. Like Frost, he has things to do in town. Where Hemingway's trout "hold," are "steady" in the current, and thereby admirable, graceful under pressure, Axelrod's trout register the helplessness of nature and his own self-conscious, clumsy attempts to be one with it. In "Elegy for Jim Baim," about a shaman figure who drowned, he says of the boys, "Our bodies long to drift down there/like his in the deep rolling silt." And trout are images of

reflected light. . . .
a light that glides larvae
up from lake-slime
and lures cutthroat into sky.

This is similar to the way the mares vanish, though this time into light, not darkness, and while Hemingway sees trout as natural fact and clear objective correlative, Axelrod sees them as imaginings that usually "drift deeper than sight," as if they, Jim Baim and the horses were ephemera of the sub-conscious, always, like dreams that when they yield to day disappear. This is what is important about Axelrod's vision. His implication is that, even when standing before Nature, we can only imagine it, having so forfeited our place in it. Frost and Hemingway can at least take Nature for granted.

Axelrod seems always "miles from home," any home. *Jerusalem of Grass* records site after site around America, as if in search of a landscape that will do. This is not heroic travel, but a poetic history of vicariousness and failure. The problem is not between man and nature, but within ourselves as extrapolated beings. In one poem he records with great pain:

“Now this is strange that I say we belong here. Look how we live. Hidden in a foreign land that we love and hate. Even the beautiful river, the forests, none of these are ours. Ours is a life made up entirely from the imagination. We say our prayers for the rains to come, not for here, but for in the Holy Land. It doesn’t exist anymore. And yet we feel the seasons of Jerusalem more than the cold of this land. In this we find a home. Would you say this is insanity?”

— Shmuel the Tailor

until we wake, ashamed strangers
on a bus into hell, two more riders
who keep no secrets and will move apart.

How can these progenitors observe fidelity if what is left looks like this?

Electrical storms clear north of the lake,
over provinces nearer the sea,
thunderheads growing orange miles above,
and in the gloom below the blazing sky
only the braids of your hair,
tied in colorful beads from Africa,
shine while the bus idles under a sycamore
and passengers file quietly to their seats.

They too are in their seats, merely witnessing "deranged" images of Nature. Our species will go on, I think he's saying, but he reminds us of what we have done with our "mutilating" drives. We probably have lost our romantic connection with the natural environment, even when we immerse ourselves in it and write. Axelrod does not use Nature aesthetically to color language or event or situation, or for the sake of human discourse, but as the now weird backdrop against which everything human still matters or does not, for him. Yes, love between man and woman, father and son, friend and friend do come into light, like the larvae and trout, in some poems centrally, but the overwhelming perspective is philosophical, and this makes for important poetry. Given how he feels, he may as well be husband, father, poet . . . Adam.

Paul Nelson
Machiasport, ME
February, 1992

Allegiances

East across the cut hayfields
Arabian mares were corralled
behind hawthorn and nailed boards.
When the day dawned clear,
steam rose from their backs
and burr-tangled manes,
the air around them sweet
with the odor of damp burlap.
Each seemed patient to stand
where I saw them last
at dusk the day before.
At what hour in the dark
did they kneel and fall
asleep in the snow, or just
before daybreak, jackknife
onto their legs again?

The woman who chose me
to love her groaned awake
in the loft, her weight shifting
over the loose plank floor.
Cedar shakes popped
and ignited in the stove,
a ray of sun lowered
through the canyon below Olsen Peak,
and I looked for the awkward,
sway-backed colt that always stood
at the middle of the crowded mares,
answering to the others
with a fidelity to habit or need.
My life still answered to little.
I spread my hands nervously
over the belly of my swelling bride.
Another pulse drummed deep
in her syncopated blood,
a single irritating grain
spun into a living pearl.

Elegy for Jim Baim

We let him drown
here in the rushes

and here in the pond,
Jim Baim, who surfaced three times

under the bare, clattering limbs
of this dead sycamore.

He dared us to come after him
and we came too.

down through the trees,
hollering like dogs.

to lob stones into the quicksand
where he went down, sinking

into the black silt
drifting at the river's heart.

We found his shed clothes
hanging here in this tree

and divvied among ourselves,
each of us hoping his body, one day,

might surface in the strip mine,
bloated as a drowned cow,

and then we'd get another chance
to toss rocks and sink him.

The largemouth bass
he coaxed from under the ice each spring

Every afternoon that winter
as I drove to work, I watched
families riding freights west
to Seattle, and one night a man
wandered from the railyard
with a family following him
to ask me directions
to the Poverello House,
where I knew they'd be turned away—
the beds full every night,
the meals already eaten.
I heard so many garbled voices,
My own, the Salish braves
drunk in parking lots, the President
and his parochial connivers,
the whole exhausted horde of us,
giddy with our betrayals,
laughing at the folly of love.

And one morning, as I sat
looking at the fields before dawn,
a yellow spider with eyes
like a string of bright emeralds
dropped from the ceiling and vanished
under the hair on my wrist
and I heard my love telling me
to hurry, look quick—horses
broke from their corral
and bolted through drifted snow,
but as they crested the hill,
the mares stopped and waited
for the sway-backed colt
to cross the ridge
before they descended
together with the sun
into the hoar-covered canyon below.

Tracing You To a Rented Room

And so this is only Monday.
Already I've traced you this far
to rented rooms
let at a daily rate
to the three men standing together
in the shared kitchen, listening
with equal concern
to each other's stories
of a well-heeled sister in Spokane.
Like a giant ox, I stumble toward them.

Parked in muddy lots
off the highway through town,
semis browse and idle
outside the streaked and steaming windows
at Emil Taber's Cafe. Rain sizzles
on the pavement, and clouds
obscure the mountain above.

My cousin lived here with his bride
in Benton Anderson's trailer
just across the street;
six months ago, they moved
to Billings and the Boom.

In my dream at dawn today,
a cougar lunged at me
from the oncoming surf.
Friends arrived from other states,
hoping to bring me home,
as I hope to bring you,
to burn away the fog
in which we lose our faces
a little earlier each day.

to hold in his hands
and weep over like a fool.

curves through his hair now
and bluegill dart

in and out between weeds
rooted in his green ribs.

Now who wants to laugh
about all the fun we had?

I can't apologize.
That's how it is.

Our bodies long to drift down there
like his in the deep rolling silt.

Good luck boys.
Even the stars look at us grim.

The pond spills out into the river
and Baim will never let us in.

Boy Scouting Rounds a Guy Out

*Eros heard the prayer and figured that
love after all was love*

One night before I knew to suspect anything
I woke and looked out from my tent
at an old man and boy
hurrying across the grassy field at midnight.
In two years, the boy would enlist for the war
and that timid old man was found out—
trashed and shunned.
Drifting up from the coal marshes,
ground fog glowed green with foxfire,
and the Milky Way, glistening brightly
as a slug trail on wet bark,
cast blue light over the naked bodies of those two
now long dead, who were so near to me
I might have cried out their names.

I told them, My hands are healing,
baby, it's a good sign. another cup of coffee
please, tomorrow. tomorrow the sun
will return to clear the valley,
and the mountain we can't see today
will draw us rapidly along with it
into the rising sea
that will rinse us clean
as children rushing into the rain.

I step into the dark office
and a cripple at the desk
tells me to follow the hall
until it ends on the left,
you're staying here
in room #5.

The Gift of a Wallet

The Bubba who fattened me in the egg yolk richness
of privilege.
who tailored my clothes, fed me bland brisquet
(triple-boiled and skimmed)
has withered, grown timid, contemptuously mousy,
a little nuts.
She drinks herself *shikker* before every Shabbos
blessing.
throws her head back, the patchy red hair, balding
on top.
and rants in the Yiddish she left in the Baltics,
story after story none of us understands.

Each month when her Social Security check arrives,
she mails me things, the accumulations of junk
she could build no fire large enough to burn,
though the clutter makes a cool flame of its own
and sucks the oxygen out of my rooms.
All this junk inhabited her life and is as alien
now
as the dark faces moved in around her block.
She keeps knocking at the chained doors of
strangers,
the occupants of Sadie and Herman Rado's house,
children swallowing laughter on Clara Manheim's
stoop.

Today I received the mildewed remains of a
wallet
my Zayda carried the last month of his life.
My education, that ironic wise ass who stands
between me
and my suffocating reluctance to grieve for him,
reminds me: aboriginal peoples will burn all
material objects of their dead
so as not to torment the spirit with memory or
desire.
to free them, the living and dead alike.

*

Zayda

My Zayda,
who I quarreled with the day he died,
whose heart was glutted by the rage of factories,
who stuttered like my father,
who reared me after my father vanished,
my Zayda knew the odd patterns in the sky
and tried awkwardly to teach me
to see a dragon, a swan, a great bear—
all the animals extinct in our lives.
But he spoke the names all wrong,
stuttered over consonants,
while stars trailed along the ecliptic,
some so immense
we could watch their chameleon atmospheres
shift color, swell, condense.
He took me to the river on summer evenings,
out past the waterworks, where citylights diffused,
his bareass, Sanova Beach.
In the black water, Polaris whirled,
the tails of meteors unbraided like hair,
and he told me he saved a boy and a girl there once,
in spite of his life, from drowning.
But I always thought him a liar, a seething freak.
So I stopped listening
whenever he grew wild in the tongue—
his old shame I thought had nothing to do with me.
And once he slapped me until I fell.
Then he went on, certain I was listening
as he rhapsodized the Northern Lights,
how they streamed from the horizon
the year before the war began in Poland,
the entire sky where the Dipper tilts
glowed emerald and white and blue,
emerald again and again white and blue.

I stack the cards neatly, a tidy, small
denomination.
shuffle and deal each around the table, hoping
no story coheres.
nothing to strain toward translation, nothing
to grieve for
in this mold-blotched gift that arrived packed
in popped corn.
What am I to keep for myself here?
What am I to claim when Bubba raises her wine
and curses lustily in a language a girl left
in Riga?
It's only so much more stained, torn-up junk
easily tossed in the fire I set between me
and the story she keeps wanting to tell, but
can't:

not of a foolish greenhorn, not of Europe,
not the *kinneahorra* that chases off evil,
but of how nothing ever distinguishes us,
how we go on dying in shabby houses crammed
with *shmukktas*.
all our accounts unredeemable, friends scattered
like birdshot.
I sit at her table, mahogany grain swirling like
a whirlpool
and while that crazy old woman raves, I listen,
without a sidelong glance or single true word
of my own.

from regret, from the loss that is no loss at
all.
So maybe I needed a wallet and Bubba must have
known.

Except for his money, nothing is missing.
When he died, this wallet was stuffed:
four-hundred and eighty-seven dollars
arranged in tidy, small denominations.
There are two photos here taken out on
Sawburg Road,
where they made Jews live in the 1920s,
where my grandparents rented their first house
before the Great Depression emptied shops
and sent them home to families in Cleveland.

One picture is of Bubba: an ordinary girl
in black frame glasses, baggy skirt, print
blouse.
She smiles at the Brownie, one arm cocked,
hand on a bony hip,
an awkward, unglamorous Garbo, she held my
Zayda's gaze,
her body and his hand in that instant steady,
while the wind behind them whipped the willows
into blur.

And another photo of them together, arm-in-arm,
grinning, intent, risen from the first sexual
joy,
the discovery of an island, an embrace I never
saw:
only the shoves and quarrels that followed, a
bitter old couple.
Here is Zayda's Drugstore Senior Discount Card;
his driver's license; an "exclusive membership"
in the Steel Works Athletic Association,
"with privileges," his name and clock number
113 penciled below.
Every expiration date is 1970 something.

Red clouds hover like ghosts.
prehistoric monsters soaring in the heat.
A short walk up the littered drive
past the ironweed, crushed cans.
and skins of deflated love.

crickets click ninety-four degrees.
The splintered doors that locked
migrants inside each night bang
hard against the wooden jamb.
banging with a madness I recognize.

Chicory twists through the floors.
swallows pack their mud nests in rafters.
plaster powders a squatter's bed.
I can't drag my gaze from the gutted dorm
and grin contented at the well-tricked.

two-fisted engines of my life.
My wife's face glitters with sweat
and our boy bawls lonely as a calf.
In foothills south of Circleville,
south of this abandoned migrant dorm.

our new rented home swelters in haze.
They're my neighbors now, who came here
as children when the country boomed.
following their fathers into a flat north.
Those same children, old today

who greeted us with baskets of squash,
who waved to their orchards and corn,
and told us, You're home here.
feel free to help yourselves
and please take all you ever need.

Abandoned Migrant Dorm

When the country boomed sixty years ago
clans wandered from the hills,
farmers, miners, shriven brides,
who lashed log ferries
and poled across the river shoals.

They begged their way north in a swarm,
until the doors of migrant dorms
swung open to welcome them home
at the edge of the Pickaway Plain.
I still hear the laughter in that name

some ironic and gentrified jackass
gave to all the lands he owned,
but never worked with his living hands.
I can't drag my gaze from the gutted dorm
and meet the eyes of my family

who sit in the car, gaping
at what I brought them two thousand miles
to see, pretending our chances
would come down to something else.
No more keep moving brother

but migrate you must not do. Move,
that's what money and laws will allow.
A rented house, credit and work
filled with good masculine light.
Sixty years hasn't changed the way

a booming country falls in love
with itself, like a lonely drunk
slurring into a cluttered mirror.
Alive in back of me, the foothills
slaver and seethe a toxic steam.

Life along the Mahoning

A clear-pitched ringing
turns me down a cinder path
into the bottoms
where men build trains
in the half-light at dawn.

Each time I come here
starlings peck my shoulder blades,
mocking my clumsy wings.

Fog lifts off the railyard
and the scene I remember
repeats itself: Snodie Washington's shack
overgrown by roses,
red sumac flailing in the dark.

and under the viaduct
my grandfather sits by himself,
thin, doddering with the sugar,
last old Jew
among twenty thousand blacks
and dour white gentiles.

When was life along this river worth living?
Men planning to work
a trick-and-a-half in the mill
six days a week?
My father young and two stores going?
Account lists long
and all customers paid through the first?

The shut-down drop forge
still thuds in back of me,
that far-off pound I slept with
and thought was my heart
beating under the concrete floor.

Bainbridge Dairy

On a rare day of sun,
we followed her path across fields,

a clear way she'd found
from one pasture to the next,

a habit of passing through
deep sod and hollows,

where roots of blackberries swell
and strain to the urge of light.

Clouds lifted from the Sound
and the far-off Olympics

lunged from the sea like whales.
With the laughter of gulls

we came through scotchbroom
and maples to old fields,

where the clearness of her mind
sweats in the leaf-fall of orchards,

in the scum of fruit
lingering in coarse grass,

and we came as lovers
one afternoon in November,

a rare day of sun when nobody saw us
or bothered to tell us to leave.

At the Smokejumper's Trailer

A thin girl opens the plywood door,
but I don't catch her name
and only begin listening close when she says
her husband has gone to town to his credit union

for our money. We nod
and I toss firewood off the flatbed,
while my cousins follow the girl
to wait inside over cups of coffee.

A quarter mile across the valley,
flamboyant clouds of steam
roll from the pulp mill stacks
and bluster in intermittent wind.

As I stack the billets,
shadows slouch towards me across fields
and I snuff up the scent of manure,
of cooked cabbage and glue.

Goats blink their slatted eyes
in the sudden dark then light
and hens peck frantically at the stiff
mud beneath my boots.

There's nothing else left for me to do,
but wait, eclipsed by what that girl
inside the trailer knows
she's been made to endure, until we leave

this bad debt none of us could pay
now that the seasons have changed
and the heights are purged of fire,
snow wading down to us through timber.

I stand here on a trestle,
gazing down at the Mahoning,
and wait for the locomotives,
the high water and the day to come.
Below me, the lantern eyes of carp
cast green light
up from the river channel.

Water laughs
and glides us back to sea,
back into the blue
where faces shine and bloat
and the Rumanians,
who escaped here each spring
to glare crazy in the furnaces,
lumber now with dolphins in their arms.

I go down the grassy bank,
a redwing trilling above my shoulders,
I go down to the river
to repeat its name—
all that's left of it,
a long and gentle sound
lingering in witch elms.

And here
I claim my last
awkward chance
to live again.

The Last Days

At Point No Point last fall,
we scavenged beaches
for slivers of bottle glass
tides had tumbled round and smooth,
no longer dangerous,
but rare amber flowers from the sea.
Five hundred miles inland today,
we followed logging roads
up Diamond Mountain and stood
apart in an old clearcut,
windrowed hayfields and winter wheat
rolling east below us to foothills.
Near the ocean, southerly days,
the last of summer,
sometimes linger into late November,
stun sour plums into blossom,
meadowlarks hallelujah the dawn,
and when lovers come together,
the heat of their skins
is urgent as the first shoots of grass
erupting toward the sun in spring.
But this morning, as we climbed
in the purple dark before day,
no familiar tide of amber light
woke in us, no wild fruit
fresh and bitter on our tongues.
The points of Orion's shoulders
rose over eastern ranges
just before the sun, winds built
and filled the cold air
with the sweet resin of pines.
Tonight, we'll drink wine with friends
until we drop
and dream like stones,
drowning in the surf.

*

Three children watch me from a window,
but when I catch their eyes, they duck away
like targets in a shooting gallery.
their faces vanishing into the room behind them

where my cousins are telling lies
about our scheme to cash in on the Boom,
as though we believed the millennium
has come at last to Butte.

Hours from now, after we've gone
without our wood or money,
as the day warms under the sun
and clouds of steam surge above him,

the smokejumper will drive loudly
down the rutted lane to his trailer,
bragging to himself how he falls
with grace through the smokey atmosphere.

A meteor skidding from heaven,
a smokejumper out of season,
he sails toward earth,
floating into the fiery trees at noon.

The Changing Day

November's twilight pitches
higher in the canyon today,
another afternoon of snow
and few promises of a spring
no one is certain
will come next year.
I've heard only rumors,
papers full of censored
news, government lies, farmers
watching crops torched
by Contras, refugees concentrated
into camps at our borders,
held without charge.
Far up the canyon walls,
squall lines jet east
over ice-shagged pines.
My trail blurs under blue
winter dunes and I wade
drifts at Windy Boy Point.
A yellow spider tiptoes
stiffly ahead of me, tucks
itself under the shaggy scales
of a juniper tree and folds
its eight legs neatly up.
For months I've lied to myself.
I'm no Adam naming a new world,
mapping out this mountainside
as though it were my home.
By April, the cabin will be
sold out from under us
only to pay the interest
on a landlord's debts.
The weather is clearing
out of Saskatchewan
and will turn so cold
metal and glass will creak,
friable by dawn.

*

I hold round pieces of glass
and cold air tightens my lungs.
There is only a season of edges ahead,
razor sharp, precarious.
gathering almost unnoticed
far beyond the border in the north.

Solstice

Miraculous swallows, agile in thermal winds,
we might have lived forever

under the vernal sky, gliding north to Shoo Fly Meadow
only six months ago,

camas flowering a blue so complete, unbroken,
at a distance we mistook it

for standing water, a lost and unmapped lake.
But now on a Sunday,

the last day of the season, snow swarms from the walls
of Wisherd Ridge, squalls

hang low over us as old hands groping down
to the stiffening earth,

and cautious as a dam-bear, you step ahead of me
across the buoyant muskeg,

another child rolling in the river of your blood
When we reach the abandoned homestead

and rest on scattered timbers near the doorstone,
voices pass us in the wind,

then a calm, suspended in the trees all day,
falls like a net around us.

From the clearing south, the sunlight swells,
floods the field with color,

and our unborn faces turn toward another year,
an in-coming tide of light.

Withdrawn south of Bonner Peak,
the changing day grows remote
and narrows like a gauntlet
at the canyon rim above.
where snow devils toil
in a forest of stunted trees.

A Friend Phones from NYC

telling me that the streets there
remind her of Calcutta.
A thin laughter fills
twenty-five hundred miles of wire,
sagging in gentle arcs
across the winter prairie.
And I think for a moment
how I'll get off the grave
at 7 a.m. tomorrow, to start cross-town
in the small dawn of January.
At the Husky Station,
I'll stop for gas
and a man will step between the pumps,
staring a 10-cent coffee
steady in his hand.
He'll pass under the red mercury vapor,
vanishing in river fog.
I've seen him each morning this week,
sitting out of the rain
on the back stairs
of the Western Montana Clinic,
constructing his day, the various
gestures at routine
he'll invent to empty the hours of time
between meals and sleeping.

Under the turbid dogday sun
he might have joined
the lines of beautiful swains,
lounging in the shade
of the county welfare,
hustling his nuts
and joking with the shabby girls
who shriek a loneliness so happy
America will never die. My nights off,

*

Mask of Snow

In my nightmare of a spring
that never comes, I can't wake myself.
some part walks separate,
refusing to come near.
Always alert, it listens a long time
to mule deer that pass at twilight
along the snowpacked trail
to the mineral lick in back of the house.
Day has almost dawned.
but the moon still glitters
in icy windowpanes. its ashes
a blue patch smoldering on the floor.
My newborn's breath rises in a cloud,
hovers over his cradle.
I speak his name,
then fall back again in a drowse.
The trail is blue and thin as wire.
With each stride, I probe cornices,
test my weight against drifts
curling over the cliff face.
The one who can't wake himself,
I climbed here in the cathedral light
of summer, but the home I claimed then
I hardly glimpsed—entering.
I'd already begun to leave.
And now I starve for the reek
of salt air and thawing earth,
for the sulfury steam
to percolate through waist-deep snow.
But the one who walks separate
bows beside the deer,
unafraid to taste
whatever ration the mountain provides.

Third Shift

I came home exhausted,
slept the entire day and woke
deep inside a vacuum,
a soundless afternoon,
daylight dwindling on the ridges.
A whole year working nights
and I'd never slept so long,
had always wakened early,
reached across the bed
to touch the familiar curve
of her naked hips and waist,
but found her gone this time,
the bed cold, scentless,
the stove unlit, the whole cabin
hushed as after months of cold.
It was as though the poles had reversed,
every orient dissolved,
gravity gone haywire, fossils
in their limestone sleep shuddered,
and I'd grown old, a desolate man,
death undoing what I trusted.
I stood a long time at the door,
my feet numb as cinder blocks,
Funnels of rubbish and snow
twisted up from pastures,
a hawk barrelrolled over pinetops.
If I had eyes, I would have seen her,
followed the clear trail she'd left me,
followed her the way a hawk
rides another's line of flight.
No fork ended in a thicket
or a crosswick of tracks,
though the whole landscape receded
and I was left, bleached by distances,
by a trail not really a trail at all,

*

I wake to the banging window
in my room, gnashing my teeth,
my jaws gripped on the lost
faces glimpsed in a dream,
like peripheral lights
flashing past me at street corners.

A friend phones from NYC,
a place as unreal to me as Calcutta,
and all I can think of, hearing her
detached laughter through the receiver,
is how, tomorrow, as the sun
waxes pale in front of me, rising
through clouds in the Hellgate Canyon,
streets will fill slowly with cars
that press forward, obedient, diurnal,
and in every doorway
there will be laughter,
coming as if from far away inside.

Skill of the Heart

The morning I lost my job,
I glanced up absently
thousands of feet above me
into the Bitterroot Range,
where winter retreated
and snowmelt erupted from canyons.
Stranded in the anxious lines
of automobiles, idling
side-by-side at traffic lights.
I knew I might never change
like my father, who stammered
until words twisted his face.
A freak to men who jeered,
he was always filled by
a rage that corrupted every
hope he ever held long enough
to value or recklessly love.
I was laid off my job
the morning my son spilled
free from his mother's body
and drew the inevitable
knife-edged air in his lungs.
Through his first hour, we slept
in an exhausted repose
unlike any other he or
I would ever know again.
All the length of the valley
to where the Bitterroots
vanish on the earth's curve,
wide fault-lines of light streaked
through low clouds that rushed over
foothills blotched green with sage.
a landscape as intent
and overflowing with the skill
of its own inexhaustible heart
as the vistas painted by Sung masters,
who washed raw silk
with India ink, and fled
this world a thousand years ago.

but a ruse, a miscalculation
I'd deliberately made, another
self-betrayed and ferocious man.
If I had eyes, I would have found her
in sun-warmed duff under pines,
waiting all afternoon for me to wake.
The brink of that world
was no violence against us.
Though every clue,
every dissembling vanity of mine,
announced her gone,
irrevocably gone.

But today, the sleek motion
of their fins and flaring gills
blurs, even in this lake that pours
imperceptibly toward falls.
They drift deeper than sight
somewhere under boulders and jams.

On windless days in summer,
the sun will tumble north
and casts float down
on currents of warm air,
and a reflected light
no words of mine can name
will surge from trout
who browse, cunning in the weeds,
a light that glides larvae
up from lake-slime
and lures cutthroat into sky.

Cutthroat

Only bog orchids uncurl
straight from the muck,
all else sags with the heaviness
of rain and fog, pouring out
cold from the canyons
below Daughter of the Sun.

Two miles north and a thousand feet
above Crystal Lake,
I stamp through old snow
crusted over windfall,
and from the ridge,
down through tamaracks and salal,
I stare at the green water
where I imagine cutthroat
curving under logs.

Just off the boulder shore,
their bodies flash
gold and orange over white sand.
They roll to the surface,
rising slowly to mayflies
drowned in the thin
pollen-clogged film.

And in my fist,
I feel their long bodies
thrash against the rod
and the clumsy way I drag them
toward shore, thrashing
even an hour later as they lie
stiffening on the damp mint
that lines my creel.

the pain of it would surge
away into the green velvet
bones of my skull. At twilight
on a game trail, miles from home
and hungry for the cold, eternal grass,
a new refuge each night,
I'd sleep at last on my knees.

Twilight on a Game Trail

I'm still miles from home
when night begins to waken at my feet.
It lifts rapidly from the grass and weeds,
deliberate as an animal
alert in the gloaming under pines.
Hours ago, a bobcat
crossed the trail ahead of me,
swagged its head side-to-side
and sprang into the underbrush.
When I stopped to drink
at the ford in the gulch,
I pressed my hands over the prints
of dew-claws I found
cooling in the damp sand.
I can see only a few strides
in any direction. I whistle my dogs
back to the trail, and strain
toward what the blind must
listen for as it approaches.
Night pulses in the pines,
jolts across the nerves
that gape between my life
and the poised, attentive others,
who care nothing about me,
will never love me, who breathe
the air I can't taste or smell
and without any self-deceiving thought
leave the trail I must follow.
If the tendons pulled taut
at my heels, if my feet ached,
gathered into clefts,
I'd stumble ahead, unsure
no more, the old loneliness
of a child shunned by his parents
who hurried ahead of him
until they vanished laughing—

*

All summer, I've tried to trace
coincidence like lines of grain
swirling in polished mahogany,
but now all events diverge
from the smashed atoms our lives become.
And though we still trade in futures,
everyone knows
a year without harvest has come.

In Tongues

Three months without rain
since the archer from Kalispell
"legally harvested" an albino bear,
grainfields on the prairie
are a checkerboard of char,
trout in dry riverbeds rot,
the greens I bring in from my garden
sour like clay on my tongue.

In the published photo, the bear
lolls across the archer's knees—
a two-year-old sow, gutted,
forelegs bound with wire, on display
in a room crowded with trophies and men.

Pink skin, yellow-white hair, sickle
moons under claws the color
of human fingernails, hers is the body
every man wants to invade, crawl inside
and begin mutilating himself.

This morning at dawn, flames
exalted on Diamond Mountain,
the well sputtered sulfury gas from the tap,
ashes rained on the cabin roof
and smoke darkened the sun
to a cinnabar sphere at noon.

Tonight, after days of fevers,
my sons laughed in their sleep,
spoke gaily to nobody
in tongues that summoned
a squall out of the canyon.
Rain rapped a moment at the window.
No promise, nothing sinister,
only a few damp welts raised in the dust.

in those ditches brimming with yeasty flesh.
Don't look up again!
Fill the sack with apples.

let obedience weave itself,
quiet, persistent in your blood,
as though a spider were

spitting filaments of silk
all through your veins.
In the forests around you at Marco Flats

are the graves of Chinese coolies,
who tattooed these canyon walls with dynamite
to lay rails that are gone now.

But the dead are neither
masters nor slaves.
At last, they may even be lovers.

You tell your son, their bones luxuriate
below you, embraced by roots, clothed
in flesh of river silt and moss.

Indian Summer

You lift your son onto a boulder,
not as sacrifice,
but to better reach the wild apples

as small as his fists and lavish
red as the kinnickinick
weaving tendrils at his feet.

Miles overhead, cutting vapor trails
across the Indian Summer sky,
jet turbines tense the air

like the lies you've told yourself
to cool the anxiety
smoldering under your seven skins.

Last night, you watched meteors
skid through constellations,
red, green, blue as the eyes

of animals caught for an instant
in a beam of reflected light.
But how explain those bombers

sleepless as sharks,
men floating so high,
untethered and alone?

As you twist off apples
from seedlings of trees pioneers planted
in orchards upstream a century ago,

on the plains of Europe today, armies
rehearse mass burials,
and your own body begins to roll

Trading Beads

1

We ride all night from the depot at Marion
as an August storm strobes the countryside,
and when we arrive at dawn in Motown,
the landscape of cornfields
deranges, blue flames leap from factories,
and in the dun-colored light, a river
finalizes its descent—channeled water
that burns weird reflections in cement.

2

This morning in Detroit,
we will promise each other nothing,
not love, not even hope,
yet we lie welcome in the storm,
in each other's sticky arms,
until we wake, ashamed strangers
on a bus into hell, two more riders
who keep no secrets and will move apart.

3

Electrical storms clear north of the lake,
over provinces nearer the sea,
thunderheads growing orange miles above,
and in the gloom below the blazing sky
only the braids of your hair,
tied in colorful beads from Africa,
shine while the bus idles under a sycamore
and passengers file quietly to their seats.

Crossing the Missouri

From the shacks west of Culbertson
light slips out across sprawling wheat
and I huddle under a bridge
to gaze at the river beneath me.
the slow, heavy current
accepting rain and the prairie
that rolls quietly down
toward the riprap shores.
Nothing rises from the black water,
no branch, no torn and mangled wings.
Even the moon is lost. I've waited an hour
for the rain to let up, listening to bitterns
call from the rushes, from their damp,
unassailable nests in the dark, upstream.

Incident at Moonville

From the coke furnace high above Lake Hope
tracks leap past the tailings pile
that sprouts scrub oak and pine.
a dozen squatters' shacks lean toward the marsh.
and copperheads doze in sulfur-rich ditches.

It's three miles through jungle to Moonville,
to the tunnel under the hill, a mile
past the creosote pilings, the trestle
boys leap from to drown in the polluted
green washes of early July.

A drunk brakeman stumbles on the rails
and falls into a subterranean sleep
as locomotives steam blindly
into the tunnel to carve him in two
like a plowboard slices through worms.

At just the instant he screams, snakes bow,
prehensile in the tick-red willows,
plumes of fog lift over forested ridges
and smother his voice—distant already, withdrawn
far from the day that hardly pauses to hear.

Haze and heat swell the afternoon like a skin.
A freight erupts with a blast into light,
and grouse flush into the sagging limbs
of scrub oak and pine, shaking down a tepid rain
to burn a fox's hungry, upturned eyes.

In the Jewish Cemetery

Out past Kulka Steel, I stutter-step
along the abandoned Penn Central track.
The river's high-water mark stains
gray trunks of elms, and tangled
willows lie flat under river-debris
in the muddy, flooded bottoms.

Up from the railbed, past wrought-iron
and sagging yews, the old gravestones
slump, tumble, and finally sink
into the green and gassy swamps.
I scatter a fist of cinders
and a blue fist of chicory
over the sod that healed my Zayda's grave.

A katydid screeches from the elms,
its voice flourishing like nothing else
in the marshy thickets of foxfire
between me and the river that hisses,
brim-full with armored bodies of carp,
fiends roiling in the channel wash,
as the humid dusk collapses like the sea
on this dwindling shore.

Song of Return

Shotguns boomed in the hills all afternoon.
At dark, three Canada geese
plunged through the pines
into blonde rushes that ring our pond.

As we sat at our fire,
roasting rabbits and corn,
they grazed the shallows,
tugging up mouthfuls of roots.

When we spoke again, wings slapped water
and the geese rose straight toward Mercury,
glittering low in the ironweeds
that smother the unmowed ridge.

All day long I'd wanted to see west
across prairies and badlands,
where the Black Hills abide in haze
and only a week ago I wore garments of sky.

In just one night, autumn wrapped around these hills.
Narcotic fog hangs in hollows above Fox Lake
and around our fire, sunburned faces
blaze scarlet as sumac horns.

Waking in September

You rushed home just now
through thistles and whorls of chicory.
Snakes rose up out of the grass.
In your room, where you are safe,
wallpaper bubbles with mold.
A wolf spider reaches her eight
bristling legs from your naked
shoulder to the paisley pillowcase.
Water beads on the torn screen.

You walked rutted lanes all night long,
ran through walls of corn wet with dew.
Your hands went numb, as though
clumps of bluets and rue
threaded your open pores
and drew your blood into the ground.

What is it that your body
keeps demanding back every day?
In that other country,
where memory drains away, the dead are
always celebrating over ruins,
while the sleeper tosses
under crazy quilts, lies naked
at dawn, his skin prickly cold.

With her careful legs, the wolf
spider probes your throat,
touches the pulse delicately,
eases down your shoulder
and crouches, poised in her silk
tunnel in the window, where sunrise
simmers orange as a rabbit's lung,
swelling deep inside the milky fog.

Driving Down Home

Late December. Frost drifts up
early from purple hollows.
I flash past mine shafts
whose timbers cave in and splinter.
rubble edging the narrow road.
Each year it's the same gesture
of return: I stomp snow off
my boots, follow the widow
across the torn linoleum floor
and sit an hour at the coal stove,
talking of her Savior
recently born, the oranges
William sends from Florida,
Anna's surgery and her
arthritic hips, the grinning
carcass of a fox nailed
to the chicken house door.
I thought, once, my mother
had forbidden herself love,
any impossible wanting,
Huddled inside her brittle,
almost weightless body, withdrawn
as far from me now as the heat
evaporating from plowed fields,
what else but her own loneliness
failed to coax her into daylight
and speak her name like a lover
promising lace and garish silks?
And yet, when the woods still
hesitate in March, a single dogwood
will flare white acetylene
among so many rough gray skins.
In the tunnel of my headlights,
I veer out of Minerva,
wind along the stagnant canal
and crest the ridge near home.

*

Kaddish

After the gas tanks break
and wings fold back like swallows,
after the rain and flames,
father, lead me back
to the ark of uncluttered light,
the purple veins of your wounded throat.

Let me pray at last
in acres of alsike and rye
on this hillside north of Massillion,
where the Tuscarawus rises
and leeches wait at the shore for us
to slough our broken skins
and bob downstream
with swift currents and sludge.

Give me to the green Jerusalem of grass,
where you sailed down from an ignited sky,
down over quailing maples.
Lead me back, father,
from the river's greasy shore,
press my hands over your punctured neck,
show me smuts and molds where they grow
in the split hollows of your wrists and ribs.

Give me to the green
shoots that hold us
fast in the thick,
downward whirling earth,
the healed fault where you fell,
the acres of uneroded grass.

Across the Great Divide

for Hollis and Laura Summers

We stayed indoors all morning
while wet snow fell steadily,
concealing the distant fields.
My sons played wildly in their room,
tossed cheap toys and shrieked
with glee at every crashing noise.
I straightened the kitchen,
put dishes in cupboards, swept,
mopped the linoleum and went to my desk
to dust and rearrange the river rocks
that glowed in blue snow-light
at the steamy windowsill.
I touched the stones to my face—
pure, indivisible facts,
cool and smooth, millions of years.

Yesterday, we'd visited my teacher
in his living room, where he lies
on a cot near his own wide
window and oak tree—teacher and tree both
diseased, lopped and drugged.
I read him Yeats,
"Proud, open-eyed and laughing"
and he swam up from his drugs,
opened his eyes, laughed.
"Raspberries—I always despised them!"
A brilliant red cardinal
landed and pecked at suet
Laura had hung outside on the feeder
in the oak tree that her husband
recognizes as his tragic, half-starved twin.
Later, as we drove home,
a cloud of ten thousand blackbirds
streamed up from the salt-covered road.

Below, in sheltered hollows,
rectangles of moonlight burn
on metal roofs, quicksilver for miles.

A Study of Moths

1

A morning after the spring rains begin,
pastures smear green the way ice
forms from the center of a pond.
Woodcocks wade in burdock
and skewer worms they can hear,
floating just under the sod.
I dodge chuckholes and rabbits
who promenade on hind legs,
blind in my headlights,
on a township road, where something else
has come up alive again—
the abandoned house on the ridge,
a back room, where a light bulb
burns through rags and plastic sheeting,
a yellow bug-light, where only
a shiny blackness just yesterday was pooled,
still as water at the bottom of a cistern.
I drive past this ranch twice every day,
thinking I've studied it all.
Tire tracks never scar the gravel drive
that grass has almost swallowed.
Even the burr-covered pony, whose hair
is wound like dubbing along barbed wire,
grows timid as a deer and never
shows itself at this end of the fields.
A quarter mile down the road already,
that's all I saw—
an incandescent halo, after-image
of a flash that makes my eyes ache,
a stream of charges
without any source at all.

2

So I make a joke of it for a while.
Quail Trap Cemetery is close enough.

*

All my house set to order.
I stood at my moist window this morning,
watching oak trees stagger off in heavy snow
and I heard a singer's voice
from the radio, this time a woman singing,
so calm and fearless. I held myself still,
stopped breathing.
"and I find myself on a mountainside,
where the rivers change directions
across the Great Divide."
and then heard my infant son
fall hard in the other room,
his head thump on the carpet,
his stunned gasp, a pause, and then
a lusty scream. How lucky
to be called to that urgent fact
that surged toward me,
cold and sober as a stone.
I hurried down the hall,
through the dingy little house
and its puny, domestic distractions,
to grasp him tight.

a man who probably owed us money.
a man with a glorious name—
Whistling Bill Ensign.

4

I can't repeat a single word
anyone of us spoke that night,
though I remember my arms
sticking to a formica table
gray with bacon grease,
and I'm certain I talked
plenty loud enough
to drown out the gurgling
noise that was Cora's lungs.
Who were those strangers?
I mean, who was I?
What more than a voice
Cora couldn't recognize?
What more than a fugitive shape
under a 30-watt bulb that cast
a dim and malleable light?
All the stranger saw
illuminated in the living room,
all I can still see
or trace in the air
here with my hands today,
is that vague line
of Cora's deflated chest,
the last weight of her body,
trying to squeeze itself
into the grimy folds of a sofa,
the stained terrycloth robe,
a pile of damp rags,
this curve, this woman,
these few coughs of a life
spent in a cluttered walk-up,
fluttering just outside
a circle of dirty yellow light.

perhaps a zombie
hoisted up its gruesome cadaver.
Low rent.
Or perhaps a short-circuit
welded itself together again
like a synapse crossed,
re-igniting the bulb that glows
clearly in the kitchen.
A March day is still too short
for anything so clear as resolution.
Afternoon dwindles over the grass
and I'm driving
home in the dark again,
electric light still filtering
through that window when I pass.

3

I was still a teenager
wanting to get drunk,
wanting. I thought,
to demonstrate for a girl
exactly what a man is.
So I stole
a 95-cent bottle of Fino Vino
from the Puerto Rican grocery,
knowing they were glad
to let me rob them, were even willing
to listen to me squeal
my naked bravos on the corner outside.
They owed my family a lot of money,
but the girl owed me nothing.
She wouldn't spend her evening
crushed by the weight
of my inflated love.
Instead, she took me to her mother,
June, who was sitting a vigil
in their neighbor's kitchen.
Cora, the woman who was dying,
was the widow of my father's friend.

Regarding a Nude on Diamond Mountain

1

I drove below this mountain one morning
five years ago, returning to the cabin
to collect traps and axes I left
when we moved,
too poor to stay any longer
where we had lived and first loved
far from towns and people.

In the anonymous twilight,
snow lowered into the valley,
a blue tide climbed over the dark
evergreen slopes of Mineral Ridge.

Children shrieked,
bolted in and out of yellow barnlights,
their faces thrown open,
daring the dwindling night.

I drove on unrecognized,
an intruder,
passing along the road into pines,
remembering my way, but almost
lost in accumulating snow.

2

She steps from her clothes freely,
stands naked here on bluffs
high above the Blackfoot at Johnsrud Bend.

Loosened from its tight braid,
her hair fans across her shoulders
and reaches clear

In the Foothills

This sudden repose before dawn—
gray light tapping at your eyes,
wet orange day lilies
sagging in roadside ditches.

You cough over the sink,
spit and go out to cut your fresh
salad of pokeweed greens.

Bass dimple the black pond.
Under the blackberry canes,
a bobwhite whoops it up alone.

Starlings snatch away weightless
blue eggs left unguarded in nests
and gulp down the lumpy yolks.

Spring gave up its lusty storms weeks ago.
Now the torpid hours toil ahead of you all day.
You try to look past yourself, but can't
see through the maze of leaves.

A lethal repose is everywhere—
in eroded gullies, hayfields, marshes,
Drizzle simmers in the treetops.

Even when you suck the cold peppery tonic
from a sassafras sprig, an old longing to die
comes at you on its spindly legs.

Across the hollow, a screendoor slams
and a woman's voice
retrieves you.

A child called home to table,
whenever you open your fists
goldfinches dart away
over the bluegrass and timothy.

David Axelrod was born in Alliance, Ohio, in 1958 of Polish, German, and Scottish descent. He worked in his family's automotive parts business for fifteen years before moving west to study poetry writing with Richard Hugo at the University of Montana, where he earned his MFA in 1982. He returned briefly to Ohio in the mid-1980's, to earn a Ph. D. in literature and writing from Ohio University. He now teaches part-time at Eastern Oregon State College, lives in La Grande and grows a big garden with his wife, fiction writer and translator Jodi Varon, and their two sons, Yascha and Ezra.

down the curve of her spine
to full white hips and thighs.
She stretches onto a weightless

tiptoe. turns in the wind.
breasts like wild apples.
her hair lifting behind her now.
an auburn banner. waving
a mile above the valley
and fields of red winter wheat.

3

And like a bear. wakening
from his dream of tendrils and grubs.
who lifts his stinging face
from a creek that unbraids and floods
over the slovenly world each spring.

I shiver. cut free
from the underworld where I slept.
free maybe as you.
who rose naked
from the dust of the sixth great day.

Shedding denim. pine needles, dirt.
my legs brittle. dry sticks.
I leave my refuge in the rocks.
and welcome in our home again.
I wobble forward to greet you
in my own flesh again.

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