

LAWS OF THE LAND

by
David Baker

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for Charlotte

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Introduction

In 1855 eleven-year-old George Belden ran away from Ohio to cowboy and scout the American West. Mark Twain would later call this common American experience “lighting out for the territory.” That territory, even as late as 1888, would include the birthplace of T.S. Eliot, St. Louis, and the brawling country around Kansas City, the native ground of David Baker, whose poems I have the privilege of introducing here. Then and to some extent now, that territory was the place of the dangerous and the unknown. Belden’s remarkable and now forgotten 1870 memoir, ***Belden: The White Chief***, wonderfully describes a moment at the heart of David Baker’s poetic vision:

And is it not strange that I, a mere boy, was possessed of a restless spirit that would not let me sleep, that was driving me from home, plenty, and friends to the wilderness, to take upon myself hardships, privations, and dangers that, if foreseen, were well calculated to appall the stoutest hearts? I said, “O, fool, how long?” and turning my horse’s head to the northward, plunged my spurs into his sides, causing him to rear wildly, and then bound furiously over the broad prairie.

This moment is the core of the tragic American dream. It tells us the home we are leaving shall not come again. If there is one element common to regional writing of the first order, the brand of Frost and Faulkner, it is the terrible sense of everything lost, perpetually being lost, alive only in the memory dramatized and in the poetry kept beating with the breath and the rituals of a place which once sustained and made meaningful men’s lives.

For David Baker, a poet of the Midwest and West, the frontier is not *out there* in 1981. It is still out of sight, but it is *down, under, inside*. For Baker, it palpably *is*. In ***Laus of the Land***, his first collection, this fine poet slowly shows us how eerily thin is the crust between a man’s life and his plunge into the unknown, which is to say Death. His initial poem, “Skating Pond,” describes a father’s ritualistic testing of ice where his sons will learn skating, and more. They will live if he has been responsible and right. The metaphor of Baker’s poem sets itself like a bass hook: each poem extends and examines the poet as father, guide, explorer of edges, and messenger bearing what will suffice of information, legend, warning, names, catastrophes, and the spirit’s survival. Baker bears forward the emotional history of place and a people as he walks his calm poems through literal *pitfalls*: his is an endless orchestration of voids, footprints, ponds, caves, black holes in space—and against this everyman wandering the landscape he clusters

details we have all known in our physical senses in order that we may behold, rehearse, and reenter both the hope for and the idea of home.

Can there be a more ancient, contemporary, and important theme for poetry? I think not. And I think our poetry has need of the young writer who knows this and writes to the home in our hearts. The Anglo-Saxon who wrote "The Seafarer" and T.S. Eliot and George Belden thoroughly understood a man's need to keep going while that terrible "O, fool, how long?" throbbed in his head. The poet perhaps more than any other is always westering. William Stafford, of Kansas and Oregon, has written, "Wherever the others went, this is home." Poets like Stafford and Baker are by definition elegaic, lyrical, and anecdotal writers, tellers of tales in the landscape they walk while always keeping an eye cocked against Death that is the one false step on ice, into a cave, down a river bank, even onto the other side of a field's fence. For these what is beautiful is costly, dangerous, necessary: for these the world is contracted, symbolic, revelatory. Poetry of exile and home-seeking makes the deepest cry in the American heart—are we not wanderers in the New World?—but before that it is the cry of a man moving in space and time, not ever to return where he has departed.

But we cry back at what we have left, making echoes, making measures. We measure against what is known, history, family, landscape, art, and memory. We measure the selves we are against the selves we carry in us, our own and others. The poems in *Laws of the Land* are deliberate and patient measures, like the walk of a woodsman or farmer, well-crafted stanzas of iambs that surprise us with rough country music of anapests and bursts of images that are like—well, like a sudden spring in a glade. They are dreams immediate as the eye of a train in the dark, flattening now to the bleached bluntness of a prairie shack, then looming with the sublime depth of a snowy Utah canyon. These are not pretty poems, but they are disciplined, solid, informed by the cycles and pulse of the Western land. Baker contains in them such events as fishing with his father, the onset of floods that leave neighbors hidden in the earth, the bitter and sweet of love, the bent backs of groundtenders, the songs of those who both belong and cannot belong. These, and this is his power, he raises to the symbols of our being—which is the true test of poetry's measurements.

A musical, sonorous poet, Baker enters imaginatively those landscapes he praises calmly and serenely, as if to ask are they crumbling even between his words? Yes, they are. His question, everywhere implicit, is what is a man in his time. Is there time enough to find the place where he exists, is himself, measured, known? To ask this is to stand in the winds that slide the West like a name called endlessly. In "A Portrait of the West," Baker shows us an oddly sensuous young woman hearing this call while

she eats cherries and searches a cabin's empty rooms. She is the pitiable purposelessness of our life. In "Ephemeræ," a long, impressive exploration of the Great Salt Lake Basin, Baker creates a dialogue with the naturalist William Bartram. Aside from the poem's admirable ambition and wonderful diversity, there is what might be called David Baker's rude portrait of our bottom measure:

the countless lives of insects, a sinking
carcass, a few buzzards circling
like high, dark crescents of moons, and me,
a man, gagging now, the only animal
so sickened by death, its stench, its solitude.

Melville and Twain would have understood these lines, their despair. Yet David Baker is not a morbid, doom-and-gloom poet. His poems are filled with the solace and consolation of true poetry—the poetry whose singing makes everything live in it, poetry which draws us closer to the dream of continuity. If it is true, as the great baseball pitcher Satchel Paige said, that we must never look back or see the shadow gaining on us, it is also true that we must constantly look back to that place of departure which can provide the only accurate point of reckoning. That lost entirely, nothing else will matter. No measurement then is possible.

David Baker's *Laus of the Land*, because it is made of poems which wed intelligence and discipline and adventurousness, teaches us how to go forward with our histories. Even Belden, crank and reprobate, knew the value of speech, ritual, and self-measurement that begins and ends at home. Writing of the Western Indians among whom he spent most of his life, he said, "One of the principal means of cultivating a heroic spirit in the Indian is the public assemblage for reciting deeds of bravery done in the tribe." A man's deeds of bravery are big events, but they are also the small glints of what the heart and the imagination experience continuously. That is why Gerard Manley Hopkins, born the same year as George Belden, wrote "O the mind, mind has mountains." David Baker's poems mean to climb the mind's mountains even as they traverse the landscape of pitfalls. They seek what poetry can reveal: Home. Self. Meaning. Our measures.

I have not cited many of David Baker's poems, nor much praised their lines, their vividness, their detailed bodies. They are there, smooth as Kansas plains, obdurate as Ozark hills, open-vistaed as Utah. I invite readers to try them. They should be tried not with any expectation that David Baker is T. S. Eliot, William Stafford, or Gerard Manley Hopkins. He is busy trying to be David Baker, a hard enough task, the poet giving us his first work. But if I am right about these poems readers will find something rare and valuable, the heroic spirit that drove George Belden and many another American into the dream that may become truth. This is the spirit

of earned residence and vision. Baker gives it to us often enough, as here
in "Front Porch," where a man sits through a dark night and

two nightjars begin answering each other
across the new distance.
I do not need to see them in the trees.
I know exactly where they are.

Dave Smith
Gainesville, Florida
September, 1981

Near Deep Waters

*"Now you invent the boat of your flesh and set it
upon the waters
and drift in the gradual swell, in the laboring salt.
Now you look down. The waters of childhood are there."*

Mark Strand

Skating Pond

for my brother

First, a fire. Father would bring the wood and stack it
tight at ice-edge, strike a match, back to the wind,
and try to kiss it lit. We watched. Cedars shook around us.
He'd crawl there in the snow and lean as if to drink.
Or tear flakes of paper, plant them deep, try to find
a flame within the dark. Or whisper words like *no*
and *close*, secrets, to the wood. They came out white and stayed.

It was no rink we'd come to skate, this pond where
bluegill grew among the moss, summers, and we knew better
than to swim. Winter turned it white. He'd step out
first to test, no visible bank and no clear view
of ice, warn us back until he knew it would hold,
then steady us as we began. Your double-blades were
more like shoes, your few years' walking risk enough to take.

We'd start slowly, hand in hand. Then I'd leave you
yet often fall, ankle-crooked or tripped by hidden flaws.
So you'd run to me and drop, on purpose, and slide
in your slick suit, your back a sled, and laugh at us
together in the snow. He'd laugh, too, but not so
hard, and listen harder to that moaning voice of ice.
Then he'd build the fire up for us. We'd warm and start again.

It was time we had then, more than memory, or love,
or any need to mark some snowy pond with the patterns
of our skates. He'd lead us finally to the fire, pink there
in the snow, and tell us we could do this every year.
We were too young to know the feel of loss. Yet he must
have looked across the pond, those patterns like words,
and seen the story of a joy no child, no man, could ever repeat.

Near Deep Waters

for my father

1. Back Water

Two buckets, old shoes, and a seine. That's all we needed,
sleeves rolled, hands pale on the fresh-cut poles,
to catch our bait. I thought it odd to come here, though,
away from the river black with the overhang of cotton-
wood and oak, yet not so deep we couldn't wade it,

to this stagnant hole. Beneath its green surface,
under seed and sludge deeper than vision, stood the water
left from spring flood, but beneath that, you said,
our bait. *Dozens and dozens of them.* So we let drop
the net, stepped it through that slime and let it sink,

then pulled. My hands hurt, the poles bent, stuck, and I
tried to imagine what I couldn't see—the movement
of claws away from such stir, perhaps, rocks dredged up,
creatures naked to the danger they could only feel.
Then we simply walked the seine out of that pool

and there they were. *Crawdads*, you said, picked one up,
plucked its pincers off in one clean twist, and
tossed it in the bucket I had filled with rocks, weed,
and water. Back at camp, we would wonder at them
raking those buckets' bottoms the rest of the afternoon.

2. The Gar

Rounding a bend in the river, what little sky we could see
black as water, you paddling, me with the lantern.
we spotted one willow pole, bent like a bow, in the bank.
Among tangled roots of a cottonwood, some moving
like living things in that slow lantern light, the pole

arched down to the river. Snapper, you guessed, or carp
(since the pole was still, not bobbing over catfish),
or maybe even gar. You'd told me of the gar before,
bony little alligators, snouts so full of teeth
they could snap a finger off like reed: how the old-timers

would prop those jaws apart with sticks, turn them loose.
Yes, a fish could drown. So down the lantern beam,
mosquitoes crossing like sparks, I watched the slight
drift of twine pulled down into darkness. But you knew
my fear, so pulled the line close, carefully, and

lifted it. It was a gar, but smaller than I'd thought,
teeth like tiny jewels. *No good to eat* was all you said.
You wound your hand in cloth, let it bite you as you loosed
the hook, then slipped it back alive into the shallow
river, under moonlight, that had no bottom, and no end.

Flood Sermon

In the night, we got up, surely half the town
and surely tired, but rose anyway and ran
hard or hopped pick-ups as they passed around
the few slow corners that there were. All hands
were needed and no excuse was good enough
for sleep or sloth: the east of town, near bluffs

already breached by flood, was threatened in
the dark and rising night. I was young, though
plenty old enough to carry hot tins
of coffee or, as the night got worse, sew
closed the barley-bags of sand the women
stuffed and tied and stacked like dirty linen.

Those jobs we did, some things we'd never
done before, we understood without much talk:
as usual, the men worked together
and smooth as field horses, moving rock
and building levees for the flood they knew
would come. The women, though busy, looked to

the children—me, my friends—who somehow sensed
the danger as much as any. Full sandbags
were stacked high, tight against the road-ridge fence,
and when the water hit it hardly tugged
against our solid dike. But that night was
long and bad, and soon the water drooled, as

through dumb lips, between the bags. Soaked then,
finally weak, the wall gave way, though not so
much from the flood as from the weight within.
We stayed until light, we watched the fog slowly
roll and lift across the land and vanish.
No one had been hurt but we had lost, this

night. the lumberyard and twenty of our homes.
The old folks talked. told each other before long
we could rebuild. better. but what a shame
it had to be this way. so black. so strong—
the first sign most of the children ever had
that the world was less good than it was bad.

Antonyms: Morning and Afternoon Near the Osage River

1. Harvest Song

The wind blows. Men are running softly through the grass.
No, the willow limbs are touching as something lifts
across the yellow sky. Nearby, down water-cut slopes
and over rock, over fallen trunks and shells, the river
with its gentle lisp passes. I have been here for an hour

already. The slow fog has finally turned to mist.
It is no wonder why they lived here, no wonder the land
is rich with what they lost or left. One week now
the field has been turned over, the blunt cornstalks
finally swallowed up by plow and soil, the ground bare.

But it's like this every year. Though the crops
are gone, something else sprouts. We find, early fall,
scores of arrowheads, from thumbnail-size bird points
to spearheads long as boots, jutting from clods
or washed to the run-off near the road. It's usually

best here, just above the river slope. But not today.
All I've got so far is this, half a small handful
of fine flint chips—flaws, mistakes. Still, this autumn
day is warming. And the sun has passed through
willows to the waiting sky, like a seed, a true song.

2. Later, A Sadness

In 1934 the bridge was built. That's what the sign says,
though I can barely read it for the rust and shotgun
patterns of sun, dead-center. It's been ten years, too,
since the last truck slammed across these thin slats
and passed. The new one's half a mile downstream.

safer, wider, steel and concrete. I can see brown
water between these boards, gaps so wide I could easily
stick a boot through sideways if I wanted to, or even
if I didn't. I don't. Beyond either low rail
the water flows so smoothly I can see clouds and bluff

reflected there like faces, though none I recognize.
Even land this vast seems, like a life, littered
with its past—here, a dead bridge. Here, a forgotten
section of road silent with weeds. A kingfisher
drops as if falling from a distant treetop,

then straightens, dives deep into shadow. Gone.
I begin my walk back. Half a mile away, a car has
just crossed the new bridge. I cannot hear the sound.
But, even this far, I can see a line of dust
rising above the road and brush, pointing the way.

Laws of the Land

"The world declares itself."

Robert Penn Warren

Removals

My own soft prints meet themselves in pairs.
strangers.

Yet this is usual. The eye seeks,
first, what is too true to believe . . .

the cottonwoods, their shadows longer
than their limbs.

Or there again, that young
bittern, holding itself straight as a stake

in the swaying weeds.

Hermit

*"Civilization is the art of living in towns of such size
that everyone does not know everyone else."*

Julian Jaynes

*"I don't get along with people. I don't like their ways.
I just grow a garden and stay in these hills."*

an Ozark hermit

1.

Afternoon deepening now, a dark animal growing
into its coat of sleep—
all around the house, the perfect garden, rows
of thick stalks, the colors of night gathering
just at the level of the trees;
here, a few tools dropped, lost feathers.
No sound.

Again, I have missed him,
my presence probably felt long before I arrived.
This is how it always is.
From where I stand, alone, a hundred cold paths
already spread away . . .
here they lead, each one, into the woods beyond,
his own vast community of shadows.

2.

Now, I kneel to the ground, knowing that
this place is his. That these clouds over
my head, whenever they have rained, have touched
the earth with his hands.

That these leaves,
now heavy on the branches, have turned daily
toward the sound of his voice. That
these stones must be the very loaves on which
he was fed as a child.

And now I realize
that I have begun to dig here with my own hands,
as if they too knew exactly what they sought.

Virga

Indian summer, one of those inescapable skies, hill-
high and hardened.

its grey clouds one shade darker
than the neck of rock racked against them,
something of a dry light along those upper reaches.

It was there, then, I looked for the rain
as I'd come to expect it.

that slow hitch and drift,
those long rags, falling, torn to powder
before my eyes. Even the few trees seemed somehow

rooted into stones, their pale leaves hung with dust,
so I stood, still as they,

and waited. Nothing happened.
Or, rather, nothing I'd expected: for though rain fell,
it seemed to fall into itself, a perfect lover.

a sound like wind against the darkened slopes,
and then was gone

I was left that suddenly, like some
old father, who had just seen his only child
touching herself in places he was never meant to know.

Virga: streaks or trails of water falling out of clouds but evaporating
before reaching the earth as precipitation.

Late: Long Climb

White wisp the wind raised, transparent as milk.
The plains beneath, moon-blue, cold. The sky with nothing
left to lose. Every step is rocked to sleep

in its cradle of stone. And not far, at last,
should be the fall, past turning back. Already I hear
its dark palms, its thick applause, water and rock,

and know what's heard is touched. I'm close enough.

Mushrooms

for my mother

Once again, the sun cool in the half-light of trees,
we step down into bottom land and feel the sink
of the earth. Here, between this sheer slope, a scarp
of limbs and rock, and the other one surely rising
through the distant trees (yet out of sight as we descend

the final steps), a river once rolled itself to sleep
and died. We know this from the rock, the shape
of land that's left, *a memory the earth keeps of itself*:
that's what you told me years ago, one spring, when
we first walked these grasses on our search.

It was mushrooms, then, we hunted—whites and browns
that rose like sponges under rot-black leaves,
or luckier, giant reds the size of skulls. For miles
we walked, heads down, and followed every fallen
log along its northern side. Stumps were good, too,

and maple trunks, and best, the grassless ground
beneath the frequent patches of May apple. We filled
our sacks that afternoon, then stopped looking and walked
until night. The wind carried in trees above us
the faint brooding of a stream we would never find.

Today we've simply come to talk. No bag. No hunt.
Yet to talk we've come back here, spring again,
the land the same, us the same. We are another way
the earth remembers itself. Wild flowers bloom
where they bloomed before, water moves slowly

beneath our feet: we walk where we have walked.
You point out now a familiar log, white with fungus,
where then we found mushrooms, how they were growing
hidden near that hollowed cave of wood, and how,
even now as you step on one, a dozen more come into focus.

Return to the Pond

Through ragweed and goldenrod, thistle raking at my ankles
in the choked fields of summer, I find my way
back to the pond. First, the three trees, then cattails
lined like beacons along the shore or nodding in the water,
then the pond itself, opaque brown, still, the lazy
sheen of sunlight. Redwing blackbirds weave the trees
together. My t-shirt hangs, humid, like a sweater.

I find that same log, half-shaded beneath a nest of limbs,
and sit at water-edge. Though I've come without a pole,
I watch a leaf drift on the water as carefully
as if it were a painted bobber, as if its slightest wake
would betray sun-perch, or bluegill, no bigger than my palm.
The water here is dark with years of stillness,
nearly stagnation. I peel off my sweat-soaked shirt.

The sun touches my skin, immediately warm. I continue,
from some vague impulse, until I am almost naked—
a slight breeze I hadn't noticed before brushing over me,
the sunlight warmest where it has so seldom been—
but I am startled as a few bubbles rise in the pond,
hardly three feet away. I cannot see into the water.
Yet I know something is down there, something alive,

though holding very still.

Caves

Deep in these Ozark hills, dark-limbed
trees thinning with each toss
of wind, the brush dying
brown and stiff, the caves become visible, even
frequent, appearing
like sunken mushrooms in the hillside.
But it is not spring here, and nothing's growing
where the frost has already
bitten the ground dry: I feel, climbing
this slope, the tentative shift of shale
beneath my feet—feel,
pulling myself up by vine and trunk,
these very roots ready to tear loose, give way.

Standing at the entrance to one, finally,
is no different. The ground
going in is bare, clawed with prints
of coon, patted flat as rock, slick with seepage,
and leads uncertainly
into darkness, a passage too narrow
and low for myself. So I bow back out and move
laterally along the hill-face
where I can see as many as
half a dozen more of those same dim openings.
Who knows, perhaps
this whole hill, its sides pocked
with tiny caves, is hollow, one huge cavern.

and I am standing on it. There could be
beneath my feet, in fact,
another kind of world, darker,
not warmed by this sun, but by a timeless seeping
of heat from the heart
of the earth. Its wind would have to be
slight, stirred only by a bat, the silent song
of its wings swooping up
some even more sightless insect
in that fine membrane of tail, or dropping

*

to the level of black
water: a still pool, fish with eyes
grown skin-covered, the echo of oceans, faint.

A fine stream of pebbles plunges away now
at my step. It falls
in a rush of dust down the hillside.
then is gone. A woodpecker knocks at a tree, far away,
though insistent as some vague
pulse. The world here remakes itself
slowly. It must be the same down there: the persistent
molding of rock, the young
bats nosing the breasts of their mothers.
Or those blind salamanders I've heard about—larva-
white and eyeless, their heads as
blunt as hammers—stumbling,
falling, no less, yet surely no more, than I.

Legacy

Three quarters of another year gone, another day's light
left hanging in a dried-up cloud, and already the leaves
have begun that long fall away from their trees.

Eighteen years ago a girl watched as I cocked my shoulder
like a trigger on this field fence, listened as I
shot my arm across a hundred and thirty acres of the best

land in Missouri and promised my love, that same barn
behind us whistling like a rotten tooth in a cold wind.
But that's what I've had to learn: to keep what I've got

and to keep quiet about it. Take those leaves, easy
enough shuck of their trees once a year—but like every
man who's watched a year's work grow, and die, I

know what they really ought to do. Go ahead and fall
away from this entire earth. . . .

And just stay there.

Homeland

The fields and low hills, bales scattered like stumps

as when the land was first cleared. Here
and there, still as stone, huge
black birds perch upon the single row of posts
running along the base of the hills.

Not one thing here moves without a purpose . . .

when the wind rises, the tall grasses lean away
and the cows' tails hang limp as rags.

A Winter Day, Nothing I Have Done

Leafless, in the heat of a season remembered for ice
and the wan light of wind, the middle of a season of birds
dead or dying beneath the dark gaze of clouds,
the tree stands. I planted it only six months ago,

more from some boredom in my life than any need
to give life to another, yet it is there, regardless
of me, of whatever has grown slack in my heart.
Its shadow is long, though thin. Its limbs,

like the lashes of an eye, do not break, but sway
in the wind they are given, lean to the day's slow light.
I have done nothing to help it since the first day
when I settled it into the earth, more a stick

than a tree. It is still small. It is alone
in a banked yard of dead grass. Often I have imagined
its sounds on long nights, in storms, its few leaves
beaten into small fists, some feverish child.

I have done nothing to help. Now it is winter,
though a strange, warm day. I imagine it there
touched by light, still for a moment before wind,
something not far from breath in its hardening trunk.

Ice River

Only after a couple of months of hard
cold, by mid-January usually,
no sooner, is the river ready, shards
of ice dropping to it from the white trees.
Before this, even in the early snow,
a frost-crust on mud and weed, it runs slowly

on, and on past wherever I might stand
to watch it, finally, freeze. Now it has.
I walk out toward that blue light at the bend
in its banks, the cold end of day, out past
the shore and skid of frozen mud to where
the snow lies flat as a road: the river

itself. I have waited this long to be
alone and small. Here the only sound is that
dull chewing, boots on snow. Even the trees
along the banks loom close, bent, the wet
rock-face bearded with long ice. I have come
back as to some trackless past, and I'm numb

with cold. Nothing moves, or appears to. Yet
under this sheet—snow on ice, thin inches
of support—the river runs black and fast.
As I walk I feel its deep pulse in the clenched
sagging of my weight. Even now, the ice
cracks a little, and small shoots pass

from my steps, to the river-edge, like roots.
In a few months I may return to fish
or walk long on the green land. Still, this mute
day is ending now, no sun, only this:
wind pulling in the heavy trees, the faint
light of snow, the blood stopped cold in my feet.

History As Place

"We live by accidents of terrain, you know."

Ernest Hemingway

Antioch Church and Cemetery, 1840-1972

for Vesta Fowler

1.

I have to tell you this. I saw a jay fly straight
out of the limbs and into the sun today, a smear
of light in that humid air we have learned so badly
to live with, then drop like a rock back to earth, dead.
That's the way it happens, you would tell me. Once

you had me drive you back to Antioch, I think
for the same reason, a half day's ride, a long one
over roads blown deep with dust. You hadn't been there
in years, and wanted, you said, to get a last piece
of the church before those men tore it down for scrap.

It was lovely, grown wild. It was where you were from.

2.

Though I pulled right up to one wall, though I could just
touch the window-carving you said you'd like to save,
I could see the wasps had got it, and the weather.
No matter. You were inside already, I could see
you through the window bowing down to pick up what

you could—pieces of old board, nails squared off

and cracking with rust, nothings. I followed you in
over the bared crosshatching of floor beams. There were
no pews, no tables, little to indicate any
difference between this place and a barn. "Over there
was the altar, yes. There, in that corner, our choir. . . ."

3.

Then we were outside, the cemetery. Old stones,
pitched and sunken, seemed to grow there, many worn smooth
as slates. A few newer ones rose, too, the grassed earth
beneath them soft as moles' paths. Iris, lily
grew wild, still spreading. "And here's my Uncle Thaddy. . . ."

These were the people you lived with as a child. They were

workers of the old pit mines, many, and farmers,
and good wives. Your family. Mine. You wanted me
to understand. A slow wind broke above us through limbs
high and full against the sky, trees older than us
both. But we didn't speak of that then, or need to.

Persimmon Trees, She Remembers, Not Far Away

Your father's farm was lovely that October. The black barn
leaned like an animal in the sweet field, and the smell
of hay, of smoke, more like a cloud, rose from the land
you said you loved. You'd take me there often,
teach me *foal* and *loft* and *fallow*, though the trees.

the deeper we walked into them, were what you liked best,
their leaves lit with color, their words, you'd say,
as soft and timid as wind. One place in particular, twenty
minutes from the house, a small patch of persimmon
trees clustered tight as a nest in the middle

of a grass clearing, was your favorite, their leaves
the first to brown and fall. You'd shake their trunks,
laughing, and collect the tiny fruits in the sagging
skin of your clothes, or pull down from their limbs
the more stubborn ones as the soft pulp of those fallen

seeped like cider into the earth beneath your feet.
Then, as we walked back to the house, you'd stop to taste
the sweet-sour kiss of persimmons on my lips, or closer in,
tell me you heard the barn moaning like the old trees
that it had been, before our own parents touched that way.

Front Porch

Under these warped eaves, the planters floating
in the humid air, the sucker vines
pulling their shadows along the trellises,
I have been watching the night come on.
Not a single car has passed by.

I have been watching the wind, slow
as a dropped feather, brush across the grass
and pass from limb to limb in the elms,
the last hand-me-down colors of the afternoon
sliding from the roofs or hanging.

a moment longer, to the metal gutters.
The streetlights have finally begun to tick on,
one at a time, with their hum and whirr.
Mosquitoes come with theirs.
The whole porch opens up to the night . . .

and, as if they were waiting for this,
two nightjars begin answering each other
across the new distance.
I do not need to see them in the trees.
I know exactly where they are.

Stories in the Land

behind the highway at a slight bend in the road that turns to the left is the place where we found the fossils the low hills had been cut to make room for the road and the wind was blowing the few clusters of grass that were growing on the tops of them it was perhaps more by accident than anything that we found the place at all we were tired from riding in the car all day and had stopped to rest and walk through the hills when we sat down for a minute you picked up a small rock and turned it over and over in your hands as we talked you noticed it was covered with fossils and as we looked around we found that nearly every rock and section of ledge in the cut hill had these fossils they were of shells and parts of shells and we even found a few in which crystals had begun to form look you said how they shine like bones like your eyes I thought then for a long time we were quiet as we looked through the rocks many of them were soft and crumbled in our fingers though we tried to pick them up carefully the sun was warm against our faces and your long gold hair glistened you said look someone has written his name on these rocks I could not see it sure you said look and your voice was a whisper see they say time was here you smiled I wanted to hold you but I didn't you were digging through the rocks again and your face was happy and far with thought overhead redwing blackbirds were flying and I watched them move through the air for a long time I thought I heard the bones of their thin wings crackling as they moved then you called me to come and look you had found a small plant with two red flowers growing in a handful of dirt in the cliff look here you said this is why this is why and your words lay down among the rocks

Passing Windows

. . . it is the end of June, end
of a long rain. The slightest hint of moon-
light, that blonde chin much as my own,
is soft as a blur, half-hidden
in the night's blue fields.

Once again I am running across the yard. My father's
voice, thin now as my own, calls out
from one of the many lighted windows.
Milo, sweet hay in the air, heavy
as the day's rain . . .

*He is sitting on the edge
of the bed. His face seems strained, strange
to me as something seems to be to him.
The windowsill is cold, slick, like
his face. He shakes!*

*—then his head leans to his hands,
less familiar to them, I think, than a cabbage,
a shock of corn. No sound. His shoulders
move slowly, a rowing motion,
but going nowhere . . .*

I drop back to the ground. Now another voice rises,
has found him. I pick up a small rock, light
in the pocket of my palm, and for an instant
I simply hold it there, smooth and cold
and pulseless as a tear.

Macon Creek, Reservoir

1.

Even for the smallest boat the creek was shallow,
too thin, too grown over with brush, limbs. We walked
the paths we'd worn smooth along those dense banks
when we moved, spot to spot, with our buckets and poles.
We seldom caught anything. We walked for hours

along the creekside anyway. Once, when we wandered
farther than we ever had, down hollows that wound
like water themselves beneath the hills, so far
the brush thinned out, we found an old field, left fallow.
That was evening. Field shacks darkened and seemed to fold.

He told me no one farmed there anymore, the old man
dead and no heirs, and just as well. Across the wide
sky, a loon called from water trees vague as night-fog.
When we started back, the way seemed longer in that
hanging dark, though Indian paintbrush burned like coals

along the water's edge. He had to carry me, even
if my legs did brush the dark leaves. Later, he set
the buckets beside a stump and said we were close,
pointed deep into the night, there, our fire still lit,
the blue smoke rising through the lowest limbs, and gone.

2.

I don't know which is hotter, the sun on my back
or these blisters rolling like little grapes between
my hands and wet paddles. We've come at least three miles,
still no sign the water's ending, no chance for shade.
Who would guess a creek a boy could simply swing across

could, dammed and winter-fed, flood a fourth of a county?
I wish I could see down through this water. We are
floating over farms, we have crossed fences and hills.
I imagine crappie, catfish, frog—all nesting
in the limbs of willows. Up here, fifteen long years

since I stared into that country night, I recall
a story about an old man who died, who left
a farm of weeds. It is a story recurrent
as these waves, a story of land and loss, and long
as every memory. The bank brush and water weeds

have not yet begun to grow along the water's edge.
They will. Cottonmouths have not come, redwings do not
flock in low clouds. They will, they will. Near the shore-
line, in shallows, treetops sway in the gentle motion
of a lake that is as natural as our given lives.

Small Confession By the River: A Love Poem

for Charlotte

Beyond the fall of bluff and down through the familiar
limb-fractured light, the wind-slip still clawing
through the few dry leaves, the river carries
its old load, the ice of northern snows. It is
like a road of cars in this distance, only slow.
When I was young, this is where I came to lean
and watch the coal trains couple in the blue
nights like dogs along the river's edge. This is
where I came to hide and feel my body want to cry.

I've brought you here, half a country away from where
we've made another life, to show you what a boy
lonely, but at home, could love if he tried.
Perhaps it is the distance of those years, or
nothing more than the clarity of a cold season's
landscape, that lets us see so far: notice
the trees, how they seem to step away from us,
or how the opposite bluff, layered like a fossil,
rises through its own limbs. We are so close.

Or notice, there, those nests like flood-hung debris.
I can say this now. My friends, in dawn light,
would pepper them with 22's until the animals were
blown right out, or leaves fell apart. Nights
I'd return, sick, to watch train lights meet
or listen to the ice floes brush and separate.
That may seem useless now. But to a boy who hated,
it was everything, the only way to be alone,
the way out of town. The way, somehow, to love.

Concurrent Memories: The Afternoon the Last Barge Left

1.

Somewhere on a broken dock step, dock no longer there,
I lean and think of touching my lips to the brown water.
Any boy would. It freckles in the summer rain,
in the slow falling rain, though sunlight from somewhere
beyond the town's roofs also spreads like a slick
beneath the tied barge and shines now, in the golden rain.

Minnows are rising as if to feed. They sip the raindrops
like seeds, like the clear wings of insects. No one
sees me when I cup one in the pool of my palms.
And when I let the water run through, I see I can
see through it, its few veins and dark organs.
It wants back in the water. It wants back where it belongs.

2.

The last time I came here was with my father to fish
all night. We heard them slap and roll but had no luck.
He said this would all be different soon, bridges
and highways coming like a plague. We watched
the river insects burn themselves against our lamp.
He said soon even the river will have nothing left to do.

He's down there now, at the barge-landing with friends.
He cannot see me lean and look into the water.
The sun is coming through low clouds, but I don't
want to go home yet. I want to watch the last
barge leave and never come back. I want to watch him
standing in the slow rain. I want to remember everything.

3.

The old barge aches at its moorings. I ache to see it.
A few men in oilskins, in no hurry, move to loosen
the lashings and others stand by the wheelhouse.
The small crowd, my father with them, stays quiet
in the rain. I watch them watch the boat, then lean.
It is as if I need to see something still in the water.

But soon the barge pulls off and begins working its way
up the river. The crowd breaks up, and the rain.
I stay and it goes farther, the water stirring
in clouds and moving in slow waves toward the shore
where I lean, my face darkening. Something here
touches the brown water, raindrop or minnow, and is gone.

History As Place

1. The Approach

Even from a distance, past a blurred rise of redbuds,
a shelf of rock thrust up like a tiny knuckle
in a slope of wasted grass,

past even the reach of fence,
the house looks old, looks abandoned. No one
walks this cattle-path or has for years, it seems,

but me, today. No one but the cows. So I follow
the trail they've left, at least a winter ago,
their tracks still bitten there,

deep in the now-solid
ground. Some are partly filled with water, dark
green of spring ooze, others only shadow . . .

both though, land-thaw and shadow, seem to seep
together out of the ground: this slow earth has not
yet erased its past,

the printed shape of its own land.
This would be a good place to make a home.
To my left, nearer now the barren house, lined

with willow, catalpa, though sunken past my sight,
a creek settles in its banks. I do not know
who these people were,

why they left: only, this was home.
Weeds, heady and blue with seed, snap under my step.
A loon lifts, like a memory, from the trees.

2. The Passage

Up close, the house is smaller. Set back in hillside, its own wooden sides leaning slack as old muscle, it stands. Still.

entrance looks easy, thanks
to the half-hearted effort of some hand, years
back, the rolls of wire he unwound and nailed too

quickly, sagging around open doors, open-faced walls:
I simply bend, high-step, and am in. This quick
I am small in a dark room

dank with the smell of earth.
its floor the color of soil. Boards bend again
with the weight of passage as I walk, room to room.

no sound but the breathing of my steps. Lives
are pressed like fossils into this wood—hand-hewn
beams crossing back and forth,

a broken table, layers of pale wallpaper flaking off like old skin . . . here, even a few remnants of wire and socket.

And on this ceiling, toward the last, back room,
wasps have made their nests. Mud-daubers.
I imagine generations of them,

sealed still inside
those damp chambers (though every one has long
since cracked and fallen to powder): birth

broken open on the births of others. I move, so, into the last room where, near the back wall, the floor has dropped away.

part of the wall itself,
and weeds are sprouting from the sunlight.
I near on hands and knees, look down. A cellar,

invisible from the outside, yawns below me, and
I go dizzy in its depths! Broken bottles shine up
from shadow—fallen beams,

black water. I move away
from my own face as the house sways in a breeze.
I remember a child, crawling among these timbers. . . .

3. The Release

Hours later, limb-shadow long on the rotting leaves.
I am walking in the hills above the old house
thinking of no one—

only a crazy whippoorwill answering
its own echo across the hollow. and my tired legs
tightened by the constant rise and fall of landscape.

I find the deer, then, without any warning or stench
of death. At first, even, I cannot look at it.
(though I've nearly fallen

into its miserable carcass),
but then I do. It is the color of mud. Its hide,
I imagine once shaken with ice and hunger, is matted

with earth and nearly alive with a pelt of bees.
All four legs are drawn beneath it like bent sticks
and its head is thrown back,

jaw bones already bare
and bleaching white. Worst, though, is its side,
or what is left. Indeed, part of its body

seems to have collapsed into itself. into decay.
and I can see that the whole body is hollow. though
a pool of yellow water.

rotten with dew, has collected
in the up-turned cavity. Insects move there, too,
will be born, will die, without having left. . . .

I lean to touch its bitten side. A piece of hide crumbles off like sod in my hand. Soon enough, it will all drop to dust:

*this land itself is formed
 by the shape of its dead. I too have been walking
 all day, and have yet to turn back for home.*

Falling Lives

*"It is not the wind
waking you, but the low roar of years
fumbling to tell you what has happened. . . ."*

Dave Smith

Peabody #7 Strip Mine

And that's what they did, strip. Even now,
twenty, forty, eighty years later—
who'll say for sure—the land lies ripped
and scattered like an animal no one
bothered to drag off the road:

its white bones still stick out
from the ground. In the deepest sites
water stands, too, where the cranes wheezed,
and where, before that, a hundred men
broke their backs with shovels

and picks. It was true, though,
if you could just lift a layer off
the earth, you'd have coal, fine, pure
as it came. Now the kids come
to swim the still green pools, and dodge

the balls of cottonmouths that knot
themselves together and sink down,
down. No one's ever bitten.
So out here, mid-dusk, I will stand
and watch something else I have

never understood. Soon it will be night.
And the sky will turn black, blacker
even than the smoke someone dreamed
in that first, good dream
that started all of this.

Up Early,

but not before that slow shoulder's already sloughed me
off. Still, something in the way the stringy light's
laced itself across the eastern hills, all that

flexed muscle and finery, the way the trees seem
to bob their heads in accord and face the simple facts—
something insistent—reminds me now of my own mortality.

. . . it is the sun, the morning.
The pale stem by which, nevertheless, this day is held.

Lamb's Canyon, Fall: Wasatch Forest

High up, sharp as a sawtooth, the upper snow
a smear of dull morning light on a mirror
of stone, the last point of rock-ridge breaks
into sky, into clouds cocked like a deadfall.
I stop, out of breath. Wind whets each blade.

There, predictable as the season, a far shot
snaps its branch! An echo drops like a feather
from shelves of rock, ice-whitened, into a vast
fog of air, that same milky color of an eye.
Something has just fallen into its blood

and will freeze there, where fallen, if not found
soon, in the spreading ooze of its own wound.
If it is found, its print will remain, a fossil,
a footprint, but will fill. I will find nothing
either way. The hunter knees his path through

the drifts. Still down-slope, I seem to float
on the thick leaves of this ground. The snow
will fall, covering me, only as I rise into
those heights, into the hard wind that seems
to soothe just when the skin has turned so cold.

A Portrait of the West

In one room, a bowl of fruit
sitting on a small table—
plums, apples, cherries,
a bruised pear. Across the room,
sunlight thick with dust,
a wooden floor, the one window
half-opened to the afternoon.
Here and there, on ledges
or hanging by rusty hooks
from the ceiling, blue
and yellow pots full of plants,
held by pieces of old rope.

A girl enters, young in her
flowered apron and sandals.
Her dark hair is full
around her face, her arms, even
in these shadows, pale and thin.
She glances around the room
then walks to the table
where one hand begins plucking
cherries, dark as heart-blood,
from the bowl. She is slow
about it, calm, each small
globe lifted to her mouth
one at a time, each
stem pulled off between
her teeth and thin fingers.
She chews slowly, the corners
of her jaws working
in their smooth hinges,
her other hand rising
like a shy bird to collect
each clean seed. Soon,
a fist of seeds.

She stays for several minutes
like this, eating cherries, looking
out the window at the chickens
shuffling in the yard, the empty
barn beyond, burned last fall.
Then a voice calls her name,
and as she hurries from the room,
her clothes waving like
curtains, she does not reply
or even look back. Nor does she
hesitate when she pushes
the wet seeds, still held,
deep in the only pocket
of her apron, never so nervous
as when she is called, like this,
from another room.

Utah: The Lava Caves

The rain just over, what's left of the day now glowing
fiercely on the far canyon wall, pink as glass,
the sand floor already dry and stirring in slow wind,
my three hours' hike has seemed longer than ever.
Prickly pear, yucca, sheep's-death hide in their shadows
and hold still.

Yet the cave pits should be close now:
soon their ragged pumice edges will be honing
themselves on my boots and palms. I've come here
so often, parched and alone, trying to find
some place where the desert's past is still visible
and go back into it as if it were my own.

Yet how many times have I clambered into the caves
and seen the light of the world snuffed out
in that barely breathable dark? Or touched the moss
there like some wild thing's fur and thought
the very rocks were, unspeakably, alive? How many
times have I called to them?

They have never answered.
And the cave pits lie before me again, like great
fallen oases. I stand at the edge of one
and look down at its black rocks before descending,
see those thousand facets half full of rain, sparkling,
each blinking in the last fierce moment of sun.
How far must I go to believe my own eyes?

The Blue Jesus: Sanctuary of Stars, Salt Lake City

for Terry Hummer

So we went up in the near-hush of whispers,
the slow scuffing of our steps
softened in the carpets. we two,
visitors, if only with some vague
curiosity, and so climbed
the long, spiralling ramp
as though moving to the open
end of a vast conch, or of day.

The blue wall slid past like the drift
of time itself, and we rose
until we could see stars painted
yellow in those heavens
where clouds and gasses revolved
as we did. The planets
appeared, near and comforting,
the earth with each
continent green and exact,
here the largest among all
the planets and stars.
Then the ramp ended
and a room opened, huge,
before us—in its center, a blue
Jesus stood in the cool glow of lights.

*And his dominion is all the heavens
and all the lands
of the heavens. . . . We saw
the others then, circled
in shadows beneath the marble
folds of his robe, his hands
reaching down to them.
One faced the others and spoke*

*

softly into the microphone
he held, like a jewel,
in both hands. The blue
Jesus looked down at them
as they, with raised
eyes, stood there. Above
them all, the constant stars
shone on the high, round ceiling.

It was only later, in the closed dark
of my car, that we spoke,
you and I, silent that long from
embarrassment, perhaps, or some
more private need for quiet.
We drove quickly
out of town on a highway lined
with lights that thinned
the farther we went. Wind
blew through the windows, stars
rimmed the clouds and hills
we couldn't see, yet knew were there.

So we spoke of that then, the night sky,
the great, colorless space
it had become, how it seemed to
turn on its slow wheel
endless as a mural, its
very stars repeating like clichés,
how *its beginning was a kind
of end, a void we both feared
and loved*—and how surely
we had been, all this
time, neither rising into it,
nor falling from anyplace above.

Ephemerae

*"What eye can trace them . . . bounding
and fluttering on the odoriferous air!"*

William Bartram

1.

Down from the blue sage and butte-sand,
down from the wild grass
swept like liquid in slow, sleepy waves,
wind hotter than the sunshine,
down from the road left like the track of some

old herd, I am walking toward where they must
breed . . . nothing moves on the low
swamp before me, yet everything moves: the heat
wavers and floats. Here it is
nearly impossible to tell water from land.

salt-plain, salt-pool, simply by sight,
but as the grasses slicken
and the slow pull at my feet—the swamp-suck,
sand falling away—makes walking
harder. I know the ground beneath me

is changing. And with what little wind
there is, I get the first smell
of the lake, stale, though still far,
the almost human stench of heat
and brine. I am near enough now to see them,

the only life in the Great Salt's backwater:
a film, a hum like wind,
a fine cloud hovering on and over
the swamp's waters, untold
millions of them moving together, *ephemerae*. . . .

2.

"How awful the proceffion!" wrote Bartram
above a Florida lagoon, 1774,
and in the "protecting fhade of majestic
Live Oaks, glorious Magnolias,
and the fragrant Orange," in the lush, sweet,

"odoriferous" air, he tried to account for
"these beautiful winged beings,
which rife into exiftence . . . a number greater
than the whole race of mankind
that have ever exifted fince the creation";

their small lives, he speculated, must pass
in the span of a human year,
most of which they spend, buried in mud,
"in the form of an ugly grub . . .
fcarcely locomotive," but then rise up,

a "refurrection from the deep," surface-ward,
to take the shape of these
insects, these "feathered fongfters."
He heard the "fweet enchanting
melody" of their new wings, saw them gather

and loom together above the still water,
in the humid dusk, and begin,
"in their new nuptial robes . . . their varied
wanton amorous chaces."
the tiny dance of mating. Bartram knew

the rest: how later they would, egg-heavy,
descend again to the surface
and there deposit their eggs to float,
"enveloped in a vifcid fcum,"
then hatch, the larvae sinking back into

"their fecure and dark habitation,
in the oozy bed beneath,"
but sure to rise again the next year, a new
generation, millions of them
mating, millions "voluntarily verging on

to deftruction, to the brink of the grave,"
to the "wide open jaws"
of their enemies. Silent. Bartram wrote:
"what a leffon doth it not
afford us of the vanity of our own purfuits!"

3.

Bartram. I am standing ankle-deep in muck,
alone. the spiny salt-grasses
bowing with these tiny lives. the water
thick and throbbing with them.
the air bright with wings. I breathe in,

as I must. this impure breath of being,
foul now with the smell
of another death. and though I think
of herds of buffalo and antelope
covering this land. vast lakes themselves.

though I see the dark clouds of their passing
settling back to the earth.
it is a cloud of insects and one animal
carcass half-submerged in swamp.
decayed beyond recognition. beyond species.

nameless in its single extinction. that have
borne in my mind these other
dead. these disappearing. I imagine you.
old traveler. watching me
alone in the swamp of this ancient lake.

half-land. half-water. as I watch you
bent with your pen in the sweet
shade of the past. Even now. bird-shadows
cross before me. Bartram.
how like your Florida this really is—

the countless lives of insects. a sinking
carcass. a few buzzards circling
like high. dark crescents of moons. and me.
a man. gagging now. the only animal
so sickened by death. its stench. its solitude.

Her Elegy in Harvest Season

Now the field must shimmer, sunlit, a scent like rain
and the blackening stalks I had once grown
so used to—and that wide reflection of sky,
and that first chill cleaving the land
like a root . . . yes, yes, it all comes back

so readily. Then, when you walked with your father
and brothers into the field, into the long
wait it would become, I was already
tendered in the giving up a girl, a woman,
must learn for that life, the seasonal
loss, the loneliness of work. I loved you

though I never loved that work or stories you told
when, after those hard weeks, you came back
to me somehow changed, somehow older
than I would ever want to be.

Yet it is the stories I remember, now, more than
your face or tenderness. You kept me

from you, as you thought best, by the terrors
of the field—the tractors and blades
that could roll and kill, the breathless
seeds, the dust, relentless strokes
of sun and sweat. You'd tell me how,

last week, you grabbed a bale to toss and found
a rattler, jaws splayed wide, hung-open
like a gate, and pulled it out,
a head and inch of body cut
by saw-sharp baling twine.

I never went into the harvest field those times
when work was worst. I feared for you,
for me. The day you fell, the hardest
work was finished, though, the field
winter-cleared and wagons full,
the barn the only chore undone. Why

it happened no one knew, or said, except that
the grain-loft floor was surely bad
for footing and when you yanked a bale
from the belt lift you slipped.
you simply fell. I have dreamed of that

last breath slammed from your chest, your death
by your father's own hard land.

and I have made new stories of my own. You see,

today, again, a slow rain has fallen, has quit,
and the clicking of the drops against
my windows was like dull wings of hoppers
rising from our steps, still resonant

in this little room, so far away. These words
are finally not for you, love, any more
than is that rain, the hollow sky,
or land, or life. They are for me, at last,
a woman and a girl grown younger
for a moment with a memory of her past,

and for all of us whose only story of our falling,
failing lives is you, is those we've lost.

David Baker was born in 1954 in Bangor, Maine, and grew up in Missouri. He received his B.S.E. in 1976 and his M.A. in 1977 from Central Missouri State University, where he also taught in 1976-77. For the two years following that, he taught high school English in Jefferson City, Missouri. In 1979, he moved to Salt Lake City, where he is currently completing his Ph.D. in English/creative writing at the University of Utah, and where he also serves as the editor of **Quarterly West**. An accomplished musician, he has played various instruments, though mainly the guitar, with many jazz, rock, and country bands. **Laws of the Land** is his first full-length collection of poetry.

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