

HANNAH'S TRAVEL  
by  
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*for Richard Blessing*

*Judy Appel, Richard Blessing, Kate McCune,  
and William Matthews gave me helpful criti-  
cisms (and plain help) while I was writing  
these poems; I thank them.*



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# Introduction

Richard Speakes has written a tour de force: a book of linked poems, in narrative sequence, set in 1851 and 1852 between Macune, Missouri, and Ft. Laramie, and thought, spoken, and daydreamed by a woman, Speakes' arresting heroine Hannah. The enterprise itself is enough to draw our attention, but what holds it is an uncommon achievement in poetry—the creation of a complex and compelling character who is importantly other than the poet. Not a persona, but a character.

An equally important achievement, nearly as rare, is the discovery, again and again, of a balance between the urge individual poems develop to behave like single, self-sufficient lyric poems on the one hand, and on the other the need the book has to be one long structure less intensely concentrated than a lyric poem but never less interesting on its surface, line by line and poem by poem.

American poetry has a great poem, John Berryman's *Homage To Mistress Bradstreet* (1956), which is historical, is a linked sequence of individual poems with a narrative, and is thought, spoken, and daydreamed by a woman. There is one important way it is unfair to compare them: Speakes has written his poem at the beginning of his poetic maturity, and Berryman wrote his at the beginning of his mastery. But we should perhaps note that this early in his writing life Speakes has written a poem so difficult and ambitious—perhaps to try such a thing one needs not to know very well what one can and can't do, for if one does it might all seem forfeit in advance—that it is hard to find another book to compare it to other than Berryman's startling masterpiece. I can think of another way they might be spoken of similarly. Some will think it a remarkable feat for Speakes to have spoken so believably in the voice of a woman. This is no small triumph for him, but in thinking of it we would do well to remember how thoroughly in our century poetry asks poets to write down not what was off thought but never so well expressed, but what the poet couldn't have said without the challenge and process of the poem. We ask our poets not to be limited to or by themselves, but to live in the sympathetic imagination, and we might say matter-of-factly about Speakes' fine book that, evidently, he thought that was not too much to ask.

Berryman had the advantage of a heroine who was also a poet, and a poet in a cheerfully more rhetorical age than ours. Speakes has a heroine who knows the Bible a little, trusts the evidence of her senses, and had the good fortune to be invented by Speakes. And so she is a woman who, entering pregnancy and soon after that the long trek westward, can say to herself:

What is strange is in my arms.

The men with whom she will set out tell stories about what they hope and fear to find:

They were like a boy  
throwing a ball against the barn at dusk,  
& in the failing light the body's lamp  
reaches to where the catch will be.

The syntax is a tiny bit formal to our ears—this conveys both a sense of an earlier colloquial range and of the formality used by a verbal person without a verbal education to match her natural talent. The ampersand is a winning touch; it suggests not only the shorthand of journal entries but also the conventions of printing from which Hannah's unbookish formality is both not so far and far.

Another example of Speakes' exact sense of tact illustrates how it operates over the length of a whole poem—the one dated "June 15, 1852"—and how what it registers (rises and dips in how "formal" diction is, for example) is the process of thought itself. Hannah is thinking about her husband, who has killed a buffalo:

The fortress of his dream  
is the world as it relents  
to his impressions  
& holds them for a spell—  
wagon tracks, a mound of earth  
& it the cross, the scar  
across his stronger hand—  
earnings in the tender  
of arrival.

Why else lug  
the bison's head & raise it  
by its horns, but that it reminds  
his desire is substantial—  
& didn't the creature run  
as if it knew his mind?  
Good or bad makes no matter,  
instead it all has meaning—  
a stronghold of such size  
one can't tell if more's  
held out or in.

There is almost more here, in the poem as well as in *Hannah's Travel*, than Speakes can handle—her theological and hymn-diction puns lead her continually toward dense philosophical problems. But how pleasing it is to see him take on so much. So it's not surprising, after all, that his moving and readable book reminds us of the work of such accomplished poets as Berryman, Margaret Atwood (*The Journals of Susannah Moody*) and George Keithley (*The Donner Party*). His future is one to watch, and *Hannah's Travel* is a book to read and re-read.

*William Matthews*  
Seattle, Washington  
January, 1982



# The fathers

May 3, 1851  
Macune, Missouri

They recede from here like straight fence  
that gives the land both sides,  
like the bodies of men who settled  
Missouri, Kentucky, western Virginia.  
As young men, each one saw the land  
left to him, & every time he looked  
he heard all its stories, the early frost  
& luck of rain, the child who died  
& his own fever passing.

One night John leans  
against the table whose every mark is the light  
it was made in, his father glaring out  
at weather, making the boy feel like weather.  
When it lifts in the sky the father thinks  
the boy's soaring is what he was looking for  
all along.

When John thinks what can't  
be taken with us—how the table  
is too much bulk for any wagon—the unspoken  
skies of California, its unexplained ground  
is what he wants. The travel.

# John

May 9, 1851  
Macune, Missouri

Each year the wheat is less his,  
isn't grain enough, nor enough stalk  
that he plows the plain world for.  
The framed deed yellows  
for how the light repeats itself  
& John grows lean, pays out his days  
as the old land's fare.

And when  
the rains don't come, when John reaches  
in to turn a calf born later  
bloodied, still, when emigrants raise the dust,  
wave at us, just two days from St. Joe  
& jump-off . . . then the plain stretches  
in his mind, all the way to mountains  
that bite back at thin air  
& all that blue.

When it snaps back fat  
spilling free land, the room is swollen  
with evening light & John jumps up,  
mouth crowded with half-chewed food  
& an idea.

May 18, 1851

Macune, Missouri

With his body he argues the power  
of travel--the wheel of arms  
rolls us, the perfect carriage  
for two . . . & a matched pair  
of horses run as if  
there were no harness, no weight  
whose follow never falters  
for all the strides & pounding  
hooves . . . the shadow  
whose sun never moves.

# Feeling the baby move

June 3, 1851

Macune, Missouri

I was a dance amongst myself  
& led with my thickening body  
a partner who knew the music  
by heart. It was a song only  
we could dance—the others  
sat nodding & listened while under  
the gazebo's white dome the musicians  
performed in parts.

Each one ponders  
something small, something that makes  
his fingers seem thick & clumsy.  
But assembled, when the parts arrive  
just in time, then they are playing,  
& the song has found its dancer.



# Portents

June 5, 1851  
Macune, Missouri

I am to mind what I behold  
for sake of the child that's in me,  
attentions given to a world speaking  
tongues of hawk flight,  
crow-with-one-eye, the intrigue  
of storm out of season, its wind  
whose verge on singing veers  
near then away from meaning, aloof  
of all precaution.

Better

the tangle of the grasses  
& the barn door's celebration  
of its hinges with a clap.  
Crow-with-one-eye hops  
at the slant of his intentions  
& flies away with the unfolding  
of his shaggy wings.

Have it so—

my child will wink, have hair  
the spring will muss for all my ribbons.  
Little one dreams she flies  
& Momma's the wind & the waking  
before she falls. The wind  
says I sing then  
hey nonny & nonny & la.

# Evidence

August 27, 1851  
Macune, Missouri

John says, *It's darker & darker here*,  
tearing off another hunk of bread,  
making a meal of it. It is like all the loaves  
I've ever baked or will, but for him  
it is soured in thin light, from each detail  
of his day the shining's been skimmed  
like cream.

The cow's dull eye  
is evidence, the meager crop a witness  
so simple it argues sing-song, rhymes *no*  
with *go*, & when the field turns wily  
it mutters *foe* into the wind.

If I say  
what I feel he'd hear it in tongues,  
a warning against women carrying babies  
turning in them. The evangelist's tent  
was never fuller than John  
in the stubbled field, John  
filled with what moves him.



# Sara Adams Emblen

born October 27, 1851  
Macune, Missouri

The midwife's hands blurred  
in their cleaning & all the while  
she gave direction, what she's repeated  
til it's the path to the well  
& you could fetch water at midnight  
thinking only of the tea you'll make.  
But then John was there with water  
& complete she took to her own hands,  
rubbed this birth away to join  
the others—

                  she held Sara's head  
in those hands as I watched  
it turn—like seeing hands guide  
one crow into a current that carried it  
gliding. Her hands spun away,  
the wind picked up, in every direction  
it howled carrying us the rest of the way.





# December 21, 1851

## Macune, Missouri

Pity the poor fathers, their sons,  
& how they go round, merry-go-round  
without a song that conjures  
their plodding to a dance.  
Around & around, as if they'd straight  
away arrive, & sing then the song  
been earned, behind them all  
their distance.

    Their very daughters  
seem saved to them, born to sing it  
far from gears that turn, & turn it  
all around—not the stark thing bodied  
& meshed, struck tooth by tooth  
with whirling—invisible in that way  
though it's what they see is missing,  
the song, the song alone.

# December 27, 1851

## Macune, Missouri

She smiles as I swing  
my hair across her face  
& squints as if at light,  
all my new weight of milk  
pendulant—  
& the planets, their moons,  
surge through the heavens  
given the simple pulse  
of sun.

\*

Sara is sudden squeals  
& reaches for a stalk  
of dusty light yoked  
to a cloud's approach,  
it looms above & ponders night—  
then the sum of darkness  
unveils constellations,  
creatures of light.



# December 29, 1851

## Macune, Missouri

I give Sara a song  
for her calming, then rock us  
to just its time, we two  
through darkness a bell  
that nods a touch shy  
of sounding, the congregation  
already gathered.

# January 2, 1852

## Macune, Missouri

If a year were a field  
our leaving's in this one selling  
its magic elixir, sure-fire  
distillation of all remedies  
known to man.

The clouds themselves  
suffered the gout til they imbibed  
in travel. And you, gentlemen,  
think on it—you've seen  
the bone-ache in the water being  
frozen to a spot.

The scoundrel's wit  
is his playing to the humors  
of an unsettled farmer—himself  
a complicated joke, the laughter  
in the lengths he'd go to get it.

# Sara discovers her hand

January 10, 1852  
Macune, Missouri

Columbus needed the travel,  
his distance for the mood  
to see new worlds within  
the circle of his own—  
less *they* make the crossing,  
appearing one day naked  
in the harbor, apparently  
so startling the Queen  
she'd forget her manners & shriek.

# John in sleep

January 15, 1852  
Macune, Missouri

The fields, the barn, all  
things in rows or housed, squared  
near as can to plumb, relax  
in luxuries of error. The line  
the horizon bends is slumber,  
the well an ease of being  
nearly straight as Father meant.  
It's that draws John  
to flight—because he'd fix it  
he rises for the horizon's gesture,  
its roundabout tease of longing.  
Then several farms' sprawl makes just  
one shape, but still it is familiar.  
So higher & more, he begins to curve  
into himself, like the ball he sees below—  
all horizon, a sleek thing perfect,  
something a boy might catch, or throw.

# Grandmother's sampler

February 16, 1852

Macune, Missouri

Here are signs & wonders  
one stitch at a time,  
& the nine year girl saw  
her hand flare up tethered  
to each, the blue crewel yarn  
slack or taut depending, just so  
as the hand goes, like its echo,  
like wind & where the leaves go.  
The wind is you & carries you.  
But then it's only an A  
on the linen, sign the flurry subsides.  
It's fine enough, but there.  
Little wonder she'll name Mama  
Alma, a small thing with her wind,  
& cut the cord when the child looks  
to her alone, eyes dense with blue.

# The teacup she gave me as a child

February 17, 1852  
Macune, Missouri

The stairs dipped palm deep  
on either side given her steps past  
reckoning, the flight made more  
complex as the wood cupped,  
the light it held in pools a form  
of memory.

Above she hovered  
the landing, poised between  
two windows' light, appearing  
there the spirit of wood worn away,  
how the hard lines curve in keeping  
with their use.

Grandmother  
called to me, *Child & bring your cup,*  
& those hours led me through  
steps of my dowry's third quilt—  
*Think of it, this the pattern*  
*he so admired*—Jacob's Ladder  
in blue, light blue, & white.

March 3, 1852

Macune, Missouri

I might as well blame the pump's  
design on drawing water . . .  
I swear the man's heart was wrought,  
plunged when it was hot,  
so fixed to shape & its  
cool touch.

But the machine  
of raising dark waters  
needs a mouth to sing them up—  
else water is a mined chemical.  
Or the sheer fluency is sucked out  
as demonstration the contraption  
works.

Let the little handle be,  
rusting in the rain. The hand of fit  
has gone & left this sculpture,  
its influence in my garden.  
It could be enough  
& in time the iron will deepens  
my hydrangeas' blue.

# Making ready

April 27, 1852  
Macune, Missouri

I sang while I packed  
as if I were in the woods, telling  
the bear I'm on my way & mean  
little, a bouquet, wildflowers  
for the table.

I topped the last crate  
with a hymnal, put all those songs  
in the dark with jars of seed,  
forget-me-not & sweet pea,  
one chopped clump of rose, roots  
bound in burlap. I named them flute,  
violin, drum.

Then I remembered  
my book of pressed flowers, the passenger  
that prepared, lighter every day,  
the hyacinth just a blue powder held  
in place hovering above its stalk.  
The voice.



# My father 3 days before we leave

May 3, 1852  
Macune, Missouri

As a young man he'd taken us his  
far way, when I was a baby,  
my mother the age I am now.  
He told her then, *A grandfather  
is an old man & that says it all.*  
Kentucky & fathers that held him down  
we rolled away. It was simple  
travel, a line you could make  
on a map.

Now Papa's come back to it  
wearing the mask of age  
to hear the breath-like rightness of adventure  
in a young man's hurried speech,  
to hear the babbling of a baby girl  
who tangles her hand in the mystery  
of her grandfather's beard.  
He must have promised silence  
to be allowed to see this again.

# The table, the apple, & the well

May 6, 1852  
Macune, Missouri

I touch as memory touches  
each thing that will remain, one finger  
trailing off the table's edge,  
feeling the table

with that one.

Beneath the tree I hear each seed  
hum the promise of ripeness, the host's  
fall to earth, the recurrence a tune I carry  
without a waste of space.

From the well

a call is moving toward its voice,  
its face still the shimmer of a face.  
I drop the bucket a last time, let it  
go full, pull slow its poised weight,  
lifting her out with the water  
for one last cup of tea.

# Departure

May 6, 1852

I looked for the first turn  
of the wheel, something crucial to name  
the start, as when I climbed a mountain  
to find the river's first trickle down.  
The blue of the wildflowers & the actual  
mountain's loom brought me to the heart  
of the matter. I was there with thistles  
that wove me in, the mess the wind  
made of my hair was the grasses'  
pull across the slope. The idea I had flared  
up with the hawk & was gone.

And so it was  
John's bark for the oxen, a ladle  
that fell from its hook, & Sara's shriek  
at our assembling. For this beginning,  
wherever it might be, I was the voice held  
back in its throat, humming until I knew the words  
the airs might need, a melody made for Sara  
when she was inside me, without a name.

# The preacher at St. Joe

May 9, 1852

St. Joe, Missouri

There was no confusing him  
with the sinner who fell drink-heavy  
near the front, there where the preacher pointed  
down, finger shaking as if its blood  
were lightning, with wrath for every meek  
inch of earth it struck.

*That man  
is no emigrant, brothers, sisters.  
His soul has already settled, squatter's rights  
in hell, he's got.*

Then that preacher  
remembered gold, the tons of mud & gravel  
he'd sluiced for a wealth of dust, the refined  
heap a man can carry in one sack.  
He puffed up, straining the seams,  
he stomped the stage & sweat mightily,  
but he couldn't bring that finger back  
to poke his own little pile, he  
couldn't shut up. And so, as I've  
done before for so many men,  
I was silent for him.

# A saloon named Lil

May 9, 1852

St. Joe, Missouri

The story is the man lost her  
as that is said, men & women  
forgetful as they are  
& possessed of meager vision.  
Now his walls' refrain is their  
several oils of Lil, his recollections  
in gilt frames—each a relation  
of how he remembered her  
to an artist,

                  each fittingly  
wrong given what he chose to say,  
errors he can cherish being  
the only man who knows the correct  
lips' fullness, how a blush  
went down her neck & the shape  
of that travel. Each right in manners  
that intrigue him less—

                                  the style of her  
favorite dress, a comb that held her hair.  
Men toast the versions  
& name them. each according to why  
he drinks. The essence is now living  
somewhere, without meaning.

# The day we became the Barton Party

May 10, 1852

St. Joe, Missouri

Fifteen wagons found each other  
& gathered outside of town, & while  
I talked rice & flour, the men  
chewed the weather, how wide  
the Platte would be, being in town  
long enough to know the issues.  
And horses vs mules vs oxen  
& weight & miles & time.  
Then buffalo, buffalo—from them they leapt  
to indians, to rifles & trails,  
when snow might reach the Rockies,  
one long moment settling  
on the Donners.

They were like a boy  
throwing a ball against the barn at dusk,  
& in the failing light the body's lamp  
reaches to where the catch will be.  
Then he throws hard to test it,  
snares the bounding thing  
at the last instant—or it leaps  
past into the field & darkness  
neither in nor out of the game.

May 10, 1852

St. Joe, Missouri

Then they settled into stories  
& they made the fires dance.  
A bottle in his hand, Barton  
swore Nebraska's steep—  
if they be neighborly the men  
would show him kindness, ease  
the labor of his oxen,  
to drink & turn his wagon light.  
I drank my brandy in tea as the oxen  
nodded their blunt heads, their thanks  
lolloped in thick-tongued silence.

But the men,  
their stories each a heave on the rope  
men tie to what they want,  
as they talked on & drank they would coil  
Nebraska's length behind them. Now  
they were all working together remembering  
what they'd done when need be,  
& near midnight, like a gigantic stump  
in their field, the Rockies tore  
loose & into view, approached  
the pace the moon draws night.  
Just a few more words, just  
one more story . . .

# Campfire

May 13, 1852  
Nebraska

Do the flames skitter, sweet one?  
& doesn't darkness attend them  
exactly? If it had a mind  
it would be to change it with grace.  
Swaddling the fire, night is itself  
transformed, it's shaped where it stoops,  
bends to find itself rapt in  
the other's every whim. Darkness  
fusses about the fire like a mother  
brushing her daughter's wisps of hair,  
as a little wind slurs what's precise  
in the mother's mind. There is a wind  
that carries the smoke away  
into the shapeless dark, where night  
hasn't a mind to change.  
It's yours, Sara. Your wind alone.



# May 14, 1852

## Nebraska

My feet in mud all day,  
I don't feel in anything  
at all, but set to,  
a gate swung the full arc  
back into the hasp & the line  
of fence is whole.

Leave the horses  
out tonight, one day's plow  
behind them, the next before,  
& at the sides their masters dream  
the fields full. Not a fence  
they could jump, & where in the world  
would they go?

# Nebraska

May 25, 1852

I choose dust & ruts,  
the wheel that rubs, the dry axle,  
the spoke that dives for center.  
I choose to do my own  
breaking down. I'll put hoops  
over my head, hitch a horse  
to my hands & then drive me  
hard for the New Start,  
for Opportunity, Destiny, for Last  
Chances & their bodies,  
their lives that are carried west,  
dragged & hauled, wheeled west.  
I led to a bedroll at night  
by hands they dream  
know the way.

The sun  
comes from where I came from  
& sets where I will go.  
Between: Nebraska, noon,  
a moment when shadow  
as I would choose it  
waits beneath the wagon.

I choose to lose my milk  
in sickness, a fever  
that won't break til  
the curdling's done. Sara. Sara.  
To make the wagon light  
I choose a wheel.

# Grief

May 27, 1852  
Nebraska

It folded its wings  
to brood in me—  
the tree that sings  
when the wind blows,  
cradle & all.

# June 1, 1852

## Nebraska

John divines loss as a task  
of will, as if all this were  
ceremony, the altar a nation wide.  
I would smash the idols  
& embrace the fulsome body—  
less soon the sun depend  
on us for rising, moon whisper  
*How full?*

Then find me  
painted the earth's own red  
chanting about the fire—  
robed in feathers, I raise  
the spirits, I fill the moon  
until it bursts  
& light spills & spills.

# Seeing my sister

June 3, 1852

Platte River, South Fork

Across the Platte she waved  
her bonnet, & the setting sun  
behind her sent a shadow  
over the slow water, each pass  
of her arm a darkness crossed  
over me, & then the red sun.  
For a moment I thought it was rising,  
that we were crossing to the other  
side of things.

But the sun did fall,  
& between Lucy's shouts  
I heard her baby cry, saw her dress splotch  
dark with milk, & then she rushed  
to their wagon.

It can be pulled from you  
just like that. Behind you  
darkness has been gathering & you're wet  
before you remember the milk  
spills for that cry. Then you hurry  
in your own time  
while men linger over horses,  
search out matches, & call  
to you, calling your name long,  
as if you were on the other side  
of the river, as if calling  
to the ferryman.

June 5, 1852

The wheels are the oxen's  
dancers, the art of the bulk  
as they progress—a grace  
otherwise their heads suggest  
nodding over food, at once  
fluent & aloof as divining  
wands—

    fork of hazel,  
the keeper's hand is sure  
to shake for provision  
of his desire. What else  
would he have but need  
for the illusive—pushed  
as he is by memory to daydream,  
making it all seem real  
with a shovel. I'd as soon love  
the beast that provides the wheel.

## June 6, 1852

Each step's a crumb  
falling, unremarkable portion  
of all, casual as what spills  
from torn bread must,  
the dust the accidents, a step  
of eating,

    each step the balance  
of leaving, the accident of arrival.  
Where I've been birds line  
all the way back feeding, each  
smaller & smaller until one's  
not there & I forget.

    Where they  
poise they leave feathers,  
each casual falling away spills  
grays, white, a quiet blue—  
a piece of sky as flight,  
trace of their suspense.

# Wagon upside down

June 7, 1852

Now if the wheel's to turn  
it's by your hand, by your leave,  
& feel the hub take to itself  
the spokes' farthest reach—  
what's meant about the heart.  
There's friction you'd never know  
but for the low rumble & grate.  
That's the man slighted muttering  
to himself, his plans to turn  
his life around. Or turned round  
but more—with your heart put into it  
the spokes blur, rim & all hum  
words of a tune I spun so  
far away, silly, silly words—  
but now the wheel's in air.

Baby's got a raindrop  
right there on her chin.  
We've been inside all this day,  
who let that raindrop in?



June 8, 1852

He will arrive to the sea  
as a man at the edge  
of waking—who wonders  
drowsed & slurred, swaddled  
in remnants of his dreaming,  
what it was brought him erect.  
To gather shells, I'll say—  
each little house of bone  
another sign & wonder.  
To see beyond  
the farthest curve the point  
of its departure—where that  
murmur you hear is telling  
& clear—you must needs smash it.  
I'll make a basket  
with my skirts & gather.  
I shan't be smashing one.

## June 9, 1852

A line from Missouri to the Rockies  
runs through my heart & shakes,  
a string drawn taut until it hums,  
the song that trembles in my throat  
when I cook or mend or wash  
dishes in sand.

I dream  
of dragging a bow across our trail,  
playing a note so low John  
puts his ear to the ground to hear it.  
*A horse, he says. Or something about  
to break the surface  
& still so far to go.*

# Buffalo

June 10, 1852

They return from the hunt not  
as the men who had dreamed  
buffalo until any cloud  
was a notion of buffalo below,  
gathering their desire & hovering  
until the wind changed their minds—  
& buffalo dispersed, letting form  
go in a mixed wind.

Today  
their yearning had not a cloud  
& the sun beat its one hoof—  
the men caught their dreaming  
with running horses near death,  
stormed buffalo & fired down  
their thick bodies in drifts  
& men made their weather.  
Returning one dream less,  
John carried by a horn its head.

# Ecclesiastes

June 12, 1852

White hair to his shoulders,  
a horseman came riding from sundown,  
his only provisions dust & the Bible  
he held aloft, held as a man can,  
as if it had hold of him.

That preacher man

brought no news  
but carried the word, delivered  
on a voice that clapped thunder & let  
lightning without time between.

*For in the multitude of dreams and many words  
there are also divers vanities.*

And clap  
the thunder, lightning shot from the god  
he'd have flint, striking his mind across it.  
*I applied mine heart to know, and to search  
and to know the wickedness of folly, even  
of foolishness and madness. He raved so  
you'd believe the stars were his flock.*

But when we were rapt  
he was finally plain, testified leaving  
home we're fools—he turned on us  
like the earth to its darkness.

Then we  
were the darkness shot with light.  
It was a mean thing he'd done,  
they all said it, or It was just  
words you must remember, & the men wanted  
only to see what oxen might need,  
women scoured wagons for mending,  
& I am now beside the lamp.

June 13, 1852

*The fool foldeth his hands together,  
and eateth his own flesh.*

***Ecclesiastes***

If I hold to loss, encircle  
with my arms, I'd crush it,  
burst the fragile skin  
of what remains, memory's white  
powdered belly—& out jump  
me bedeviled.

I will cling  
to a single hair it won't miss,  
witness loss spin  
beneath the moon. The wheel of it,  
the carriage, the rider who  
sings from the dark.

# June 14, 1852

*All the rivers run into the sea  
yet the sea is not full.*

**Ecclesiastes**

Where will John's sons go  
with the earth plowed straight & cropped—  
a nation wide behind them settled  
for placid abundance.

  If I might raise  
one enduring man . . . his weight  
could tip the continent & tumble  
generations in a clatter by his porch.  
Ezra there had a longing, I'd say,  
& short-lived wives. He fancied  
God's will moved him, though I swear  
it was a horse.

  I'd grow shrill  
soon enough, my delivery  
a claw sharpened by its work.  
Woman, rip these years & shred them,  
their tatters will seem to him  
the very fabric of a man.

June 15, 1852

Ft. Laramie

The fortress of his dream  
is the world as it relents  
to his impressions  
& holds them for a spell—  
wagon tracks, a mound of earth  
& it the cross, the scar  
across his stronger hand—  
earnings in the tender  
of arrival.

Why else lug  
the bison's head & raise it  
by its horns, but that it reminds  
his desire is substantial—  
& didn't the creature run  
as if it knew his mind?  
Good or bad makes no matter,  
instead it all has meaning—  
a stronghold of such size  
one can't tell if more's  
held out or in.

# At Ft. Laramie

June 17, 1852

I counted sacks of flour,  
tugging the seams looking for strength  
& I wondered how far the rice would go.  
John said we only need food to get there.  
Tending to these things makes loving  
the man in my arms at night like eating,  
the surplus & the wanting, the growl  
of a stomach that won't stop working  
though empty of all but its own juice.

For each thing the wagon can't hold,  
for each thing abandoned to ease  
the oxen's pull, my mind swells  
to hold that much more. In this world  
there is something wrong with love,  
as its weight is what's wrong with the  
china closet we left behind.  
We placed it facing east as I insisted,  
between the ruts. Let the next train roll  
through its doors. I opened them wide  
& thought of every yes I'd ever said to John.



## June 21, 1852

If there was cream to churn  
I'd remember butter in my arms  
& a song to work in, lift & fall  
through my work as it thickens, until  
I'd transformed it wholly—  
like the last month I carried  
Sara, giving it all my weight.  
Then I'd think of bread, knead  
the dough, turning it into itself  
with a lean, lift on my toes a dance  
of weight, cover & rise, shape  
the stubbed shape, cover & rise—  
all to spread the butter on,  
watch it melt back thin, taste  
its being butter now, the cream  
far behind. But it would melt  
by itself here.

It would pool its fat  
& slide, the casual chore of a heat  
that smudges the hard line of the flats  
with shimmer & blur. Each day we stalk  
a curtain that waves & waves before us.  
On the other side John sees rock-sure  
the new start awaits us, our arrival  
another child, pet of the new start.  
John churns in me to make it so—  
*a son*, he says, hurrying to him & the way  
he'll tell him this as story.



Born in 1947, Richard Speakes was raised in a family that lived in several states during his childhood, including Washington, Virginia, Rhode Island, California, and Alaska. He thinks with equal affection of Seattle, Washington, and Santa Rosa, California, and so has at least two homes. With his wife Judy Appel and their two daughters, he now lives in New Orleans, where he teaches at the University of New Orleans as an instructor in its English Department.

He received an M.A. in Creative Writing in 1980 from the University of Washington, where he studied with the poets David Wagoner, William Matthews, Richard Blessing, and Jane Shore. While at the University of Washington he was for two years the Managing Editor of **The Seattle Review**. Speakes' most significant training has come from a long apprenticeship to the poet, translator, editor, and teacher, D. L. Emblen. With Emblen and the poet Richard Welin, Speakes edited **Loon, A Journal of Poetry** during its six years of publication, 1973-1978. Through association with Emblen and Welin, Speakes began to learn his craft, a learning he cherishes all the more because it had no established hours, no degrees, no goals beyond its own relentless and loving activity.

Speakes, who in 1979 had a chapbook, **Necessities**, published by Clamshell Press of Santa Rosa, California, is currently working on a second book of poems (whose working title is **Lies That Forgive the Truth**) and thinking it would be interesting to write prose-fiction.



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