

Walsh

A TASTE OF THE KNIFE

A TASTE OF THE KNIFE  
by  
Marnie Walsh

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# Introduction

As an outdoorswoman, an observer of hunters, Indians, creatures of nature, and the things of earth, Marnie Walsh seems to have been most impressed by the grimness of life. The sordid and the brutal, in both man and nature, enter her poems with more force and more power than do the lyrical elements of a very few of her poems. Most of these poems, especially in their observations of Indians, are character sketches with a persistent similarity. Their strength derives from accumulated evidence, from repetition which is much like the pounding of a drum. One beat is hardly distinguishable from another, but this sameness is an important part of her observations and implied interpretations. Especially in the sketches of Indians, where it is impossible to let the futility and the monotony of reservation life pass by unnoticed, the regularity of theme and technique operates like a *wacipi* drum, pounding its way into the reader's sensibilities.

In the individual poems, however, sensibility is not as important as the elementary description, the simple details of everyday life. Walsh is a keen observer, even though she may not like what she sees. In the character sketches she tries hard to enter the consciousness of each character, to pick up the language of the person she is writing about, and to say what is happening without her own editorializing. One way of doing this, of course is by juxtaposition:

old bull-toes  
put his mark  
on our hands at the door

is immediately followed by an implied but striking contrast,

white mens music  
up on the stage

and from these two facts, briefly mentioned, we are able to see a great deal about the tragic encounter of two cultures. In another juxtaposition, college life for a young woman gives way to drunkenness and pregnancy the moment she returns to the reservation.

Little is left to the imagination. Occasional images of discovery or beauty (a few of which almost become symbolic) are subordinated to realistic detail. To support the reality, especially in the Indian sketches, language remains on a rather primitive level. The Vickie pieces seem to come from a teen-ager, relatively illiterate and naive, exposed to constant drinking and fighting which are described in non-literary language, i.e., the language of Vickie. Walsh is trying to produce stark reality, to be literal rather than literary. The commonplace overshadows

the unusual. There are no surprises. Rarely does anything humorous or “soft” interfere with the sordid elements of reality or offer relief from them. The poems, then, are like a protest against the conditions in which Indians live, both off and on the reservation, and their chief ingredient is the stating of the conditions.

There is, of course, method in this “madness.” Ultimately, in the long Thomas poem, the traditional Indian way of life is formally contrasted with the present conditions under which he suffers. “What was” and “what is” are two entirely different things, and suddenly from the series of Indian poems comes a loud lament, a cry of sadness as well as anger, and the poems become a narrative centering on the plight of the Northern Plains Indian whom Walsh seems to know well from long association.

The bizarre, the grim, the literal reality continue into the non-Indian poems, but imagery and suggestiveness become more important as propaganda drops away and the poet and her poetry—as well as nature—become the subjects. A kind of sadness remains, as in “The Journey,” but the sadness is driven deeper, as in “Spirit Lake, Minnesota,” no longer a question of social criticism but of the very condition of nature and therefore of all life. This sadness is quite different from the grimness of the Indian poems or from “Last Summer It So Happened.” It is contemplative, philosophical. The close relationship between the natural world and the human world (“June the Twenty-Second”) lends a subtle dignity to both; it also provides images which have both feeling and a strong visual quality.

Marnie Walsh is a regionalist in the good sense of that term, examining her own land, her own neighbors, her own climate, her own familiar objects to see what they have in store for her and for those of us who read the poems. To “cast in ever wider circles / while the wind tricks my senses” is, among other things, to wander (as Marnie does) and let outside influences play upon the natural rootedness. But the focus of the perspective thus achieved is still on the nests of her own field, both literally and metaphorically.

Poems are true, in spite of Marnie’s line which says that “The truthful man / makes a wretched poet.” But they are true in at least two ways. One is suggested by the title of this book, *A Taste of the Knife*, which refers to a ceremony in which the messenger’s truthfulness is tested by placing a knife in his mouth. If he cuts his tongue while speaking, he lies; if not, he speaks the truth. Most of the poems in this book speak that kind of truth, a literal and hard truth. The others are the

“lies” that begin to “leave the taste of music / in our mouths.” These are more suggestive, more lyrical, more literary. But still true. Whether Marnie Walsh is speaking harshly and literally about human conditions, or gently and metaphorically about poems, love, and nature, she speaks the truth.

*John Milton*  
University of South Dakota  
Vermillion



# Vickie Loans-Arrow Fort Yates, No. Dak., 1970

1

i went to the dance  
tommy little dog  
ask me  
i wait by the road  
seen the red go  
in the water in the lake  
then yellow spiderwebs  
climb up the sky  
one star watching  
it get dark  
tommys pickup come down the hill  
i get in  
saturday night is whisky  
night  
we drink i forget  
the red sun in the water

2

i hear  
the agency hall  
banging shouting stomping  
i ready to dance  
old bull-toes  
put his mark  
on our hands at the door  
white mens music  
up on the stage  
christmas lights all around  
one time i was the angel  
up there  
mama made me pretty wings  
tommy was a shepherd  
charlie two-head  
baby jesus  
he died after  
i forget why

3

well  
them white mens music  
just what we like  
for dancing  
the floor go rockarock  
i got on my red dress  
my beads  
tommy wear his sateen shirt  
purple pink  
we go round and round  
push push  
saturday night whisky night

4

some old squaws  
on benches next the wall  
watch us  
outside the old men  
mostly drunk  
spit on ground  
drink tell jokes  
aunt nettie drunk  
in her plymouth  
on back seat  
aunt nettie come back  
to reservation  
been to college  
right away cecil dog-heart  
give her baby  
when she drunk  
saturday nights  
all the men get on her

5

we all drink vodka  
at my cousins truck  
everybody happy  
everybody feeling good  
lights all dusty  
i got dusty eyes  
so i not see right  
joshua get mad

nobody care but tommy  
they fight fall down  
joshua get a thing  
out of truck  
hit tommy on head  
too much  
it get all quiet  
we go away

6

next day aunt nettie  
say he dead  
we dig potatoes a little  
mama ask me  
how i come home  
if tommy dead  
i say i forget  
but i dont forget  
when i seen the sun  
all red  
go in the water

# Vickie Loans-Arrow 1971

1

when my aunt nettie was a kid  
she stole real good  
from out the stores  
beads rings easy things  
stole more hard stuff later  
the police catch her sometimes  
but she so little  
with soft eyes  
they dont do nothing to her

2

but her papa beat her bad  
to teach her good  
and put her in catholic school  
her mama cried at that  
but nettie learnt everything  
so easy that they say  
she must come to college  
and she did for a while

3

my aunt nettie was real pretty  
when little and when she come home  
she got a baby after a time  
but give it away  
then it seem she dont feel  
like doing nothing  
dont feel like stealing  
just fools around  
gets drunk  
and screwed

4

sometimes she like to tell me  
what all she done in college  
she dont tell though  
why she come home  
nathan say she stole money

and got throwed out  
i remember one time special  
she told me some poetry  
she liked told it soft  
about love and some lady in a tower  
by a lake

5  
when aunt nettie got too drunk  
she told poetry  
and oh she knowed it good  
but all the people laughed  
and she took to crying a lot  
wouldnt eat  
just drank whisky all the time  
dont wear nice clothes  
dont go to dances  
got skinny and littler  
till wasnt much left of her  
no mama to care and no papa to beat her  
they dead and her alone

6  
yesterday they find her  
all crazy  
screaming and naked  
she say she lost  
and cant find her tower  
by the lake  
some people take her away  
but not her poetry  
i stole it  
and she wont miss it where she went

# Vickie Loans-Arrow 1972

1  
this morning  
me and my cousin  
charlene lost-nation  
are in to bobby simons bar  
and charlene say  
i tired of living  
there aint nothing in it  
and bobby simon  
behind the bar  
goes ha ha ha  
when she fall off  
the stool  
im laughing too  
she so drunk  
she funny

2  
i get her up  
then she say  
there aint nothing in it  
to them old white farmers  
drinking their beer  
and talking crops  
they dont listen  
dont even look at her  
and bobby simon say  
i see your mama out front  
so we go out  
and the sun so yellow  
burn my eyes  
and make charlenes mama  
shiver like shes made  
out of water  
but it only the wind  
all gold color  
moving everything in waves

3

she say goddam you  
charlene them kids of yours  
come over and i got to  
take them in  
while you drunk all the time  
i aint going to do it  
no more  
it too damn hot  
i watch her shoes all torn  
and wrinkly  
and her fat legs  
floating on the yellow wind  
then charlene say  
there aint nothing in it  
it all plain shit  
and we go back in the bar

4

we drink and she pulls  
her face up tight  
tells me it dont pay to think  
theres something to it  
cause there aint  
and says wont nobody  
never believe her  
what she says  
i just laugh  
she so drunk  
she funny

5

well me and bobby simon  
drink some more  
i seen charlene  
when she gone to the can  
she dont come back  
pretty soon bobby simon  
say i better check her out  
so i go to see  
i find her all right  
sitting in a corner  
theres blood on her mouth

and her chin  
and down her dress

6  
she looks at me  
and i see the knife  
sticking out between her teeth  
and remember what that means  
and i know shed like to die  
but cant  
so she killed her tongue  
instead  
i leave her there  
i go out the door  
and down the street  
and the yellow wind  
make me shiver and sweat  
because now i believe her  
but wont never say so



# Vickie Loans-Arrow 1973

1

my brother nathan  
comes home on leave  
from the war on the bus  
and we all there to meet him  
snow is every place  
deep and white  
he picks it up in his hands  
his eyes dont stop looking at it

2

my brothers friends is there too  
george little elk and cousin wayne  
who got a new car  
from getting his leg shot off  
where nathan been  
my brother look quiet  
when he seen how george  
got bad nerves  
that make him shake all over  
and laugh like he cant close  
his mouth no more

3

we all go home  
and mama cooks lots to eat  
it start to get dark over the snow  
nathan go out and watch  
he dont make no shadow  
i think a shadow on snow  
aint good to see anyway  
then him and his friends  
sit around and drink  
say hey lets go to town  
they pretty drunk and my brother  
fall down in the snow  
laughing and white all over  
like somebodys ghost

4

he tell us all next morning  
he run into his old girl friend  
and she take him home  
he dont know what happen  
to wayne and george  
there aint no girls want  
no cripples or crazies  
so say uncle morris  
and nathan get terrible mad  
throw his coffee at morris  
and hollers goddam whores  
goddam bitches  
goddam world

5

then my brother run away  
out the door in the snow  
i follow him and see  
he make just a little shadow  
even in daytime  
and it slides over the snow  
like some old owl  
he go over the hill to the road  
and he the one find the car  
that belong to cousin wayne  
nathan seen it sticking up  
out of the ditch  
finds george some ways off  
where he drug his self  
cousin waynes head stuck half  
through the windshield  
not shaking no more

6

after that nathan dont talk much  
no more and dont go nowhere  
just sits to home drunk  
then it time he go again  
and we all take him to the bus  
early in the morning dark  
with some pink to the east  
well the bus goes with nathan in it

my brother dont look back  
dont look out the window  
at the shadow running  
in the snow beside it.

# Herman Two-Lance Pine Ridge, So. Dak.

1  
mama got a job  
in the moccasin factory  
for the blue wing company  
they get big boxes  
cowhides all cut out  
ready to sew  
chauncey hollow horn  
drive the truck  
what brings them  
from rapid city  
mama sew the pieces  
on a machine  
other ladies sew too  
they all the time laughing  
telling gossip

2  
in the blue wing factory  
they got a coffee  
machine  
they got a machine makes it  
warm inside in winter  
cool in summer  
got a machine  
to sew on beads  
when me and grandpa  
go past where mama work  
he make shaming noises  
in his mouth

3  
all day he just sit  
in the yard  
dont look at nothing  
but the prairie  
mama bring him tobacco  
buy him warm coat  
he dont wear it

cook him beans out of cans  
his favorite  
she get good money  
from the blue wing company

4

one day she bring me  
moccasins from there  
grandpa hit her  
she laugh and say  
old man got old bones  
is good for nothing  
grandpa go outside  
look out on the prairie  
the wind blow his white hair  
he sings sad old words  
i dont know  
what they mean  
but i want to tell him  
it dont matter  
all of us  
is good for nothing  
but dont know how  
so i cant

# Angelina Runs-Against Pine Ridge, So. Dak.

i got wine  
a whole bottle  
and i just set here  
in the weeds  
by the depot  
and drink my wine  
its too early  
for them soldiers  
and their fuckin  
dollars  
so i drink my wine  
and wave at the trains  
but nobody ever waves back

i never got money enough  
for a ticket home  
only for wine

# Celia Coyote-Running Pine Ridge, So. Dak.

winter nights on the reservation  
grandma dishes up stew and stories  
about the good times  
when the war was on  
and the white men built the place  
to fly their planes from  
about the good times  
when she was fourteen like me  
well she says the soldiers  
come from all over with money  
for whisky and girls  
and having a red skin  
made no difference at all  
when having fun in the bushes  
in halley park in town

she says when she was fourteen and pretty  
she had such good times  
everybody drunk and dancing in the bars  
then she gets up from the table  
to show how it was  
she says them soldiers was so horny  
theyd of laid her on the floor right there  
every night grandma and her sister  
name of shirley got drunk  
got laid got paid so many dollars  
her pocketbook was overfull  
and she hever had no good times  
after the war

at school they keep telling us  
another war is about ready  
and i ready too  
to get some of them good times

# Thomas Holy-Flute

The coyote in the water reeds  
catching crayfish for his dinner  
can no longer catch the rabbit,  
the snake, the squirrel, the gopher.

A green and yellow sickness  
is closing down his eyes,  
sewing up his pocket-ears,  
stopping up his nose.

His fur is torn and sparse  
and hanging on his bones;  
his legs are minus one, his nails  
worn down to none.

And oh his teeth! his prideful teeth  
like mine no longer latch;  
so side by side we wait to eat  
whatever each may catch.



# John Knew-The-Crow 1880

I saw a blue-winged bird  
sitting silent in the marsh,  
his brothers flown away.  
Ice grew among his feathers.

I saw a snake  
in the forest rock.  
She gave me warning, I gave her none;  
I wear hers against my breast.

I saw the buffalo in rut.  
They could not see me  
for the earth ran away into the sky,  
and the sound carried off the sun.

I saw the turtle on the grass,  
too big, too blind to move.  
His neck died beneath my ax,  
but the claws walked on toward the water.

I saw my mother and my father die,  
and the soldiers took me away.

# Emmet Kills-Warrior Turtle Mountain Reservation

1  
nobody know what i got inside  
but i think to tell it all  
how it is to be indian  
on the reservation  
where i was born  
where i grow up  
where i die

2  
i live in a government house  
eat government food  
go to their school  
where i read about black people  
live in a crowd in a city  
see pictures where they all mad  
at rats in their houses

3  
i would like to live in a city  
i would like to get mad  
at a thing like rats

4  
they told me  
we take care of your mama  
in government hospital  
she get their funeral too  
my brother at their war  
my sister in their jail  
i come out to the prairie  
sit on old rock  
i think about old days  
when the indian didnt have  
no government  
to be born or die

5  
well that what i got inside  
that my story  
the government can go shit

# Seth Dismounts Thrice

## Rapid City, So. Dak., 1967

1

seth dismounts thrice  
caught josephine  
his new wife  
in somebodys bed  
took his thirty-thirty carbine  
got in korea  
shot them dead

2

seth had the idea  
to go tell the police  
but instead  
went to the star-  
light found denise  
eagle-ear at the bar  
and then she said  
did he want a piece  
drunk he did it drunk  
in halley park  
but her head broke  
it went thunk  
on a rock in the dark

3

seth thinks it good joke  
for some fat white  
lady tourist to find  
in daylight  
but three times bad sign  
for dumb indian buck  
next day police find him  
seth say it just his luck

4

i say it sure been  
one fucked up  
high price night  
for seth dismounts thrice

# Charlie Two-Head

## White Shield, No. Dak., 1968

1

my sister betty  
got charlie last winter  
we all like him  
when he new  
one day we go to town  
charlie stayed to home  
we all come back  
betty look at him then  
he got blood  
coming out the nose  
out the eyes  
lots of flies  
all around  
we wash him up  
he dont move any  
betty dont want police  
to ask questions  
at night she put him  
in lake

2

it get summer again  
the ice go away  
people with big boats  
come fishing  
a white man catch charlie  
thought he got big catfish  
haul him in  
has heart attack  
i hear about it

3

and i think  
charlie full of surprise  
like when betty get him

and when we find him dead  
and when he got fished out  
from the lake

# Bessie Dreaming Bear Rosebud, So. Dak., 1960

we all went to town one day  
went to a store  
bought you new shoes  
red high heels

aint seen you since



# Lila Good-Weasel Standing Rock, No. Dak.

my grandma lives  
on porcupine creek  
it only about

this

wide

since it dried  
up six years past  
when grandpa died  
of the flu

she got one room  
one bed and one blanket  
she dont need no more

she got white eyes  
from cataracts  
the doctor say  
and water in her legs  
and belly  
they like to swell up  
like to bust

she lose a lot  
every night  
peeing in her bed  
and crying all day

so much water in her  
it just leaks out  
all the time  
and i think the creek  
would get

THIS

WIDE

pretty soon  
maybe she will drown first

Thomas Iron-Eyes  
Born *circa* 1840.  
Died 1919, Rosebud Agency, S.D.

1

I woke before the day, when the night bird  
Knocked three times upon my door  
To warn the Other Sleep was coming.  
By candlelight I painted the two broad stripes  
Of white across my forehead, the three scarlet spots  
Upon my cheek. I greased well my braids  
With sour fat from the cooking pot, then tied them  
With a bit of bright string saved for the occasion.  
From the trunk I took the dress of ceremony,  
The breechclout and the elkskin shirt,  
The smoke of their breaths strong in my nose;  
Smoke not of this time, this life or place,  
But of my youth, of the many lodges I dwelt within;  
The pony raids, the counting coup;  
The smell of grass when it first was green,  
And the smell of coming snows, when food was plentiful  
Within the camp, and ice crept over the rivers.  
Carefully I put on the dress, then the leggings with scalps,  
As thin now and as colorless as the hair  
Of sickly animals, sinew-tied along the seams;  
And on my feet the red-beaded moccasins  
Worn by none but the bravest of warriors.  
I lie here, waiting, my dry bones and ancient skin  
Holding my old heart.  
The daystar finds me ready for my journey.

2

Another time, another life, another place,  
My people would have wrapped me in deerskin,  
Sewed me in the finest of furs;  
Then borne me in honor to the cottonwood bier,  
Laying at my right hand the sacred pipe,  
And at my left the arrows and bow, the lance  
I long ago bound with thongs and hung  
With the feathers from the eagle's breast.

Below the scaffold of the dead  
My pony of the speckled skin and fierce heart  
Would be led, and with a blow of the stone ax  
Upon his skull, lie down to wait my need.  
I would know that far above  
In the sacred hoop of the sky  
Long-sighted hawks, hanging on silent wings,  
Marked my passage.

3

When the Life-Giver hid from the night,  
The dark wind would speak to my spirit  
And I would arise, taking up my weapons.  
Mounting my horse I would follow  
The great path over the earth,  
The road leading to the Old Grandfathers  
Beyond the stars.  
I would see the glow of their cooking fires  
Bright as arrow tips across the northern sky;  
Waiting for me, old friends dance and feast  
And play the games of gambling.  
Behind me drums would beat, and willow whistles cry  
Like the doves of spring who nested  
In the berry bushes near the river by my village.  
I would pause to hear my sons in council  
Speaking of my deeds in war, my strength and wisdom,  
Praising me; knowing my women in their sorrow  
Were tearing their clothing, their faces bloodied  
And smeared with ashes.

4

But I am Thomas. I am here,  
Where no grass grows, no clear rivers run;  
Where dirt and despair abound,  
Where heat and rain alike rust out  
The souls of my people, the roofs of tin;  
Where hunger sits in the dooryards,  
Where disease, like a serpent, slips from house to house.  
I am Thomas, waiting for the wagon  
To bring the government box of pine;  
Waiting for the journey to the burying ground  
Below sandy buttes where rattlesnakes  
Stink in burrows, and the white man's wooden trinities

Stand in crooked rows.  
There I shall be put beneath the earth.  
There shall my spirit be sealed within  
The planks of the coffin.  
There I shall not hear the dark wind's cry  
To come and ride the starry road  
Across the holy circle of the sky.

# Last Summer It So Happened

Last summer my neighbor  
refused a future  
whose base materials were  
a heart of fat,  
a lean purse,  
and an unending thirst.

In the forty-fifth year  
of his life  
by starlight he placed  
the barrel of a rifle  
into his mouth  
and ate of its silver fruit.

But a bit of his head  
flew over my fence  
and fell in my garden.  
Picking flowers the following day,  
I thought it a toadstool,  
until I leaned down and touched.

This summer my garden grew  
nothing but weeds:  
I fear my neighbor sowed  
random seeds.  
I fear for my head.  
I fear the future.

# Why I Chose to Live in the Desert

One morning a Voice spoke to me. It said,  
My son: Choose what of this world  
you want for your own,  
and I considered an ocean or a prairie,  
but settled for a mountain.  
That same day I went to the County Courthouse  
with the title in my hand;  
a deed in perpetuity  
with stamps and seals and an Indisputable Signature,  
and it was recorded I owned a mountain.

I took good care of my mountain,  
fencing it well, hiring men with guns  
and silent faces to tend my boundaries,  
while I kept vigilant watch,  
protecting my possession.

But lightning set fire to the forests,  
and animals fouled the paths;  
snakes and lizards ripened in the rocks,  
and the fences were stricken with blight.  
The men with guns fell to feuding  
and died of their wounds or moved on.  
It made me realize owning a mountain  
had been a bad choice and I moved to the desert.  
Here, all Voices are lost on the wind.

# The Journey

These horses eat from pails,  
dew beading the rims  
like silver bracelets gleaming  
in the morning sun.

These horses bend their necks  
to receive the harness,  
soft as a summer's afternoon  
against their sable skins.

These horses hide their eyes  
beneath plumes of darkness  
and walk on ivory feet,  
taking the familiar path.

I the driver,  
I the passenger.

# Spirit Lake, Minnesota

the summer storm comes over the lake  
from out of the west  
red thunder cracks the sun  
and drives before it  
great flocks of sheep  
the little lambs drowning  
in the purple foam

then the wind goes to sleep  
in the tall grasses  
of summer's twilight  
and i hear water birds mourning  
their lost children  
whose small green feathers  
unfold on the gentle waves



## June the Twenty-Second

Down in the thickets  
the locusts are sewing  
their shrouds as the spiders  
spin snares of lace;  
and deep in the shadows,  
lunching on lizards,  
lies the goldenskin  
and buttontailed snake.

And in and beyond them,  
under and over the grass and the dirt,  
sober and somber, blundering blindly,  
ants dig their tunnels  
diverse in the earth;  
hasty and rude, desperate for food  
to nourish their seasonal race.

While out in the meadow  
atop the blue clover  
a dragonfly chooses her lover.

# New Year's Eve

i wanted to go home but things kept breaking down  
and my money kept getting older  
and time kept caving in like sand  
until the day before the new year

then my house fell apart late in the afternoon  
and it was time for a drink so i went to the market  
and they were celebrating new years eve  
in the central square of some city

i liked the torches and costumes  
and the music (but not quite)  
then a man said to me where is your body  
i wasnt sure of an answer

i said id watch a while before i told  
well you need a body you know he said  
and i said well you see it right here  
and he shouted you cant crucify yourself

so i looked about and everybody had a body  
besides his own and there were crosses in the square  
and every so often they nailed up a body  
it seemed quite orderly and reasonable

he said go buy a body  
at the store next to the church  
theyre cheap and a bargain tonight  
i thanked him for his advice

the lady at the counter was most helpful  
but all she had left were children  
you should have come earlier she said  
by now every body is well picked over

i counted the money so old in my purse  
just enough for a bottle or body  
it wasnt hard to make a choice  
given the circumstances

so i bought a girl of nine or ten  
with a handful of nails thrown in  
and i pegged that kid to a cross as fast  
as id toss off a glass of gin

and everyone cheered and applauded  
while i carried a torch round the square  
i liked the torches and costumes  
and the music (even less than before)

i never got home because of the things that broke  
i never got home because my money got old  
i never got home because the months had holes  
nothing got better

# Fishing on Lake Metigoshe

bluebottles wheel  
between me and the arabs  
billowing through  
the blue desert that is  
the sky

the sun breathes yellow  
my hook brings up  
an empty clamshell  
from the bottom of the glass

we laugh at one another  
he wider  
and better  
while the white butterfly  
who rests on the oar  
claps his wings  
in silent applause

# It Was The Season

it was the season of locusts  
and the day was so hot  
my hair melted  
it ran down my back like wax

it was the season of hornets  
and the day was so hot  
my eyes fused  
they ran down my face like lava

it was the season of beetles  
and the day was so hot  
my head blew up and the sun went out

# The Red Fox

A winter day on the prairie  
finds me in a bus  
going nowhere  
through a nowhere  
of grey snow  
and the bus grey also  
only the road ahead  
real enough  
to lead somewhere

It is cold  
prairie cold  
and the prairie runs grey  
up hills not there  
runs over the bus and down  
crossing the dark window  
following us

My breath is a wet  
circle of existence  
against the window  
through which I glimpse  
the fox  
sitting in his singular sunset  
the wind sleeking his fur

# Poets/Poems

I am the chariot  
rolling through alleys  
on philosophic wheels.  
Follow me and be blinded  
in my fiery dust.

I am the bird  
molten with love,  
wingless in the thicket.  
Bend close and be bitten  
by the snake beside me.

I am the box  
within a box  
within a box.  
Open me and be deafened  
by my shadow.

I am the unicorn  
feeding in the forest  
on leaves of glass.  
Stalk me and be wounded  
by a flowering arrow.

I am the eye  
without a lid  
looking at you.

# Poets/Poems

i cast in ever wider circles  
while the wind tricks my senses  
and the clouds  
roll across the earth  
like shadow rocks,  
my shadow racing before them

infinite is this field  
a remote and secret place  
where i hunt

language nests in this field  
i am the seeker  
come to steal its fledglings

words



# Poets/Poems

Mainly,  
the truthful man  
makes a wretched poet;  
honesties are necessary  
for those of good character.

However,  
lies are lean wisdoms,  
lies are our moral climates;  
they leave the taste of music  
in our mouths.

Thus,  
this is a poem,  
a piece of glass  
we look at each other through.

# Dacotah Winter

It is this:  
it is where all compass points  
show north

where the days are cancelled out  
by a sluggish moon  
and the wheel of the sun  
is broken

it is where wolves wait  
in white caves  
sniffing pale winds  
red mouths watching

it is where the long-fingered  
hand of winter  
clangs down a crystal lid  
to the sound of snow

it is where the doe-eyed mouse  
in her green gold nest  
sleeps.

# A Successful Retirement

I was born, was married at thirty, retired at sixty,  
And could not admit I had no future.  
So I spent my days making birdhouses, beer,  
And a picket fence around the backyard.

But the birds refused my shelters, and the beer  
Blew up. The fence fell apart during a high wind.  
So I spent my time making a bomb in the cellar,  
And it has taken months of labor and planning.

My wife would open the door, holler down,  
“What are you doing down there?”  
“Building a bomb,” I’d say, and she’d go “Haha.”  
And tell the neighbors who came to morning coffee.

Then they would holler down, “Good luck with your bomb!”  
But I kept working, getting the bomb finished, thinking,  
“To hell with birds, to hell with beer, to hell with fences.”  
My bomb was beautiful, proof of personal success.

One day at breakfast my son Joe asked, “How’s the bomb?”  
And I said “DONE! by God.” But he just said, “Gimme  
Twenty till payday,” and Millie talked about her acne,  
My wife about her dentist, took out her uppers to show me.

I told myself: They are all just failure-examples,  
Like my birdhouses, my beer, and my picket fence.  
Tonight I intend to demonstrate my bomb-achievement,  
And we shall all retire.

# To Billie Jean: Streetwalker Who At One Time Was A Rockette

She stands beneath the light  
waiting for the cue  
and when the horns signal  
she lifts her head  
smiling she waves  
her broken arms then  
begins her dance  
on legs corroded  
with veins of old cruelties  
dances alone in the night  
her final appearance

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*Ms. Walsh's poetry from **A Taste of the Knife** has been selected for inclusion in the Pushcart Press **Best of the Small Presses** anthology.*

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A TASTE OF THE KNIFE

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