MOLTING

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
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Director of Thesis

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Thematically, the poetry contained in this thesis deals with change, with transition. Many of the poems directly address the emotional responses spurred by the inevitable changes that occur in the course of a lifetime: the passing of childhood, the loss of relationships and opportunities, the inertia that settles in at middle age, the deterioration of the aging process, and, eventually, death. The thesis was conceived, originally, as a series of poems covering major periods within a lifecycle, as a pseudo biography. However, while most of the works seemed to fall logically into a specific natural phase of life, the voices became multi-gendered and too broad to assign to a specific persona. The inevitable conclusion of this thesis is that the only constant is the constancy of change: everything is moving, everything is changing, everything is molting into something that it was not yesterday.

Accepted by: _________________________, Chair

[Signatures]
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Sarah's Children

When you consider the fiery birth of worlds a billion light years out, or the violent crash of trees turning into lumber, molting into cramped little shoebox houses . . . then I am okay.

Abraham's wife, standing beside him counting the stars, wondering if there is that much milk in all the world to feed the bastard babies numbered in the round night sky.

The shape of the Earth mutates inside my belly, and I am as light as marrow in the bones of birds flying low across the houses.
Hatching

You were that little once. I could hold you in one hand.

The frogs hid outside your window that night and we listened to them crooning deep opera until they were driven silent by older boys ruining tires.

Then you were all flailing arms and pumping legs pushing off hard, trying to throw a knuckleball.

But before I learned to catch the strange rotation on that pitch, you were up there on the road drinking beer and ruining tires with the others.

I have been sleeping in your room with the window open, holding my breath to make quiet. But every morning when I wake up in your bed the frogs outside have hatched back into tadpoles; silent, wiggling black spots, their eyes bigger than their bodies.
Understanding Snowballs

My son, who is only four, who doesn't understand snow, is saving a snowball in the freezer so he can take it out in August and hit his sister in the eye.

He doesn't understand that snow is transient, that it comes into our lives to brighten a permanent gray landscape for just a moment, then blows away in the wind or vanishes altogether when the sun strikes it with envious particles of burning light.

In a week or two, I'll toss the snowball into the sink after he has forgotten that it is hiding in behind the frozen peas, and it will disappear into the drain, a sweet wet kiss of the winter world outside for the gross horrors of the septic.

He is only four, and he doesn't understand the dark, doesn't know that there are awful souls trapped in the black sky outside his bedroom window; that the wind sounds moving the trees are really the voices of damned men whining for release.

He listens to the limbs brushing together, stares up through the window into the nothingness without even flinching.

Then there is a little pinhole wound in the night sky that lets the light in, and my son, who is only four, who doesn't understand at all, calls it a star.
Unrhymed Sonnet for Appalachian Boys

Little boys in Appalachia play basketball
on barnyard courts. Every one is skins.
They wear sneakers without brand names and logos,
shine with sweat in the cool fall air,
dance and whistle and wave for the ball.
Trying desperately to shed the weight
of opponents hanging on every move,
playing tighter than their shadows.
And when it rains hard on the tin barn roof,
they race in through the only open door
to a cocoon of hanging tobacco,
to the musty smell of old work.
Then they put their shirts back on
and whisper softly, praying for sun.
Mr. Otto’s Big Boned Girl

You don’t need to bring me Hershey bars and nylons, Mr. Otto. World War II is over.

I am a big boned girl, I know.
I’ve heard my mother whisper to my father
in the evenings when the lights are off,
mapping out the world in front of me, tracing every turn
from the head of the hollow
down to where the dirt road meets the pavement.

Does your house look like my father’s, Mr. Otto?
Is it a short trip over there,
driving beside the shallow creek
that has cut into the hills a thousand years,
eating down to reach the shale,
to mark the only road
leading out into the bigness of the world.
To some other world that is not some other world at all.

I am a big boned girl, I know.
My hips sway when I walk,
instead of swiveling like the fragile necks of birds
who turn their heads to keep their eyes from drying in the wind.
Instead of pulsing, supple, bent over a boyfriend’s bed,
like the naked willow hips of girls
who live on streets with foreign names, in gated subdivisions
where the keepers mulch white tulips in the spring.

Mr. Otto’s hands are rough,
with shadows under every fingernail.
He lost his left thumb to the sawmill.
The ball of his fist makes little tremors in the house
when he knocks at my father’s door,
and my mother, with those bones she gave to me,
goes quietly out to answer.
Floating off New Brunswick

You left me these three fish when you went down to Boston without me, to think history through and save us from drowning. Now they are floating upside down in brackish looking water that was clean eleven hours ago, a choking algae bloomed up overnight. They swim like my great grandfather, who put to sea to fish for cod at seventeen and came back to stand on a litter-strewn shore. Fifty years in a dark hold turning wrenches over diesel engines had left black quarter moons beneath his fingernails. He changed his mind when the boat had gone, walked back into the water to float out where the cod would keep their skins and be happy he was dead. At least there would be the brilliant copper sunrise off New Brunswick watching over his bones—these floating little lumps of gold, turning white and swelling, have just the faint glow of a short fluorescent bulb. Then you are back to remind me of what it is like to try to breathe under water; my great grandfather standing outside in a fishing cap and faded yellow nor'easter, knocking with translucent knuckles, a pale ghost on the doorstep begging entry.
Fat Kathy

I am coming back to you, Fat Kathy,  
"fatty, fatty, two-by-four,"
with my eyes full of hungry scenes  
and my pockets emptied  
of loose change,
a thirty-five-year nosebleed of my own.  
With palms turned up, I am coming back  
compliant, giving alms to the open air,  
wondering if forgiveness  
is still the color of your pale skin.  
When we were ten, I threw your books  
back into the circle of keep-away boys  
on a playground scattered with gravel,  
and watched your scraped knees bleed  
on the white stones.
Now, I am coming back to you, Fat Kathy,  
if I can find your playground ghost,  
to dress your wounded shins,  
to say I finally understand  
that quaking look you gave me,  
to tell you that the thin world  
I went on to find is only thin  
because it’s starving.
On Being My Father

I will never be my father,  
as much as I would like it;  
a brickyard worker—  
burly shoulders, powerful hands  
which gripped a bottom block  
sixteen inches across, hot from the kiln,  
and pitched it twelve feet through the air  
into the rejected pile.

He was molded from red Kentucky clay,  
formed and fired into a perfectly tanned  
brick of a man. I will always see him  
framed by the gaping maw  
of the smoldering igloo,  
the glowing bricks behind him,  
flames licking his back,  
hardened by the intense heat.

I will never be him, now,  
a brickyard worker—  
a man who sweated big sweat,  
a chiseled man who smelled of work  
and tobacco and whiskey and gunpowder,  
could wheel five hundred pounds of brick  
to the dock two hundred yards away,  
back and forth all day,  
placing the unblemished ones in tall,  
perfect, symmetrical stacks.

And out behind the kilns  
the pile with chipped corners and gouged skins,  
broken and cooling on the ground,  
fired incorrectly once and ruined forever,  
fragments of themselves. Cracked and imperfect,  
used only to fill the potholes  
of an isolated county road.
The Chicken God

My father was a chicken catcher in Chatham County. He'd wade into the coups and catch them up by twos, the air so full of down that every time he exhaled his breath made little clouds around him. A tall brown man wading into a sea of living white spreading out from his legs, fleeing his massive hands, the monstrous grip that snatched them by the legs to shove them into boxes for the short drive off to slaughter. The chickens understood him, a small god in a small square pen, picking and choosing, carting them off to where their heads would be wrung from their bodies by gutting women in blood stained aprons. When he came home in the evening he would plunge his head into the barrel at the corner of the house, swirling the rainwater, breathing it into his nostrils where the smell of birds was so strong he could taste pinfeather at the back of his throat. At night he dreamed of pillows stuffed with the down of their brief lives, saw them milling around below him, their eyes filled with that final horror.

I went with him when he bought his funeral clothes, as slick and black as the dark bands on a Dominique's tail, and my mother swore that when he died the roosters crowed all afternoon for miles around.
The Mathematician Writes a Love Poem

This is the love poem numerically failed.  
The poem of inferior numbers,  
of uncertain fractional words  
always rounded downward.

This is the poem about the old janitor  
who works outside the mathematician's office,  
his fingers self-tattooed with a ballpoint pen  
when he was immortal at seventeen,  
one letter to the back of every finger  
so that LOVE stretches, spelled out in faded blue  
when he forms his hand into a fist.

He squeezes the word a hundred times a day  
around the handle of a mop,  
LOVE and LOVE and LOVE again and again  
fading from his flesh with every flexing of the knuckles,  
with every day he walks the hallway  
rolling a bucket along the dirty floor.

This is the poem that understands mathematics,  
knows that no one can count to infinity, to forever;  
understands the sanctity of higher numbers, repeating decimals;  
of days going into years, the long and loose  
but finite nature of gray mornings.
Walking to Panama

She said to me, her lips gone thin and white,
all my friends have given up and walked to Panama.
Her tongue thick with trilling Spanish sounds—
but I understood she spoke it as a sentence
handed down in fear and broken English
from a smoke-filled room inside her.

The storms would come to flash the loose mosquito netting,
to light her fine-boned face in strange relief;
and I would lie awake beside her
to listen to the taxis racing through the streets.

Twelve miles south of Cali
odd shaped men in unmatched clothing,
faces black, moving through the darkness.

And I would fall asleep beside her,
snoring safely in my perfect English,
a foreign man in a country filled with foreign thoughts,
dreaming of narrow girls with fine white lips
walking north to Panama.
Inertia

Face down on the floor,
I am invented on a Sunday morning.
A crossword puzzle
ripe with empty spaces and black squares
eating up the page,
the milk and the mail not running;
the things that make life are not moving.
Mosquitoes from the sidewalk drains
pasted to the wall across the alley,
legs like thin gray needles spread out
against the brownstone,
and I have time to count them.
On the fire escape below,
a guttural tongue in Vietnamese
going at a torrid rate; the only thing
between me and the street,
the only voice alive for miles.
But if I can imagine one clear thing—
a rain crow on a telephone wire
with the whitest sky behind it;
if I could fix
and hold one object long enough to gather dust,
then I could breathe through my mouth until Monday
when the mailman comes.
Dancing in Havana

You might imagine it's all painted gray lambs
stacking up there in the sky
off to the south,
past the sudden end of Highway 1
where it runs into shallow waters,
a ninety mile breath of azure

blowing toward Havana. A pale white city,
an ancient Chevys starving for parts,
for carburetors and fuel pumps and distributor caps,
for hearts and lungs and livers.

An aging city with varicose veins,
where they salsa in the alleys after sunset,
where my old Aunt Luella
still dances the merengue
in that white dress, its roses smaller
than her eyes.

But there is a wall out there on the water.
Overloaded boats come crashing through;
sometimes falter at the heavy smell of salt
and stretch out on the bottom,
fingers reaching for a foreign coast.

Driving all night in the big Chrysler
you and I reach the land farthest south
in all the world,
the jumping off point.

We can sink here quietly,
or we can swim all the way to Cuba,
to pale, white old Havana
drowning softly in Spanish, but dancing madly,
surrounded by a rush of blue.
Cartoon Balloons

We haggle over last year's weather,
relive the turn of trees, the first freeze of the ground,
the frost of some dead season
more important than tomorrow's melting cat gut
and the muddied rivers in your chest.

* A balloon, you say, a big cartoon balloon, *
with the ears of a mouse and the trunk of an elephant—
he likes the idea of the cartoon animals
running around inside you.

We watch the small blue screen, bolted to the wall above us.
A squelch of electric soldiers moving on an obscene hill.
The bland mid-western voice gone bass enough
to make us both believe, for just a moment,
in the raw importance of some pointless piece of ground.

The background beeping leaps into unsteady rhythms,
a frightening sound that interrupts the nothing
we have given to the room around us.

Then you are riding down the hall in frantic hurried silence,
bed wheels shuddering on porcelain tile.

I carry him to the small glass window
to see the hushed cartoon balloons,
to burn them into his infant mind
before they pop and are torn forever.
Dreaming in American

The barefoot Vietnamese farmer
with his mangled leg
and his no-stars-tonight black hair
mushes his ox across the rice fields,
knee deep in the flood.

He moves with tethered caution,
picking his way around old craters
where the brown mud water is deep enough
to suck him under,
lingering depressions filled with thirty years of sludge,
jagged shrapnel marking their edges with razors
searching for a foot.

He sleeps under a cypress
through the steamiest part of the day,
switching at flies,
dreaming in American:
of tall blonde women
haunting the paddies,
breasts bulging under tight denim,

of long cars and Coca-Cola,
of short cold winter days in Kansas.

Crisscrossing the Delta
in the trail of the gaunt ox,
he brushes the memories away from his face,
shudders in the Southeast Asian rain
falling long and thin and dark
like bombs spiraling down
from the belly of a forgotten B-52,

a hulking ghost
left behind in the scramble.
Ask the Man Who Made the Mountains

This is your answer, though these are not the words you wanted:
	his is only the stiff-legged boy
hobbling with one foot turned out,
picking over the ragged mountains
piled higher than the corrugated roofs of houses
steaming in the West Virginia rain.

When he is gone off somewhere
making tobacco grow, forming snakes with his fingers,
you will ask again:

then, it will only be the girl
with her round and awkward foot
splayed like the flat hooves of a foundered cow,
going up to the edge of a slag pond
to push one hesitating toe into the water,
breaking the surface,
sending perfect little semi-circles toward the middle
and watching as they fade to glass.

When he is out burning the ridges,
flooding the hollows with black coal silt,
you will ask once more:

but your words will echo off the hills like
the low throat sounds of a mumbling old woman
patching her children's quilts.
Natchez is Sleeping

It is the same when you return,
though all the creeks run backward, uphill it seems.
The bus that drops you off slides away,
a kid in a gray shroud wearing roller skates
so he glides like cigarette smoke toward the rear of a fan.
Everything is hiding in plain sight just where you left it,
except for the clapboard house that was over there
or the grocery store that burned down last December;
the cracks in the side streets might have lengthened.
No one seems to notice the crawl of the river
moving closer and closer to the outskirts of town.
The emperor comes down from Oxford,
squats on the corner drinking whiskey neat from the bottle,
his bony legs hunched up, making his knees protrude;
he tells some catfish lie, but no one is listening.
The lady with long red hair and a star tattooed on her ass
drives up from Louisiana on Friday,
rides naked on horseback down Canal Street;
not even the young boys throwing rocks at street signs
turn their heads to look as she passes.
Natchez tosses through some relic of a dream.
Fitful, she dries and bakes in the awful sun.
The splendidly drunken author with the prominent nose
gulps uneasily as the naked lady rides by him;
he feels God near, just down the street and tired of waiting.
From outside the Greyhound station
you'd be hard pressed to recognize a single feature
of this toothless old woman from that gone country,
to hear one dark-skinned voice that would pass for deep bass strings.
And even if you could, in the flourish of sweating silence
that rules here with the heat,
the voice of that sleeping nation with its yard-long vowels
would ping and resonate like a marble rolling around in a tin barrel,
or resound like the spatter of afternoon rain blowing in from the Gulf,
falling across the still batteries and onto the tight skin drums
inside the perfect memory of your ears.
Vespers

What you really want to know about is the blood,
about the sliver from the broken bottle,
the tiny piece that stuck in the heel of the girl child's foot,
a blood-slick surface reflecting light
making a ruby out of the cheap glass.

What it feels like at four in the morning,
clutching a blanket in the corner of the basement,
smelling the damp margins of it,
the spider webs and dark things
filling up your nose.

What it sounds like inside,
living inside with the scream of the wind
going around the house. There are no monsters
outside the house—it was the wind,
only the wind.

That dead conversation,
that thing the Sisters wanted to hear in rich detail
before waddling down the hall to vespers,
before mumbling their prayers in dim cubicles
with single beds and cinderblock walls,
genuflecting twice to brush the thoughts
backward into some lightless closet,
cluttered and unclean.

It was like going to sleep with my eyes open,
dreaming in daylight
and waking up to whisper softly to myself—
death will be like drowning
and turning into a mermaid.
Blue Impala

I simply should have stayed at home and imagined you, today—imagined the beaded sweat on the restaurant glasses and the drive across the big iron bridge to meet you.

I simply could have conjured your face in blue, and thought of the wrinkles on your forehead as lazy sky and dents on the fenders of a '63 Impala.

And afterward, driving back into the city, there was just the slightest urge to swerve the car out beyond the girders of the big iron bridge.

To imagine being you. To feel the falling, the floating off toward the mouth of the river where it empties into saw-grass marshes, a salt mud flat when the tide is out.

To imagine years of oxidation sending up rusty bubbles breaking into rainbows at the surface, sucked up by the sun in some insane cycle of evaporation and regeneration.

I simply should have stayed at home and imagined you, today—or taken the old car out past Harbor Point where the roads are smooth and flat and straight and fast.

I could have conjured your young face, unwrinkled in the seat beside me, the stomach-deep smell of gasoline and motor oil, hurtling along, driving with my eyes closed while you counted slowly to ten.
Thumbing Through Georgia

The sycamore leaf goes round and round
and finally settles into the ochre dirt
where it will be pummeled by the wheels of cars
going down to Selma,
or up toward Atlanta where the leaves have
already fallen a week before,
have already been ground into red clay.

The water from the rusted wheel
at the mill on Jeter's Creek spills over
into the field beside the interstate,
seeps up into the bottom of a pot hole made wide
by the big trucks
rushing south to the Gulf.

A grasshopper crawls into the passing lane
and is snatched up in the wake of a roaring pickup,
the bed filled with sunburned pumpkins
picked early for a northern market;
the fragile bug swirls in the slipstream
and lands with broken legs on the white line
that marks the edge of the pavement;
delicate lace wings grossly contorted.

The traffic is going by so fast
that God, thumbing south for the winter,
walks all night without a single ride,
the narrow strips of pavement
running parallel up and down Georgia
taking Him nowhere.
Moving the Old Rose

The soil is not soft in Eastern Kentucky.
Rocks bite at the blade of the shovel,
limestone as hard as tempered steel
refusing to give way, as hard-shale as my father
who watched the root ball planted.

It is an old flower we are moving, his mother's rose
that lived through wars that shook the world,
deaths that shook the house until the chimney toppled over
and the cobbled rock foundation followed,
a heap of broken stone spread out across the ground.

Her slender fingers drew the dirt around the naked tendrils
when he helped her plant it with the soiled hands of a boy.
He has tended it for decades gone, a private religion,
arriving every Sunday evening, offerings of manure and water.
A stubborn old man now, he tells me how to cut back stems,
how to swing the mattock, how deep he thinks the taproot runs.

I won't tell him that he didn't need to come:
that the hole at the corner of my house is waiting,
that I am forty-two and live amid the dogwood
and the redbud and the constancy of growing things
I have moved in from the woods.
He wouldn't hear me say it, anyway.

His far off eyes are watching rocks exposed to light
after seventy years in the blindness of the earth—
there is something buried in these hills
that he holds his breath to see, something tangled in the roots
of the old rose we are moving from his mother's house.
At the Station in Venice

His mind is filled completely.  
There is simply no space left  
for the stubbled faces and the insane words  
of blind men selling pencils,  
staggering around the streets  
carrying signs proclaiming the end of time.  
But time cannot end as long as there are clocks,  
and defeated old Germans with thick glasses  
to fix them when the hands are winding down.  
His mind is clogged with remembered things:  
the shortest walk to the train station in Venezia,  
a place he hasn't been in sixty years;  
the faint odor of a perfume whose name escapes him;  
ringlets at her temples, the way girls wore them  
when the war was over,  
when his mind was moving like a coal driven engine.  
The taste of sweet Italian wine faded from his tongue.  
She might still be there, he imagines,  
twisting the hem of her blue flowered dress,  
sitting alone on the granite steps overlooking the water  
where the vaporetti putter by  
in a finely falling Adriatic rain;  
waiting for a young man in a uniform  
with slightly tarnished buttons.  
He knows that his mind is full,  
that there is no room for new thoughts.  
It is fair that the pencil-selling prophets are blind,  
that the old German men who are condemned  
to fix the clocks and keep time going on  
will lose their vision also. And it is fair, he knows, now,  
that the farther the train moves  
from a familiar station, the more likely  
he has missed the connection  
that would have carried him home.
Greta

She walks all night in the room next door
dragging her bad foot,
leaving contrails of dust and toenail polish.
I can hear her through the walls, pouring whiskey,
reciting lines from fluttering old movies,
all of them about young girls
wishing for the useless men they'd lost the day before.
I pass her in the hall,
her pupils fixed at the elevator or
the yellow fleurs-de-lis of the peeling paper.
In the folds of her mind she is Garbo,
in her thin gray hair and the porcelain bones of her cheeks,
in the touch of strain and unstaged sadness
frozen into the curve of her lips.
One of a thousand old stars circling Central Park,
endlessly pushing shopping carts,
talking to the ghosts of windy matrons hanging in the trees.
In the lobby, clutching a worn silk purse,
she waits for a taxi that will whisk her back
to where she was;
waits for God to brush His lips across her face;
for someone standing in the margins to whisper a forgotten line,
for the grainy fineness of black and white film
to make her new again.
To Envy Birds

With my old legs and liver spotted hands
it is time for me to envy birds.
To watch them soar, absolutely still above the poplars
in the hollow down below the house,
and wonder where it is
the wind will take them next.

Five minutes west of here,
above my brother's wasting farm
where the dandelions have overtaken orchards,
turned his hay fields into yellow growths
of splendid worthless weed.

It's time for me to wonder what it is they're looking for
that no one else can see; to think of how
the ugly leafless dogwood bends beneath their weight
when they finally come to rest,
four hundred miles away from here
in the hard red clay of Georgia.

And I will be here in the spring, perhaps,
enving the birds,
perched here in this choking little room,
the windows still nailed tight against the winter,
begging with short breath their feathered arms.
Grubs

There is no one watching us today.
No one at all.

We’ve ridden in here on the backs of pale white grubs
fat from feeding on the heart of the Earth.
And every night there is that sound that comes up to the bedroom window,
clicking, tapping, sometimes whispering softly,
telling us the owl has learned our names.

It’s not the voice of young girls with brown bellies laughing off in the
distance.
A truck out on the interstate,
so far away its wheels whine as quietly as a snoring mole
burrowed deep and blind beneath the dirt.

We peep into the windows of houses,
of swayed-back barns in the south grown over with yards of kudzu,
into the narrow slits of sunlight filled with fine hairs and dust
falling on rusted trailers,
or into the stark darkness after midnight on long holiday weekends.
We’ll see nothing inside there.
No one is ever at home.

We can take off our clothes
and swim naked in the baptismal at the church on Bethel Hill.
No one will know.

When the lights go off this evening
we’ll sleep like men with rocks on their eyes,
holding the lids closed until morning,
when we’ll roll over, strangely awake, to lean on our elbows
and stare out at the unplowed fields.

And no one will be watching.
No one at all.
Three Things I Know for Sure

When I've walked back up the frozen furrows through the last determined stalks of hickory cane, planted late, earless, brittle roots hugging the ground; when I've come back from dumping the stinking pan downwind beyond the garden; then tell me those three things you know for sure.

Sit in the broken swing and tell me that God is waiting, that your young wife will be standing beside Him, wearing a pleated Sunday dress.

When I have swept the porch and carried in your wood, when I've brushed the last spider web from the rafters; then tell me that after you're gone the moon will still rise bright and blood-filled over Miller's Ridge.

Write these on the crackling parchment leaves at the center of your Bible where the births and deaths have drifted past your eyes, eighty years in legal black ink.

When I've lifted you out of the swing and carried you back into the bed, filled the water pitcher from the kitchen and set it on the stand, tucked the quilts up underneath your feet; then tell me those three things as I turn the lights off through the house and lock the doors.

I'll take them with me when I go, when I drive back up the hill to wait for morning.
Biography of My Grandmother at the Piano

She is beginning to become herself
now that the upright is old
and evening is all around the house;
beginning to fill up the frail space
taken up by her body,
laboring to pull air into her lungs
and breathe out faint words
no one seems to hear or understand;
beginning to lose herself
in the dimming little place of who she is,
the dresser and the gas stove far behind her,
her hair swept back at the temples
in bits of ash and snow;
beginning to move her fingers across the old keys,
notes drifting out over the sofa,
through the window and onto the street,
where the gyro vendors and the children
drawing cartoon animals with sidewalk chalk
can feel the grooved felt hammers
falling on the wires,
can hear the tiny percussions of her
floating past, slipping off into a tremulous echo;
the vendors and the children humming along.
Looking for the Yellow Dog

He goes searching through the cans and bags and bottles
thrown from the windows of a world going by in air conditioned cars.

A yellow dog, slipped off between the years he can remember
and the days that fall away uncounted and unmarked
on garage door girlie calendars.

And everything that happened happens now, spread out in fading light
along the turns and bends and switchbacks of the road.

His old wife saying to him *it will rain this afternoon*,
bent over laundry on the screened-in porch.
The yellow dog barking at the shadow of the swelling clouds.

She is saying to him that her hair is falling out in patches
and her chest is feeling thin; then he is racing through the puddled yard,
running along the road, too late to catch what is left of the day.

The yellow dog rolls around dreaming in its sleep,
waiting for what seems a hundred years before it runs off too
beyond the rise, chasing the cars that pass the house.

Now there is only the ditch line and the trash of other people living.

And even if he finds the carcass of the yellow dog,
the first sight of its body will be like another door opening
onto a wet and muddy yard with the road beyond.
By Subtraction

Mr. Robbins remembers the color of his mother's hair when she was young, an auburn mixed with sun. He recalls a jagged spur of lightning cutting across a baseball field so vivid that even the grass surrounding second base paled in the sudden fire.

Getting home is different. He shows up at my doorstep once a week like a vacuum cleaner salesman, a look of terror on his face. I point him to the house next door where he has lived for forty years.

He blames the moon. It doesn't follow him anymore. And the stars are only dim reminders, the constellations disappearing one by one from the cartographic section of his brain.

An old man with used blood, the circularity of the evenings contract his heart—a horrible silent grace in the repetition.

He scrubs the windows on Wednesdays, rushes about the house for a pencil to write himself a note on where he put his glasses, draws schematics (in moments when his mind is clear) to remind him of the path his shoelaces should take each morning.

But Mr. Robbins knows the answer to that question about God's face, though he could never tell us.

He has rearranged and charted the stars into a map that Magellan would be proud of, taken the bright points down from the ceiling, dusted and polished every one to yellow perfection and re-hung them beautifully disarrayed in the dark October sky. Now even the moon is jealous.
A Proper Southern Funeral

He was buried in a graveyard
where the vetch had taken
the wind-sanded markers of southern dead,
had eaten the stunted red cedars
and covered the bases of half rotted oaks
in shade too dense for flowers.
Just as a cemetery should be.

The steep dirt road so badly rutted
the hearse bogged at the bottom
of the hill; the pallbearers struggled up through
knee deep mud, dragging the casket
between them; the women’s shoes ruined,
the men with pant legs rolled up to their knees,
black socks and white shins,
the hair matted to their legs.
Struggling along, the way a procession should.

The green awning covering the open grave
collapsed onto the ground from the weight of rain,
so thick in the faces of mourners
they could part it with the blade of their hands;
the old women left behind in cars
craned their necks to watch them go,
staggering under the roll of thunder and the torrent.
The skies precise and fine and properly angry.

This is how we sent him off.
Without a burning ship or plastic flowers,
without the whining of a windy preacher,
without the singing of a single mournful word.
Death as it should be done—hurried, howling and dirty.