The Departure of Wolf
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MARK WIDRLECHNER

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I dedicate this compilation of recent verses to all the wolves that must strike out alone in search of new lives.

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Introduction

The Departure of Wolf brings together all the poems contained in ten of the eleven chapbooks in my Sun Series, spanning the period between January 2016 and January 2018. Each section of this compilation corresponds to a chapbook. Only Sun Series #5, “Four Sides of the Sun,” has been omitted. The four, seven-part poems in that work are closely integrated with illustrations by Molly Nagel in a fashion that doesn’t lend itself to the present format.

The inception of the Sun Series occurred at a time in my life that was filled with joyous love and a wonderful new home in New Mexico adorned with many representations of the Sun. At that point, my relationship with the Wolf Spirit was strong. But as the seasons progressed, relationships in my life changed with some key people close to me, with my declining confidence in our political system, and with the Wolf Spirit itself. A darker tone became more prominent in the poems that emerged, to the degree that after Sun Series #11, the next chapbook I created: “Is This the Stuff of the Fourth Dream?” initiated my new Moon Series.

I also finally realized that the Wolf Spirit was no longer a major presence in my life, a shift that had likely been underway for quite some time. That recognition was the inspiration behind the book’s namesake poem, which can be found in Sun Series #11.

As has been true since the poems of “This Wildest Year,” almost all of the poems herein came together in a nearly spontaneous fashion. One exception that I’d like to mention has to do with my fascination with abecedaria. These alphabetical word puzzles are fun to play with and take time to assemble. Over the years, all but one of mine have been 23 words long, beginning with an A-word and ending with a W-word. However, inspired by the fine poems of D.G. Jones, I crafted “All 26,” my only 26-word abecedarium to date. You can find it in Sun Series #6.

Another small group of poems that deserve a brief note are my
“Mixed Messages.” They are a form of blackout poetry where all the words are found on advertising signs in CyRide buses, and the order of lines is dictated by the physical arrangement of those signs.

Moving from the words to the interspersed images, I've included twelve images of pine bark. For much of my life, I didn’t give pines their due respect, but, in my retirement, I've spent considerable time hiking through western pine forests and have gained a new appreciation. Their trunks are often beautiful and can tell many silent stories. I've chosen some of my favorite pine-bark photos to serve as meditative breaks, allowing you some extra space and time for contemplation between poems.

I sincerely hope that some of the insights that emerged through these changes in my life will resonate with you.
List of Pine Bark Images

Cover: Ponderosa Pine, Catron County, New Mexico, 28 September 2016

Introduction: Pinyon Pine, Grant County, New Mexico, 8 September 2015

Sun Series #1: Ponderosa Pine, Grant County, New Mexico, 8 September 2015

Sun Series #2: Ponderosa Pine, Catron County, New Mexico, 26 February 2018

Sun Series #3: Ponderosa Pine, Deschutes County, Oregon, 12 March 2017

Sun Series #4: Ponderosa Pine, Deschutes County, Oregon, 12 March 2017

Sun Series #5: Ponderosa Pine, Boulder County, Colorado, 9 August 2012

Sun Series #6: Scots Pine, Polk County, Iowa, 9 May 2014

Sun Series #7: Ponderosa Pine, Grant County, New Mexico, 21 September 2018

Sun Series #8: Loblolly Pine, Caddo Parish, Louisiana, 28 June 2016

Sun Series #9: Ponderosa Pine, Catron County, New Mexico, 26 February 2018

Sun Series #10: Ponderosa Pine, Deschutes County, Oregon, 12 March 2017
GRATEFUL ON THE ROAD TO SILVER CITY
(SUN SERIES #1)
Early Sunday Morning

Is the twelfth floor
of this tower high enough
for the melody of my flute
to carry through the early morning air
all the way west to you?

Is there enough rawhide
in this wide world
to lash our beds together
and let us embrace in quiet eden
before the dawn breaks?
Barefoot at Your Own Risk

Atlanta blackberry collecting
dewberries evergreen
frequenting grassy hills in June
keep layering making new order
prickles quite ruby sharp
tearing up veins wantonly
An Unexpected Downburst

eyellow and tan leaves
are flying every which way
chaos reigns

as four wet vultures
soar low above the treetops
shaking wildly

just before the lightning strikes
Elk Meadow

In the waning phase of the Old Elk Moon
At sunrise
I made my way back to the cedars
Alone
To the spot where you sang to me
Reassuringly
In those uncertain days
When I first ran with wolves

I hiked towards the big tree
For an hour or two
Needing your advice
Along the way I met Wolf
And felt good

By the time I reached your meadow
The sun was high
And you were gone
But you left me all the answers
I would need
Two Dreams

one wrote to me because
last night she saw my dear one
gone

and told me of the oppressive heat
that had taken her down
to the ER

the other shared the notion
that the soundtrack to her life
had turned mint green

of the two
I’ll keep the second
with visions of spearmint candy

two kinds
one like green glass shards
the other a sun with green and white rays

both youthful and refreshing
Linda

the white-haired one
who once made us all feel at home
whether she slept that night or not
has left the hall

her loyal son sits
by his father deep in old memories
while we share the news
both ancient and recent

the hours pass

now in the fading light
many southbound geese rest
on the lawn together
beyond the windows

beyond the hall
Approaching the Equinox

The one who has devoted her energies
to the transformation of her sweet, weak lover
has shared all she can.

Finding the studio bare…

Can she now turn her attention
to the yellow, sprouting moon
rising above that hazy horizon
and find new life and fresh energy
(after all she’s been through)
once the dry, waving grasses
have burned to black stubble?
On the Edge of Town

As I stepped into the meat market,
my cell phone rang…
Potential trouble…
But the butcher nodded and handed me
three very sharp knives,
well wrapped.
I knew everything would turn out fine
in the end.
Fatal Attraction

Before it drowned in the soapy dishwater,
a noisy fly flew down to the cool sanctuary,
where it was safe,
but it left.

It flew up to my bedroom,
where the air was hot (and I was restless),
but it left...

(escaping my desire to kill it),
only to enter the quiet kitchen
(after I left).
Factors That Might Have Influenced My Decision

The sun set before the moon rose tonight.

My brights caught the eyes of a young, agile cat darting across the road.

The roadrunner tried to catch a hummingbird as it hovered at her feeder.

Five bucks are known to stand in the brush behind those feeders.

My brights illuminated the back of a doe who slowly lifted her head.

Her daughter was not there when it happened; still, it felt like a healing place to her.

Her hair was white now.

Two smooth, pale rocks rest together on the counter before an imagined coyote.

Her old lover was too interested in his long-haired students.

But real coyotes still howl there, even their pups.

It is so, for the kneeling nun watches over it all; so I turned off my lights and parked.

Tonight — the stars are uncountable.
Salt Lake City – 1915

A hundred years have flown by
since an angry swarm of bees
flew out from the Temple Square
to sting him with their steely points.

It stilled his pen but, thankfully, not his soul
(which really didn’t need saving),
for we still sing his songs together,
feet in motion, blood stirring,
with visions of what could be.
Far to Go (Fargo – 2011)

a bison bull of many colors
settled down to rest
outside the shops
as the lights
went out for the night
before the first hard freeze
of fall
Just Past Maxwell

the blood moon was in shadowy view
when she found a fox in the field
(or did he find her?)

side by side they sat in moist brome
fears suspended by the sky’s spectacle
unveiling

almost touching
they licked dew from the tips of the blades
till the clouds moved in
Mixed Messages
(This Could Be You)

Never eat again
Recalibrate the weight
(We won’t tell Grandma)
No gossip
Complaints or concerns
Ask current students how to prepare
Preparing for the Day of the Dead

in this chilled gray cloud
with wet leaves falling
everywhere wet
and shaking black umbrellas
bells toll

she defies death
and gravitates to the place
most likely to witness
early morning manifestations
of lynx
November Past

the dark, unbending heartwood tower
antithesis of lighthouse
that guides the reaper
across unfeatured plains
dust flying in its wake
The Missing Ingredient

The thyme was nowhere to be found.
It slipped off the carousel while it was spinning fast
And silently hid in the shadows
Waiting to be rediscovered.
Black Cherry

a flattened drop
of coagulated blood
was stuck to the bench
under the mouse
amid fresh wood chips

its color persists
its radicle emerges
now penetrating

an idea sprouts
amid fresh wood chips
Off Ridge Road

down by the corner
bright yellow buffalo gourds
mark Apache Street

a covey pecks grit
guard perched alone on a post
above those striped spheres
This Cold Rain No Longer Annoys Me

His puzzling acts
(whatever their inscrutable motivation)
have brought this bright shining smile
to my side,
a graceful runner,
a new fellow traveler,
one to share this long
(and sometimes inscrutable) road.

For that,
I will always be grateful.

A hundred blackbirds wheel
and suddenly land
in the drenched earth,
acting as one.
WHITE FEATHERS
(SUN SERIES #2)
A Walk in the Woods

Six times I’ve seen the unfolding
of the juneberries along this way.
Every time, they change.

Some are filled with white candles;
others have less to offer
(at least, this time around).

Breathe in the air from the budding trees;
this world no longer sleeps.
A dry leaf flies up from the forest floor.

The sunning snake warms
among blossoms well sedged,
white and tinted pink.

The queen bumblebees
provision their nests
ignoring my slow steps
towards the fallen oak
that blocks my path.
At the Lotus Center

When she peered for a moment through the translucent curtain she could make out those ecstatic dancers and their spinning teachers

It was only a matter of time before she realized that she was skipping as she made her way up Broadway
A Kindred Spirit
(to Stephen P.)

last winter we met
you surprised me
and I’ve been thinking about you
for a long time now

this afternoon we met again
you got your wish (in the shadows at 5 am)
and I told you a sad tale about an elk
in the meadow by Big Tree

your eyes cannot lie
His Breath

One night
in this spring of
improbable occurrences
I nearly met the Earthmaker
who was standing near the entrance
to the dark Bear’s den
After the News

a whole box of incense
is not enough
the boxes are empty
smoke rises in all directions
Behind My Own Place

That last night
In a lull between the storms
In the waning phase of the Whippoorwill Moon
I finally met the Tree Frog
And watched it change its colors
Before my unblinking eyes
Cherry Creek

Well past the tall pines
where scenes refuse to be recorded,
high in the leafy trees,
birds are singing so many new songs
from all sides.

Wander there down the dry creek bed
till you find the muddy spring
and a few shy mosquitoes.

Those two campers and their red pickup
are packing up and will soon be gone.

It’s just you and the birdsongs
and the dry creek bed.
Excerpt from a Letter to a Friend

…and so you should really make the trip. Bright crystals of amethyst await your discerning eyes (and not just in the quiet shops). They are of this place. And there is a Navajo man who carves the most amazing bobcat fetishes from stone. One will surely take your breath away…
Green Bay – 1969

Over glasses of cheap red wine
I heard from the brother of a reputable source
A short tale of his aunt
And the day in Green Bay back in ’69
When she watched a strange man
Turn into a wolf —
Right there out her door

Strange how such night tales are saved
For when the witness has passed

If only Vasko could have been with us
At the table
Secret Treats

that evening
when absolutely no one was around
we sought out the cherries
tart and juicy
and stood behind the tree
savoring each red bite
my graceful runner and I
In Migration

It was a gentle morning, a south breeze.
The moon was waxing.

She stood at the threshold in temporary disbelief.
A male bunting landed on her hand and rested there.

She was overcome by longing.

When the dark-eyed artist looked up from the table and saw them together, the bird took flight into a sky filled with fluttering sheets torn free from old diaries.
The Feathers Rose

after crossing the violet star
without knowing its true meaning
and filling the bird baths
with fresh water
the dove left a pure white feather
small down on the dark gray ground
I picked it up and slipped it
into my breast pocket

after meeting the healer
in her cool, dark shop
I crossed the bright street
over to the shady side
where the dove left a pure white feather
a larger one on the sidewalk
I stepped over it with care
and made my way to class

not long after…
she taught us how to hold the dove softly
in our hands and feel its peace
and share its joy
when the dove left a pure white feather
to fall into my hands as I watched
the pink waving petals of the lotus
surround sixteen ripening seeds in its fragrant womb
the feathers rose
the petals rose
the peace rose
the joy rose
as I heard my beloved enter the room
the dove fluttered above us
and the violet star
held new meaning
No Nuzzles

The air was crisp and clean
On the road to Medicine Lodge
Two doves sat side by side on the telephone wire
Clumps of silvery sage graced our right for miles
So we knew we were on the right road

When we saw the doe
We felt compelled to clip some sprigs of sage
And slip them in her soft mouth

Had she had her fawn?
South of Silver City

In the rain-cooled air of late afternoon,
Hummingbird stopped by for a drink
Just in time to hear Robert sing of the old days.
Sensing a trap, he was cross
(As hummingbirds often can be)
And became a violet-throated illusion.
Word got ’round…
During the night,
Coyotes dug up the drainage line.
Summer Hunt

two does and two young coons
slipping into the tall grass
an hour with the flutemaker in his workshop
considering all the crossroads missed
(and a few taken)
before the summer hunt begins
some rains must fall
fall in spoiling plans and breaking limbs
fall before a fresh new morning
two does and four eager students
the tall grass wet with dew
the summer hunt begins
we meet the sacred earth
Summer Solstice – 2016

Our Moon
golden and full
snuck up behind Cooke’s Peak
last night
but only after
the purple haze and sky blue pink
had vanished
in a strong south wind that
also vanished
once the brightest twinkling stars
made themselves
noticed
while somewhere
past the pines
the Song Dogs were calling
for you
Sunday Morning

He calls for the offering.
He does not know that I have it hidden in my pocket.
It is not for him;
it is for you.

The service continues as I walk past.
He is convinced that the penitent sinner will be forgiven.
I am not so sure and walk away out of earshot.

I take a young tendril from the tip of the grapevine and chew…
Your pale phlox are dancing all around me.
Viagra

a bone chilling day
each flower
goes hopelessly impotent
jilted knights
ladies missed
no ovules pollinated
quick remedy
Sunshine
that uplifting vibrant warmth
Toward the Source
(of the Gila)

Without much warning
A lance flew north
Into the rocky wilderness

Would its blade be honed
As the days go by
Or would it become entangled
In branches of juniper and catclaw?
The buntings were singing in the branches.
The vireos were in an angry chase,
And the ovenbird called out for you,
Just before the flutes of the wood thrushes
Began to weave their magic.

You stopped to show me where you met the bobcat
(And how it saved you that night),
And I shared my secrets about the buntings.
So when you finally saw one,
You’ll never forget it.

Over plates of fried catfish that night,
We realized that we are becoming the elders.
Even by sharing our secrets,
It does not seem to be enough.
We are not ready for this.

But the flutes play on…
To See the Dragonfly

if only we could pass our days
in cheerful curiosity
like the eleven bushtits
that looked me over on the way in
or like the spike on the way out
(not the three does that fled)
but that velvet spike
the one that followed them
prancing
East of Webster City

having learned a little something
about late summer love
I can tell them that
bright finches will bear gifts of thistledown
to sweetly line the nest of their hearts conjoined
while their blessing prayers fly skyward
with the help of a fine feather fan
decorated with soft ewe’s wool
and that night
at least one old billy goat
will be dancing with joy
The Departure of Wolf
THE FIRST DAY OF FALL
(SUN SERIES #3)
The First Day of Fall
(in memory of Rick Hall)

…on the unsettling balance of the interplay of
too-powerful forces of darkness and light…

The reaper walks up the street,
a long, lanky dog by his side,
heading to the sharpening shop,
old scythe in hand.

Without thinking, he crushes
some grains of rice on the sidewalk
by the courthouse steps.

His dog stops for a moment,
catching the scent of songbirds
up in the poplars.

The sun is shining now.
Yesterday evening,
its rays caught a horizontal rainbow
to grace the green hills to the east.

Those storms moved on
but stopped in one place
for too long in mourning
and let loose a deluge
to wash away a bride’s tears.
East of Meade

golden and rusty
miles and miles of milo fields
three doves cross over

big sky — a south breeze
silver marsh hawk banks in grace
over hidden prey
Not Far from the Hot Springs

black cottonwood
I touched your sticky bud
and took you home
Dreamscape

The moist ground under the trees puddled;
In the pools, there were glints of the moon,
Many,
And swirls of low clouds and breeze.
Above Dillon Falls

I dream of elk dreaming under a cloudless sky
And want to know where they’ve been hiding
If only to see the matted grass
And know the colors of the flowers that blossom there
Where they bed down
In the dappled shade of pines
Endless pines
The Sprouting of the Burning Grass Moon

after everyone had left the house
but you
i found Coyote
hiding in the parlor

uneasy
he would not tell me
what he was doing there
and anyone who might know
was asleep

still i sensed
it was a good sign
and offered to take him west
once morning broke

now we should give silent prayers
for the ones
who once lived in this house
and seek sleep ourselves
as best we can
Losing Our Bearings

There are tinges of futile darkness
in the air that bring to mind
a long cold hike we took
years ago, one October afternoon,
to gather wild ginger
west past the elk pasture.

The clouds thickened and it began
to snow, to snow hard enough
that we lost our bearings
and walked almost in circles
as the sun went down
and the winds picked up.

This time,
will our car turn over
when we finally get back
to the start?
An Important Occasion

I.  
When the bride’s youngest uncle showed us the picture he took of that dark-headed spike walking calmly among the thin pines on the rim, I sensed that the skies would soon clear.

He was already in the hall.

II.  
An hour before it began, the old field along Brewer’s Creek, the one below the graveyard south of the chapel, was filled with bright finches…

The brighter their plumage, the sweeter their songs. The sweeter their songs, the thinner the clouds. The thinner the clouds, the swifter the winds to blow them all away.
III.
The waning moon had not yet risen.
The sleeping birds (and departing revelers) were bathed in the gentle light of a billion stars.
Cross the Bridge

beyond that rushing river
past the steaming spring
someone made an (almost) secret garden
long ago…
one with hidden fountains
of the clearest mountain water
and walls of mountain stone
in every shade of green…
those walls are not so high
nor the brambles there so thick
that my love could not find me
you know it wasn’t long thereafter
that the dipper spied us dancing
together on the lawn
After the Dance

When she put her arm
around his shoulder,
did she want to tap
into his inner strength
or was she just acknowledging
his fragility?
San Carlos

tall palms (in formation)
guard the nearly deserted casino
gray plume rising behind the arena
a two coyote morning
Untimely

unsettling
separation
not at that time in snow
when bulls and cows
go their own ways
but now
in the ripening time
when your power
is nearly peak

what is pulling them apart
stronger than love
tearing
taking them away
from each other
now
in the ripening time?

has their garden gone untended
too long
unsettling?
is it too late to ask your help
to share some medicine
or will everything start over
different
sometime
after the ripening
driven by the rupture
that’s pulling them apart?
Double Prayers

so what does it mean
when the dark green stick of incense
breaks in two as you gently
take it from the box?
The King of Hearts

when Elvis returns
as a bird he will surely
be the cardinal
feathers perfectly in place
the last bird singing
Dreams Deferred

beyond the high rimrock
and all the messages left there
by the little piles of hail

across Apache Creek
and the coots in the marsh
with the last of their young

he tells me now
to follow the road north
all the way to Quemado

he’s seen my dreams there
waiting
singing in the shadows

but it’s too late for now
for me
I’ve lost my muddy chance
Power Without Light

In this latest dream, we drove past old barns onto a ranch where we didn’t belong.

Behind the last barn, a row of willows carefully trained to the forms of bull elk…

Just past that barn, we turned and drove parallel to the willows.

The trees became animated, swaying.

The herd awoke and turned towards us and began to move.

Within a few steps, their antlers fell away, and they became huge black bears.

We drove away, down to a house that seemed to have no doors for entry, till we reached it.
As we came close, the roof opened up and we had to enter by climbing down into it from above.

That’s when we learned about the one who ran this ranch and his dangerous games.

I left the rest and beat a hasty retreat.
Nothing is Settled  
(to Daphne)

It’s been a stormy day.  
Nothing is settled.  

The elk mint has grown quite tall  
and is falling over.  
He is unsure of his surroundings  
and calls out to the Mystery for help.  

Hints of help are in the air.  

A monarch caterpillar sits curled  
on the wet earth.  
I pick it up and place it on a flat leaf  
on the largest milkweed.  

Recognizing the leaf,  
it straightens up.  
The next time I look,  
it is gone.  

Nothing is settled.  
I cut the elk mint to dry inside.
The Old Wagon Road

An hour towards Signal Peak, seeing no one but tracks, you spot the first ponderosas and then you look down, eyes catching the flecks of fool’s gold everywhere, mirrors reflecting the late morning sun at your back.

Can you feel the diamonds on the soles of your boots?
Long Dark Night

write him notes
till you’ve run out of things to say
let him know
how you’d forgive him
(or not)

take his painting from the corner
and rip it from its frame

some long dark night
break up that frame
(out back)
set it aflame

burn the painting
burn your notes
add a splash of his favorite whiskey
and turn away

it’s time to find a new artist
with new paintings
in colors that seem newborn
in the first light of day
The Hard Process of Transformation

The alphas don’t know what to make of that young she-wolf whose maternal instincts stand conflicted with her feelings of freedom.

They pull so hard that when a fresh feather dances by, enchanting, she cannot decide whether to catch it in her muzzle and take it to her heart or let it drift by.

At night, they hear her whining each time the bells from the distant settlement chime.
Morning Songs

Shanti Shanti Shanti

across the hall
a trumpet sounds
a daybreak riff
clear and sweet

on the street
a mother shepherds
her two little ones
to the park
where they pluck
the steel harp

a chipping sparrow
trills

a westbound coal train
glides to a stop
two hoppers short
of clearing the street

the gate bell rings
Shanti
Shanti
Shanti
BLOOD IS THICKER
(SUN SERIES #4)
The Season of Remembrance

something has been digging
under the blue cedars
turning up the chocolate earth
enriched by many bones

a scrub jay curtly calls
from atop a peeling cross
and once I approach her angel’s harp
(she was only fifteen)
to pause there

it chimes
Meditation XXI
(Words are Incidental)

the archer sights a crystal
in the heart of his target

he releases the arrow
for it to find its mark

not for its point to shatter the stone
but for it to become one with it
Fred

sleep now
the lathe still spins
the plans are laid out

the knives are sharp
the grinder is humming
(empty casings on the table)

sleep now
those planks are sound
that pork is so fresh

sleep now
sawdust falls to the floor
trimmed fat will be rendered
as bits fly down to the sawdusted floor
and all is swept clean

I can’t wake you now
but silently wonder
which brought more joy
your wooden toys
or those sausages
Summers with Babi V.

on the verge of a dream state
i see her again
standing by that old gas stove
across from the table
taking the chill off my milk

later
she would humor me
and let me fix
crude pizzas for lunch
from her fried potato pancakes
Summers with Babi VI.

the summer bazaar was on...
she took us upstairs
to a warm hall filled with tables
covered with knick-knacks
and windows looking
out over the busy street
with its many signs of savings
(and loans)

not much here for me
(nor for my little sister for that matter)
but Babi greeted many friends
as we shuffled around the hall

and when we left
i came down the stairs
holding a small glass jar
holding a summer surprise
i would never forget
The Facts of Life

at some point
even a dwarf conifer
outgrows its spot

the school of fish
(formerly swirling)
gathers dust from inactivity

and parents become disinterested
in the exploits of their offspring
Unexpected in Dallas

strong iced tea, unsweet
incendiary salsa
innocently green
These Anxious Times

The CEO has been replaced.
(He was a class act.)

In the transition,
the airline has become untied.
Its planes take precipitous paths,
and votives are lit in the cockpits,
while passengers cut red cotton cloth
into strips
and burst into sudden applause
on those flights that actually land.
Co-motion

when a roadrunner
causes a commotion
on the driveway
can a coyote
be all that far behind?
Just West of Amarillo

I pull off the road
park under a tree
and roll down my windows

I reach over
and pull out a plastic bag
from my pack

It holds half a pomegranate

As I pick at it
I think back to the December
when I was ten
and my smiling Mom
with stories of Christmas oranges
and that red round fruit

I wipe my purple-splattered fingers
on a white paper napkin
to the raucous calls
of grackles in the grass
that suddenly stop
with a siren
and the rapid passing
of an ambulance
Horse Heaven
(The Rains Were Good)

beneath inviting grassy mountains
golden curving hills

in a shallow draw
four quarter horses
each of its own color
(that Paint can run like the wind)
stood
walked
grazed
slept
in the seductive sun
of late afternoon
Chicago 2016

anytime a standing curse
involving a billy goat
(no matter how old)
is overcome
prepare for serious repercussions
Postscript at Walmart

anytime Britney spears fragrances
(no matter how mundane)
prepare for olfactory explosions
Late November Offerings

Since the last time,
an old oak (maybe three feet across)
split, with its branches reaching out
almost to the trail.

There, a woman in a white coat
walked slowly back and forth
with her back to her husband,
who stood on the picnic lawn
by a flaming barbecue grill.

As I came near, I could see
he was feeding yellowed pages,
one by one, into the flames.

Back in the woods,
I left my own offering
and received the call
of her red-bellied sister;
that was all.

All that remained after that
were fallen branches
and wisps of gray ashes
flying up through the grates.
Little to Fear

The two of us were nervous eagles just learning to fly on that creaky old ski lift as we slowly soared rocking above stiff trees

The hare had little to fear from us but still he jumped into the brush as our shadows passed

And when our relieved feet met earth again it was high time for hot tea stiffened with shots of brandy
Mixed Messages (#183)

In Biomedical Sciences
your pathway to opportunities start
to reach your
interior and exterior options
infused with
pink eye?
Stop by DoctorsNow.
in the heart of this beast
where uncounted veins converge
one distant stream carries signs of wolves
long unnoticed

till the little one told the tales
of his ancient pack
bowing soully to the sun
in their hemp linen shirts
riding on the backs of rams
across high passes

signs that only became clear
when each stream was followed
back to its source
Out of Nowhere

this sleepy morning
I had no intention
of becoming a magician
but the Box Elder Bug
up my sleeve
had different ideas
Almost

After an interview almost good enough
to land the job (and a decent lunch
in Greektown), I hopped the 'L'
out to the line’s end, where he waited for me
patiently tall in the sun.

We hugged and got in his Chevy.
Loosening my tie, I smiled
on that short drive back to Babi and home.

What did I almost tell him then
that, surely, I would have said
had I seen the sky blue forget-me-nots
that I placed in his unmoving hands
that same summer?
Inquirienda
(To All Our Relations)

The eyes of generations look out through the dimming windows of time. Little silver bells tinkle as we think of them, those we think we know and those unattainably real.

What lessons have they left for us? Which ones reside in our silent cores, resting or acting?

How many found their callings? Was Karel, the huntsman, enchanted by his forest and the stags beyond? Was Antonín, the master joiner, taken in by some satin veneer or a plank perfectly planed? Were their tasks meant to be or only routes to survival?

Did they share the wherewithal needed to find our rightful ways through this world, if only we would know those whose blood now courses through our veins?
Close to Heart

jasper pebbles
rest beneath the surface
each winter, rising
(almost unnoticed, rising)
slowly rising
through the rich black loam
to meet the sun and moon

all her lunar mothers
have known these ancient, flowing stones
and have held them close to heart
before their sacred spark

in this rich loam pasture
new goats do roam
among the rising stones
where she now makes her home

some say where goats do roam
kids are soon to follow
As I Slept

“I will sleep between the crow’s lean shadow and the wolf’s.”
–The closing lines to “Moon of Chinook Winds,”
by Duane Niatum (2000)

As I slept between the shadows of wolf and crow,
a fog crept in
till it obscured the moonlight,
freeing my dreams to wander wherever they would,
leaving no visible traces on the walls of my mind (or theirs).

By sunrise, the fog was so thick
the morning barely stirred.
Acting Up

the lowest joint of my left index finger
throbs and aches
as I drift past ghostly aspen
below a slightly bluer haze

what is in the air this morning?
…unanticipated change
Unseasonably Warm

winds blow confused, warm...
and cold off the thinning ice
lotus tubers swell
An Early Flight

At 4:30 in the morning,
who can I call
to talk about the many qualities of light,
the ways that gravity
can hold us back or pull us together,
and just how love
can warp the passage of time?
Night is Passing

Tell me, friend,
do you see the Spirit Bear
carrying my Father away
on the horns of his Sprouting Moon?

Where are they going now?
Out to find the fragrant path
in the far woods?
Or beyond to meet the Spotted Eagle
way up high?
On Boston Hill

Ladies exercise nervous dogs
on a warming red-rock trail.
I smile a bit as they pull them back
and pass.

I’m not sure exactly what,
but I’m here searching for something
for you.

When I see that dark chunk,
with a thin white line, in the pile,
I pick it up and pieces split off
right in my hand.

This must be it.
Eight South

a few days after his cardiac arrest
a new brittle air blew in from the northwest
pure but unforgiving
his refuge warm and bright
well insulated from those wicked winds
blasts that the rest of us
cannot avoid

his came early

tightly wrapped we trudge on
into a milky sevenfold squall
while he rests in thin bedclothes
restless from his storm within
oblivious (for now)
to the ones swirling outside around him
All 26 (A Brief Tribute to D.G. Jones)

Alphabet bit, chomping down excitedly;
for, Good Heavens, it’s Jones —
keeping life’s many nuances open,
poems quietly revealing,
surpassing that Underworld,
visionary words X-raying your Zodiac.
Small Signs

lines of dark elm buds swell
one or two dandelions bloom on short stems
hunkered down in dry grass
blossoms on the rosemary
share an intensity
that rivals the sky’s
will the rains come soon?
Practice

thin wisps of smoke rise
through the bottom of her upraised flute
emerging from each hole in turn
slowly working upwards
upwards towards the bird
upwards towards the timeless sky

practice on the throat this day
its energies in motion
powering intentions
that drive the flow and sound the flute

this day with Kālī’s mudra shown
the hands turn from the throat
upwards towards the timeless sky
then outwards to confront and slay
any obstacle that stands
squarely in the way of her sounding the flute
and making the most beautiful music
Patience

“..trägt es einmal der Fluß zutag, der in die Stille der Steine greift…”
(it sustains only the river now that reaches into the silence of the stones…)
–from “Das Buch von mönchischen Leben,” (Poem 16)
by Rainer Marie Rilke (1899)

resting on the sandy edge
as the water passes
considering mussels and minnows
with an unspoken desire
to come another step closer
to mining the silence of the stones
the way the river does
Reluctant Self-Analysis

Question everything:
the choreography and the collisions
the contradictions and the prophecies

Embellish only like the wild things do
not some fancy breed

Calculate only when it comes to verbs
(Our daily talk is sloppy)

Insert emotions discretely as adjectives
tucked among those expected
by a careful observer of nature and life

Unsatisfied
this analysis reflects my voice within
through a mirror fractured

This is still just a recipe for uneasy artifice

If the words don’t flow out
as water does from an unpiped spring
no tampering
will ever make them right
Coyotes?

well into the night
we wake to honking, honking
silent hunters stalk
Mixed Messages #951

Biting off your roommate’s head?  
A lifetime of healthy smiles  
Need help?  
This bus is no place for  
Spray tanning  
Your zombie is showing.
Valentine’s Dinner

after the main course
she sensed his state of temporary bliss
and looked at him in such a way
that he felt compelled to explain

but that was cut short
by the buttery sweets
scented perfectly with cardamom
then even the spoons swooned
Urbana – 1978 (to Jude)

Would I be watching these birds
so intently
if her sister’s dearest friend
hadn’t taken ornithology lab
forty years ago?

And what about that
bright streak of a blackburnian
that flitted into the rosy redbuds
right before my eyes
while walking home from class?

And would I have been
on the wrong side of that street,
but for my walking partner
(the professor of Chinese literature)
and that inscrutable old husky dog
who’d rest in the sun
in his front yard just down the way?

Sometimes he would even stand up
and stretch,
half acknowledging my smile.
In the Shower Last Night
(Inspired by Juan Felipe Herrera)

it was way too late in the day
to act upon a sudden urge
for ouzo
and tender chunks of lamb
with artichokes and lemon
(and plenty of garlic)

but that jagged anise
might just have the power
to bring old chefs back from the dead
and make the hands on clocks spin
backwards
Shattered

The quivering winds
that burst in after midnight
were not enough to quell
the changes from within,
ones that had built upon themselves
for far too long confined
within a vessel flawed
just enough to crack and burst,
shattering the vitreous silence,
leaving dangerous shards in their wake.
Mushroom Envy

“In woods of dead elm, 
guide book in hand, all I get 
is mushroom envy”


so many wrong times in the woods
when they tease me
(the fall honey mushrooms especially)
not quite taunting
like that six-point buck on the day
after the close of hunting season
but with just a hint of smiles
knowing that I won’t be the one
cutting them off and taking them away

I turn my eyes skyward
envious of all the creatures
that will walk in my tracks
South of Ely

Pause long enough from your hunt
to catch the reflections off frost
on the high-spreading arms
of a white-barked birch
nestled among the high spires
of dark spruce
at the side of the sun-rising road.
North of Socorro

This crisp winter morning, a sunning shrike is singing his deceptively gentle songs high atop a leafless branch not far from the sparrows.
Late February

upon reemergence
the light had a new quality
her tears were replaced
by cottony clusters of snow

those approaching the door
halted their fall
and (at least for a moment)
floated back up towards the source
Year of the Rooster

after a satisfying meal
if your fortune cookie comes empty
offering no advice
just drink your tea and
seek out a lucky dragon
anything is possible
MINING THE SILENCE OF THE STONES
(SUN SERIES #7)
Breaking Dormancy

do not focus on the forgetting
forgetting is all around us
the fields disked past the edge of town
it is the remembering that carries
the past into the moment
dormant seeds germinate and with
the right peace those scenes
that emerge show us again
and again what we thought
to be forgotten
Above Main Street

within the spirit of free stars and the hearts of geodes
on her ledge sit six zonal geraniums
(the salmon particularly floriferous)
potbound but striving for the sky
On Bond Street

a sidewalk lined with pin oaks
tan leaves half fallen
at the corner, a bouquet of last year’s roses
half a stake, marked only by the word
remember
At the Next Table Over

In a room the color of butternut squash
(or perhaps closer to the ginger jar lamps
Mother bought years ago
when she redecorated the living room),
the lady in jeans asked him a most difficult question:
“Exactly how old were you?”
Fortunately, no one around the table
will know the correct answer.
Just East of the Bridge

the perched eagle waits
for me to pass the spot
where the accident occurred
(both mine and this newer one)

in a quiet spell
it will drop back to the shoulder
and take its chances
’bout like we all do
The Gaffer

for him, she crafts
a single translucent bead
in his secret shade of sun
Full Crow Moon

eleven o’clock
a spark flies out toward the moon
remember the Elk
Grandmother Knows

She notices the trees coming down not far from Big Elk, soft maples and old cottonwoods, and all the big houses going up on the sad, bare side of the river, with views of Her beautiful bluffs (for now).

Swirling clouds of returning blackbirds prepare to land in the remaining treetops overlooking all those plum buds waiting to burst.
Her Talisman

I try to recall the words to the song
I need for calling mine
while she knits a sea green shawl
woven from waters that come from the shore.

Lost in her pocket, gray beach stones rest.

She sets down her needles
and pulls out the smoothest
to slip in my palm.

So grounded, soon the lost words will return.
Crooked River

Seven point stag standing on the road from Prineville
Will you ever see your secret son?
You cross and prepare to shed another year
With the last of melting snows

The river rushes through a canyon
Of orange willows and red osier
While your son wonders if his points
Will ever come between big ears
Lost behind his deepest dreams
The Roses are Wild

roses hang from the rafters
over nymphs wearing green felt hats
and limey chicken
golden squash
and white bowls of steaming roast duck soup
in a noisy savory haze
lit by big round lamps
too-hot chilies
and the duck lover’s beguiling smile
Anxious Days

his monsignor is dead
obituary torn
his clock did not spring forward
as it should
appetites lost

it’s about time
to compile an impendium
of all the shoes that have yet to drop

the old slippers
the white gym shoes
the soft tan loafers
the black oxfords
(all polished up)
and even the snow boots
that could slip at half a moment’s notice
and crash
precipitously through thin ice
They tell me to prepare to meet my God. 
What’s there to prepare for? 
If you’ve made it to fifty 
without becoming acquainted 
with the animating force, 
you’re probably not all that good 
at reading signs either...
In shingles, the farmer wrote
“To God be the glory”
on the roof of his barn.

The shingles have darkened,
the road past now four lanes and divided.

God gets what it wants.

The traffic speeds by,
as moss resumes its unending task
of covering shingles, green and black alike.
It Could Have Been Last Spring

water flows over a retaining dam
the low conversations of mallards
continue unabated beneath the noisy ones of geese
water passes out the culvert
and falls into the deep south pond
not far from where a curious young mink
once walked out onto the path
it could have been last spring
but no
you were there with me

was it seven years ago now
(or even more)?
"不欲琭琭如玉. 珞珞如石."

(Don’t strive for the glamour of jade,
but rather seek to be as plain and solid as a stone.)
–from Verse 39 of the Tao Te Ching

heartwood cracks
the brittle branch snaps
while the supple ones live on through the storm

but a soft stone crumbles away
muddying the stream
while the hardest ones become smoother than jade
Rambles

At the time when white ashes are turning all shades but green,
the massive white oak in the pasture shows no hints of its crimson glory.
That will come in time with sun and frost.

But it’s now I hear the music start,
voices in close harmony, and want to find them
and slip into the dimensions of such perfect sound.

On a Sunday morning just after sunrise,
a coyote strides across campus thinking she’s alone
(but for the rabbits).

Can you see her?
I hear the voices again and let them carry me
on the breeze that song dog is sniffing
as she follows the edge of thick brambles
beside a long green field where later that day
(thirty years ago),
I come upon two teams of women in rugby tangles
and long wild runs when the ball flies,
the players as strong and tough and beautiful
as the rampant blackberries I’ve been picking
up in the hills west of town.

My fingers sticky purple with juice and blood,
the music picks up its pace.
Metamorphic

I slept like a rock, heavy on my arm,  
blocking out the barking hounds  
and the goings on of coons out on the deck.

By dawn, that arm of mine had begun to change,  
but the metamorphic process was reversible (maybe).

The rock came back to tingling life  
as my feet hit the floor.
Blessings of the Willows
(Niedziela Wierzbowa)

At anthesis, willows bless the bees,
ending the famine they’ve endured
for how many bee-years.
The hordes of sawflies would not survive
but for their green flags unfurled from tiny buds,
offerings begun in this time of soft emergence.
Some will ask the priests
to bless their budding branches,
but isn’t it really the other way around?
Gone?

Red Deer has disappeared.
From time to time, I think I see her signs,
but cannot tell if they are artifacts from movements
set to motion springs ago
or if she only walks while I’m in dreamless sleep.
Rebirth
(as a distinct possibility)

“Bin ich im Basalte wie ein noch ungefundenes Metall?”
(Am I within the rock like a metal that hasn’t been mined?)
–from Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode” (1903),
translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

after the year’s first thunder

to have half a chance at restriking the coin of your soul

take refuge with twenty-eight sparking stones

set close and low in the almost darkness

in clouds of steam your ore will melt

and pool in your heart

as you accept the stones’ offerings

and sing your sweat in gratitude

old tarnish falls away in layers as you crawl out wet
to meet the stars
Snowdrops (Six Years Gone)

in grief’s wake
little white flowers bloom
their distribution can only be mapped
after the fact
and their phenology remains
totally unpredictable
Lovers

seems somehow superficial
water flowing without rock
(or premature)
in some lifetime, the bedrock will become caressed

who is more patient the stream or the stone?
and what of all the polished rocks
that now sit dry?
The Right Steps

So many times, the time is not right.
Elk rest in the shade far away from your scent,
Hidden by ridges and those rolling ravines
    just coming green.

They do not take callers until they are ready
(And say little when they are ready).
Your songs may be lost to them on the breeze
Or your dances may spook them.

Don’t be discouraged…
Some things happen through persistence
And others through sincerity or the convergence
    of enough desires.
Then there are the times when you know
You must be dancing the right steps
For pussy willows are falling, soft,
From your feet to the floor.
Returned to Tom Maney

At the edge of the old circle of his spirit,
down past the redbuds and low gray benches,
one side of a tall cedar had been
really roughed up.

As I tugged on a soft tan ribbon of its inner bark
(so fine you could see right through it),
two circling Broad-wingeds began to pipe;
otherwise, I would’ve never seen ’em.
envision the essence
visualize in your mind’s eye
the extraction of the key idea
that core
the true smell of it
how do you foresee the distillation?
the stray molecules escaping the still
(with your knowing nose)
and those caught visible
in the receiving flask in the end
leaving the dark distractions
the residues
behind
Mixed Messages #6103

class the bus is no place for
fall classes
take gray
for more information
save money
& more
apply today!
Mixed Messages
(Southbound 6)

when you ruffle the
mastermind
living on campus
daily trips to
a lifetime of healthy smiles
or unusual behavior
Growing Fast

“(truth is a frozen allomorph of time)”
—from “To the Muses, in Oklahoma” by Carter Revard (1998)

Such a thing to note in passing
over an ice-covered pond…
But, in May,
this world changes too fast
to be certain of many truths.

Yet I do know the trimmers come
before the mowing,
and the sweetgrass is all headed out
(in moist ground at the edge of our deck).

This time, I hear the roar of weed whackers
and catch them trimming by the house.

Stepping out into the sunshine,
I redirect them; for, truly,
this is not the time for cutting sweetgrass.
Adages

I.
the early bird misses the big dog
(who is slow to rise)
but the big dog can catch many worms

II.
hang a dreamcatcher from your rear-view mirror
for when you’re asleep at the wheel

III.
mostly…
roses are pink
and violets are violet
but what rhymes with violet?

IV.
be wary of the man
with a wren as his totem
Lapsang Souchong
(for J.W.V.R.)

I’ve been drinking a tea made of smoke
reading about the trickster
from someone who knows those stories
but doesn’t often let on.

There’s been a cold rain
and a northeast wind that’s brought back
a lion to April’s end.

Out the window past my mug
two doves sit in the swamp white
(wisely holding tight buds).

One’s hard to make out
low and darkly wet
the colors of branches and storms.

The other sits tall and looks
like the doves on a sunny day;
maybe the trickster knows
where it’s been hiding out.

This tea was Bill’s favorite —
haven’t seen him in years.
I wonder if he still keeps bees
and is handy with a smoker.
Realignment

finding himself in a shrinking world
he’s trying harder to align himself with eternity
(not the harder of difficult, but the harder of diligence)
sharing his well-seasoned love with those
(mostly) gone to us
seeking warmth in those arms that wrap around him
in his quiet room when no one else is near
Hurley

your paws say clearly
how much you will grow (and grow)
run and learn — watchful

may you keep coyotes
to feasting only on mice
while guarding your flock
The Interloper

that seventh spring (for the first time)
there was a gentle shower with light, fickle winds

so many flowers in bud —
the bloodroots fresh against new leaves,
the juneberries more noticeably white
in that subdued light of late afternoon

the usual characters were there (nuthatch and downies)
but three were unexpected…

she wore a t-shirt and denim shorts;
her height and figure
(and the length of the hair down her back)
could have been yours at 20

she stood on the overlook
just above the tree’s bleeding heart,
and, above her, perched a pair of vultures

she noticed me moving and left
following the bluff ridge east;
I kept my distance but would take the same path
upon reaching the heart, that black pair
startled me with their sudden departure;
for a minute, I saw her again,
but when I veered from the bluff ridge trail,
the shower intensified
Shooting Out the Stars

“…not knowing how deep the woods are and lightless…”

My dear, I’d be willing to walk
depth into the woods for you some night
and know they say it’s darkest before the dawn,
but when you start your story in the New Moon
and then proceed to shoot out the stars
one after another,
I get nervous.

I wonder what I did with my old lighter,
knowing that, even if I do find it,
I’ll just fumble with it in the dark.
Hunting & Gathering

near to the shore, smooth roses dance
pink and fragrant
the water cold (and choppy)
an osprey finds shallow crappies
in easy reach

would you be willing
to take a dive for your next meal?

somewhere out there, wild strawberries bloom
in a few warm weeks
the grasses will be so much taller
She Wanted a Sequel

each new May day
the rose dance would resume
with a new fresh breeze
until finally the last five petals
flew free
lost into the lake’s spray

when Maggie came down to the bay
Memorial Day weekend
she wanted an encore
but wild roses are remontant
only in pink dreams
At the End of the Session

She sells the essence of forgiveness in little brown vials. I picked one up, turned it around, and tried to read the label. I couldn’t quite make it out (print’s too small).

Surely, there are bouquets of roses in there and chains of lilac wisteria draped over the gates, or maybe those waxy tuberoses, the ones Grandpa used to tend back by the garage.

Should I open the cap? Should I?
Elk Pasture Bliss

as the Midsummer Moon began to grow
gray clouds finally pushed off to the east
and the morning sun rose high enough
to shine right into their muddy green paradise

there the boys of summer were relaxing
antlers growing almost as fast as the grasses
that surrounded them

i could stare long into their backlit eyes
while robins fought and buntings and orioles
sang their irrepressible joys
And Another Stopped to Watch

finding a kindred spirit
in her favorite place
this wet side of the Rockies
Opening Time at the Dump

the roadrunner
darts into
tall grass

angels’ trumpets
still open
pure white

over the ridge
a lone quail
hollers
The Hitchhiker

a silent cicada hitched a ride
on the back of my field shirt
he sat for hours on the bed
his tiny blood red eyes
at a loss for the familiar
in the stillness of a half-darkened room

when I went to hang up the shirt
I knew I must return him
to the open land of double rainbows
and many singing beaks
to his freedom and potential doom
The Right Question

In the healing space beyond the threshold,
I recalled an encounter near Lake Audy
from that fall when I had to stop in Winnipeg
(once the spring birds and tourists were gone)
to find a new suitcase
when my old one suddenly gave out.

She’d heard parts of that story before,
but when I got to the part about the two elk cows,
joyful in the morning meadow,
she asked me to consider why there were two.

Good teachers know how to ask
the right questions.
City of Wrens
(Earth Day 2017)

I walked along the turbulent creek
Through the new city of wrens.
If I listened only to their news
I’d think that all is right in this world.
The Poem on Guadalupe Street

Its words deserve to be read aloud
Leave the silent readings to your private thoughts
And dreams and long, dark books
The engineer always sounds the bell when the train approaches the station

Across the way, a wolf with marbled eyes
Sits in frozen wait under the cerulean doves of love
Come bearing sage and recite those special words that set him free

The doves take wing

The poem moves on
Spending the Morning with Cranes

after seeing what nine May days
in the Wudangshan
could do for their teacher
he left her class in almost flight
as he rose up the hill back to his car

he knew he’d need to find his own teacher soon
and create some new antlered forms
some new moves
Totally Unexpected

after the storm
the drought
the gentle rains
the wait was over

coming down the flowing Mimbres
just before Faywood
blue lightning finally struck
struck right on a hot June afternoon
with few clouds in a hazy sky

ten cows dozed
among white poppies
maybe the dust felt right
on brown elk bellies

when she saw them off to the left
we stopped
aroused the herd rose
and met our eyes
ears and nostrils at full attention
would they run?
no — blue lightning finally struck
Awakening

tell me something
about the nature of chaos
about those dewdrops
on top of the black mailbox
at sunrise
Late June

Let the hearts of those who seek the luscious little apricots, just as they fall to the rain-soaked ground, rejoice.

There are few midsummer blessings as precious as these soft treasures when touched by the sun.
Early Summer in Tucson

The young man at the desk is sharply dressed. A cool white shirt, but wool slacks?

Is he honoring the sheep or just a slave to fashion?
Dust Storms May Exist

mirage lake — salt flats
dust devils dance ’cross the road
those crazy white plumes
don’t stop in the travel lanes
the gas gauge is getting low
and light

a twisting snake flies with grace
through a closed sky
first olive
now orange
now

open

set free by a solar flare
set from the inside out
in rings
banana pepper rings
zig-zag cut
golden
orange
red
A Most Delicate Spider

why she relocated
I cannot say
there would seem to be
more action at her previous post
along the floorboards
but there she was
positioned next to the bathroom faucet
last night
and with a delicate patience
there she remained to greet me
when I washed my face
in the morning
Across the Divide

windows wide open

the evening air is warm and still
a little hazy
on the other side of those shaded hills
there’s a lodge tonight

would’ve done me some good
but it’s late for thinking of it

that towhee just keeps singing
the same words
clear from atop the power pole
he won’t stop

the crickets join him

and a long-eared rabbit
is all stretched out on the warm earth
her nose almost touching
the quail block

the smoke will rise
straight up tonight
the haze will thicken a bit
but takes a long, long time to mix

it’s a night for slow prayers
In the Aftermath

two strings hang broken
on the harp in the park
it must have been
a wild serenade last night

(the chipping sparrows
are still talking about it)

and cicada killers patrol the lawn now
but they didn’t witness
the bacchanalia
one approaches a shop door
bumping the glass
but she wisely flies off
as I approach
The Longing Fawn

through a wooden gate
in thick blue walls
lived a longing fawn
and hands in motion
one always holding
a lit cigarette
Mixed Messages #182

Need help?
Our Pregnancy Center is here for you
Same Day Delivery
Ask about our Interior & Exterior options
Call us today!
No appointment needed
Oracle of the Muses

as bullies crush
defeated energies flow
gaining height in just kingdoms
lively muses now openly predict
quite rousing success to underdogs
(verbatim wise)
The Moon is Waxing

the blue moon wild
antlers at the window altar
low — for this room
is well rooted into the earth
quiet ground where we are led
down to our core
and up the sides of the walls
towards the rising moon

when we finally rest
our breath is unforced
a bed of drying calendula
rest on the slope past the window
there I rub its seeds
into my hands
and take this place away
Driven

You might think with so many years under his belt that he’d know when to call it a day in the face of those cool gusts kicked up by the storm moving in, the way the cows know to stay away from the smoldering brush pile at the far end of their pasture.

But he is too driven and will only stop at the end of his task at hand or the lightning bolt’s.
A Sunday Morning Like No Other

The road that connects them is red
The tobacco is wrapped
Three strands make the braid
You’re watching my back
As I walk the road
More or less clockwise
(Not so perfectly through the light,
greening rain)

Gently sensing your many blessings
Your gifts
Your true heart
Port Huron Early in the Elk Moon

throughout the star-filled night
unseen trains vainly break the silence
awakening creatures near and far
no cars at the crossing
Restoration
(East of Tapley Woods)

when bunting answers
above the sweet coneflowers
your morning mantra
you are truly heading home
That Uppity Bear

Alonzo Stag and Bruce deBuck just saw that new billboard off Route 15…

“So Smokey went dot com, eh?”

“Sure… That uppity bear gets all the press.”

“So what’s in it for us, Bruce?”

“Not much, Lonnie. And he’ll find all the grub he wants now that he bought that big ranch up in Montana.”

“Dang it, Bruce… Our aspen are gettin’ way too old. They’re shot.”

“You got a match?”

“Nah… I gave up smokin’ weed years ago, back when I was still a raghorn.”

“Yeah… Right…”
The First Sign

MARK WIDRLECHNER AND RAYMOND CRANFILL

summer lightning
the boy chases bright fireflies
through the dew-soaked grass
briefly one lands in his hair
the boy illuminated
REALIGNMENT
(SUN SERIES #10)
Return of the Mountain Spirits

The rainbow east of the creek presaged the rest, even when the stubborn western clouds revealed only brief glimpses of the sprouting moon before it set.

The fire in the center lit easily, and, just as the blessings were said, a gentle rain came to add its acknowledgement.

Orange sparks flew.

The Mountain Spirits had been absent from these parts for a long time, but they returned, as eleven dancers stepped lightly at the circle’s edge, knowing deep in their soles that the world only spins in one direction.

And at the end, when the dance was complete, the orange sparks flew higher yet and met the brightening stars.
A Longing

In the cool of the morning,
On a trip into town,
She handed me a pomegranate
From the blue bowl on her desk.

I drove way out back
To the old cottonwood tree —
The massive one, with branches broken,
Heavy with mistletoe.

I held the fruit in my hand;
It felt good like a baseball.

As I split it open,
My thoughts turned to you,
My dear…
My thoughts turned to you.
Temporary Exile

insistent karma pushes me along
into temporary exile
reluctant… but I cannot resist

the miles fly by my sleepy eyes
on this day that started way too soon

greener pastures may await
but they are empty now
devoid of your touch in this season of our lives
when I can hardly let go

the air in this stretch is particularly choppy
as winds swirl east of the resistant mountains
that I must cross before I find
my verdant but deserted retreat
South of Cortland

Although I pass at seventy miles per hour, my nose knows what the big orange mowers cut. The scent of dry dyssodia enters through the vent and fills my lungs. This is not water from St. Sava’s spring, but something must be cured today.
Warrior, Too
(With a Bow to Bree Zlee Bodnar)

You see where the slender bamboo has grown thickly
In a formerly open path to enlightenment.
Unsheathe your knife,
Opening to the wisdom offered by the breath
In this moment of dark green obstruction.
Our Morning Walk

ninety minutes after sunrise
vegetation soaked and shining
a flock of jays agitates a calm sky
the hawk must be near

along the trail
one particular switchgrass plant
(bigger than most)
cascades its huge panicles over the edge

a million rhinestones sparkle
and shatter...
soaking my dog
Labor Day – 3 pm

the woods seem more chaotic
crickets the only constant
(and the lack of birdsong)
on this unseasonable day
of queer yellow light
and eyes that itch hoping for rain

everything suffers a bit
dry leaves fall and branches
others color prematurely
a red mushroom shrivels
finally a pewee calls out — tentatively
wondering what time it really is
Mixed Messages #949
(A Long Trip)

Convenient access to
New talent
Aspire to lead
Get the keys
Tell your driver
From the Alps to the Great Wall
Meditation XXII

from time to time
a stained shirt if not too worn
with repeated washings
will once again become presentable
In the Interest of Time

In the interest of time,  
she brought out the ladder,  
but I didn’t need it,  
as I stretched as tall as I could  
to pull her parents’ memories  
off the top shelf —  
two cardboard boxes  
to revive her own.
Consequences

the green wall crumbles
with each passing sun
those arborvitae slowly become
more a misnomer
when you forget to remember
the big ones you transplanted last year
in a summer like this
After Work

some fresh beer was poured
a fruit fly lands on the glass
just above the foam
Early in the Equinox

At three, the pack stopped along the road
Under the endless star shimmer
And broke into high song,
As every formerly sleeping dog
In the neighborhood woke up
And took notice.
In Light Mist

mountains partly hidden
Raven flies up the valley
beneath low gray clouds
After a Fall

these scars are not trophies
to be displayed with pride
nor must they be hidden away

they will be there and change
but slowly in these shortening days

not even a bumper crop
of fallen buckeyes
nor an afternoon hooting
of a Great Horned Owl
can change the fact
that the regrowth around the break
will strengthen
but the telling signs
never disappear
He Was Reading Old Poems
(response to Jesús J. Barquet)

In an old enough house,
the colors
on the walls in each room call,
as the light through the windows
allows.

At first, that’s all there is to it.

But the edges and ceiling lines,
the moldings and doorframes,
and every little crack in the paint
hint of the layering,
the depths beneath,
fragments
of what was (or might have been)
all around him.

Perhaps it still is.
Haven

we all need to go
to that place where we are safest
to realign

the old cows lead their herds
down to the ranches
at the edge of town

the smart bulls follow in rut
their bellows and bugles
echoing off tall walls of pine
Still Green

I want to pluck a gingko leaf
off this tree, while it’s still green,
and hold it to my chest.

I am not ready for the buttery yellow
or the sudden drop.

The sun is shining brightly,
and I can still believe there’s time.
The First Black Woolly Bear

I step over last night’s dark fox scat
and sidestep the slow caterpillar
making its way across the trail.

The field is green and yellow,
tan with crisp brown,
filled with gleaning birds
that won’t be here for long.

Scattered frost asters
are the last hope for bees,
and up high the geese are calling.

Everything is on the move.
Releasing

all along the pond’s east shore
milkweed pods open
releasing their silk and seeds
to the half-warm wind
to fly away free
in ones, in twos and threes

some find the pond
more find the earth

why can’t I take their hint?
Near Battle Creek

The Sun has not yet risen
But a new day begins to form
In the temporary gaps of silence
Between the passing cars and trucks on the Interstate
Five hundred feet or so south of these windows
Just past the grove of dying ash
That gives the wood to heat this home
Too High

Phoenix has risen
too high for its own true good
incendiary
The Sun is Cold
(Sister’s Watching)

Newly fallen trees have blocked the way, as I prepare for your offering.

Another branch falls with a thud, but there is no wind. The remaining snag is shaking.

Soon a red belly flies before me, calling just above my head.
What If?

What would you give up
alone
to be deeply desired
for just one year
if you knew the conditions
at the start
and what if you didn’t?
At a Crossroads

not long after sunset
i came to this crossing
(for the first time)
and did not know which way to turn
but my lights found the back of a buck
not far up the road

he had a beautiful rack
and let me follow
the road soon ended
down at the river
but what does it matter
he let me get close
Step Lightly

Can I learn how to step lightly and quickly away as the angry cement hardens underfoot on this repaved path that (not long ago) felt so springy and smelled so freshly sweet?

In the end, can my shoes be cleaned off well enough or must they be thrown away leaving me barefoot?

(Hard to imagine when you grow up in a home where you put on your slippers as soon as you come in the door.)
Awaiting the Dawn

Somehow word got out…
He was back at his place off the ridge
and knew more than he did when he left,
but that didn’t make it any easier.
So they came down the road
and called for him, a bit before five.
They were pretty adamant;
yet he only stirred
and wouldn’t leave his warm bed.
The pre-dawn air was too cold,
and the furnace was still sleeping.
That restless dreamer awoke at first light,
low golden lines to the east of Cooke’s Peak,
and sensed that the time would be near
to sing with others under the stars
and pray-in a new dawn.
The Afterglow
(A Very Temporary Study in Red, Black, & White)

From behind the Burros,
running north as far as the eye can see,
a broken band of narrow clouds hangs
just above the horizon.

The thinner parts glow red,
rivaling the ruby taillights of the traffic
heading west towards Tyrone.

The thicker parts swirl
rust and charcoal
into their darkest cores.

Not far above all this,
in the second day of its sprouting,
a fine, cocked crescent shines pure white,
suspended in the deepest blue…
imperceptibly setting.
Tonight

her purple fox won’t let me forget
she left her signs everywhere
and for a totemic symbolist like me
that’s tantamount to indelibility
inescapable until
The Coldest Morning So Far

outside the window
the thrasher was calling sharply
as she asked me when the realignments
would end
i replied
can they?
and then i awoke
Contemplating Sixty

My office filled with black balloons felt premature at fifty, but was done in good humor, which turns my thoughts to ice cream and how fast our dreams can melt away.

Raising the heat another notch…
To be reborn, the sages were right; that darkest part within a pained heart must first be contained before it can be burned away.

Now these lessons keep on coming, even when I’m unprepared; some may lead to worldly wisdom (too soon to tell), others to doubt, but, surely, from love I cannot turn away.
Authenticity of Place
(for Virginia)

true to its history
true to its prehistory
true to what the land would do
without it being watched
true to the spirits of the place
asleep or awake or unfathomable

those who call it home
may long for it when they are away

those who sleep uneasily
may seek to escape it

those fools who think the world belongs to them
may obliterate it

those who sense the sleeping spirits
may mourn or plant trees or become warriors
Breakfast

In the low-angled light of a late November morning,
White-winged doves patrol the gravel
Beneath the feeder, searching for any fallen seeds
Rejected by the perched jay.
They pace and peck until temporarily displaced
By a quail parade.
One marching hen kicks up a cluster of white feathers
That fly a bit and settle apart.
As more pass, the feathers rise again
Separated by feet and breeze
Till most can no longer be seen.
The covey continues out into the low oaks,
But a few feathers remain
Caught on stones, waving with the winds,
One free, rolling over and over,
Perfectly white through backlit rays
Until the doves return.

Not five minutes later…
A disorganized army of quail
Reemerges from under the oaks
Retaking the ground under that feeder.
More animated than the doves,
They spare and chase and shove each other,
Kicking and bobbing and pecking all the time
Until, startled, they burst into confused flight,
One deflecting off the window with a thud.
It all begins innocently enough
above the old gold mill
in fine gravel, pale beige,
with secret towhees and juncos
kicking up duff.

From here…
to keep climbing
I must look down
taking careful, measured steps.
The last monsoonal storm of the season
set forth a torrent here
to erase the trailmaker’s craft,
exposing sharp points of pink and gray,
fragments of ores in green and blue,
pyritic reflections,
and chunks of quartz:
white or smoky, with hints of violet.

To keep climbing then
is to rise through the junipers and piñons,
with their somber trunks, on one side
and far views of tan stone columns
on the other. The oaks keep changing.
The way turns ’round the side of the mountain.
To keep climbing,  
I enter a grove of Douglas fir and ponderosa,  
of inky blue-black, crested jays,  
and the oaks keep changing.

One sapling fir stands all roughed up,  
the target of some randy buck.  
And one pine bough  
holds a strange new growth  
below its needles, bright ochre,  
almost fluorescent.

I stop there to stare  
and then look past it into the sky,  
sensing luminous turquoise and amethyst spirits  
of injured muses, hovering, and higher yet,  
one dear, lost lover.

I hesitate to keep climbing,  
standing still until a pair of ravens  
flies overhead with news  
that it’s time to descend.

Many hidden birds make themselves seen  
on the way back down.
A Land of Enchantment

with as much power
as she held
how would I have known?
the red wolf’s skin did not fit
her comfortably

I thought we were both
enchanted
by that smiling moon
ascending behind Cooke’s Peak

now a thousand miles away
I see clearly — I was
as I stir
the lamb stew alone
Out in the Sticks
(Not Far From Freeport)

He sang of walking with her
through a field of wildflowers
under the moonlight
out in the sticks
and how happy he’d be
to check her for ticks

I just had to smile —
how many times
had I used that same line?

You must have too
for then came the signs —
the cut bank of blocky yellow lime
basking in the sun
and after the bend
a long swath of willows
head high
young branches glowing
Sends Him Through the Doors

Is the night tender?
North of Portales
In his father’s bed
She would spur him on
To make love
Like he didn’t know how
Till the night became
So tender again
New Territory

In this part of the valley,
the winding creek undercuts
hills unnoticed from the mile roads.

Thank the deer for any trails.

Old fences stand,
rusty hindrances to our passage,
the only bridges,
downed logs and thin ice.

As we scout for birds this morning,
the soft earth still smells of autumn
with late-fallen leaves.

My partner spots a coyote,
heading upstream as we work down,
and then another.

They cross the creek
silently over to my side;
without a trace, they’re gone.

Calling birds quiet.

A barred owl takes flight.
Loneliness

her blue kimono
hangs alone in the closet
with one dead cricket
Adrift

security elusive
the placid harbor is but sky mirage
the pilot repeatedly misled us
the landing still uncertain
only a bar of bittersweet chocolate remains
for temporary sustenance and shallow consolation
Four Crows
(to Mary Kline-Misol)

They are not her formal teachers, but they follow her around in the treetops and tell her nearly everything she needs to know to paint them, revealing all they wish to have revealed.
The Departure of Wolf

Much more might be said
about the arrival of wolf
and the coming to grips
with the primal drive
the flash in the eyes
those uneasy first encounters

Than about his departure
perhaps on a night of blowing powder snow
and low clouds
when dreams are forgotten
and any leftover traps deftly sprung

What can we really say?

In the aftermath
there’s the uncertainty
of his circling back
after marking the farthest reaches
of his range

The coming to grips
with his half-perceived absence
and unscripted endings
The Moon of Cracking Trees
(to Pat S.)

after I broke camp
not because I wanted to
because I had to
(the air had become way too frigid)

and the hides were packed
I went to see the one who
carves hearts from antlers
(he shared with me many warm blankets)
As Dreams are Known To Do

To think of the dreams
that are missed to the waking mind
(each night, there might be at least a few)
without considering that each
might not be mine (or yours) alone,
but shared with other present spirits,
had not crossed my mind but once (too long ago),
with a story so vivid, I refused to think
my sleeping mind could not take it up again
(but it refused).
That day, I had to ask my friends
what they had dreamt the night before.
Disappointed, I let the whole thing go
(until tonight).

After the altar was taken down
and only a few ashes remained to be swept,
the Maskmaker told me otherwise
of a morning twelve years back,
when two friends apart
had shared a single dream
of a ride in a red convertible
(on the edge of town)
and other things that don’t make sense
(as dreams are known to do).
Colophon

*The Departure of Wolf* was produced using the McLuhan theme in Pressbooks by Harrison W. Inefuku, Iowa State University Library.