

Leaf of My Puzzled Desire

A Collection of Poems

by

Richard P. Gabriel

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Richard P. Gabriel is a poet, essayist, and computer scientist. His most recent book is a collection of essays called *Patterns of Software: Tales from the Software Community. Work in Progress: Writers' Workshop and the Work of Making Things* is expected out in Spring 2002 from Addison Wesley Longman. His manuscript of poetry, *Leaf of My Puzzled Desire*, was a finalist for the National Poetry Series.

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Sudden Snap and **Trying Language** will appear in *Printed Matter*

Good Evening, Bitter and **Unnormalized Models** will appear in 88

Slow, Slow Journey

*. . . Even through the apparatus,
it was just a gritty streak, a place in the sky
where something had been poorly erased.*

Comet

Dean Young

Time Leaves

Wind-pearled leaves upturned on birches,
and leaves' papered veins' faint scrolls carry
dropped lines in mid-kiss, lips from old films,
lies spurting in fine print.

From across the weed-spattered field erupting life
in mites and speck flies, grasshoppers and light-clear moths, I stare
at those leaves, and even these binoculars, perfect and fine,
fail. And still between us, the fragments I need—life flares—
rise in the heat-perfume. Feet and fingers stop, lips
stop their glassy brush.

Dust and stalk-dry fragrance lull this lizard to a stillness
ready to break for shade. How far the trees stand
bending to a wind overhead.

All the Pretty Bridges Were Built to Fall Down

The bridge would not be forgotten—
painted its rust-gilded green and draped
forlorn at dawn, performing the dullest duties:
a father standing beside the bed on the eve
of daystorms. In leaves, the sound of a crowd
settling, footsteps over water-rush, water on stone,
water past wood, green stretched wide on the verge
of narrows.

Nothing happens here: river
flows first to sea then back with the tide,
cars drive afar then back.
A small gray bird with a deep yellow lore

flung a note by my ear and disappeared
in the crowd noising over there, and I crossed
the bridge confused by a bucket of no, a garage door
slowly rising on 6 or 8 dry rusty wheels behind the hedgerow,
sounds like a bush full of spring birds and my note
mixed in salt-sweet elixir mudding beneath bridge boards,
a father earseeking the pat-pat of light footsteps
stepping away. I returned.

The bridge will not be forgotten,
nor the downslurred birdcry, nor the father.
One day I'll return to the bridge,
and it will run just one way,
one final way,
all the way to who the hell cares where.

Unnormalized Models

This is the recipe for this.
Random fields,
exponential models,
motivated from (turn

your head
and say natural language
processing

). Segmenting and
labeling sequences. A
framework

based on
conditional random fields
offering several

advantages over
hidden Markov models and
stochastic grammar.

(she was thin
I thought
not normal I
liked her segments
enough to fill
the universe with a 2-d
string)

Second, we derive an equivalence
between the well-known
technique of boosting and maximum
likelihood for exponential
models. The idea of
unnormalized models plays
a key role.

Night Lacks

When the light was most uncertain I woke;
outside, snow grayed streets, just one
streetlight lit the world—night sweats
in the chill night air. In this valley

the night wind knows the day wind's
mad and sweeps back dust and scraps.
Its river knows flat land stalls flow
and a river will sink beneath its alluvial fan
with no direction to take, no
downhill bed that finds right

into the night mind posed as a cup
or as a boat filled with the spilt or flown.
The one light lights one fat spot on the road
that in day is no choice at all but a road;

at night curbs only point and tonight the road
hides in snow and nightness. Eyes
that see only black watch me each night,
and in the turning light the night-dog—
black as guilt and keen as a jester to twist
laugh to howl—greeted me, alert
all night should I wake, eager
to sniff the road broken beyond
the snow-swallowed light,
the one that in day I hide in the sun's hurt halo.

When the light was most certain I fell to a heap,
trapped in the wind-borne snow
gathered in the crook of the sleeping dog's wrist
on the porch-slab beside the shingled house

where, when the rye-filled field
held day's sun-shamed heat, I laid
my head, and the only thing that could
happened.

Sudden Snap

Some things work better sudden.
The cheapest Polaroid camera
at arm's length indoors, low
light, fluorescents flickering—
bring it to aim at your head and snap
— give the rangefinder no
time to work, give the lightmeter no
time to work out the foolish lighting,
give your arm no time to stop, give
yourself no time to pose. This picture
captures beauty: your face
swept arclike, your head
an orange halo, the lights
6-sided flare-ups, pieces
of pictures the camera
couldn't forget, chemicals
striving to make sense quit part through,
you look wise & giddy, post-traumatic,
pre-orgasmic. A sudden snap captures.
The trick is to end it before it's complete.

Bird's-head Cane

The river jukes past the bridge's ice-breaking piers,
over a spite-sharp rock bed—the Merrimack
is storm-filled to edges. Wind-effects
web rain shawls down to shag and pine.
I curl behind a riverman's shack, waiting
to cross Rocks Village Bridge.

Steel, green as pondbright, hammocks the bridge's
wood planks, tight-bolted on. Six rock piers
split the river in seven, the bridge rustles
in soft circles around each pier.
I step out, hold high her bird's-head cane, beginning
to cross Rocks Village Bridge.

The bridge turntable in mid-span begins rotating—
do tall ships wait? A gale scratches off
planks, throws them up birchtop,
down to crazy-beauty water.
I spin dizzy to mid-span, needing
to help Rocks Village Bridge fret and fly apart.

The storm, the bridge dissolved in air and river,
my rusting will and stressed desire, all
team to keep her from the bird's-head cane.
I wander circles, cane finger-gone. I dream alive,
throttled, slipped beneath rocks, meaning
to cross Rocks Village Bridge.

Times before, I watched and hoped that Rocks Village Bridge
would fade to land and pass to rye, stones
would rise to pebbles—then sand. Piers
fold as chairs, steel enmoss trunks.
Then I could sprint the vanished divide,
hand her the bird's-head cane.

Laid Low in the Cimiterò delle Porte Sante

Each day those weeks in Florence, hotel living
on Borgo San Iacopo, we fought winter-like. Bone cold in
January, we had no weather warning. Her early music
at Musèò di San Marco and my Arno-wandering,
street-wandering strangered us the way the narrow wander,
the high-walled street separation defeats neighbors. On streets
summer-gorged on tourists and scooter rasps, each door
is a night of stone thighs and sagged affection—a canvas-draped
pole, pegs lost. We're slow now as shallow Arno
slowed to ice, subtle as days ramped to nights through clouds—
dark burst before a pink veil.

Sunday, near night, we drift Viale Galileo to
San Miniato al Monte. I insist on Cimiterò di Porte Sante
and she cites me for sentimentality. Snow starts, its Florentine rareness
unexpected after our weeks. We—she and I, the cemetery—are
snow-pulled to the clouds, Florence-scurry hangs farther below.
A woman offers a marble handful of snowflakes to him,
stone-backed at attention, solid uniform stained fume-black in streaks.
We crouch to their story told in greenglass at their side. They died in '42,
in '43, her flow-snapped dress stopped mid-stride—were these flakes
her wedding gift to him? Forty years she held air-sent presents
across the boundary of their plots; today her stonehand warms my cheek.

The Bridge of Solitude

Cutting, deep fissure—mistake of placement
sharply repaired by the furious river, rockfast earth
stands hooded and stubborn—the gulf is nothing
there to stop us. The Old Bridge
spans the rift, and even the oldest call it
The Old Bridge. Rock clutter and desert-dry:
barren cleft. Nothing is all
about.

The bridge is a shallow rise, its haunches pierced by arches
lightening pressure, made from marble drilled ounces lighter.
Forgotten are all who passed but these few names carved
on the sandstone approach. Lying, I scratch

with a stone-pen deep enough my name
to see while I gaze down at the river
that flutters like an owl rising as the sun passes
over me.

Death on Peaks Abstracted to Death

Mountains attract terrible things:

arctic storms sudden in our midst,
ground vertical to shed footsteps.

Many seek the hell in a terrible death
as the or-else in a summit-and-back proposition.

Terrible things:

stone smooth to repel foot- and handholds,
rock rough to shred skin.

In the distance these terrible things make high beauty,
they attract.

But our minds manipulate abstract concepts;
our hands and machines, bits of matter—we build

gear to outfit us as more than human when with our steps
that beauty grows close and cold merciless
to freeze the life of our veins.

Such things as, when silence surrounds us on the sides of mountains,
help us shout far. But, look, this is too abstract—

here, read this: Is it really what we want—when we lie alone
in snow caves, no food, no air, when winds beckoned by mountains
freezes our faces black with dead skin, when 27 thousand feet is just too high,

when it's dark on our way down from the summit to the high camp,
when the loneliness of our deaths in the hands of failure settles,
just there—

is it really what we want then,
to dial our wives on our cell phones
and bid them goodbye?

A Painter of Bridges

It's a marble floor, marbled glass, it swifts
about the high air, it reflects a bit of blue.
It's a dust of mist settling nowhere, shattering
to smaller bits instead. And the man stands upon it—remote,
amid the tops of mountains.

Blink—the mist's away; he stands on a pillar of orange-gold
steel. He wears a nylon web harness,
beige around the waist and blue about each leg, and a screwgate
clipped to a rope clipped to a wire handrail descending parabolic.

Hundreds and hundreds of feet remote below,
scraped and marbleized, the blue-here smooth-there current spins, dazed,
to sea. And he sees the patterns some men make.

A pail dangles at his belt, fire-full of paint,
and, filling his brush, he seizes on the man below spiraling,
sizing up the passion.

A painter of bridges carries many tools—a radio
connects him to men and trucks at land's end.

The horse bristles hair-fill three-quarters
with paint—he finds a bubble, beading corrosion,
finds it more pressing than the man in his spin,
soaks it with paint, fills it with gold.

She Places the Chicken Carefully

The screendoor bangbangs shut and somewhere behind me she puts the chicken in the fridge. I'm deep below the surface, beyond cool distance somewhere in the sandhills of dreaming, remembering her cascading shape and the funnel her feeling makes.

So, she crosses her arms at her knees and lifts her dress like the shirt a fighter extracts his chest from, moving like one of those accordion parallelogram things clowns use to punch each other with. Her desire squeezes one end and her clothes pop off the other. Now she's nude, not quite plucked like the chicken she placed away. She flares—I mean her shape. There's quite a dark punctuation mark in the middle. I feel out, like she's knocked me in the head.

What she does next really should be kept a secret, but let's say it's kind of like sitting down, or sort of like singing in the shower. Except there's no water, exactly. And the chair would be more like something else. A funnel takes a wide undefined thing and narrows it down, speeds it up, and her hips are kind of wide but the definition has a comma in a funny place. My memory feels like forgetting.

Somewhere behind me she takes the chicken from the fridge and the screendoor bangbangs shut. I'll bet she's going to cook it for supper—maybe serve it to her family at the end of a parallelogram.

The River Gone

The river is sawing its bed to hell,
taking mountain streams in its *to*
stroke and salt sea water in its *fro*
at the point exactly between
the life of hills and the life of oceans,
at the point of a bridge. We've come
all this way to cross

but we hunker on the hard
bank by the bridge approach,
we sit facing the bridgework, eyes wide
and the swingbridge stupid, all
open—as if waiting for the next ship
to pass, but the river is beyond ships. Each, a stranger,
has a reason to cross, but our hearts
are as stingy as closed mouths, as shy
as girls waiting along the wall to dance for
the first time.

The water is opaque and above level
fix only crooked fingers of rocks and cormorants'
heads and necks. Our way is broken, so
I relax my desire, take one bird to my arms—pliant
soft rush of riffled feathers softening the clip of swifting
water. I clack shut the bird's bill, finger closed
its nostril holes and puff—rush
of my air in the silty hollow of the living bird
and its caressing wings fold sound
on sound. As long as I play this throaty trill,
this unmusical birdheart music,
the water will wisp away. The final dry
riverbed reeks before us, the song grows. Reeling,
we all cross, all
but me.

Ink Evaporates Alone in Bed

It's the hour when mist
locks horns with night and I can hear hot
streetlights sizzle in the war, carving
shapes in jokes and books of only facts. How
will nightmares pollute my sleep?

My madwit—a preview, some gadget—
clanks into the spotlight to entertain,
but I turn blue and back somewhere just beyond,
—song sounds at breathturn—
tracing passing shapes with the sides
of my eyes.

How can I revise “somewhere” to some place
distinct before dawn washes me away or reason
slips me a dream? I make a drop of mist and rise
in vapor from the touch of the hot
glass of nearest burning.

How sad.
How sad to be here
and know the sound of the song when the words breathe in
and the last drop of ink has been wasted on
a true story.

The Desert Fills With Roads

The desert rubble, dry beds, the life drifted out . . .

Days in sugared air,
lolling under pines, supple pine bed
thick and motes rising, sparking air,
my head blank in near sleep, muscleless limbs,
damp blur, bone rib bridge over a river flowing both ways,
or cage, needles hiss in a light wind, so far,
so very far from any desert.

Desert life litters the plain: I see cactus, globemallow, chinchweed . . .

Two-day storm, snow falling fat,
neighbors sealed behind unplowed roads,
I hover over my strings
and feel their tin notes formed and finished,
crave their crippled slur,
raise the garage door, power up 8 6L6's
16 twelves stacked 4 high & wide,
Black Beauty guitar, crybaby, oh
let it go, let it go. . . .
Neighbors' cries to 911 come up empty, barren
countryside peals in small echoes, and a patch
of snow drops from a far branch.

*It makes no sense, it hurts my eyes, my forehead cracks
in the sun . . .*

Car packed and oil changed;
she says goodbye, the baby cries;
the car rounds the bend
toward a road that leads away.

*I see scorpions and lizards on the roads in the thrill of days,
amid the hidden; what road
takes me from place to place?*

The Dance or the Dancer

Is it the way she dances in the cool
cafeteria to the nasal strum of Stratocasters
that makes the winter night colder and colder,
makes the stars fall deeper into the sky? Is it the way her form
fills her dress like dried fruit soaked
by over-humidity as the last arc of the sun
drenches below the line of the Gulf,
the side view of her bent at the waist thick as a heavyweight's knee
or the sight of a quilt folded on a bed
on one of those frightened nights? What about her hair
that drifts down as if by choice into a ranging trail
that strays around her ears and lips, over her eyes
and catches in the sharps of her teeth? Is it
the sound of the song or something subtle and wary
in the way they play it, how they are the only ones
who can stare while they feel the strings'
slight vibrations in their hands, the smooth
necks deep in the crooks of their hands, the bursting
sound of the low strings muted by the palms of their hands
making a quick cry in the throats of their amps?
For hours I've watched them: The song makes
the moves the players make, the sounds of the song
make the dance and the dancer, the dancer makes the song
through the staring eyes of the players. And I am on the edge
of attraction about to hop from this quiet place to the next.
Each time the sounds are different the song returns,
and I'm caught between two places of air, one too humid,
one touched by the bright brick of the night sky. What will I
step into: the hands of the players or the sway of the dancer?
The sound of the song? The staring eyes?

Trying Language

I'm sorry

it's your language

I'm just trying
to use it

Death of Sheriff William Brady

At day lite I hurt some men talkin and got up and put a morat on my horse.
Billy and his men was in camp nere by town and at sun up they head to worge town.
My fren Lon said see some well armed men comming.
They was Frank Macnab, Jim French, Fred Wate, Jon Midelton, Henry Brown,
and W H Bonney.

When they come in sight of some horses tide up in front of a little coral
they duck down and crauld up to the high doby wall.
French and Wate drilt some port holes in the wall and Jon stept out on gard.
Billy and the others lode there gons and cract jokes where we could all here
them as if nothing was the mater.

That mornin Brady eate brekfast at the Worly and then he stept out goin toworge
Elisis house to rest Macswain.
He stopt by the hotel to get Pepen and Hinman and Billy Mathhews
they was all in a room playing poker.

Billy tolt them when the first shot is fired, all of you kill a man every shot.
Brady and Pepen and Hinman walk up the street past the doby wall but they
thot it was sollid made of rock and no holes in it.
Billy and his boys jerked there gons out and they big shooting came off.

They was three shots hit Brady one in the leg and too in the body.
I nodist Hinman was shot thru the chest.
Brady he dropped his pistols and come realing to worge us.
He said something like I wish I wish, and then said blood is cloging
in my mouth and fell acrost his winchester.
Billy come out and roled him over to take his winchester but in the minnet
as he taken his hands down from his side Mathhews fired and
Billy got scard and said you old long logged S..B.

When Billy run up to Brady, Hinman said don't shood for I am killed.
In a wile Hinman ast for some water and Lon crauld out to him but
Billy drewe a beede on Hinman and killed him.
Pepen jest run way to worge Tunstall's store.

Billy and his frends were old long hungry looking men from 7 rivers and was
blood thirsty and would go in the fight for pass time.

I went down to the Worly for some grub ware I seen Billy who was grinnin
like a kressant moon and you
see them clere blu eyes fare skin and his yella hair.

Shadows Creep Faster

beneath a stone outcrop a woodrat turns
his back on me · everywhere the dark is rising ·
it's like that when news hits · in the flat distinct
desert the rising dark is slow ·
the shadow of one manlike cactus touches
the base of another and crawls up and into it ·
that muddy red is the salving heat where light
which touches the tips of needlepoints falls back
into the sun · *the sun sets* ·
we sit for hours while the light drains · chollas in shadows ·
the woodrat, the pocket mouse, the speckled toad all make
their preparations under the smoketree

Caravan Dogs

Tonight amid the silence of dogs
we unpack carts and bed down beasts,
place coins on the eyes of one who was loved
and not loved—some mourn or not,
or less.

Things and people vary in importance.
By glancing through a campsite one can see
what's needed or not by what's not packed
and is.

Tomorrow at dawn dogs will bark,
people will stir,
and the caravan will resume once more
its slow, slow journey
across the sometimes revealed
wide desert.

The Never-Stops Wind

Suddenly the freight car lurches.
The door slams back, a man with a flashlight
Calls me good evening.
I nod as I write good evening, lonely
And sick for home.

James Wright

—For the members of the Clutter Family who died Sunday
morning, November 15, 1959, in Holcomb, Kansas, at the
hands of two killers
—To Truman Capote, the teller of the tale
—To Heather McHugh, the teller of telling

Clutter Reverb

I. Report

2am. The shock—of last resort—shotgun report—rips out
and, wallbounced,

returns—reverb. Reversed by shot, stilled by light
and opened,

his head stone-stops. Nancy turns—*please don't*—straining tied
and rests—

her face—white shocked—against the wall. Her trembling, stilled
and quick-

gone in shotgun stutter—in dark cold bits.

II. Response

2am. Stray bits—all that's left escapes, bounced in wide-west
and east-widening

echoes through uncertain night,
and rips

past crouched elms, captured in stone quartz bits,
and heads

in light, in reverie bright with shock, in wave circles dim
and still

into my open door, my quartzstone cloak.

Last To See Them

Thirty-five years later I lean the car east;
slow-beat songs, and steady, counter-tap
the highway seams and ripples—

the land slaps back from the thick blade—the fresh
sharp blade—shotgun explosions in Holcomb,
nighthell kneeling on the mattress pad, killer's

Cat's Paw on the cardboard bed intending
comfort in the minute before some more
uncertain death-sounds.

The hard echoes drew Capote; the soft ones pull me through
the never-stops wind digging by my side to release
them—left unexpected behind—telling me to unbind

the head-swaddling, let them see in light
the green-gold fire of half-grown wheat.

They tell me no, stay home—bury us.
But I come to unwrap

my head, to catch the edge of me, to feel
the thought of it shed.

The Day of Many Coincidences

Nancy's head tilted back, mouth open,
awaited Dad's Elixir, and only the blond oak floor and ash
varnished smooth as fur, soft as the sun on
the day of her change, could harden the air.

Herb places the poison far back in her throat.

The magpies' hiddenness washes away in
wind whirlwound by the tornado of scrutiny, by the
Superchief butting hardened
air around Holcomb, wedging Herb and Nancy apart
from rest.

The magpie's fright heated upward trembles Herb's hand
above Nancy's tongue, arched up toward
Herb's reliable love, and only the tips of her hair
braided to a luster hung down
could feel the threat
of any train whose parts and pieces gather

in nests of bolts and dens of rods, rails piling,
burrows of plating and caves of steeltruss, huts and homes
of steam and combusting, cities of designs driven
down by the hand of calamity in wretched drives,

whose cinders are gathering to unexplode a train
through Holcomb, the little vacuum going puff.

Trust in the Teller

The lights of Holcomb scatter on in clusters
beneath the water tank. Holcomb Longhorns,
it says. I sit in my car by the road above town—
by the sand hills—alone with the coyote yip-howl,
the hollow pheasant whistle, the cloud-covering sun.

I imagine Bob Rupp's house behind me—small
pens of hogs, cattle and a dog, his wife Coleen nearby. He
stands watch with me. The elm tunnel is diminishing,
trying to fade. The lights in the house and
the blue TV—will they ever come on? He

sits in his car by her place above town—he
waits for the workers to leave. He
pulls the flower from his hip—pink-green and red,
almost see-through—he bends to put it over her head.
He waits for Nancy's hands to reach up. He

waits by the side of the road above town.
He waits with me for the lights to come on.

Curtains of Wake

Eight trains a day pull a curtain of wake
through town, and Holcomb in silence
recedes from River Valley Farm. But there is
no valley—only a river landed anyplace with its little
walls of habit. And there is no silence, only dry-cracking
tumult and whirlwind of metal parts on fabrications,
a nothing-web made of ten thousand jugglers tossing
scrap and debris,
an unlikely explosion in a line to the south of town.
When it happens, in the shadow of shouts,
all less lessens.

Nancy stands at the curtain, its fabric between her legs, her
arms about his shoulders, fingers in gauze, and just feels
the warm whirlwind—and, when it passes, the hard pull.

The Never-Stops Wind

Imagine a kicked earthshell, pantone,
fractal—flowers and trees, grasses thrashed
in variety, spread thin—valleys sunk acid deep by rivers—

the confusion of possibility high, the skin of life tight,
so tough, smooth—every part, each scale
the same, each birth balanced by death—

the wind starts, whispering soft in the wind-bent
wheat, slow from the west, turning (once) a grain of sand—Nancy's
eyes open (just once), bursting in the dark valley—

the wind-blown world, a rug scraped flat, the chaos
sheered away leaving the space between, flowers and trees turned
rye and wheat, the high confusion turned still, sliced simple—

the never-stops wind dropping Holcomb behind, a red
horizon stain urged against the sky, scope replacing scale—
the wasp-buzz considerations and conciliations clipped to relief.

See the Clutters gathered at the peak of the lane, their faces
phosphor white, awash in quick silver—the 10 o'clock news—
when Bobby Rupp leaves, blown by wind—when only two things can happen.

This is it! This has to be it!

Hurd's Philips 66 blurts bright with desolate brilliance,
one in a line of singularities along US 50 in Garden City.
In their black Chevy they carry a knife with a curved blade—it's very sharp.
A shotgun with pheasants carved on its stock—nice for hunting.

They've stopped for gasoline.
They have many shells, lengths of rope, gummy-blue rubber gloves.

Perry sitting on the can, rubbing his knees, chews aspirin,
enjoying the flavor and awaiting the result.
Dick pays for gas—high test—and grabs a bag of
jelly beans. "Let's go, honey."

Two stray tomcats with strange and clever habits juke
past tumbleweeds breezing east across Main Street, a galaxy
of two humbled in the near-collision and altered in their courses
spy the dark car—Dick veers to kill and Perry pulls the wheel.
The car heels and the cats jump, the heads of the killers
knock.

The stray bits of dust and piles of rock never stopped their vigil, never
felt any wind, only bent the light that reflects off the tracks past which
they turn west up the elm lane.

Nancy Clutter is the Truth About Me

Her tomb—I stand here chased again—she wears her prom dress—
finger-brushed red.

She laid it out dead night—she laid them out.
She died stunned cold November—the wind
—I feel it now—clear moon. She picked
warm clothes. No truth.

Her head is wrapped in cotton, shellacked grey—obscured.
The last thing she saw was the wall behind her bed.
The last thing she said—*please don't*.
The last thing she felt—a hot sting at the back of her head,

Bobby in her head—back to the wind, floating moonlight—dust—
nothing real.
Her eyes evaporated. Something chased me here.

The same song over&over&over.
Etching 9ths. Syncopated. Synthetic—digital clean. Her soft fingers blending the tone.
The scalpel-edge bass. Only two things can happen.

I want you—over&over&over—I want you beside. . .—
I want the blanket on. . .—I want the wind to stop—
I want to lay my head. . .—you are the only one I want&you

Blood Bubbles

They drove up the elm lane—their black cocoon
in a lake of moon silk, miles wide around white,
desert of coincidence. In this flat world the most fragment wind. . . .

Thistle in its caged thinking dips, drawn
by what draws air to dawn. In the plane of coincidences many
outcomes cluster. About likelihood. The thatched lane is the cylinder

of dual determinacy—all scattering moonlight and flecks of breeze
aim on its axis and bend only as it bends. All that might resolve
to two. They sat; the baby, ill, called, and a light turned on.

Nostalgia for Life

Hundreds stand—four steel caskets lie
before the sanctuary, First Methodist Church,
Garden City, Kansas. Rev. Leonard Cowan and his 48-voice
chancel choir spill and tumble, stones for jewels
in the hopeless bargain. Mr. & Mrs. Fielding Hands sing
“Whispering Hope.”

Inside the caskets lie their heads—sprayed Christmas shimmering.
Outside church, Bobby shifts his arms and fingers,
resets his head, slinging Nancy low in her cherry velvet toward the hearse.
Small pieces of Lord’s Prayer echo large
from headstones back to trees, back to Holcomb. 11 am.

The Santa Fe sprints east in the rising November warmth; car tires brush
US 50 through the streets of Holcomb, serene,
solemn. Laundry idles, cattle stare and chew.
Bobby stands by the gray steel fence listening to the first sand
flecks spray steel—remembering the night. No one but Bobby feels the wind
pick up.

Soft-Spoken

A drink, gloves, a flashlight, the knife, and Mr. Hickock's shotgun—the house, tremendous, looked empty. Full—filled with the ends of many trails—it overflowed in constancy, it billowed, catching the wind and strays.

Dick's plan had been long hard work, full of webs and proof—all gone false leaving only glory and the excitement. Perry with worthless bits transported to the car felt the wind scratch cat's paws on the rippleless lake. Behind, the Clutters huddled alone—suspicion blowing miles away.

Perry, in two, stepped away toward the fields and highway, but the story read on, the ending in his hands unknown. It would be a dream—she was ready for sleep, Perry said, hearing Herb's soft-spoken calm stopped up in clogging blood. Blood bubbled, Perry shot, and then the branchings thinned.

Kenyon's head in a circle of light murmured muffled pleadings; Nancy turned to the wall whispering hope. Bonnie—silence. The sky brightened clear as day. The killers sat and listened: Nothing—just the wind.

The Wind and A Kiss

One hard season drags into the next—their borders
smeared by wind. November 14—another blunt day, shell of sky
darkly blue, tumbleweed bundles leaping up the elm lane.
Bobby drives his Ford down the lane into the wind;
the headlights probe thistle and twigs on end.

He knocks and Nancy answers. Mother's asleep upstairs, Dad
and Kenyon watch TV, white on black, and gray.
Bobby and Nancy, the blanket on their laps—
folding hands beneath—he feels her finger
ring-bare again. Air falls on the door, whistles past brick. Phosphor paints
them gashed in lines like wind-run shadows in the elm lane.

Bobby and Nancy, together at the door, stand on the porch. The moon
snaps strict through dust to their feet, it never stops.
The wind tangles, their fingers web—she feels him touch the bare ring spot
on her thumb, real impossibility. Their kiss—mouths soft, wet skim blooming in the
sheer-sliced wind—she reaches on toes, lifting.

One hard season drags into another—years shredded and blown.
Robert Rupp stands in his yard looking down at the house. He
thumps his ring round and round. He hears thistle bound up the lane,
hears hogs rustle back, hears supper pans drop in the sink, hears
the wind threaten to stop.

Clear as Day

we talked awhile
made a date to see *Blue Denim*
we kissed and she ran into the house
it was cold and
kind of windy
a lot of tumbleweeds blowing about
the moon was so bright it was
clear as day
I drove away down the lane
I didn't see anyone
there must have been someone down there
hiding among the trees just waiting
for me to leave

I thought I could see for miles around

Teller and Told

And here they lie—Herb and Nancy—
and here we talk, you and I;
and, beyond the fence, the whispers.

Hear that?—the Santa Fe running
distant—silent,
only a cry: a horn in the
wheat.

His last hope is, in silence, to wake, to walk
the elm lane tremendous to its end. To see the river
swell to lake, moonwashed and smooth. My cloak lies quartzstone, now,
over him.

Their words and acts were simple—only the dark is
night. They would lie here, simple under stones—only
the story needed you.

One night—last night?—
Nancy's whispered *oh please*—
her seducing words before we placed the poison.
From that moment to this, just one fragment remains fixed.

We are the wind and the wheat.

Leaf of My Puzzled Desire

No telling what these bits once were except
they were whole and had a purpose, horizons
far different than to be junked on a side street.
Sunlight glitters across broken shards of glass:
a man says, When I was younger my dreams of what
I hoped to write woke me from the soundest sleep

Stephen Dobyns

Leaf of My Puzzled Desire

A leaf falls in high wind and drifts
along a path unfolding by simple rules:
rise away from heat, sink toward cold.
I'll claim this mirage
forming in the heat field tinged
the reluctant blue of made belief. *Move*
rapidly toward the rising heat.

After an odd juke, the leaf, drained,
pauses on a stone whose alter-center
is the rare blue-shading-white
of pale turquoise.
A lizard turns one eye
and studies the stone and leaf
for hours no one sees.

While resting,
cool. In cooling,
form wind. Without wind,
settle.

In time
the lizard rises
and leaves its marks of walking away,
records attitudes of legs and tail,
a sign with all the meaning
I need.

Even Leonardo Doesn't Know

Two candles light her face in the room.
da Vinci mixes paints, locks the door;
he starts to dissolve the pigment around her lips;
he sweats and unties the string from his neck,
unbuttons his shirt, slips it off,
softening the paint,
shading off the color values so her face in all light
seems lit by two candles.

He closes the drapes so no one sees him bare to the waist
working her, the paint softened enough for him
to see the two candles reflected and himself.
He slips loose his waist string,
stroking her lips' corners to remove harsh hints of light.

He is badgered by her sidelong gaze and interested slight smile
that thousands would study along with light that glides
over her form and the vacant and dreamy background.
He is never enough; his errors pile and bulk.
Tonight's fault is a color too strong in the corners of her mouth.

On in the night the room fills with oily smoke and breath,
heat from muscles and skill, drops that mix and smear on the floor.
Her face grows moist as he pulls colors from it,
the mirror-paint showing him and two lights.
He erases another blemish, working the errors,
one by one,
aside.

The Teacher of Crows

I know a crow caged in Pittsburgh who says "Caw! Caw!"
I don't mean the sound a crow makes which a writer marks
"Caw! Caw!" but the sound a child makes
when reading the signs "Caw! Caw!"

A great man perhaps taught the crow this subtle self-putdown.
Is it proper for a crow to crudely grasp a wooden dowel
and glance your way saying "Caw! Caw!" (Actually
it's more like "caw, caw" —

debonair.) What if
the man who looks sane stops you in the street and grasps your arm
saying "Human! Speech!?" The abstraction is slapstick.
Can the crow tell when you're laid low by its "Caw, Caw"
that it just made itself a fool? Or is the crow better:

self-confident enough to enjoy the joke as you?
The teacher of crows is gone—only his disciplines remain.

The Source of It All

Even the day after death, air drains
to the floor as if the circle of wind
makes a difference; we sit
puzzled by the cold at our feet
in a room half-filled with the urge
to move, just any part of us
in any direction but the round
envelope of the air in the room. This time
I hung behind and watched grave workers pull away
the green carpets and lower by clever parts
the coffin into its box and lower half-lids
with fat ropes over the dark roses we left.
The pieces formed an imperfect seal they
covered with thin and dusty soil
which billowed like the flock of birds
that picked just then to head south. Two men
with shovels and a wind building to early snow. Make
that three. I'll tell you what it is:
The cold wind come down from Montreal cools
the winter glass, and air warmed by our grief
rises to meet the glass where it chills and falls
along the glass face, gaining speed as it gains cold,
draining to the floor, heavy as a lump of clay
mixed in dusty soil. Warm air is forced up
to the glass to circle, circle, to circle.
Have you ever smelled cold glass, winter
just beyond, smelled what it does to warm air?
Smell the cold glass, tell me what you smell.

Colors Too Bright

Colors too bright saturate her eyes—
her dream. It's the hour when only one dog barks,
and a green as hot as red burns her hands to the touch
as she breaks for the door, the heat from her night shirt hard
as acid and even the dark sears white. Above, the borealis tries
every color, God's safety valve against star

burn-in—what will be when real light bangs the leaves, her eyes:
the Great Bear in his skimpy outline will fade, she will fade
and what small substance her hand holds in colors too sharp
will fly a reversed burst in her eyes. But this is only night,
the domain of the hawkowl who sees, who hears, who is the owl
of light, whose sight is reversed, mirror of hunger and heat, fear

of lower branches and who sits there. Colors, fragments, songs
spill spawn across the lower fifth of the sky, maybe a horizon line,
fill her night shirt with nighthawk moves. She makes the X
across her chest, fingers folds at the end of her shirt, and scissors it up
and off, holds it still, and drops its liquid green
at the edge of the line cutting her off from the tree

she adores. Her dream was never more real—
she becomes the nightowl—
she hears the hidden land-sighs—
she pierces the branch with the nails of her toes—
she glides on a hung string, silent, to her first meal.

Our Language Suits Us Like Pants

Inner pouch of my heart's being
turned inside out, sentiment

hacked in lines by some random
loser whose idea of poetry is to fester
beneath trees and flame about sunsets.
Sure, tense syntax and moby images lend
an air of winitude to the bletcherous crock.
Tweaking the cruft into clever stanzas
just makes it clear the poet is a puremade bagbiter.
Even when we can't say it, our words do,
their denial graceful with powerful ugliness.
So say it easy: the heart's life-lining revealed

in laminar beams of line, the sunlight's
catastrophe on cloud reflecting the world's pond
of despair: say there's a way to come around it all,
come around finally and win big.

Crossed Elements

The bird books say that male birds make their song-making selves when testosterone fills the brain in the presence of birdsong—singing needs more than song alone or time. The river shifts from foot to foot awaiting the day you'll cross.

One day I saw the desert road dissolve as I sped,
by chance, away from you, strange repeller,
and approaching the break
in the distorting road,
I saw water too deep to cross,
almost,
and the mind built to make symbols
after hearing your voice can see
only water turned to river, can hear only hiss.

I'll almost tell you what.
You opened your mouth as if to sing.
I turned my shoulder across yours
and faced away. You pulled the air
far into your chest. I walked back to the river
and across. I heard the river hiss,
I walked as I watched the water.

Sleepwalking on Ice

I heard them call, the knives, their sharp
little voices tucked between one note
and the next and edging up;
calling me from bed,
urging me to leave the clutch of her skin,
hot to the touch, taunting

in long zinging shouts—their between-note tones
slurring from one off-place to another shedding
a music more whole than dead-on notes
held steady, glass-flat. It's the pitch of black
when the song of night
cracks the wintercoat of rain:
trees turned ice. I ran but the floor
shellacked with keep-on ice
turned my running off. I stood entirely

motionless, but one small
light through the window or an
imperfect level slid me toward them
with the force of shallow decline.

In their drawer, the clutch of knives all writhed
and rolled but the one I grasped. Chilled, lit,
I sliced in circles the half of me,
and from the other half
fell the half I forgot.

Faith Seed

Snow falls and where it ends, he thinks, all will.
Streets stop, dark gorges on the city, even
streetlight penetrates shallow the dark
where he leans shoulder to brick, knee bent and foot tucked,
hands pocketed and tight, everything he has
neatly put away against the cold—everything evaporated
to a bulb of streetlight whose shape is seen by tattered flakes,
every sound in the night swallowed and the song in his head faded.
Waiting at their meeting place for the woman who left him
just outside a small ring of faith that dimly lights his face,
he knows light can't be seen—it's as dark as what's lost—
unless you stand where it's aimed. He knows
this not by faith but by time
spent standing in the shade.

Or unless you stand where it scatters, where light
gone wrong in a bad-luck bounce lands by chance.
He knows this not from faith but from times spent sitting in night
dark rooms warmly lit by a streetlight's mild distraction,
lit by what the orange bright arc cares nothing of,
or little of.

(. . . somewhere else, in the metal-stained light of a streetlight's arc
a rained-on curb bursts orange and bare, but
in the room beyond, behind the thin curtain gauze,
after the mist sprinkles chance, the sprung-free light hangs
like a hushed song, like the last of her shhh as she closes
the door between them . . .)

He believes in faith, all but its size; he's seen
it angled, not head-on, caught only its side
as it passed nearby—as it passed while he stood in the shade.
Faith's flight is wide, and when it passes, the shade
lightens.

Outside the streetlight, a sound starts—
of steps and shifting shoes on the whitening curb,
light sounds coming near in the dark.
His hands pull free from what pocket warmth there was,
his boot slips down the brick and his knee unfolds.

He hears shoes stopping in the midst of the streetlight's orange arc;
he leans his shoulder forward and pushes up from the wall.
Toward the back of his mind he hears the sounds
of a serenade and steps into the rim of his streetlight,
he hears the shhh swell to faith.

Jimmy, Jimmy, Oh Jimmy Mack

James Michael Maguire 1953–1980

Jimmy's grave is flat and nothing
in the cemetery grove of fat maples
blowing electric green not a mile from the river
wind blowing like the background sound
of highspeed tires on the highway not far away
nearby toy trucks and a 2-month-old's grave
playing dead but it's Jimmy I found
curled black Jimmy in his box
whose head thrown through sheetrock
was a missile aimed at his mother's cunt bursting out black Jimmy's
voice knocked from his head Jimmy bare
in the trees by the stonewall we tried
being girls by the side of the road we lay
on each other and he whispered lust my name
and Buddy and Jimmy and me with the girls
in the sandpit Buddy a man
almost and Jimmy and Buddy bare jumping from the sand cliffs
for the girls to watch Buddy hard
and I told them it's ok it's ok
but they hunched in a circle thinking God Jimmy
in a school for the deaf for imbeciles coming home
Jimmy in the shootout
with cops in his car to escape his head
through the windshield the oak
bark the meat through the otherside
past the sandpit the highway the river Jimmy
laughing Jimmy
whose voice was bunched on one side of his head the cracks in his skull
like the hammer in her cunt Jimmy
under ground his stone flat and nothing only the baby
can laugh under ground in his box full of toys
in the electric green cemetery by the river wind
blowing the sand over grass in my eyes with no cracks
in my head to see with
no cracks in my head
direct to you
Jimmy

In Kansas I Ask Nancy (Dead) to Love Me

Every line and staggered word is packed
in the back seat, her face finally
evaporated to small towns, huddled hard islands.
She tracks me flat, and wind-whisk voices tell it: Everyone
I could love

is in the ground. On the small hill high
where I stand and hear the far metal-metal whine
of wheels on rails angled on a line
away from me lies
the girl dressed in gauze
who raises the blue cup in her hands.

In the proposition of things it's words
for bones—sense to dust sand-papered—
and lines for flesh is too much to ask for:

the small grass blades
brush my eyelids,
roots talk with the dead.

Good Evening, Bitter

The evening is cracked
by understandings and slivers
of lights beneath doorways,
a broken bowl the color of glass
roses still rocks, and the cup
emptied of tea still holds
its folded lemon among sifted
leaves.

Beneath your shut bedroom door
the crack of light is darkened
by your passing,

I wait in its shadow.

Red Lining

Remember the day at the anthill
when I took your hand?
A simple scene: sitting on a green
hillside, low hills, complex
clouds evolving in the sky, red ants climbing
up the backs of your thighs and under your shorts.
Last night I woke before the clouds broke

from a hiding horizon.
The dream that woke me:
We were on a hillside, sitting in red ants
stretching in a line, along a row of low hills
up your legs to your arm. They had taken your hand.
I followed that line, stepping neither up nor down,
followed it all the way back to this bed.

Years later, I sat on the hillside
and watched cars at dusk drive away
toward the hidden horizon, not a constant
level but near, and though the hills
may have been green, all I could see were the red lights
in a line like a river flowing out,
and in that line a gap, a car not there,
something forgotten, or someone.

Wrapped in a Single Conclusion

You say you love me—it seems
less important than the sweet snow
falling just outside, the corner of my bed
pushed up against the window.
Have I felt this way before?
All the things I could say are rolled into one word
I hear each time the wind hits the glass
by my head. All I might feel
is the healing scar a sharp stone makes in the well
of high value.
I am deep in snow, each flake
makes a flat sound. I lie here just the same,
you say you love me just the same. Can this world
of snow and glass, you and me,
ever fly apart?

The Last to Know Always Vanishes

For my family, just the two of them

I. Which You Is It?

Late November, the sky
held close, snow
drunk-walking down.
The gray thin maples at grass's verge
stood steady. Mother and Father butchered
a pig in the lowering sky light.

No sound
but the slice of knife through meat
like birth sliding out
and the murmuring words
of butchers at work.

II. Mother: House of Hard Hearing

Your house refused to be painted,
fell down instead—its fell-down beams holding
up against the bleach of deep noticing
reserved for children and bees. Did you think
I didn't see its nails rust and thin
till they snapped? Its foundation—
not dug, but sandy soil piled
against mortared rocks broken square—
is filled by debris
heaped on broken floors and half-hearted walls:
lamps I never saw lit, books you closed
as soon as I opened them, bits of plates
and cups you used for whispered meals
long after I fell to bed.
In that new-made dump I added my own
throw-aways: soup cans and letters,
apple cores and pictures of us. You said

to make a strong foundation wall
place an iron meteorite
in poured concrete and connect
an iron rod from its center to the surface
—hammer, and the blow
would ring hard, bursting
by vibration small caves of trapped air,
the voice of resonating metal
settling unstill forms. But that's all

☺ ☺ ☺

you said. The back
of my hand is a wild place to see
the future and each hair
that turns white there is a year
the bedstead and springs creak
from hard rust and warm winds
not my jump for joy.

III. The Knife

A 9-inch slaughter knife,
thick blade, fresh sharp edge,
prepared to painlessly open
the flesh deep to the bone
at the back of a neck.

What kind of steel was it, which knife-smith
designed the blade,
forged it to follow the exact line
that separates a pig from its life?
What kind of thing could
so quickly move
between life and death?

IV. Father: Butterflies Gather and Rejoice

The beams were hand-hewn
but you never said by whose—the wood
well past brown and into gray
and generations of cows had so smoothed
the slats that held their necks in place
they were riverstones in a bowl of water.
By the time I thought to ask
so were you and your memories had shattered
like the south-facing boards you never painted.
After the hay was lined in rows
you backed the hay-rake under the barn
on the ground level side
and there it still sits after 30 years rusting
by the pool of urine-soaked water which gathers
every day after I wash down the cow stalls.
Your fingers grow curved like old paper or weed stalks.
But none of this explains the massed butterfly swarm
by the ditch that drains the pool beneath the barn
and sends the water—piss and all—to the seasonal stream
that draws what's left to the dispersing sea.
Your hands once smooth have hardened to boards
that move in tight-bound circles by your knees;
I know them only by their rasp touch on my cheek.
Your voice has washed into itself and dried to a pair of folded wings.

In the field, one by one, the butterflies drop
to a bare spot where they watch the sky fold to firey ash
and the barn drop its time-worn beams
on your last day's work and the waste left behind.

V. My Yearly Walk

I've long since left this valley behind,
but every year I return, stop by the river,
and up from bitter river smells
past sugar-filled trees I climb small rolled lawns
by upturned stones bearing names,
by gaps in straight headstone rows
where dead will some day lie. I seek
the piece of land they bought
among the boring long, same rows,
the place where they will be one day:
Through ten or twenty years of quiet,
gap-or-grave is their only message to me.
It takes a minute to find the gap.

Sometimes I want to find the gap, and sometimes
I want to find graves.
When I find the gap I stand in it
and look down toward the river
that flows with indecision both ways.
I pretend I still live in this valley.
I think: *You're still alive
somewhere.*

VI. The Meteorite Always Rings Twice

After you left I cleared the cellar,
heaped its contents in a hole I dug
by the stream. With the tips
of my fingers I checked the concrete walls
he poured for rods. Later,
while the sky dispersed to blurring shards,
I finger-combed my hair and thought
of what you said. I think

a hangman worked here once
and from that sun-cured joist
after the stool was kicked free
you held your breath instead.

Make More

Confusionists and superficial intellectuals move ahead....
Paul Feyerabend

Dreamsong and Blessing

One day my daughter will die
with long memories I can never know
filled with love for strangers
in a town I'll never be to
in a bed, I hope, made up lovingly
by people I can't imagine who hold her
tenderly, who find her a blessing,
after her head unfolds thoughts
I could never have, after a life
defining people who today
can only stumble and mutter. With all the words
I can find and lines I can write in wild profusion,
in all my clever thinking and imagining,
with all the books I've written and postures, the incredible
singing I've heard and playing I've done and places
I've been and people I've loved and hated,
all the muscle work for nothing much
I've tried to picture the tint of purple
on the iris outside the window where she'll
breathe in her last and with that last breath
say a word that some will write down
and others never forget, but I can't:
that day is too removed, my simplicity
too limiting, my reach no wider
than her wrist the day I first brought
her home and all she could dream of
was me.

http://www.BerlinOnline.de/spass/live_kamera/.html/alex.html

The name "Christa" sat down,
her back to me, her fists behind her back.
With the three least fingers of each hand she held
the fingers of her lover, and in the circle of the thumb
and forefinger of her left
she held my thumb, and in the other circle,
my forefinger. Her mother watched.
Later we drove to a German bahnhof
on a high place leaving a valley. The arrows
meant the opposite, and a couple
stole my car for a baby carriage. The Ford
dealer was down the street, but I didn't want
to find it. It was the last I saw of her name.
Later I sat in my study with the warm spring air
of California heaving like breath in and out
of my opened screendoor—I watched the cars
at 3am drive in big jumps through
Alexanderplatz on a rainy night in Berlin
as if miracles could happen
or do.

False Waiting

Waiting
for you, night rain
freezing close
to the sound of nails
dropping on nails.
Hollow sound
of an umbrella
slows outside
my door, I raise
my head
from this poem
brewing one word short.
The less sound
passes, knocks rain next
door, the rainless nest
ducks inside.
Rain resumes.
The search resumes
for the word I'm short.

Where Did That Story Come From?

She waved
at me I think
from her bedroom window
dressed like women unashamed of themselves do
in panties and bra nothing else
the palm of her hand directed her
her wrist elbow and arm followed its directings
her shoulders waved side to side
her upper body
swaying breasts even in their harnesses
hitched up and ready for work
and her hips and legs but I couldn't see them
head hair eyes all of her was waving
at me I think
from her bedroom window
like a woman enthusiastic for her lover
going or coming who knows
her palm was pushing a handkerchief I think
perhaps she weeps I thought

then I saw what she was doing
washing windows
like any housewife
on display
where did that story come from?

Multi-ku (1)

On trash day snow
flakes off the bottoms of clouds

covers the streets
and garbage trucks backing up pack it
down

fills in like probing questionnaires
the tracks of footprints left before
dawn

On the mantle above
creaking flakes of fired cinders
the picture of you and me
settles in

Finger Paints

Only a dozen acrylics in his box
plus whatever his fussy palette might yield,
and the combinations science predicted
though he preferred to feel them between his fingers.
His canvas was just that—rough hemp
fabric he made himself, feeling each
thick thread in his fingers before washing
and stretching it tight to sun dry.
His easel was white pine pieces sewed
together with twine and old bolts
he found at the junkyard or by the road.
Only the acrylics and horsehair brushes
were storebought—even his director's chair
was made of old beach umbrellas abandoned
on recycling days and wood from a barn torn down.

He'd find a house or horsestall broken down
or a store burned half to the ground, a car wreck
that killed 6 seniors on their way to the prom
in June. He thought of the crickets silenced
by the metal wrenching sounds of a car twisting
like light off a freshly bought diamond ring
the driver would want to give his girl
after the last dance, only their last dance
was a spinetwister, and only because
of a coincidence of physics that they came
to rest in each others' arms did the painter
set himself down in front of their car
in some following year to paint only
what he could feel
between the calloused pads
of his work-wearied fingers.

Floor Life

We lie near
each other

tonight separated
by ocean, plane ride,
homelights below, above.

My shirt and pants
on your blouse and skirt

on the floor in your closet
tonight.

Secrets of Travel, of Work

Rivers and bridges, mountains, seas—do not give them new names.
They are as silly clothes or none, are no more than gossip.

Spend midday on foot; use a stick as a third thin leg;
save morning time and evening time for thought.

Wish for beds or mats you've never warmed, simple food
without excess drink, for poetry is the duty of man alone

and woman alone but the duty of man and woman together
is production. With simple food you can do anything.

Keep your poems to your pockets, carried as winged insects tucked
in vegetable cloth. When asked, make them fly away; when asked,

make more.