

Recollecting Snow

Recollecting Snow

by

William C. Watterson

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RECOLLECTING SNOW

RECOLLECTING SNOW

My cat with no hope of heaven
stares out the window
at new snow in the clearing,
the curl of her tail
like an inverted question mark.

In her I accept the silence,
the voicelessness at the heart of silence
which is the purest suffering.

Recollecting snow,
I see that feeling leaves no trace,
like filled-in footprints
of something in the night
that scurried from the storm,
just ink marks on a page
made by somebody on the way
to somewhere else
and the paper always empty
and always full . . .

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HORATIAN VARIATIONS
(ODE XI: "To Phyllis")

I have a case of good Barolo almost ten years old
and parsley for garlands and crowns.
I've got ivy for your hair, Phyllis,
that bright silk that shimmers down.
My house smiles with heirloom silver,
and we're ready for the big Spring do:
the caterer's girls run all around,
and a last fire warms the open flue
with hickory smoke that wafts
like incense from the ground.
It's all for you, this celebration
of Maecenas' birthday in mid-April
happier than my own,
hallowed time of the sea-born Venus.
As for Telephus, forget him;
He may be hot, but that rich bitch
has him on a leash, and they're both mutts.
Think of Bellerophon and Pegasus
and you won't get hurt:
a lofty mount can throw a stud
and soar: no need to paw the dirt.
Some things just weren't meant to fly.
Come, then, O last of my loves,
for I will never again care for any woman.
Read out loud these words of mine again
from that whiskey throat of yours:
Sometimes a poem can still kill the pain.

AT THE GRAVE OF TOLSTOY
(Yashnaya Polyana)

In the late October light
that cannot make up for loss
yellow birch leaves
whisper a secret:

"Life is suffering, art vanity.
The music the wind makes
means only itself,
as if the rib cage
were a wind chime
with the heart gone
out of the body."

Everywhere small birds are skittering
on the way to somewhere else.

Soon the first snowflakes will fall.

Underground your bones say
"like angels we hasten
mutely on the wing."

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ON READING CAVAFY

Without hope, in love with the history
that doomed you,
you hung on for centuries
in a city of rose-water and brine,
mud and myrrh, this Alexandria,
whore of all desire
and pitiless as the Farshooter's glint
on distant waves or the wider ocean of an ephebe's eyes.
Through the tavern haze of years
I see you drowning in that dream,
in depths cloudless as unmixed ouzo,
in the small oblivion of a stranger's smile.

How well your nostrils knew it,
the odor of decay nearest the root
where Ptolemies in the earth
mulched the stiff papyrus.
Your stylus mastered the emptiness
of paper,
but the hollow of your groin was hapless,
the boys there pale as muskrose
in Elysian darkness.

Once you saw a working-class Adonis
shed his cinnamon-colored suit on the beach
then stride with adolescent calm
into the repeating waves.
Your feathered talons
longed for that stark thigh,
and twenty years later you wrote a poem
about the moment, unconsummated,
your tongue on fire
and Clio your only audience.
Those wide eyes ripe as olives --

RECOLLECTING SNOW

were they Attic or Egyptian?
Even you could not remember.

Mnemosyne nursed you
but in her womb there is only one idea,
the idea of academic Plato
with his heaven for all the flesh
lost but perfect forever
as if the salt of memory
could cure past stench
the flyblown forms of time.

On the strand a boy's delicate footprints
run into the sea.
It is as if his golden ankles
had suddenly sprouted wings . . .

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THE KARMA OF PENS

A bankrupt spends his last dollar on a pen,
but drops it on the sidewalk near the court house.

A secretary finds it on the way to work
and leaves it on her desk during lunch break.

Her boss picks it up to sign a notice
telling her she's been let go.

He takes it home with its blue-bullet cap,
where his wife who is a college professor
swipes it to grade a batch of freshman papers,
most of them in the red.

She brings it to her office and a student borrows it
to write a last love letter before committing suicide.

He flings it in the sweet grass of a springtime
he has decided to forego.

An old poet with nothing left to say
spots the Paper-mate on campus
but lets it lie.

He is through outwitting silence
and just keeps moving.

Everywhere night is falling
and the mercury starts to plunge.

A dew drop forms like a diamond
on the ballpoint.

If you should chance to come this way yourself,
You would see it shines for no one in the dark.

SEPTEMBER

A herd of Holsteins,
maybe fifty in all,
glows in a final nimbus of light
as darkness devours the hill crest.

They have grazed on that slope
for years
though none has stood
in the same spot relative to the others
nor likely will again.

Sunset gilds but cannot save
this abstraction of black and white on green,
its brief surety moot as memory.

The soon-to-be departed cows
go out like candles, one by one.

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NANTUCKET FAREWELL

The brown shingled house on Hulbert Avenue,
the hundred yards of white picket fence
with each morning glory and rose
in its place and blooming without effort
though inside the gate this year
there are weeds on the croquet pitch
and the lawn is brown around the edges
wept-for but unwatered.
In the house dust deepens on the mantles
and mildew sours the salt-sweet air.
Day help lets the telephone ring too long.
They snatch drinks and pilfer silver
and thread-bare Orientals underfoot
go gritty and unvacuumed this Labor Day.

The matriarch is dead at ninety,
carried off by a terrible stroke
that did her in at last
though her own swing was still sound
on the last tee of the back nine
in the game that finally bogeyed her.
Along with golf and tennis
it was the two martinis every night before dinner
(without wine),
the chicken a la King on toast
and pride in lineage
that kept her at the top of her form,
her widow's wealth devoured
by prep schools and prodigal offspring
with their poor business sense
and marital disasters.

Her twenty grandchildren and great grandchildren
were all terrified of the bony talons
and shrill bird-like voice
that quickened to rebuke at table

RECOLLECTING SNOW

or anywhere else they were made to sit or stand,
blond heads bowed in frozen deference.
There would be no intercession
from cowed parents
when scolding was dished out
and they knew it.
Your cousins, jocks from Groton,
trembled like girls
in the icy wither of her stare.

Next year strangers will be living here,
Some Lopahin with too much money
and too loud a voice
and a wife who cannot silence
the children clambering over furniture
and running noisily through rooms
your Grandmother would not have let them in.
(Now they can pay the taxes and the upkeep.)

Sell the antiques. Keep the yellowing photos
of your Grandfather with his prize fish,
of Lucy's first dip in the surf,
of Uncle Jarvis in his sailor suit at six
(finished at forty by the booze),
of your Grandmother scowling at her geriatric trophies,
of potted neighbors clowning their red-eyed way
through end-of-season bashes at the Club.

Put on one of those funky straw hats
that hang in the hall
where ghosts in white-sheeted chairs
bid you a gruff farewell
pretending you'll come back next May.
Feel the uselessness of keys
as you lock the place up
for the last time in September
and dance down the steps
of the wrap-around porch

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like a tourist,
fool that you are
for having known this life at all,
fool for having lost it.

THE LORD'S PRAYER: PC VERSION

Our anti-patriarchal ideology, with art no haven,
hallowed be thy game.
Empowerment come, all liberals are scum,
in college as they are in government.
Give us this day our daily deconstruction,
And forgive us our aporia,
as we forgive those who have interrogated our discourse.
Lead us not into interiority,
but deliver us from bourgeois humanism,
for thine is the kinkdom (French theory), the university
presses,
and tenure,
forever and ever.

A(wo)men.

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LIKE HILDEGARDE A PETAL ON THE BREATH OF
GOD

Like a hooked rainbow
taut on a line,
or a hummingbird
in a high wind.
Like the sight of a supernova
outlasting the event by years,
or a sketch by Leonardo
of machines that wouldn't work.
Like a last ode by Keats
or Mercutio's dying quibble,
we came to the end of love so lightly.

HOUSEMASTER

He drove a womb-white Thunderbird
to weekend trysts,
his mother on the mantle piece
larger than life in her silver frame,
mute witness to a long list
of fifth-form crushes.

At Christmas time he got away
to Key West or Morocco;
hinting at beaches, whores,
the jet-set whirl of sleazy millionaires
in search of novel pleasures.
A man of the world in his mind,
he lorded it over us like girls.

Most nights he reeked of gin,
sang along with Callas
"falsetto" in his study
or prowled the hall for boys
unduly bad at bedtime.
The hairbrush he hid in the drawer
of his mother's Hepplewhite
made us all think twice about cheek.

In class his proofs were simple and austere,
the certainties of Euclid
the logic of his universe,
inevitable and clear
as the ninety mile an hour course he steered
into a tree when he couldn't veer away
from the clinic's fatal call:
He was "positive" after all.

There was no blood when they found him
prim as a propped-up doll

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in pepper and salt herringbone,
the discipline of death formal
as the bruise-blue silk and gold
of his old school tie,
that noose around his neck
snapped neatly above the collar.
His eyes were open and seemed to stare
beyond the shattered windshield
at some reality that for him
would now no longer be a possibility:
Rugby scrums, Puccini arias, Homecoming teas
and grateful old boys at the urn
learning their way with new wives,
balancing saucers like smiles
and full to overflowing.

ON A LATE DRAWING BY MICHELANGELO
(Presented to Tomasso de Cavalieri in 1533)

"You gave this soul, although divine, to time."
Sonnet XXII

Here it is for everyone to see,
an old man's obsession
with the body as pure function:
A putto shits in a corner
while another wipes wine lees
from his mouth.
Amorini piss the failed arc
of their transcendence,
smirking allegories
of mindless pleasure.

The youthful David is beautiful,
his power the power
of the nude male animal
unburdened by soul.

The old Nicodemus is also beautiful,
a face without a body
briefly marble
on the way back to being dust.

Did you really think Tomasso
in the rapt perfection of his form
could love an old sculptor struggling
to free himself from stone?

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

VITAL SIGNS

I was electronic blips on a screen
their frequency and range
suddenly faltering
and then I was only a line,
the shortest distance
between two points.

Why?

Somebody wrote me out of the script
like a minor character
in a daytime soap.

Who?

An orderly in blinding white
wheeled me out
in the hidden compartment
of the death gurney
as the theme song from
"Days of our Lives"
began to play
in an empty hospital room,
that moment when I always
changed the channel
anyway.

CAT FALL

I.

Outside
the feral mother won't let me near
though when I call she hears me;
she never quite finishes her food.
She covers the bowl with grass,
then arranges sticks and stones
around it in patterns
I do not understand.

Only she knows what she means.

II.

Inside
the paws of the kitten who survived
explore the keyboard
of an old piano,
striking notes randomly
like a tone row by Schoenberg
never to be repeated.
Music at the edge,
at the edge music
which will not harden into form.

A gust rattles the windowpane.

On the roof the rain is playing
its small silver triangle.

III.

Yellow eyes stare up into my eyes,
their vacancy
unwordable as song . . .

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GUSSIE

Everybody knew Gussie:
the stout posture of chest
ample as Brunhilde's
even at seventy,
the strong straight arms
that lugged the shopping bags
with fifteen pounds of canned cat food
apiece,
the symmetry of her gait
as she marched down the same old streets,
winter and summer,
come snow or high humidity
to supermarkets and back again
to that decaying house of her father,
its single Victorian tower
like a battlement or a church
pawing its way toward heaven.

For forty years she salvaged:
tortoise shells, calicos, and Russian blues,
orange tigers and grey,
Siamese, Persians, and Angoras,
mothers with their young, Toms,
orphans of both sexes (fixed and unfixed),
the one-eyed, the tailless, and the lame,
money cats all who ate away
the last of an old immigrant's fortune,
her father's horsehair sofas in the parlor
year-round creches of kittens,
the bookcases living libraries
and bowls of brown kibble
like cocktail snacks
on a sideboard scratched to shreds.

RECOLLECTING SNOW

Gussie knew nobody but waved to all
briskly, winter and summer,
too busy on her errands to stop,
her kindness like a clock
Teutonic and precise
with hands always on time
though behind the impassive face
neighbors said the tooth of a gear was gone

her escapement imperfect
like the gap in an alley fighter's grin.

The postman found her in January
frozen on the kitchen floor.
On her breast a mackerel tabby purred:
his motor ran twenty-four hours
after the corpse was cold.

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THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

He falls asleep
changing his will in his mind,
who to leave to, who not to,
though even dead drunk
he knows that he himself
is worthless.

Somewhere are distant nieces,
nephews, cousins, and friends,
their Christmas cards
on the mantel
a tinselled reminder
that Scrooge still has a chance.

All are dispensable as reruns
in a house without a wife;
Were they so great --
Alastair Sims', or Jimmy Stewart's,
or somebody else's wonderful life?
Perhaps. But what earthly use
are jingle bells, helping hands, or wings?

In the end he decides
on the animal league,
remembers the green-black
and grey stripes
of an abandoned tabby,
the pitiless yellow eyes
that asked for nothing
as she circled and circled
the narrow cage.
The cool touch of her nose
through the bars
felt like a snowflake
on the booze-numb knuckles
of his fist.

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He weeps -- not because he loves --
(that is unimportant now),
but because what has been most to him
has been littlest and least.

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A MEMORY OF JAMES WRIGHT
(MAY, 1970)

In Ohio on a jag
he intoned at Oberlin:
"Who put the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?"
Ar greener English Kenyon
he contained himself,
began with "Winter Remembered" got by heart
and said the piece for Ransom,
the gentleman trying hard to hear,
his head inclined to Lowell perhaps
in the icy echoes of Ascension Hall.

In the poems between poems
he cursed Kent State,
the bull muscles of his neck
knotted and angry,
the wine-dark kindness of his eyes
overflowing.

Where courteous Dekes tapped kegs
Ransom's white head bowed again
his half-glass golden as the day failed:
"These days suicides get high grades
for feeling, but a poet will find God
in darkness and in light,
in hunger and satiety."
Comely the nightfall
under roots and stars
but we go soon enough
beneath the sobering shales.

Later, the master out of earshot
like a shade, Wright muttered:
"Roethke didn't drown by accident,
you know.
He swam himself to death

RECOLLECTING SNOW

in the cruel blue lanes of a college pool."

Outside in the twilight it was Springtime.

Nighthawk and thrush, phoebe and shrike,
made tumult with the tongues of many birds.

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ELEGY FOR F.O. MATTHIESSEN
(1902-1950)

At the end of the road was a door
which was a window
in a business-class hotel
near North Station.
You jumped,
knowing we are all passers-by.

The last thing you did
was take your Skull and Bones pin off,
leaving old gold on a bureau of deal.

Mattie, the boys at Harvard are still blond,
the brick of Massachusetts Hall
ruddy as the jowls of an old banker
after three martinis.
Boston is still black and white
in winter,
like a monochrome of Emerson,
his granite face
surveying the profit and the loss.

On the Charles crew jocks hunch and stroke
in the long boats,
preps from Groton and St. Mark's,
tomorrow's trustees
and members of the Corporation.
They row with the current
and the flood bears them swiftly away.

CATECHISM

The priest tells us after school
that genitals
are the gifts of God's love,
that the pleasure there
derives from agency
and the replication
of creation in Genesis
ex nihilo
and the promulgation
of his wondrous image
here on earth.

He says that Christ the child
is ubiquitous
in the shuddering darkness,
his rebirth the end of each true act of love
and all we know of Heaven.

He exhorts us when we sire children
to see in our minds' eye
at the moment of conception
a swirl of putti
encompassing the Father's throne,
small boys maturely formed,
their wings static as hummingbirds'
in the rapt reciprocity
of His love.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

SEMINAR

They watch me like a t.v. turned down low
and now I am watching them watch me,
their faces blank as endpapers
in books they will never read.

I am, apparently, a rerun,
just words but no music,
my "teacher knows best" voice a drag
no matter how much I modulate,
a one-man show minus commercial interruptions,
my rating lower than I know.

When the hour ends I unplug myself,
my cord a prehensile tail
that slithers like a whip.

When the screen goes dark
the Keats ode fails
like perfect fauna frozen in the shale.

THE HUMANIST

All day he sits at a desk
churning out prose with footnotes
which are the poetry left his life,
the last word on history.

His posture aches
and he knows the pain of not being able
to give his work away,
the pathos of self-addressed stamped envelopes,
but always he must stand faster,
the fruits of his toil
cast before editors and deans
as of no worth,
his labor the lilies
of some field.

He sings to empty houses.

Science at least
might have served his self-importance
better.
He could have published negative results,
made something of nothing,
amounted to more.

As it is, he thinks only
of the past,
of the idea he had that devotion
was once the measure of all things.

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REX JACOBUS LUDI

"The King doth much covet his presence."
-- Lord Thomas Howard (1603)

He enters the schoolroom like a god,
bandy legs invisible beneath the gown.
A monarch at ten months,
the reins of the realm
slacken now in his fist,
his search for the absolute
having brought him to this:

A Scottish page, Robert Carr,
awaits his Latin lesson,
Lily's strict grammar held like a prayer book
in his upturned palm.
Adorned in crimson doublet
and sky-blue hose,
he rises and bows at once
keen as a maiden on courtship.
When he thinks of his good fortune --
the King's undivided attention --
he thanks the stars for his beauty,
but also he trembles slightly
because he knows the way
a glance can freeze on his master's face,
the suddenness of disappointment
majesty's most terrible prerogative.
His power to hurt the King confuses him.

Though he has known the sure caress
of his Sire's hand through honeyed curls
for rendering Ficino well,
he has also knelt untrussed
to receive the rod
impartial as a sceptre

in its regal sway.
He never really knows
when his father feels the fondest:
when he is laughing, his white teeth
nibbling at the ruddy skin of a prized pippin,

or when, smiling through tears that blind,
he thanks the Lord for his correction,
begging pardon over and over again
as he kisses with feverish lips
the birch that has marked him
for the King's own creature.

As the boy recites,
James thinks of Aristotle, Alexander, the stars,
of Plato's horses,
of the white colt and the black one
that must be checked
lest the chariot veer
from its imperial course.
By the third mistake
he knows he must be rigorous,
sees that the boy knows too
from the sudden flush of crimson at his throat,
from the rushed swelling
of the stripling's slender chest.
All night he had had this dream
of a king awaiting the moment
of his own displeasure anxiously,
like a pupil who cannot construe
but who hopes against hope
the favor of chastisement
will be spared him.

How can anyone give it tongue,
the King asks silently,
this idea he has for pure perfection
in a boy,

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this love so lonely no subject
must be honored with it lightly?
He ends the lesson briskly,
assigning the second eclogue
of Vergil.

As he puts the book down slowly,
his eyes and the boy's meet,
deliberately avoid the small, shy twigs
a gardener has bound with silk.

There is a black oak prie-dieu
and on it a purple velvet cushion
trimmed in gold.
There is silence like a leaden mace
and there is this power
unutterable between them.

The long white finger of the sovereign points.

BLUE ANGELS

(Brunswick Naval Air Station: 2005)

Their purpose is destruction,
their thunder anathema to God.
Nevertheless the crowd seems pleased,
perhaps because the pilots,
beautiful barbarians
who neither smoke nor drink,
are blonder than the boys next door,
the ones who didn't die in Vietnam.

After take-offs and formations,
final fiery touchdowns
that race backward in the blood,
azure eyes burn
right through the stands.
Their virgin stares are pitiless
and peremptory.

My household gods --
too small for this century of machines --
have fled in terror to the garden.

Bread and circuses,
the priceless spectacle:
Is this the death of empire?
In a roar of air
the green earth quickens to their rush,
her doom their dark desire.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

FABLE

He wasn't good for anything in the morning
because he was always hungover.
He wasn't good for anything after five p.m.
because he was always drunk.
That left him somewhere between
four and six hours per day
to be what he thought of
as more or less himself,
depending on how well the aspirin worked.

It was during those few hours each day
that he suffered in the purest, least metabolic way.
He suffered for the squirrel crushed by a car
but still convulsing in the road,
for the homeless, the AIDS-ridden,
for welfare mothers and unwanted children,
for teenage gang members and their victims,
for hungry Ethiopians and fleeing Rwandans,
for hurricane victims wallowing in their filth,
for Iraqis and Afghanis and survivors of tsunamis.

Every day there was this need to suffer
and the same abundance of occasion,
the tentacles of his grief involuntary as flagella .

His own pain, he knew, by comparison was nothing,
or if it was something
it was because he personally had nothing to suffer for
and that was what really bothered him.

In a way he was a saint,
a martyr of the systoles and the diastoles
that kept him going after the liver said
"no, I do not want to live,"
but the brain has a mind of its own
and the synapses kept firing

RECOLLECTING SNOW

their altruistic messages
and he lived on and on unhappily ever after
like some frog prince
awaiting the transforming kiss
though no one ever swam into his ken
or entered the dark wood
where he kept a fifth of vodka in a tree stump
in case he got tired of reading Dante.

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IVORY PUDDINGTON
SACO, MAINE

At the first Crown court session ever
in the district of Maine
you were fined one shilling
for being drunk
at Mrs. Tym's
on May 20, 1640.

Since we do not know when you were born
or when or where you died
you enter history
on that one day only
in early Spring
on May 20, 1640.

Was it mulled ale or apple cider
that got you so giddy
you danced all through the town,
for once a lord
of self-delight
on May 20, 1640?

In the end you swayed to inner song
without sound or motion:
Puritans manacled
your slave's ankles
for mistreading
on May 20, 1640.

I hope wild irises were early,
the water-color greens
of marsh grass and new fern
by blue freshets
blurring to art
on May 20, 1640.

RECOLLECTING SNOW

Ivory, with no stone to mark the time
your buried bones lie still.
But never mind that now --
how the body danced
on May 20, 1640!

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

COLISEUM

(In Memory of Pier Paolo Pasolini)

Ragazzi cruise in stationary poses
like cattle grazing in a Vergil eclogue.
They stare past you toward something lost,
a golden age where love and money
never got confused.

Perhaps they have souls,
perhaps not.
Capretti,
all you can be sure of
is their frisk.

Near Vespasian's garden of stone
they burn out quiet as martyrs,
sempiternal forms
gone today, here tomorrow,
self-consuming, self-renewing,
discounted forever
in the smouldering ash of a history
in which poverty is born of poverty,
desire of desire,
death of death.

Now one startles the whole flock,
jean-tight flanks tense
at the spank of his sandals
as he bounds
to the roadside
where a blood-red Fiat
idles by the curb.

It has come out of the scream of traffic,
the driver's tinted window
opened just a crack.

END OF SUMMER
(Camden, Maine)

At the Bach concert I consider
how the music of repetition
has been the music of my life:
motor rhythms and recapitulations
that harden to obsession
in a fugue that never ends.

Why can't the last voice
ever catch up with the first?

On the terrace
I lift a glass of Montepulciano
and watch your young male face
catch the sea's dark fire
as white gulls circle overhead.
Any second now the sun will sink,
a thin gold coin of spent September,
but for the moment
red boats and blue water
are very much themselves
in the *tutti* of full summer.

When you look past me
toward the open sea
with eyes impatient
for the voyaging,
I know that I must lose you
as the wheeling insistence
of gull cry
tells me here it is at last,
the coda I've been waiting for.

In my head harpsichord continuo,
the oboe *obligato* and never sweeter,
the violin right on pitch

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

as it abandons the cello
half-way up the staircase,
andante,
of insurmountable desire . . .

SABBATHDAY LAKE

White butterflies, labor and love,
dance a final pas de deux in the September garden,
their sudden flurry pitiless as early snow.

Game zinnias, some purple, some gold,
blaze as the far blue of the horizon fades,
but already the lilies of the field
are done for,
their day's raiment of brief fire
the sole wage of unremitting toil.

In furrow and wheel rut
apples and dung ripen,
the stooks of next year's fallow already in rows,
all use past,
like hearts and hands of the sleeping dead
in a nearby field where a solitary stone reads
"Shakers."

White-washed rooms awaiting winter --
is it the broom of memory or forgetfulness
that sweeps them clean?

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

STILL LIFE

(For Katharine Watson)

The composition holds within itself
an abstraction of shapes
which is the logic of its being
though the things themselves
also seem real:
oysters, a glass of wine,
yellow pears,
a blue and white vase
with a pink peony
dawn-drenched and immense.

A small green bug
has fixed himself
like a drop of dew
to the fulminating blossom,
but he is only an afterthought.

At rest for the moment,
he is the only thing capable of motion.

He alone can will his departure.

In distant galleries Greek torsos
and Egyptian mummy cases
will outlast me,
but right now there is a frame
and I am in it,
unable to will my departure.

Here are oysters and wine,
these pears, this flower . . .

ADELINE RAVOUX

"Monsieur Vincent," "Monsieur Vincent," she cried
to the yellow wheatfield,
but already he was gone,
the small revolver left to rust
in the dew of nightfall
like a blade, a beard.

He had painted her all in blue,
this child, half peasant, half madonna,
in thanks for wine and onions she brought,
though when he staggered back
to her father's cut-rate inn,
hemorrhaged and blanching
where no light could reach,
the silence burst like a shell between them.
Except for her he never thought to see again,
the last delirium was weightless,
easy.

"Do not cry, little one.
It is nothing to have lived for art,
everything never to have been loved.
To see best you must suffer as much as you can
without losing the light,
though I must lose it now
to crow shine, wheat sheen,
the greens and yellows
of a half-shot day
alive and kicking under heaven.

Look how lightly I let go,
the candle on my hat
you used to laugh at
flickered out and finished
where the white canvas waits.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

For such as me
even the dark is lovely,
the absent colors there -- incomparable --
radiant and primary as the sun.

VAN GOGH'S SUNFLOWERS

To hold those haggard faces in my hands,
radiant and punished by the frost light,

as if such giants might be windmills,
their blades churning like petals

as brown eyes battered blind
behold their executioners,

the crows sharp-beaked as furies
repeating their assault.

The search for seeds is endless,
and they can never find their fill.

A solitary bird, swart blue with silken wing
struts in the foreground,

his famine a vain black maw
and yet I hardly notice him

here in this October
where flowers burn up heaven, earth

the imperial sun itself
with life, with light, with yellow

deafening all my senses
in a final blaze of field.

The black bird, no less than I,
is casual, inconsequential.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

ON A LATE LANDSCAPE BY GEORGE INNESS
(For Ann Lofquist)

Coppery sky. Dark trees.
Before the heavens break
a menace of far thunder,
the billows' edge burnished
like an old penny lost
through the crack
of a farmhouse floor.

In a pasture to the left
an old Holstein kneels
in shadow,
the black of her coat
devouring what's left of the white
in the ruminating twilight.

It is Montclair, 1893.
He is going to die soon.
At the vanishing point
where he lingers
in a trick too true of perspective
a single red maple shines.
He has caught it in the secret shimmer
of storms,
in that halo not of this earth
which says the gods have given us eyes.

Though the first cold drops may fall
any second now
he does not hurry
the studied sure brushwork
that is his only ease.

If the rainbow comes, he will paint it.

RECOLLECTING SNOW

TO A YOUNG MUSEUM GUARD

In blue livery unfit for a king
she stands more or less
at attention,
her white gloves unsullied by art.

A pillar of late empire,
she holds the building up
like a caryatid grown clumsy
on the wage of her subsistence.

Watching her watch,
she knows that time is money,
that money is marble, giltwood
and paint.

If you look too long
she returns your stare,
afraid of what you might be thinking,
afraid of what she does not know.

She would love it if every day were Monday
and the stone rolled away from the tomb.

You wouldn't find her here
or anywhere that beauty needed money
or colors for the world to pay for
time and time again.

On her day off she goes to the beach,
for a moment finds herself
like Venus freezing in the foam.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

SALON DES REFUSES

I hired the hall myself
after laboring for years
in a studio of failed perspectives
and muddy pigments,
the landscape of my life
a glade Corot passed over
on the golden road to Arcady.

Nobody came.

To have missed the moment of art
and not know why --
to not have seen
the lilies of Monet on fire
for all eyes but mine --
and yet this filling up of space
with shape and color
fears the dark
more surely than the stretcher's
blinding white.

My stains have staunched the blankness.

"Che gelida manina?"

The day I put my brush down
is the day I die.

INTO THE WOODS
(With apologies to Dante)

Better than half way through.
At fifty-three, better by a long shot.

That is why I made for the maples
this October
to stand among my old acquaintances
the trees,
their mottled hues of rouge
in late afternoon
like the face of a drunk
flushed and grandiloquent
and about to say something huge.

What?

Beautiful, wounded hands
that with veined palms open wide
then fall where all hands fall --
in the grist of last year's leaf meal --
how lightly you hold the passerines,
their notes the old refrain
of loss without end
as one by one they dart away
into the oblivion of air.

I think the trees have harbored music
and motion but no love.

No love.

I pause under the canopy
with raised arms.
I move my lips but nothing's said.
Closing my eyes in the twilight,

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

I can't remember what it was
I came for.

PASTORAL

"The forests avenge themselves."
Old Ekdal in The Wild Duck

One winter Mr. John Jacob Astor
kept his Rolls Royce
in my great grandfather's cow shed.
The chrome glowed like heirloom silver
in the blue light of January mornings,
the ghost-breath of Holsteins
as they lowed
homage to a mute monster
whose scarlet hide
and fifty coats of milk-white paint
crowded two whole stalls
like a bull too big for its stanchion.

When the chauffeur came in Spring
in grey jodphurs and black jack-boots,
he demanded the unborn flesh of calves,
paying with gold eagles
while wide-eyed kids
capered on the running board.
In that cold barn of a house
strangers huddled over veal
in morels and heavy cream,
washing it down with old Latour,
brick-red but browning at the edges.

Years later in a chicken coop
near St. Petersburg
I saw a gilded chair
from the reign of "Louis Seize"
rotting in the straw.
The fluted legs were broken off

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

and stained needlework
bulged every which way from the rents.
A brood hen with yellow eyes cocked her head
then pecked at the horsehair
spilling from the heart
of Boucher's mannered shepherd boy,
doomed chevalier slumming in a slouch hat,
his blood-red breeches and scrip
cut all to ribbons in the twilight.

NIGHTSCAPE WITH DOVES

New snow in the clearing.
Blank as a page,
the field remains unmarred,
obscure cuneiform of doves' feet
as yet unprinted,
though you hear a cry of birds,
clay-colored mourners,
in a nearby margin of trees.
Because it is dusk
you cannot see their shapes
in the enveloping blackness.

The great night falls
and you are nearer wherever the end is,
but right now meaning is a sound
inexpressibly itself,
a trick much like the trick of happiness,
a completeness which knows
that the end of the book
is the last white page
you go on revising forever.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

THE GHOSTS OF JULY

(In Memory of Werner Van Haeften)

We were silhouettes on the wall
in the sick yellow light
of a truck's high beams
idling in the courtyard.
Then we were dead.

At Plotzensee the others had a slower time of it,
strangled from meat hooks
until even the cameramen threw up
though for Hitler
there could never be enough retribution.
Beck they left alone with a Luger.
von Trescow pulled the trigger on the front,
then von Moltke, von Trot zu Solz, von Wartenburg,
von Freytagh-Loringhoven, von Schwanenfeld, von
Drechsel . . .
took their terrible turns.
They bruised Von Witzleben's bones
for the show trial,
but the old warrior still looked daggers in the dock,
his inmate's trousers held up only by a cord.

Klaus, I praise your one good hand
but also your shattered one and the bad eye
you came back with, half-alive, from Africa,
still a patriot, still a lover
of what was good about Germany.
It wasn't your fault
that with only the single hand
there wasn't time to connect
the two bombs at Wolfschanze,
that you had to make do with the one
which would have been enough
were the table not so sturdy,
or the Fuhrer less devilish in his luck.

RECOLLECTING SNOW

You saw the detonation from a phone booth,
told Berlin that Hitler was blown up
then flew for two euphoric hours
back to headquarters
where the high command
lay coiled like a snake.
When you found out Hitler was alive
and that Fromm was listening to Keitel
you made call after frantic call
from Bendlerstrasse,
a voice on the wire
getting thinner and thinner
as the coup came all untangled.
"Walkyrie" never made it into motion,
but already the death maidens

had marked you from the air.

Early that summer
in your native Bavaria
we picnicked with your wife and children,
root and branch in full flower,
your slim form
as we swam in the clear lake
pale and distant
as a winter moon,
the white rose
of your Catholic chastity
in utmost blossom
as you stared ahead blankly
at the sacrifice.
I think of you in snow,
Christ's athlete,
a boy smiling in a glass paperweight
while all around him
the numbing blizzard of history falls
like petals on water.

I had to go first, you understand,

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

but not from vanity or fear
or the mayhem of a moment
we both knew was inevitable.
I ran out in front
because my body was a shield --
then a shroud --
that fit your body perfectly,
because time had run out,
because there was only
that single moment left
to show how much I loved you.

HIGH BIDDER

At the auction a dealer I know
smiles past me at a boy
holding up a Chinese vase.
The glaze is peach-bloom,
supremely prized,
the vessel blessed
with small firm curves
and sloping adolescent shoulders.
They say such shapes first came into being
in imitation of the female form,
but here too is a norm for legends
in red-tag Levis and a college sweatshirt.
Is Marcus admiring the ware
or the wearer?

I can't be sure.

In any event, he loses the lot
to some party on the telephone.

Over a quick lunch
we discuss cars and weather,
AIDS, the prices people pay
for beauty that lasts
and beauty that doesn't,
ancient or skin-deep,
our soup in styrofoam cups steaming
with chunks of real chicken.
I say, "Marcus, what's the rub
between ephebes and artefacts,
young bodies and old baubles?
Between Queen Anne tables
with their knobby spinster's legs
and dark rings left by drunks
who died before we were born,
and fresh kids heady on the wine
of their own immemorial handsomeness?"

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

Leaning forward, he smiles -- this time at me --
behind the glint of glasses
his hawk eyes fierce
with the knowledge of extinction.

"Secrets," he says.

SUMMER SATURDAY

It is a hot July afternoon
and I am watching the boy across the street
mow the family lawn.

I can see him but he can't see me.

He is wearing red and yellow surfing jambs
of Hawaiian implications --
nothing else --

and going at things more or less
with a vengeance,
the way teenagers do.

His chiseled curls
droop with blond exertion,
and the curve of his thigh
reminds me of a youthful David
by Donatello,
the Walkman at his hip
swaying like a sling.

He is thinking that tonight he will take
his girl friend out in his father's car,
that they will drive around for awhile
and maybe drink a little
and that if all goes well
we will take her in the dew
of early morning.

The hum of his motor oppresses me,
so I turn away from the window
and head for the icebox
ivory-smooth as a coffin.

There's nothing like a cold beer,
I think, after the grass is cut
on a hot July afternoon.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

MONHEGAN REVISITED

Gull cry and love cry run with the wind
then hover where the wrecked hull sprawls
rusty and rudderless in July sunshine.
Now both are lost where the boat,
on its side and lonely' hove to long ago.
old roses climb the fish house wall,
weathered and beaten brown;
They bob like buoys on the turn of tide,
pink and sweet as unsalted guts.

On summer's cliffs too sheer for us
we lay where lichen gilded the great stones
and juniper haunted crevices,
huge fissures where the body
wakened like a child
(later gin could not bridge them,
its medicine a clear dream
of the green places gone foggy).
The mail boat roiled – coming and going –
her wake a wash of queasy islands
leeward and out of reach.

Just out of reach like love
or the small bleached deer bone
ledge-bound and white as snow,
frail relic of summer remembering itself,
always remembering itself.

AT THE STATE STORE

(In Memory of Leo Connellan)

A woman with a red face studies the gin specials.
I have no idea what pain she needs to numb.

Two college boys push a cart full of tequila and rum,
the only things they'll get their hands on this weekend.

A fat man eyes the Absolut
but opts for a half-gallon of Popov.
His stance is monumental.
You can tell from the vacancy of his stare
that he's a pro, a solitary drinker
in a class all by himself.
You can also tell his liver is shot
from the way his pants hang.
For him it is much too late.

In the cash line I hug a single malt
Like an infant at the breast.

Drink and the world drinks with you.
Forswear and you drink alone.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

TEACHING MY SON TO TALK

We go to the farm near nightfall
(hardly a farm at all now
hemmed in as it is by houses
of equal shape and color)
though the walls are white as a temple's still
and the work of the old clapboards holds
and there's a red barn sagging
from the weight of generations
like a father's heart about to burst.

The game is name and point
as I show him the animals for the first time
and he repeats them syllable by syllable
with little thuds
in a paradise already fallen
like a ripe apple in the grass
its time come.
Peering into bovine eyes
that glow like wild honey
in the twilight
he says after me "cow,"
his awe so original he dares to touch
the enormous wet nose
though only for the briefest second,
his tiny arm recoiling
like a serpent after striking.

Soon it's "chicken," "duck," "goose,"
then "pig" and "pony,"
"rabbit," "rooster," and "lamb"
in a cacophony of names
pungent as a barnyard
until I want to tell him
"these are the things themselves
unsullied by syntax or desire.
love them beyond language
and the poor power of words."

RECOLLECTING SNOW

Incense of dung and milk commingles
in shadows of late light
here in this cathedral of barn
where the animals in their eloquence
praise the great creator
with their silence.

But he is tired and nodding now
the litany on his tongue
mechanical and fading fast
as his lids grow heavy
and he no longer points.
He says "cow, nice cow
bye-bye pony
good goose good goosey
go sleep now
go sleep."

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

HOME SHOPPING

At night he pours over catalogs of luxuries
he has decided to forego:
crystal balloons by Baccarat
for Musigny he will never sip,
black velvet slippers
with gold fox heads on them,
the pool-side bar and grill
on gleaming wheels that costs more
than the second-hand Volvo
he's still driving.

Like a cat in the window he takes his time,
his consolation the incomparable satisfaction
of wishing for nothing in particular.

CROSSING BROOKLYN BRIDGE

Behind me Carroll Gardens where my friend Gennaro
lives.

I can still see his cheeky brothers,
plump-faced putti with ripe olive eyes,
still hear their high shrieks of delight
as they give the raspberry to strangers from the doorway
then run inside to hide.

Their pregnant sister looks up as I pass,
smiles down at the family of marigolds
she has been tending in a window box.
On the sidewalk the Sicilian grandfather
sits in his green-plaid plastic lawn chair like a throne,
spits as the mood takes him any which way into wind,
the same wind perhaps that blew him
from Messina in 1906 in steerage
to this seat of honor on the street
or maybe another.

Tomato and basil linger on the air,
their sweet simmer a sine qua non of summer.

I am bound for SoHo and another gallery opening,
the state of art an upscale warehouse
where canvasses all concept and no craft
will stare me down,
the painter's Montrachet in jelly glasses
a priceless joke that only rich Bohemians
can afford.

Pale faces taut as lampshades
will shed hushed light
on bold aesthetic motives, on passion, on AIDS,
on the City's science of living and dying
on the edge.

To reach Manhattan
I will brave this bridge at a great height,
the blue of harbor and sky
a reciprocity as in Boudin

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

where heaven mirrors water,
where when you fall -- up or down --
it will be through river light
that lands you lucky on your feet
near a gypsy cab
that carries you the rest of the way.

No seconds now for Berryman or Crane,
for mistakes made metaphors
for that bridge to the unwordable
cabled like a lyre
and stretching the whole arch span of it.
Today foot traffic keeps me on the verge --
cordovans, earth shoes, sandals, jogging pumps

men and women like Mercury with wings at heels,
their faces on fire with life like Whitman's strangers
whose bright electric eyes give me that look that says
somewhere they will be waiting for me.

For their sake, for the sake of who's ahead
or might be next I keep on moving,
the human flow I go with now, alive,
never to be repeated, never satisfied.
I whistle. I quicken my step.
I salute the white gull
for a moment motionless
on the downdraft.

Love and art, art and love
that have brought me to this
will find a way to lift me back.

THROUGH A GLASS LIGHTLY

The night I took thirteen undergraduates
to see a production of green As You Like It
in the grey chill of November
was the night I realized I was an old-maid schoolteacher,
my PH.D. and predilection for scholarship and verse
notwithstanding.

Shepherding boys and girls onto a College van,
I counted noses or heads
then heard my own voice, distant,
telling them what to expect,
what not to.

A student drove and we made small talk
about campus life, the arts, what the kids
who weren't going would be doing that night:
fraternities, beer, the awkward letting go
of adolescent sex
before the hangover, the guilt,
the lonely books of Sunday afternoons.

Rosalind and Orlando lived happily ever after
(with money and a potent dukedom)
and the blue bus discharged my students,
one by one,
at their respective destinations,
like a disappearing act or a Commencement.

As for me, I went back to my house, to my cats,
to the long weekend of a winter
that was really just beginning
though lilac (of the genus olive)
would come again in May
redolent but bearing no fruit
and mocking me in great purple armfuls . . .

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

PROLEPSIS

When the flowers appear they are already gone.
Richard Eberhart

April swells green in the bud
but already you see the gold of leaves
letting go in autumn,
now quickening, now unfastening,
now longing only for earth.

Blood of Keats streaks the swallow's side,
his music a stain upon the silence.

They say the nightingale
in migratory pain
burst her heart upon the prick of song.

MY CONVERSATION WITH GEORGE CRUMB

At intermission a musicologist
promised the audience a panel discussion
featuring "real live composers"
whose pieces would then be played.

Minutes later in the men's room
I quipped to an old-timer
standing next to me:
"What about some real dead composers?"
He smiled and nodded sagely.

"Do you know about Percy Grainger's wife?
She fought the Australian government
for the right to turn her husband's skeleton
into a wind chime."

And I thought -- what more reasonable
than to want the body you loved in life
to keep on making music
whenever the wind might will it?

"Ars longa vita brevis est."

I've been hung up on the avant-garde
ever since.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

FOR FINNY IN HIS PINK SHIRT

"Only Phineas never was afraid, only Phineas never hated anyone."

John Knowles

Into the river and out of the woods.
How to get back to where
we were still sixteen,
two separate pieces,
five foot eight and a half
and a hundred and fifty pounds
(more or less),
one brown one blond,
two otters all over each other
in the cold water of betrayal.

Fact is, I can't come anywhere
near that tree
where a prick in the guts
made me murderous behind your back.

Fucked is
the guy who loves his best pal
(which is what you were)
and never lets it show.

The jerk who jiggled you off the limb
wanted to bring you down
all right,
not crippled from the crush,
but uncool for once,
for once unsure of yourself

as if the school tie
you used for a belt
really had come undone
and you stood

RECOLLECTING SNOW

with your pants down
in front of Mr.Patchwither
and his wife

your face blushing
like that fairy shirt
of spanked pink
that only you could
get away with wearing

in a school where boys
who were afraid of being girls
would never grow up
to be real men.

WILLIAM C. WATTERSON

ON THE WAY TO THE HOSPITAL

On this ordinary afternoon in October
I head for the out-patient lab in Portland for tests
the day awash in the wet light of fall.

Leaving Yarmouth I pass a black iron pot of zinnias
on a service station island
reminding me how crazy Mainers are for flowers
the season being so short.

One huge crimson survivor of first frost
imbibes the fading gold of autumn.

It knows it won't come back.