



Under
ORION

Dennis Ross

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Under Orion is posted on the Forum page of the Heidelberg Graphics Web site:

www.HeidelbergGraphics.com

in Chico, California, for the enjoyment of readers.

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One

Listen,
it's good to be heard.

See?
It's good to be seen.

Different Folks

I've been feeding Duffy watermelon
checking his water, scoping out
the perimeter for predators
wondering if he needs a massage
when our neighbor Josh swaggers
across the road and perches on the canal bridge
before throwing the torch to his hash pipe

A few coughs later he's singing
"Back in the Saddle Again"
head thrown back, cowboy hat bobbing
with the dreamy rhythm

I look at Duffy and shrug
when he gives a soft conspiratorial quack

Josh stretches the refrain
"—Back where a friend is a friend—"
a baritone Gene Autry one foot out of the
stirrup

soon our fifty-one-year-old erstwhile hippy
on parole and under house arrest by his mother
is humming so loud it brings
Pereira's Jack Russells out barking

Duffy sticks his head straight up
cocks an eye and quack-quack-quacks
paddling around in circles

Josh turns and sees me
waves then stands and stretches
knocks the dottle into the canal

"How's the duck?" he bellows
above the Jack Russell uproar
"How's he like that melon?"

"He likes the seeds," I yell

Josh nods
"Hey, differ'nt strokes,"
and whistles his way back across the road
his three-legged ridgeback Hoagy
hobbling halfway to meet him

Captive Audience

For Rose and Bonnie

When no one's around
I come through the door
sideways in a soft-shoe

shuffle across linoleum
mouth full of loony tunes
whistling singing prancing

I transfix upturned eyes
and both dogs applaud
each schottische each song

tails pound the floor
for more more more more
and eyes dance *bravo* as I

tap my Astaire stick and pivot
through a pool of sunlight
stop on a dime and spread

arms wide and bow-wow-
wow them till they leap
up and charge the stage

A Perfect Morning

Birds in my ears
floaters in my eyes
dust motes in the light
a breeze nuzzles

curtains aside
while I sprawl across the bed
and listen to blood purr
deep in my veins

After breakfast
Bonnie and Rose pace me
sniffing their zig-zag way
across the pasture

A pheasant
thunders up
daring them to follow
until I call them back

Cows lift blank gazes
watch a moment then bend
down to graze, eyes half closed
and the smell of crushed grass
rises about their faces
drifts to us across
the perfect morning

Rebirth

Goldfinches dangle from star thistles
a lone phoebe calls from a shovel handle

I pull bermuda roots up for hours
fingers wriggling pale as grubs in black loam

later sweet leaf smoke fills the air
while I sweep the potting shed

until surprised from my song
by a rustle and glint whisked out of shadows

a dead dragonfly to pluck from the litter
and prop on the windowsill

where it shimmers
with sunlight

Thunderstorm

Twenty miles away bedrock rubs the sky
wind eddies and a thunderhead towers
an ivory genie swollen with light glowers
from the vortex turns zinc then lead
and finally sable trimmed with gold

The black underbelly of clouds rumbles
above house and barn—sudden darkness
whipped with cool moist wind

Lightning flares and I count
three before the porch shakes
and both astonished dogs
press close at once

After the thunderstorm
a pin-up moon bobs up for air

Heat lingers

Crickets croon
and quaver

The gopher snake glides across the garden

After a Shower

A flurry of white-crowned sparrows rush
The feeder in the bare quince bush

Magpies sweep down scattering cries
Thrash mud puddles in the drive

Near the gate a squirrel plays
Up a post to catch some rays

Watches old black Bonnie sniff
Across the lawn then squat to piss

Bonnie picks a perfect walnut up
And flings it playful as a pup

Finds a spot, turns three times, sprawls
And cracks the nut between her paws

Goose Summer

Last night somewhere
south of here spiders
scrambled up stalks
and turned tails toward the sky

sent silk strands snaking out like kite
strings until a taut tug by the breeze
caught and they lifted off hitching a million
rides going anywhere the sky took them

dancing free
and wingless
all night
under stars

while we slept. The yellow
garden spider wove her web
a tatted flower stretched
between two tomato plants

bright as Indra's glistening net
dewdrops catching moonlight
and now she floats at the exact
center of attraction, entranced

with the dream unfolding
around her, a golden whole
note, calm and lucid point
considering the gravity of this

last meeting place of flies.
This morning she watches
with lidless eyes, sways
three feet above leaf mold

grows instantly alert
when I pick a tomato
shaking her world.
She scuttles off to hide.
Serene, afloat,
leaning on that shimmering nothing
that buoys her up motionless.

Later the dogs and I walk
together across gauze-
wrapped fields, clothes
and hair festooned with gossamer.

Take the Road

I feel my way along the fence
careful where I put my feet
home bound in the fog
Bonnie padding at my side

The cottonwood looms to my left
I know, I hear crows calling there
while I stare hard where home should be
till all falls silent and we pause

particles becalmed adrift
in this cloud chamber out of time
where I'm lucky to know left from right
lucky that I walk, don't fly

out of myself and take the road
less traveled and the other too

Afterbirth

I hold the mare's nose twisted in a twitch
while she glares into my face, eyes clear as
water

at the business end the vet reaches deep
arm buried past the elbow searching for
afterbirth

pulls steamy pudding out and misses the bucket
then hoses off his arms, rolls down his sleeves

that evening two shy vultures step an awkward
hat dance around the somber placenta

after their meal they shake huge wings loose
rise up into the sky while day bleeds away

The Dead Calf

All afternoon the cow faced down the crows
and vultures, chasing them from nearby posts
when they tried to work past her to the calf
dead on the ground at her feet.

The next morning she still stood
guard, reaching down to nuzzle
the shrinking pile of fur,
and when Mike came to feed the herd

He took half a bale of hay
to where she stood refusing to move.
Later that afternoon he returned,
slipped a knotted rope around

the calf's neck, and dragged it
behind his pickup to the corral,
drawing the cow like a hooked fish in his wake
head down nose touching the jouncing bait

The Tallowman Comes and Goes

Ears forward, head up
the calf stands poised
beside the dead cow
sprawled as if sunning herself
udder flat and breathless
bagpipes on a belly
swollen with the slow
explosion of new life
that bubbles from her nose
pools like meadowfoam
around her gaping mouth

Later the calf follows a steady tractor
that drags the cow to the gate
for the tallowman's moaning winch
a slow ascension into the truck
a whoosh and hiss of gasses
that take the breath away

and later still
the calf refuses hay
refuses to be chased down
high-tails his way
across the pasture
then circles back
to the flattened
grass that marks
the empty center of the world

Garden Work

Web-toed Rose

burnt-log brindle

tail curled into

a question mark

nuzzles loam over a bone

paws the ground

sniffs checking it out

and looks up

along her muzzle

caked with dirt

brown eyes alert

watching me wash

aphids off cabbages

Tater

What does it mean

struggling into its jacket

long idle hours in the dark?

This is the word made starch

cool and firm in the hand

sweet and flaky in the mouth.

Spring Garden

A toad bulbs up
from the alembic earth

time doesn't tick

a clock clicks
and things change

fingers pick across

strings strung taut
for pea-green music

Indian Summer Evening

All day the hours
circle on a thermal

until dusk spreads
enormous weightless wings

and thin light drifts
across widening years

I meet it here, face
cocked toward first stars

a sliver of a glance
the world gives itself
unruffled as the breeze
touching and passing on

into the killdeer's call
across the stubbly field

In the Pet Store

The goldfish tries to tell me
something but can't get it out
of that little mouth opening and closing.

I think of a number
count backward from ten
to clear my mind

and watch him mouthing *Om*
there in solitary confinement
his only company

waiting for a break,
so I take it for him
remembering the time

all of us spilled out
a door together laughing
across the lawn

to the car
pointed east
then shot down the road

while Vernon shouted
out the window
"You'll hear from us again!"

Two

The dead forget
what to live without

Escape from the Motherland

I worked my way
out of the blood-warm
cavern

an arrowhead chipped
from a living block
blue with aching

a living artifact
from a rifted world
bare and speechless

shouting even before
I was strapped with names
of men I never knew

swallowed up like
a dream fading
into dawn

Name that Tune

The nuns suggest Harry
a little joke for my brothers
Tom and Dick, but
Mom dubs me Dennis Howard

Dennis for the tenor singing on the radio
while I was just a gleam in Howard's eye

Longview

I race to catch up scabbling on slick streets
until she takes my hand and we skirt a puddle

Back in the apartment she hangs wet coats
over chairs near the stove, rubs my hands and feet

then unpacks soggy bags on the draining board
while water warms for tea and cocoa

Later we share a shoebox of jumbled snapshots
brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers

She names everyone in a dreamy complicity
needing more than silent memory and I scoot
close

Morning After

Marvin at the breakfast table
sips coffee from a green mug
Redwing boots on the floor
beside white-stockinged feet

Mom at the stove
singing about her only sunshine
about her "be-eautiful morning glory
kissed and caressed by the de-ew"

Snug in bed I listen
faking sleep until Marvin goes
then she cooks our breakfast
"tra-la-la-la, tweedle-dee-dee-dee"

later we walk to town
both of us picking orange
and black caterpillars from the road
to hang on willow branches

Lazy Wind

Mom leaves me by the steel drum
boiling with fire and goes off
pulling carrots from the frost-rimed field
before the sun is fully up.

Warming her hands a while later
she says, "A lazy wind goes
through you, not around."

The sun slowly bleaches the sky
but offers no heat where I stand
bunched up inside two coats
stamping the hard ground.

At night the bed opens like a flower.
Outside the tent night hunkers down.
I roll over and face a wall of dreams,

anchor myself to her smooth breaths,
a small animal surrendering
while the winter moon pulls
us toward another morning.

Plenty

Trucks and cars back up snug to the river
buckets and coolers in easy reach on the bank.

Bud wades butt-deep, hip boots parting
the stream of smelt, mining the living vein,

scoops wriggling nuggets out and sweeps
through the air to dump them in our tub.

Half his height, I get the short shift,
scramble after the squirming silver

overflow. Chinook called them candlefish,
These taper-thin sparks of life

dancing wildly in the air; dried, they burn
like torches, alive as stars at night.

Today we fill tin tubs to their rims,
measure happiness by the seething pound;

we'll give smelt away to family, neighbors, friends,
anyone who'll take them off our hands.

Viento

Wind riddles trees
rattles the coalshed door
ravels the slate-gray river

our sleeves flap
full as windsocks
gorged on air

a marsh hawk teeters
her white rump flashes
between poplars

Olive yells from the porch
her words scattering
while I mouth "what?"

she waves a *never mind*
and casts me off
goes back in the house

surrenders to the wind
prowling everywhere
constant as a pulse

Sturgeon Rock

A permanent eddie wobbles
like a wavering eye
not far from Sturgeon Rock

The Columbia's current rubs up
against the slough's backwash
and twines into a funnel

hung at the edge of the drop-
off into the river's deep
circling plunge toward darkness

It's a good place to fish
Where water gropes for life
and bait drifts down a long

spiral to plumb the dreaming
mud sluggish as a lover
stirred from a drowsy lull

What Dreams May Come

Grandpa Ingram loading pigs
took a header from the cart
when the horses shied,

broke his neck at ninety eight;
grandma lost her "stubborn mule"
who "just wouldn't leave the ranch."

But in her dreams he'd confide
where he'd buried their life savings
so many shovel lengths

from this fence post looking east
and she lurched awake again
to jot it down once more.

March 12, Alliance, Nebraska

A wall rose at the door they opened
a white wall, crystal remnants of the storm
that tore a three-day hole across the land
and cached the house within a twelve-foot drift

Mom reached daylight just beneath the eaves
then walked above the fences to the barn
and burrowed down to where the horses stirred
restless after long days in their stalls

She rode her pony Topsy through the air
down to the lake, the pack was thinner there
where their and the other kinkaders' cattle stood
chest deep in ice, hoary backs to the wind

they'd fled three days before into the warmer
water that slowly froze about their shaking
flanks and left them marbled statues
eyes sightless blebs in silvered light

She dropped Topsy's reins and skidded
out to ride them one-by-one, her breath
the only cloud in that pale blue sky,
while Topsy nickered, shied from all that death

The Gray Whale at Cascade Locks

The whale turned a wrong
corner and blimped up the river
until high-centering in Portland
where some guys with guns
tired of plunking beer bottles
filled him full of holes

county workers strapped him
on an east-bound freight headed
up the Columbia River Gorge

there's no horizon
on the Gorge
where mountains
concede the sky
a narrow strip of blue

anyway, half the kids in Cascade Locks
scrambled down to see the whale
chained across a boxcar
out on a lark from school and learning
to be mouth breathers
watching death's fat joke
rumble past, a gray
wave collapsing on its way
to Wyoming, flies swarming
a boggy blowhole
eyes sunken and soggy as a sump

Monochrome

Everything's smudged
in my memory that January:
I'm five and the world
shears off while the sun
shrinks to a zinc penny

Someone cracks a door
a burst of light hurls
a shadow at the wall
orbiting my confusion

Dick tells Mom
Tommy drowned
they're dragging the slough

He sank gripping his army-surplus
flashlight like a wand

Later we all stand on the bank
watching through a fog of breaths

They hooked him up a little after nine
hunting down the flashlight beam
lacing through the murk

The L-shaped torch tumbled back
as they grappled him onto the boat

Its amber beam plays across my memory
of his oval face with eyes still as quartz
fixed beyond our human faces
his gaze frozen as if
listening hard to the wind
rising on the river
beyond the pullmotor whine

Penny

I talk and watch
slender fingers
busy with clothespins

frozen sheets crackle
when Mom scatters
stars of frost
into the air

She looks past me
and I turn to see
Penny stagger out
a raw wound above her ear

Penny has hidden under
the shed for two weeks
since Marvin tried
"to put her out of her misery"

driven out at last
to lick our hands
wobbly with hunger
tail tucked between legs

the distemper broken
like a lanced boil
by the hatchet blow

Later she lay
behind the stove
on a gunnysack

legs dancing to the chase

Howard at McCrumb's Auto Court

I saw this man once
upon the morning
we buried his other son
his flat Dick Tracy profile
in the window of an Olds
unable to meet Mom's rage

Later she fumbled around
the kitchen where knives
and forks made no sense
clattering into drawers

Now here he is on this postcard
signed "Hod" and packed into a trunk,
a little short of God and as distant now

Under Orion

The night she died
the moon was pared
away to almost nothing
and maple leaves
fretted the yard
restless as the geese
wedging their way south
above the house
calling among the stars.
I stood outside
in Earth's huge shadow
there under Orion
waiting for the dog
star to rise blue above the Sierra,
remembering her the way
birds remember the world,
by heart, the songs
she sang peeling
apples by the sink
reeling through my mind,
wondering how long until
we're all ground under
earth's great plates,
till we're blown away
beyond perception
by solar winds expanding
across a wavering sky
where no bird sings.

Estate Sale

An autumn sky
the color of her eyes
leaves across the lawn
golden as the braid tucked
away with handkerchiefs
in her cedar chest

After the last word we meet
silence soft as humus and knowing
gives way like fingers melting
into a palm where the bud of each
fingertip listens listens listens

Sap sinks into old roots
smoke rises over fields
the mockingbird in the pyracantha scolds
a white cat drowsing by the porch

We've picked the house clean
as the maples in the yard
where we stand awkward
the last odds and ends
giving nothing away

Memorial Day

A swarm of bees
clusters on a bough
and morning blows house
lights out one-by-one.

Four-year-old Dick
wanders down to watch
Chuck sweep the hay into windrows
and finds surprised mice
scattering in the open air.
He scurries to catch one
then stands holding
the finger the mouse bit
crying "I don't want to die,
I don't want to die."

Rereading an Old Letter

For H. H.

You miss her most after
sunlight burns away the mist
and morning looms blue and yellow
beyond the kitchen window
butter, a blue tablecloth, red-gold hair

You drive alone through the evening
crossing fields fading in moonlight
along roads where no one
sings those old songs
you always sang together

no words, no tune, no sentimental plea
no warble-laced harmonies
just your heart rocking
your brain roiling with a voice
clear under the sky's dark bowl

empty of her keen laugh.
Later still, you miss the slow
shared blossoming together,
liquid brush of skin on skin
under a climbing moon

But now you slip
down a long quiet road into darkness
pulled in a single direction.

Three

It takes so long
dividing everything in two

before and after
me and you

Two Springs

I'd been thinking about my nephew
Willy and the mound of squirrel skulls
raked from the ashes of the fire
he cracked one-by-one like walnuts
while we talked late one afternoon

Then I glanced up from the bog
of memory and saw you holding
something in the hand behind your back
and marveled at the broad sunlit
smile swinging onto your face

The White Balloon

My scalp crawls
when I look through
the snapshot's crack in time
and there we are
just that side of the rift
the forest dark beyond

Pale hair flows down her back
and I stand beside her
weight on one foot
showing her something
cupped in my hands

Our naked two-year-old
daughter, Becca, gazes up at us
who always had so much to say
the taut string in her fist stretching
up to the white balloon mooning
above us, a cartoon bubble
silent with age as the dead
key on a toy piano

The Angle of Reflection

A steady desert light
trims the even edges of the sky

We move and the ground gives
sand slipping underfoot

There is security in distance
a golden loneliness, insistent quiet

We can see a storm coming
miles away wherever we stand

Rain skims in all directions
the wind chirrs

We say nothing and listen
to the voice of a boundless sky

Evidence of Life

This land is unmarked
frontier where years
sweep behind without trace

memories once precise
grow porous as a net
thrown over a fog bank

but somehow I recall
standing here on all fours
mutant nature lapping at my feet

while a moon bubbled amber
I raised my head
and sang into the wind

tonight moonlight pools in the room
and dreams drift into dunes
blinding as a continent of snow

I wake from sleep's premature
burial, the sun rising like a fever
toward a future I'll never know

Code Talkers

The homing device starts
humming in your head
as you round the corner
into a room stuffed
with awkward glances
you translate into silence
while answers edge away
from questions they can't
agree with any more

I Don't Mind and You Don't Matter

I don't mind that life in another country
looks out of someone else's eyes, plays

checkers by a duckpond while here, here
we stand on surface tension in the mirror

hair electric on my neck
and love still a cunning word

for harmony whose silver waters
wash my heart away, away

and yes, black petals
unfolding as I sway

No Shadows in the New Moon

The pillow's hollow from your dreams
when I wake and hear you making coffee.

Rain rattles the corrugated roof,
a car hisses past on the street.

A water pipe thumps, then hums
and dishes chime far off.

Listening to everything
I'm surprised by nothing.

Like clockwork we return
to these routines; hopes

worn thin as beaten gold
reflect for a moment then forget.

In a distant room your feet
scuff the red-tiled floor.

A door opens, then closes, swinging
on a hinge of silence between us.

Ravel, Unravel

Summer after summer
tiles crumble
ice melts

days lean
together, prop
each other up

Tonight heat fills
the darkness
in and out

a glass sweats,
your hand slips
around it, cool

we listen
to the creek
empty itself

All the time
we have
follows it

rolls over stones
shimmering
in the heat

Four

In a field
wild with mustard
a rabbit grows alert
as a dark comforter of crows
settles over a cottonwood

The Red Shouldered Hawk

The red shouldered hawk
sweeps past the roof

rises suddenly to her nest
high in the sycamore

two gray chicks fluffy as lint balls
hoarsely welcome her back

she drops her catch
hops to another branch

the chicks cackle
climbing over one another

learning to live with the sky

The Trick

The trick is to catch yourself
listening to the scuttle of shale
down a mountainside

stand still in the moment
with a red-tailed hawk
rising on an updraft

that breathless moment
the wind drops
and thought leaps

free as a salmon
in a cataract

as the dream wraps
its bright coat
around the dreamer

Absence

Last night I shot awake
in that enormous hour
before the sun comes up
my heart an elbow in my ribs.

Your face swam like the moon
torn from its moorings
more real in the melting shadows
than I could let you know.

I got up to watch
the sunrise and write
how I've spent a life
that comes at last to nothing

but this moment alone
thankless as birdsong
weightless as a dustmote
dancing in sunlight.

After Reading about Light Cones

Here in California you wait
long enough and the sun
slides into the Pacific

birds under the eaves fall
into stunned silence
and maybe it's worth the wait

tagging along as Earth
corkscrews through the only heaven's
great gulf between us.

Tonight Sirius guards my rear
as deaf Rose pads beside me
between the house and barn.

I take her collar
when the bull
snorts near the trough.

A dog-toothed moon
hangs in the yawning sky
and the night stretches

long as morning shadows
where we began this wait
to make our beds in darkness.