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Cro's Cabin

Shaun Leggett

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

February 1996

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ABSTRACT

Cro's Cabin

Shaun Leggett

These poems, a series of lyric and narrative poems interspersed with prosaic journal entries, attempt to explore how we see the world around us by telling the story of a young man's experience as he grows aware of this constructed process. The poems titled by date portray Cro's daily experiences while the more "traditionally" titled poems explore the world around him that he cannot always see. The Journal Entries are Cro's attempt to synthesize these things. As Cro says of this process in his Journal Entry of July 10th, "A poet drives down that road, watched from behind the trees, unable to name the eyes he feels on him. A poet drives down that road, watched from behind the trees, named by the eyes he feels on him. Poets swerve away from words with unerring instinct. They go for the ditches. They get dirty in there, between words and meaning."

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May 29th

Cro arrives in the evening
just as it's done
and pulls the shade of sky
down to where dusk holds
the sounds of mice and crickets
in its soft hands the ground,
their rummaging rustles
like constant wind through the tall grass
yellow along the drive
and in the fields.

He navigates by the more tangible darkness:
the shepherd crook of the pump
sticking darker out of the night,
the wide trunks of trees
bordering the flagstones
between the black cabin
and the shed
to the weathered vegetable bin,
he runs his fingers over the rough boards
to the cold rock and the key.
He finger-finds the key hole,
opens the cabin door
the smell of mice, waits still,
patient, then the layers
of cedar wood, smoke, lamp oil and dust
to find his way through
to the lights.

At the car again, behind him
the cabin shines
like a jack'o'lantern
beaming rectangular eyes
into the night, its tongue
flopping orangely out the door
of its huge alien head
and disappearing into the perimeter
mute glowing light.

Cro reaches into the true blackness
his pale hands vanish into nothingness
but feel and pull his carefully contained past
into the light,
into the cabin.

Epilogue

Cro sits at the table in the centre
the one room cabin a stillness and silence,
the long drive just done
with the shadow-weight pushing him,
wild, here and three fingers of *Bushmills*
amber in the glass and light.

May 30th,
Cro's Journal-

Arrived yesterday well after the sun set. It was late by the time I got everything settled but went for a walk despite. No moon, no stars, just dark. Funny how the world goes away without light. We close our eyes, block out light and banish all matter(s). But on this walk empty houses, crooked trees, stumbling over rocks and rotting logs. There is barely any distinction. Form leaks substance and everything slides into something else. A pool, walk through dark waters. Dark, an open mouth -- you walk in, dissolve inside. But this is all more fictionally dramatic. Walked across the old fields to the stilt house. The clumps of sumac, stands of birches and piles of rock: everything glowed with a mute light as though it had spent the day storing sun to get through the night. To retain shape. The yellow grass burned to ash under my feet. For now the house has survived another winter, perched on the side of the hill. It has been that way always. As a child my heart thrilled with fear when I could finally bring myself to enter it, certain it was only waiting for this moment, to swallow me and slide back into the lake. Now, twenty-two years later, residue of a child's certainty. I enter and hear the shifts and groans of the house in my spine, my legs heavy and ready to leave. The Hobbit Hole is fading. Every year more of the roof and roots slip into it, filling it up. One day its door will not open here any more. The ramparts remain much the same; the beech thriving. Lone sentinel. Nothing else but scrub seems to be able to find purchase in the flagstone floor. The door and window frames bone grey. Bones of home. A barn actually. And the back door with the clutching-tree stooping over the path to grab you as you come out. The path to the old writer's cabin. A little too Grimm for me but the only way to Weathertop. But it wasn't there without the moon and stars. Just a hill in a cow pasture. It is amazing to stand amongst the stars so low on the ground, but not last night. Took the road home; the cabin like a smouldering heap of hot gold cooling in the darkness. The way it leaked light.

May 30th

The bass above the door smokes
a verathaned cigar but it only tells
the last story over and over.

Cro sits in the one room cabin
his grandfather built the floors
green to the walls and the fridge
a white block in the corner he sits
in a chair at the table with the orange
residue of autumn leaves arranged in
the milk jug in the centre
the lattice window frames
sections of outside
the rain
sliding over
glass squares.

June 2nd

The witching hour drawing closed
and things turning widdershins
into themselves.

At one a.m. Cro's alarm rings

the cabin still

more so than it would have been had he not gone to sleep
and dreamt all that dancing.

No matter.

Indistinct

and formless,

until the bared bulb light
bounces off ambered walls
not making it very far

he pulls on socks,

pants and the rest.

He is obsessed

haunted

by the symmetry of the pyramidal
way the arborvitae in the field tapers
towards the sky with unbroken edges
and not so much as a brown needle
breaks its green skin;
how the sun sets directly behind it
throwing a great arrowhead
shadow
flying east across the field

a black wound
this idea
dancing into his head
everything is shadow,
tonight contracting to a point
as if the cycle of our days
is the hibernating heart beat
of the earth, the daylight expanding
across the world and filling it up
with blood
until night squeezes it out,
leaving just the after-burn.

He is not sure what to think
when he finds the cedar fluid
and perfect and later
musing
on the dock
surrounded by the slopping
sound of the lake
he is disturbed
by the night
colour of the day
red canoe.

Dance of the Cedar Fairies

All places have night
and their particular erlking
though here it's not alders
but cedars that slip
their roots from soil
to dance through fields
under cover of summer
thunder,
stalking through night-woods
to crowd around summer homes
on the edge of sleep, rustling
the names of children
terrified of the wind
and clinging to sheets beyond hope,
the cedars scratching on the roof
press sounds like footsteps
out of the old wooden eaves,
the breeze
parents claim,
the cedars tapping
at the window panes.

June 5th

Down the dirt road at dusk again something
last minute always keeps him
from bringing a flashlight.

The dust settles on his shoes with each
step he remembers the call and
how he always knows the morning
 come. He wakes and the air
a strip of leather running
into his mouth,
the cabin too hot with sunlight
he gets out of bed not having shaken
the sand of sleep from his body
so the kettle is heavier, the chair harder
and the day progresses
in strange ways.

When the water boils, the phone
shrills and Cro puts the hot kettle
on the table to burn
another ring into the wood.

The dry paper bag of her voice
crumples the dinner invitation
down the line, the day's rituals
speaking moth-winged
flutter about him,
touching the fine hair
in his ears,
the importance of nothing
is attended to.

Cro walks towards Black Mariah's house
an evening once every summer
the weedy drive
lined to her door
with old, old pines.

Dinner at Black Mariah's -- I

Mariah named for her black spinster dresses
these past forty years boils potatoes & peas
& the brisket all in the same pot,
talks about his grandmother
the few times she ever come up here and her dead
son the doctor
Cro chews the smells
of kerosene & always apples
in the centre piece bowl,
a kidney
pan rusting in the lamplight.

Dinner at Black Mariah's -- II

Mariah named for her black spinster dresses
these past forty years boils potatoes & peas
& the brisket, talks about his grandmother
the few times she ever come up here so
out of place like the tea roses
she'd plant with grand names: *Chrysler Imperial*,
Scarlet Knight & King's Ransom that never survived
the winter but Mariah's favourite *Whisky Mac*
always did, kind of, and her dead
son the doctor as a child
dreamed of becoming a clown
but his *Cadillac* so blue
that it becomes black in the retelling
rolls over and off her tongue again
in the curve at the oak just up the Line
as Cro chews the smell
of kerosene & always apples
in the centre piece bowl
a kidney pan rusted
in the lamp's light.

June 8th

Cro sifts the thick dust and boxes
of generations stored
in the loft: the dust contains flakes
of his father's, mother's skin and bits
of their hair and his grandfather and even
his grandmother always too old to climb
but hers probably floated up
thinly over the years
on windy open-door-days
or was carried clinging to the fur
of winter month mice.

Cro came first in bright bleak April
when the field showing through snow
looked like threshed wheat
and inside the coffee cups full
of mouse shit and the musty
smell stuffing up his head so full
that even wet the mud
outside smelled cold, smelled clean.

**June 8th,
Cro's Journal-**

I feel dislocated.

Disassociated. Perhaps that is how my grandmother felt up here, planting her English Tea roses and sitting silently through the visits of coarse-clothed neighbours. The May blackflies and evening mosquitoes right through most of the summer. Ironically, her only passion seemed to be swimming in the lake. That is where she became an amazingly hard woman, setting off in the evening rain, August, with her umbrella and towel and my grandfather scoffing because wet was wet, lake, rain, it was all the same. I think water has been the undoing of much of my family.

June 10th,
Cro's Journal-

The Big Dipper & The Maple Tree

the bear pads down
the black mountain sky
she comes down low
and gets off in the maple tree,
celestial wind shaking branches,
and the heady musk:
the air lifting off the leaves
strong in the warm night.

Every night, around 11 p.m., the beer or coffee I've been drinking sends me outside looking for more room. I step onto the porch. Actually, that is just the way it started and now I step out every night, even the clouded ones, because Ursa Major fills up the sky and dips into the field so that its rim bumps against the top of the great maple in the field like some magic sign.

**June 14th,
Cro's Journal-**

Necropsy

Grandmother forgive
youth is all ego
and old age
elastic with time,
your skin
I always noticed
in passing-
I'm sorry for being
that young in your
stretched time,
spun wisps of gray
hair, faded eyes
clouding
the quiet need
of your autumn
days drove me
into the summer
afternoons I
arrogantly believe(d)
you spent watching
vein-blue hand
flat against the window
always pleased
when I happened back
for a mitt
my cards

or water
hurried,
out of breath
& time.

How little I
understood
time's ravishes
like an appendix scar
always there
undressed in
private.

June 15th

Not even noon and already the cicada heat
has pinned everything down
so that to walk the flagstones
beneath the pines
is alien and the interior
of the wood shed threatening.
The field grass, buttermilk
yellow,
brittle with want
of fire.
Cro watches
from the porch,
beer gone
warm sun dial shadows
turning
different
every new time
he looks.

June 15th,
Cro's Journal-

I dreamt of my grandmother last night. Probably because Mariah goes on and on about her. There is a mystery of connection I'll never know, but the dream. By the sea, a much bigger lake, with a horse, I know and have never seen, but is so much more than a horse and this place or its people and probably all things, and my grandmother who is herself but not bodily. A much heavier, stronger woman. A swimmer...

Seahorse

the old woman walks in the sea
her hand on the back
of a brown stallion
eighteen hands high
steadies her.

skirt stiff with dried brine,
only the wet hem moves
with the swells.

she walks slow, testing
favouring the cane
and he laughs with big horse teeth
like so many yellow tombstones
tilted in the ridges of his red gums.

What Simon Said -- I

This is from the beginning. It happened
on hot summer days, like this one,
when Syd used to sit on the porch, drink beer,
watch Barnable crisscrossing his fields.
This before the wind screens grew
into perfectly pyramidal cedars,
their fat bottom branches touching one another.
Back then he could see Barn in his overalls
humping buckets, hoes and sacks between the sheds and fields,
stopping to pump water over his head,
Massy Fergusson cap and all, standing there
picking splinters out of his hands from the pump handle
and generally finishing up the midday chores,
slapping mud-dust from his thighs,
then starting cross the fields. Syd, the porch, shade.

*He always said Barn jerked as he walked,
his knees never locked like normal people's,
cracking and popping like dry twigs,*
and he walks slow across the field
like he's still carrying one of those seed bags.
Syd lights a *Player's* navy cut cigarette, waits,
but when Barn arrives he walks right by
the green steps of the porch,
the green steps to the shade,
to the fresh painted pump, and dowses his head,
cap and all, again. Syd pops the cap
off another beer, lets it bounce
off the boards and clatter around the legs of his chair,
it comes to rest *McEwen* facing up.

Barn mounts the steps, Syd takes a long pull,
head titled back and eyes never leaving Barn's
eyes which never leave the bottle until they close
as he drops his body like a bag of seed
into the empty chair and lets out a lot of air,
rubbing at his face with an old square of burlap
that has found extended life as a handkerchief.
"Sure hot." He replaces the hankie in his hand
with a leather tobacco pouch, dry and cracked.
Syd lights another *Players*, tilts the beer bottle
to his lips again while Barn sits there
smoothing out a crumpled piece of rolling paper
on his knee, the sound of dry and cracked fingers
brushing across paper, overalls
full ten minutes before he pours the stale shake of his pouch,
like sand, onto the paper,
slowly rolls it between his thumbs and forefingers.
Too absorbed to even notice the thin shower of tobacco dust
spilling out the end of the shaping tube
like grain off an elevator. "Whew! Real scorcher.
Better here, shade." He uses his already open mouth
to poke his tongue out and wet the glue,
intent and still losing tobacco so Syd says,
"How'd you like a tailor made, Barnable?"
"Don't mind if I do." And he keeps it unlit
between his pale earthworm lips
while he restores his tobacco then lights the cigarette
with his own matches, takes out the wet burlap
and pushes it around his face some more, sighs
so Syd says, "Can I offer you a beer, Barnable?"
"Don't mind if you do." Syd reaches his arm back behind him,
through the door, into the cabin where he feels the cool brown
bottle he places beside the mirror for Barn

everyday of the summer he pulls it out
sweating in the shade of the porch.

**June 16th,
Cro's Journal-**

Reading a lot of William Blake lately. Talking of vision. Gets my mind going places I can never find my way back to. It keeps me still like trying to calm a mug of coffee you filled too full -- carrying it across the room. I see it again & again. If we could have kept his eyes in a jar of formaldehyde, borrowed them for an hour. Laid their visions flat on the page. I have a long list of names for my jar of poets' eyeballs.

June 17th

incredulous and cup
of tea to hand, a small
bleached table
with its single drawer
separates Cro's pressing hips
from the window sill

outside
the bee floats
golf-ball-big
bumping like an ice cube
against the glass,
each of the six panes,
in patterns,
with its surprising
loud body up
and then back down
bubbles in a glass
outside the window
the cedar very still
in the sun and heat
way high and sinking
heavily through the air
to touch this glass
the sleeping cabin

June 17th, Evening

Syd made the frame of the only
mirror hanging in the cabin by the back
door and grandfather bass
the mirror
was cheap then and it's old
now, rust brown sores speckling
like a fish's belly
but the bad light in the cabin
compensates for that
and from a distance
the reflection is clear of spots
but the gentle curving frame
suggests
a minute distortion
as though maybe Cro is a clown
staring into a funhouse mirror
his eyes swimming in silver.

Cro's Cabin

The clown swims out of the mirror intent
on breaking the silver
surface but nothing shatters
 his head crests
 water speckled like the belly of the fish.

He throws his leg over the frame,
clammers into the room
briefly standing toes and faces
 touching Cro before he grips ears
 climbs into his skull through his right pupil.

Cro's vision blurry and wet,
it is raining in the cabin
alternating bands
heavy and dark water
and then lighter
as the lake pours into the cabin
through the clown hole,
floats the furniture out
through the windows
air

while the clown rattles
the winter carapace of a cicada
propelled skittering overhead,
the wind's distant
roaring through the loft
dust full
of old boxes
tearing their covering
flaps
off.

June 19th

Cro remembers Jen, her hair
long down to her bum growing
up together but only now
it's Jennifer
and her legs long
all the way to her ass,
short hair & hugging her legs
on the couch
that Christmas eve curled inwards
like a photograph of a dancer,
this daughter of family friends
one herself so contained
amongst them all not reserved he
fantasizes naked the brown arc of her body
and her green-seed-eyes, swollen,
burst into sharp shoots,
grow into spiny hard stalks
that rip at the skin of his legs
as he crosses the fields
unable to discover their names
or relief from the raw
patchy rash
that always follows.

Nightly This Dream

maintains the repetition of features.

Bright black vixen eyes
under snow weighted
pine boughs and the brown
grouse almost blue caught
in the reflection of grainy air
between the juniper
and the white snow
then the revolving pattern,
a crooked stick thrown through the air
spinning on its elbow pulling
this way and that in a dance,
her incisors pierced through
spread wings sweeping
the snow into drifts
and not a drop
of blood but feathers,
feathers
breaking and scattering.

**June 20th,
Cro's Journal-**

Two things I know: summer arrives bright, fast -- a goldfinch. I have never seen summer arrive. One day it's just here, the air thicker with its birds, cicadas and hot sun. The fish come off the lake bottom to warm themselves. Summertime. Hello. The other is history happens in unlikely places. This is why we are always looking back on it pinned down, kept still and in one place but it's never how it happened.

June 21st,
Cro's Journal-

Blake saw a tree starred with angels at Peckham Rye when he was just a boy. I am but a boy, wondering exactly what he saw though I don't doubt they were angels and I find myself stumbling through the fields, watching the tops of cedars for something but not even a cloud, not a crow.

The First Dream

The given dream
of angels climbing carefully down
the mortal ladder
hiking their skirts and tucking their wings
in shadow and
going into the night.
Stars in the sky.

Their Mortal Likeness Proof

Where do the feathers end
on an angel's wings? It seems
such an artificial belief,
thinking halfway and safe,
that these feathers
cover just their wings. I think
their feathers spread
across the shoulders and downy
backs getting smaller
and fading into skin. Why else
do they cover their beauty in robes:
that beauty would wound us.

Three Crows

Bent as they fly
three crows track blue
cross his eyes

up there high wind
down here their feathers
flutter like coat-tails

in a crooked line
three crows dwindle
black dots in the sky

morning stars:
a crooked stick constellation

being pushed by the blue
of the whole sky
into the sun three crows

black spots crossing
the flat faced sun
and then growing

in his blue eyes

they fly out of
sun sky three-crow-
crooked line

uprooting his eyes.

July 1st

Cro in the field watches the poacher
reeling from beak-sharp wrath,
two angry sparrows driving him
into the sun.

Later:

black cloaked yegg
falls smoking from the sun,
a much darker Icarus,
jagged tail feathers
fluttering, the harried
beads of its eyes
calculating:
hungry egg-drinking thief.

Sundown

There is day end
low clinging light

thick and crab-moving
amongst the pine trees

into the sandy clearing:
two black cloak crows

together cock their heads
over the struggling sparrow

its wings stir small and dusty
disturbing the air.

July 1st,
Cro's Journal-

These meditative walks are not working. I am distracted with flights of fancy --as acrobatic as swallows. My mind wanders and soon boards the cedar spaceships. Such crafty and mercurial trees. Left unchecked they now populate what once were fields, attaining their night-seed shapes with alien purpose. Space pods. In the middle of the night they take-off, shower of earth and pebbles, detaching from the Canadian Shield and thrusting into the sky to intercept passing meteors and plant themselves like tail-fins, new guidance systems with roots in the kelvin ice temperatures of space.

There is something old and wise in them, the cedars. The dark fine hair of their bark.

I'm here. I have seen the moon resting gently in the brittle tips of that dead tree. Lying like a child being offered up into the night on the thin fingers of the erlking, held firmly, unmoving, and they say that the moon is so big, if it were to actually come down here looking for that child, we would all go mad. And that is not even bothering to explain the more complicated reality of gravitational chaos that would rend this landscape into fragments of barren rock and then pin it all down and still with the unimaginable cold of space. I have seen that moon come down looking for this tree on too many nights.

I drank all the *Bushmills*.

Going to walk now, thinking of the spaceship pod-shape of the cedars in the old pastures.

Woman by Water

-1-

Dusk is ash gray
on this evening
like rain
Cro goes walking

-2-

the tree trunks are slats
you watch the world through

an absence of light
running ahead of night
erasing knowledge, distance,
and depth

-3-

the water pools black ink
at the foot of the hill
glimpsed through trees
its edge
startling with green reeds,
the woman dark
shape amongst them

-4-

she plucks reeds. one weaves
into blue-black hair,
one cracks between teeth
she sucks moisture out
with green lips
he feels
blackest eyes
all the way down
through the trees
watching Cro walk down.

-5-

she stands in water to her knees
and does not smile
when Cro steps in
and lays his poet's hand
on faint blue skin
cold beneath her shift

-6-

the woman in water
cradles Cro in her hips
her hands steadying him.

it goes like that,
the moon cresting the trees
and bouncing its white ball
off the lake, into the trees
and suddenly he can hear
the moving sounds
letting out his breath

-7-

she makes small sounds
he gathers in his stomach
like hunger

his body, scattered, breathes
somewhere out on the lake
and watches from trees,

reforming around her,
the wind in her hair
his hands full of reeds

he follows somewhere her voice
chasing his breath and blood
in his head, loosening

she is all around him touching
becoming less distinct
with each kiss

shortening breath
the nighthawks grow dark
in the calling trees

-8-

Nighthawks calling
the slow moon spanning
the sky's lungs ache,
the night bleeds out
all definition
the cold form
he holds
anchored

-9-

night is a lidded eye
and Cro walks up
its dark curve.
A hill in the distance.

Resting On Weathertop

The lantern moon pours dead light
washing down the walls of sky
& igniting clouds with the sick
yellow edges of cigarette smoke,
tatters racing the round
face of the moon,
shaping thin bodied spirits
these night people lean
over the necks of nightmares,
the wind nags bend tree tops
with their passage,

the elemental night
cradles the sky & Cro
in faint glowing grass,
blanketed in tattered light
of the wrecked moon,
wounded, luminous.

**July 2nd,
Cro's Journal-**

Woke up in the mist and dimness of the false dawn, barely able to see the tops of the trees and the grass at my feet. Cold. I have never slept through the whole night on Weathertop despite the countless naps I've had there. Hazy dream stuff left tangled in my head. Must have been more effected by the whisky than I thought. Nettles, burrs and leaves in my hair but the strangest thing is the water reeds. The mist barely lifted as I walked home, damp and shivering I felt the air on my skin right through my clothing, form coalescing in sudden appearances before me: fences, gates, trees. Following the road by feel, new born. Such a gray journey. It was all there, so still, and I knew later in the day I would see it but then, now, beyond my eyes' reaching. Quickening something inside me. I want to say sex but it is sense. Clear sensation that we come to only expect in love. So filling and then home, exhausted.

Afternoon, went for a constitutional hangover cure up the road and met one Maeve Standish, newer to these parts than my own return. She was jogging up a healthy sweat and I immediately felt pasty and puffy. Hungover, I was probably both. She was wearing not much of some lycra outfit, perfectly suited for her hard body. Seems intelligent enough, though. And she has red hair and green eyes. Can't be too bad with the Irish in her though she is a law student. Her parents have bought the old Whelan farm up the line, and she is here to help them settle in.

I like the way she bent over from the waist to break off a piece of grass. She chewed it as we talked, making her lips faintly green, making me smile. Making me feel foolish.

Dinner at Black Mariah's -- III

All the rooms in her house look the same
decorated with the cluttered storage
of a long life waiting. Cro
in the dining room Cro doesn't dare move,
the air is charged with an invisible frenzy
of humming birds and butterflies.
Candle light tumbles out the windows
capering like fairies amongst beds of purple pansies,
inside bounces against polished brass plates,
trays mounted to the walls, disappears
in the dust and black spaces
between piled boxes and collections:
ceramic creamers, candlesticks mostly in use,
cast bookends with felt-covered bases,
souvenir spoons, match boxes and egg cups,
crates of magazines and newspapers, pens and all
the other stuff Black Mariah could never bear
to throw out and somehow her voice, exciting
the fluttering and finding its way
down the long hall packed
with old oil lamps,
whispers and mutters about Cro.
Coming all that way from the kitchen.

Royal Alfred

If she ever had one,
 Mariah says,
her husband must have been Alfred,
no family name but sometimes
Royal Alfred
for his bluish pallor.

He wasn't around long
at least not all at once
nobody really saw him much,
him being one for sleeping,
curled amongst the rocks and water
on the shore of Shadow Lake

his old white spine shore-curved
like a fin of driftwood pressed
into shape
by the wind

and his beard-mottled face,
the lichen stained rocks.
People stopped
early morning fishing there.

Local legend has it Alfred rose
wet and blue-naked
in the shroud of a rain misted dawn
to chase some local girls
screaming
down the Welsh Line.

Dinner at Black Mariah's -- IV

Candle flame flickers and capers shadows
along the walls Cro caught
in some children's tale,
the table spread before him
with silver candlesticks and salt&pepper
shakers ready to sprout legs and march to his plate,
the steaming brisket and bowls of potatoes,
peas, the whole setting out of proportion
and his legs don't reach the floor any more.

Looking down he sees buckles
on his small shoes hanging above the floor,
kicking out at the air and swinging
back to find purchase on the bottom rung
bracing the chair legs.

Black Mariah's voice like water
caught in the canals of his ears
after swimming, shifting like waves,
tides, going on and on, but
not with words:

he sees raven prying at the shell,
a long grey beach curving into distance
and pale blue sky, clouds, then people,
small and white as grubs, spilling
out onto the sand and scattering.

Raven's black beak like a spear falling
out of the sky snapping them up
in showers of sand
but not fast enough. She believes
these things and still the smell of apples,
Cro chewing looks down as his long feet plant firmly
on the floor in their old tennis shoes
and hears: *And there's more.*
An old Kawarthan legend

Guide to Southern Ontario & Other Birds

• the more practically minded birder might wish to consult *Peterson's Guide to Eastern and Central North American Birds*

AMERICAN CROW: *Corvus brachyrhynchos:*

A large, chunky, ebony bird.

Completely black; glossed with purplish in strong sunlight.

Bill and feet strong and black

feathers drip fuliginous rains

leaving inky pools beneath trees,

spreading the pall

of funereal wings,

a small, gregarious song sits

on the wind.

NORTHERN RAVEN: *Corvus corax:*

Note the wedge-shaped tail.

Much larger than Crow,

inclined to be solitary, hawklike,

it alternates flapping and sailing,

gliding flat-wing black kite.

Ravenous necrophagous.

When perched, not too distant

atop northern cairns, notice the "goitre" look

(shaggy throat feathers) and heavier

"Roman nose" bill denoting the avian intellect

present at the world's creation,

his influence legion and myth

changing on wing with black marble eyes,

accidents spiralling down from heaven,

a lost feather plummets

lazily earthward.

BLUE JAY: *Cyanocitta cristata*:

A showy, noisy, blue bird with a crest,
bold white spots in wings and tail;
black necklace. Pretty polly
is a large, graceful bird
of eerie silences and blue blurring
through open spaces its raucous
ghost blue screams like hawks
with red shoulders and music.

GRAY JAY: *Perisoreus canadensis*: (Canada Jay)

Gray eidolon of the cool
northern woods, a black patch
partial cap across the back of his head,
a white forehead or crown.
His breath soft *whee-ah*
wind through pine trees.
Deep in the tight laced boreal trees
the pine winds dance
in branches.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE: *Pica pica*: (American Magpie)

A large, slender, black-and-white bird,
long wedge-tipped tail streams behind
in flight, iridescent green black,
and large white patches flash in the wings.
The magpie, like poetry, is beautiful
in motion flying glittering jewel magpie.
Piebald Margaret will steal the jewels
your eyes harsh and rapid.

July 3rd, Sunrise

Dawn walking crooked
through the trees
stumbles
his arms full
of bright green ferns
spilling
across the forest floor.

**July 3rd,
Cro's Journal-**

Funny that morning, aurally, is mourning. Consider all the bright possibilities of the former and the bleak soul drowning of the latter. Yet there is something bittersweet about the brevity of the slanting dawn, the gold light dappled through the canopy of leaves and there is something so deep and still in mourning that leaves nothing but a possibility of pouring forth and spreading over this earth. There is a warm and gentle rain. I listen to it speaking to the earth.

Actually, it's not raining at all.

July 3rd

On such still mornings he walks
with fields of goldenrod
beneath his arms and he stops,
spreads them out like picnic blankets
while hummingbirds and bees
grow loud.

July 6th

Row boat amongst weeds
and last year's leaves,
more than that the remnants
of red paint fading
to a bloody brown,
what hasn't peeled off in weather
where nothing ever really was
between the house and the forest,
old steps led to a path
in the forest now grown over-
if they brought you
to the boat you'd miss it

young maples, no higher
than your knees crowd
protectively around.
Rainy days, nodding leaves,
standing close
you can smell the lake
washing out of it.
The mud it rested on
at summer's end before
it was put up on winter logs

now so far from water
it demands new life,
rainboat

The Coven of Corvids -- I

*Deep in the black god's wood, damp with shadows,
phosphor fungus and pale moon toad stools;
here the coven of corvids meet
but once a year the member's masque...*

OLD KAWARTHAN LEGEND

The setting: an oak leaf bower,
lattice-work floor of branches,
tight as a web. No light penetrates this place.

They enter: black oil eyes
the only life in dead masks.
The players: A Raven with the face
of fox, or maybe coyote,
so hard to tell in this gloom,
the smell of his breath rising
out of a carrion gullet,
he finds Whiskybae waiting under wings
and bear mask, as quiet and hidden here
as in the black spruce fastness --
forget him. The garrulous cousin
talking blue streaks through the long
unmoving mouth of skink.
He'd rather beat the sunny air
with his blue big wings,
noisier than rattling bone,
oblivious to the fox brown eyes
that always watch.

Tiny diamonds driven like hail
wing beaten throughout the night
flight from Notukeu Creek
gust in and swirl
about legs ringed in cricoid
segments
herald piebald Margaret,
but in the second before his appearance,
jackdaws everyone of them,
scoop up and swallow the glittering stones.
Then he is there, jewels dazzle
his feathers. The trout mask
lips pursed in stupid surprise
he never stops watching
their eyes looking
for the opportunity to steal them.

He would wear them like beads
looking for memories
in their crystal balls.

July 9th,
Cro's Journal-

The days fall faster up here than I expected and I don't know what I have accomplished. Very little writing but maybe peace. Peace is a heavy word you can drop like a rock. Serenity is a hollow word that echoes prettily; a splash in a pool and ripples. So it must be peace. You can hurt yourself with peace, and there have been a number of near misses.

I have seen Maeve Standish again. Twice in fact, last weekend, and much more than that in thought. For our second corporeal meeting I helped "chance" along. I like the way she seems to fit in so effortlessly up here, amongst the trees, the woods and rural fences, as relaxed standing upon this dirt road as if there really was nowhere else. Perhaps that is it. Maeve Standish lives in moments. Now that is a rare peace to know.

She has the most muscularly beautiful legs I have ever seen and I know she knows I think this, unable to stop staring like a twelve year old boy until she laughed and then I looked up, probably flushed, and saw her dimples. Christ! Red hair, green eyes and dimples. Funny how want can just fountain out of the ground we stand on and the earth reels and pitches like a much smaller ship.

For some reason, though I know what she looks like, I cannot remember what she looks like in her absence. I can describe her here on paper, but I picture a woman with alarmingly blue skin -- but I find it attractive and her lips as green as water reeds. And I put black hair on her, all curly with an oily sheen to it.

The night-blue woman moves across the sky with the moon in her belly.
The blue-night woman moves
across the sky
the curving moon belly

What Simon Said -- II

Barn said it fell out of the sky
like a bird-shot duck
but Syd told it so Barn wasn't even there,
likely over-talking a visit in town.
Syd was sure no one ever saw how the earth
rose up and slapped that plane
with a hand the size of a hill
and hairs like pine trees all over it,
but Syd heard it. When he was old
he'd say it sounded like Simon's circular saw
caught in a pine-knot, or cutting
wood too wet with that hot
running engine sound but longer,
drawn out.

There isn't really anyone around any more
to say
if that bald rock hill
had been shaved down
by that plane.

Like train brakes, Syd once said,
but with breaking trees
exploding in half
like gun shots.

A train wreck out of the sky.
Branded again with the arrogance
of Icarus.

But he only laughed at the dreams he had,
huge pines, douglas firs maybe,
reaching up to tear into the fuselage
and him going along with it and pulling
his dream-feet up onto the seat
away from the clutching branches,
no one else in his dream, the big empty cabin.

He baited our child fears of midnight trees
like the ones in *The Wizard of Oz*,
starting at every sound
until he had tired us out with our own fear
and then half teasing, but wholly serious,
explaining how you saw things by moonlight
you never would with a flashlight
and that sinking into the mud
at the bottom of our tired minds,
rooting there.

So those nights he'd come in
not quiet enough closing the door,
then you'd know it was safe to sleep
Syd having patrolled around the lake
without a flashlight
and seen everything out there
sneaking up on the dark.

The Coven of Corvids -- II

The pageant:

is a stately progression
the ideas of an argument
filing towards logical conclusions
at the peaks of evolution
unconnected by troughs
obscured in tar smoke and torch shadow
throwing all manner of skulkings
shapes in the hovering air
black birds.

stalking widdershins
describing circles
they arrive
where they started from
the bright apical points
the spires of churches
an artful trick
masked

July 10th,
Cro's Journal-

"the deer peek out of the word 'deer' and they have no name"

Tim Lilburn

This world is transfixed by our language: held there like an animal in the glare of headlights, crouched on the highway, waiting. There is a moment when you realise you are going to hit that animal and the nearly subconscious evaluation that results in *it's only a raccoon*. The small jolt felt in the car and that memory lodged in the base of your spine to be remembered later, at odd times, seeing an infant wrapped in the powder blue blankets of his stroller or the fork frozen between plate and mouth and the voices in your ears losing texture, humming. You look at the passenger or driver, sharing that queasy absence where your stomach was, then you are a minute and a mile past it all. Willing the forgetting. Wanting it.

But there are things out there bigger than bread boxes.

It is these things that really impact: the deer and moose of language you don't want to hit. Love, life, happiness, god for some of us, these are worth your life to avoid. Even missing them results in death or injury.

Sometimes the curve is blind, sometimes you survive. The blaring horn wedged on with the weight of the body buckling the hood and the wind shield a spider web tracery fracturing the light of the one unshattered high-beam. You get out of the car into this crazy night with your bruised chest and a deer dead on your car, its brown eye like a marble. It is already stiff with death and unreal. No more a deer than the broken car or the raucous blare dividing the night from death down the solid yellow line of this road. It is just *deer*, nostrils wet with blood.

Poetry is the instinct to swerve no matter what, and the best poets are quick as gun fighters. They don't discriminate between raccoons and deer. They go for the ditch.

They'd rather go for the ditch. It's called self-preservation, preservation of language: because a deer is only a deer when it's dead on the asphalt or the hood of that car above. When it leaves the black god forest and walks across our eye for the moment it takes to cross our language and leave it again on the other side. And only that moment. Unless we stop it, hold it here. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

A poet drives down that road, watched from behind the trees, unable to name the eyes he feels on him. A poet drives down that road, watched from behind the trees, named by the eyes he feels on him.

Poets swerve away from words with unerring instinct. They go for the ditches. They get dirty in there, between words and meaning.

I'm walking through nights now, when I can't see anything except by the grace of the moon. I'm shedding words, gathering eyes.

July 14th,
Cro's Journal-

Seen Maeve every night since I last wrote. Instead, we're making love as supple as a willow switch.

I want to become an architect and build a bridge that curves the way she arches her back.

July 22nd

it's one of those big sun days
and it washes the green out of the trees,
burning the lake into white glare
so that Cro gets to just sitting
the canoe held motionless
with the thickness of heat
in a dimple of water
and him thinking of the lake
down there
where the winter water
sank

and those cold horses stamping March
out of their legs, shivering flanks
and the chaotic vapour of their breath
steaming halos around tossed heads
trying to see around blinders,
wondering in their horse-way
if they are done out here
on the frozen lake
the cutting wind
cutting ice

the sleigh's runners thick as barn beams
because the men pile the ice
in blue veined pyramids.

the horses would have left nervous long ago
but they're strapped with leather
to the sleigh while
the men run across the hard packed snow
before the groaning breaks off
thunders-

but they can't overcome the weight
the horses
of all that ice
alone the horses
it collapses (ever so) slowly
 (the ice floating
 and then sinking and then)
beneath them the lake above them
screams sounding human.

July 25th -- I

The rain comes hissing
falling over the tree line,
the lake leaps and reaches
back into the sky,
the swimmer rough
with gooseflesh watches
the other side & cold water
between here and there;
then swimming:
never closer to there
than here
with the lake falling back
down all around him.

July 25th -- II

The rain hisses into the lake
sizzling over the surface sounding
like the sky evaporating
in the heat of summer's end,

all this sky in the lake
has made the water super-buoyant
so Cro floats unnaturally,
easily, like a bottle.

He keeps just enough breath
in his body to float where the flat
surface of water meets the
underside of the sky

and draws a horizon of water
across his eyes half under
water, half over the gray shades
of the day, of the rain descending
in green water.

The Green Water Dream

There is water gray
green water and noise
cradling his head

He wears the wet sound
like a helmet
around his head he sees

He has no control
over the green water
he's thrown his body in
the river has it holding
his arms tight and pulling
his legs down

He kicks

July 27th

Cro on the balcony leans
over the sumac and privet
rioting below

 down the field to the lake,
the lake down there
a low
and flat
silver coin
like the experiment-nickels of hot
droning Augusts
taped to the rail so as not to shake off
with the passing train
and flatter after that
they burned his small fingers
as he picked at the tape his legs
still full of the shaking weight
leaning over the darkening green
and into the chill purple twilight
that lifts off the ground
and into the sky.

August 1st

Mornings when the clouds are stretched
thin and the colour of linen hanging
as though they are stuck on the sky
the way you made clouds with cotton
in kindergarten
when it was a lot easier,
glue them to the blue
construction paper and they're so
full up there they force
sunlight out of the sky
so it lies over the ground,
cleansing everything, warming
the grainy perfume of wild flowers
and the glowing colours bunching
in small banks through the fields.

On these days Cro walks and the sun
swirls around his ankles
along the Welsh Line to the highway
to see the old cak again
he tells himself that story
in the curve of the road
the surrounding forest recedes
from its shade
squatting there alone
old man sitting on a stump but who
would sit on those awful knees
and anyways Cro hardly ever makes it,
walking up the humping road with each rise
he gets higher & higher in the air
each step larger
until he is a cosmonaut
striding across the sky.

August 5th

The operation is precise
on the half-bushel basket
each peach quartered
pried from the pit
the skin peeled away

(there is enough to waste
and the long day begging.)

away from each section
the round motion

dulling the knife on the pits
until it passes through Cro's thumb
without blood

his left arm ending in a peach
and his right hand a knife
until his eyes are quartered
in the white curve of the bowl
fracturing vision

these veined fractures
beginning
the imperceptible
pulling apart.

August 10th

Sometimes the sun has a way about it
that slows things down and summer,
coming suddenly upon its end,
is surprised.

Cro gets to looking around.
Things have taken on a wild
and alien air,

shocked still
the summer's shadow is a green so deep
it's easier on the tongue
to call it black.

Days like this the old lady
in his grandmother hated
the stupidity of summer gaping and sweating
crouched there before her,
not going anywhere
not getting on with it.

The only thing left of her,
lily-of-the-valley implacable
and patient in the damp shadows
that crawl from under the house.
Thin and swan-curved necks
hang the tiny bell-white flowers,
their clapper-stamen swing
lazy and perfume the air

lingering everywhere,
my grandmother, this and every
thick summer day.

August 12th

He finds one of memory's keys
at the back of a locked drawer

an old bar of olive oil green
soap wrapped in brittle yellow

wax paper flaking and peeled
open under his fingers

the durable consistency
of smooth sealing wax,

it escapes slippery from fingers-
across the floor he sees it

with other eyes, green, sliding
again, another time, onto the floor

from older fingers and woman
hands. That old perspective

atop the kitchen stove, an old
McLeary Royal Charm wood stove

with a hot water tank, cast iron
and enamel, everything else

down there on the floor clean
scrubbed with a rough cloth,

he chases these things
like a dog would a ball,

the bounding of his eyes
after these visions

from the same slippery fingers
dispersing into the night

they slip out of the cabin
through chinks in the walls.

The Coven of Corvids -- III

Bear mask and a cloak of feathers
stalks the round, a bone rattle clatters
in his hands a human skull carpal
dice poked through eye sockets

Fox points his black nose into the sky
and dips it back down cutting
the crescent moon again and again
into the sky's white wound

Skink drags his long tail feathers
erasing prints and unction confusion
crowds his heart, stuffs storm clouds
in his brain the quiet places masked

Trout following steps careful over longicorns
not there and he peers out of his mouth laughing
inside, he's too clever to see with his eyes
the strong crushing jaws of the mind.

**August 17th 1788,
W. Blake's Journal -**

Acushla,
I came upon such strangeness
as I walked out
today at Peckham Rye,
Small black angels
With jagged feather tresses,
perched on limbs,
their ebony oil eyes.

They spoke like screaming pulleys
and pulled me
into the air with words,
their banshee
Voices smote the trees
shook loose the leaves,
and howled-out my ears
with an icy breeze,

Funnelling down the sound
cordial of their words,
Hollowing out the dark
places of my soul
Contracting with the pulse
of the heart
Running rampant in the cordate
shapes my eyes extol.

Then the sky boiled
a furious sound
and rushed overhead
but I was not afraid
Being struck with the wonder
of all around
As Heaven brushed the earth,
lightning frayed

My vision, the crows
spread the wings of night
and silence
and soft rain descended from them.
I am hurrying home, Acushla,
wrapped tight
in the bright beauty,
this storm upon Peckham.

**August 21st,
Cro's Journal-**

August 21st

is the day of summer's turning
from the white heat of July
to the gold fading & burning
apples fall, the season passed by

draw in your breath, Autumn's cold sigh
warms the colours of the fall
and August vegetables, they lie
in deep colours tasted with the eye.

Summer's End

August ends and summer
packs itself up with the loose
untidy corners of last fall's
leaves still brown they peek
from under bushes --
someone else's bundles
of old papers tied
with a baker's string.
Sometimes summer packs up
before we're ready to leave
for that place where seasons go.

Cro & the Nine Cedars

The cedar leans against the cabin
by the window
catching its breath
resting in the roots
of the long journey.

Cro dreams in its slow language
for hours feeling the earth
deeply patient for the water.

The roots entwine about
the foundation and hold
the cabin close, still.

Cro sleeps and his breath
draws air the cedar tree
through the red framed window.

The black crow sways
in the height of the cedar
connects the sky to the earth.

The cedar stares in the window
it gets into the cabin
shouldering aside the air.
Cro dreams the wind.

A cedar grows
out of Cro
open mouthed
its bronchioles
root in his lungs.

Breaking through sleep,
his trunk and limbs
pinned to the bed heavy
and wet like fresh cut logs.

Small forests of cedars grow
along the ridge of his brow,
they green over his trunk

and the fragrance of cedar
brushed from the tips
hangs in the green air like paint.