

“The Salt Lick”

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The Department

of

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Abstract

The Salt Lick

by Makeba Cooper

My thesis project, The Salt Lick, a collection of poems, explores the contemporary effects of industry and nature on the human psyche, approaching the subject via themes such as desire and consumption; industry and futility; lost potential and renewal as they intersect with animal, human and world.

Many of the poems oscillate between discretion and deviance. The actual and concrete, explored in some poems – in terms of objectivity or historicity, are often subverted by implicit or metaphorical meaning. Subjectivity, in poems like, “The Salt Lick”, moves away from pure linearity, interrogating, instead, the perceptions of the subject operating outside of temporal constraints – a departure which also creates agency. The work of both D.H. Lawrence and Joyce Carol Oates, could be said to influence this project in terms of its gothic elements and interest in “sexual psychology”, as it relates to seduction and corruption; social observation and estrangement; unconscious forces and violence.

Whether explicit or restrained, this project revisits experiences born from an American mill town; where poems are narrative, or imperative, in tone and tense, this thesis hopes to remain unified thematically by the prosperity and poverty – both material and psychical that derives from a collision between industry, nature and man.

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Chapter One

To the River

Dad wanted his ashes spread upriver near his favorite spot.
It was not many minutes behind his childhood home
the path to it in my memory,

overgrown with tall grass: cat tails, goldenrods
black-eyed susans. Near the ground,
wild strawberries, bitter from the acidic earth.

Dead leaves from autumn confused
the summer colors, dull amber hues mingled,
branches snapped beneath our feet

as we neared the water's edge.
The reflection of everything tall slanted across the river's face,
distorted by an indecisive current.

Under the surface, in the shallow parts, we fished
for mussels tucked under the mud—
then gored them open against the rocks.

That dad had a wish for his ashes complicated mourning,
that he forgot the house was gone, the water dancing
with sewage, the hemlock and paper birches,

infested with gypsy moths, complicated our journey.
We knocked at the stranger's door, asked permission
to complete our last task.

The stranger said, no. So, we were left to trespass,
but the canoe on top of the Jeep was rotted,
we forgot the paddles; the gaslight went on 20 minutes ago,

and we left Dad's ashes on top of the bookshelf.
Though light changes and people go in seasons
we would never find our way back.

But for the dust—the path to the river
is hidden and far.

July

You met your grandson for the first time
in the summer,

when so many important things
happened, like your death

two years later.
You were proud of me then: married,

a mother, a passport that let me leave
and come back.

And I still come back.

Whatever happened to your old tackle box,
dad, did they get that too?

The silver minnows, wax worms, sinkers,
shiners, maggots...

the perch's favorite food.
Why weren't we grander, more legitimate;

why weren't you as tall
as the tales you told—

drag races in your Corvette,
how you almost played for the Cowboys...

and where was your God when mom's
mind went away,

the light through the stairway balustrade,
the splintered view at nine.

Nine at night,
when Pastor Pearl came

with mouthfuls of prayer

and intervention;

to exorcize whatever demons
came to court her.

I watched you
in the corner rocker your father made,

self-effaced
by a chaos you couldn't fix,

I backed up the stairs to bed unnoticed
when the last light went out

and all sound had fallen mute,
as inside a womb.

He was *so* small in your arms,
yet deafening,

perhaps the liveliest thing you'd held
since your best catch

and you *got* him to sleep—
swayed his temper

in the rocker your father made
for your mother

and I was proud of *you* then.
July is a good month to fish for perch.

It's a good time to remember,
a good time to pray.

The Last Theatre

Yesterday's burden has been drained:
two thumbs slid down the lids,
interstices laced with fine metal thread;
the wrists, the mouth, the long body
pocket emptied of small change and spleen.

The Dracula machine is done digesting;
pancake tan spread over visible skin,
spackled into the old hole in your neck;
starched shirt collars fastened with pins.

A velvet curtain separates you and your box
from the fold-out chairs, and few faces
suspended in disbelief.

The fourth wall separates you
from the audience that does not applaud,
does not know your shoulders carried me
until I was almost grown,
how Sundays at the river, you sometimes
set the yellow perch free.

Arrival of Light

Before the Puerto-Ricans, the Irish and Italians; the Polish and Germans; the Estonians and Ukrainians; the Latvians and Lithuanians and the French Canadians came.

The moon dropped its light on their tenements equally, glimpsing their small customs, under a cot, over a small wooden key-chest, on a night table: a small pictish stone,

Verdi's anvil, a tin of bellflower, a taufscheine— a runic song from memory; a dainas, a poem by Janonis, a guiros made of gourde.

Dawn rises inside unsalutary light, the workday with the pitch of a steam whistle out from the black-lung mills.

A procession of uneven height forms: father, mother, sister, child—piecework affords the girl one red ribbon from the company store, but her hand got taken

by the spindle, beneath the spools, a ribbon of blood instead. The machines keep moving as the dim memory of day consummates

under the display of a sickle moon. Cast iron pot and ladle clatter over coal; grain boils. Eat.

The seasons change between black, the Dutch arrive with a hex sign. A mother sews booties with company thread, by the light of a kerosene lamp.

Blackstone*

A haunted womb rubs
in the window
a broken pane and smoke
pass through

her body of dust, an hourglass
empties to the ground.
She aches for an undying seed
—one cell

to bring back the light
restart the engines
bring back the children
bring back the boats

restock the river
harvest the bellflower
revive the color
in her baby's black face.

Sulfur beneath the granite
patina on bronze booties
see her beauty
turning to dust

crystal glasses—There!
crystal houses
chandeliers in the gallery
but there are no guests

a fractured night
a fork in the water
a little hand reaches
down to the light

*The Blackstone River is located in the US states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Its waters powered the first textile mill in the United States. The Blackstone River became known as "Americas hardest working river". Later, as a result of industrialization, it became known as the primary source of the areas bay pollution. — *Britannica*

We Drive the Night

We drive the night
on the backs of broken horses
'round the atmosphere
of lilac light.

The workday done:
steam whistle, cigarette
smudged out on the bottom
of your hard black boot.

The twilight sky full with hot air balloons
abandoning our small town,
mill town medley of loose teeth
and cotton money.

Your dark-trimmed eyes
determine to have me; you lace
your fingers into my skirted waist,
and lead me to the ride.

The promise of the hunter moon
brings on the night, spectral
ether flashes engage
our upturned eyes.

We laugh into the black wind,
cheating trouble. Your brazen,
lowborn ways make you alive
like a cup of fire—

takes a man's daughter out
from her taper-legged bed,
dead to all sounds but urgency.
You make me feel all of you.

We drive the night, and you've
lassoed a lover on your chipped,
glass-eyed stallion, counter round
a crowd of faces...

the hearts of wooden horses beating
mutiny, carrying the carnival night.

American Thread Company

I

The stone harvested from the river outside built
Mill No.4. Calcified traces mark the walls and floors
alongside the graffiti. The innards are a temple
for vagrants and bored youth.

The railway on the other side makes no sound.
The weeds nest pinkie-mice—less now in number,
they are prey to water snakes black
against the craggy divide of untamed granite.

Crests of sand hide fire ants that quarry flesh, undetected
by bare feet that amble near the river's edge. Bitten,
the ankle vein becomes prominent. The lethal blood blue
beneath the transparent putty skin of hairless mice.

They die invariably as anomalies of puberty consumed.
The nest, a rusted can sated with filament, stick
and cardboard, lies empty. A syringe of unknown content
jogs along the current's redundant lip.

II

A pack of American Spirit cigarettes lies at the side
of a half-eaten pizza, still in the box. Graffiti ambiance
reads: F.T.W.: *FUCK THIS WORLD*,
Donna Gives Good Head, The Boss is Back.

The Dr. Pepper soda can: a homemade bowl, stale
from nickel-bag weed, hesitates, as the sharp autumn wind
driven through the broken panes passes over it;
dead leaves take flight in static corners.

The echo of her first time slaps beneath her thighs
and the dead cold floor; a demonstration of electric potential
dispels its contradiction under a stony twilight.
She pulls up her pants and listens to nothing.

She smells herself: wet chalk, onion, lonely dark girl,
a pipe sound, a ghost train, smoke trails augur, a lighter flickers,
her eyes shake, no one knows her, wet rock under buttocks,
devirgined junkie, at the bottom of Mill No.4.

III

She throws into the river, like an old woman who spits:
a needle, a can she kicks alongside the tracks.
Dusk is leaving, whisper sounds come up from the millstone
between the weeds, a hiss, the sound of paper in the wind.

She pulls thread from between her toes, picks at the scabs around
her ankles and throbbing veins, where a collection of bites form,
burning like an assaulted cervix. The fire mounts, an injection
of milk-blood; she is over-nourished by intermittent silence.

She follows the tracks east, myriad nests secrete a miscellany
of life. A white-footed mouse drags her only remaining pup,
inching past the entrails of others lost—to a can, teetering at the edge
of quarry stone, falling, at last by a push of ruthless autumn wind.

A copperhead steals between the rocks, claiming some dark space
near the water's periphery. Her feet are sluggish, dusty,
fifteen years old, moving still. The mill looms beyond her
black-grey-white-amber color absorbs the remaining light.

The fire ants search for food.

The Tallgrass Prairie

False Aster, Arrowhead Rattlebox,
Oldfield Balsam, Missouri Ironweed,
Swampwood Betony, Sagamon Clef Phlox,
Savanna Blazing Star, Prairie Lily,
Bog White Violet, Wild White Indigo,
Round Headed Bush Clover, Plains Buttercup,
Canada Lousewort, Kankakee Mallow,
Three-Toothed Cinquefoil, Plains Prickly Pear Cactus,
Clasping-Leaf Doll's Daisy, Wild Petunia
Daisy Fleabane, Bastard Toadflax, Cowslip
Dwarf Dandelion, Wild Poinsettia,
Hoary Pea, Harebell, Kingcup, Wild Parsnip
Dawnflower, Pasture Rose,
Showy Goldenrod, Balsam, Pussy Toes.

Chapter Two

August 15, 1985

(Diary Entry)

I see the moon out there again, getting full.
There's a lone cricket somewhere close.
The heat's getting to me, mom's gone again;
feels like a long time I've been figuring things out on my own.
No wind left to turn the blades in the window fan
— guess I'll just lie here like the dark.
I looked through an old photo album today. Dad and Jared
swimming at Hop River — Dad in his cut-offs,
hair whipped to the side wet coming out of the water.
Shoulders burnt and freckled. Eyes.
Alive. Jared's holding onto the inner tube, trying not to slip.
Mom snapped the shot. I'm not really there,
but you can see my right leg, foot stiff in the water.
I'm sitting on a rock by the rope swing,
holding the rope. There's a mean cluster of red
running down my leg, where the fire ants got me good.
The picture's always moving in my head;
the mirror water showing the other side of things.

August 22, 1985

(Diary Entry)

I've got Jared's Jackknife under my pillow
but I don't stab it at the dark anymore.
The knots in the wood beams don't scare me now:
black-eyes, owls' heads, petrified faces...
they're just scars from amputated branches—
little arms that couldn't carry their load,
that's all.

Every time I take the short cut
his eyes follow me through the blinds,
then snap shut,
like he'll try to steal me from the back again
thinking up some candy sweet coax
like I'm still 9 and stupid;

like I'll never tell.

Maybe I'll tear into his house one night
and sew his mouth shut with Jared's knife,

maybe I'll do that.

Saw the guy at the Best Diner again.
Jamie didn't notice him,
but I did.
And everything flew away like a million secrets
pitched at a bright sky—
like luck came for me,
dad's still alive;
mom's not working at the mill anymore
and Jared's still looking out for me.

Nobody knows me except you.
I want to be small again,
smaller than this:
The moon is a big eye.

The Salt Lick

I

The stone wall opens at the middle, releasing us out
into the tall grass where the thirsting green seeks rain.
There we recline expressing ourselves through touch,
I am clumsy, shy in natural light.
We distract ourselves with interior things;
external things will take us from each other soon enough.

II

The drone of Mr. Cochran's buzz saw is there behind us
cutting down the dying river birch,
one of six he humbles today.
Sick bark chafes away; life along the river is changing.

III

Feeling you draw out of me, mute chokes of breath, voiceless
physical talk. I am afraid. You see me at your grasp.
Is this love trembling as the saw to the birch's neck cutting
into her last layer. A horsefly disturbs us.
black-eyed susans compete with the goldenrod that blaze
the edges of the field leading down to the path to the river.
You want to take me there now.
But I don't want Mr. Cochran to see me, to know things.
I am fifteen. I am dangerous.

IV

You pick me up, carry me; I close my eyes.
I think I faint, drip honey over your arms. Listen
to the low sound and sudden crack
before the falling timber.

V

After the river bath you wring out the hair hanging
down my back. Droplets descend, find their way home.
We swell under the water. Suck. I see myself,
startle playful in liquid motion. *Who are you.*
Perhaps you should take me back to the tracks,
Let me run home under the late,
heavy sun before it goes to sleep.
My mother is calling me. I think I can hear her:

“Precious, Precious, its time to come home.”

VI

I see her now in her plaid slacks and turquoise sweater,
hair shorn short, dark, strong against her freckled skin.
Beautiful hands, long fingers. She's braiding cornhusks,
snaps peas into a black bucket she keeps under the sink.
Thursday is laundry day, but I don't let her wash
my clothes anymore; my life is private now.

VII

Thursday bleeds into Friday bleeds into Saturday,
and I am still far from home. Mom doesn't think
to wait for me:

"There'll always be leftovers for her later"

But later is as far away as a country neighbor's house.

VIII

Mr. Cochran spends time behind his bay-window blinds, looking through binoculars. He has a Polaroid camera and uses colored thumbtacks to hang pictures on the corkboard basement wall. He lives alone. Neighborhood children bring him sick pleasure in the dim, in the dark.

VIX

Mom's kneading dough now: roll, roll, dust with flour—
roll, roll, dust. She bakes what her garden brings,
offering it up on Sundays to Jared to me to God.

X

My brother Jared's off with friends on dirt bikes shooting squirrels
with BB guns. Earlier, mom warns us not to touch the mice
--the mother might kill them; certain scents don't mix;
tiny pink putty things, their eyes gluey slits—
and mom's yellow dish-gloved hands like a surgeon's.
She brings them back to the shed by the old salt lick.

XI

Inside there's still hay for goats, the hornet's nest is empty,
spider webs make a strange finish over the broken windowpane.
But the spiders are missing and the goats are long gone.
It's cooler inside the shed, slight breeze, slight relief.

The day demands attention, mom must go.

XII

"The garage needs painting,
luckily less often than my hair"
mom says, as she shuts the door to the station wagon,
 heading off to the other life she leads.
Jamie, my best friend, walking up like any other day:
 "Have a good time Mrs. Mary Mother of God"
Smart-ass. Always one step ahead, behind the sun
shines her hair golden, her hips, I wish I had
but I am smaller, less shapely.
 Less.

XIII

We adjust the plastic strung lawn chairs towards the sun.

Jamie hands me a bottle of red nail polish, I paint.

“Jamie, do you think I’m sexy?”

“Sexy is as sexy does – need some pointers?”

I hesitate, finish painting, wondering

if I’m enough of anything to want.

“Another summer of nothing –

you know what I mean,

painting this flaking old garage.

My mom’s got me pinned down.

I just want to see him again”

Jamie laughs at me in that way that says I’m crazy, crazy, crazy.

“You don’t even *know* him”

Know.

XIV

Bite of red apple, grape Bubble Yum in back pocket,
thick August heat drags us along the tracks.

XV

The mall sits just across the mouth of the river,
but the Best Diner stands alone in the dirt;
the road coughs as last cars pass by the late drone day:

“Don’t you remember him?”

Jamie never remembers anything,
takes the last piece of pizza, the front seat.

“You remember—the guy by the juke box. Dark hair,
aviators, jeans, t-shirt, tan”

“He’s ancient!”

“ He’s not!”

I plead.

XVI

Best friends since first grade: subliminal conversations,
raised eyebrows revealing our inside outside.
We are close blades of grass, but a fissure occurs
breaking earth, divided by darkness, *red secret*.

He approaches.

“We better get back before your mom;
you’ll be so grounded
if you get caught. Plus there’s the garage;
we are so dead.”

XVII

His looks make me sit like I'm balancing books on my head
awaiting something amazing. Wide eyes, hot cheeks.
Thunder Dome is playing, the cash register rings in rings
out rings. People watch people. Watch:

He walks long legs over
lean long legs towards me, me, me:

"Don't you want to leave this world"

XVIII

The August heat sheds my skin there is nothing,
nothing but him, his height, his hands,
and the hours that hide.

“Wanna go for a ride?”

XIX

His talk takes me out of the Best Diner to the dusty
front lot, Jamie waits with, watching,
daring me not to dare—“Call me later, *okay?*”
The Pabst Blue Ribbon electric sign fires in the window.
Jamie leaves looking back, hesitates, crosses the tracks,
shaking her head like I’m crazy, crazy, crazy.

XX

He takes my hand, convinces with stroking thumb—
seems to know my sometimes, my somethings;
closes the door to his Comet, peels-out the tires
—kicking away the world.

XXI

I look in the side-view mirror, an orange sun hangs low.

Outside the window, trees garnish the drive—
feeble, regal birch and pine. I can smell the river,
the musk inside his car,

his hand rides up my thigh, he stops short

—shifts down quick

“Is that it there on the right?”

“Yes.”

XXII

Around my side to let me out, he knows grown things—
that there is nothing inside of me to say, but do.

He takes out his gray army-issue bag marked Private,
loosens the neck, checks the contents, lights a cigarette,
sucks until the tip is red-hot ember
pulls it shut—

“This the way?”

“Yes.”

XXIII

We pass a red splash of paint on a tree trunk,
consider it's the right direction.
A woodpecker breaks the sound of our impatient
feet through the grass. We know why.

XXIV

He smudges out his cigarette on the stone wall,
open at the middle. The low humid heat of August
magnifies touch like fingers around a pulsing throat.

He takes my hand leading me down the way,
down. Says it's going to be good,
just what my little body needs, isn't it—

“That's what you came for, right?”

XXV

He spreads out the well-worn, gray-wool blanket.
The tall grass surrounds: sounds of insects,
burrs on the edge of the blanket, the heavy pollen
of goldenrod waiting to feed.

I have lived fifteen years as such;
this is my last day.

XXVI

Mom's back home, turns on the porch light.
Dusk is coming. She fills the black bucket
at the outside tap, starts at the peas;
first harvest pears are baking in the oven

As long as there's fruit there's knowledge, good and bad,

XXVII

There is no sign of rain, the field grass moves ever so slowly, so slightly. The kitchen looks out into the backyard onto the field. The shed draws the line with its shadow — and you can see the searchlight from some distance, except for a blue minute at dusk and dawn, where it moves from blue to black to blue again.

XXVIII

But tonight the stars betray the black sky. They don't distract
wandering minds from the doldrums,
don't show the way home. But you can hear the river,
the earth moving, the things beneath.
You can follow the woods that border,
but not everyway
lets you in.

XXIX

Back behind Mr. Cochran's house, stacks of birch piled high beside
the storm door to the basement. He cracks his knuckles
licks his thick wet fingers, adjusts his horn-rims and rakes the plot
of fresh earth a final time. He thinks about what he'll build above it,
arranges the rake and spade, the buzz saw and twine,
sheets out a blue tarp over the wood;

a white-footed mouse slips out slips in, sniffs frantically.

XXX

Jared rides up the pebble-dirt drive to mom in the back,
goes inside to wash the day away, read magazines, be alone.

“Where’s your sister?”

mom shouts up the stairs

“Beats me”

Jared says on the way to the phone waking the country night.
It’s Jamie, she says something’s going on down at the riverhead:

“Cops everywhere!”

The screen door knocks hard behind him,
so loud for such a rickety thing.

He’s off to the river to see the news.

XXXI

Mom snaps her peas, lets her fingers fall to peace
in the cool water turning black with night.
Her silhouette reflecting inside, the porch light a beacon
— a full moon in a bucket. She laughs at her thoughts,
shakes off her hands, wipes them on the terry dishtowel
on the picnic table beside her. Breath out:

“That’s enough for now.”

XXXII

Nothing moves in this August heat, barely a ripple to distort
the river's face. Mom wondering about her pie,
if the dough will rise, if Rick will ask her to marry him.
She's looking out the kitchen window now,
towards the field—the searchlight a beacon.
She remembers the shed, the little pink putty things.
She cleans the cobwebs from her hair walking over
to the old salt lick, picks up the shoebox, the empty box,
it's cooler in the shed ,
She listens to the sound of night, it too seems empty,
realizing...

“Precious, Precious it's time to come home.”

Dawn

A golden dim softens your unfussed hair.
The timbre of your hymn cradles this wordless room.
In this time of quiet you give, still
give as a thin line of salvific light that breaks into day.
Though you hide your care among penny rolls
and hours of decent, unnoticed work
you wait for me still—
with the hardy bread that lucks the table,
the grace-wind slighting the window-dressing
that always is...
the pitcher of milk thuds softly down
onto the heartwood
and you wait.
How to know but in the stomach
that it is empty?

Dusk

You will not know the terror at my feet
or how they slumped through the loam
and the dank took my bones—
the moment of muted violet before the black night
my raw-throated breath that called out

mama.

Night of the Comet

Place me in the trunk of your Comet
and head north on Route 6.

Keep going until you see the full moon,
in your rear view mirror, just peaking over
the ridge of Hop River road.

Then you'll know its time to turn
right into the woods.

Bring me to the river's edge.

Spread out your gray wool army-issue blanket
and make a picnic of me again.

Remember the sound of the birches breaking,
remember their branches snapping
beneath your knees.

Remember my dark silhouette
and the smell of Love's Baby Soft
mingling with your spit, your spit
sprayed over my open mouth.

Remember my back fillings, my molars,
reflecting the full moonlight.

Remember my eyes. You held them open
with little splinters of stick.

Remember the ones you picked up from the ground
around my head that lay open over the rocks,
The back spread out like butterfly wings;
iridescent secrets seeping into the silty waters
of the river bank, the glimmering pieces

of me floating away under the black blue sky,
above the panorama of our first date.

Remember the romantic buzz of horse flies
around my dead fruit, the fire ants
making love to my still pliable thighs
the cry laugh scream silence in the space
between the trees.

Jackson Browne's, *Somebody's Baby*
leaking out from the back of your Mercury Comet,
the pretty refrain to the river's starry night.

The Good Sleep

Everything is good under this purpling light.

Through the open evening windows,

a slow shadow gently reclines,

smallness sounds quietly out.

You lace your fingers in prayer and down your head.

This is what I wish for you:

the peace of night coming, a restful bed

and sleep unlike that of the dead, but as we once were

in the river fishing mussels, skipping rocks

wrists untouched.

Chapter Three

The Product

I want to be paid by the public for my narcissism,
use my baby as a hood ornament and start a new fashion trend.
Be the first adult female to have sex with Michael Jackson
and video tape it. Play it at private parties for like-minded, unusual
guests, that use thumb tacks to stick up their kiddy pictures,
on the cork boards of their basement-level, picture-forum shrines.
I want to rip my face off and put it back together
in time for my Big Debut. Wear Red as a symbol. Bring back
suntan pantyhose, wear them with patent leather platform sandals
and walk into middle-class television sets, with the new rules
for the millennium. I want to make the Watoosie and Booty Pop
an art form that only a very lucky few can assimilate.
I want my clitoris to take on phallic proportions and feed the media
with its pulp. I want to kidnap baby Jesus from the nativity scene
at the East Brook Mall, and hold him ransom--make God pay
for my short young life.

Goodwill Rock

He sat at his junkyard entrance in a metal tulip lawn chair. Behind him, a dream land of immense fortune. He decided to charge an entrance fee, tired of the Sunday takers, the backs of their station wagons and pickup trucks kicking up dust as they leave with the treasures he provided.

Last week Mrs. Wilson left with a Christmas tree stand shaped like a rocket toboggan and a broken, but *real* wood picture frame. Mr. Jenkins came with his five grisly sons leaving with a perfectly good Robert Jones Junior nine-iron and three Tupperware containers—with lids, including the highly coveted lettuce crisper.

Beside him, a metal cash box rusted like the chair he sat on and the table beneath—beside that, an ashtray bursting with the fried ends of Pall Mall straights that help along his emphysema, keeping his oxygen tank company as he counts out change. “Today is the day that will change my life”, he thought.

He finished rolling pennies, put them in a Ziploc sandwich bag and imagined the possibilities—“I’ll call them Goodwill Rocks!” With the help of his

new bronchodilator he'll be able to communicate the fascinating details of his lunar find and sell them to the Sunday takers. He's already raked up three buckets worth from the salvage yard. It won't matter that they're not authenticated. It won't matter.

People around here have seen the sky rocks—on countless summer nights—fall right into his backyard. He'll use his new bait box to display them. He'll lay it atop the hand-crocheted doily his wife made. He'll put a new coat of white paint on the table and chairs, treat it like serious business. He'll smoke one pack less a day, bathe more—better facilitate customer relations. He'll move the old ice box at the back of the lot up front and fill it with pop, in case the lines are long under the July sun. He'll get the mole removed from his right earlobe. He'll get to keep the house. Call his daughter, maybe talk to the grand kids.

Maybe his lungs won't collapse after all. God planned it all along. Six acres of patchy grass and quarry dust. One acre of junk. Even though his lungs gripe like the women he loved, there's still the stellar justice that can bring him back to life! It won't matter that they're not authenticated. It won't matter.

The Pilgrimage

She fed the masses with the last mercurial fish
skimmed from silver surfaces,
nursed the western desert with a trickle
of silicone milk. Traveled the years
of perpetual dawn, over mountains of granite
countertops, combing the leaden meadow,
fingers searching for blades of grass—
one phosphorescent follicle,
to plant in the scalp of the earth.
Her pilgrimage marked by flags of fallen hair,
her prayers of hope for a harvest,
of more than a plastic bag; the junkyard land
is silent of the children it does not have.
So gather 'round the precipice
of the Amazing Nothing.
Because God is dying, but not yet dead,
we must mechanize new methods for man.

Under the Footbridge

They straighten the stream channels
for swiftness.

The Heritage Dam rapes
riparian land of verdant curves.

The mill is now a mausoleum
of bureau space and parking plots;

junkies fire pipes and insert needles
behind it. Bic light looks sexy

at night, against the granite fished
from the water to build it.

The current moves along
the odd plastic diaper and bladderless tire.

Main Street's Planned Parenthood
nurtures pregnant teens

under fluorescent light.
Friends hug in the waiting room,

while male rainbow trout grow breasts
beneath degraded headwaters,

and naturally fickle waterways are coerced
into the sluice.

But real Lovers leave no trace, make footpaths
instead— for leisure and observation

of fowl:
the Blue Heron,

perched under the footbridge
where we used to smoke pot, drink beer

and watch birds. Hurry!
Let's clean up the graffiti, revamp

the Victorian Manors on Prospect Hill;
relaunch Hosmer Mountain Soda Company's

antique line:
Sarasparilla's a cure all.

Though, there is *something* to be said
for a deadfall—

for the season's last leaves moving slowly south
toward the estuary.

The Speciesist's River

You are a beautiful machine;
your flesh produces flesh
and I eat you.

The combination of you
produces
many recipes.

I too am a machine
and produce meat
like my own,

its variety less delectable;
it is unholy here
to devour.

Sometimes unwillingly
ourselves, like you
are birthed.

Sometimes, like you,
we are found in bags
in rivers,

floating mute towards the source
seeking, perhaps,
an estuary.

Unlike you, dominion
lies in my hands:
strangle, stifle,

cut out from the inside,
chop, marinate, cure,

dispose of.

My industry is utility:
pluck, skin, bleed,
prove you suffer.

Speak! you motionless thing—
rise from the waters
howl, wail, mew...

Manifest your sentience
so that my table holds
no arbitrary meal.

The Fledgling

I

Where is my baby bird? She dreams,
her head thrashes against the pillow,
fever flashes under her unsettled lids.
Outside, torrents of rain.

II

The water's rising in the brook behind.
An American crow caws out,
warning the congregation from a tip
of black branch; readying for the night roost,
keeping close watch over the nestlings
—her clutch of eggs.

III

They mate for life.
Older generations stay as helpers,
siblings build safe beds of stick—
feeding the hatchlings; the hard work
of family protects from predators.

IV

She dreams, the flicker of fluorescent light
on the other side of her closed eyes;
a cold metal dilation between
her pried open thighs, struggling
beneath a mask of nitrous miasma.

V

The Anatomic Gift Foundation approves
her whole body donation
her viable egg hatches into a surprise
red biohazard disposal bag.
The Stericycle truck comes and goes
behind the building discreetly.

Night Crawler

You bore your way out
from terrestrial blackness,

to journey the fields under the safety
of darkest lazuli,

the glistening earth distended
with April rain.

By the numbers you burrowed out.
Though you serve the earth,

eaters of dirt—
entourage to the exsanguinous,

it *was* time to reach the air.
There, where the globeflowers

borrow tiny light from the stars
—the wetlands

to which your masses edge.
great fertile exhumation!

Which of you deep-dwellers will escape
the paralysis of light,

escape the hunter
with his bean cans,

headlamp brightening above his head?