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## Shape-Note Singing

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## Shape-Note Singing

Shape-Note Singing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Traci Letellier  
John Brown University  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2001

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## ABSTRACT

*Shape-Note Singing* is a collection of poems about what is loved, lost, and being lost. Placed in the landscape of the Ozark foothills in the northwest corner of the state of Arkansas, the collection explores the poet's connection to kin, land, and lore. *Shape-Note Singing* is the story of plain-spoken folks of simple origins telling the truth as they see it and as best they know how.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this collection of poems to my ancestors who made the Ozark foothills of Northwest Arkansas their home, but specifically I dedicate this to my grandparents, Ray and Sis (Austin) Manos, and Elvin and Dorothy (Williams, Speed) Rankin, and to my great-grandparents, Willie and Lizzie (Haley) Manos, Ralph and Tempie (Wilmoth) Austin, Marvin and Liddie (Coleman) Rankin, and Burley and Cleta (Simpson) Speed.

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## Shape-Note Singing

*for Willie Marshall Manos, 1885-1946*

Teach me the notes  
that I might know

their shape and place.  
For this old world

groans—full longing  
and lonesome.

And my own throat,  
too, is heavy, low.

Teach me, teacher,  
to sound. To make

such noise as can  
shake the music

from my sleep-  
sad soul.

Rainbow, Halo, Color of Sky

*for Lizzie Haley Manos, 1886-1918*

We do not know where you're buried and don't have much  
to go on: a constellation of fields, fences, a lone cluster of oaks.

No photograph. Your oldest gone before my father  
thought to ask, and her only child—a daughter too—adopted

and estranged. So though we carry your DNA afloat in our bodies,  
we have not seen your face and don't know which traits are yours.

This is how in a generation so much is lost. 32 years and eight months  
when influenza took you. I'm 32 and five. *Listen.* Between us—

the whirl of stars. In my mind I can almost make you out: a housewife  
stoking the stove, watching the orange sparks spit, listening

for the boy asleep in the next room. (Later, startled awake by some  
rotation of earth, he will listen for your movements in the kitchen.

He will cry, but you will not come for him.) This boy you once strained  
your ear to hear will become my father's father. And the Great War

that ended the week before you died—there will be another.  
Your son will fight in the New Guinea campaign, build roads, earn

the Combat Infantryman Badge. He will come home. I don't know  
if the living are apparitions of the dead. I haven't seen the ice crystals

or interstellar dust. I don't know what moves beyond the spheres  
and clusters of spheres, but I send this small capsule to say:

*we know you lived—  
the light scatters, and we are here.*

Fetching Corncobs, 1919

—*Gravette, Arkansas*

The old man sent the boy into the yard to fetch  
the cobs after the chickens had picked them over.  
He said he wanted to make a pipe. Said the dark

had come on quick, but the hours till bed were  
sure to pass blackstrap slow, and an old man needs  
a corncob pipe to accompany his thinking. I imagine

the boy listening for coyotes as he crept from the house,  
then kneeling against the damp ground and feeling  
through the scraps while the old man watched, unseen,

from the porch. The cold. The moon—a husk of light.  
One-by-one, those we love go down to the earth,  
taking their supper with them and leaving us table scraps.

They don't do it out of meanness, but it's a bitter thing  
and anyone who tells you otherwise is a liar. At two years  
old, the boy had come to know something of this. His mother

died just months before and his father was out cobbling  
a living out of whatever work he could put his hands to,  
leaving no time to care for babies. So the youngest, Ray,

had gone to live with Grandpa Joe. When he grew up,  
he told this story about the corncobs to his boy, my father,  
who later told it to me. Said he'd come to think Grandpa Joe

wasn't so much interested in making pipes as in the boy  
who'd fallen into his care—in making sure he learned  
not to fear the dark. Now, I know this is just a scrap

from the table of a small boy, but it's fallen into my care.  
I put it here for safekeeping. Once there was a dim room,  
and in the room—an old man, a boy, a corncob pipe.

## Might Could

*for my father*

Is another way of saying maybe so.  
You know, that *could* be a possibility.

It means, not just now, but *might* do  
later on. I need some time to think it

over. *Might could* means it's probably  
not going to happen, but with the Good

Lord all things are possible, so who *can*  
say? It means, that's a fine idea, just fine,

and well—we *could*—but see, just now,  
I don't want to bad enough. *Might* try

me again tomorrow, or the day after  
that; right now, I'd just as soon sit

here on the porch. *Might could* means,  
that *could* be the worst idea I've had

the misfortune of coming across,  
but who am I to dash a fella's hopes?

## Calving Season

*for Elvin & Dorothy Rankin*

There is a tenderness like a scrap of light on the floor,  
like a cow marking her newborn calf by cleaning it,

or a pocket cut just-so beneath the collarbone where  
the metronome goes to help the stubborn motor below

keep time. And in the voice of an old mechanic talking  
motors, there's a tenderness there too. The way he cocks

his head to listen to what a particular engine has to tell.  
And in the way that same mechanic, a rancher also,

will search high and low his fields until he finds the heifer  
alone in a thicket. How he'll feel for the calf's ankles and pull.

Then later, how he'll comb his wife's white hair before taking  
her to town for supper, sliding the bobby pin near her temple

like she used to do. And how, though his arms now hang  
from his shoulders from years of overuse, he'll hoist her—

all limbs like a calf—from her wheelchair and maneuver her  
with the patience of a rancher, the pragmatism of a mechanic

into the passenger's seat of their car. Yes, there's a tenderness  
like this, which I guess, is a kind of stubbornness too.

One Story in Winter, Another in Spring

*for "Sis" Thelma Clarice Austin Manos, 1921-2013*

On the winter's night that she lay dying,  
I held the woman's hand who bore my father.

Years before, she had welcomed me this way,  
knowing all the time she'd maybe get to see

me grown but that was all. And when she died,  
I spoke out loud the name her mother gave her

and released her unto God with all the certainty  
I could muster—and I felt nothing. Now you

might think you know where this is going, that  
it's about what's lost, what even now we're losing,

and you'd be right. But there's something else.  
Because later, I tell you, when I was doing some

mundane thing and not expecting anything,  
she sent word to me. Okay, not a word exactly,

but more a sense I later put to words that said  
she'd arrived where she was going—had no more

use for grief. Now this may seem as outlandish  
to you as it did to me, but it happened. This also

happened: a girl named Paizley who lives just up  
the street and whose momma died two winters ago,

brought over a bag chock-full of greens that her daddy  
grew himself. And as she and I were saying goodbye,

Travis, a farmer friend of ours who lost his crop  
when the Illinois flooded two summers ago, dropped

by a dozen of his own hens' eggs—the color of coffee  
with cream—and we talked on the porch in the early

evening. I remember the Star of Bethlehem growing  
soft and milky white beyond our steps, and our neighbors'

purple Irises planted by someone who lived there once  
but not anymore. I want to remember that the gifts

we give we received from the earth, passing from  
hands that cannot hold into hands that cannot hold.

## The Farmer Considers His Heirloom Tomatoes

Always hearing talk from folks around  
here about *the good old days*. But go on

and ask them, the good old days for who?  
Nine times out of ten they'll just hem

and haw at you, because they don't have  
an answer. Time comes when you've got

to dig the past up, drag it out into the dazzle-  
light day. Nevermind that it's ugly to look at.

Never mind that people aren't going to want  
to see. What's needed then is for us all to look

long and look hard. Lest we forget ourselves.  
Lest we trade away the hard truths others

earned for us. But then, there are other times,  
when the tomatoes tug heavy on their vines,

and there's nothing doing but to kneel right  
there and then, knowing that pretty soon

you'll get to choose which seeds to save  
and plant again next season. And that—

to my manner of thinking—is a most joyful task.  
Might even be the best kind of protest there is.

## Prayer of a Foothills Healer

Lord, make me of a quiet mind and steadfast  
heart. Wake me before the sap rises in the pulp

and the buds spring forth, that I might sense  
the first stem's quiver in my marrow. Then will

I rise early and take to the woods. I will lift my  
eyes to these hills from whence comes my help.

Guide these, my hands, to the sassafras and burdock,  
to the blue burvene, dogwood and wild cherry,

so too, to the roots of sarsaparilla and mayapple.  
For the physicians here are few and far-between.

The roads, likewise, slow-going. And it falls  
on us women-folk to see to it that our neighbors

and loved ones are looked after in times of need—  
whether they be young or old, sick or dying,

or with child. We are the night watchmen.  
It is we who keep the kerosene lamps.

Notes of a Foothills Healer

For Injury, Illness, & Common Ailments

*a salve*

Twelve green persimmons,  
sliced through while the seeds  
are still tender. Fry in hog's  
lard—a teacupful. Strain.

*an incantation*

With chills & fever,  
I cannot agree.  
I tie you fast  
'round this hickory tree.

*a remedy*

Eighteen dogwood berries,  
taken once a day for nine days.  
Wait three days. Then three  
a day for three days running.

*a tea*

One bud each from nine  
mullein plants. Crushed  
and steeped. A woolen sock  
wrapped around the throat.

## Outlaw Country

I come from a country of bootleggers  
and horse thieves, of hanging judges  
and picnics, of a people who loved  
and loathed their outlaws. By day,  
we hunted them; by night, we read  
their dime novel tales to our children,  
and when the time came, we killed them,  
gleefully. We laid their bodies on tables,  
rifled through their clothes, and marveled  
at their effects, holding each coin, pocket  
watch, comb, to the light—turning it over  
and over. And once we were satisfied,  
we propped them up like trophies, set them  
slack-jawed and stripped shirtless in chairs,  
took long-exposure photographs of their  
lazy stares, dark wounds gaping. And when  
that wasn't enough, we embalmed them,  
stood their coffins in barber shop windows,  
charged admission to curious townsfolk.  
We loomed. We gloated, finding our outlaws, too,  
were human—as prone to dying and as carnal.

## Hieroglyph

The creases on your back  
speak the story of our sheets.

Here, the ligature of desire;  
there, the longhand of sleep.

The runes we make, my love,  
are crude and won't outlast us.

Who are we to think we'd  
be spared? Civilizations appeared

glittering. They deciphered  
stars, carved calculations in stone.

They built golden cities where  
another man, once, was loved.

## Everywhere the Wasteland

### *1. There was a man sent by God, whose name was John.*

How he missed the wilderness now.  
It was hard, at first, almost unbearable—  
but slowly it had come to him, the same  
raw peace his exiled fathers had grown  
to understand through wandering. *What  
did you go out into the wilderness to see?*  
He learned to be at home among the rocks  
and thorns, beneath that lidless sweep of sky  
where exposure transformed his skin  
into the tanned hide he wore, and there  
he found Jehovah-Jireh in the dust. Each drop  
of water the River Jordan, each star an oil lamp,  
each locust a gift of manna, and the honey—  
the honey! Golden amber on the tongue.

### *2. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light.*

Hadn't the word of God come to him,  
the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness?  
Hadn't he recognized the Lord first?  
Plunged Him into the Jordan. Its current tugged  
them toward the sea. Hadn't he seen  
the dove descend? The water streamed  
from their limbs. Heard the voice  
of thunder. *What did you go out  
into the wilderness to see?* But soon  
his voice that once drew blistered crowds  
dried up. And the expanse between  
walls held a different wasteland altogether,  
with a night vast, perhaps unbounded—  
and a blank sky unpricked by stars.

### *3. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.*

Hadn't he prepared the way? Told them plainly  
he was not the Christ—that he baptized  
only with water—that One mightier was coming  
Whose sandal he was not worthy to untie.  
Hadn't he warned them? Saying even now

the axe is at the root of the tree.  
News kept coming: a miraculous catch  
of fish, a centurion's servant healed. But in prison,  
he saw none of it. At last, he sent word  
with his disciples, "Are you the Coming One,  
or do we look for another?" *What did you  
go out into the wilderness to see? A reed?*

A reed  
shaken by the wind.

Cain's Ballroom, 1935

—*Tulsa, Oklahoma*

In these parts, Nellie Johnstone will  
always be No. 1 and all the men  
in love with her. They leave the fields

and stream into this dime-a-dance  
joint, famous for its maple, spring-  
loaded floor and as the home of Bob

Wills, "The King of Western Swing."  
His six Texas Playboys all shiny and clean  
shaven—gleaming like the silver screen

in sterling and mother-of-pearl. The girls,  
hair in pins, red nails and redder  
mouths—smell like flowers, every

kind. The guys with slicked hair and just-  
polished shoes have washed off the dust,  
forgotten the derricks. Traces of grime

linger beneath their nails maybe, but  
the girls don't mind, their faces flushed  
from dancing. They are laughing, shouting

above the music. At 2:56 a.m., the boys play  
their final tune. A slow number. And bodies  
remember their weariness. Amid grateful

whoops and whistles, the instruments  
fall silent. Cases are unsnapped. A fiddle,  
a Gibson, a lap steel each gingerly put to bed.

The hungry musicians suck calloused  
fingers, find hats and coats, and leave  
in a hurry. The girls, blistered and

barefoot, are carrying their heels—  
straps looped over fingers. Couples  
that paired off early to the music

teeter into the street, their arms  
slung around each other's waists.  
They're talking in low voices

or kissing. The red neon "CAIN'S" sign  
hums above North Main, which  
empties to the sweet crude night.

Mammoth Black Twig, 1833

They came like cuttings  
bringing whip & tongue,  
seed & scion. They grafted  
themselves to the rootstock  
ground. For a time the air  
was laden with blossom,  
and it seemed every apple  
had a name. In those days  
of Bellflower & Brightwater,  
before the heavy rains.  
Days of Ada Red & Highfill  
Blue, of Winesap, Etris & Gano—  
before the scab & San Jose,  
before the codling moth  
& blotch, before the Phoma  
spot, the black & bitter rot.

Frank James Surrenders, 1882

—*Jefferson City, Missouri*

Make no mistake, Cole Younger had it right.  
I am a scoundrel. I never told it otherwise.

And yet, I can neither confirm nor deny  
the stories in those yellow-backed books.

In fact, I believe those books have done a lot  
of harm to the youth of this land. Some of what

you've heard about me is true. I joined up under  
Quantrill after the war—that's how things got

going. Jesse soon followed me. And while I might've  
been the one to get us in it—come to find out—

Jesse had it in him something natural. For twenty-one  
years, we lived in the saddle, riding side-by-side,

till nigh on five months ago, Bob Ford brought  
an end to it. Governor, my life has been one

long, anxious, inexorable vigil. I've been hunted  
day-in, day-out, not knowing a moment's peace.

Here is my gun and my holster. No man has touched  
either since 1861. Today, I relinquish them to you.

## After the Lynching

### 1. They slept.

Then rose the next morning,  
and washed, and dressed—

leaving their spattered clothes  
where they fell, putting the coffee

on the stove to percolate,  
cracking the eggs into the skillet,

hearing the sizzle spit—satisfied.  
Some, perhaps most, paused

above their plates, *heads bowed,*  
*eyes closed,* and gave thanks.

### 2. They ate.

While somewhere off an old  
forgotten turn of road,

a figure paused, *head bowed,*  
*eyes closed,* then turned

amid the glistening branches—  
then paused. And turned.

And it was morning and  
it was night the first day.

### 3. They slept.

Even as they woke, and ate,  
and worked, they walked

in darkness, dwelling in a land  
of deep darkness. And that

darkness was unspeakable,  
and it came not from without

but within. As it is written:

*What enters a man cannot defile*

*him because it enters not his heart,  
but his belly. It is that which comes*

*out of man that defiles him. That is,  
the deep darkness. That is, the heart.*

## Chorus Tree

I can't see them maybe, but on account  
of the tymbal leaves, I know they are there.  
You hear that cacophony? Does it rattle  
in you? Hear how it clamors, rises, then dies?  
Only a fool or some love-sick other would  
mistake that mournful sound for singing.  
I know. My forebears conceded their bones  
to these hills. Now, they loiter underground,  
feeding at the roots of deciduous trees.  
They are my congregation, my own  
Great Southern Brood. They emerge each  
some-odd year to molt outside my window.  
Come September, I'll find the cast-off skins—  
brittle, intact—and still crouched, still clinging.

Last Hanging in Arkansas, 1914

—Paris, Logan County

Let's give the mules that pulled the logs a day off.  
Give them back the whole livelong day to stand  
around swatting flies. Then, let's go further  
and spare the tree. So that the tree was never  
felled, never stripped, never hewn. Let's say it  
stands where it grew to this day. And the farmer  
who grew the hemp, say he planted wheat, instead.  
So far, so good. But what about the hangman?  
He went into some other line of work—insurance,  
maybe. In any case, he's hopeless with rope,  
and there isn't any rope now to come by. Okay,  
where are we? We've still got the damaged well  
Ambrose Johnson found upon returning home,  
a wagonload of rocks, some telephone wire,  
a dead girl clenching dirt in her fists. Let's put  
Mandy Stephens, 19, sick in bed. Make it a headache,  
nothing serious. Just make it so she's too unwell  
to go dancing that warm spring night in 1913.  
While we're at it, let's unloop the cursive of the note  
she wrote and pinned to her pillow. Let's unwind  
each wishful word like charcoal thread all the way  
back to the whittled nib. Let's fold the red velvet dress  
and return it to the trunk, tucking it among cedar bows—  
for some future happy time. But what if the figure  
waiting at the Johnson place isn't Tillman? And the baby  
Mandy carries—already a good four months along—  
doesn't belong to him either? He professed his innocence  
to the end, and many in Paris believed him. Even Judge  
Jeptha Evans had his misgivings: *Give whiskey to the guilty  
and innocent alike, he said, and morphine to the perishing.*

Bluff-Dweller

O God, my God, what have you done?  
But you have torn me from a wound

and fashioned me from a rib. Behold,  
you have set me down amid the sheltering

bluffs, and lo, but they are filled with bones.  
You have placed your hand heavy upon me,

and wetted my throat on the Spavinaw,  
saying, *Prophesy unto the breath, prophesy,*

*O daughter.* But what shall I prophesy?  
These walnut trees are become stumps,

and buzzards circle the cut fields? Behold,  
but there are rows upon rows of chicken

houses and trailer houses likewise? Shall I  
say unto the kudzu in winter, *drape these*

*native woods like nets*, or unto the hay  
bales in summer, *lean doleful on the hill?*

I have driven in the shit-wake of chicken  
trucks and watched the sky purple these

foothills with dusk. I have seen the barn,  
though stalwart, buckled by the crest of years.

I am acquainted with the heart—that rugged  
country. But what, Lord God, to make of it?

Culex

It distracts from the sunset  
this incessant brushing off,

mechanical scratching  
at red hives. In my rush

to catch the rainbow  
sherbet sky I forgot

my porch swing companions—  
miniscule but copious,

and their greedy, spindle-noses  
needling disappointments.

Where can discontentment  
keep coming from? Pooling

after all-day rain, making mirrors  
on sidewalks and tarmac,

in the pastures and parking lots  
making little discs of sky-silvery

reflections: heady glimpses  
of other, more opulent realms.

In the Walls

Why would I go back?

That dreary old house yawns like a ghost,  
it gapes like a cello, all lonely and hollow.

Besides, you know what we'd find—

    a rusted mailbox leaning

        a glowering sweetgum dropping leaves

    a torn screen door clapping on its hinge

        creaky floorboards, cluttered gutters  
        moths, cobwebs, wasps' nests  
        mildew, lime scale, asbestos—

Don't get me started.

We might collide with spitting spectres,  
the old begrudging ghosts.

All these years and they're still waiting—

    sulking in corners and along corridors,

        muttering through vents and radiators

    murmuring beneath paper, behind plaster—

*remember remember remember.*

Unreconstructed, 1889

*Myra Maybelle Shirley*

They say she could go into a cave  
up there by Maysville

and come out somewhere over  
near Lake Francis. That was back  
when everything west of here

was Indian Territory. And rather than  
surrender, Shelby rode his men down  
to Mexico. In those days, to keep

the wild dogs at bay, hunters  
riding home at night would  
hack off scraps of deer to fling

into the dark. And Quantrill's  
Raiders gave up the good fight  
to become horse thieves and

bootleggers and get themselves  
hanged one-by-one—or shot  
in the back, more like. On account

of the blood, Jehovah's wrath fell  
on Jasper County, but mostly  
Carthage, which was torn asunder

almost—first by the war, then  
by bad blood between jayhawkers  
and sympathizers. By this time,

her father's riches lay in ruins.  
And shortly after, her brother,  
a bushwhacker, was ambushed

in Sarcoxie—shot in the back  
while trying to escape. Now whether  
at this point she strapped on six-guns

and rode out seeking vengeance  
is up to speculation, but what is  
known is that she took up

with the James-Younger gang  
and before long, tall tales about  
the “Bandit Queen” and “Petticoat Terror

of the Plains” started cropping up—  
selling for 25 cents. In them,  
she’s commonly described a belle.

But I have it from my father, whose  
mother’s brother ate cornbread  
with her at the Rowe’s place—that in truth,

she was a bony woman with a  
“hatchet face” and mean mouth—  
a soul hardened by war and hatred.

A mother, who harbored fugitives  
and stole her neighbors’ horses—  
played the piano forte, wore a velvet

riding habit. And who, turning up  
the river lane to Younger’s Bend, was blown  
from her saddle by a shotgun blast.

They say her killer never could  
be brought to justice.

## The Delta Bluesman Sings the Last Millennium

I've got one foot in this world  
and the other in the last.

Maybe that's what makes  
me sullen. Maybe that's

why I can't help lookin'  
behind. I was there when

sleepy time smacked its lips  
and rolled over. Watched it

heave its great bulk of same-old,  
same-old into this newfangled

age, and I knew you couldn't  
withstand it. Your years stretched

taut across the century before—  
all those cars and inventions

and wars. Maybe that's what  
makes me sullen. Maybe that's

why I can't look so hopeful  
ahead. I don't mean your dead

were better than our living.  
Only, come water, come coal—

it's you, and me, and Casey Jones  
a-goin' where the cold wind blows.

To the Lord God Bird, a Prayer in Desolation

*possible sighting—Brinkley, Monroe Co., Arkansas, 2004*

Why do we have to let things get so bad  
that they might never get better, before

trying to make them better? And why am I  
asking you, a bird, or worse—something

holy, a ghost? Don't tell me it's in our nature.  
Tell me something I don't already know.

Better, show me: The tattered wing. The low-  
lie bayou. The Big Woods you knew. We lost

most of it. By *lost*, I mean, we cut it down.  
Because it is in our nature. First, we know

not what we do, and then we know and do  
it anyway. We manifest. We make ways where

there were none, cut swaths, move mountain  
tops, flood valleys, dam rivers. We are never

content, and our discontent is our undoing—  
*your* undoing. But then, this is an old story.

You already know it, and know it better.  
So, you tell *me*. Have you seen the scant saplings

of another Big Woods in the making, and  
this time, are we bound to leave them alone?

What of that old wayfarer, the soul? I hear it's lost,  
or rumored so, but I have yet to cross that river.

Detritus

*after Eavan Boland*

Unlike Atlantis,  
Rome doesn't sink.

Each year a layer of silt  
raises the city

an inch, burying it  
alive. Now everywhere

underground urns,  
porticoes, bath houses,

canals, frescoes, piazzas—  
one pristine city heaped

upon another. When Montaigne  
arrived in 1580, he saw

perforated walls and moth-  
eaten streets. Amazed,

he observed crude shovels  
striking capitals of Doric

columns and recorded  
how the stricken don't

drown their sorrow,  
they exhume it.

They pry the roofs off  
and fill empty rooms

with earth. They build  
their houses.

## Muscle Memory: A Color Study

Love, we will return in colors  
more brilliant. Remembering desire

after years of slumber, after years  
of sinking into the dank earth.

Remembering how we loved  
the light—minute fibers threading

out in all directions, hairline  
fractures webbing our eyelids.

Even eyes closed, even behind fingers,  
we couldn't escape it then—orange

and magnificent shattering the horizon.  
Then, its memory, a faint flicker;

its desire, a thin thread. But remembering  
how muscle and sinew quiver together,

a slender shoot quickens, pushing aside  
the close earth to make room for its

new strength. Slowly, it turns its fragile  
neck and gaining force, begins to tunnel

toward the surface. This earth we loved  
will not be rid of us. Remembering,

after all, how we loved the sky and named it—  
that single skipping motion of breath opening

to breath. And at last, the earth exhaling  
upwards. My love, we will return in colors.

See: from our hands, a multitude of carrots,  
and from our chests, two purple-fisted beets.

## Daffodils

Even now, the forgotten bulbs turn  
in secret pockets of earth. Soon they

will split open, send up slender shoots.  
Then the shock of sunburst heads appearing

out of seeming nowhere. I saw two schoolgirl  
rows of them, all dressed up and faces ablaze.

But the path they flanked was overgrown,  
the porch steps gone, the porch gone too.

All that remained was a brick-and-mortar  
chimney and those blind perennials,

lifting their orphan throats like birds.  
I saw them stand giddy and trembling

on exclamation stalks, like pretty girls  
glimpsed when driving through the small

small towns. No one can tell them their  
beauty has few beholders and is soon gone.

Again, the Night as Metaphor

The 'o'  
in *body*:  
all shadow-  
sunk and  
navel-shaped  
hurling  
accusations  
at the dark.

The 'o'  
in *soul*:  
all opal-  
glare and  
sickle-hewn,  
flinging back  
its hip-slung  
retort.

## The Hunter Considers His Hunting Dog

There is no loyalty on God's green earth like a hunting dog standing stock-still in the purple dusk prairie pointing at a bird he sees only with his nose. It doesn't matter if you can see the bird or not. You don't argue with him. He's the expert in the matter. And it is no small grievance that a dog and his boy should be parted—no matter that the boy is not a boy any longer but a man. The dog can't understand this. Try explaining old age to him; no matter how knowingly he looks at you, he's not going to understand a word you're saying. But then again, he doesn't need to. He knows better than you do. He knows it in his bones. Like he knows that since he was a pup the boy has taken care of the necessities: food, water, a roof to stop the rain, a grassy place to run, a warm bed in out of the howling night. The dog knows without having to think the thought that he loves the boy. He doesn't need to get worked up to it or be convinced of anything. He doesn't need to settle any scores; he isn't holding any grudges. His love is just a thing like any other: his bed, his dog bowl. It just is. And he knows this: the boy and he will always be together.

## Chiaroscuro

I wish you hadn't turned it on;  
I can't take them tonight. Their  
white teeth and heavy makeup,  
penchant for saying ghastly things  
in deadpan voices: a tragic earthquake,  
a plane crash, a mudslide, *al oscuro*—  
our suffering summed up by a 30-second  
clip. And if the messenger is a woman,  
stiffly coiffed with a bed tan and red lips,  
still—what's to keep us from flinging  
ourselves from a bridge? The ratings,  
of course, require black eyeliner, a smudge  
of rouge. They say Caravaggio fashioned  
the Holy Mother's face after a drowned prostitute.  
He saw her corpse being fished from the Tiber—  
gray skin, streaming hair—and remembered  
the canvas he kept tucked away for such moments.  
A message scans across the teleprompter.  
Quickly—can you make it out?

Something . . . *we played the pipe*—  
about shadows. Something about the play  
of light . . . *we sang a dirge*—and dark.

## The Well-Witcher

*for Marvin Rankin, 1900-1991*

I cannot tell you how the forked branch moves.  
Only *that* it moves, and its movement is not  
of my making. I walk these fields, these hills,

these woods. I trace them slow and wait.  
I do not find the lispings veins. The cut branch  
finds them. I grip the Y-shaped end. I mean

to tell you, I grip it hard. The branch, finding  
water, turns down. Folks tell me it is my hands  
that turn it. It is not my hands. I have heard

it called many a thing: superstition, divination,  
a trick of the coal-hearted devil. Well, I do not  
know about all that. I only know that the forked

branch moves, and I grow old like earth. I only  
know my upright palms. The wild cherry tree.  
You must cut it in the spring, when the sap is rising.

The Last Cod

This is it.

The last one.

Battered, deep-fried,  
wrapped in paper.

The last fillet.

The people said, "Give us what we want."  
And the men at desks said, "We have to give them what they want."  
And the old fisherman muttered, "There won't be any left."  
And the old sea murmured: *Enough. Enough.*

But no one heard.

Strange how unceremoniously  
the end comes.

Battered, deep-fried,  
wrapped in paper.

Doused with vinegar,  
dredged in salt.

Zerelda Elizabeth Cole James Simms Samuel is Pleased to Offer  
Tours of the James Family Farm for the Modest Sum of .25 Cents

—*Kearney, Missouri, 1883*

Them Clay County hills, them Almighty Heaven-  
Above Bluffs nursed my brigand sons. They grew  
in wisdom and in stature, suckled on the milk  
of bitterness and honey of revenge. I schooled them  
at my knee: these is the times of which it was written,  
neighbor will turn against neighbor, and eye for an eye,  
them that live by the sword is most certain to die  
by it. They fed until full, until the fields grew ripe  
for harvest. Now, don't you chasten me. Don't talk to me  
about the Good Lord. For I never once received nothing  
from his hand that I didn't take from it myself. And don't  
talk to me of his blessings neither. For he could not see fit  
to spare my father, my brother, my husbands, my two sons.  
I carry my grief in an empty sleeve—a phantom limb  
that wakes me in the night. I buried my Jesse in the front yard  
where I can keep watch from my window. I buried him  
nine feet down so no coward can ever touch him again.  
I keep a shotgun beside my bed for that purpose. If the Lord  
has something for me now, well, that's his business.

## Apparition in an Arkansas Field

There was a gray barn  
With a sunken rust roof  
Stooped in a fescue field.  
The place looked forgotten for years.

I happened on it once  
In a thick veil of morning  
When winter had taken the wood,  
Frost had taken the red clay road.

*What are you waiting for?*  
I said to the barn.  
*What are you waiting for?*  
To the wind this time.

The road vanished in a fog  
And passing by I could feel the wind  
Weaving in and out my ribs, idly—  
As through slats of wood.

Terra Firma

Because the slope of your body  
is familiar and a comfort, I fit

my frame against yours, sleeping.  
How did we come to drift here?

And on what Precambrian seas?  
Your people plowed the sandy loam

of the wind-lashed Dakotas, scaled  
the Chilkoot pass for gold. Mine

tracked west before the railroad,  
staking claims of this Ozark chert.

They taught shape-note singing,  
caught influenza, religion, a knife

someplace fatal. Now, I don't need  
to know the meaning of all this or what

their ghosts might tell us if they cared  
or could. Only, I find myself indebted.

I find myself awake with musings.  
Wasps still cling to their clod house

out back, though the gathering cold  
has slowed their movements to sap.

Sumac maroons beside the road. October  
rains water my peoples' driftwood bones.