

Spring Geese

and Other Poems
by Denise Low



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Cover: Canada Geese

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Museum of Natural History
The University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66045
1984

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Museum of Natural History

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"Tourist Attraction" and "Deer on the Highway" in *Air City Review*.
"Sand Bar Exhibit" and "The Last of the Strawberries" in *Naked Man*.
"Snakes" and "Wild Strawberries" in *Little Balkans Review*.
"Tuttle Creek Catch" in *Cape Rock*.
"How To Look for Arrowheads" and "Place" in *Touchstone*. "Place" also
appears in "A Geography of Kansas Poetry," a tape-slide presentation
sponsored by the Kansas Committee for the Humanities.
"Flight" and "Stratification of Snow" in *Mikrokosmos*.
"Clinton Reservoir Displacement" in *West Branch*.
"Mother's Day Drive" in *Focus Midwest*.
"Toward Manhattan" and "West" in *Inscape*.
"The Concrete Cabin" in *Tellus*.
"Red Oak Floor" in *Amok*.
"Land Turtle" in *Museums of Natural History Associates Newsletter*.

for my father

Francis Dotson

who took me to archaeology lectures
instead of football games

for my husband

Tony Allard

who listens and listens

for my sons

Daniel Low

David Low

who have insatiable curiosity

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Preface

Some years ago my two children began attending educational programs at the University of Kansas Natural History Museum. They started with Animal Story Hour, for three-to-five-year-olds, and graduated to upper-level classes. They studied map making, aquatic biology, dinosaurs, and animal tracks. They went on a snake hunt, an archaeological dig, and a fossil hunt. The seemingly bland prairie around us became fascinating.

At first my role was passive, that of mother-schlepper. As I wandered the museum halls waiting for the boys' classes to let out, though, I found the beehive, the fluorescent mineral exhibit, and the allosaurus. And then—I was envious. I began taking classes myself, with patient leaders and packs of chipper, half-grown kids. Early Saturday mornings, still half asleep, I boarded the quirky Blue Goose bus and learned what was under the wheat fields and along the rivers. I collected my own coal samples, fossil corals, and arrowheads. I felt as excited as the kids.

Without design, I began writing more and more about what I had experienced through the museum. My field of vision expanded, and I began to identify with poet Gary Snyder's observation that modern poets, such as Charles Olson, can get back to the Pleistocene:

I mean [poets'] imagination is able to encompass it, that they feel that it's part of their lives, that they feel comradeship in connection with it, that they feel that there is humanity in that that speaks to them. This is part of our history.

(The Real Work, Interviews and Talks)

In Kansas the Pleistocene glacier stopped at the Wakarusa River. The rocks just under garden dirt are Pennsylvanian limestone, about 280 million years old. The past pervades the landscape and interests many writers in this area.

Some of these poems are about specific museum exhibits, such as "Land Turtle," "Flight," "Split Root Basket," and others with obvious titles. Some came more indirectly, like "Hymns for Spring Strawberries" and "Day Lilies." Both plants were included in the Medieval Garden Exhibit. Museum classes and trips were the source of "Coal Bed, Douglas Group," "River Front Park," "Glacial Till," and others. The museum gift shop, a wonderful place to forage, provided the fossil in "A Gift of a Fossil Ammonite."

And then I found myself arranging my own excursions, expanding on the museum's example. "Clinton Lake, Archaic Site" is my own amateur dig. Out the back door I found trees, snakes, and geology. Travelling the highways I saw new information lined up in the rocks. And I expanded my repertoire of museums. Trips to Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History and the Garden of Eden in Lucas, Kansas, yielded several poems.

This is not over yet; I have further goals. Ian Edwards told me about a huge trilobite he found out near Lone Star Lake. And I know that a mastodon tooth, just like the one in the museum exhibit, is inching down the Kaw River to meet up with me in a sandbar. One spring day after floodwaters recede, the boys and I will take the canoe out, and a shovel.

A number of people helped inform the accuracy of these poems: Daniel F. Merriam, Geology Department, Wichita State University; J. D. Stewart and Ruth Gennrich, Natural History Museum; and Roger Williams, Paleontological Institute. Good editorial advice came from A. G. Sobin and Anita Skeen, of Wichita State University, and Tony Allard. I am grateful to Philip Humphrey, Ruth Gennrich, Cathy Dwigans, and Joseph Collins, of the museum, and Arly Allen for invaluable assistance and faith in the project. Jane Hoskinson and Jan Morris, of University Relations, contributed editing and design expertise. And I thank Sherry Sparks for her exquisite drawings.

Animal Kingdom



Walrus

Panorama Walrus

The voluptuous male walrus—
barrels of stuffing
under cracked brown hide,
tusks the length of my arm,
knock-kneed flippers.

Someone hauled this huge carcass
from white Arctic icing on the map
down through the pink Hudsonian Life Zone
into heat of this yellow Prairie.

His silent harem squats behind him,
three prone sacks with eyes,
crowding the harp seal family.
Gneiss pebbles disguise the floor.
Plaster glaciers stipple the walls.

He stares across the room
into the Austral Life Zone case—
 coyotes, rabbits, a prairie dog that swivels—
and there
his gaze is level with
another Lord of the Flesh,
the lumpy, bearded American Bison.

After bright grassland
comes a red desert of rattlers and cactus,
then a crowded green jungle,
and open hallway.
But the unmoved walrus never flinches.
He sits in a complete circle,
Canada to Mexico,
in perfect museum weather.

Flight

Fossil birds are the rarest:
no tusks or horns or molars,
the delicate span of bones
easily erased in heavy folds of mud.

Their meat too sweet—
broken up by heavy jaws.

Hollow bones and feathers
too light
to sink into sediment shallows.

Their wings
too fast
for the grip of floods or volcanos.

We have
some pterosaurs stuck in shale,
a few sharp-toothed loon cousins,
one contorted bat.

The rest an invisible flock
still in flight.

Spring Geese

Not one tidy vee
but a whole complex of angles
branching off each other
like a genealogy.

Spring, not fall,
and this is Kansas,
not the northern wood.

Not a magazine cover
of migrating geese.

But their honking chorus
spread across the southern horizon
stays in my ears for days.

Land Turtle

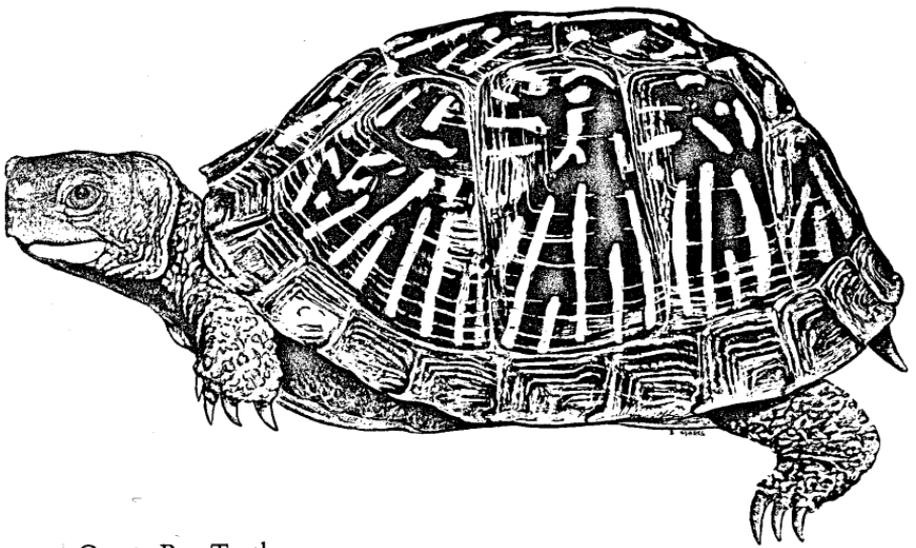
They carry every stumble boneside out,
their grace hidden—
the slender spine threaded through the shell,
serpent neck to rapier tail.

Each lugs a clumsy rock,
down slopes, too, a relentless weight
present at fumbled matings.
Foraging progresses like a lento parade.

Silent cave carriers—
defense the one undeniable trump
since the Triassic.

Their cousins navigate ponds,
chasing fish.
Buoyed and muscular,
sea tortoises ride waves.

But on land the creature staggers,
leg bones rigged like gears,
feet and stunted paddles and short thighs
jumbled, each move a measured portage.



Ornate Box Turtle

Niobrara Shark: A Lesson

Shark bones sprawl in Niobrara Chalk,
fifteen feet of stony ribs
hung against the museum wall—
impressions of pumice-skin,
mottled rock, the grainy sea bed.
Perfect rings of cartilage and vertebrae
shape a wandering line of spine.

Halfway back floats the last meal,
chunks of backbone and spiked jaw,
a puzzle of broken fish.

Best preserved is the shark's head:
some skull, jaw, and a tumble of teeth.
Triangular, serrated tools,
edges jutting into our air,
shining stones hooked into dull bone.
Shark teeth—
amulets of long life.

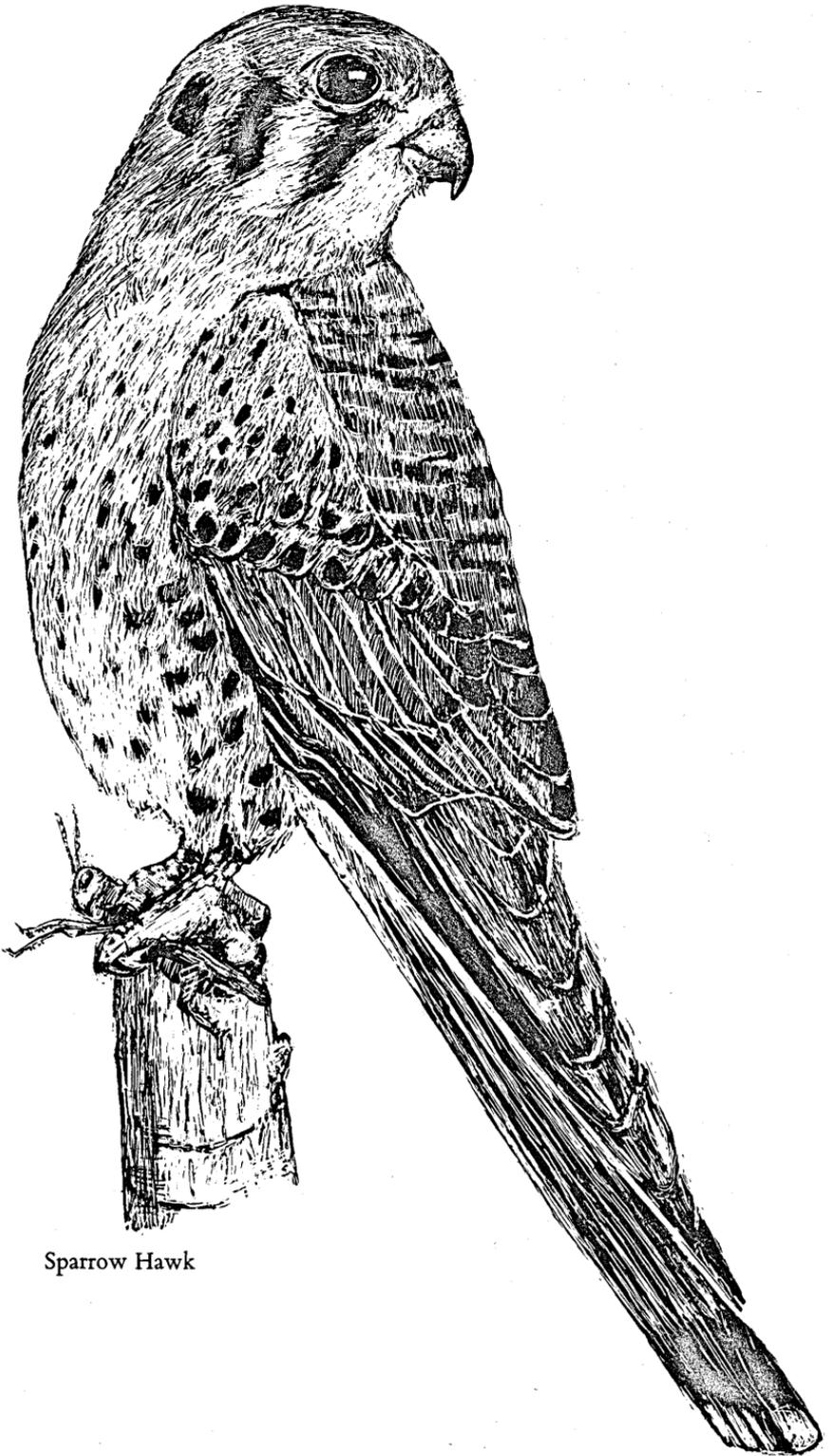
Sparrows

Summer solstice.
Birdsong surrounds us
through the sun's fullest circle.

Rising spirals of bell tones
from the catbird in the pine,
chucking from blackbirds;

brown-capped sparrows
send out simple words
over and over,
their whirring throats
as busy as water:

measures of sound
spin into a round sky.



Sparrow Hawk

Rolla to Lawrence

Red-winged blackbird
dead on the road
six miles out of Rolla.
The body tells a story.

Opossum by the Gasconade River,
teeth bared in final fear,
motionless on concrete.

White cabbage moth,
wings flying flat and beautiful
on my windshield.

White and yellow cat,
fur catching afternoon sun,
I-70 past Columbia.

Something dark under vultures,
Blackwater, Missouri.

Roadside yellow with goldenrod—
sparrows wheel away just in time.

Near Turner
another stiff-legged dog,
a felled sparrow hawk,
wind lifting an empty wing.

Toward Lawrence
a dead coyote, yellow dog,
sun moving down flat and west.

Grackles lift off the road
rasping alarm,
dark shapes escaping into night sky.

Tourist Attraction

Relic of the Indian Wars,
Custer's only survivor,
the horse stands here
suspended in his last parade.

His frame is wood,
the flesh string and clay,
the chestnut hide upholstered over.
Signs tell his life—
“He lived his early years a mustang
before traders broke
and sold him to the army.”

“After Little Big Horn
the Seventh Cavalry showed Comanche
draped in mourning
on all ceremonial occasions.”

The stuffed horse
stands at attention behind glass,
the humidifier preserving his fur.

Snakes

They fill the out-of-doors,
their old cellophane skins
left blowing in yellowed grasses,
their holes unhidden beside creek beds.

We learn
Beware of rocky outcrops.
Don't flip flat stones.
Stay away from old wells.

They pass busy nights—
slipping wordless past sleeping dogs,
stalking toads in the garden.
Toward dawn
they circle the back porch.

At the Natural History Museum
we watch them eat mice
one slow swallow
and strike at glass.

We don't read Genesis
or Freud
or Aztec codices.

We watch where we step.

Sand Bar Exhibit

On first floor we see
an Ice Age bison head
pulled out of a Kaw River sand bar,
a granular gray skull,

and buffalo in last night's dream
come to mind—
a small buffalo herd
in Flint Hills pasture—

and other buffalo,

the massive grandfather
at the Manhattan Zoo,
a fierce Minotaur
behind a deep ravine,

the buffalo nickel
collected by my children,
the animal's shiny hump
worn flat,

the herd at Fort Riley
posing for a postcard,

and last Saturday Mel and I ate
buffalo at Ziegfield's Cafe.
We saw a head on the wall,
a sign looped through its horns,
BUFFALO STEW \$1.98.
The meat was filling,
the gravy heavy and sweet.

We drove home along the river,
ice reaching toward the channel.
Underneath
horns and teeth and bones
creep along the sandy bottom.

Deer on the Highway

Four slaughtered deer pass by
tied over a camper roof,
elegant thin legs waving slightly,
hooves sharp in the air:

somehow those hills around the road
still send out wild animals.

Among fences and red Herefords
slip coyotes and woodchucks, raccoons, mice,
beaver, voles, and even antlered deer.

One morning
tramping over what looked like a burial mound—
a flat rise covered with river sand—
I found a small hollow hidden from wind,
grass crushed and rounded to fit their bodies,
shards of grass scat
and moon-shaped tracks.

Several times
I have seen them from this road,
six one time, when Gary Snyder visited,
two males one Thanksgiving afternoon.
They float out of wheat or corn stubble,
moving soundlessly toward water,
still travelling through these hills.

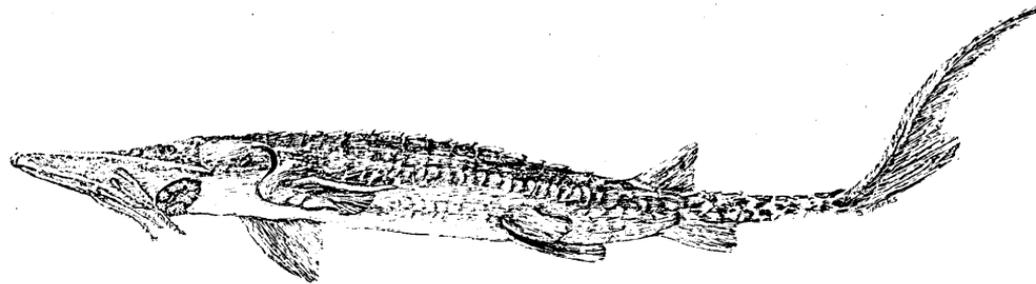
Tuttle Creek Catch

A surprised fisherman left
the shovelnose sturgeon to rot.
It was odder than any dream.

Dogs bark at it.
Children poke it with sticks.

For weeks it remains unmoved,
the skin becomes gray leather,
the eyes—unwound clocks.

Edges of flesh blur,
sink into sand—
a creature from another time
melting into this.



Shovelnose Sturgeon

Dungeon Master, Level Two

Lover, each day we outwit dragons.
You ask What Is Wrong?
and mine stirs,
an Allosaurus double from Loch Ness,
circles of vermilion painted on each scale.

Sometimes you mistake it for me,
though I am much prettier,
more simply dressed,
more genial, warmer.
The beast can change costumes at will.
She is a shape-shifter, a role she learned
playing Dungeons and Dragons with the kids.

Some nights you stroke the wrong arm
and my Pavlov's dragon,
unthinking, takes charge.
She spins out video documentaries:
a scene from My Life, Age Two, say,
and at once you are crowded in bed
with a woman, a frightened little girl,
and a foul-smelling reptile.

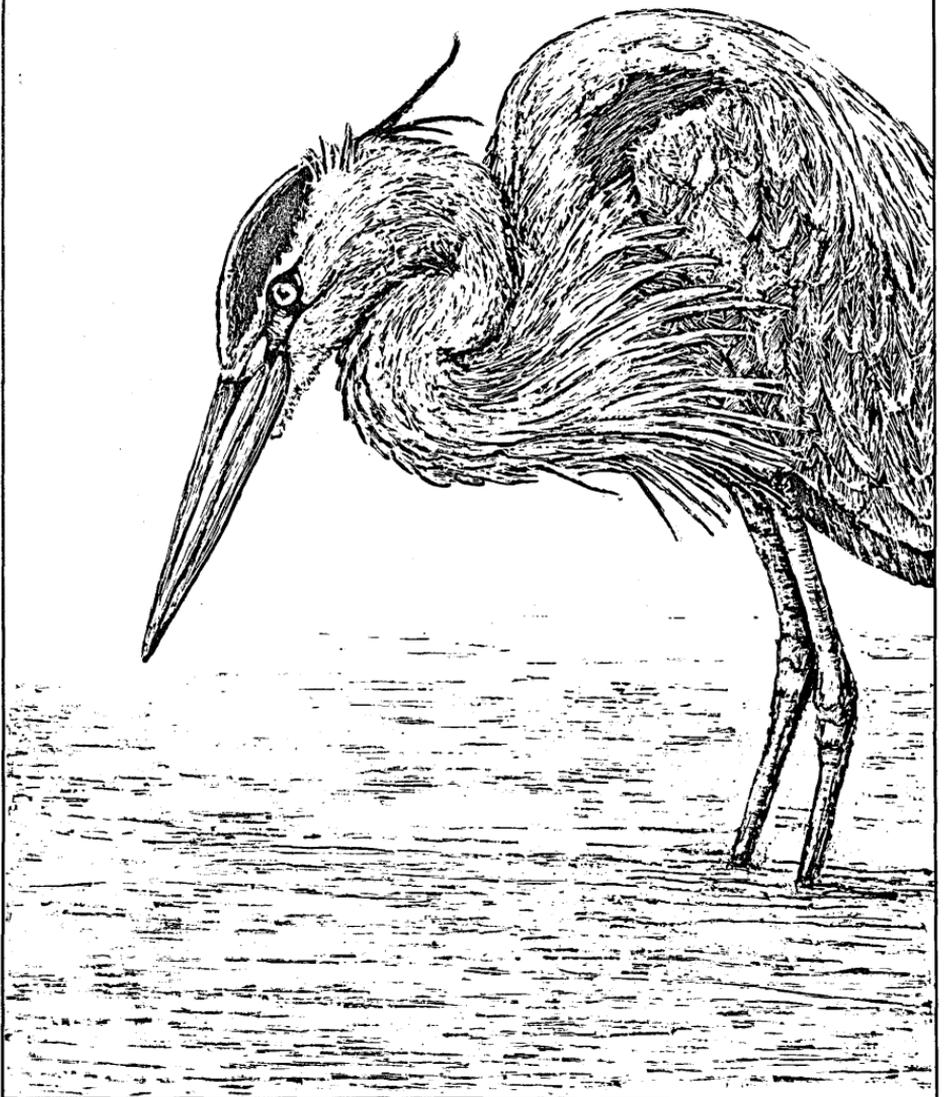
Some evenings you metamorphose, too.
A Mesopotamian creature:
wings, lion's body, man's head.
He thrashes about your side of the bed,
growling and whimpering in flowered sheets,
shifting his tail so the spikes don't hurt.
In the morning you say you slept badly.
I only say,
"You talked in your sleep."
I cannot tell the truth.

Sometimes curtains rise on
Crash of the Dragons—
two carnivores ram together,
all incisors, red eyes, and foreshortened noses.
The bedroom windows quiver.
They fall asleep bloody and sore.

Finally you have learned to trick the reptile.
When my dragon appears
you ask her to tell stories
until she drowns and falls dormant,
lids closing over elliptical irises,
tail twitching feebly.
Or you send her out after the hound
and slam the bedroom door.
You can turn her charge into a romp,
chasing bones in the back yard,
Good Exercise, you in the Lancelot suit
I found at a garage sale.

You come back triumphant, breathing heavily,
cheeks flushed vermilion from the contest.
I help you pull off boots.
I unlace your armor
and set it next to mine.
We lie down together in bed,
safe and gentle for a time.

Field Trips



Great Blue Heron

Field Trip

The bus stops by a slumping hill.
The fossil bed is weathered,
just brown clay where the road cuts through—
 Beil limestone from the Pennsylvanian
 300 million years old.
The clay looks just like the gumbo
inches below my tomatoes and lettuce.

Then kids start pulling shells
out of the sticky mud,
 mussels and clams and horn corals,
 old stone crumbling away
 from sea urchins and squids.

Beachcombing
this November morning in the hills.

Oxbow Lake Field Trip

Old maps show this course
in thick black lines
curved like a yoke.
The river sculpted the curve
deeper and farther
with violent spring surges.

Today one bank is caught finally
against a bluff,
the other sides blend into rows of corn.
This piece of river is at rest,
trapped in the corner it carved—
one meander long,
one river wide.
We call it Lakeview.

A heron flaps in slow motion
across flat khaki water.

A mile away,
curtained by willows,
the river current churns mud and water
moving east to Kansas City.

For the Missouri River Buddha

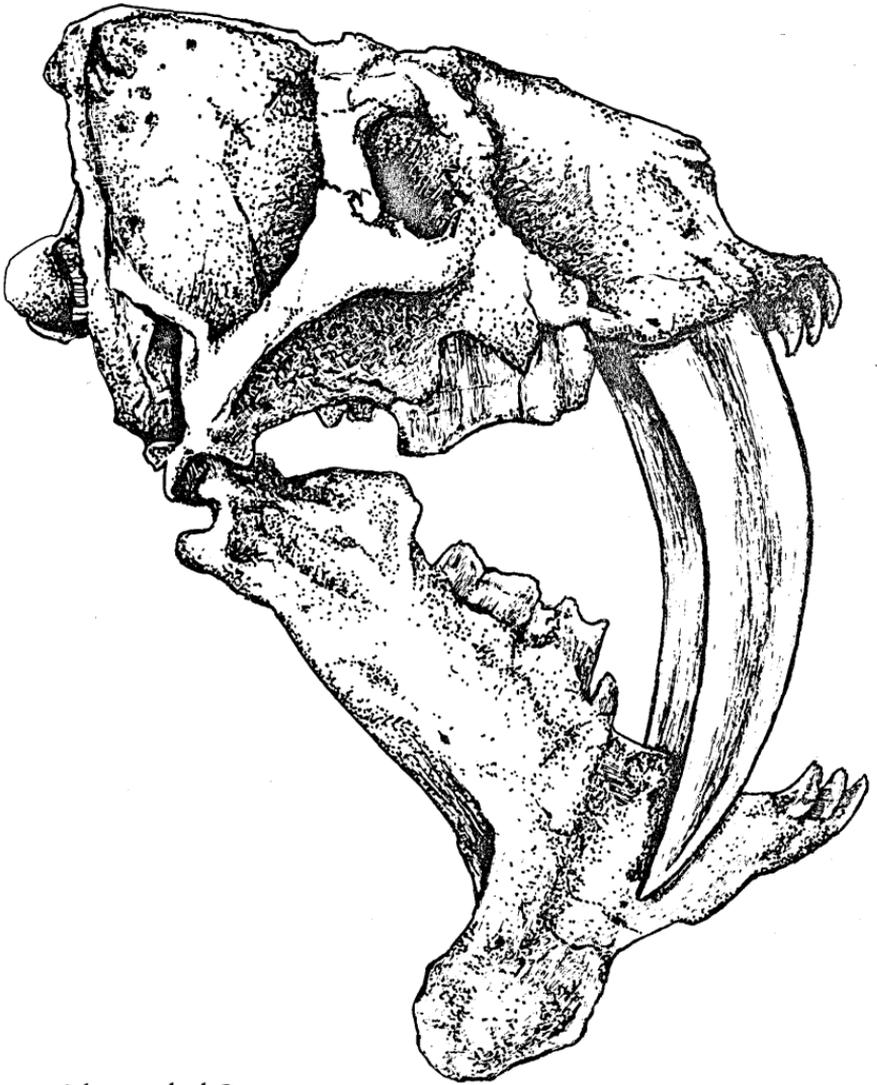
Underground rivers twist
green scarves of water
through walls of china calcite.

Miles of midnight waters
lapse into sunlight,
 an opening in a wall
 at Meramec Springs,
or flow up into trees and wildflowers.

Black strands of rain
braid into fissures and veins,
soak into worn mountains.

Deep under dirt, under storm water,
chert bursts into crystals—
Aux Arcs quartz.

Under our maps
underground minerals and rain
tangle together their own watershed
and sing to the Buddha.
Downstream the Missouri River holds
wavering pinwheels of the Milky Way.



Saber-toothed Cat

Glacial Till

We imagined
this pastureland as ocean,
kicked shells out of mud
a thousand miles from the gulf
and held our breath
thinking of sea water
above us.

Then ice.
The till is a pudding—
 pink quartzite from the Dakotas,
 granite, chert, limestone, and sandstone
 pebbles mortared together.

Lakes form along the glacier's edge.
The Kaw and the Missouri Rivers turn east.
Saber-toothed cats roam here
and huge bison, mastodons, rhinos.

Arctic winds
above two hundred feet of ice.

How To Look for Arrowheads

There is a logic:

Start with water—they had to.
On a clear winter day
climb down the stubbly bluff
to creek level.
Imagine yourself closer
to the Pleistocene.
Look back up
through willows and cottonwoods
for a place to spend the night,
a hill to dull northern winds.

Look for flint,
jagged, horn-smooth,
not weak limestones and shales.

Tens and hundreds of flakes,
discards,
mark the old workshop rubble.

Further down the gully
you can find tools—
scrapers, burins, knives—
embossed with regular strokes
even as beaver markings.

And maybe,
lodged sideways in washed clay
or flat under wet leaves,
you will pull out
a pink, finely worked
stemmed heart.

Gravity Follows Me from the Flint Hills

Flint strata flank this highway
broken only by erosion,
the Nemaha fault zone,
these asphalt roads.

Flint runs under
the El Dorado oil fields
and Bible belt fundamentalists
certain of Jesus,
and Eternity.

Rinds of oceans and marshlands
settle under the prairies
tidy as piled rock fences.

Gravity, patient as the sun,
pulls at the next layer—
Concrete, Asphalt, Lumber, Bricks.
Concrete, Asphalt, Lumber, Bricks.

Stratification of Snow

“Not only is the universe inside our heads equal to the physical universe in terms of the neurophysiological properties involved—but the internal environment may be more real.”

Michael Talbot

Snow turns the town into a gingerbread village
and my son Daniel says the blowing snow
is crystals like quartz crystals.
I say yes and try to explain
how rocks and ice amount
to really the same thing.

G. calls and tapdances stories
of shovelling five kinds of snow,
each layer an episode of cold or thaw,
and I say rocks and ice fall down the same—
I saw snow and limestone strata
on all the roads to Wichita last week,

and something else, too.
These words float around inside my head,
drift toward sentences.

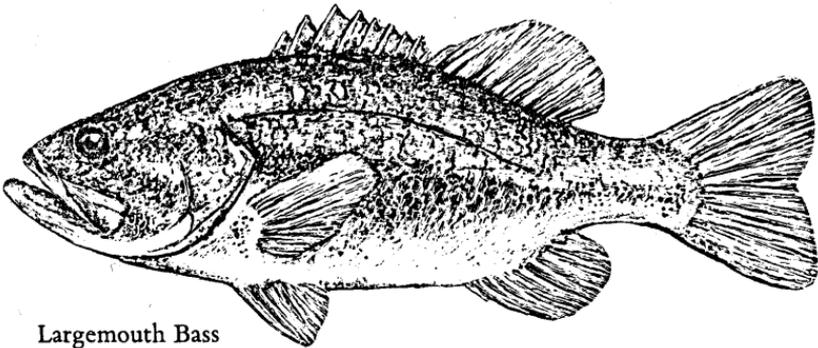
Like those glass balls
full of water and miniature villages
you turn upside down and back
to make the snow fall
into carpets of white sparkles.

Clinton Reservoir Displacement

The muddy new lake laps
over pastures and fields.

High over
an old windbreak
or a tree-lined creek
a few brown ducks
circle endlessly
around through limbs.
Tips of drowned elms
shape a last gesture
to the sun.

A gravel county road
slides straight
into the valley
full of water.
Farmers stand in hip boots
twenty feet out
solid on the road bed
casting and casting for bass.



Largemouth Bass

Spring Rain Runs

down the brick street
deeper in the middle,
an old creek bed,
and several blocks over
a gully meets the run-off
and carries the flood
past doghouses and clotheslines
behind frame houses,
rain sliding off the roofs
in sheets.

Shifts in the sidewalk
catch these cold drops
and behind the garage
a grassy puddle forms
under red tile eaves.

A few miles south
cattle drop calves,
one just born
lifted to its feet and fell,
unready for solid ground,
still floating in this rain.

Water collects in rounds,
reflects the shallow bowl of hip bones,
and water in my flesh
hears, somehow hears,
and sees this chill, this rain.

Views of Kansas Highways

1. Mother's Day Drive

We head north, toward Lawrence,
into limestone country.
Highway slices stone,
exposing multitudes of skeletons,
hills filled with fossils—
crinoids, corals, clams.

Calcite
like these thick bones of mine
first formed grain by grain
from my mother's bloodstream.

Seedling cottonwoods
push up through rock cracks.
Layers of old ocean debris
hold up new spring grasses.

2. Toward Manhattan

Limestone blocks line the road
like walls of Assyrian fortresses.

We enter gates
to an old land
or hewn doors of hell—
the Great Desert.

Stacks of naked stones
mortared in place
follow us:
 black shale for old shallows, marshes,
 yellow limestone for sea bottoms.

Further below
peaks of the Nemaha Mountains
are buried in rain, wind, grit.
We pass carefully over the dead giant,
stepping on a grave.

At the center of the continent,
this New World,
lie frost-heaved rocks, sediment,
these ruins.

3. Matfield Green

for Dzigka

The trees refuse to follow from Topeka.
The car radio loses contact
and mumbles fuzz to itself.

The highway bisects a moonscape
and you are completely alone.

If you see a diesel truck
it lumbers like a beast
lost from another age,
like you.

Two sounds rise from the gullies
and repetitious hills out there—

in the summer,
wind and waves of cicada chants.

In the winter
only yelps of wind.

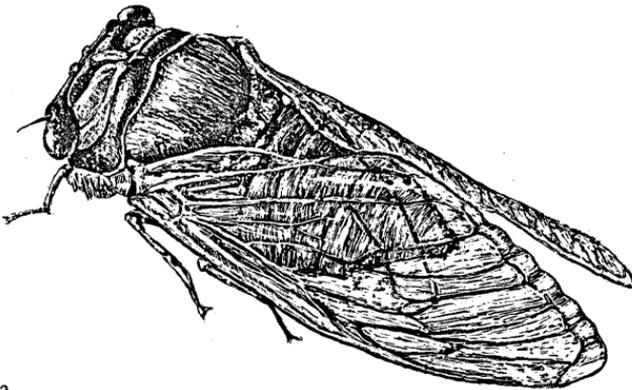
4. West

Here the sky gives clarity to each tree—

a gray hand on the horizon,
perpendicular on horizontal.

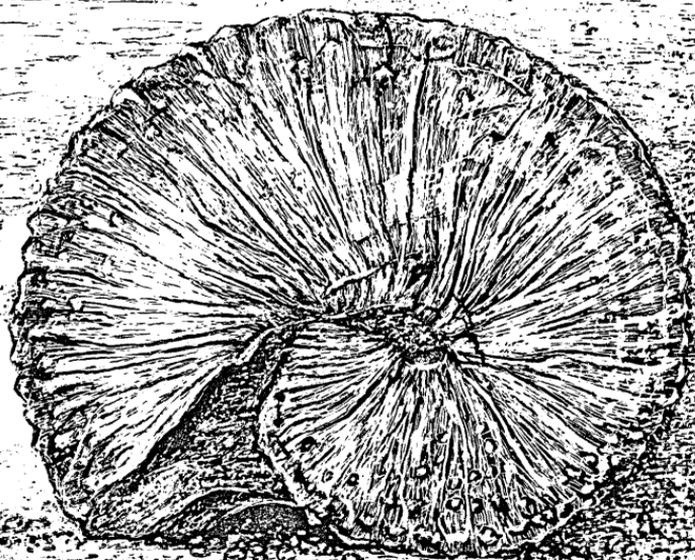
The long slope of miles
approaching Colorado,
moving always into blue blue haze.

Each tree a slow traveller on this road.



Cicada

Histories



Ammonite

Place

Is it the eagles returning to Lecompton, old Eagle Town,
that stretch of lookout cottonwoods on the Kaw River,

or is it those rivers we measure towns by,
where we wait for flood and drought tides?

Or finding my grandfather during a storm,
clouds and lightning and his face by the window?

Is it the house I grew up in,
the way the sun slanted through the front window,
warm bars of winter dust and light?

Is it a locus inside a muddy muscle,
the heart squeezing rivulets of blood
again, again, again.

A Gift of a Fossil Ammonite

for Eileen E. M. Williams

An Indian legend says a tail
follows every person.
It reaches behind
longer and longer as life unwraps,
a map of covered territory.

This sea creature,
Ram's Horn of Ammon,
still lugs a whorled world,
the old empty rooms
turning around a center,
some chipped pearl still
cemented on the outside.

The stony shell sheltered
a soft worm, a garden slug
attached
to its flat spire,
alone in an old Victorian home.

Crammed into the end compartment
the soft body grew,
squeezed out of the small center segments,
head end pushed forward
out of the shell casement,
out of the nursery.

Lost muscle is replaced by fossilized mud,
now polished like onyx,
the casting coiled in its nest.
The echo body shows exactly
ridges and embroidered suture patterns.

And no one knows, you say,
handing me this birthday gift,
why ammonites died out
leaving only one distant relation,
the nautilus.

We can choose whatever ending
to the story we want,
holding here, with wine and cake,
a frozen spiral clock winding forward,
not in endless circles,
the ammonite twirling out, chamber by chamber,
a time line—its allotted inches—
some 100 million years before ours.

Its dance we follow.

Fossil Tracks in Flagstone

Professor Mudge looks beneath his toes.
Leaves skitter by,
puddles and shoes and cigar wrappings—
Kansas Avenue, downtown Topeka.

In a diagonal across the walk
round-toed imprints
half the size of his boot.

No strange child or feral dog.

B. F. Mudge, university paleontologist, squints:

Limnopus vagus, amphibian,

raised from the grave
at Osage City quarry,

a busy dinosaur afternoon,
Permian, interrupted
and now set back into place—

flagstone, Kansas Avenue, 1873.



Limnophus vagus

Catalogue: Plains Indian Photographs

"The warrior who wore the bonnet proclaimed thereby that he regarded himself as adept in fighting and as having full knowledge of the ethics of mortal combat."

Exhibit notation

Little Big Horn survivors:
their eyes stare out of the Nineteenth Century,
stone beads in the necklace of time.

Northern Cheyenne and Lakota,
these men prepared for death:
Crow King, Two Moons, Rain-in-the-Face, Crazy Horse,
Iron Tail, Sitting Bull, Low Dog, Hump.

Their daily prayer was *Hokahey*—
"Today is a good day to die."

Even defeated and starved
they wear
breast plates, fine bone collars.
They still hold
coup sticks, feathered stone clubs.
They dress
in blue army coats and buffalo hides,
hooped earrings and medallions.

Each tells his story:

Gall
"The soldiers killed
my two wives and three children
early in the fight."

Two Moons

“I shouted,
Fight the white soldiers.
I shall stay even
if I am killed.”

Hump

“My horse was shot from under me
and I was wounded.
The fight was confused and quick.”

For the slow camera
these men sit
as formal as corpses.
Obsidian eyes focus at a point
beyond ghost photographers
beyond chaotic battles and murders
beyond the closing loop of their own lives.

Clinton Lake, Archaic Site

The oldest tools are cruder,
hacked out of local flint,
dingy gray with fossil intrusions.
To find them I examine
each rock at my feet, check chipped
edges for working on both sides,
feel the flat obverse for percussive bulge.

I ignore the geese overhead and frantic ducks.
My children lose themselves
chasing up blank gullies.
In early darkness
I can see only shimmering navy-black water
and a confused library of stones to sort.
I scuff over remains of hearths, work areas,
as if trying to touch some woman or man.

A chipped hide scraper appears at water's edge,
thick and blunt-nosed,
left behind by nomads, star followers.
The stone tool is cold and wet,
three thousand years old.
Reaching towards it
I lose my hands in twilight and mud.

The Oldest Wheel

hangs motionless in plexiglass
spotlighted in the dark gallery.
It was unearthed in Kish, Mesopotamia,
according to the sign,
squeezed to this ovoid shape
by weight of a tomb roof.
"Once part of a four-wheeled vehicle"
rolling toward Fertile Crescent Eternity
and Chicago's Field Museum.

Four thousand five hundred years ago
it was wood, not this black clay.
A leather tire was studded to the rim.
The bronze nails still gleam under the lights—
shafts squared like old barn nails
and topped with mushroom caps or flat heads.

"The wood has completely decayed,"
it says,
but the bronze is still "evident,"
nail tips pointing towards an invisible hub.

Photographs show the wheel exhibit in miniature,
and then the entire tomb excavation,
the wheel *in situ*.
Gray clouds hang over what must be Kish,
like now, outside, clouds and smog
hover just above Lake Michigan.

This trophy of bronze nails and shaped mud
has travelled into the upper Chicago stratum.
No mention is made of the driver,
or his whereabouts.

An Egyptian Paradise

"Perhaps a mummy's best friend is an Egyptologist: sealed in a glass case, kept at a constant temperature . . . but your mummy isn't even safe in a museum."

William Burroughs

In the basement of the Field Museum
the mummies are ready:
wrapped, bundled, X-rayed, and coffined.
Book of the Dead spells are complete.
Entrails sorted into jars.
Magicians and priests paid.

Their stone sarcophagi
have sailed past grave robbers' ghosts,
British archaeologists,
and U. S. Customs.

They slumber in stages of undress,
bandages opened part way
for daily inspection.
Museum assistants monitor the deterioration
and send bad mummies
into Storage Room Hell
or worse: to Hollywood.

Near the reconstructed tomb room rests
a case of stone and clay *ushebt*—
miniature mummies,
dummy mummies,
inscribed with magical directions.
The tiny servants await orders.
They will fight off demons
in these Western Lands.
They will haunt commuters
all along Lake Shore Drive.

The mummies' hearts have been weighed
against ostrich feathers and judged.
Their flesh is as sound as dried apricots.
They are prepared
for Everlasting Life in Chicago.

The Concrete Cabin

"I have a will that none except my widow, my descendants, their husbands and wives, shall go in to see me for less than one dollar."

Samuel P. Dinsmoor

Children under twelve are free,
the rest of us pay a buck fifty.
Our hostess readies her speech.

First the black-and-white photographs,
her pointer checking off
the chronology of faces:

the boy in Union blue
no beard

the first Mrs. Dinsmoor
he married on horseback

the second missus, only 20,
and Sam a codger of 81

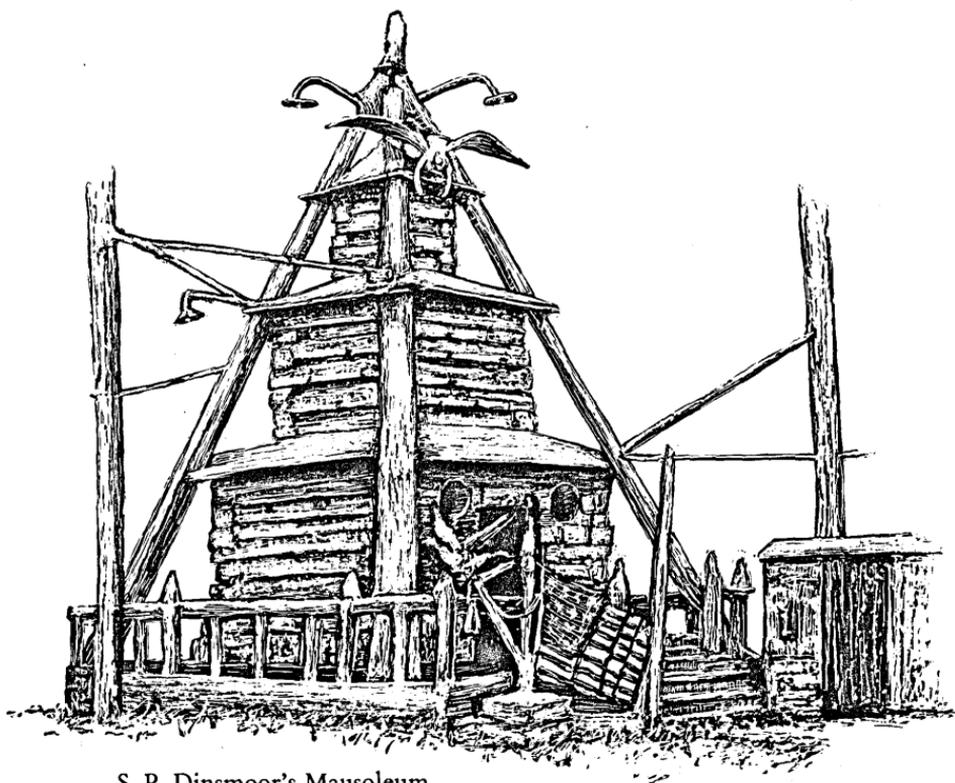
their son and daughter

the cement coffin he made
and rehearsed lying in.

Then we move through the handmade concrete house—
3000 feet of carved wooden molding,
rooms of ash and walnut upstairs,
the kitchen downstairs,
below ground.
Cement walls, cement floors
smelling of bread mold.

Last she leads us to the mausoleum,
pauses for the climax and the lock,
shines a flashlight
deep into his concrete tomb.

His grin is cracked and gray,
turned cement.



S. P. Dinsmoor's Mausoleum

Small Town Landscapes

for Mary Swander

The county highway grids
and repeating stretches of grass and cattle
hold people apart.

Gravel roads called "town"
branch off the black top.
The same gas station, beer hall, post office
appear every twenty miles,
their names vanish as soon as spoken—
 Wilsey, Olpe, Allen.

Insurance calendars
hung in sheds
mark a cycle
of high school football, basketball, and harvest.
One farm kid says,
 "We watch a lot of television."

Each town of old families
immortalizes the few sires and dams:
swarthy German Catholics with green eyes
populate one quadrant,
round-faced blonds another.

In one place children have six toes
or half the town is twins,
matching potatoes in overalls.
Or a seed of Parkinson's disease
flourishes like wheat.
The middle-aged tremble in wheelchairs.

In this isolation
strains of genius are tolerated
equally with the retarded.

People live undisturbed in tumbling houses
surrounded by uncut weeds.
And a body can indulge himself.
One of those barns contains 350 antique violins,
another a tractor seat collection,
barbed wire displays, cattle skulls,
arrowheads arranged in sunflower patterns,
a vehicle pieced together from a Harley and a Ford,

all secret in those wide open spaces.

The Oldest Continuous Civilization

We walk through the Shanghai Exhibit
with hushed grandmothers and scholars.
Potted bamboos mark dim gallery pathways,
and lights burnish only the specimens.
Chinese flute music fades and resumes
like moments of imagination.

The pottery is thousands of years old,
preserved intact by unknown accidents.
Illumined charts of the dynasties
appear and recede.
Leisurely, we pace a map of time,
ten minutes and a panel for the Chou Dynasty,
half a room for the T'ang.

Our own lives scale down
next to walls of history.
Charts trace generations of cities, not men,
shifts of races and trade routes.

Bronze vessels, paintings,
jade, ivory, and porcelain
fit silhouettes traced on timelines,
cloaks of text surrounding each object.

We pause at the largest exhibit.
Funerary figurines march five meters
under glass—odd pottery chess pieces
of slave women, palace guards, and horsemen—
and death is as ordered
as our stroll through galleries.

A fluorescent-bright sales room comes last
like a burst of organ music after church
or daylight after a movie.

Among ceramic horses, paper cutouts, and post cards
our procession disperses.

The oldest continuous civilization
behind us.

Split Root Basket

Cedar roots cut out of mud
cleaned and sliced
the thickness of yarn

still fragrant and pliable
plaited in tight rhythm—
a coarse cloth bowl.

Cherry bark laid into the weave
forms bands of maroon mountains,
snakes, clouds, Rain Woman.

Strong root fibers
out of the earth
hold together
water and sky and voices.

New Cambria, Kansas: Indian Burial Pit

Farmers pitched a garage
over the eroded burial mound.
Corn fields stretch to the river.

Inside, a hundred nests of bones
rest in the pit,
river sand troweled and brushed away.

Skeletons curled
in a vast mother.

The farmer says
they lived here one thousand years
without murders or wars.

Tonight as I climb down
an endless ladder into dreams
I will sleep better,
thinking of them.

Flora



Horsetail Ferns

Coal Bed, Douglas Group

Yellow stones step down
into the Underworld—
red shale, gray shale
and one ebony streak.

A thin swamp between old mud seas:
 ginkgo trees
 horsetail ferns
 seed ferns
 hissing Madagascar roaches
 ancient pines
now matted black pulp,
four inches of Persephone's rock,
a lost world under pastures and fields.

Brought up to daylight
it crumbles
into brittle paper scraps,
black decades
scattered across the table.

Hades triumphs,
allowing none of his subjects
another life
beyond this tomb
spreading beneath our feet.

River Front Park

We walk River Front Trail,
a narrow muddy line in weeds,
through old Kansa half-blood lands.

The river runs broad and brown,
glinting through the brush.

Mud gullies cut into the trail
draining newly furrowed fields.
We lower ourselves into them
to dark river level and back up.

Wild grapevines grip willows and elms;
ancient horsetail ferns rise together,
sumac and pokeberry and wild carrot
tangle like snarled morning hair.

Past the third bend the trail stops.

An old black willow
lies scattered over the path—

the trunk and brittle limbs fall apart.
Stiff gray leaves scrape together.
Wind tugs open
fingers of dry brown seeds.

Bulb

Bulb. Noun (Middle English from Latin *bulbus*, from Greek *bolbos*) An underground bud that sends down roots.

Not seeds, but buds
broken from an ancient branch.

Dusted in bonemeal
they are shrouded mummies
ready for the long journey.

Eight inches down
blossoms stir.
Roots creep to bedrock.
Leaves spear up through dirt.

As our dead settle into graves
bulbs nourish themselves,
at home in the Underworld.

Lullaby

This land ought to be a forest.
The clothesline, telephone pole,
pruned bushes, and safe grass
out my backyard window
can be taken away,

and Twenty-Third Street Taco Tico,
McDonald's and Southern Hills Shopping Center
must rise and slope down to fit
the limestone and shale cuesta.

Just under concrete footings
the chorus of cicadas swells
and crescendos in maple trees
and crab apples, lilac bushes
and cottonwoods along the river.

Rabbits, squirrels and possums
carry on their generations
in gardens and alleys.

Out back
a sapling grows embedded
in the chain link fence.
My neighbor and I,
we can't move it.



Virginia Opossum

Red Oak Floor

for Ed Alsop

The red oak floor
gleams under my bare feet.
I sweep and boards whisper
of sleet, breezes, quick-footed squirrels.

Summer and fall and winter
spun into ring calendars,
sliced flat for this floor.

Knots where limbs came off,
smooth lengthwise whorls
shaven from the trunk.

Auburn, brown, and yellow boards
reassemble a forest
as ice over the river
suspends brittle sticks, leaves, crayfish shells.

Sycamore: A Removal

It dropped huge-handed leaves
over the garden
and long peelings of bark.
White skin underneath matched the snow.

After the tree cutters leave,
a new silence.
The sky presses into the fence
and unfamiliar houses
appear in the distance.

The sun practices new angles.

All Souls' Day

Every Halloween
the Dark Goddess returns.
Leaves, petals, grass
sink back into ground.

She pulls gowns off trees,
stuffs orange and green into mud.

She petrifies butterflies—
their wings blow with leaves.

Her mouth yawns open.
Clouds. Cold. Winds. Rain.

The spell is cast.

Day Lilies

When I moved, my mother sent me
iris and lemon balm, forget-me-nots
and families of day lilies
with names and ruffles, stripes,
already in bloom:
Edna Spaulding, Susie Wong, Day Queen.
I poked them into the dirt
and watched the dozen blossoms
fall in a week.
By August I had lost their name tags.
Heat nourished flies.

This spring, roots by the back door
showed green hope—
tubers under rumpled brown leaves,
huddling like bunches of onions
as iris jewelled about them.
I remembered day lilies
and the transplanted garden.

By June the bloomstalks rose
from three feet of arching leaves,
a dozen buds forming on each stem.
My mother sent me again
a list of descriptions:
 Cahokia—late apricot-pink
 Towhead—pale yellow with a green throat,
 blooms have eight petals instead of six.
And through this long summer
corals and yellows open wide-eyed,
rising each day
from deep-set roots.

Hymns for Spring Strawberries

1. Wild Strawberries

The patch sprawls against a slope
twined with other seasons' plants—
sumac stems from last fall,
fresh shoots of sweet William, vervain.
Even the birds cannot find them.

Beneath open mittens of poison ivy
the shaded fruit is pink;
lifted toward the sun,
deep scarlet,
sunken seeds flecking the juice.

Up the rise a single turtle
forages in the leaves.

The berries separate whole
with a thuck.

2. Meditation

Past the spearmint that persists
through cracks in the walk,

past just-blooming raspberries
and a slippery stone pond,

stepping gingerly among open fans of leaves
holding steady in the mud

basket in hand
bending back to sun.

Seizing lumps, circles, jewels of red,
dirt alchemized into deep sweetness.

Daniel moving up against me
touching my elbow,
humming, lost in strawberries.

3. The Last of the Strawberries

turn the color of blood clots
and make soft food for bugs.

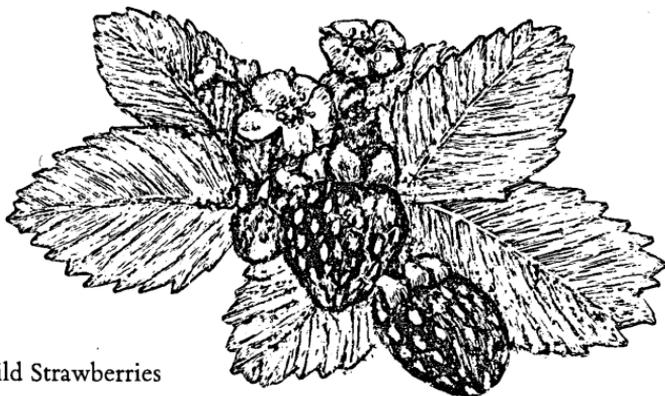
Spinach bolts to the sky
leaving behind stalks of bitter flowers.

Cabbage moths float freely
through decapitated broccoli plants.

The tulips fold tight dry gowns
and slip back into the ground.

Weeds range through the garden
leaching water and food from brown crust.

The sun stares and stares.



Wild Strawberries

Denise Low teaches in the English departments of the University of Kansas and Washburn University. As an editor with Cottonwood Review Press, she published two anthologies of Kansas poetry, *30 Kansas Poets* and *Confluence*. Her chapbooks include *Dragon Kite* (BookMark Press/University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1981) and *Quilting* (Holiseventh Press, 1984). She has published poetry, reviews, articles, and interviews in various magazines and anthologies. In addition, she regularly reviews poetry for the *Kansas City Star*. She works with the Kansas Arts Commission Artists-in-Education program, where poets teach creative writing workshops in the public schools. Her work has won various prizes, including the Lichtor Poetry Prize. Her degrees include the B.A. and the M.A. in English from the University of Kansas and the M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Wichita State University. She lives in Lawrence, Kansas, with her husband and two children.

Colophon

This work is set in Bembo type, 10 points over a 12-point base. It was set on an APS μ 5 phototypesetter from a digitized master font. The characters are drawn on phototypesetting paper at speeds of about 1000 lines per minute.

Bembo is a roman face that may properly be called the first modern type design. It was created by Francesco Griffo da Bologna (c. 1450–1518) for the booklet *De Aetna* written by Pietro Cardinal Bembo. *De Aetna* was printed and published by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1495–1496.

The illustrations were printed using a “linetone” process recently developed by Allen Press, Inc. Line and wash drawings reproduced using this technique can show tonal variation without sacrificing detail or contrast.

The paper used is #80 Lustro Offset Enamel Dull Cream manufactured by the S. D. Warren Paper Company of Boston, Massachusetts. L.O.E. Dull Cream imparts the warmth of early book papers, while also having a coated surface for superior reproduction. It is an acid-free sheet with an archival shelf-life of between 100 and 300 years.