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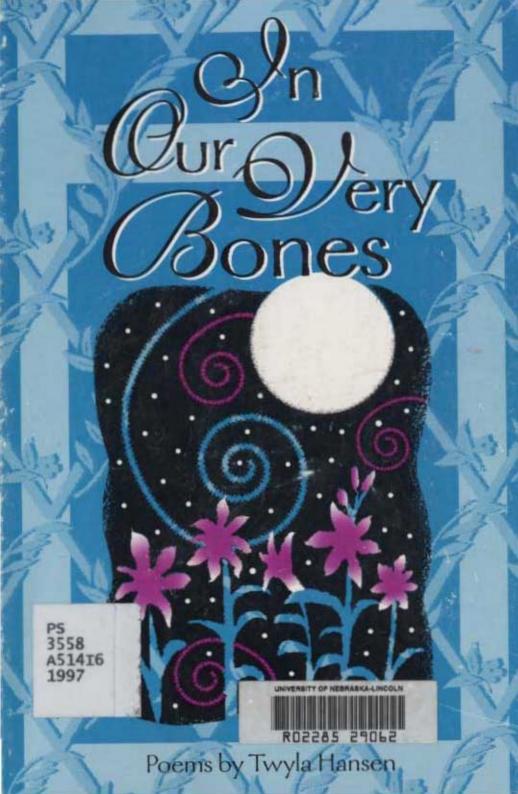
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In Our Very Bones Poems by Twyla Hansen

In Our Very Bones

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A Slow Tempo Press P.O. Box 83686 Lincoln, Nebraska 68501-3686

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Confluence: "Cedar Waxwings"

Crab Orchard Review: "Dragonfly," "Each Time I Look Up," "In Early Fall"

Ellipsis: "My Neighbor's Daughter Learning to Drive"

The Flintlock: "Harvest Moon"

Great River Review: "On the Screen Porch," "Wind"

Hurakan: "Blue Herons"

Iowa Woman: "Full Moon, Partial Eclipse," "Full Moon, Total Eclipse"

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The Laurel Review: "Platte River State Park, Late January,"

"Walking, Early Spring"

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Collier, Nancy Curtis & Linda Hasselstrom: "Wind"

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"Winter"

Nebraska Poets Calendar —1994: "On the Screen Porch"; —1995: "Song of the Pasque Flower"; —1996: "Warbler"

Nebraska Territory: "Back Yard," "Brother Story," "Crane River"

North Dakota Quarterly: "At the Prairie, the Day Before"

Prairie Fire: "Nine-Mile Prairie" Prairie Winds: "Prairie Trout" Riverrun: "Winter Solstice"

Sidewalks: "Dog Days"

Slant: "First the Yellow," "Mid-September," "When You Leave"

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January," "The Separator," "Song of the Pasque Flower"

West Branch: "If My Father Were Still Alive"

Whetstone: "Memorial Day"

Whole Notes: "Annular Eclipse," "Conspiracy"

Wisconsin Review: "Lilac Tripping"

Yarrow: "Autumn," "My Husband Snoring"

"Full Moon, Total Eclipse" won Honorable Mention in the 1993 *Iowa Woman* writing contest. "Beginning Dance" has been set to music for women's chorus by Associate Professor Jean Henderson of Nebraska Wesleyan University. Sincere thanks, too, goes to the Nebraska Wesleyan Writers, Prairie Trout and other friends, for listening, reading and helping shape many of these poems.

— to mom

Ruth

& her next-door neighbors

Steve

Joei

Kathleen

Madelyne

Distances

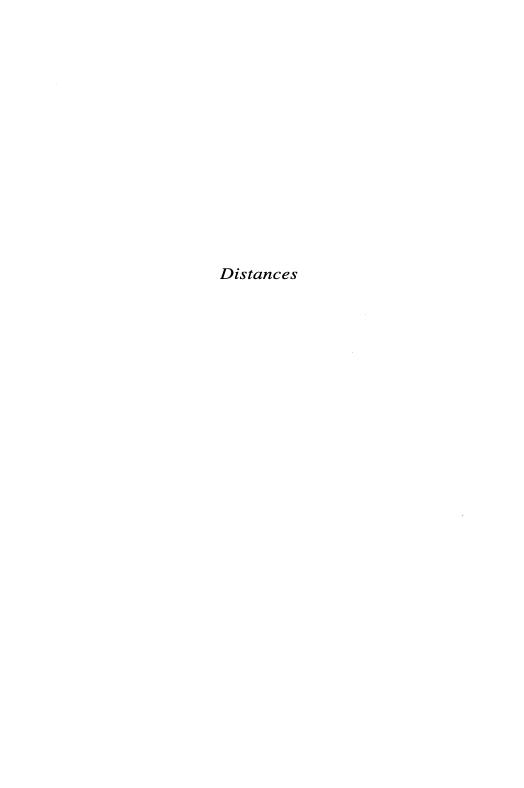
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Midwestern Autumn

An outwitted barn inches toward the surrounding cornfield.

Insistent wind; all day the unnoticed ripening: sorghum to russet, soybeans to yellow, sumac to crimson.

The sun coats us with Indian summer; leaves off the honeylocust like warm snow.

We cruise this land of wide, flat rivers, shy maples beginning to turn, a grove of upstart cottonwoods in roadside gumbo.

People who once laughed and sweated in these empty sheds, talked community and crop in the shriveling towns — where are they? —

implements rusting next to barbed wire.

This landscape inches toward horizontal oblivion, harvest moon rising full before sunset,

light far in the distance for those remaining, land-beacon, out of the wetlands cattails and reedgrass waving and waving.

Going to the Graves

For a hundred miles driving homeward I inhale peony, fern, columbine, daisy.

In the passenger's seat the small frame I call mother seems even smaller.

She moves somewhat stooped among the stones, old friends — parents, brother, husband —

stares back at my father's full name, the sting now dulled, hers unfinished beside his.

How odd, I imagine, to see your name carved in stone.

She carries the pail to far corners, family history spreading like flowers —

cousins dead from the big war, Danish in-laws with that clumsy Swede spelling —

at this rural cemetery
with its gnarled red cedars,
its townfolk, its stories told,

retold, a comforting, I guess, where things never seem to change, your name just one among so many.

Memorial Day

This is the way I remember: an odd day off from work, watering petunias and salvia planted in their mulch beds, the huge heads of the peonies drooping

from a recent soaking.

At the lake my son is loafing and drinking with his buddies, under the sun

laughing over the waves against the dock, a refuge in this landlocked state.

He probably isn't thinking now about his grandfather's grave across town

resting under the shade of a hackberry, probably can't remember a dozen years back, the bad heart,

nor picture his other grandfather healthy, which is what I try to do, unbending my father's legs from his nursing bed, his eyes brightening at the break of a new day sweeping over leisure times

like a splash of water, rising out of the deepness toward one side or the other, undiminished and abloom.

On the Screen Porch

High in the oriole-nest elm cicadas buzz the dusk of summer. Awake on a musty mattress, I try the rhythm, try to settle down.

As usual, I've been sent to bed before I'm sleepy, before dark, before the rest of the farm family lets loose another day's labor.

I imagine a pendulous nest, a flutter of leaf undersides, a pale half-moon expanding the flattened landscape.

Low hoots drift my way from the grove; from the hog shed, hungry squeals. My task this long day has been to gather spent cicada shells into Band-Aid tin,

my private, papery brood. In dim light, neatly I suspend them on sweet cotton, each facing the gathering dark, each listening to my lullaby.

Gophers

Always the older boys started it — at recess instead of everybody-must-play softball, bats were put to a heavier use,

the rest of us not required, yet willing recruits to their grisly game, buckets carried from the pumphouse

to holes in that weedy playground, one after another emptying them until the bats started swinging

down, toward exit holes into water, into mud, into small-boned fur, until our rural landscape lay quiet

after the bell had rung, some of us wondering why they were so loathsome, covering our ears at the score:

8th graders 14, gophers 0, like the lopsided victory at corn-shelling time,

bodies of mouse and rat measured by the bushel basket, no match for pitchfork or scoop,

and the farm cats, as the crib showed us its ribs, running from death to death, eyes wild and confused.

Lilac Tripping

Lilacs look more like trees than bushes. My brother stretches wire between two to trip rabbits. Eva Loppnow, heavy on the piano wires, pounds out Sunday school tunes. The rows planted behind our house grow taller and taller. Along the path I step over it without looking. Her singing drowns the church basement with more than lilac perfume.

The sky between the trunks far above our heads is purple. Don't they sleep at night I want to know. Mrs. Loppnow, praying, nods heavy at her bench. Stepping on the wire makes the leaves clap. My brother aims and shoots, the arrow off the wire splattering violet. When she trips middle C, we have to clamp our mouths tight. Rabbits meanwhile step under it sure-footed in a purple dusk.

The Separator

It's a young girl who watches: down in the damp part-concrete, part-earth cellar of an old farmhouse. a woman with raw hands lifts high pails of warm liquid, carried steaming from the Brown Swiss milk barn by a man with tanned arms and white forehead. Wide-eyed, she sees the liquid disappear into a contraption one size larger than their round German neighbor, metal tubs and octopus spouts every which way; electric, it hums and whirs the pails of milk into their proper waiting cans: skim for the hogs, whole raw to be used at suppertime, and cream thick and yellow — into a small jar for delicacies, the rest into a tall can to sell at the co-op on Saturday. And afterward she sees it disassembled. the woman with raw hands scrubbing myriad metal parts in scalding water at the utility sink. The scene is repeated daily to the young girl's apparent indifference.

In a few short years things change: livestock are sold, the barnyards standing empty. The corncrib will be unsealed for the last time, and the shellers, after a hard day's work, will go home. An investor takes over; the land is farmed by strangers. She will be older then, and like her brothers, scattered into city occupations, far away from the raw rub of the land. And she will one day be staring into a plastic tub of sterile white cream

bought at the Hinky Dinky, trying her hand at mother's recipe, when it all floods back to her: the raw fresh milk, the farm she can't go home to, the man and woman now relieved and old. And the cream: slow and yellow, flowing like thick butterscotch, separating like never again.

Conspiracy

The plot seems almost new: autumn sun in a slant through golden honeylocusts,

redder reds on the sumacs, annuals momentarily suspended between seasons,

on her one free morning, with furniture and floors swept, clothes washed and put away,

the cat springing to her lap, its perfect warm face purring to hers, innocent, simple,

like the child in the photo so many years ago, framed as a total imp,

two steps away from a hug, that child now about to leave, his cat-like body only yesterday

draped over the bed while she folded, his easy chatter filled with bravado,

with soft doubt, this transition called fall, the scattering of bright leaves,

a lazy north breeze, the sweet damp earth turning to compost, a mother like most others trying not to feel the change of season in her bones,

stroking the cat, silent, the sun streaming in now

brilliantly, so briefly, all of it flooding before her, gathering up in a yellow blur.

My Neighbor's Daughter Learning To Drive

Through purpled lilacs
I see her Sky Hawk
backing down the drive,
above me a jay throwing its voice,
a muffled call, and all around
I notice that rabbits
own this yard.

Years ago I remember learning to drive on country roads, my older brother advising me that the trick to a manual transmission is to always, always, keep up your speed, and how the dust rolled.

Every spring, it seems, I intend to improve this place: shall I transplant the trumpet-creeper, trim the bittersweet, or is it already, as usual, too late? Her car disappears down the street.

It was three maybe four years ago I noticed a change next door: sweet-girl sounds no longer floating over the fence, adolescence setting in, that same year my son leaving home.

Overhead, the sky displays its spring-scrubbed blue. On the maple, the tight budfists are beginning to unfold, the very, very last of the oak leaves letting go.

Platte River State Park, Late January

In wind all night a thin maple: its nakedness under the halogen half-moon across the floor, dancing. The woman on her cot studying the shapes, steady breathing from adjoining rooms. The cold on vacation, wearing its dark glasses.

Outdoors on a hilltop, swaying. A tune from high school, its half-remembered words, once spiraling. Against her face the air like a lover's hand. Stars in a navy-glass skydome. Unaided eye: Cassiopeia, the two Dippers, Draco the Dragon.

But winter insists:
January exhales
over her neck, sinks
past furrowed trunks
to the frozen lake.
The girl inside
the woman wanting
one more dance, slow
close and tingly. The
Dragon tail wagging
them apart.

Spring Equinox

Tonight at 9:52 the sun they say on its tireless path toward its equinox will cross the equator and ascend north

and if you believe that can love and hope and equality be far behind that out of this dreary madness the earth can vernally rise

intensified by sun and warmth and knowledge that once again our restless bodies will shed their outer skins and rotate to face each other in the fleeting promise of morning light

When You Leave

When you leave it will be empty: dried leaves on gray-haired limbs, clumps of gooseberry minus the berries.

Tracks across frozen water will lead to a frigid channel, springs seeping away from the source, snow-covered hills reminding us of the rolling, frozen sea.

The sun, low and yellow, will not thaw any ice-covered bridges, all slipping and falling, no turtle miraculous emerging from the snowbank to save me.

When you leave it will be all deer track and rabbit scat, decayed leaf and prickly ash, evidence of frantic digging. Brush continuing a slow choke over the disconnected sandbar, little bluestem fighting back.

When you are gone it will be indelible as a leaf fossil in ice, brief, no answer in the night to the call of your name, morning minus the light, forever non-communion.

My Husband Snoring

At sleepless 2 a.m. tossing the next day's impossible schedule over and over again, I'm not interested in pat theories or explanations — why the mind chooses now to work OT, why the wind thumps at the window, or why some folk are simply blessed hitting their pillows with instant, weighted sleep.

Take the one beside me, snigging his breath every night to a higher, disruptive cadence, secure in his cocoon of down and feather and cotton — out like a light, dead to the world, all the trials and tribulations laid to rest. Take me, please, to that blissful state, let loose my brain in a pasture dazzling green, beside still waters make me lie beside him.

Full Moon, Total Eclipse

Tonight every thing will be round: moon, cloud, starfield of sky, the lunar eclipse at midnight painted, they say, orange-red, and I dreaming a perfect circle:

maybe two-score years ago, mother in the night padding room to room waking my older brothers and me to see from an upstairs hall window what must have been an eclipse,

what I'm remembering is moonlight on her bare arms and nightgown, my brothers' voices strangely hushed, father pointing, lifting me up,

gathering, it seems, that late hour on purpose for the last time for what surely was an eclipse — lighting the treetops, the outbuildings —

eeriness coating the countryside, later, then, most of us scattering, not returning the same, or ever.

How odd, at times, the earth angles. Back then the child not once dreaming absolutes, not yet projecting a future:

a woman—when she thinks of it, sad in her bones, missing her brothers, a slow wave of light over this life —

for the most part happy, tossing late into the night, the circle, so imperfectly whole.

My Father's Miniatures

They sit on a shelf in a city home: wooden grain wagon, cattle tank, windmill —

assembled out of years spent emptying the slatted crib, elevating into the silo

sweet green silage, greasing zerks, chopping out ice for thirsty livestock —

formed and fitted to exact proportion of workhorse, of implement, of farmer,

hand-worked in contrast, then, to the real — actual heft of his team, immobile wagon-

weight mired in a spring-mudded row, effort of bicep, of elbow, of fist:

husk-husk-heave, arms and legs and torso muscled and sore against the elements —

my father in his last days recalling the labor that carved our future,

himself a pared-down miniature, bone-thin artifact.

Wind

Early spring, southern gusts suck what little moisture the ground has hoarded over this dry winter, similar, father observes, to the Dirty Thirties, those drouth years when corn plants seared in the fields, so many gave it all up.

He survived, somehow, just as we'll survive this odd spring with no rain; the wind, he says, is always with us. I recall the farm — the way the breeze whined through the pine grove, rattling leaves in the maples, carrying the fine grit and effluvium of clover, alfalfa, Brown Swiss, sweet cud.

Father spends his days now in a recliner, the past floating out of and into his reality, repeating the stories I know backwards — his immigrant parents, how they longed for their wooded homeland, starting new in this flat country. There were slough grasses in those days, through the bottomlands, waving high over their heads,

and I picture myself lying in a hollow on a tallgrass bed, seedheads nodding as my lover's body sweats in unison with mine, the sun warming our skins, the whole universe tilting toward harmony, but when I look up, that, too, seems passing, like the wind.

If My Father Were Still Alive

If my father were still alive I would tell him of the cows, watch his face return with the story of my granddaughter,

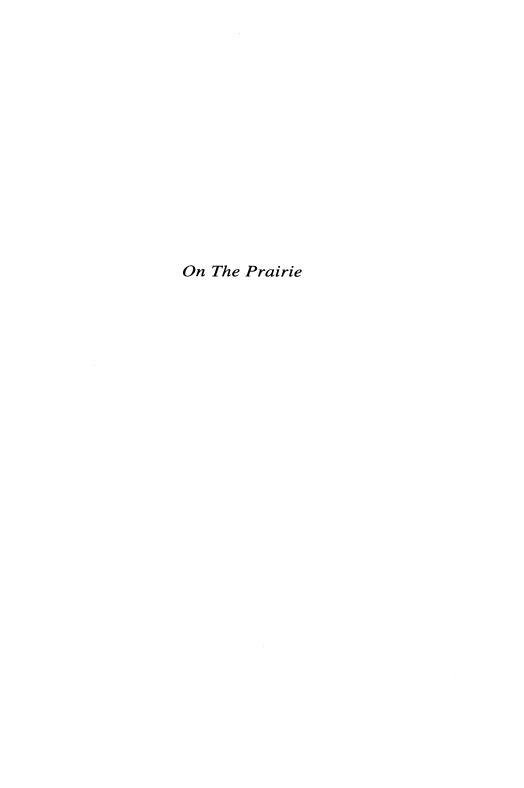
how sometimes in her dreams they loom massive over her with their bulbous eyes, their bluish leaky udders, their crushing leaden hooves.

How'd she come up with cows, he'd ask, meaning city child, and of course I'd be at a loss, mother having targeted pickles as the cause of my nightmares.

If my father were still alive I could tell him I no longer wake in the night recalling his grayness, his eyes and mouth wide open as if caught at the end by surprise,

but rather as the farmer in his forties, I not much older than my granddaughter, he full of muscle and sweat and grin, sleeves of his workshirt rolled up, spreading grain in feed bunks

to those rows of mammoth tongues, those bony rumps, those dumb curious creatures inclined to wander off into the dark.



Song of the Pasque Flower

Each flower species has its own song, an expression of its life

— Dakota Sioux tradition

as if a sign from the center during the third moon over this earth we rise low and layender

while four-legged and winged ones begin stirring over the plains buffalo dropping their calves moon equaling the sun

our voices in the wind to children of all flowering nations a signal to awaken to rise from their sleep

and we, first of the wild leafy ones, silk of our purple plumes like prairie smoke waving to catch the sun

Blue Moon

So when it falls as it does on a slow news day, the local paper makes a feature of it, explains simply that it is the second full moon of a month, that the saying I loved as a child means correctly "once every two or three years."

But I want to hang on to childhood magic, want to believe in old adages and that a blue moon on a New Year's Eve in this quickening dark of a river valley along the highway is rarer, surely, than any event in a month of Sundays.

I wonder, could any ordinary bird in the hand possibly be worth those two red-tailed hawks just now? Is the red sky tonight a delight to even land-locked sailors? Is it possible to dance freely by the light of the moon?

How would the newspaper report this? How could anyone not stopped along the shoulder out in the middle of a flat nowhere surrounded with only the expanse of frozen stubblefields in every direction

not watching the hugeout-of-proportion-perfectly-bright-round disk rising over the shelterbelt into an immense navy-blue sky not standing oblivious to the subzero air as a spectacle older than anybody's childhood unfolds in this short play of sky

find just the precise words?

Crane River

...language is not even a river...

— Mary Oliver

No word sufficient to redeem this channel, running like countless others through banks of opportunity, where each cubic flow-inch is deliberated, where once only grass dominated,

no language to account for late-winter clouds hanging benign and cold, under them your breath a vapor-pool, rising, the frigid earth bundled, hushed, and over the curved horizon

a hint of sun—not quite coral, no description adequate for their trill the voice of sandhill crane flowing through your middle ear, through anvil, hammer, stirrup—

spindle-legs roosting in sand-basin, your feet snug in insulation, binoculars trained on the mass, immeasurable, their trebles at lift-off, at first light when all things merge into one —

earth, sky, animal — a diminished river running through it.

Nine-Mile Prairie

—for Marge

Note the sun,
how it has tipped the grassends
to tangerine.
At first, it will seem that nothing

At first, it will seem that nothing alive moves. Try scaring some bullfrogs into the ripply pond.

Step

lightly aside from the snake, its dull green torso disappearing into the thatch. The wind, strong against your cheekbones, blows on north, bending the spent bluestem. Last week's rain has settled in the plum thicket, the gaudy velvet sumac stalks on standby. Pull at the switchgrass, its stems now stiff, until you notice the cuts in your palms, the blood on the old shirt borrowed from your husband.

Roll

over and over, a glacial pebble, down the west ridge.
Hike to the highest point, turning slowly in each of the four directions. Watch the hawk, looping low over the tallgrass.
Observe the emerald wheatfield, its tender uprising a promise.
Two bluebirds will fly off from their nestbox. Take it as a signal: sit down. Wait for the ground-cherries to swell.

Late May

Baptisia bracteata: wild indigo in bloom. We crouch over bushy clumps, students, learning its creamy pea-shaped flowers, drooping racemes, when mature, forming bladder-like pods. All parts hairy.

We left on the horizon the thin, blue cityline to study this unplowed patch: meadowlark, kingbird, thrasher. Rubberducky call of a wood thrush. Green bunchgrass ankle high above blackened soil. Native perennial growing from knobby caudex, rhizomes.

We touch the leaves, connect with antiquity. How many lifelines make up a millenia? Certain blossoms etched by something dark, unseen artist. Leaves alternate, palmate. Leaflets oblong-lanceolate to elliptic.

Surrounding us: bluestem, switchgrass, pussytoes, prairie rose. The sky hangs gray, lacking definition. Swallows dip and curve, pheasants squawk, four deer skit across the ravine. Plants break off at ground level, tumble by wind, aiding seed dispersal.

Brome and sumac invade an unburned acre, mullien leaves rise low and wooly from its taproot. Pawnee, Omaha, Ponca: dried pods used as rattles by plains children.
Above, the breeze, as it has forever, blows on by. Below, prairie roots hold fast, deep.

We are standing on sacred ground.

Prairie Trout

It's been said they once lived widespread throughout the Great Plains, roamed freely in the cold, clean tallgrass, their skin hues blending with the landscape's subtlety, weaving like a whisper of wind.

In the early days children could be seen chasing them, watching in the distance for a ripple, then off among the browns, golds and reds, hoping for a glimpse of elusive freckle, for a brush of delicate dorsal fin.

Today they're as rare as the blue moon. Perhaps it's a loss of habitat, clarity or light, the sheer solitude of unclosing eyes, of landed gills. Just imagine a school of rainbow swishing beside insect and mammal.

Beneath hawk and swallow and meadowlark, beneath sun and moon and sun, wild and unscaled. Just imagine.

Vines

"Doctors can bury their mistakes, but architects can only plant vines."

— Frank Lloyd Wright

And landowners in the south can only wring their hands, kudzu smothering the countryside, only too well adapted. A good idea, perhaps, at the time: settlers writing to the homeland for seeds of "that pretty yellow flower," the dandelion. A weed is, after all, merely a plant out of place.

But what possible advice to give the horticulturist who should know better? Today with double-fisted pruning shears I'm attempting: red raspberry suckers springing up thorny, Hall's honeysuckle on a roll, trumpetcreeper in odd corners, wild grapevine the birds must have planted everywhere.

Be careful, they say, of what you desire; you just might get it. And if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. So. If I ever finish, I'll praise the behaved: English and Boston ivies proper on shaded brick, Virginia creeper in its suction cups climbing the siding, periwinkle shining its true blue eyes. Can I help it if I want one of everything? Give me bittersweet—that aggressive dioecious beauty, euonymus with its purple wintercreeper sheen, Goldflame honeysuckle clustered in fragrance. Bright morning glory greeting each day, sweet pea, showy, true to its name. And clematis, twisting refined tendrils, temperate king of all blooming creation.

Building a Bat House

Simple rough-cedar box with vertical interior slats, slant roof, absence of floor.

No matter scant is known about bat housing requirements, my husband undaunted

saws, nails, worries it together from instructions, instructions advocating "try this."

Try facing it on a pole east or southeast so roosting bodies will warm by early sun.

Bats, skilled night-navigators, the instructions declare, eat untold households of insects.

Try having patience, they urge, it may take eons to attract bats to your house.

Avoid looks people might give, like you've just blurted "spider condo" or "snake garden."

Never mind, the instructions say, bats don't entangle themselves in hair, don't go for the jugular.

Try ignoring the gasp that says something has just now swooped past your throat, low, flapping wild.

Blue Herons

What does it mean — all day rain coming straight down, slow, a noticeable absence of wind, leaves plush beneath canopies, stilt-legs in the flooded fields?

All morning I have glimpsed them — along this highway bottomland the river tried hard to reclaim, broken dikes and debris and backwater — blue-gray sentinels nearly motionless, patient for a meal.

And what can we do —
in these wide-open spaces
where mud creeks are capable
of churning out of their banks,
flattening brome and fence and farmstead —

but to take inventory of threatened senses, to pick ourselves up above the dark water, to rise, to rise?

Dragonfly

What is it, this science, this matter of the living known only through observation, things not wished for in some other life, but simply how they *are*.

Consider the dragonfly,
glistening bluish or green,
predator of smaller insects,
patrolling her beat over the wetland,
devouring prey on the wing.

How some worm-like creature evolved into her great advantage: four stout wings, compound eyes nearly covering her head, metamorphosis extending her lifespan.

How when she whirs swiftly about this microhabitat all movements become relative — not good or evil, beautiful or ugly, but efficient, no inkling of adaptation

or preservation, the thirty-inch wingspan of her predecessor, *Meganeura*, like the mere shadow of danger passing overhead — tiny hell-click in the fold of a tiny brain.

Morning

August air so thick the nearby city fuzzes blue. It's the height of summer, of heat, surely something huge about to drop from the sky. Why is it every year we stand somewhere gaping, asking where did it go? Out here tall grass, on command, bows in waves. On this rolling land wind dictates the day, charging every breath. Earth holds firm, steady, this view green mile into mile. It's as if the swallows, purposeful in their wild circling, hold some unspoken secret. As if this temporary landing could make us whole.

Mid-September

I have come to this place alone before the noisy crowd descends to celebrate its dying breed silence.

Always, it seems, modern living surrounds us: lawnmowers, whining tires, white noise of television — even joggers — plugged in, tuned out to whatever kind of solitude nature offers.

Out here one monarch, then another, roves from goldenrod to bluestem to sumac, its wings a wonder in silent flight over untold spaces never plowed.

Only the swish of turning grasses, song of meadowlark or kingbird, the upward flight of pheasant interrupt. Almost deadly, this silence.

Warbler

I've heard them, their sweet cantatas drifting from a cathedral of oaks yet, straining, I'm unable to sight them in their high loft during migration,

until one fall day
against the door glass
an unlucky traveler,
a delicate marvel,
a revelation of bib and stripe
and wingbar,

and I carry it limp in my palm to a honeylocust trunk, returning it to a damp mulch of earth, saying thank you, saying forgive me, saying what other exquisites dwell in this shelter of canopy —

one song now lost, yet infinitely, through a cloister of leaves, echoing.

Autumn

See it now in the reds of the sumac, the golds of indiangrass, prairie plants curious with dew, leaves on the linden yellowing, acorns dropping like manna. Or through the eyes of a toddler her measured steps intense, not a moment to waste taking a bent-close look at bunchgrass, at broken twig, this sidewalk of the season some crazy, endless highway.

Turkey Vultures

Lofted silence. Terrible red baldness. How we're at once repulsed and fascinated, your return to this dense suburban woodlot. Circling like so many slow wings caught in a down draft, feathertips spread, unflapping landing gear of the ancient. A dozen or so on a long migration, this stop-over and surrounding fields, a day of fattening on the dead and dying.

We shudder at your bad taste, your naked unmistakable head as if held too close to something evil, oh dark prince of the scavengers. This neighborhood sleeps uneasy, after sunset the roosting in high branches. Deep down each of us welcoming this ritual, this annual wildness in our midst, each in our bones dreading that spiral toward the inevitable.

Harvest Moon

Almost in the time it takes to say twice Gray-headed prairie coneflower, the moon due east Rises round at sunset like a slice of cheddar, Hangs fat above the city tree line, Glows soft in the aftermath of a shortened day.

Out on these rolling acres we've known so much: Stiff goldenrod, purple dotted gayfeather, Giddy bright crimson of the sumac. Pollen Hanging yellow and delicate from the heads of Indiangrass, bluestem tinged purple.

And beside me you're breathing the same musk That drifts up from the darkened ravine, hearing The same guarded movements of deer, the same Flap of quail from the ridge—not yet fall but Ripened summer—our hands together and warm,

Standing braced on this virgin land, you and I Making dreams under a plump moon, making sure What they say can happen this impending night Happens.

Winter

Before sunrise, barely visible — hairline crescent of a very old moon. Under it, activity of the nocturnal slowing down.

On the prairie, wind through muslin tallgrass an ancient soundwave, beneath our boots — unseen highways.

We can see them — small mammals — with UV powder, says the biologist, trapping, then tracking.

Mostly

we attempt understanding — succession, endothermic, ecosystem — our ill-equipped bodies losing heat rapidly to a stiff wind.

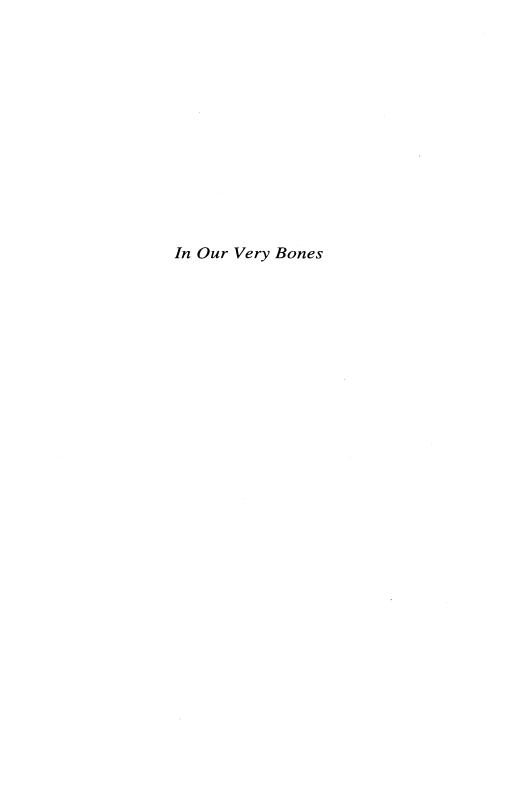
Voles snake tunnels to rooty, tuberish meals; our mentor digs eagerly, curious in this constant world.

Surrounded by prime grassland, occasional glacial erratics, some of us lost ones begin the song:

go ahead, sleep — little ground squirrel, harvest mouse, puny pocket gopher — jump into that upside-down robin's nest, that hideaway den.

Huddle in your thick, shivering coats, burn that brown fat, slip into torpor.

While over on the west ridge — in sync but running away — three whitetail.



At the Hospital

At the hospital I breathe hospital — bandage and antiseptic and bedsheet, my grandmother in a dotted bedgown lying against the cranked-up head.

Grandmother with the bad hip and now the very bad heart saying my name. Not Bonnie — cousin whose name she sometimes called me

by mistake, favored granddaughter of her first daughter — Bonnie with the most charmed of charming smiles. Grandmother gray against the pillow.

O, why must I recall such things now?
Like the new girl with perfect skin in 8th grade,
Linda, in spite of her father the hired hand
and her mother's maiden name — Velma

Elsie Googat — stealing away my best friend. Velma in her bouffant hair curlers and pink housecoat yelling at Linda's brother as he tracks cowshit across the linoleum.

And my own mother, years ago, yelling in frustration the first syllables of my brothers' names until she gets it right: Wal - El - Ran-DALL! Randall. Who before I was born

contracted rheumatic fever, who when not around my father would sometimes speak of. *Inflammation*, he'd say, *it sometimes returns*. I with the near-sighted eyes and the crooked

tooth, the first name nobody's ever heard of. My grandmother smiling a weak smile. Grandmother, who even then I thought would live forever, shrunken under a stark

white sheet. The sun slipping low beyond the windowsill. *Hello*, she says. *Hello*, *Twyla*.

Brother Story

He was probably nine, I five and spoiled when my brother started punching me silly probably for good reason. I was the baby, the peabrain, the whiner and lying tattler, instigating trouble behind mother's back.

My toothpick arms felt his full knuckles, these chickenlegs the sharp toe of his boot under the supper table. Once he kicked so hard mashed potatoes splattered out of my twitface mouth all over the oilcloth.

It wasn't until he started dating I learned bruises weren't part of my permanent anatomy. Even then he had to drag me, dumbbell, along to town so I could attend basketball games, go rollerskating or to movies with friends.

He'd dump me off and be gone for hours — I'd wait in the cafe until it closed, then outside. But if I, asseyes, so much as complained, we'd both have to stay home and so we called a truce, sort of: if I wouldn't smoke, he wouldn't fart

and it was later on I discovered this is what is known as brotherly love.

In Early Fall

In early fall cattails stand firm and dry in the ditches, goldenrod and giant ragweed waving their inflorescences, and everywhere in-between—intricate spiderwebs.

At times when I walk this trail entire decades disappear, smell of rotting cottonwood leaves and damp milo rising, taking me faster down the dirt farm lane

toward the windbreak, through the pines where father in his bee veil has just opened a hive box, old rags at work in the smoker, the calmed bees allowing themselves to be

brushed aside as one by one he removes the laden combs, returning the empties, all day in the damp cellar the hot knife opening wax, the glutinous extracting,

my father grinning and all of us for a short lifetime sampling until we are sick — that sweet, sweet pollen of summer.

Each Time I Look Up

the guy at a back table gives me long looks.

Perhaps I remind him of his high school English teacher — slim blonde with the easy smile, her Ripe Raisin lips voicing active, not passive, hint of lace at her kick pleat — his tongue suddenly stuttering when she calls his name,

or his favorite aunt, on the farm near his hometown — Tressa who always wanted to go to college but married instead right out of high school, alive in that entire small community after supper sitting at the table watching her rub a glass with the dishtowel over and over, she saying work hard study study,

or a girlfriend, the one with the bad eyesight, in the backseat groping for her glasses, her unframed face a pale subject he still wonders about, opening his book to the chapter on paramecia, alone at a table toward the back of the coffeehouse, burying himself in the reality of appearance, for a second reminded of her

each time I look up.

Behind My Back

is redundant, I know, since whatever goes on behind you must happen facing your backside

back's permission or not, it relies instead on the senses, the tactile, pure instinct

which is why, facing forward, not speaking, implicitly over the pale of my back I allow your dark and lovely

hands.

Cedar Waxwings

There I was, gaping, at year's end, with snow on the ground, with disinterest scurrying all around me. when I recognized them: royalty in miniature visiting the crabapples, zipping in their black masks from the nearby sycamore, from the low-cloud sky an abundant flock of crested birds. charging like tiny brown divers after fermenting fruits, stirring up the fog, splattering the walk. Have you ever wondered how it must be to rise, to feel truly weightless? They flit giddy like moths into the crabapples, fly back shy toward branches like fortune-hunters filled with good luck, and the morning holds them in its grayness, those gatherers, those berry-pickers, those sleekly elegant nomadic dashers.

Planting the Garden

— after Marge Piercy

Because a poet once said The moon is always female, I plant my garden in a sudden burst: straight rows, mounds of hope, ignoring the old farmer's advice,

welcome diversion to the heavy coat
of winter. Or to the problems of writers
who sift through notes, staring at the
odd phrase that now has lost its sting,
wondering what on earth we had in mind.

Spring at last, something to focus on, something to pay off. And because the moon is always female, I scratch at this earth; who needs petty feedback ("we liked your poem 'Empty' but felt it lacking...")

when terrestrial things are sufficient,
their own self-contained miracle.
And now, especially, after the news,
as I burrow more determinedly the rows
to become peas and lettuce and spinach,

that the seed of my only offspring
will likewise this fall come to bear,
that by the full harvest moon, they tell me,
I'll be a grandmother. How sweet! the
rhythm of seed and soil and heartbeat

carrying all of us into this ripening season, the wordless moon, always female, rising plump.

At the Prairie, the Day Before

— for Kathleen Claire

The day before you arrived started much like today, clouded and misty, a day of celebration and families near the city on Nine-Mile Prairie where many gathered in an afternoon of festivities — poetry, fiddling and guitar, nature hikes, and the swift-feathered release of raptors;

the day before you arrived stirrings already begun — autumnal equinox, changing of seasons, and you pressing heavy on your mother's spine; we celebrated women, women on the prairies, and prairies, acres of tall grass now but a remnant of what had once seemed endless, yet the sky still defining the horizon on a day much like today — flat, filled with moisture; out on a section of mowed prairie the effluvium of sweet, damp hay rose up to greet us, voices of celebration and of mothers and of earth — laughter of children playing games, the clop-clop buggy rides, wings lifting free at last;

on the day before you arrived there was yet so much to learn, too much to touch all at once — the parting of big bluestem, rough sunflower, dotted gayfeather, showy-wand goldenrod, the silk of indiangrass — we toured the prairie to connect with what is almost lost, celebrating women, celebrating mothers, trying in our very bones to connect with mother earth; you were speaking to us even then

the day before you arrived,
a day that started out in fog,
you stirring your father to nervousness,
in your own manner telling us all to listen
though it was yet somewhat early —
the song and dance and celebration
on the prairie was, though we didn't yet know it,
only the beginning —
and surely the women on the prairie
knew deep in their bones that one day,
generations later, you might be here,

that on the day before you arrived we might be celebrating women out on Nine-Mile Prairie, and that the love they planted in their homes would be the planting of the one seed that would one day be celebrated by your arrival, passing down, as women and men do, generation to generation, the seed,

arriving as you did today resembling the tight, folded bud of the blue downy gentian the bright bloom of your skin against the pastel wrap of our receiving arms, with your dark hair and eyes and wiggling tongue and your wrinkled, perfect fingers and toes that new flower now unfolding into blossom rare prairie orchid known as nodding ladies' tresses, described by the botanist as a delicate spiral of white flagsand it is you, granddaughter, that fragrant orchid of the prairie now unfolding to wave among the forbes and the grasses as we gather under the sun on this last day of summer in one deep and universal breath.

Beginning Dance

The curved, fingernail slice of moon floats upright against a darkened sky this last night in September. Only minutes ago, it was the corals and the reds, the sun on a downflame toward earth, a youthful moon to the west southwest to follow.

Snug in a house of women, a young man watches his newborn purse her lips, plot the far-flung axis of the universe. At the edge of town, fall fields of half-green cornplants spread effluvia into the half-warm airwaves, a raucous gathering of blackbirds lining distant trees.

Born on the cusp, this child will teach her parents a language they never knew existed, filled with the bright lexicon of stars, the purple, determined pull of the moon. Soon, we'll marvel at each season's sunsets, at growth so rapid we're left without breath. We will all, very soon, begin to dance.

Full Moon, Partial Eclipse

Down the street a three-month-old stirs all-night fussy, keeping her parents on uncertain edge. We are loping toward the holidays, toward the shortest day, the moon meanwhile only partially eclipsed, hidden behind layers of cloud-heavy sky, the latest storm missing us. Out on the prairie, snow-covered tallgrass protects its young, rocks them peaceful in the all-night breeze, an all-night melt seeping into earth-pores. In early morning, a naked full moon illuminates the room. its light awash over our surprised skin. O see now that child, her perfect round face asleep, serene, yet ever absorbing, breathing harmony.

Annular Eclipse

Days, weeks, even hundreds of years ahead scientists predict such events, and can, they say, with precision, track them eons back in history.

Today

the moon slips between earth and sun, for a few hours in our corner of the cosmos sunlight dimming only partially, further south a thin circle behind the moon's dark silhouette, celestial alignments the skies have awed and mystified for centuries: wars halting, pagans converting, skeptics glimpsing into a greater order.

But today

in this neighborhood the sky deepens to turquoiseblue while tree canopies form on lawns and sidewalks perfect pinholes. My granddaughter, meanwhile, on pudgy legs in tennies running 'round and 'round the trunks, countless partial solar eclipses dappling hair and forearms and tongue, her face a perfect smiling ring of sun.

Walking, Early Spring

No place on earth has better weather.

— The Weather Channel

come on — all you prognosticators all you steam-pressed, teeth-whitened forecasters come out of your climate-controlled studios and those permanent sun-shiny backdrops come hither to where the weather blows

vow to walk along these brisk miles commit no less than three mornings a week strive to elevate your heart rate breathe out that mid-life sludge at least reconsider your worst habit

concentrate now on your feet those bunionized, mistreated dogs putting one in front of the other leaning into "42 and calm" feel the cold front before you unfurl

switching from south to northwest clouding over the early sun pressing your windbreaker, your hood your ill-equipped internal mechanisms walk with your old friend, the wind

and you can do it, to one more light pole yes, just to the next pole and then to the next yes, you'd prefer a walk in Country Club Park but you don't have trees and quiet here what you have instead is traffic

four lanes of it, and open edge-fields cars, trucks, vans all speeding somewhere

straight trucks, 4-wheel drives, toy pickups freight haulers, sedans, sport-utility vehicles scuzzmobiles in all makes and models

deliverers, city servants, retirees middle managers, contractors, single moms attendants, commuters, late-shift workers minimum-wage earners at the gas & grub guys with beards and black caps

they're all tooting for you, yes waving you into this blasted wind, until the turn-around and then on the way back it's behind you your old friend insistent over your legs over your bottomside, your shoulder blades

and into your neighborhood, into yards and shrubs and robins, your old friend on mute into a day that starts taking on a life of its own and you can't do a damn thing about the weather into the shelter of each other — come on

Dog Days

Under porch shade, a plastic shallow pool vibrates with wiggle and splash, the child within all paddle and thrash, her slim body a pale thirty-pound fish.

She's got her mama's hazel eyes, her daddy's brown-shiny hair, she's got everyone she knows focused on her corner of the hemisphere.

Tonight on a damp pillow she will dream of Sirius — brightest star in the Milky Way, rising on its canine legs with the moon, dragging up with it heat and humidity.

Her drowsy mama, meanwhile, sprawls on a nearby chair pillow, the humid breeze stroking her arms, her propped-up legs, the newest child within this Pisces

all poke and kick, fattening minnow-star, floating in a warm, amniotic sea.

Poem for Madelyne

August: month of wind-blown Leo, time of hurricanes and drought, the time of endless, humid air pawing its way up from the Gulf. We taste its lush tomatoes, its peppers, the bountiful, finite rows of sweet corn;

already the countless, blinking fireflies have disappeared — soundless as when in the back yard they first arrived. These nights we fall asleep to cicada-drone, the constant, hopeful call of crickets, toads searching deftly the night for insects.

Madelyne Elaine: your name singing through winter, through rain, singing now from the tops of the cottonwoods, trembling there since the first waxy-green unfolding, your name a fresh breath between the flash and the long-awaited thunder;

your tiny body a red, red petunia with fuzzy leaves, its fragrance drifting over us through the muggy airwaves, your dark, unfocused eyes looking this way and that, following the sound of your name, searching, as all in this impossible world are, for love.

First the Yellow

First the yellow air, when it cools sinking further down the atlas, night breathing open-mouthed, its throat a long, dark cave.

Morning with its fog, its untamed geese in a tight group, moving about.

Trees all pod and nut, all soundless needle and shedding leaf and the garden with its sad pupils still in rows, preparing its last withering lesson.

Now the incessant stirring, all day the wing-whir into earth, those tireless yellow-jackets building a papery castle for the queen, tumbling wild into fallen pears, into rotting apples, flying freely into the fortune of someone else's trash.

And I, too, tasting sulfur, touching seedheads, walking the old orchard in late summer, my body lumbering like a full-grown grasshopper, mouth parts turning dry, slender legs itching like a cricket's.

Listen: haven't I already lived the extravagant, striped life of royalty?

Give me antennae, wing membranes dipped blue or gold; I want to migrate with the monarchs, dance this closing life-stage with dragonflies.

Winter Solstice

"...Orion always comes up sideways,
Throwing a leg up over our fence..."

— Robert Frost "The Star-Splitter"

Tomorrow night Orion's fame will rise over our fence of treetops to remind us: among the dying, somewhere out there in clouds of gas and dust, stars yet form.

We'll live through the longest night tonight surely as we'll survive this shortest day winter's official beginning, almost Christmas as the early ones in their own worlds survived,

invoking as we do with probe and candle, the sun, bringing its spirit in the form of evergreen into our homes, celebrating this season of the dark and the cold.

Let us join then with those ancient voices — elk, antelope, coyote, the echoing of caves — throwing our hopes up straightaway by wing or prayer, hunting for the light.

Not Even the Wind

not even the wind even on a day like today with gusts straight from the south can undo it

a purple fitted-bottom sheet fresh from the washer after the final rinse the spin-dry cycle

lifted onto the clothesline all day snapping and waving in the full sun not even the wind

causing it to dissipate the scent of vanilla or apricot or patchouli rising up as you smooth it back down

oil off the back or the buttocks massage oil accumulating even when you're careful in the nape of the neck

hands circling every curve rubbing every ripple the body glistening pale by lamplight

muscles flexing in response to the kneading to the loosening involuntarily

all around us this small life on a windy planet spinning and the wind not even the wind can let everything go

Full Moon Rising, February

—for Tom

On the desert at night, sky forms a canopy above the saguaro forest. Behind the Sierrita Mountains, city lights a distant glow, sand becoming cool.

Winter, above our heads steam rising off the hot tub. Breeze cooling our faces, your body against yellow deck lights resembling fire.

The full moon rises at sunset into Leo, and for a time we'll not distinguish Regulus — brightest star in the sickle — nor Denebola — tail of the lion. Tonight we simply stare.

In a strange city on a strange bed finding love. Warmth of the water lingering. Over me your hands, moon's light through a strange window, circling.

Shadows moving from the corners of our eyes, rustling sounds. From the hillsides coyotes howling questions, echoing answers: prickly pear, organ pipe, ocotillo, hedge hog.

Tonight a lineup of sun, earth and moon, closer moon causing higher tides, pool lapping against its sides. Tonight I dream deeply the dream of home.

Backyard

It's that place after I've gone everywhere, seen everything, I can't wait to return to,

trumpetcreeper and sumac and bluestem, prairie small enough to be taken in —

and I sit at dusk with a fatcat on my lap watching blue in the form of jay become red in the form of sunset,

my back yard unable to contain itself, already a half moon nesting atop the ash, and I'm like that myself, I guess,

at home but not contained, already my wild heart beating as if those wings sufficient to have brought me back,

in spite of all that's so secure to lift me somehow far, far away.



Twyla Hansen's first collection of poetry is *How to Live in the Heartland.* Since 1982 she has been employed as a horticulturist and arboretum curator at Nebraska Wesleyan University. She was raised in northeast Nebraska on land her grandparents farmed as immigrants from Denmark in the late 1800's. She and her husbank have a married son and two granddaughters.

In Our Very both is a back of sale reflection and self-awareness to the best sense. These parems are made of life's realities: carefully drawn; moving partrayed; beautifully woven with dignity, humor, vibrance and joy in the act of living; yet wonderfully free of self-abscrption.

-David Lee

A woman collects a "private, papery brood" of cicada shells, she knows the Latin names for the wild plants that others call weeds, she recognizes "the song of meadowlark or kingbird." Here it is,

Twyla Hansen seems to announce to the rest of us, the remarkable, unremarkable, ordinary world.

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TEMPO

-Andrea Hollander Budy

