

1997

In Our Very Bones

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Poems by Twyla Hansen

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A Slow Tempo Press
Lincoln, Nebraska
1997

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"My Husband Snoring," "Nine-Mile Prairie," "Platte River State Park, Late January," "The Separator," "Song of the Pasque Flower"

West Branch: "If My Father Were Still Alive"

Whetstone: "Memorial Day"

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Yarrow: "Autumn," "My Husband Snoring"

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— *to mom*

Ruth

& her next-door neighbors

Steve

Joei

Kathleen

Madelyne

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Distances

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 bud-
fists 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 vernal 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.

On The Prairie

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 lavender

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 huge-
out-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 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. Rubber-ducky 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 wide-
spread 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 meadow-
lark, 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 indiagrass,
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,
Glowes 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.

In Our Very Bones

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 flags—
and 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 turquoise-
blue 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
suzzmobiles 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,

trumpet creeper 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 husband have a married son and two granddaughters.

In Our Very Bones is a book of self-reflection and self-awareness in the best sense. These poems are made of life's realities: carefully drawn; movingly portrayed; beautifully woven with dignity, humor, vibrance and joy in the act of living; yet wonderfully free of self-absorption.

—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*.

—Andrea Hollander Budy

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