Out Our Way

Sometimes the moon is whole,
and sometimes there’s none at all.
When Matthew saw the clouds,
each one became the moon.

When I raise my voice a bit,
you raise your voice a lot.
Then Matthew cries. We smoke.
Each eye becomes a cloud

and screams at every moon
and beats against the flames.
The dark is whole sometimes,
and sometimes a cloud is all.

Table of Contents

3  A Small Winter’s Song
4  Her Dark Eyes
5  The Cold Room
6  The Orphan
7  Little People
8  Eugene
9  Boy Who Grew Up With Dogs
10  Little League
11  The Tar Court Game
12  Night Running
14  The Cat
15  The Cat and the Carpenter
16  High Prairie Church
17  Brothers
18  A Woodsman to a Nun
19  The Exile
20  Corpus Christi Day
21  In the Plaza San Martín
22  On the Way to Madras
23  The Scholar’s Heaven
24  Cynthy at Vedauwoo
25  Good Lord John
26  Thanksgiving
27  For My Russian Grandmother
28  Bereft
29  A.W.O.L.
30  Honeymoon
31  Garden of Delights
32  Out Our Way
33  Short Days at High Altitude
34  Winter Dreams
for Cheryl, Matt, and Kacy,
whose “quiet lives” enliven mine,

and for Bunny and Leo
of blessed memory

Garden of Delights

She flowers,
direct like chive.

Like wild sage.
quick to the touch.

Like mint,
a drink of love.

Like savory,
wintering
beneath the hutch.

Like dill,
a web of laces,
flavoring dull
colorless places.
A Small Winter’s Song

The moon smoked the shadows through the trees.  
I could hear the freeze happening,  
feel the ice forming in the fissures  
of the road. And silent, thin  
furrow-paths, stretched along the field,  
stilled their light waters.

Through the wires and limbs, humming low,  
electrons were flowing  
thicker than blood in a worn heart.

Zig-zagging, alone and wolf-eyed,  
breathing the burning snow,  
I sang under the keen stars my tenor part.

Honeymoon

We slept very little in that high place.  
Out of breath, having driven all day,  
we felt our way through the brush to the path  
to the tune of crickets, their body song.

The cabin groaning in every board,  
the moonlight sneaking around our shade,  
we lay down, uncovered, and without a word,  
began the private life we had made  
public with many words. In the light rain,  
grasshoppers crawling in the morning grass,  
I baited her hook, then saw to mine.  
We fished the dark pond for strawberry bass.
Her Dark Eyes

Kacy bubbles like a shaken Coke—
flashes like a stirred fire.
She teases in code from an old joke,
and dances on a taut wire.

Humming a tune only cats can hear,
she curls on the couch, the sun
warming both feet, her purr
idling, her lives stirring within.

A.W.O.L.

for Dad

You said, “I need a shot and a beer.
Let’s buck this froggy camp,
lit by fireflies only.” Nightcrawlers
humped their bellies higher.
Some careful steps got us through that swamp,

the years. That was 1944. Remember—
you at Marseilles, me unborn?
I’ll finish the boilermaker
that finished you. I’ll shoulder
you drooling back at dawn.

We’ll get you over the barbed wire yet.
Those barbs in my back draw real blood,
but forget it. I owe a real debt,
drinking this night, smelling this mud.
Now you know why I never forget

your stories, why, when you flare
in the dark, I flash my beam.
You said, “I’ve lost the North Star,
where the hell’s home?” Our name
is our star, the one we share.
Bereft

First the light left.
She found a mate.

She lost an eye
but mapped the curb.

She lost a car
but read the News.

When numbers blurred,
she scratched her name.

When voices slurried,
she heard one song.

The earth heaved,
but she dined out.

Reduced to water,
she fed me milk.

The Cold Room

Apples in torn bags, potatoes and onions
in damp balsa baskets. A seedling,
tubers, and bulbs—everywhere a kind of quiet life,
waiting.

A half-empty bottle, a holiday, a sorrow.
Do I hear the father’s drone?
Are the women cleaning fish? On the towel,
on the nightstand, is a deep circle of wine.

This room is a deep pond:
a carp drifts across the rug for rice,
attracted by the light from a small hand.
Even in the dark you can see your breath.

I think I see a girl or the impression of a girl,
asleep in the bed, or half-asleep, her book half-closed.
Is she Emma, the doctor’s wife, growing bored?
Is she Jane, nursing her blind lord?

Now the candle is dying,
the little words swim into the rushes
of possibility, into the core, becoming wishes.
The Orphan

Today I brought bottles from the neighbor’s porch
to the corner store. The man paid me a toy,
a rubber skeleton with an eye like a torch.
I wanted a candy that screams like a jay—

you hear them calling from the trees;
you hear them over the rusty swing.
We gather after supper to poke at bees,
and after I’m stung, Father pulls out the sting.

The white stuff he smears is shiny and cool.
Now, returning to mowing, he catches a stone,
and stalls and cusses. He tells me it’s cruel
to trap fireflies, but I am all alone.

I am surrounded by Paxton Woods,
rummaging through leaves that make you itch.
I would stay forever if I could,
but when called home I don’t say much.

Father told me to be quiet and good.
Once he went to Boston, into the sky.
I tried to follow, climbing Rosen’s shed,
but got too scared, just one rung shy.

For My Russian Grandmother

My deep spring, my well, my source,
water without bitter,
air without dust or cloud.
I wander nameless streets toward
your dark room, your doorway,
your window and trailing ivy.
In my sleep I wander still—
your name, your mirror.

In your sleep you visit me,
call my Jewish name,
offer macaroons and tea,
touch absently
each of my bruised knuckles,
the buttons on my sleeve.
Thanksgiving

In that pale land, Grandmother boiled carp for the Days of Awe. My grandfather lived in another world—he studied law,

and, reciting to himself, bowed to peasants passing in a crowd, and broke a simple crust for sparrows scraping at the dust.

He listened to his boots, liked to hear them meet the clicking cobblestone street; forgave his debtors, forgot his debts,

and hearing the Christians’ evening bell, he prayed for Russia and Israel.

Little People

I. Barely dawn, barely dressed, the new day crawling down the street over wrinkled leaves, a fallen nest, the broken shell. On sparrow feet, Didi dances, all sunny, spit-curled, into—oh, not mine—her only world.

II. Even when teething, you would drop off mid-cry into deepest breathing.

Now, waiting on the winter sky for a star, my teeth grit. Still, the night wheels blankly by

my window. Oh, my boy Matt, draped with a drowsing cat, I’d like to sleep like that.
Eugene

Steering cock-eyed down the hall,
poking that leg like a gawky calf.
If I could, I’d plow it all under,
wish my memory be cleft
like his tongue. But his name
stumbles after me in bad dreams:

His hand cocked with a silver spoon,
the whole fist royally leather-bound,
his face breathing so close to mine,
my chums craning, as if he’d been crowned
King of the May. I spoke no word,
though they waited, he waited, for any kind.

You knew him, too. Has the boy been cured
who was so dumb and blind?

Good Lord John

I see that finger stub, machine victim,
and behind the house a woods full of starving
wrens picking at bolts. I see him
with grease, with a chainsaw, carving
his good name into every breathing and nameless plant,
see him tractoring the grand and great children
around and into the catfish pond—his Grand Tours,
all Creation forming like iron to his bent.
I see his small woman, bones hollow as a wren,
loving under her spare curse his spinning tires.

This finger-stab of a man, I hear him in the garden
swearing, praising God’s indifferent sword,
then stomping mud through the hall without pardon,
and to his own sons denying every word.
Boy Who Grew Up With Dogs

Through fog,
and through whole trees and mown stalks,
growing up in fields in a single season,
come the idle-tongued dogs
and the boy.

They excuse sharp edges by growling
or flashing a mean face.
They return from the field
with the field in their fur.

Houses whisper by underground riders.
Old ones on the porch fear
he will not share with his own
but drop to paw at puddles
or sniff the chinks between stones.

Words! Words!
they call into the wind again and again.
He touches barnwood as he ambles by,
so rough and good.

Cynthy at Vedauwoo

If she could come up here,
being gentle, she would catch a trout
with a pork rind or piece of cheddar.
Drawing a circle in the dirt,
she would name within it every flower
I can’t name, which is every one.
She would find out
the green stuff churning dust from stone;
the bugs, birdsongs, mushrooms, like her own
backyard, wind-borne and time-tossed.
But this place, so high, wild, and rare,
where I stroll casually, so young and lost,
would turn her to stone. Her heart,
so well-worn, could not draw enough air.
Little League

The fathers always called us “men,”
and drilled by growling “hey” and “hup”
and, for any hurt, shrugged “rub it up.”
After pre-game prayer, I prayed again
for dark or fire or ice, amen.
Fingering the scripture on my chest,
I dreamt I was home already, undressed
for dreams of stroking a home run;
then angled my brim, blocking the sun,
and threw the ball past everyone.

I came to bat with three men on.
The coach said, “Mister, bring ‘em in
or don’t come back.” I see him still,
but no pitch looked fat, or ever will.

The Scholar’s Heaven

for John Mathison

From the last rung, his first view is
a cheering throng lining the golden street.
A banner waves: “Here we have no adjectives.
Things speak truly in their truer selves.”
“Think of it,” the advocate pleads,
“a man who never forgot.”

But, digressing, he shies away
to lie on his side facing the bottom row.
The titles gaze back, as it is written,
speaking when they are spoken to.

A company of browsers finds him there—
Greeks and Jane Austen. She holds a finger
to her lips, while Byron tiptoes on two good feet.
There’s Arnold hustling the leviathan roast
into another parlor, and there they toast
the all-time canon of scholarships.

For every book—an eternity!
Here, one need not crane his neck.
In a horizontal study, clouds fall away.
Even hamartia becomes plain as The Play. He puffs
contentedly. Who would ask him to douse his pipe?
On the Way to Madras

We gambled for the lower berth.
I folded a dhoti under my head.
Outside, the dozing and near dead
curled on the naked earth,
wrapped in a yard of cloth.
The luckiest lay in a wooden cart,
one near a door, one on stone,
most in the footworn path,
including a girl, dark as the air,
my daughter’s size,
who rose in the dawn haze
and walked, crying and far,
until I couldn’t hear.
I squinted to see her clear.

The Tar Court Game

Whatever the calendar or the clock
demanded then, in their rusty voices,
their pleas were like rain to rock.
Artless, they called us.
But the ball’s slap and swish
was our music, and our vision
a body winding between bodies;
when, from ditches and high houses,
a wave sent the soul of hot stones
weaving through our sneaks,
drawing us to orders against orders:
it was summer, it was Brady’s hoop.
My lean and quick friends
eagerly under the net, smoking
the rim, incensed with sweat;
and Brady, the ghost going two ways,
wagging his shadow as he drove past Willis,
caught short and pale. I know
his cries, and the cries of the losers,
their lost pride strutting, and all
our bodies crying, 0 Pain!
When the bell-ringing boy wheeled into our game,
delivered the News, we drank our scores kneeling.
From beyond the river, the factory hummed,
but for us the swing shift held its breath.
We returned to our tar dripping,
shooting for our simple lives.
Night Running

beyond streetlights above the river
   between the parking lot and grainery
under the sky darkening with storm and night
   echo the nighthawks visible invisible
the color of storm and night I hear
one scream and one reply

while you drink white wine on your houseboat
   or upend between buildings a paper bag
while you light lanterns on the stone shore
   drawing the catfish and the catfish rolling
the nighthawk screams darting like a locust
drawing locusts into its wind

and I am running echoing the stone path
   in the hollow of my knees
Nighthawk draw my wind my lungs
   burn like the horizon can’t you see
their long taut tails pointing toward night
their white bars

can’t you feel them above the hotel
   where widows roll in their sleep
above the park where lovers and thieves
   draw stolen breaths
between the east and westbound tracks
coupling and uncoupling beneath the storm

come out of your bars douse your flashlights
   this is no time for drawing baths
in my knees are the screams of a bird
   in them the river rising in the hollow

In the Plaza San Martín

I was the only blond, the only one
smiling, jingling a few sols de oro,
leaning against the dark statue

of the Liberator. The others
leaned to the speaker’s every word
like kindling

and sparked every time he spoke
of northern matters, my country
snuffing the very light

and air. Next morning,
in rain as hushed as the signs
draped across a palmera plant

in the park, I read
scrawls of muerte, of viva,
blurring beside the spiny bush.
Corpus Christi Day

There is the hill and the holiday sword.
There is the Church of the Dancing Saint.
The children eye the adobe bird.
The faithless sway in their midday faint.
The faithful brandy their heads and drone.
And all, all nod with trembling distrust
At the sun swinging west on its ancient thread.

Madre Maria! Such beautiful bones!
Ay, and we know his bones are dust.
I only know what I’ve heard you read.
And I only know what I kick is stone—
Are the heavens here? Has the thief been cured?
Look! Look! The sweets from the shattered bird!

washing the stone path stones between buildings rising to the eaves
floating we are little higher than the catfish little lower than the nighthawks are disappearing with the dawn drawn to morning like a swallow like dew smaller lighter singing blue
The Cat

A cat is built all up and down.
He walks a window sill
no wider than a draftsman’s lead,
and still he manages to keep
his paws pointed, his head
erect, his dignity, even in the leap,
and lands intact,
his ears carrying the crown.

The Exile

Eastward, you walk alone,
where once you walked in couples,
walking the hollow ground
where honor falls like apples.

Above the springing tree
greens a heavy cloud,
where wisdom bears its brood
and light a singing child.

How heavy on their feet
go all these rootless lives!
Oh, open the hollow doors,
where honor falls like leaves,

where we see and do not see,
and lie down and do not sleep.
A Woodsman to a Nun

Dark sister, you walk in the night
wearing whatever ancient light
the stars will give. Does singing numb
your fears? Or is it what you’ve become
while walking, your path seen in your mind,
smiling, sleeping, as though blind
to your guide, an invisibility
whispering to his lady?

Dark sister, I walk in the night
by creekbeds frozen still and tight.
I’ve used my senses in the dark
following trees, the ones I mark.
Tonight the bark grows on the cut.
Tonight the creek is mute.
Since belief for me is a thing of trees
or creeks, since now I’ve none of these,
I cannot move. You simply stride,
your shadow lover by your side.

The Cat and the Carpenter

The cat sits at the door,
and if he had to choose
between his bed on the floor
and the one under skies, he’d lose
his comfort, be gone to look
with the first unclicking of the lock.

The wind which strikes a spark
off the cat’s claws
flickers the fire in my shed.
It is only a pause,
a turn, a shake of the head,
and a return to separate laws.
High Prairie Church

Stands ghost-white under the moon,  
a square cell cooled by oak,  
sliced by tornadoes and dying,  
neighbored by corn and spaces,  

and fewer well-worn faces.  
Cloth flaps on a windy bone,  
and warm ones huddle to park  
secret by graveyard stone,  

and one in the hallowed dark  
kneels in quiet places,  
disturbing the common dawn,  
protesting being alone.

Brothers

One broke his nose but healed;  
the team’s big stick.  
The other, lefthanded in right field,  
studied rocks.  

Jack was Huck Finn, firm,  
and liked to raise a fuss.  
Stephen, dissecting a worm,  
was like Joyce’s Dedalus,  

wandering the shore or woods,  
humming to God knows what.  
Jack gathered his sandlot kids  
to rope young girls. But  

I wonder what they’re into now?  
Will Jack marry again?  
Did Stephen vow?  
Did either whisper to anyone Amen?