

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research:
Department of English

English, Department of

Fall 11-2010

Keep Going

Jeff Lacey

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Lacey, Jeff, "Keep Going" (2010). *Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research: Department of English*. 38.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss/38>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research: Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

KEEP GOING

by

Jeff Lacey

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert Brooke

Lincoln, Nebraska

November, 2010

KEEP GOING

Jeff Lacey, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2010

Advisor: Robert Brooke

Keep Going is a collection of poetry whose themes include life in modern America, man's relationship with the natural world, and living in the Midwest. The collection includes both free verse and metric poetry and both narrative and lyric poetry.

Acknowledgements

I owe my committee tremendous thanks for their guidance during the composition of this thesis: Ted Kooser, for his excellent artistic tutelage; Gerry Shapiro, for both his artistic tutelage and his advice about how to successfully navigate the university system; and last, and perhaps most, Robert Brooke, for his tremendous generosity in becoming the head of my committee when circumstances left me stranded on the rocks of academia without bark. Without his intelligence, patience, and guidance, I would have undoubtedly failed at this venture. Thank you so all so much.

I would also like to thank my wife Katrena, who let me abandon her to drive through the night from Omaha to Lincoln for years without complaint, who read countless (and often poor) lines of verse, and who never failed to give me her unflinching support. I love you dearly.

My family should also be thanked for their steady encouragement and support.

Finally, I would like to thank my friend Dan Boster, a dear colleague who also supported me both intellectually and artistically during this endeavor. Thanks Dan!

For Georgia, Thomas, and Augustus

Always remember to keep going.

Contents

While Driving,	1
Guarding Will Brown,	2
Cave Painting, Indian Caves State Park,	3
Letter to a Student,	4
My Great Grandmother's Speller,	5
At a Train Crossing in Greenwood,	6
Adult Swim, Oak Hill Pool,	7
Official,	8
Loan Officer,	9
To My Son, Not Yet Born, 12.15.09,	10
Crabapple,	11
First Field,	12
In the Old Market,	13
Osage Hedgerow,	14
First Homesteader,	15
Double Play,	16
Goal Posts,	17
Pilot,	18
In Guatemala,	19
Advent in Arizona,	21
Gravestones in Boston,	22
Snapping Turtle-Shedd Aquarium, Chicago,	23
Rhetoric,	24
36 th Birthday,	25
Winter Funeral In Omaha,	26
The Witches of Thessaly,	27
Stockyards, 1990	
Photograph of Ralston Ice Cutters,	29
In the Blind,	30
St. Francis Converts a Wolf,	31
Lilac,	32
The Deaths of Ten Pet Hamsters, as Told to Me by Various Students,	33
young tiresias is blinded when he sees athena bathing,	34
Lobster Cage Demonstration-Honeymoon,	35
Lesson,	36
Spring,	37
Release,	38
Rocket,	39
marine,	40
Grandfather,	41
Night at Gavin Point's Dam,	42
Still Life,	43
What Will We Find in the Yard at Night?,	44
English as a Second Language at Our Lady Of Guadeloupe Church,	45
Dance Class,	46
so the day after my vasectomy,	47
Fables,	48
Accountant,	50

While Driving

In the sky over a spent cornfield
an eagle trails southbound geese.

Keep going, a long need
inside me says. *Keep going*.

Guarding Will Brown

On September 28th, 1919, Will Brown was lynched, his body riddled by bullets and burned on a public pyre. Ed P. Smith, Omaha's mayor, was hanged . . . Douglas County's magnificent court house was in a mass of flames. . . Two hundred policemen, representing state, county and city authority, were powerless to thwart the orgy of lawlessness.

From "Historic Omaha"

I almost stayed in bed that day; I knew
 what people like my neighbor thought—
 a big Pole who works nights at the stockyards—
 and *The Bee* fueled it for a week, story after story
 like a flint struck again and again, and soon
 who knew or even cared if he was guilty?
 But what else could I do? It was my job.
 I awoke, buttoned up my uniform,
 made sure my gun was clean and oiled and ready,
 and rode a clean streetcar towards downtown.
 It was a quiet, sticky summer morning
 with Harney in long bars of shadow and sunshine,
 and I thought we might get through the day all right,
 but no. When I looked outside at four, a crowd,
 a herd of men--thousands of sunlit faces,
 all of them like one cruel burning face.
 They started yelling, started setting fires,
 and then rocks started popping through the windows.
 When they saw us bring him up, the noise swelled
 and they shoved against the doors, then spilled
 into the courthouse like flames through grass.
 When we got to the fourth floor I looked down
 and saw they'd filled the lobby, right behind us—
 I saw a shotgun pointed, pulled him down—
 the marble rail exploded like a burning limb,
 slivers sprinkling down on all of us.
 When they tried to take him, of course I fought,
 but who knows? If things had been different
 I might have been the one who dragged him out.
 You can see where the shot hit the rail to this day,
 a rough brand outside of courtrooms 3 and 4.

Cave Painting, Indian Caves State Park

For three hundred years
 this antelope has run

in the long shadow
 of its sandstone ledge

and is now so faded
 you might suspect

it has been slowly getting faster—
 faster than the rain,

faster than the wind,
 and is now gaining

on that day it outruns
 even itself.

My Great Grandmother's Speller

On the yellow fields of its pages columns of words
wearing their phonetics like epaulets, waiting
to be called into the gray weather of sound
to fight or retreat, and on the back page
in careful script the name *Wilhelmina*
like a pressed flower.

At A Train Crossing In Greenwood

The train
holds on
to its
long way
despite
the night,
despite
the stars,

and goes
and goes
until
it's gone,
until
it fades
into
a sound

to those
who wait
at this
cold crossing,
night-wrapped,
silent
in our
going.

Adult Swim, Oak Hill Pool

My father at the far end now,
a white walrus at play
in the sparkling water,
his great body as light
as all memory.

Official

My father was one. In my favorite story
he was working a game in a frozen rain in York
and after one play found a finger by the ball
but no one claimed it. *So*, he would say
I lined them up and told them to hold out their hands.
He found the kid, the center, in shock, trembling,
staring straight ahead.

So—who do we need
When we hang ourselves up in the air, lost
in the furious speed of our goings? Someone
infinitely practical, a clear thinker to keep us safe.
My father was one. Stripes suited him.

Loan Officer

Eighty today
as he sits in his living room
at a great table fashioned
from rough boards

rebuilding in miniature
the destroyer on whose deck
he once rode out
those merciless seas

each piece impossibly accurate
from the foil sieves of the grates
to the useless white rails

and at five o'clock in winter
the ship's shadows
set out over a ghost sea of photographs
to the shore of the dim hall

where great guns of thought
shell the silences.

To My Son, Not Yet Born 12.15.09

Last fall in Kimmel Orchard I watched your mother
slowly walk a downhill apple row
with you in her belly under her green sweater,
as round and taut as any apple ever.
Further on, your sister and your brother
slipped neatly in and out of sight,
ducking the lower branches, navigating
the last bees of fall, and searching out
the perfect windfall for a full-mouthed bite.
the moment ripened. I filled with hope
as though I'd plucked from time the fruit of wonder.

And now tonight, from my desk I see
the trees are roots grown up into the stars
and the snow's a field as big as night itself.
behind me, your mother deep inside the house,
fast asleep, still waiting, and as I write
those apples visit me, self-evident,
destined, red with arrival.
I cannot wait to talk with you again.

Crabapple

Only September
and the dying crabapple already sits bare

and the neighbor's black cat
stretches up the trunk

and the lemon of the sun rattles through
the bewildered branches.

Oh not quite dead yet
but nothing left to do

and a long way from blossoms,
a long way from blossoms.

First Field

From mailbox to mailbox again and again.
We'd run posts and hook and gos and flys
and when it grew too hard to see the ball
wobbling in its arc beneath the streetlight

we'd move into the night filled yard,
the goal line reset at our thin pine,
our heads down then, shoving hard against
whatever boys shove against when they go for two.

Oh my brothers, I will not forget
how incredible we were, at being fierce,
at the reckless art of physical sacrifice—
how the final argument would always win
and how we walked from that first field forever tied.

In The Old Market

—a Christmas letter

The white horse pulling the carriage
Is wearing her glossiest rig:
Blossoming with holly, sprinkled
With bells, she is her own holiday.

You can tell she feels good
to have such heavy breath in her nostrils,
to have announced on every street
her glowing body—

as she jingles away you can feel
a rhythm you've nearly forgotten,
shaking your soul clean of snow,
making cold miles warm again.

Osage Hedgerow

after one hundred years
I am still here
in unbroken tangle
for a half mile

and today I will
remain myself
my dark branches still
scrawled skywards

in the distance
the young highway
and a small museum
caught in my oblivion of thorns

even now wrens sew
their paths
into the shadows
of my fruit

even now
I am a wall in the world
holding the world
away

First Homesteader

They say in 1862 on New Year's Eve
Daniel Freeman walked through a light snow
to the house of the sitting land registrar
and pulled the drinking man out of his party.
They say it never happened, but hear me out:
imagine the two men shoulder to shoulder
moving through the loose winter quiet
towards the clapboard box of the land office.
Now imagine the rattle and scrape of the chairs
over the office floor, the quick wraith
of the lamplight slipping through the air
as the contract is signed; a moment free from ceremony,
carried out in a huddle, bald of words.
Now imagine, after a handshake,
each off in their own direction
down the wintry streets of Beatrice:
one to pour the dark wine of the present
again into the glass of the future,
one back into the dark to rip history's sod
loose from the past.

Double Play

Fielding the shortstop's toss
and rising

like a white flame
into the air above the bag

the second baseman
pivots to throw,

spinning on a red axis
in a field of summer light,

snapping the spark of all he has
into what's possible.

Goal Posts

Tonight from the south stadium
I see the bright ball of the moon
sailing over the roaring crowd,
sailing over the bent head
of the waiting kicker, and sailing
wide left of the goal posts
which stand now like great white calipers
measuring the cold air,
exacting that hard margin between
comedy and tragedy, between
the vast sigh of *almost*
and the roar of *forever*.

Pilot

It is a quietly wild thing to trust your life to him—
a stranger who stepped onto the plane
though the same door you did,
wheeling a bag similar to yours.

What's in his head
as he seats himself
before his giant book of gauges
to read the epic of the sky?

Has his wife just left him?
Has he decided that we are the ones
that will prove to her
that he means it this time?

Or, as we ascend,
has he just remembered his father's birthday,
that he forgot to go
before he left Starbucks?

As he hauls us over ruddy fields of clouds
is he remembering his first kiss,
the taste of Aqua Net
when some of her hair crept in?

When we land and finally shuffle past
is he keeping a secret from us,
some terrible blinking light
looking up at him for the last 1,000 miles?

Thank you, we say: for your able monotone,
for hours of straight-backed boredom,
for letting us forget
we were too far above the earth,

for letting us concentrate on that great
burlwood watch in the Sky Mall catalogue
or the magnificent folds of the forearm
of the woman next to us.

Remind us again,
In your dapper hat and epaulets,
how capable we are
of perfect faith.

In Guatemala

I

Then there is the story of Barromeche
the wealthiest man in Antigua who,
overcome by San Juan's speeches,
promised all his gold to the poor.

However. As he drove his heavy wagon
along the moonlit mountain road
the greed oiled and rattled in his heart.
Then it struck.

He buried his riches one sack at a time
out through the mountains among the pines,
one sack at a time, down on his knees,
digging with a knife by broken moonlight.

Locals say if you find a trove of that tainted gold
leave it alone, leave it alone.

II

And now we've come
to a Spanish cannon
on the wall of the first garrison,
after three centuries
its barrel still trained
on the sparkling shield of the bay.

All day tourists stroll by;
some stop to look seaward
along the trajectory of an imaginary ball;
all day long the cannon
waits to fire.

If you look closely, you can see
the skin of the barrel flaking away
like the wrapper of a poor cigar,
and if you look out over the bay

you can see that pale soldier the sun
still moving.

III

When Barromeche arrived at the mission
it was early morning
and San Juan stood waiting at the fountain.

When Barromeche said the gold was stolen
San Juan took his hands
and said a prayer for the safety of his brother.

It was then the saint saw dirt on the nobleman's knuckles.
To this day
his broken soul roams the pines around Antigua.

IV

At an intersection
a stray dog stands beneath
a flowerbox full of violets
watching students cross the street.

He is small and gray
and bears scars across his ribs
and it might be
he has been there for centuries,

A ghost
among the vendors,
a deep stare
at the edge of a cobblestone street.

Advent in Arizona

Our neighbors draped white lights
on the saguaro cacti in their yard
and all December those heavy arms
would lift to the desert night
bearing their own stars. This Christmas
I hope they're still at work,
green saints in sparkling robes,
grateful and amazed.

Gravestones in Boston

Tourists mill around
the rough pale work

some are half-sunk
(quarters being dropped into
death's meter)

some lean forward
(peering down into their graves
as though something more
might happen)

some lean backwards
(bored
and ready
for stars)

Snapping Turtle, Shedd Aquarium, Chicago

When they dredged him to the surface
he sat no bigger than a fist,
hungry only for minnows
and the soft-backed crayfish
flashing in the shallows.

In time, he mastered his trade,
dozens of shad heads bobbing
to the surface of his life,
the clouded water deepening
around him. Above him it is written

his beak will wait for weeks
until his dinner drops in, squawking
for its life, and until it tires
he keeps quiet, a great green stone
on the tank's gray floor.

Now in council with the dark
he wants to be taken for nothing,
a rock. Moss throbs on his back,
a rose thread from a meal
floats, unspooling.

Two lovers glide up to the glass
like bright fish. They speak
of evolution, of jaw design.
He will have none of this.
The old man remains green.
He pulls all of himself into the dark.

Rhetoric

Last night my dog brought me
a snow crusted grackle,
laying it at my feet
as I prepared for class.

Wide-eyed, head frozen upwards,
it was a glittering relic,
the cold pod of its body
a piece of death's old argument.

36th Birthday

for lunch today

a piece of
4-day-old apple pie

someone left in
the workroom

the crust was soft
though not incredible

I dropped a hunk
on my shirt

Winter Funeral in Omaha*--for Virginia*

an ice storm
 during the service

rattling against
 the stained glass

then on the way
 to the internment

the hearse couldn't
 make the hill

her grandsons got out
 and tried to push

their thick backs straining
 beneath their black coats

but they only slipped to their knees
 and the tires spun and spun

until it seemed
 they would catch fire

when everyone at last
 was huddled in the mausoleum

her youngest began to weep
 and the pall bearers coughed

as they slid her into place
 her casket trying to take

a few frozen beads of rain
 into the quiet

The Witches of Thessaly*

The witches of Thessaly knew how
to draw the moon from the sky
so they did,

coaxing it down from its high shelf
on the wall of night
as one might a cat,

luring and luring
until at last
it listened.

When it arrived,
its white belly splintering through the rafters
and wrecking their good bowls,

the witches of Thessaly,
from where they lay pinned
to the ground, all strained

for their dark books again,
hoping to correct things.
As though they wanted to be good.

When the moon was satisfied
it climbed out of the foundation
and slipped through the hedge of a cloud,

back on to its old road,
kept going.

**Take care, my good friend,
That we do not suffer the reputed fate
Of the witches of Thessaly,
Who draw the moon down from the sky
-Socrates in **Gorgias***

Stockyards, 1990

Driving home after curfew
we floated over the viaduct
and in the wild light of the moon
we could see the maze of white fence
stretching out for a mile to the south,
the earth below it dropping away
into the summery darkness;
we caught the heavy sway of manure,
heard a few boards rattle in the wind,
the wooden sound of abandonment.
In the back seat Brian *mooed*
and we all laughed lightly,
voices from a city of ghosts.

Photograph of Ralston Ice Cutters

When they'd arrive for the season
 they'd build shanties out of old pallets.
 left behind from the previous year.
 You can see them in the background,
 grainy quirks huddled on the shore.
 Imagine lying down in one at night—
 the wind seeping in,
 the brittle sound of a small fire,
 thoughts floating towards
 the icehouse of sleep.

*

One winter a drunk slipped in
 and the current slid him along beneath the ice
 faster than their axes could work.
 When, after hours, they fished him out
 he would not say what he'd seen
 (silence the only pay for that overtime).

*

They have not stopped their work for the photograph—
 a man on the right pulls on a hooked pole, easing
 the next block down the waterway, and further back
 another man leans hard to slow things down—
 a muscled, steady chorus in the tension.

*

They are in rough coats
 and the scarves hiding their faces are gray,
 the hill behind them is gray, the sky is gray.
 A hard word echoing through winter.

*

Behind them on the ridge, the owner's house.
 A darker block, watching.
 When he sold it, they all melted back.

*

It has been a hundred years
 and the lake is not there
 and the men are not there,

but the clean edged block of their photograph
still drifts along the cold channel of time.

In the blind

One cold March morning
a family of three cranes rose from the river

with flecks and veins of ice
still clinging to their legs

and the ice held tight all the way up
until the cranes trailed glittering ribbons.

There might have been wisdom in it—
how the ice clung on,

how the cranes seemed not to notice—
the sum of a promise

to never be apart,
and this the only way.

St Francis Converts a Wolf

Francis touched its graying ear,
the harvest moon of its eye,

and as he blessed it both knew
there was no way it could not be a wolf—

the same songs would be pulled
from his chest by the stars,

the channels he followed through night
would still be followed.

It would be a long time
before Francis was in heaven,

before the wolf lay down in the leaves,
before either knew the real sum of their meeting.

Lilac

This is the way hope should be:
a wavecrest of spring breaking
at the edge of a neighbor's lawn,
rolling over the long beach of winter.

The Deaths of Ten Pet Hamsters, as Told to Me by Various Students

Or,

What I Have Learned After Ten Years of Teaching

Left in the back seat of a car, cooked. Eaten by own mother. Water-bottle malfunction, dehydration. Fed to cat during play. Drowned taking bath with caretaker. Escaped, found starved in home office. Dropped from deck during play, shaken/chewed by dog. Fed glitter during play, diarrhea. Cat slept on top of cage, fear. Hubris.

**young tiresias is blinded
when he sees athena bathing**

already too late
when he sees
her bare back lavender
in the moonlight of the river

her pale waist
a ghostly rose
the great spark of her shield
propped up on the night-lit shore

stumbling back up the rocks
he tries to not see the dark heap of robes
to wring the memory out
but his dog running before him

fades already out
the fate-filled sky
fades already out
only the voices of night birds now

and her bare back lavender
in the moonlight of the river
for the rest of his long life
he will see and he will see her

Lobster Cage Demonstration, Honeymoon

When the white-haired captain pulled up the trap, bay water gushed from it, a wash of sound. When he set it on the rail what sea was left showered from its gray ribs. He had a rough time dropping the cage to the black rubber-matted deck; he rattled it down on to the gray bench and then almost tipped it over. The scent of the bay came with it; fish-water, cormorant guano, the tang of salt. The air around us smelled like this anyway, but this was another layer, the Atlantic coming closer, becoming more specific, the green smells amplified. In the cage, two brown glistening lobsters huddled together. They clawed at each other, arched their backs, then at last sat still, one on top of the other, as though their stillness would camouflage them that they might survive. Beyond us, water lapped and popped at the side of the trawler and the dark green bay sparkled. It was then that the captain began to explain.

Lesson

Patrick Kavanagh called poetry
the one room in his life
he kept clean

so tonight at the window
I look into my bare yard
and keep quiet,

waiting for the right word
to spring across the green
like a soul's rabbit.

Spring

The door of the hardware store is propped
and a breeze floats down the aisle
where the last snow shovels hang.

I imagine the fresh air heaping up
on top of the last pallet of icemelter.
I want the display rack of seed packets
to start turning like a mill wheel.

Towards the back,
the windsock display knows
and has started to jellyfish towards summer,
a small school of rainbows.

Release

*Pen knife, do what you must;
cut through the impossible knot
so the leader may be retied
for the great sailing out again
over the bright water of thought.*

Rocket

At sixteen we spent summer nights
lighting bottle rockets at Wherspann Lake.

We loved how they sizzled up, a fiery leap,
and we loved how they'd disappear

right before the snap
and the spiked cloud hanging.

Then, after all of them were lit,
the night became skin and stars,

the quick arc of bodies.

Most times you could see where they dropped,
a small ripple in the watery dark,

weightless, finished.

marine

returns to school in uniform and
is glad to see me
(if only for a minute)

his hands shake and
he cannot sleep (and he
has gotten laid twice)

and he remembers
Ender's Game and no
they have not told him

where he goes next
(but probably the
same place) and

then he thanks me
for all I've done and
leaves

so the bell rings
again and again and
in my car I try to

remember his name

Grandfather

No words
just summer sky
and those thick hands
unwrapping cucumber vines
from tomato cages.

Sometimes if a man is
very quiet
the stillnesses bear shoots
years afterwards.

Night At Gavin's Point Dam

Two bow hunters stand at an iron rail
looking down into the closed spillway,
peering down into an oval of light
cast by a streetlight from the parking lot.
They are hunting gars and the gars
In the water below are hunting minnows.
The two consider distances, and speak
in soft voices. They make small corrections
to the aluminum dials on their bows
and adjust the drag on their reels
and when it is time to shoot, the next will pull
back until the pulleys of the bow accept him
into the rest of the let-off. Then he will sight
along the arrow to the back of the gar—
a thin bar of shadow just beneath the surface—
and the shot will zip down the bank, the line
spiraling wildly after. Most times the shot
strikes the water and the gar slips away,
but every now and then the arrow matters
and a small gar is reeled up the riprap,
arriving at the rail tattered and gasping,
all pinny teeth and dying-eyed amazement,
the arrowhead buried inside it.
On the far bank, among the great piles of concrete,
fireflies spark and swirl; down in the oval
of light the other gars glide through the emptiness.
If you watch for awhile, pretending
not to notice, it all becomes one thing:
the light, the men, and the gar all working
in the calm spillway, angle and muscle,
air and force, all connected in summery rhythm,
the spillway seeping just a little now, the runnels of water
going, beginning.

Still Life

I want life to be like this:
my days hanging like green grapes
over the side of a silver cup,
my memories as luminous as cherries;

I want my heart to be like this:
a simple glass of water, outrageously clear,
holding the glow of an unseen candle
as though dissolving a sliver of light.

What will we find in the yard at night?

for Georgia

What will we find in the yard at night?

The green and clean and glowing grass,
the trembling windswept summer grass,
the shadowed grass,
the spongy grass,
the soft and lithe, longlistening grass,
the grass that hides the old dark ground,
grass that sweetly makes no sound.

And what will we find in the air at night?

The fireflies, the fireflies,
The little sparks of fireflies,
The whirling flies,
The twirling flies,
The leaping light of fireflies,
A brightness sprinkled into night
That flecks the darkness with good light.

And what will we find in the tree at night?

Sweetly swinging maple leaves,
the weightless, softly swaying leaves,
whispering leaves,
wishing leaves,
broad as shipsails blowing leaves,
sister, brother, healthy leaves
leaves in love with clean warm night,
playing moonlit, quick and light.

What will we find in the sky at night?

A giant toybox full of stars,
A perfect sparkling spray of stars,
simple stars,
strong stars,
clean and careful, loving stars,
pinpoints weighed against the moon,
goodnight's brilliant wedding gown.

And what will we find in our dreams at night?

The grass, the leaves, the patient stars,
the grass, the leaves, the patient stars,
an ocean of sleep to wash our hearts.

**English as a Second Language
At Our Lady of Guadeloupe Church**

In a barewalled classroom
above the new narthex
twenty-eight students waited for me
to explain the past tense
of the verb *to be*.

they were

come in from
the cold air of warehouses
where all day
the glossy bodies of cows
float wordlessly by on hooks;

he was

a hand with blood caked into
the creases of his fingernails
moving a pencil across a blank page
(small cuts into a white flank)
when he looked at you
you were sized up, never enough;

she was

the soft rocking of her baby
in the carrier at her feet
and when we were too far
past translation
her baby stirred
but she never quit listening;

it was

a new word floating out over them
and their soft trying and retrying,
the sound of their voices like bees
suddenly awake in January
and looking, looking;

we were

frost on the stained glass behind us—
a fresh design, wanting to belong;

I was

in a barewalled classroom
above the new narthex
trying to explain the past tense
of the verb *to be*.
But I was too young, and failed them.

Dance Class

Little girls in black leotards
line up at the bar
and wrap their arms around
imaginary bears

then so softly are asked
to open their arms and lean forward
to peer into a happy stream
running along the floor

and they wobble,
their faces dreamy,
and you can tell they feel
they are beautiful.

At the edge of the room
a father is looking for his daughter
in a forest of mirrors.

**so the day after
my vasectomy**

I got a flat tire
on the interstate

and no one could come so
I hit my knees

tried not to bust
my stitches

not get hit
by a truck

I shoved hard
at the tire iron

shoved hard
at the tire iron

the spare worked well enough
but when I drove home

things
felt different

Fables

*I am not Socrates,
Or was meant to be:
I am a man who cannot sleep,
who saw a graying rabbit creep
out from under a bush
and (as though just waking up)
remembered something he'd read
once when he was young.
Perhaps I should not fail
to read the given dream.*

I

The Grasshopper and the Ant

Moonlight fills the summer grass and he
is still awake, still sifting through
the giant blades for what in cold he'll need,
turning every seed, inspecting weight,
gauging the value of hauling it home.
The moon will be to midnight when he's done
but until then, he works. Where is the other?

That one's asleep beneath an island of coneflowers,
greenly elegant, dreaming sweetly of nothing
and tomorrow, another nothing new
and no true danger—the crow of consequence
perched now inside the shadowy cottonwood
is much too far to hope, with him so fast.
Tomorrow the ant will still be just a fool
and this one a green arc, a sunlit leaping out
over the full and swaying fields,
as weightless, it feels sometimes, as light itself.

It will be midday when his impossible legs
cast their shadow deep down in the grass,
over the ant bent at his long work.
The ant will look up from the dirt and see
him flying, and it will be like the sun blinking,
the thinnest wildest flash of summery darkness,
and without thinking the ant will fill full
with self-righteous anger—
perhaps he'll even seize the awful vision

of the gray husk of his friend beneath the snow—
 but then he'll stop himself. Things like that
 serve no one well; besides, he needs to work,
 so he'll go on. And soon he will be right.
 But now, nothing is right. He works.

II

The Fox and the Grapes

Stretching up the beam towards the grapes
 the fox's body is long and beautiful,
 carved for stealth, elegantly physical
 and as silent as an empty room, but
 not built for this work. The grapes hover
 ripe and round in the morning air,
 clustered together like so many lovers,
 jiggling as the fox shakes the vine, the fruit
 a succulent pendulum hanging at the truth,
 high up against an orange sky.

Here is where the fox should go away
 but she doesn't. So it goes.

She stays and circles, and circles again,
 looking up, around for some advantage,
 some edge to leap from, or a tool to use,
 but nothing. Then, down. She grabs the root
 with her needle teeth, leans back and pulls.
 If she can't, then neither can the grapes.
 But even that fails. She is not built for rage.

Some day you will see her at the edge of a cornfield,
 slipping around for mice, back to what
 she can do, having forgotten her judgement
 that the grapes were sour anyways,
 having forgotten
 that she knew that they were not.

Accountant

And I have walked down Oakwood Street
in winter, when the limbs are bare
and ledger out the winter stars
and justify the entries there.

And I have sat upon the green
that cascades down from city hall
and counted fire trucks rolling by
and felt nothing at all.

My grandfather walked these streets—
he went from door to door
offering to keep the books
for any soul who lived here.

I see him now, almost a dream,
alone and down the oak-leaved way:
a linen suit, a perfect hat,
a case to keep track of the days.

I know he won't be coming back
(the world adjusted for his sleep);
but I still hope to talk with him
and count with him what we may keep.