

First Steps

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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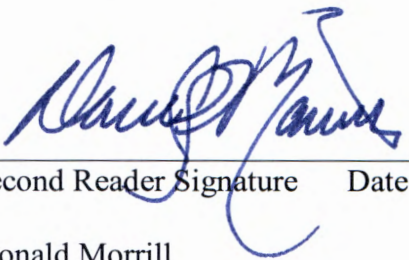
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Abstract for *First Steps*

The poems are intentionally accessible and holding at their core observations or concerns that are meant to be meaningful to the reader. Topics are drawn from an experienced life; work in corporate America, the domestic life of a mature family, the experiences in a small town community. The author tends to explore the nature of our temporal existence and the social norms of belonging.

The work is written in a narrative free verse style often utilizing the second person to deliver a more quirky feel. The writer is simultaneously learning her own lessons in form and meter while delivering to the reader a diversity of experiences. In this work each poem stands as an original event.

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Solace

A clutch of clover grows beneath a spigot where water drains
down the cracks of a concrete wall and saturates
the dark earth and satisfies the thin white roots of the clover

like when you were a child and drank from a cold cup
and how it filled up your chest and was fresh--

and you are that child
talking to yourself and happy and stroking your own arm

and considering all the toys, infinite and provided,
and how the sky is a smocked dress
embroidered with birds.

The Tiny Plant

A young woman jumped from the fifth floor of the west garage.
I don't know her name or the smell of her hair. It happened at dawn.

The security cameras watched as the sun came up over the campus,
over the dewy soccer field and reflected off dorm windows holding their sleepers.

She must have felt the sun on her face and thought
it will never be more promising than this. A man
was sleeping under a grey wool blanket on a bench along the road.

On the ground there was a plastic bottle lying on its side. In the seam
of the sidewalk, there was a tendril of green turned to the sky. Its roots
snug as a thought. The tiny plant wondered what it felt like to fly.

It wondered what it felt like to sleep.

Avis Returns

What the fuck, she screamed,
At the rental car return an employee backed a car into a woman
removing her suitcase from the trunk.

The Avis man behind the wheel made himself small, his head
well below his hands. The on-lookers were still as pines.

What the fuck, she repeated.

The agitated customer beside me asked, *Did he hit her?*
Was she hit? The little birds that live in the gaps between
the concrete beams were chirping about a clump of sticks
that had fallen to the garage floor. Then one bird
flew over

and plucked a curl from the forehead of the indignant woman,

and then the woman's face went slack and her head became
the empty moon that rises in the morning when everyone's asleep.

The Young Man

The lake shivered with anticipation
and the high bird in the sky
was a bold comma.

The plastic slats of the porch chair
stuck to the boy's legs and mosquitos
loll'd lazily overhead.

He had eight or nine paychecks
in his pocket from selling cars.
He was young "with potential,"
and unafraid.

Lord, let him loose, unwind
his obligations, unfurl him
like the long ribbon tail of a kite.

Life's Work

There's a photographer
who takes pictures of animals
at the edge of extinction. There were
a couple of frogs he said, and a bird and

an arctic fox with a surprised face. Then his wife found
a lump like a paperweight or was it like a fist or maybe
a meteor. He was home three days in March.
His voice was heavy and unraveling like a cable.
He bought a thousand acres in Nebraska,
as a fly-over for birds, a rest along the route,

for the avocets with their black upturned bills
and the curlews with feathers like bark and
the studious sandpipers. Cancer has a way,
he said, I want to give my full devotion.
It's something akin to a calling.

In Preparation for the Annual OARS Regatta

I

At the lake today, a middle school dad was told *give her a test*. The dad, a man being watched by other men, pointed his bow to the lake and twisted the speed control to the graphic of the Jack Rabbit. The boat performed as instructed-- and the man lurched back with the jolt and held his hat on his head. The boat bucked, fresh from refueling, charged on without him.

II

5 o' clock on a Friday.
Witnesses, good citizens all, lifted
their cell phones and made the calls. The man
was rescued and pressure applied to his crooked,
bleeding nose.

The boat ran on until a launch with the coach
came alongside. She spoke to the boat
in the voice she saves for small children,

III

Above them all, a lost seagull,
beating against the wind,
paid no attention.

The Neighbor, Rick

Rick is a retired fire chief who just turned seventy. He's tall with dark, flat hair and a wide moustache that curves downward with his mouth and a clean white truck he won't drive without his black Lab.

At Christmas, his old fire ladder is used for the lights.

When I took him his holiday pie, Rick talked about his brother in the nursing home, how only his appearance is left of him. I stood with my pie in my hands feeling the bumpy edges of the cold metal foil.

Rick can't hunt anymore and when he fishes he lets them slip from his hands. He says he sees something in their eyes.

Comice Pear

On a companionless day consider
the yielding and granular Comice pear.
Consider its fat and round body, short neck and thick stem.
Think of its green skin blushing with dots of red,
creamy flesh lounging beside a slice of brie.

You eat the Comice pear out of your hand:
it's a great shape to hold.
You eat a circle around the middle, the dry ends
held with your fingertips, until finally
holding only the stem between two fingers. You wipe away
juice at the side of your mouth. Not sticky like candy,
but fresh like clean sheets. The sweetness lingers
behind your tongue. It's like a place you haven't traveled to yet,
but you know you'll find a lover there.

Winging It

We have flown so far west so fast, the sun
is refusing to set. Like flipping a coin.

We are all here
on trial. Like this, not like that.
Ridiculous.

Life is all so made-up.
All I want is to be brave.

Flying out of the Phoenix Airport

The Phoenix airport has a cactus in the garden as tall as two men and straight as a finger. You wonder who rakes the garden, no grass, but the tine marks are exquisite. Your plane takes off over craggy un-treed mountains with cell towers like cake candles. You put down your tray table to eat the fried rice made for you at the airport. It has white chunks of rice and you wonder who made it but you are not angry with them because they don't know you and how can you care for someone who is flying away.

You eat the round chunks of white rice and pretend you are satisfied. The pilot says there will be bumps. Nobody wondered if the pilot knew what to do about the bumps. Just knowing they were coming was enough. Last night you wanted to believe in religion so you went to a political rally. You took a picture with the mascot of the politician (it had a plastic head and looked just like him). You couldn't post the picture because your shirt was opened and you don't know how God or the politician would feel about that.

The Powerful

I weed the herb garden around the purple peppermint
around the rough leaves of the spearmint,
around the tiny leaves of thyme clinging
to their straight stick. My hand smells like mint.

The rosemary is arrogant, robust.
It scorns the skittish sage, who relaxes only in winter.
The parsley bobs its head, not agreeing, keeping time with the breeze.
A small orange marigold blooms from a descendent seed--
a flower garden from the past.

I stop and straighten. My hand is filled
with the moist limpness of weed bodies. They lie
across my hand in a vivid shock of green. A weed does not know
it's to be disregarded. I wonder if I'm a weed.

Buying a Used Pontoon

I bought the boat without thinking. It was old
and solid and the thin man selling it had cancer;
the money going for medical bills.

Jack was meticulous with his notebook paper receipt,
taking a long time to write it out and frustrated
the second time he gave directions to the boat ramp.

Driving the boat away, the weather was cold enough
to feel uncomfortably alive; the crinkled leaves in the stern
swirled in a small brown tornado.

I thought about Jack and his cigarettes in his pocket
the five times it took to start the boat, the chugging
and clicking and wiggling used to turn it over
and how the smoke was blue and how Jack let
out a sigh when it finally started. He said it was
just cold-natured.

I wiped the dash with my hand then my hand on my pants.
I found a country station on the radio and sang along.
I stood behind the wheel, hardly a wake behind me.

Eating Breakfast in California

You are staying at a Hilton; not a regular Hilton

but one that commands a watery adjective like

Bayfront, Riverside, Oceanview.

You wake up alone and you take a shower.

You lift your arm to see a mottled bruise then you see

the black stubble in your pits and you regret

not bringing a razor. You regret a lot.

You go to breakfast in the hotel because you have a coupon.

It's Continental so you are required to have the oatmeal

which is described as steel cut oats, quinoa,

Job's tears (a plant in California) with

a citrus maple syrup. You pause at Job's tears

because it reminds you how you wish you had done

something different with your life. Then you think about

the crescendo of popularity that quinoa has enjoyed--

it's the glossiness, you suspect. You wonder about the trends

in oatmeal next year. Hopefully something like rhubarb,

because you respect its determined red color

though you can't remember how it tastes.

Eating Breakfast in California 2

In the hotel restaurant there is a woman
at the table next to you, she is young, even her hair
is young, swept to the right in a French braid.
She has a baby. Her husband is at the buffet
and you remember what it is like
when you can't go to the buffet together.
They will never go the buffet together
until they are older and it won't matter.
The baby girl is sitting in a high chair.
She looks at you and spits out a round blackberry
the size of the end of your thumb.
She is wearing a bib. Later you drop blueberry compote on your shirt
but your shirt is purple so you have been protected by Providence or
maybe God, but you think not. This is California.
There's art in the bathrooms. Nothing is impossible.
Your waitress is beautiful, like arrogant rain.
You would never think that anywhere else.

The Decline of Religion

The church sells white Easter Lilies. You order them a few weeks ahead and pay by putting a check in an envelope clearly marked for that purpose, and you wait until after Easter services (every one) to pick up the lilies because the church uses them as decoration. Clever really, to get the parishioners to pay while they use up the value for themselves.

For twenty years you bought the lilies. When the blooms become limp you plant them in the front flower bed where they return every year, one at a time so it's not as showy as you would expect. But you stopped going to church on the non-holidays and you felt embarrassed going only on the holidays, so you don't.

You miss the lilies. You decide to buy a lilly from the home improvement store, red and out of season, and when its bloom goes limp you plant the bulb in the front flower bed. Then the following spring, your red lilly is missing and when you pass by the pastor's house you notice one red bloom.

Uncomfortable Employment

The cleaning ladies have gone and
the house smells like a dry-cleaned shirt.
There are so many in the closet.

I heat up leftovers, country style steak,
lima beans, a bit congealed but I don't mind.
You should ask me about this sometime.

When I was a little kid I cared about whales and zebras.
Mostly I care about retirement now.
I dream about it sometimes.

It's like brushing the hair out of a lover's eyes.
I stayed at my job to believe I belong.
I just couldn't think of anywhere else to go.

The Storm

When I moved from under the shelter of the bridge
the waves did not hesitate. The hull bounced like
a nodding head. I pulled with my right oar to travel
with the waves' direction.

Then the tan water came over the stern. It flowed into
the small cock pit until it was under water. The gunwales
too. On all sides submerged. My red hat, water bottle
and rag floated away as if they'd lost hope.

I could see cars on the road, driving to the grocery,
a gull standing on shore with its head down,
people on the dock like vertical shadows,
or perhaps they were made of chocolate.

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In the warm water the waves were comforting in
their predictability. I thought about the time when I will be dead.
I don't think there will be anyone I know there. It might
be like going to the movies alone.

My Circumstance

It's there on my skin when I bend my wrist, the tiny fissures that work their way over to the bone and in the widening of my pores, larger than before and in that darkening spot on my forearm and its companions that were not there on Tuesday.

This ticking of my body moves me to the edge as I re-calculate my pension and count the savings and I don't know which pounding is louder but I hear it inside my head like how I hear my heartbeat when I cover my ears. Because I am not beautiful, I cannot speak of beauty. Only the young are beautiful. All of them are.

It's All the Same Until It Isn't

On every flight I have ever taken, a woman hacks into her sleeve.
It's a dull loud exhale, then gasp, which starts the baby behind her wailing
then the unaccompanied minor with the hoodie pulls it up over his head
and the frequent flyer eating the same six salted pretzels
from the same blue foil bag looks up.
If one person orders an unusual drink, others will follow
and the plane will run out of Fresca.

I am seated on the exit row and when the plane takes off there
is a bumpiness like when my uncle drives the Winnebago over
the dirt road. I look at the wing and see a flap, loose
at one end, spinning, and I take the hand
of the man sitting next to me, but he doesn't offer me a pretzel.

Watching Cal Collins Row Past

Fuck you, Cal Collins, I said out loud
as I saw her row past
the plate glass window of the waterside restaurant.
She was on the sprint, her arms outstretched,
hands tight on the oar handles,
her back firm, her leg muscles
smoothed into ridgelines. Her hair in a tie
through the back of her baseball cap.
Her eyes staring at an imagined
challenger.

Fuck you, I thought, there you go,
when I am at my papers. My words
to your action. You, the governor's granddaughter
with freedom to train. I would have to beat you,
for you to remember my name.

The Narrowing of Time

When she finally answered the door then
turned away
you could see the delicate gown:
lilacs on linen,
over slumped shoulders, and soiled,
the mother in a haze, no thoughts
of her small white dog kept
from its water bowl.
She is tenacious against time
and the indignity
of being stuck on a toilet.
There is a single mindedness.
Here. Function takes on an infinite value,
small actions engross absolutely,
as at the center
of a black hole.

Power of Attorney

I felt late for a plane that leaves in three days
and she was the subtle difference between being
pretty and beautiful, though she was dying.

I felt heavy, heavier than ever,
and hurt on the inside, like how
a child hurts and the falling snow
was soaked and stark and reckless.

Afraid to choose for her,
I got a tattoo of a postage stamp
to mail myself away.

Obligation

Brown claws of bald branches
reach up to grasp white evening sky.
Flying snow, like uncertain months.
It was a solid, still day with only a grunt
of thunder like a man clearing his throat.
I fell asleep on a bed full of pens. They wrote
on the sheets while I slept. They said
my mother, *how you have slowed me
with your dying.*

In Blue Death

In blue death
light from the surface
filters down
suspending the smallest particles.
The fish
are all together and alike and pursing
their rigid lips.

Though I am dead I am.
-- the water bathes me with touch
like a breeze. It is as if
I were a hollow tree and the world
moves all around and through me.

Another Business Flight

The woman across the aisle has a face like a ball of clay squeezed by a hand and she is plump and playing solitaire. She leans over to tell the cancer patient that she plays to kill the time. Her heart is like a piece of frozen fruit

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At the Rancho Mirage Resort

It's past noon and the far mauve mountains
are drawn with chalk. The white bungalows
hold their balconies. A garden gives
yellow buds to its hummingbirds.
A club of clouds discuss the weather.

Two golfers approach the green,
and for a moment, one places his hand
on the other's shoulder. Belonging
is a distant tree,
with shimmering leaves.

Hearing the News

From across the lake, a distant dog
bites out barks in groups of three.
A drab heron changes its course
like a hesitant weather vane.

On our walk, the windows of a house
in the morning has yellow eyes
that mirror the sun
behind our backs.
The air is heavy,
expectant:

my friend says she is sick again.

**Coxsackie Correctional
PO Box 999
Prisoner #16A4288
Coxsackie, NY 12051-0999**

Dear Nephew,

In the last letter, I wrote, "if you have time." Sorry. I feel awkward writing to a prisoner in a prison and it reminds me of how in the eighties we couldn't say cancer to people who have cancer and I want to tell you what is happening out here but it seems cruel like eating an ice cream in front of someone who is not getting a cone for many years. But it is a tremendous spring.

There are ducks, of more kinds than I can recall. My favorites, the "squeakers," (they don't quack), they have dark brown bodies, soft as felt with pink bills and pink feet and they fly low over the house a few minutes before sundown each night. Sorry.

I should talk about the drudgery of work and how the human resources department can't find an e-mail address for the new hire and how the "k" sticks on my keyboard, or how my yard is more weeds than grass.

But you have missed a fantastic spring. Almost magical, as when the forest floor moves but you can't see the animal rustling.

The Evangelist

There is a small knocking on the door, empty raps and spaced apart and when you open the door there's a woman who drops her pamphlets and bends over to retrieve them. She is wearing an orange, round skirt and her panty hose are bunched at her sandaled toes. She speaks and you notice she has a lisp.

She nervously holds out a pamphlet and asks you what you think about the supernatural—the werewolves and vampires and the undead and such things and you love her for her lisp and you want to invite her in but you have work and you try to decide if this is just a money thing or she's an old lady who wants to save you.

You're honest and tell her you won't read the magazine and you think about offering her water but you don't. You close the door but decide not to lock it because you don't want her to hear the bolt.

As you turn, you see a zombie seated with crossed legs on your sofa drinking a bottle of water. You notice a bit of his elbow has fallen off and rests on the edge of the rug and you can see tiny veins—as when you look closely at a new leaf.

Leaving for College

There's a row of hangers against a white closet wall,
like empty hearts. I think of when I smoothed
my hand over your soft head. On the journey
of parenthood, you were permanent. That moment,
open with opportunity, and limitless.

There's a path that comes up from the ocean floor and makes
its way through continents and countries and through the
dazzling city and past the town on the river and then follows
the tree line of the forest and up into the mountains and as it goes
it becomes narrower and smaller until the wide road becomes
a stony footpath until finally there is no trampled turf to follow.
I will wait for you there.

Living in a Beautiful Place

On the flat bridge between two lakes,
it's common to see tourists stopped.

A view from either side, but the left opens
to a vista framed by the soft edges of cypress spires.

The sky, the color of an Easter egg dipped
one end blue, the other end pink.

The lake lies, still as a care,
and flat as an unfrosted cake.

This morning, I am stunned to see my neighbor there,
his camera held over his head like an offering.

This customary view on a common morning,
then an osprey wings past with moss for his nest.

Your Last Day at Home

If I were a giant I would have a shirt with polka dots and great green shoes.
I would wear my hair long and my nails trimmed. I would sing.

I would pull myself onto a cloud and walk across its breadth, atop the whole
of the great flat earth, wading through cloud vapor. I would stride to the horizon.

I would reach over the edge of the paper world and pull the sun from its setting,
and it would still be today and you would still be here.

Upstate Thruway

At a rest area in upstate New York there is a farm stand that sells purple berries that look like clusters of tiny ball bearings, and pears as agreeable as patience. The fruit is placed in a thin lattice basket that I hold with two hands like a present as I walk to my rental car. I roll down the window then eat the berries with two fingers and look around for a napkin and adjust the mirror to deflect the sun.

At the same time, a planet's spin away, a baby is peering out a dark window and trying to learn the word for star.

On the Crossover

At the beach, on the bottom step of a crossover,
at the edge of the close crawling ocean,
it's early morning and you greet people,
but then there are too many. A small girl
in a blue bathing suit places a shell
in her pail and gives a shake to be sure.
Then a daughter and father are jogging and he gets
a stitch in his side

and looks down as he slows. How quiet
isn't really quiet. How it's a humming in your ears.
How the whole world is just the place you are.

The Beach House

She chose the seashell valance with its perfectly spaced shells.
the material for the comforter as well, her world in muslin balanced.

The house is seated on porous rocks the eager renters flow up brittle boards,
she considers the paying hoards and her few things left behind the owners lock.

The view from the den is worth the cost, blue dream of peace reaching across
wet sand a salve for prior loss. A beach house to beguile her family.

What is it about a water view that makes her turn her head? Like the envious tide
to the migrating moon, she is compliant to its direction.

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Our House on Hillcrest Drive

To my Aunt on her 70th birthday

We will go together, I will take your hand in mine.
Our house will stand before us, tucked in its ivy beds,
clapboard grey as water, like the grey upon our heads.
The mantle sounds Westminster chimes.

Around back is our playhouse with the shingle *Innisfree*,
the humming block of a honey bee house, corn neatly in clay rows,
a moss covered birdbath, a magnolia's soothing boughs--
always you belong with me.

Now we're more root than leaf and others own our will,
age nudged us on our own, to try to recreate,
our house on Hillcrest Drive and the peace of its estate.
Together we will go there still.



Leaving Only Because

The plane flies away.
It has no way of knowing,
here is just as good.

Thousands have left me
since I have been waiting here.
It's not personal.

Walking the Dog

The park is around the bend of the lake,
past neat houses with thick grass skirts. Walking my dog on a leash,
he's behind me, dependably slow as the mail.

He's ready to head back.
So old, there's really no need for the leash. Like me.

All Things Fade

The diner closed today.

The Rusty Fox. The sign like a fox head,
a faded orange triangle with rust at the edges. I remember
the scrape of metal chairs, the blue smoke caught
moving through slanted sun beams. I ordered the prime rib, pink
as a child's dress. It tasted like yesterday placed on a plate.

I saw a dead man there once. He was
checking his texts. He wore a plaid hat
and a rumpled shirt that hung around him like a bag.
He said being dead was like stepping off an escalator to
a solid place and in the smoke from his cigar I could see faces.

The Tate

I sat on the bench outside of the Tate
sickened by the frosting of thoughts
that came from my museum experience.
Was it ever the intent of any great painter
to be displayed alongside the others?
So much feeling in one place--
the painters who themselves
were spent before single images.
Sargent ought be sketching "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose"
with only the prim, posed girls as company.
Turner, the son of a barber,
should have taken his father's sheers and cut only
the hair around my eyes. Instead, that madman
tossed the seas, terrifying his renderings,
and drowning me when I was only looking.

Long Lake

In a mountain place beside Long Lake,
white pines frame a widened view.
There's a wet dog that ventured a swim,
and a man who leans on his car.

It's a red station wagon, a canoe on top,
and a woman with her hands to her head,
shading her eyes from the leisurely sun,
saluting the summer-day scene.

It's respite they seek, as animals do,
to rub balm upon their hearts, to use the canoe,
to draw soothing strokes across their vexed souls.
The Loon calling will make their heart moody.

Like the sheet of rock that cuts into the lake
They will rest here for the time being,
then return to the earth as dust or as dirt,
as real as this magazine cover.

Insomnia Is

Skipping a flat stone that neither slows nor sinks.
Sad, like a woman touching a screen.
I've seen love sit up in its bed, brooding upon lack of sleep,
the mind makes an appearance
and flits for its next appointment. Life does not move.

The Church in Cologne

The church in Cologne is covered
with black coal dust and circled with gypsies,
hired for their deformities,
pushing tin cups through the crowds.

The church is piled high, like sand
dribbled from a closed hand. Inside,
there is an arched grey sky
buoyed by buttresses.

On the lids of grey caskets are stone casts
of the old Romans inside. Immortal
gargoyles lean over the balconies,
their forked tongues waving in whispers.

The organ begins, audacious.
The sounds soared up to a carved apostle
who stepped from his pedestal to pray. The notes
falling over themselves with grief.

Layoff at Work

There is a company reception tonight:
She will wear a thousand- dollar suit,
and appear to drink gin.

Moving clockwise around the room, touching
the blue jackets between the shoulder blades,
laughing too easily.

Tomorrow there will be a layoff at work,
the one she has chosen.

He will pack a stapler, his wedding picture.
He will open his top desk drawer and it will
jingle with paperclips and change.

He will begin to pick up the coins.
Feeling the force of the stares, he will leave
without closing the drawer.

Another Art

Happiness, so simple for you darling,
no tiny bird is easier to snare,
his golden chest, his heart beats to press,
against your hands cupped round.

At least a hundred ways to make you happy,
start small with honest gestures for yourself,
a crust of cake, a finger full of frosting,
or use a sharpened pencil to make lists.

As you improve, demand a lofty standard,
a job whose pay is so much more than fair,
a lover with a more pleasant demeanor,
than those you have solicited to date.

Happiness, so simple for you darling,
engage your mind to keep yourself at ease,
don't dare compare yourself against the others,
believe, because the fear's in that you won't.

Last, a tattoo printed on your inner arms,
on one hope is traced, the other there is joy,
This etching makes the happiness your choice,
so by leaving there is nothing to destroy.

The Rower

This time of year, leaves tumble around in gusts, and slide onto the waters seemly glass. They are pulled upon the current, the far ocean drawing in her rivulets, the smaller streams called inward by the larger until they are merged in likeness and condition. On this day the sun casts lime green light on morning grass.

For heartless men, to beat upon the water is quixotic, a habit that does not release the spirit or the peace they seek. But the pain can translate to a tenderness that satisfies a far gone childish need.

The greatest rower that ever lived had the lengthened body of a boy.
He was old enough to know life's pangs and ills. Between God and boy stands only wanting will.

His long tan back, shirtless rippling water, his muscle flows and ebbs from solid shore. His palms are callused bark, and blisters are translucent buds upon his hands. He rows for pure heart and not for fame or notice and dreads the lengthy labor to despair.

Both madmen and oarsmen hear the boat sing. The shadow of the shaft passes, the oar is dipped and water is sent boiling to aft. There is a willowy sway of hands away and the blade is returned again to the surface. When he drives his legs and pulls the grip to chest, the silver droplets run downward on oars shaft, they dive to their bed and comfort in deep lake.

When the boy is pressing to his finish, his body swings in effort and in rhythm, the rate is raised to challenge on the sprint. When past the line the rowers name is written upon the water where he went. For what is life if not a race until the end?

Better than Good

On a happy walk in an open field,
my new puppies tumbled together.
A bush of lantana offered luxurious blooms.
There was no demand on my heart or my head,
no conference or call to attend.
I felt no enmity or envy.
To think I could trust outside myself
didn't make me feel small.
I forgave what I'd left undone.
When turning to go, I saw a far lake
and many rising birds.