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Milwaukee Road| Poems

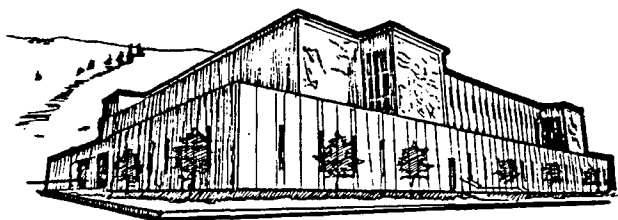
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University of
Montana

THE MILWAUKEE ROAD

by

David W. Dale

B. A., Montana State University, Missoula, 1962

M. A. T., University of Montana, 1969

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

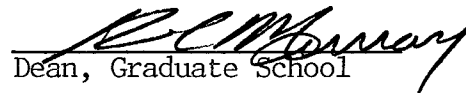
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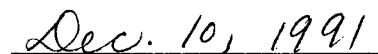
Master of Fine Arts

1991

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CutBank 24, "My Brothers"

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Jeopardy, Spring 1984, "Senile Dementia" ("Out of
Kilter")

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The Slackwater Review, "Dear Charlie" ("Letter to
Marshall from the Clearwater")

Trestle Creek Review, "The Milwaukee Road," "Rules
of the Road for the Apprentice Brakeman," and
"What We Call Our Own"

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Alberton, 1921

On Friday nights the Masons meet
above the butcher shop across the yard
from the hotel Grandfather bought in 1914
and made into a house.
Afterward the Grand Potentate
and the Most Exalted Keeper of the Outer Door
have a drink on the top landing of the outside stairs.
As they write their names
in urine in the snow in Grandpa's yard,
two little girls watch from their bedroom window.
Giggling, they scamper to their brick-warm bed.

Saturday afternoons the children swim
in the millpond where Tommy Riley drowned
last week. Fishermen found
his body yesterday in the pool below the gorge.
"Micks don't float" gets a laugh
from the crowd in Chadwick's Bar.
Saturday nights the KKK burn crosses
on Lace Curtain Irish lawns.
Two little girls watch from the window
as the Grand Dragon lights theirs.
Then, cowering near their father,
they practice their catechism.

Grandpa's called on Sundays
to conduct the freight to Avery.
His brakeman, still drunk from last night's fun,
his hand badly burned, can't throw a switch
or set a brake. Rounding Deadman's Curve
up Bullion Pass, the hopper car ahead of the caboose
derails. Grandpa jumps free.
The whistle drowns the brakeman's scream.

for Carl Henry Wilson
1883-1948

Gabby Hollow

Going through Gram's things in her trunk,
I found a clipping in the family album.
The headline reads, "Alberton Girl Drowns."
Janet Adams. She'd been swimming at Gabby Hollow,
heard the screams of Mrs. Healy's son,
and, holding the mother's hand, waded
into the water. She caught the little boy,
passed him easily back, lost her balance,
stepped forward into a hole--and drowned.

I asked Mom if she remembered.
One day Aunt Dorothy and Mom had started
for the store, leaving little Glen with Gram.
He begged her to go, she shooed him along.
Didn't realize that his sisters were already in town
across from the depot. A freight was coming--
Glen screamed from the middle of the tracks.
Janet, at the crossing in her parents' car,
saw Glen, leaped from the back seat,
caught him up and dove from the path of the train.
The cow-catcher ripped her dress.
This summer let's go stand on the tracks
where Uncle Glen was. We'll find
Gabby Hollow too; we can touch her there.

for Janet Adams
1899-1916

Nine Mile

Wagons block
the Nine Mile Road.
Tinkers.
A woman conjures rain,
sends her goats
to foul the stream.
Grandpa backs our hoopie up the hill.
Katie, frantic at her beads,
prays away the gypsy's curse.

The picnic spoiled,
we children sob.
Glen won't be stilled--
he wants the wild strawberries
promised weeks
and the Brookies
magic in the pool below the gate.
Whistles there grow on willow trees,
dandelion parachutes confuse the bees.

for Kathryn Barlow Wilson
1884-1965

Pockets Full of Raisins

Mary Anne went away today.
Mrs. Barlow can't stop crying.
Ruptured appendix Momma says.
A little sack breaks
and sends bad juices
through your body.

Yesterday we played hollyhocks
by the brick wall of our quarters.
The bricks keep the flowers warm at night.
She made dolls; I made parachuters.
A secret: I like her dolls best.
The day before we played sand box.
She makes hers wet
and builds tunnels this long.
From my end I push our army through;
from hers she pulls them home.

We ate raisins after.
We stuffed our pockets full,
both pockets, both full.
Mary Anne died today.
Mrs. Barlow doesn't know.
The little sack broke and the juices . . .

Retaining Wall

Father shows me how to walk
the wall below the garden
where we didn't plant
the corn because it'd grow
too high to see the edge.

He goes first.
He puts his arms up
the way he shows me airplanes--
Stukas diving
at the Greeks in Corinth,
Messerschmitts out of the sun
at Thunderbolts.

Then we fly together on the edge--
Father at the controls,
my hands filled with raspberries
for our breakfast treat.
Our Flying Fortress
falls from the sky
crashes on the driveway
where my berries stain the gravel.
We'll pick some more for Mom.

for Arbie Myron Dale
1890-1950

Army Brats

When me and Tommy Smith set the field on fire
 and the wind blew the flames
 through the weeds
 to the place for cleaning clothes
 to the house for guinea pigs for asperiments
 to the boiler building too,
 you should have seen how assited everybody was.
 The Fort's red fire truck
 with all those bells
 and the ladder that ran up the wall
 with the guy who jumped out
 the window and hit on his butt
 real funny that day--
 and ten guys holding onto the net ,
 and twenty guys on the truck
 and one real goofy guy putting on
 a yellow coat running in back.
 The soldiers from Camp William Henry Harrison
 even came in Jeeps.
 We hoped they'd send the tanks
 but they didn't.
 And they put it out in time
 and never knew we did all of it
 but Momma knew I think
 because she wouldn't let me play
 with Tommy for a week.
 So then we brokened out
 the windows of the downstairs
 of the doctors' quarters--
 me and Mary Anne--
 after we played natomy
 in her downstairs.
 I showed her mine
 and she showed me hers
 but she didn't have one
 so we brokened the windows like I told you
 and we really got in trouble then.
 So me and Jackie Culbertson threw
 those tear gas bombs
 we got from the mumanition dump
 at the party by the flag and cannon
 and Whoosh--
 everybody got real assited again.
 Boy-oh-boy
 did we have fun that summer.

One Parachute

My brother Arbie
 sits behind his pilot
 and on the radio
 tells the other Pregnant Turkeys
 how to fly
 and when to dive at ships.
 He fires his machine guns
 from his turret
 at the fighters from the air base
 on the island he can't tell me--
 but I know it's Okinawa,
 I can read the papers.
 They shot down a Zero
 and two Tojos last week
 and Arbie got a Betty,
 that's a bomber with two motors--
 and he watched the crew
 bail out.
 They floated, soft
 and safe, Arbie says,
 like the dandelions
 we used to run with
 in the wind.
 Arbie and Lieutenant Bill and Jim McClatchey,
 he's the gunner in the belly,
 got their Navy Crosses
 when they sank that battleship
 the Yamamoto.
 They flew in
 low and slow,
 climbed out
 steep
 and all OK.
 Arbie watched their torpedo hit
 amidships. Boy!
 I couldn't find the Turkey in my book
 but Tommy told me T.B.M.,
 the new torpedo bomber Grumman makes,
 and there it was,
 the biggest single engine in the war
 with a belly big enough
 to hold a ton of bombs
 or a 22 inch torpedo,
 a really nasty fish, Arbie says.

There's another turret aft--
that's Navy talk I'm learning--
for Jim to shoot his guns.

But it flies so slow
would be so easy to hit with the ack-ack.
I'm scared.

The telegram came today.
Their Turkey was on fire
over that island I told you,
trailing smoke
all over the sky--
and one parachute
like a dandelion . . .
That was Arbie, Momma says.
The rescue patrol will find him
in the jungle
and he's gonna write and tell me
how Lieutenant Bill and Jim McClatchey
flew back to their ship
and All OK.

Lincoln Logs

Home cooking in Lambkin's Cafe,
milk-fried chicken, new potatoes
with cream gravy and peas,
and on my slice of carrot cake,
a candle for being twelve today.

I'll steer our Studebaker Champion
through the birch forest to the cabin
on Copper Creek. There's a fire
of seasoned fir. At the table by the window
bourbon ditches and the pinochle game

while I, sleepy in my bag, drift off
to bids of clubs and hearts--
a hundred aces, double marriages.
At dawn, the creek alive with Mayflies,
Father follows the hatch upstream.

Aunt Clara and I try sculpins
in the pool below the falls.
Every nibble snaps my line
to willow trees. Auntie bends
the branches down, her breasts

dappled in the morning sun.
She teaches me to flip my cast
across to where the current takes my line
to a Rainbow, which strikes,
and while I marvel at my fine erection, runs.

Dad

The night my father died
I tried to cry--
to imitate my mother's sobs,
to blaspheme God and curse the fool
who couldn't read a cardiogram.

Instead my nose bled three hours.
They had to call the doctor.
Silver nitrate and a hot bath
while Mom got
phenobarbital.

I didn't miss him
until the August day on Dog Creek.
A hatch was on. He hadn't taught me flies,
the way he made a Goofus Bug, a Sandy Mite,
a Royal Coachman dance in magic esses through the air.

Deaconess Home for Children

Tommy and I have our own room
in Bridger Cottage where we stay
and it's neat because we're friends.
At night when "Just-call-me-Grandma"
orders lights out, we choke
our laughter in the dark.

At recess today we watched
the girls from Glacier Cottage
slide the slide.
Tommy whispers Mary's panties.
"Grandma" hears our giggles
and Tommy--he's smart--he rolls
under the bunk and hides.
Me, I get the rubber shoe
across my butt and when
I wiggle, legs.
I bite the pillow so I can't
scream, because Tommy--he thinks
I'm tough as hell.

In the mornings we form up
on the landing, march
to breakfast mush, to class
at eight, to noon goulash,
to recess, and after supper,
to catechism, prayers, and bed.
Today's rain means crossing
Highway 12 to the gym
where fifty years of dust pounds loose.
Tonight I have my asthma in the dark.
"Grandma" hears me breathe,
comes again with her medicine.

Sea Duty

Aboard a ship of the line
 chasing a Russian sub
 in the Persian Gulf
 I watch the porpoises
 weaving
 at flank speed
 at the point of the bow.
 General Quarters:
 Entombed in the handling room
 below the forward five inch guns
 we're surrounded
 by projectiles and powder charges.
 Oil oozes
 from the mount over head.
 Pings from sonar
 sound no sub.
 Nothing breeches.
 Back to fishing
 off the fantail
 swabbing decks and chipping paint.
 The heat of our quarters
 forces the crew on deck
 to inhale the spray,
 the breeze of Bahrain,
 and the desert sunset.
 Midwatch:
 The helmsman's toy cuts
 a laughing wake.
 Our cook mothers us
 with warm bread and strawberry jam.
 At five bells, Aden
 off the starboard quarter.
 Dead goats and flies.
 Fresh stores at Massawa.
 We guzzle the milk like beer.
 Liberty
 in Piraeus soon.
 Women,
 then the Acropolis.
 After Suez mud,
 Mediterranean blue is home.
 We pass Ithaca at dawn.
 Odysseus and Penelope, playing
 with their children on the beach,
 wave . . .

For Linda

Louie and his gang took turns--
You came to me broken.
Your mother found us in the morning,
holding close and mending.

A dirty joke,
we scandalized the prom.
Your eyes defiant, my flowers in your hair,
alone, we danced for hours.

In your fourth month you went away.
At sea I read your mother's cable:
LINDA LOST THE BABY STOP
HER HUSBAND HIT HER STOP SHE FELL

In my last picture, you work at Jester's,
flirting with the truckers,
that heavy, musky hair trapped in a net,
your eyes, merely tired.

Off Limits: Aden, Yemen

Drunk and game for a whore,
I turn the corner.
Fetid men repulse me.
A camel coughs and spits.

That spring on the Prickly Pear,
the bear surprised us near the falls.
We gave him the riffles
and watched from the pines.

Here urine is the stream.
Pet goats nose the feces
and children play
with bloated flies.

816 Power Street

We sleighed winter away on that trail
where the iron stakes are cemented in.
One Sunday snow Cousin Mike missed the curve
and wrecked his knee against the old Dodge, laughing.
He showed me his scar at our reunion this July.

This cottonwood was my second home in summer.
It's manicured now, Japanese.
That's the scar of the branch that broke
when I skinned the cat just one more time.
Snow covers the dents of my head and shoulder in the lawn.

One full moon we rode
a four-man sled from the top--right through
those fences there. We jumped that ditch
and crashed against Miss Duncan's wall.
She watched us from her upstairs window, boarded now,

then ran down, washed away our blood
and sent us home, each with a turnover
she'd made from Jonathans saved
from those she let us steal. That's Mom calling us
for dinner. Come on--we've time for one more run.

for Michael Anthony Schilling

My Brothers

I used to steal my brother's stamps
from his secret box in the basement
one-at-a-time from blocks of four,
the rare Colombian two-cent worth five bucks.

There, too, were corporal's stripes,
a medical discharge, some photos, and a letter,
"Dear Arbie, Thanks for the toy soldiers.
I hope to see you Christmas. Love, David."

A simple story. The stamps went for rent.
My brother's dead, the little men lost
last move. I remember days when they
fought wars and won.

Kelly's First Steps

i

On Father's Day you left
your son Tim
to find you in the basement,
hanging from a beam.
The foot of your spica cast
just touched the floor.

Jesus, Larry, why?
Was it your leg--
the fracture spiralling up
the femoral shaft,
refusing to heal?
After eight years of pain
was this your last operation?

Or your face--
the scars I gave you
when I drove you through the windshield?
They bleed again
in the gravel by the car
when you dream--don't they?
And your smile contorted
by the severed labial nerve
frightened your son Kelly
and later your only grandchild
before they moved to California.

ii

Or was it your wife's running off
to Canada with the Cree,
your friend who tried to heal you
with his chants
and his mephitic potions,
their magic as black
as the pins and screws and plates
up the length of your femur--
and the casts,
the goddamned casts.
Your only magic finally
was the dozens of different pills.

iii

The Cree, I think--
 the brave you wanted to be
 in your sad Indian dream
 where you wore the bear tooth necklace
 and the beaded vest;
 you captured every wall of your home
 with Shope and Powell warriors.
 You went too far, Larry--
 all those powwows:
 Arlee, Browning, Elmo, Lame Deer,
 where Little Worm, your youngest,
 danced in your place,
 winning the War Dance prize
 in the costume the Cree's mother made.
 Your hair, Norwegian blond,
 was braided every morning
 by your new wife,
 Blackfoot, full-blood--
 dutiful, silent.

iv

When she began to leave you alone
 every night to go to the Bison
 Bar, you did it, didn't
 you, Larry?

Oh, God,
 your livid face,
 your blood-red scars.
 Cut him down, Timmy,
 cut your father down.

v

Larry, let me remember you instead
 on the picnic up Lump Gulch
 in the birch grove by the creek--
 chugging a beer, beaming
 at little Kelly's first steps
 and his falling, laughing in the leaves.

To Bury Strangers In

The old woman wants her father moved
from the Potter's Field. We count the graves,
his the third we find in the fourteenth row
from the end of the road dividing Broadwater Park
and Chessman Square. Their mausoleums,
miniatures of Monticello and the Synagogue Emanu El,
are the pride of this necropolis,
rivaling the civic center's minaret.

We dig for his coffin,
find deep a layer of loam in the clay,
rust-colored, rich with mold.
We sift to find a bit of the cranial arch
and what has to be his lower jaw.
Both go, along with all the carameled rest,
into his new box of cedar--labeled Ernest Jones.
The first name on the plate of his rusted marker stake
was lost in his first spring storm,
nineteen-eighteen, the year influenza
killed more than the First Great War--
at any rate Eighteen's the year
that took some thirty in this section.

We place the cedar box and what remains
of Mister Jones on a wagon drawn by a brace of mules.
The old woman directs our small cortege
to the spot we've dug beside the entrepreneur
and the whore whose sporting house on Joliet and State
had walls of mirrors in every room,
and whose silver bought
the city's myopic squint for years and years.

Valley Homemaker Passes

Louise Darcy, 62, died today,
 one week after the school
 in the valley was named for her son,
 Warrant Officer Jim Darcy,
 who earlier this year gave his life
 for his country in the conflict in Viet Nam.
 William F. "Bill" Darcy survives.

*

Bill Darcy? He goes to all the funerals
 of every family he knows. At the get-together
 afterwards, Bill, dressed in his only suit,
 waits for the inevitable lull,
 puts his drink carefully aside,
 and takes from his inside pocket
 a small, black leather case.

"Jimmy's medal," Bill says. "And this
 is the letter from the President
 about what Jimmy did. He flew
 his helicopter in to get the wounded out.
 Three missions. And on his third flight
 back to the hospital, they shot him down.
 He didn't have to go the third time--
 once was all--just once was all he had to.
 They haven't sent him home.
 But here's his medal the President sent.
 Louise died, you know.
 Just sat there in her chair.
 Have you seen the school?
 It's nice. It's out in the valley.
 The President sent this letter. About what Jimmy did."

Bill drinks his drink, checks his watch.
 Solemnly shaking our hands, he says good bye.
 From the door we watch him walk, reading his newspaper,
 to a taxi waiting at the curb.
 Bill Darcy? He survives.

for Jim Darcy
 1945-1967

Karl's of Ronan

Karl's is crowded tonight.
The Rotarians in the back
consider the drunks.
A Kootenai reels through
the door and whoops.

Karl, crew-cut, officious
throws him out.
A wino cheers--
Karl nods,
his bow tie a citation.

The poker game gets serious.
The grocer opens: "Indians
can't hold their liquor."
The druggist raises:
"It's something in their genes."

The Kootenai is vomiting
in the gutter, his hands
grasping his pickup.
His children watch,
fascinated.

Georgetown Lake

Smell the sewage.
Homes on shore with septic tanks.
The lake is weeds.
Fish and Game plants trout
for Californians.

Forest Service
wants to lease Grassy Point
for overnigheters. Four dollars
a head. Drive to Anaconda
and see the smoke stack instead.

Let's float Clark's Fork
this July. At Fish Creek
in Tarkio Gorge
we'll climax
with a leaping Rainbow.

In the evening with bourbon
and cribbage by the fire,
we had a law. Don't pee
in Flint Creek. You'll spoil
the morning coffee.

Little Sister

Susan floats
her eyes
staring
though the water
at the sun.
I'm too deep,
arms too weak
to crawl.
One dislocates at the shoulder.
Her father screams from the shore.
I run
uphill
on the sandy bottom.
Susan, so cold
in my arms,
begins to choke,
then, vomiting,
embraces me
and laughs,
and laughs.

V. A. Hospital, Fort Harrison

There by the honeysuckle
around the sun porch
Dad and I walk
when he comes back
from death.
His heart is bad
this time too.
He gasps--
his face is blue--
he collapses in my arms.
I place his nitroglycerin
underneath his tongue.
"Stay, Daddy, please
stay with me this time."
He does, walking there
by the honeysuckle
where a little boy
catches bees in a jar
and watches them
buzz themselves to death.

The Yellow Swallows

On the road above the foot bridge
where Jimmy falls into the slough
the swallows whir
their yellow bellies
in my face, scare away
my worm from nosing trout.

Below the dam, bobbing
in the yellow foam
Jimmy floats along
to the canal where
big bass feed
underneath the water cress.
He screams once.

This June we'll play in the crawdad pond
above the dam. We'll catch enough
for stew. The birds will leave us be.

Jimmy rises above
the cress. The yellow
swallows dive at
his staring eyes.

Cooney Convalescent Home

The lobby--
spotless.
Easy chairs, a couch,
four TVs,
card tables with jigsaw puzzles,
none complete.
Posed,
the cutest little couple in the home
hold hands.

Room two--
A daughter feeds a spoonful
of tapioca pudding to her mother
who spits it up
and looks at me
in recognition.

Nurses' station--
The TV drowns
the blips
of number four's heart monitor.
One nurse works the daily crossword,
another cheats at solitaire.
At my, "Where's Mrs. ____'s room?"
the card player rises to hand me
an admission form.

Exit one--
A stairway to a wall,
the handrail, newly polished brass
ready for inspection.

Room five--
A woman strapped to her bed,
her IV infiltrated.
In her hand the bell-cord torn
from the wall.
Stroking her swollen arm,
she moans a lullaby.

The sun room--
A widow stares
at the telephone,
checks her watch,
dials the same number three times
without lifting the receiver.

Exit two--
the street.
An open car door
blocked by and orderly
with a hypo.
He motions for me to roll up my sleeve.

Out of Kilter

Why am I standing here looking in the ice box?
My books are in the hall.
Am I reading Vonnegut or Roth tonight--
whichever one a beer will help.
Do I drink Oly anymore?

My dog is old. She farts by the fire.
Wear your slippers. There's a draft.
Indians in Moccasin Flats play violins
raucously. You wouldn't know.
But I was there in '54 when Swede
was knifed for saying "Grace"
before the Pemmican and wine.

Roth. And how tough it is to be a Jew.
It's not so easy being old and fat and drunk,
either, buddy boy. A norther's coming in
off the Lake through the window.
The mountains disappear. Sparrows feed
in their box on the corner of the deck.
Snow in April. Perhaps Vonnegut and a change
of diet for the dog.

West of Bernard DeVoto's Cedar Grove

A stand of Tamarack,
sharp against a sky gone mad.
Pend d' Orielle country, Idaho.
The hatch is on--
Salmon Flies to feed
the trout finning in the riffles.

I wake in the night, frightened
by a bear fondling his mate
in the brush. I laugh and turn
to move a cone before nude warmth
of earth receives my dream.
Sleep is rich beneath the stars.

The Lochsa swells to crescendo
and cuts toward the falls. In the pool
I see the Dolly Varden, deep.
She sees the ess of line.
She strikes and starts the play.
Speckled girl, you're mine today.

for Richard Hugo
1923-1982

Touching Home

About that baseball diamond
in Deer Lodge I tore up
with my motorcycle. It began
when my uncle Glen made just for me

a ferris wheel. I loved him.
After my father died the spring
when I was twelve, Uncle Glen
came to see us Christmas.

He gave me a mitt, not the first base
he played so well in Helena.
He's dead now too--
and I have you to laugh with, Coz.

I was talking of Glen the other day
with Mom--the time up Dog Creek
with your brother John. We drove out
with a sack of Brook trout.

Our old hoopie boiled over on the hogback.
Conserving the rest of the beer,
Glen took a hip boot from the trunk,
scrambled down the bank to the creek,

and filled it to the top.
We chain-ganged the boot to the car
and gave her a big drink,
a remedy which seems right now a fine idea.

Donna, Below Yaak Falls

A sparrow flies
from the laurel grove
You pose in the morning sun
You're unaware
that your breasts are bare
The deer begin to run
You shake the water from your hair
The trout begin to rise
I fish the swirl
below the pool
and know
that nothing dies

McClay Bridge

Yesterday, wasn't it Dear?
We were swimming in the Bitterroot.
Showing off, I surfed the rapids,
then, to scare you, jumped
from the topmost girder of the bridge.
Cannon balling, I splashed
the kids on the road.

And later, you braved the run with me.
Side by side, stroking deep,
we let the eddy take us
around, across the swirl
to our friends by the fire on the beach.
Many Beers was there with his uke
and the latest Kingston Trio tune.

We sang of old sloops and home.
And feeling there, we kissed
and thought of this day.
You've just called from work.
At your request I peel some spuds,
chill the wine, pick up the house,
clean up Jim, and write for you,
my Dear, this poem.

for Donna Smatlan Dale

Nine Pipes

My boys and I go fishing Sundays
at Nine Pipes--after the Salish chief
who tried to save his people.
Good medicine--
ringed by the Mission Range
and the Cabinets, at sunset
water is fire. Fog at dawn
the smoke of peace.

We have to cast for Jim.
He knows wind
rippling his bobber is bass.
Once it is, a wee one,
his dorsal fin a lesson--caress.

Calculating light and speed,
I photograph Mount Harding--
after the white chief who tried
to steal Wyoming.
Salish are the mountains.
Turtle Woman poses on a log.
Blue Heron offers her leg,
the sunlight on her thigh.

Erich ponders frogs among the cattails.
No pictures. No bait. No spears.
Simply communion, a child's game.
Dave fishes the creek down,
his body, rod, and essing line
a Flathead song.

for my sons

Floater Beware

Jesus, Old Man, remember
 that run down the Swan?
 What a name for a crazy river, eh?
 The bend swept us

right into the bank,
 the bushes and pine branches
 ripped your rod from the raft,
 lifted my hat,

and, as an afterthought,
 rearranged my nose.
 And, Oh, Christ, the log jam.
 Way out of control,

crashing,
 doubling the raft,
 we lost the rest of the gear--
 and nearly Old Dad.

How did you ever learn
 that leap frog
 over Tamarack spears?
 that stutter step across the beavers' lodge?

Some nights I feel the wrist lock
 that wrests me free
 from the force that sucked me down,
 down, underneath that goddammed dam.

When we sloshed ashore at Point Pleasant,
 the two escapees from Swan River Youth Corps
 gave us their six trout.
 I haven't fished the river since,

even from the bank,
 but if you can break away from golf,
 maybe we can try a fly or two
 where Cilly Creek flows in.

for David Mathew Dale

Missouri Float

To float
with herons
blue and soaring
To fish
for Rainbows
in our wake
To sing
with Erich's line
a chanty
and tremble
for Missouri's sake
To laugh
at frog's discordant croak
and smile
at Kenny's awkward cast
To land
with friends
at Townsend bridge
and pray to God
our song
will last

for Erich Arbie Dale

Almost Skunked

The rotten log I'm sitting on breaks
in half. On my butt in the gravel bar
I laugh at the Jocko River's private joke.
No fish, not even a nibble.
On my way to camp I'm lost in seven foot cattails,
still phallic in August.

Paul, beyond perspiration at seventy-five,
shares his catch
cooked with onions and spuds,
before cribbage and beer and sleep and the dream again
of Jimmy on the footbridge fifteen inches wide,
the handrail facing down the inlet.

The hole below us narrows fifty feet down stream
for the rush to the reservoir a mile away.
I've two rainbows big enough to smoke.
I rebait, hook my shirt as Jimmy has his strike.
He's coltish on the planks.
To let him land his fish, I move.

His splash is thunder in the sun.
So slow beneath the bridge,
his eyes, under water,
moon wide,
see nothing.
My scream is mute.

I remove my vest . . .
take a careful step into the stream.
I stroke a perfect scissors, glide,
touch him, lift him gently up into my arms.
We hug long in the current,
sobbing, laughing, before we talk again.

for James Wilson Dale

Letter to Sizer from Big Arm

Dear Myron,

This morning we hiked
to Upper Morell Falls,
Jimmy, Erich, Donna, and I,
and on a ledge a hundred feet
above the cataracts, ate
a picnic lunch, the spray
making the sandwiches soggy.

Erich, of course, scared us
with his derring-do at the edge.
We kept a tight rein on Jim.
But what I have to tell you is,
my Donna, in order to test
the doctor's guess that my heart
was good for another mile or two--
tripped on a root
and fell--back into my arms.
I couldn't have been more tickled.

I thought of sailing
with you at the helm, hiked out
and laughing maniacally in the face
of a 50 knot gale on Flathead Lake.

My best regards to your Cora,
Dave

To Brother Snuffy, from Brother Feets

This to thank you again for showing
me McCaffrey's Pack Camp
and leading me through the corrals
and down the secret trail
to the beaver dams in the meadows below.

Just this morning Erich and I
met a doe in the mist,
eating this year's first onions.
She let us fish.
Those big, red-bellied Brookies
still hang
about the logs
and in the ponds
tucked into the grove
of golden willows,
fishable only by a quarter
mile wade around
the beargrass and the cowbells
where aspen stand
quaking with our splashes.

Much rain this May. We took
eight trout apiece,
two meals only--some rules
are worth remembering.
No booze this trip.
I'll try a sober spring--
Erich says, "Right on, Dad."
(Hell, I'd just as well try summer too.)
No beer cans again around
the fire pit near our giant Tamarack.
Somebody knows we care.

Sounds to me you're working
too hard, old friend.
Come on--let someone else mind the store.
You'll sleep well again
after a good stiff drink
of this Clearwater air.
We're waiting for you
way up here in God's living room.

for Larry Hibbard
1937-1991

Recipe for Flathead Pike

Pike lurk among the reeds--
use wire leader and a treble hook.
Sucker meat for bait;
leave the caudal fin--I'll tell you why.
Build a fire on the beach.
Use cottonwood and juniper,
no bugs--good smell.
Get the beer from the raft.
Make camp.

Check your rod.
There's a Carp nosing the night crawler.
Atta boy. We've bait.
To the Pike the fin says Bullhead.
Make the meat curve
provocatively. Cast above the hole.
He's deep. Leave the bail open--
his being all assumes no resistance.
There goes your line back to the reeds.
Hit him now!

Six pound test needs
seven minutes playing time.
Now he's done. Ease him in. Careful,
he'll take your hand for his hook.
Sixteen pounds, a trophy for a Californian.
To hell with him.
Filet the back meat. Blend beer
and flour for batter. Coat and fry in oil.
Serve with spuds and corn on the cob at sunset.
Salud!

Rainbow Lake on a Rainy Day

Fish jumping around our raft won't bite
on worms or spoons. You keep casting anyway,
laughing at private jokes: Old Orville--
to fix the hole in his pocket his wife simply
sewed another to the bottom. His reaching for change
still keeps us in stitches. We see the flag
waving from the Tamarack by the ramp.
Breakfast: eggs over easy, hash browns, and trout.

As we row in trolling, a Rainbow strikes.
Another captures the Coeur d' Alenes.
We'll play some cribbage after chow.
Remember, at ten cents a peg you owe me
Thompson Falls. Listen. The Blue Grouse
knows the sun's behind the next cloud.

for Dick Standen

Montana Primer

Al taught me three big salmon eggs
above the barb, one split shot.
I should bounce the bottom through the riff
and just above the hole, bang,
a strike every time.
I'd sleep through every drive.
Back by noon, he'd fry the trout,
dipped in egg and corn meal,
and serve with bread, baked beans,
and one clandestine beer.
I can't find his creeks and rivers now.

Jimmy's asleep, his legs over my lap,
a dream playing smiles across his face.
We hunt new streams.
I teach him Daredevils,
Wonderlures and Hurricanes.
Spin through the hole, son--not too fast.
Big Mouth feel like logs.
Set the hook easy.
I know the drag is right.
We'll filet this baby on the spot,
cook him, and serve him up
with those spuds baking beneath the coals.
Here, Jim-lad, have a slug of Old Dad's beer.

for Al Borsberry

Letter to Ernie from Helena

Hearing of your trouble at the Rusty Nail Saloon,
I felt a poor friend indeed. Christ, I wish I'd remembered
to tell you of the Case of the Swimming Pool
in Zillah. It seems some kids were playing
grab-ass. One knocked my David down. It was miles
until I hugged him "It's O.K." in my arms.
Then I went berserk. Donna tells me I screamed
mellifluous obscenities at the boy, his buddy,
and the lifeguard before I broke the latter's nose.
Then someone called the cops.
Felony Assault--later dropped.
One cop asked, "Freud who?"
when I tried to explain the tiger inside that comes
when you try to protect your kids.
This weekend we'll talk again on the Swan.
Let's stop at the bend where the ants rule the bank.
Remember Jimmy stirring them into a stew,
then running backwards off the edge into the hole?
You grabbed him quick and called him your dead bother's name.

for Ernie Kradolfer

The Games We Play

We were twelve, I think, at the softball game
up Rimini when Rollie-the-Hotshot,
who went on to play Class/A ball
with the Timberjacks of the old Pioneer League,
hit a homer way beyond the stand
of lodgepole pines and drove in three runs
to receive the adulation of our folks.

My only hit bounced high
above the pitcher's head
and after Tommy-the-Shrimp struck out,
I died on first.
In the bottom of the ninth I bobbled
the pop fly, overthrew second.
My father went to get another beer
while the runner scored--four to three.

My junior leaguer's too deep
too slow to catch the fly to right.
The runner scores--bottom of the ninth,
six to five. Jimmy won't have to bat.
We'll leave for the sport up Clark's Fork.
With his mitt we'll field some grasshoppers
at Blackfeet Bend. We'll bait our hooks,
with spit for luck, and pitch to the German Browns,
hungry, ready to hit and run.

Letter to Marshall from the Clearwater

Dear Charlie, Remember your claim
that ice cream causes heart attacks?
And my counter that coffee gives you clap?
Well, barium enemas sure as hell
give you cramps. But no tumor,
thanks to Big Ernie. Yesterday a new kid
on the staff expressed relief after hearing
that his leukemia was a kidney infection.
What's the real disease creating
such hypochondria? We know the cure
though, don't we? The Clearwater.
There's a pool just downstream
from the cabin where the Rainbow rise
to Mayflies every moon,
and riffles a mile below where we screen
for sculpins for the Loch Laven north
of Sperry Grade. A story in The Missoulian
today tells of nine of the ten pregant
women living south of Condon
miscarrying. County Health diagnoses
2-4D sprayed for weed control.
(Birth control?) My God, Charlie,
let's go fishing. I'll meet you in the Lodge
the day the Hellgrammites fly.

Grandpa's Favorite Spot

Up to his armpits in the muck
of the beaver dams up Snowshoe Creek
Grandpa needs help. Dave and I pull him out
and help him back to the car
where he sleeps in the Bear Grass,
losing his favorite knife.
Years later we'll find it rusted
in the Indian Paint Brush by the bridge.

I lose a boot in the same hole.
With a few pan-size Brookies I limp back.
A game warden waits, blinds me
with his revolver, chromed, a gift from the governor.
"These your fish?" He swings a stringer-full in my face.
(Someone's left them weeks hanging in the water.)
"You Asshole. They're decomposing, for God's sake."
"Fish is fish--ten bucks. And twenty more for "Asshole.'"

Forget that creep.
Find your kids upstream.
Rig Erich a Woollyworm for the big bend
in the meadow, help Jim undo his rooster tail,
clean some trout with your favorite fishing knife.
Nail the lunger finning there since last spring.

On Sending the Kid to University

Now I understand
why the son has to leave home.
When he comes back
that first weekend, gushing
about rush parties, registration lines
and new pals in the dorm
I can feel the way
I did the first time he hegged me hard
and whispered Dad
before I tucked him in.

And I understand too
why the second day
he's bored--with Dad's b.s.,
with girls who giggle when they talk--
and with his beat up Chevrolet.
So leave again tomorrow, Dave,
to chemistry, biology, and golf--
to Tri Delt girls sophisticate
and poker games till dawn.

But still I want you
beside me once again on Rock Creek
listening to the stream and me
teaching you how to cast a fly--
and the Creek
after your oh-so-fine presentation
giving you her Rainbow.

What We Call Our Own

My grandpa
would take off
his thumb
and throw it
down the stairs.
I could hear it bump.
I'd look
until my gram,
his Didlet
(from Katydid for Kate)
would say "Dad,"
just so.
Now my Jim and I
play Whose Nose Whose?
until my Donna
whispers "Dinner."
All thumbs,
our Jimmy tries
to use
his knife and fork.

Rules of the Road for the Apprentice Brakeman

On the approach to the depot,
 stride, don't hop from the caboose
 or you'll be picking cinders
 from your hands and knees
 as the conductor's lantern swings
 "okay" to the engineer and switching crew.
 Leave your call early
 to be on Petty Creek
 an hour before the West-bound's due.

Don't flail the water with your weighted line,
 scaring the trout and hooking bushes
 with the wrong fly.
 Watch the old man fish above the pool:
 Stop your cast at one o'clock.
 Pause, say "Ah," flex the forearm
 and gently with the wrist
 complete the ess's final curve
 to touch your Royal Wulff
 just at the outer edge of the last ring
 of the circle made by the two pound Cutthroat
 waiting for another pass.

When you go to swing aboard the 805,
 Reach for his hand. Take the first watch,
 let him rest. Saltese Crossing's a breeze.
 Wake him up before Taft to read the signals right.
 The tunnel's black and long.
 And don't hop off at Avery.
 You'll need good knees
 for the hike through Saint Jo Gorge
 to our camp among the pines.

for Glen Barlow Wilson
 1913-1973

The Milwaukee Road

One hundred thirty nine
inches of snow
on Lookout they say--
and winter half over . . .
But it's cozy in a caboose--
the stove sizzles
and the coffee perks.

Only three cars to switch
at Bonner--logs,
we'll have to check the binders.
Remember that crazy brakeman--Wilson?
He'd stand between the rails
and laugh at the couplings' crushing jaws.
And logs this run.

Here comes Little Joe to the south
to welcome us in.
And me into Carl 46 thousand--
it's hard to come back
from a double skunk in crib.
He'll pay his debt with the first beer
in the Snag Saloon in Avery.

Remember the run when we jumped
just east of Lombard to fish old Sixteen?
Big Brookies,
the kind that bust your heart--
so egg crazy, we couldn't keep baited up.
Yes, real tackle busters, natives,
wild, as they're meant to be.

And it's home soon to Harlow,
the wife and kids and Sunday pot roast.
We'll work on the Short Line
in the game room--finish
the new hopper car and make
the ore run to Deer Lodge.
Dave can be engineer.