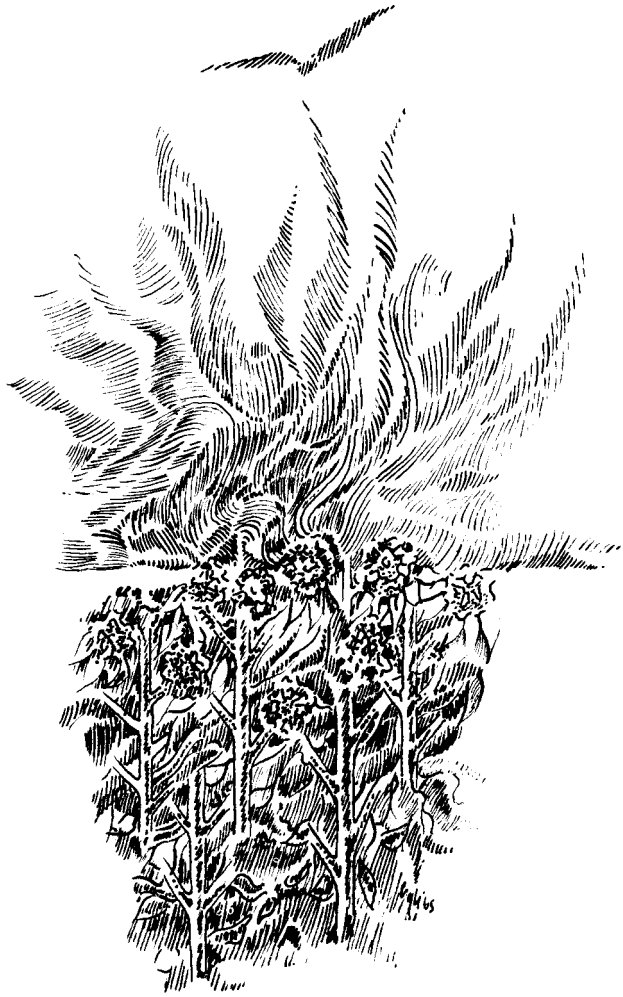


Tern's Bone
and Other Poems
by Suzanne Gross

drawings by James Cagle

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
FROM THE CAUSE OF SAINT ELIZABETH	6
TERN'S BONE	8
DEEPWATER WIFE	10
GRASS ORACLE	11
DATELINE: DEATH	12
THE LINK	14
FOX VALLEY ORACLE	16
STUDY OF A DOG'S HEAD	18
MAA NE HRA	19
MY FATHER'S SON	22
A GRAVE IN THE DESERT	23
THE OSEBERG QUEEN	24
CORONA BOREALIS	
<i>The Prairie Gull</i>	30
<i>Orion</i>	32
<i>In the Marsh</i>	34
<i>The Runes</i>	36
<i>Horses</i>	38
<i>The Snowtree</i>	40
<i>Cantata</i>	42
<i>Nocturne</i>	44
<i>Advent</i>	46
MONOLOGUE TO SAINT MARY MAGDALEN	48

Introduction

We are proud to devote this issue to the work of Suzanne Gross, on the tenth anniversary of her first appearance in these pages. Her "Guitarist" in the Spring 1955 issue was the first of her poems to receive national publication. Since then her work has appeared in a dozen magazines and has been widely honored: In 1958 she won first prize in the first Sister Madaleva Poetry Association contest. In 1961, first prize in the *Chicago Choice* inaugural issue competition. Her poems have been in the Borestone Mountain *Best Poems of 1961* and *Best Poems of 1962*. Her first volume was *Sand Verbena* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1962).

Born in winter 1933 in Janesville, Wisconsin, Suzanne Gross attended the University of Pittsburgh and, for a summer, the University of Wisconsin, before graduating from Beloit College. She has worked for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Department of the Interior) and the Agricultural Research Service (Department of Agriculture) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and for the Forest Service there and in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin.

Since 1963 she has been Poet in Residence at St. Norbert College, West DePere, Wisconsin, a school to be congratulated for its wisdom in providing for the poet the ideal proportions of association with the academic community and freedom for writing. The combination is rare.

M.K.S.

Of herself and her work, Suzanne Gross says:

I am not far from the farm. On my mother's side, a great-grandfather came from Devonshire during the Wisconsin wheat boom, planted 1,000 acres near Janesville to the gold grass, and was wiped out with the others. In my memory there is a terrible story of fire on that farm.

On my father's side, a great-grandfather came from Hesse-Nassau, farmed in Ohio, and then in Wisconsin. My father's father farmed in the Kickapoo valley, near Bear Creek where my father grew up. I have been on that farm, folded in the hard hands of the hills, subject to floods, timber rattlers, deep winters, and the violent cycles of God that make gristle in the hearts of men and women. On that farm I milked enormous cows, with my face in the sweet flank and the milk singing in the pail; I picked strawberries and blueberries; shelled corn until my hands were polished and too tender to touch; snapped beans on the back stoop for a thousand lifetimes; loved a dog, was run away with by a fat horse whom I also loved, and listened to the dogs running the foxes in the dark.

From such bearded forefathers, such tales, and such a childhood I drank up a hungry cherishing of the ground, and the worship of water. Five years in the desert only made the hunger sharper and the worship more deep.

It is said there are Normans in the beginnings of my mother's father's family. If so, perhaps it was their fathers who passed on to me something about the sea, and the ships on the sea.

Five years with the United States Department of Agriculture, in the Animal Disease Eradication Branch of A.R.S., and in the Forest Service, brought me to facts that expanded, enriched, illumined land and water, and increased the wonder.

Inextricably interwoven with these sources of flesh and spirit is, for me, Christ. I am a Christian

because all my ancestors have been as far back as my ancestors can be discovered at all. I am a Catholic Christian, gladly, because of Demeter, and because of Dionysus, who have not been lost but taken up; and because I must eat and drink Christ, that I shall not let the body or the earth go, or be left behind.

Probably I am a poet for the same reason that I am a woman; though I do not understand why I should be either, I rejoice to be both.

When I was a child, my mother read me Milton's "Sonnet on His Blindness." I did not know it then, nor for several years afterward, but I was hopelessly in love with the English language from that moment. And I do not resent that it must *mean*: I love the sounds it makes because they mean, and can teach me to mean always over and over again, newly. And I do not mind saying over and over again what we have always said: how lovely the world is, how painful too, and mysterious; how good love is, and how much like death; how fearful death is, and we do not know what we shall become.

Like all poets, I suppose, I hoped in the beginning to say new things in a new language. I am not now ashamed of that hope, but I had rather now say these things over and over until I have learned how to sing them: perhaps this is why I love best of poets my dear Milton, and Keats, and Shakespeare, and John Donne, and Wilfred Owen, and Dylan Thomas, and Edith Sitwell, and Whitman, and Dickinson, and living men and women whose names, I think, follow as naturally as sons and daughters from those above.

And perhaps that is why the music I love, and that is so essential to, and so much a part of, my work is Bach, and the strong, classical Chopin we know so little, and Schumann and Brahms, Mozart, Beethoven, and Richard Strauss.

And perhaps that is why I am not, at least not willingly, of the family of Rimbaud. I too, would approach the condition of music; but I believe that no beatitude is to be won head-on.

Suzanne Gross

From the Cause of Saint Elizabeth

Then we followed on her voice, sounding
down the narrow passages and down
the windings of the hollow stairways,
and so we came up with her, alone
in the empty hall of the Wartburg,
where she hugged the naked wall, turning
her face to crush its bones to the cold,
and crawling her fingers up and down
the stone, patting it, pressing it, then
driving her nails hard against the rock,
as she would dig a hole to hold to.
Huddled under the dark vaults, we
heard her say ah body, how shall we do,
we have lost our friend. Then she suffered
us to lead her helplessly to sleep.
So going in, she saw their silent
bed and crying God, ah will of God,
fell all her length headlong to the ground.

All this time, those who went out with him
to the Holy Land were riding home
from Italy, fraught with his princely bones.
We saw them passing through the valley,
going north along the River Lech.

Over the casques and the blowing hair
of men and horses, a silver cross
with five great rubies moved to his pace
that bore it. Black horses followed him,
bearing that casket where the duke's bones
lay wrapped in silk and cloth of silver.
Through the dust, the velvet footcloths shone.
Once, men's voices burned out in psalms
that flowed away over the water.
Then nothing sounded, only their feet
lifted and falling, the shift and strain
of harness, and horses' sighs; the clink
of hoof on stone, a bird, and the leaves.

And so alone beyond the grieving
knights she stood beside his bier. And there,
as she so long desired, they opened
her the coffin and she looked on his
bones. A little while she leaned her hands
against the edge, then slowly spread them
out, reaching all her fingers to touch
the remnants of his body. At this
she broke and wept aloud, and sank
down on the bier, holding in her hands
some fragments of his hands. And so she spoke
to God: I know not all is lost
when bodies are, though flesh is our bread.
Surely we shall find our flesh again
dearer than we knew. Till then be this,
this, the hand you strike with, shut on me.
I had no gift to give but this: none
but this was dear, and nothing more was
mine. And thank you in this place and time
to hold again this little much of
the hands you made for me to sleep in.

Tern's Bone

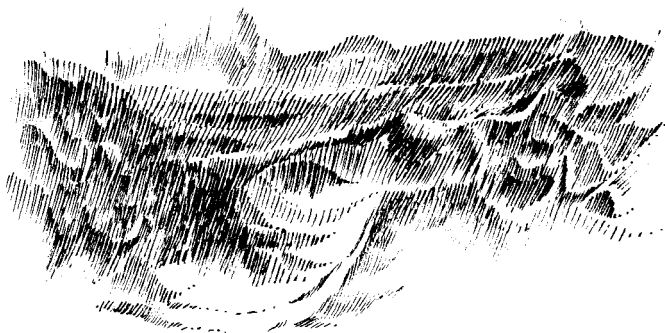
A black tern of the inland sea
has given me the polished bone
that built a seabird's breast in him,
and held the deep muscles of flight
clasped like hands around the muscle
of his heart. When I saw the bone,
it lay in a litter of beer
cans and torn beach party papers:

a little shipwreck in the sand,
the graceful keel turned up to catch
the light. I found the loveliness
of this as he that left it here
for me once found his feeding there.
The black tern is a scavenger
though he can dive into the sea.

In my hand his breast lies empty
now. Not even he shall ever
drink again the wine the precious
kylix of his bone held for him.
Another now has poured it out
beside the sea. So shall the son
and father die, and leave a key
of silver and a key of bone,
though neither shall unlock for us
their singing and the doors of death.

The killer of bulls, when the grace
of his courage is gone, leaves his
torn and bloody shoes. No music
is more than this bone. The soaring
bird that left it here is gone now.

Then who may assure me that he,
the legendary rapist now
coming closer in the darkness,
though old and brutal, truly is
my spouse whom I shall learn to love.



Deepwater Wife

I don't believe she ever spoke
his name. Andrew, she called their son,
but never told us if it meant
that seaman, and that saint. Perhaps.
She came daily to the hot beach.
Some of the time she swam: not well,
but trusting the water as we
could not, letting it draw her down
inside itself, under the waves,
moving her through the layers of light
and dying light, the bands of blood
warmth and shocking cold, surrendered,
as if she were or would be drowned.
Long before the first of us saw
the least shadow of smoke, she knew
the invisible density
below the shifting horizon .
And when, at last, a ship arose,
her eyes broke and left her open to the sea.



Grass Oracle

How barbed with light the seeming
armor of the wheat, the glumes
that hold the topaz folded
grains so folded between them,
as the kernel hides the haulm
in the secretly feeding
sun of the stranger's bread.

This is the friend and the flesh
and the daughter of heaven,
the low, and grace of the ground,
and the meek, and that gentles
the fire and the breakers of rain.

See, it is only the grass,
having too a hollow culm,
the leaf sheath wrapped around it,
and the thin blade of the leaf
a little broken and curled;
and having sessile spikelets
with barbed or bearded glumes.
See, it is grass. See, it shines
light of its own on itself
and is gold.



Dateline: Death

The paper told where
it happened of course.
I have forgotten
the place now. It could
have been the corn-green
town where I was born
and the trestle curves
a little west to
cross the power dam:
there where I stood once,
stricken on the bank
above the rainbow,
and let explosions
in the water spin
me down and drown me.

The paper said three
children walked across
a trestle tall as
mine was. They were one
boy nine years old, one
girl of six, and one
thirteen, who was her
sister. When they had
come halfway across,
the water running

louder under them,
glittering more now
into their squinting,
they heard the diesel
horn behind them blow.

Silently all three
began to run. Then
the youngest fell, caught
her ankle hard, down
between the shaking
ties. The others leaped,
before they missed her,
safe from the roadbed.
Then, only then, one
saw her sister held
before the train, who
turned again, ran back
again, and tore at
the shackled foot. Then
she knelt on the ties
and took her sister
in her arms, blinding
her against her breast,
and said to her see,
I am here with you,
there is nothing to
be frightened of.
And the train struck them.

It may have taken
five minutes at the
most, the newspaper
said. She could not have
known the thing she chose.
She could not have known.

The Link

Now that I think of it, I think
it's no wonder the tarsier is
never found out of its island;
still less surprising it is rare,
nocturnal, and so little known.

I am getting ahead of my
self. What I wanted to say is,
I remember reading in one
of those popular, misleading
books of science, how the author
caught, or was caught by, a tarsier.
Its picture, too, was in the book:
a quite unlikely animal
closely, as it were lovingly,
clothed in its fur. The photo showed

its articulate paws and its
sort of smile. Its head, or I should
say its face was eyes: slanted, huge,
shining and dark—the eggs that hatched
the resurrection of the dead.

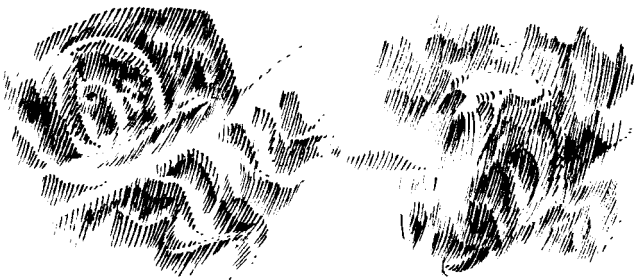
But I am digressing again.
Apparently hoping to find
whatever should discover him,
the man went into the forest,
walking in the dark. There, the light

he had unexpectedly fell
on a tarsier and blinded it.

There are a number of easy,
inadequate explanations
of all that followed. The tarsier
sprang out of the light to the man
it saw, however dizzily,
behind, or beyond it, and clung
to his naked arm, huddling its
body deeper into the warm bend
of his elbow. Once it looked up
out of its becoming, blinded eyes
into the other's. Then it hid
its face against him, trembling
all over, and hugged him harder.

The man forgot the specimen
to know what beat against his arm.
He touched it, spoke to it. He bent
his shoulders and his breaking chest
around it, trying to tell it.

I don't remember if he said
he collected the thing and it
died on his hands, or if he said
he let it go there in the dark,
in the green tremendous silence.





Fox Valley Oracle

I shall take leaves
and go to ground:
cleft, the furrow, mouth of earth,
and let the breath of earth
be breath in me.
And I shall say

here, it is here in the dark

and nine rooms of night:
in the flared owl's hunting and flight
over the hay and the crowns of light;

in the pulsing and shiver of singing
by the milkroute roads and the ringing
of berries and catkins swinging

over the porches and the stinking flood
of the river. I shall say the buried blood
of children founds the mud

of houses, crumpled alleys
bear the names of men from valleys
of apples, the fox, and the sallies

of the whitetails to the sprung grain.
It is here in the nightlong reach of the rain
to the sleeping women slain

by the glitter of sulphur; and here
in the running of chain and the freighter's sheer;
in logs winking and gear

branching iron, the slips
and the bull wheel, the stone ships
shouting, and the flaking chips

of dung in the burdock; in an awn
of wheat; awake in the green caves of the lawn,
in the starred and smoking dawn

of the black-crowned heron, and the peace
of the houses broken by wild geese
passing unseen. It is a fleece

at the fair, it is a plover's cry.
The fathering swan of the summer shall fly
forever, and myths in the sky

be true. It is here

in the fields at the sea of a lake,
where seagulls float in the waved wake
of a tractor, waves break

through the roots of the farm,
and god is white pine
and the harp-horned mother.

Study of a Dog's Head

Quiet, she sat at my feet.
She was dark as an oak-leaf
dying, and I touched her face.
I held her head in the shape
of my hands, my fingers made
a crown, the spring of an arch
with her skull. I touched her face,
not for the warm, watersmooth
eddy and flow of her hair,
not for the ridging of bone
above the brain, as knuckled
and sudden as the mountains
in the sea, nor the wingspread
of the bone over her eyes:
for the two round veins rising
from under them, tingly
wrinkled with muscle and nerve—
it was for them I went down
on my knees to look at her
with my hands. I touched the two
veins, and I felt, I felt them
fill and fill and fill with blood.

Maa Ne Hra

My name is the throne
and I am she who reigns
in the palace the king is.
I am fields of barley, fields of wheat.
My name is bread.
I am the mother of millet,
and the water's wife.
I was a tent in the desert.

I bathe in the dark,
afraid to see myself
so naked. Never, never, the child
never was. Dust is in all
the glasses for wine and the leaves
of longed-for books are uncut.
The dog has found a way
to die and the shore birds
have flown from the shore.
High as the hay
that is high as a child is,
thistles have blown and are choking
the door, and while I slept,
the plover rose over the prairie
singing and flew from the land.
The clover is mowed
and their houses of grass.

All I had I gave away,
all but some books
and my letters. The sheets
that I signed with my blood
I burned. Under the sycamore,
under the tamarisk there I sat down
and wept the songs inside me.

The river poured me out,
it silted my body
with dust and my tongue
choked me. The mountains are lovely
where wind woman lives, but my
home is the prairie and I am your sister,
child of the chernozem and your father,
the father of rivers.

Long days we lay
together in our mother's arms
and breathed her hair. She taught us
how we grew in her. The single
blood that flowed between us
unfolded us both
from the same point of love.
It was for you then,
I am freemartin now.
Soon the sun will rise,
young animals cry to be fed.
We have colostrum in our hands.

It was your knees that made my hands
the shape they are to hold
anything in them, and your fingers
drew my face the way it is.
Where any bone that bears me now
turns in the bond of another,
you turn with me, you move.

I looked for you always,
with children and among the waterbirds.
When I found you by the river,
you had been torn and were dead.
I was the terrible
hawk that hung over you,
and found a father in the way
you held me in your eyes.

In the train between cities
I rode in the smoker where old
railroad men ruminated their cigars,
holding out their watches to exchange
remarks about lost time
and time to make up
at every stop. One of them once
held out in his hands
a handful of seed pods and asked
the old trainmen what they would be.
Nobody answered him. Haws, he said,
they're haws. And I saw through the glass
the plowed counties of spring. I call you
crying in the hands of that old man,
and in the always dark, religious furrows.

You do not hear me call you
crying over the heartsick hills
of the old road
north by the way of the shore.
It is darker
in the car than the night is
all around me. Ashes scatter
my thighs. It is colder in the car than
the walls are of snow.

Now I am old
as you are old in loss
who loved me in the dithyramb
of time and in the formal
pain of instruments:
you whose heart stands still
before the throne, the majesty
and gracious presence of death:
my brother who are prince
of death and promise of the corn.

My Father's Son

Like me, my father's son
grows old. Each year I see
him, he has a little
more loosed himself to slow
minutiae of death.

That is, his flesh gathers
earthward, a kind of mud
inches off his muscles,
pools, packs up fat to warm
an endangered belly
increasingly cared for.

The bad dreams of fathers
have bruised the slackened skin
around his eyes. His heart is
not in his children's games
as it was in his own:
who stood at the anchor
windlass in Norfolk Roads,

and dawn about to break
across the streaming chains,
and sang, because he knew
the song, *Away Rio*,
as the dark steel lifted
to meet the first dark sea.

A Grave in the Desert

Coming a long way and too late,
I found her name had turned to stone.
She was broken, she was numbers
cut in a rock. There I fell down.

My heart beat thick against the grave.
I lifted the sand and sunburned
grass to rinse my eyes and my mouth
in her body given me back

by that gravid, waterless ground
where she lay down young. I forgot
that careful laws enjoin concrete
and steel to keep me clean of her

unsafe, unsanitary flesh.
And I forgot I shall not live
to have wheat from the planting loins,
crumbs of the soil never shall fall

in my hands from hands that feed me.
So long I thought I knew my long
desire returning in the wild
rose along the road. Rather,

an iron thousand years shall lock
its lid upon the eye before
the any body of my love
shall run to seed and be my pasture.

The Oseberg Queen

Where the rough plow dove, look:
a ship is rising clean,
for a swan-stemmed she-drake
breaches in a sea of
mounds, she rocks her bonehoard
in a light grown older
by a thousand-year night.

A skerry of stallions
lies broken in the bow.

Fanged skulls of dogs bite clay
at the strewn hooves of the
auroch's calf, whose strumming
horns are wreathed in ropes. Here
where the holy horsebones
thunder among anchors,
tall sledges reel apart:
wood writhing with wound-worms,
light-elves, sharp flowers, and
the netted nervework of
the brain become the hands.

Here is a chest of wheat
and apples. Oh apples
keep their ancient shape more
than queens do in the grave.

For the queen's struck to her
black bones, who lay in the
beginning royal, robed

upon her bed, snake-necked
ward-wolves at the corner
posts watching her asleep.

No hound howled when a man-
shaped need clawed in the clay
that clasped her clay and hacked
away her arms to get
her red-gold rings. The dogs
of oak gape whole, their teeth

and their springing eyes are
sharp as ever. Mats of
thread imprint the earth, that
once were heroes ventured
from her loom. Looms unstrung
lie loud with the flutes of
her larking stark bones. Her
scissors and her spindle
roll with her spinning braids
and hoard of horseshoe nails.
Her wagon breaks in a
millenium of stones:
wood melons for the hubs,
a beast-twined shallow trough
the wagon bed, shafts for
the shaggy team that hauled
her state, four smiling swans
to rock her on. Cool skill
will build it whole again.
Between two planks of the
buckled deck a little
sharp axe lies perfectly
preserved. Now bow and stern
of the sea shell ship grave
curve as the bull calf's horns
or the shadowed moon; carved
sea-snake's arms or body
cradling still the viking
jetsam of a queen. They
who come to catalogue
the find shall find her lamps
of iron in her bones.
Her thirty oars are all
run out to row, though kin
and cattle die and sign
the meadows with their dung,

sow the sea floors with their
acts as nameless smooth as
sailors' skulls. The goggled
world takes pictures of a
ship swayed piecemeal up in
chains. The sea gives up its
bone and wooden dead a
lion or a dragon
or a sailor at a

time. A trove's tricked from the
drowning years, look! in the
tug and tanker tangle
of the harbor barbed with
steeple, islands, shipwrecks,
ways, hand in hand with the
bulging divers, wonders
walk in their wood and clay.
These cherubs hold kings' wheat,
a crowned sheaf on a shield.
How between their cloudbank
curls their cheeks still blow rich
winds and wars. Their wooden
fruit hangs green and ripe as
ever at their infant
thighs. The man-eyed lion
leaps no longer at the
bow-wave; still brave with gold,
he lies tamed by water
on the deep salvors' barge.
Beside him Hercules
bearded as a Swedish knight
glares in his hood of fangs,
the hell-dog captive at
his thick-toed feet. An arm
without a body lifts
a torch of wooden fire.

A hero with a book
treads Caesar down; headless
now, a Roman soldier
bears the furious moon
upon his shield. A one-
armed warrior, sheathed from head
to foot in his armor,
has no face. The lips and
fingers of the sea have
touched away the edge of
feature, the man is a
gesture in the body
of a tree: the knee and
elbow flexed, the bow
of unreal bones unstrung, the
crested globe so turned that
eyes gleam that are not there.
The nail that held his hand
and his harp to David,
rusted and fell away.
Here is the harp, and the
hand surrendered by the
sea. The harp is crude, the
strings too thick for song. But
how the certain hand still
arches gentle on the
bars, that elsewhere failed the
kingly body in the
sea. See, David's harp and
David's hand were carved all
one. The head of the oak-
breasted sailor rising
from a leafy corbel
has flesh enough for lips
wrung from his stump teeth and
cheeks grooved as he always

drowns. Eels writhe his lime-slick
hair, slide from his nostrils
into his mouth, eels loop
the bay of his sea-sucked
brains. Neither the scholars
nor the salvors know where
this image stood in the
watery hulk of men,
no, nor the lovely knight.

Bushels of money swing
from the sea, all lost ships
are full of treasure. A
cock crows on a painted
plate the size of bread, a
cock on a dunghill sings
up two suns in leaf or
two round trees rising. A
loaf of butter clings still
pale as wheat and rancid
in its keg. What Ragnar
bent with shackling fists to
pull this boot on? night and
the midwatch come again.
Oh, was it this one? See
the deep sea diving man
shod in lead, barred windows
at his ears, his wing-nut
necklace heavy on his
chest, twice cabled to his
crew on the rocking swell,
once to the subtle air, who
walked lost anchors down the
wreck. He stands forever
taken streaming on the
shore in valves and rivets,
mittening a sailor's

skull. His bloated suit is
smooth beside the mortal
scabs and angles of the
bone. Dark countries take their
shapes in light above the
shelving sockets where the
sea's remembrances have
spoken tides' night and the
shipmates' jagged cries to
patient mineral, though
no remembrance hungers
in the bone. The world's web's
unpicked in fish-mined eyes.
Hard bread and horse wore the
teeth as little as a
child's. The heavy wishbone
of the jaw was broken
by the sea. Still without
live sight or sound, wasted
bone sees on and on, tells
the diver's breast what that
last vision was that scooped
the meat of heaven from the
head. They found him fish-picked
in his humble shroud of
gathered bones beneath the
bronze ton of a cannon.
Oh, hear, the salty caul,
ache of darkness in the
shell that sings: I was. For
high above the crowd of
newsmen from around the
world, in nylon ropes the
heavy cannon sways, cast
with a king's name, little
mermaids, flowers, and crowns.

Corona Borealis

The Prairie Gull

How the harpstrung iron sang in earth,
when heavy horses walked the long fields,
and fathers called back the former light,
that green day seep to the inland bone.
Far out at sea, the folded seabird
slept, and no wing hurt the sleeping heart.

See, yet from the sea's unspoken heart,
searching the wound of the broken earth
that iron moulds, the risen seabird
finds the chords of air that arch the fields
unseen, and wrings to his blown bright bone
his shape shaken in the forming light.

From the naked metal light strikes light:
a flash as fire to the buckled heart,
a sun in chains at the turning bone.
From shod hoofs and the share in the earth
long lights ring to the church in the fields
of bread, gold as the eye of the seabird.

Ah sharp, sharp the wings of the seabird
carve out his storms in the formal light,
at the plough's wake in the homeward fields
where his cries dive on the ploughman's heart.
Huge hooves sink in the still bearing earth,
the following iron strikes to bone.

And none can think what flesh clad this bone
springing from the plough, that the seabird
seeks inland, swept deep to the rived earth;
or how long this lay cased from the light
in black wood, or the name of the heart
of the body spent in the red fields.

Lost with harpshaped iron in the fields,
now the wand and sceptre of the bone
appear. None can know if some dark heart
shall bloom that here fell sown. The seabird
shall harrow the seed: look where his light
wings rise to the sea from silent earth.

Over the fields the burning seabird
lifts his harp of bone in the last light.
The farm's heart wakes in the spinning earth.

Orion

I saw, last night, a lion shining
in the dark, pacing over the hills
and the still farms, going beside me
silent at my shoulder, at my hand,
as the road ran home. All night, all night
over me, he was a question of stars.

I might not have known him in the stars,
but that in a darkened room shining
with friends, I learned the fabulous night
where the great dog barks on the cold hills
of the northeast world, and the bright hand
of a swan's child waits to tame or break me.

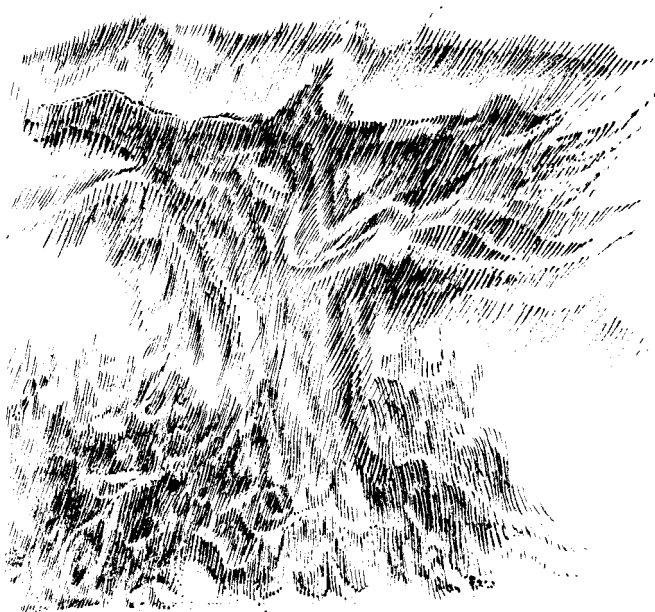
More lovely, more terrible to me,
tall Orion hunts among the stars.
That same dog follows at his left hand,
his sword is light, a sun his shining
arm. His, all his are the winter hills.
His white thigh is a glory in the night.

Deep in his body, the horse of night
calls to the astronomers, and me.
Still I seek, as I first found, his hills
fiery with snow, his orchard of stars:
before the lion sang, a shining
note burned in the sea-born hunter's hand.

And now look, look again; for my hand
turns the pages of the rising night
and finds no children's story shining
in the room: a lion has taught me.
There is a god's son among the stars
who bleeds: Orion once who walked the hills

happy with a loveless virgin—hills
safe from the daughters of wine. Her hand
slew him in the sea. He drowned in stars,
when the god of music dared the night
in the eyes of his twin. Over me
lion, Orion and the dark, shining.

From the snowing hills, from the deep of night,
slain Orion's hand and blood have touched me.
And more than the stars, the dark horse shining.





In the Marsh

Night, my night has fallen in the blood.
The secret, sweet marrow, white and gold
as early snow, has fledged out black-birds
from the center of the brimming bone;
has fleshed animals I never saw
until they all lay dying in my arms.

Oh close your eyes, sleep now, in the arms
of the ground: I dreamed an elk-calf's blood
had stained me to the heart: that I saw
the fawn look in at me — so, the gold
blackened in his wounds and eyes, and his bone
slacked — I bore it through the night and the birds.

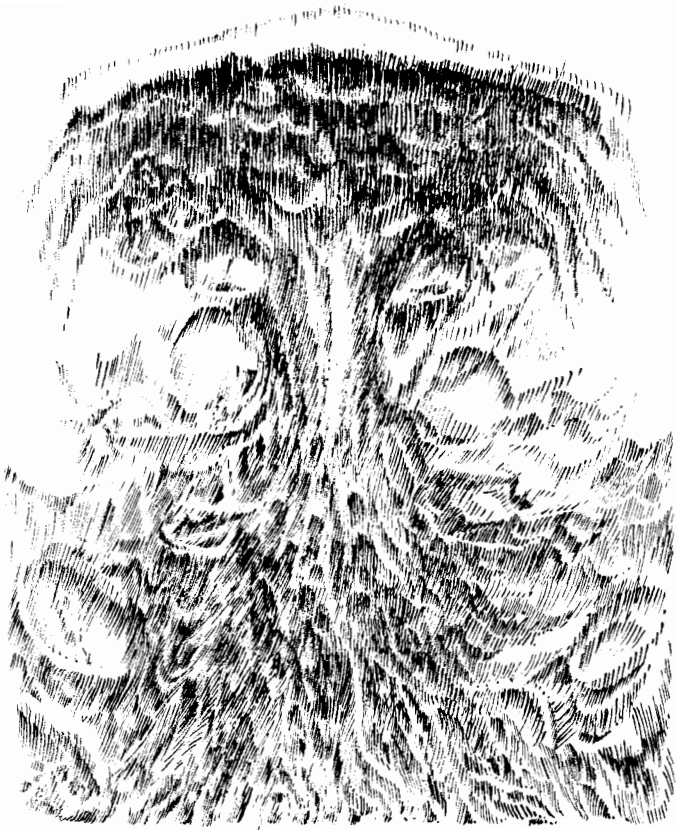
And I have dreamed, dreamed, dreamed of great birds:
the swan, the swan, too, fell in my arms,
so light, so light, that was flutes of bone,
northern cross. He marked me with his blood,
before he died still rayed with his gold.
His wings unbent and swept the earth, I saw.

Sleep, sleep now, close your eyes: I saw
the sun die too, that lighted the birds
home from the cornfields heavy with gold.
By the dark water, I raised my arms
to slow, dark birds. Slow and warm as blood,
my tears scarred the flesh wrought over the bone.

One day, in the marsh, I found a bone:
a mallard's thigh, or goldeneye's; I saw
it gleam in the red grass, all his blood
gone in the rains of spring. See, a bird's
bone's my fetish; see, my hunter's arms
are reeds in Horicon, clashing and gold.

Eyes, close your eyes: in the marsh long gold
light sang in the fretted woods, winged bone
sighed into the rising mist, my arms
ached with heavy cold — oh then I saw
the deer speak, one to one, and great birds
beat by in pairs, crying out of the blood.

Tell me: was that gold light then death I saw?
the frost at the bone an omen of birds?
for my arms and arms burn in the night's blood.



The Runes

When they come that shall lay me in earth,
who then waking in the prayers of flame
shall know, or could tell them: her eyes,
that bruise the cool flakes, embraced no voice;
the singing bones would sheave no more light.
Only she could touch, long before dying.

So it shall be, the stars all dying
out at last. I shall have worn the earth
smooth and so little, reaching through light
and rough love to trace the forms of flame,
listening to snow, and to the voice
of the Pleiades rising through dark eyes.

A line of song may stab out my eyes
and I, childless, walk away dying.
And I may lift a glass, and the voice
there in the wine pierce me and seel. Earth
shall ruin at the bone gates, dumb flame
leap, and fall down in the ashes of light.

Once before the last remembered light
flares and flutters out behind the eyes,
and thick dark chokes the animal flame
spent in the littered hoard and dying —
once, while I am still betrothed to earth
with broken rings of bone and a stone's voice,

come: spell in my hands all the world's voice.
Deeper in the flesh, that I feel light
break through blood, engrave the names of earth:
blue paws in the snow, the wolves gold eyes;
egrets, and evening's rose; the dying
swan at the singer's throat, and Rigel's flame.

Burn into my hands with hands of flame
the white bows seething seaward; the voice
of rivers in the desert, dying
black song and silver; the green light
that rises from the corn. Come, pierce eyes
in my hands, that I shall see the earth.

Cut me so with flame I shall crave no light,
nor then any voice more to bless the eyes
that led me dying to the heart of earth.

Horses

All the brave winter there were horses
on the hills. The day I drove from home
in the melting light, I saw the white
mare in the angle of the fence, bells
of mud dangling from her feet and mane.
She slept, I think, nor rang in the blown snow.

Beside her, rumpled and whisked with snow,
the dark one, in the way that horses
have, shook the comb of his crisp, clumped mane
and settled to her ribs, as at home;
his head hung over her, still as bells
that no one rings, so dark against the white.

As once I meant to pray, and the white
fields beyond the house of bread, the snow
shadowing the sky, the turquoise bells
swung in the steeples of spruce, horses
remembered, wound me to the green home
of some stranger, caught in the hills' mane.

But oh, she rode a horse, and the mane
all braided streamed, so lightly and so white.
And nobody I knew was at home
in that house. Arched and spinning in the snow,
in scarlet halters, two black horses
wheeled and sprang. Their male necks flared like bells.

There hung on every tress, silver bells.
Each dark stallion whirled his bannered mane,
and battered air; and then the horses
leaned hard bone on bone, and wreathed the white
pasture in a smoking spray of snow.
Play, she said, and sing, and know no home.

And so I turned away, going home.
She spoke: all the silver shining bells
sparkled as she spurred him through the snow,
and sparkling rang in the floating mane.
There in the broken corn, in the white
drifted field, I prayed for two black horses.

And I have come home, and hear the swept mane
shaking silver bells through the drifted white
days, the tinkling snow, the heartbeat of horses.





The Snowtree

We slept. All night the burning train rose
in the west, swaying into the dark,
moaning and swinging its single light
on a shrouded field, a hooded tree.
We slept. And all night long, fiery stars
fell, swam and drifted in the flowing snow.

So folding, unfolding wings of snow,
the flashing train soared home. And night rose
in a floating waterfall of stars.
Silent, silent, in the praise of dark,
all the starry animals, the tree
beside the blinded house, respired light.

From night, the so sleeping, gentle light
bloomed crystal, rang to the touch of snow.
Shining at the door, the apple tree
shimmered on a silver stem, a rose
of swan's feathers and ice, bearing dark
garnets, rubies, and gathered blood of stars.

All the world's waters sang in the stars
of jewelled dust on the boughs of light
that morning. Young rivers burst their dark
pens of ice and swirled away the snow;
seasalt and sweet, the swarming sap rose
warm in hidden branches of the bones' tree;

the gold blood fountained in the pine tree
throbbing through summer; pale shooting stars
in the firefly forest and a rose
on the whispered prairie shattered light
for the crowns of grass. Enchanted snow
floated the living tree, flowed from the dark

body of the wived field, from the dark,
weeping palaces of stone. The tree
is naked now, now the blessing snow
sinks to the starving roots. The swift stars,
with diamond claws and fangs of light,
tore the singing tree and the wild, one rose.

We sleep. In the dark heaven of earth, stars
and seas rise to the tree. In the mole-light
silently, silently, snow crowns the rose.

Cantata

Spring shall come: they are clearing the stones
from the fields; and see, the trance of death
shall break away and let the body
go. The sun shall discover the earth.
The shroud veils a bride asleep; the heart
unfolds that was so buried in the fall.

In the woods, below the waterfall,
I stand still and hear the melting stones
tick, and water dropping from the heart
of the fern-green ice sing me the death
of cold. I breathe in the taint of earth:
sharp, like bread; and sweet as a cow's body;

rank, like raw milk; good as the body
of a man haying and in the fall
of love. I kneel down to feel the earth,
the flood-combed grass, lichens on the stones,
clenched roots. When I rise to tell the death
of death, there is no one to hear my heart

say, it lives. And though I break my heart
to be your bread, and bless your body
in my hands, I come to bear this death
growing on my blood. O let me fall
asleep, and drown now, as the numb stones
shall drown when the whistling swans cross the earth

and cry. Though I would rock in the earth
forever, no worm will sing my heart
to sleep. I must go over the stones
to touch the flying hands and body
of this blind gull, and see the sun fall
on this green bay and wild swans in the death

of the daylight. Gulls struck gulls to death
here; they have written it in the earth,
in the lapped sand. And now the swans fall
deeper as they flash into the heart
of the water, seeing a body
cast a shadow here darker than the stones.

Come, sleep's brother death, close over my heart
the farming hands of earth. Let my body
fall harrowed. See, they are clearing the stones.

Nocturne

They say of the seal-wives they drown
the men who follow their song
beyond the breakers, walking
into the shipwecks and fishermen talking
under the sea, into the long
and echoing choirs of light to lie down

with the women the beautiful seals become. Down
there in the dark that is deeper than breathing they
drown

and never come home. They say it is death to long
for the seal-women so. Only the hearing their song
is the danger of death. I do not think they die. They
are all talking
together and singing there, and I am walking

under the water with them. I am walking
alive in the deeps of the rain, where deer lie down
in the streaming grass. I hear them talking,
I see them dive in the waves of the hay. Though I
drown

here, I shall not die. I am learning the song
the animals sing to themselves, hearing your hands
and long

hair stream in the long
swell of the rain. I am walking
on the shore, and hear at my ankles the song
the breakers say, rolling the pebbles up and down
to shine them smaller and smaller and drown
them at last in the dune-grass. Children are talking

there, out of the reach of the sea, talking
of cities to build in the sand. And I hear the long
combers come in and they call me. They will not
drown

me so close to the shore. I am walking
into them, naked now as I go down
the slope of the land under water. The song

of the breaking sea is rising to the song
that is breaking my breast. The voices talking
on shore and all the lights are dying down.
The water is lifting me, lifting me, long
waves have hold of me now. They are walking
me out to sea with them, naked and helpless, to
drown.

Blue water, teach me the song of my dying I long
to know. Still as they are talking ashore, teach me
to sing as I am walking
down to deep water, blinded and shining, to drown.

Advent

I did not see the snow begin to fall.
I was alone in the house, and did not know
how quietly that afternoon the light
was leaving me to all
that I belong to of the night,
and the drifting down of snow.

Soon, though, sharper points of snow
touched the tips of my eyes. I felt the fall
of winter tap at windows emptied by the night,
and tick in tiny hairs at my wrist till I could know
the closer cold drifting all
the hollows of the body. I reached for the light,

and my hand shrank as if pricked by the light
stab of a needle. Suddenly snow
glittered again on my mother's hair, as walking all
the way from church, I watched it fall
on her, flash, and fade in her furs. I did not know,
then, what the snow was. I only knew the winter night

hurt me with cold and stars. And I knew, when night
came early, I could see my breath vanish out of the
light.

The grown-ups said it was my ghost. I did not know,
then, how they knew, or why they wanted snow
for Christmas. I only saw the white sky fall
until I could not see the garden or the lily-pool at all

and white tombs covered all
the peonies. I lay awake against the night,
and tried, inside myself, to make the fires of fall
come back. Now, I sleep without a light.

Born in winter, mated in the snow,
pelted like the fox with fire, we cannot say we know

that after winter we shall know
the handclasp of the rain, though all
the fields lie down now in the snow,
turned from the plow as though the night
will not be long and the morning light
will come, and spring, and summer, and fall.

I only know that any night
at all may be forever when the last light
dies and the snow and the darkness fall.

Monologue to Saint Mary Magdalen

I too have let the desert rock me
dumb, and huddled in a skull, fierce to
be as nerveless, smooth, amnesiac
as that soupbone of the sun. But flesh
would not fall and let me season dry,
drifted with the cipher of an ox.

Still those horns arrest embrace and prayer.
Rib of cattle, skull of man, shapely
rack and fret, teach me nothing, nothing
but the gorgeous garb of flesh they wore.
So to the old bone's proscenium
my chorus, grave and naked, returns.

You who are my young mother, say
if the pale and tawny clients flared
always at your thighs, and your polished
fingers ached across the bone. Say that
when you turned a grove of lovers turned
with you into a daylight. I crave
that lost and cried away now, as I
think you did; and bless what bodies burned
upon my own; bless though hooded hell
whirl and clatter in the sand to dance
me broken on the wishbone of a
wound. I cherish lovely fire to slay
great angels in their holes. Could you, my
saint that were so rare a craftsman to
the taut and easy bone, curse flesh? you,
whose artful hands shut the tough, dusty
feet of God into your hair; who ran,
so simply glad again, to take the
brave scarred lover in your famous arms.