

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Daniel M. Spees for the Master of Arts

in English presented on May 6, 1994

Title: Asleep In The Orchard Grass

Abstract Approved: 

This thesis is a volume of poems introduced by a statement of personal and aesthetic concerns related to its composition. The introduction treats of both the political consciousness and the private self-awareness which influenced the creation of the individual poems. The primary aesthetic influence on the work is the deep image, surrealism being a lesser one.

The volume itself is divided into three sections: "Before All Possibility," "Lightning Among the Living," and "One More Distance." The aesthetic influences mentioned above become increasingly operative section by section. A controlling voice pervades the volume. Through the work, this voice moves from self-involvement, through connection to others, and finally, in the last section, into contact with the unconscious. Of course, to divide the work so neatly is somewhat deceptive: influences from each of the sections penetrate all of them.

The title of the work, as well as containing elements which resonate through a number of the poems, indicates contact, perhaps communion, with the intricate and various strands of thought, emotion, being, and experience which shape the self. This contact, as the idea of sleep suggests, is achieved largely through a bypassing of the conscious, analytical mind.

Asleep In The Orchard Grass

A Thesis

Presented to

The Division of English

Emporia State University

In Partial Fulfillment

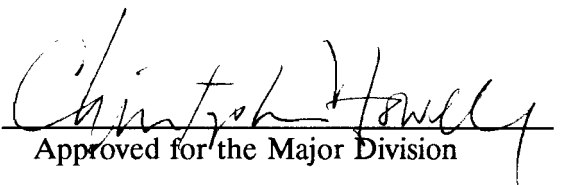
of the Requirements for the Degree

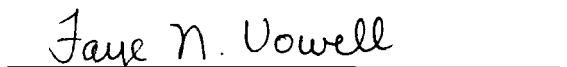
Master of Arts

by

Daniel M. Spees

May 1994


Approved for the Major Division


Approved for the Graduate Council

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to my son, Nathaniel, born during its writing, and the inspiration for much of its content.

I would also like to thank Christopher Howell for his invaluable help with the writing of this book.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
<i>I. Before All Possibility</i>	
Just a Scratch	7
The Surrender	8
Lake	9
Last Call at the Lucky Saloon	10
Lose My Balance	11
Crossing	12
Proverbs for Otherwise Defeated Men	13
Alcoholism	14
Nestlings	15
The Factory's Address is the Same, but Hers Keeps Changing	16
Heart Song	17
What the Sheep Said	18
<i>II. Lightning Among the Living</i>	
Beyond Matfield	27
Coffee	28
Asleep	29
Iowa	30
The Beauty of Winter	31
Just Rewards of Ambition	32
Front Stoop, 2 a.m.	33
The Window on the First Great Truth	34
Solace	36
Seeing the Last Sun	38
Harness	40
Brinesmell	42
<i>III. One More Distance</i>	
Baudelaire Changes His Stripes	44
The Bear Shifts	46
A Whisper	47
Pine Boughs	48
Affection for the Rain	49
Mousetrap	50
Surface	51

The Convergence Chorale	52
The Lizards	53
July 17, 1991	54
The Bargain	55
The Green Entrances	56
Yard Work	57
Nobody Was Expecting It	58
God Goes Fishing	59
The Tiber, the Spring, the Swamp	60

Introduction

I. Personal Considerations

As recently as a year ago, I would have said that a poem must consist of concrete language, a series of images. I would have said that poems should properly be understood to be experiences, not descriptions of experiences, that it is not the poet's job to "communicate" in any ordinary sense. The document I hereby introduce represents something of a departure from these ideas, though I do feel they are still excellent and active in my writing.

The shift between what I might have said a year ago and what I now propose was brought on by my developing awareness of the relationship between my writing and two broad categories of my consciousness. In the first category rests my perception of myself within the context of the human community, a context subject to a number of important subdivisions. For instance, I feel compelled to note that I am a white American male and have a particular set of impressions related to this status and to the world I see around me. It is clear to me that our society has waged genocidal war in order to occupy the wide slice of North America's psychological and actual space which it now does, and that it continues embarked upon a program of global imperialism. It is not my aim here to catalog injustices, but merely to observe that societies breed cultures, that an artist's work consists largely of one side of a conversation with his/her culture, and that the culture with which I am conversing is in many ways a vicious one. I believe that my work would suffer were I unaware of my privileged status and of the sufferings of those

upon the exploitation of which this privilege rests. I feel myself under an obligation to recognize, as a poet, that all is decidedly *not* right with the world, and that to the extent to which material/political reality is important in human experience it is also important to art and the making of art.

I do not think that this perspective dictates that individual experience always be sacrificed to communal experience or that every poem serve a political agenda. Poetry is not obliged to initiate social change, serving as it does other equally important functions. There is in any case some question as to its efficacy in bringing about such change, particularly in a society like that of the United States which, in the main, ignores poetry and may have finally succeeded in producing a post-literate generation. If certain poetry in certain circumstances indeed has this efficacy, then so much the better, but this cannot be poetry's sole purpose.

What then is the relationship between my political consciousness and my writing? The relationship is not overtly displayed in my work, as the poems are not explicitly political, but there is a world depicted in the poems in which human beings are fragile, battered, and in need of a just and compassionate order which is largely absent. My work can easily be understood as political when set against the United States' mass-media propaganda machine, which daily assures us that we live in a morally superior nation in which competition and acquisition pay off materially and ethically.

The second category includes all of the influences which are particular to my individual experience as a human being. I must stress that I am not attempting to neatly divide poetry between the political and the autobiographical, but merely presenting a broad spectrum of means at my disposal for understanding myself, at one end of which is myself within community and at the other is myself as an individual. The subject of

poetry, or any art, is human experience, and I see no inherent qualitative difference between a poem about Tiananmen Square and one concerning an individual speaker's spat with his uncle. The former could conceivably be a very bad piece of art while the latter inspired compassion and insight into the human predicament. The poet who produces a lyric about waking up in the morning does not thereby dispense with all moral imperatives.

II. Aesthetic Perspective

I may have given the impression that the writing of poetry is a conscious and analytical process for me, but it is not. It is intuitive, and much of the work gets done entirely outside the conscious sphere. Analysis here merely aids intuition in much the same way that intuition can aid analysis in, say, mathematical computation. When I read Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*, it seems clear that Kinnell's unconscious is communicating with mine (whatever else may be transpiring). I list Kinnell, along with other deep image poets such as Robert Bly, Federico Garcia Lorca, and James Wright, among my influences, but I do not necessarily consider myself a deep image poet. I admire the work of these poets because they recognize that, though we may have more direct and obvious access to the conscious mind, much of human activity is initiated by the unconscious mind. Consciousness is often equated with self, but the unconscious may have the better claim to this status. Deep image writing, which employs imagery derived from the unconscious which is resonant within the unconscious of its reader, is not an artificial trick designed to achieve a novel effect. It is rather writing which takes into account that zone of ourselves responsible for much, if not most, of what makes us think, feel, and act as we do.

I have mentioned that I do not necessarily consider myself a deep image poet, and that is because accessing unconscious material is not consistently my first priority when I write. The deep image poets I referred to above have, I think, explored the unconscious in their work far more rigorously than I. The deep image is important to me not because it is an esoteric discipline which searches regions unavailable to the uninitiated, but because it insists on breaking our habit (particularly rampant in western culture) of ignoring what is at least half of who and what we are. I embrace what deep image elements there are in my work because to do otherwise would be to diminish not only the work but myself.

What then is my project when I set about writing a poem? I begin with an image, or a sound, or a dramatic situation, and allow that image, sound, or situation to dictate further ones. But if, for example, I am halfway through tracing a narrative line in a piece, and discover that sound is emerging as a more important element than the story it is telling, I cease to think about the story and follow the music. I give myself permission to write poems which cannot be paraphrased, or poems which narrate stories, or poems which play upon sound, or some combination. What I disallow myself is a preconceived notion of what the poem I am writing *should* do.

Another influence which bears mentioning in this connection is that of surrealism. The surrealist tenet that there is no necessary distinction between what is "interior" and what is "exterior" (or between the subjective and the objective) as far as human beings and their environment is concerned, is operative in a number of the poems. Again, I have no wish here to align myself with a school, but rather to note a significant element of my sensibility.

Essential to the writing of poems, of course, is some notion of what a poem is.

The definition varies, depending on whom offers it, more widely than one might think. I define it as a verbal artifact. It is like an instance of speech, spoken by someone, to someone, but, unlike speech, it is preserved, it is an instance caught mid-step and so gives the reader a long look at what is otherwise fleeting. Still, like speech, it is meant to be uttered aloud--to be heard as well as read--if it is to be fully understood.

At some point in the drafting of a poem, perhaps quite early on, I get a sense, or invent a sense, of who the speaker is. This has been true in the production of this volume also, and though it seems to me the speaker of each poem is different from all the others, one presence seems to speak from the book, a presence caught between the uncomfortable perception of existing in an unjust community and his perception of himself alone. This speaker finds redemption, to the extent that redemption is possible, through, on an individual level, giving and receiving the kind of compassion which his society lacks, and also by allowing himself to perceive and speak from the well of the unconscious. He makes a journey from self-absorbed, agonized consciousness toward interface with the deep image.

When I mentioned important functions of poetry other than the political, this is one of the things I had in mind: preserving for humanity a conduit between our conscious minds and our unconscious selves. Whether most people read poetry or not, poetry keeps alive our souls in a way that the ravenous corporate mass can never do, and that is what poets have always, in one way or another, achieved.

I. Before All Possibility

Just a Scratch

My father bought the frame
of a U-Haul trailer and built
plywood sides for it, and painted
it aquamarine. One of the guys
at the lodge had told him
where to find the boneyard
of a worn-out forest fire,
and my father said, *Great!*
He could get all the wood
he'd need to keep my brother
and me splitting all winter.
Sawdust stuck to my father's
cheeks as he chainsawed
a gray tree on the gutted slope.
He slipped and whisked
some skin from his calf. . .
Jesus H. Christ! The dead
branches were so thick
you could *shovel* kindling
in around the stove-lengths,
so out the shovel came,

and when he turned with its black
length over his shoulder,
he drew a line of red across
my neck, *just a scratch*, he said
as the blood rushed my feet,
tipping me to the grass
between the wheel-ruts.

The Surrender

When Dad's Dodge gave up
at the I-70 summit of the Rockies
the student let it coast into the next
exit, to a shut-down
access road. On his face dawned
neither the realization of danger
nor the potential consolation of wildflowers.
Careful with the removal
of a battered cigarette
from its sheath, he got it
to his lips intact. That was all
I could see from the RV's tinted window,
that and the way his bluejeans
hung from the corners of his hips
like a defeated hammock.
But I could also tell
he was sorry his dad had found
out about how the angels
shucked the guise of pigeons
at the library
or stood in blue caftans on the machine-
shop floor at his first job out of college.
It was too bad
he'd got so crazy, which maybe
was why dad had forked over the car.

Lake

It was precisely in the center of summer,
the time to escape in swimming. . .

my girlfriend's cousin had a cabin
up in Reading, right by a lake,
so with blankets and towels
in a cardboard box

we rode weekends to this shack on the shore
where there was a porch, cots and a kerosene
lamp, all the clumsy necessities
distasteful to parents--
an outhouse listing left,
hammock between pines, cistern,
matches, clothespins, sandals. . .

The loneliest lake in the county,
my girlfriend's fat cousin said
among the lapping, whispering
chuckling noises of the insects,
water, and trees, and my girlfriend
would laugh about it until dark.

The loneliest lake maybe in Kansas,
she'd murmur in my ear beside me
on the creaking canvas. At ten o'clock
the water went black except for splashes
of moonlight. Her thighs were like
cool slick lotion on my sunburned hide,

like memory, like lakesounds interrupting
logic as I lecture my kids.

Last Call at the Lucky Saloon

Bees well out of twilit
brass lecterns.
I stoop to gather

and cover tomorrow with maps
of Nebraska and bits
of foil. The clouds

are hammered rafters between which
a cat reclines in the blue
before all possibility.

I pass along
the street with my fists
in a weaving run and stumble
like drunks.

Lose My Balance

I leave Gina's apartment at 1:00 a.m., higher than I thought. The grass is spongy from constant rain. Somebody is following me. The Burger King sits a lake of asphalt away: reflective panes and steel. Its playground, wrapped in netting, is a huge and sinuous cantaloupe. Metal street signs speak under their breath. If I run, I will lose my balance. A black dog eyes me impassively from the grass a hundred yards away. My hands and feet smell the dog's sweet carrion breath. My bones rebel. My heart sends heat to the lungs and steam to the lips. I can see veins throbbing in the pavement. My apartment hunches up to me like a fat man in a winter coat, and the hilt of the key refuses to budge the bolt.

Crossing

Right at 7:34,

like always, like it's
just supposed to be that way,

the railroad crossing
lights begin to flash

like intense little flames
or angry eyes.

They planned it
like that, *just to bring
me up short*, that's what
I sometimes think,

but I unclench my teeth and fists
and light a cigarette. . .

It tastes
like coming home,
the tang of spiced
cider, biting
your tongue, a 9-volt

battery, vinegar
on cabbage, the stinking, delicious
funk of a lover's

sweat, of an overripe
peach, even the swig
of antacid

chasing the morning's
first beer.

Proverbs for Otherwise Defeated Men

The eyes jerk,
the lips will not be a party
to Friday. It seems
every hour bland fat guys promise

to quit eating in offices. They won't
give their names,
or numbers,

and they don't lend money
from rocking chairs and
a roommate would seem like a crowd.

If they need to
phone they do it
from the corner store
where they can stand

and watch the invitations of women
pass them by
because it only costs a quarter

and later they get drunk.

Tuesday is movie night, bathrobe night.

It's better to live in a building--
you don't mind the neighbors.
Cowboy hats, cigarettes, and bad checks,
it all goes together,

at least that's the wisdom.

Alcoholism

Alone in my apartment
I drink the last of the three
beers I have, a faint humming in my skin,
my belly burning
almost unpleasantly.
Never again, I swear,
will I drink
without the money to buy enough,
though maybe I should
swear off altogether.
But I've taken
that oath more than once,
making my fellow bar flies
nod indulgently.
They've heard it before,
said it, too.
He'll be back, they think.
As if it matters,
there's always somebody on the next stool.
Every day I play a game
of pool, have a smoke,
desire an end to the misery.
Every day I desire a black-haired girl
who will kiss my fat belly
and sit with me at movies.
But right now I think
I'll go next door
and cadge a few bucks from Bob.

Nestlings

The sun runs from me
as I climb.
Sweat leaks from my face like

tears that could not wait
for my eyes.
From hills brown

in the last mist of dusk,
I see something in the street,
round as the top

of a swimmer's head.
It is a nest tossed
out of the tree's arms.

Now I will demonstrate
my kindness, holding
the twittering hearts

of nestlings in
my palms.
But the babies lie

on the blacktop, yellow and bare,
their dead veins
like stopped blue rivers,

bulbous eyes
and hints of wings,
like a sudden failure,

like stones hitting my skin,
and my body
keeps crying.

The Factory's Address is the Same, but Hers Keeps Changing

The Nordenskjold Sea is an arm
of the Arctic, like God's
in the act of the comets' abandonment
to a course elliptical
as yours, trailing
telegrams:

--bomb commemoration today--

--gambled last week--no luggage--home soon--

We arise unrested for work,
but signed a yellow-dog contract,
have to listen to skiing sagas,
work extra shifts at straight time.

The hands of forgiveness hold
me like a desolate monologue,
the sun shines through my schooner.
Graves open and close
on the earth
like the boiling surface
of a thick stew.

Heart Song

Taut slopes ease
down to the line
of the piano
wire valley.

The airway is open enough
to take the cedar
scent of the tourniquet
stick.

Torture is like a stone close
to water, persistent.

All the fences
are on fire, a lonely relief
map of backwaters.
Sheets twine
and renal failure sings.

What the Sheep Said

for Nat

I. You've Entered My Sleep

A white bird,
the water's surface,
his shining shadow.

Black orchids kissing.

Under the skin
of a green pool,
black hair washes
your shoulders.
You vanish
beneath a bank of lilies,
appear at the shore lifting
water to my mouth.

I've heard your
stately songs of loss,
carriage of head and arms
belied by your lush mouth.

Your translucent face
turns to smile
at a word.

II. The Cold Room

Branches are bare all over town.
The stars drift their gradual circles
across the sky like bright motes.
In the darkness,

children's laughter.
Snow through wind-brushed
alleys heaps against a dumpster.
The neon marquee of the movie house
jitters and stains

the snow hot pink and aquamarine.
At home in my loft, I wash
a canvas in yellow

and black birds appear.
Tea steams in a tin cup.
The sheriff's four-by-four

pushes past my window.
Silent on the couch
she lies reading, a forgotten

hand resting on a fan
of photographs.
I wish I was mist

rising from her lips.

III. Three Hours Before Dawn

Among the serene dead I approach
the river. The lean bodies
and glossy paws of dogs move
through the mountains
and wet grass.

My feet cool
on glistening river clay
and a bird glides
over the water
where spot fires burn between
charred trees.

Sound of a penny whistle
from a swollen boat,
its hull slicked with moss,
drifting toward
my feet. I get in.

IV. Confession

When you drop a brick from the brink
of a roof and watch it
end over end,
plummeting,
it's hard not to feel
it's pulling you with it.

A shell
of anguish
drug through each day
is hoisted
onto the wreck of your bed,
and tears press pointlessly
like tethered watchdogs.

Bending to kiss her
seems electrically obvious,
but it's a brass handle
at a penny arcade:
you can't let go.

V. Grace

Men once
reached
into the burning

bones of trees
thinking they could
hold fire.

*

She wears wide stripes
of linen. Brass bangles
at her throat,
she reads poems
to an upturned

sheaf of faces
and she stands like
a slender

stone.
Her eyes move
across the pages

as Chinese carp
glitter in their pool.
The room is nothing

but her voice,
and I am the pale
ice watching

this grace
which surpasses
even my longing.

VI. *Love Song for Blade and Brine*

He pulls fish
from between his ribs
and they gasp
on his desk calendar,
blurring April.
Seawater drenches his pants.

Gills pump like a bellows,
he prods them with a pencil.
Should he confess
the teeth of caverns,
dripped there geologically,
and how he wants to strip his skull for speed
and sprint away?

He saunters the avenue
while sun clangs
and seawater runs from his eyes,
ribs, and knees, beads on his thighs.
He walks the rhythm
of axe and howling throng,
drops his fish
on the academy steps:
there it damned well is,
but if you think my neck is next,
you haven't seen this bad boy run.

VII. The Song's Hands

The songs of crickets
make the night bearable.

A beetle reaches
the top of a rock,

shell gleaming
in the moon.

A crane considers
the shallows on one foot.

Another foot.
Trees

on the bank sway together,
horses drink, toss their heads,

and snort. Night bearable
and the crickets singing.

VIII. Operating Theater

Sleep and a gleaming
dream of steel
and surgeons brilliantly lit.

I sit clamped in a black
chair as they search
my body's text

for the error,
the cipher
that makes my heart.

I see a woman,
a doorway,
a thread

from her skirt.
The dream's sullen phantoms,
the kiss,
the dark bite.

II. Lightning Among the Living

Beyond Matfield

All the leaves
are down, dead trees
like lightning
among the living. We listen
to afternoon lyrics

and walk a beach
littered with beer cans, Thanksgiving,
and arguments. Our eyes are beads,
wooden in a loop
of subject/object like the hill,
a cheek dotted with kisses, with graves.

Breath wears a glove
of fragility, a creek bed
lined with wool. We cross the hay
field to the gate, kissing ice
off the rocks.

And later,
as we ascend the bridge's shoulder slope,
the moon a superabundant buttermilk balloon
above the silo, isn't it
the dead who are awake?

Coffee

It wasn't the first time
he gave up and merely sat down
to stare, with an empty stomach,
aching head, but he was

held rigid by a picture of fish
and their comfortable cold current
washing mountains and woods
in the frame hanging
on the kitchen wall.
Then he dreamed

of pasture shoulders draped
with poplar trees and heat
and flanks of browsing
cows. True, it was his grave
he really thought
about, not cows,
though it was the grave that turned
him to the stink of the living,

the towns he wouldn't see,
people who would neither cry
nor think of him.
The percolator
rattled like lungs
and the blood

in the glass
knob consoled, but suddenly
the chain of days snaked
out in front of him

seemed short.
The chair, the cups,
the kitchen floor,
sun pushing dust
around in shafts. How wrong
to claim the present
ends. . .Nobody
else was up yet
and the staircase
did not call him, and the coffee
sighed, was done.

Asleep

The woman lies
asleep on her side,
thighs slipping
a white cotton shift,
her head cradled by embroidered blooms,
eyes adjoined,
lips parted. . .

The five-month belly is taut,
hair splashed black, sweet
drifting in a blue couch.
Curtain's edge lifting, grazing
her fingers.

Iowa

The train's lament is audible as the ringing
arms enfold the crossing.

The cars conduct an orchestra
of right angles. I reel through
successive sharp contrasts
of painted words.

Snow blows over
the windshield approaching
from the other side of the tracks,
like the breath puffing
from my nostrils to ice
my beard. The perfectly
good atoms of my body
are ruined with vision
and sound. They love what's
wrecking them like rocks
love the sea, like I love my wife
who shudders with disgust
at the stink of my tobacco breath,
the sweat drenching
my beefy face,
the way my very hands move.

She'll end by casting
me off like the train
does distance,
leaving me in parallel halves
hard and flat and cold,
but even in January
you have to think of all that green
corn blanketing the *Iowa*
stencilled on the boxcars.

The Beauty of Winter

She liked it when he talked about snow,
but he wouldn't speak at first,
in spite of her pleading,
and since that day his desire was unpredictable.
She said she couldn't wait for a story.
Wouldn't he at least tell her *one*?
He said he was far too tired,
would as soon she cried as talk.
He told her how hard speech was
when it was hot outside:
he thought she'd give up.
She wanted him to tell her
a story, but she
didn't like to be humored,
why couldn't he rise to it,
why wasn't he more kind.
Kindness, he told her, doesn't
fall like snow, according to law.
Tell me, she demanded, why this is so.
Because snow lasts even in the face
of shovels, even of plows, he said,
snow drifts as high as it wants.
She wanted him to tell it
more like a story. He told her he could
describe Christmas
and feel neither warm nor happy.
He said snow doesn't know from colored lights.
She wanted him to stop then.
She wanted him to smile, and
that was what she asked him, to smile.
He said it's simply useless
to ask the snow to fall upwards,
even if you're the wind.
She wanted him to get back
into his newspaper.
He told her it was too late,
that everybody asks for what they want.
But if I listen, she whispered,
what will you teach me?
The snow will collect
on your grave,
he wanted to say, as on anyone else's.
The beauty of winter, he said.

Just Rewards of Ambition

Back when my life was over
I was twenty-two, worked
at a carwash across

a parking lot from a strip
joint. 500 cars
a day in summer, not enough

hours in fall, nothing
but a beer
at Murphy's when I got off

the bus, red beans
and rice when I got home.
I built a cage

in a corner
of my room, but came home
with a rat that birthed

a dozen pink and wriggling
fingers in my bed, and I took it
back to the pet store so that

the cage sat empty under
my mural of what I figured
my skull looked like,

electric and blue under the meat.
Then I worked
at a group home

for the developmentally disabled
and got lost
on the East Side

with eight of them in a minivan.
Enough. Then I went
to grad school

and married a coworker
from my first campus job.
And now a baby's on the way,

so everything is different.

Front Stoop, 2 a.m.

The stars hurt my eyes.
I'm smoking a cigarette
while my wife drowns
at the back of the house.
Smoke stuffs my lungs
like laundry in a duffel,
but I'm not going to pack.
I slide into a hot bath
and console my skin with soap.
When I extend my legs
into air, the fat slips
like candle wax.
Immersed in the amniotic wash
of my wife's belly, in waters
dark as Carlsbad, someone
else is doing the same.
In the suds,
a shadow of him
grown tall and smarting
under the stars.
Yesterday
his shoulders turned
under my hand.

The Window on the First Great Truth

Every day
after prenatal
class and teaching
freshmen what a narrator

is, before I'm too
hungry to think
and have to patrol
grocery aisles,

wash dishes, reprimand
children, there is a little
window through which

I see everything
I've given up
and the nothing
I'd have if I hadn't.

Through actual windows
in my office,
a net of branches,
a spreading squirrel

hotel. From the apartment
I can see a pickup,
some stars,

an empty pasture.
My colleagues don't mind
my simply staring,
but my wife sighs

over all those socks
that need picking up,
the saucers that need
handling. I get tiredest

thinking
about the finite
list of days

and what if I spent
them differently.

Everybody dies
and most don't get

enough to eat
while they wait.
The first great truth
is suffering, after all,

so I stretch
across my bed,
and my wife is sleeping.

Solace

Just when it has
seemed she couldn't
bear one more

contraction
stopping her in the market,
one more comfortless
night, often a solace

has come
and relieved nothing

of the pain except
the way she
held it,
for a while glad

in the foolishness
of hoping
the blinking baby

would redeem
mistaken marriage,
a sister to balance

her prior sons.
I know there's no solace

that doesn't
whitewash boards
really old and raw.

Tonight we howled and scathed
each other over
a cup left unrinsed,

an endearment unsaid around
the systematic
ruination of lives.

Our voices strident
and relentless,
we attacked
the blank fact

of sharing

what there cannot be enough of.
But often a solace comes

from the inexact net of winter
stars, and from being happy
we have anything worth this anguish,
these demands.

Seeing the Last Sun

Ben will be reaching into his breast pocket
for a Marlboro.
I will get my arms around
the curving architecture
of his solid trunk,
broadened from labor,
and hug him back.
We'll walk from my apartment to my office
without one memory of silence,
two alcoholic brothers
being sober together a little,
thinking of this or that day,
laughing at some of them,
doing it all with charity,
pausing to stand with same angel,
skirting the edge of the Catholic school,
finding a Pre-Mycenean bottle cap,
recalling eight different women,
embellishing six dirty tricks,
raking our bosses a bit,
his foreman, my director,
being almost tolerant of them, almost serene,
criss-crossing the streets to avoid dogs,
digging graves along the way,
picking a place on the gazebo steps,
the only one with any sun left,
climbing a ramp, frail and noisy,
narrow and cracked, boardwalk across train tracks,
incised eight times by the rails themselves,
gleamingly oblivious like our hands
as they dance with lit cigarettes--both of us thinking
the same thing, each of us hopping
our own freight, both of us telling
the same lame jokes, the city lights blurring,
fences zooming by, like being drunk,
both of us walking to the front steps of my building
so we can sit on a bench, so I can
show him where the gargoyles should be, so we can
look for monkeys in the tame sycamore
branches, the wildness lost--
trees inoculated and trees sedated--
wrapped in the center of a spreading quilt
of barnyards, pastures, hay fields, and towns
laid out in grids regular as the chain mesh

marking a playground--the baler patrols
the field in a constantly diminishing circle
just over the treeline and fifteen streets
from the campus where we sit, leaving one
package after another, bristling and hot,
to be hooked onto the flatbed and stacked
in the mow in heart-lurching heat, we sitting there
paring our nails, he with penknife,
me with stainless clippers, standing up
and smelling the hay, walking single file
until we reach the library, singing The Doors
all the way back, grasping at rain patiently,
grasping at wind, walking into the shadow,
seeing the last blue, seeing the last
crow, last sun.

Harness

I remember when it seemed
like the world
wanted me to be
good and believe

in exercise
and drafting resumes.
Sometimes, when sober,
I thought I was

supposed to pray
alone beneath the basement
kitchen window
to learn God's stern dictates.

Now I know
my mistake was this choice
between resistance
of the harness or the buckling

of it snugly on when,
of course, there's
nothing
to take or leave.

The lesson should be
that we get a grimly
noble freedom
in return

for recognition of the world's indifference,
but since I've already drunk
the cup of coffee
that grim freedom

and a buck has bought me,
I look at the question
this way: I haven't
had a beer in eight

months, I unbolted
the training wheels
from Junior's
bike and he actually rode

the damned thing,
and God talks
to me every time
my wife smiles or the mail arrives.

Brinesmell

Last night I had
to meet my wife
after a lecture she attended.
I saw two dogs,
unusual in two ways:
they were the only ones I saw while crossing campus,
and both dragged leashes.
They looked at me like poised fists.
Dogs used to roam through town
only at night--trotting
the shining pavements
after rain,
sniffing the ankles of the late movie line--
but now they bask on the old Highway 11 median strip
and you hear howling down Merchant Street.

*

The last time I heard music
in this town was when they tore
down the drive-in
and the fluted squawk-boxes
slipped a dying blare of percussion.

I once was caught in my Dodge
in a teller-window line
during the Garden Bounty Parade
and heard the sound of gum
coming free of a Shriner's heel.

*

I can't tell you why I don't play my records
anymore. I should have taken
her and the boys and the baby
away from here back then

when I didn't have all this money tying me down,
to a place where it seems like
a faded billboard on the horizon,
in amber light at 3:00 a.m.,
is barely holding back the brinesmell of the sea.

III. One More Distance

Baudelaire Changes His Stripes

Compassion, forgiveness, health, charity,
are the light and heat by which the body moves;
man standing in defeat but also new clothes
feeds us with enlivening eyes.

We are steadfast, our work is long;
we bear each other hand to shoulder,
we tend each other with soap and cloth,
methodically washing mud-caked feet.

Angels, silently behind us, watch
and set prayers to the music of our blood,
fortifying armatures of spirit
to support any weight of sorrow.

Their fingers smooth our hair with oil
and consoling gestures
in spite of ledgers of crimes
stacked against us on sagging shelves.

Volunteers among the famine-wracked,
we force love beyond our limits,
collapse sleeping at a dusty door,
rasp our breath into the earth.

Communities of angels sing in our limbs--
synchronized, flying, a steady V of geese,
they caress and coax reservoirs untapped;
each time we wake, we smile in our pain.

If rations, blankets, medicine, clothes,
have not been released
from our hands, they will be soon,
for our souls though slow are certain.

Of all the birds, saints, nurses, servants,
horses and dogs that nuzzle
and work and give and sacrifice and rest
in glorious service,

there's one more just and abundant.
It performs no plays, never struts with pomp,
yet it would die for the least of us,
and unflinchingly stitch all wounds.

It is love, tears tracking its hard face.
You know it as we do. This radiant
lion swells its chest roaring for the weak--
you--oppressed comrade--my fellow--my brother!

The Bear Shifts

in his
chair, his
sweet staple is books.

He chews
the magnificent
thumb, a cloud

watches like a coin
in the jaws. His breath
straight as looming

pencil,
water, and paint from rafters

of the page.
His vocable box opens then,
its spine stretching

to a funeral
or the photograph

of a hotel. He folds
a pendant onto her

shoulders, a tunnel,
a coil
of sentences.

A Whisper

Disregard, fool, that midnight idea
heard in March by a defiled river.
Sentence like a victim, staggering,
drooling strands of linked forms,
bouquets of vibrating words.
The moon affixed its foggy disclosure
and they decided at once.

Dirt, verbs, gestures, were the fragrance
that revived and woke you.
Birds blathered on roads,
a rabbit slept,
a rock noticed the smell
on the slopes.
Still, it was lovely, the idea,
and it slept,
blushing with sex,
as if one must admit true air
by not diminishing.

And that partial seeming,
like seas or stances,
or this wood with an insolent
slant of marrow,
these sizes stretched across everyone,
four bats slumped on the floor
of my master's recall,
these clearly repeated the master sign.

Here in front of some trees, a fabulous boy
dragged over you with desire,
impatient to sleep and dream
of triumph known in caution.
Don't be regretful yet:
wonderful, cleanly, remade,
oh, moon of my mechanic and fool for this sound,
monster and maniac oaf!

Don't be, I'm sure you're saying, anything.
Simple hate before drudgery,
blooms, eroding humps of farm country.
I'm not the teacher of speeches.
I write obituary operas.
That's the idea.

Pine Boughs

Seven gray horses gather
in a mist of circles.
Water flows from the mountains

like heavy whispers
of the stones.
Seven gray horses gather in mist

at the edges of a forest
that fences back eroding hills.
Water flows from the mountains

like a road
between weary villages.
Seven gray horses gather in a mist

of breathing.
Their muscles shift like
water flowing from mountains.

The horses dance their dance,
turn and step, disperse
and gather in the mountains.
Water flows from the mist.

Affection for the Rain

Blue is the color of angels,
a constant reminder

of their absence here
in the flesh, a poor mirror.

Water reflects all right,
so there is one more distance

between us and the sea.
I stood four times

in the mushroom circle
back of my house.

The circle marks the exact
place where the ancient

maple is not: isn't that blue
enough, without being washed

by the sky? But the sky
is blue, and so are my eyes,

my protest.

Mousetrap

She kissed the bleached fence like blade,
the wreck of a noose.

She polished the terrific blooms in her paws,

her final gun, her stake.

No matter how far she ran, the moronic river rocks
lost her with all the others.

Stroking pine spikes, the hinges
of cows, laughing in a green chair
at this particular rubble,

she drives a dusty shovel into the trench
with a shout, and it reflects
her dissonant hair like screws.

She thinks dunes of metallic soil
would look better ruined in the market,
all the foliage of vice.

The mouse agitates at the bannister.
She will draw him out with simple veins,
abrupt paths,
burnt flags of scissors.

Surface

It is important to search
every surface inside
the door. It is possible
to find
six keys
on hooks sunk
with linear insistence into hardwood.
Also, there are worse things
than having no future.
Look at the dead, for example.
I remember
you wore a yellow hat
with the color
you turned when I caught your faint wrists.
I used to stuff ashtrays,
and with the butts of real
cigarettes, too--fat sweet
whiskey-smelling killers.
That was when I was immortal.

The Convergence Chorale

Radios, aspirin, fire
doors and brooms
return to the crime
if at all.

Have I righted
this weight
of water?

Awakened laconically?

Yes, you.

Turn understandably
in blue robes.

Wait up.

The Lizards

Lizards, like darting shoes,
scurry over the rocks, but then they hide.
Every afternoon

a blue, burned quartz rock
stands in the lizard's way so simply,
but that is the way they go.

Five directions, and small, fledgling bits of wonder,
for which a dune likely sinks.
Repeatedly hunting, licking insects

from air, carrion, cacti,
dust, sun and wind from space,
brown birds, backs,

their scales slowly warmed.
They nestle to drink the heat of sand.
The deaths, though frequent, are not sad,

and, like the shade
they find by a resting stone,
cold entirely.

July 17, 1991

In a pool of light
at a round table,

the bald man smokes a cigar
and studies the newspaper.

A violin keens
stubbornly from

the room's dark
corners. His white hands clench,

unclench like the slight
tendrils of a barnacle.

He reads about a building
which has burned to

the ground, an accident
from which he will

collect the insurance.
He folds the paper.

The Bargain

I don't think
I am as surprised
as I ought to be.
You arrived at the grove,
your boots obscure
with dust.
I handed you a tin cup,
water dripped
from the awning
of your beard.
I know the country
you were traveling
through, its wasted
trees. Three times
I ascended to the highest
platform of the tower
with my glass.
Finally I *did*
see the cloud
your horse kicked
up, and it is a long
way to come. . .
I can't say more.
Seventy-five dollars
is a lot of money.

The Green Entrances

Don't utter my number,
imitate the trees. The sedan
which conveys your tryst
is aghast before the moon
in this impossible night.

Don't lame me
with earth's comma:
your vigilante life
in carbon collapse.

Announce me for somber duration.
A blocked calm limits repose.
In the denuded center:
a parade of banjos and lunar vaccines.

The sun, fruit trees,
the brusque sun's pantomime:
what crosses the tyrant's lips
is carnal and secret.

Why roses, mountains of meat:
what impediment to acquaintance
with the tremendous caricature?

The hand ponders
what intrusions mass
at the essence
of shining.

What rivers appreciate
torrents of common carp.
The sun despises
the big moon, interminably green.
Green hands, our sons telling
moronic tales full of green pecans.
Our sons, our only sons,
abase entrances in masks of green.

Yard Work

He revokes the bucket's lips
of water, of refusal
down a well.
All the girls

lionize his chest, from which he draws
a sparkling brick to enshrine its bargain
from the spirits of mortar.
If he could contrive escape,

he could mass the armies
of wet clay,
or drive the tube
of trees. If he stops

the sodden dandelions,
herds of blue cattle
heap the highway
and he's finished.

Nobody Was Expecting It

By then the train was away with a cargo of pianos. The first was a woman in Ethic, Georgia: she noticed a new blackness in the sky. A girl in Lostfarthing, North Dakota spent the dinner hour under her brother's bed. In the Shell station's back room, a poker night regular turned and listened to the approaching desert. His yellow cigarette shifted like a compass needle. It stayed quiet until sunup as far as anybody knew. Except, that is, for Chester Halford, who saw a pigeon bank into a Kentucky mortuary's airspace and plummet to the roof.

God Goes Fishing

(after Philip Levine)

Train whistle moaning out of the dark,
an elkhound at the trestle, the trestle
not drifting into visible space
from the embankment, and winter, and no snow
falling where it fell before.

The old dog in a matted pelt
tells me this is Kansas, this--
he does not say--is the epitome of visible space,
the wide empty plain you get to
after a nervous breakdown,

obesity, liquor, and hate.
He takes off at a slow trot
and the tongue drops from his jaws.
I remember the Tuesday morning
walk to the supermarket,

I saw him lounge on the grass
and growl, and raise
his wedge of a face in cautious scrutiny
of just me. I could tell him that.
I could tell him I was after some doughnuts

or maybe a good cheese.
I could tell him that this isn't
the Kansas I had seen in movies
or read about, or that last night
I saw an old couple laugh,

and not the tired tittering of surrender,
really laugh. We are together
here by the ravine, him and me,
to think it over, the shabby coat of flesh
and the dirt quietly waiting,

and we conclude that we're stuck:
one or two birds that think dawn before us,
no consolation and no stone notes
from God (whom I imagine
fishing in a straw hat).

The Tiber, the Spring, the Swamp

Hands ring the day's tocsin.
Hands in the rushing Tiber,
 delicate and silent hands.
 Hands in the cienega's vector
 of the old bell hung by the levee.
Hands built the levee,
and the river wears it like a hat.

Can you peel the boughs
and the sorrow of the house nuns love?
 The emperor's love is hermetic,
 a dulcimer's carnation.
The secret peal of the poor secretary's
bell abides entreaty the color of bone.

Voice radar for girls and candid blood.
The recurring despair of teeth
 has the purity of weapons,
but love is a weapon, Poseidon's,
a weapon of solitary voice.

But hands, the love of nuns,
incandescences, fill that frame,
 the caricaturist's shifting canvas,
 the emphatic picture window
arranging wooded hillsides.
Enter the lucid and legal instant,

the flame of virtue in a bowl
of lentils. Hands join the suave
 prose of grime, the two
 handles of desolation
 in a secretary's life.
They total a bog of genuflections
which you cannot completely recant.

I, Daniel M. Spees, hereby submit this thesis/report to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available for use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, or other reproduction of this document is allowed for private study, scholarship (including teaching) and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential financial gain will be allowed without written permission of the author.

Daniel M. Spees
Signature of Author

May 4, 1994
Date

Asleep in the Orchard Grass
Title of Thesis/Research Project

Wally Cooper
Signature of Graduate Office Staff Member

May 5, 1994
Date Received