

## Thistledown

For the first time after long heat,  
the sun floats pale above the oak savanna,  
its edges drawn. Now begins the movement  
inward, withdrawing its flame from the high places  
of summer and striving, to fully inhabit  
its depths, its ring of steady warmth.

For it is the warmth, not the fire,  
of long-lasting love which endures the burning-  
off of years and bodies, stirred in us  
now by that autumnal heartbeat. Two crows  
fly together, their cries going out before them  
to meet the darkening burr oaks on the hill.

Thistledown falls as if from open drawers, fold  
upon fold of linens tumbled before the goldenrod.  
On its own journey, the sower of thistles  
travels with us, a homespun beauty finely feathered.  
I lift one to the wind, coppery wings carry it  
over fields toward the inward-circling sun.

## Ode to Wooden Steps

*For Pablo Neruda*

We live  
surrounded  
by the benevolence  
of wood.  
How clearly  
I see it  
in the soaked grain  
of these porch steps,  
the black whorls  
welcoming rain.  
The ends  
of the boards  
are soft,  
divided  
where water  
and age  
knock.  
It takes  
a long time  
to let them in,  
it happens only  
at wood's  
pace.

The nature  
of wood is  
vertical,  
which is why  
we dance well  
on a wooden  
floor, from  
its sheer  
upright energy.

Wood splits  
and bends,  
slumps  
as it chooses,  
twists,  
shrugs,  
and develops  
a deep  
slouch,  
in suffering  
remains true.  
In the tree  
struck by lightning,  
in the blue stump  
glowing in a  
swamp,  
in the thin  
cracks on the  
200-year-old  
fiddle,  
the honesty of  
wood is  
visible,  
written  
in the swerve  
of its grain.

The wind pushes  
lightly.  
A maple seed  
whirls to rest  
on the top  
step,  
its small  
yellow brain  
split open.

The black  
wood waits for  
the driving  
of the wedge,  
for the  
raindrop that  
dissolves  
its heart.

## Olivet

In fields given over to the gold of harvest,  
how much returns to fill the empty places.  
The barndoors of western Wisconsin  
give glimpses of the saved souls of wheat.

Saying yes to you in my heart, I took  
the long way home at sunset,  
pulled off the road at a junction called Olivet.  
On clotheslines I saw the sad sheets

of the married, of the desire  
not to travel on alone.  
A house of dust, its beams on fire,  
gathered itself around me.

A one-room schoolhouse overgrown with burdock  
stood apart from the white houses.  
Some abandonment in childhood must have  
caused me to stand alone.

The dirt road loves the fields as they are.  
That was the kind of love you gave me.  
There are places I have driven by only once  
and lived in the rest of my life.

## Snow Flying

*"Family is fate."—Michael Meade*

1.

In moving air, the fates of snow  
weave a vagueness over hills.  
There is a snow that flies rather than falls,  
as if the same few flurry endlessly  
without touching ground. And if today  
there is no new snow, then there's no stopping,  
no getting rid of the snow that is here,  
someone forgotten whose face we see clearly  
at four o'clock in the morning.

2.

How low the sun through curtains  
in January! I was born in this light  
showing under the doorway of the year.  
There is dark heat inside a family,  
each household wrapped around its fire,  
poorly vented, wasteful, throwing smoke  
which blinds and chokes us as it warms us.  
At dusk I find a pine cone and think  
of my mother and father growing old.

3.

Night is coming. There is no alternative  
in winter to the threadbare furs we spread  
with others in the cave of the heart.  
No alternative to placing the long-delayed call,  
agreeing to accept the heat without light  
of the father so difficult to uproot, who stands in  
whatever light is left, as proud as a stump.  
No choice but to let snow follow its necessity  
over the earth, flying or falling.

## Keeping the Star

Keep this star for when you lose the world,  
when grief and desire become a blurred door  
that floats away across a plain room  
without books or kisses.

Look to what grows dark beyond the walls,  
that in night which holds the blue sky  
singing in its black embrace.

It's all spun around a necessary star,  
star of prisons. Keep it:

It has the power to burst from dull thoughts,  
breathe in airless colors,  
and roll back the filth of your neglect.

Let it pour through the chimney hole  
patched with tin! Unloved objects—  
empty jars, faces in clippings,  
balls of hair spurned by the brush—  
all the children of failure

will step forward in its blinding wind,  
sons and daughters of that before which  
there is no trivial being.