



Under  
ORION

Dennis Ross

# Under Orion

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## One

Listen,  
it's good to be heard.

See?  
It's good to be seen.

## Different Folks

I've been feeding Duffy watermelon  
checking his water, scoping out  
the perimeter for predators  
wondering if he needs a massage  
when our neighbor Josh swaggers  
across the road and perches on the canal bridge  
before throwing the torch to his hash pipe

A few coughs later he's singing  
"Back in the Saddle Again"  
head thrown back, cowboy hat bobbing  
with the dreamy rhythm

I look at Duffy and shrug  
when he gives a soft conspiratorial quack

Josh stretches the refrain  
"—Back where a friend is a friend—"  
a baritone Gene Autry one foot out of the  
stirrup

soon our fifty-one-year-old erstwhile hippy  
on parole and under house arrest by his mother  
is humming so loud it brings  
Pereira's Jack Russells out barking

Duffy sticks his head straight up  
cocks an eye and quack-quack-quacks  
paddling around in circles

Josh turns and sees me  
waves then stands and stretches  
knocks the dottle into the canal

"How's the duck?" he bellows  
above the Jack Russell uproar  
"How's he like that melon?"

"He likes the seeds," I yell

Josh nods  
"Hey, differ'nt strokes,"  
and whistles his way back across the road  
his three-legged ridgeback Hoagy  
hobbling halfway to meet him

# Captive Audience

*For Rose and Bonnie*

When no one's around  
I come through the door  
sideways in a soft-shoe

shuffle across linoleum  
mouth full of loony tunes  
whistling singing prancing

I transfix upturned eyes  
and both dogs applaud  
each schottische each song

tails pound the floor  
for more more more more  
and eyes dance *bravo* as I

tap my Astaire stick and pivot  
through a pool of sunlight  
stop on a dime and spread

arms wide and bow-wow-  
wow them till they leap  
up and charge the stage

## A Perfect Morning

Birds in my ears  
floaters in my eyes  
dust motes in the light  
a breeze nuzzles

curtains aside  
while I sprawl across the bed  
and listen to blood purr  
deep in my veins

After breakfast  
Bonnie and Rose pace me  
sniffing their zig-zag way  
across the pasture

A pheasant  
thunders up  
daring them to follow  
until I call them back

Cows lift blank gazes  
watch a moment then bend  
down to graze, eyes half closed  
and the smell of crushed grass  
rises about their faces  
drifts to us across  
the perfect morning

## Rebirth

Goldfinches dangle from star thistles  
a lone phoebe calls from a shovel handle

I pull bermuda roots up for hours  
fingers wriggling pale as grubs in black loam

later sweet leaf smoke fills the air  
while I sweep the potting shed

until surprised from my song  
by a rustle and glint whisked out of shadows

a dead dragonfly to pluck from the litter  
and prop on the windowsill

where it shimmers  
with sunlight

# Thunderstorm

Twenty miles away bedrock rubs the sky  
wind eddies and a thunderhead towers  
an ivory genie swollen with light glowers  
from the vortex turns zinc then lead  
and finally sable trimmed with gold

The black underbelly of clouds rumbles  
above house and barn—sudden darkness  
whipped with cool moist wind

Lightning flares and I count  
three before the porch shakes  
and both astonished dogs  
press close at once

After the thunderstorm  
a pin-up moon bobs up for air

Heat lingers

Crickets croon  
and quaver

The gopher snake glides across the garden

## After a Shower

A flurry of white-crowned sparrows rush  
The feeder in the bare quince bush

Magpies sweep down scattering cries  
Thrash mud puddles in the drive

Near the gate a squirrel plays  
Up a post to catch some rays

Watches old black Bonnie sniff  
Across the lawn then squat to piss

Bonnie picks a perfect walnut up  
And flings it playful as a pup

Finds a spot, turns three times, sprawls  
And cracks the nut between her paws

## Goose Summer

Last night somewhere  
south of here spiders  
scrambled up stalks  
and turned tails toward the sky

sent silk strands snaking out like kite  
strings until a taut tug by the breeze  
caught and they lifted off hitching a million  
rides going anywhere the sky took them

dancing free  
and wingless  
all night  
under stars

while we slept. The yellow  
garden spider wove her web  
a tatted flower stretched  
between two tomato plants

bright as Indra's glistening net  
dewdrops catching moonlight  
and now she floats at the exact  
center of attraction, entranced

with the dream unfolding  
around her, a golden whole  
note, calm and lucid point  
considering the gravity of this

last meeting place of flies.  
This morning she watches  
with lidless eyes, sways  
three feet above leaf mold

grows instantly alert  
when I pick a tomato  
shaking her world.  
She scuttles off to hide.  
Serene, afloat,  
leaning on that shimmering nothing  
that buoys her up motionless.

Later the dogs and I walk  
together across gauze-  
wrapped fields, clothes  
and hair festooned with gossamer.

## Take the Road

I feel my way along the fence  
careful where I put my feet  
home bound in the fog  
Bonnie padding at my side

The cottonwood looms to my left  
I know, I hear crows calling there  
while I stare hard where home should be  
till all falls silent and we pause

particles becalmed adrift  
in this cloud chamber out of time  
where I'm lucky to know left from right  
lucky that I walk, don't fly

out of myself and take the road  
less traveled and the other too

## Afterbirth

I hold the mare's nose twisted in a twitch  
while she glares into my face, eyes clear as  
water

at the business end the vet reaches deep  
arm buried past the elbow searching for  
afterbirth

pulls steamy pudding out and misses the bucket  
then hoses off his arms, rolls down his sleeves

that evening two shy vultures step an awkward  
hat dance around the somber placenta

after their meal they shake huge wings loose  
rise up into the sky while day bleeds away

## The Dead Calf

All afternoon the cow faced down the crows  
and vultures, chasing them from nearby posts  
when they tried to work past her to the calf  
dead on the ground at her feet.

The next morning she still stood  
guard, reaching down to nuzzle  
the shrinking pile of fur,  
and when Mike came to feed the herd

He took half a bale of hay  
to where she stood refusing to move.  
Later that afternoon he returned,  
slipped a knotted rope around

the calf's neck, and dragged it  
behind his pickup to the corral,  
drawing the cow like a hooked fish in his wake  
head down nose touching the jouncing bait

## The Tallowman Comes and Goes

Ears forward, head up  
the calf stands poised  
beside the dead cow  
sprawled as if sunning herself  
udder flat and breathless  
bagpipes on a belly  
swollen with the slow  
explosion of new life  
that bubbles from her nose  
pools like meadowfoam  
around her gaping mouth

Later the calf follows a steady tractor  
that drags the cow to the gate  
for the tallowman's moaning winch  
a slow ascension into the truck  
a whoosh and hiss of gasses  
that take the breath away

and later still  
the calf refuses hay  
refuses to be chased down  
high-tails his way  
across the pasture  
then circles back  
to the flattened  
grass that marks  
the empty center of the world

## Garden Work

Web-toed Rose

burnt-log brindle

tail curled into

a question mark

nuzzles loam over a bone

paws the ground

sniffs checking it out

and looks up

along her muzzle

caked with dirt

brown eyes alert

watching me wash

aphids off cabbages

# Tater

What does it mean

struggling into its jacket

long idle hours in the dark?

This is the word made starch

cool and firm in the hand

sweet and flaky in the mouth.

## Spring Garden

A toad bulbs up  
from the alembic earth

time doesn't tick

a clock clicks  
and things change

fingers pick across

strings strung taut  
for pea-green music

## Indian Summer Evening

All day the hours  
circle on a thermal

until dusk spreads  
enormous weightless wings

and thin light drifts  
across widening years

I meet it here, face  
cocked toward first stars

a sliver of a glance  
the world gives itself  
unruffled as the breeze  
touching and passing on

into the killdeer's call  
across the stubbly field

## In the Pet Store

The goldfish tries to tell me  
something but can't get it out  
of that little mouth opening and closing.

I think of a number  
count backward from ten  
to clear my mind

and watch him mouthing *Om*  
there in solitary confinement  
his only company

waiting for a break,  
so I take it for him  
remembering the time

all of us spilled out  
a door together laughing  
across the lawn

to the car  
pointed east  
then shot down the road

while Vernon shouted  
out the window  
"You'll hear from us again!"



## Two

The dead forget  
what to live without

# Escape from the Motherland

I worked my way  
out of the blood-warm  
cavern

an arrowhead chipped  
from a living block  
blue with aching

a living artifact  
from a rifted world  
bare and speechless

shouting even before  
I was strapped with names  
of men I never knew

swallowed up like  
a dream fading  
into dawn

## Name that Tune

The nuns suggest Harry  
a little joke for my brothers  
Tom and Dick, but  
Mom dubs me Dennis Howard

Dennis for the tenor singing on the radio  
while I was just a gleam in Howard's eye

## Longview

I race to catch up scabbling on slick streets  
until she takes my hand and we skirt a puddle

Back in the apartment she hangs wet coats  
over chairs near the stove, rubs my hands and feet

then unpacks soggy bags on the draining board  
while water warms for tea and cocoa

Later we share a shoebox of jumbled snapshots  
brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers

She names everyone in a dreamy complicity  
needing more than silent memory and I scoot  
close

## Morning After

Marvin at the breakfast table  
sips coffee from a green mug  
Redwing boots on the floor  
beside white-stockinged feet

Mom at the stove  
singing about her only sunshine  
about her "be-eautiful morning glory  
kissed and caressed by the de-ew"

Snug in bed I listen  
faking sleep until Marvin goes  
then she cooks our breakfast  
"tra-la-la-la, tweedle-dee-dee-dee"

later we walk to town  
both of us picking orange  
and black caterpillars from the road  
to hang on willow branches

## Lazy Wind

Mom leaves me by the steel drum  
boiling with fire and goes off  
pulling carrots from the frost-rimed field  
before the sun is fully up.

Warming her hands a while later  
she says, "A lazy wind goes  
through you, not around."

The sun slowly bleaches the sky  
but offers no heat where I stand  
bunched up inside two coats  
stamping the hard ground.

At night the bed opens like a flower.  
Outside the tent night hunkers down.  
I roll over and face a wall of dreams,

anchor myself to her smooth breaths,  
a small animal surrendering  
while the winter moon pulls  
us toward another morning.

## Plenty

Trucks and cars back up snug to the river  
buckets and coolers in easy reach on the bank.

Bud wades butt-deep, hip boots parting  
the stream of smelt, mining the living vein,

scoops wriggling nuggets out and sweeps  
through the air to dump them in our tub.

Half his height, I get the short shift,  
scramble after the squirming silver

overflow. Chinook called them candlefish,  
These taper-thin sparks of life

dancing wildly in the air; dried, they burn  
like torches, alive as stars at night.

Today we fill tin tubs to their rims,  
measure happiness by the seething pound;

we'll give smelt away to family, neighbors, friends,  
anyone who'll take them off our hands.

## Viento

Wind riddles trees  
rattles the coalshed door  
ravels the slate-gray river

our sleeves flap  
full as windsocks  
gorged on air

a marsh hawk teeters  
her white rump flashes  
between poplars

Olive yells from the porch  
her words scattering  
while I mouth "what?"

she waves a *never mind*  
and casts me off  
goes back in the house

surrenders to the wind  
prowling everywhere  
constant as a pulse

## Sturgeon Rock

A permanent eddie wobbles  
like a wavering eye  
not far from Sturgeon Rock

The Columbia's current rubs up  
against the slough's backwash  
and twines into a funnel

hung at the edge of the drop-  
off into the river's deep  
circling plunge toward darkness

It's a good place to fish  
Where water gropes for life  
and bait drifts down a long

spiral to plumb the dreaming  
mud sluggish as a lover  
stirred from a drowsy lull

## What Dreams May Come

Grandpa Ingram loading pigs  
took a header from the cart  
when the horses shied,

broke his neck at ninety eight;  
grandma lost her "stubborn mule"  
who "just wouldn't leave the ranch."

But in her dreams he'd confide  
where he'd buried their life savings  
so many shovel lengths

from this fence post looking east  
and she lurched awake again  
to jot it down once more.

## March 12, Alliance, Nebraska

A wall rose at the door they opened  
a white wall, crystal remnants of the storm  
that tore a three-day hole across the land  
and cached the house within a twelve-foot drift

Mom reached daylight just beneath the eaves  
then walked above the fences to the barn  
and burrowed down to where the horses stirred  
restless after long days in their stalls

She rode her pony Topsy through the air  
down to the lake, the pack was thinner there  
where their and the other kinkaders' cattle stood  
chest deep in ice, hoary backs to the wind

they'd fled three days before into the warmer  
water that slowly froze about their shaking  
flanks and left them marbled statues  
eyes sightless blebs in silvered light

She dropped Topsy's reins and skidded  
out to ride them one-by-one, her breath  
the only cloud in that pale blue sky,  
while Topsy nickered, shied from all that death

## The Gray Whale at Cascade Locks

The whale turned a wrong  
corner and blimped up the river  
until high-centering in Portland  
where some guys with guns  
tired of plunking beer bottles  
filled him full of holes

county workers strapped him  
on an east-bound freight headed  
up the Columbia River Gorge

there's no horizon  
on the Gorge  
where mountains  
concede the sky  
a narrow strip of blue

anyway, half the kids in Cascade Locks  
scrambled down to see the whale  
chained across a boxcar  
out on a lark from school and learning  
to be mouth breathers  
watching death's fat joke  
rumble past, a gray  
wave collapsing on its way  
to Wyoming, flies swarming  
a boggy blowhole  
eyes sunken and soggy as a sump

## Monochrome

Everything's smudged  
in my memory that January:  
I'm five and the world  
shears off while the sun  
shrinks to a zinc penny

Someone cracks a door  
a burst of light hurls  
a shadow at the wall  
orbiting my confusion

Dick tells Mom  
Tommy drowned  
they're dragging the slough

He sank gripping his army-surplus  
flashlight like a wand

Later we all stand on the bank  
watching through a fog of breaths

They hooked him up a little after nine  
hunting down the flashlight beam  
lacing through the murk

The L-shaped torch tumbled back  
as they grappled him onto the boat

Its amber beam plays across my memory  
of his oval face with eyes still as quartz  
fixed beyond our human faces  
his gaze frozen as if  
listening hard to the wind  
rising on the river  
beyond the pullmotor whine

## Penny

I talk and watch  
slender fingers  
busy with clothespins

frozen sheets crackle  
when Mom scatters  
stars of frost  
into the air

She looks past me  
and I turn to see  
Penny stagger out  
a raw wound above her ear

Penny has hidden under  
the shed for two weeks  
since Marvin tried  
"to put her out of her misery"

driven out at last  
to lick our hands  
wobbly with hunger  
tail tucked between legs

the distemper broken  
like a lanced boil  
by the hatchet blow

Later she lay  
behind the stove  
on a gunnysack

legs dancing to the chase

## Howard at McCrumb's Auto Court

I saw this man once  
upon the morning  
we buried his other son  
his flat Dick Tracy profile  
in the window of an Olds  
unable to meet Mom's rage

Later she fumbled around  
the kitchen where knives  
and forks made no sense  
clattering into drawers

Now here he is on this postcard  
signed "Hod" and packed into a trunk,  
a little short of God and as distant now

## Under Orion

The night she died  
the moon was pared  
away to almost nothing  
and maple leaves  
fretted the yard  
restless as the geese  
wedging their way south  
above the house  
calling among the stars.  
I stood outside  
in Earth's huge shadow  
there under Orion  
waiting for the dog  
star to rise blue above the Sierra,  
remembering her the way  
birds remember the world,  
by heart, the songs  
she sang peeling  
apples by the sink  
reeling through my mind,  
wondering how long until  
we're all ground under  
earth's great plates,  
till we're blown away  
beyond perception  
by solar winds expanding  
across a wavering sky  
where no bird sings.

## Estate Sale

An autumn sky  
the color of her eyes  
leaves across the lawn  
golden as the braid tucked  
away with handkerchiefs  
in her cedar chest

After the last word we meet  
silence soft as humus and knowing  
gives way like fingers melting  
into a palm where the bud of each  
fingertip listens listens listens

Sap sinks into old roots  
smoke rises over fields  
the mockingbird in the pyracantha scolds  
a white cat drowsing by the porch

We've picked the house clean  
as the maples in the yard  
where we stand awkward  
the last odds and ends  
giving nothing away

## Memorial Day

A swarm of bees  
clusters on a bough  
and morning blows house  
lights out one-by-one.

Four-year-old Dick  
wanders down to watch  
Chuck sweep the hay into windrows  
and finds surprised mice  
scattering in the open air.  
He scurries to catch one  
then stands holding  
the finger the mouse bit  
crying "I don't want to die,  
I don't want to die."

# Rereading an Old Letter

*For H. H.*

You miss her most after  
sunlight burns away the mist  
and morning looms blue and yellow  
beyond the kitchen window  
butter, a blue tablecloth, red-gold hair

You drive alone through the evening  
crossing fields fading in moonlight  
along roads where no one  
sings those old songs  
you always sang together

no words, no tune, no sentimental plea  
no warble-laced harmonies  
just your heart rocking  
your brain roiling with a voice  
clear under the sky's dark bowl

empty of her keen laugh.  
Later still, you miss the slow  
shared blossoming together,  
liquid brush of skin on skin  
under a climbing moon

But now you slip  
down a long quiet road into darkness  
pulled in a single direction.



## Three

It takes so long  
dividing everything in two

before and after  
me and you

## Two Springs

I'd been thinking about my nephew  
Willy and the mound of squirrel skulls  
raked from the ashes of the fire  
he cracked one-by-one like walnuts  
while we talked late one afternoon

Then I glanced up from the bog  
of memory and saw you holding  
something in the hand behind your back  
and marveled at the broad sunlit  
smile swinging onto your face

## The White Balloon

My scalp crawls  
when I look through  
the snapshot's crack in time  
and there we are  
just that side of the rift  
the forest dark beyond

Pale hair flows down her back  
and I stand beside her  
weight on one foot  
showing her something  
cupped in my hands

Our naked two-year-old  
daughter, Becca, gazes up at us  
who always had so much to say  
the taut string in her fist stretching  
up to the white balloon mooning  
above us, a cartoon bubble  
silent with age as the dead  
key on a toy piano

## The Angle of Reflection

A steady desert light  
trims the even edges of the sky

We move and the ground gives  
sand slipping underfoot

There is security in distance  
a golden loneliness, insistent quiet

We can see a storm coming  
miles away wherever we stand

Rain skims in all directions  
the wind chirrs

We say nothing and listen  
to the voice of a boundless sky

## Evidence of Life

This land is unmarked  
frontier where years  
sweep behind without trace

memories once precise  
grow porous as a net  
thrown over a fog bank

but somehow I recall  
standing here on all fours  
mutant nature lapping at my feet

while a moon bubbled amber  
I raised my head  
and sang into the wind

tonight moonlight pools in the room  
and dreams drift into dunes  
blinding as a continent of snow

I wake from sleep's premature  
burial, the sun rising like a fever  
toward a future I'll never know

## Code Talkers

The homing device starts  
humming in your head  
as you round the corner  
into a room stuffed  
with awkward glances  
you translate into silence  
while answers edge away  
from questions they can't  
agree with any more

# I Don't Mind and You Don't Matter

I don't mind that life in another country  
looks out of someone else's eyes, plays

checkers by a duckpond while here, here  
we stand on surface tension in the mirror

hair electric on my neck  
and love still a cunning word

for harmony whose silver waters  
wash my heart away, away

and yes, black petals  
unfolding as I sway

## No Shadows in the New Moon

The pillow's hollow from your dreams  
when I wake and hear you making coffee.

Rain rattles the corrugated roof,  
a car hisses past on the street.

A water pipe thumps, then hums  
and dishes chime far off.

Listening to everything  
I'm surprised by nothing.

Like clockwork we return  
to these routines; hopes

worn thin as beaten gold  
reflect for a moment then forget.

In a distant room your feet  
scuff the red-tiled floor.

A door opens, then closes, swinging  
on a hinge of silence between us.

## Ravel, Unravel

Summer after summer  
tiles crumble  
ice melts

days lean  
together, prop  
each other up

Tonight heat fills  
the darkness  
in and out

a glass sweats,  
your hand slips  
around it, cool

we listen  
to the creek  
empty itself

All the time  
we have  
follows it

rolls over stones  
shimmering  
in the heat



## Four

In a field  
wild with mustard  
a rabbit grows alert  
as a dark comforter of crows  
settles over a cottonwood

## The Red Shouldered Hawk

The red shouldered hawk  
sweeps past the roof

rises suddenly to her nest  
high in the sycamore

two gray chicks fluffy as lint balls  
hoarsely welcome her back

she drops her catch  
hops to another branch

the chicks cackle  
climbing over one another

learning to live with the sky

## The Trick

The trick is to catch yourself  
listening to the scuttle of shale  
down a mountainside

stand still in the moment  
with a red-tailed hawk  
rising on an updraft

that breathless moment  
the wind drops  
and thought leaps

free as a salmon  
in a cataract

as the dream wraps  
its bright coat  
around the dreamer

## Absence

Last night I shot awake  
in that enormous hour  
before the sun comes up  
my heart an elbow in my ribs.

Your face swam like the moon  
torn from its moorings  
more real in the melting shadows  
than I could let you know.

I got up to watch  
the sunrise and write  
how I've spent a life  
that comes at last to nothing

but this moment alone  
thankless as birdsong  
weightless as a dustmote  
dancing in sunlight.

## After Reading about Light Cones

Here in California you wait  
long enough and the sun  
slides into the Pacific

birds under the eaves fall  
into stunned silence  
and maybe it's worth the wait

tagging along as Earth  
corkscrews through the only heaven's  
great gulf between us.

Tonight Sirius guards my rear  
as deaf Rose pads beside me  
between the house and barn.

I take her collar  
when the bull  
snorts near the trough.

A dog-toothed moon  
hangs in the yawning sky  
and the night stretches

long as morning shadows  
where we began this wait  
to make our beds in darkness.