

THE IOWA POETRY PRIZE

# *Tropical Depressions*

*Poems by Elton Glaser*



## Tropical Depressions

Winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize







# Tropical Depressions

POEMS BY ELTON GLASER

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*For my mother and father*





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# O N E

---

*To have been born into a world of beauty,  
to die amid ugliness, is the common fate of  
all us exiles.*

—Evelyn Waugh



## Complaint against Crows

---

In the August cornfields, the crows  
thin in winter, tumescent by May  
lurch black and sleek as politicians.

I hate their icy hearts,  
their dry, scrabbling feet.

They bore me  
like the letters I sent long ago  
complaining to you of love.

What do I complain of now?

These words  
and the small defections of the mind.

The way the breasts  
of women at sixteen  
sweep back and forth in their gaudy halters  
like radar.

Exile, a northern sun  
scraping the windows, the palaver of leaves  
from a strange tree, the wry  
silence of snow.



The soft fall of money in another hand,  
praise fitted and draped on another name,  
peace expanding a worthier heart.

The inquisitions of the future,  
the inquest of the past.

And these crows, these insolent crows  
fat with satisfactions of the harvest,  
beating their black wings against the grain.

## Festive Songs on Lesser Occasions

*You will die of the domestic.*

—Jon Anderson

---

These beehive mornings, the hectic  
Rising of the sun, butter and honey  
Falling from distressed bread, and on the radio  
Some over-the-counter-tenor or French horns  
Blurry as trumpets with a three-day cold—

And soon the menopausal shower,  
Hot flashes in the bathroom  
As children work the basin faucets  
Like spaceship controls, and I lift  
Flaming towards that unfinished planet  
Far above the hairy dregs of this day—

Until, out of the bourbon's backlash  
And tobacco and last night's  
*Risorgimento* in the sheets, I piece myself  
Together and pull the necktie tight,  
The knot so hard against my throat  
I can feel the blood stop in its tracks  
And turn back. And the world begins.

## El Rancho Roacho

*Dance this mess around.*

—The B-52's

---

I know this place:  
the bellhop with his heroin tattoos,  
the keyclerk screaming the midnight  
names of luck; the way they toss  
each morning down the halls  
a bucket of sawdust, soaking up  
the poor man's gravy, enough  
blood and mucus  
to announce the birth  
of some great beast that drools  
at your doorsill, bringing  
news of the new day.

It's always like this  
at the taco motels,  
the cantinas where skinny women  
slide from their barstools  
at the first rough touch  
of their tits, where the mean boys  
crouch in the alley, running  
their blue blades over stone: all this  
night labor longing for dawn.

I've given my fingerprints  
to the city of lost angels, I sleep  
with a ginshot hag that hates me,

I don't hang no picture frames.  
Nine lifetimes past lunch, red-eyed,  
one lung praying to cancer,  
I pound my way back  
through the alphabet, typing  
with ten thumbs and a headbone  
these pornographies for children,  
the old sad pop-up books of love.  
In this way, I pay for  
the invention of the wheel  
and every wreck that followed.

Bad afternoons, I race the dial  
around the kilohertz, pulling  
from the public air  
a gangwar of drums and guitars,  
anything to keep me  
from thinking  
of those sighs and grunts  
in another room: is someone  
coming or crapping  
or easing the ache  
that drives him through  
the sliding noose of his dreams?

O I'm dancing the Apocalypso,  
both feet on fire  
and my eyes  
sucking the light from the room.  
I have seen God  
with his pompadour and fruitboots,  
his big rings banging  
on the keyboard, and a voice  
one decibel above brain damage  
calling through the clouds:  
*Keep a-knockin'*  
*but you can't come in.*

My door is always  
open to the hell of hard shoulders,  
and I'll give you so much  
grief and passion you can  
start a new earth of your own,  
all snarls and sweet whiskey  
and something dripping you can't turn off.

## *Mal de Moi*

---

When I see that summer moon  
cranked up to heaven, and feel  
a telltale rattle in the backbone,  
corkscrew in the brain,  
I go down these guilty streets  
looking for someone low enough  
to live up to—  
                  some sly eyeshadow,  
a tongue that swings down  
like a rat's tail between  
two dislocated lips, whose business is giving  
voodoo blowjobs for loot;  
                  or some citizen  
improving his hours under the neon,  
a face gone green and German,  
saving the blade for me, a steel  
keepsake in a slur of blood, working  
from the hangnails in. Ah,  
if this is life,  
all jumpcut and slow dissolve,  
I can leave it  
but I can't  
leave it alone, or stand here  
in a suit broken on the rack, my head  
bowed and bare to the passing weather.

One more time let me mole through  
the alleys that mislead my feet  
to Bonsoir the Hatter  
who will, with his thimble  
upright as a robot's condom, pull shut  
the shades and fit me  
in this small *chapeau*, a dream  
with seven feathers roosting in the band  
and a brim dipped continentally down,  
until the mirrors all throw back  
a face so farfetched and grand  
it's like leaping on the queen's lap  
at the opera, the royal box, overcome  
by the flashpoint  
of those high heroic arias  
in a language I will never understand.

## Ground Level

---

### I

These plants can't live on love and dog piss.

Hibiscus, you know the moods of water,  
How it broods and breaks and takes down  
Each twist in the sun's conspiracies, too shifty  
For the ferns and the weeping fig.

Mimosa, you've heard the alibis of light,  
Sunbows over your African tassels, your leaves  
Asleep in the half-truths of the moon  
That only the backward rose believes in.

These plants can't live on wishes and the bad luck of birds.

### 2

It's that kind of weather, so weird  
Even the newborn greens can't grow: the days droop  
Like lizards on a warm stone  
And the nights keep travelling, looking for  
The lost motels on the star-map.



You see these bare shrubs mulling for a grubstake,  
Bell peppers tolling in the wind,  
And lilies polishing the pews on Sunday  
When the sermons stick to the roof. . . .

3

And here comes that fool  
With his sloppy boots and a chainsaw,  
Wheezing and eager to bring the world back  
To ground level, down to the brine and briars,  
A human scale where the impatient teeth  
Whittle even the air away, until the clouds  
Hover over our heads like the blank balloons  
Of a comic strip, panels in which  
The people have nothing to say or think  
And the joke is too painful to explain.

## The Lesson

---

### I

Students, in their sullen analysis,  
pull the blood back  
knob by knuckle and once more  
drive their tired pens  
through the heart of a poem.  
Another inquisition of the trivial,  
wrong answers  
to the questions no one asked.  
Another sick look  
out the window, the panes  
crusted with dust and the damp lines  
from a thousand clouded brows.

### 2

I think Casanova once bent deep,  
as they do, over  
an unforgiving book, keeping  
his neat accounts  
after the spillage and farewells  
silken with promises, pouring sand  
on the lies, the brutal praise.  
Perhaps, in his stone room, hiding  
from the law or a lover's arms,

he felt a warm wind  
tease the hair from his neck  
like a woman's touch,  
half-savage, half-civilized,  
until he must turn  
back to his stale page, longing  
for someone else to betray.

3

Little shepherd of the book,  
have all your sheep gone  
over the stony end, putting down  
a last backsliding adjective, or phrases  
that look both ways  
before crossing the mind?  
Somewhere among them, I'm hunting  
that blunt genius who  
wasted on the walls of the men's room.  
I staggered through last night  
his brave idiom, lifesize and naked:  
*My mother died in this bar.*  
He, too, shall pass.  
Let the other bastards  
repeat this lesson till they learn.

## Corrosive Sublimate

---

With blindfolds and dope, with all the hairy pangs  
Of honey eaten from a lion's head,

They woo the hazards, coax the foreskin back  
In the brackets of a scratch-and-sniff hotel,

The Simian-Hilton, where the bellhop looks  
Like an organgrinder's monkey in his pillbox cap,

And the torsos turn over when the clocks  
Strike two, wrapping up

The half-hour honeymoon and the hot lunch.  
I know how it is:

You want someone with the soul of Hogarth  
And the hands of Norman Rockwell

To sanctify this scene,  
An overlay of Boy Scouts on the debauchery,

And not simply to set down  
The ache and pester of these days

That slide like butter in a scorched pan,  
A hard white cream that clarifies

And then burns black.  
Was there ever a green age

When the goatgod and his women  
Tangled underneath the trees, wild flesh and horseflies,

The only music their split squeals  
And someone's breath in a bonepipe,

Long before the Greeks began  
To take themselves seriously,

All those noble speeches  
Wiping up the backstage blood?

And now, for your sake, I'll take up  
The slack, painting on a red smile

As if I were a whore who, after fucking,  
Washes out her womb

With vinegar, rinsing in alum  
Until the membranes pull tight

Around a snag of raw beef,  
Lying like a virgin for your needs.

## Hogtown Stomp

---

O you can sing the blues with the best of them, though you're not blind or black and your kidneys still flush twice a day. When you plug in your little amp and with a big thumb bend a scream and stutter from the lowest string, all the bellies on the dancefloor drop like erratic elevators. You hurt them till it helps.

One-man ghetto, blue eyes bleary from the smoke of burnt-out lives, you buck and wing to your own rough tune as the platform rattles and the sweat leaps off you like baptism in reverse. That song about bad luck, that song about the amber mysteries of whiskey, that one where the women pull back their long legs to the vanishing point—every syllable cured in sour mash and swept out by a slurred tongue! Mule of passion, you unload those burdens until even the nights grow lighter and the days drive you home at the end of the empty streets.

## Elegant Solutions

---

I could never be confused with that man moved by his own music, that Adonis of the avenues, whose poems survive only in secret, in primitive abandon of the ballpoint on bodies that, for me, remain forever insurmountable—slant rhyme of the breasts, Lascaux of the labia. Nor do I in the least resemble that bard among cowboys, Slim Volume, who schooled his meters in the mesquite gaits of his nag, and nightly tested a leadpipe lullabye on the bulls, their big eyes blank as his verse.

Having thrown over all interest in cattle and pantoums and mysteries of the garter belt, I will consecrate myself entirely to the important questions of our time, such as: does Critical Mass define the number of murders one must commit before one can be properly acclaimed a mass murderer? Such as: does the nuclear-driven vibrator really constitute the first of the Six Warning Signs of God?

Pending the elegant solutions, I am going to visit all the forgotten places of this earth, including the gazebo and the mezzanine. I will be blessed among fishfries, consoled by parachutes, anointed with a local anaesthesia. In spite of the damage beige has done, in spite of the duckblind and the clipboard, I will continue my experiments with postminstrel depression, getting as much mileage as I can out of the wishbone, and conflating my headlong pleasures: to watch halftime ceremonies at the Enigma

Bowl, and to deconstruct nostalgias of the wet dream (always alert to the afterglow of a peignoir, pajamas in a vapor lock).

And when I have made my peace with the lefthand hinges of this allegory, and have arranged for the perpetual upkeep of the busy-signal, I will purchase that small plot my years have hankered for, and spend these last days humoring the dead, who have gone the way of the inkwell and the napkin ring, and on whom I will leave my mark in accents grave and acute.



## Homage to Catatonia

---

I've lived so long on the business end of English, I can take anything, even the woman I love, Hulga, who stands there in her spandex pants, pointing a sharp finger at my heart, saying "I'll freeze your assets, son. I'm gonna close *all* your accounts."

But tonight I'm feeling rangy as a leopard with his halfback hips, I'm cranked up, I'm deep in the Gospel of Gratified Desire. All over town, my syntax is raising the hair of strangers. And she says, pulling off her blue inscrutable shirt, "You know, you have the hands of a mutant."

Promiscuous syllables! Panoramas of the breath! I offer you this deadpan stare, a brain nine years behind the news. Here in the dry bowels of America, in a bedroom blocked by books and tampons damp with her blood, I'm holed up like the last tourist of the inward life, taking the woman I love, taking the lines of least resistance.

## Coming and Going

---

Whatever we get out of this,  
It's not enough. Once,  
I could rattle a flat highway  
To somewhere else, on the front seat  
A jug of monkey rum  
And miles behind me a woman  
With her heart blown out, soaking  
The motel bed in moans,  
As the moonlight fell  
Face down in the parking lot.

After the wrong turns  
That heaved us here, as far  
From heaven as from hell,  
We brood over the blame:  
The unforgiving shifts of weather; a blur  
Where the plot lines rise  
Out of smalltalk into crisis;  
Havoc in the maps. Looking for  
The only road left open, the course  
Of least grief, we try  
To take it all back,  
Like wheels sidewinding deep  
In mire and loose gravel,  
In the slack panic of regret.

But the way I feel tonight,  
Neither misery nor mercy  
Can steer me through the mudmaze  
Or heal my needs. And already  
It's too late for anger,  
The kind that patches up  
The wound it's opened, poultice  
At the pressure point; too late  
For apologies, the rearview retrieval  
Of colliding lives. I want to  
Put the pedal down again and leave  
Blue smears and smoke  
When I drive these shaken dreams away.

## Wedlock

---

*Jesus, help me*

she cries, her knees bruised  
on the bathroom tile, her curls  
splashed over the porcelain  
as sixteen years of agony  
spill into the bowl, the first rule  
of drinking lost hours before:  
never mix bile with bourbon.

Some nights there's no telling  
grace from disgrace.  
And when Jesus can't come,  
a spell of projectile vomiting  
will soothe the soul.

Her needs are simple now—  
a cool hand on the forehead;  
words that will ease  
the long way up, loosen  
the locked jaw, and  
fill her with herself.

But you're not the one  
to save her; she's trembling  
in your hands as if  
you had found her once more  
hiding from her crimes

and forced her, head bent,  
to the block—cop and judge  
and keeper of the breakneck blade.

And when you brush the sweat back  
from the pale wreckage of her face,  
you'll feel the same sick abyss  
she drops through each morning  
as you leave, taking  
the whole day with you;  
and you'll know, in the sour smell  
of her kiss, how she recoiled  
those angry midnights when you  
offered on your lips  
a backwash of tobacco and muscat women.

And now her eyes  
slide back, empty  
as the name you gave her,  
as if she were looking through  
the keyhole of hell, as if  
face down in the toilet  
she saw herself this time  
inside the white fossil  
of her bridal veil, draining  
like an abscess, cleaning out  
the small foul pool of her life.

## New Year's Fear

---

A sudden wind between us shakes out  
The match you lit the rockets with, the last one  
Scorching through the sky, blue quench  
And hoot, drizzle of small stars,  
A new year's nova blown back to earth.

For blocks around us, the crackers spizz and boom  
As if this were an Irish wake and time  
Would rise out of its dead self to dance,  
The good booze moving like the bowels of God.

But nothing changes in the end: it's still  
All alibis and elegies.

And yet

In this midnight blitz, I see  
The fires praise your face, the brow burning,  
Each cheekbone angled out in flame. You blaze  
Crazy as a Chinese holiday,  
A hundred torches dripping and licking  
Over the dragons with human feet, those halfbreeds  
That lash me back in line, unrolling the daredevil  
Scare and lightning of their tongues.

I want to pull this night down over me,  
Pillow my head on the useless moon,

Before the dawn storms through  
The smoke and sex and chatter,  
And every pledge we made starts breaking like the day.

## Planting the Flag

---

This hand adventuring  
between the sheets  
may bring back  
fresh encompassings,  
silks and spices of the flesh.

But if there were sudden  
errors in the wind,  
or the stars' evasion, or a mind  
snapping in the storm  
like a white sail too tightly rigged—

would I still come  
splashing to the shore,  
this sinking sand and tangle  
of dry vines from which  
a wild red face  
looks out  
in awe and anger, and claim it,  
planting the flag  
in some higher name, as if  
this were a new world mine to take  
and not an island of its own,  
already old and far from  
the whispered riches of the East?



This hand will hold  
what it can, because it can, making  
the salt voyage home, keel high,  
or full as the moon  
that deepens and carries back  
new latitudes of light, beyond  
the birdcries and bellblare,  
the green sleepwalking waves.

## Primitives

---

No more than halfway out the cave  
where the black wounds of bison  
drip from the walls and the wheel  
still rolls slowly towards us from the future,  
I'm busy inventing the brake.

You can tell this

from the slump in my forehead, by the way  
my hands tangle in their own loose hair.

But when my woman burns  
her strange meat in the shadows—  
something with feathers pulled down  
on the hot savannah, or something with claws  
plucked up from the sucking swamp—  
I put by my tools and gaze, recalling  
that scrink of flint, the sparks'  
quick scatter in the dry wood.

And as the flames braid and waver,  
I do the apeman dance, once more walking  
on these ugly knuckles, hands clenched  
against the earth, as if my infant senses  
stumbled their first step in the new world.

O woman, when you fry  
in that tatter of smoke, I know  
there's no stopping, I can feel  
my slow head bob and gnaw

like a blaze that feeds on what we breathe,  
then licks itself clean, more mother to us  
than those far waters aswarm with dirty life:  
fire that is always faithful  
to itself, always on the move,  
bicker and sweet tongue  
and the long backbends of love.

T W O

---

*You've got to stop mocking—and start enduring—the truth.*

—Raeburn Miller



## Storm Damage

---

Another bad night,  
The rain speaking in tongues again  
And the radio pulling through the purged air  
Only some brimstone preacher  
Hotwired from the wilds of Oklahoma,  
That sooner-or-later state  
Where all my sins will be healed  
By five dollars and a baptism of dust,  
As if Jesus had nothing better to do  
Than ride shotgun all day in a pickup truck,  
Blessing the oil rigs and the rodeos.

Oh it's a serious rain all right,  
A nervous sobbing wreck, some sleazy angel  
Drunk on his own grief and smearing  
The windows with a wet face, while the wind  
Does its falldown comedy, its vicious slapstick.  
But I'm too tired to let these mysteries in,  
Too washed out for any voice  
That sweeps in sour against the freedoms  
Of whiskey and money and painful women.  
Let it all slobber down the drainpipes,  
Slide out like grudges and black mud. I could

Drown in my own sleep, the big cold dreams  
Closing over me, if not  
For those long spikes of lightning driven in the sky  
And those gusts that blow half the moon away  
And that god-gossip wrangling through the trees.

## Descripture

---

I've been reading the latest  
cutrate testament, two books  
trimmed back and patched into one,  
the uplift updated  
for the busy and the bored.

I kneel to that genius  
who could divinely mix and match  
until only the good parts remain,  
spliced together beyond the logic  
of theology or the scholar's art,  
to keep the plot line moving  
and hold no one back  
by laws or lists or lamentations.

It's a hell of a story this way:  
Noah loading up the ark  
with a plague of frogs, of hail, of flies,  
as the rising waters turn to blood;  
Solomon, that wise miser,  
splitting a baby in two, and those halves  
hacked in half again and so on and so on,  
until five thousand faithful were fed  
on the infant's flesh, and only  
the true mother threw up her meal,  
and those four disciples



slapping their brows in astonishment  
when, out of the great stinking fish  
their nets had snagged and landed,  
old Jonah stepped forth, still seasick,  
still disgruntled, asking for  
a shortcut back to Nineveh.

Each night, in the halo zone  
of my lamp, I thumb through the passions  
and obligatos of belief, wrestling with  
the messengers of God, reliving the miracles,  
the foolproof promise of a second chance.  
It's all here, set down  
in the secret language anyone can learn,  
decoding as quickly as Judas  
who, according to this gospel,  
was last seen lost  
in the hanging bathrooms of Babylon  
where, under those drawings  
that massacre the innocents, he read  
the handwriting on the wall:  
*For a good time, call Jesus Christ.*

And thanks to this little black book,  
I've got his number too.

## Holograms of the Holy

---

When we build the new church,  
we'll have this 3-D Christ  
tacked up on the wall, the spikes  
so close and clear we can almost  
feel the sharp blood drip  
on our special glasses,  
the ones that make us look  
like dictators from Bolivia or moviestars  
at the bottom of a three-day drunk.  
When we build the new church,  
we'll pull out the pews and put in  
some bucket seats with valves  
and levers and swivel controls,  
for those long novenas when we're all  
kneebent and backbroke from toting up  
the excremental repetitions of the litany.  
When we build the new church,  
our priest will come down in thunder  
to the gospel bells, he'll ring out  
his parables of power behind a pulpit  
fashioned halfway between  
the presidential podium and  
the grillwork from a Coupe de Ville.  
O there won't be nothing  
good enough for us—  
we'll wrap the altar rail

in aluminum siding and scrape  
every stain out those stained glass windows.  
And in the lobby, we'll build  
a baptism basin big as a  
Greek armpit-heater, so deep you could  
drown a whole orphanage in it at one time!  
But brothers and sisters,  
we'll have no hand-holding hymns  
when we build the new church,  
no slim and sickly young men  
swishing their catgut guitars to a holy yodel—  
when we build the new church,  
we'll wire in these new computer organs  
that play nothing but the fugue states  
of Bach, Bach as baroque  
as a handshake in Harlem,  
as fiery as brimstones sizzling  
from the devil's piss, until  
the whole nave is ablaze  
with that good German knowhow,  
beyond all miracles of the collection plate.

## Syllabus of Errors

---

### I

I still believe, the way an amputee still feels the leg he has watched a surgeon toss in the bloody bucket. But will that pay my admission to the other world, sweep me through the turnstiles of purgatory, or out of hell, its only exit a revolving door? And from which side will I watch the gates of heaven swing shut on a blind hinge?

### II

At the professor's funeral, we all stood sadly upwind while his body cried out for the gift that was almost given. I would have brought back his tongue, cured in lies and the droppings of minor poets, but it was much too good for you.

### III

Your sweet times have turned bitter in the brain, those nights of arsenic for the lovers, those long afternoons dismembering the saints. I will close them like books, asylums of memory where summer is always slumming but the moon provokes no miracles on the wrecked bed—nothing to disinherit, nothing to deny.

#### IV

I put out the lights of a waning year. Something slow moves  
through the city, some broken word that no one should hear, like  
*old* or *desire*. Through the dead streets, I carry a shovel with me  
to fill whatever has become empty in the night.

## Dolls Divided

---

They were wood raised to the highest power, our features pressed against them like a fingerprint filled with blood from the victim's heart. But though we covered them in the morning with their dwarf clothes and undressed them each evening, we could never find in their smooth grain the hanging gardens of our father or what our mother hid between her legs, the only thing both sow's ear and silk purse.

And however often we laid them for the night between the pages of our books, marking the places we had abandoned for sleep, we would find them no wiser by morning. All those acres of oak brought down at the knees! Spines broken that the brain might live! We shook them and shook them—even God in his tantrums was not so angry!—until their heads came clear from their bodies, wreckage all around us, stupid and sexless and beyond repair.

## Dolls Reading Descartes

---

They have the unencumbered look of cows that moment before the sledgehead storms into the brain. Does nothing brew inside that painted porcelain, no great thoughts steeping in their teapot skulls? Good breeding will always tell, René. Old slugabed, in a hot room you dreamed the world down to geometry and wound up years later with a chill caught at dawn drilling metaphysics into the Queen of Sweden, dead in that land of bears among the rocks and ice—even you cannot disrupt these sailor suits and pinafores, or make one glazed eye blink at your method and your mathematics.

And yet, there is a crack starting in the cranium, just under the horsehair toupees, and spreading like a new line drawn on the maps when the treaties have all been sealed, another country cut from a stubborn birth. Some deep pressure must be pushing through the core, the dura mater laboring at last. They are trying to think and it's killing them. O God, what horrors will back out now—spiked wings whetted on the air, or white ooze circling a sunset yolk like a bloodclot in heaven—when this eggshell breaks?

## Ragdoll Raga

---

Why should I complain of my birth? I was not built up from mud or knocked into knobs and vents on a stolen rib. These stitches were spliced in small and neat by a seamstress less frantic than Herr Frankenstein, who laced up the square skull of his monster like a cheap football. I was made new from castoff calico and silk, diapers and denim, with a widewale spine of corduroy. These are mother-of-pearl buttons that are my eyes and my smile is a crescent of red thread. Five pairs of fragrant pantyhose are bunched up for a brain (no woolgathering in this head), with floppy forearms scissored from the heel-and-toe of socks. And at my crotch, someone has riveted a strip of hardworking leather.

Lies only are fashioned from whole cloth. All the thinlipped idealists and planetary diplomats could not cut and join a more transfigured, particolored man. I should be flung forth by rocketship to teach those misshapen strangers who patrol the outer stars that we here on earth know how to piece together our differences. There need be no text but textiles, the silent jigsaw body of our beliefs. Let my mission rise above the world's emergencies. Where I was brother to the packrat, now I shall be kin to Christ hammered into heaven, Buddha broken on the wheel, Mohammed strangling through the holy words on Mt. Hira. Cargo and captain of this craft, I hurl myself inside the mapless night, looking for a casket with a trapdoor, a cradle with a brake.



## Excursions on the Ontological Plan

---

Even these islands of light  
Where one longs to be abandoned,  
Beyond the crazed slaves and the bores  
Abrading the slippage of the mind,  
Darken a little at the edges—  
Slub in the weedstems, gurry in the mud—  
As though to remind all tourists  
With a taste for cornflakes and bronze monuments  
That the tea rose tilted pink against  
A glaze of moonlight on palace stones  
Must spread its roots deep  
In dung and desire. And should one find  
That each route through the hinterland  
Leads to a zoo where weasels  
Suck dead paint from Easter eggs,  
Or to a state museum hung  
With tattoos heavy in the frame, the skin  
Pinpricked in savage slogans, one might well  
Refuse to leave the bus, the way  
Some giant fern in an arboretum  
Will snub the rain, adding its slow inch  
From cigar stubs and vibrations of steam.  
Already the summer and the sunburnt day  
Feel half rare, half done. But the shorelines  
Still lap with brine as one waits

For the tide to bring back the transport  
Bobbing like a bottle tossed overboard,  
In which the wine dregs darken  
A folded phrase of distress  
Or muted alleluia, the text tainted,  
Taking on the same high shade  
As this navigable broth that bears up  
A vexed regatta, the flags  
Testing the wind or lashing out  
Signals too quick to decode, as if  
Plato were talking to himself again.

## Acronym

---

I have been studying the 3000 abbreviations of sleep,  
chain letters sent out from the suburbs  
where children are redesigning the toothpaste tube  
and lawyers stand gazing at their lawns,  
afraid those strange new plumes in the high bermuda  
will mean more money out the pocket, bad karma  
however you look at it, and you do look  
as the mailman hands you a branded envelope and steps back,  
leaving you alone with those dark thoughts knocking  
at the threshold of your head. Now  
neither of us will understand what it means,  
tired as we are from these field trips into the interior  
and our late nights cataloguing  
the butterflies and native labials, the broken urns  
that other world was buried in; unless,  
out of the acids of this life,  
a dream develops like a passport photograph  
that, though it in no way resembles us,  
will take us pronto from this place, our footsteps  
stamping down the same pavement  
that welcomed us nine years before, as if time  
were the solemn stiffnecked star  
of the only movie that made you  
drench your seat,  
*Revenge of the Zombies:*  
dead and on the move.

## Deciduous Variations on Akron

*Promise me something, Uncle Ray!*

*What!*

*That when I die I won't be from Ohio.*

—Barry Hannah, *Ray*

---

Fall is our favorite conclusion.

We can do without

the leaves backlit from heaven,  
the gold coronas, yellow of old skulls,  
and reds sparking like volleys from a banjo,  
in whose presence the fine-tuned hairs  
of tourists vibrate and gawk.

The sky goes nowhere, a sealed confession,  
the stone of Lazarus undisturbed.

We like it that way. In this tale,  
the hero turns back, his horse sore-footed,  
his sword heavy in his hand, never guessing  
that the girl's wild cries were just  
one more sad joke from the dragon.

Three wishes are never enough.

We want the axioms of autumn,  
X and Y of the big trees, a natural algebra  
printed on the air like  
the timetable for a Chinese railway.

This is the landscape of necessity,  
adventures for the ornery eye, all freaks  
and flaws, aberration of atoms.

Here, the brain spins with the speed  
of rearwheels in slush, snowsmoke,  
the engine in a high hot whine.

And we come to the dead end  
of ourselves, as if some needle pierced us  
pointing out true north, the lodestar  
that leads wise men to Akron—no switchbacks  
or byways, no last detour  
around the damage, only this white weather  
where nothing changes, everything hurts.

## Seasonal Adjustments

---

I

This winter's gone on so long  
I can smell spring  
even in the urinals swabbed down  
with pine oil, a scent so strong  
it clears a path from here  
to Slidell, Louisiana  
where once more I stand  
moonfaced and confused  
in a circle of tall trees  
snarled at the top  
and let the sunlight  
warm me from the earth up.

2

Still north of April  
and a cold rain  
splinters the state, sharp  
as an icepick through the heart.  
I don't need this, even a blind  
baffling of fog would do, something  
sullen and sluggish  
to hide my life in. Outside the window,

the driveway writhes with worms  
and two sorry chickadees  
peck at the hanging feedbox,  
their wings slicked back, their skullcaps  
bobbing at the seder of seeds.  
What do they care  
for the byzantine misery of taxes?  
Their eyes don't crawl upward  
when the evening news  
pours its blue light on the pork chops.  
They don't feel in their wet breasts  
a surge, a sick fear they'll be  
condemned to die in Ohio,  
that last outpost of civilized asylum.  
They bring back people I once knew  
on the Mississippi, who loved  
its loose romance, its sidle  
and rich silt, its minstrel winds,  
and could not spell that river's name  
the same way twice.

I'm writing this poem  
sometime before the last snowfall becomes  
the first flood, each flake a wheel  
spinning with my limbs  
lashed to its cold spokes.

I'm writing this poem  
while others defend the beachheads  
of Florida, throwing their money  
at the sun, bribing the sea,  
living on grapefruit and degradation.

I'm writing this poem  
the way the ancient Persians  
pursued their hard affairs,  
drinking the night down  
to its conclusion, then taking up  
counsel again when the cups were quenched,  
sober in dull daylight.

You will find this story  
lodged in the nine volumes of Herodotus,  
a man just Greek enough  
to tell the truth  
as though it were a lie  
too beautiful to disbelieve.



## Complaint against Complaint

---

All day the smallest things have turned on me—  
this button swinging from my cuff  
like an eyeball jarred loose; the old car confusing  
second with reverse until it backs up straight ahead;  
these words, tense and tired of my low-rent poems,  
out scouting someplace serenely sturdy in the beams.

Now I'm looking at the way three robins  
haggle over one gone worm, and the way  
that spider unspools a thin shimmer in the yew,  
trying to live down its bad reputation.  
Now I'm letting the blood pour through the skyline  
until nothing's left but the night's white knuckle.

Is it too late to call the whole show off? If he were here,  
St. Francis would slide back his hood and say:  
go humble through the hills and naked, where even  
the bees and wolves will name you *brother*  
and feed you for nothing, as if you were  
too pure or stupid to forage for yourself.  
But he's not here. I hoist my nuts  
under the baggy bathrobe and heat the TV cuisine:  
crow, with a backlash of bacon.

O when there's so much gnashing of teeth  
the tongue must always be in danger. I need  
some hard wine to wash this dinner down;  
I need the blue haze of books and saxophones,  
a muse rigged out in grit, bald,  
with a bad squint; I need to know that,  
whatever slurs and gripes this mouth is guilty of,  
there won't be one ear listening.



# T H R E E

---

*If I had to live in a city I think I would prefer New Orleans to any other—both Southern and Catholic and with indications that the Devil's existence is freely recognized.*

—Flannery O'Connor



## Views of the Vieux Carré

---

We go out into  
The warm unnatural morning—  
Winters should be all ice  
And shimmer of snow, chained wheels  
Over the glassy streets—  
To mail the postcards bragging  
Of blue days, gumbo,  
And oysters in a burlap sack,  
Their slick scenes enhancing  
What we saw: the white cathedral,  
Arabesques of ironwork, a river  
Rising out of myth and history,  
Market stalls with their garlands  
Of garlic and creole squash.

Friends, be grateful  
For what you've got, these cards  
Whose backs are too small  
To hold complaint. They might be letters  
Telling of homesick children  
Unruly in school, motors slow  
And cranky on the drive down,  
An apartment of missing windowpanes  
And the dead stench  
Of curry dyed into the drapes.

We send you the life  
It would be wrong to clarify,  
A blur of bright lines, a dream  
Too fluent for the facts to freeze.

## Moonwalk on the Mississippi

---

From here the days go by like barges  
That never move until I look away  
And turn back to find them  
Lower down the river, and wait  
For the flat decks to disappear into the bend,  
So distant now they must be taken on belief.

I watch them from this walkway  
Reflecting the nickname of a mayor, these wooden steps  
That lead me each afternoon to hear  
The water wearing at the rocks, a slow return  
Of stone to another state, where everything  
Empties at last into the long gulf.

And I drift like those people waving  
From the tourist boats, sternwheelers that browse  
Through bayous under the warning eye  
Of gators trolling in the standstill water, their wakes  
Waning to a bank shrouded with moss.  
I raise my hand to all who trespass this way.



And wherever the unspent hours wash up, in a delta  
Rich with riversoil, or this crescent where spiders  
Crawl from tropic cargoes on the dock, I know that  
Behind me, across the statue and busy pigeons in the Square,  
The cathedral clock will soon count out  
The shadows striking what the sun had only touched.

—New Orleans, 1981

# Hydromancy

---

## I

I can still remember  
that August when I was nine, a warm day  
and mean, whitecaps building across the lake.  
I had come with canepole and tackle  
to the old bridge where pelicans  
settled on every post to scan for mullets  
catapulting near the shore. And I watched  
the water turn against itself.

## II

Today the surface moves like the brown sighing  
of a sow's belly. I pick out a shell  
from the litter on the seawall steps, a gray runt  
the waves had knocked apart or the gulls broke open,  
and smooth off the salt, pressing its cool shape  
to my palm. There is no genius in this whorl,  
these dull halfrings I rub between my fingers,  
but under the winter sun something is coming true.

### III

Years from now, a spring wind pants in the sail,  
groaning the small boat over beer cans, gloves,  
a baby in a plastic bag. Syrup of ammonia,  
shawl of creosote, the lake smears beneath my face  
like a window a wounded bird has thrashed against.  
I don't want to raise those secrets  
dragged deep in ooze, or salvage what the tides sucked out,  
not while I can still remember  
the end we crawled to out of mutant waters.

—Lake Pontchartrain, 1981

## Fantasia on Tchoupitoulas Wharf

---

Some things come in their own time, as  
Long before noon the stevedores, steeped  
In sweat, break work for a snack  
Of crackers and hogshead cheese swilled down  
With cans of Dixie beer which they crush  
And sail into the river, a silver tip  
For the tonic of their appetites. But  
Fed or fasting, they must wait for days  
Before a thunderhead swells over them  
Like a black toad about to croak,  
The rain that comes in raw against the skin,  
Steaming the gray sides of ships, and the white  
Racks of lightning that force them from  
Their cranes and cargo holds to the warehouse  
Where money gives way to fear, where some things  
Arrive before or beyond their time, and the rats  
Sit out the storm while the foreman  
Labors to set straight what men and weather have deranged.

## Magdalena of Decatur Street

---

I'm no high-rise whore, I got no use  
for lotions you can lick from my breasts  
in six flavors like mango and crème de menthe,  
no use for any Vulvomatic vibrator  
with twirling attachments and touch control.

Most nights you can find me  
outside the Little Dixie Bar'n'Grill,  
pulling a rattail comb through my hair,  
that black cloud that drizzles  
an acid rain, and looking you in the eye.

All the boys know me, they call me  
Queen of the Night, they buy me  
those longneck beers that go down  
slick as oysters off a cold shell.  
But they don't know my Christian name  
and I ain't telling. It's mine.

What I most like is some young one  
saved up three months to meet me. And after  
that first fast shot, I tease out  
a second run of sperm  
like rapids of wild milk, lashing and breaking.

I can bear the traffic, the catcalls,  
the bulls in their seersucker suits.  
It's all smoke in the bagpipes anyhow.

And at full tide I overflow  
to the Greek bars, go barefoot  
when the ships come in and we dance  
the handkerchief dance, those small dark men  
that loop and glide around me  
in the midnight jukebox light, my whole body  
at home, hot and fat and free, outside  
the lockstep beats of the heart.

## Elegy for Professor Longhair

---

Over the low lope of the bass, the highhat's chatter,  
I'll always hear that upright  
Stutter and sway—the Professor's playing  
His bareknuckle rhumba boogie on Rampart Street!  
Stand back now, it's the crawfish love call,  
It's the wild bell ringing for resurrection,  
It's the ghost of hambones in Congo Square,  
Voodoo by Jesus out of Jelly Roll!

I'll take my place in the second line,  
Do the zulu strut  
Where the brothers sweat through the streets,  
Slow drag and blues—oh the bottom  
Done drop out the big drum and the horn's  
All empty, but the tourists still  
Step off the train, some hi-fi squalling  
*Get yo' ticket in yo' hand, you wanna go to New Orleans!*

I've come back and you've gone.  
No gospel or gris-gris  
Could keep you here, however much  
You loved the jukejoints pouring out  
Bourbon and a smoky beat, the palm trees  
Lashing their green rhythm down Elysian Fields.  
These words are for the wide river  
That spreads forever south, and that black box

You rode like a raft into heaven.



## Plantation

---

Now, at dusk, beyond the river's slow strokes  
and the migraine of mosquitoes, I almost see  
her white gown glide across the columns, a silk bell  
that echoes down the long alley of pine and oak  
where on her bridal day she walked beneath  
a gold and silver tangle in the branches, a dust  
the field slaves spread through the canopy of webs  
hung by spiders her father shipped from Africa.

Now, under the snags of moss, a small wind  
rises from that hollow of brick and cypress beams,  
too weak to blow the ghosts away, though it carries  
a bobwhite's call from the canebrake, the dry stalks  
that rattle like chains, and from the worn earth it brings  
a lolling odor of jasmine and black sweat.

What life do I betray, standing here  
on the false side of history, facing two pasts  
beyond approach: these ruins the moon will overflow  
and, far behind, those sour cabins gone back to darkness  
under the wild grass, the spearhead blades of palmetto?  
Now, at the edge of judgment, I lean against  
a rough pine stuck with locust pods split down the back,  
and enter this long moment haunting the bottomland, a bitter  
beauty that seven generations could not raze forever or restore.

## Mosquito Hawks

---

You call them dragonflies  
But you come from another country  
Of snow and unions, without a summer  
Worth the name. I passed my childhood  
Picking them off the wire fence  
That kept my father's junkyard  
From my mother's house, and bringing them  
Back to the concrete slab—both morgue  
And front porch—where my brother  
Waited to probe them with a pin,  
Their fierce heads turning like ball-turrets  
To attack the thin pain suddenly inside them.  
It was soon done, the jaws snapped open  
Forever and the wings swept down  
A final time. The matchbox burials  
Bored us before long—science  
Never weeps over those martyrs whose reward  
Is the walking lame, the robot heart,  
The comatose who go on living.

Your young days were different—  
You would lie down for hours in August  
Behind the family's weekend home  
(Three bathrooms, a deck foursquare to the sun),

Watching them patrol the dusk  
For insects, the sheer panels of their wings  
Holding the light's last color, a fire so distant  
It burns only in fables now.

Darling, whatever name they died under,  
It was an old story we repeated  
Years ago, your privilege always to witness  
Those brave banners that take the field  
And never to hear  
The rebel yells surpassing sure defeat.

## Cajun Graveyard

---

You must go beyond  
those old square slat-sided homes  
where dead leaves stumble down the street

and blue runners bend across the sugardirt  
like the tires of bicycles  
torn in two,

and find yourself  
halfway to nowhere,  
the ground sucking underfoot

as if to pull you in,  
a siege of water  
that slows down the land.

If you were seeking  
enigmas in the stone,  
the graveyard stone of northern colonies,

there are none here, no lives  
that might be rubbed away  
and framed against a parlor wall—

only stoneflies that spin a lazy loop  
around the sun and bristle  
through the toadflax and Spanish dagger.

Each plot ends  
in a slant moss-branded cross,  
silvered by the wind and rain,

propped up with  
boxes of the dead,  
those pine contraptions

where, under lids of glass,  
someone has wired in backwood designs  
of brooding beads, jewelled insects,

and unnatural eyes  
that stare so deep and cold  
you turn your head away.

The stories here are carried  
in the heart, not blazoned out  
for passing strangers: that heavy man

standing by the white chaplets  
of bridal wreath can tell you  
how in this bog was buried

his *grandpère's* neighbor  
lost to the *loup-garou*;  
and over there a gambler burns

who took with him to the grave  
his charm for bottom cards,  
the ninth bone of a black cat's tail;

and back to where the high grass  
blows all day without a breeze,  
he points out his wife still withers

like the fish bouquet she lies beneath,  
mean as catfish, a sweetmeat snack  
for beetles and the muddy slugs.

From far off as  
False River and St. Francisville,  
they all come back to

the parish they had cradled in  
and could not finally leave.  
Under your eggshell tread,

these souls, these dreams  
in remission  
before the cure that kills,

wash inside the soil, not like  
the ghostly air of swampgas, that fraud  
fading on the green dawn, but like

the wild stirrings  
from grass-spike to weed-stalk  
that send you trembling into your own new skin.

## High Ground in Louisiana

---

Women are walking on the levee, up where  
The winds brush cool against them

Even in August, clinging their dresses tightly  
Around thighs, bare feet freshened in the grass.

They feel the river push beneath them,  
Muscle of water that lifts the great freighters

Towards Africa or the crooked streets of Europe,  
Worlds away from the brown bayous sleeping

Under their fathers' boats, so still  
They could hear the catfish snore. At the green hour,

Young women simmer in the breeze and sweep  
Their long hair back with ribbons, loving

The slow bulge of ships that leave them  
Shaken like the heat, the waves of day dissolving.



## Chicken on Sunday

---

Sometimes, thinking about women,  
I call back those Sundays  
When the black man my father paid  
Would hold a red hen's head  
Across the block and with an axe  
Hack it clean through, the carcass  
Scrabbling in the gravel, its soul  
A wild spray in the face. And  
Wiping my eyes free, I'd watch him  
Scald the body deep  
Inside a pail, his big hands  
Stripping the craw down to skin,  
The blue slops and grit gouged out.  
It was the edge of revelation, like Swift  
Sick that the great globes  
Of Celia's ass could shit. And we'd eat  
The flesh my mother set before us,  
White meat and dark, my mouth  
Pulling at the bird, its thin wings  
And wishbone bent back, its small heart  
Still steaming on the platter, a scrap  
My tongue could never take to, dry  
Hole of darkness, gristle at the lips.

## Cottonmouth

---

On the mud shore at Mandeville,  
Summer swarming around me, I stepped  
Halfway up a cypress knee to watch

The stale waves collapsing on the lake,  
And then put both feet firmly down  
To straddle the crooked root. Nearby,

The driftwood slid in a slow turn;  
One black branch untangled itself  
And twisted free. Long and round

As a dwarf's leg, the blunt body  
Spilled forward in my direction, stopping  
Where my left shoe scuffed the mud.

I could not shift or scream, afraid  
The squat loops would straighten out  
And slip again into power glide.

When the hinges of the jaw dropped open,  
I looked into a bomber's moon, two teeth  
Filling their tunnels with bad milk.

And I saw myself stretched out stiff  
In that casket of odd cotton, held in  
By the twin hooks of pain and repose.

The slant eyes locked on mine, cold  
As the gunmetal scales overcast along  
The stubborn stump that bent against my life.

I did not blink, though sweat streamed  
In currents from my forehead, both of us stinking  
With the hot musk of the swampland,

Both bewildered, too brooding to risk  
Another inch forward or away. If my lips  
Had not fused shut with fear,

I could have called for a club  
To crush that catastrophic head,  
And let the venom drizzle in the mud.

He would not strike; I could not stir—  
Until, like a comic scene relieving  
The heartstop of tragedy, a vagrant turtle

Picked its slow way out of the marsh  
To gawk at the standoff, its oldman's neck  
Telescoping from the shell for a better look.

And in that stretched second  
Of the snake's distraction,  
I pulled free from the treeroot,

Leaving one life behind me  
On the beach, and another  
Walking backward into the future.

## At Bay St. Louis

---

No wind, even the sun in irons,  
And the telltales lagging down the stays—  
The whole heavy afternoon stalls to a trance.

I keep a tired course across the bay, one leg  
Looped over the hiking stick, one hand  
Tracing the saltscrawls of water below the boat.

*Voyageur, voyeur:* I watch as you disband  
The halter and press into the deck, your breasts  
Spread warm beneath you in a slow blur.

Summer and sleep. Nostalgias of the flesh.  
Will this day never waken or breathe again,  
Or the sky break through its deep coma of clouds?

I drift back to that night of port and panatelas,  
A candle tapping its flame against the dark  
And in your room the whispers fading.

By starlight and shadow, we knew the world was bent  
On its own way, its good turns pulling us down  
Until your name was fire in my mouth.

Now all those years have come to water,  
The stubborn water that stays us, two salt hearts at Bay  
St. Louis where the horizon draws a line

Over the harbor, the slip we sailed from  
Before the day was wasted in dead weather.  
That is another shore we'll never reach.

## Wading the Gulf

---

I still see you spilled out  
in the low waters off Biloxi, the gulf stream  
warming itself on your thighs.

That night was a steeple of stars  
and the poisoned bells  
of jellyfish floating down the dark.

What were you thinking then,  
a half mile out from shore  
where the water's soiled silk

still only tugged between our legs,  
your breasts set free  
in a blue permission of the moon?

Did you want those salt shallows  
to plummet sudden, deep, and cold,  
your face dissolving in the brine?

That night for the first time  
I felt my birth  
wash round me again, and looked out

over the stalled sea,  
that foolish soup I stewed in  
before some fish

stood on its hind fins and sucked  
a new self from the air.  
Far behind us, bonfires

leaped on the beach  
like signal flares to call us back,  
as if we were the ones lost.



## Poosum County Breakdown

---

Driving through even the most coonbent, stumpwater  
outlands of the South, you can see  
these hovels crazy with azaleas,  
accelerating into beauty. In the front yard,  
three children squat in a ring, barefoot  
and strangling the cat whose past catastrophes  
have already emptied his mean brain  
and earned him the name he never answered to:  
*Mulehead*. No one minds if you sit there  
drinking drugstore bourbon behind the wheel,  
letting each hard pull improve the drama.  
Then it's twilight on the back roads, slow seep of moon  
and all the hormones hopping like frogs  
in a spring ditch, big-eyed and amok.  
Pa swings home from his daywork,  
the dragtail dog at his heels; he's humming  
a little gospel tune he can't recall the words to,  
though they must be true and everlasting  
like the woman who waits for him upside  
the doorpost, brushing down from her wobbly hair  
a black natter of gnats. Well, that looks good.  
And in the flare from a hurricane lamp  
you can just make out their moist daughter  
pressing her thin dress to the windowpane—  
and she's the darling of your dreams!

Half-stoned and moaning, your heart  
rattling like a woodpecker's honeymoon,  
you take her where the neon rubs against the night  
from motels blinking out their prices, and she says  
*yes yes and all you want*, as if this were really happening  
and you could hold her helpless in your arms,  
hot crust of her nipples upswept as she  
brands your unclaimed hide. . . .  
And you wake to those wild kids  
whanging on your fenders, those red-dirt dwarfs  
an eyelash away from idiots, and know  
that feeling, the sweat sick on your forehead,  
as if you had just stepped out of a film's false darkness  
into the disappointing light of day.

## Red Beans & Rice

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This town is full of Tabasco  
and clarinet players named Sidney,  
grasshopper ethics with a catfish smile.  
We are always kind to strangers, because  
that's where the money comes from—greenbacks  
gushing out of Dallas, a trickle of small change  
from Toledo. Even the clouds cooperate,  
backing up when the sun wants an easement  
or rushing rain down to keep the oysters happy.  
We measure love on a sliding scale, not like  
those hardshell women and peckerwoods upstate  
where nobody sucks on grain liquor and bangs  
the bottom of a lard can while the radio  
cracks out another sloppy chorus of Frogman Henry  
crooning "Is You Is Or Is You Ain't My Baby?"  
But come Sunday, we balance on our knees,  
strippers and street cleaners in the same pew, listening  
with our heads shut tight so the sermon  
won't use up the rest of the week. The other days, too,  
have their mottoes and regalia: Mondays are made  
for sidemeat steaming on a mound of rice  
and red beans, the ugly child that only his mother loves;  
Tuesday breaks once a year, a fat riot, a freaks' parade  
before forty slow days of denial; Wednesday stays home,

a bubble of nothing dead center  
in the spirit level; Thursdays blunder around  
like a blind paraplegic on a whoopee crutch,  
no cure except suicide or Friday, when seafood  
heals whatever hurts us: okra gumbo for the dispossessed,  
blue crabs and crawfish for the idiots, fantail shrimp  
spread out to ease the insulted and the injured.  
And Saturday nights, thank God, we all get sick again.  
If summer's hot scenes make us too lazy  
to live, we don't mind, the funerals here  
are worth dying for—a ruckus of bells and old priests  
praying for cool weather in the afterlife, and sometimes  
the wild umbrellas, drumgrunts and trumpets  
of a streetband raising the dust, the whole spook show  
swinging through laments as a limousine  
drives off to deposit you in a vault guarded by  
a stone angel standing on the roof, his heavy wings  
closed behind him like the last exit out of paradise.

—New Orleans, 1981



*The Iowa Poetry Prize Winners*

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1988

Elton Glaser, *Tropical Depressions*

Michael Pettit, *Cardinal Points*

Elton Glaser teaches at the University of Akron. His first book, *Relics*, was published by Wesleyan University Press in 1984.







1987 Iowa Poetry Prize Cowinner

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