



**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

Selected Works of Jim McCord and Bruce McColl

Relationships are old as stone, sturdy  
as brick, delicate as doilies, fragile  
as flowers, cool or warm as love.

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

This project was conceived several years after we met at the Vermont Studio Center during a summer residency in 1998. To keep it fresh, it's been shaped and reshaped many times as a cooperative effort of give, take, adjust and accommodate. Its intention from the start was to explore complementary and contrasting relationships between art and poetry in respect to subjects, objects, images, designs, compositions, spaces, textures, styles, techniques.

Our first experiment— a poem that occasioned a painting, which, in turn, inspired a second poem, then a second painting— threw open the door of inquiry in ways we had never considered. Sometimes a painting or pastel led to a poem, sometimes a poem to a pastel or painting. Sometimes a detail in a painting appeared in a poem, or was the occasion for an entire poem. Sometimes the reverse happened. Sometimes what first appeared to be an eye- and ear-catching pair of objects ended up being discarded for lack of interplay. At other times what seemed a curious misfit of objects became surprisingly fit. Some of the pairs are recognizable 'illustrations.' Others exist because of their suggestiveness, or their deliberate intention to puzzle in order to provoke thought. Too, some pairs reflect changes along the way that were not anticipated— Bruce at different points, for example, including textiles and knitted pieces in his paintings, striking up a love affair with pastel, and playing more fully with possibilities of abstraction. In partial response to his shifts in expression, Jim's poetry sometimes moved toward more open forms and freer, suggestive play with diction, image, and sound.

While assembling *Building Relationships*, we have continually fed off the inquisitiveness of each other— an enlivening experience. We hope, of course, that these visual and verbal pairings might have a similar effect on others.

Jim McCord and Bruce McColl  
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DREAMING DREAM, 2001

I probably told you about *this* place, which is approximately my idea of heaven.

*Elizabeth Bishop, letter from North Haven*

## North Haven Dreaming

Adam is nowhere to be seen. Eve has had enough of his bookish mouth and sent him off to prune by himself. She sleeps to dream of more than him, perhaps of what she's lost: an adoring reflection in a lake of glass nodding love before her muddled entrance into the world of man.

Or perhaps she's listening to a toad croaking words of godly happiness and wisdom in her ear, or picturing a paradise less riddled with do's and don'ts. She's dyed her golden tresses brown to feel the earthy beauty of round thighs shaped to match distant hills. She lies on lake-blue ground half-curved, unlike her tightly-coiled cat dreaming fancies, unlike the open book of knowledge she set aside.

Adam the modernist painter has subdued the earth. He bounds his flat, bold-colored Eden with stylized shorelines beneath comic strip clouds. His God's light casts sharp-edged shadows. There are no birds, no bird songs. His flowers offer no fragrance, his trees no fruit, tabled fruit no taste. All nature is reduced to a geometry Eve cannot understand.

Yet this is Eve's Eden as well. Sky, sea, lake, land, blue grass, still lives, table top and chair wind around paved roadways in devilishly subtle, serpentine patterns. Woman and man are connected, if jaggedly, by imaginings of what could be. By surprising breaks of visual logic. By the narrow crevice that joins the two sides of this diptych to make it one whole.

## Painting and Poetry

Please be selective when you borrow bits and pieces of my poems. You can take an image now and then if you promise not to twist my gray words into splashes of color, break my lines into streams of light to mute shadings, shadows, nights that drip pitch.

When we say rhythm we picture together an ocean but I hear a tolling bell, you see pastel swells. Composition brings us closer: undressed thought trying on every size and shape for perfect fit.

Most in common is our foolishness to blanket white with type and brush when what we seek in unison is airy space to glide through with eye of hawk.



JIM IN GARDEN, 2006



NUDE WITH ORCHIDS AND FRUIT, 2001

## Lyrical Ballads on Canvas

You say you don't tell tales  
yet you do. There's no such thing  
as a lyric without a ballad, strings  
of words without bejeweled accompaniment,  
intimacy uncaught by the ear of another.

Impassioned paint turns pale when human  
history isn't wrapped around it. You can  
place your tables, chairs, stool, figures,  
fruit where you like, frame them in blue,  
but you can't hide their stories.

That teapot, I'd guess, has been stained  
most days of its life: rounding Cape Horn  
on a Captain's table, providing warm company  
in winter-bound Michigan, passing from host  
to guest, friend to friend, in your seaside cot.

I bet that young woman stretching in evening  
light prefers chianti to tea, bouquets  
to house plants. She looks as if she'd find  
comfort in any cushioned chair, could feel  
a single pea beneath ten or twelve mattresses.

As for those orchids you cut to use: only one  
cranes its neck toward white-skinned nakedness.  
At its back the room is curtained black,  
heads of blossoms on bowed necks loll, petals  
ready themselves for soft falls to floor.



HOUSE OF CARDS, 2007

## Interiors

What kind of painter stays indoors  
in an ill-lit brick studio with shuttered  
windows mixing bold colors that shout  
beauty, evoke gratified desire?

What kind of painter returns home  
to well-known rooms to sketch from safe  
distances cut flowers, faceless figures,  
tables littered with ceramic and glass?

Even Vuillard looked hard out his patio window  
to choose his wallpaper. Even Bonnard walked  
out and down stone steps to greet his morning  
garden, follow sandy paths to the sea.

Outdoor light soothed these two like wine.  
You find light breathing  
in common corners on iron filings  
scattered in memory waiting for a magnet:

a hand-me-down vase from a grandmother  
you never knew, a remnant of dress fabric  
discarded, a knife from an Appalachian sculptor  
who whittled mystical figurines from stumps.

All of these odd ends painted in  
before you saw the place they hold in familiar  
niches alive with ubiquitous bouquet, flowering  
wife, budding daughters you know so well.



BRICK AND MORTAR I, 2002

## Living in A Mason's House

I

Brick and concrete block  
require little care compared  
to shingle and clapboard.  
Though fired stone's not

granite-strong, it offers  
workability that's easy  
to repair. Masons come to  
point and tuck pocked

brick and block skin tight  
with working eyes that track  
hairline cracks, bowing  
walls we cannot see, flakes

of mortar dust on sills,  
mortar receding in thin seams.  
Forget the nicks and pits,  
they say, in bricks chipped

deeper than flesh deep. We're  
also told in sharper tones  
to eye the gritty, binding  
glue that seals each brick

to keep out ice from cutting  
through to chill insides.  
But infestation doesn't move  
from only outside shell to in.

II

Plaster swathes in a mason's  
house cover woven wattle strips  
for wavy ceilings, swelling walls.  
Lacquer smooth, they often crack

in lines as thin as nylon thread  
when forced to face the winter's  
bite or too soon welcome summer's  
kiss. Nor do our oak floors bend

with ease (as live oaks outside  
do), but sometimes splinter,  
often split, under varnish  
brushed too thick. Deeper yet

set cement blocks hold steady  
(as best they can) a house  
with unsure footing in a basement  
damned with oozing cracks lifted

in thaw-blessed spring by a restless  
water table. Floods then force us  
to consider shifting spirit levels---  
how accurate, precise, how wrong.

And how unlikely it would be  
to bubble balance earth and block,  
wind and brick, rain and wood,  
slabs of slate with open sky.

Someday we'd like our home to breathe  
as now our airy attic breathes  
through soffit vents and vented peak  
in easy, measured breaths.

III

But it's time to leave  
not-well-enough alone,  
to learn to live with facial  
pocks, mild indigestion.

We think we've come to know  
where materials fit well  
and which suffer sinfully  
from Masonic consistency.

It's time to say that doggedness---  
or maybe, simply, thoughtlessness---  
made outside right as it could be,  
inside too often far from true.

Pride can be a wrecking ball,  
but it's difficult to know for sure  
if one can ever willingly  
let go of what one knows so well.

How like a person we'd like our  
house to be: brick & skin, mortar  
& muscle, plaster & bone, wattle &  
nerves, wood & blood, nails & cells

assembled-- composed-- as a living,  
growing, changing, dying thing--  
an awkward, contradictory, most  
precarious, most human mix.

## Beyond Brick & Mortar

I

You knew a house is never just a house, but didn't quite know why. You said our brick one caught your eye and held it fast. It's always easier to start at some distance outside with the view strong, orderly. Brick doesn't peel or rot, is fireproof, taut, an easy puzzle of red rectangles interlocked on cement foundation blocks. Surveying the whole you never saw nicks, chips, pits, dust, mortar retreating through the hard shell toward innards.

But once you came inside parental haunts began to fly: water table turned restless, spirit levels shifted, a dark current beneath. You noticed hair-line cracks in our plaster ceiling. Your father unbending as swathed walls crept in like winter chill seeking warmth. The rhythms of "A Mason's House" matched his clock. Your mother hummed and swayed with light wafts and icy winds, her calloused hands arranging flowers, knitting socks. Strangers invaded our home, not yours.



BRICK AND MORTAR II, 2002

I wanted to paint a portrait of my parents, which is the hardest thing in the world to do.

Bruce McColl

## II

I remember your first thick-skinned portrait  
to house them both too bright with fabric,  
too loose with charcoal, figures faceless.  
Cut flowers, a potted plant, a tea pot  
for mother, book and hammer for father.

Only in side panels did figures begin to dawn  
like trees coming into silent focus  
to separate themselves from unsettling night.

They arrived mid-west domestic, Victorian stiff-  
backed, faces blank as pans, hands doing the talking.  
Your buxom mother stocked full as her two  
Frigidaire's for another Depression to protect you  
from the sight and sounds of a hollow stomach,  
xylophone ribs jangling. Your father in casual  
dress, a drafted sermon in hand, half-formed thought  
in mind, wondering how to make fire from watery  
words. One splash of burnt red on his shirt  
rhymed with the unapologetic brick wall behind.

No idle hands of the devil in this house,  
no chance it could be angel minds that curse.  
Fingers turned pages, hands penciled changes,  
cut flowers, knit, weeded garden. Mother planted  
annuals, father hardier perennials. Your paint  
froze moments when loose ends seemed to tighten  
against broken background patterns. You squinted  
to see who you think they were, or might be.

When walls began to crack again you built  
as best you could with inherited chipped bricks.  
Their faceless bodies melted into chairs,  
became bits of dress committing more familiar acts.  
Mother's soft cylinder hands fingered lap work  
like two Fates in one: knitter of earthy yarns,  
flower cutter, arranger of both. Father's sermon  
gave way to holy book, his every limb replaced  
by one black, flat rectangle on his lap. His wall  
clock ticked as stoically as each brick block  
at his back. How clever: your mother and father  
artfully connected to table, wall, brushes of color.

## III

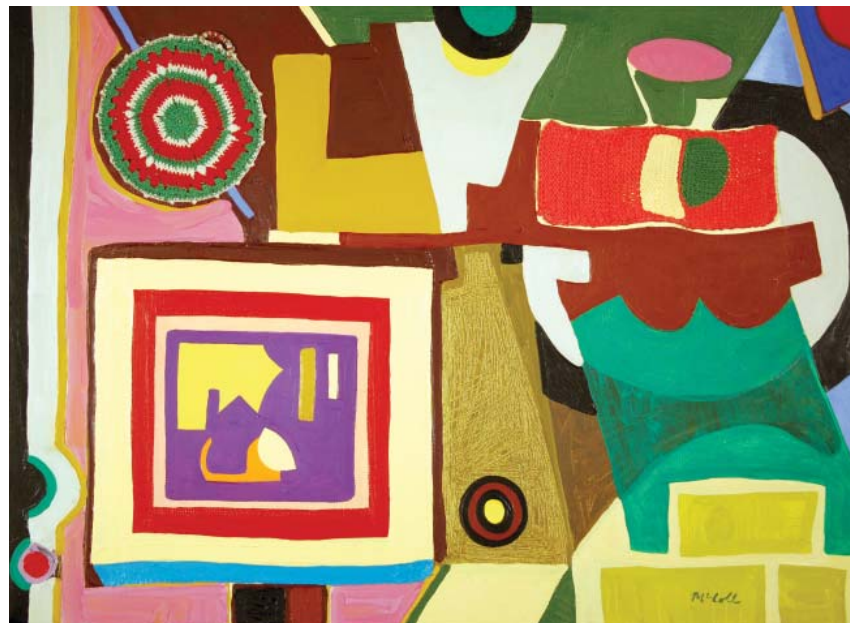
But they'd also drifted apart, abstracted  
from each self and from each other. "Where,"  
you asked yourself, "is the mortar that holds  
to help me move from cluttered past to clearer  
present, rebuild my ghostly house of incidental intent?"

Once discarded stone reset in place on forgotten  
foundations made gay again grand manor houses  
of desolation. You strained to do the same with  
fired brick, oak, frayed fabric, short-lived  
flowers, a ticking clock in biblical synch.  
You shuffled these like cards, played at solitaire  
until you found the capstone for your coping:  
a self-portrait to hold together family  
leftovers, textures only you can spin,  
colors bright as solar flares, earthy  
as those on cave walls, one piece of fruit  
for wife's sake, a teapot to share warmth.

Identity is a messy palette dominated by  
blacks and whites built up over shadowy  
generations without resolve in art or life.  
But relationships are old as stone, fired  
as brick, delicate as doilies, fragile  
as flowers, cool or warm as love.



BRICK AND MORTAR II, 2002



TURN TABLE, 2004

## Tradition

I always knew I wore my father's ears, no pride to offset embarrassment there. I started wearing Pendletons like his when I could buy them at thirteen. Those days I also hoped to hear my own wing tips click, whether on his truck dock or in a hall of justice where everyone must learn to give and take. When dad died I felt I didn't want or need much. His widow gave me four railroad books (limited editions signed by the author), a pair of jade cufflinks that looked better than they were, an 1898 Liberty silver dollar in fair condition, his London Fog.

On him the coat seemed always out of place, its fine weave covering his bulky teamster frame. It hung hidden in my closet six years before I tried it on, another two before it kept me warm. The trouble was I kept seeing him in it, he shadowing me in a way I thought he hadn't been allowed since I took off in stride to go my way. With time I grew into it, it settled into me— accepting with my ears other features that I had come to be. I wear the coat now seasonally in spring and fall: the too brilliant light of expectant summer, too dark anger of winter beginning to pass.

## Reflections

Mother's in the hospital again, urinary tract infection out of control complicated by high blood pressure, dizziness, fear. Another four to five day near-naked stay to mend what's wrong before the confused return home to refocus, if she can, under changing light.

I wonder what force draws birds to windows in late fall: their own vain reflection or the falsity of reflected trees, sky, heaven? Clarifying light this time of year seems to misguide, disorient, foul sure flight.

When I hear that dull thud against my window pane, I picture a common finch only stunned, its quivering beak able to catch fresh breath, its cushioned shoulder, perhaps, having taken the glassy blow to prevent a fatal crash.

Outside beneath brown ferns I want to see no bird of fading purples I have to cradle in gloved hands— no lifeless head swinging like a sunflower on broken neck— no breathless Cordelia when father Lear exhales an unbelieving “Never, never, never, never, never” near his play's dying end.



NEEDLEPOINT, 2003

## Reading A Day Lily

Please accept this day lily from me,  
this lily-of-the-day called so because  
it blooms under the sun's eye for one

day only. And please let's plant  
it in that shallow, narrow hollow  
in our garden shaded by twiggy shrubs

now roseless, named roses of Sharon.  
I would like the two to be companions,  
but I would also like the one to be

known from the other. In ancient China  
day lilies were 'forgetting plants'  
used both as medicine and hallucinogen

to rid the body and the mind of poisons.  
You can see how tall and straight  
this one stands with dignity, with

history. Brilliant, delineating,  
formal-- almost ceremonial-- curative:  
it reminds me of a poem. But it is

not a poem. I want it to be nothing  
beyond itself. Its color is what  
you see, its texture is what you see

*I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys*  
*The Song of Solomon*

and feel, its fragrance is what you  
smell. Look at it and listen. Its long  
leaves splay like a crowned bulrush

from which budded stalks shoot  
upward. Its buds are green casings  
with three seams like healed scars.

Filling, swelling, thinning,  
they take on a cast of the  
blossom's color hidden within.

At day's opening seams break, sepals  
become three petals that discover  
three brighter petals inside.

At day's height six crepe tongues  
circle an open throat of six pistils,  
each topped by a powdery gold worm.

At day's close petals shrivel and  
deepen color before folding  
into each other, enfolding withered

pistils, hushing the silent mouth.  
Perhaps they shroud their infant loss,  
perhaps feel dismay with deep hurt.

The flower's head at night snaps cleanly  
from stalk, open wound glistening  
for one heart-beat before sealing itself.

Only the showy blossom, I realize, lives  
one day only-- our day lily birthing and  
living and dying through seasons, through

time. Please receive this day lily from me--  
this flower true to its self for us  
fed by day, by night, by dawn, by dusk.



DAY LILLIES, 2008



THE PAINTING LESSON, 2001

Humans are kind of ugly really. Don't you think  
our cat Inky's body is more perfect? I do.

*Rane Hall*

## A Cat Lesson

The naked bodies of two women and their  
smocked painter of same gender with hair  
tied back have caught the eye of a second  
painter no where seen but everywhere felt.  
He's the one who whittles arms wooden  
as an easel, shapes breasts more like pears  
than oranges. He's the one who marks little  
difference between thighs and a vase empty  
of flowers. Because of him blossoms live  
as long as paint holds. Because of him two  
petals become rose color of modeled flesh.  
But like the smocked painter, he's also  
trying to learn to read sacred texts.

Only the sheeny cat with white paws  
and antennal tail sprawled on the floor  
feels truly comfortable. Only he lives  
within and without the painting both,  
free to roam on floor or grass. Only he  
meets the painter eye-to-eye, makes sure  
he's getting it right as he can.



DAISY DOILY WITH YELLOW CURTAIN, 2002

## Textures

Each surface a luminous body swimming.  
You begin with twists of the wrist, cast  
light-gauge line like a fly fisherman,  
filament skimming the surface, settling  
where it will in still pools or creeping  
brooks. Next come ripples of papery collage,  
fine-spun linen nets with lumps of glue  
hiding beneath like blind cave fish. Paint  
then takes the flowing character you give it.

You're a maker of lucent dreams, grazing  
canvas with thin wash, marbling stretched  
cloth, studding streams with diamonds.

## Stargazers Innocent and Experienced

In a common florist's vase newborn stargazers, like innocence, stand naked for beauty's sake knowing neither the beauty of nakedness nor knifing pain of loss. Impatient buds strain to burst casings, fisted petals open slowly, stamens cast about unfamiliar feelings, stiff stems soften in warm Aegean water.

A few days later on the same table experience cuts sharp as a florist's knife. Its broad blade threatens every gravid bud, delights in terrorizing emerald leaves, sends chills through erect stems. Whirling blossoms undismayed pirouette above to an operatic dance of life sung by soprano whites and yellows, choric violets, basso blues.



STARGAZER AND CUTTING KNIFE, 2001

## Daffodil Shoots

Why do you never reappear trumpeting your brassy yellow when I need you most? Why do you always wait in the wings until punier snowdrops and crocuses leave their children's theatre stage? How you tease: your head raised up but snugly wrapped in wrinkled brown snake skin that refuses to shed before its time, your silver-green spears with blunt tips tempting me and crying patience at the same lingering, cold moment. Though I must, I can hardly wait for you to nose out pale as winter sun, become radiant, full-faced spring.

But the issue can't be forced and everybody knows trumpets have no crinkled mouths or powdered tongues. Nor do they have crepe collars like the one you, my son, once wore as a knock-kneed English schoolboy pretending to be a choir angel at your Nativity concert. After its brilliant toots, I wonder what a daffodil's autumnal thoughts might be as it digs in for a long sleep, maybe for death. On my last bedding down I'd like to hear again you, Eric, sing a child's birth, and I'd like to picture a host of angels trumpeting with daffodils the glory of your life.



MOBILE (FOR IRIS AND EVE), 2005

## Iris

I see you seated like baby Buddha  
in your playpen next to a pot of gold  
whacking plastic toys bright as India's  
sun, shiny as apples, glistening as new  
leaf, gleaming as Greek seas— orange,  
red, green, blue— colors of the rainbow  
that is your name. If there were gods  
you'd be a messenger to remind earth  
of heaven and heaven of human beauties  
fragile as mist receiving color  
from a momentary spray of light.

As you grow like the flower  
that bears your name your round  
shoulders will square, your spine  
straighten on a strong stem.  
When that time comes, show  
off your flashy sepal dress  
as if it were made of petals,  
catch a breeze and wave your yellow  
sleeve to early summer sun,  
your indigo to cloudless sky,  
your violet to passing day.

You are precious as a cats-eye  
of milky ultramarine, unique  
in pattern as a fingerprint,  
the protectress of sight opening  
and closing yourself to shafts  
of light. You move thoughtless  
as an eye lid, quiet as hushed  
breath. Because of you I can see  
the contour of your soft form.  
One day you'll spy through altering eye  
the shifting shapes of mother, father.

Another year you'll learn how  
your name was conceived, birthed,  
burnished: a rainbow moment  
caught by your mother's eye  
before she ever thought of you.  
Iridescent, she fled swiftly  
as a messenger to where her lover  
welcomed her and talked to him  
of Dame Iris's fairly honorable defeat.

May honor grace in equal measure  
your defeats and all your victories.



LADY SLIPPER, 2007

## Raku Vase

This artifact is filled with a past  
it does not know yet repeats;  
full of a present it feels  
is happening but cannot know  
the significance of; aware vaguely  
of a hopeful future it can share.

It's an earthy child of fiery accident  
shaped by good fortune and bad, pulled  
to birth by iron tongs, sprinkled  
with sawdust before scrubbed clean  
of ash. Its unglazed black surface  
registers gray, scattered, unknowable  
ideograms here and there. Its two  
glazed surfaces shine like thinly  
clouded skies and glassy aqua seas.

The finished object is scarred with irregular,  
unintended cracks to make it whole, complete.  
No two square micrometers are the same.  
It stands on a rough, out-of-round base.  
Its small mouth opens wide to welcome  
a cluster of short-lived wild flowers.



RAKU VASE WITH IRIS, 2005



NURSERY, 2005

## Gardening

You've finally stepped outside your studio  
to that other world of greens and browns,  
grass and trees, plots and subplots, temptation,  
sin and freedom where Eve span, Adam delved.

Sketching gardens in pastel can loosen a painter  
up, soften hard edges of framed infant beds.  
There's no need for fine detail when you plough  
ground, work your colored sticks like pitchforks  
with twisted tines, turn over textured soil  
to let fresh air in. Leave the lawn shaggy, unkempt  
for another good lesson. Then put down your chalk,  
kick shoes off, hop around like a speckled robin  
just nudged out of nest, relish earth's wormy-ness.

## More than Green

John Constable never saw so many shades of green as we have in our garden, or felt a need to break them up with summer color. His red shirted boys half-hidden in verdant woodlands are not enough for us. We want blues brilliant and rare as Fra Angelico's, blues to recall life's sorrow, promise, reward; we want purples that course through petals deeper than blood lines; reds to sting our noses, fire us; pale violets to calm like dusk; pinks we feel the baby skin of; oranges whose sticky juice runs down our face; yellows and whites that inspire with radiance. And we want more: every tone scattered like windblown seed in new turned beds to balance the spectrum of green that runs from darkest yew branch to lightest yew tip.

Some blends grow beyond control: wild black raspberries on silver stems, violet-blue lupines, black-eyed and orange-rayed Susans, white wild carrot. But others we can hold in place: spring bells satin white as snow, purple crocuses streaked gold, hearts that bleed pink, red bee balm behind buttery lilies. We've come to an understanding with nature's primary coloring. She accepts our intrusions, we her green being. We like to say we no longer think in terms of win or lose, order and disorder. She's also taught us to draw on our different natures: you the hard laborer wield shovel, hack sumac, wrestle with roots while I pull easy weeds, pluck spent blossoms, polish beds. Together we garden to enliven greenness with flowery color believing we'll never, like John Constable, mature to brown.



BUTTERFLY GARDEN, 2007

## The Smell of Flowers and Trees

Like a pollinating bee you bob and weave to find the sweetest flowers: April lilacs in the garden, cloying narcissus beside woodland paths. Yet you snub wood, your buildings flat-backed clapboard smothered by generations of paint, your trees aroma free.

I recommend a few sniffs of bow-sawed cedar and white pine. It's honey to run your nose along a cedar block or sticky limb of dripping pine. Essence of arboreta can clear your head of tar-thick oil and turpentine.



PATH TO GARDEN, 2008

## Early Blooming Azalea

It's cliché we die like flowers,  
hard to accept that's all there is.  
Some favor stone in unkempt graveyards,  
some ashes spread on calming seas.

Reincarnation's fancy fiction,  
rebirth vain hope not worth belief.  
I deny thoughts of after places,  
try to greet death as life's due ease.

So I work hard to have this flower  
fill empty spaces outside and in.  
Planted in shade close by my window,  
it feeds a need to see earth live.

In early spring come flared azaleas,  
streaked orange cooled by yellow flames.  
Still grazed by all that brings a darkness,  
this is one light my eye can hold.



SPRING BLOSSOMS, 2008

## After Halloween

A clutch of squirrels on lunch break  
eat with teeth straight as backhoes  
the pumpkin we put out for grabs,  
its face orange as an industrial sun  
destined to blacken and dissolve  
around dormant seed. Autumn grass  
looks greener than midsummer green,  
chokecherry redder than the red  
it must be. Chipmunks underground  
wrap high tails of summer about  
them to blanket dozes before sleep.  
Their beds of tangled roots anchor  
open-mesh nets of maple boughs  
cast over gray, watery skies.

## Early Winter

The sky's a dull sheet of steel  
lighter than gunmetal, darker  
than our asphalt road: uniform,  
its bulk immobile, touching nothing,  
moving nothing, hands folded  
in indifference, eyes steady, cold.

But a breeze sneaks beneath all this  
to soothe limbs of weeping spruce  
hanging like tattered sleeves.  
Pine branches seesaw with ease.  
Seed globes of clematis bob.  
Arthritic yews wave as best they can.

## In Live Winter

The trees are leafless, the ground frozen  
brown. But today I refuse to measure loss.

I call up acts of sight precise  
as a rifle scope through barbwire brush

to see the late summer tomato top  
of a red-bellied woodpecker on white suet,

a holly berry red cardinal pecking snow,  
the blood red tail of a gliding hawk

caught in a razor-thin sheet  
of glassy light slicing the ice air.



BED, 2005