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## Skirting the Light: Some Poems

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Skirting the Light

Some Poems  
by  
Joe Pitkin

Thesis Advisor:  
Kenneth  
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## Night Garden

From my window,  
The day's rain shines on the sidewalk  
Like a subway rail. But now  
The sky opens up clear and black;  
The moon and stars wait,  
White as a fence gate, and a smell of fresh paint  
Moves in the air.

While in my mouth, one wisdom tooth hides like an arrowhead.  
Only the point shows, like the tip  
Of a stone submerged in the harbor.  
Perhaps it fears  
Coming in further--"Wise move,  
Wisdom tooth," I say into the mirror.  
The flesh around it festers, soft and swollen,  
Infected with life  
And a raspberry seed.

And as I sleep, with the moon  
Shining through the open window  
Into my open mouth, the seed sprouts.  
It wraps its roots  
Around my buried tooth;  
A thicket fills the room,  
Tangled and thorny,  
With small, sour fruit,  
And the flesh ripening.

Dreaming of Long Hair

When I wake, the walls  
Of my apartment close in  
To a point above me. I try  
To stand, and end up  
Looking like a conehead.  
Even just sitting nowadays, I get tangled  
In the spokes of a high-backed chair.  
I want to flex, break out shooting,  
Watch the chair explode  
Into a thousand bullet-shaped shards.

Outside, children's voices are cut off  
By the slamming of a van door.  
Maybe some fingers get cut off, too.  
But why should I worry?--  
Severed fingers will wriggle and burrow  
Into the soft earth, laying eggs like locusts.

Right now, I want everything to burst  
Its boundaries, want all doorframes  
To break apart  
As the oxen and broad horses of dreams  
Muscle their way out of houses  
Into the daylight.  
Years from now, I want a barber  
To run his fingers through my thick, tangled hair,  
Searching for my last cut.

### Moon Worship

The moon is waxing, now  
A slim scimitar slashing through the green flames  
Burning just after sunset, the cruel horns  
Of some Mesopotamian god, screaming down  
Like an eagle attacking, searing away  
Two swaths of sky  
Above the black and angry mountains,  
Jagged as teeth--

Though it seems the moon is not moving at all.  
It seems perched, rather, buoyed up  
By the sun's green breath.  
Rather, that unlit part of the moon  
Hangs dull against the green twilight,  
Grey as a plug nickel.

A truck driver looks back to the road  
And swerves hard to miss a cat slashing by.  
Would the angels observing us note such a gesture?  
Is the trucker's five hundred mile journey  
The twitch in a drunk's eye to them,  
And the beauty of a suspended moon  
A figment of the imagination only?

The trucker stops to look at the moon.  
He has an inexplicable desire  
To offer up a prayer to it,  
When he remembers a drunken night, stumbling  
From the sidewalk into the snow.  
His outline etched a snow angel gone wrong,  
Arms outstretched, plummeting  
From a still and unmoved heaven.

A Rope of Infinite Coils

In the back yard at night  
The porch light falls softly on the blue snow  
And the sound of a cello, woman-shaped,  
Draws this pain out of me--  
A rope that comes from deep in the earth  
Uncoils into the sky forever, like smoke.

### The Vale of Soul Making

Saint Anthony dug holes in the desert  
To stay out of trouble,  
Though he might as well have been  
Here in this gym:  
A gummy asphalt track, some hoops,  
A tennis court, pale brick walls and filthy windows,  
The whole place cavernous and moist  
As the interior of a shoe.

Here, in this gym: runners gasp in rhythm,  
Over and over, as if chanting  
A mantra, the tight circle  
Of the track seeming to spiral down,  
Into the earth, towards  
Some point of focus.  
Pain, that's one way--even the man  
Sitting Indian-style on the floor, even his shoes  
Have a green lightning bolt of pain on the sole.

Here, in this gym: the tennis court waits in the center  
Surrounded by the spiralling track,  
Like a target growing smaller  
Every time a circle closes around it.  
The ball spins across the net and back  
Like glowing green electricity,  
Like the oscillation  
Of the primal wave of light.

Here, in this gym: though anywhere  
Will do. Down in the valley,  
Where trucks roar by on the business loop,  
Seagulls scare from the fields,  
Take to the air, hang in the wind  
Like a thousand white prayer flags.  
Then, the truck passes, and they turn again

To the newly planted fields, descending like pilgrims  
Upon a desert teacher.



### Shirt Sewn From a Single Thread

Beneath the billboard for the Magdalen Bridge Appeal,  
A man smelling like piss holds out his hat--  
"Will ya help me to build th'bridge?"

He yells to passersby.

Meanwhile, a man in a three-piece suit clips by  
Holding a flat bicycle tire. He is pretending  
His day has been perfectly ordinary; he holds  
His tire like a briefcase, eyes fixed  
On an infinitely receding point.

While in the employment office,  
The man at the window explains to a small grey woman  
The law that sets working life  
From age sixteen to sixty-five.

And at night, two schoolmates stop in the cold  
To drink from a bottle of wine.  
They wear fingerless gloves  
Like the cliched drunks they will become, but tonight  
They are going to a wedding party.

And in a little room that looks  
On the empty street,  
A dark woman sits reading. She keeps  
The love letters she has received,  
Written in exotic tongues, keeps them  
As bookmarks. In the room above her  
A teenage boy lays awake, leaves the light burning  
At his bathroom mirror, shaving kit on the shelf  
Like an offering.

They will all sleep tonight, worn out  
As shirts that ache  
To be torn into rags.  
Yet, for all that, their closets are full of shirts  
Where buttons cling to their collars  
By a single thread.

## Gargoyles

High above the street, in any one of the city's  
Innumerable churches, hanging  
At the edge of the roof,  
Gargoyles are scowling.  
I think that maybe  
They are lamenting their fates.  
Vultures wearing barrister's wigs, gorillas  
Playing the bagpipes, strain-faced men--  
They stare as if surprised; bug-eyed,  
Fish-mouthed, vomiting the cold rain  
Into the street below.

Meanwhile, down in the dishroom,  
The hot water has run out, and the grease  
Clots in the drains and pipes.  
Tatters of meat cling to my arms, though  
I've not eaten, except for five tiny potatoes  
Come my way, oozing grease,  
And a shred of lamb, limp as a scrap  
Dangling between a wolf's teeth.  
I am rooted to this spot  
Like a skewed fencepost, stooped over  
The sink, running cold water  
Over hands and dirty dishes.

And after work, falling asleep  
Where I flop on the bed, gargoyles  
Cackle and fight outside my window  
After the bars close,  
Basking in the night's freedom, free at last  
From the edge of the roof! Half-dreaming, I imagine  
They are laughing at me, at my dishwasher's hands  
Dry and cracked as two old leather wallets.

But once I am asleep, stretched out,

My head doesn't stand atop my innards--the mind  
Loosens the reins on organs and bones,  
Steps down to talk to them in dream.  
The organs take their places  
As pistols, a speeding car, fog on the bridge--  
They are asking where  
The brain is leading them.

In the morning, I find  
My greasy clothes still on, even the boots.  
Sunlight, a white flossy strand, glides  
Between tall churches, lined up  
Like grey and yellow teeth; the morning  
Washes over my boots. In the early light, I hear  
No voices, and the rain has stopped.  
All my insides slip silently,  
Without complaint,  
Into their bridles.

## Spring

Sometime in the night,  
A dog got free  
And now he is mine, I guess.  
I knew him--I can't pretend  
His appearance was a surprise. All of February  
He waited, tied to a porch  
On a street I take  
When I walk to work.  
Every day as I walked by,  
He pulled at his chain,  
Slobbering with hope, or passion,  
Or some more subtle dog emotion  
Detected only among themselves.

Now, though, he won't leave me alone--  
He rubs up against me, and my legs disappear  
Into him, and from the waist down  
I roam as a wet dog named Lucky.

Still, I wasn't always this way--  
A Bach cantata was braiding itself in my head  
When I noticed him following me.  
I met him without a word, as I would a neer-do-well brother.

We were only together half a block  
And already I couldn't stand him.  
Pretending not to notice him galumphing beside me,  
I dashed across the street,  
And cars blared angrily as he moseyed after,  
Against the light, swaggering like a pair of testicles.

My mind racing, I ducked into a supermarket.  
I shook my head, smiling,  
When the bagboy asked if he was mine.  
Employees chased him out with a shopping cart.

Yet, while I bought milk and rice,  
He wandered the parking lot,  
Sniffing crotches and licking spilled ice cream.

Even now, at home,  
I know he is down in the yard.  
I've tried everything, I really have--  
Bach cantatas, every hour on the hour,  
Days of reading nothing but Saint Augustine  
And Ann Landers--  
I even hit myself with a soup ladle  
From time to time--

But I still know he's down there, waiting,  
Eating and growling and humping things.

Witches, and how I Became Familiar With Them

Witches don't have to be young and dark,  
Though the one I know usually is.  
I saw her in England, riding sidesaddle  
On the back fender of a man's bike.  
She told the man where to turn,  
And he did--"I thought slavery's been abolished!"  
I thought to myself. That's right,  
He'd been enchanted.

Her face shone like a half moon  
In the night sky that was  
Her long, black coat. The steel tips  
Of her pointy shoes  
Glinted like meteors under the street lamps, while  
In her hand, she held the man's tail light  
Like a receding supernova, or some other  
Gorgeous and remote disaster.

Now, when I dream of her, I dream  
We shared a secret smile  
As she rode by me, looking back.  
I dream her smile told me  
She had no need to enchant me, and besides,  
My being in love with another  
Would only complicate things.

Of course, she never really smiled,  
And she knows she didn't,  
Because when I saw her in the library  
On the Wednesday after,  
She made no sign that she knew me  
(Perhaps this was a part of her disguise,  
Since she had given herself  
Longer legs and red hair).

She smiled in the Thai restaurant, though,  
When she appeared as the beautiful waitress,  
And in the street, as a schoolgirl in kneesocks,  
She even waved!

Fearing for my safety, I fled the country,  
Though on the plane she sat next to me  
As a shy woman with nice teeth.  
What was the big idea  
In sitting next to me--did she think  
I wouldn't notice her?

The damage had been done, I could see that--  
I was only in America a few weeks  
When the woman I loved  
(A pale, good-hearted girl)  
Began asking whether  
I was just stringing her along.

I couldn't live among  
Insinuations like that; who could?

So now, having left her,  
I wander the supermarket late at night,  
Carrying only a box of raisin bran  
That I don't want, hoping  
To find the woman who follows me  
Among the rows of waxy apples.

### Travelling Piece

The woman left him at noon, and immediately  
He began drinking. By three,  
His sister had to leave work  
To undress him and put him to bed.  
She wrapped him in a white sheet  
As one would a dead body.

At six he awoke,  
The sheet drenched and clinging  
As if to stone.  
His head was a thick marble ache.  
He felt like less than a man,  
Wrapped in a white sheet  
The way a statue is draped.

He awoke once more, at midnight.  
The street lights sent lightning streaks  
Across his walls, and the headlights passing  
Before his window  
Made him feel as if he were on a train.  
He felt like less than a man,  
Not even shaped like a man--  
An antique armoire, perhaps,  
Wrapped in a white sheet  
As if it were being moved across the country.



## The End of the World

When he found me,  
I was a sharp stone in his shoe.  
And what a stone I was!--smooth and green,  
Like a jade tooth, quietly I bit  
Into his heel, where the blisters lay  
As dry and dead as the husk of a snake; I bit  
Until the dead skin split and curled like flame,  
And the new emerged from the carcass  
Screaming like any newborn.

Of course, when he noticed me,  
He dumped me onto the sidewalk  
Without a word of thanks.  
But that night, I changed myself  
Into a new mystery: a corrugated tube,  
With spirals of wire  
Like the edges of dozens of wings, or of claws  
That crawl up from the deep.  
I added some scraps of wet newspaper, too,  
In order that I might look  
A little ragged, unsanitary.

When people saw me, lying there  
In the sidewalk, they didn't know what to think:  
Was I a cog from a car engine, hopelessly lost,  
Or some unspeakable terror  
From late night TV movies?  
Nobody was about to pick me up  
For a closer look, but no matter--  
I had already laid eggs  
At the base of each person's spine.

And that night, I marauded through the darkness  
Of people's horrific dreams, in which a man realized  
He feared his mother, and a woman found

She hated her job. They awaken to find  
That the world has ended,  
And that the new one started without them  
Ages ago...

There are books of the Bible  
That say this will happen  
With a flurry of horsemen, or dragons,  
Or giant cucumbers or something.  
But the gospel I bring is that  
The world ends every day, on sidewalks and  
In closets, ends with bits of newspaper,  
And spent matches, and shards of glass.

### In the Wilderness

In the wilderness, April was not a month  
Of record rainfall. In the silence  
Of its wasted plain, buds did not blare  
From emaciated maples  
Like sexed-up trombones. Though the wilderness  
Lay perfectly flat, without boundaries,  
No screaming children, slippery  
With their odorless sweat,  
Played their wild soccer games there.

What the man in the wilderness saw instead  
Was a street sign in the middle of that nowhere:  
Yield--the signpost rusted, twisted  
Like a human spine.

No road meandered  
Like a cool black snake  
Towards the river, and no bicyclists  
Glided down it like seagulls.  
No flotilla of clouds sailed eastward  
Like so many fat black galleons.

The gully which appeared in the wilderness  
Was dry, and the dusty wind crept  
Up and down its length like a soldier.

There was no scent  
Of blood, or of the enraging nectar--  
No smell at all. The butterflies  
With wings like burning paper  
Avoided the wilderness entirely  
When they swarmed up out of the south,  
Like a million peaches being devoured  
By a million black mouths.

In the wilderness, no one spoke,  
And although a husk of a leaf  
Scraped around in the dry fountain,  
No cars washed by like waves,  
And no bees hummed like rain  
In the non-existent maples.

Instead, the silence of the wilderness  
Was punctuated only  
By a clacking of typewriter keys  
And the sound of death  
Creaking along behind the man  
In the guise of an old paper cutter.

Yet no word came into the wilderness,  
And none came out.  
This was because  
The U.S. Postal Service  
Had posted no mailboxes there.

The man in the wilderness felt sure  
That stormclouds were waiting  
Just off the endless horizon,  
But that the wind was forever  
Keeping them at bay.

He was sure of this, although  
Nothing had told him that things were this way,  
Since nothing in the wilderness spoke.

And as the night slipped in  
Like slow spreading glaucoma,  
There was no idling of cars  
Like passionate cicadas, no rustling of clothes,  
No kiss of steam.

There was only a clouded-  
Over moon and the hard angles  
Of a bare fountain. Only the ache  
Of a crescent scar on a thigh,  
Like the scar of the first separation  
Of man and woman. Only the voiceless wind  
And what seemed like another storm blowing over.

And in the dreamed world  
Which the man longed to drift into,  
The rain became snow in the night,  
Breaking branches, tearing away powerlines  
Like undergarments, as the wind swirled  
About the wilderness, without snow, without rain,  
Without sweat, even.

(Nor, for that matter, was there hunger,  
Or thirst, or any kind of desire,  
except perhaps for sleep)--

The day, when it stumbled in  
Like a drunk up all night,  
Had no sun. It looked like the night  
Except for one shade of grey.  
The man only knew the day had come  
Because it was time to walk again.

He stood up in a field of stones, and found  
That he had spent the night, sleepless,  
In an old graveyard.  
The wind had worn down the markers  
Where immigrant miners were buried  
(The wilderness held innumerable  
Mining operations): some Japanese,  
Slovenian, Apache--immigrants

Of every nationality, who died  
In the mines of the wilderness.  
Their markers, inscribed  
In a hundred languages,  
Had been worn down by the wind  
Until smooth and round  
As river stones, the nameless rib cages beneath  
Packed with dust.

The man walked further and further in,  
Where the contours around him disappeared:  
The hill with its sidewalk and maples,  
Its row of stately Victorian houses, gone.  
He saw only one thing  
On the flat ground,  
Against the flat sky--  
A lone telephone pole  
In the middle of nowhere,  
Stripped of its lines.

He walked around it  
As if stalking around his totem pole,  
If a totem pole could be faceless  
And still a totem pole.  
Walking around it, inscribing a circle  
With his totemless pole as the center,  
Things came back to him  
Appearing as if out of nowhere:  
On the ground, a twisted shock  
Of bark--frayed, damp, matted--  
Like a tangle of hair  
Washed up from the deep.  
It was a wreck  
Of the rainstorm that had passed over  
The man and his wilderness--

The pole would not save him, he knew that.  
And the handful of bark  
Did not necessarily look like  
The hair of any woman he knew.  
All the same, without knowing it,  
He was defining his salvation negatively,  
Piecing into place those things  
That would not lead him out--  
He hoped that the hole  
That remained after such a process  
Would have a memorable shape.

Storms had raged here, he realized,  
Furious and passionate storms.  
First a shock of wet bark, then  
The realization that rain  
As well as wind  
Will wear down a gravestone, now

A street gutter appears, and around it  
A street, and around that,  
Houses. A street gutter stiff with rain,  
Sweeping away husks of leaves  
Through the grate and into the black underground.

The grass over the gutter  
Hangs long and unmown,  
Choked with black silt.  
Someone, a child perhaps,  
Has dropped the piece of a puzzle there,  
Dark and damp, almost useless.  
"Look at that," says the man,  
As if only to hear his own voice,  
"Imagine, a puzzle piece out here

In the middle of nowhere."

He stands there a moment, considering it.

Then, looking up, the shape of the piece

Cut into his memory,

He begins to walk out.



## The Night Before the War

In my room, our dorm sent ultimata  
Through my desk lamp, the shorted bulb  
Flashing on and off like semaphor. I pretended  
Not to know what it was about, pretended not to hear  
The deafening weight of the house, creaking  
In the buzzing, snapping circuit. But even the kitchen  
Held the same opinion--water in pots quivered,  
About to boil, while faucets screamed  
As if the bombs were falling already.

I confess, now,  
I had borrowed a bike from outside the dorm  
(Ted's, I think, though it could have been anybody's).  
Just a quick trip to the co-op and back.  
I knew no one would miss it if I borrowed it.  
But now the bike had a flat!

(We could overlook this before,  
You know. But now the bright lights  
And busy roar leave  
Nothing hidden for long.)

I knelt, the night before the war started,  
Outside our dorm, in the darkness and total silence of  
A bike rack, crouched beside the borrowed bike  
With my tire-patching kit. I prayed  
No one would see me. But in the street behind,  
A street sweeper with flashing orange lights  
Roared by, casting pale orange stares  
Like an enormous, leering jack-o-lantern.

And what we lost, I remember  
Only vaguely, like the Christmas tree  
Of any given year--But I remember this:  
Outside my window,

With the rain glistening under a street lamp,  
I saw fish gliding silently by.  
I looked again, and the fish became  
A couple arm in arm, their umbrella shining.  
If I had continued believing them fish,  
They wouldn't have known or cared.  
No vote of conscience necessary: "Fish,  
Or shiny umbrella?" It was a cool evening,  
A night when fish were returning  
To their dark, still caves, and couples  
Under shiny umbrellas dreamed  
Of their quiet, peaceful homes.

## Sacks

I put down my load in the park,  
In the open circle of light  
Like the mouth of a dark sack.  
Dim figures, obscure, slink by  
At the outskirts of my sight.  
They seem to be laboring under heavy burdens--  
One carries a bicycle, for all I can make out,  
Another a churchbell, still another  
A brass bed. Like prop people they skulk around,  
Unseen--I expect one of them  
Will eventually pull up the maples in the park  
And stagger off, leaving only the stage  
Of the streetlight, myself and my sacks.

Out of the darkness, ambling like a coyote,  
A man in a wool sweater comes.  
He has small eyes, a hook nose, and a full beard--  
The head of a sphinx.  
He looks like my father.  
"Running away from home?" he asks.  
I laugh and say yes,  
Though it suddenly occurs to me  
How many runaways  
Are foiled in their purposes  
By carrying just a sack or two.

I'm sure the man with the kind face  
And the sphinx head  
Would just love to know what I have in the sacks--  
The woman I love  
Curled up, asleep?  
A weeping willow, golden in the moonlight,  
Like a sleeping sun?  
A whole sleeping forest perhaps, doomed  
To be cut down and pressed into bibles?

I have nothing so wonderful in the sacks,  
And not wanting to disappoint the sphinx-faced man,  
I tell him nothing.

(Though I suppose it is worth noting  
The socks rolled up inside,  
Like snakes eating their own tails.)

My shadow does not know what to make  
Of the man with the sacks.  
Am I Kokopelli, the humpbacked flute-man,  
With a sack full of wedding moccasins  
For the girls of the Hopi village?  
Or am I a bagpiper in a Scottish regiment, piping away  
As he walks unwittingly into the minefield?  
Perhaps I am just a man  
Finished with waiting tables,  
Tired as a bagged fish,  
Coming home from the all-night laundromat.

(Shadowy figures still skirt the light,  
Shuffling under their burdens.)

I step out from under the light,  
Abandon the shadow that doesn't know me.  
At this time of night,  
I don't care what's in the sacks.  
They could be full of rocks, for all I care.  
They're still my sacks.