

**Don Welch Poetry**  
from *Homing: The Collected Poems of Don Welch*  
Rogue Faculty Press, 2016

**Singing a Bird's Song**

Begin.

Never ask where a call ends  
and a song begins.

Before the sediment of the west  
pulls down the sun,  
sing until your feathers burn.

So you have only five notes:  
try purity of tone.

Sing the weight the moment  
of a single branch can hold.

**Cardinal**

A cardinal in the snow  
is one of the few things  
to recommend itself  
without metaphor.

**The Reaches of the Platte River**

Out here distance  
runs on to the reaches.

Past the heron  
moving its peculiar gray  
through morning,  
past the crane  
in its slow glimmer  
in the light.

Only up close  
is the eye exact,  
and then things run on.

And unlike the killdeer  
the reaches camouflage themselves  
in themselves.

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So we say  
there are moments  
in which dares, like hunters,  
shatter space.

In which love, unopened,  
is still conclusion.

But neither of these  
describes the way  
we go into the reaches.

To go deep into what they are  
we fly as silently as owls,  
the wind pushing our soft masks back.

**Funeral at Ansley**

I write of a cemetery,  
of the perpetual care of buffalo grass,  
of kingbirds and catbirds  
and cottonwoods;

of wild roses around headstones,  
with their high thin stems  
and their tight tines  
and their blooms pursed  
in the morning.

I write of old faces,  
of cotton hose and flowered dresses  
and mouths which have grown up  
on the weather.

And I write of one woman  
who lies a last time in the long sun  
of August, uncramped by the wind  
which autumns each one of us

under catbirds and kingbirds  
and cottonwoods, and the gray-green  
leaves of the buffalo grass.

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**From *The Rarer Game: A Sequence of Poems about Birds and an Animal***

**2. The Snow Geese**

After the first snow  
an edge comes on.  
The dew that has gathered itself  
all fall on the roof,  
loosening itself from the eaves,  
now stays, hard in the sun.  
The roof is a sum  
of its brilliant selves,  
a white explosion of nerves.

North of the house  
snow geese stand in a field,  
silent, their acts pulled down,  
their orange bills in the cold  
announcing themselves.

Suddenly, I'm up,  
putting my hands on the pane,  
wanting out with those geese.  
My hands and wrists and arms  
are fuses abroad with the cold.

And when the geese turn,  
short bodies, their shadows firm  
against the ground, I want to go forth  
over and over again in the snow,  
putting my flat hands down.

**5. The Hawk**

Somewhere years from now  
I hope I'm saying this  
to my sons. Why the hawk  
had hit the trap I couldn't guess.  
In the face of it  
it was pointless.

But it had hit the trigger  
dead center with both feet,  
for a moment lifting  
that fatal weight

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before the blind torque  
of the trap had sprung.

After that its wings had clawed  
at the sand for hours,  
its cries had gradually sunk back  
into its throat, although  
its beak, thrust defiantly  
at the stream, held on  
to an animal yellow.

Then it had pulled everything in,  
for a moment the hawk  
and only the hawk's turn.  
In that blind and beautiful light,  
trying to hold on,  
as the trap held on,  
to what it was.

### **The Doe**

In the quarter light  
of the morning  
the doe slipped into  
the clearing like brown smoke.

Above her  
the outcropping of the rocks  
held their breath,  
her blood moved in her hams  
like delicate water.

As she came down  
through the draw  
each of her steps  
was a precise awakening  
To an act undone.

the great bells  
of her ears,  
alive to sound,  
hung there in time,

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cast to announce  
that single thing  
out of tune  
with the morning.

**The Coyote**

After I put the wounded coyote  
in a box on the back porch  
it crouched like a fawn hand  
in a corrugate world.

It gave me more mistrust than  
the box could hold,  
and that night it howled,  
its voice cutting through  
the screen door and over  
the fields.

And far in the hills  
the voice, alone, materialized.

It kept climbing a rock.  
All night it kept calling  
something on the back porch  
whose blood was feeding a box.

**The River**

*--For Dutch Welch*

Winter,  
late afternoon,  
the sun a pale flare  
in the westering trees.

Here, the willows  
have almost gone home  
to the dark,  
there is a perceptible  
wind trailing the edges  
of minutes.

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This afternoon  
it was warm.

And now my father,  
picking up decoys, swings  
lead weights around their necks,  
his back to the west.

All day,  
having moved in this river  
like a pleasant doom,  
his surgeries blending  
with the buckbrush and trees,  
he has had his eyes  
unraveled by birds.

Tonight deer will unfold themselves  
from the dark and come forth.

In the deepest channels  
slush ice will form itself  
in cold lacy jags,  
the slews grow brittle  
with ice.

I look west.

There is a single hole  
in the clouds through which  
time is escaping.

**From *The Platte River***  
**Now, At The Edge Of This River**

Wade in. The river which grips  
your ankles is the smoothest chain.  
Even, still, it has you.

What it asks is the initiation  
of your skin, your feet  
given over drift sand.

Look: ahead a long sandbar  
has risen like an ancient whale,  
head down, its flukes thrust into land.

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If you want to know its graver self,  
walk carefully its taut arch,  
then take its lead.

Step off again.  
in the shallows you'll find grains  
of sand which flake like gold.

Be glad for motes. But go on,  
go much darker, dive in.  
The water wants only to involve you.

**The River As A Figure of Love**

The sand bar was the perfect page.  
Our steps had written themselves  
precisely across it, and the bar itself  
was a small island which spoke  
elevated truths.

Give me your hand, you said.  
Water's skin is so unbelievably supple  
it is easy to step into its life.

Without it, the air would know only  
spiritual nuptials; the earth  
only general truths. And the atoms  
of the sun would split themselves  
in their own parched throats.

It was moonless. The river  
flowed in dexterous silence.

Those who cannot love  
have never been inside it.

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**Tell Yourself**  
-- for Larry Holland

Tell yourself one must have a love for ducks  
to wade a braided river in the late October sun,

someone who has learned to dead-man stock tanks,  
rip-rap towheads, walk thin ice.

Imagine him saying shovelers and mergansers,  
goldeneyes and scaup, and mallards

with green-heads like God's celestial whole notes  
falling from the heavens.

Someone like this must love the dark, the kind  
of strong black night before the sun comes up

that makes him trust the compass in his brain stem;  
someone who in following his father,

a lifeline of advice thrown over  
the old man's shoulder,

knows the ways of dark water  
and how a blind is found.

**The Coneflower**

But it's beautiful, you said,  
taking the wild coneflower  
you'd found in a ditch

among loosestrife and thistles,  
cockleburs and dock,  
and centering it in a milk glass vase

full of baby's breath,  
alyssum, and purple live-for-ever—  
the flower you brought out of the country

gracing your cancer-drug table,  
stalk-tough, its head up  
in its season a star of survival.

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**The Tale Of Water**

There is a moment  
when the eyes of water  
grow violet,

when like amethysts,  
blue diamonds,  
they see from a summit,

and the air is full of alarm—  
something has happened  
to water,

it has been caught in an ache,  
frozen in angles,  
spiculed.

On the edge of the mountains,  
in towering falls,  
there are long frozen tongues.

In nuclear winter  
how long would the leaves be green  
in your memory?

Even the weed sings,  
wearing clear pearls,  
orbed in original energy.

This is the tale of water.  
Listen hard.

**From *A Brief History of Feathers*  
Baltimore Oriole**

This morning the oriole  
is a good carpenter,  
working itself  
for the sake of its nest.

Hounding the right bits of grass,  
it has tuned flight  
into a muscular blossoming.

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The air is something  
it keeps slipping into;  
it is what it beats  
into breath with its life.

Tonight the sky will be hung  
with migrational stars;  
it will be the dark hunting  
grounds of owls, the briefer tomb  
of anything sleeping.

But tomorrow the oriole  
will be at its work again,  
and it will be singing.

### **The Mute Swans**

One by one a hundred mute swans  
were snowing the lake with silence.

### **Turkey Vulture**

Ugly, it looks like bad prose,  
and flies as if the whole world  
were made of ball-bearings.

### **March**

Come, south wind,  
warm palm and pulse of crane time.  
Sage the winds.  
Turn our solitude inside out.

Return the knots of ice  
to what they were at birth,  
beads of hope,  
clear mysteries of unwordable water.  
to what the clods and stalks  
and pavements drink.

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Come, purge us of our brittleness.  
Make us adequate.  
Be our aqueduct to spring.

**From *Inklings***  
**Two Horses**

Two horses  
standing on a rise  
have just broken  
a cast of night,  
are a severity  
of shoulders.

The light cannot believe itself

It can only  
follow them down  
into a swale,  
among the redroot,  
the nimblewill.

**An Acre Of Butterflies**

The Impressionist  
never painted  
with these yellows,

and couples never flew with  
such light grace.

The blooms  
of the alfalfa  
are astounded

by the aerial exclamations  
on their page.

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**At The Road's Edge**

At the road's edge the snowbirds  
looked like the heads of brown weeds,  
activated clods, a feathery hopping,  
a scattering. But as they flew,

their white wing patches flashing  
over the stubble, their brown  
selves invisible, for a moment  
they looked like snowflakes,

symphonies of whole notes bent  
to an old baton. But just as  
suddenly, as if perfectly scored,  
they made a white sweep to the left

and landed, hunkering down.  
When I got to the store, I called home.  
What was it, I asked, had I come for?

**April**

Visitors of color, the leaves are talking  
greens on the thresholds of their tongues.  
From the fields the cranes have almost gone.  
the wind's assumed a softer vowel.

Last night our vane swung north to south,  
easing the winter in our shoulder out.  
Tonight my wife is sleeveless, the neighbors  
opening windows, the mail-slots of spring.

This turn in our lives was such a gracious thing,  
the breeze filling our curtains with good will;  
in our windows' panes the breaths of the last frost.  
Down the hall our kids kicked off their quilts,  
their night-lights moths. All night they fluttered,  
warmer than they had been for months.

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**A Drop Of Dew**

The clearest sense  
of morning

among dragonflies  
and bees.

**Zorn**

In fishing, when we stood at that point  
where the water runs from the river into the lake,

working thee tackle into the evening,  
playing out that monofilament from our palms,

you taught me how in strength,  
strength falls.

In that sleeve of air that was ours  
among the nighthawks, gnats, and nocturnal turtles,

how to put thumb to the hook in the gather dark,  
and how in releasing the bait

and slipping the poles under our arms, we all  
come back through the darkness the way we came,

our hands leaving little glittering pieces of feelings  
behind us.

**To Find Me**

To find me  
go to the park  
with a bag of popcorn.

I'll be one of the pigeons.

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**Montana Sky**

In this blue  
this blue in it blue-flood

in this free-up  
without a black bird

there is only moon  
a slice of time

the silver tongue  
of a bird.

**After Haying**

There were evenings when  
the land drew the sky across its pelvis

blue coming down  
marrying the brown

filling the windbreaks  
with the shadows of soft songs.

**The Iris**

This morning the iris,  
fertile, deeply purple,  
is presenting itself to hard woods.

But what can our oaks say  
to this mystery of physics,  
this propulsion of color,

this *esse* without words?  
Now a bee drops by,  
the transitive of a rooted lover.

It enters this oboe of morning.  
It kisses its alto of color.

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**Rowe Sanctuary**

This sanctuary knows its place.  
It has so for a million years,  
its grasses the original transcriptions  
of how stems whisper winds.

And no one interprets this river  
better than the cranes,  
each one a long gray syllable  
in the book of love.

This sanctuary says, *Come in.*  
Wash your faces in the wind,  
*Co-create wonder with your eyes,*  
*Treat your soles to something*

*Other than cement.* It says,  
*Worship is a natural event.*  
*It's here you justify your lives.*