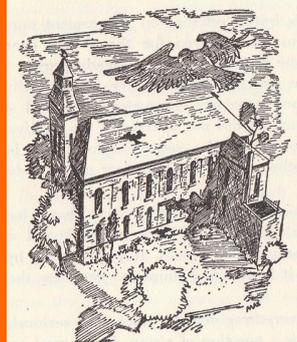


Max Wickert

SIX EARLY POEMS



St. Bonaventure University, Alumni Hall

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Note: “The Mother House” and “Aube” are apprentice pieces, composed prior to my arrival in Buffalo. “Dawn Scene” and “Two Questions” show my heavy debt, both personal and stylistic, to John Logan, whom I considered my friend and mentor for almost a decade. In “Born Lucky” a more independent voice can, I think, be heard. I include the perhaps overly ambitious “The Assumption of the Cloth” because it betrays something of my debt to Irving Feldman, whose work I eventually came greatly to admire.

The Mother House

A scabby clown waits by our motherhouse door.
He is hungry and clacks his rattling gourd,
A grin smeared under his trashy nose.
He is an amateur, his prayer is secular.

Over crisp caulflowers, chaste beets,
Our vestals and coy anchoresses, cheered
By his shimmies watch with dimpled chins
How the horny spirit dissolves his skin.
The silly fool struts with bitten toes.

What if

Hot charity bred in her breasts
And moulting seven black veils, our prioress
Should cut a dido clear across the board,
Her naked ankles toppling cabbages and bread,

And frantically squeeze against her bare
Rosy skin his rotten piebald rump:
Tears, yellow tresses netting his sick stumps,
Sunlight on which walls, a scent of tangerines
And the soft plainsong of her ravished moans . . .

--written 1965, published *Descant* (XIV:2, Winter 1970)

Aube

At dawn you head weighs heavy on my arm.
In your close-lidded calm you have become
Mere body in this morning of white wind.
Borne out of waning night you have gained
The huger dignities of limb and bone,
Your every lightness bequeathed to the moon.

Your flesh, skin, sinew enduring these beams
Is astonished, not quite itself, but claims
Kingship with the transfigured frame. It carves
Itself in contours innocent of nerves,
A weight like marble where winds cannot stir
Even a random irreverent hair.

Our bodiliness all comes after love,
Secures us down with the ultimate proof
Of our fickleness to separate cores.
We may have ghosts that leap in lunar airs
And mingle, but the solid dawn invents
The new forsaken body's evidence.

After our levities subside and we
Are grave after all our love, we betray
Our love also to air. Then we rest
In our separate permanence. At last
We become opaque and we learn anew
That fickleness has forsaken us too.

When the trumpets of the last white wind sound
The last love-abandoned dawn, I will find
Your severed body in such holy calm,
I will not know the still head on my arm
But close my lids, nor wake your laden eyes
For the forsaking of eternities.

--written 1965, published *Descant* (XIV:2, Winter 1970)

Dawn Scene (for John Logan)

At four o'clock we reach his flat.
Waggish with circumspection he ascends,
skirts the sleeping bun on the stair
and lurches through his door.
We follow. The cold morning scents
his room already with regret.
It nags us like our distant, passionate wives.
So that's that.
We've once more carried our several loves
to the high threshold of his lair.
Here we are once more.
In unembarrassed silence he has taken
absolute possession of the saggy davenport.
He flaps a vague am at the remaining gin.
His face relaxes, his heavy old body is calm.
His mouth has dropped open. The light enters it.

My head reels, heart sinks, gut is shaken.
Is alcohol what makes me look at him
with this quick, painful urgency of wishing well?
Is it the gin?
What makes his frame so huge and still?
Spirits in our either mouths.
I am maternal, stupid, protective, wide awake.
A boozing-pot insures his obstinate-faith.
I can almost spell out the reason
of his textless passion.

He sits in the relentless dawn. We make
and awkward exit. The fat
white morning light rushes in.

--written 1967; published in *Choice* (#6, 1970)

Two Questions

1

Made naked for my wife I sense with second sight
my ancestors stabbing for her in the dark.
I have no art to keep their blackness out—
an anonymous goat at the end of the week.

She calls it "Give and Take"
and offers Love's gay body with a smile
that I can't see.

I grow into that hoary ruck:
a parent cancels a parent out
to thrill as the ancient vessels crack,
to hurl honey and ashes in the eyes
of a vague Justice, radiant and terrible.

Love also is blind. Soon my blank face
knows what it cannot recognize.
Then light turns out the droning hordes,
and I, myself again, confuse
swords and arrows, arrows and swords.

I hear the insignificant birds.
She sleeps. She sees blackness and is beautiful. I
I must not look back, I have too many words.
The dawn after the crashing night is still.
Is it apology or gratitude I feel?

At breakfast I find her face again.
Cups clink, our child squalls, and we talk.
We are chaste and garrulous as the light swirls in.

I tell her of my three friends who took
An easy hussy to their place last week,
flicked off all lights and by and by
romped naked with her and crowed and squawked,
cut capers on the couch, dancing. And then all three
screwed her in the high old eighteenth-century way.
They homed under her earth like parentless gods
until the charge of the next day. ("She's something else!"
one of them said when he told me of that sweet night, a little sad.)

My wife's calm eyes are interested.
Perhaps she reckons those times we laid
our selves to rest and trusted
the arrows that flew in our lost nights, or the rusted
swords of the buzzing racial hive.

But where is that other blackness listed
in which my friends' wan bodies come to live
and glow like proud negroes in a negative?

--written 1967, published in *Works* (II.3, Summer 1970)

Born Lucky

The doctors are helping me to pervert your absence
Into an advantage. Not knowing you, they have
An edge of confidence over your friends.
Obedient to their misunderstandings, which
They tell me are my misunderstandings,
I sin constantly against your memory,
but I side with them as the walking catfish sides
With gravel against the disappearance of puddles.

I am not pretty these days, my mouth
Twisted with the strain of trying to outsmart
These invincibles, my eyes screwed into
The shifty leer of trying to capitalize
On confessions of ineradicable deviousness.
"That's what you were always like," one says.
I admit it. But must I therefore admit
That your image and name are cheap tricks of it.

Even if I do, there are still my hands,
The only honest parts of me, still moist
With your treasure; and I remember, I remember
Your shy glance at then before they ever touched you,
My delighted surprise even then at your gift:
That's what I was always like--out of my element,
A sneaky survivor with wonderful hands,
In this one respect, at least, born lucky.

--written in 1975, published in *American Poetry Review* (VIII:4, July/August
1978); reprinted in *Poems Since When* (1988)

The Assumption of the Cloth: A Monologue

Always the world leaps in the girl's bones to its first senses again . . .

--Norman Talbot

1

It is dark just now. The Universal Trust
Company's vastness of lobby lacks
custom. The mandate of all investors
devolves on a maintenance staff of one—
you, my mother. The foyer's indefinite flagstone
sheet slices your obscurely dizzy void,
a Cartesian flatness where your scuffed knees
keep book each night, your head the dot
of a question mark tipped forward for the sake
of each morning's clean slate.

And I,
your single-minded myriad son, asleep
except in a bankruptcy of imagination
that would wish these very lines erased,
vicariously clear the accounts of my despairs,
cancel myself to underwrite your project.

Garbed in a proper shabbiness, your shape
arrested by each spot on the floor, slaps down
a sodden clout, your purpose, and rubs
at scuffs and doodles of diurnal business,
rung high in the air, limp hem
rising indecently over the backs
of lumpy thighs. With each breath you sigh
"Out! out!" in the consciousness of your rectitude,
guiltless somnambulist, immaculate Lady Macbeth.

What's the point? Why, this is what you're for,
isn't it, mom? To tidy up my grounds
for confidence, to make sure there's nothing there.
Only in the perfect vacancy of my sense of pathos
could I dream of letting my assets go rot,
standing at your back in the night. And yet,
what (if I could) would I be doing if not
assuming the position of all who have always
shafted you?

I can see me now, shambling
still sleepy behind you, filial and effete,
knowing those breasts drained of felicity
from which I imagine myself ripped or dropped.

And I would twist the angle of my approach
into a gesture of recrimination:
"Mother, mother, how could you leave me behind?"
Your arthritic fingers would keep on clutching,
cramped in the assiduities of your immolation,
the wet cloth of your call: going about my business . . .

Scintillating its annular filament, the obscene,
upside-down light bulb of your haunches ignites
a distaste in me that (I flatter myself) becomes me
Fists balled pink in a perverse last tantrum,
I rock the deck you kneel on, dearest swab,
and, vainly thinking I turn a new leaf,
tilt the level that alone sustains you
in the vertiginous chaos of near-exhaustion
towards what? Knees still bent, hands
still gripping your rag, buttocks still
stuck out, your body is sliding sideways
off the tipped ledger page of my pity
into infancy . . .

2

Fetal and still on your side, your delivery sponsored
by the Cybernetic Fellowship Foundation, you blink,
wrinkled petal, monkey face, at the dawn
of my categorical disenchantment, oh my curled daughter.
Your fingers palpate a floppy patch of twill
in a cartoon of post-natal stupefaction.
I pronounce that damp blanket your only certitude.
Croon to it, do, as to the knowledge of the impossible,
the tear-soaked banner of terrific might-have-beens,
a tattered prince who is out of your star:
"Coochie-coo, Calamity!"

God, girl, will you never see
my severity brilliant above your cradle,
my sole relaxation a crooked, bitter grin?
As though I, tricky governor of heads and dice,
had grimly seen myself caught in the trap
of a diffidence so systematic that siring
a daughter seemed merely a form of hygiene,
a hypothesis try forestall the glut of hypotheses . . .

Let your world be wadded, warn, wet.
Let your mind be muffled, unweaned. Let your mouth
drool in the drop-cloth of my projects. Be silly,
be secure. Be unaware, child, of the glare
of arc lamps, cathodes, high-frequency oscillators

"Crap! papal bullshit!" and unfrocks himself.

"Hello, little vicar," you drawl, not changing
position, but letting the kerchief hang still
above your sex, flag marking the spot.
Sad-sack Tristan trots to his tabernacle,
stares point blank between your thighs, in his eyes
a weary admission: "Here comes mankind."
He knows the lay of the land, thinks
"It's a bad lay," pardons his own bad puns.

Hail, humorous whore. Hold your ragman now.
Humping time. The world is white and flat,
a sheet of bleached parchment without signature.
You lie on it smiling while he, the *pis aller*
tool of all its cocks-of-the-walk, begins
to hammer you through it till you fall away
into the endless holy space below . . .

4

It is written that you fall and in your fall let go
the slow-unfurling banner of all my power.
Hurling, gathering speed, you straighten yourself,
gymnast overvaulting a faded nightmare,
and sing the death of the cotton hero in whose eyes
you dwindle to a vanishing point.
There the suck of history, the shroud of his story,
my story, no longer extrude your womb.
Sluggish and drenched, your cast-off veil,
while you plummet away, is swimming up
toward the firmament on which I squat,
nobodaddy, a son-of-a bitch who tries
to whore his female universe. I stare
down at my flat, white sheet of sky.
A wet rag has risen to its underside,
pasty cloud of ignorance and pain.
It bleeds now through the tissue of this page.

--written 1971, unpublished