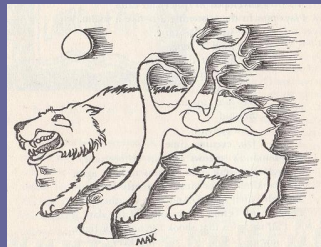


Max Wickert

[from] **DEPARTURES**



Max Wickert, Illustration to *The Laurel* (1958)

Contents

<i>page</i>	
3	1 “When the bell has rung the inward world”
4	2 <i>The Months</i>
6	3 “Good night, good night, and now go to sleep”
7	4 “The outward world is taken away”
8	5 “The foolish husband bound to his house”
9	6 “Over here I walk with freer breath”
10	10 “The pitch black comes and I am in it”
11	11 “One night last summer when you were gone”
12	13 “I pass on: the rocks close behind me”
13	14 “My body is dispersed every night”
14	15 “No, leave me alone, I have nothing”
15	17 “My urge for girls in the flush of health”
16	18 “Father, come on. It’s time to get up.”
17	21 “And all will be well. The flakes of dust”
18	24 “Your slim body in the rushes, in”
19	25 “I love your fingers, the little bones”
20	<i>Epilogue</i>

1

When the bell has rung the inward world
will be torn away. The sudden child
will leap from his mother's agony
and in the twinkling of an eye
husband and wife will turn from the lie
of marriage.

As soon as the bell sounds
will be the time of departures. Words
will hurry out of the useless brain
and the fire of the earth will burn
to rush away from its flesh of stone.

The bell will hardly have rung when blood
will run from blood and when all the gold
in the earth will be suddenly spent.
Quickly the bright body will depart
from the jail of soul. Quicker than that,
too quickly, the poet abandons
his poem.

Now the bell rings. He runs.

--written 1967, published in *Presence* (#3, "Three Sections from Departures,"
Summer 1968)

2

THE MONTHS

There is so little left of my now--
a few feathers stuck to a shovel,
my stink lingering in the gravel,
the final cadence of my slow cry
garbled in a rushing of water.

You there, on your chair in the parlor,
combing your hair and full of tears, you
are also full of my life. You grow
big-bellied as I fade into air.
What a long wait it is to silence,

what weary flight to complete absence.
Your hair is crackling beneath your comb
as you feel my first kick in your womb.
My shadow behind the window panes
moves a little further out of sight.

In the fourth month, I return at night
rustling wings in my dream of farewells,
a black beak worrying your nipples.
In the early dawn, you sit up straight
and hear soft wailing from the kitchen.

I am between your heart and the sun,
forever saying goodbye, never
going away. Life is half over.
It comes and goes at once. You begin
to feel your backbone aching with me.

Your footfall on the stairs is heavy.
Who could predict that it takes so long?
I know I should stop hesitating
behind your threshold and fly away.
You've already forgotten my name.

In a little while, I will become
indistinguishable from the rain-
drops' tattoo upon your window pane
or from the low unremitting drum
of your pulse. And now the rain must end.

O my girl, I have brought you to bed,
chained you to the rack of my parting.

Soon I will make you scream for my long
fall out of knowledge into the red
heat of your blood. I am finished. See,

there is nothing at all left of me.
My soiled life drops out of you, and soon
the rough tongue of time will lick me clean.
You smile and I cry my infant cry.
You will not remember me. Goodbye.

--written 1968, published in Philip Dacey & John Knoll, ed., *I Love You All Day It Is That Simple* (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1970); also in *Michigan Quarterly Review* (X.3, Summer 1971) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

3

Goodnight, goodnight, and now go to sleep.
We've talked too much and it's hard to stop.
Sometimes I think you're all in my head,
that you spill from my mouth with each word,
rise to my brain with my blood, grow ripe
in the tears I don't shed. When the lamp

is out though--when you doze off and sprawl
solidly against my back, I feel
I have no such stakes in you. I see
it is your presence leaves me empty,
fidgeting for property, a fool
with dreams about a farmyard idyll.

It's not that you rule in my mind, no,
nor body. It's that you're there below
my pressure, under my eyes, always,
even through nights in which I'm dreamless.
What do I have for myself?
Who really fills my soul? If only you

weren't here, I could tell what I own:
Up there are my two vineyards. All mine.
This is my plow field. My well. My grass.
This is my barn full of wheat. This is
my very own mossy dark ravine.
And over here is a long way down.

--written summer 1967, published in *Presence* (No. 3, Summer 1968).

4

The outward world is taken away.
I can't listen any longer, I
can't look at you. But I see a bright
danger as I close my eyes. A great
hum as of gongs is shaking like rain
through the silence at my ears. Our son
smiles an angry smile somewhere among
tangles of unbearable lightning;
his laughter frightens me because it
echoes everywhere, nowhere. His foot
kicks at all gates and his fingers pull
at a thousand window slats. He will
get to me before he gets to you, pin
me down in a world not my own.
And he'll pretend to be right at home.
Then it will be your turn. The small flame
at which you stare each night will grow pale
and tremble while you shiver to feel
your house belong to another. See,
darling, I'm gone. When finally
the inward world is taken away
I will look to your small light and I
will listen for your terrible cry.

--written 1968, published in *Buffalo Courier Express Sunday Magazine*
(January 14, 1979)

5

The foolish husband bound to his house
complains. He's difficult to locate.
Find out the wife first. It's her story
will make his mumbling clear. The nonsense
of marriage now. The dumb cowardice.

A married woman should have no past.
She should take a man who is virgin.
They should suddenly leave the city,
dance like wildfires in the desert waste,
visible, exposed, courageous, lost.

This is what should be. But then the facts
are otherwise. The bride at the church
whores after her girl-hood. Her body
tingles with the scars of years, contracts
and throbs with ancient twitches and aches.

She is stiff with white veils. The bridegroom
mopes after her from room to room. Lost
to themselves they trade for a baby.
Husband., what are you? Your house is a dream.
Go away. Your wife is not at home.

--written in 1968, published in *Presence* (#3, "Three Sections from
Departures," Summer 1968) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

6

Over here I walk with freer breath.
Taking things as they are, leaving things
as they are, 'I have forgotten youth.
The face of my sister coarsening
in marriage smiles kindly from the bark
of every tree that grows. My father
hides in the tall grass, a mossy rock
I rest on. My still unborn brother
sings from a black cricket hole. And I
see but I do not look, I hear but
do not listen.

Even while you die,
mother, your eyes too shine in the lights
of the fireflies and your hard palms
keep the woodpecker's nest. The small bones
of your aching feet roll in clear streams.
Your name is marked on all trees and stones
and I walk more slowly here until
your dying makes me stand wholly still.

--written in 1968, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)

10

The pitch black comes and I am in it
riding toward your vanishing house.
Make ready for the sable planet.

It melts the horizon in its rise
and I am in it. I am coming
into the far corners of your eyes.

Faster than you think the glistening
lake surface turns to steel and the steel
dissolves in my solid air. The long

highways vanish. Every animal
bursts its skin and the sap of blossoms
boils up pell mell with rocks. What you smell

are hints of my hot metal. It comes
quickly and it is quickly over.
And I make haste in those lightless beams.

They come. I love you. Stay indoors,
bolt them out, don't let them shine on you.

What you almost hear is my sorrow.

--written in 1968, published in *Michigan Quarterly Review* (X:3,
"Warning," Summer 1971)

11

One night last summer when you were gone
I took your necklace and spread it on
my chest and felt how heavy and cool
it was. Today's minutes leave a chill
like those pearls on the string on my skin.
I shouldn't enjoy being alone.

Lady of pearls, you cook my red soup.
Friends drop from my hands and feet.
I grope for myself when I go home from school.
(Away from home I'm sentimental.)
The cool minutes lie over my words
like rows upon rows of heavy pearls.

Someone talks to me who is not you,
who does not have a friend's voice but grew
in the minutes of my solitude.
I see a body sexual and round,
my heavy hermaphrodite of love,
talking as he leans over his stove.

Your necklace hangs around his black throat.
I eat his supper with my friends. But
I remember it was you who said:
Talk to me! Talk to me! Something red
streaks down the blackness before my eyes.
I dream constantly of long journeys.

--written in early 1969, published in *Works* (II:3, Summer 1970).

13

I pass on: the rocks close behind me,
the patterns of their veins fade out,
caverns fill with sediment. You flee,
already contracted to a point
on the horizon where all lines meet.

My nervous hands fumble over stone:
Open, open up, let me in. Rocks
close around me, I forget my skin.
Things are turning inside out, the axe
of my panic heart can't cut, it sticks.

I have no choice but stand: Let me out.
A stabbing pain at my side. Heavy
pebbles roll rattling into my chest,
I am filled with the cumbrous world,
I lift my round eyes with difficulty.

And there you are, finally, once again:
Together we walk in the avenues
of the inanimate earth. We learn
it is stone, nothing but stone that says,
Behold! I will be with you always.

--written in 1968, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)

14

My body is dispersed every night
slowly sinking in the loam of sleep.
My joints loosen, my skull opens up,
fingers and toes go groping about

by themselves, and I'm not astonished
if my quick eyes start out of my head.
Disordering myself in the mud
I create all that I ever wished.

Though I can't see the luminous shape
that I form all around me, I know
the foretaste of his milk and the slow
rocking ease of his procreant lap.

And I know who I am too when he
rises into the night from the ooze
and speaks his first word with my own voice.
And what he says takes my breath away.

But when that word is spoken, my sleep
breaks and the shroud of my former skin
folds suddenly around me again.
I fall into waking as a trap

shuts over my partial self. And then
my eyes roll back like boulders to graves
and my mound of flesh is back in love
marked by my sex as by a tombstone.

Because I must assert this body
I hurl myself wildly on your clay.

--written in 1968, published in *Michigan Quarterly Review* (X:3, "He is
the Mother," Summer 1971)

15

No, leave me alone, I have nothing,
nothing to say to you. Let me stand
under the thick web of stars and pour
out the warm liquid of my breath on

the warm air. Let me feel the prickle
of my pepper flesh rotting away.
Don't come near me. No, my spittle
is unpleasantly sweet and my brain

a raisin shrivelling with the moon.
The filmy net in the sky lowers.,
my fingertips reel it down around
the black earth, around my heart. Never

touch me, no, never look at my face--
it fades, it is blurred in thickening meshes.
Don't walk with me. No. my pace
echoes away in the seething dew.

I'm not at all what you think I am.
No, not even the smear vanishing
on the dawn is myself. Already
it is a bad taste on the blue tongue

of another day. No, do not ask
what has become of me tomorrow.
I've nothing to say to you. The last
traces of my unsightly sorrow

will be burned in the noonday sun.
It is then your wounds will get better,
your hate washed from your eyes.
It is then you will see the night come and let her

lead you to your pillow in the air.
As for me: no, no I won't be there.

--written in 1968, published in *Prologue* (III:2, 1969).

17

My urge for girls in the flush of health
brought me to you. I noticed your breath
quicken as I rushed ashore to find
that you were alone. You were afraid.

I'm glad. How long I yearned for this!
Take a last look now, feel the grass,
watch the waves turn black, hear the lone magpie
shriek, bend to the wilting blossoms. I
heard of you; now I am here to see.

I pause after I take off your clothes
and am all unsatisfied. The grass
is picking at the earth with its small knives.
The thought drives me on, so I remove
your skin and flesh. The bad weather
of centuries cracks the rocks. So here
I am chipping at your bones. And yet,
your marrow hides a fire to heat
my zero chill. I can't fathom it.

I have taken everything away
from you. Still you are here. The magpie
has fled with your eyes. Your threadbare dress
and strands of your hair are drifting west
on the sea. Still you are here. Flowers
have eaten your heart. Still you are here.
Your form flutters like the ghost of a flag
in my wind. My snowdrifts melt and sag
with your long-dry tears. Your lost hands dig

ever-changing patterns on my ice.
I've never been colder, and this
is not the place for me. Your terror
of meeting me endures forever.
If I could leave you as I found you
all things might be better. Anyhow,
it is time for me to travel west.
O love, love, see how I sally out--
a lewd shape in a rudderless boat.

--written in 1968, published in *Prologue* (III.2, "Four Sectons from
Departures, 1969)

18

Father, come on. It's time to get up.
I'll nag you out of your bed of chaff.
Wake up. Shake the earwigs from your ears,
brush the dead leaves with clumsy fingers
from your mammoth thigh. Come, be off:
I can tell you this is no time for sleep.

You've sprawled long enough gathering moss
on your rough temples, your hair matted
over the sly crocus, your knuckles
rammed through the cracking ice. Now all hell's
breaking loose, and I rise from the dead
to raise you up. Listen to my voice.

Listen for the droning, inside your skull,
aching behind your blind eye; I pound
the ruthless anvil under your ribs.
The grass pushing at your back., the sobs
of the fickle wind hiding behind
bush and waterfall shout with my will.

I know you won't like it, but the time
is ripe. I must scourge you on once more,
I, son of your loins, the small demon
that loves and mocks you with the question,
Father, father, where is my mother?
I exult to see you rise and scream.

--written in 1968, published in *Buffalo Courier Express Sunday Magazine*
(April 9, 1978)

21

And all will be well. The flakes of dust
fall untouched from your lashes. You strain
wrists, ankles to earth. The grass you brushed
against has stained your belly green.

My tongue has become a tongue of air
to cut your blossom. Your bright rich skin
has opened up without my pressure.
Slowly my arms of rock drop you down.

Turning your knees outward, you receive
my ice, my storms twist between your breasts
and my thumb points out your gold. The curve
of your arched back grows tense. Your fruit bursts

and the oils of all your aches flow, soak
deep down into the soil. Your mouth tastes
of salt, your eyes shine in the dark. Look!
my thousand thoughts suck at small black teats.

A secular bird, high in the air, soars,
swoops, turns alone. His screams are silly.
What has he lost? The morning nears.
Dune grass stands up by the empty sea:

a good time for going west, a wind
for music on hollow bones. Goodbye.
All will be well. I grow awake and
find myself born on your green belly.

--written in 1968, unpublished

24

Your slim body in the rushes, in
the wet places, gentle mistress of
pale orange newts and whip-tail tadpoles
and clear water--

 I'll lie down with you
on the bank of the creek and cherish
your wet hair and skin, I'll shower you
with small blue coins of forget-me-nots.

*

This is my hold in the ground. "You know,
your eyebrows look like faint smears of earth . . . "
Leaf-mold rank in my nostrils, her I
have given burial to the ghost-bird
of my self esteem.

 A naked tree
gripping the soil so tightly.
 A warning?

*

Darling, winter fire, ice heat: eat
these words, guilt-paper. Don't look at me.

*

I'm silent about the air round us.
In spring-time, in your other season,
we breathe

 Love
 into each other's mouths.

--written in 1968, unpublished

25

--for *Esther*

I love your fingers, the little bones
in them, your shoulder blades when the light
is on your back.

And why aren't we
frightened by the blaze in the west
behind the buttonwoods? Sudden gold
on our lips, and a queer voice somewhere,
a wail of music from the rivers
of Babylon.

Stars.

There will be fog--
brook and flat valley milling with white
dancers. Oh, the small bones. The sweetness.

*

A beast crashes through the dry thicket.
Apples drop with a thud. Blades of grass
snap, frost-brittle.

Your lips at my mouth.

I'm transparent, a giant of glass
brooding on the edge of the dark world.
Slowly the weight of the still midnight
shifts onto my shoulders.

The sweetness!

*

And Herod murdered all the children.
Two toys lie broken on a white sheet.
Two lovers awake.

Thick smoke of blood
rises to the sky. The animals
are coming to the river to drink.

*

Love, you are all the morning I have.

--written in 1969, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight*
(Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972)

Epilogue

. . . and again say goodbye, let it go
again, leave the skin, the house, the new
life in the scrappy old limbs. Cold, cold
blows the wind and breath is cold. The world
begs to be left alone. You and I
are through, again and again. Goodbye,
farewell, goodbye is our gospel, our
good news, our ultimate desire.
Amen, I will be with you always
cries the voice of the last stone, the voice
of the chill wind that blows upward-, up
through the tatters and holes of our sleep,
forsaking, releasing all we are
and all we will ever be elsewhere,
letting out the child in the belly,
the bee in the hollow tree, the cry
in the pain, the sweetness in the grape,
the red blood in the heart's covered cup,
the fire in the mountain, the brain
in the skull, the huge toad sleeping in
the stone of the world, the word
behind the teeth, the girl clutched in a boy's hand.

--written in 1968, published in *Choice* (#7/8, 1972), reprinted in *Choice*
(#10, 1978) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)