

Classic Poetry Series

David Wagoner
- poems -

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David Wagoner(5 June 1926)

David Russell Wagoner is an American poet who has written many poetry collections and ten novels. Two of his books have been nominated for National Book Awards.

Early Life

Born in Massillon, Ohio and raised in Whiting, Indiana from the age of seven, Wagoner attended Pennsylvania State University where he was a member of Naval ROTC and graduated in three years. He received an M.A. in English from the Indiana University in 1949 and has taught at the University of Washington since 1954 on the suggestion of friend and fellow poet Theodore Roethke.

Career

Wagoner was editor of Poetry Northwest from 1966 to 2002 and his play An Eye For An Eye For An Eye was produced in 1973. Wagoner was elected chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1978 and served in that capacity until 1999. One of his novels, The Escape Artist, was turned into a film by executive producer Francis Ford Coppola. He currently teaches in the low-residency MFA program of the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts on Whidbey Island.

The natural environment of the Pacific Northwest is the subject of much of David Wagoner's poetry. He cites his move from the Midwest as a defining moment: "[W]hen I came over the Cascades and down into the coastal rainforest for the first time in the fall of 1954, it was a big event for me, it was a real crossing of a threshold, a real change of consciousness. Nothing was ever the same again."

A Snap Quiz in Body Language

We can't hear what they're saying, but that man is holding that woman in his arms. Your assignment is to deduce their thoughts from what they do. They've left no apparent space between their bodies. It could be called a close embrace, but notice her arms are at her sides, her hands relaxed, her face impassive, while he's whispering something in her ear. His upper torso is tilted slightly forward. Hers is yielding but not in a way suggesting sweet surrender. Is this a seduction scene? Is she being held for questioning? Should she call a lawyer? He's looking into her eyes now. How wide open would you say they are? What does he see in them? If he were to let her go, class, what would she do?

David Wagoner

Among Driftwood

Trees haven't come here to die. They've done that
in other forests, on other coasts, having lost
their leaves and their bark and come ashore
by themselves on a five-mile sand spit. Branches
and split logs, upended stumps, roots in the wind,
and in one small cove, someone
with nothing better to do it with
has built a shack, then abandoned it—
a doorway, but no roof, accidental windows,
no hope of a foundation. It's already
slumping back to what it was
like a sandcastle. These parts of trees
have surrendered and been washed clean
of imperfections. They won't be judged
for punk knot, frost crack, pitch scab,
or heart rot by lumbermen. The stump outside
the door has ninety rings on its face
and is looking good for more,
regardless of contractors. I remember
shacks in the woods and shacks nailed up in trees
and along bent railroad tracks,
under new freeways, and up skid-road alleys
where the impulse was to be half savage
or halfway civilized, to be where
no one could say, at least for a little while,
Get out of there. Keep moving. Go away.
I crawl inside as if I'm coming home.

David Wagoner

At The Door

All actors look for them-the defining moments
When what a character does is what he is.
The script may say, He goes to the door
And exits or She goes out the door stage left.

But you see your fingers touching the doorknob,
Closing around it, turning it
As if by themselves. The latch slides
Out of the strike-plate, the door swings on its hinges,
And you're about to take that step
Over the threshold into a different light.

For the audience, you may simply be
Disappearing from the scene, yet in those few seconds
You can reach for the knob as the last object on earth
You wanted to touch. Or you can take it
Warmly like the hand your father offered
Once in forgiveness and afterward
Kept to himself.

Or you can stand there briefly, as bewildered
As by the door of a walk-in time-lock safe,
Stand there and stare
At the whole concept of shutness, like a rat
Whose maze has been rebaffled overnight,
Stand still and quiver, unable to turn
Around or go left or right.

Or you can grasp it with a sly, soundless discretion,
Open it inch by inch, testing each fraction
Of torque on the spindles, on tiptoe
Slip yourself through the upright slot
And press the lock-stile silently
Back into its frame.

Or you can use your shoulder
Or the hard heel of your shoe
And a leg-thrust to break it open.

Or you can approach the door as if accustomed
To having all barriers open by themselves.
You can wrench aside
This unauthorized interruption of your progress
And then leave it ajar
For others to do with as they may see fit.

Or you can stand at ease
And give the impression you can see through
This door or any door and have no need
To take your physical self to the other side.

Or you can turn the knob as if at last
Nothing could please you more, your body language
Filled with expectations of joy at where you're going,
Holding yourself momentarily in the posture
Of an awestruck pilgrim at the gate-though you know
You'll only be stepping out against the scrim
Or a wobbly flat daubed with a landscape,
A scribble of leaves, a hint of flowers,
The bare suggestion of a garden.

David Wagoner

Bums at Breakfast

Daily, the bums sat down to eat in our kitchen.
They seemed to be whatever the day was like:
If it was hot or cold, they were hot or cold;
If it was wet, they came in dripping wet.
One left his snowy shoes on the back porch
But his socks stuck to the clean linoleum,
And one, when my mother led him to the sink,
Wrung out his hat instead of washing his hands.

My father said they'd made a mark on the house,
A hobo's sign on the sidewalk, pointing the way.
I hunted everywhere, but never found it.
It must have said, 'It's only good in the morning-
When the husband's out.' My father knew by heart
Lectures on Thrift and Doggedness,
But he was always either working or sleeping.
My mother didn't know any advice.

They ate their food politely, with old hands,
Not looking around, and spoke in short, plain answers.
Sometimes they said what they'd been doing lately
Or told us what was wrong; but listening hard,
I broke their language into secret codes:
Their east meant west, their job meant walking and walking,
Their money meant danger, home meant running and hiding,
Their father and mother were different kinds of weather.

Dumbly, I watched them leave by the back door,
Their pockets empty as a ten-year-old's;
Yet they looked twice as rich, being full of breakfast.
I carried mine like a lump all the way to school.
When I was growing hungry, where would they be?
None ever came twice. Never to lunch or dinner.
They were always starting fresh in the fresh morning.
I dreamed of days that stopped at the beginning.

David Wagoner

Do Not Proceed Beyond This Point without a Guide

The official warning, nailed to a hemlock,
Doesn't say why. I stand with my back to it,
Afraid I've come as far as I can
By being stubborn, and look
Downward for miles at the hazy crags and spurs.

A rubble-covered ridge like a bombed stairway
Leads up beyond the sign. It doesn't
Seem any worse than what I've climbed already.
Why should I have to take a guide along
To watch me scaring myself to death?

What was it I wanted? A chance to look around
On a high rock already named and numbered
By somebody else? A chance to shout
Over the heads of people who quit sooner?
Shout what? I can't go tell it on the mountain.

I sit for a while, raking the dead leaves
Out of my lungs and traveling lightheaded
Downward again in my mind's eye, till there's nothing
Left of my feet but rags and bones
And nothing to look down on but my shoes.

The closer I come to it, the harder it is to doubt
How well this mountain can take me or leave me.
The hemlock had more sense. It stayed where it was,
Grew up and down at the same time, branch and root,
Being a guide instead of needing one.

David Wagoner

Every Good Boy Does Fine

I practiced my cornet in a cold garage
Where I could blast it till the oil in drums
Boomed back; tossed free throws till I couldn't move my thumbs;
Sprinted through tires, tackling a headless dummy.

In my first contest, playing a wobbly solo,
I blew up in the coda, alone on stage,
And twisting like my hand-tied necktie, saw the judge
Letting my silence dwindle down his scale.

At my first basketball game, gangling away from home
A hundred miles by bus to a dressing room,
Under the showering voice of the coach, I stood in a towel,
Having forgotten shoes, socks, uniform.

In my first football game, the first play under the lights
I intercepted a pass. For seventy yards, I ran
Through music and squeals, surging, lifting my cleats,
Only to be brought down by the safety man.

I took my second chances with less care, but in dreams
I saw the bald judge slumped in the front row,
The coach and team at the doorway, the safety man
Galloping loud at my heels. They watch me now.

You who have always homed your way through passages,
Sat safe on the bench while some came naked to court,
Slipped out of arms to win in the long run,
Consider this poem a failure, sprawling flat on a page.

David Wagoner

Following A Stream

Don't do it, the guidebook says,
if you're lost. Then it goes on
 to talk about something else,
 taking the easy way out,
which of course is what water does
as a matter of course always
 taking whatever turn
 the earth has told it to
while and since it was born,
including flowing over
 the edge of a waterfall
 or simply disappearing
underground for a long dark time
before it reappears
 as a spring so far away
 from where you thought you were
and where you think you are
it might never occur
 to you to imagine where
 that could be as you go downhill.

David Wagoner

For a Student Sleeping in a Poetry Workshop

I've watched his eyelids sag, spring open
Vaguely and gradually go sliding
Shut again, fly up
With a kind of drunken surprise, then wobble
Peacefully together to send him
Home from one school early. Soon his lashes
Flutter in REM sleep. I suppose he's dreaming
What all of us kings and poets and peasants
Have dreamed: of not making the grade,
Of draining the inexhaustible horn cup
Of the cerebral cortex where ganglions
Are ganging up on us with more connections
Than atoms in heaven, but coming up once more
Empty. I see a clear stillness
Settle over his face, a calming of the surface
Of water when the wind dies. Somewhere
Down there, he's taking another course
Whose resonance (let's hope) resembles
The muttered thunder, the gutter bowling, the lightning
Of minor minions of Thor, the groans and gurgling
Of feral lovers and preliterate Mowglis, the songs
Of shamans whistled through bird bones. A worried neighbor
Gives him the elbow, and he shudders
Awake, recollects himself, brings back
His hands from aboriginal outposts,
Takes in new light, reorganizes his shoes,
Stands up in them at the buzzer, barely recalls
His books and notebooks, meets my eyes
And wonders what to say and whether to say it,
Then keeps it to himself as today's lesson.

David Wagoner

For Laurel and Hardy on My Workroom Wall

They're tipping their battered derbies and striding forward
In step for a change, chipper, self-assured,
Their cardboard suitcases labeled
Guest of Steerage. They've just arrived at the boot camp
Of the good old French Foreign Legion
Which they've chosen as their slice of life
Instead of drowning themselves. Once again
They're about to become their own mothers and fathers
And their own unknowable children
Who will rehearse sad laughter and mock tears,
Will frown with completely unsuccessful
Concentration, and will practice the amazement
Of suddenly understanding everything
That baffles them and will go on baffling them
While they pretend they're only one reel away
From belonging in the world. Their arrival
Will mark a new beginning of meaningless
Hostilities with a slaphappy ending. In a moment,
They'll hear music, and as if they'd known all along
This was what they'd come for, they'll put down
The mops and buckets given them as charms
With which to cleanse the Sahara and move their feet
With a calm, sure, delicate disregard
For all close-order drill and begin dancing.

David Wagoner

Getting There

You take a final step and, look, suddenly
You're there. You've arrived
At the one place all your drudgery was aimed for:
This common ground
Where you stretch out, pressing your cheek to sandstone.
What did you want
To be? You'll remember soon. You feel like tinder
Under a burning glass,
A luminous point of change. The sky is pulsing
Against the cracked horizon,
Holding it firm till the arrival of stars
In time with your heartbeats.
Like wind etching rock, you've made a lasting impression
On the self you were
By having come all this way through all this welter
Under your own power
Though your traces on a map would make an unpromising
Meandering lifeline.
What have you learned so far? You'll find out later,
Telling it haltingly
Like a dream, that lost traveller's dream
Under the last bill
Where through the night you'll take your time out of mind
To unburden yourself
Of elements along elementary paths
By the break of morning.
You've earned this worn-down, hard, incredible sight
Called Here and Now.
Now, what you make of it means everything,
Means starting over:
The life in your hands is neither here nor there
But getting there,
So you're standing again and breathing, beginning another journey without
regret
Forever, being your own unpeaceable kingdom,
The end of endings. David Wagoner from *In Broken Country*

David Wagoner

In Rubble

Right after the bomb, even before the ceiling
And walls and floor are rearranging
You and themselves into a different world,
You must hold still, must wait for them
To settle down in unpredictable ways,
To bring their wars, shuddering,
To an end, and only then should you begin
Numbly to feel what freedom may be left
To your feet or knees, to your elbows
Or clenched fingers. Where you used to walk
Or lean or lie down or fix your attention
At a whim or stomp your foot
Or slump in a chair, you'll find a new
Architecturally unsound floor-plan
To contend with, if you can move
At all. Now you may remember others
Who were somewhere near you before
This breakdown of circumstances. Caught by surprise
Like you, they may be waiting separately
At their own levels, inside their own portions
Of your incoherent flat. They may be thinking
Of you, as you are of them, and wondering
Whether some common passageway, no matter
How crooked or narrow, might still exist
Between you, through which you might share the absence
Of food and water and the cold comfort
Of daylight. They may be expecting you
To arrive at any moment, to crawl through dust
And fire to their rescue as they find their bodies
Growing more stiff, assuming even more
Unusual attitudes at every turn
Of a second hand, at every sound
Of a bell or an alarm, at every pounding
Of a door or a heart, so if you can't reach them
Now and they can't reach you, remember, please
Remember, whatever you say,
Whatever you hear or keep to yourself, whatever
You scream or whisper, will need to make
Some kind of sense, perhaps for days and days.

David Wagoner

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. you must let it find you.

David Wagoner

Mapmaking

It's an old desire: a sketch of part of the earth
There in your hands. You touch it, saying, There.
So make your map:
If you have no crossroads, no confluence of streams
To set your starting point, you simply pretend
You know where you are
And begin outlining a landscape, using a compass
And your measured stride toward landmarks: thrusts of bedrock,
Trees or boulders, whatever
Seems likely to be around after you've gone.
You fix your eyes on them, one at a time,
And learn the hard way
How hard it is to fabricate broken country.
You go where your line takes you: uphill or down,
Over or straight through,
Between and past the casual, accidental
Substance of this world. Once there, you turn back
To confirm your bearings,
To reconcile what you saw with what you see,
Comparing foresight and hindsight. These are moments
When your opinion
Of yourself as cartographer may suffer.
Your traverse ought to return to its beginning,
To a known point, though you,
Slipshod, footsore by dusk, may find your hope
Falls short of perfection: remember no one
Really depends on you
To do away with uncertainty forever.
Your piece of paper may seem in years to come
An amusing footnote
For wandering minds, a record of out-of-the-way
Transfixions (better preserved by photographers)
Whose terrain is so far askew
It should be left to divert imaginations
Like yours that enjoy believing they've mapped out
Some share of the unknown.

David Wagoner

My Father Laughing in the Chicago Theater

His heavy body would double itself forward
At the waist, swell, and come heaving around
To slam at his seatback, making the screws groan
And squawk down half the row as it went tilting
Under my mother and me, under whoever
Was out of luck on the other side of him.
Like a boxer slipping punches, he'd lift his elbows
To flail and jerk, and his wide-open mouth
Would boom out four deep haaa's to the end of his breath.

He was laughing at Burns and Allen or Jack Benny
In person or at his limitless engagement
With Groucho, Chico, and Harpo. While my mother
Sat there between us, gazing at the stage
And chuckling placidly, I watched with amazement
The spectacle of a helpless father, unmanned,
Disarmed by laughter. The tears would dribble
From under his bifocals, as real as sweat.
He would gape and gag, go limp, and spring back to life.

I would laugh too, but partly at him, afraid
Of becoming him. He could scowl anywhere,
Be solemn or blank in church or going to work,
Turn grim with a cold chisel, or he could smile
At babies or football games, but he only laughed
There in that theater. And up the aisle
And through the lobby to the parking lot
And all the way home, I'd see the glow on his cheeks
Fade to the usual hectic steelmill sunburn.

David Wagoner

My Fire

In the cave under our house
I tended the fire: a furnace
Where black fossils of ferns
And swamp-shaking dinosaurs
Would burn through the cold mornings
If I shook the dying and dead
Ashes down through the grate
And, with firetongs, hauled out clinkers
Like the vertebrae of monsters.

I made my magic there,
Not the bloody charms of hunters,
Not shamans or animals
Painted on damp walls,
But something from fire. My father
Tended huge rows of fires
And burned with them all day,
Sometimes all evening, all night
In a steelmill, brought fire home
On his face and his burnt skin
And slept, glowing dark red.

My fire made steam in coils
And pipes and radiators
Poured from the steel he made
Somewhere I'd only seen
Far off, the burning mountains
Where God kept His true flame
To Himself, melting and turning
Blood-colored ore to pigs
And men to something stranger.

My spirit would swell and sing
Inside those pipes, would knock
And rattle to be let out,
Would circle through walls and floors,
Turn back to water and fall
To the fire again, turn white,
Rise hissing in every room

Against the windows to grow
Fronds and bone-white flowers,
All ice in a frozen garden.

David Wagoner

Natural Disasters

Long ago, we had to admit, in acquisitive English
the Romans knew what they were talking about
when they made a negative out of lucky stars
by labeling some of the deadly ones disasters,
and it's in their very nature, naturally,
to be disastrous, to give even their most
distant inhabitants and poor dependents
hell now and then. Always, inevitably, as sure
as we happen to be born in the abnormal
course of events, more of them show up
at all the wrong times and places and occasions
with bad attitudes, ready to be that cave-in,
this lightning stroke, that twister, those earthquakes,
tsunamis, sudden rearrangements of shores
and mountains and half or whole continents,
and we're expected to be theirs in sickness
and health in what we've dubbed forever
and a day with stars still in our eyes
and a star-like core still burning under our feet.

David Wagoner

Old Man, Old Man

Young men, not knowing what to remember,
Come to this hiding place of the moons and years,
To this Old Man. Old Man, they say, where should we go?
Where did you find what you remember? Was it perched in a tree?
Did it hover deep in the white water? Was it covered over
With dead stalks in the grass? Will we taste it
If our mouths have long lain empty?
Will we feel it between our eyes if we face the wind
All night, and turn the color of earth?
If we lie down in the rain, can we remember sunlight?

He answers, I have become the best and worst I dreamed.
When I move my feet, the ground moves under them.
When I lie down, I fit the earth too well.
Stones long underwater will burst in the fire, but stones
Long in the sun and under the dry night
Will ring when you strike them. Or break in two.
There were always many places to beg for answers:
Now the places themselves have come in close to be told.
I have called even my voice in close to whisper with it:
Every secret is as near as your fingers.
If your heart stutters with pain and hope,
Bend forward over it like a man at a small campfire.

David Wagoner

Peacock Display

He approaches her, trailing his whole fortune,
Perfectly cocksure, and suddenly spreads
The huge fan of his tail for her amazement.

Each turquoise and purple, black-horned, walleyed quill
Comes quivering forward, an amphitheatric shell
For his most fortunate audience: her alone.

He plumes himself. He shakes his brassily gold
Wings and rump in a dance, lifting his claws
Stiff-legged under the great bulge of his breast.

And she strolls calmly away, pecking and pausing,
Not watching him, astonished to discover
All these seeds spread just for her in the dirt.

David Wagoner

Report from a Forest Logged by the Weyerhaeuser Company

Three square miles clear-cut.

Now only the facts matter:

The heaps of gray-splintered rubble,
The churned-up duff, the roots, the bulldozed slash,
The silence,

And beyond the ninth hummock

(All of them pitched sideways like wrecked houses)

A creek still running somewhere, bridged and dammed
By cracked branches.

No birdsong. Not one note.

And this is April, a sunlit morning.

Nothing but facts. Wedges like half-moons
Fallen where saws cut over and under them
Bear ninety or more rings.

A trillium gapes at so much light

Among the living: a bent huckleberry,

A patch of salal, a wasp,

And now, making a mistake about me,
Two brown-and-black butterflies landing
For a moment on my boot.

Among the dead: thousands of fir seedlings

A foot high, planted ten feet apart,

Parched brown for lack of the usual free rain,
Two buckshot beer cans, and overhead,
A vulture big as an eagle.

Selective logging, they say, we'll take three miles,

It's good for the bears and deer, they say,

More brush and berries sooner or later,

We're thinking about the future-if you're in it

With us, they say. It's a comfort to say

Like Dividend or Forest Management or Keep Out.

They've managed this to a fare-thee-well.

David Wagoner

Road Kill

The three crows are scuttling back and forth
 between the gutter and the dead possum
 near the yellow-striped center
where commuters are trying hard not to encounter
 anything but the road on the way to work
 this dark winter morning. The crows are hungry,
and their half-finished breakfast is no longer
 worrying about its share of the wealth,
 so it's all theirs. Other birds, if down here
on their own, on their own two feet, would panic instantly
 instantly seeing us rapidly approaching
 in our free-wheeling machinery,
but not these customers who've learned exactly
 how much time and space are being offered
 between the violent edges
of a snatch-and-grab breakfast. None of us
 bothers honking. We've grown accustomed
 to their evasions and skillful getaways,
their unflutterable manners in keeping this highway clear
 of the evidence of our hurry to get somewhere,
 no matter what might be unable
to get out of our road quickly enough. Sure,
 later, in the middles of our day,
 we might slow down
a little or even swerve, but it's rush hour
 for everyone involved in forward progress
 except the possum. The crows know
they have to take chances now
 while there are still chances to take
 and their share of the market is still open.

David Wagoner

That Child

That child was dangerous. That just-born
Newly washed and silent baby
 Wrapped in deerskin and held warm
Against the side of its mother could understand
 The language of birds and animals
 Even when asleep. It knew why Bluejay
Was scolding the bushes, what Hawk was explaining
 To the wind on the cliffside, what Bittern had found out
 While standing alone in marsh grass. It knew
What the screams of Fox and the whistling of Otter
 Were telling the forest. That child knew
 The language of Fire
As it gnawed at sticks like Beaver
 And what Water said all day and all night
 At the creek's mouth. As its small fingers
Closed around Stone, it held what Stone was saying.
 It knew what Bear Mother whispered to herself
 Under the snow. It could not tell
Anyone what it knew. It would laugh
 Or cry out or startle or suddenly stare
 At nothing, but had no way
To repeat what it was hearing, what it wanted most
 Not to remember. It had no way to know
 Why it would fall under a spell
And lie still as if not breathing,
 Having grown afraid
 Of what it could understand. That child would learn
To sit and crawl and stand and begin
 Putting one foot forward and following it
 With the other, would learn to put one word
It could barely remember slightly ahead
 Of the other and then walk and speak
 And finally run and chatter,
And all the Tillamook would know that child
 Had forgotten everything and at last could listen
 Only to people and was safe now.

David Wagoner

The Cherry Tree

Out of the nursery and into the garden
where it rooted and survived its first hard winter,
then a few years of freedom while it blossomed,
put out its first tentative branches, withstood
the insects and the poisons for insects,
developed strange ideas about its height
and suffered the pruning of its quirks and clutters,
its self-indulgent thrusts
and the infighting of stems at cross purposes
year after year. Each April it forgot
why it couldn't do what it had to do,
and always after blossoms, fruit, and leaf-fall,
was shown once more what simply couldn't happen.

Its oldest branches now, the survivors carved
by knife blades, rain, and wind, are sending shoots
straight up, blood red, into the light again.

David Wagoner

The Heart Of The Forest

You pretend to look for wildflowers, but what you're doing
is trying to find traces of where your feet
lost their sense of direction in the woods.

You can name the trees and what's staying alive
under them, but you're afraid this may be a time
when you find the ghost-pale, skinned corpses of beavers

or the green antlers still on the skulls of elk,
or the leaflike, feather-light wings of owls suspended
upside down on spikes among living branches,

so you rehearse remembering the place
where one of your clumsy feet once found itself
secure, where it lifted you and moved you,

where you breathed again and saw, in the near-darkness
of the forest floor, a fir tree fallen and broken
into nurse logs, out of whose rotten, moss-covered sides,

among small spillways of lilies of the valley,
dozens of other selves were growing, rooted
all the way through into another forest

where nothing comes to an end, where nothing is lost,
and lying down with one ear to the ground,
you listened to its heart and yours still beating.

David Wagoner

The Junior High School Band Concert

When our semi-conductor
Raised his baton, we sat there
Gaping at Marche Militaire,
Our mouth-opening number.
It seemed faintly familiar
(We'd rehearsed it all that winter),
But we attacked in such a blur,
No army anywhere
On its stomach or all fours
Could have squeezed through our crossfire.

I played cornet, seventh chair,
Out of seven, my embouchure
A glorified Bronx cheer
Through that three-keyed keyhole stopper
And neighborhood window-slammer
Where mildew fought for air
At every exhausted corner,
My fingering still unsure
After scaling it for a year
Except on the spit-valve lever.

Each straight-faced mother and father
Retested his moral fiber
Against our traps and slurs
And the inadvertent whickers
Paradiddled by our snares,
And when the brass bulled forth
A blare fit to horn over
Jericho two bars sooner
Than Joshua's harsh measures,
They still had the nerve to stare.

By the last lost chord, our director
Looked older and soberer.
No doubt, in his mind's ear
Some band somewhere
In some music of some Sphere
Was striking a note as pure

As the wishes of Franz Schubert,
But meanwhile here we were:
A lesson in everything minor,
Decomposing our first composer.

David Wagoner

The Name

When a man or a woman died, something of theirs,
some token—a beaded belt, a pair of moccasins,
a necklace—would be left beside the path
where a hunting party, returning, would see it
and know that name was dead now.

They would remember how to say it,
but not at the campfire, not in stories,
not whispered in the night to anyone else,
but only to themselves.

Then, after years, when the right one had been born,
they would hold that child above the earth
to the four directions and speak the name again.

David Wagoner

The Shooting Of John Dillinger Outside The Biograph Theater, July 22, 1934

Chicago ran a fever of a hundred and one that groggy Sunday.
A reporter fried an egg on a sidewalk; the air looked shaky.
And a hundred thousand people were in the lake like shirts in
a laundry.

Why was Johnny lonely?

Not because two dozen solid citizens, heat-struck, had keeled
over backward.

Not because those lawful souls had fallen out of their sockets
and melted.

But because the sun went down like a lump in a furnace or a
bull in the Stockyards.

Where was Johnny headed?

Under the Biograph Theater sign that said, "Our Air is
Refrigerated."

Past seventeen FBI men and four policemen who stood in
doorways and sweated.

Johnny sat down in a cold seat to watch Clark Gable get
electrocuted.

Had Johnny been mistreated?

Yes, but Gable told the D.A. he'd rather fry than be shut up
forever.

Two women sat by looked sweet, one looked like
J. Edgar Hoover.

Polly Hamilton made him feel hot, but Anna Sage made him
shiver.

Was Johnny a good lover?

Yes, but he passed out his share of squeezes and pokes like a
jittery masher

While Agent Purvis sneaked up and down the aisle like an
extra usher,

Trying to make sure they wouldn't slip out till the show was
over.

Was Johnny a fourflusher?

No, not if he knew the got it up or got it back.

But he liked to take snapshots of policemen with his own Kodak,
And once in a while he liked to take them with an automatic.

Why was Johnny frantic?

Because he couldn't take a walk or sit down in a movie
Without begin afraid he'd run smack into somebody
Who'd point at his rearranged face and holler, "Johnny!"
Was Johnny ugly?

Yes, because Dr. Wilhelm Loeser had given him a new profile
With a baggy jawline and squint eyes and an erased dimple,
With kangaroo-tendon cheekbones and a gigolo's mustache
that should've been illegal.

Did Johnny love a girl?

Yes, a good-looking, hard-headed Indian named Billie Frechette.
He wanted to marry her and lie down and try to get over it,
But she was locked in jail for giving him first-aid and comfort.

Did Johnny feel hurt?

He felt like breaking a bank or jumping over a railing
Into some panicky teller's cage to shout, "Reach for the ceiling!"
Or like kicking some vice president in the bum checks and
smiling.

What was he really doing?

Going up the aisle with the crowd and into the lobby
With Polly saying, "Would you do what Clark done?" And
Johnny saying, "Maybe."

And Anna saying, "If he'd been smart, he'd of acted like
Bing Crosby."

Did Johnny look flashy?

Yes, his white-on-white shirt and tie were luminous.
His trousers were creased like knives to the tops of his shoes,
And his yellow straw hat came down to his dark glasses.

Was Johnny suspicious?

Yes, and when Agent Purvis signalled with a trembling cigar,
Johnny ducked left and ran out of the theater,
And innocent Polly and squealing Anna were left nowhere.

Was Johnny a fast runner?

No, but he crouched and scurried past a friendly liquor store
Under the coupled arms of double-daters, under awnings,
under stars,

To the curb at the mouth of an alley. He hunched there.

Was Johnny a thinker?

No, but he was thinking more or less of Billie Frechette
Who was lost in prison for longer than he could possibly wait,
And then it was suddenly too hard to think around a bullet.

Did anyone shoot straight?

Yes, but Mrs. Etta Natalsky fell out from under her picture hat.

Theresa Paulus sprawled on the sidewalk, clutching her left foot.
And both of them groaned loud and long under the streetlight.
Did Johnny like that?
No, but he lay down with those strange women, his face
in the alley,
One shoe off, cinders in his mouth, his eyelids heavy.
When they shouted questions at him, he talked back to nobody.
Did Johnny lie easy?
Yes, holding his gun and holding his breath as a last trick,
He waited, but when the Agents came close, his breath
wouldn't work.
Clark Gable walked his last mile; Johnny ran a half a block.
Did he run out of luck?
Yes, before he was cool, they had him spread out on dished-in
marble
In the Cook County Morgue, surrounded by babbling people
With a crime reporter presiding over the head of the table.
Did Johnny have a soul?
Yes, and it was climbing his slippery wind-pipe like a trapped
burglar.
It was beating the inside of his ribcage, hollering, "Let me
out of here!"
Maybe it got out, and maybe it just stayed there.
Was Johnny a money-maker?
Yes, and thousands paid \$25 to see him, mostly women,
And one said, "I wouldn't have come, except he's a moral
lesson,"
And another, "I'm feels like a dead man."
Did Johnny have a brain?
Yes, and it always worked best through the worst of dangers,
Through flat-footed hammerlocks, through guarded doors,
around corners,
But it got taken out in the morgue and sold to some doctors.
Could Johnny take orders?
No, but he stayed in the wicker basket carried by six men
Through the bulging crowd to the hearse and let himself be
locked in,
And he stayed put as it went driving south in a driving rain.
And he didn't get stolen?
No, not even after his old hard-nosed dad refused to sell
The quick-drawing corpse for \$10,000 to somebody in a
carnival.

He figured he'd let Johnny decide how to get to Hell.
Did anyone wish him well?
Yes, half of Indiana camped in the family pasture,
And the minister said, "With luck, he could have been a
minister."
And up the sleeve of his oversized gray suit, Johnny twitched
a finger.
Does anyone remember?
Everyone still some dead ones.It was a new kind of
holiday
With hot and cold drinks and hot and cold planted
him in a cemetery
With three unknown vice presidents, Benjamin Harrison, and
James Whitcomb Riley,
Who never held up anybody.

David Wagoner

The Silence of the Stars

When Laurens van der Post one night

In the Kalahari Desert told the Bushmen
He couldn't hear the stars
Singing, they didn't believe him. They looked at him,
half-smiling. They examined his face
To see whether he was joking
Or deceiving them. Then two of those small men
Who plant nothing, who have almost
Nothing to hunt, who live
On almost nothing, and with no one
But themselves, led him away
From the crackling thorn-scrub fire
And stood with him under the night sky
And listened. One of them whispered,
Do you not hear them now?
And van der Post listened, not wanting
To disbelieve, but had to answer,
No. They walked him slowly
Like a sick man to the small dim
Circle of firelight and told him
They were terribly sorry,
And he felt even sorrier
For himself and blamed his ancestors
For their strange loss of hearing,
Which was his loss now. On some clear night
When nearby houses have turned off their visions,
When the traffic dwindles, when through streets
Are between sirens and the jets overhead
Are between crossings, when the wind
Is hanging fire in the fir trees,
And the long-eared owl in the neighboring grove
Between calls is regarding his own darkness,
I look at the stars again as I first did
To school myself in the names of constellations
And remember my first sense of their terrible distance,
I can still hear what I thought
At the edge of silence where the inside jokes
Of my heartbeat, my arterial traffic,
The C above high C of my inner ear, myself

Tunelessly humming, but now I know what they are:
My fair share of the music of the spheres
And clusters of ripening stars,
Of the songs from the throats of the old gods
Still tending ever tone-deaf creatures
Through their exiles in the desert.

David Wagoner

Their Bodies

To the students of anatomy
at Indiana University

That gaunt old man came first, his hair as white
As your scoured tables. Maybe you'll recollect him
By the scars of steelmill burns on the backs of his hands,
On the nape of his neck, on his arms and sinewy legs,
And her by the enduring innocence
Of her face, as open to all of you in death
As it would have been in life: she would memorize
Your names and ages and pastimes and hometowns
If she could, but she can't now, so remember her.

They believed in doctors, listened to their advice,
And followed it faithfully. You should treat them
One last time as they would have treated you.
They had been kind to others all their lives
And believed in being useful. Remember somewhere
Their son is trying hard to believe you'll learn
As much as possible from them, as he did,
And will do your best to learn politely and truly.

They gave away the gift of those useful bodies
Against his wish. (They had their own ways
Of doing everything, always.) If you're not certain
Which ones are theirs, be gentle to everybody.

David Wagoner

This Is A Wonderful Poem

Come at it carefully, don't trust it, that isn't its right name,
It's wearing stolen rags, it's never been washed, its breath
Would look moss-green if it were really breathing,
It won't get out of the way, it stares at you
Out of eyes burnt gray as the sidewalk,
Its skin is overcast with colorless dirt,
It has no distinguishing marks, no I.D. cards,
It wants something of yours but hasn't decided
Whether to ask for it or just take it,
There are no policemen, no friendly neighbors,
No peacekeeping busybodies to yell for, only this
Thing standing between you and the place you were headed,
You have about thirty seconds to get past it, around it,
Or simply to back away and try to forget it,
It won't take no for an answer: try hitting it first
And you'll learn what's trembling in its torn pocket.
Now, what do you want to do about it?

David Wagoner

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Thoreau and the Snapping Turtle

As his boat glided across a flooded meadow,
He saw beneath him under lily pads,
Brown as dead leaves in mud, a yard-long
Snapping turtle staring up through the water
At him, its shell as jagged as old bark.

He plunged his arm in after it to the shoulder,
Stretching and missing, but groping till he caught it
By the last ridge of its tail. Then he held on,
Hauled it over the gunwale, and flopped it writhing
Into the boat. It began gasping for air

Through a huge gray mouth, then suddenly
Heaved its hunchback upward, slammed the thwart
As quick as a spring trap and, thrusting its neck
Forward a foot at a lunge, snapped its beaked jaws
So violently, he only petted it once,

Then flinched away. And all the way to the landing
It hissed and struck, thumping the seat
Under him hard and loud as a stake-driver.
It was so heavy, he had to drag it home,
All thirty pounds of it, wrong side up by the tail.

His neighbors agreed it walked like an elephant,
lilting this way and that, its head held high,
A scarf of ragged skin at its throat. It would sag
Slowly to rest then, out of its element,
Unable to bear its weight in this new world.

Each time he turned it over, it tried to recover
By catching at the floor with its claws, by straining
The arch of its neck, by springing convulsively,
Tail coiling snakelike. But finally it slumped
On its spiky back like an exhausted dragon.
He said he'd seen a cutoff snapper's head
That would still bite at anything held near it
As if the whole of its life were mechanical,
That a heart cut out of one had gone on beating

By itself like clockwork till the following morning.

And the next week he wrote: It is worth the while
To ask ourselves... Is our life innocent
Enough? Do we live inhumanely, toward man
Or beast, in thought or act? To be successful
And serene we must be at one with the universe.

The least conscious and needless injury
Inflicted on any creature is
To its extent a suicide. What peace-
Or life-can a murderer have?... White maple keys
Have begun to fall and float downstream like wings.

There are myriads of shad-flies fluttering
Over the dark still water under the hill.

David Wagoner

Up Against the Sea

At the foot of the cliff, the sea is taking back
what it left there long ago, and the landowners
have made a barricade of three old cars
between low and high tide and loaded them
with so many river stones, they've been weighed down
below their springs, below their shock absorbers.

The waves are breaking over the side panels,
on blurred teenage graffiti, and barnacles
and tougher limpets have made themselves at home
on mats and cushions, on the salt versions
of vinyl and rust. The sea is welcoming
all of them, as ever, as passengers
at the end of a lover's leap, at the beginning
of a joy ride down an old lover's lane again.

David Wagoner

Wallace Stevens On His Way To Work

He would leave early and walk slowly
 As if balancing books
On the way to school, already expecting
To be tardy once again and heavy
With numbers, the unfashionably rounded
Toes of his shoes invisible beyond
The slope of his corporation. He would pause
At his favorite fundamentally sound
Park bench, which had been the birthplace
Of paeans and ruminations on other mornings,
 And would turn his back to it, having gauged the distance
 Between his knees and the edge of the hardwood
Almost invariably unoccupied
At this enlightened hour by the bums of nighttime
(For whom the owlish eye of the moon
Had been closed by daylight) , and would give himself wholly over
Backwards and trustingly downwards
And be well seated there. He would remove
From his sinister jacket pocket a postcard
And touch it and retouch it with the point
 Of the fountain he produced at his fingertips
And fill it with his never-before-uttered
 Runes and obligatos and pellucidly cryptic
 Duets from private pageants, from broken ends
Of fandangos with the amoeba chaos chaos
Couchant and rampant. Then he would rise
 With an effort as heartfelt as a decision
To get out of bed on Sunday and carefully
 Relocate his center of gravity
 Above and beyond an imaginary axis
Between his feet and carry the good news
 Along the path and the sidewalk, well on his way
 To readjusting the business of the earth.

David Wagoner