
A Poet's Evening: Joseph Caldwell

JOSEPH W. CALDWELL

Buffalo Creek

Trucks rumble up and down the hollow
spilling dust which coats crippled sassafras leaves
then sifts through screens like flour.
When it rains the dust
changes to a fine gray dough,
sticking to shoes
leaving tracks across the porch.
The Company says it has a permit-
operates within the law.
Trucks just keep coming on
coal in their open wombs
going past the hill.
The afternoon sun shines straight
on a grime plated yellow bicycle
leaning against the post
of the front porch
where an empty glider sits
under scaling white ceiling paint.
At dusk, a firefly
smothers in the dust covered grass.

Out-Migration

**Rust streaks on the tin roof
like tree rings
tell this farmhouse's age.
Swing chains chime
behind morning glory on the porch.
Sun slants through a glassless
window on hay bales
stacked in the dining room.
When farmers first settled here,
cleared bottom land
gave all they needed.
Now young men pull away in pickups,
seeking jobs in sprawling Carolina towns,
and a curtain of dust
trailing behind
settles on sumac leaves.**

Cabin Creek, Near Ohley

All along the winding creek
one row of clapboard houses
hugs the hollow sides.
Tracks hold the level land,
rusted rails curving through pocked hills.
Mine drainage hemorrhages
from ruptured veins
of worked out tombs
turning rocks along the creek purple.
A cedar waxwing sits
on a broken tavern sign.
Redbuds dominate this quiet day,
fuchsia branches
dogwood,
reclaiming sovereignty.

School Boy on Harts Creek

The bus meanders through this tarpaper county
where frost covers the bottoms
like a linen tablecloth.
A boy, wearing flannel lined jeans,
stands on the frozen mud.
Cold seeps up sleeves frayed
by his older brother's hands.
He will draw numbers
on steamed windows
and through the shapes
he will look at sad houses,
each interior about the same,
ungarnished walls,
places where in half-light bent men pause
and light cigarettes.
These things he accepts, and more:
Frozen pipes, his mother working nights at the truck stop,
and the waiting that is more than patience,
and winter.

Kanawha Trail

**November's morning sun uncovers
frost covered spider webs
criss crossing the trail.
A purple sweet gum angles
over bruised mushrooms
before fading
to a surface grave.
Hemlock roots grasp
cantilevered rocks.
Shadows interlock trees
becoming undone
and I trudge along
oblivious to myself.**

Paint Creek

**Black plastic bags
spill from open dumps
into Paint Creek
and float past hulks of cars.
Near the far bank,
that edges steep hills
white dogwoods dot the air
and red maple leaves become the first
to give themselves to spring.
At places in the rushing stream,
whitecaps flash past wild phlox,
and near a sealed mine shaft
where a Tree of Heaven flourishes,
purple blossoms point straight up
to camouflage slashes left
on stripped ridges.
Old scars fading
behind shimmering trees,
I watch time
struggle to resurrect
these mauled mountains.**

Firewatch
Kate's Mountain

Ridges unfold, stepping away
into plateaus
wrinkled by ancient streams.
Tin barn roofs
shine like broken mirrors
scattered across the valley.
Then winds advance,
clouds compress
into surging waves
breaking over the crest.
Listening to steady rain,
I make plans:

Acid Rain

**Epitaphs fade
on sandstone markers
poking the grounds
below cobwebs
on rusted cedars.
A fine mist erases time.**

Contact

**Dawn at the high meadow farm
finds the sun supported by wild flowers
erect before the first morning breeze.
Dew perspires on split-rail posts.
Sheep walk around limestone outcroppings
to drink at the blue sulphur spring.
The meadow undulates like a wave,
sinkhole troughs surrounded by
swells of pink clover.
I am nearer when I am here.**

Morning Meditation

**A towboat blows its horn
awakening me after dawn.
The acappello tone
vibrates through
oaks on river ridges.
The resonance is so pure
moving around the hills
that I don't complain.
Thus becomes my morning meditation.**

**St. Joseph's Hill
Abbey of Gethsemane**

An oak crowns the meadow's crest
and the November sky
outlines each arthritic limb.
I stand behind the concrete cross
and watch a flock of swallows
guided by an unseen force
suddenly change direction.
A steady wind lifts
the toil of my undone tasks.
Tonight stars will rest
on the cross's arms,
flickering candles
that radiate the spirit
of the truth that lasts.

Night Walk

**Reflections of one thousand moons
shine off puddles
all along the road.
All these moons
belong
to the one moon,
lighting the way.
When viewed
in their oneness
I see the world in a puddle.**

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Point Mountain

On Point Mountain's crest
stars turn snow
into 10,000 prisms.

Below, serpentine valleys,
sheltered from radio signals
carrying disasters.

In the sterile cold
distanced from events,
I see all I need to know.

South Side Bridge

**Bridge girder splits moon,
snow sprinkled on coal mounds,
lamp light falshes off barge waves,**

**Years goals unmet,
new plans indistinct
the present is enough.
But when the earth leans
toward the sun,
apple blossoms cover river walk.**

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"Tell Me Your Maiden Name"

—Otterbien Cemetery, Jackson County

Some reverently placed roses in vases.
One woman worked alone, trimming peony
With a delicate touch
Which seemed to be a form of prayer.

As I approached she turned
With a look of quiet desperation
Something more than grief.

After pausing, she finally spoke
"All the markers look the same,
I can't remember who I came to see."
Crowded clouds merged into green hills.

Keeney Mountain

**Mountains before and after.
Effervescent stars
suggest meteor showers.
A devout fox patrols.**

**Winter has begun
early dark, vast stillness.
No trace of sweet smells,
cattails embedded in ice.**

**Sterile limbs drop snow
onto fluttering beech leaves
offering sacraments
to paralyzed tree rings.**

**Yet, I do not experience
unyielding sadness.
I stare at chalked fields
and create distinctions.**

Harmony Creek—April

**Rushing water polishes
my mind's abstractions.
No need to hesitate.**

**Green begins to dominate
unlocking fuchsia buds,
winter's indifference past.**

**Trilliums below limestone cliffs
turn pink as they age,
hundreds at a time.**

**If only momentarily,
I'm allowed to see
the intensity of this spring.**

**I listen to the flow,
lulled into the present,
and separate the meaning of things.**

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July 15

**It is the 15th of July.
Next to the silent road,
monarchs smell milkweed.
Wind whispers through pear trees.**

**Eleven mountains come into focus.
Uncertainty fuses
into erratic shadows
moving from ridge to ridge.**

**Inner clarity appears
as thoughts expire.
Bluebird on mockorgange
prepares for flight.**

**I face the seductive landscape.
Valleys below look like**

**Chinese paintings marked with calligraphy.
I comprehend the land
and find my footing for today.**

Acknowledgments

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Caldwell practices with the firm Caldwell & Riffie. The firm has two managing partners and two associates. The firm is located at 3818 MacCorkle Avenue in Charleston. It is my understanding that Caldwell is engaged, primarily, in bankruptcy practice.