This is to certify that the

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WATERSHED

presented by

WILLIAM DAVID BARILLAS

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Douglas Lawler
Major professor

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WATERSHED

By

William David Barillas

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ABSTRACT

WATERSHED

By

William David Barillas

This thesis project collection of original poetry explores themes of land, lore, language, and life in places near and far, with particular concern for experience in the Michigan region. The author makes use of prose/poetry collage and of tale/parable in margin-justified "prose" form. The collection begins with a poem entitled "Manitou" which introduces the central theme of the poems that follow: what it means to be a native of a place. Prose fragments adapted from histories of the author's locale of origin (near where the Flint River, Pewanagosibi, in the Ojibwa, turns north at Flushing) are interspersed among the poems, echoing their themes and providing continuity. A personal essay concludes the thesis, stating the author's objectives as a poet of place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The historical prose fragments which bridge sections of this thesis were adapted from various nineteenth-century histories of the area of Michigan where I grew up, including *The History of Saginaw County, Michigan* (Chapman & Co., 1881), *The History of Genesee County, Michigan* by Franklin Ellis (Lippincott, 1879), *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, and archival material included in *Flushing Sesquicentennial History* (Flushing Area Historical Society, 1987). The fragments woven into the poem "This Name" were adapted from *Guatemala: A Historical Survey* by Amy Elizabeth Jensen (Exposition Press, 1955).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

wa·ter·shed *n* 1 : a summit or boundary line separating the drainage districts of two streams or coasts : WATER PARTING : DIVIDE 2 : a region or area bounded peripherally by a water parting and draining ultimately to a particular watercourse or body of water 3 : a crucial dividing point or line (as in time)

--Adapted from *Webster's Dictionary*

MANITOU

Softly,
under pines that reforestation planted
chokingly close,
I pause,
stopping to rest on rises
only delving could discern
as burial mounds
(sacred, peacepiped)
from mere earth plowed
(the work of a bulldozer
and a day's pay).

The aborigines sought Manitou
with its feral joys
and Good Medicine.
The pioneers sought Manifest Destiny
armed with a work ethic
that feared the wild.

My back to the earth, my eyes to the heavens,
the sky's blue reminds me of birds.
The cry of a hawk reminds me
that birds are not symbolic.
Ghosts say that birds have changed.
Gulls were not always seen so far inland.
Swans did not always mimic pigeons.

When Indian Summer has glowed its end,
ducks still feed without handout.
When the river rushes winter ice,
a flock will form a row.
Striping a fish swum channel,
twenty feed as ducks do -
ducking down, ducktail up,
billing fish that cannot wish for else.

The first, at front, has first chance,
but soon relinquishes.
Turning, he drifts to the line's end,
giving another room at the top,
as a solitary mallard watches all
from farther midstream.

I am cold.
I rise to leave.
The needles could blanket me,
but I am not a native

yet.

LOVE POEM/LAND POEM

Somewhere in Michigan

What?

This.

Where?

Here.

Why?

Because.

Who?

Us.

WINDROWING:
SOUTHERN MICHIGAN COUNTIES C. 1840

The oaks were chopped
halfway through, until began
only the slightest trembling
of their fall. Down a line
a quarter mile or more
they were cut. Then at one end
a tree was chosen
that when felled
would crash into the next
that would crash into the next
and so on for a quarter mile:
"a sight, a noise of paralyzing grandeur
that none will ever see or hear again."
This was the *drive*.
After the cattle and the deer
had browsed the foliage
after a season or a year to dry
boys and men would touch flame
to the tinder below the great trunks
and the air would be sucked in
the night illuminated for miles around
as centuries of broadleaf life
were sacrificed for the clearing.

GILLIAN OF

Gillian of the pink shirt I gave her
Gillian of sandalwood and patchouli
Gillian of cream lace curtains draped on nails
Gillian of bonsai trees and borzoi dogs
Gillian of glide between line dried sheets, mackinaw blanket warmth
Gillian of calloused feet
Gillian of angelic hands
Gillian of line drawn nudes riding horses
Gillian of fresh trout, tomatoes with vinagrette
Gillian of cosmos flowers, ferny strivers concealing the cannabis
Gillian of the lawyer's farmhouse where I met her at sixteen
Gillian of "swim in the nude, we won't watch, it's liberating"
Gillian khakiclad, pulling up in her jeep as if reining in a horse
Gillian of man's world, forsythia bloom in the parking lot
Gillian of three years later, recognize me through the restaurant window,
call me, embrace me in the street before I know who it is
Gillian of phone numbers exchanged
Gillian of sixteen years beyond my age
Gillian who was advised in 1970 to buy gold but bought clothing instead
Gillian of "you sleep on the sofa"
Gillian of second night, poem of which I shall not tell here
Gillian of name change, learned only from an old envelope
Gillian of black cat birthing six kittens Easter morning
Gillian of rainy day, let's go to bed
Gillian of sunny day, let's go to bed
Gillian of "How happy can one perfect sunflower
make one imperfect old lady?"
Gillian of lake eyes
Gillian of agates gathered on the Superior shore
Gillian of camping in the rain, shoo skunk with hot coals,
absentminded tomato soup in the coffee instead of powdered cocoa
Gillian of blistered feet: "*you* run down the dune to epiphany"
Gillian of cheerleader photograph, bare legged, wry schoolgirl grin
I wish I'd been there to kiss

Gillian of paw paw fruit, puffballs, purple flaming aster in the woods
Gillian of 1963 Volvo, Pee Wee Herman doll strapped in up front
Gillian of nile table, snakegrass bouquet, ivory, pewter, brass
Gillian of the second petoskey stone bolo tie
in the shape of the Lower Peninsula
Gillian of reluctant kiss and handholding in public
Gillian of the pink shirt I gave her
Gillian of sandalwood
Gillian of patchouli
Gillian to whom I devote my tongue in this utterance of love

The natives we saw here
    Were forced from their plain
By a curse which they say
    Here yet does remain

We now proceed down the Flint River until we come to the high bluff one mile above the Village of Flushing, on the Bailey farm. I first saw the mounds at that point opened in 1833 or 1834. At that time the farm was one dense forest. I think there were about twenty mounds, great and small, some forty feet or more in diameter and six feet high, with large pine trees growing on the top of them. We found upon opening the largest one that it was still full of human bones. The skeletons did not appear to be arranged in any order, but had been thrown promiscuously together before they were covered. This left hardly a doubt that they had been slain in some battle. The bones were too much decomposed to find any marks of violence upon them, but subsequent inquiries have confirmed my belief that a once populous tribe of the Saginaw Valley was exterminated by another group of people.

BLUEJAY FEATHERS FOR MEDICINE BAG

Found the brightest blue/black/white
stabbed into moss on the bank
of the River Raisin's tributary Saline
east side of a maple stump
the scene of the struggle
enough feathers for a wing
to gather from the drying moist
of bird body torn
on last year's leaves
this year's periwinkle

(on the stump, a single tuft
of brown and white striped owl down)

CAMP BIRKETT
Pinckney, Michigan

On the east side
of a glacial drop lake
silvering the Huron flow
children run
and chance to learn
the ways of leaf and land.

Elbows back
to send the arrow
through colors into straw.

Splashs in the shallows:
this amazing substance water.

Turtles in the pit.
Snapper by the tail
as the kids scatter screaming.

The bounce of a rubber ball
in this place
of juniper and pine,
hornbeam, sycamore,
hickory and oak.

May asphalt never encroach
upon this living place.

IN SEARCH OF THE GIPPER'S GRAVE

"Rock, when the team is up against it, when things are going wrong and the breaks are beating the boys--tell them to go in there with all they've got and win just one for the Gipper."

--Attributed to Notre Dame football star George Gipp, on his deathbed, Christmas 1920, by coach Knute Rockne.

Driving up the Keeweenaw spinal column
In copper country, up 41 past Houghton
We're headed to Calumet, which means "peacepipe"
Where the 1913 copper strike ended at Christmas:
Someone entered Italian Hall
Climbed the stairs to the ballroom
Yelled "Fire!"

We search for the Hall. An oldtimer says
"Ya, dey knocked it down, den."
Standing on the vacant lot
I talk with the former police chief
About the Jacobsville Sandstone
And how his generation moved away
Coming back now to die
In their hometown.
Driving more, a roadsign says
"Welcome to Laurium, Michigan"
And I know that name, something or someone
About it; not the panicked crowd
Of Italian children trampling and suffocating
Or the photographs in the local laundromat
Of the mass funeral of tiny coffins
Or Calumet's rococco opera house
For the mining company society wives
But a person
Whose name occurs to me

Even before I can read the inscription
On the roadside monument.
I say:

"The Gipper! George Gipp!
Win one for the Gipper; this is his town.
We have got to find his grave!"

Driving, searching,
Taking directions from people
In bakeries, at the post office,
By a gas station on a corner;
Scenes from the Ronald Reagan movie occur to me:
I've never watched it all the way through.
Somehow I knew before books confirmed
That Gipp was a drinking, gambling legend
Not a clean cut, processed smiler.
He dropkicked with his hands to his side
Not held up in a Hollywood pose.

The graveyard: always follow
The first set of directions you hear:
Drive farther than you think.
A longhaired boy on a riding mower,
Wearing a Twins cap, says "Look in lot twenty."

The copper money went to Boston
And the mines closed up forever.
Seventy died that Christmas in 1913.
Reagan's movie was a hit
Though the Gipper's last request
Was more likely a bet on some horse.
The stone reads:

GEORGE GIPP
1895-1920

FORD LAKE

A Poem in Prepositions

In Milan, Michigan, 1938
at the Huron Valley prison
under the Emergency Bank Robbery Act
the last
execution
in Michigan
took place

Here,
Henry Ford
created an artificial lake
by damming the Saline River
built
an electric plant
powered by the water
flowing under the bridge
over the dam
into and through the generators
which no longer light the homes
of Milan, where all--

the power plant (now the library)
dam and bridge
evoke lost architectural ideals--
1930's Art Deco
--linear concrete and chrome,
cool curving steel bars
still green, now diminished
by chain link,
the bridge's cast steel supports
since painted over
with now peeling white

"The bridge knows it's green"

Speech of Ogemawkeketo to Lewis Cass, Treaty of Saginaw, 1919

You do not know our wishes. Our people wonder what has brought you so far from your homes. Your young men have invited us to come and light the council fire. We are here to smoke the pipe of peace, but not to sell our lands. Your people trespass upon our hunting grounds. You flock to our shores. Our waters grow warm; our land melts like a cake of ice. Our possessions grow smaller and smaller; the warm wave of the white man rolls in upon us and melts us away. Our women reproach us. Our children want homes. Shall we sell from under them the spot where they spread their blankets? We have not called you here. We smoke with you the pipe of peace.

THE GLACIER

"I think this cumbered continent envies its cliff then...."

--Robinson Jeffers, "November Surf"

A great sheet of ice
four miles thick
comes roaring, crashing
down onto the lakeland from the north
(at the rate of about an inch a day)
and it dips into Superior
to buck up on the U.P.
having scoured out the asbestoform fibers
on the floor of the western arm
of the greatest lake
tossing ore boats onto M-28
burying all the poachers
and inbred drivers of all-terrain vehicles
not even pausing at the Straits
but crushing the bridge
to bounce it to Ohio
with the world's longest porch
on Grand (Turtle Island) Hotel
and south, the sacred pines of Hartwick
(who know their time will return)
grinding the windshields of Winnebagos
into a fine sandy grit
knocking down pizza franchises like dominoes
not bothering to check in with security
at Dow Chemical at Midland
and at Ludington to the west
but plowing them under
with the dredging projects and condos
shopping malls and survey system
Theodore Roethke's grave at Oakwood Cemetary, Saginaw
General George Armstrong Custer statue at Monroe
and everyone who listens to the scientists

up in the Renaissance Center in Detroit
with their lasers pointed north
who are unable to stop the ice
which buries them, notepads, lasers and all
on its way to Ohio.

THE GREAT FIRE OF 1881

Michigan's Thumb Country

> "Ah Theodore Roethke...what would *you* have made
> of the greenhouse effect?"

Slashings left by the loggers
and by farmers clearing land
covered thousands of acres--
a tangled welter of pine tops, limbs, and stumps
on which a man from Port Huron had walked for a mile,
leaping from trunk to trunk, not once touching the ground.

That summer of drought, the Thumb country was
"as dry as a man after eating salt mackeral."
Streams stopped running. Swamps dried down to clay.
Old timers remembered the heat of ten summers before,
and when a white haze, the scent of burning popple,
descended from the west, and the sun burned bright red,
they muttered that these were the signs
that had preceded the fires of seventy-one.

Then came the winds--of a howling force
to tear roofs from houses,
to lift and violently toss large men,
to splinter trees and roll boulders like pebbles.
Darkness fell at noon, and when the sky rained burning pitch,
farmers fought to extinguish spot fires
with shovels and brooms. Then they ran:
gathering their children and belongings
in buggies and carts, racing the flames
that burned handles off ploughs,
that leaped into arches, sparing what was leaped
and destroying what was struck.
Potatoes roasted in the ground. Fish cooked in the streams.
Peach trees burst into blossom, and birds flew over Lake Huron,
drowning for lack of a perch.

People near the coast waded into the lake,
having to dive below the lye poisoned surface
for drinking water. People inland jumped into wells,
or wrapped themselves in wet rugs
against the walls of flame and smoke.
Some ran to clearings--as did bears, deer, and other mammals.

And some...many...burned, or suffocated
in the fields, in the woods, in the streams,
in their homes. When relief came to bury the dead,
to feed and clothe the survivors,
some saw that now the land was truly cleared,
that what isolated fires and timber cruising could not,
this inferno had done: leveled the ground
so that streams could be straightened,
so that the Indians left, canoeing south to the reservation,
so that the timber was ash, and the ash was scattered
for the bigger farms and smaller woods yet to come.

The black-capped chickadee, the Parus atricapillus *of the Europeans, nests in the woods during fine weather, and comes into the city or village to spend the winter. It thankfully receives all the crumbs which fall from the tables of the people.*

BIRD IS NOT BIRD

(Track One, in rhythm to Track Two--
Track Three, cardinal, chickadee, nuthatch,
and thrush songs, crow caws, kestrel cries,
and mourning dove cooing, optional)

Bird is not bird
is not bird is
not bird is not
bird is not bird
is not bird is
not bird is not
bird is not bird
is not bird is
not bird is not
bird is not bird
is not bird is
not bird is not
bird is not bird
is not bird is
not bird is not
bird is not bird
is not bird is
not bird is not
bird...

BIRD IS NOT BIRD

East Lansing, Michigan

Bird is not bird
is a crow
is a thrush
is a nuthatch or crow
that flies through these dreams
that perches in trees
a dinosaur with wings
that didn't get extinct
got smart, got feathered
flocked all together
like kingfisher, dove
kestrel above in the trees
in the lot with the realty sign
where crows caw caw black
being bird
being crow

THE LOT WITH THE REALTY SIGN

East Lansing, Michigan

Two
black squirrels
gambol like lemurs
in the overhead.
I crouch, observing a mallard
dabble for something
in the water
of this swale.
Grackles bathe, and over
the distant humming of a bandsaw
a racket of jays
resounds.
I stop counting species
to watch a male cardinal,
preening red,
fend off another suitor for his mate.
Cars hiss on the mainroad
and I resolve
to remove the strands
of plastic survey tape
that festoon the trunks of trees
of this remnant wetland

within city limits.

SONG OF MICHIGAN

Longfellow was either deluded,
stupid, or the first of the foresters.
If Hiawatha was other than a fool's noble savage,
he would have made a Big Canoe and paddled away--
away from the land lost to a pillage
that stripped the big pines for a midwestern floor.
They left two at Hartwick to boast evermore
of how a few men with axes, saws, and narrow gauge rail
laid low the mitten's mighty wood
where I'd have dreamed of the white pine's rule.

The Halfway House on the stage route between Flint and Flushing was built on the north bank of the river about 1850. It was busiest under its third owner, John Ponsford. Ponsford, a big man who was liked by all, killed the last big bear to be seen in this area. One night a party was going on and about midnight a storm came up with crashes of lightning and roaring thunder. It was too dangerous to go outside and start home, so the merrymakers kept dancing. In the middle of the storm, when both the elements and the music quieted a bit, the group heard the squealing of a pig which was evidently in great distress. Ponsford and some men ran out onto the porch, and during a flash of lightning saw a huge black bear standing up on its feet and holding a good sized pig. Ponsford grabbed his gun, quickly loaded it, and went out to rescue the pig. At the next big flash of lightning he fired. Then it sounded like the place had been struck by a cyclone and the pigpen and the fences were being demolished. When things quieted down a bit, one brave fellow with a lantern discovered that Ponsford had, with one shot, killed both the bear and the pig--the very pig that he had hoped to fatten for the next winter's pork. This called for a celebration. For the next several days the guests of the Halfway House enjoyed roast bear, roast pork, and a generous helping of the liquids of the day.

CHILDHOOD

Flushing, Michigan

The other boys would net the fish
(The little fish that browse the shore)
And cast them on the drowning beach
To flap and gasp and nevermore
To swim the circuit of the pond.
Deferred by size and age I'd wait
For them to leave so I could toss
The little fish back to the pond
To breathe and swim therein.

YOUTH

Dayton Blvd., Flint, Michigan

I remember in the dark
In the back seat of the Ford
Winter coming on
My father driving home
I had spent another day
At play and being young
Until time to drive away
From my Grandmother's house
Past the glass and window shop
Approaching the main road curve
We slow and come to stop
The light turns green, we move

THE DANCING DUCK

For Kira

I am just a dancing duck
A dancing duck am I.

Some other ducks,
They like to flap
And others like to fly.
But I am just a dancing duck
A dancing duck am I.

I like to swim
And dive about
In rivers, lake, and sky.
But most of all I love to dance
A dancing duck am I.

I eat mussels, cress, and fish
(I'm known for minnow pie).
And after lunch
Why, then I dance
A dancing duck am I.

And if you're walking on the beach
And find duck prints on the sand
And if those prints make patterns
Like only waltzing can
Watusi, twist, or rhumba,
I tell you this is why:
I the dancing duck was there
A dancing duck am I.

A dancing duck, a dancing duck
A dancing duck am I.

Their trip, in October 1835, to Flushing, occupied three weeks time, the journey being made by canal to Buffalo, thence to Detroit by boat. The third day, they reached Thomas Irish's tavern in Grand Blanc. Upon arriving there, Mr. Evans drank a great quantity of cider, and very serious results very nearly followed, he becoming for a time like one dead. His daughter became alarmed, and the presence of a crowd of roughs and horse thieves, who deliberately proceeded to strip her father and hunt for his valuables, tended to heighten her anxiety, she in the meantime being scoffed and jeered at by them. At length the landlord appeared and stayed proceedings.

HEARTWOOD

Wayne's getting on in years and his relatives want to send him to a home. He retired nine years ago from his job at the tool and die and went home with a gold watch that a nephew will inherit, forget in his trousers, and run through the washer. Wayne's little house in this little town was heated with coal until 1959 when Wayne bought a gas furnace from the hardware store. He turned the old coal bin into another storage room for his mason jars filled with nuts, screws, and nails. Wayne has his tools neatly arranged on the wall. Plugs in the pegboard hold his hammers on the right, his wrenches on the left, and his screwdrivers in the middle, according to size. Wayne can fix anything, even though he often buttons his flannel shirts the wrong way, and doesn't discover the extra hole for hours. He keeps the plumbing working in his house, and the wiring, and the toaster, and the lamps. Since his mother died, he has dusted the antique furniture every week, and has tried to keep the house picked up. He doesn't go out much. His Nash in the garage hasn't been driven in years. His relatives bring him groceries. His relatives drive him to the hardware store when he needs to go.

Wayne owns three acres. The back two are wooded with about forty blue spruces, all at least thirty feet tall. He doesn't like that they were planted in rows, but they make him happy. Songbirds come in the spring and Wayne sits out back, listening and watching. He shoots at the starlings with his pellet rifle, but he puts out nesting material for the others, and three kinds of feed. In summer he trims the bottoms of the trees and patches any holes with tree cement. He has only cut down two in thirty years--one spruce whose heartwood was diseased, and a little one that never grew and took light

from two healthier, bigger trees. His spruces are his pride and joy.

Today his relatives are coming--his nephew Jerry and Jerry's wife Marcella. When Wayne's other relatives want something done, like getting Wayne to spend less on birdseed, they ask Jerry and Marcella to pay Wayne a visit. Jerry is Wayne's next of kin and stands to inherit what little Wayne has. He probably will because Wayne likes him--Jerry has his own business, a general store in the little town *he* lives in. So generally, Wayne listens to what Jerry has to say. Today, Jerry has to say that some of Wayne's spruces have to go. Wayne doesn't really understand Jerry's explanation about the neighbors' drain field, but he nods his head in silence, listening to Jerry. After a fidgeting moment, he asks "How many?" Jerry replies "Oh, not too many. Maybe five or six in the back." Wayne swallows, looks at the floor, and says "OK."

Jerry smiles and walks out the front door to his car. Marcella makes small talk with Wayne as she looks at the silver in the china cabinet. She moves a small plate on the top shelf over to the left a few inches. Five minutes later an angry buzzing sound kicks up out back. After ten minutes of this high pitched buzz and rip, Wayne begins to nervously straighten his collar. Marcella notices this, and pats him on the shoulder, saying "I'll go out back and see how it's coming."

She walks out the back door. Wayne sits with his hands clasped between his knees. Marcella soon returns, saying "He's done. He's just dragging the logs closer together." When Jerry finally enters, sweaty and very piny smelling, he laughs and washes his hands in the sink, saying "Well, Wayne, I'll come back next weekend and cut you a nice stack of firewood for the winter." Wayne slowly smiles, and says "Thanks Jerry," as he stands up to walk to the back window.

He stares out back for a moment. When Jerry and Marcella leave, he sees them to the door. He resets the plate in the china cabinet where his mother put it. He looks out the back window again then returns to his chair to sit. He says to himself aloud "I don't think I'll go out today."

CANCER'S CURE

Somewhere once a cloistered monk
Drew his cloak in the cold of stone
Shut his door of oak and walked
To a room of scrolls and feather pens
Where his brethren wrote the Truth against
The pagan lies they had spared the flame
Saving, unwit, the words of Greece

Somewhere else an armored man
Climbed the temple pyramid
And laughed to burn as Devil's work
The codex of the Mayan mind
Making ash that day of cancer's cure

I PRONOUNCE YOU

For the last time:
his name is
Garcia Lorca
not just *Lorca*
but
Federico Garcia Lorca
perhaps even lisping his surname
as would the Catalonians:
Garthia
just as my name
isn't Bar *ill* as
but Bar *e* as
with silent Spanish L's
so maybe I should spell it
phonetically
so all you well meaning anglos
and anglicized spics
and name dropping poets
will get it right:
William Bareas

nah

THIS NAME

Barillas

signifying
silver bars
(originally a plural, diminuative noun)
was a title
given by the Spanish Crown to designate
a family of the Basque region
as members of the lesser nobility
(who may have spelled it with a V)
one of whose descendents somehow found himself
in Guatemala
the founder of a landed family
(with a town by their name)
one member of which

one Manuel Lisandro Barillas
(my great-great Grandfather)

was elected President in 1885.

At first Barillas was a kind and generous man, but he was not able to control the country, which was in a troubled state. He immediately withdrew the decree of the federation, and he made peace with the other republics.

I have heard many inventive
mispronounciations of my name: this doesn't anger me.
In fact, I am amused,
unless the speaker intended....
But I can't blame others,
I who speak no Spanish myself
except for my name
and to order breakfast: "jugo de naranja, por favor...."

Barillas was elected and served for one term, but he was defeated for re-election. Angered by his defeat, he went to Chiapas, on the Guatemalan border, where he had a force of twenty-five men heavily armed.

I visited Guatemala one summer this decade.
What I most remember,
other than that my relatives drank instant coffee,
was leaving flowers at the family tomb
as jets buzzed the National Palace.
We learned later that a coup d'etat had taken place.

To this group, he hoped to add others who were dissatisfied with the government of Guatemala.

Imagine this:
A Guatemalan who speaks no Spanish
A Michiganian named

Barillas had given up everything he had, and his daughter had even sacrificed her diamonds to purchase guns and ammunition for his campaign.

My older brother is bilingual.
I asked my father why not me as well.
"It's the mother who teaches
the children how to speak,"
he said
saying more about himself, me, and the family
than about linguistics.

Barillas was killed in Mexico City on April 7, 1907 at the age of sixty-seven. He was riding on a streetcar when a youth of seventeen climbed aboard and stabbed him twice in the neck, severing the jugular vein. His assassin, it was learned, had come to Mexico for the particular purpose of killing him.

Silent Spanish L's.
Slender silver bars
on the field of the family crest.

FATHER

Perhaps at his age I too will stop for yellow lights.

THIS CAT

curls beside me on the sofa. The black and white television is tuned to a program about a leopard family in Africa. Once, this cat noticed the shape of a bobcat in a show about Canada, its dark feline form racing across a blank of snow on the screen, in pursuit of a rabbit. This cat pressed his nose to the screen, and was startled when the bobcat pounced, successfully. Some disbelieve this story. No matter. I speak this cat's name. He answers, and I watch the mother leopard stalk a deer.

John Reed of Flushing had a fiery temper which was not always under control. On one occasion he became angry with his cow and drove her away into the woods to the north, kicking her at every step, until finally both were tired out. He had tried to turn her back at first, but she was obstinate, and that roused his ire. His foot came up at the same time with his ire, and when at last he stopped to rest, he found himself in a strange neighborhood, lost in the forest. He finally pulled off one of his boots, milked the cow into it, drank the milk, and lay down on a log, where he was found the next day by the neighbors, who had instituted a search for him. He had fought mosquitoes all night and looked somewhat the worse for wear.

PROJECT POEMS

1. Find a posthole shovel
and dig a hole two feet deep.
Dig it in soft dirt or wet sand in the woods,
so when you've dug an identical second next to it,
you'll step in up to your knees.
Wiggle your feet around so you can stand flat.
Stand there for days. Don't sing.
If you get hungry, eat snakes
or other small animals that happen by.
Never hold your breath.

2. Pick a photo of yourself.
Not one of your favorites.
Not a recent one either.
Pick one that's at least three years old.
Use your scissors to cut yourself out.
You only want your head, maybe with your chest
down to the third button.
Color black over your eyes with a permanent marker,
like sunglasses.
(You don't want to be easily identified).
Take your photo to an open field, maybe a cemetary.
Climb a tall tree. A pine is best for this.
Pin the photo at the very top, onto the trunk.
Face it so it can see a long way.
Climb down and never go back up.
If you have to because you get too curious,
wait at least one year.

3. Stack shoes on top of the basement stairs.
When you are sure that someone is in the other room,
push the shoes so that they fall noisily down the steps.

At the same time, yell loudly and sound surprised.
Run down to the foot of the stairs
and lay on top of the shoes.
When the person who was in the other room
comes running down,
play dead until they're kneeling over you saying
"Are you all right?"

4. Assume an ideology.
Structure your thinking accordingly.
Squint your eyes a lot.
Don't accept any contradictory arguments.
Compile vast archives of footnotes.
Mail yourself letters. Change your name.

AUNT ROSE (A Poem For My Former Landlady)

Aunt Rose, you're breathing your life away
and your nieces don't want your canned food from the attic.
I see you on your way to Lucky Drugs.
I'm just out of a bookstore, out from looking
at Michigan books. It's cold out, Aunt Rose,
October in Ann Arbor. Cold out, but not as cold
as last winter, when you made my sister wait outside
on the step, the bitterest night of the year.
Aunt Rose, I'll never see one of your little notes
on the stairway again.
Aunt Rose, I took the best Life magazines
from the stacks in the basement.
I know you knew because you placed milk cartons on them,
just so. Aunt Rose, I should have known $50 a month
was too good to be true.
No lock on my door, a skeleton key for the front,
and all your shades drawn tight.
Aunt Rose, sunlight is good for you.
At least you could have left my draperies alone.
And I don't care if you have to clip the obituaries.
Old newspapers are a fire hazard.
Aunt Rose, I know something of your story.
That was your parents' house.
I found an ancient, unopened package
of Gillette Blueblades in the medicine cabinet.
Aunt Rose, I remember your musty dusty carpet
and your knickknacks. Even your new wallpaper looked old.
Aunt Rose, you're not poor. Even with a house and money
you muster only a sort of smile.
Aunt Rose, the demonstrations stopped years ago.
The campus is pretty quiet these days.
Aunt Rose, I can still hear the theme music
to "Jeopardy" beneath my floor.
When the Tigers won the World Series, and some people
got too crazy in Detroit, you said

"It's too bad a few can spoil everything for so many."
Now I know for a fact that wasn't an original thought!
Aunt Rose, I joked to someone
that your hymen has fibromated.
Aunt Rose, I remember the icons around your house.
Aunt Rose, you were always saying "Well I didn't know..."
as in "I didn't know I was running a greenhouse,"
when I moved in my houseplants.
Aunt Rose, your refrigerator is disgusting.
I know because my sister looked.
And when you cooked, there was a weird brown smell everywhere.
Aunt Rose, I took four old half pint milk bottles
from your basement.
I still have the skeleton key I thought I had lost.
Aunt Rose, you wouldn't let me in
so I had to get a master set to move out.
Aunt Rose, I see you screaming from the porch as I do so.

NICE, THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

THEY:

walked through garish neon commercial streets
    not sleepwalking in the least
bearing crosses of light luggage,
    backpacks containing all their life
grumbled hungry in their sneakers
    in search of the first cheap eat
walked more, past fountains and liberation plaques
    to the stony beach
made their bed in the shade of the bridge,
    by the floodgates, amid litter
sleeping fitfully but thankfully, unsure
    if the others there were violent
awoke early to the Mediterranean sun
    foreboding the day's heat to come
had double espressos in a cafe,
    thinking of real food to really eat
went straight to the beach
    to start on the summer's first tan
armed with grass mats, sunglasses, tanning oil,
    mineral water, and tropical fruit
disappointed that this was a beach
    to come away from with tan lines
one of them actually having brought no bathing suit
    but trunks for the occasion
slathered on oil intent on not letting
    their bodies burn instead of tan
baked on one side then the other
    in the crazy shining silly Frenchman sun
swimming in the heaven blue water
    believing in spontaneous generation
body surfing incredulous
    wishing for wet dreams then and there
watching the rich play
    and the rest mimic the pretensions of the rich

sickened by bulbous Michelin women
who shouldn't be allowed to take off their tops
encouraged by the slightest darkening of their skin,
wishing the process was faster
rinsed and dried, then left to eat yet more
French bread and cheese, not believing they were
bought the biggest bottles of the cheapest wine
and drank them quickly
headed for the salty, rocky, palmtreed beach
once again
tried to sleep, this time with cameras
to capture the elusive sunrise
awoke at 2 a.m. to the sound of gendarmes digging
in the rocks, probably looking for dope
were forced to leave, and therefore
trudged half asleep across town to the train station
made camp behind a concrete potted tree
on the steps of a restaurant
tried to sleep though the city raised a clamor
and the cement was very hard
6 a.m. arriving with two gendarmes breathing
authoritarianly above
turning over they looked up to the cops
and felt like ants before the stomping child
were told to leave and therefore packed their bags
and sought coffee
were bitched out in the supermarket
for not knowing how to work the fruit scales
surprised the attendant by threatening in French
to call the manager
left to spend another burning day on the beach,
pineapple and pear their salvation
watched the sun go down very pastel,
waterwashed, and sandy
drank more wine and were accosted
by an ugly woman with overpriced hashish
tried to drown their bewilderment

in the color wash and warmth around
watching the rich end another day
of play and sun and sea
saw the arabs packing their cases of drink
and food for sale to leave
having advertising on the beach with hissing voice
"Heineken beers! Orangina! Schweppesssssssssssss!
all so existential and inexplicable
refused to risk being kicked off the beach again
and so walked into town
were welcomed as brethren in a Lebanese restaurant
but were cheated and felt like dupes
sought a crash in the residential areas
as the dark came tumbling down
stood on a street corner debating whether or not
the place was right to jump into a courtyard
leaving instead and being exhausted
took the first place to sleep they saw
lay down on a 45 degree angle on woodchips
under a small tree or two
worrying about rolling away or into
excremental candy wrappers
drank more espresso and bought more bread, cheese,
and water for the trip
then took the first train out with the tickets
they had saved in their pockets

DEORA CRIOST

Dingle Peninsula, Ireland

The land stops here at Dingle.
Europe ends here, where Brendan prayed
To his God for a safe journey westward.
America, where a new sleep awaited a people
Lies many times beyond that blue.
This is the season of fuchsia
Whose nectar is honey
And Christ's fallen tears when bitten.
Some who travel here unbridled run
Like the woman who rested from her ride
And cried to see her horse stumble and fall
Off a cliff. Or the boy who hitched to Tralee
With a man who traded Connemara marble
For the boy's pendant of Michigan petoskey.
They all see and learn of the same green land
A land long unaccustomed to trees.
The land has grown weary of its own
Yet will heal the wounds and hide the scars.
When houses are built of rock like the walls
That divide the flocks into their colors and farms
They stand like the people who work with the soil
Who lift up the peat to warm their lives.
When the houses are left, the ceilings soon fall
And the land creeps up close to cover the walls
With ivy, then grass, defining the windows
Reclaiming the rocks like the shawl does the widow.

THE HARD WAY UP

Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh, Scotland

Down, past mountain phlox,
through clefted crags from the summit
the mountain stream, cool and good to drink
sprays up into the air just for your photo.
Between volcanic mounts
the inland bound gulls glide
no, shoot on thermals from the sea.
Wingless, I take the rockface instead
and throwing bad handholds
to crash on the plain below
freeclimb daring or reckless
ninety feet to a summit of sorts.
But the way!
Climbing is man's flying
falling would be but dying.

Mrs. Paton Flushing, Near Flint River, April 6, 1843

According to accounts that can be relied on, we have had the hardest winter that has occurred for fifty-four years. It commenced in October and is now snowing; the snow in the woods is from two to three feet deep. But we don't suffer on the timbered land anything like those on the oak-openings, as regards our stock. We have the woods to resort to, where there is plenty of maple and basswood. We cut them down, and the cattle feed on the tops.

MY FATHER'S YARD

I grew
to love the dandelions
and to wish
for more delicate wildflowers.
But that was his yard.

He never used pesticides
or weedkillers
and before
the spring's first mowing
I saw the prairie and the forest
making their first struggling rise
toward climax.
Juniper children
by the hundreds:
we tried pulling them once
wearing garden gloves
but it was useless.

There is no grass
only moss
under the crab apple
and by the spruces.

On our west side
the white pine strives:
a foot diameter now.
Violets spread
among the needles
at the base.

My father
has an imperfect knowledge
of composting

but he never dumped
clippings in the woods.

I have planted periwinkle
and a succession of pines
where the birch died.
None have taken
because I'm away:
no one waters them.

I often disagree
with how my father
prunes the fruit trees.

But it is his yard.

Around the bend of the Flint River below the Main Street bridge is a spot where baptismal ceremonies were held many years ago. One year the congregation decided to hold winter baptisms. A big hole was cut in the ice, and all was in readiness--but of the number supposed to attend only one young woman appeared. The ritual was carried out, but the next day the woman had a bad cold, which developed into pneumonia. After a long illness, she partially recovered, but was for many years in frail condition. That apparently ended winter river baptisms.

FIRST DAY OF WINTER

Flint River; Genesee County, Michigan

I sat in the potter's field
Waiting for noon
On solstice day.

I had stopped in the spruce grove
Where skunk cabbages rise in spring.

I faced south
To the cold white sun
Tracing its lowest course
Over the river valley.

The oaks on the far bank
Were twisted silhouettes.
Sitting low before the rise
I couldn't see the road.

WATERSHED, IN PLAIN TALK

Personal Essay

My earliest memory is of Lake Superior, staying with my family in a cabin by the beach, iron ore carriers bellowing in the morning fog, the other children and I laughing as we grab our towels and run out onto the beach. While this memory of my third year has the abbreviated, cinematic quality of a dream, I nonetheless sense that it *is* a memory and not just something I was told about. The memory consists of details, like the color of our cabin (blue, my Grandmother's next door, yellow) and the varnished wooden pegs on the wall for our towels. Then there is the unmistakable feeling, in breathing, in the joints, on the surface of the skin--the scalp even--of being in proximity to one of the big lakes.

From the start, then, I've closely identified with the geographical uniqueness of my location, the Great Lakes, and more specifically, Michigan. While I have spent most of my life in the Lower Peninsula's suburbia, where some effort is required to find wildness amidst roads and manicured lawns, I have travelled around the state enough to know that wherever I may search for what I need to grow as a person and as a writer, somewhere here is a river valley that I will reinhabit, celebrate, and sustain. I have cultural harkenings to points around the globe, and a sense of the planet and of the continent as places, but my point of reference is within the Great Lakes watershed.

I mean to contribute to a bioregional poetry of Michigan and the Great Lakes. While the lack of a distinct Michigan poetic tradition may seem daunting, I suggest that the nascent quality of geographically sensitive poetry in the region is a boon to a poet of place, a challenge to perform what Olson called a "saturation job" on knowing the largely untapped body of Michigan myth, natural lore, and human history, that such knowledge may be applied to treatment of local experience. Williams' Paterson, Snyder's Sierra Nevada, Berry's Kentucky, and even Faulkner's postage stamp Yoknapatawpha stand as models for how one universalizes the local, reminding me that my undertaking is not so far from certain main currents in modern--if not modernist--American literature. The poems of this thesis collection constitute a step, however modest, toward a Michigan extension of the idea of place as promulgated by such authors.

The difficulty lies not in materials or tradition but in approach. Wendell Berry (see "The Regional Motive" in *A Continuous Harmony*) states that true regionalism, as opposed to a false provincial chauvinism, is distinguished by its commitment to *life* in the region before writing of the region. This

implies that an author cannot live in isolation or in exile from life in the place, which of course must be further understood in the context of other places--watersheds within watersheds within the planet. Bioregionalism implies not only literary expression but political community and ecological responsibility. To sing *of* the place one must live *in* the place and make one's life an example of commitment to, defense of, and love for, the natural and human (and to cite Dr. Williams, the elemental) character of the place.

Toward such a commitment, book work is helpful, but cannot replace footwork and handiwork. There is no abstract "Michigan" to which I hold allegiance--not that cumbersome agent of industry under the capitol dome in Lansing, nor the behemoth itself in Detroit. The Michigan that I am speaking of consists of two peninsulas surrounded by the waters of the greatest lakes (freshwater seas) in the world, centering on a basin of Pre-Cambrian and Paleozoic bedrock blanketed by the deposits left by several glacial ages, the last of which (better, the most recent of which--we're in an interstadial period) retreated north from Lake Superior only ten thousand years ago. It is a land of ancient forests, deciduous in the south, coniferous in the north, that survive only in spirit, and in a promise for the future embodied in second and third growth timber. It is a land of subtle beauty--the grey expanse of cloud cover that descends on us from the lakes, the nesting of a killdeer in a grassy swale--that occasionally rises to grandeur--late afternoon sun on Sleeping Bear Dune, or a thunderstorm on the Pictured Rocks. It is a place where water determines so much of the elemental character--how towns grew up by rivers and lakes, the availability of clean water becoming part of the Michigan myth that all this natural beauty and abundance was endless.

It wasn't, and it isn't. The waters have been poisoned. The soil is

washing away. Urban and suburban and industrial sprawl crowds out the other peninsular inhabitants--birds and mammals and the spirit of open, undeveloped shorelines, and wild forests. The land is carrying too many people, too many of whom live in an unsustainable manner. We are of the world, and the world burns itself up, at the expense of the planet. Humanity has declared its independence from place; our culture celebrates mobility and homogenization. Those who try to live responsibly, with reverence for the web of life that weaves itself uniquely in each place, find themselves besieged by a thoughtless, terminally adolescent, ego-fixing, shortsighted, eat-your-fill-and-trash-what's-left way of "life". Would-be reinhabitants easily become down-trodden, defeatist.

What's a poet to do? Rouse, rouse! Thief of fire, unacknowledged legislator, bringer of wisdom through delight--these are the roles that the poet, earth-diver, can play to bring back our world from the depths. Descend and arise--relate the past that we may have a future. Sing of the lumberjacks and the pioneers, that their magnificent though misplaced energy can be channeled into tree *planting*. Tell us about the native tribes of this region--and listen to the natives themselves relate--how over the course of ten thousand years they discovered the sacred spots and learned what songs would make the hunt or the planting successful. And celebrate the land itself, from your own intimate knowledge of the forest, Roethke's "far field", the shores, the rivers, the glacial moraines, and yes, the city, which one day will not be a monstrous tick sucking the life-blood of the land, but the civilized, cultural gathering place it was meant to be. Be angry and irreverent, observant and contemplative, capricious and jocular, mournful and bereft, ecstatic and involved--in the life of the place, and then, if appropriate, in song, sweet song.

Romantic? So be it. All the knowledge one can obtain, all the reasonable, "reasoned" means to transforming culture--science, religion, government, whatever--are nothing without spirit, passion, and--oh, you kid--love to make them serve the biosphere. Informed love that knows how to use the right tools to fix, build, rake, dig, plant, or whatever the task of transformation calls for. Poetry is one such tool among many.

The poems that make up this collection are by necessity the expression of a yet tentative bioregionalism. The task that I set for myself in the poem "Manitou", to become a native, is a lifetime proposal. Roethke differed with Eliot's "Old men should be explorers" by countering "I'll be an Indian." I agree with Uncle Ted, but posit that exploring is a valid endeavor for poets of place, especially in their youth. I feel the need to understand other places and cultures, especially those to which I have a personal attachment, before I reinhabit a particular place, making the local universal. Thus in "This Name" a challenge, akin to that of "Manitou", arises: to explore my Latin heritage--I've arrived in Michigan via Guatemala from Spain. Homage to Catalonia, indeed, and the Mayan city of Tikal. Thus also with "Deora Criost": Spain isn't the only European nation I harken to. Like all North Americans (Turtle Islanders), I come here from somewhere. We weave the tribal blanket of many threads; many places converge here to make us who we are.

I have undertaken a good deal of exploration within Michigan as well, since extensive intercontinental travel has been possible so far only in reading. Many of my poems have come from my residence and travel in locales around the state. Walking along the Saline River near Milan I discovered the paw paw fruit, puffballs, and purple flaming aster of "Gillian Of", as well as the spot where an owl rended its prey, evoked in "Bluejay Feathers for Medicine Bag." Endless staring out of a window in East Lansing inspired

"Bird Is Not Bird," a poem in triphonic. I'm happiest when knowledge from books informs and heightens an experience: I've always known that Pictured Rocks and Sleeping Bear Dunes were two of the most sacred spots in the region, but returning to them with a deeper appreciation of Indian lore and geology made them even dearer on later visits. This kind of marriage of education and experience occurred in the writing of "In Search of the Gipper's Grave." The "saturation job" of subsuming the geological, limnological, biological, historical, and cultural background of the region gives actual contact with life on the land a context and a conduit for expression.

Of my aesthetics, which are of course in a fairly early state of development, I should first state that I am first and forever a lyric poet. I have ambitions as a writer of fiction and I love to read narrative poetry but narrative isn't what I'm after in my own verse. I'm trying to work out the implications of Williams' work on the line as breath-unit, the so-called "variable foot." Typically I want each line to be a phrase, a memorable one at that, that is uttered and savored with an actual or at least a mental breath to follow. Even the incantatory Whitman long-breath of "Gillian Of" follows this general and intuitively applied practice--the phrases are just longer and for a different effect. A line is a place, a location within the poem's greater geography. The poem moves through space and time, and its parts, syllables, words, and phrases, are rocks and rivers in the terrain.

In my short lined pieces I tend to break to a new line after a noun or verb, not on a preposition or a conjunction. I think this results from a desire for each line to be taken in without a feeling of the next coming up, ready-or-not, lickety-split. Lately I've come to question this tendency of mine, and have begun to experiment with a longer, discursive transition

between lines. Rhyming and half-rhyming are effects I savor, should they arise naturally and playfully, as in "Manitou", "Bird Is Not Bird", and "The Dancing Duck." I also think of the delight I take in the names of things, forsythia, Garcia Lorca, nuthatch or crow, as part of my lyricism. In any case, I prefer forms and content that lend themselves to vocal delivery; I've recently become enamoured of the oral tradition, and have found that song-like phrases help in the task of memorization for recital. An essential characteristic of oral poetry is the way it bridges the personal and the public, the experiential and the historical, the speaker and the audience. The listener breathes in what the speaker exhales, and the speaker paces the lines according to the response the listener breathes back. Song implies chorus, chorus being a sharing of the common air.

This thesis itself is a long breath. I'm ready to breath in now. A path lies ahead that will take me to the next field of expression; at this stage in my long walk I've reached a watershed. Poetry has come to be work, and I'm going to let it find its way to me for a change. Let the playfulness return. In the meantime, the saturation job continues, as I explore deeper and farther. And the leaves come out into a new spring.