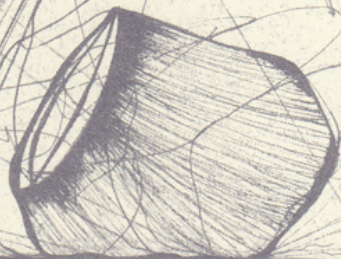


# THE BOOK OF NATURE

REGAN GOOD







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DRAWINGS BY  
CHRISTOPHER STACKHOUSE

UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE

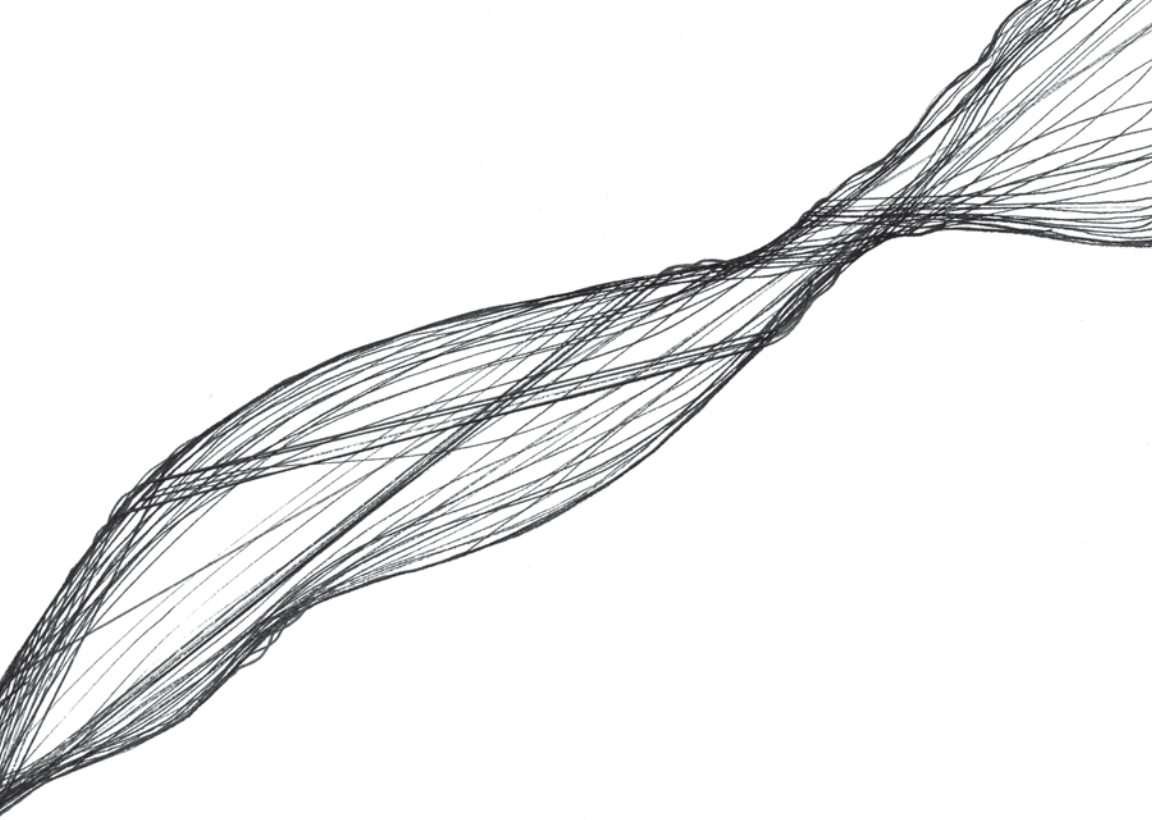


## THE BIRDS

There were deep hollows, leaves. The elements of air, water, earth, fire ornamenting the sticks, the stems extending matter out. Now it is an electric chair, a stripped foliate with wind scrolling through it, banners of air, birds moving (threading, zeroing deftly) inside the tree shape. The birds tighten a wire. Here to there, a lattice of tripped mines: arrivals, departures. A diagram: Recall the fruit that hung. Recall the blight. Recall the leaf. These birds are scavengers. They dictate the inner sanctum. They say: Now we are the fruit, we are the lifeblood, we are meat-eaters. Clocking mechanisms rotate in our cores. We siphon the tree for our devices, it is our backdrop, it is expendable. We revolve inside the stricken shape, memento mori made of living tissue, delineating passage through bare branches. If you eat us, we will taste poisonous. If you touch us, we will draw blood. Snap the wire: We have sewn the remnants upright into a semblance of a tree, detonating extinction.

## THE BOOK OF NATURE

Look, here there is room: rock, air, fire, water. They have given up calling. They have given up their differences. Birds choir the trees in this boneyard. The crows come and go as if the air were leisure—free of grooves, free of routes. The birds fly a cat's cradle of strings, webbing the element that is air (that is breath, that is a conflagration of Souls), revolving and revolving, turning the pages like a madman believing he is a book, furthering the elements (rock, fire), carefully turning the pages (water, air), turning night into day. Onslaught of days made of arrivals, departures. The elements shiftless as belief, turning into the next day and the next. The night giving back its differences (rock, air, fire, water) until they are all a backdrop of a single kind for the one hand the mind knows the mind is.



## PEACOCK

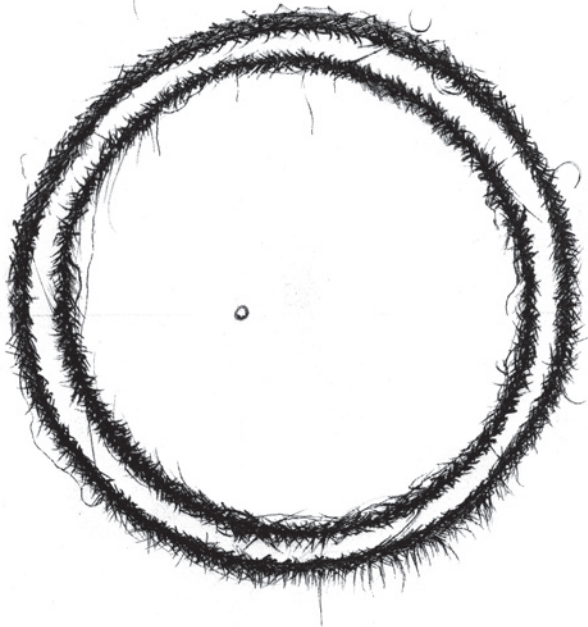
Come to see the gallows, the knot and the loop dangling. The wind moves it: a pendulum. The many-necked wind loops its faces through it and lives on. The sun whites out the wall map of rivers, of cities. Description belongs to one realm or the other like the medicinal peacock, the dragon bird dragging its details in the dust. It has Heaven on the brain. Its extremities become idolatry: a terrible bird of gold, green, electric-blue.

In Spain, El Greco's hands are kept in a box in the floor. The nuns bow and point to the hands. We come to see them through a window, bound in bandages, a burial of precious details without the backdrop, without the peacock (this bird, which is the surface and the loophole through it) past the eyelets, the neon eyes, past superfluous beauty, which, you see, is poisonous. And so his distortion. And then our anxiety.



## THE MASKS

Masks hang from trees latched by wires. The branches are scarred with crosses. Birds defecate a black, uninhabitable reef. The masks rotate on their strings, twisting, lying, masquerading as fruit. They hang nationless, godless. They were the voice box, the mouthpiece, the vehicle for the swift intelligence to whine through: iron lung, Holy Sonnet 14, a loudspeaker rigged to a balcony. The wind (with its tongue cut out) lifts the masks slowly, insistently, stuttering through the eye-holes, the mouth-hole. I see God in the making, the wind casting votes. There is nowhere to go, but to the physical evidence moving there, arguing Classical Truths. Does something speak in the crease where the mask eats the face? Here is the lie. They are not Souls—their wires snap undone. They are not Souls infesting these earthly branches. But O if the wind could be something other than wind, whispers some inalienable right...



## ALUMINOSIS

See the house, a concetto, the night around it is waste marble. Inside the mind adheres to the present too closely: Meditation graphs extinction on every remnant this season burns. The trees are diseased or possessed. A dormant virus erupts. Branches slough black in the surge of sugar. Night holds the house: a pieta. Mary's folds run in rivulets of movement (wind, birds) the ruin (which holds still) is cradled and swathed in the living tissue. In a cage, a wasp-waisted dog bristles with wolf- blood. He will erupt into his bloodline without pathos or pity, diagramming a building stricken in deficiencies, omissions, the Something-we-were-not-inoculated-for taking over—a ruin that shoots through the concrete in a bright fissure, a ruin that said the walls will fall, that said, the material is porous and alloyed, and the air, the air is the enemy.

## THE RUIN THEORY OF VALUE

Watch the hand control the end. (The architect Speer built the fault lines to comply.) Hubris bends the natural law. (Christ and his end.) These birds flying with thorned sticks build their nests in the dying trees. Outside the house, the trees are truly possessed by wind, by fire. The Poem (the opposite of Ruin) coheres inside the house. I watch two trees stirred from their centers turn every inch of surface into scorched earth: Let no stone go unturned, leave nothing standing. Recall the plans for the buildings, the outlines, the dotted lines delineating the massive stone steps, what the eye could see, and what was invisible to the eye (a human hair woven into the bird's nest), a striation of human smell throughout that kingdom. What was invisible (the wind itself ringing around each outcrop of branches, leaves, the wind noosing and noosing) taking every last appendage down to the stick.

## SONG

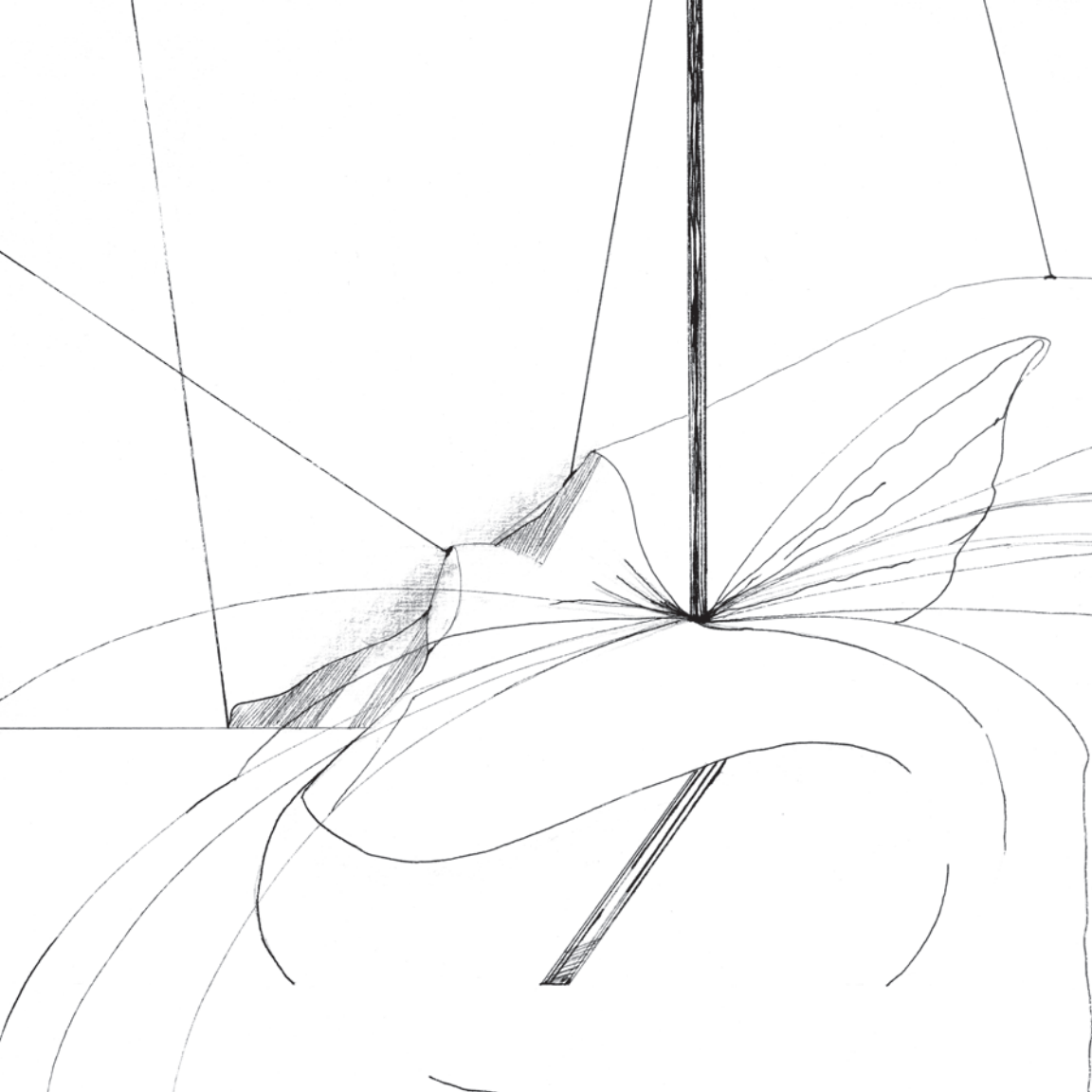
A hummingbird burns its body-fat carving a rut in air. A hummingbird with a blood disease ghosts the flower head. I sit. I watch. It does no good. Trees catch a headful of wind and are swept to sea. From here the tin-seam roofs suck the sun home. No way out from the direct fire. Attain unto it. The On High burns brightly: mine down-sitting and mine up-rising. If I ascend to Heaven: Thou art there. If I make my bed in Hell: Thou art there. The birds do not drag an evening curtain down. They clatter inhuman sounds.

The hummingbird snags in the thorn bush. Panic drives the thorn points deeper in. Its neck goes limp. Its needle beak splits. Its eyes turn to milk. That bird drove rhapsodic through the clarity of the branches until it drowned in its own small reserves of lungwater.

## MONUMENT OF MIND AND MATTER

Leaves, seeds—the pavement studded with remnants, finery, details. (Birds coalesce swiftly into the branches from the living ground.) The birds are ornaments. They are sycophants. The tree is their idol. They cluster, teeming inside the sacrosanct tree shape. They are all instinct tracing the barren rooms, alighting on junctures, abandoning them for the higher atmosphere where the wind has blown itself visible. (The birds inside scroll cyclic through this stronghold, turning revolutions.)

They sing songs of their devotion to the control box. They sing: We are jewels. We are idea. We are more mind than matter. The air is cruel between us. We hover, a pestilence, supplicants to this division.



## BIRDS ATE THE SONG AND BROKE THE LIGHT

Wild imaginings of clipped, winged things. Lord, a red cardinal. Look, Lord, your red bird. (Sparks burst from God's jagged cuts: bright droplets of liquid love.) You reveal my mortal ignorance. In snow, a cardinal lands on a red twig, stuck through the bones with hunger. Mortal shock of the cardinal bright as blood in the ghosting snow—Soul's bloody, rhetorical knot. I said: Dear heart. And so it flew.

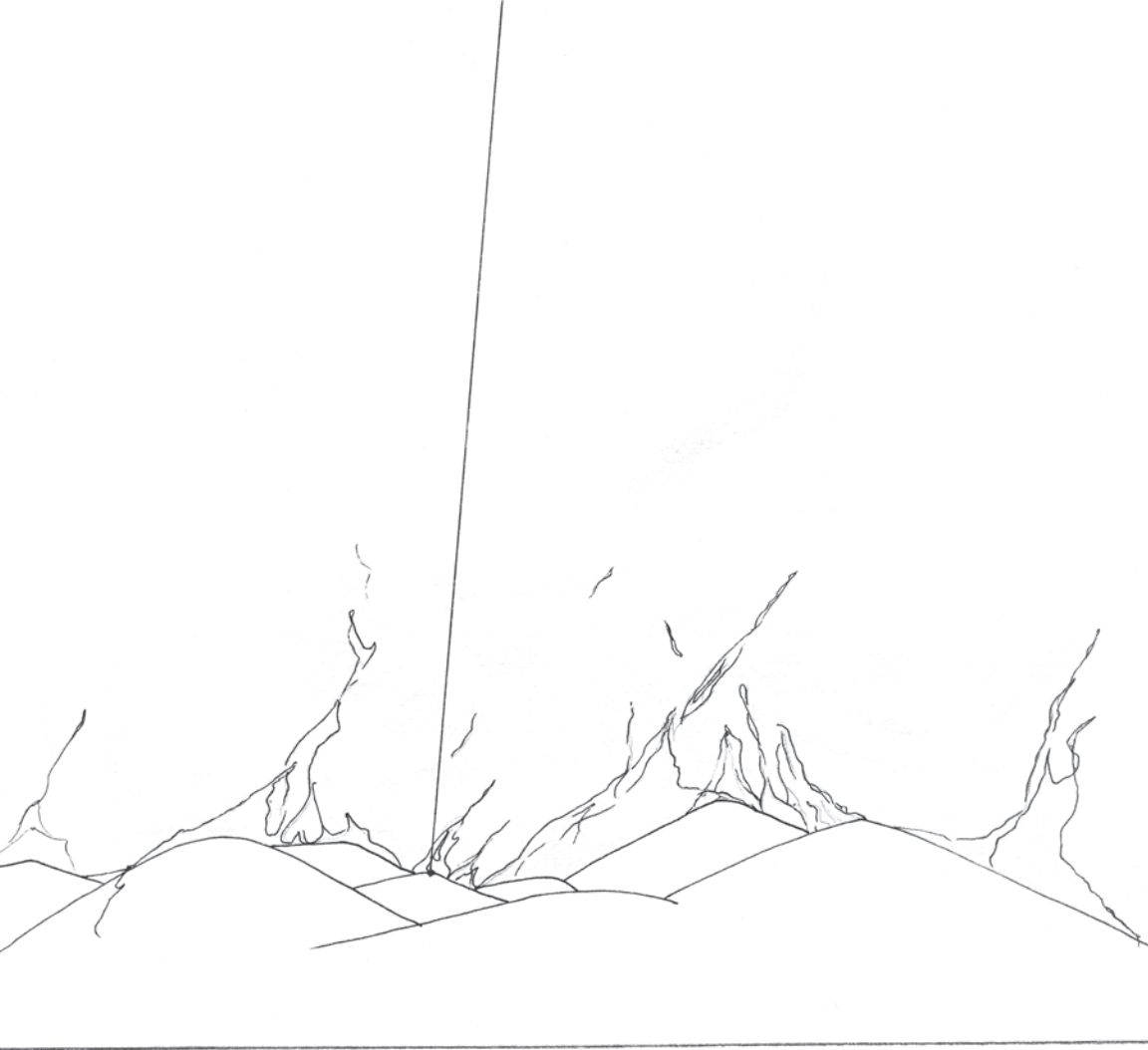
Hung a seeded bell, watched them eat it down to nothing but its net. Birds ate the bell so darkness & wind passed through and emptied it. Birds ate the song and broke the bell. Birds ate the bell seed by seed, then flew upwards and away—Whosoever knows a common bird? These squeak and eat and still the waters rage. Around them the same “integrated atmospheres” in which hangs the net their hunger made.



## FIRE SERMON OF THE RED BIRDS

Issued from and bound to minutia, birds clip the distance. Snipping through the immaculate blown open, the red birds edge the house. The birds rush headlong with rapture on the brain. Infinitesimal hearts divebomb the garden, murder between their beaks. The birds bleat quick cries, cries that come like clear water shot through with scarlet. We know what is burning, the sunlight pooling into flames. Impulsion is hunger and the garden blazes.

A bird the color of heat articulates the purest sentence of the airwaves, abolishes the endstop, hangs headlong on the lip of the air, and the rest is history—



## NOTES

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The poem *The Book of Nature* refers to a man who believed he was a book. He believed his thoughts were the pages of the book being turned with each new thought.

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The poem *Aluminosis* refers to a term used to describe shoddy construction work (in Spain) that resulted in bricks so cut with rank alloys they became weakened, crumbled, and caused buildings to collapse. The veins of alloy turn silver when exposed to air.

A concetto is a Renaissance art term referring to the perfect and complete form of a sculpture waiting to be uncovered within a block of marble. The removed stone is known as waste marble.

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The poem *A Theory of Ruin Value* refers to an idea proposed in 1934 by the Nazi architect Albert Speer. He proposed the monumental buildings of the Reich could have their ruin built in. This way if the Reich fell, it would collapse into a heroic, classical ruin. Speer explained his theory in his memoirs thusly: “By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models...”

## AN INTERVIEW WITH REGAN GOOD FROM THE HAMPDEN-SYDNEY POETRY REVIEW

*HSPR*: Despite the ever-changing world of publishing—electronic and mobile media, etc.—poets keep sending poems to little magazines, and little magazines keep on publishing (with new ones emerging every year). Why do we do this? For you, as a writer and/or reader, what good are these little journals?

*RG*: I publish randomly and sporadically in journals. I send work out in a very unorganized way, when I am asked to submit or when the mood strikes me. I also write slowly (I often keep poems open and unfinished for years) so I don't have an endless supply of available work. I am always shocked and pleased when poems get taken. But I don't know what good such journals do. To be honest, I have grown pretty skeptical of their proliferation, on the Internet and otherwise. On a glass half full day, I'd say: How great that there is so much interest in and appreciation for poetry in the 21st century. It's natural to replace the old dogs with new blood. But I fear more is afoot than love of poetry. There is a lot of misplaced ambition in the air. The ambition should be

to write better and better poems, not, as one graduate school peer put it, to “get famous.” I feel like poetry is being used in a way I’m not sure we’ve seen before. I shrink from it.

*HSPR*: It seems there are always a handful of *lost* or *forgotten* or *underappreciated* writers out there, writers without published books or greater recognition. What writers, to you, are deserving of more recognition – or, if they are already perhaps well known, what writers are deserving of a different kind of recognition or assessment?

*RG*: I return again and again to Emily Dickinson’s letter to Higginson: “I smile when you suggest I delay ‘to publish,’ that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin. If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better.” Romantic (or coy) as it may sound, she was concerned with and sustained by the work alone—i.e. she had no other ulterior motives. This is an idea that doesn’t have a lot of purchase in a time of poetry professionalism. (Dickinson not needing publication was certainly helped by the fact she was a genius.)

But it's unclear how much it hurt her emotionally not to publish or be recognized; she seemed to have wanted nothing to do with "the world" outside her mind, especially after a certain point. But the fact she sent Higginson poems suggests that she too wanted to be appreciated by at least one other soul. Dickinson never had a book of poems published in her lifetime. And how does that bear on her achievement? Not at all. As the painter Agnes Martin wrote: "The life of an artist is inspired, self-sufficient and independent (unrelated to society)." When I feel frustrated about this subject I sometimes think of the scene in *Babette's Feast* when Babette's rich and complex history is revealed to her long-time employers. Though the two sisters have known Babette as a lost soul, it comes to light that she had, among other things, been a renowned Chef de Cuisine in Paris before she landed on their bleak Danish isle. With her winnings from a Parisian lottery ticket Babette asks permission to create a magnificent feast. She purchases the finest china, tableware and ingredients. She labors in joy. She makes a magical, life-changing meal for a gaggle of crotchety Danes. When her employers note she has foolishly spent all her winnings and will now be poor forever, she answers: "An artist is never poor."

*HSPR*: Writers have always seemed to gather together for one reason or another. Many poets spend time at MFA programs and writing workshops. For you, what is or has been the usefulness, whether through a workshop or otherwise, of making and maintaining friendships with a community of writers?

*RG*: I was lucky enough to study with two excellent poets during the two years of my MFA at Iowa: Jorie Graham and Jim Galvin. They were great opposites, her Whitman to his Dickinson. One was riveted, effusive, and spoke in meta-poetics; the other was Zen-like, terse, and remote in his contemplation of the students' work. The first generously (more generously than we or the poems deserved) read our work as, say, artifacts of the journey of *The Hero*. Or she'd compare one's description of a bird to Giotto's birds in the Arena Chapel frescos. The other would pass out pieces of handmade paper and dare us to write on them. Or he'd write a Lakota death song on the blackboard, a song that ensured the warrior/writer passage to the afterlife. Two people knew the song, the warrior and his best friend. If the warrior fell, his friend would have to sing it for him. Galvin said: "Make sure your poems are as important to you as an Indian death song." This push-pull—being encouraged to reach for sublime, Olympian heights on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to

be reminded of one's paltry place in the pantheon—was good for me. Cosmic praise tempered by indifference.

Some students rolled their eyes at Galvin's seemingly sentimental insistence on work bearing such moral and mortal pressure. I don't know what would have happened if I had gone to another program with poets of lesser intensity, intelligence and commitment. Beyond studying with excellent mentors if you can find them, the second best thing about an MFA is that it will be the first time you are truly surrounded by people who do this unusual thing you do and take it just as seriously. You recognize each other. I am still bonded with many of my Iowa friends. But I am not in business with them. I don't think of myself as being in a community of writers, though certainly my best friends are writers and many of them I met in graduate school.

*HSPR:* One could make a decent argument for the case that all writing, to an extent, is nature writing. Describe, if you would, your relationship (in poetry or otherwise) with the natural world.

*RG:* My mother read poems to me at an early age, mostly by Bishop, Lowell, and Roethke. Roethke was a favorite, probably because he sometimes



wrote from the perspective of a child, especially in the greenhouse poems. Compounding my interest was the fact that our house had a stone cellar with a dirt floor so I recognized Roethke's striving vegetation—things weirdly living on in dank places, things bursting from dried husks to life. I turned images from poems like “Root Cellar” and “Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze” over and over in my mind.

The first poem I wrote as a child described the contents of a window gutter—dead leaves, long-dead moths, spider webs with bundled flies, and a dead-spider “balled up like short black thread.” As an adult, trees, oceans, gardens, horses, and birds, especially birds, populate the poems. I have had a fascination with bird life and bird movement for a while now. I took birds as my personal Objective Correlative while in Iowa City, and they have stuck around. Birds did things in the Mid-West I had never seen them do on the East Coast, like when literally hundreds would settle into a single tree at the same moment. They were scary; they were bigger than I was in all ways. They stood for Nature in my mind. Looking at the birds began with an effort to remove my “will” from the poem, to simply watch the natural world long enough that it might reveal something to me.

The problem of nature—death—moves me more consistently than other things like politics or other traditional poetic themes. Sometimes I wish I could write good political poetry like Yeats or be moved by what moves my peers, like theory or pop culture. But I know my instrument pretty well. Someone recently referred to my writings as “weird nature poems” that exhibit a “skeptical awe.” I love that description and took it as a compliment.

## THE BOOK OF NATURE

Regan Good © 2009, 2010

Christopher Stackhouse (*drawings*) © 2009, 2010

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