

**Back-stepping Between 2 Bridges**

by

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## **Black Walnuts**

We had green-skinned walnuts falling  
from three high-reaching trees.  
They stained the harvester's hands with brown  
and smelled sharply of acrid sap.  
The meat within is not for eating  
until the nuts have seasoned,  
stored away on winter's shelf.

More than holiday bags of nuts  
I treasure the country's black walnuts,  
for they have a hard-creased wood  
beautiful to feel, difficult to crack.  
Picking out their meats takes a pleased focus.  
I'd say they are like well-bound books  
I've set aside to open when words  
I savor taste wildly full of meaning.

## Back Stepping Between 2 Bridges

From spaces between the weathered boards  
I observed the water--  
shallow and slow in late summer,  
high and rushing in spring.  
I leaned my bamboo pole against rusted railing  
to catch sunfish and bull fish  
for supper and cats.

I jumped from bog-to-bog below our sledding hill,  
to follow a stream which bent and turned  
to the steep drop-off into the creek  
where my brother dared me slide down  
on glare-ice snow.

In the water's hook, a dimple of sand  
held the clear glimmer of a tiger-eyed marble.  
As if at recess, a minnow school shot left, then right.  
Disrupting their game, we played bully,  
made ripples by dropping a pebble.  
The fish scattered; the caught marble was ours.

To the west rose the railroad embankment.  
From its bridge the creek ambled eastward.  
Its double tunnels were a spy glass to another world.  
When I heard the rumble and tenor of the train  
right on time  
I knew the engineer would wave  
until last  
the conductor riding the caboose waved back.

Dropped by the bus at the highway  
I hiked down the county road.  
I hopped along on the oily ties reaching the railroad bridge  
where yellow and pink snapdragons grew in the pebbles.  
Down the rough incline of the ditch  
I hung on like crazy to weeds  
or if lucky a sapling,  
dug my heels in, gravelly dust rising,  
squeezed thin between wire and barbs,  
then a leisurely uphill hike  
through grazed pasture grass.  
Other days, I strolled on our long gravel lane  
gently down to the wooden bridge, then up,  
steeply up through the canopy of elms

to a white, gabled-roofed farmhouse  
which had expanded and rambled into many rooms,  
as if to provide for growing and wondering.

From my hilltop, I could listen for the whistle blasts,  
the reverberating metal of a train on the rail bridge.  
Sunfish were jumping from their waiting pool,  
meeting the clatter of box cars.

## Oaring through Water Lilies

After Claude Monet's series *Water Lilies*

Waters can stream and gurgle past me, on-the-go  
Western tributaries.  
Yet I am captivated by waters happily settled,  
translucent, and painted with impressions of light.  
The staying meets the muddy banks while  
blurred colors, as Monet's, stretch and laze  
in pastel majority.  
Inside earthen elbows are watery-beds  
for lovely, yellow-headed pads.

—

Splotches of green  
and dabs of yellow appear  
as I unfurl the watered silk.  
A fabric waves, revealing  
traces of pads and jots of lilies,  
until I blink awake.  
Then, I brush markings on a new canvas,  
hang colors to dry like fresh linen  
in the brisk air.

—

Again, lily water emerges  
from imagination's rhizome,  
rootstock accepting grafts,  
extending through offshoots:  
In roadway ditches--  
after the rushing ice melt--  
pink petals and golden yellows float  
upon liquid green.  
Transfixed, I feel the pull of deep roots--  
familiar water lilies resurrected,  
their undulating before me  
in the lane's fresh grasses.  
Their shimmer bobs and flashes  
colors which sustain me.  
I'm ever oaring through lily blooms.

## Prairie Castles

When climate change was yet chained, the frozen landscape  
changelessly towered, a white fortress on the prairie.  
We played to defy winter, shoveling into huge snowdrifts,  
hollowing cold rooms--in which I can still sit  
in the timeless portion of my mind.

Hardened snow banks are like rocks buffeting farm buildings:  
by us transfigured into our medieval burgh,  
its heavy doors opening to peasants—neighbor kids  
tunneling for shelter from cold wind in our castle's labyrinth  
of rooms. Their shadows ripple on my skin,  
thoughts of time's lodgers.

In its kingdom, winter rules until spring breezily challenges  
with a ruckus of black birds swarming expectant trees.  
Robins watch for widening slots in cold's receding walls.  
Less an icy regal voice, in fly barn pigeons, mocking jesters  
leaving dirt upon the quiet straw.

First published in *Bolts of Silk*

## **Barn Climbing**

Scaling a weathered skeleton of the barn's walls,  
sometimes hearing the creak of nails  
pounded near a century earlier,  
I carefully squared shoe tips into the boxes  
of somewhat sturdy juts of boards.  
The straw dust hung in the air  
a reminder of sun-dried days of harvest.  
Upward, the gabled crown's height  
was a grail not to be obtained, up where the barn swayed  
as it yielded to prairie winds, enough to raise the roof.  
While rising upright, an uneasy vertical dance,  
the calming of mathematical reason begged me  
calculate the bales stacked from a year's growing.  
Pigeons perched along a metal track below the peak.  
With a sweep of fingers I plucked eggs from their nests.  
O they were admired, then gently dropped  
into the loft's soft basket far below.

## **Snowball Bush**

Billowy white spheres blithely nod  
until storm shakes their bush.  
Their white graffiti litters the grass.  
Yet after the pelting rain,  
green limbs begin their swagger.  
The spry branches support  
their drying white balls  
which bravely lift their chins  
as they transmute,  
tinted lovely lavenders:  
color of sighs,  
cue for final bows.

## Migrations with Monarchs

From a depth of darkened leaves, I envisage orange wings--  
thousands, thousands--  
restless and ever seeking changing landscapes.  
The weight of wings is too much to bear, yet too much to lose.  
Through dusky blue foliage, I approach what reappears  
enmasse, a still, of orange butterflies--  
lacy black edging their multitudes of folded wings.

To a hilltop we children came to welcome  
numerous large orange, black-veined butterflies.  
Like a flung coverlet, the ruffle of wings laid on rough bark  
and underneath the many circular layers of century trees--  
into their inner pulse.  
Once among these towering elms, the migrating monarchs briefly reigned.  
Later if not toppled by storms, these trees  
once planted by homesteading pioneers  
fell to Dutch elm disease, returning to earth.  
Like the delicately-winged we sought the air.  
We rose on wooden swings, suspended between giant yard elms.  
While momentum lasted, oh, the hollering crescendo--  
before, ah, the expected somehow soothing decrescendo.  
Ours was flying without concern for clouds.

Now, traveling, turning, reaching another long gravel lane  
I settled on an old prairie farm  
where milkweed with its bunched balls of pink  
invites returning monarchs to lay pale green eggs  
and brightly-striped caterpillars to hungrily feed on leaves.  
I sowed flower seeds and waited for blooms to scent the air,  
waited for the monarchs' lifted wings bound to the south,  
waited and paced in the yard circle 'round, until in late summer  
on a young ash, I saw its bark seem to move in the dusk.  
With a flashlight, yes, I knew butterflies were convening, grouping,  
silently folding their wings to rest upon smooth trees  
and called to my son to come and see.  
Some years, the air is greater with orange;  
other, fewer flutter about the impatiens, zinnias, glads, glories.  
Above the leaves, into blue they disappear--  
with no shawl to guard against wet cold, the altered weather  
on a Mexican mountaintop where firs are sought for shelter  
before monarchs can relay their new generations north.

First published in *Oak Bend Review*

## Spring Breezes

We fly a kite in the pasture while  
at first, I'm jumping from bog hump to hump,  
chasing its falling knotted tail.

Now, wind the string in;  
reel our hold out--  
releasing the triangular paper bird  
into layers of breeze.

Play it into the wind--  
dancing our feet, fingering a lofty tug  
from the upwardly dashing kite.  
No letting go.

We can run back with the stay--  
preventing the kite's swift dive  
down to earth.

Let's keep working the line--  
playing with shifting drafts  
found in higher spaces.

First published in *Bolts of Silk*

## Seasons of Alfalfa

When alfalfa lies deep green in the night,  
fireflies blanket the purple flowers.  
In the sun yellow butterflies hasten.  
A breeze blows bright wings  
and undulant green.

Hungry for what flies of night and day  
possess,  
heifers stretch their necks over fencing.  
Yet soon, round bales of dried flowers dot  
the stubble.

Temptation seems removed  
until cattle snort vapor from cold nostrils.  
Then the farmer cuts twine and releases  
a forgotten fragrance.

In the loosened weave  
do sparks and yellow wings entice  
those seeking summer blossoms?

First published in *the Aurorean*

## Contours & Lines

A glacier left hills to rise and slope  
along a meandering creek line.  
On cattle paths along the steep incline, we sang,  
“You take the high way, and I'll take the low way”:  
a dueling song of getting to Scotland first.

The hill's dents and bumps were a turf to perch on  
or to inch down toward the ragged dirt bank's drop-off  
into a sandy bottom flow.

Now, I explore hills in a grid's 3-dimensional curve stitching.  
The computer program sets lines bending,  
suggests fluidity in rock and dirt,  
the sequences beneath circumstantial grasses.  
On the desk monitor the mathematician's graph  
surges and retracts, bulges and slims.

Yet I remember with vivid certainty  
the rosy glow of the hills we climbed.

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When mechanical 'dozers push away rolls and curves  
made by glaciers, the altered landscape flattens  
into a predictable mesh of maximized fields  
or sleeper communities from engineers' blueprints.

No whimsical wand or challenges of magic in a blackened wood.  
Puck's darting, playful figure disappears as streetlights line up.

Then, with a whoop and a shout, “We're playing outside!”  
We sought spaces machines had not worked  
and high-stepped and low-stepped.  
We yipped, “We're sinking in the creek mud!”  
We cleansed ourselves in clearer water near sand bars.

Here with primitive yelps our voices resonated.  
Like age-old bare feet, ours felt dust and grass.  
We were ancient herders on green slopes.

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I am both there and here,  
as a brain flicks and switches

in nerve endings linked to ice-made geology--  
topped by darker green's & ripened yellow's.  
Rose light peeks through along my mind's  
contours and lines.

**Mary Belardi Erickson** originated from New Jersey, youthfully thrived in Minnesota and has returned to that countryside. Her work is published online and in print, most recently or forthcoming in *Flutter*, *Numinous*, *Avocet*, *The Aureorean*, *Oak Bend Review*, *Bolts of Silk*, *Perspectives*, *MindFlights*, *Waterways*, *Victorian Violet Journal*, as well as others. She was nominated for *Dancz Books Best of the Web 2010*. She received 2nd Place, *2009 Numinous Magazine Poetry Prize*. Her poems will appear in Sephyrus Press *Afterlife Anthology* and Silver Boomer Books *From the Porch Swing – memories of our grandparents*.