

**WHITE MAPS**

**Selected Poems: 1986 - 2000**

**by**

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Photo by Harry Morris

Introduction by D. S. Black

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WHITE MAPS is dedicated to my family; to all the friends who have given me unequivocal support for the last thirty years; and to planet Earth, the jewel in my brain that is slowly burning out.

EARTHBOUND, 000

LEDGER, 000

THE LEDGES, 000

ELIXIRS, 000

THE MARTIAN GIRL, 000

TALES FROM PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTINGS, 000

LETTERS FROM MORGANTOWN, 000

## WHITE MAPS

**EARTHBOUND**

**BOOK I: WINTER WEEDS**

## LETTER TO MY WIFE

These bleak landscapes are the mirror-image  
of my silences, my words the black skeletons of the  
weeds burned into the snows. I am the distant figure  
you see, in the middle of the fields, the shadow  
of a stick encased in ice.

I return home to you to give you what I have  
found, the hours of wandering, the frozen green  
eyes of the river, the colored chips of glass  
that I picked up by the factory twenty years  
ago.

I have walked all day in the heavy grey light  
to show you the full moon rising through the antlers  
of the sky, in a winter dusk as blue as the city  
where I once lived, for a moment, in the oracle  
of your coming.



## NOVEMBER AFTERNOON

Dark cryings of the wind haunt the eaves, a cold machinery eating the last leaves. A chill walks through the house, I can hear it in the voices of everyone I love and everyone who is dead that I loved.

A white moaning through metal and glass, the hemlock thrashing wildly. As the demon days lash out now, warning with their brooding languages, the long fangs of banshees gnashing, crows waiting.

My soul crawls through the dead weeds, I will become the bitter wind, keening in my sleep as the skins of the dead bang and flap back and forth on the porch.

## SPELLS

December in silver, with time to hear the bare trees singing. Decades of Christmases in West Virginia, California, Maine, many of them spent drinking alone.

This year, in Ohio, watching the red-breasted nuthatches feed on suet, the gangs of crows flying from one treetop to the next, counting the dead.

I drink my Rebel Yell and listen to the winds blowing years of ice in and out of the house, dreaming of Paris, New Orleans, a cabin in the woods, darkening the pages with distant sounds. We will become as ash in this white crucible, waiting for all the owls of the earth to rise at once from this strange sadness.

I have come to this place, this hour, to bind you in silver, my eyes heated with the image of your body. As another year ends, we cannot be too careful with each other as the house shudders inside the walls of time.

## WINTER WEEDS

Maybe it's something in the wind, a long coat flapping, maybe it's a footstep on the porch or hands fumbling at the storm door latch, maybe it's some uncontrollable metallic noise trapped inside the skull-bone, like the high pitched rasping of branches rubbing together in the empty sky.

Maybe it's a dark memory invading sleep or a black sun searing the mind on a beautiful spring afternoon, it could be anything, any childhood horror creeping up the clammy cellar steps at night, but it's not anything, it is only the wind passing by, only nothingness itself moving from one nowhere to another and leaving behind an unbearably lovely silver music to haunt the vast spaces where you should be.

## MONONGAHELA

A dark river flows through the winter hills. It is not water, but the passage of souls beneath the frozen bridges. The bargemen cough, stopping their work for a moment to listen. Black wings unfold in their lungs, a flock of crows sitting in silence on a treetop, staring.

The river runs on, past the old glass factory, piles of rusted railroad spikes, sagging grey houses caught forever between the coal trains and the dead. From the storm windows sooty faces peer, suspended in between the panes.

At night, miles of iron screech and the river laps and laps at the sticks that look like rotten hands clutching at the weeds and stones along the empty banks.

ALMOST NEW YEAR'S EVE AGAIN

Now that the far distant future is already gone,  
the years have to be imagined to become real.  
It used to be that they just happened by themselves.  
Now, they must be taken, or they take us.  
Either way, all our work is for death.  
In two days, the idea of 1986 will end. I have  
everything and nothing to worry about.  
Waiting, while you sleep, I listen to the snow  
falling.

MEDITATIONS IN FEBRUARY

The insurmountable days end, a whisper of gold silk  
in the refuge of evening, where I can hear you calling  
me to come and see the five deer dancing in the moon-  
light on the hillside across the tracks.

I try to make each moment such a vision of  
strangeness and beauty. I call the years by name:  
rain, crows, hills of red light, the realness of  
death.

There are no questions to be answered. Dreams  
give no signs, only colors. My pen is a bone writing  
on mist in the breath of a lamp.

It is night on Earth.

## THE SMOKEY LANGUAGES OF DUSK

From the hilltops we can hear the music of the bridges, the green sighs of the river, the gold and iron light falling from the cataracts of suns.

We stand on the threshold of a silent world, looking out over the remnants of the town: distant trains, the rotting kilns and chimneys of the glass factory, voices of crows like black crystal breaking in the air.

We walk, and dream ourselves a new life, a house with many rooms to wander through, and the river in the middle of it:

The hands we see reaching from its depths are not our reflections but our real selves climbing back into us, creatures of mist dreaming endlessly of not hearing, but being, the music that surrounds us in the dusk.

## AT CLAY AND WHARF STREETS

Turning a corner, there is suddenly a block of warehouses, behind them two or three sets of tracks, and the river rippling softly just beyond. It is one of those places that opens suddenly in the mind, as though one had been swallowed into another life, and more certainly, another time: decades ago, in the late February light, on a seductively warm Sunday afternoon, with undertones of melancholy, the shadows of old things, forgotten thoughts, in the sweet amber air, brick, stone hues, two bright green railroad cars painted against the black gravel;

it is one of those times when the poem exists off the page, it is the real poem, already written and read, but not on paper. It is the vast, inviting chamber of a carriage house, drenched in drowsy gold, dust and sepia: we walk through it, memorizing its details, scents of iron, ancient polished wood, raw earth;

we can hear the dream-sounds of houses collapsing in on themselves, the center of words, in slow motion. We float down the street, inside a great pale emerald, painted in river pigments, all the secrets of light stored in the folds of stone, in the translucent moment between winter and spring when silence and eternity saturate everything, a world of breathless cardinal and haunted glass.



## REVELATION AND FUTILITY

I remember our walk of two days ago, in mid-evening, high above the town. We saw a flock of cedar waxwings in the slender golden branches, a rabbit crossing into the shadows, the brilliant flames of cardinals in their treetops, each one pulsing at the center of its song.

Later, at home, we gasped in awe at the huge moon rising out of the smokey hollows. Maybe we should have followed it, gone to live behind the black clouds, leaving our bodies and souls behind for the wind to swallow.

It is already late in the morning, now, as I sit and read the green rain. I have nowhere to go or be but here. A soft wind stirs the pages, where I hide and wait for summer.

I drink sadness from the sweet air around your sleep and cannot write the end of hopeless dreams.

## AT THE CEMETERY

Evening, time of rivers and thrushes, in your  
cities of light a million gnats dance, dark bells toll  
in your graves, angels watch us closely as we walk by  
lilies of granite that guard the sleeping bodies.

Time of fireflies, pink light, dead violets.  
O still faces sunken in the grass. The angels open  
their stone cloaks to us as they stare into the  
Victorian sunset.

The earth falls into black echoes, time of  
melancholy, the breath of eternal evening like a  
cercloth draping our hands in the last light  
caught from the eyes of the dying.

TGIF

My books rot in my hands, I cannot find a job, but  
I have these words to solace me: wife, cat, river, moon.  
So another week ends. So the planet grinds to dust.

EVANESCENCE

At the edge of death, this throat of silence,  
crumbling infinities, a hand reflected in a window  
at night.

**BOOK II: BEAR METAPHYSICS**

## COSMOLOGIES

I sit, I watch, I listen, in a lawn chair of plastic and aluminum. I dream of the secrets that exist just beneath the grass. The late night breezes gently blow the walnut tree. Behind the stand of hemlock across the street I can see the moon's light, a lamp of silence surrounded by dark grey clouds.

Fireflies rise here and there in the darkness, the magic lanterns of summer. Besides attracting food and mates, their lights illuminate a world only they can see, the world of invisible elves and tree spirits who move through our nights and believe in Earth less and less as the centuries pass. Soon their shadows will fade, and the lightning bugs will see only these human hands, writing their names.

Early July, as I await the coming of the katydids, crickets and grasshoppers en masse, in my time, August. To have been born a cicada would have been a noble, a meaningful destiny. To die as food in the maw of a wolf. To jump as a young mantis from one blade of grass to another...to sing like a woodthrush or be as majestic as a pileated woodpecker. The endangered species are the lucky ones: they are leaving this planet for good: leaving the human trash to eat their own radioactive turds.

So I lift my crystal drinking glass and toast the moon with my whiskey. Like the wolf, the ivory-bill, the dusky seaside sparrow, some day too the moon will disappear. Sitting here in all this sickness, I see all of this beauty, and I cannot decide if life is truly worth the effort.

The human ego thinks it has the right to encompass and destroy the universe. I think it has only the right - and the mentality - to destroy itself. Luna moth, screech owl, panther, all of you who are slowly disappearing: come home. Wherever I am I will speak with you. Because I became human only by a very bad mistake.

## DOUBLE VISION

1.

There are two desks, two lamps, two pens,  
two shot glasses, two bottles of beer, two  
of each word. There are two nights, two  
earths, two writing hands, two brains in  
my skull.

2.

I am sitting in a small room in a small house  
in a small town in West Virginia. It is just  
after midnight. Anyone looking in the window  
would see a man sitting at a table hunched  
over a spiral notebook, one hand holding his  
head and the other moving a fountain pen  
across the page. At times they would see one  
hand lift a shot glass to a mouth.

3.

It is past the middle of July, the moon is  
down and the katydids are beginning to sing  
again in earnest, like the broken echo of the  
cicada's music ringing on into the night.  
When the insects begin their endless raga  
it is time to dream of summer's end, autumn,  
death, drunkenness.

4.

As I sit the lizards are at rest in the  
living-room, my wife sleeps and the cat wan-  
ders ceaselessly from window to window.  
Another whiskey is called for. I can see no  
stars because of the haze, but I can see  
three bright lights widely spaced on the  
road leading to the edge of town. With  
each shot the bourbon tastes sweeter.  
Loud cars race up and down the Saturday  
night streets. As most people crave light  
and speed, so I crave slowness and the dark.

5.

Like smoke and whiskey West Virginia moves  
into me. It all goes into the glass, what this  
poem is about: sitting at a table after mid-  
night, drinking, brooding, just about to close  
one eye in order to see one of everything again,  
and to fall unconscious into the cooling  
earth of the world I must call home.

## LUNES

1.

Getting up sometime between midnight and dawn to feed the cat, I take a piss, and through the partly opened curtains of the bathroom window I look out into the dank black hotness of the night, and see the blue spruce drooping in the heavy blanket of silence, the orange ember of the half moon burning deep within the haze.

3.

For a moment, I wonder if I am an apparition standing there or if the window has opened onto another dimension by some weird spell of the heat; or if I am looking from the bottom of the river, in the mud with the giant catfish, and seeing a planet that I will never inhabit --- a poetic utopia, or the landscape of moments just after death, inside an opaque, dark green orb swathed in a mist that bleeds from the center of someone else's vision.

3.

After a fitful night of wakefulness and serial dreams, I awaken suddenly at mid-morning, still dreaming: a sky and the sun are a dead white, a sere haze still fills the hollows, and the earth is so quiet that I can hear a dog barking twenty-five years away, I can hear the river all the way across town, but the raging coal trucks, the trains and the tugs are all silent, silent, they are not moving through my world.



## WHEN YOU ARE GONE

Wolf, brother, when you are gone  
I will build a hut of fur and bone  
And live there the rest of my life  
Worshipping your ghost.  
I will build fires on the ridgetops  
To melt your howls frozen there  
Like totems in the moonlight.  
I will pray and rant in the red flames  
And carry your song back  
To my hut of blood and stone  
And dance in the snow of your passing  
From this Earth, Great Wolf,  
When you are gone  
The planet will be lost to savagery  
And the world will not end  
The way it is supposed to

## BEAR METAPHYSICS

In wilderness areas there is something called "bear management." This means that if a bear becomes unruly or too real or exhibits anti-social behavior toward people, it is either taken to another, remoter area or it is "removed," meaning exterminated with extreme prejudice.

This attitude exhibited toward the bear sums up everything gross about human consciousness regarding other life forms. The rangers and naturalists, but for the few extremists, have to go along with the masses whether they want to or not, because of the incredible belief that we have eminent domain without compensation over the entire planet, and that if any other species gets in our way, for any reason, we have the right to hunt it into extinction.

Grizzly and wolf: obviously doomed. Pushed deeper and deeper into a shrinking wilderness habitat. The bears even let groups of people stand around and watch them fish for salmon: if only these people could see how ignoble, undignified and freakish they look in their blue and orange nylon windbreakers looking through huge camera lenses at these magnificent, godly beings fishing in the waters of their earthly paradise!

Ultimately, humans will win, because humans fight dirty, always, fight to "win" at any cost, breeding like maggots in their own foul sumps and covering the earth in the offal of legends.

The planet is finished.

## IVORYBILL

It has been stated that there have been sightings of you by woodsmen, rumors of reports floating out of wild and isolated regions the exact whereabouts of which have been kept utterly secret from both professionals and public so that, if indeed it is true, you may live out the rest of your doomed lives here undisturbed, hopefully, and die in peace in your deepest haunts.

The image of the pileated woodpecker mates high in the treetops in early spring is in itself almost unbelievable: an hallucination, a privileged peek into another dimension of time and place through a rift in the world's fabric. To see you, Ivory-bill, would be worth living a long and tortured life, to see you and die happily, having seen a fabled creature far more inspiring and necessary than a thousand wine-drenched visions of Pan or a stampede of centaurs in the mists of a winter dawn.

Your reality has been in question for at least fifty years. Holy quests have been made for any sighting, however fleeting, of your plumage, for any hearing of your call that is the echoed invocation of the primordial essence of our pitiful race. You, greatest of all woodpeckers, crested presence of the kingdom of trees: gone, like the rest, into the mist. Classic myths are paltry and meaningless next to your majesty, and to that of all your kin --- the extinct, the endangered, the exiled species that we can only catalog now, like the works of obscure poets --- we can only imagine you now, wanting to see you so badly in the gloomiest depths of these woods.

Luckily, for those of us with eyes, your ghost, your afterimage, remains --- one in the mind, one in the manifestation of the pileated, which we can still see, for a time, in the great trees, and hear drumming in the hollows of this dead American dream.

## IDEALS

I used sometimes to become a man, but becoming a man was a complex and painful transformation, and after a while I decided to become a wolverine for good. As a man I was always sorry and longing, but as a wolverine I am strong and pure. As a man I would be called a misanthrope. I am aloneness and hostility. This is my virtue, not my failing. Only at mating time do I even seek out my own kind. We couple and we part. Men think us vicious and cruel only because they see their own viciousness and cruelty mirrored in our snarls, and they are jealous of our essence. As a man I was confused and distraught in all ways, at all times, but as I am now, I am wholly wolverine. I have no apologies, no excuses. I want to be left alone, and will do anything to stay that way. I am unrestrained antisociality. The other animals know me as I am. Men will never understand, because they are inferior. To be a man was nothing. To be a wolverine, even the last one on earth, is everything. My hackles are raised forever.

# BARRED OWL SUITE

for Jenny: 1987

1.

Centuries from cities, no job, I don't care.  
 Maybe I could die with you now.  
 I told someone we were going to spend all our savings  
 And kill ourselves. We could walk out into the woods  
 And just keep walking until we fell.  
 Then crawl up under a rock ledge above a stream  
 And go to sleep in each other's arms.  
 Let the woods eat us. It's the only way I could do it -  
 Just going to sleep on an unimaginably beautiful summer  
 Night, and not waking up again on this earth.

2.

I know that life is not freedom.  
 But I can't believe that death is either.  
 And I am perversely attached to this flickering consciousness.  
 I like the idea of spending a few more years here with you,  
 Listening to the drone of insects, the winter winds,  
 The woodthrushes and bluejays.  
 Suicide seems the ultimate act of sadness,  
 Most of the time. I am going to try to die  
 Without being completely drowned in sadness.

3.

Yesterday, finding the barred owl feather,  
 And ten minutes later hearing its song filling the woods  
 We had just left, makes it all seem worthwhile  
 In some incomprehensible way.  
 The owl was calling us back to life, but not to this one.  
 I can still hear it, reverberating deep inside my body.  
 I thought how beautiful it would be to live out there,  
 But I might have been thinking of suicide.  
 To have been born human is not one of the greater glories  
 On this earth.

FUR

In the simpler times,  
We threw sticks into the fire

Deep into the night.  
We listened to the beings passing

Through the woods behind us,  
We looked into their eyes

As they paused to sniff the air.  
We drowned in their silences.

We drank the moonlit streams,  
We sank into the earth.

We chanted songs to each other,  
Soft and low, in a strange language.

This was in the simpler times.  
We had everything then.

**BOOK III: SONGS OF THE GREEN HERMIT**

## THE UNINHABITABLE IMAGE

This is not my sun,  
This is not my earth.  
These words are memories of where I am,  
Dead voices that walk inside me at night  
To return to the silence of animals.  
This is not my skin,  
These are not my people.



## THE PATH TO GREEN EVENINGS

In deep hollows, lingering,  
Silver shadows of ice and snow,  
Sere browns and greys flow  
Around the bone-colored trees.

Haunted by the songs of ghost-birds  
One day soon to return.  
Winds, high and pauseless,  
The fall of light and mist

Into pools of still gold,  
And the dark ice jewels  
Clinging to a stone breast,  
Awaiting the hermit of the leaves.

## VISITATION

You are the stone  
In my hand, under water,  
The black owl of my throat  
Casting its lunar spell.  
I walk, while you are gone,  
In the image of you.

I drink white words  
From a violet flask,  
And listen to the river  
As I sleep. I speak  
From underground,  
Drunk on the red mists  
And winter's flint,  
An infinity of black  
Branches in my tongue,  
A planet of iron  
Resting in my hand.

The town is years away.  
My vigil is under stones,  
In the ringing glass  
Of moonlight. As I walk  
In your image my fingers  
Move in clear water  
Into the shape of an owl,  
Calling to me as softly  
As the trees of dusk.

## THE ELECTROCUTION OF THE MOTHS

Io        Luna        Cecropia  
      Sphinx   Hawk       Hummingbird  
wings sizzle       smoke       crumple

the great beauties fall to the streets  
the last of their line

Some day there will be no more  
metamorphoses

No myths that can be remembered

Nothing will be called anything

## KINGFISHER

We want nothing  
Beyond what we have:  
Wind and shadow,  
Silver-green echoes of the ancient river  
Shimmering along the edges  
Of the brilliant wings  
That have unfolded  
From our backs.

Beneath invisible moons  
Of snow  
I have placed your body  
On the marble altars  
Of the spring  
That rises from the earth,  
Tall and slowly,  
To drown in the winegold light  
Around our hands,

Long frozen  
In the cold black grasses,  
As we await the coming  
Of the purple cloaked galaxies,  
The crested splendor of your  
Presence.

## GREEN BANK NOCTURNE

The giant moon fills  
The pastured hollows,  
My breath falls asleep  
Beneath dead-leaf wings,  
And awakens, in the pulse,  
Under the whippoorwill's  
Dark throat of summer.

Long grass fills the room,  
A nest of gold,  
As I become your song,  
And the world is faint  
With the last things  
Perishing.

## WAYFARER

Awaiting the green moons  
Of summer,  
Your eyes hold all the ruins  
Of winter in their keep,  
Nights of ice and blindness,  
The terror of awakening  
Again and again  
In rooms of clawed steel.  
But already the bloodroot  
Answers your longing,  
And the bluebells echo  
Your soul in the hollows.  
Soon the spring will be  
Your gown of lace and emeralds,  
The summer an endless golden sleep.  
Feast then  
On the red grape  
And the russet light,  
Drink deeply of this honey  
And pass on,  
Beneath the shadows  
Of the silent crows.

## CICADA NYMPH

I have no need of song or wings.  
I want only to drink of this great root,  
Flexing my amber legs in the black earth.  
I do not want to rise in light  
Or fill the green hours with ancient music.

I might turn into gold or crystal,  
Ensorcel the rich white neck of summer  
And chant eternity's secrets for a season;  
Then fall from bark to dark dust,  
Or be imprisoned in a bamboo cage,  
Dry and songless as the chimes of August.

But I do not want to be born.  
I would instead stay here,  
Never leaving my root-mother,  
My maple, blind and moist and safe  
Beneath the whole planet.

## WHERE THE GIANT MOTHS GO TO DIE

There is a place between summer and autumn  
Where I go to write the echoes of your words  
In the indigoes of silence,  
There, where the white lilacs  
Are still reflected in the night waters,  
Awaiting the touch of a darker bird.  
I watch the world die slowly,  
In the moonlight,  
I am the eyes of the fields there,  
Grey in half sleep,  
Gazing back at this unrecognizable world.  
Here are my messages, then,  
Made of the particles of your voice.



## THE CHILDHOOD OF AUTUMN

Through evening mists,  
Glimpses of snow and dead leaves  
On the distant hillsides.

Within the rippling circle of doves,  
A luminous grey silence,  
The wet green scent of woodsmoke.

Spring shadows  
Of ice and snow,  
The russet sleep  
Of an ancient light-

While birds robe the air in song,  
A cold, dark April  
Rains down its dark petals.

## EVENSONG

Gold sun,  
Torn from the storm,  
Held in the dark  
Hands of the river,  
The light of cemeteries  
Shines upward from you  
Onto our broken faces.  
Speak now, sun,  
From the flood of voices  
Carrying you  
Away from our feet,  
Deep into the evening,  
Back to the brooding emptiness  
That closes around the planet  
Of the lone cricket's song.

## BECOMING SECRET

Close the curtains so that only the distant  
Deep red glow of the sunset  
Can be seen behind them.

Think then of the green heron perched  
On the dead branch like a marsh god;  
Of the dark blue bunting  
Half hidden in a tent of leaves;  
Of the woodthrush singing  
To our preterhuman memories  
In timeless hollows  
Where the white dogwoods float  
In a perfect arrangement of mist.

Shut out what can be seen  
And live again, invisible and still,  
In the real world,  
With blacksnakes and winter wrens,  
The huge, infallible rocks  
And the eternal and superior intelligence  
Of lichens.

## AFTERIMAGES

Echoes return from the coming autumn.  
Here, yellow cries rise in our path  
From the long dry grasses, and the red coal  
Of the ever more distant sun  
Is swallowed by the ancient green.

The birds migrate backward through  
Night and time to the origins of summer;  
Shadows envelope us as we sink into water,  
Our breaths stir the cicada shells  
As we pass from one exile to another.

Our lives are still there:  
In the darkness of the trees,  
Frozen in between the cuckoo's notes.

## THRESHOLD

I enfold myself  
In forgotten voices,  
The words  
Of leaves, stones,  
Roots.

My hands  
Lost  
In the woods,  
Submerged  
In thrush-light,  
In the body of earth.

## FOLKLORE

It is late,  
And I have things to say.

My face has been under stones,  
Chewing on larvae.

I have seen stars drowned  
In light, deep in the woods.

I have floated through the night  
Into the cities of salamanders.

When the owls formed a canopy  
Over my head and told me their tales,

I began my vigil of silence,  
Turning the world back into words.