

J O H N L E A X

Recluse Freedom

Poems



WORDFARM
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

WordFarm
2816 E. Spring St.
Seattle, WA 98122
www.wordfarm.net
info@wordfarm.net

Copyright © 2012 by Melissa Stevens

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of WordFarm.

Cover Image: iStockphoto
Cover Design: Andrew Craft

USA ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-012-2
USA ISBN-10: 1-60226-012-5
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition: 2012

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leax, John.
[Poems. Selections]
Recluse freedom : poems, 1990-2010 / John Leax. -- 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-012-2 (pbk.)
ISBN-10: 1-60226-012-5 (pbk.)
I. Title.
PS3562.E262A6 2012
811'.54--dc23

2012004156

P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Y 17 16 15 14 13 12

Contents

Considered from a Certain Aspect	11
WRITING HOME	
Home	15
Homecoming	18
Family Story	20
The Body of the Lord	22
Words	24
Sorrow	27
Marriage	29
19 Torpey Street	31
The Garden	33
The Woods	36
BRIGHT WINGS	
Dance	41
Landscape with Crows	42
Spring Herons	44
A Bird in the Hand	46
Two Rose-Breasted Grosbeaks	48
Orioles	49
Surprise	51
A Crow in Light	52
Faith in a Seed	53
Bright Wings	54
Great Horned Owl	55
RECLUSE: AN ADIRONDACK IDYLL	
Recluse	59
Star Lake Night	60
Eclipse	61
Praying the Psalms in Adirondack Park	62
Meeting the Bear	63
Life List	64
Climbing Arab in My Sleep	65
Matins	66
Mountain Literature	67
Bear Mountain	69
Star Lake Morning	70
Benson Mines	71
The Upshot	73
Proximate Thoughts	74

WALKING THE RIDGE HOME

One..... 77
Two..... 79
Three 81
Four 83
Five 84
Six 86
Seven..... 88

FLAT MOUNTAIN POEMS

Flat Mountain Lost and Found 93
On Flat Mountain Summit with Josie and Ernie 94
While Massaging My Arthritic Hands, I Consider the Advice of St.
Augustine..... 95
A Scrap of Paper 96
Late Night: Thinking of William Carlos Williams, I Remember the Red
Wheelbarrow and the Old Statue of St. Francis in the Shed..... 101
Floating the River..... 102
Wanting a Friend in Perilous Times 103
Hand in Hand with the *Daemon Meridianus*..... 104
4 A.M. Meditation on the Baptism of Christ 105
Walking Beside the River the Afternoon of the Autumnal Equinox 106
The Night of the Hunter's Moon..... 107
On the Morning after the Killing Frost, I Discover Myself
Almost Happy 108
Awake in the Eternal Present..... 109
Walking the Circuit around the Cornfield I Walk Every Day, I Glimpse
the Nature of Creation and Submit to Joy..... 110
In Flat Mountain Garden, the Word Becomes Flesh 111
Invitation from Flat Mountain 112
Flat Mountain Dream 113
Waiting for Rain, I Remember Three Old Poets Who Wandered the Slopes
of Flat Mountain in My Youth 115
Flat Mountain Folly 117
A Casual Account of My Life at War at Mouth of the Creek 119
Recluse Freedom..... 127

Other Books by John Leax 128

Considered from a Certain Aspect

...each kind of being is in its own way, is good in its own way, is beautiful in its own way.

—Jacques Maritain (Joseph W. Evans, translator)

The beaver, rippling the still
pond of its own making,
its small paws
feeding the thin branches into its nibbling teeth,
is in its own way—
good and beautiful.

The old, one-eyed man, not striding,
ambling, stopping and starting
on the path,
as his vision beholds and holds him
moved and motionless—What
has he abandoned to be what
he, in his own way, will be?

God knows.

He is *himself*, in his own way,
this moment, good and beautiful,
watched by the rich, red-brown doe
still on the path between
the fringe of cottonwoods
lining the creek like words
and the knee-high corn
that is, in its own way,
like the doe,
good and beautiful.

Home

Even then, before I knew the word
contained more pain than comfort,
I loved the way, when we rode
from Wilkinsburg to East Pittsburgh,
the streetcar, at a certain point,
rattled under the highway
and slipped along the steep tree-
covered hillside beneath the stone bluffs
down into the valley, and the stop
a block above the mile-long Westinghouse
plant, and the transfer to the car
to Turtle Creek.

I loved the way, at that same point,
the highway took to the air,
bridging the streetcar line to scale
the valley side and run along the ridge:
the way, when being driven to grandmother's
and a life I did not understand,
I could look back from my father's car
at the bluffs, where I longed to stand
on the porch of a teetering house
looking out, owning the valley
with my eyes, or stare out the side window
down onto East Pittsburgh and then,
from the wild height of the Westinghouse
Bridge that I sometimes walked, holding
my mother's hand in the wind, see far below
Turtle Creek running its sulfurous way
to the great Monongahela, the Ohio,
and the wondrous Mississippi.

I loved those moments of suspension

in car and streetcar between places,
the sinuous lines of the hills
running away from the crowded valleys,
and the veins of roads connecting
the mysteries of disparate lives
and habitations I knew darkly and in part.

I loved the way, from the streetcar stop,
I knew if I wound up the switch-backing
streets, I would find the Greensburg Pike,
and it would lead to a house where
sleep descended on my eyes and I dreamed
of greater hills and valleys holding
me safely in their folds. And I loved
that the way to that house was a longer walk
than I would make, that that journey
could be accomplished only by another's grace,
and that, though we did not go that way,
once we had, and so I knew we could again.

I loved the way we'd take the number seven
up the street along the plant
(where my grandfather worked) rising
like another bluff over my head
to Turtle Creek itself, and from there
ride the bus along another creek
up Brown Avenue out of town
two or three miles to Leax Lane,
where once I lived in wholeness,
where broken truth occupied a wounded
hill that slowly leaked its orange waters
down and down and down until they ran
under that bridge of suicides and wind,
where I held tight my mother's hand
and made it safe across.

I loved the way, from any point,
I knew the hills and waters were a guide,
that even as they ran off together,
giving up their richness to a delta
far away, I could, by placing one foot
after the other, trust them
to lead me home.

Dance

At the drip line of the apple tree, a bird
kicked up snow as if it were
bathing in dust. In the unsteady light,
I called the bird a dove.

Its head bobbed sharply up and down.
Rising puffs of white rose over it
as it slowly turned, leaving the yard
imprinted as if by angel wings.

A dark third wing, previously
hidden, emerged from the drift,
as if a second bird were dancing
close against its breast.

The wing twitched once, twice,
as if it would catch the air
or repel the closeness of its striking
partner. And then the dance came round.

A sharp-shinned hawk looked up.
He shifted, stabbed the snow,
lifted a winter-olive goldfinch
in his beak and flew.

I stood in the window. The emptied
imprints filled with light.

Recluse

For Chinese intellectuals, living as a recluse did not normally mean living the ascetic life of an isolated hermit. Instead it meant a highly cultivated life in a secluded mountain setting, complete with family and visiting friends.

—David Hinton, *The Mountain Poems of Hsieh Ling-yun*

When the Vanderbilts purchased Sagamore from William West Durant, they constructed an outdoor bowling alley on a reinforced concrete slab that withstood an earthquake. The architectural originality of the camp, however, was all in the façade. Nothing of substance was effected. Nor was the life original.

One of the tasks of their servants, who lived out of sight, was to greet guests by setting off fireworks as they arrived.

At Star Lake in the shadow of Maple Mountain, I live with my wife in a four-room cabin. Were it at Sagamore, it would be in the servants' village. On the wall beside our door a sign identifies the cabin as *Sparrows' Nest*. This comforts me, for the Psalmist writes, "Even the sparrow finds a home," and Jesus himself proclaims, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." I live here apart, a temporary resident, and work contentedly, secluded in this mountain setting. Friends visit my wife.

What name should we give this place we call for so short a time our home? Shall we call it a wilderness containing a garden walled against the wild? Or is it the One vast garden holding the wild we must preserve to know our lives originally?

Is it of any consequence that Durant died a pauper, that Vanderbilt was lost at sea? Is it safe to ascend a height?

Flat Mountain Lost and Found

Hidden heights rise
over landscapes unimagined
by loquacious travelers.

Bears rake blueberries
with gentle claws
and growl approvingly
when one approaches empty
of voracious thought.

Go away or come.
It does not matter.

Who isn't already
at Flat Mountain
is surely lost.

A Scrap of Paper

1.

A friend brought us firewood in the autumn, not enough to fully heat the house, but enough for the small stove we now burn evenings and on weekends after I've walked along the snowy ridge above the river.

This cold morning—
icicles in my beard
wrinkles in my skin

Clarified, I twist old poems into tight sticks to start the flames.

My coals?
Ha!
Ignite your own heart.

2.

The same friend gave me rough-sawn hemlock from his mill to replace the raised beds in my vegetable garden. In early spring, before the ground was warm, I laid out a new design on a scrap of paper. It took a month to realize it on the ground. From left-over boards I made an arbor for an entrance and a gate decorated with an oversized painted tulip.

My garden folly—
speculation
in petals!

3.

Enriched by compost, the beds were quickly overgrown, the hemlock hidden beneath thick foliage.

Defended by tiny needles
the squash vines
climb where they will

In the groundhog trap
the slug-gnawed broccoli
becomes irresistible

Beetle after beetle
jagged feet clinging
to my fingers
I cleanse the garden

4.

It was my desire to retire without followers, to live companioned
by my books and poems among these vegetables, flowers, and
fruit.

It was not meant to be—
children nibble the sorrel
claiming my path

It was my desire to be awake to the smallest movement of insect
or bird, to make maintenance holy, to find every task a medita-
tion.

In my idleness
sitting in the garden
going to seed
I consider
a single question:
shall I rise
and close the gate?

5.

Just after the 4th of July, an old friend and I traveled with our wives to hear a celebrated poet. The audience was large, filling a covered amphitheater. Two white-bearded cynics, we sat in the last row under the roof where the breeze was cool.

“He’s a poet of sentiment,” my friend said.

“Yes,” I agreed. “He cleverly manages details and builds to a touching moment.”

We visited the bookstore following the reading. No copy of his work remained for sale.

In the shallows of the lily pond
small fish—what can they know
of winter or spring?
—gold scales in the sun

6.

Some nights later I dreamed of a friend dead many years, a poet of brilliant intellect. He was not dead but had been living, protected by his wife, as a recluse hidden in the upstairs of his country house. Sometimes at night he walked in his garden. For a reason never explained he revealed himself to me. I asked if we might resume our exchange of letters. “Yes,” he answered, “but not as before. I want to hear nothing of poetry. Write only of your garden.”

At his death I had written

Where did he go?
Into the eye of quiet—
tossed by the hurricane winds
of the Spirit

7.

A tooth was causing me pain, so I took myself to the dentist. He determined I needed a crown. After much grinding, he paused and spoke. "You have what we call a short tooth. If I were you, I'd skip the cosmetic porcelain and simply have a metal crown."

"Fine with me," I said. "I'm trying to keep my mouth shut anyway."

Shall I interrogate my silence?

Mindful of nothing
but my brush
I paint the ricks
that will hold the wood
that will hold the fire
that will be light
in the long cold

8.

In the 17th century Basho complained that he could write nothing to compare with the greatness of the writers he followed. Everything, he said, comes off as imitation. He wrote, "It is easy enough to say, for example, that such and such a day was rainy in the morning but fine in the afternoon, that there was a pine tree at such and such a place, or that the name of a river at a certain place was such and such, for these things are what everyone says in their diaries" (translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa).

I went hiking with a young poet who offered to accompany me on the last trail I had not walked along the river's gorge.

I stood at Hog's Back Lookout—
on the far peninsula point
a stunted juniper

500 years old

At home

In the wash
of hummingbird wings
I scrub from my ears
ambition's buzz

9.

Considering the overgrown garden beds, I remember a teacher
once told me if I would learn to write, I would need to learn
what to keep out.

Gathering basket
in hand I swing
the garden gate

The Night of the Hunter's Moon

From the disturbance of the great, lake city,
I fled south, up the river to Mouth of the Creek.
Driving the ridge, above the dividing gorge,
I drove between the Hunter's Moon rising
to the east and falling sun lighting vermillion
clouds to the west. Confucius said, *The virtuous
love mountains; the wise love waters.*
Dissolute in the perturbation of motion,
I descended to the valley at the deep cut,
where the dry canal leaves the riverside.

Darkness came to me. The familiar road,
dangerous with deer, settled my mind.
*He who flees ought to know the place
to which he ought to flee.* Bears roam here,
look in at screen doors. Coyotes bark
and squabble in the hills, pick off
wandering cats. Good for them!

Beyond Whisky Bridge, the takeout
before the falls for high-water drifters,
I slowed. *In flight is my beginning.*
I came to Mouth of the Creek,
talked quietly with my wife, sipped hibiscus tea.
The earlier form is lost in the change
of all things to a state of greater splendor.

Flat Mountain is never far.

Other Books by John Leax

Poetry

Reaching into Silence

The Task of Adam

Country Labors

Tabloid News

Prose

In Season and Out

Standing Ground

Grace Is Where I Live

Out Walking

Fiction

Nightwatch

Chapbooks

A Proper Reticence

Finding the Word

Meditations on the Alphabet

Shoring the Ruins

The Fall's Discipline