

**Classic Poetry Series**

**David Wagoner**  
**- poems -**

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# David Wagoner(5 June 1926)

David Russell Wagoner is an American poet who has written many poetry collections and ten novels. Two of his books have been nominated for National Book Awards.

## <b>Early Life</b>

Born in Massillon, Ohio and raised in Whiting, Indiana from the age of seven, Wagoner attended Pennsylvania State University where he was a member of Naval ROTC and graduated in three years. He received an M.A. in English from the Indiana University in 1949 and has taught at the University of Washington since 1954 on the suggestion of friend and fellow poet Theodore Roethke.

## <b>Career</b>

Wagoner was editor of Poetry Northwest from 1966 to 2002 and his play An Eye For An Eye For An Eye was produced in 1973. Wagoner was elected chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1978 and served in that capacity until 1999. One of his novels, The Escape Artist, was turned into a film by executive producer Francis Ford Coppola. He currently teaches in the low-residency MFA program of the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts on Whidbey Island.

The natural environment of the Pacific Northwest is the subject of much of David Wagoner's poetry. He cites his move from the Midwest as a defining moment: "[W]hen I came over the Cascades and down into the coastal rainforest for the first time in the fall of 1954, it was a big event for me, it was a real crossing of a threshold, a real change of consciousness. Nothing was ever the same again."

# A Snap Quiz in Body Language

We can't hear what they're saying, but that man is holding that woman in his arms. Your assignment is to deduce their thoughts from what they do. They've left no apparent space between their bodies. It could be called a close embrace, but notice her arms are at her sides, her hands relaxed, her face impassive, while he's whispering something in her ear. His upper torso is tilted slightly forward. Hers is yielding but not in a way suggesting sweet surrender. Is this a seduction scene? Is she being held for questioning? Should she call a lawyer? He's looking into her eyes now. How wide open would you say they are? What does he see in them? If he were to let her go, class, what would she do?

David Wagoner

# Among Driftwood

Trees haven't come here to die. They've done that  
in other forests, on other coasts, having lost  
their leaves and their bark and come ashore  
by themselves on a five-mile sand spit. Branches  
and split logs, upended stumps, roots in the wind,  
and in one small cove, someone  
with nothing better to do it with  
has built a shack, then abandoned it—  
a doorway, but no roof, accidental windows,  
no hope of a foundation. It's already  
slumping back to what it was  
like a sandcastle. These parts of trees  
have surrendered and been washed clean  
of imperfections. They won't be judged  
for punk knot, frost crack, pitch scab,  
or heart rot by lumbermen. The stump outside  
the door has ninety rings on its face  
and is looking good for more,  
regardless of contractors. I remember  
shacks in the woods and shacks nailed up in trees  
and along bent railroad tracks,  
under new freeways, and up skid-road alleys  
where the impulse was to be half savage  
or halfway civilized, to be where  
no one could say, at least for a little while,  
Get out of there. Keep moving. Go away.  
I crawl inside as if I'm coming home.

David Wagoner

# At The Door

All actors look for them-the defining moments  
When what a character does is what he is.  
The script may say, He goes to the door  
And exits or She goes out the door stage left.

But you see your fingers touching the doorknob,  
Closing around it, turning it  
As if by themselves. The latch slides  
Out of the strike-plate, the door swings on its hinges,  
And you're about to take that step  
Over the threshold into a different light.

For the audience, you may simply be  
Disappearing from the scene, yet in those few seconds  
You can reach for the knob as the last object on earth  
You wanted to touch. Or you can take it  
Warmly like the hand your father offered  
Once in forgiveness and afterward  
Kept to himself.

Or you can stand there briefly, as bewildered  
As by the door of a walk-in time-lock safe,  
Stand there and stare  
At the whole concept of shutness, like a rat  
Whose maze has been rebaffled overnight,  
Stand still and quiver, unable to turn  
Around or go left or right.

Or you can grasp it with a sly, soundless discretion,  
Open it inch by inch, testing each fraction  
Of torque on the spindles, on tiptoe  
Slip yourself through the upright slot  
And press the lock-stile silently  
Back into its frame.

Or you can use your shoulder  
Or the hard heel of your shoe  
And a leg-thrust to break it open.

Or you can approach the door as if accustomed  
To having all barriers open by themselves.  
You can wrench aside  
This unauthorized interruption of your progress  
And then leave it ajar  
For others to do with as they may see fit.

Or you can stand at ease  
And give the impression you can see through  
This door or any door and have no need  
To take your physical self to the other side.

Or you can turn the knob as if at last  
Nothing could please you more, your body language  
Filled with expectations of joy at where you're going,  
Holding yourself momentarily in the posture  
Of an awestruck pilgrim at the gate-though you know  
You'll only be stepping out against the scrim  
Or a wobbly flat daubed with a landscape,  
A scribble of leaves, a hint of flowers,  
The bare suggestion of a garden.

David Wagoner

# Bums at Breakfast

Daily, the bums sat down to eat in our kitchen.  
They seemed to be whatever the day was like:  
If it was hot or cold, they were hot or cold;  
If it was wet, they came in dripping wet.  
One left his snowy shoes on the back porch  
But his socks stuck to the clean linoleum,  
And one, when my mother led him to the sink,  
Wrung out his hat instead of washing his hands.

My father said they'd made a mark on the house,  
A hobo's sign on the sidewalk, pointing the way.  
I hunted everywhere, but never found it.  
It must have said, 'It's only good in the morning-  
When the husband's out.' My father knew by heart  
Lectures on Thrift and Doggedness,  
But he was always either working or sleeping.  
My mother didn't know any advice.

They ate their food politely, with old hands,  
Not looking around, and spoke in short, plain answers.  
Sometimes they said what they'd been doing lately  
Or told us what was wrong; but listening hard,  
I broke their language into secret codes:  
Their east meant west, their job meant walking and walking,  
Their money meant danger, home meant running and hiding,  
Their father and mother were different kinds of weather.

Dumbly, I watched them leave by the back door,  
Their pockets empty as a ten-year-old's;  
Yet they looked twice as rich, being full of breakfast.  
I carried mine like a lump all the way to school.  
When I was growing hungry, where would they be?  
None ever came twice. Never to lunch or dinner.  
They were always starting fresh in the fresh morning.  
I dreamed of days that stopped at the beginning.

David Wagoner

# Do Not Proceed Beyond This Point without a Guide

The official warning, nailed to a hemlock,  
Doesn't say why. I stand with my back to it,  
Afraid I've come as far as I can  
By being stubborn, and look  
Downward for miles at the hazy crags and spurs.

A rubble-covered ridge like a bombed stairway  
Leads up beyond the sign. It doesn't  
Seem any worse than what I've climbed already.  
Why should I have to take a guide along  
To watch me scaring myself to death?

What was it I wanted? A chance to look around  
On a high rock already named and numbered  
By somebody else? A chance to shout  
Over the heads of people who quit sooner?  
Shout what? I can't go tell it on the mountain.

I sit for a while, raking the dead leaves  
Out of my lungs and traveling lightheaded  
Downward again in my mind's eye, till there's nothing  
Left of my feet but rags and bones  
And nothing to look down on but my shoes.

The closer I come to it, the harder it is to doubt  
How well this mountain can take me or leave me.  
The hemlock had more sense. It stayed where it was,  
Grew up and down at the same time, branch and root,  
Being a guide instead of needing one.

David Wagoner



# Every Good Boy Does Fine

I practiced my cornet in a cold garage  
Where I could blast it till the oil in drums  
Boomed back; tossed free throws till I couldn't move my thumbs;  
Sprinted through tires, tackling a headless dummy.

In my first contest, playing a wobbly solo,  
I blew up in the coda, alone on stage,  
And twisting like my hand-tied necktie, saw the judge  
Letting my silence dwindle down his scale.

At my first basketball game, gangling away from home  
A hundred miles by bus to a dressing room,  
Under the showering voice of the coach, I stood in a towel,  
Having forgotten shoes, socks, uniform.

In my first football game, the first play under the lights  
I intercepted a pass. For seventy yards, I ran  
Through music and squeals, surging, lifting my cleats,  
Only to be brought down by the safety man.

I took my second chances with less care, but in dreams  
I saw the bald judge slumped in the front row,  
The coach and team at the doorway, the safety man  
Galloping loud at my heels. They watch me now.

You who have always homed your way through passages,  
Sat safe on the bench while some came naked to court,  
Slipped out of arms to win in the long run,  
Consider this poem a failure, sprawling flat on a page.

David Wagoner

## Following A Stream

Don't do it, the guidebook says,  
if you're lost. Then it goes on  
    to talk about something else,  
    taking the easy way out,  
which of course is what water does  
as a matter of course always  
    taking whatever turn  
    the earth has told it to  
while and since it was born,  
including flowing over  
    the edge of a waterfall  
    or simply disappearing  
underground for a long dark time  
before it reappears  
    as a spring so far away  
    from where you thought you were  
and where you think you are  
it might never occur  
    to you to imagine where  
    that could be as you go downhill.

David Wagoner



# For a Student Sleeping in a Poetry Workshop

I've watched his eyelids sag, spring open  
Vaguely and gradually go sliding  
Shut again, fly up  
With a kind of drunken surprise, then wobble  
Peacefully together to send him  
Home from one school early. Soon his lashes  
Flutter in REM sleep. I suppose he's dreaming  
What all of us kings and poets and peasants  
Have dreamed: of not making the grade,  
Of draining the inexhaustible horn cup  
Of the cerebral cortex where ganglions  
Are ganging up on us with more connections  
Than atoms in heaven, but coming up once more  
Empty. I see a clear stillness  
Settle over his face, a calming of the surface  
Of water when the wind dies. Somewhere  
Down there, he's taking another course  
Whose resonance (let's hope) resembles  
The muttered thunder, the gutter bowling, the lightning  
Of minor minions of Thor, the groans and gurgling  
Of feral lovers and preliterate Mowglis, the songs  
Of shamans whistled through bird bones. A worried neighbor  
Gives him the elbow, and he shudders  
Awake, recollects himself, brings back  
His hands from aboriginal outposts,  
Takes in new light, reorganizes his shoes,  
Stands up in them at the buzzer, barely recalls  
His books and notebooks, meets my eyes  
And wonders what to say and whether to say it,  
Then keeps it to himself as today's lesson.

David Wagoner

# For Laurel and Hardy on My Workroom Wall

They're tipping their battered derbies and striding forward  
In step for a change, chipper, self-assured,  
Their cardboard suitcases labeled  
Guest of Steerage. They've just arrived at the boot camp  
Of the good old French Foreign Legion  
Which they've chosen as their slice of life  
Instead of drowning themselves. Once again  
They're about to become their own mothers and fathers  
And their own unknowable children  
Who will rehearse sad laughter and mock tears,  
Will frown with completely unsuccessful  
Concentration, and will practice the amazement  
Of suddenly understanding everything  
That baffles them and will go on baffling them  
While they pretend they're only one reel away  
From belonging in the world. Their arrival  
Will mark a new beginning of meaningless  
Hostilities with a slaphappy ending. In a moment,  
They'll hear music, and as if they'd known all along  
This was what they'd come for, they'll put down  
The mops and buckets given them as charms  
With which to cleanse the Sahara and move their feet  
With a calm, sure, delicate disregard  
For all close-order drill and begin dancing.

David Wagoner

# Getting There

You take a final step and, look, suddenly  
You're there. You've arrived  
At the one place all your drudgery was aimed for:  
This common ground  
Where you stretch out, pressing your cheek to sandstone.  
What did you want  
To be? You'll remember soon. You feel like tinder  
Under a burning glass,  
A luminous point of change. The sky is pulsing  
Against the cracked horizon,  
Holding it firm till the arrival of stars  
In time with your heartbeats.  
Like wind etching rock, you've made a lasting impression  
On the self you were  
By having come all this way through all this welter  
Under your own power  
Though your traces on a map would make an unpromising  
Meandering lifeline.  
What have you learned so far? You'll find out later,  
Telling it haltingly  
Like a dream, that lost traveller's dream  
Under the last bill  
Where through the night you'll take your time out of mind  
To unburden yourself  
Of elements along elementary paths  
By the break of morning.  
You've earned this worn-down, hard, incredible sight  
Called Here and Now.  
Now, what you make of it means everything,  
Means starting over:  
The life in your hands is neither here nor there  
But getting there,  
So you're standing again and breathing, beginning another journey without  
regret  
Forever, being your own unpeaceable kingdom,  
The end of endings. David Wagoner from *In Broken Country*

David Wagoner

# In Rubble

Right after the bomb, even before the ceiling  
And walls and floor are rearranging  
You and themselves into a different world,  
You must hold still, must wait for them  
To settle down in unpredictable ways,  
To bring their wars, shuddering,  
To an end, and only then should you begin  
Numbly to feel what freedom may be left  
To your feet or knees, to your elbows  
Or clenched fingers. Where you used to walk  
Or lean or lie down or fix your attention  
At a whim or stomp your foot  
Or slump in a chair, you'll find a new  
Architecturally unsound floor-plan  
To contend with, if you can move  
At all. Now you may remember others  
Who were somewhere near you before  
This breakdown of circumstances. Caught by surprise  
Like you, they may be waiting separately  
At their own levels, inside their own portions  
Of your incoherent flat. They may be thinking  
Of you, as you are of them, and wondering  
Whether some common passageway, no matter  
How crooked or narrow, might still exist  
Between you, through which you might share the absence  
Of food and water and the cold comfort  
Of daylight. They may be expecting you  
To arrive at any moment, to crawl through dust  
And fire to their rescue as they find their bodies  
Growing more stiff, assuming even more  
Unusual attitudes at every turn  
Of a second hand, at every sound  
Of a bell or an alarm, at every pounding  
Of a door or a heart, so if you can't reach them  
Now and they can't reach you, remember, please  
Remember, whatever you say,  
Whatever you hear or keep to yourself, whatever  
You scream or whisper, will need to make  
Some kind of sense, perhaps for days and days.

David Wagoner



# Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. you must let it find you.

David Wagoner

# Mapmaking

It's an old desire: a sketch of part of the earth  
There in your hands. You touch it, saying, There.  
So make your map:  
If you have no crossroads, no confluence of streams  
To set your starting point, you simply pretend  
You know where you are  
And begin outlining a landscape, using a compass  
And your measured stride toward landmarks: thrusts of bedrock,  
Trees or boulders, whatever  
Seems likely to be around after you've gone.  
You fix your eyes on them, one at a time,  
And learn the hard way  
How hard it is to fabricate broken country.  
You go where your line takes you: uphill or down,  
Over or straight through,  
Between and past the casual, accidental  
Substance of this world. Once there, you turn back  
To confirm your bearings,  
To reconcile what you saw with what you see,  
Comparing foresight and hindsight. These are moments  
When your opinion  
Of yourself as cartographer may suffer.  
Your traverse ought to return to its beginning,  
To a known point, though you,  
Slipshod, footsore by dusk, may find your hope  
Falls short of perfection: remember no one  
Really depends on you  
To do away with uncertainty forever.  
Your piece of paper may seem in years to come  
An amusing footnote  
For wandering minds, a record of out-of-the-way  
Transfixions (better preserved by photographers)  
Whose terrain is so far askew  
It should be left to divert imaginations  
Like yours that enjoy believing they've mapped out  
Some share of the unknown.

David Wagoner

# My Father Laughing in the Chicago Theater

His heavy body would double itself forward  
At the waist, swell, and come heaving around  
To slam at his seatback, making the screws groan  
And squawk down half the row as it went tilting  
Under my mother and me, under whoever  
Was out of luck on the other side of him.  
Like a boxer slipping punches, he'd lift his elbows  
To flail and jerk, and his wide-open mouth  
Would boom out four deep haaa's to the end of his breath.

He was laughing at Burns and Allen or Jack Benny  
In person or at his limitless engagement  
With Groucho, Chico, and Harpo. While my mother  
Sat there between us, gazing at the stage  
And chuckling placidly, I watched with amazement  
The spectacle of a helpless father, unmanned,  
Disarmed by laughter. The tears would dribble  
From under his bifocals, as real as sweat.  
He would gape and gag, go limp, and spring back to life.

I would laugh too, but partly at him, afraid  
Of becoming him. He could scowl anywhere,  
Be solemn or blank in church or going to work,  
Turn grim with a cold chisel, or he could smile  
At babies or football games, but he only laughed  
There in that theater. And up the aisle  
And through the lobby to the parking lot  
And all the way home, I'd see the glow on his cheeks  
Fade to the usual hectic steelmill sunburn.

David Wagoner

# My Fire

In the cave under our house  
I tended the fire: a furnace  
Where black fossils of ferns  
And swamp-shaking dinosaurs  
Would burn through the cold mornings  
If I shook the dying and dead  
Ashes down through the grate  
And, with firetongs, hauled out clinkers  
Like the vertebrae of monsters.

I made my magic there,  
Not the bloody charms of hunters,  
Not shamans or animals  
Painted on damp walls,  
But something from fire. My father  
Tended huge rows of fires  
And burned with them all day,  
Sometimes all evening, all night  
In a steelmill, brought fire home  
On his face and his burnt skin  
And slept, glowing dark red.

My fire made steam in coils  
And pipes and radiators  
Poured from the steel he made  
Somewhere I'd only seen  
Far off, the burning mountains  
Where God kept His true flame  
To Himself, melting and turning  
Blood-colored ore to pigs  
And men to something stranger.

My spirit would swell and sing  
Inside those pipes, would knock  
And rattle to be let out,  
Would circle through walls and floors,  
Turn back to water and fall  
To the fire again, turn white,  
Rise hissing in every room

Against the windows to grow  
Fronds and bone-white flowers,  
All ice in a frozen garden.

David Wagoner

# Natural Disasters

Long ago, we had to admit, in acquisitive English  
the Romans knew what they were talking about  
when they made a negative out of lucky stars  
by labeling some of the deadly ones disasters,  
and it's in their very nature, naturally,  
to be disastrous, to give even their most  
distant inhabitants and poor dependents  
hell now and then. Always, inevitably, as sure  
as we happen to be born in the abnormal  
course of events, more of them show up  
at all the wrong times and places and occasions  
with bad attitudes, ready to be that cave-in,  
this lightning stroke, that twister, those earthquakes,  
tsunamis, sudden rearrangements of shores  
and mountains and half or whole continents,  
and we're expected to be theirs in sickness  
and health in what we've dubbed forever  
and a day with stars still in our eyes  
and a star-like core still burning under our feet.

David Wagoner

# Old Man, Old Man

Young men, not knowing what to remember,  
Come to this hiding place of the moons and years,  
To this Old Man. Old Man, they say, where should we go?  
Where did you find what you remember? Was it perched in a tree?  
Did it hover deep in the white water? Was it covered over  
With dead stalks in the grass? Will we taste it  
If our mouths have long lain empty?  
Will we feel it between our eyes if we face the wind  
All night, and turn the color of earth?  
If we lie down in the rain, can we remember sunlight?

He answers, I have become the best and worst I dreamed.  
When I move my feet, the ground moves under them.  
When I lie down, I fit the earth too well.  
Stones long underwater will burst in the fire, but stones  
Long in the sun and under the dry night  
Will ring when you strike them. Or break in two.  
There were always many places to beg for answers:  
Now the places themselves have come in close to be told.  
I have called even my voice in close to whisper with it:  
Every secret is as near as your fingers.  
If your heart stutters with pain and hope,  
Bend forward over it like a man at a small campfire.

David Wagoner

# Peacock Display

He approaches her, trailing his whole fortune,  
Perfectly cocksure, and suddenly spreads  
The huge fan of his tail for her amazement.

Each turquoise and purple, black-horned, walleyed quill  
Comes quivering forward, an amphitheatric shell  
For his most fortunate audience: her alone.

He plumes himself. He shakes his brassily gold  
Wings and rump in a dance, lifting his claws  
Stiff-legged under the great bulge of his breast.

And she strolls calmly away, pecking and pausing,  
Not watching him, astonished to discover  
All these seeds spread just for her in the dirt.

David Wagoner



# Report from a Forest Logged by the Weyerhaeuser Company

Three square miles clear-cut.

Now only the facts matter:

The heaps of gray-splintered rubble,

The churned-up duff, the roots, the bulldozed slash,

The silence,

And beyond the ninth hummock

(All of them pitched sideways like wrecked houses)

A creek still running somewhere, bridged and dammed

By cracked branches.

No birdsong. Not one note.

And this is April, a sunlit morning.

Nothing but facts. Wedges like half-moons

Fallen where saws cut over and under them

Bear ninety or more rings.

A trillium gapes at so much light

Among the living: a bent huckleberry,

A patch of salal, a wasp,

And now, making a mistake about me,

Two brown-and-black butterflies landing

For a moment on my boot.

Among the dead: thousands of fir seedlings

A foot high, planted ten feet apart,

Parched brown for lack of the usual free rain,

Two buckshot beer cans, and overhead,

A vulture big as an eagle.

Selective logging, they say, we'll take three miles,

It's good for the bears and deer, they say,

More brush and berries sooner or later,

We're thinking about the future-if you're in it

With us, they say. It's a comfort to say

Like Dividend or Forest Management or Keep Out.

They've managed this to a fare-thee-well.

David Wagoner

# Road Kill

The three crows are scuttling back and forth  
    between the gutter and the dead possum  
        near the yellow-striped center  
where commuters are trying hard not to encounter  
    anything but the road on the way to work  
        this dark winter morning. The crows are hungry,  
and their half-finished breakfast is no longer  
    worrying about its share of the wealth,  
        so it's all theirs. Other birds, if down here  
on their own, on their own two feet, would panic instantly  
    instantly seeing us rapidly approaching  
        in our free-wheeling machinery,  
but not these customers who've learned exactly  
    how much time and space are being offered  
        between the violent edges  
of a snatch-and-grab breakfast. None of us  
    bothers honking. We've grown accustomed  
        to their evasions and skillful getaways,  
their unflappable manners in keeping this highway clear  
    of the evidence of our hurry to get somewhere,  
        no matter what might be unable  
to get out of our road quickly enough. Sure,  
    later, in the middles of our day,  
        we might slow down  
a little or even swerve, but it's rush hour  
    for everyone involved in forward progress  
        except the possum. The crows know  
they have to take chances now  
    while there are still chances to take  
        and their share of the market is still open.

David Wagoner

# That Child

That child was dangerous. That just-born  
Newly washed and silent baby  
    Wrapped in deerskin and held warm  
Against the side of its mother could understand  
    The language of birds and animals  
    Even when asleep. It knew why Bluejay  
Was scolding the bushes, what Hawk was explaining  
    To the wind on the cliffside, what Bittern had found out  
    While standing alone in marsh grass. It knew  
What the screams of Fox and the whistling of Otter  
    Were telling the forest. That child knew  
    The language of Fire  
As it gnawed at sticks like Beaver  
    And what Water said all day and all night  
    At the creek's mouth. As its small fingers  
Closed around Stone, it held what Stone was saying.  
    It knew what Bear Mother whispered to herself  
    Under the snow. It could not tell  
Anyone what it knew. It would laugh  
    Or cry out or startle or suddenly stare  
    At nothing, but had no way  
To repeat what it was hearing, what it wanted most  
    Not to remember. It had no way to know  
    Why it would fall under a spell  
And lie still as if not breathing,  
    Having grown afraid  
    Of what it could understand. That child would learn  
To sit and crawl and stand and begin  
    Putting one foot forward and following it  
    With the other, would learn to put one word  
It could barely remember slightly ahead  
    Of the other and then walk and speak  
    And finally run and chatter,  
And all the Tillamook would know that child  
    Had forgotten everything and at last could listen  
    Only to people and was safe now.

David Wagoner

# The Cherry Tree

Out of the nursery and into the garden  
where it rooted and survived its first hard winter,  
then a few years of freedom while it blossomed,  
put out its first tentative branches, withstood  
the insects and the poisons for insects,  
developed strange ideas about its height  
and suffered the pruning of its quirks and clutters,  
its self-indulgent thrusts  
and the infighting of stems at cross purposes  
year after year. Each April it forgot  
why it couldn't do what it had to do,  
and always after blossoms, fruit, and leaf-fall,  
was shown once more what simply couldn't happen.

Its oldest branches now, the survivors carved  
by knife blades, rain, and wind, are sending shoots  
straight up, blood red, into the light again.

David Wagoner

# The Heart Of The Forest

You pretend to look for wildflowers, but what you're doing  
is trying to find traces of where your feet  
lost their sense of direction in the woods.

You can name the trees and what's staying alive  
under them, but you're afraid this may be a time  
when you find the ghost-pale, skinned corpses of beavers

or the green antlers still on the skulls of elk,  
or the leaflike, feather-light wings of owls suspended  
upside down on spikes among living branches,

so you rehearse remembering the place  
where one of your clumsy feet once found itself  
secure, where it lifted you and moved you,

where you breathed again and saw, in the near-darkness  
of the forest floor, a fir tree fallen and broken  
into nurse logs, out of whose rotten, moss-covered sides,

among small spillways of lilies of the valley,  
dozens of other selves were growing, rooted  
all the way through into another forest

where nothing comes to an end, where nothing is lost,  
and lying down with one ear to the ground,  
you listened to its heart and yours still beating.

David Wagoner

# The Junior High School Band Concert

When our semi-conductor  
Raised his baton, we sat there  
Gaping at Marche Militaire,  
Our mouth-opening number.  
It seemed faintly familiar  
(We'd rehearsed it all that winter),  
But we attacked in such a blur,  
No army anywhere  
On its stomach or all fours  
Could have squeezed through our crossfire.

I played cornet, seventh chair,  
Out of seven, my embouchure  
A glorified Bronx cheer  
Through that three-keyed keyhole stopper  
And neighborhood window-slammer  
Where mildew fought for air  
At every exhausted corner,  
My fingering still unsure  
After scaling it for a year  
Except on the spit-valve lever.

Each straight-faced mother and father  
Retested his moral fiber  
Against our traps and slurs  
And the inadvertent whickers  
Paradiddled by our snares,  
And when the brass bulled forth  
A blare fit to horn over  
Jericho two bars sooner  
Than Joshua's harsh measures,  
They still had the nerve to stare.

By the last lost chord, our director  
Looked older and soberer.  
No doubt, in his mind's ear  
Some band somewhere  
In some music of some Sphere  
Was striking a note as pure

As the wishes of Franz Schubert,  
But meanwhile here we were:  
A lesson in everything minor,  
Decomposing our first composer.

David Wagoner



# The Name

When a man or a woman died, something of theirs,  
some token—a beaded belt, a pair of moccasins,  
a necklace—would be left beside the path  
where a hunting party, returning, would see it  
and know that name was dead now.

They would remember how to say it,  
but not at the campfire, not in stories,  
not whispered in the night to anyone else,  
but only to themselves.

Then, after years, when the right one had been born,  
they would hold that child above the earth  
to the four directions and speak the name again.

David Wagoner

# The Shooting Of John Dillinger Outside The Biograph Theater, July 22, 1934

Chicago ran a fever of a hundred and one that groggy Sunday.  
A reporter fried an egg on a sidewalk; the air looked shaky.  
And a hundred thousand people were in the lake like shirts in  
a laundry.

Why was Johnny lonely?

Not because two dozen solid citizens, heat-struck, had keeled  
over backward.

Not because those lawful souls had fallen out of their sockets  
and melted.

But because the sun went down like a lump in a furnace or a  
bull in the Stockyards.

Where was Johnny headed?

Under the Biograph Theater sign that said, "Our Air is  
Refrigerated."

Past seventeen FBI men and four policemen who stood in  
doorways and sweated.

Johnny sat down in a cold seat to watch Clark Gable get  
electrocuted.

Had Johnny been mistreated?

Yes, but Gable told the D.A. he'd rather fry than be shut up  
forever.

Two women sat by looked sweet, one looked like  
J. Edgar Hoover.

Polly Hamilton made him feel hot, but Anna Sage made him  
shiver.

Was Johnny a good lover?

Yes, but he passed out his share of squeezes and pokes like a  
jittery masher

While Agent Purvis sneaked up and down the aisle like an  
extra usher,

Trying to make sure they wouldn't slip out till the show was  
over.

Was Johnny a fourflusher?

No, not if he knew the got it up or got it back.

But he liked to take snapshots of policemen with his own Kodak,  
And once in a while he liked to take them with an automatic.

Why was Johnny frantic?

Because he couldn't take a walk or sit down in a movie  
Without begin afraid he'd run smack into somebody  
Who'd point at his rearranged face and holler, "Johnny!"  
Was Johnny ugly?

Yes, because Dr. Wilhelm Loeser had given him a new profile  
With a baggy jawline and squint eyes and an erased dimple,  
With kangaroo-tendon cheekbones and a gigolo's mustache  
that should've been illegal.

Did Johnny love a girl?

Yes, a good-looking, hard-headed Indian named Billie Frechette.  
He wanted to marry her and lie down and try to get over it,  
But she was locked in jail for giving him first-aid and comfort.

Did Johnny feel hurt?

He felt like breaking a bank or jumping over a railing  
Into some panicky teller's cage to shout, "Reach for the ceiling!"  
Or like kicking some vice president in the bum checks and  
smiling.

What was he really doing?

Going up the aisle with the crowd and into the lobby  
With Polly saying, "Would you do what Clark done?" And  
Johnny saying, "Maybe."  
And Anna saying, "If he'd been smart, he'd of acted like  
Bing Crosby."

Did Johnny look flashy?

Yes, his white-on-white shirt and tie were luminous.  
His trousers were creased like knives to the tops of his shoes,  
And his yellow straw hat came down to his dark glasses.

Was Johnny suspicious?

Yes, and when Agent Purvis signalled with a trembling cigar,  
Johnny ducked left and ran out of the theater,  
And innocent Polly and squealing Anna were left nowhere.

Was Johnny a fast runner?

No, but he crouched and scurried past a friendly liquor store  
Under the coupled arms of double-daters, under awnings,  
under stars,

To the curb at the mouth of an alley. He hunched there.

Was Johnny a thinker?

No, but he was thinking more or less of Billie Frechette  
Who was lost in prison for longer than he could possibly wait,  
And then it was suddenly too hard to think around a bullet.

Did anyone shoot straight?

Yes, but Mrs. Etta Natalsky fell out from under her picture hat.

Theresa Paulus sprawled on the sidewalk, clutching her left foot.  
And both of them groaned loud and long under the streetlight.  
Did Johnny like that?  
No, but he lay down with those strange women, his face  
in the alley,  
One shoe off, cinders in his mouth, his eyelids heavy.  
When they shouted questions at him, he talked back to nobody.  
Did Johnny lie easy?  
Yes, holding his gun and holding his breath as a last trick,  
He waited, but when the Agents came close, his breath  
wouldn't work.  
Clark Gable walked his last mile; Johnny ran a half a block.  
Did he run out of luck?  
Yes, before he was cool, they had him spread out on dished-in  
marble  
In the Cook County Morgue, surrounded by babbling people  
With a crime reporter presiding over the head of the table.  
Did Johnny have a soul?  
Yes, and it was climbing his slippery wind-pipe like a trapped  
burglar.  
It was beating the inside of his ribcage, hollering, "Let me  
out of here!"  
Maybe it got out, and maybe it just stayed there.  
Was Johnny a money-maker?  
Yes, and thousands paid \$25 to see him, mostly women,  
And one said, "I wouldn't have come, except he's a moral  
lesson,"  
And another, "I'm feels like a dead man."  
Did Johnny have a brain?  
Yes, and it always worked best through the worst of dangers,  
Through flat-footed hammerlocks, through guarded doors,  
around corners,  
But it got taken out in the morgue and sold to some doctors.  
Could Johnny take orders?  
No, but he stayed in the wicker basket carried by six men  
Through the bulging crowd to the hearse and let himself be  
locked in,  
And he stayed put as it went driving south in a driving rain.  
And he didn't get stolen?  
No, not even after his old hard-nosed dad refused to sell  
The quick-drawing corpse for \$10,000 to somebody in a  
carnival.

He figured he'd let Johnny decide how to get to Hell.  
Did anyone wish him well?  
Yes, half of Indiana camped in the family pasture,  
And the minister said, &quot;With luck, he could have been a  
minister.&quot;  
And up the sleeve of his oversized gray suit, Johnny twitched  
a finger.  
Does anyone remember?  
Everyone still some dead ones.It was a new kind of  
holiday  
With hot and cold drinks and hot and cold planted  
him in a cemetery  
With three unknown vice presidents, Benjamin Harrison, and  
James Whitcomb Riley,  
Who never held up anybody.

David Wagoner

# The Silence of the Stars

When Laurens van der Post one night

In the Kalahari Desert told the Bushmen  
He couldn't hear the stars  
Singing, they didn't believe him. They looked at him,  
half-smiling. They examined his face  
To see whether he was joking  
Or deceiving them. Then two of those small men  
Who plant nothing, who have almost  
Nothing to hunt, who live  
On almost nothing, and with no one  
But themselves, led him away  
From the crackling thorn-scrub fire  
And stood with him under the night sky  
And listened. One of them whispered,  
Do you not hear them now?  
And van der Post listened, not wanting  
To disbelieve, but had to answer,  
No. They walked him slowly  
Like a sick man to the small dim  
Circle of firelight and told him  
They were terribly sorry,  
And he felt even sorrier  
For himself and blamed his ancestors  
For their strange loss of hearing,  
Which was his loss now. On some clear night  
When nearby houses have turned off their visions,  
When the traffic dwindles, when through streets  
Are between sirens and the jets overhead  
Are between crossings, when the wind  
Is hanging fire in the fir trees,  
And the long-eared owl in the neighboring grove  
Between calls is regarding his own darkness,  
I look at the stars again as I first did  
To school myself in the names of constellations  
And remember my first sense of their terrible distance,  
I can still hear what I thought  
At the edge of silence where the inside jokes  
Of my heartbeat, my arterial traffic,  
The C above high C of my inner ear, myself

Tunelessly humming, but now I know what they are:  
My fair share of the music of the spheres  
And clusters of ripening stars,  
Of the songs from the throats of the old gods  
Still tending ever tone-deaf creatures  
Through their exiles in the desert.

David Wagoner

# Their Bodies

To the students of anatomy  
at Indiana University

That gaunt old man came first, his hair as white  
As your scoured tables. Maybe you'll recollect him  
By the scars of steelmill burns on the backs of his hands,  
On the nape of his neck, on his arms and sinewy legs,  
And her by the enduring innocence  
Of her face, as open to all of you in death  
As it would have been in life: she would memorize  
Your names and ages and pastimes and hometowns  
If she could, but she can't now, so remember her.

They believed in doctors, listened to their advice,  
And followed it faithfully. You should treat them  
One last time as they would have treated you.  
They had been kind to others all their lives  
And believed in being useful. Remember somewhere  
Their son is trying hard to believe you'll learn  
As much as possible from them, as he did,  
And will do your best to learn politely and truly.

They gave away the gift of those useful bodies  
Against his wish. (They had their own ways  
Of doing everything, always.) If you're not certain  
Which ones are theirs, be gentle to everybody.

David Wagoner



## This Is A Wonderful Poem

Come at it carefully, don't trust it, that isn't its right name,  
It's wearing stolen rags, it's never been washed, its breath  
Would look moss-green if it were really breathing,  
It won't get out of the way, it stares at you  
Out of eyes burnt gray as the sidewalk,  
Its skin is overcast with colorless dirt,  
It has no distinguishing marks, no I.D. cards,  
It wants something of yours but hasn't decided  
Whether to ask for it or just take it,  
There are no policemen, no friendly neighbors,  
No peacekeeping busybodies to yell for, only this  
Thing standing between you and the place you were headed,  
You have about thirty seconds to get past it, around it,  
Or simply to back away and try to forget it,  
It won't take no for an answer: try hitting it first  
And you'll learn what's trembling in its torn pocket.  
Now, what do you want to do about it?

David Wagoner

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David Wagoner

# Thoreau and the Snapping Turtle

As his boat glided across a flooded meadow,  
He saw beneath him under lily pads,  
Brown as dead leaves in mud, a yard-long  
Snapping turtle staring up through the water  
At him, its shell as jagged as old bark.

He plunged his arm in after it to the shoulder,  
Stretching and missing, but groping till he caught it  
By the last ridge of its tail. Then he held on,  
Hauled it over the gunwale, and flopped it writhing  
Into the boat. It began gasping for air

Through a huge gray mouth, then suddenly  
Heaved its hunchback upward, slammed the thwart  
As quick as a spring trap and, thrusting its neck  
Forward a foot at a lunge, snapped its beaked jaws  
So violently, he only petted it once,

Then flinched away. And all the way to the landing  
It hissed and struck, thumping the seat  
Under him hard and loud as a stake-driver.  
It was so heavy, he had to drag it home,  
All thirty pounds of it, wrong side up by the tail.

His neighbors agreed it walked like an elephant,  
lilting this way and that, its head held high,  
A scarf of ragged skin at its throat. It would sag  
Slowly to rest then, out of its element,  
Unable to bear its weight in this new world.

Each time he turned it over, it tried to recover  
By catching at the floor with its claws, by straining  
The arch of its neck, by springing convulsively,  
Tail coiling snakelike. But finally it slumped  
On its spiky back like an exhausted dragon.  
He said he'd seen a cutoff snapper's head  
That would still bite at anything held near it  
As if the whole of its life were mechanical,  
That a heart cut out of one had gone on beating

By itself like clockwork till the following morning.

And the next week he wrote: It is worth the while  
To ask ourselves... Is our life innocent  
Enough? Do we live inhumanely, toward man  
Or beast, in thought or act? To be successful  
And serene we must be at one with the universe.

The least conscious and needless injury  
Inflicted on any creature is  
To its extent a suicide. What peace-  
Or life-can a murderer have?... White maple keys  
Have begun to fall and float downstream like wings.

There are myriads of shad-flies fluttering  
Over the dark still water under the hill.

David Wagoner

# Up Against the Sea

At the foot of the cliff, the sea is taking back  
what it left there long ago, and the landowners  
have made a barricade of three old cars  
between low and high tide and loaded them  
with so many river stones, they've been weighed down  
below their springs, below their shock absorbers.

The waves are breaking over the side panels,  
on blurred teenage graffiti, and barnacles  
and tougher limpets have made themselves at home  
on mats and cushions, on the salt versions  
of vinyl and rust. The sea is welcoming  
all of them, as ever, as passengers  
at the end of a lover's leap, at the beginning  
of a joy ride down an old lover's lane again.

David Wagoner

# Wallace Stevens On His Way To Work

He would leave early and walk slowly  
    As if balancing books  
On the way to school, already expecting  
To be tardy once again and heavy  
With numbers, the unfashionably rounded  
Toes of his shoes invisible beyond  
The slope of his corporation. He would pause  
At his favorite fundamentally sound  
Park bench, which had been the birthplace  
Of paeans and ruminations on other mornings,  
    And would turn his back to it, having gauged the distance  
    Between his knees and the edge of the hardwood  
Almost invariably unoccupied  
At this enlightened hour by the bums of nighttime  
(For whom the owlish eye of the moon  
Had been closed by daylight) , and would give himself wholly over  
Backwards and trustingly downwards  
And be well seated there. He would remove  
From his sinister jacket pocket a postcard  
And touch it and retouch it with the point  
    Of the fountain he produced at his fingertips  
And fill it with his never-before-uttered  
    Runes and obligatos and pellucidly cryptic  
    Duets from private pageants, from broken ends  
Of fandangos with the amoeba chaos chaos  
Couchant and rampant. Then he would rise  
    With an effort as heartfelt as a decision  
To get out of bed on Sunday and carefully  
    Relocate his center of gravity  
    Above and beyond an imaginary axis  
Between his feet and carry the good news  
    Along the path and the sidewalk, well on his way  
    To readjusting the business of the earth.

David Wagoner