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# Old Maps

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# **OLD MAPS**

By

**Samuel H. Manhart**

**B.A. University of Michigan, 1994**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the**

**Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**(in English)**

**The Graduate School**

**The University of Maine**

**August, 2002**

**Advisory Committee:**

**Constance Hunting, Professor of English, Advisor**

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# **OLD MAPS**

**By Samuel H. Manhart**

**Thesis Advisor: Professor Constance Hunting**

**An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)  
August, 2002**

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at The University of Maine, I submit a collection of poems I have entitled *Old Maps*. Many of the poems in this thesis employ natural imagery, and while it is my intent to discover and analyze the natural world, I also hope to uncover and disclose a more thorough understanding of myself through verse. The self-reflections I see in nature both surprise me and find their expression in my poetry. It is my hope, as I believe it is the hope of every poet, that readers will find in this text one or two poems they would like to learn to read with their eyes closed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a great debt of personal gratitude to many people, but to none more than my parents for their lifelong love, encouragement, and support. I dedicate this work to Lila and Joseph Manhart. My wife, Emilie Brand Manhart, has been my inspiration, my motivation, and my toughest critic. Without her, these pages would not exist. The members of my thesis committee, Constance Hunting, Pat Burnes, and Steve Evans, have been generous of their time and criticism. Many other academic associates and friends have taken an interest in my poetry: Sebastian Matthews, Sean Henne, Jean Pataky, Jackie Livesay, Walter Clark, Alan Howes, Suzanne Spring, Deborah Marcero, Kelly Allen, George Randall, Elizabeth Wise, Klaus Brand, Beth Brand, Josie Sigler, Tabitha Morgan, Charlie Brand Manhart, Dan Hanna, and my sister, Lisa Manhart, all populate the lines that follow either in name or in spirit. I thank you all.

Sam Manhart  
August, 2002

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## Old Maps

## **The drink**

That boat ride was more than twenty years ago.

I remember dipping the cup over the side  
and drinking a raw, clear cupfull of surface.

Lake Superior's blue was unfathomable.

It doubled itself

over and over

under the baby blue of cloudless sky.

The coves near shore

were still warm enough for swimming,

but here where the lake disappeared

downward with sunken sunlight and wonder,

the water held a chill that flowed under my ribs

with each swallow.

The distant strip of thin green shoreline

bobbed and dipped, deep in August,

the tamarack boards of abandoned shanties

warping under the late summer gravity

of sunshine, sand dune, and spider web;

but here where the sun tangled

only with a sparkling plain of crystalline,

its warmth was Septembered away

by water and wind.

The day turned cool and the season turned

with one gulp drawn over the side of a tiny boat.

And here on the page where I say them aloud,  
there are questions to be asked of my memories:  
How do they register sunlight,  
and what is reflected from their blue depths?  
Does a tossed-in, kerplunking stone  
ever come to rest?

I still remember the laughter  
my question received at the time:  
"If I dove in deep enough  
with the cup in my hand,  
would the water come to the surface blue?"

And back here again,  
somewhere before the page--  
where I do  
my remembering--  
is a place more liquid than land  
where the next season, and the last,  
are always adrift just offshore.

## Old maps

The trail junction no longer exists.  
There was no right turn,  
or we missed it among the fallen trees,  
those that tapped against  
the transparent evergreen ceiling  
and toppled by virtue of their growth.

Or maybe we did find the spur,  
and the straight path  
was hidden by windfall.  
Still, we have found the summit,  
somewhat according to our stated plan.

And so we have reached a junction,  
and now we are free to head home.

And that home may be  
as elusive as  
the reflection  
of a late-spring sunset  
on a mountain pond,

the pond  
surrounded by scrub pine,  
fallen hemlock, and the occasional birch

who have all conspired  
to bury the foundation  
of a shelter that no longer exists.

## **Tasting the winds**

In the glare of late afternoon I couldn't see it  
circling me like rust around a junkyard.  
It finally had to tap me on my shoulder.

I turned around and stared down at my feet.  
Sand whistled against my boots.  
Tiny flags of beachgrass braved the wind,  
clinging to cracks in the pilings,  
and a sandpiper's shadow crossed mine at the knees.  
A spider scurried under the arch of my boot sole,  
frantic for a moment's cover or a new perspective.

I'm still trying to see my life in that moment,  
and this one too, still trying to stand still  
at each intersection of root and shadow and flight,  
to see the grains and the crumbings of now,  
to touch and savor them  
in the briefness between palate and memory.

## Deborah, making poems

Deborah sat sketching Samaine  
in front of the red orange  
andirons of the fire tonight.

I wandered past  
and wondered if Samaine saw  
that she was being drawn,  
  
and then I saw Deborah's eyes.

They saw and secretly caressed  
the surfaces  
of curve of neck,  
of a smiling eye in profile  
and penumbra of chin on chest.

Deborah versed her  
in stroke and gentle sweep,  
her brown eyes wide  
and her hand waiting,  
poised the way a leaf in Spring  
waits for rain to unfurl,  
sure of purpose and  
greening to the suggestions of  
available light.

I smiled,  
and my smile tinkered with envy  
at her gleaming voyeurism,  
and her sight.

**Deborah, have I seen this one before?**

**and as I'm saying the words**

**I realize that I know I haven't**

**and before I finish**

**the arc of my question**

**I know that**

**some small crease in my mind,**

**some waiting-patiently smile of recognition**

**has always**

**known her new painting.**

**I exhale the question**

**and see that**

**I've always been tip-toed**

**and held breath**

**for the blue curve of the nude's back**

**and the green light**

**through the open window,**

**the yellow.**

**Credo-- Navajo woman climbing**

I wait to follow her  
and believe in my own clenched fist  
raised against granite  
under the noon sun,

my eyes  
straining with wonder  
at the upward sweep  
of the Navajo woman,  
fluid and elusive as flute music.

She greets the sky  
where doubt is blued away by belief.

## Twelve

for Josie

When her mother was there

she'd sew all day.

Sometimes she'd sew all day and drink vodka.

Her absence is the long poem

her daughter can't yet write.

The daughter has seen the pictures

of people she knows

on the pin cushion

of missing people at the post office,

but for now she sits at home

and waits

and waits

and stares at the empty sewing machine

and wonders how it is that

already she is becoming blood.

## **Time zones**

He could see himself  
as condescending  
when it was pointed out,  
but only in the cuddliest  
terms of the word--  
bad jokes  
over long telephone lines.

He didn't see the cut.  
He couldn't feel her flow away.

## Five Haiku

Alan

Unruffleable,  
Like scent of sage in woodsmoke,  
A cairn seen in mist.

**Alan on teaching**

Don't hide the raisins,  
toss them in the air and go  
find them together.

## **Union Station**

**Black Chicago man,  
the bartender called him by  
name: Venerable.**

**Summer solstice**

The Lake Michigan  
horizon yawns and sunsets  
our tiny troubles.

## **Cat and mouse**

Clouds are a tiger's  
paw prints, the big cat prowling  
and striping the wind.

## **Burning time**

The leaves  
are  
tumbling  
down  
remembered harpsichord music,  
the pulse  
of this morning breeze  
piling up at my feet.

Little notes  
played  
down

in the days  
since we last spent our nights together,

our breath  
tickling fire.

And there,  
there  
you are--

you and  
the Santa Annas  
are  
tumbling  
over the Sierras  
and  
chuckling  
your way  
down to the coast,

scorching  
entire valleys  
as you descend.

## One year later

Ice-storm splintered birch tops  
hang drying this spring,  
the dryest I can remember  
in Maine.

Not a black fly or a moth,  
not a mosquito's manic hum  
or a tic until late late May;  
the spiders in the rafters  
are eating each other.

Living birch have tapped the poor soil dry.  
They've managed to water the sky green  
at the expense of oak and maple:  
red and sugar maple bud to a sun-baked,  
purple-veined wilt.

When the white pine go popping into flame  
and withstand the hot wind's char upright,  
new moss will curl its way  
up the blackened heights  
through force of root  
and a quenching certainty

that death and a moment's relife  
are as inevitable  
as lovers and forest fires.

## Gary and Matt

In New Hampshire, the name Gary is said with a softened a like the word *gallery* with the middle syllable lopped off.

It is not the hard midwestern a of Gary, Indiana.

The name Matt is said the same everywhere.

Gary has always been

from New Hampshire.

He works when he has to,

but mainly he kicks back

with Matt.

Matt, who never works, is

originally from New Jersey,

a kicked-back shabby mut.

"I stole him on a trip to New Jersey with an old girlfriend,"

Gary offers as Matt sniffs my open palm.

"Jersey?"

"I was in Jersey visiting an old girlfriend's parents.

The people next door had him tied up in their backyard,

where he'd stayed tied up for seven years. We

went and checked him out, tics all over his shit-matted fur.

The people weren't mean, really, I mean, they were about

five million years old, right? They thought he liked it out there.

So I'm threatening to call animal rights' organizations and by this time I have a crying girlfriend and these old people have no idea what's happening, and the next thing I know I'm crossing the Massachusetts line with an untrained dog in a car full of untrained dog piss, cause that's what they do, untrained dogs, they sniff around and find places that don't smell like their piss, and they piss."

"Sounds fun."

"                   Anyway,  
take him to the vet; ringworm, heartworm.  
Small doses of cyanide to kill the heartworm,  
vet says he probably won't last too long after that.

That was ten years ago."

"And the girlfriend?"

"That was three girlfriends ago, I don't know.  
When she left, she didn't have room for him,  
so he stayed. Also, I wanted him to stay."

"What's his name?"

"Matt. Name's the only thing came with him."

"So he's..."

"About seventeen, ...people years, and since I stole him  
he's been alright,  
ahh, 'cept for the cataracts.  
Oh! Matt's blind."

In the silence that followed, the old dog lifted his head to  
The absence of voice and waited for my response  
with upturned eyes of nothing, oil-slicks.  
I felt his tender, aged spine through his spindly fur.  
Matt wagged his tail.

"I hope he likes your music, Gary."

## **Silence gathering in northern Maine**

### **1. Surfacing**

The stars'  
individual reflections  
deepen the water's calm.

A loon strikes  
her first hesitant low note  
of the evening.

The splash of a fish follows,  
very close,  
and the loon sings again,

waking the lake  
to the night.

I lie down and lie still  
on the cool,  
smooth granite,  
soothed by  
the singularity of sound.

Her wail fades  
to a flutter

as the milky way  
salamanders  
across the crest of sky.

## 2. Walter and the hummingbird

Walter sat chatting with a hummingbird  
as I trampled the pebbles that beach the lake.  
Interrupting their meeting was my mistake.  
They eyed one another graciously,  
each as much for his own as the other's sake,  
fed by the moment's proximity, that of a  
canoe's prow yearning  
through and through its point of wake.

I can't say what secrets they shared, whether  
of flight or verse or the rhyme of the breeze.  
Walter turned me a smile when the  
hummingbird turned, adjourning downwind  
toward the water-lined horizon of trees.

### **3. Prey**

There's a new sound  
alongside the silence,  
rising above the loon's call  
and over the low slap of lake on land  
in the north wind.

Wolves are howling a chant  
to the forested night, some miles away,  
some many miles.

Moose, near and far,  
must also hear  
the wolves.

They all must hear  
the occasional airplane  
rush overhead.

I see myself as prey tonight,  
in league with the waking moose  
as the wolves go silent  
and set out, circling  
the scent of their next meal.

My new fear can only see  
the blue gleam in their eyes

as prowling, inevitable truth,

invisible as a distant flight  
fading from sound to silence  
beyond the clouds.

We all gaze warily out  
at the encroaching darkness.

#### 4. Henne's song

Winds in the trees arrange an overtone tonight,  
Sean Henne on pennywhistle, sitting in on  
Autumn's first curtain call, a swirling tune  
tinged with a lingering taste of Spring.

How crisp and clear his pipe notes were last May,  
darting through the just-budding blackbirch and  
across the big lake's tiny, homespun bay.  
His music is thickly muted with that  
memory now, or he's strolling through a  
clearing a couple hundred feet away.

His song circles low among huddled spruce trees  
and bounds swiftly skyward on a flutter  
of stiffening breeze through the white pines' needles  
and the yellowing petals of blackbirch leaves.

Undertones are also winded this Fall:

A train whistle's dirge for the rusting mechanical rubble  
of last century's hardfought timber haul,  
a moose churning with purpose through the alders,  
and wolves- although that might have been the coyotes' calls.

I remember the smile Sean'd hesitate to share  
after piping a cherished Irish tune.

In the midnight calm I can see that smile,  
as bright as the shine of the now-setting moon,  
as certain as this century's timber haul,  
and as sure as the Allagash River,  
flowing fast toward the shrill silence of winter.

## **New England mountains**

Lakes are the expression  
of these valleys,  
and rivers are the voice  
of these lakes.

## On the water

Listen--

rising just there  
where the stars are disappearing  
over the cleft in the ridge,

feel the first white ripples  
of it  
on the water  
on the other side  
of the pond;

those aren't the lights of town,  
they're further away made closer.

This night--  
this being to you  
this us watching the moon rise,  
taking possession  
of its light  
and hoping what shape  
its long reflection  
will say.

You can see me by it.

## Scanning the surface

I don't know when I write.

And that is a question; it asks,  
how will today's lines find me,  
will they seek me out,  
and what will I be about  
when they do.

They could be lurking anywhere--  
something the dog says maybe  
or a lone leaf clinging  
to a maple in the woods

or the cleave of cured oak,  
split and pinwheeling  
from the block of old memories  
or a memory snatched from an old poet  
and unshaped

or a more certain memory,  
newer, even recent, one of my own,  
of moonlit August  
loon song

and Beth with her camera  
the next day,  
approaching the loons  
on Donnell Pond,  
holding her breath with them  
as they plunged,  
willing them closer

and scanning the surface  
for the double ringlet  
of their next rise.

**Football in Maine: a mixed metaphor**

"Talk about  
wind in the sails,

they gotta find out  
that what they're doin'  
isn't gonna be enough

because so far today

The Black Bears  
are  
taken 'em to the woodshed!"

## **The morning news**

It was a beautiful day.  
I'd climbed a big mountain that yesterday,  
and the sunshine felt sweet  
on my warmly aching thighs  
as I stretched and coffeed  
in the backyard.

The dog peed  
and I smiled at him for that  
and we went to school.

Taught a good class  
and didn't find out until almost eleven  
that the sunshine  
and the mountain trail  
and that brilliant sparkle on the river  
on the way to school that morning  
didn't matter anymore.

In fact, you're the first person I've told  
about the mountain.

Went home and watched,  
my wife and I staring,  
looking to one another  
and occasionally touching

the coffee table or a knee  
to make sure  
things were still real.

## **In between fires**

I can't see the dog  
or tell what he's chasing.  
The woodshed is still empty  
and no September wind  
plays through the open rafters;  
it's still too soon to move quickly.

I sit and listen to nothing,  
a moment to moment  
to moment that seems  
not to move,  
not to live,  
but there is something darker  
than merely tonight,  
something more silent than no more news,  
  
an urge to touch the sky,  
to kindle a fire.

(We have always been  
better culprits than victims.)

When we do touch the sky  
our fires will make  
the ones lit against us look tiny.

We all silently agree on that  
and wait for the moment to move.

If the mourning doves are out there,  
even they are silent for now.

The dog licks my hand,  
lets me know he's here,  
lets me know we're together  
and alone.

I give his snout a pat  
and note the lack of blood.

## **Defying gravity**

**How shocking**

**to see it,**

**to follow**

**its jetwhite**

**under belly**

**and silver wings**

**against**

**a sunlit blue**

**and that trailing**

**dovetail**

**fly,**

**actually fly keep going and be gone.**

## **In December**

You won't see it happen.

It wouldn't happen if you were there.

You can swim out in the lake  
in the Spring  
and see the band of rocks  
twenty-some feet from the shore  
and wonder why they are there,

but Spring is another season  
with its own array of impositions,  
its own unique body of evidence.

It's late fall now,  
time of hard frost and frozen lake,  
frozen just yesterday or late last night.  
And it is a warm surprise to see the lake frozen,  
as it is every year.

The dog sniffs and paws the shoreline,  
suspicious, perhaps thirsty.

The man tries a tiptoe on the ice  
and then thinks better of it, retreats,  
advances with a stick...tap tap tap...

Retreats again, finds a stone

the size of a pig's head, advances  
and heaves

and for that brief arc of time the silence is absolute

and his eyes follow the shotput--  
he is sure the stone  
will slosh through the thin ice  
with a muffled kerplunk.

The solid thunk of percussion  
startles the dog and the man jumps  
as if waking from a falling-dream.  
He looks around and is relieved to see  
only the silence of the woods resettling itself,  
blindly tolerant of man and dog.

In a few days there will be a scattering  
of stones just offshore.  
One solitary walker won't trust  
the evidence of the last.

Bigger stones and the occasional log  
will dot the ice. They'll all disappear  
under a snow that will fall as silently  
as the lake was windless the night it froze.

Before they are completely covered,  
maybe as the snow is just starting to fall,  
someone will declare it winter  
and start away across the lake,  
afoot tenderly, as if into a poem,  
testing the water's solidity  
and hoping the words support his weight.

## **Prayer**

god is listening to you  
in the silence that gathers  
just as the loon dives  
from where the circles expand  
on the watery surface of dawn  
god is listening to you

## Visiting Walden

They'd stumbled through "Economy,"  
some of them.

The bell screeched  
to mark the end  
of the visitor's brief visit  
and he rose above  
the slamzipscurry  
of a substitute Friday afternoon  
with

"What?  
Oh,  
and read "The Bean Field"  
before you die... (zip zip) thrice--  
not a cat's nine in reverse  
don't add one third kitty and stir--  
it's the reading it on tiptoe,  
the seeing yourself  
in the talk of it,  
the reaping--

...If we could die thrice  
I'd do it once to know it right away,"

but with that the room was empty  
and he realized that maybe he had.

On his way out  
he remembered  
that it was *Rumi* who said

the keeping away is pulling me in.

**Regressive**  
for Lisa

Jennifer could always run fast.  
6th grade olympics-- gold gold gold,  
and she got all sparkling A's too.  
So did I for that matter,  
and so did my twin sister Lisa.

Jennifer was our enemy  
with those curls and the medals,  
and she didn't hide the fact  
that she didn't like Lisa.  
I always wanted to beat her up  
for that before I knew better.

She was friends  
with that bastardface Mike  
who ruled the class:  
"If anybody makes fun  
of Freddy with his new glasses  
I'll kill 'em."  
They were best buddies,  
and he meant it  
and we all knew it.

And he could run fast too.

He could catch me.

Lisa always hated him for that.

She hated that he never got beat up,

but we both knew

he didn't get straight A's,

not even close.

High five!

## AFTERWORD

When the Canadian poet Nicole Brossard visited The University of Maine in the Spring of 2002, she contextualized the development of her writing in terms of a dichotomy between early influences and, thereafter, voices with which she seeks companionship, a dialogue. I consider this an excellent system of nomenclature, and while the notion of a true dialogue with established poets seems a bit presumptuous for a young writer with only the most meager public exposure, I can speak broadly of poetic influences. I can also aspire to favorable comparisons with these influences, and perhaps that constitutes a form of companionship.

Robert Frost introduced me to the possibilities of poetry. His ability to say something simply, exactly, while simultaneously suggesting a complex range of alternative interpretations, made me a reader of poetry. That the exhaustion of apple-picking could become a lament on unfinished work, a dream, a seasonal ode, and a statement on the condition of the life of the poet all at once led me to read Frost thoroughly. When I started writing, his resonances permeated my words. But while an overindulgence in one writer produced a series of shoddy approximations in my writing, it also urged me to read those who influenced Frost, as well as those he influenced.

As to the former, Wordsworth, and specifically his use of memory in his poetry, has come to influence my writing very much. Some of the romantic predispositions that emerge in my poems I owe variously to Keats, Shelley, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman. Reading

those who have come after Frost has taken me, perhaps quite thankfully, away from him. The dialogue of "Gary and Matt" owes much to David Budbill's *Judevine*, a collection of poems set in a fictitious northern Vermont town. The way Galway Kinnell shapes a momentary encounter with a bird in "The Gray Heron" directly informs the moment I try to capture in "Tasting the winds." Still more recent voices color the way I see the landscape, the way I interact with my own poems: A friend once described William Matthews as a fox running through the woods on a course parallel to that of the reader; Jane Kenyon expresses joy and its absence with a truth one can squeeze like an orange; Louise Glück finds in the natural world a rare plot of common ground between personal, theological faith and the magical probability of nature's animistic expression. Hayden Carruth, Elizabeth Bishop, Gary Snyder, and C.D. Wright start a long list of poets who, in their focus on the natural world and the minute detail as platforms for broader expression (and thus, interpretation), inspire me and influence my poetry.

If I can claim to have a dialogue with other poets, it is with the poets I see and talk to every day. Emilie Manhart, Sebastian Matthews, and Josie Sigler inform my verse as surely as any poet I've read, as thoroughly as the mountains I climb, the streams I paddle, and the memories I shape.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Samuel H. Manhart was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on December 28, 1968. He was raised in New Kensington, Pennsylvania and then in Michigan, where he graduated from North Muskegon High School in 1987 and Muskegon Community College in 1990. Samuel then attended The University of Michigan and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and Language in 1994. In the summer of 2000, he commenced graduate studies in English at The University of Maine.

After receiving his degree, Samuel will continue to live, teach, and write in Orono. Samuel is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in August, 2002.