

## Josh Rathkamp: Five Poems

### What's Wrong with Being Human

I lived two houses down a dead end street.  
When the river ran rough  
we checked our basements.  
We called to each other to help.  
We hauled boxes up  
from the dark like large fish.

When Mary or Mark or Helen died,  
little by little,  
we all did. We sent flowers.  
The street took to looking  
like a Cadillac. It grew bolder.  
It grew rosy cheeks.

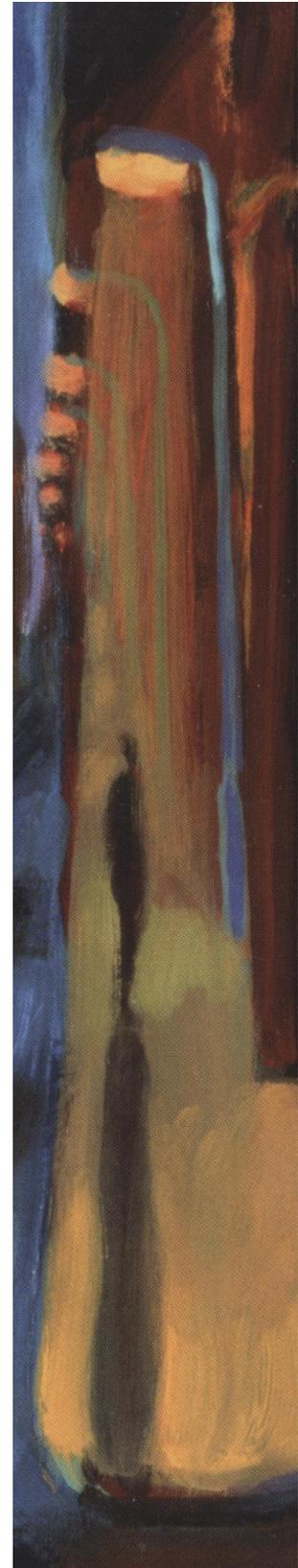
When Jack repainted, John  
repainted, and the painters  
ate lunch on the roof.

We said *it looks nice*,  
nodding at our mailboxes.  
We waved while shoveling snow  
off the walkway no one walked  
but the dogs and our manic-depressive  
mailman.

When we wanted an egg or a glass  
of milk we drove to the store.  
We stared out our windows.  
Our children grew without parents.  
We grew into speaking without words.

We thought our reflections  
in the lamplight were only there  
out of loyalty, and, if given  
a chance, would run  
like Mrs. Eddie's dead son  
naked, through trees.

Originally in *The Drunken Boat*



*Some Nights No Cars at All*  
Cover Detail: "Street Lit Stroll"  
Michael Bishop

## In Response to the Psychic's Conversation with my Wife

There are worse things to put under a pillow  
than an oiled baseball mitt.  
Say regret, say scissors, say an arm and a hand  
that won't reach across to where you lie  
waiting for a finger to trace with a finger.  
If nothing else there must be fingers  
on hands fumbling through shirtsleeves,  
fingers on hands searching for a hole  
that can deliver them from darkness.  
There are worse things to be than alone.  
Sometimes the nightlights burn out  
and we can't find the bathroom without knocking  
our shins, we can't find our daughter  
under the sheets, but don't worry  
she's there but where her head should be  
it's feet. Sometimes in bed we get twisted,  
we wake tired from sleep. What I mean is  
it gets tough before it gets better.  
Let's pack our bags  
for New York, maybe Toronto,  
some town with a chill where buildings  
grow up instead of stretch out  
so impossibly like your sister's Downward Dog.  
Sometimes the lights go out, the air  
conditioner trembles, but the men  
behind our house in hard hats  
always turn it back on.  
It's the time in the middle, the time between  
when everything's quiet, when noises  
we didn't even notice die down,  
let us be. We think it's the first time  
in years we can hear  
ourselves breathing. We think even if everything turns  
sour, if sweat dries in white rings  
under the arms of your favorite tank top,  
if the easy inflate pool, which wasn't easy at all,  
stays gunked-up and green, it wouldn't be all bad,  
a strawberry's still a strawberry  
even if it rots in the bottom bin of the fridge.

Originally in *Superstition Review*.

## **My Brother Met Lou Ferrigno Outside a Haunted House**

And it was good, tasteful, the way he sat  
almost alone, speaking to my brother as a brother:  
a hug, exchanges of money, a photo to remember him  
big and strong and green crashing through a wall.  
There was no line—no one else came to see him.  
I was there. My brother was there. And it seemed  
the end to all ends was actually, here—a haunted house  
in October, in weather unseasonably warm, in a hug  
and a souvenir picture. I don't know if they talked TV,  
baseball, or the way mountains in this town  
look more like red camels than mountains.  
Children scurried from the haunted house EXIT like roaches  
and I remembered the only true way out  
was at the end, past the masked high school boys,  
secretly high, secretly laughing and in love  
with the girls who run straight through the plastic-net wall  
of the make-shift haunted house like Lou himself did.  
All I know is it was a long time before my brother turned  
to leave Lou sitting there like a rock.

Originally in *Gulf Coast*.

## Spectators Along the Interstate

A few miles outside Kalamazoo we wonder  
how on earth the first spring storm

blew the roof off a barn,  
sent it dragging-ass like a barge out to sea.

On the news a farmer stood sure  
of its connection to God; it's representational, he said,

as if the roof had perched on a church steeple.  
By morning its picture plastered everywhere

brought people believing in miracles,  
the roof in all its ridiculousness,

still erect, flown over the highway  
in a perfectly flocked V. It's not hard to imagine

the spectators along the interstate,  
the wet stuck smell of a wet corn field,

the roof, a big roof so sick of the years  
of its body it had to let go, say yes to the wind,

yes to the water, yes to the earth that knows  
the powerful and the beautiful have different names.

Originally in *Passages North*.

## Stopping For Directions

When I stopped for directions we argued. The man in glasses behind the counter rose, said, *from here*, pointing at a small spot on the map, black as night, *follow the fork*. He traced a line on the map too many times, explaining it leads toward nothing, tall ponderosas, rabid dogs, and a stream, *one-*

*two feet deep*. Browns and rainbows weave there like someone drunk at the wheel. Yesterday, he said, a young man hooked ten in an hour. Said they'd hit anything—folded gum wrappers, small kernels of corn. *Out here*, he said, *everyone is desperate*. There were two pictures on the register: a cabin at night,

a fire engulfing that cabin, turning the night almost day bright. He said he lost everything—once. His wife, an autographed Ty Cobb baseball, his two leopard cats, a bloodhound too senile for the man, too dumb too, to smell the burning sofa or hear his wife, her screams returning back to the nothing

they were born from. He said he remembers nothing that day gave. Only the quiet before the night gives into itself. He hears in dreams his dog barking up the wrong tree, no one there except the trees and a beautiful woman too lovely for his wife, *too lovely*, he said, *too*

*damn lovely*. He said it happens, regular, twice each week. The doctors say, *sorry, there is nothing to do*. He must go on living like he must. *Man, it's easy*, he said, *keep driving straight through the night*. I looked back at the map trying to find the one line he traced like a stream with his finger. *Right here?*

I asked, trying to act dumb, like I couldn't hear misery, his footsteps, his loud breathing, his two cats frantically clawing through the screen or his one dog still digging holes in his dreams. There is something to turn up: photographs of a cabin at night, pictures of a woman standing next to a man.

Old man, out here, unlike you, I can say nothing. Tonight we are two clouds hovering in the sky— one swiftly a bluebird, the other a crouched man.

Originally in *Passages North*.