

J O H N   L E A X

# Recluse Freedom

*Poems*



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# Contents

Considered from a Certain Aspect .....	11
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## 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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*