

Love Poems / Politics / Ecology / Meditation / Imagination / Accidents

"One doesn't have to be human to enjoy this book." --Sky



**Eliot Katz** is the author of 5 books of poetry, including, most recently, *When the Skyline Crumbles* (Cosmological Knot Press, 2007), *View from the Big Woods: Poems from North America's Skull* (Cosmological Knot Press, 2007), and *Unlocking The Exits* (Coffee House Press, 1999). A cofounder with Danny Shot of *Long Shot* literary journal, he guest-edited the journal's 2004 "Beat Bush issue." Katz is also a coeditor, with Allen Ginsberg and Andy Clausen, of *Poems for the Nation* (Seven Stories Press). Called "another classic New Jersey bard" by Ginsberg, Katz worked for many years as a housing advocate for Central Jersey homeless families. He currently lives in New York City, and serves as poetry editor of the online progressive politics quarterly, *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture* ([www.logosjournal.com](http://www.logosjournal.com)).

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∞ Cosmological Knot Press

[back cover]

# View from the Big Woods

## Poems from North America's Skull



by Eliot Katz

[front cover]

# View from the Big Woods

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## Poems from North America's Skull

by Eliot Katz

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Some of the poems in this collection, as well as some earlier poems and prose by the author, can be found online on Jim Cohn's Museum of American Poetics website at [www.poetspath.com/exhibits/eliotkatz](http://www.poetspath.com/exhibits/eliotkatz)

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## Helicopter Ride

A low-flying helicopter through the Canadian drizzle  
takes us 45 minutes over millions of acres of evergreen forest,  
steep cliffs, streams, some oil rigs, some clear-cut land  
laid bare by mountain loggers.

The sight is breathtaking, a little scary--  
if we crashed these forests, who would find us?

We're taking a helicopter because dirt roads  
too soaked from rains to drive.

Vivian in back seat talks to Terry the pilot  
about which direction best to approach Nose Mountain  
to avoid clouds.

Terry turns to me: "Do they have taxis like this in New York?"

2000

## These Beautiful Territories

The cloud outside the window is shaped like an angel  
The gods have forgotten to say goodbye to these beautiful territories  
It's impossible to keep shoes unmuddy along these trails  
Danny was right, I should have brought a pair of hiking boots  
Oprah's rituals for recently divorced find their way onto  
    one of two channels in the mountain forest cabin  
What's the trick to self-esteem, to mindfulness?  
What's the trick to working one's way through all the damn tricks  
    and getting to heart of the matter?  
What's the heart matter in midst of a million poplar trees?  
How wander muddy trails to right spirit, right action,  
    end of grudges, compassion for all, the path  
    to suffering's end?  
I'm getting older--how wonderful it feels to find a new kind spirit  
    as perhaps company for the next journey  
One learns to release urban reliances here taking an aching back  
    out to outhouse first thing in the morning  
What history lessons are they teaching George Washboard Bush  
    back in the States tonight?  
Kerouac the Canadian said trees don't talk good  
It's true! I can't tell what the hell they're saying!  
Wooo taaacaaa waaaahhhhh eeeeeeeeee  
But for some reason they cuddle up like longtime friends.  
I give them advice--Duck the buzzsaw! Slip the lightning!  
Hold your nose when the trucks drive by!  
These trees will outlast America's next president  
    whether it's Slicker or Dumber  
& love will arrive with new water buckets to quench our thirst

2000

## 7 Types of Bliss

--for Vivian

No fires on the forest horizon but beautiful blue smoke emanating from inside.  
Vibrations at perfect complementary pitch from subatomic strings behind  
    eyelids to moans and screams echoing across the pine tops.  
7 hands, 49 positions, 2401 ecstasies, infinite beauty & kind clear light  
    with generator on or off.  
I thought a bumblebee in flowers near the porch sounded like a moose  
    calling from distant woods, we're a long way from Manhattan.  
Smooth strides calm intelligence going about cabin firetower tasks,  
    full bookcases, those eyes, that body, those hands, that love.  
Rock & rolling across the galaxy like next week we'll be 3,000 miles apart,  
    like neutrinos shot from the sun that will stop for nothing and no one.  
Like nothing, like emptiness, like total joyous effort, like no thing known  
    or unknown, like the orgasmic energy of the universe is present  
    in every touch or stroke if only the air is clear & we are ready to  
    receive it & we are.  
In a small luminous cabin, atop North America's skull, Nose Mountain,  
    Alberta, Canada.

2000

## No ideas but in moving hands

With no ideas for writing, Vivian reminds me at times like this  
to exercise the hand  
so move hand--write about how far you are from all the action  
in New York  
move hand--write about how nice to get away from Bushisms  
for the week  
move hand--like our beautiful fingers moved last night  
move hand--faster, so much to be done and such a short  
life to do it  
move hand--keep the mama & papa bears guessing  
move hand--turn up the Leonard Cohen CD and keep away  
from temptation of those 2 TV stations  
move hand--finish yr novel about a homeless outreach center  
director detective  
move hand--let the gods know you're not afraid  
move hand--swish the air and turn the broom into a stalk of edible corn  
move hand--persuade the earth's forests to denounce the Nike swoosh  
move hand--age the wine and smile gracefully  
move hand--try to imagine a utopia no one has yet written  
move hand--even if nobody reads yr poems, the least you can do  
is keep the graveyard at bay

2001

## Walt's Trees

Here in Alberta's forests, the trees honor a long-term peace treaty  
In the wind they bow hello to their neighbor trees  
They lower branches welcoming new human arrivals to the tower  
None defend themselves with guns or night-vision missiles  
None have developed high-tech pepper spray for crowd control  
None go to Congress every 10 minutes pounding wood tables--  
"give more war money"  
In Nose Mountain, no four-star general trees moan over lost suitcases  
In distance, I spot clear-cuts, where buzz-saws've carved giant figure 8's  
Who would cut down such beautiful herds of leaving breathing organisms?  
Walt's trees, will you forgive my daily reading of *The New York Times*?

June 2001

## She Makes My Lute Awake

It's morning in Nose Mountain's pine forest cabin  
Outside the elms and evergreens rock, rattle, shake  
Last night we read Tom Wyatt by the propane heater  
Today the air is pure, & she makes my lute awake

There's a symphony outside made by birds & strings  
Forest is grumblin as if ground's about to quake  
Baby bears are yawning & wolves all start to howl  
She radios the weather, then makes my lute awake

From bookcase window Sky the Cat studies Sky the Sky  
There's a peacefulness up here that string notes amplify  
When gods grow sick of heaven they'll retire at Nose gate  
Till then, I brew the coffee, she makes my lute awake

She plays some piano, guitar, a swiss trombone  
Up here Apollo stood and named the moon  
After breakfast in mythic robes we meditate  
Then flip back the jazz & make our lutes awake

2001

## 2001 Skies

July 1st, Canada Day, we sit morning meditation facing out Vivian's  
forest cabin window  
today lower back muscles ache, I squirm in chair seeking comfort,  
watch a thin trail of smoke rise from sage incense stick on window sill.  
Where does that smoke go? Surely to the place where dead souls  
congregate--  
Heaven & Hell a myth invented to avoid announcing humanity's  
humble place in the universe.  
Follow breath out nostrils, empty thoughts, let spirit enter soul's  
thin smoke stream.  
This morning Vivian's & my one-year anniversary,  
beautiful dawn of lovemaking before breakfast muffins--  
last night white-tailed deer spotted in dirt road by cabin,  
easy to see with light lasting till 11pm this far north--  
then groups of hares hopping across same road, then marble-sized  
hail thudding cabin roof an hour.  
Back to breath, the thin trail of smoke, maybe I should close  
my eyes today?  
No, it's our anniversary, all body energies whisper "remain open,"  
how thankful I feel.  
Vivian's Siamese cat Sky digs front left claw into my rubber sandal  
near screen door  
& starts clapping around the room, 3 tiny paws and one man's  
size 12 sandal--  
is laughing aloud considered a meditation faux pas?  
Back to breath, back to thin trail of smoke--  
a small gray moth clings to window from outside, unable to cross  
transparent threshold & kill itself in the flame.  
Inhale, exhale, too many thoughts to empty this morning--  
we are not yet anywhere the species we all know we can become.

2001

## Letter to Allen from North America's Skull

Allen, I'm sitting in straight-backed chair  
Vivian's Canadian forestry cabin Nose Mountain, Alberta  
meditating each morning, sitting up, eyes open, following  
breath thru nostrils  
more than I did while you walked this planet,  
like you taught me Naropa, Boulder, summer 1980,  
though with bad back I need help from this sympathetic chair.

Allen, I think you'd be happy your younger students & friends  
still care to follow yr advice, still write poems imagining your  
editing eyes on their shoulders--  
It's beautiful here, with eyes open out cabin window  
I can see the tallest evergreen on lawn sway in northern breeze,  
can see fog slowly filling horizon,  
fog inhaling my exhale, fog carrying my spirit in its hazy pouch  
traversing the continent.

Did you ever think we'd elect a president dumb as GW?  
Each evening *The NY Times* has to make key editorial decision  
whether to quote GW's daily linguistic fuckups  
or paraphrase instead, perhaps use partial quote ending right  
before tongue slip,  
about once a week including on front page a line like:  
"Teach a child to read and he or her will pass a literary test."  
Did you think thoroughly discredited programs from your lifetime,  
Star Wars and nuclear power,  
would spring back to the front burner--so much of our language  
still taxed by war.

Up here in mountain forests, there are no newspapers,  
though we've access to 2 TV channels & a too-slow world wide  
laptop computer web.  
I know Milosevic was sent to Hague's war crimes tribunal few  
days ago  
but haven't been able to follow his nation's reaction.  
I know there were protests in San Diego against genetically  
modified food  
but wasn't able to learn details--  
I wish you were here to see this new anti-corporate-globalization  
movement grow!

Up here I don't know who's winning at Wimbledon,  
don't know whether Barry Bonds continues to hone in on McGwire's  
70 home runs,  
don't know who won the Mets game last night or night before.  
Allen, I think you would have liked Vivian.  
Actually, let me introduce you--  
here she is, a meditator, visual arts exhibitor, now writing poems  
& experimental novels publishers promise to read,  
long hair, bluegreen eyes, laid back Canadian energy most of the time,  
a sharp empathetic mind of a once biologist and still herbalist  
and human rights ecological advocate,  
beautiful lover, here taking care of me outside my urban  
living proclivities  
during 8-summer stint as Alberta firetower watcher.

So, I'm doing alright--better than most in our nation,  
probably 7 million these days without permanent home,  
2 million locked away in nation's fastest growing industry--  
prisons,  
many for minor pot crimes, or drugs you always viewed  
as spiritual/medical, not criminal, questions,  
several hundred thousand families about to be kicked off  
welfare January 2002--  
Clinton's promise to end welfare as he knew it--nobody  
on TV talking about this historic safety net rip.

While I'm up here for two weeks breathing clean mountain air  
they may be spraying pesticides through NYC streets third  
summer in a row!  
Battling flu-like symptoms of West Nile virus, they've created  
a cure worse than the disease!  
If you were walking yr Lower East Side haunts after midnight,  
you might have to duck quick into alleyways to avoid  
splashed untrained spray trucks!

Allen, we still need you, your ideas, your imagination, your poetry,  
your presence,  
we're trying to honor your memory, trying to keep your compassionate  
activist utopian spirit alive.  
When Bush ran for president, he said he was a "compassionate  
conservative,"  
misusing one of your favorite Bodhi-politic adjectives--  
governing, he's pulled out Kyoto protocols on global warming,  
cut taxes on wealthy so no money to fix broken social programs,

renege on campaign promise to limit CO2 emissions, dropped  
a few obligatory bombs on Saddam,  
racing full speed to prove conservative credentials while we wait  
to see what the hell he thinks compassion might mean.  
If I figure it out, I'll let you know.

Allen, I miss our once-every-few-months political discussions  
at the all-night Kiev.  
Gregory died earlier this year, left another void in New York's  
poetry scene.  
If you get a chance, please write, tell me which part of the Multiversal  
Emptiness you're hanging out these days.  
Actually, if you can hear me now, you know I don't believe  
in any notion of conscious life after death,  
don't buy any of the existing scripts for Heaven, Hell,  
or the Ground Round.  
And yet, I write to you, as one writes to the future--  
and I remain, your student and friend, E. Katz.

July 2001

## In Defense of Lateness

Sitting at kitchen table, Nose Mtn, ten minutes after breakfast,  
nowhere to go, no work anxiety,  
no brochures due Thursday afternoon, no meetings to prepare  
for supervisor at noon--

It occurs to me: where'd concept of deadlines arise?  
Isn't a deadline something for the living to avoid at any cost?  
As best we know, in our three measly dimensions of space,  
time moves irrevocably forward--  
but whoever decided it was thus best to arrive "on time"?  
When I enter work late, which is often, why feel so guilty?  
Why not put off notions of alarm clocks and tennis shoes?  
Why not celebrate the mystery of delay, the not-yet of the not-here?  
Why not savor the extra fifteen minutes it takes to depart  
your apartment fifteen minutes late for the train?

Two years ago, a week after injuring my back,  
I was 20 minutes late for an informal date at The Knitting Factory  
with a writer whose work I admired.

I looked every left-side profile seated in the bar--none was hers.  
When I got home I called to see what happened--  
"Now that you've moved from Jersey to New York," she said,  
"you have to learn to show when you say you'll show."  
Lucky with sharp jolting lower spine pain to show anywhere at all,  
I learned to appreciate the practical beauty of lateness in hastening  
the awareness of incompatible lives.  
Perhaps the world is made up of those who slowly observe time  
and those who open their morning eyes on time?  
Perhaps there is no real difference at all between on time and late--  
each a temporary malady interchangeable  
in temporal dimensions we're simply late in discovering?

Perhaps I was born too late for my own good? I would like to have  
been there for the first jazz poetry reading!  
I would like to have driven Mississippi for Freedom Summer!  
I would like to have helped levitate the Pentagon!  
Would like to have cast 12 million more votes against Hitler  
after the 1920 Kapp Putsch!  
Would like to have warned Tyrannosaurus Rex: "Duck!  
Meteor incoming!"  
I would like to have procrastinated fifteen minutes before lifting  
that orange juice carton that threw out my back!  
I would like to have been healthy enough to march in Seattle!  
Perhaps he or she who hesitates wins the day!

Perhaps after quantum physics is perfectly explained the one  
who enters last will be seen the first one there!  
Perhaps evolution is a big zig-zagging 11-dimensional spiral?  
Even if time is progress, lateness may be only an illusory  
superstring membrane wavelength away!

I hereby grant purple stars to all who joined the war too late!  
But what if I was nanoseconds late the instant I caught Vivian's eye?  
What if I'd been a sideglance late seeing that handgun waving  
out New Brunswick's car window?  
What if I'd been so late being born into this world I went directly  
to the next?  
What if my alarm clock never rang and there was never another  
wake-up call?  
Maybe even age 45 there's still time to learn to be on time  
at least for work and special occasions--  
and to remember to be late for the final goodbye?



## What We Don't See

Look at those trees! There are millions of 'em  
Where the cat treads lightly  
Whatever we don't see is there

A helicopter whirls overhead; we are not alone  
Strong winds coerce the leaves into speaking politely  
In forests like these, the unseen future flourishes

Millions of species remain undiscovered  
Time has its way of dealing with warriors  
The trees are doubly upset with the news in the papers

This moment of life is safe from their weapons  
Even the radio ends up talking in whispers  
Your skin wakes my skin like a million tiny fingers

2002

## To the Northern Winds, July 4th

Sitting in cabin kitchen with Vivian  
meditating with eyes open  
following breath out nostrils  
the day clear and beautiful  
but cold, and windy as hell

It's heaven up here in Canada's north country  
no inkling of industrial air pollution  
not another human being within 50 miles  
just Vivian and I reenergizing our love  
and daily nightly mercurial wanderings

Forest dust blows from here through the hemisphere  
it slips through the eyelid & the screen door  
nests between the molars & under the tongue  
it can make a nation crazy  
or cause a dog to sit up and take notice

It's been a crazy fucking year  
full of death and the fear that creates more death  
full of heightened alerts & habitual nightmares  
full of bedroom intruders dressed in terrorist beards  
& talking busted syntax on the Pentagon's porch

O Northern Winds can you blow some uncommon sense  
into our nation down below?  
Can you wine & dine us this year with a cleansing tempest?  
Can you whistle and make our giant egos disappear?  
Can you help us elect a new president?

The terrorists have murdered innocent lives  
and given America's insane right an unnatural gift  
from up here where the winds howl  
it's obvious nature abhors a fundamentalist judge  
and the whole pyramid scheme of corporate theft

The Northern Winds blow the leaves hard  
but take time off so the trunks can rest  
We remember the World Wars and the inhuman slaughters  
we recall the old famines and the new disease  
yet have begun to build another dangerous century

Last night ravens flew figure 8's near the cabin, playing  
in yr gusts. O Winds, we have learned to cross large continents  
to embrace our love. Can you shake us out of our future-destroying  
weapony for a new start? Tell the children:  
another new century can begin whenever we choose.

2002

### **The Holy Mountain Texts**

In the middle of the Canadian Rocky Mountain forest  
We drank woodsy Merlot and prepared to study the holy texts  
We read the No Matching Socks Sutra  
We danced the Waltz of the Yellow-Rumped Warbler  
We read the Prayer of the No More Royalty Butterfly  
We chanted Om My Heart Belongs to You and Yogi Bear  
We read the Diamond Sutra of the Torn Moccasins  
We prayed to the Humongous Mosquito Gods  
We debated the Midrash of Coyotes versus the Pet Cats  
We praised the Ghostly Caribou who shed an antler of illusions  
We sang the testament of the Back Spasm Healers  
We bowed to the white toenails in the Muddy Trail Wolf poop  
We meditated on the Front Yard Lawn Mower Sutra  
We danced with bees humming in the nectar of bluebells  
We marched to the tune of the Double Rainbow Creek  
We anointed the nose of the hermetic porcupine  
We purified our hairy bodies in the moonlit dew  
And yelled "Away ye gods!" as the Holy Grizzly turned.

Eliot Katz and Vivian Demuth  
2002

### **From Nose Mountain, Love Poem for XMB81**

*"Do not allow the kingdom of heaven to wither"*  
--*"The Apocryphon of James"*

We light a cedar incense stick & face out  
the cabin picture window & glass front door  
to meditate. Dharma the cat goes to the  
door, stands on her back paws & looks  
outside, too. Is it coincidence, or is she trying  
to understand the picture we are viewing?  
Or perhaps fulfilling her name's sake & joining  
us in a reflective journey? Last year Dharma  
was a light rambunctious kitten, darting  
with sharp paws one end of cabin to other,  
running reckless outside after hares twice  
her size. This year she is calmer, almost full  
grown, and glides slowly. This year, looking  
down Nose Mountain's ridge, it's easy  
to see the clear-cuts have grown larger  
& come closer to the mountain. It is we,  
not the gods, responsible to keep this Earth  
happily supporting human & other animal life.  
The fire weeds & paint brushes are sprouting  
flowers purple, blue, yellow, orange, while  
below the border a U.S. president & his hack  
Congress are sending our ecological work shoes  
through a military-made conveyor belt toward  
the board room paper shredder. In preparation  
for two political party conventions, the dogs  
of Iowa have been put on a daily prescription  
of amphetamine pills; a pimple unique as a  
snowflake or fingerprint has been made to grow  
on the nose of anyone living left-of-center Boston  
or New York; the unfinished, unworkable  
Star Wars laser system has been turned inward  
where it can read anti-Bush bumper stickers  
traveling at speeds up to 212 political miles  
per hour. My love, even though I might complain  
a bit about the bites, I would walk thru miles  
of West Nile-infected mosquitoes to reach you,  
would outrun the mountain lions, beat the bears  
in an arm wrestle contest, make the oil rigs stop  
their drilling so I can hear your breath at night  
& hold you again after too many weeks of sleepless

solitary dawns. XMB81, can you hear me  
on heaven's radio? I am calling you from  
the innermost part of my being, where the vocal  
chords speak in a volume we know but cannot hear,  
in a language that has been used since the first  
great meteor arrived. There are fundamentalists  
born in every nation on this feverish planet,  
memorizing false righteousness & uttering fake  
compassion. This year the conventions will go  
as well as conventions will go. New York City  
will see passionate protest and overzealous arrests.  
We will work for Kerry in November. As Abbie  
Hoffman used to say, sometimes it really is  
better to have the lesser of two evils than the evil  
of two lessers. It will be another 20 years before  
elected officials provide a political solution,  
50 before they answer to humane needs. And heaven?  
What is heaven? Only those remnants we can  
rescue from the extremists' claws.

2004

## I Was Tired

I was tired of this war and its bloody gymnastics, tired of seeing denial as the nation's new 24-hour cable occupation. Even the White House door has cracks, I thought, so why not head to the beach for a few days and go surfing, get away for awhile. Only I didn't know how to surf and was never really a good swimmer. What did George W. Bush know and when did he know it? And how long did it take him to forget? So back up to the mountain forests I flew, where it was time for Vivian and I to renew, too long since we last saw each other under New York City sheets, since she left for her annual summer forest fire-watching beat. The war sure drags on, doesn't it, and the images of torture haven't even all been released. One day this war is going to come into our kitchens like Martha Rosler's anti-Vietnam War collages, insurgent Iraqi bullets flying over the morning eggs. Wait, I guess something like that already happened with 9/11, so how did so many Americans get suckered for so long into believing Saddam had something to do with that? I wonder whether Cheney's kids know how to surf? Well, it's good to see Vivian again. My old friends' jazz trio Solar is on the CD player, the Northern Lights are appearing nightly like a Broadway show out the bedroom window, paperback novels and history books are springing out the suitcase & being read, the Buddha dropped by last night for a surprise visit and promised to come back in a couple of days. Even Dharma the Cat can see that more of this wilderness picture ought to be trucked into the city. Last night I dreamt that I was picking stars one at a time off the shelf of the mountain's moonlit sky. Why are they still using those secret prisons & uranium-tipped bullets anyway? Be mindful now, eating those eggs.

2005

## Karl Visits the Cabin

I'd come back to Nose Mountain to get away  
from all but Vivian & the birds  
for a week.  
But somehow Karl Rove  
followed me.

At dusk around 11pm  
Rove opened the cabin door.  
"How the hell did you get up  
the mountain?" I asked,  
confident Canada's forestry department  
would never have  
driven him in.  
He reminded me  
about the helipad  
at edge of the yard.

I took the unexpected opportunity  
to ask how his conscience  
could rationalize  
all the political dirty tricks  
he'd engineered  
over decades.  
He replied: "Dirt is in the eye  
of the window washer."

"Except for Vivian and me, there isn't  
another soul within 50 miles,  
so tell me honestly--  
did you arrange the Valerie Plame leak  
to screw Joe Wilson  
for his antiwar op-ed?  
And are you afraid of being charged?  
I've been dying to know, and up here  
I'm almost completely out of touch  
with American news."

"There is no leak," Rove answered,  
"when the faucets  
are permanently open.  
And yes, I'm always just a little afraid."

I asked whether he feels bad  
with each new American soldier death  
or innocent Iraqi killed  
because of his team's geopolitical ambitions  
and his own  
ruthless political drives?

"It's never easy," he replied,  
"to see an innocent  
person die.  
You'll see.  
It's never easy."

2005

## Mixed Nuts With Salt

*"The revolt against redistribution is killing  
civilization from ghetto to rainforest."  
--Ronald Wright, from A Short History  
of Progress*

Here from N. America's skull, it's easy to look down  
into the forest & see clear-cuts by day,  
up at the sky & see Northern Lights at night.

A deer wanders in bushes 20 feet from the cabin,  
coyote calls are heard in the distance unseen--  
our species survival may depend this century

on willingness to share rather than ravage.  
From up here in the boreal forest, that's obvious,  
like wearing boots for the long muddy trail.

In U.S. cities, the world can look more like a ballpark,  
in which people simply choose a team  
& then cheer, no matter its players' behaviors.

These days, too many Americans are rooting  
for the right-wing nuts,  
even against the well-being of the planet.

"Go nuts!" urge Limbaugh's & O'Reilly's callers,  
"Tear down those trees, let the waters dry,  
let Wal-Mart pay its workers in copper coin."

And with home team applause, the nuts are winning.  
From up here in the boreal forest, it's difficult  
to figure out how to re-write the rules of the sport.

2005

## Who's There?

Here I am, here is a contingent self  
a body with eyes and pen  
wearing reading glasses this foggy forest morning

Here is what, a contingent what  
a being on a mountaintop listening to rains wash in  
a disembodied hand to pet the purring cat

Here is death, holding its morning celebration  
for it knows another creature will come in just a few minutes  
the wind, the fog, wolves howling in the distance

Here is an ecosystem, a contingent planet  
Vivian sleeping beautiful under covers in other room  
a cat named Dharma that has found a temporary plaything

Here's a kitchen blender waiting for generator switch  
a black hole beneath the galaxy savoring its prey  
outside window, evergreen outlines becoming visible at dawn

2005

## When the Fire Tower's Jumping

There's a sheet of dark gray smoke  
covering the forest's bright orange sunset  
and the pre-thunderstorm winds  
make the log cabin windows quake

Over in BC they lit a match  
to kill a few trees with pine beetles  
and the flames took off like Nascar  
or like a hard day's night

Ain't had no rain for almost a week now  
& the mercury is swelling  
scientists say it's global heat stroke  
& our elected leaders are so helpless

The fire lookouts are going crazy  
Vivian's radio is non-stop gab  
The hazard level's extreme & tension mounting  
The first lightning bolt's a big drag

Now Vivian's climbing her 60-foot tower  
where she's got her scope & forest maps  
She's a vision of grace with 20/20 vision  
& a sixth sense for tickling sparks

It's been six years, mostly great ones  
all the troubles blow away  
what's hazard on the mountain  
turns to fuel in a city day

When wind dies down & body tires  
the U'verse lets out a great big yawn  
We're all meat for the planet's harvest  
but while we're here we clasp our arms

It's a long hard struggle there is no doubt  
I'm glad you're with me for the ride  
When wind dies down & planet tires  
we'll find a lightning bolt that's ours

2006

## Writing as Fast as I Can

Sitting at cabin window Franklin the cat & I both wonder what to write about tonight. I start exercising the hand, better than sitting here feeling writer's knock-a-block. Franklin starts clawing at the cloth chair covering, pulling it to shreds, guess he doesn't want to sit still either. Well, the world is going to shreds, why shouldn't the cat join in? On TV tonight, Alberta's biggest logging company, Warehouse, took out a commercial to advertise itself as a great contributor to the region's environment. Pulling out the boreal forest tree-by-tree is quite a green accomplishment. Yet, what about me addicted to my daily reading of the *New York Times*? Even up here in the middle of a beautiful forest, am I not going crazy for a world news fix? Now Franklin is starting at me, wondering whether I'll get anything decent out of this automatic writing exercise. Does he frown watching those green-washing ads, too? I'm writing with a Bic blue pen as fast as I can, could go a lot faster with a keyboard, but the only computer up here is in bedroom and Vivian is sleeping after another long day with hot dry weather and fire hazard labeled "extreme." No breaks for the fire lookouts this summer. Get tired, get fired or fried, global warming weather threatening one of the best global warming protection mechanisms we have left, Canada's huge beautiful boreal forest. Today was our 6-year anniversary of being together--I'll always remember first night we spent in a Grande Prairie hotel, then a week in the forest with plenty of rain and plenty of time for creating smokes of our own. Even with hazard at extreme, we still manage a few sexy moments to celebrate. Look at those huge thin mosquitoes outside the cabin window screen. I wonder whether my mosquito repellent with citronella really works? Vivian thinks I have a phobia about mosquitoes and she's right--they love me, love biting my skin though I can't imagine why, and West Nile has recently reached this part of the continent. How many bites does it take up here in the forest before one's odds of getting West Nile from any single bite are better than 50/50? What about Lyme Disease? I'm almost 50 years old, no kids, so what's to lose? I've already had a pretty full life, probably the height of my poetry years already behind me. How high was that? So what if I got West Nile or Lyme? The worst that would mean is I'd slowly start losing my mind, probably better for automatic writing experiments like this one anyway. Let the mind follow its disconnected thoughts--planes, war, oil, desert, rye, heat, overreach, ear-cooker telephones, pay toilets requiring foreign coins, electrified blueberry grids short-circuiting, water that won't stop bubbling from above, lightning-struck dragonflies, one percent risk paranoia, gut check from a food-poisoned editor, napalm fires without city hydrants, summer all winter long, skin inside-out, off ramp collisions, Bechtel flu, automatic writing automatic war, ill-defined powder attack, family seeking revenge seeks a family that would also like revenge, economic hit-man in a batting slump, a ripe mid-east peach, an overripe southern strategy peach, a time like no other to savor impeach.

2006

## The day of the flies

The whole mountaintop today was abuzz with flies  
& I couldn't help thinking of Emily D's poem  
about hearing a fly buzz when she died--

Am I dying? Am I like the mouse I saw yesterday  
lying in wait for the lawnmower--  
me wondering whether it still had breath enough to move.

On CBC radio today they announced Osama bin Laden  
had released a second day's worth of internet messages--  
why didn't they mention his first day's missive yesterday?

More threats from bin Laden, and I am guessing there  
are more boasts in return from Bush, who I'm sure  
believes he is winning his ill-defined "war on terror"--

well, we are all going to die anyway--so I suppose  
we're all winning--or maybe we're all losing--  
or maybe there is a world beyond the contest

where we can watch ourselves watching ourselves,  
where the flies buzz & we know we are alive!--  
beyond the fear & terror, beyond the businesses

of war. Looking out over the ridge the smoke  
from B.C.'s forest fire makes the whole horizon hazy--  
I am eating smoke & breathing death, wondering

how much closer are my friends to electing  
progressive Democrats or 3rd parties to office, who is  
winning Wimbledon, and whether Cervantes was right

in calling poetry an incurable & contagious disease?

2006

## Thinking About Emptiness from North America's Skull

*"With no obstruction,  
How can there be  
Absence of obstruction?"*  
Nagarjuna, *Verses from the Center*,  
tr. Stephen Bachelor

Over the horizon bright  
jagged bolts of white lightning  
are thrown like javelins  
from the top of the continent.

Where are they landing?  
Nowhere.  
Who is throwing those electrified spears?  
No one.

Outside the cabin window after the storm  
the tops of some of the mountain's evergreen trees  
have become a dirty orange  
as if they were everorange trees.

I wonder what natural processes  
or acts of industry  
have turned the tops of these trees orange?  
Is industry a part of nature's course?

From the edge of the mountain  
I see dozens of oil rigs dot the landscape  
Even three or four years ago  
I could only see one or two.

What license from the galaxy  
could give oil & gas companies the right  
to despoil Canada's boreal forest?  
Could a business contract give this right?

Who will stop the logging industry's  
ever-widening clear-cuts?  
Is it possible that trees exploit us  
like this in another universe?

At 11pm, the sun has gone down  
and the treetops look green again

What kept me from seeing what was there?  
What in this cabin window creates illusion?

With record-breaking heat, the fire lookouts  
are on "extreme hazard" all week  
They are calling smoke locations into the radio  
all day & through the night.

Are there really other humans listening  
at another end of the radio?  
Who heard Vivian call in that smoky ridge?  
If she didn't see it, would someone else?

On the FM radio, I listen to local gossip.  
No war talk. The disaster in Iraq must be  
over up here! For global warming, the locals  
know it's past the tipping point.

At midnight, it finally gets dark  
Soon all appearances will vanish  
Goodnight Vivian, goodnight Eliot  
With luck we'll all meet again in the morning.

2006

## The View from the Big Woods

About a week before leaving for a 12-day summer vacation, I sent *The New York Times* a Letter to the Editor, which they published on June 20, 2006. In my letter, I addressed an op-ed column by David Brooks in which he wrote that he has a "personal War Council" that believes "success is still plausible" in the Iraq war. I wrote that such a belief simply shows "how callous some of our mainstream policy analysts have become toward the value of individual human lives," since the war had already caused the deaths of up to 100,000 Iraqi civilians and over 2,500 American troops. Little did I know that my partner and I would soon find ourselves in an unexpected position to try to help save actual human lives.

In his book, *The Future of Life*, biologist Edward O. Wilson writes: "It has always been clear that the struggle to save biological diversity will be won or lost in the forests." In terms of slowing down global warming before it becomes global heat stroke, one of the planet's most important forests in need of preservation is Canada's expansive boreal forest, which the Natural Resources Defense Council website notes is "among the largest intact forest ecosystems left on earth." According to the NRDC: "Like the Amazon, the boreal forest is of critical importance to all living things. Its trees and peat lands comprise one of the world's largest 'carbon reservoirs'; carbon stored in this way is carbon not released into the atmosphere, where it would trap heat and accelerate global warming."

For the past 14 years, my partner, Vivian Demuth, has been working summers for the Canadian forestry department as a fire lookout in the middle of the boreal forest in the province of Alberta. For the past 12 of those years, she's been working from mid-May to mid-September on Nose Mountain, a beautifully scenic 5,000-foot peak in the Canadian Rockies, where she lives alone--or sometimes with a cat--in a simple, but solidly built cedar cabin. She has a generator that she can run for electricity a few hours each day, a satellite phone, a propane-powered stove and refrigerator, a radio tuned permanently to CBC, and a TV that picks up rough images of two local stations. There is no fresh water source for many miles. Big barrels below the corners of the cabin roof catch rain water for taking solar-bag showers and washing dishes, and the forestry department drives or helicopters in big bottles of drinking water, along with her food supply, every four weeks. The nearest town, Grande Prairie, is about a 2-1/2 hour ride down a dirt road, so quick trips to the nearest convenience store are totally inconvenient, and Vivian doesn't have wheels up there anyway.

Vivian spends most of her days looking for smokes from inside a 60-foot tower adjacent to her cabin. It is a mystery to me how they either build or truck these towers up to these mountaintops and plant them deep enough into the ground to



withstand the wild mountain winds. The network in Vivian's part of Alberta has about a dozen of these tower lookout stations. When a tower person notices a "smoke" (the initial flames of what could potentially become a raging forest fire), she or he uses an Osborne firefinder spotting-scope to try to pinpoint its location. When a second lookout is able to see the same smoke, it becomes possible to identify the exact location by noting the intersecting measured points from the two different scopes. Once the location is pinpointed, a firefighting helicopter or small plane can be dispatched to the smoke to put it out before it turns into a fiery monster that would eat up acres of leaving, breathing organisms in its path.

*Thinking about Emptiness from North America's Skull*

Over the horizon bright  
jagged bolts of white lightning  
are thrown like javelins  
from the top of the continent.

Where are they landing?  
Nowhere.  
Who is throwing those electrified spears?  
No one.

I'd never spent time in a forest until I started going out with Vivian, a Canadian poet and fiction writer, six years ago. She spends her winters with me in New York City, and once each summer I head up to visit her on Nose Mountain for a week or two. Although the mosquitoes occasionally get under my skin (in both senses of that phrase, especially now that the West Nile virus has reached this part of the continent), and although I sometimes worry about potentially dangerous grizzly bears when I'm walking down the dirt road to throw vegetable scraps far away from the cabin, my previous trips had all been beautiful, relaxing getaways with lots of time for reading, writing, and enjoying the wilderness.

While we met briefly in New York City after a poetry reading, it was Nose Mountain where I traveled in the summer of 2000 to see if it would be possible to start a relationship. In bed on some nights during that first summer, we would sometimes joke that we were looking for smokes. I've written many poems up there, and in those poems I've taken to calling Nose Mountain "North America's Skull." The mountain actually looks like a nose when one is helicoptering in from just the right angle. The view from Vivian's Nose Mountain backyard is stunning, with millions of forest acres visible, although each summer one sees more oil drilling sites in the distance and more figure-8-shaped clear-cut areas engineered by an ever-expanding logging industry. As a progressive poet and news junkie, I do miss my daily fix of Democracy Now with Amy Goodman,

commondreams, mediachannel, altnet, counterpunch, a cable talk show or two, and *The New York Times*--I admit to feeling guilty about my daily newspaper habit when I'm in the middle of the forest--but it's amazing how much poetic inspiration one can draw from drastically changing scenery, not to mention taking a few weeks off from a day job.

When I arrived at Nose Mountain this summer, Vivian was in the middle of her busiest fire season ever. Almost every day, the fire hazard seemed to be at "extreme"--the result of too little snow in late winter and extraordinarily hot and dry weather in the spring and early summer. Recent studies show that the increased danger of forest fires is likely the result of global warming, and my sense is that global warming is taking on a mind of its own, attacking those very resources that we humans need to defend ourselves against it. I guess this is the feeling of a tipping point approaching. (Has anyone else noticed that global warming shares the same two initials as our president?) After about a week of consecutive days of precipitation-less heat, July 3rd arrived as a day of lightning strikes and thunderstorms. When lightning strikes in the forest, the forestry radio system turns into a manic talkathon. Lookouts report the instant they see the first strike hit, and helicopters--staffed by a mix of firefighters and forestry department supervisors--patrol the area all day, reporting their take-offs and landings, and letting all those on the area's radio network know what is found at locations where smokes have been reported.

Outside the cabin window after the storm  
the tops of some of the mountain's evergreen trees  
have become a dirty orange  
as if they were everorange trees.

I wonder what natural processes  
or acts of industry  
have turned the tops of these trees orange?  
Is industry a part of nature's course?

Each fire lookout station has a helipad and a fuel tank. When the helicopters on smoke patrol are running out of fuel, they land at an accessible tower to re-fuel. On July 3rd, soon after a brief thunderstorm had passed, a helicopter came down to refuel at the helipad on Nose Mountain. Vivian was in the tower, and I was sitting at the cabin window watching through some trees. The helicopter seemed to stay on the ground longer than I'd expected, and I figured these guys had been out all day and could probably use a little down time. When it started to take off, I saw it spin around one time, and I thought that seemed pretty odd, but what did a city guy know? I figured helicopters probably spun around sometimes when they were taking off. A little ballet move, either for practical reasons or just for show. It was about 10 or 20 seconds later that Vivian screamed, and then yelled

over the forestry radio: "The helicopter crashed! Emergency! I'm going down! Send help fast!" Or something like that.

I pictured a helicopter crashing with an explosion or fire, so my first instinct was to grab Vivian's fire extinguisher in the cabin and run down to help as fast as I could. With my chronic bad back, I don't think I'd even tried to run at full speed for about seven years until that moment, but I knew that adrenaline would overcome any physical pain for at least a short while. When I got to the edge of the mountain, Vivian was already close to the crash, which was only about 30 yards down the side of the mountain, but it was a pretty steep drop with lots of brush and some poplar trees to walk through or around to get there. I tossed Vivian the fire extinguisher and she yelled to get the first-aid kit and a sheet. I ran back to the cabin, and luckily I'd remembered where Vivian had shown me she kept the first-aid kit. I couldn't find a sheet quickly, so grabbed a thin blanket instead. On that trip or a subsequent one--I can't remember which--I also grabbed a portable forestry radio so Vivian could continue calling her coworkers for help.

At the crash site, Vivian had sprayed the helicopter with the fire extinguisher. Looking back, I'm not sure, but it's possible that this act alone may have helped save some lives. The helicopter was flipped on its side and still smoking, but Vivian was getting into it to help a guy who was seriously hurt in the back seat, and who I couldn't see. Two other guys, the pilot and another passenger, were thankfully walking outside the helicopter; they seemed to be in shock, but didn't seem that badly hurt physically. I opened the first-aid kit, gave Vivian a pair of latex gloves and put a pair on myself. That was about the only thing I remembered from a short first-aid class I'd taken a few years ago. Vivian started calling out for things, mostly bandages, and I did the best I could to find those things in the kit & toss them to her in the helicopter.

I knew Vivian had EMT experience before she was a fire lookout, but I was still deeply impressed by her courage and physical strength, by her knowledge of first-aid, and by her ability to act quickly and decisively in a mountain-environment crisis. And I was doing the best I could for a 49-year-old city guy with a bad back and no experience with this sort of thing. It was probably about 15 or 20 minutes later when a second helicopter landed to provide additional help. I can't really be sure about the time that elapsed--things seemed to be moving simultaneously in slow motion and faster than sound. Soon, there would be a third helicopter coming to help and, I think, a fourth. When the first new helper came down the side of the mountain, he and Vivian somehow pulled the seriously wounded guy straight up and out of the downed helicopter, put him on the ground, and started trying CPR. The pilot had told us the injured guy's name was Darcy, and Vivian was calling Darcy to hear her and stay with us. At Vivian's suggestion, I took a piece of gauze and pressed it against a big gash on Darcy's forehead. I had a strong feeling that I was looking closely into the eyes

of the dead or the dying. It's possible that Darcy had passed away on impact, but we weren't sure, and Vivian was doing her heroic best to save his life.

I ran a few steps up the mountain and, again at Vivian's appeal, yelled to the guys still arriving to bring down a stretcher board and make sure a medevac helicopter was on its way. I'll never forget one image I had when looking up at the mountain. One of Vivian's favorite supervisors, Don Cousins, was standing up on the mountain without a shirt, running to help. Don is about 55 or 60 years old, and in winters he races a dog sled up north. So he is probably in pretty good shape. He'd recently told Vivian that he named one of his newer dogs Eliot. It was a comfort to me to know that someone with Don's decades of experience was on the scene, although with the mosquitoes out in full force I wondered why he had taken off his shirt.

Soon, six guys came down the mountainside with a spine board, and they put Darcy on it. I helped put Darcy's arms on the board and helped clamp the straps around him. The six guys carried him up the mountain. Then they came down a second time and went to the other side of the helicopter. Vivian and I looked at each other with surprise. The pilot and the other passenger walking around somewhat in shock had answered yes when we asked them if there were just the three of them on board. Perhaps they had misunderstood us. But now we realized there was a fourth guy whom we hadn't seen, lying beyond our sight on the other side of the copter. When they were putting him on the spine board, he was conscious and even joking, though he said he was fading out a bit. His name was Rob and he knew that something serious had happened to his leg. It turned out that a part of Rob's leg and a part of his arm had somehow been cut off in the accident. I later realized that Vivian's supervisor Don may already have been down the mountainside and taken off his shirt to use as a tourniquet for Rob. I'm also pretty sure that the pilot, who I originally assumed had been walking around in shock, had also been putting bandages on Rob.

When they'd gotten the two guys up the mountain, Don said that a medevac helicopter was at least an hour away, so they were going to take the two seriously wounded guys by helicopter to the Grande Prairie hospital, which was about a 40-minute flight from Nose Tower. The first helicopter off the mountain took Darcy, Rob, Don, Vivian, and the pilot of the crashed copter who seemed in decent physical shape except for a hurt shoulder.

When they left, I was up at the cabin with about a dozen other firefighters, mostly Native Canadians, who'd been flown in at some point to help. All the humans were walking around in a daze and the mosquitoes were going crazy. I figured Vivian would be flown back soon, but instead the forestry department thankfully decided to fly me to Grande Prairie so that Vivian and I could spend the night in a hotel instead of back on the mountain. They gave me about three minutes to gather up a change of clothes for both of us, and sent me right out to

the helipad for the flight. I'd been brought in to the mountain by helicopter a week earlier, but I have to admit I was pretty nervous going out so soon after the crash. I remember asking the pilot a silly question--if he could please take his time taking off.

At 11pm, the sun has gone down  
and the treetops look green again  
What kept me from seeing what was there?  
What in this cabin window creates illusion?

With record-breaking heat, the fire lookouts  
are on "extreme hazard" all week  
They are calling smoke locations into the radio  
all day & through the night.

Are there really other humans listening  
at another end of the radio?  
Who heard Vivian call in that smoky ridge?  
If she didn't see it, would someone else?

The helicopter that flew me off the mountain also carried the fourth passenger, Earl, from the original craft. He still seemed pretty much in shock and there was an ambulance waiting at the airport to take him to the hospital for a check-up. There was also a windowless van. Gwen, Vivian's forestry coworker who was coordinating things at the airport, told me that the van had Darcy's body in it. Darcy hadn't made it. As Vivian and another forestry worker had been trying CPR before the guys had carried Darcy up the mountain, Darcy did not have a pulse. I knew it would have been a miracle to find out that he'd been revived after the 40-minute helicopter flight to the hospital. But it was still a psychic jolt to have his death confirmed.

A guy named Jason drove me by car to the forestry office, where Vivian was waiting for me, and we took a cab to the hotel. I was worried about how Vivian was doing. I knew I felt pretty shaken up, and Vivian had tried so hard to keep Darcy alive. Plus, the tragedy had taken place among her forest worker colleagues and on a mountain that had served as her close friend for 12 years. We held each other a long time that night.

A few days later, on my way back to New York, I saw an article about the crash in the *Edmonton Sun*. It had a photo of Darcy Moses. The pilot, Jack, and Earl had been released from the hospital. Rob, who'd lost part of his arm and leg, had survived and was in intensive care. Darcy was a 20-year-old Native Canadian with a 15-month old son. His mother said he was on only his second helicopter trip, and that he'd told her how much he loved his new job. He said he could see

their home in miniature from the air, and he'd assured her just a few days earlier that it was safer in the air than on the ground.

When I got back to New York City, I checked the internet to see if there was any more news about the Nose Mountain crash. There was indeed a new article: the day after the accident on North America's Skull, another Bell 206 helicopter had crashed in a different part of Alberta, killing the pilot, who was bucketing water on a fire and who was the sole passenger on board. As Kurt Vonnegut wrote in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "and so it goes."

On the FM radio, I listen to local gossip.  
No war talk. The disaster in Iraq must be  
over up here! For global warming, the locals  
know it's past the tipping point.

At midnight, it finally gets dark  
Soon all appearances will vanish  
Goodnight Vivian, goodnight Eliot  
With luck we may all meet again in the morning.

I called Vivian every day from New York for the first week after I returned. She seemed to be doing okay. She'd visited Rob in the hospital and said he was in pretty good spirits. And Darcy's family had visited Nose Mountain to do a ritual at the crash site, which seemed to help both Vivian and the family. Vivian had recently finished a manuscript for a novel entitled *Eyes of the Forest*, which included a then-purely-fictional helicopter accident--I think that strange, prescient coincidence had somehow helped prepare her a bit for dealing with the real thing. Now she was back in the tower, back on high hazard, looking for smokes.

Before moving to New York City, I spent nine years in Central New Jersey working as an advocate with Middlesex Interfaith Partners with the Homeless, so I've seen up close a good number of folks going through unfair and difficult times. But there was something different about looking into the eyes of the newly dead on the side of a remote mountain. I have a new appreciation for the risks people are taking to protect this boreal forest that is "of critical importance to all living things." I wish the oil and logging industries would sacrifice some additional profits to match the sacrifice these courageous firefighters and forestry workers are making. And I have a new appreciation for one more area in which the vast resources currently being spent on an unwarranted and disastrous war in Iraq could be put to better use.

July 2006