Badlands I

Call this land beautiful if you wish but do not expect to be flattered in return.

Badlands is a capricious mistress accustomed to betrayal and to whim.

Dead stillness and white calm give way with no warning and less regard to hot wind and stinging silt blinding those who stare too long, transfixed struck dumb by sunset's mirror.

The lines of age are never earned easily and most often hide secrets best left as silent regret.

The wind knows everything And is indifferent.

Badlands II

Tired of the washboard main road I took the two track on Sheep Mountain.

In a while I realized the two track hadn't seen traffic in a long time.

Grasses tore against my high clearance floor and everywhere I looked the way seemed all the same.

Calm down, I told myself in the manner of those accustomed to traveling alone. The table is small and you will soon be out.

But I wasn't.

I recrossed my own tracks at least three times in as many hours thought I'd found my way and suddenly, heart pounding, realized I was inches from a canyon drop I hadn't seen coming.

I swallowed hard, thinking of what had almost been and was glad, for once, I'd stopped speeding when the grasses got window high.

Don't panic, I told myself If there's a road in there's a road out. You have a full tank and worse come to worst you can radio you're lost.

They'd laugh at that tell the story many times.

Not the way I want to be remembered.

"How could you get lost when you can see the whole world from anyplace on the table?" they'd ask me when they came for me.

How could I ever explain the prairie all looks the same when you're from a city?

Sweating now from fear and dreams of future shame I realized the storm was coming.

"Stay off Sheep Mountain in a storm," they all had warned.

"If the gumbo roads don't do you in the spirits of those who died there will."

I reached another dead end tracks stopped short at grass's edge and then realized all that stood between me and the main road was a ditch I hadn't even seen my first time past.

Hoping the truck would make it I flipped the gear and gave it gas.

Safe, then, on sandy road I saw the milepost sign and knew exactly where I was.

Retelling the story now it seems tame enough but you did not hear my heart when I was lost in prairie grass.

Don't take the two track unless you're sure how to get back home or the prairie will teach you how small you really are.

Badlands III

Tomorrow I will return to a place where passing traffic drowns out the call of angry jays and where important people talk all day and say nothing and where no one ever sees the Milky Way and orange is the color of the sky.

That is home or at least where I pay my bills.

This land changes you if you let it.

The wind is its voice and its creator and all things heed its messages even cottonwood which whispers back or roars defiance to the storm.

Time passes here easier than sleep.

Day comes and night settles
for hours and for miles
unbroken except for clouds
white buffalo in Sioux children's minds
red warning flags in ranchers'
and cryptic grey for poets and for passersby.

There is no place to hide here from yourself and what you fear.
The meadowlark will break your heart the magpie steal your breakfast and once you've seen the buffalo graze on Sage Creek they will rumble through your dreams forever.