

*Western*

I was four,  
holed up  
in a hospital  
full of nuns,  
when I watched  
my first man die.

That was after  
the redheaded doc  
smiled over his bowtie  
and slipped me a mickey  
in my Seven-Up.

While I was out  
they put steel rods  
like antennas in my arm  
and set it in a plaster cast  
the second time that year.

I came to in a room  
white as clouds,  
and what I saw  
between the bars  
of the crib beside mine

was a little fella  
wrapped in flannel  
with tubes sticking in him.  
He didn't cry at all  
in our days and nights  
together.

\*

Later they rolled me  
across the wide tile  
of the hall to a room  
with lath-and-plaster walls  
painted surgery-green  
and dark-stained woodwork  
around high windows.

In the next bed lay a quiet man,  
younger than my daddy,  
who rested his head  
in the crook of one arm  
and spat tobacco into a can,

and listened to the stories  
of the old man in the bed in front of me  
who looked like my grandpa  
missing a leg,  
who chewed and spat  
into his own can.

I had a few toys in my bed,  
and my folks visited  
when they could.  
I got my shots,  
and the days passed  
in the drone of an old man's voice  
and the clink of spit on tin.

\*

One day  
after a night I bawled,  
a starched young nun  
came to tell me her story:  
Once upon a time  
she was so sad

she cried  
the Missouri River.

Her story helped.  
I passed the time  
wondering what a river was,  
and why one had a special name.

One day the old man dressed to leave  
in white shirt and suspenders,  
one leg of his church pants pinned up,  
no tie and his hat square on the bed.

When a nurse came in  
and told him he might as well sit,  
he waved her off and said, *I'll be fine*,  
then lost his hold on the bedpost  
and fell headlong into the high light  
of those old windows,  
spasmed, vomited and was still  
beside a too-late basin  
before a kneeling nun.

\*

I was running a green tractor  
up and down my cast,  
and I saw it all,  
and I didn't cry out  
and I didn't bawl.

It's an old story.  
I finished my time in that room.  
My left arm's not much good since,  
and I prefer horses  
to tractors of any color.