

wes hempel

## The Work

My father walked under red and yellow banners flapping  
in the hoods he shined at Arrow Auto Sales  
across the street from the liquor store  
back and forth he moved with rags  
in his blue uniform

I drank grape juice and watched  
*The Birdman of Alcatraz*. I had a fever

My mother took in laundry and mending in our neighborhood  
We advertised at the grocery store  
tacked signs on telephone poles  
For underwear bills at J.C. Penney  
the living room smelled like starch

At the ironing board back and forth she moved  
around buttons and snaps, watching with me  
We didn't want it to so it ended

At lunchtime she made soup and my father came home  
I sat in the rocker leafing through the catalog  
I knew there wasn't anything in there for me

Now it's twenty years and I'm stocking-holed  
downtown after leaving my shoes on the bus  
and staring at a pair of underwear in the gutter  
I'd like to say I'm fond of curbs  
but I'd rather be alone

If I were a woman I'd squeeze my breasts and say  
the night was dark, the night was blue  
around the corner a car flew  
a screech was heard, a yell was heard  
a man got hit by a flying turd

When I close my eyes I see everything  
sky shed of its blue jacket  
violet shoe polish black and shadows of birds

My mother lives in a trailer in Alabama now  
Moving through rooms with a crescent moon  
on her instep, she wears her scars on the outside

I have a friend who can't take off his pants  
He's afraid his legs will be gone  
I like to see everything. Sometimes  
I can never find my clothes