

# **SIX EARS OF CORN**

**Poetry by Donna Shipley**

**Woodcuts by Karen Sjöholm**



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OF  
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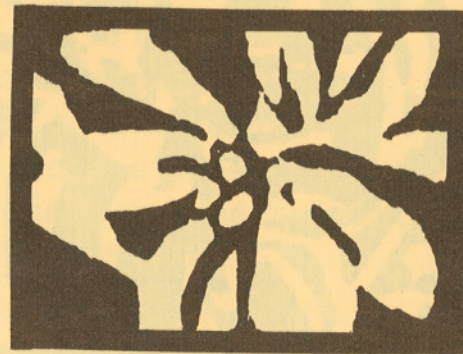
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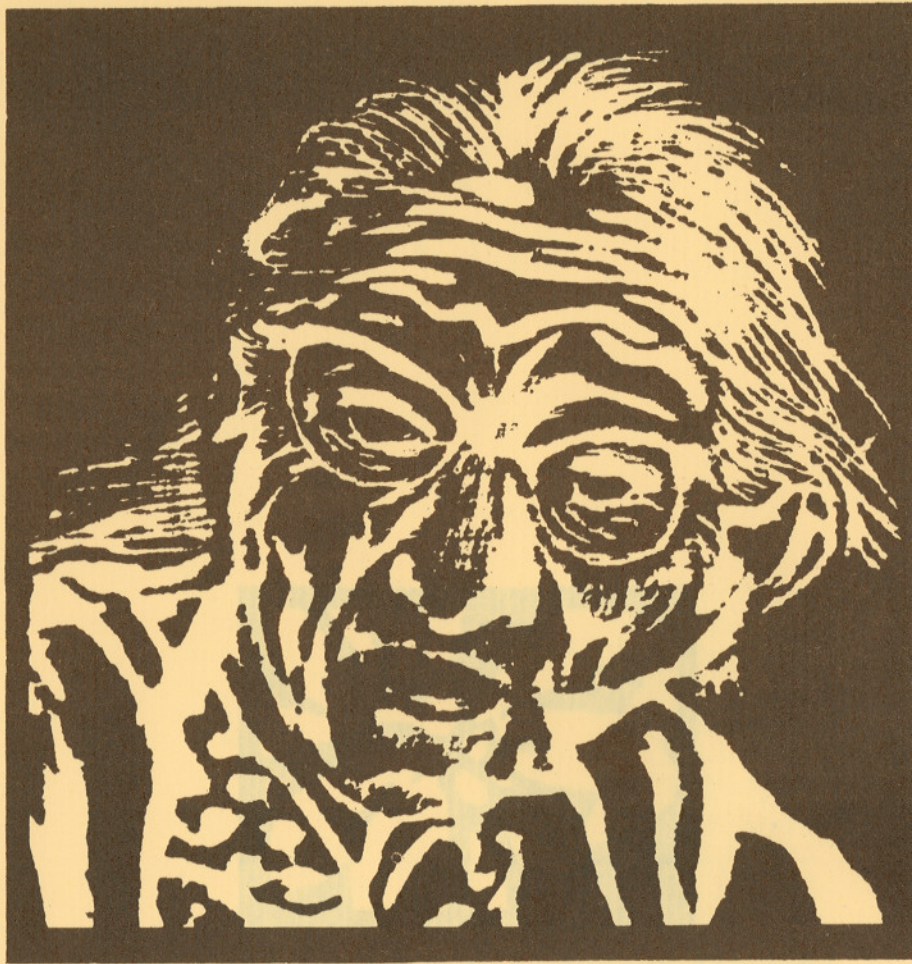


all the woodblocks were drawn from photographs  
taken by donna of family and friends

These poems are for all of us.







it wasn't that daddy was a mean man  
it was just that  
life  
was so hard  
for all of us  
you see  
he had a dream  
of being a railroad man  
but then he met momma  
first one thing  
led to another  
and before he hardly knew  
what hit him  
they was twelve of us kids

one day when pap  
was going down to the crossroads  
i begged him to take me along  
he never took to me much but  
that day he took me along  
i sat in the wagon on some feed sacks  
during the five mile ride  
he didn't speak a word to me

when we got to the store  
the men hanging around the stove  
got to talking about me  
getting growed up and all



pap asked robert bradshaw  
the store keeper  
to church on sunday  
old robert said he was busy  
so pap asked him to wednesday night prayer meeting

i could see pap's blood boiling  
when old robert told him  
that was his poker night  
then he asked pap to join him  
he accused pap of getting uppity  
since hed gone and got religion

i had gone over to the candy counter  
and old robert bradshaw ask me  
ifin i wanted somethin  
i told him i was just lookin  
there was a china doll in that case  
it was about two inches high  
and dressed in china clothes  
it was the most beautiful thing i ever saw  
i ask how much it was  
and old robert said  
a penny  
he ask me ifin i wanted it  
and i said no  
boy i tell you  
i wanted that doll moren anything

and everbody in that store knew i was lying  
thru my teeth  
when i said no  
but i knew we didn't have the money for it  
they wasn't hardly enough  
for food and clothes  
let alone china dolls  
pap said  
give her the doll and put it on my bill  
i grabbed that doll  
and ran like a bat outta hell  
before anybody could change their mind

i talked to that china doll all the way home  
pap didnt say nothing  
even when i said  
thank you pap

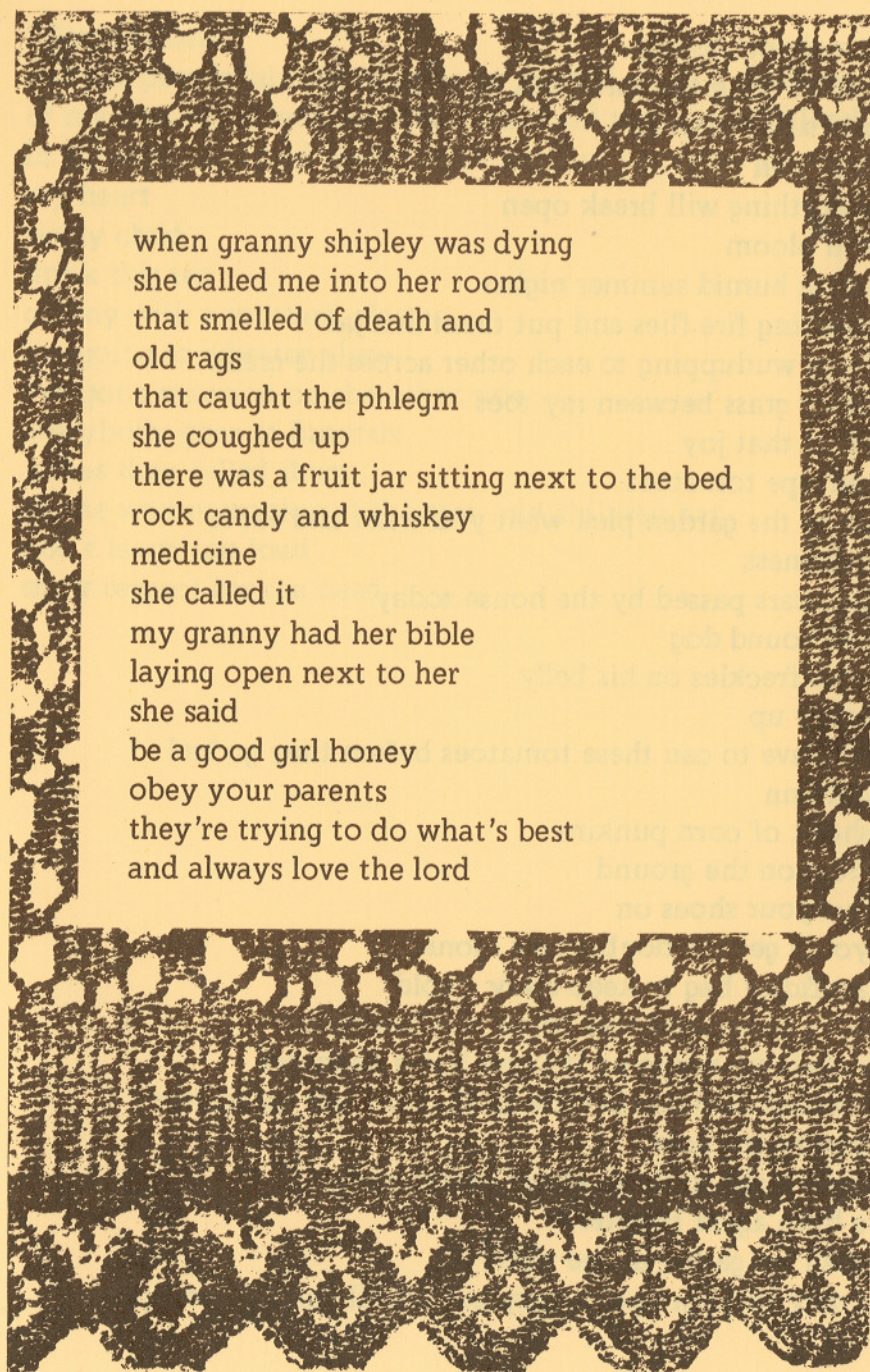
it was nigh on supper time  
when we got home  
everybody came out and stood around the wagon  
pap took the china doll outta my hand  
and said  
see this  
this here is a china doll  
we was in the store and jessie wanted this doll  
didnt you jessie  
she wanted this here doll moren anything  
now my bible says



that youre not suppose to love anything moren god  
and it says  
you aint suppose to covet things  
jessie wanted this here doll moren that  
now ive raised my children  
to be good god fearing christians  
that don't covet what they aint got

pap took my china doll  
and laid it on the ground  
and then he said  
this here is a lesson for all of us  
i am ruler of my house  
and god is ruler of us all  
then he took his heavy brogan boot  
and smashed the doll  
into the earth

after pap ate his supper  
he told me to saddle the mule  
that night  
robert bradshaws store  
burned to the ground



when granny shipley was dying  
she called me into her room  
that smelled of death and  
old rags  
that caught the phlegm  
she coughed up  
there was a fruit jar sitting next to the bed  
rock candy and whiskey  
medicine  
she called it  
my granny had her bible  
laying open next to her  
she said  
be a good girl honey  
obey your parents  
they're trying to do what's best  
and always love the lord



it's almost spring  
before long the earth will be turned  
and seeds planted  
and then  
everything will break open  
and bloom  
warm humid summer nights  
catching fire flies and put them in a jar  
frogs wudupping to each other across the creek  
dewy grass between my toes  
all of that joy  
red ripe tomatoes  
go to the garden pick what you want and eat it  
quietness  
two cars passed by the house today  
old hound dog  
with freckles on his belly  
hurry up  
we have to can these tomatoes before they go bad  
autumn  
shock of corn punkins  
frost on the ground  
put your shoes on  
you'll get the double new monie  
assifidity bag to keep away a cold  
bury those cabbages below the freeze line  
i made up my mind if i ever had a daughter  
i would dedicate her life to the lord and his service  
you're ten now  
you ought to think about becomming  
a born again believer  
shall we gather at the river?  
i may be poor and hungry but it's all part of god's plan

i don't believe  
and the people laid their hands on me and tried to heal me  
of my non-belief and the music was loud and people talked  
in tongues and i said the spirit of the lord has come into  
my heart  
sickly child  
drink this tea  
granny with a mustard plaster  
i'm going to a better place  
i've got a mansion on the other side  
everybody goes to funerals  
wakes they called them  
all the women cook and the men and children eat  
don't laugh too loud  
show respect for the dead



"are you mine rich or poore?  
tell me darlin are you shore?  
will you whisper i love you?  
and make all my dreams come true?  
will you honor and obey?  
will you promise not to stray?  
tell me darlin  
are you mine mine alone?"

star taught me that song  
she learned it from one a them  
country music songbooks  
you can get em at the news stand  
they cost a quarter

she was my best friend  
or at least she was  
until she stole my boyfriend  
we would go to dancing parties together  
she wore a seventy five yard petticoat  
one night when we were going to a party  
the preacher  
of the local baptist church stopped by  
and asked us what the orange stuff

on our mouths was  
he and god  
didnt take too kindly to lipstick  
or dancing parties  
but we went to the party  
and kept score  
to see who got kissed the most  
when we played  
spin the bottle  
the thought of eternal damnation  
hanging over our heads  
never kept us from having  
a good time  
when she was in 9th grade  
she announced  
her marriage  
to a man named  
elmer  
who worked at the grocery store





"boy i sure am craving some of them eagle craw beans"  
"what kinda beans is them? something you order  
special from the seed catalog?"

lord no honey  
eagle craws is special  
when your great granddaddy first moved here  
he lost his horse  
and all his seeds  
while he was a crossing a flooded creek  
well  
he needed seeds  
and they wernt nobody around to borry from  
so  
in the spring  
he started killing birds  
and sliting open their craws  
so he could get the seed  
to plant his garden  
one of the birds he killed  
was an eagle  
and when he planted  
the seeds he found  
eagle craw beans come up





when i was a little girl  
my momma would tell me  
of hard times in the country

she spoke of biscuits and  
flour gravy for every meal  
for months

after her daddy died  
she quit school  
she didn't have shoes or a dress to wear  
so she had to stay home

once during the depression  
she went with her momma up to the big houses  
on watauga street  
to beg  
for food and old clothes

she told me once because i was  
being ungrateful  
you see  
when i was eight  
i had a beautiful pink lace dress  
and my shoes were ugly boots  
and i cried  
so my momma told me what hard times in the country were

one sunday morning my momma  
and her momma went to church  
to make a joyful noise unto the lord and praise  
his holy name  
my momma saw her momma fall to her knees and praise god  
and pray for forgiveness



and ask god to give her strength to carry on  
and god help her feed her babies

up until that time my momma  
was not a born again believer  
but as she and her momma walked  
along towards home  
talking about food  
and wondering if god was  
going to provide  
and old car came down the road  
and ran  
right over an old rooster  
my grandmomma picked  
up that old dead bird  
and said  
god works in mysterious ways  
that sunday they had chicken and dumplings for dinner

nancy would spend the summer with me  
on saturdays  
we'd go to the local dime store  
and steal things  
but we quit  
only because we got caught  
it was easy to do  
since the store  
had some band making country music  
to draw people in  
folks would listen to Bonnie Lou and Buster  
and we'd steal  
cheap perfume  
and rings  
that always made your finger turn green  
she married at sixteen  
and came to me once  
for a woman to woman talk  
something wasn't quite right inside her  
she said it was an empty feeling  
like part of her was missing  
at the time  
i was too young to know  
by the time i figured it out  
she was dead  
in a moment of anger  
her husband  
had driven his car  
into a tree  
to kill her



tony was my boyfriend  
when i was six  
we use to sneak off  
behind the church  
after wednesday night prayer meeting  
and kiss each other  
he always gave me  
a box of  
chocolate covered cherries  
for christmas  
his daddy had been killed in the war  
his momma was a school teacher  
when she died  
me and pap went over  
to his house  
learning to do my duty  
that's how pap called it  
me and tony went out  
to the fields  
to bring the cows in  
he talked about his momma and cried  
the next year  
he fell in love  
with  
my best friend

my cousin's name  
was bug  
bug dollarhide  
they called her bug  
'cause everybody  
said she was buggy  
when she was little  
somebody womped her one  
right up the side of the head  
and it went and  
affected her mind  
old bug had this thing  
about god  
and the church  
she believed that she had to be saved  
once a week  
so every sunday  
she'd go to a different church  
and when they'd have the altar call  
old bug'd get religion  
every sunday  
the spirit of the lord  
would come into her  
and she'd get saved  
and join a new church  
when bug died  
half the preachers in the county  
thought they was gonna be the one  
to preach the funeral



looking out the kitchen window  
at the big walnut tree  
pap says  
somebody musta kilt that squirrel  
ever year he comes up there  
'cept this year  
he ain't been around  
i betcha somebody up and killed him

kids gotta tease each other about something  
they teased me cause i used a syrup bucket to  
carry my lunch in  
apple butter on a cold biscuit to eat  
sometimes a little piece of salt pork or ham  
some of the kids was lucky  
they had p-nut butter  
one day i swaped a ham biscuit  
for a p-nut butter sandwich  
on white store bought bread  
i really thought i was something

## The Abortion

when i was fifteen  
and married  
and pregnant  
my husband  
he came home  
higher than a georgia pine tree  
drunk  
i turned my face to the wall  
and pretended  
to be asleep  
thinking  
about the child  
and wondering  
was this what my life was suppose to be about?  
as thick hands  
groped  
for me across the lumpy bed  
i heard a voice say  
im gonna fuck you woman  
as the big bad wolf  
began to huff and puff and blow his house in  
i lay there  
the big bad wolf  
with his clumsy hands  
i got me an idea  
and before i could change my mind  
i hit him  
as hard as i could



right in the balls  
and screamed out  
you cock sucking gallon of shit  
youd fuck yer own mother  
knowing full well  
what was going to happen  
i waited for him  
to beat the shit out of me  
like a rag doll  
my body bounced off the wall  
and i cussed him more  
and he beat me harder  
i felt his foot in my belly  
and as he opened the front door  
to throw me down the steps  
i could feel the warm blood  
oozing  
between my legs

"god damn old miss mitchell"  
"who's old miss mitchell"  
"she's nobody honey  
your grandmomma said  
you should never god damn anybody  
so i made her up"

one summer she came roaring up  
in a ford convertible  
with the top down  
and the radio playing  
country music  
full blast  
she had a new permanent wave  
bright red fingernails  
and high heel shoes  
she was beautiful and laughed a lot  
with my momma  
she'd say  
do you remember  
the time  
i bought that pair of falsies  
so i could look like a movie star  
and old jack bales was trying  
to look down the front of my dress  
and he said  
boy  
i'd like to have a handful of that  
and i said  
you would  
and i just reached down the front of my dress  
grabbed a hold of one of them falsies  
and handed it to him  
you oughta seen the look on his face



now i was a wright  
before i married your uncle noahy  
you ask me why  
i married him?  
well  
daddy was real bad to drink  
he was always bringing home his friends  
a wanting me to take up with them  
noahy was the first decent man  
to come along  
so i ran off and married him  
course you know  
they ain't none of them wrights  
no good  
none of them never did nothin  
cept fer two of my cousins  
i hear tell  
they even got a monument up for them  
in a place called kitty hawk  
seems like  
they had something or other  
to do with  
the airplane





i remember the morning  
old charlie crawford knocked on the door  
my momma was cooking  
a big pot of  
corn meal mush  
daddy went to the door  
and there stood charlie  
his wife  
and seven kids  
charlie told daddy that old man riggs  
had thrown them out  
that very morning  
for seven years charlie and his family  
had worked the soil  
tenant farming was how they called it  
every year  
old man riggs would take  
half  
of all they raised  
now he had gone and evicted them  
his tax lawyer had told him  
it didn't pay  
to keep tenant farmers these days  
daddy brought them in  
and momma fed them mush  
years later when my brothers wanted to tease me  
they'd say  
you're going to grow up and marry  
old charlie crawford  
then they'd laugh and run away

god almighty  
christ in heaven  
i don't reckon i know why i did it  
i just love to play poker  
and i was broke and byrd asked me what'd i bet  
he had an eye on junie  
so i said  
i love my pretty little wife more'n anything  
but i got a winning streak  
i'll bet my wife  
and you know what?  
that sonvabitch won

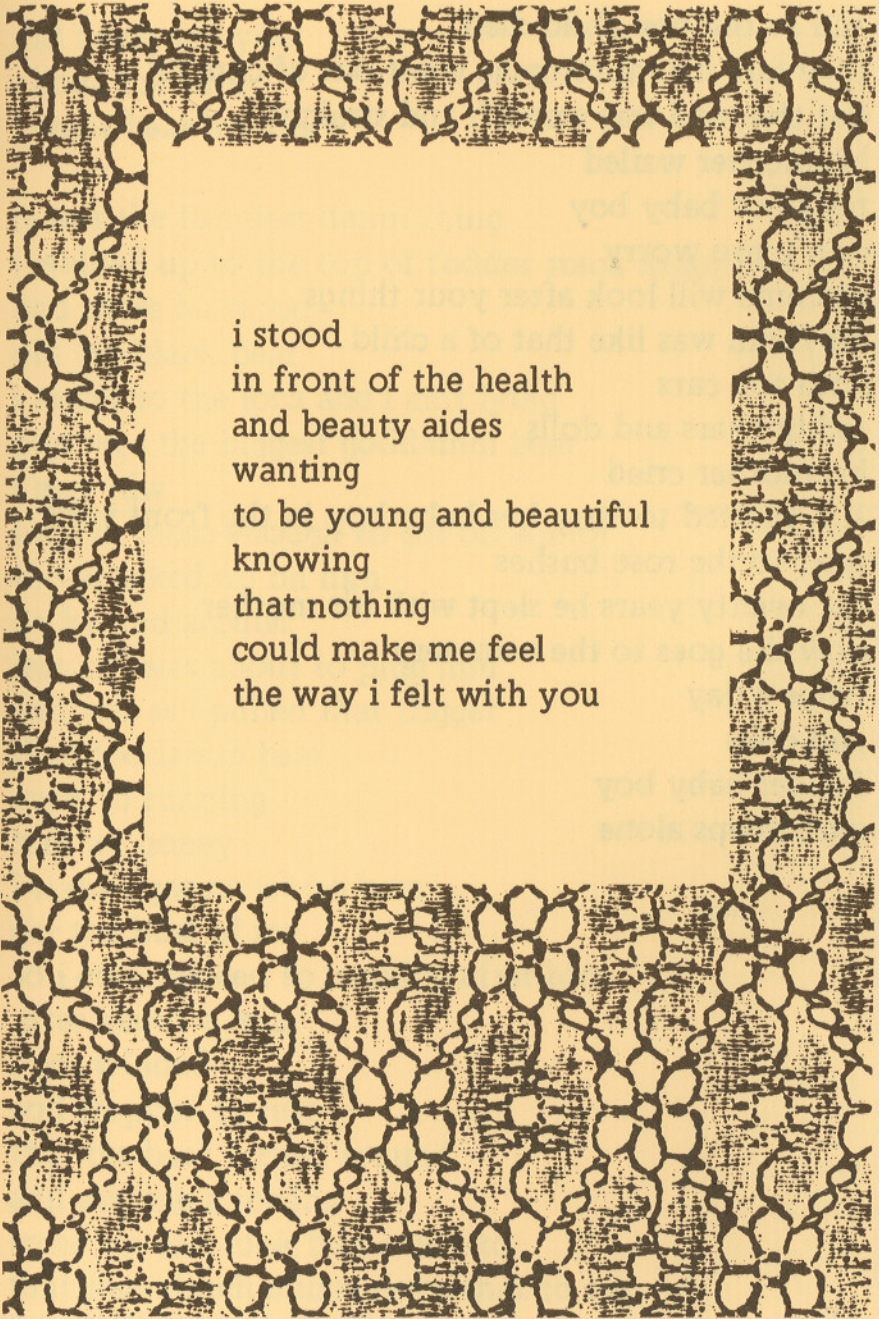


did you hear?  
she blowed out her brains  
said she couldn't stand it any more  
put a shotgun in her mouth  
and pulled the trigger  
what will happen to her six children  
and her poor husband  
he's disabled you know  
she never was the same after they got the welfare  
god works in mysterious ways  
if you hear a dove cooing  
it's a sign of death  
a hard cold winter  
wash jones will go deep in the fodder tonight  
old man  
he'd work on people's farms  
people'd say  
wash come on in this house and i'll make you a bed  
on the floor in front of the fire  
wash'd say  
no thankee i'd jest as soon sleep in the barn  
he'd go out and dig into the fodder and  
use it for a blanket  
so when it was going to be cold  
folk's would say  
wash jones will go deep in the fodder tonight

faded eyes peer out  
from a faded face  
the roots of her hair show gray  
through the home dye job made possible  
by our lady clairol  
she drug on her cigarette  
and bragged  
"i never loved anybody"



judy cut pieces of net  
into squares  
and filled the squares with rice  
so people could shower her  
on her wedding day  
i was her bridesmaid  
and wore a yellow dress  
made of bonded lace  
from jc penny  
seventeen dollars and ninety nine cents  
plus tax  
satin shoes  
from bell brothers  
six dollars and ninety eight cents  
plus one dollar  
for the dye job  
judy changed her mind at the last minute  
and said  
she couldn't go thru with it  
but her momma said  
they was all them people waiting in the church  
and besides  
everything had cost so much



i stood  
in front of the health  
and beauty aides  
wanting  
to be young and beautiful  
knowing  
that nothing  
could make me feel  
the way i felt with you



and so the boy child died  
they said his motorcycle went out of control  
but the road was smooth and straight  
his mother wailed  
my poor baby boy  
don't you worry  
momma will look after your things  
his room was like that of a child  
with toy cars  
teddy bears and dolls  
his mother cried  
and wanted to bury her baby boy in the front yard  
next to the rose bushes  
for twenty years he slept with his mother  
now she goes to the cemetery  
twice a day  
and cries  
for her baby boy  
who sleeps alone

did i ever tell you  
about the time  
i went bear huntin

it was the funniest damn thing  
i walked up to the top of fodder stack mountain  
and there he stood  
old big black bear  
i swear to the lord and i aint lying  
that was the biggest goddam bear  
i ever saw  
i wernt close enough to get off a shot  
so i sneaked up on him  
he looked around  
jest as i was about to plug him  
and jest as i pulled that trigger  
that goddam bear  
took to running  
huh uh honey  
i wasn't gonna let no bear  
get the best of me  
so i commenced to running after him  
after about a mile  
i got winded  
so i stopped to rest  
that ole bear turned around  
and saw me a resting  
so he up and took him a rest to  
that sonvabitch musta done that to me  
five or six times



ever time i'd stop to get my wind  
he'd rest a bit  
i ran for nearly six mile before i figgured out  
they wernt no way  
that bear was going home with me  
i made it back home  
my clothes was froze to me  
from sweating so much in the cold  
i woke up the next morning  
with the double new monie  
almost had to go to the hospital  
huh uh honey  
i tell you one thing  
i don't hunt  
no bears no more





once  
in charleston west virginia  
in july  
in a vegetable market  
an old woman  
in a black hat and coat  
asked the man in the white apron  
how much for one ear of corn  
we don't sell just one ear of corn  
six is the smallest amount we sell

she was explaining how six  
ears were too many  
since her husband died  
the salesman turned from her  
while she was speaking

i bought six ears of corn  
and followed her  
down the street to an old hotel  
and asked her if she would like  
to buy an ear of corn  
since six was too many for one person  
and i was alone

my brother took me to the bus station  
we stopped at the truck stop for breakfast  
as he walked me to the bus he said,  
"write if you find work"

