2006

Clearance | Poems

Elizabeth Sanger

The University of Montana

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THE CLEARANCE

poems

by

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B.A. State University of New York at Plattsburgh, 2004

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2006

Approved by

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

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Even the animals are not shut out from this wisdom... for they do not stand idly in front of sensuous things... but, despairing of their reality... they grasp them without hesitation and consume them.

~Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

So the unspeakable is guarded by language...

~G. Agamben, *The Place of Negativity*
The Sign

Twilight at the striated
fields softens their bonds,
the tawny and moss
lash-marks of culture, till.

That loam more fertile
than its forced yield
is infinite to plumb.
What calls in approach

from the border-forests
is absorbed by the palpable

gris-gray swath. Grange
fades out. A trace of grange

remains. When behind a tree
all of its shadows shuffle

to a whorl perpetually
descending into the horizon

you are these first unutterable
futures. I came to tell you

I cannot say what I have become.
1. Yet longing. The green sign lit with nerves, transparent moths pulsing, a locus of unrest in the fathomless sky. A place one would scratch at the throat, smoking in the luminescent television. From this angle, no factories or stealth of passing cars.

What cities of sleep have vanished again. The body flickering, dressing itself with thorns. As if staring at a thing long enough were touching.
2.
There are never so many questions as rain in the hallway
the summer without doors. Early on, a heron
posited snake-thin in silhouette
at the lip of obscured waters. Then, in a notebook, careful footsteps
anticipate devotions.

But the pale green buds dripping
from the deep green trees. The asking palm.
Searching a pelt of mixed darkness
in an occupied room, something uncertain
congeals on the tongue. The one light is drowning, spits a great distance.
3.
And still, half-willing. What demands, know this wingspan, pain feathering the legs to forcible unflight. Outside, green glass stipples the street of redemption, children thin in their shadows in the doorways of dead buildings. For a while done dreaming oceans, sweet almond salve. The raw stalk of the neck, bending. The bed aslant. With grease, oil of skin, takes it in hand. Shows how it is done.
4.
The gun was steady,
and the hunger,
and the skin incidental

as the eyes from which no pasture, no gently
waving grasses would be growing.

What tender ode would fit the sticky cordage. The rose-
colored muscle.

Hung from the rafters, splayed
on a table. The place the body collects its thirst
given like faith in birds’ fervent migrations.

Said, the coldness and dryness
are necessary components.
5.
The patience, the perseverance is not
and never will be a garden. Those years of admiring
wayward blossoms, wild roses clotting
at the side of the rose. What smells here
is rotten. Cat-eye, and fish-gut, and other burials
never questioned. It’s been said, poor earth, it’s been said,
for a song. That a world of brilliant equipment
could not tame it. Aggrieved, the hand clamps
when it tries loving. The green vines
are growing, close in when sleeping.
6.
But when the book of sleep is open it spills hours, forgives
no midnight. And months are no different
and even collected

sit empty as a flawed glass jar
with no heart. At the window, an evening task
hollows the bones, bleeds out
webbed memory: carriage, arbor, stiletto.

Gone unfinished
no thing that was begun. Up the stairwell

a face drifts through the dark. Will there be travel.
Will there be harbor.
Untitled

Would you were where my sister keeps
her bones,
deep in her body, perfecting
their whiteness.

I know teeth
on a peach, nubbin chewed from the nail. The pulsing

mouthful of salt
and alloy, and my friend
in the clipped field behind the house

mimicking the speech of
the instrument, his. His
readied ligature.

Yesterday I went to the quarry. I passed through
the orchard, its fruits
a peculiar trembling to the heart

where water-snakes thresh the surface
of rumored depths. The ruined stone
embracing the water
     dead of frogs and fish.
The Clearance

Tremolo along great lengths of twine
I am always speaking, I don’t know why Oh it does
increase affection, to remember the slate

pattering, patterning a skip

like distant ancestry, to inherit
someone else’s particular—

my grandmother gave me this
abuse, to have never seen such water, the turbid, deep-weeded center

were there a center
and the spectrum of light
more willing: in this world I am afraid
to use the word—

bodied intricacies of bindweed, cypress, gull,
hoarhound and sturgeon all flattened

to black, all signified by—
Commissive

1.
A day terns make
uncertain, gesture
toward—long-beaked,
collecting pebbles—recollecting
the mussel's surrendered, tensile grip.
I couldn’t want
more. So we assemble
the shore, and you kneel
where your knees may keep.

2.
But for solace, (a bird
in the hand, etc.) I may not have
more than one. Anywhere specific
rock-throttled ligature gives
under quartz, unplumbed
    granite and shale, in description
no longer easily given—labyrinthine, as a body
    polyphonal—it gives.
At the gate a stuttering son
oracles division, “Did you know I am, and you are...” as the sloe-dark
costlines are curling away from one another
and I am moved to quote
your prairie neighbors, who are so far, who are
away. What then
is the correct pronunciation
of “chimera”? Of “untenable”?

3.
The phone rings all day
with old news: longing
needle (what consolation
it was) and its four-
cornered, four-chambered
bloom: or was it wound,
    your tongue worrying
an abscess, the only word
mine knows,
    across the distance. In the sense “of being”
the sense of being
apart—existence

an illness if everything is reducible
to the exertions of objects
across a plain grid.
The lines tremble.

4.
Is it fair: to say what slaughter of you
stands looking at me looking at you
beneath the bittersweet, winter-sapped limbs,
dusk-washed
and dreaming me briefly

in the cattailed backlands: your emptied
socket: your half-milked eye
and your necessary beauty moving toward me
in electric, authored strands of light.

Though I listened every time I had an ear
chorded to the northern highways, their unbodied
rumble and no eye
for the accident marking your face
in silhouette,

or this, our rejoinder— by the tree
where our swallows still —the tree
that is not our future, but the sum
of itself in the gauzy dusk, withholding.
Figura

From synthetic crash of sea; sea's admonishment
presaged on the newly
sheer slip of shore

(grow me a face
where she is buried)

I in my half-shaded bode, shadow

of contiguity, event
sundered to a simple limb, history
cloaked and needful

ask how many
simultaneous woods are she
hooded through

or what bespeaks the tender
auto, its mad patience
to begin being—
The authorities say that if the eye
had some color in it when it was observing, it would
recognize neither the color it had nor the color it had not…
~Meister Eckhart, The Book of Benedictus
White Series
~for L.

I.
On this unbreathing plain
tattered to a quilt
of pigment-bled grasses: verdure siphoned
from the ground, the grasses
always birthing
the un-iterate: a tamped swell, every epic
condensed to a day
unmarked as more than one
following another
just like it, a palette
of indistinction (one arrived with her tools
of art, left with her tools
unmarred),
   you are not a face hung among faces.
I speak you best
in not speaking
grotesqueries (let the herd)— violent amethyst
and all the rest
come as fish heads
mouthing their strong, detailed chins.
I neglect to mention
it is all of the days, when days are also faces.
II.
As the word unspoken
allows all other words

the walls were a treasury
banked in silence, necessity

in a room
where even the sound

was tongued indulgent,
asking disaster

as those long, many-chroma’ed
strokes. Musculature spasmed.

At finish the narrowly
preserved was as flowered bone,

its myriad intricacies
conceived from the pelvis,

its myriad uncertainties
understood as promise, one.
III.
Is it all seasons
it may be

all seasons are winter's
crystal edges

tyidoscopic as a ten-point star
held to the throat. Held in

the throat, your particulars
are no one's. Are mine

rendered nightly
through a rough distilling cloth,

as drink in a snowing country
I take a glass in hand.

Shade bodies
to darken the glass.
IV.
And if you have always been
an unlimited room
and I wonder at the walls
of all rooms: a singular matter
your blanched flesh, endless
alabaster unsculpted to resemble
the unspoken in me: overwhelming

this press for good tinder, were I to cross
the wildly abstracted field of a dream of a parking lot folded
   and unfolded upon itself a figure of white

bird toward a horizon
where it does not exists

to still and again meet you—
V.
If there were interlude for the mute, the unified
diffuse, I have carved it. And if there were you
there were I
as you, bound
to your traffic in paradox.

How they wring their teeth
of their missing, who know nothing
of the solace of missing, how distance binds.
First the fundaments, color. Then the unclasping:
a hand of light.
The Clearance

Not wilderness as such, but a predictable distance
dressed, every occasional
tendril, the dusk-rushed grove bearing its resemblances
with numerical finitude and the accident
writhing in the net of creepers isn’t, really. Even
the animals. Especially the animals (their choired gaze so reliably
needing). Here I wrested from a warping glass
smitten with vines, a smothering
underbrush darkly radiant
in someone’s (there is this one I say
I tried) assumption commonwealth to find togetherness
is not the way I like it. Consider: we shared a literal tongue.
Malocchio

To be delivered
of subject. Confronted

with nullity, the dark-
mattered ballast and yet I do not know to trust

the elevated duty of attention. The eye
is costumed. Brought civet, attar

of hyacinth. A jar for ash.

Lately I have been dreaming
what I don’t remember—the fatted orb, the orchard hung
by torsioned limbs and the dirt road

snaking a perilous
swim-hole. The eye

is lonely. In poor health. And the constant
is not sight

but seeking. If a bottle on the sill
darkens, if across the room its glass

perpetually refracts (as in a poem
“a man walks,” and is

therefore always walking
through molting apple-flowers

in the shuttered dusk)
I will drink it

down and devote a lucent fiber, a careful
ribbon and sundry items make

undeservedly totemic. The eye

is twelve times independent.
Casual stupidity

offends it. What tenuous, what tender
line connects. A town of French pronunciation. A sweat-
bricked house of faces
at its abundant casements.
Homecoming

She existed spared
autumn. Tendriled, unmoving. All around her her master’s fauna

fat for no slaughter, no sup
in the lassitude of perfection. I have been

that wanting. The shouts of the crowd
emptied out and I grew marvelous

smaller in his jacket as all
the banners rained down from the gray-

clopped strata. At the bonfire I gorged
on apple-beer; in the dark

beyond I made of my mouth a trough
for his feeding.
Speculation

A mutant glass makes her. She is done as she has done: swimmingly, recovering from one oscillant depth to the next, scarified, better yet because someone penned the whorl, hung the lobe with stars, modern stars. Before her the silvered mother may linger, finishing her slenderizing exercises. Fathers show teeth. As her position demands: we become us, the unwritten congress of the dark-beaked, thorn-billed being written by a patient’s (patient, a rivulet unbinds) hand. What is illness but a metaphor for a stranger comes into town; someone goes away on a journey . . .

and the fog-bodiced mountains foot-stitched front to back, every year a signature a sign a little black cross. The supernal gusts fang at the summit. The stony breaths flattening the grasses, the uniformed mouths expelling stones. In the ghost-frame, bone outlines. Just the shoulder’s ephemeral shiver.
in the field, slumped
as if sleeping, it is always
too late

is nothing in progress

the grass slowly running
underwater, the waterlogged willow

does not insist
nor do you wish to

bear the weight of its being, heavy does not describe it

on the mound bodies are
a slab of light

unbroken through rain, barely
congregant rain

unfree
in the air

here, I thin for you
practice at small churches, white clapboard, forgiveness

not for the body, but the act of the body
you loved

no one resides here but the flowers
of children lessoning

raise their heads and I look for you

a boundless, unwired sky, blue
as if it had never been so
it is still
dusk, the tree blackly figuring

through the pale
stuck in thinning,
yet you

cannot help but be, you think

responsible for this: must allow
each slender tip

and how it feels
inside you

likewise the spire, grass
the buried horizon

where love is nearly impossible

in any condition, yours
is no different

witness the hill, petrified
rain in my house in threads
attenuates down the pane
easily lessening
the rule of water not ours
but before gravity exacts a return
let me
where you are, I lay will lay you down
and it will disappear into the ground, your holding
skull out the eyes
the stuffed corridors
underearth
suffering no animal there now
plaintive with flesh
some figure of flesh
is water, immaterial

flood my sleep, rain wedding

white flowers

bruised on the bush

all the children are girls

as if to say we made me

when light changed by refusing it

and I took in my body
all degradations, night patching over night
and clouds rolling over
the moon over the church
over the pasture

in movement, being, my body

unbecoming, every word

is a weight

I try to know better
Uniformitarian Principle

How do we admit what we did?

What was done is easier: the minimum evidence of drift, a suggestion, vegetal

lushness in the digits
once uncurled to etch the narrative (the beginning’s beginning) of the emergency

    you came to say
that prehensile grasp

was more important than the world, was

the world through slitted gillwork
laboring to breathe and breathing in

the fetal darkness: an umbrella clause for devastation

in the great seafloor trenches
and along the rifted anterior margins, where lately I have seen you

tending your horse with the kindness
particular to those who no longer care much for others. Once a great body

of forest and silky glen split apart
knew a son brushed in light.

Which does not age. Which is unflinchingly egalitarian in nature, as in anyone

can make him; and I may make him.
I.
Could you step out into this city, as approaching
the crest of its hill
its amber pin-prick
carillon is upswept: could you
go further, o honeyed black
seraph is unkempt, is rising, spreading
its future as pennons sidereal
but that are not stars.
But on foot there is no nevering
the stars.

II.
We turned back frightened by the carcass of a dog.
As if it were your parents,
in the woods, the hairs of your body
responding
before your body knew further. Your parents, perpetually
wintering. The gibbous moon came
long ossified, done bone
diffuse in the long
unwatched night. Frightened. As if it were
my parents.

III.
At the end of reverse passage
the plush heathering skies of the canyon
past dusk, and further: could it be
believing in war begins there still,
as the cat on the stony jut practices its jaw
with languor of the unchallenged: unfueled, knowing nothing
of modern bargaining for trust and hedges. And one of us
might have wept for it.

IV.
So lessons in basic geography became lessons in how with hunger
to identify the cardinals. Wild, clustered
back country habitations, huckleberry, hunting lantern, sanctuary
in a stand of pines, a steeple of pines, complications
of electronica, railroads, myth of the self-
made man
and if we were touched, childhood. Can we tremble.
The Clearance

I cannot say what it was, what left the shelf to describe us slogging along it for once

patient, for once
unfettered by suggestion (but how
the blown eyeball of bracken
suggests itself!) in a sunken path, an inverse augury—you must go
first, salt marsh hushing up your step, water ankling

and the cinctured sky radically dividing
along gray and grayer and simply graying
to the inner conflagration of stones. Where we sat
I “imagined” I did not, as my regard for you is first
you don’t, would not accede
but to describe a sign

of new growth, though I was thinking even such
dilute light trebling across the water
is a liar; I was rousting unquiet diagrams

of how far a doze of a shifting, oblique horizon
muttering up its single hunter (easier, they say,
on the interior eye) and his flight from mercy
to mercy must be—it must be tireless, must be

there were at least three of me sitting there
beside you, one not moving, one waiting
to be moved, one marking out the uncompromising

radial and its keep—alternately, the assault
of flight the moment I believed.
I would caress the negative
you awaiting (it is a long wait), constitutive
you or your absence
whitely swanning back to shadow
in the vesicles compounding
so large a voice
of shadow—
I.
That loss allows us—needful earth
aped of the sky, sign
a love so great we had to make it
an object
of return: allow me, briefly
your zero
slipping on the horizon, goodbye
against the sea-line, declinations
of average rose

.
II.

inexactly in every shuddering tree, the object

the tree shuttering

you these things

I know I do not know them—wandering, sensate catalogue

the mutt having eaten

assembles beneath me

his whited orchard of bones. I wanted to see how

they conducted light (increments of), were

consumed by
III.

ordinary articles court me like my friend
and his “intentions”: your basic triangle
resolute in the exactitude
of its material description—the angle
of your jaw against a coaxing stone I find
because I am looking for it and I
so close to the ocean stand before it
believing dumbly in stones
IV.

as nothing expresses you
better than not-
even the breath
clefting a stretch of shore
willing, the invisible
rupture I am faced by
I'm afraid to look behind me
too many tin cans
shivering in the backward sand, soluble toxin the sand
also becomes
indication and I don't want to see it,
what I do not signify—
V.

fidelity, abysmal star-
bloom, absent
anemone gorged
the wound I left me
to explore you
who determines the tragedy
of the quotidian: time-
startled household implements
resisting skins
my body non-existent as fulcrum for shifting
afternoon light
is no atrocity
I say I believe
VI.

come to you bearing your quiet:
sutured trunk, colossus
bound down to each
petty grievance
a tortured limb
right outside my window

*where the birds of the air come and perch, I transparently*

permuting through a host of good men
to whom I have been
giving—in action alone
determined
and once, wildly

vested in the sea-froth garment of my sex, an empty room

right behind my window—you

I object; I undress
VII.

as dolomite, tennis shoe, faithless

horse a systemic

narcissus folded, unfolded

in the bowels—the prison

of one communicant

self flourishing

the only world

obedient, increasingly, as hunger (in a cell, light

at light’s angle; everything

else as I) knifing the rotted

font, cell’s perfect round

where each water mirrors, meets

each other in the dig, a signature

I repeat: my body,

consumed,

composed of,

flowers
VIII.

and what pleasure
my addictions, their insistence
that I exist
for no object
other (his speaking apparatus
preempted, museum-
gloss on his organ)—

“half the time I am looking for beauty”
half the time I am finding it—and then
the collective wedded
stilled
as a black and white photograph
of sand, worshipful
nowhere stretching over their shoulder
absent a scything moon I imagine
a poverty of want
IX.

in the shape of an I—earlier

I was now

as one guilded bride, novitiate’s arm

sweeping the shore, shag-crusted, spit-

flitted shore-arm in the distance

it takes to realize now

*that they still have to learn the mystery*

*of eating bread and drinking wine*—in the distance

it takes to realize the sea’s leviathan

hunger off its bridle now

I am the shore-arm now

I am the sea—
Epilogue

As dirt takes water
to that bride adorned, my wanting days

suggest tongues and belly
their animal undersides at table, asking more

meat and beer. To say you exist
I etch the perplexity of her

measure of wifeliness onto the table—i.e., I crave
mastery, light

crawling through the window, I cannot help it

matter—tractable sod, a resting
stone, perhaps

there is no living or dying after all
only this

symphonic footstep, wild rose knotting
by the side of the road
and then there is no road
The Needle

As penalty. That whosoever cuts down any tree growing in another man’s ground. A trespass. A cup of poison. That whosoever pirates sacred vestments. Who tightens the boot and who makes the boot beautiful, in extremity, the final stroke.

An awful tree is growing in my neighbor’s yard. Who tightens the boot, its limbs bound and knotted, housing a caucus of uneasy swallows as at dusk you approach with a rose. The quiet birds rustle. I was frightened and so I let you in, knowing how the body accommodates, which is poorly, which is you, and you christening nape, clavicle, and you are most on the hip, and closer, where I want to be touched. See, I am willing and sick with the burden of wonderment. Was I unhappy? I imagined you carnal and feasting. Beaked and sucking. What pink tongue. What wine and color, and the tapestries hung one after another, baroque, scrawled in old tongue, and the bodies, and the gold instruments, and he said, you are always sexual. I would you conduct me in. I would not run, I would be bound and shaved on a rude stone altar for entrance. It is to say I am right here. And it not because the stars are looking. And it is not because they come to the ceremony wound in braids are looking. Who tightens the boot makes it beautiful. Their hair covers their faces and I do not know if they have faces.
Self-Portrait in Winter

Finally, how to carry the sky
at twilight? A rose so cool
its beauty seems now in moments
less quiet inadmissible.

What surety there is manifests
in the waves, colorless
and roaring, one knows, simply
by gazing on the scene mid-ocean,
where opposing winds set two crashing
into each other, sending up tremendous
spray wrestling for space as do brothers,
giving no quarter, and in the sand,
described by a hand attendant
to the intricate confluence of lines
comprising the illusion of one body
as achieved by its many, many small
parts. It is so dull to contemplate
the infinite like this. I remember
nothing of that night but the sky:
no one marveling at the mussels
who know no life beyond stubborn
attachment to the algae-slick rock
in the shallows, no weathered white
beach house pecking out from between
the pines trees to the left
on a rocky bluff, no graying shore,
no ocean. Only the sky, absence,
the vanishing point.
NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to the editors of the journals in which some of these poems first appeared: Meridian (“The Sign”) and WebConjunctions (“The Needle” “Self-Portrait in Winter”).

I would also like to thank Karen Volkman, Prageeta Sharma and Paul Dietrich for their support, dedicated work on this thesis and overall good cheer. Thank you Joanna Klink. Thank you Greg Pape and Bill Knott.

Thank you Jill Beauchesne, Brandon Shimoda, Devon Wootten and Nathan Bartel—my readers and my friends.

Thank you Walker.

Thanks especially to my family: Kate and Devon Sanger and Hedi McKinley

Thank you Luke. This work is for you.

“Figura” borrows the phrase “history, cloaked and needful” from Erich Auerbach’s essay by the same name.

“Homecoming” was inspired by Lucas Cranach the Elder’s Adam and Eve (panel painting, 1526).

“Speculation” is indebted to The Conference of the Birds, by Farid Al-Din Attar (1119-1193).

“Uniformitarian Principle” borrows “the beginning’s beginning” from Susan Maxwell’s Passengers; the rest of the italicized language is lifted from a 1950’s high school textbook, author unknown.

“O” owes much to Language and Death: The Place of Negativity, by G. Agamben et al. The phrase “that they still have to learn the mystery of eating bread and drinking wine” is borrowed from Hegel’s discussion of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

“The Needle” gratefully borrows “you are always sexual” from Nathan Bartel’s “The Instrument.”