River of the West

Tom Rea

The University of Montana

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THE RIVER OF THE WEST

by

Tom Rea

B.A., Williams College, 1972

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
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Approved by:

Madeleine De Freys
Chairman, Board of Examiners

R. Marples
Dean, Graduate School

May 23, 1979
Date
Out on de bleak ocean, mon.

--Peter Matthiessen

and above me
a wild crow crying 'yaw yaw yaw'
from a branch nothing cried from ever in my life.

--Galway Kinnell
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Some of these poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the following magazines:

CutBank
Poetry NOW
Quarterly West
Silver Vain

and in a chapbook, Man In A Rowboat, published by the Copper Canyon Press, September 1977.
Giants

At the time when giants strode the earth, picked their teeth with trees, left lakes in their footprints, threw mountains back and forth to pass the time, the ground was soft and the sea still warm. There were no words yet. We sat at the mouth of a cave in a canyon wall and stared at each other across a fire that would not stay lit. From time to time a mountain landed nearby. Your face would change at this, and watching yours, I'd feel the shape of mine change too.
The Climber Takes a Breather

At this height, hawks fall up. Rock shreds the rain clouds and a sharp smell in the couloir. Ducks ravel off for Baffin and the Pole.

Drink it all or take a step: the rope would hold you dangling in blue air, the valley spread below you like a hand. What is a knot in the belly but the belly pulling through itself.

Something hits you like wind, but older. Suppose flat was a plant, rhododendron a word. The flat grows thick along the river. A muskrat slips down the current. Goats peer from crags nosing pools for rainwater.

You weren't bred for ledges. What is a knot. Push off sideways, take a long jump for desert, splash clean as a trained whale whose mother mourns the deep like a great trombone.
At the Natural History Museum

Ranked in a kick line, flailing
their tiny forearms like infants
the old tyrannosaurs creak,
shift like cracking houses
into step. I know that song.
The music goes
We're dying to be you, music
from an earlier ooze, roar
of the sea before shells.
Those ribs could hold a ship
turned over, fit for sailing past
the Pleistocene and eight-foot beavers
to a time when each wet molecule
hadn't thought of fossils, mineral
moving in on animal, cell
by rusty cell. Skeletons
leap for the walls. The old guard
whose song goes emphysema
wheezing in the corner by the giant clam,
tips back his head for one last
lung-rattler, shatters it
off marble floors, stony
ears of lookers, and Mrs. Florio's
third grade who don't touch.

They are on a field trip to Pre-Cambrian
jumping and wiggling at the granite.
All but calm Eileen, prettiest
eyes in the class says Teacher.
She behaves the whole long walk
to the film room where they all turn
eyes alone, little bodies
streaming out behind like tadpole tails.
The man's voice tells them
how tiny their lives are
next to rocks.
Eileen believes him but Spider
roots deep in his head
for a frog-song, singing
Swamp, how we loved in the swamp.
Washington at the Forks of the Ohio

Washington's moon was a silver dollar worn smooth. He claimed it one night in his youth as it sank in the Ohio. Then it blurred, bled a cold light toward him through the mist. He felt himself grow outward softly, the grim lines at his mouth not set.

He claimed it with his outstretched thumb, not for the King, or Virginia but private, for his lean surveyor's eyes trained to run straight lines direct through hills and meadows, draw bounds to mark us off from them, clear up the difference.

He touched his face and remembered dreams his eye teeth falling out sweet blood in the unplugged gaps. And around his neck hung another moon points up, a silver gorget, Indians knew him an officer by it, different from the men.

The distinction lay cool and smooth to his touch. Standing there at the Forks the katy-dids wheezing he wished things clearer, wished he knew the pounding in him for what it was. His first big failure lay a month off at Fort Necessity and his heart boomed toward it.

So when you run your thumb over a quarter over his face stamped on it, picture him trying to squeeze that dollar-moon and wring its secret, clue to some rarefied geography beyond men's boundaries and cheap routes west. His arm falls. The wild forest sighs all around him. A soft regret swirls in his eyes, in the air, unnamed.
Bear

The bear claws his name on aspen bark
claw how high he can reach on a good day
the berries fat and the salmon
slow and careless.

Look at his haunch, how it moves under fur,
think of the fat he can live off, think
if he can chew fish and remember winter
in the shiver of leaves.

On good nights the bear sees his uncle
climb the sky. He lifts his nose and sneezes
news to the polestar, turns home, and dreams
of his heart and gimp left foot.

Bear's mate is the mean one, slouched back in the den
with cubs. His cousin is dying in the Denver zoo
one cage down from the pool where seals
try anything for fun.
Lugs Benedict on the Coast, 1934

He dreams of saxophones and hounds baying in mesquite. Gulls dive the murk.
Gold and evening move across the Sound.

Down in kelp, dolphin songs surround the rocks. He calls them Lucy, they moan back dreams of saxophones and hounds.

Sea mud licks his boots. Waves pound dust from his lips. His hands go wet. Gold and evening move across the Sound like seasons. Seals come crowned with light. They thrive in bulk and sing like saxophones and hounds.

A chinook broke ice one night, his sister drowned in Horse Creek. Her bones beach up gold when evening moves across the Sound.

Years shove his eyes around. Whales breach and blow the sea like milk. He dreams of saxophones and hounds. Gold and evening move across the Sound.
Vermeer at an Empty Canvas

In another quarter hour, red
will come up on the rug and the sun
hit the wineglass. Memory
is egg and oil, color:
the girl's eye
flicks her lover's in the mirror;
light bulks alive in the milkmaid's forearm,
begins in the stream from jug to bowl.
Yesterday, a long
walk along the water watching boats
tack up the sound. When I came in
Maria turned from the corner by the window
her hand on the sill like that.
Behind her the corner began to move
the wall bowed in big waves
I reeled, the floor
held its pattern and I grabbed
a chair for balance.

This
is the best part, this white square,
air through the window. I breathe
and hold it, house and day
pivot slowly around me.
The quiet grows, builds
solid figures out of air,
voices for the room,
voices for the room behind that.
La Bouillotte

((The Hot Water Jug), ca. 1728-31. Oil on Canvas
Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin, French, 1699-1779)

The lie is stillness
holds light as onions do,
three small white ones
laid between jug and water glass.
Glass and jug line up, pull
the light around them like a shawl.
The shine on the jug's dull glaze
softly warms the water in the room.

If cut, the onions would wet your eyes.
Step out into the street, let sun
warm your face. Color is only
light that does not soak in.
Horses clop by on cobbles, gutters
steam and a man is selling limes.
A thin crack runs to the horizon.
The sky glows pale French blue.

A man walks through the doorway,
steps out of his body and climbs
heaven. His thumbnail
is long and he runs it down
the blue dome. Swallows
dive around him he is yelling
Lisette, Baptiste, come look, come look.
Young Women Picking Fruit

(1891. Oil on canvas
Mary Cassatt, American, 1844-1926)

Rose has taken hold of the pear.
The heel of her palm shows around it.
Its red makes you think apple but look
at the shape. How ripe. Her round arm goes up and pink
gathers in the folds of her dress.

Susan sits in her hat
gazing up at Rose, one elbow
propped back on the chair. She wears
a blue flowered print,
lace at the neck and cuffs
holding a pear in her lap.

You want to smell the rot.
The flop of leaf
against branch, apple opaque
to the ground. Their skin
glows like fruit. The green lawn
soaks up daylight, soaks
their talk and the moment
that barely holds them.
They could burst the canvas
in a long soft slit down the middle.
White pulp begins to show, turning
slowly brown in the heavy garden air.
Moonlight

(Oil on canvas. Ralph Albert Blakelock, American, 1847-1919)

The moon is a green wafer veined by trees. The leaves move, the leaves breathe roughly and the wind whirls down like sulphur from the clouds. Blown circles, Mr. Blakelock, you paint in a smooth noise. The water throws silver wriggles at the moon. Behind your back did the night get blacker? wild eyes peer from shadows, your hand go numb on the brush?

People don't paint at night. They sit at a table and hoot like owls. Next morning you got up in cold feet, the moon had tumbled down your chimney. You built a fire. Green licked through the orange flames, moon green, the breath in the bushes. Something yellow grew beyond the lake.

I wonder if you walked home drunk that night. Was it gin behind your eyes turned the sky that color? Pounded the blood in your ears toward thick brush strokes, blurred edges: the lurching green of your heart.
Sir George Nevill, 3rd Lord Bergavenny
(circa 1534. Oil and tempera on oak panel
Hans Holbein the Younger, German, 1497-1543)

Mister, your face is heart of oak.
You've been stuck a long time
in that painting, lips
a dreamless horizon, flesh
skinned over the wood. You gaze off right,
beyond the frame. I have this lurch
to call you Captain, web your skies
with tarred rope. High on the poop the mate
calls above creaking timbers, calls the clouds
God's lips peeling back, lightning
the brazen laugh He saves for Englishmen.

Beyond the frame, gunmetal weather
blues and gleams. A steady swell,
salt tang of blood.
Colors were duller then.
A split world had turned passions
brown as the fur at your neck.
In the new race for continents
you could hate a Spaniard like an angel.
Hunting straits through wide unknowns,
men discovered people. Natives
untouched by papist hands.

Behind you, if that sky
is a dull blade it won't rust.
Your eyes control such things
by habit. Rents come in forever
from your green estates. Still,
boring a narrow passage down
through years, it is a lusher green
you stare at. The charm of far waters,
lands where the light falls
solid as rock and iron. Where flesh,
like singing, knows nothing of its end.
Cape Cod Afternoon

(1936. Oil on canvas
Edward Hopper, American, 1882-1967)

Blocks of light on the big house slant
crazy off pitched roofs and gable ends.
The green lawn breathes a lungful of ocean.

Someone has left a window open,
a black square calling, Supper:
and down at the beach in seaweed,
in rocks and tide pools, a child
takes a lazy poke at a starfish.
He's lost a sneaker and the scheme
to blame it on his brother. He drags
a stick in the sand for a snake track,
wiggly first, then wide curves. Gulls rise,
scream off toward Spain.
Down at the harbor his friend Louie
the Portugese crabber tells him

"Lose a shoe it floats to Africa,
maybe you get a letter back." Water is flat
around the boats, with rainbows. You can smell

sun on the dock wood. Here by the splintery part
those summer people crashed their boat
all laughing right up against. A lady
fell in and the sail went shivering crazy.
The sky that day was orange, his brother
found a dearie in the road that matched it.

Round and clear, like Daddy's Navy song
0 the ocean waves may roll.
The lawn is turning gold now,

his bare foot chilly. Looking up,
the house, the thinning light, he waves
at the empty air.

Waves and waves like flags
in the Bristol parade when music
quits. Feet and thumping drums.
Red Cloud and the Iron Horse

Silent Red Cloud stares from a knoll, his pony stolen from the Crows and a fine one. The locomotive chugs on the plain, makes its own wind. His eyes smoke like range fire and the train gets closer. Until he sees lounging against the great brass bell on the boiler a woman, red dress and her white breasts bared to the sun and all that grass. The pony snorts under him. There is no blood in his vision, grass brushes his hanging feet.

Down along the river
his wife's brothers sing
the chokecherry song. It is that time of year come round again.
The tracks lie straight across the plain.

He fixes on one red spark
its long arc moving toward him, feels the horse skit sideways and shudder. Something tips. The sky rim is a bowl rim, he is water and moving on a dead run.

Twice to drive the buffalo from a Blackfoot range and once to please a woman, he torched the prairie red and big.
High Plains, Wyoming

You could name a town after it, this clarity:
yucca leaf on sandstone
a kiss from eighty yards.
Sun eats rock. What grows
keeps a long time at it.

Once two Frenchmen
might have made it this far
but probably not. A.D. 1742, they were
looking for the River of the West.
They had no idea, they lost
the astrolabe two days out. Louis
and Francois Verendrye, thirsty.
The river flowed only on the map.

But there was a time
you could float to the ocean in a month,
just drift, no portages, no falls.
Wind that never had a sand grain in it
lined your arms and you knew
it was the right direction. You could smell
by the banks, their peculiar mud.
Man in a Rowboat

There was a lake once, and a great blue heron flapped across it, dragging legs and bad weather from the southeast. Fish jumped at a mayfly hatch, but their mood was not good and their eyes gave nothing away.

Put a man on the lake in a rowboat. He smells the storm but stays to watch bugs, fish rings in the fading light, and how deep he can see if he leans from the gunwales and looks straight down. The water has a way of pulling his eye that scares him. Thump the oars out, and let him bend toward shoreline, long slow strokes. Bring the heron back, low along the water and the man laughs, the first drops hit his neck.
Magic

When doves fly loose
from his hat, the magician
feels his clean heart scorn
the audience. The dupes,
the way their jaws
drop you'd think worms
might crawl in, curl up
for winter. His girl assistant
holds the rabbit toward him
on a tray. Its white
trembles close to pink.
Three times a week the fat old buck
disappears. Thin air
or trick drawers,
it doesn't matter: When Miasmo
kicks the spindly table to pieces

all the kids at Amy Boggs'
eighth birthday party
damn well take notice,
their eyes logy from ice cream
and way too long in the pool.
The girl snaps her glittering leotard
down over one hard buttock. Miasmo
moves on to the snaking cane. Cannibals
thinks Amy's mother, passing out
the shrunken heads, it's a shame
to frighten children like that.
But where'd the bunny go?
says Spider, thinking holes
behind the wood pile, how he gets
little enough to slip away.
To Her Son on Mother's Day

Honestly Harold, how can you sit
down in the cellar like that again, thrilled
silly watching spiders
tango out the drainpipe.
Watch you don't catch cold or worse,
bored, start moaning like the time
water rose to an inch from the ceiling
and you were trapped, breathed
through a garden hose three days
before the river went down.
Bridges lay strewn along the bank
that Monday, wrecked cars
leaned on their tired shoulders
already rusting. Remember? You swam
upstairs at last and we went for a walk,
your clothes stinking in the heat,
the weather by then
broken and the drought begun.

It was,
you said, wonderful to be out. Downtown
they were cleaning up the mud,
a slow job, the big brushes
somehow deafening. In the air
steel rang repairing on steel.
Cold wind rose off the dull water
flapping like a sheet.
Harold Dreams His Future

Spring mornings like this when nothing seems to come out right I think of myself old in a corner and cracked. Gills will be invented by then, new ways of breathing as the room fills up with water. Balloons swim by outside. We are on the 18th floor and it is beautiful the way they rise and bulge, fill the sky with color. People laugh and pour frothy champagne. Their affairs begin like the day, red streaks flecked with gold. The city thumps. People don't see me watching but they could, there is no glass in the window. I run my eyes along the corner of the room, the astonishing grain of floorboards. It is cool and pleasant, but empty. The gills work fairly well. About then my daughter slides in and we bump noses, solemn and dumb as two old goldfish in a cement pond.
Harold's Wife

said she was not happy, said again
she was, said those worn stones, stories
always end when people get married:
groom and bride wave, toss
confetti from the steamboat deck
rumble off gaily in the stagecoach
take hands, walk simply
toward a plum-blue lake.

At the end the sky gets dark
fast, shade drawn against blank streets
clogged with cars. Plants shrink, strange
winds blow up from nowhere.
Now we're on our own.
Trunk to branch
to twig-tip: we grow
by spreading, end for now at our toes,

our fingers. Then touch me here she says,
meaning not breast or shoulder, meaning
some place serene and hollow,
plain light from small-town houses
spilled on the lawn.
Out in the barn the goats
swell toward milk-time. The night
looms at the doorway in thick heaps.

Oh but the night gapes lovely
with stars. I want it
all she says, how
can I roll it down to hand size?
Stars scatter from her fist like dimes.
Comes a muddy voice:
I eat, says the river.
Run down to me and I thrive.
Harold Punches Out

So much for work thinks dulled Harold, stumbling home from the job pissed at the boss and mad for the typist's knees. Only quitting time feels real, street lights on at five, the air changed since morning. That hour in summer, fringed awnings lapped his hair past storefronts, bars soured the rich air like money.

Streets are thick now with snow. Money seems always a thin thing. Against the cold, say, turning the corner in time to see a kid skid his bike on the ice, plow into a small dog like Caesar conquering his pain.
The Admiral's Women

They say Columbus
had four wives. Fatima
he met in a Tripoli bazaar.
From behind her veil the black eyes
lanced him. Years later,
the tint of her skin long forgotten,
her fingers on his cheek, there were days
those eyes came to him out of the brine-wind,
carrying faint scents
of dung and foreign spices.

Anna,
stout Genovese, stayed behind
while he traipsed around the courts of Europe
with his Plan. He would write her
at night from crumbling inns:
My darling, they have turned me down again.
She didn't mind. He'd
give it up pretty soon she'd think,
while her hands thumped dough or
chapped in dish water.

Helga, the third, he took for pure
information. Met her in Iceland, her uncle
knew the Western waters, and the tales
of fur-headed, flat-nosed men
in skin boats who paid dear for iron.
Late at night, wind
roaring from the hearth he'd pump her
for sailing times, currents, the shape
of coasts. She was the simplest,
her dull braids the color of new rope.

Last was Unth, the maharani.
He loved her best of all, tried
to teach her words. Agua, he'd say,
slapping the sea, or tierra
letting sand run through his fingers.
Her father was a Carib head man
until the sailors hacked him up, hung
the bits on trees. Bombay? he'd ask,
and she, in terror,
pointed West.
Albino Gorilla, Barcelona Zoo

Her eyes pink in the April sun, my wife told about him. Afternoon came later than usual. Sun whitened her limbs. She stretched like petals all flat with new tones coming, and grabbed her ankles. Bowed like that, she could roll to Chicago.

She says they did once, she and a crazy Spanish ape. Dust kept them going and low rumba music, softer than rubber on blacktop. They slept under bridges. They danced on bent street corners melting under the glare. People gave them ham. For water they drank what they could. Two good months she said, summertime.

The hammock quilts her back and the sky rolls under us like mercury but redder. Long blue Oldsmobiles sheet the land, their engines warm and idling.
Phone Call

When the phone rings at night
birds settle blackly on the line outside
and listen in: sly chirps
behind the words a friend is drunk
it's three A.M., bars closed, and what
am I doing? Dazed,
my wife says "geese in the fall," her arm
becoming fact on the bedclothes,
her shoulders rolling.

Out there something waits for shape
something in the night like cat fur
rises to the brush of a hand.

The birds get louder. I'd tell him
don't talk, we're tapped, but he might
come over. Rivers run between us
fast under a thin ice-glaze. The ice
could crack, he'd drown, and who'd
be guilty? Air hisses on the line.
My wife shifts. The birds
have flown off bored, but if the night
had wings or arms it would soften
at their cries, and open, open.
For My Brother in the Churches of France

---
e lo soleills plovil
--Arnaut Daniel

The nave filled with perfumed moths
clerestory light threw half the columns into shadow
stubby candles everywhere, more smell
than light, and light
pooled deep blues and bloods from the rose window.

Each saint in his niche.
Vines bruised your face,
live vines, hanging
like that hunchback behind the pews
softly peeling a banana for years.

The Orinoco broke through the doors like children
shrieking for lunch. You staggered,
delight hot air in your belly, and rose
up under the groin vault, a balloon in a rain forest.

Rain fell chiming from the arches.
All eyes turned up
prying cracks between each cut stone.
Of course, when a man knows well
what he does, it soothes the eye
like balm on a hot sore to watch him:
the long reach of tongs from forge to anvil,
ing the hammer as it draws
taut curves from the slackened steel
before the plunge
burble and long hiss
of cool.

He has shaped a loon cry.
The air solidifies around him
when he holds it up, laughing
in the morning work light.
The dying fire leaves
orange spilled across his face.
He hands me the new tool.
All the things that hold him there,
cap, skew leather apron, gloves
cuffed to the elbows, glow.
The Mast-Head

Looking out for whales from the Mast-Head, Melville yawns that dreamy chapter where he nearly lets go and falls in. A finch slips out of a dive veers off the eastern horizon and the green islands humped below it.

Sailors call those islands Encantadas, they move around. Birds have no trouble, but men once they chart them, return to find them gone. The bird curves back, and to keep from drifting Melville chats with him, sharing the big arc of the crow's nest when the ship rolls.

In his clear eyes sea and sky join, the horizon a line of release, or round arms holding. Embrace me, finch, he says, but the bird has dragon in him and keeps a wary distance. Herman retreats to his dreams of Union, one big soul and a certain small Manhattan bar near the Custom House famous for its pickled lizards. The unfurled sails fill with a plop, white hymn to the round blue sea humming in the ropes. Herman a hundred feet above the deck routine, thinks "a part of every shore the round globe over," remembers the black Hudson sloshing the Bowery docks, and brick reflecting in the gutters. Birds carve new shapes above the rising day.
April

The woods were dry.
Snow gone a month and rain
a month away. Cow dung
steamed in the pasture, late
afternoon. In the woods
my grandmother burned
tent caterpillars. The gallon can
trembled, caught a flash of light
when she lifted it
to the sapling crotch,
doused the gray cocoons in kerosene
and kerosene spilled down the trunk,
shined the bark and faded.
The dry leaves curled
dust around her shoes.

Can you see her face, the lines
of it, that chin, those puzzled
eyes when flames lurched
toward the dry woods floor?
Did she run, or shout? I
was five. New red sneakers
lifted my feet like wings. The worms
writhed in their burning tents,
curled, charred
and stuttered up as smoke
into the blue maw of sky.
Plum

Snow can fall
softly, as if down
were its direction only
by accident, the way
when you entered a room
my old Aunt Marian
would look up, eyes
bulgy and dim behind
thick lenses, the accident
of you and her in the same room
unremarkable, if soothing.

Maybe she'd lick
a stamp or straighten
the antimacassar, not
thinking how her daughter
died alone from pills
in a darkening room.
One day, home
on a Christmas visit
my father will give me
that same look
and say "Oh,"
the one round vowel
hung between us like a plum
that knows its own
ripeness, and exactly
when to fall.
El Dorado

Pizarro built gilt cathedrals
in his head, bright visions.
Long before he killed the Inca he saw them
shimmering high in the Andes,
himself at the top, Christ-bright
or hell, brighter: gold is soft
and it gleams for whoever holds the hammer.

Thin soldier-priests leaned out the windows
toward him, their arms stretched up, gold trumpets
blaring their martial faith like noon
in Madrid. Light in the tropics
is hard, old pirate, can horror

last four hundred years? I can hate
the doberman across the alley.
But greed and blood, gold and severed limbs
are never common, like hot stuccoed walls,
meat on a white plate.

Last night he dined with me.
I could goad him like a dog.
And like a dog his grin
mirrored my own. My face shone
in his gold breast plate.
Stink of conquest:
El Dorado
the gilded man he'd hunted so long.