Sleeping with Foxes

Roberta Jean Hill

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SLEEPING WITH FOXES

By

Roberta J. Hill

B.A., University of Wisconsin, 1971

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for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

[Signature]

Dean, Graduate School

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Star Quilt

These are notes to lightning in my bedroom.
A star forged from linen thread and patches.
Purple, yellow, red like diamond suckers, children

of the star gleam on sweaty nights. The quilt unfolds
against sheets, moving, warm clouds of Chinook.
It covers my cuts, my red birch clusters under pine.

Under it your mouth begins a legend,
and wide as the plain, I hope Wisconsin marshes
promise your caress. The candle locks

us in forest smells, your cheek tattered
by shadow. Sweetened by wings, my mothlike heart
flies nightly among geraniums.

We know of land that looks lonely,
but isn't, of beef with hides of velveteen,
of sorrow, an eddy in blood.

Star Quilt, sewn from dawn light by fingers
of flint, take away those touches
meant for noisier skins,
anoint us with grass and twilight air,
so we may embrace, two bitter roots
pushing back into the dust.
Whispers
for Tony

They will come for you in morning
where faded rooms mask the taste of bones.

Birds flit then rise over low bushes
that twist rootlike along slopes. A morning like others,
touched with bacon smell, worn leaves,
and air so sharp it freezes eyes into clear vision.

They will come to say I am not blessed
or loved, that all I own is worthless. Soapstone carved
in delicate designs without concern or meaning, strands
of hair
locked in pony beads, a feather cut by messages and time.

Your destiny trails the purple star, Antares.
Few moons win us, wrap around our souls. Your fingers
slip my grasp, the touch branches give the wind.

In softening years, the wheel will creak
but never stop. The moon on my thumbnail
sets. Birth is never easy, seeds break
with their own lost art. In your turning, remember
turnips
softly thawing on the plain, a canyon with its river
partner,
the strong trail and ashes. Watch the rinsed sky, Tony,
the night when stars own wings.

They will come for you in evening
from a place where dust is cloaked. I will watch
the moon discovering her face. We'll speak of stone,
seashine
and hide the words that guide us, the songs that heal us,
the last language unopen to easy fear. In that moment,
my life will be a package. In that dusk,
the final stillness, sweet. The ants return seeking
weeds and pearls. And I will wait, soundless and
unwakened.
All footsteps harmless, all secrets dampened I will wait,
to see that storm of riches in your sudden gaze.
Eunique a the hi a tho, Father

White horses, tails high, rise from the cedar.
Smoke brings the fat crickets,
trembling breeze.
Find that holy place, a promise.
Embers glow like moon air.

I call you back from the grasses.
Wake me when sand pipers
fly. They fade,
and new sounds flutter. Cattails at sunrise.
Hair matted by sleep.

Sun on the meadow. Grey boughs lie tangled.
The ground I was born to
wants me to leave.
I've searched everywhere to tell you
my eyes are with the hazels.

Wind swells through fences, drones a flat ache for hours.
At night, music would echo
from your womanless bedroom.
Far down those bleaching cliffs,
roses shed a torrent.
Will you brush my ear? An ice bear sometimes lumbers west.

Your life still gleams, the edges melting.

I never let you know.

You showed me, how under snow and darkness, the grasses breathe for miles.
Sleeping with Foxes

You burst into the world with smiles wide as April, a crimson baby, blossoming, called Rosa. They drenched you, not knowing it dwarfed Indian magic, and you were blessed with names of flowers, saints.

Dad's guitar rusted near toys. You, a red-brown nugget among sparrows, ran to touch azaleas, Lou'siana tenderness, and chased chickens during hurricanes.

When you were ten, the neighbor boys tied, burned a savage.
Mother pulled you, crying, from the flame.
On the shaker porch, when spring rain whipped trees, we philosophized as children about drops caught in our eyrie. Small eagles, one in blue flannel, longing for leaden wind and pride. Lady who no longer lives with time, listen, take this ragged shawl, this dew.

The years have swung roughly since you left Denver. Stones anchor these mountains. Where or how can I reach you? I've checked mail from Lake Tahoe
and points east, asked detectives
who confessed you were a bride, a bone.
Are you sleeping with foxes, nosed deep in warmth,
buried in thickets of blackberries and ground fog?

Wind blows the marshgrass along the bay shore.
Bees twist honeysuckle in our backyard.
It is we who have grown desperate, bitter,
sensing that wind blows in gusts, skims
this jagged distance without leaving sons.
Song for Healing

Mary, will you ever grow? Water, blessed by bishops has been poured on your head and even the sea has tried. How was I to know those sixth grade friends were queer. Two strange girls but neighbors just the same. All the inane smiles that lead from gradeschool toward the blurred leap, dusty feet you have to trample midnight dread. The camel that you called yourself longed for rain and straps to hold its anger down. Camel anger, being left by father, the theft of any scrap of hope.

No dungeons are at Winnebago. There's light, air and padlocked doors. The women haven't changed a thousand years. Day-glow eyes flower into shrieks in this Thorazine Age. Tumbling down the hall, sixth grade again, without your camel's hump of hate, I feel like a mother, a childhood friend. Outside, a wobbly young bird flies from a stump. The warm mud oozes raw. Madness is winter and solitary. You gag on memories and guilt, til it smashes you down to hunks of church window, a spectrum of holy trips to the sea.
Mary, will you ever grow again? Be old as lichen on bark
or rock? Insanity's a jewel that keeps the owner
bold in any wind. Remember mommy foaming at the mouth?
Your brightness dissolves by fury into a snail's breath.
The apocalypse of soul echoes in eyes hollow in fright.
Your tongue keeps absolving teeth devoid of prayer.
Don't let life roll out its victories like coins. Become
some lady in a flower print dress, children laughing on
the way
to school. Come to day, from your incandescent dawn.
Live in a happy anonymous town, your lawn,
green, your hair, a bit grey.
A Nation Wrapped in Stone

for Susan Iron Shell

When night shadows slipped across the plain, I saw a man beside his horse, sleeping where neither man nor horse had been. I've prayed to a star that lied. The spirits near the ceiling of your room, did they leave on horseback, turning dew into threads by moonlight?

In wild stretch of days, you didn't fear ashes or weeping. We, left behind, can't warm sunlight. Isaac, you left with the wind.

The chokecherry grows slower. I held your trembling wife,
and windows trembled in our north room. The creek gnaws remaining snow. Our blood runs pale.

You taught us to be kind to one another. Now we wake, questioning our dreams. Nighthawks in warm fog. A nation wrapped in stone.

What do nurses know of hay, of scents that float broken between canyons, of strength in a worn face? You wept love, not death. Around your bed, owls stood.
The north wind hunts us with music, enough pain to set fires in ancient hills. West winds growl around Parmalee.
The tanned, uneven banks will hold more frost. Unlike dust we cannot die from tears. You've settled on a quiet prairie. Shrouded eyes in thickets give a reason to contain this heavy rind. We are left with grief, sinking boneward,
and time to watch rain soak the trees.
On Morris Street

Trains whistle when you say aught six.
Wheels clatter Pestigo, Suring, Sheboygan,
fifty years, whirlwind time. Fire licks
its back, your only love. Nana stops plans

for another beer. You hide in the basement,
take a secret bottle from a staircase,
worn by dog feet. Often your face bent
over tinder, hands clawed sparks in the fireplace

from Glamorgan. You polish Wales,
yet it'll never shine. Grandfather, cousin to fire,
I'm your stranger. The Morris Street house knows tales
of men limed with bonedust, coal, baked mud.

Nana, sixty years a wife, carries down food
during battles of French-Indian Wars.
Ten loaves she'd knead, grind Chippewa blood
in bread, her arm its crust. Grocery stores

own less, freezers saving soup for World War Three.
Grief's my cobweb. I've no broom. Pine, cedar hear
my mousey prayers. Five years you sheltered me,
like a gull, I couldn't say good-bye. I fear
bay wind wailing among trees. Your treasures long
to join the race. Pines are wise, their death's
a dazzling flare. Let my foreign love keep
you there. Be the smoky breath

of home where fragrance curls in steam.
Both of you will argue details of my leaving,
Was May or June the month I missed?
Near Grindel Lake, the snow drifts blowing,
time with you, an echo along the shore.
Through desert ruins, a spooked coyote runs.
Braid me into stories for sons I never bore,
a daughter lost, hoarfrost in the sun.
This woman in the photograph
was mother when she was south.
You called her tired, angered.
Hands too limp to hold the future,
mouth too tight to shed pain.
When she looked at me, the winter
treeline grew closer. Cirrhosis fired
her eyes. For a setting,
her body yellowed. In northern beds,
bayou songs drained love away. This garage
burned one night, fire drooling
from its doors. Rage buried
the garbage. The landlord said the cesspool
soon will overflow, bringing back the past.
My sister aged in seventh grade,
mother in her bones. Curtains,
then crisp, gradually wound
on their rods. Crushed, winged relics.
Swamp

Tamaracks swing light away,
dote on slag among the clouds.
Their wavering eyes kiss, then curve
around a dog whose garbled throat
swills my night, tears my day.
I turn to bite his velvet nerve,
but find frogs instead. Sharp
like iron under skin, they try
to bleed my leather crimes, to whisper
"Joy is tough like hide." "Surprise
them with a rock." I cry, "bruise
them down to proper size."
My red belief lies curled in mud.
A soft hot star hugged by the sea.
Dangers

Slag, with feathered grass nearby,
stood sleek and cool, a mountain's heart.
In wavering heat, it rose
until its leather surface hugged
a cloud. Tamaracks, bloated into wind,
stirred sleeping bees.

Those tough gusts moaned
along clapboard and tar. Each man's eye
bruised another's. Mud held moats
that kept green trees
from growing there. Sandtown,
cows graze in your blackened shards.

The moon at times ignored the night
and came to rest in a mother's eye.
If one soft hand curved round a face
or childlike smiles made children young,
I might have loved that splintered house
where wolves shed tears in smoky dreams.
Direction

Walk east. Dawn polishes the sky,
turning frost to rainbows, vapor.
A fever, alien and wild, is in me,
like slivers, cut loose from the sun's core,
flow in my fingers, ease in my eyes.
The sun leaves light under trees,
circle on circle, drop on drop. Pine moths
suckle daisies to light up mountain slopes.

I saw your picture, and let aches surrender
to the avalanche. This place holds the memory
of rocking. Slow, white curtains breathe in gusts.
Flowery songs hummed lazily out of tune.
The sky changed, I've become a stranger
hating sloven clocks and vacant pain.

In the south, heat lashes you to cherries. I chronicle
the sun as it burns jewellike reflections between leaves,
as it flares into air this wavering smell of camomile.
Smoke drifts along peonies, wet, ant-seeded,
and rests in lilacs rubbed with blue sky. I would be
content
as a gull watching waves bend light into dark.
In the threshing wind, a gate swings.
Bones were never meant for one like her. Terrible red eye
at every doorstep. Circled sunlight
cups the trees. A misty heron flies along the pine,
she's the reason I've come. Mountains hush
my dull senses, hush the deep-throated ache, uneasy trees.

A father is cigarette smoke late on winter nights,
tears on a weather-tender face,
a smell of earth and powder.
The piano and violin lonely, and the artist gone,
she slipped into the blue painting
where a dwarf hides in the clouds.
Like you, I wait first light to strike
darkness. In north air, the mazes twist repeatedly,
perfection never rests. To find a lost tradition,
I would watch your heart for signs,
 cracklings in a pine,
footsteps on a marsh floor.

Our closets held the scent of loss,
and clothes for a woman no longer needy.
But the rocking I hold true
though it often robs my heart.
The rocks from the man in the French Sudan, the quartz and mica dissolved with kaleidoscopes. Snow patterns in red and blue, broken into, scattered on a rug, like stories for a child's idle years.

The moon leans west. Blurred by trees, she clings to grey rock and grass in patches. Small long cloud slung over a low mountain. Dreams gather in these mists. I've lived as a misshapen thing, bound by water and geese in flight. Lights flicker up hard against bald stone. No music lilts my stifling home. I live here unafraid of storms. No music, just rain, this thunder, growing.
"Peacock colored tears and rotten oranges," said the fire. "You swim in salt and think it is the sea." Thief, webs like crowns keep us near this door. You laugh. One hundred voices answer, "No migration." You act the warrior, wind thief, yet watchers from shade declare your sky stormless. By whose right do you court exhausting thunder bound in leaves?
Whose night rocks do you drown like mossy turtles?
I shelter with claws one final whisper,
Ashes for a tired moon.

Once Mesquito sang in swamps
on the far moon rim. Green flanks bridged the silence with music. A thief hidden in the clouds, hacked his tail, a sea sound thundered, hacked his wings, rustling trees broke, smashed the flanks. The silent dust boiled into mountain, forest. Birds flooded from his head. Animals ran from mouth or ear. The legs jumped stiffly on the grass. Shells crack.
Each one a man. Granite. Each a nation.
Possessors of the Flint. Keepers at the Western Door.
The fire steams and spits. Look skyward,
my fingers curl.

The eaglebone cries. My lair mushrooms.
Seven echoes fell the walls. Across glaring fields, light sweeps in a rush of stars. Notes burn on an empty rise. In Wyoming, she howled and dark plains drank up rainbows.
I rub my arms with magic stones.
Call nets down, down into mud, hunt for other thieves. My rooms fill with frost, and snarled roots. I must wait for the sound of a car on gravel. An old woman sleeps by the mirror. Elms bend against the night.
Seal at Stinson Beach

She asked brown eyes, "Burn me loose.
Unmask this loss of estuaries, lamp shells."
The lowland wheat dreams against moonlight
and empty houses creak their own tough joy.
On this wintry coast, remember how, in faint light,
mother's eyes wore green, how
Eleanor sank. A trunk along flat pine.

Beyond breakers, a mute hunter floats, forgetful
of running sharks, sea moss. Teach me
your crisscross answer
to the cackling of gulls.
Closets can mend
sinister days, yet these losses hum
in the walls.

He swam a shadow, a blemish on the waves.
Is this the last year of tasting dust,
of violent wakings?
Blue seashot boils around my shoes. Breakers crash.
Hiss again. He leans, foreign as a star,
for places where the Man O'War
hangs its tendrils down.
In the drawing back, the breathing in, I find my bones.
Steps

Digging earth from puddles she would wake stranded. Hollyhocks flooded the back step. Morning bright with leaves.

In green schoolrooms, chalk bit blackboards. On the third floor, dim light made smoke of cobwebs, and a dark child whispered,

"Remember, O most blessed . . . " robins paced the blowing grass.

Picnic day, her father sat, muttering: "She's dead." over and over to fresh rain. His shoulders bent, broken like a doll. The springs of the couch broke open like wounds.

The fallen cow lay wrapped in drops like a bursting pear. This was real. Micahist. Some children ran through the ponds under ferns. Its neck was a home for midges and its smell, a bleach for dingy clouds. In radiant sheets of water, a shadow buried the sun.

Weeds grew to stone. She hid among witchhazels, the yellow flowers, a tired beacon.
Night air flashed on empty fields. Twice Minona teased their birth, dotting the broken hay with footprints. A flame danced through birches. Lights along the backbone. Veins stuffed with stars. This life forbids comfort, traces with fingers a terrible sharing. Years. Years to find the right step.

Men stroked her thighs, tried to make her sleep. Their throats went dry from calling, as ducks caught in a thicket cry. Woolen mud never awakens, yet bright maples gather pain. The sap glistens, beads in moon wash.

Pretend these mountains are not hungry. I've heard a young voice muttering at wind, like straw on fire. Snakes are stoned on heated rocks. She moves drunk toward lightning, letting her arms stiffen, wanting to be fog, the smell of dead fruit. I've covered her tracks with a difficult river, and like a plover, wade from water to rock and back. It foams beryl green in the sunset, and at every bend, leaves something behind.
Beginning the Year at Rosebud, S. D.

No pavement chalks the plain with memories, rows of curb crumbling to dirt each twilight. Raw bones bend from an amber flood of gravel, used clothing, whiskey. We walked, and a dead dog seemed to leap from an iced shore, barks swelling her belly.

Three days I've waited, eyes frosted shut to illusions of scrap and promising wind.

I'm untrapped here, in another place where the banister interned my smile and glued my soul to the lion's mane, walls nibble this new year. While cedar cradles its medicine in ironing, I see my father's red eyes lock thunder in the living room. Someone's brain cries in the basket, watches steam and church bells fade. My empty hands ache from stains and cigarette smoke. I am a renegade, name frozen at birth, entrails layered with scorpions.

Hay fields have poisoned my ears by now. The fourth day grows heavy and fat like an orchid. A withered grandmother's face trickles wisdom of buffalo wallows and graveyards marked with clumps of sage. Here, stars are ringed
by bitter wind and silence. I know of a lodestone in the prairie,
where children are unconsolled by wishes,
where tears salt bread.
Rodeo

Your fingers taunt ropes, and a bruise
rides in your thigh. Black horse, face brushed
by wild dreams, smells knowledge in your bones.
I'm moonsick, dusty in arid heat.
The crowd breaks into a rash, you spur
Night Wind from a chute. Fifty for the Sioux --
hometown boy. Buffalo weep for the Sioux.
Their tears grew strange plants that bruise
prairie canyons. Flowers shaped into spurs,
they leave horses unbroken. Like snails brushing
water grass, they touch houses aching with heat,
their gnarled roots weigh the clink of bones.

Children lean toward thunderheads the color of bone,
and coyotes dance with ruffled grouse. The Sioux
dance on solitude between jingling bells. Your heated
limbs recommend calm rain. Your freedom, bruised
by prayer and the snort of bulls, was hushed
in hours and minutes too old for enduring.

Bruise the fallen calf,
Brush my growing scar with your spurs.
Depot in Rapid City

When the last bus leaves, moths stream toward lights like litter in wind. One by one, bulbs dim. The ticket man locks up, talks of ancestors pale from dreaming. In this corner, sleep is ugly, the moon vigilant. Here, hatred taps along sidewalks. He dreams of wild buses and the one per cent he cannot see. You look down corridors, where building edges whirr at the night, to find an aged Indian gnawing glass. Businessmen rub the medicine stones, and wear crisp smiles that wrinkle in daylight. Muffled, the heartbeat continues, abandoned stars haunt the reservations. Clear as tracks, are callings and cold signals on the wind.
Night along the Mackinac Bridge

I wait to tangle fear around my hand
like fire, to hold your owl's eyes with mine.
Lake Michigan dries sweat from magic,
squeezes belief into the world. Jacob runs
away the night as beer crackles down his jeans.
My past rustles offshore, a sail only rowboats watch.

I return to kin I've avoided fifteen years,
and find my skin's never felt so much at home.
That cinnamon wrapping would tear
from schools where Jesuits waged revenge.
Near Oneida, geese gather over fields, fewer now
bound for Labrador. Last year, you left with them.

I'll unravel black hair, shape mongoloid folds,
always be stupid about the songs; one year late,
I'm a miller burned by bulbs. Jacob can't race
alone, his mangled leg's bound in cast, a lung blown,
his collarbone slips away to visit fog. Over sand,
night hawks bellow, names unknown, but being found.
Notes for Albuquerque

"There is a screw loose in the public machinery somewhere."
Schoolcraft on the BIA 1828

I.

Threads spiral toward a center,
turn on fingers of freezing children.
One boy ran, scared by routine, a glaring sun.
Hiding three days,
they found him blistered.
He fell asleep in Math, stupid.
Call him a fire-eyed coyote,
a berry in the paw of a bear.
"Cut the heat in Arizona. It's warm there."

II.

Beware of wind.
Apache nights dry the morning. Why hatred in Ronan? They watch Red Sky Sun Down make an x. Her knowledge could protect the bees. "We must help the boarding schools, get water from Gila Community, dam it in the mountains."
III.

A man was promoted today. Now an assistant commissioner
dreams of junior high and Shakespeare.
"Dark skinned savages with wailing song."
Dimpled girls once teased his stutter.
He no longer listens. Children are sick
in Santa Rosa. At Salt River,
work Math on toilet paper.

IV.

Lose this hurt,
a trestle lost to canyons. Our ground
is now legend. Dew smokes along
Skanawis. The circle of meeting trees
north of the Lawrence gives way to moss.
Children are sick in Santa Rosa.
We give away to this deepening thunder.
The sand knows lizards and coyotes.
Only owls have homes.
Women know how to wait here.
They smell dust on wind and know you haven't come.
I've grown lean walking along dirt roads,
under a glassy sun, whispering to steps.
Twenty years I've lived on ruin. When I escaped
they buried you. All that's left is a radio
with a golden band. It smells of heat,
old baseball games, a shimmering city inside.
The front door has stopped banging and the apple tree
holds an old tire strange children swing in.

This house with broken light has lost me
now when the sweet grass dries. Its scent lingers
in the living room among sewing and worn-out shoes.
In your silence, I grew visions for myself, and received
a name no one could live up to. Blood rises
of hot summer wind, rose petals trickle
past rough solemn wood. Hear the distant sobbing?
An Indian who's afraid of tears. She charms her eyes
to smiling, waits for the new blue star. Answers
never come late.

Look west long enough, the moon will grow
inside you. Coyote hears her song, he'll teach you now.
Mirrors follow trails of blood and lightning. 

Mother needs the strength of one like you. Let blood 
dry, but seize the lightning. Hold it like your mother 
rocks the trees. In your fear, watch the road, breathe 
deeply. 

Indians know how to wait.
Dream of Rebirth

We stand on the edge of wounds, hugging canned meat, waiting for owls to come grind
nightsmell in our ears. Over fields, darkness has been rumbling. Crows gather.
Our luxuries are hatred. Grief. Worn-out hands carry the pale remains of forgotten murders.
If I could only lull or change this slow hunger, this midnight swollen four hundred years.

Groping within us are cries yet unheard.
We are born with cobwebs in our mouths bleeding with prophecies.
Yet within this interior, a spirit kindles moonlight glittering deep into the sea.
These seeds take root in the hush of dusk. Songs, a thin echo, heal the salted marsh, and yield visions untrembling in our grip.

I dreamed an absolute silence birds had fled.
The sun, a meagre hope, again was sacred.
We need to be purified by fury.
Once more eagles will restore our prayers.
We'll forget the strangeness of your pity.
Some will anoint the graves with pollen.
Some of us may wake unashamed.

Some will rise that clear morning like the swallows.
Reach for arrows of falling light. A man once sang in this temple. The moon stretched out her richest dreams to him, softly touching the faces of his people. Eyes of dark blood. Hands like warm adobe. Cedars drink thin air. Ruins are left to us walking the paths of rain, following where shadows meet and listen.

They piled the even bricks to echo the moon's pale ring. When she rose, whistling like a doe in the quiet glare, some would enter these dens, the deep rooms of wolves, purer than we could wish, without the weight of bodies. What have we left? Secrets of dust and hate. Below this rim world, the earth fades like a prayer.

We wear stranger masks. Seven miles from Porcupine tanks chill the prairie. Flares bloom in thunderheads to fall like flickering comets.
A boy crouches in dirt. He has held the sun.
Its hard gold fire breathes with him. Minneconjous fell like snow. Sparkling water people.
Death will hum like ashes in their ears.
The stillness branches.

Deep inside the noise of burning comes
the sound of wings. When hawks die
singing, some hidden vein will burst inside my throat,
dreams will shiver on this haunted sleep.
Reach for arrows of rising light.
Bones flash like shells
in green salt grass.
A thin moon soars above the pines,
plants no blame in open fields.

I watch a weeping birch let its trail of leaves
ride a stalking wind.
Owls call through the haze.
How can I mark this sorrow? We live the flames
of twilight. Dewclaws drum the trappings of this dust.
Meeting canyons still hold blood and flesh.
Spirits rise on blackmouthed water, dance like grouse
in dry creekbeds. Believe the distant ice,
the robber storm.
inside the circled weeds, raw hours strike. Purple thistles
wrinkle near the corn.
Cottonwoods will answer
when they come to make the grey mare captive
in her flight.
I keep hearing singing in the sun.
It rustles through the turnips on those hills.
Crows will find us walking north.
You and I must gather under elms.