Twenty-nine points of reference

Karin Schalm

The University of Montana

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Author's Signature Karin Schalm

Date May 10, 1996

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Twenty-Nine Points of Reference

by Karin Schalm

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The University of Montana

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Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

may 13, 1996
Date
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Cleave
Christmas Flower
Blue Daffodils
Kampala
Entendre
Zoo
Standing
Red Bird

for Gerald Stern

I push two sticks into the ground
and wait for them to blossom.
A red bird hovers above me,
carrying honey from the orchard
to my window. I must be impatient.
My mother is dying.
I have prescriptions to refill,
Top Ramen to buy at the grocers.
I must keep the washcloth close
and sponge her hot forehead.
Each time I hold her fingers
I see them blooming into roses.
The red bird is burning
from inside her own belly.
Let me say Poland, or Schubert,
and have it all be over.
Let me change this story,
say the red bird flew away
and the flowers turned to honey
without her.
Tuning the Piano

There's always a few sports cars involved, sports cars and a polished piano.
Once I came across a cow in the upstairs bedroom.
The men tell me not to move anything.
They need silence and ask for this small favor.

The maid keeps forgetting to let the dog out. She closes the folding stairs to my room without thinking. On Thursdays I hide my toothbrush so Martinez won't ruin the bristles with her scrubbing.

I make a list of all the colleges I'll apply to. The Monsignor keeps a copy next to his belly and gives me a coin whenever I add another. I leave a rope in his office and pray he'll use it.

When it rains, I stay busy with myself. I cut the map of Brazil out and train an ant to walk the perimeter. If the ant strays too far to the center, I nudge him back with my little finger.
Box

My mother sits
on the black wobbly foot stool
in the living room,
telephone receiver in her lap.
I hear a woman's voice
repeating a question. The voice sounds
automated.
Mother's satin pajamas smell like chicken soup.
One of her eyes circles
under its lid. The other
stares straight forward.
"I've got a safety deposit box in Modesto,"
she says.
Stooping down,
I ask what she means about the box
and fumble between her legs
for the phone.
I know I should let it go--coax her
back to bed, but I want to find out
if there's any money involved. In fact I get
a little desperate
thinking I might have lost it already.
Her closed eyelid
twitches.
She talks to me, saying more than I can remember.
For the first time
her words sound intimate: "inside cedar lid,"
"red calico,"
"hundreds of bills with scented animals."
I stop asking questions,
copy down all her instructions.
Coliseum of Big Heads

Quarry the old marble and harvest the harbor.
An atmosphere we can't breathe in.
10,000 cages could not hold the lion.
History's waiting on the tarmac.
A word for "darkness on the mountain."
The latinate derivative of stone.
Almost everyone I know grinds his or her teeth.
Enough translation! The lexicon speaks algebra.
Export the chauffeur.
A road or ring is like a road or ring.
Remember your unfinished business with r's and s's.
Holding a candle to the belly of a whale.
Archaeology

Once my mother loved to buy sports cars, yellow sports cars especially. She drove them to her waitressing job or the dry cleaners. Once my goat Lucy jumped up on the Porsche, denting its hood. Mom paid a man to steal the car once and drive it across the border. I think it was our neighbor—he liked guns. He ran around the place barefoot, helping me chase down the cow with a rope and a bucket of alfalfa. Once he shot all our animals. Once Mom took a serrated knife with a plastic handle into the bathroom. The lime tree scraped against the house, the whole tree moved back and forth in the wind. It felt as though the house was moving. Even now I feel it moving inside me. My sister says we carry thirty pounds of black tar in our colons. She thinks rotting is the cause of all illness. She thinks a lot. She fell off a cliff in high school—her forehead smashed into seven pieces; her femur pushed through her pelvis. I caught rides to the hospital with a man who wanted his hands rubbed in rose-scented lotion. My sister cried when I lifted metal weights from her bed or pressed the pear-shaped pan beneath her. The two of us lived alone in a mustard-colored duplex. Tangles of sea fig spread out their rubbery fingers. One day I turned all the knives in the wrong direction. My mother told me on her death bed how embarrassed this made her. She thought I should shave my armpits. She thought my sister and I were trying to kill her. She's dead, and my sister lives in Texas.
We had a garden with summer squash.
I grew sunflowers in a clump
crowded at the center. When I think of my mother
I think of yellow. My mother and I were gardeners,
but we had other things in common.
We taught school together in Stockton
after her second divorce and first mastectomy.
She married a man who went on
to make the plastic pails McDonald's puts their pickles in.
This is what we call America. He made a lot of money
and proved it by buying a Ferrari.
Stray bullets pierced the garage from the freeway.
I spent my time walking in asparagus fields
along the levee.
"She didn't go to the doctor till her whole breast
was purple and hard," my mother's
best friend told me.
She wore a blue terry cloth robe and little
scuffling slippers because
she always had the right clothes
for every occasion. "Where's my miracle cure?
I'm so young. Who will take care of me?"
My sister and I made lemon jello.
Then we held teaspoons of sugar water
up to her mouth, feeding her like a bird.
One pill counteracted the side effects of another. The dosage
kept changing. She thought we were trying to kill her.
She wouldn't lie down for fear
of falling asleep and dying.
Her feet pooled up with blood and turned black
from all that sitting.
A student of mine called this summer to tell me
she'd tried to cut her own breasts off.
I try to draw a red picture of a flower, but I have a hard time
concentrating.
"May I get you a soft drink, a blanket or a pillow?"
My mother worked a first class flight
with James A. Michener as the only passenger.
She got his address to write a letter.
All I can remember is that the book
was one thousand and eighty-eight pages,
and for years after I had a keen desire
to be an archaeologist. I like to keep track of things.
I used to have a collection in my head of license plate numbers: 688-KQQ, 592-RJZ, 372-URP. By the time I turned twelve I had memorized quite a few numbers. When I went with my mom in the car, I would lift my toes as we drove across bridges. It was like jumping over the river. I remember being truly happy we didn’t live in the dry, sandy desert.
Insel rode into heaven on the back of a dusty-feathered peacock. The bird carried her across an ashy desert. At night Insel fed the peacock cracked corn from her sack. She flung the corn in a circle, tucking a few broken kernels in her sock before sleeping with the bag buried beneath her. The peacock ate and ate, waking Insel with a peck at her heel. Finally, when the sack fell empty, Insel slept with her arms draped about the peacock's big chest and shoulders. On the fourth morning she woke with wind on her ankles, the bird flying above the horizon.

As they grew closer to the edge of the sky, darkness hung about them day and night. Insel sang to quiet the bird's hunger; she sang songs from the fields, songs of her father's harvests. The peacock struggled all the more when she stopped singing. At first Insel managed to dream between the bird's restless thrashings, but eventually sleep disappeared completely. When insomnia took over, she hooked the peacock's feet through her coat and used both hands to light matches from a silk-covered matchbook she had taken from her mother's bureau. She held the flames close to the peacock's rump, searing each blue-green feather within her reach.

By the time Insel and the peacock alighted, she hated the bird that had grudgingly carried her. She crushed amber glass in a mortar and mixed the slivers with corn gruel. Cheerfully feeding the bird, Insel said, "Here is your reward for taking me so far from my home with nothing much in your belly." The peacock swallowed Insel's food and danced. Pieces of glass pierced the bird's soft throat and belly. Because her father trained her to be thrifty, Insel plucked the peacock's feathers. She made a dress out of all those Prussian blue eyes.
Ciudad Real

In the market, in the mornings,
women sell the Toro de Lidia.
Red meat hanging on the stands
*cincuenta centavos! Cincuenta centavos!*

I was washing when I heard the crowd.
The bull fell, snapping three swords,
all but the smallest parts still inside him.

Cut the slab in cubes, add one part salt and crushed peppers to five parts palm oil. Stew rib bones in wine. Serve the heart whole on a fresh bed of lettuce. Add four green mangoes, peeled. Remove the pits and cover in sugar.

She prepared for holidays
by drinking straight honey.
We found her sandals and scarf.
The pepper tree shines beneath her metal balcony.

*What is the sun across the plains?*
A sharp fleck of obsidian.
*What is the blood inside the well?*
News

A boy slipped through the ice today into the river. The evening headline read "Chilly Deception," which means the boy survived. A human chain must have formed in time to save him.

My hands sting as I ride my bike on the path by the river. I hit a slippery section of rutted ice, but just keep peddling. Another article said Hungarian women strip in New York City for thirty-five dollars a week. The two brothers who promised good jobs in America must be feeding them. No doubt the women feel poorly dancing naked in a foreign country, but they aren't "pieces of meat." We reserve these words for animals slaughtered and eaten. I feel lucky to have a bike and to be riding. Yellow street lights shine on the river, shadows behind each ripple.

Ice chunks crack, drifting out into the center. Wind cuts against my knuckles. I can't help but wonder if the people held hands, or stretched across the ice head to ankle.
My Erotic Double

I urged her not to come, but she came inside the coffin—she brought a knife with her. How terrible to have your dog eaten for dinner. All the strings were visible. We ate the dog inside the coffin—she brought a knife with her to rescue me. She was just a novice at this, and all the strings were visible. We ate the dog with chutney and a piece each of shortbread.

She tried to rescue me, but being a novice at killing she had to practice on my mother. What terror with chutney and a piece each of shortbread. I stabbed the ruined puppet with pins. I'm not making a killing. I only practiced on my mother. What terror to find her shredded clothes in the coffin. I stabbed the ruined puppet with pins. I'm not making a blue shirt. The message warned not to find her clothes shredded in the coffin. She kept asking me if I'd make her a blue shirt. The message warned not to bring the dog any closer.

She kept asking me to re-make her. I urged her not to, but she came even closer. How terrible to have eaten your dog for dinner.
II

Hugoisms
One

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courage nowhere bomberDier Hours must engines beyond Rock air back Nothing degrading prayer

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floors Road, sign
December without defeat, sinners ClydesDale Hide Our big-time tomorrow Running already
each light. despair.
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high below Rotting night. second without emplacements, gunner's unguarded, Roast. wlnk--picnics prohibits gayway,
floweRs painted. Hills outside tug
chaOs River. Llke onCe
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faCe. witHout normAl, BremeRton, twisteD Here sUn niGht.
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lighT buriAl, lunkeR crackeD
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climbeD Hundreds jUkebox
liGht,
bloOd. Rock
village roCks migHt
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BUtte.
eight colored roof windows vacant

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Rings dies victory lights Indians rehearse
feigned, helping husbands begun,
information—Roots lightning sick

might perhaps jitters arrived hoping rumors
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husband Her LUtnerans
doG ignOre Remembering
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nigHt JuliA, childRen
hoardeD His sUn

tuGs BeyOnd Romp girl's
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doctor pretenD Hard QuesTions.
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riGhts.
cattAils mercuRial
sheereD hobby
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hiGh EurOpean Runs time
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six

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24
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seven

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right. blood right size
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begged Ohio. Rivers river recent Without beneath murder

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salvation statue perched Haven out edge
Dinosaur,
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SundAys, reheaRsal,
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eight

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28
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nine

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biGger.

HugO Rays vlgorous baCk liGht beneAth despeRately
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miGht
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tendeR's
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picked. sigHt
CertAin summer marrieD. Happy sUmmer biG refOrming
III
Feeding the Geese

One hand holds corn, the other pebbles. I want to swim back. Which hand can I open? I'm anxious about the geese. Last time I saw them, I tied a string to their tails--by now it must be broken. They fly all day in the middle of winter. A voice says, "save yourself." My dog, my silly dead dog. I reach for the lamp, cracking its glass with my clumsy fingers. Corn spills out. All the pebbles sink deeper. I want to pet my dog in the close, dark water.
At The Pig Races

I get stuck pushing a cart, of all things.
The sow on my right runs with her babies
toppling along beside her. I could offer
to carry the straggling piglets,
but that would only hamper my progress.
I'm hoping to win this pig race.

Luckily I'm on the inside.
The turf's still fresh from summer.
I'm sure I could run faster without the cart,
but there's no losing it. My legs and arms hurt.
The pigs keep gaining. For a moment I forget
why I'm running.

I hear my mother cheering
in the center of the Winner's Circle.
She wants a photo of herself
standing next to me and the cart.
She wants to hand me a wreath of flowers,
but the sound of her voice

distracts me. The sow passes
my front wheels and charges on
towards the finish. One of her piglets
gets trampled in the rush. It's time
to drop the cart, but my hands won't open
around the wooden handles.
Summer

What did they wear?
Blue cotton dresses with yellow windmills,
white socks and leather sandals,
barrettes in home-cropped hair.
The eldest ran home from church, stopping
to pet her pup.
Sundays their father let them stay.
Mondays meant the German neighbors.
They said the youngest made her stories up:
"whipped with three belts." She probably just
missed her mother.
Hot days the neighbors ordered, "strip outside."
The eldest ran home naked. The youngest tried to,
but the couple sprayed her with cold water--
one hose on the bottom, the other on the belly.
Betty Jo begins with hand circles. Her middle finger is a compass needle that points towards Tokyo. The pointing's easier if she imagines herself in a juniper hedgerow, making her way towards saffron tulips. It's something felt, she says, like the robust tumor growing in a notch on her knee.

It's rough for anyone to play hopscotch with a tin can full of milk, but politics aside, Betty Jo's only getting older, and I'm reminded of golden grass every time I see her.

Today she's an ostrich standing on her left leg with a silk bandana wrapped about her face. She balances Tommy's expensive Nordic microscope on her forearms and a glass of chocolate-covered-sprinkles with her upright knee. I want the glass to be holding something different, and Tommy claims Betty Jo should sleep with him in the tomato fields because she borrowed his prize possession without asking. Tit for tat: the Hoover Dam is just another concrete wall.

I know what the glass cannot contain. We're temporarily out of salt pork and mottled potatoes. (I feel feverish over the loss.)

The circles only get bigger, so Betty Jo puts the microscope on her head with sprinkles on top. Her hip bones punctuate the center of each motion.
Cleave

I want to call my housemate "towhead"
but that means very blond or sandbar in a river
(especially covered with cottonwood trees)
and she is neither. Instead I walk across the bridge
towards the old red depot and notice how buildings
brighten in the afternoon. The prairie in this town
runs up hillsides with yellow grasses and weeds.
The river beneath me flows faster in spring.
My mother feels guilty to be bald
and still beautiful at fifty,
so the hospital sends her a poinsettia,
a very large and red poinsettia.

She's planned ahead for this crisis
by buying a salamander silver Miata
along with a garage door opener,
but the flowers make her even happier.

When she calls me over to adjust the leaves
or rotate the pot, and she's still happy
(this poinsettia looks good from all directions),
I realize she's given up.

A law suit would take too long,
and the hospital knows this.
Everyone's allowed to bow out gracefully
on account of the Christmas flower's beauty.

The radiologist who pulled my mother's hand
onto his penis, saying how much he wanted her
each week in his office,
will be put on probation again.

I'm more concerned about the car now,
and how I'll pay for it.
Blue Daffodils

Lop-eared zombie keeps a broken accordion
by the footpath of stone.
He's a dandy and wants very badly
to befriend loquacious glamour girls.
He hands them blue daffodils in exchange for time.
I've heard a chameleon changes from brown
to neon orange in less than three minutes.
A pebble becomes a pearly piece of corn.
What's a little time spent with a zombie?
Kampala

My fiance left me standing in this shrubby town. I wait at a small plaster church, holding the monogramed ring he gave me. Rice boils daily in a sticky vat, getting sweeter and sweeter. I drink the fermented drink and watch the forest grow smaller.

Why am I always alone in Africa? I'd like to dance the mating dance as jackal, populate all of Kampala with wild dogs.

I block out the details: slow death of my mother, disappearance of the man who asked me to marry. I cannot see the waxy flowers at my feet or hear birds sing from manicured bushes. I return to the plaster church, pale yellow building on a busy corner. People pass in clean cotton shirts and dresses, watching me urinate on the crabby patch of lawn.

I turn myself into the first human dog and howl to my master--grief, grief! A woman shuffles an ivory-headed wand along the street. She's leading a pack of children to a place with trees, past town. I circle around all of Africa but cannot find them.
She wraps red flannel strips dipped in camphor around her chapped knuckles. An amber ring dimpling her middle finger pokes through the homemade bandages and shines in the fire light.

Her name means "Destroyer" in English. She has learned to call the ring her "resignation." Its cold metal band sends a sting up her left arm to her breast. The pain knots up like sea weed clumped tight around stone. She took scissors to her shirt down at Beaufort Coast, thinking the operation would be simple. And why not? Hadn't she chased the giant with just enough pluck to make him tumble off the edge of the world?

Two sandhill cranes tear open her coarse sacks piled high with imported rice for winter. The large cinnamon-colored birds sing as if they had marbles rattling in their throats. Their song becomes a race, the gurgling tune running faster and faster until a creamy film covers their grain-stuffed beaks.
My knees flop against the sides of the tub.
I touch the white scars on my thighs, letting my fingers
slide down the curve of my legs.
I know they're watching, but I want to feel myself
in the warm water.
How small the tender hole is.

The baby lies in his stainless steel crib.
He's so quiet--has he learned to breathe? They taped
a name in blue block letters to the headboard.
"Eggy." Fixed it while I was under...
We both have plastic I.D. bracelets. Mine says
I'm the mother of the child.
His gives name and date of birth.

This morning one of the males unjammed the dumbwaiter
with a long lever. They brought him
through the ceiling on a mechanized ladder.
I thought I might recognize this one, but I didn't.
A mob of guards in neon tartan jumpsuits circled the worker,
their guns drawn. They motioned for me to crouch down,
holed up in the corner with my head down.
I made a turd, throwing it
over their heads as skeet. One startled and shot his uzi,
just missing the tinted glass, peppering
the back wall with metal pieces.

They took my blankets and the last of my clothes.
Back to fate, gruel twice a day with gritty
paste--vitamins mashed in for the baby's sake.
They think they're so clever.
Nutritional supplements are a hoax.
We need the real thing,
otherwise our bodies won't metabolize it.
For nursing mothers plenty of greens--chard and spinach,
nuts, kiwis and bananas instead of sweets,
and the lion's share of well-trimmed meat.

I lift the baby out of the crib, into the tub.
My nipples ooze, but I don't feed him my yummy milk.
I push his wrinkled face under water, making him struggle.
It's good to know he's alive, in a strange sort of way.
My feelings for him have neither grown nor abated.
Standing

I saw a movie once about standing,
about how to stand at a funeral: straight-backed,
bowled head, one hand holding the wrist of the other.
If there are flowers involved, say tulips,
the blossoms droop down. And if the tulips
are yellow, tilted at just the right angle,
I'll be standing in a circle at James Jefferies' funeral.
James, who jumped from the grain silo.
His body was lying flat on the gravel.
Who found the body? Who went into the rainy night
not expecting to see James Jefferies?
Who went to the movie in time to buy pale
yellow flowers? If the body were found in the river
I think I'd understand better. Somebody told me
they found the body in the river.
Impossible. James jumped from the silo.
He saw himself dead. He kicked his legs out from the rim,
straightening his body as the ground grew closer.
We stand in the park, the tulips doing what tulips do.