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The University of Montana

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AN ANGEL IN THE EMPTY CHAIR

By

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B.A., University of Montana, 1983

Presented in partial fulfillment for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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1986

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AN ANGEL IN THE EMPTY CHAIR

POEMS BY

DANIEL DEFRANK

FOR MY FAMILY AND MY FRIENDS

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I. THE GLORY OF FAITH

TIED TO THE EARTH
BUT SAILING

When you hold onto her hand
She knows who you are.
The technician wheels
The death room equipment
Into the truck.
Trees and sparrows
Know she is alive
And now she hears them,
They are ecstatic.
In the back yard,
A raven with a broken wing
Caws and caws at a cat.

BEING BORN

We should have taken
Sniggerfritz and Jake
They would have led us
Around where you stood
When you stopped
On the narrow ledge
Above the shallow quarry

You smiled facing me
Faked rocking motions
Forced me
To adjust my balance

(stanza break)

I pressed against the bluffs
Pushed myself away from them
Watching you
Watch me fall
Into the stagnant wash

I put my drenched corduroy coat
On an ancient boulder

In the sunshine breeze
I dried as we laughed
Walking in dinosaur tracks

THE GLORY OF FAITH

(for mom)

I regard you as America

Your touch tough

Transcendent energy

Steadfast dripping

Antibiotic bloodstream

But the nurses wore masks

And gowns other employees

Were a chain of human gaiety

Singing carols

(no stanza break)

Dancing

In the hospital hall
Where I was signing you in
They took you away
The nurses wore masks
And gowns the doctor
Family wanted you to know

Our prayers howled
Like truckloads
Of perishable goods
In holiday traffic.

DEAD FEVER

This collision course
Has been on forever.
The voice, the depth of anger
Disguised as ignorance,
Suggests your reaction.
Shimmering doubts
Between frustration and anger
Guilty, rush through the floor
Await new stairs. Cringing at
My former self
Behind the New Orleans face
It's Christmas and all the crumbs
Remind me of home. Ranging where
The anger subsides I try to budge
But the rail at the edge of the bed

(no stanza break)

Is old. The trellis is connected
To the porch.
Home is the only nuance.
Doctor Lockett
Presses against my chest,
Tells me to rest.

CHRISTMAS PAIN

The interest is working
In your favor, I said
To mother under the last full moon
And tears filled her eyes,
She went into the bathroom
And cried. On Christmas night
The tick of the holiday drones.
I drive cold roads home. The skyline
Strains but keeps up with
The cancer of growth: oak trees
Spared, taken and replanted
At the whim of engineers
Who planned and designed
Offices where friends, dentists work,
And doctors wreck their marriages.

(no stanza break)

In the streetlight spot, the place
On the concrete where the bleeding dog
Died for a week I was afraid to drive by.
At the corner I turn and park on the street
Look to the moon as shadows call me
To sleep. Even when all the special
Holiday fun is absorbed into the walls
No one can read, the poinsetta glows
In the candle flicker
Where the tablecloth
Has been graced
With forgotten poppy seeds.

POEM FOR GLORIA

Submerged in the mountain pool
A whistle calls from the trees
And I hear a black rabbit
Jumping where the nest
Joins dark forest.
She appears with a towel
Holds it out of reach
Urges me to reach for it.
I pull it dry from the water
And dry my eyes. She dropped
From sight, but my only sister
Evaporated in a miscarriage,
Flooded away without a cry,
Showed me she was.
The ripples call her name
I never knew. How she became
An angel: I could never tell.

NOT FAR AWAY

Arrive

No one shares it with you.

Recollections squawk

Like a wheelchair,

Dissolve in an airy,

Long-lost odor.

Find yourself

In the room

With the presence

Of someone you miss.

Sculpt them how they are.

They are there.

Behind the trial

Which is the intent

As spiraling shapes

Masquerade past

And it is tomorrow

Overflowing.

WOMAN IN THE SEASHORE BREEZE

I always wonder
What would have happened
If I hadn't been assertive
Charted this course
The way I have Awaited
The downward spiral
Which is imagination
Where the unimagined ultimate spirit
The world you have created and known
Surfaces it is your own

Parts of it reel inward
A strand or two of her dark
Seashore-lightened hair
Blows away with dead souls
Who are drawn inward

(no stanza break)

As reverse air
And undertow wave
Gives
Takes at the same time

Velocity swirls the spray
Into patterns of violent momentary
Motionlessness, focused
In less than a second,
Filtered lovingly
By my eye.

AN ANGEL IN THE EMPTY CHAIR

In the not so distant past
When the layers of ice were frozen
Indistinguishable the river here
Ran quieter. On some big boulders
In the shade tiny glaciers
Reveal the structure of their make-up,
The structure of their destruction.
I break one in half and shove,
Trying to speed it into doom. It catches
On another rock. I watch it,
Push it again until it floats
Slowly and then it positions itself
In the slight rush of the creek.
On a huge boulder a small bird
Sings an early spring song.

(no stanza break)

I imagine my friend's dead father
And my uncle
In the image of the man in the suspension
On the bridge
In the sun.
Another man, the dead poet
Appears on the empty bench.
A Gray Jay washes its wings
In granular splashes
Of the watery passage.
A disturbance appears
Above the surface.
Waves swirl and separate
Light filtered by moss and trees.
A column of sun
Whitens passing whitecaps
How fresh and new
Even dead gray looks
Basking in early spring.

I HERDED THE NIGHT INTO ITS NEST
AND RESTED

Even the trees mourn your passing away.
And I am dazed, how you escaped the world
Not what we see on the camera today.

As she splashes ashore the angel waves
Dives beneath sandy shoreline's strained swirls.
Even the trees mourn your passing away.

A whole new place is howling: it is made.
Onward: with your parents your soul hurled,
Not what we see on the camera today.

But who were your parents who were they?
A fusion of love in the eye a pearl,
Even the trees mourn your passing away.

(stanza break)

Raindrops spill listen to what they say
The call suspended snapped to no avail
Not what we see on the camera today.

An angel waves as she splashes away.
The walls are floors where the newborn wail
Even the trees mourn your passing away
Not what we see on the camera today.

II. VISITATION MYTH

FOR THE WIND

Traces of sugar were found in the fuel.
Far from home a hound
Moans to a bitch in heat. Helicopters
Corral stallions that will never
Be missed. The world is on sale.
Engines tune the clouds; ready
I jump and the plane
Falls from the sky. Flags marked
Pieces of flesh and wreckage.
In a warehouse, investigators piece
The accident back, loved ones file suit.
Everyone is required to pay.

TWO DAY TREK

The rail stops here. Women
Pull silver grocery carts
Across an abandoned track bed.
Boxes of ginger snaps jump
And the cookies crumble.

The women walk toward the smoke,
Short cut across the dry river
Carry groceries up to the crossing
Where men on horses help them.

VISITATION MYTH

On a thread of a web
It descended from nowhere
Above the abyss.

Dropping to about a foot
Above the tub it caught
My eye, stopped and began

A great recoil to where it dropped from.
Quickly it returns to the top of the rail
Where it hangs

Pulling itself past the plastic
Curtain, (which must seem
Like great bluffs).

(stanza break)

Its form defined
Behind plastic,
It begins to descend,

Comes half way down, stepping
Attaching
A new web, it drops and ascends again.

ABC POEM

Everything is always just so good.
The window or the doorway
Always remains closed until a day,
Or a moment in a day, when fall
Unveils a flashing of diamonds.
A fully-defined rainbow drops
Into the valley. At day's end
A whistle will call and the dog
Will not understand. Airmail
Arrives and: American bullets
Conceive disaster-ending freedom.
Grieving halos, I justify kitchens.
Leaves must now open. Petals quake.
River stems toward undeveloped vapors.
Withered extreme young zinnias freeze
In the splendor of October.

THE POETRY HOUSE
WAS TORN DOWN TODAY

The poetry house was torn down today.
From across the street I watched it fall.
They did it to make the poets go away.

The crowd that had gathered slowly faded.
Two strangers looked back to see what I saw.
The poetry house was torn down today.

In the rubble I could make out a cave
But out hopped a heart from nowhere at all;
They did it to make the poets go away.

Just after it fell it began to rain:
Wet dripped between bricks of the broken walls.
The poetry house was torn down today.

(stanza break)

They brought big trucks and hauled it away.
They scraped the soil clean, it awaits fresh sod
They did it to make the poets go away.

But the poets, they arrived in droves
They climbed the trees, they began to caw.
The poetry house was torn down today.
They did it to make the poets go away.

TO BE READ ALOUD
SOFTLY

The butterfly pounds
Battering against the window:
While I wake up attack
Days I have grown accustomed to,
A cabin in the wood beckons.
The pencil I found broken
In the trash bin on campus
Obliges
Purging the anger
It was sharpened broken for.
I tell myself
I intend to do the work
I will cut out garbage
And cable tv and reverse
This process of settling
And pursue change
For the sake
Of pure illumination.

LUNAR ESCAPE

Frozen spring blooms crack
Like white glitter
Falling
To an unfriendly award ground.
Birds pick up the pieces,
Fly to their nest and sing
The third movement
Lunar escape
Fluid behind trees.

Blooms open to morning sun
Only to be frozen late tonight
And carried away tomorrow
By birds.

(no stanza break)

What matters flies in
To the mental block
That was just like
Crossing your fingers.

I am transferring it to you
Frozen spring blooms crack
Taking the escape chute
Slamming wild ocean.

III. THE FIRE ITSELF

ONE RANGER

The whistle of the truck ripples off
In the air. The hill ahead is steep
Illumination in sunset brilliance.
Looking for some thing, some ghost, loose,
Close, I pick up the road, reflectors shine
White and the canyon, mountains and moonlight
Restrict no wheel that ever rolled. General
Custer flashes before my black mirage,
A nightmare, nothing
On a horse leaping the highway,
Flying through fields
Following wind, bending branches,
Crossing the river on a light wave
That never ends.

LATE WINTER

Seemingly unseen frozen loosened
By the sunlight one small rock
Catches my attention
As it falls each bounce
Rattling rage and anger
Displacing a pleasant whiff
Momentum from the forests
In the breeze tandem ghosts
Track under the humming

High-voltage lines, spot-placed pines
Spared by the last wind-swept fire.
On the hillside in the flourish
A muscled shape speeds toward town
Lands near an ugly green complex,
Perches in a tree. I stop
Walking and watch the eagle watch town.

(stanza break)

From upstream, patches of ice pass

Melting, frenzied. Majestic

The eagle rustles its feathers

Drops dung and flies east

Swooping a red Subaru.

Patches of ice

Flow past the falls approach

The inevitable processing plant.

DRIVING TO MONTANA

Deer are attracted
By the garbage thrown
By passing motorists.
On the long drive, one by one,
They are hit, placed at the side
Of the highway, become stiff.
In Texas, the first one
Is a cow. The second one crushed
Flat as pavement.
In Wyoming, on the second day,
The third has maggots.
Driving from dawn into Montana,
Signs shine: NO TURNS.
In the passing headlamp edge,
Three young deer graze....

OUT OF PLACE

The queen visits the studs regularly
Doles out sugar, gives trainer's advice
Smiles what could be any woman's smile.

Eliminate doubt:

This one is grace with pearls.
She is adorned in gold remorse,

Rides in a priceless carriage
Pulled by noble animals role-playing.
"A horse has to be trained to cope

With her majesty." The royal muse
Smiles what is a wry smile and molecules
Fall like glitter and cheese.

UPON THE CONTEMPLATION OF CHANGE

Waves lap at trash
Along the lake shore.
An empty Coors wrapper
Extends trashy holiday wishes.
Christmas, 1985, Arlington, Sarah's dad
Had a heart attack, drove Catherine's
New Oldsmobile to the hospital where
She volunteers.

A gold Nova, three black men
I took to be hoodlums blocking me
Cast lines in a lake no person
Is allowed to swim in. One boat
Motors December waves.
Its wake splashes the beach.

(stanza break)

Two of the men strain not to be seen,
Piss against the chain link fence.
A VW microbus sputters around, stops
Before moving on. One of the men
Rolls a snow tire to the Nova,
Opens the trunk and draws a rifle.

FROM THE PARKING LOT
OF THE PALOMINO MOTEL

A red lawn dart
Has found a home
On the roof of unit 21.
I catch a little boy's eyes
From the front window
Of a passing Malibu wagon.
Noises waiting to be slaughtered
Call from the stock trailer
And I hear them
When the kill man
Gets that look in his eyes.
Sounds that fade as the little boy
Chomps on his hamburger. Tropical
Palms plastic in the breeze,
Their limbs rustle noise
As the Malibu passes back.

LAUGH YOUR WAY THROUGH

Days are laced with dog-eared laughter

And madness.

Bushes rustle

With frozen leaves.

The fence goes up tomorrow;

Television buried somewhere

In the basement: the aerial

Receives this broadcast. The thud

Of the car door: football

Players rush to the window

And look into the street

Where a clown stands frowning.

YAKIMA IN PASSING

The dachshund waddles
Across the street
Her teats sagging.
Punk sunglasses walks by
Gives the dog a pat on the head
And keeps walking. The maid
Waits outside my room for me
To stop drinking and remove
The "Do Not Disturb" sign.
I hear doors open and close,
The maid pacing in the hallway.
I pop another top: Her desperate face
Glow like the hooker-red carpet
And bedspread.

THE EDEN OF CHEMICALS

We who have known only days
Know only air:
Clear awareness.
No steps...language
Without letters
Void utter tones
Blurred stark.

Radiation.
Senses warm,
The garden is new.
Animals appear.
Jungles. Branches. Rivers.

(stanza break)

Beyond the plastic atmosphere
Breath after chemical breath
A glorious spawning
In an oxygen-rich
Sealed room. All feelings
Are lost.

Step again.

THE RIVER IS BOILING

Anvil clouds shower veils
Of precipitation

Onto a semi-circle
Of retired vehicles, waiting

Unable to refuel
At the only gas station in sight.

Regular cows graze on the grass
Grow in the wind.

Near the wire fence, one pair
Clean each other's ears.

Farmers and tractors
Edge the horizon. Canyonland crevices

Reflect fall red and the wide, fertile
Canyon ledges shadow a hawk dropping:

NO RECEIPT WILL BE GIVEN:

Turn in your soul.

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK

As long as you can make it work for you
That is the name of the game in this town:
Prey on them until they fade into hues.

Use those who don't know you, never call truce.
In the self-destruct mode, good people drown.
As long as you can make it work for you

Look through their eyes, make yourself cunning, shrewd.
You don't get rich giving sounds to the ground;
Prey on them until they fade into hues.

Faces deleted from the computer
I would like to reassemble them now
As long as you can make it work for you:

(stanza break)

When you are ripping at them, love them too.
Swaddle them in certainty and when you drown
Prey on them until they fade into hues.

Even if all they do is prey on you
You don't get rich giving sounds to the ground.
As long as you can make it work for you
Prey on them until they fade into hues.

THE FIRE ITSELF

I.

Know what they are doing
When they look you in the eye
And lie.
I want them behind me.
Looking into one world
The world that lets me see
A speeding ambulance
On the deck of an aircraft carrier,
Carrying ashes
And a few
Unatomized
Pieces of flesh.
What downed the craft?
He who framed
And finished the eye of god knows

(no stanza break)

That nothing satisfies
The cool, worthless dollar.
A tree placed lovingly in the music
In silence
Its bare golden branches
Are traces of greed
That join the world
Where light we cannot perceive
Across the fence
Undoes the place.
It takes its own reflection,
Mt. Sentinel, Main Hall:
Full moon, the clock like a needle.
A sweeping edge
Peeling the quiet neighborhood.
Should we be happy,
When they are lying? Am I slamming
At sickness with a broken hammer;
Need someone
Sprinkle nuclear salt?

(no stanza break)

We climb underground
Into the explosion, where we forget
We are children in the dark
Who say
Repeating in the silence,
Find the footsteps
Of an honest man.

II.

Filling socks
He was put here to fill;
He can make anyone laugh.
Seeing him, I can think
When people I thought were friends lie,
I like to laugh;

(no stanza break)

I pretend I don't know who it is I am.
Lying when I say, look across at the light
Wait for it to make sense
Remember looking through a kaleidoscope
On the piano,
That came across the ocean
In a dusty covered wagon.
Wash my feet, enter the room
With a quick quiet thud;
Tired of being played with.
My designs and dreams woven,
Interwoven by angry children
Trying to imagine without television.
When the looking glass begs you to walk,
Question the quiet man
Who is waiting,
Mixing softened butter with sugar:
Easter cookies
Warm from the oven.

(no stanza break)

I look across pages of days
At a sharpened edge
I didn't sharpen. The lion
Surrounded by Africa
Is a world I am missing.
The point where the tooth
Impales the heart and
The whale is harpooned,
The night sharpened
And the world with cashmere
Sails:
The boat
Blurrs
As it pulls away.
Say
Friends are on that boat,
It follows no course, changes
Silence into void
Shred it like gum wrappers.

(stanza break)

III.

In wine-colored sky
Three lemons change
Into a bagel that can feed
The world. Easter preachers
Are selling talking Bibles
That interpret themselves.
I am told to feel guilty for
The stake I drive through
The heart of the savior every day.
If he were here
I would tell him
I am sorry I wasn't there.
The dirty moon severed the haze.

(no stanza break)

The choir is screaming
Isn't it enough
Somehow to know that he never knew
We are not monsters
Wrapped in the drudgery of skin.
In the figment of night
They have told us
With a flying command
The looking glass failed paradise.
"Jungle trees bleed poisonous sap"
I juggle the world
In the missile
That wraps itself
In the target.