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Breath of the voyeur| [Poems]

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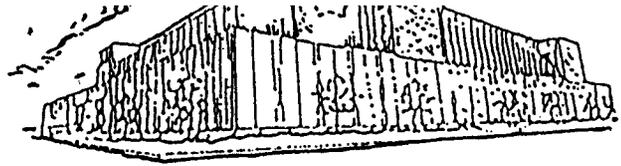
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BREATH OF THE VOYEUR

by

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B.A. Santa Clara University, 1992

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Art

The University of Montana

1998

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The Dancer

Spun of this round, round world,
of straw, of silk and tacking
nails, comes a dancer. Others

follow, unfurling themselves, the
steps, in bodies and repeating the windy
rhythms in counterpoint. Hordes of

ancestors, unheard of, swam in salt
mines like drowning or gathered leather
from broken boots. Their bodies can hear

the bodies, this time, grasses
singing beneath their feet, crusted
bread stored in hems

of pockets and in their
hair. She's barefoot, the dancer,
the one of tacking nails, and

straw. She builds solid dwellings
with no space yet for children--
wooden walls, floors, a

fire. She gathers lichen in the
smoke and sings to rivers, wields
a red axe like cutting

silk. A dancer, her legs, her long
arms extend, recoil, and
re extend, her hands callused, un-

blistered. Turning slowly,
boiling pots continue graceful boils
her breath rolls out of and into--

the moss on the walls,
wet like spring, flowers early.

Dora Maar

1.

She might just like this box. The wooden slats
are not your usual weathered grey. Artistic,
she said, yes, fanciful. Black linen, beaded.
She hums the perfect madrigal, her fingers,
red-nailed, curled prettily around her ear.
The branding iron, flake by flake,
disintegrates into the corner. Weathered.
And fanciful. Her legs are crossed. The right
eye wanders left, and now cannot be stopped,
the vagrancy. It's all her head, a weakness
she has for things she's never seen except
in ritual. She has good teeth, he said.

2.

Are those her lungs sprung lightly purple from
her chest? Among the broken vases holding
flowering plants, she never can be sure.
She's thought of burials and trade-offs, she
never can get the proper hours sleeping.
So many situations end without
beauty. Outside—and now, she dares—and why not—
the wind leaps at her, mocks her painted hair.
The wrong country has claimed her for itself.

3.

She dare not dare to turn the page. The next chapter is too familiar: she clearly sees too much. The snow has melted months ago—do only I find that odd? Do I? Willing, she is, yes, eager, even so. Her side aches. Sweats. And someone might be coming. Listen. Still, she gets this feeling every day about now. She should change her clothing and refresh her ankle perfume. A touch of Vaseline extends the garden musk for days, outlives even the lung flowers as though continually sprouting. A strange light always shone on him. She sidesteps his reflection, constantly, or did. She does the tango now, or how she remembers it, between the metal flakes and her barnyard armchair. She never trips, never.

The Sacristy Cracks

The priest wraps up
the extended metaphor

too quickly to no
objections: the pall bearers

are busy blending in with
the crowd. Busy, stepping backwards.

One excuses himself for a smoke.
Only the burgundy-haired girl

hears him. The two of them
careening in a green Toyota.

They are second cousins come
of age. Not fast enough

for conditions, the Boise brothers
sweep up the pieces,

heads down, blending
into their brown suits.

Broken pens and bits
of glass bleed their thighs.

Laughing. Flying home
through cracks in cement sidewalks,

Grandma walks the moss,
hands out gold engraved

napkins to the street boys. Gets home
herself to twenty-three stories

and an elevator attendant with a skeleton
key. A coat hanger. The right moves. The

shakes and the premonitions
are getting better. Terrible,

—
better, she'd told them, it's revival,
honey. On fire, she sends

caveats for warm-ups, working,
sliplless, and did you think

undone? Done up, dangerous,
moving deeper.

Keeping and Unveiling

Two hands interlocked overhead,
her breasts now blue. The gunsmoke sky
rolls into her body. She is

all breast, all butt, she is elbows
and teeth. She is brain. She is the iris
that emerges purple and striped.

in a field of poppies. The gathering bloom
convects, volcanic. Fields of cadmium
orange and slate scrape and undulate.

She stands as the medicine woman,
legs wide, gathers the billowing wind
beneath her skirt. The sky increases.

She trades secrets in a clay room.
Olive oil lamps cast shadows and gold
onto arching hands, keeping and unveiling.

Girl Before a Mirror

I can't begin.

How sweet it seems, my face
before the mirror, how
sweetly I have said "no matter," how

I keep my hair so blonde, so
windblown you are foolish
in love with me. And now,
the halfmoon blows by,

a deep red, distended--
the reflection slow to move
in swamps I watch and rich
with vegetable. By this, by leaves

and fruits and *decomposing*
I am enthralled. *The moon*
must be changed here
passed me by--

though in my toes, how I trip,
and in my arms, how I know
they will be fat and strong
for years yet, I feel

its tug and the swamp
still holding something,
moved inside and walking
like I walk and staining walls

with fingers that, yes, know more
than fabrics and earth, more
than the belly growing out
of mine, this thing so white

and stretching. I am unlearned,
I am author of this face--
I invent myself mirror
to mirror--

Each sheet explodes
slowly like flowers
to wet seeds. See,
my face, my body doubles
and halves. I am not the words
offered: this yellow not
my skin--the green around
my eyes is not fatigue--this red
too red for blood.

Thinking about Walking

I.

Just another karaoke
cowgirl from the city,
nights, dressed to go
and go. Theodore
catches my younger sister
in corners. Her
initiation, he says. *C'mon*,
she might have said
—she's thirteen—
or just sat shy while the man
with the fresh gun
unloads.

Uncaged,
the dogs bark wild and
hairsprung. The sound
track tinkles onward
from the black box.

II.

Strap and shimmy for
shrimp-faced boys,
their velvet horses. Ass
they like, my spine
spiked.

The man
on the phone wants me
pregnant, his blue head
sparking
the electronic line, sharp-nosed
scissors ready in the pocket.
All night, nothing
peeled from its sticky
seating. The player
piano stopped
playing hours before
daybreak, but
the last note still
wafts
in the smoke-heavy air.

III.

The quintessential aisle
marked out in railroad
ties, the bride
in a bouffant do and
bustle. Intrepid,
the poodle trips and
piddles among the on-
lookers. The sun
attacks every unnatural
color, but the brash
glint of rent-a-
pearl is overpowered
by the deliberate
nature
of my delicate heel.

In Explanation

**She didn't ask for friends
with bruises.**

**She wasn't born
to wait in windows.**

She bought a ticket.

**She likes to shove her cunt
at passing cars.**

**When she dreams,
she sees open roads and waves
of flattened grain.**

The Narcissist

A black day, today,
as she draws out the drawing
on the dark bone above
her eye, the smooth arc lengthened
by each slow stroke. A pool
of salmon pink
for her lips, now,
she rests.

She has had coffee but
will not reach
for the cup. The symptoms,

she insists, are *here*
and *here*. Her hand on her head
slips. She refuses water.

When they arrive, she says
she prefers the coffee table
to the bed. She lies

on the glass top and watches
herself watching the scrutiny:
the dark hair-frame
for the placid skin; the cirque
of the overdrawn eyebrow
that drains, deliberately, to the center
of the eye.

A Century Later

It's 6 p.m.
in this town of cowpokes and poets.
Time of day fades to the next
time of the next day. Authentic men
gather beneath the moose head,
the kind from story books in which
the wild west in spurs and leather
comes in for a good cry
after the last page turns.

A long line
of beards and exuberance plays
along counters and walls. Faces
in photograph, toothy and reveling,
might reach a lost arm beyond
their frames to slap a buddy
on the back or slide a drink to the men
below. They're heterosexual, goddamn,
and friendly. Beneath them,

bowlegged,
the short one in a pair of Reeboks
leans against boxes of bar glasses, stacked
and waiting. He trades stories
for nothing. His back is slapped, heartily,
but he's still standing, in fact,
he's jangling his ankles

and lurching with laughter
at the rough-hide hands of friends.
The TV blares behind him
the golf channel. A commercial, bright
and fast, catches his eye.
He wonders what the boxes wait for.
He wonders if his next drink will be
better than the last.

The faces sing at him
the same note or down the same
swallow another hour, another
century, the expressions tireless,
the bodies dead or lost. Nothing
is what he expected. He is tired
wondering which way home and

starved
for pickled beans his grandmother stored
in a room like this, those last pounds
of moose meat wrapped in paper and foil
forgotten five years until freezer burn
turned the packages into white plastic
and the kids threw them out.

The Weight of All Your Body Falling

You're a hard-working hobo
you're paid. You're wanted.
But the way you move and cough
and speak leaves suggestions--
old and smoky-- the air can't quite
sustain. It's a long train,
a ghost train, you ride, reaching
to open the next door. The links
you never make it through. Sunk
among hydraulics and the turning of the wheel--
the engineer calls, not to you,
but in the sound wafts a picture
you can't contain or forget,
a concentration on the smell
of metal sweating against your skin,
the constant weight of all your body falling--

The Prophesied

This is the rough beast
arrived soft on the breath
between our open mouths.
Centuries count. And still.

And when the sun rises orange
behind the ridge line and the trees
stand resolute and within reach
of the sun, I am the invited voyeur,

the apprentice, here to watch
the filling, here to welcome whatever
comes slouching down
the hillside to where you sleep.

I have filled my body with your breath.
These long nights we gather and part,
survivors of the burning wind.

Streetwalker

They are bedraggled the pair
of pet mice, having freely
found their way to nest

beneath the storm grating.
Over them, like birds
of prey, the boys commence

recruiting, and the street dwellers
scurry up, unclear which side
is theirs, whether to hide

or decorate their bodies, but
--is it instinct?--tells them
something here they want

from the exchange-- a sock
turned slowly thick and grey may
bubble up into a puddle of

springtails, my own belly
teeming with blood and
synapses, at the very least.

But I avoid their eyes. Un-
connected, crawling, carrying
on, my legs are thin as sticks

among steel-framed structures,
the workers replaced by cranes
and scaffolding. The sterile scrape

of metal on metal is a hollow echo
to the shriek of a falcon
for its paralyzed prey.

The Pencil Lines Emerge

He is not yet ready.

The rivers have been running
upstream for several days. He is
unconcerned, he tells himself, keeping
careful notes (the notebook fits
his hand, calculations increase
his eyelids). Nearly, he is
certain, *the cliffs will outlast—*
he is considering the cup
of mustard tea. Molecules
coming loose, reconvening
quickly each time. He does not
stockpile. He writes it down in
different places each time
in every language he's invented—
According to calculations.
He doesn't believe in numbers.
The notebook is becoming
explicit, the pencil lines
emerging as small mountains,
a comparison he refuses.

Terminus

Granted: the rain is seeping
through. Miles down, by thick
conjecture, dip our arms on bent

knees. How deep the breath
of birds, at rest, their limbs
unclipped. Our heavy arms bandaged

quick with poultice. The impulse
to keep sifting through this over-lush, this
urge to hunt metals from mud. *Mercy,*

I say. *And how so sacred.*
Carnavalesque behind the sand
stone, black birds crack

the air with open beaks.
The tallest bush convects
in shadow. Wild ones beat

into the sky, backs slick
with what they uncontain.

Worship

This is the room where what I dreamed
last night came back to haunt me.

I came back last night to haunt myself.

The voices, my voice all of them. Pulled
out of an easy chair, I've been seen
by me to walk stiff-legged
in a bad cramp.

When I stretch, I stretch my body
against my own.

The voices sweat out of me
moist meat in a wet bag
and mingle there like tongues.

I have one mind on the sky.

I watch the mountain
and this room.

You're talking again
in yōur sleep, shouting, crying.

Before the volcano throws its load
of holy stone, hide with us,
here beneath the pick-up.

We'll dodge relics behind horses.

We'll watch the fall
of the midday sky.

Like I Love You

I write poems. By this
I mean I am un-
finished, standing
at the threshold

of things I can't yet
write, of times I turn
or fall asleep or lie.
Today, when I'm thinking

poetry I'm thinking
of your body, the physical
space you take up, the space
you take in my mind, my imagination,

in my body when you're gone
and I'm looking forward
to the next night,
to one hundred nights

from now. I see
no way in or
no way that is *not*
in, a sea of tiny waves

in sand, in rock, in ocean, all in, in.
I can never write when I mean to
but when the spray soaks
the jetty where I've walked, when

I feel your fingers, wet,
on my breasts, on the tips
of my hip bones though
you're in town

buying shellfish and fat
paper, the words fall out of me so
beautiful, inscrutable,
believe me, so true.

In the Sitting Room

She barely sits at all there, wearing blue
on the devil's happy couch, her arms

and hands released on the guitar
ringing through her hip bone. The ball

of her foot, her pinking toes, and now
the arch dares boldly from beneath

the gold-embroidered hem of her large
pants. Fattened on the air around her,

the house plants cannot be contained
by those cold clay pots. They tumble

as the tropics. The watcher, the other
woman unveils her sunlit legs

from beneath her yellow skirt. Blooming,
sweet peas. A liquid phrase, her hand

along her hip bone. Trips and pools,
the dress, the music breeding green

notes, not written down but wet,
that slide from stop to stop. Her yellow arms

roll tangerines. In blue, she pulls the sounds
from strings and plops them into finger bowls

of floating grapes, their skins
soaked, thin and bursting.

Letter to my Sister

Your eyes marching on your body, watching--
you are framed in pictures where the sky
is too blue and the flower petals like small circles, *or*
the house, the stream, the whole story is blackened
with heavy oils, *or worse*,
none of this exists. What you call boredom
is rage, lost--

I can say you needed things
you could not breathe without,
things spoken for long
before your birth. Almost insidious so much
speaking. You took a breath, somehow--
began sorting, molecule by
molecule, lived
happy like the hard
wood of a tree that once
bore fruit but stands cold
in the balmy fall.

Cameras, official cameras say lightning
strikes up, not down. I've been waiting
to hear this. The tree generates, you see.
We do not see the potential building though
it sits by our side, our own hair
stands on end. From the backbone
of a mountain range, I watched clouds that blacken

mountains, ten different mountains, different
clouds dwarfed by horizons so distant they might
meet if only I could stand taller, but
can I breathe here, can I? The tree
could not hold the purple fire back-- The sky ripped
like a carcass bare, the sound I love like story
telling, the breaking of every
membrane, my body--

This is not our language. We are voyeurs. To whom
am I speaking? through my bones and here,
where they separate from my body?

The words lie. I meant this for
you. The radio pops,
screams as if the battlefield surrounds
but that's *translation* you see-- not the language
of silence, of fire-- just stand there, just
watch-- just speak the tongue of
storms that turns all color
to its edge--

The Story

Your insides are loud
and crowded with pills
and paralysis. You stand
with one fist concealed
beneath the uncurled
curve of another,
your delicate bones
a deceptive invitation--
like whispers. Roll closer.
Say something with saliva.
Strike me if you want,
my flesh is tough
and eager. You're the first
to hate me timidly.

Say something about resurrecting the dead.
Say something about real
truth that pulls up
unassembled on flat-bed
train cars or floats
in the harbor or on the wind.

We're both lost among
metal parts somewhere.
Let the hammers stop clanging
one second, one hour, let the dust
settle, let us hear what's left
to listen for.

Say something I won't believe.
Something to make me stumble straight
into howling winds.
Untangle your arms from mine
and pull the wires straight.
Tell me the story again
where the lights go out and you are born,
unscathed, from a burning rainstorm.

I am Dizzy Walking

In this room I'm all I can hear
breathing, even if I'm still
and attentive though something
moves the air, nonetheless,
and today I spent talking to a man
who looks like my father in all
but crucial ways. I'm looking for dishonest
divisions here, half-
lines to erase, to recombine
and reassess. I ask, was love
benign when four years old and walking
by the beds, through rows of fire-
yellow and fuchsia, the evening breeze blew
the tulip heads
open, exposed their
centers, dark
like sex, and
closed, leaving me the startled
softness of their modest
package?

I thought my step
misplaced--

Misshapen like layers, my mind and
flesh imprinted like a pink
nestling to its mother, I am large

with feathers, definitions
exploding as fireworks or fire-
power and always the need to
specify shades of
each, endless,
approaches of *precision*, an abstract
I understand, the world
teetering on *yes* and
no.

Yes, what writes in me also
loves and moves until
walking is nothing so
simple, every line a
semblance that unearths
earth of the body. No,
not earth as spoken of,
nor body, but each
creating. Again and again it's
morning coming up between
different hills, the sun continually
sprung on me, like joy--

I am dizzy walking
with the river. My mind
a twisted thread unwound
around my body, pulled

along, a lover
translating the wind and
kick of water falling
to the bottom of this temporary
land, so gentle
the geese of early
spring do not squawk
from the bushes,
leafless and gentle
like the tongue and the palate
together saying, "along, a lover."

Endlessly these words
can bear the profound
opening, the easy
mouth, the head
like calypso growing
wild, this ecstatic flight--

The Cultivation of Flight

We've never met. I haven't lived a day
without you. I know now your feet
disappear beneath me, piercing softly--

Yes, enemies by nature, but I'm small
and indecisive. I can't hate. I might have
curled up longer among your downy wings,

your sting, had I known--
the exchange slow, the silence.
Slower, even, than my return.

But happenstance I understand--the breaking
of you, of whatever should have
been. I thought there was nothing

I could write down. Even now, clearly
thinking, I am eluded: only the smell
of leaves remains and *not enough*. Will

nothing be? How long will I wander
here in the same four footsteps, in
you, in sight of what?

I forget the question. I
walked here myself. I must have
found my own trail even
with no concept no

wandering. She's too far and
though I'm oldest and need
nothing from her, I have to scream
for her, to say *I need you, I am not—*

Yes, I know you have the upper hand.
I mean—
I am waiting, and I do not believe in fate.

I won't understand *ways out*
of you for ten years yet, or the panic
of too small a perspective
overgrown, the labyrinth, the *I am lost*.

Because our locus is ever changing,
understand: this is no theory. I am
desperate. Nothing is serious
enough. In "do not" I hear myself
echo *what then?* if no reference, no
gravity, if everything one thinks real
disappears? if I, from this living
space marked in footsteps, am moved
by something I cannot control *then—*
am I harvested? or am I saved?

This wall of weeds grown up
to cage—is that all? She wraps her
hands around my armpits that first time
and I realize: I am something
other.

Those next first steps
my belly stinging, spackled
white like the egg of some great bird.