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CROSSING OVER

By

Sandra Lea Witt

B.A., University of Northern Iowa, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

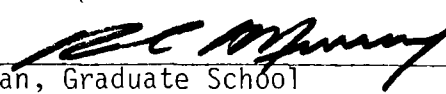
Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1980

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

6/3/80
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of the poems included here have appeared in The Colorado Quarterly, The Anthology of Magazine Verse and Contemporary Poetry for 1979, and The Montana Review.

All poems not previously published ©, June, 1980 by Sandra Lea Witt.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section I	Page
ALIEN LANDS	
Drifting in Monte Carlo.....	1
On Becoming a Lady.....	3
The Grass.....	4
Upon Leaving German Waltzes.....	5
Door.....	6
Passages.....	7
Night in Tarkijon.....	8
Peshawar Pakistan.....	10
Cholera.....	11
Falling Stars.....	12
Looking For Safety.....	13
Caloi Bazaar.....	14
First Snow.....	15
Fire.....	16
To A Far Voyager.....	17
Light On Water.....	19
Section II	
CROSSING OVER	
Fish.....	22

Loss of the Pasture.....	23
Working Coal.....	25
The Crash.....	27
Letter to Major G. Thomson from his Wife Jenny.....	29
Song to a Shadow.....	31
Crossing Over.....	33

I. ALIEN LANDS

Drifting in Monte Carlo

The woman on the beach hears the casino jangle,
the Kanuga board fall into its number.
Beside her, the Iowa boy played out.
She smooths her wrap against the wind,
thinks of day-boats over coral,
their bob. Tiny crabs scatter at a touch,
gone the way Mary wore yellow
and smelled of cereal,
the mural broke from its plaster
beneath lemon hair.

They came down to Monte Carlo
with Fiats and Audis, the moon
carved a brittle peel in the rearview mirror.
In spite of road's pitch
they held to each other until pulled in
by French coins, the familiar smell
like smoked fish. Remembering
the backyard and a lawn chair,
her body joined smoke. A rubber wading pool
the color of pine needles around her knees,

and Mary's hand knotted in her skirt.
How the fish fell on her plate white and open.

The spines of broken clams
sail gently like hair in the backwash.
The boy, thrown against the beach,
slumbers cool as peppermint.
Notched by a gull, a fish drops silver.
His long back rolls side to side.

On Becoming a Lady

By walnut trees I chopped the hearts
away from white worms, my hands
dyed Indian, gold stones.
My dolls wore their hair in corn silk,
petticoats of hollyhock. A lady,
I leave the dolls withering
in the field, return to my garden
saddened by bluebells. When I remove
white gloves, handkerchief daubing my forehead,
the dark hollyhock glowers from its stalk.
Small stitches confine the urchin in me:
lace tableclothes, and silver rings for napkins.
In the grove walnuts roll their green heads.
In the Mandan chair I tap my fingers.
I think of cool blue nights,
my arms grown delicate, fine as blades.

The Grass

takes it all back,
where the flowers last year crowded
near windowsills, the sad bark of an elm
peeled by children, where the apple tree
lost its hold and fell. Grass
is without scruples. Anywhere
is home. The purple crocus
goes under and even the iris
has a hard time pushing toward light.
All the way downriver the roots of white pine
pressed toward the bank. Water rolled
from my paddle. Early this morning
I noticed the forlorn look of your cap
lying at the base of a tree.

Upon Leaving German Waltzes

Listening to the talk of moonlight
you walk the hills. In Keokuk
on crude planks in fields you made
your own dances. Women spun
full-skirted beneath the stars, dizzy
with being young and the smell of apples.
You remember the grace that horses
carried in their muscles. A black horse,
sleeker than most, shot by your brother
who could not rein in its wildness.
You remember the moon glinting off the breast
of a woman on the ship's prow,
the drum of water rolling under,
throb of a waltz.
Later, bent like the moon around a shovel,
you hoped to recover
what cost your travels; the waltz
they played when you slipped
to the deck a stowaway,
leaving all of the clear days
lying out over the baltic.
Skirts swirled over that rainy climate
like tiny umbrellas drifting away.

Door

The air you have displaced
falls in behind you.
Disturbed
it whispers near your shoulders.
Are those tears
against your arms
that surround you like waves.
Do your feet hesitate
a moment in this current,
hear the voices down
the long hall muttering.
In this darkness
be certain hands.
Go about your work.
Push aside this hollow breath
even now at the threshold
of the metal door.

Passages

In Samangon the lorries pass
all day in painted flowers with their loads
of sheep and chickens drooping.
The ladies, brown hollyhocks in their gowns,
wander the courtyard past cherry trees
and pecans. Watermelons cool in the spring.
No macadam soothes the traveler, but
over the ridge caves, veins of gold,
fall and fall through mountains.
You can hear the chants of monks swell
behind the mural riddled with shot, the Buddahs
turn their faces back to sandstone.
It is Saturday in Samangon when Sunnite
and Shiite chant. Beside mud walls
the voice gives up its offering.

Night in Tarkijon

White monkeys walking above rooves, cause the stones
to falter. Dark faces pitch among stars,
their manes silver in moonlight.

Every night, clattering the wooden shingles
held by rock, they move slowly
toward higher angles of mountain
the village top and roosting chickens.

But first they gather and stone each other
as you stone them in daylight,
clustered in trees like pale grapes,
chattering when rocks totter them,
they shin higher until swaying at tree top
the stones fall short.

Is it the frozen prayerwheel,
the cold of the blue valley below
or the manes above your roof
that trap you inside?

Coniconi is two thousand feet below.

Pigeons strut and flare in the moonlit alterpiece.

It is winter, and below the prayerflags
everything is hungry. You close your eyes
and hear the mice rustle away.

Peshawar Pakistan

Like a slow clock, a heavy measured step
of metal against stone, the horse and gaudi
swayed me. When we hit the buffalo's horn
the seat rang out like a bell.
The slow animal looked but did not bellow.
It's skin was worn leather, it knew better
than to answer. The streets swayed
under the weight of the tiered buildings,
the ladies covered in fabric kept behind the men,
and lifted the dust like hunger to our mouths.
Our eyes flowed over their tight skin,
beggars in grey and the sweetness of sewage
beneath jasmine. Tightening on my mouth
jasmine drew into a kernel my breath
and entered me like a lover,
whose yellow eyes warped my dreams,
whose skull shrank beside me on the pillow.

Cholera

You think you've found
another baby to wind around
your boney hand. This one
has armed herself
with needles. She sees you
prying at the windows
with your band of skeletal cronies.
She has been through
that country where fear
hungers beneath coats,
scuttles away with its charges,
lies still beside the road,
that black sea of children
whose faces shine from bone.
She has felt death rustling
in her hair. She says begone.
There is nothing for you here.

Falling Stars

The one you must look for
stretching along the snowy landscape
spins in darkness, turns silver.
Snow leans into fence, heavy,
packed into unspeakable shapes.
The muscled necks of Cayuse
arch in damp fur. Unlike the camel
crossing the Sahara, this one
is without tracks. If she falls
she opens the quiet. If she spins
the air turns away. Circling
the horizon in red boots,
you would be red. Your arms beckoning her
to fall your direction as snow does,
as birds do winter mornings
shot through the heart.
All night long she holds you
on the crest of a snow drift.
Ice jangles trees.
The hard clacks of geese up north
last fall close over your ears
and the V moves upward.
An arrow of light, you break apart.

Looking For Safety

Living in the cave of her body
she misses winter, not seeing
where safety is, the waving light of ice
or the morning lying in wait.
Blind. The world taps at her
through her ears, autumn's brittle orange
flares, goes out. This is a kind of death
without the rescue of stillness.
Hearing only
the soft snow hissing against the glass.
What is touch when weather numbs the face?
The dark passage of the ear echoes
like an empty hall. Even snow loses
the valleys of white and blue, becomes
the sting when doors open.
Summer and everything that was sight
has gone. The skin gropes toward light
looking for a warmth remembered yellow:
beside the tennis courts the tock of the ball
against rackets. The body moves through air
trying to sense with its skin.

Caloi Bazaar*

A charcoal pot below the table
gives the only heat. Near it
brittle faces crack. Bare feet
in rubber shoes clop through snow
while outside my gate old boots are gone
like air in mountains. At night
beggars cuddle the warmth of mud walls.
Red dresses sewn with bangles glitter
for the tourists, but there are none.

When beggars flutter at me
blind, and awkward, I beat their hands,
travel two days for the lush greenery
of Peshawar. In winter, sun opens
a cold eye. The boys in skeletal light
bargain each pound. At night they sing
in the bone bazaar.

*Literally caloi means city in Persian, but it is often used to designate a particular section of a large downtown area of a city.

First Snow

Pale lashes fall
in the eye of the horse
whose hooves make no sound.
Whose round, quiet shapes
drift and gather beneath me.
Tracks we have been through
close behind us like gates.
Sound has no place
or lies in a shell
rolling somewhere over snow.
Sight is limited
to trees sliding
into background like clay.
Once movement stopped,
the air became solid,
packed hard to the face,
willow spinning white
with her sharp hands.
Mother, I say. Nightmare
stills wind
where the fall began.
No one moves.
Above me stars crystalize.

Fire

The coals burn red in the dark
trying to see. Slowly the smoke lifts
its head, a faint horse
from a cauldron running into air.

Our eyes do not think
but blend quietly and disappear.
For hours there is nothing
but flame with its blue lashes
falling closed or manes
tiring in the dark.

The quiet lengthens. Curls its body
end round end toward sleep,
while heads no longer rise
but nuzzle near their beginnings.

Slowly the hearth whitens
and falls as light
has done before it.

To a Far Voyager

You would not wake from the cabin
where fixtures lit the sink.
The snowball bush glowed like the moon.
I tapped the wall with sticks
but turned to sleep in the willow's shadow.

All night you slept across the room from your sister,
quilt stitched with blue stars,
the pet monkeys rattled their cages.
Tell me again how you slid the agates out
and water hissed all along the bank:
thieves, thieves,
how the cows low with dim voices
behind the graveyard and trample out
when the river rises. I've seen
splayed tracks in flowerbeds,
dark bodies rubbing against windows.

You grow smaller each day.
Past Babar's unguarded tomb
pistachio trees close green shells
and you lay flat against the stone
where men bow and are afraid.

Come home again.

When cattle drift toward the river
on rainy mornings, I will watch you.

Light on Water

The elms have not yet died
and their heart-shaped leaves blacken
in the moonlight. Now while the moon climbs,
wake and turn toward the window.
At the chipped gate a man puts on his hat
and moves slowly as if in deep water.
The season is late. Milkweeds swell
and break along his ankles. If there is a candle,
light it for the one leaving, the one you rise up
on your elbow to see. Your arms hurt
and you recognize the voice hanging sharp over the roses,
the bend of his neck like a long plunge downhill.

Leaning into the fence, I watched you bend
and pull weeds from the flowers,
the shirt strained against my shoulders.
I watered your cattle, Joanna. Those days
the trillium suffered beneath the hooves,
the chickens flared their wings
at the speckling grain. All that month
scraped raw against my skin, but now
I am whispering and turning in your arms

though your eyes search out the pools of light
that shatter against the gravel.

Huddled by the shed the chickens tremble
in the scarecrow's shadow. A man nears the channel.

I watch the light break around your throat,
coral and small bones.

I take off my shoes and dive.

II. CROSSING OVER

Fish

She wishes her eyes did not sting mornings,
that the fish gleaming in the dark river
would not sing to her with his round, soft mouth.
Like bubbles the sound rises, fills the ears,
becomes a soft glove over every sound.

She cannot say it is the wind
because wind never enters the ear so warmly.
The river hardens and only
the center keeps moving,
but the song sings higher.

Sometimes she sees the tail,
a bright fan glimmer.
Sometimes the fish hides along the bottom
and will not answer until she turns away.

But always it is the hard eyes she fears
below the song, turning in the wedge of its head
like pieces of clay glittering
and the mouth gaping, a soft wound.

Loss of the Pasture

I miss the rattle and stamp
the knots of horses together
their noses lifted toward wind,
lady'slipper and clover cropped between jaws.
Patches of sumac down the ditch
cover speckled eggs. I find them again
in the sandpile, brown stones smooth and breakable,
swallows winging toward me.

My mother reels away from the stretcher
like a bird down a long canyon.
When the grave goes in
they say the needle stuck at 85.
My brother, mean in a flowered shirt,
goes to trial. Stepladder stitches across his cheek.

I think of running toward the pasture,
the stream that never cuts the same path,
oak trees heavy with hawks that soar
and hang still in the air.

I want them the way I want the shed
with its door falling to open again

on a birth of kittens in yellow light,
the soft muzzle of a horse as it finds my hand.
Bending at my waist I break
the one iris the lawn allows.
A scarlet bird trembles on a limb.

Working Coal

With eyes behind blinders
ponies tilt down tunnels.
The carts roll out bituminous-smudged,
follow their steel beds
and rock the tunnels with drumming metal.
A pony skitters, hide trembles.
Like a star moving through darkness
the slow cart moves out toward the mine's mouth.

The lamp's blue breath winds deep into seams.
Ponies do not follow where cold air
echoes the clop of hooves,
the smell of moss and black water.
In tight cubbies I lie in dampness,
chisel a slab back,
feel its thud in air.

The porous walls crack to the pick.
Black ferns unfold. Carried to carts
they shine, stunned by exposure.

Faces glow mica riding up
behind ponies. Fear of the lamp's flicker
and petrified fronds trail
into a blue day.

The Crash

The tree rattled brittle with ice,
a pepper of stones. Cars slid
toward crumpled fenders. Gathering the wheel
in both hands, you pumped the brake,
heard the crash of your shoe and that other crash
against the windshield. What you remember
is the one light dangling from the pole
at the dark end of the street, the murmurs
behind half opened doors.

What is it to say that children
left their steaming baths to watch you
laboring beneath stars or that a voice
like silver wafted toward the sidewalk.
Snow sculpted your arms
and behind darkened windows
women slept in nightgowns that shimmered
through motions of what passed
in their minds.

Was it Sundays dappled in the rich shade
of an elm that held them, sleep unshattered?
Circling twice, a white car spiraled away
like a bird and you felt yourself
in the white landscape careening out
toward wherever an open coat meant shelter.

Letter to Major George Thomson from his Wife Jenny

I have given up seeing you this winter.
By the bay window a sunny morning,
I saw the names of Oscar Parker and Major Corbett
in the Tribune. Your name was omitted.
All night lying under our blue quilt
I remembered your hair
blown against your throat,
the steady draw of the buggy.

Snow thickens the roof of the barn
as I walk to the Central House. Our room
was fourteen. In the parlor I listen
to the tread of men's boots. The pine door
opens and I imagine I hear you singing
as you used to lying on the bed.
The amber lamp remains and through the window
the prairies reach out under snow.

I dreamt you came home. Father and I
were scooping oats for the Bay and the brown mare.
You lounged against the barn door in blue
with epaulets and so many gold buttons.

I did not recognize you until you had gone.
Ann Butler said the horses are dying from long marches
and when I watch the snow fall
I feel a bird break from the sky
inside my skull and plunge.

Since the last battle I close my eyes
but can't control myself. I can hear nothing
by telegraph. The government claims the wires.
Years pass between the days, each morning
disjointed, a bird startled from the grass,
no pattern for flight. Lately I don't know
if the brown grass is a new spring
or a spring we knew together.

It is small comfort to know that nothing
is ever finished, that each touch
we carry with us to feel again
some unsuspecting morning,
wheat against our thighs.
Lately I have felt a lameness
between my shoulders.

Song To a Shadow

Across the street a shadow man
puts on his hat and leaves. He leaves
everything behind him glowing.
Like a falling star, he goes out.

Sometimes he turns slowly in my direction
and I close the drapes or I turn toward the light
at the open door. Sometimes I am not dressed
and I flinch away from the phone.

When I walk at evening, a hat bobs
in shadow beneath a shed,
but no profile follows me.
The matted leaves tremble with rain.
He hides behind the face of another.

Mister, where have you gone?
Nights when the latch has sounded
I turn over the frayed scraps of suit
left hanging behind your door. I watch
the cotton fall again from your lover's shoulders,
hear the sharp slap of the lock.

Meanwhile across the street the shadow man
rummages through his things strewn
before the window. He seems to call my name
or the name of a woman left waiting
at a bus depot years ago.

Her arm is perched in a wave
that never follows through.
The name forgets itself,
stutters on his lips like a moth.
How can I recall him, the way he lurches out
toward makeshift stars.

Crossing Over

In the compartment her muff waits
for her hands to enter, but she is standing,
fur cap around her face pressed to the window,
the starched handkerchief rustling in its trim.
Held in by straps, fashionable hounds
nose the cobblestone beside his boots.
Again he waves,
and the train carries her past his eyes.
His face was at her temple
when April rushed around them like swollen streams.

She snaps her leather bag, looks in on linen,
the water-silk prints tied with ribbon for her mother,
whose grey hair rolls heavy against her neck
as she flattens sour dough in the kitchen.
Already snow flashes blue
on the metal tray where a glass
of hot tea hennas her fingers.
Let the porter shuttle her baggage back and forth,
the Russian winter unravel
cold names: Bartoff, Pavlich,
her feet warm to the hot metal under the cloth.

She will have partridge
and summer all over again with red wine,
the pendants on her bust asleep like tiny voyagers,
the garden aching with flowers.
She follows past the willows
to the brook and flat white stones
to step on, to cross over.