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DEAD INDIAN LEDGE AND OTHER POEMS

by

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B.A. Intermountain Union College, 1929

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

STATE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1936

Approved;

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CONTENTS

I. DEAD INDIAN LEDGE

DEAD INDIAN LEDGE.....	1
ON TWO MEDICINE RIVER.....	2
AMONG THE ROCKS.....	4
REVELATION ON MOUNT CANNON.....	5
PRAIRIE CAMP.....	6
AUTUMN AT TWO MEDICINE.....	6
FISHERMAN'S LUCK.....	7
IN EXTENUATION.....	8
EVALUATION BY A CURRANT BUSH.....	9
VIA LOGAN PASS.....	10

II. SPECIMENS

SPECIMENS.....	11
ASSIGNMENT AFTER CLASS.....	12
LIQUOR STORE INDIAN.....	13
BABY HERCULES(CRYPTIC-ELLIPTIC STYLE).....	14
LAMENT FOR EVENING.....	14
EPIITAPHS TO INTIMATES.....	15
PERFECTION-TEN MONTHS OLD.....	16
TWO LADIES.....	17

III. IN STRONG NOSTALGIA

FORTY BELOW.....	18
SQUAW GULCH.....	19
REMEMBRANCE OF SHEEP.....	20
MEMORY MADE SURE.....	21
GATES.....	22
RELICS OF FATHER REVALLI.....	23
SONG OF TIME AND WILD BILL.....	24

IV. A CRUEL JEST IT IS...

MORTAL SWING.....	25
COLLOQUY.....	26
RELUCTANCE TO WRITE.....	29
INSPIRATION'S SOURCE.....	30
ONE WHO BURIED BIRDS.....	31
GOPHER.....	33
ADOLESCENCE.....	34
CARPE NOCTEM.....	35
INTERLUDE.....	36
CHURCH.....	37
DISINHERITED.....	38
EPATHETIC PANGS.....	39

CONTENTS (CONTINUED)

	MOODS SING.....	40
	SHOCKER.....	41
	OIL.....	42
LONG	HANG OVER.....	43

DEAD INDIAN LEDGE

DEAD INDIAN LEDGE

Seeking sand drifts in the blanket folds
Pushing the fabric to the body lines,
Whispering sand sifts down on Deep Breast,
Searching drift-fingers clutch at his robe
Smooth the flesh away from high cheek bones
Caressing
Melting the flesh to new alliance.
In a rotting blanket Deep Breast
Lies on a sandstone ledge
Barren and weathered
Where the hawk's bitter cry echoes
Against the stolid marching river cliffs,
And the sun
Each day makes sharper shadows
On the gray rock by the changing head,
And the unhurried sand
Works on.

AMONG THE ROCKS

To stand there among the rocks
At nightfall when the curious have gone;
We the incurious and well-satisfied --
Oh, we could stand there while the heat was drawn --
From the rocks and from the steaming brain,
To ache with a cool nearness that lasts on
Fulfilled as now, and unfulfilled forever.

We could exult in two-ness and in one-ness
And if the strong limbs of flesh assert
Themselves, and cling and yearn
There in the Rocks, that could not bring a hurt.
The moment leaves a space of sickly dust
But the thin dust, unvital and inert,
Stirs and whirls slowly from the rocks.

Then we, incurious and well satisfied --
We would rise up and walk before the moon
And words would come, not for a head
Against the shoulder, but words strewn
Like rainspots on full pools
Among the Rocks; coolness on coolness, soon
To be cool nearness, when the bodies stand aside.

REVELATION ON MOUNT CANNON

I saw a wind-torn pine
Wrenched and whipped in a mountain storm
Cling with root fingers to a rocky slope
Where chance had dropped a seed.
I noted the first gusts pass --
Rip howling down the gap;
Observed the main force of the storm,
Imminent, whoop and flame
Among the swaying peaks.
I beheld the tree cease struggling as the wind
Unwound rough fingers from its branches;
If the roots held it stands there yet.

PRAIRIE CAMP

At evening when the Rockies stretch
A torn black wall against infinity,
The purple plains compose themselves
Hiding the hysteria of coyotes in coulees;
Muted rattle the hooves of horses --
A clean cool wind comes near,
Shoulders the sage and sneaks away.
A planet endless spaces to the east
Stares and, grudging, grants me sleep.

AUTUMN AT TWO MEDICINE

The wind's strained voice, owl-sad,
A leafless branch across the face of the moon:
As the sere mind gestures at despair
Against significant silence in the peaks.

FISHERMAN'S LUCK

All day we've slipped and scraped along this bank,
Have seen a dozen perfect pools for fish -
A hundred spots that cried aloud for casting.
Remember, we sat sanguine by this creek,
Rigging up rods and pulling on our boots
Just as the sun popped like a squeezed grape
From the dawn mist.

We rushed, perspiring, to the bend ahead
During the heat of noon and afternoon,
And studied running water till the sky
Flowed blue - the gray rocks rippled.
Let's see, we have a trout or two
But nothing much. "Fisherman's luck,"
Did I hear you say?

Consider, though, how hard it is down a street -
Corners ahead demand more on a creek;
A river's just the right place for a hike
And sometimes there are fish.

IN EXTENUATION

Trees, ecstatic, tensed their limbs
In the soft sun - in the sensual air
Along the Musselshell.
Insects, wing-stayed, hung
Above rose thorns;
Sang aroused songs
With lines left out.
The river, fluid, warm, clung to the bank;
Reluctant, ran clear fingers over stones.
You have lost something to me;
In your absence
I am caught away.

EVALUATION BY A CURRANT BUSH

There's the place
Where Dave Clare killed Slim Wilkie;
Dave on horseback in the dusty trail
Slim crouched behind the yellow currant bush
Below the bluff,
Where mud swallows stick their nests.
Slim had his chance and sent a shot too high;
Dave from a fear-mad horse
Took aim, and death
Came down his rifle barrel
To tear the hatred out of Wilkie's heart.
A bitter look fell off like a sunburned leaf,
Wild currant branches eased Slim to the ground,
Took him, squirming absently,
And let him down -
 Let him down -
For failures nothing to a currant bush.

VIA LOGAN PASS

You ask about the Rockies;
Well, the bears eat garbage there
And a fine highway, scenic stops and all,
Is chiselled through the shoulders of the peaks.

You ask about the Rockies;
Mountain goats now cling to crags
So that the tourist, western traps for all,
Can get snapshots of the oddest mountain freaks.

Oh, you mean the wildest Rockies?
Well, the mountain-lion's scream
Now yields to auto sirens retching on the rocky walls,
While the big-horns sold their birthright
And are wan domestic sneaks
And the bears - why the bears eat garbage there.

SPECIMENS

SPECIMENS

Devil with spectacles --

I remember Pete,

A chopped out profile

Before the fire door,

Back bent to thrust a shovel at the flames.

You've seen the sloughed shell

Of the grasshopper?

Old Bill was like that --

Always it was an effort not to touch

His body, rustling dry,

And shatter it.

Londine, two-hundred fifty pounds

Of salve and ointment;

Only to speak to him

Meant you were right.

Micety in the large - an elephant

With a hair ribbon.

A voice that talked

And talked was Marcia.

A body? I suppose,

But first and last

A voice that talked

And talked - a shout

Caught between cliffs.

ASSIGNMENT AFTER CLASS

Maturity hides itself along her length
But shows through, faintly traced,
In the pert challenge at the hips,
Inviting incompleteness of the waist
And eager unconvincing breasts.
One is caught with thoughts:
Who steals the near done, to-be-perfect stone,
Facets uncut?
Sit there and give advice, and smile;
Who thought of theft -
Few see the new plant grow,
Many that it has grown.
Lean back and say a this or that,
Hold to such things as, "pages 3 to 12."
Words that rattle and are pat
Have added virtue and are comfortable;
Assignments make a suitable charge of shot
By which the animal moment's scared away.

LIQUOR STORE INDIAN

Crooked Horn stood by a street lamp
On the main square yesterday,
A leathery aborigine
From a reservation camp.

Civilization, a ten-gallon hat,
Rode his rancid hair,
At his feet a lumpy flare
Where his old squaw, Fish Guts, knelt.

You'd wonder what he might think
Behind those brooding eyes -
Of the whiteman's lies?
No, but where he could get drink.

BABY HERCULES
(cryptic-elliptic style)

An enigmatic smirk usurped his face;
In both his hands
Masses of twisted serpents without heads -
Headless but quite effective for all that,
As he flourished them
Before us dumbstruck folk
Who never really saw till then
That serpents scintillate without their heads
If one can only make them writhe enough.

LAMENT FOR EVENING

What have they been doing
To my Evening
That makes an operation necessary?
Has the diet of dewy eyes and eventide
Finally festered, rendering her unable
To march to altars as the poet's bride,
That she is etherized upon a table?

EPITAPHS TO INTIMATES

She pulled the moon down over her head;
The air she took in through its yellow net -
Ethereal stuff - and she lives on it yet
Somewhere though labelled ten years dead.

He couldn't help it that he looked at life
Nor could he keep his face straight as he looked
So he became a mouth with corners crook'd
And aching, till he used a knife.

PERFECTION-TEN MONTHS OLD

Fairies play with Marguerite
Upon the kitchen floor
But none of them are half as sweet
As is our baby Marguerite
Bouncing across the floor.

She glances into every nook
And each forbidden place
With such a pert and knowing look
They're set a task who undertook
To keep her in small space.

Elves keep snarling up her hair
And spotting all her clothes;
It's very clear she knows they're there,
She chats with them behind my chair
To plot her mother's woes.

Peg utters such important lines
When splashing in her tub,
We stand close by and watch for signs
Of excellence of other kinds,
And find them - there's the rub!

TWO LADIES

She thing;
Curling her hair
Painting her face
Fitting clothes against her body
Lovingly: as a means
To an end.

Voice saying hello across the hall...
It catalogues magnificently...
One which cannot say ten words
Successively
Without some pointed gossip...
A heaven-sent medium for disparagement...
The flat eager note
For pouring pleasant swill
To willing wallowers.

IN STRONG NOSTALGIA

FORTY BELOW

Alone, apart in a room
When the world stared through the sash
And walks outside groaned chill;
Did you look at the snow in the street -
The trees huddling tired in the gloom -
Your prints looking scared on the wall?
When frost gnawed hard at the pane,
The room, a trap, grew small,
Creaked cold, closed in -
Were you forced to curl up in your brain?

SQUAW GULCH

The service berry bushes in Squaw Gulch
The little pool so cold it stung the teeth
Refreshed us as we climbed along the trail,
And that old cottonwood, Squaw Tree,
Stood calm and set adrift
Its cotton in the sweet slow-moving air,
And boyhood rested on the shaded stone,
Conjured success up in the languid leaves
From flat on the back, and through a half-closed eye:
But youth stood up at last and took the trail -
Through brush and rocks
And left Squaw Gulch Behind.

REMEMBRANCE OF SHEEP

We rode the bucks for money
When they brought the dusty sheep
To the old corral at Baltic;
But the fence began to creep
Into all the grassy stretches of the flat.

We clamped the pungent fulness
Of the sheep between our knees
And fanned the foolish creatures
For our dime and quarter fees
Nor ever thought to see an end of that.

Now the dust clouds never move along
Above the noisy herds
And there isn't any Baltic
A And the jeering herder's words
Only echo with the ghostly woolie's blat.

MEMORY MADE SURE

The packrat bit me -
Bit and reached my mind,
Made little blood-lined furrows
 On my being,
Back on the homestead
 Another life ago.
Nerves have checked off much since
But I know how his teeth
Slid through flesh and sang on bone -
I was befriending him.

GATES

There's something that is friendly about a country gate -
No, it's not the roses nor the trees that cause it,
For an old homestead barbwire with just two poles standing straight
That never was acquainted with a tree
Can somehow say welcome to a fellow on the road,
I know because I've had it said to me.
Now a town gate, and it's strange too, seems to shut a person out
As though entering it would almost be a sin;
A country gate no matter where you find it
Somehow reaches out and tries to call you in.

RELICS OF FATHER RAVALLI

Dustily peaceful place
Almost a hundred years removed from rush.
The leaves of church-yard trees
Claim intimate knowledge of the log walled past -
Those branches did not frame the father's view
Of that raw mountain to the south.
But one understands the leaves - does not the brain
Suggests that it has been here long ago?

When the scythe slid through unfamiliar grain
An interloper with strange things to tell
Sat in Father Ravalli's favorite seat;
Tired, relaxed against the bulky arms
After a day with hammer, saw and book.
Surely he thought contemporary things:
"Are enough candles moulded?"
Is there something I missed doing?"
Or did he live a hundred years askew,
Did his brain pick up centuries as he sat,
And steep itself in strong nostalgia
Like age-entangled, sighing leaves?

SONG TO TIME AND WILD BILL

You can't chase us away from Wild Bill
Who lived in the Black Hills
And everywhere in the west.
His gun smoke lingers here
A strain strong and clear
In the prairie air.

Time, though you've done your worst
McCandless still is curst
And Hickok praised;
Dodge City's marshal strides,
Or on a tall horse rides
In the old streets.

The saddle creak still sounds in the pines
On trails he took past the old mines,
In the wild times
His long hair glows and lights
At Deadwood tables these nights
The old blaze.

(chorus)

Oh, you can't chase us away from Wild Bill
Who lives in the Black Hills
And everywhere in the west.
His gun smoke lingers here,
A strain strong and clear
In the prairie air.

A CRUEL JEST IT IS...

MORTAL SWING

Cling to the mathematical swing
And go up, up - and back
In a geometric track.
Let's swing till the spheres sing,
Go up, up-until
At the end of the arc
Hang stark
And recede short of our fill -
Recede eager still.

COLLOQUY

A nameless marble bust,
Which might have been
The portrait of a race,
 Stood in the hall.

And there one came
As placeless as a bird
Bearing a sheet of parchment
In his hand
And on his face
A look of desperation
 To be heard;

"Marble, I'll tell you things,"

 The poet said,

"Which men have known before,
But which have swum
Shark-like beneath the surface
Of their thoughts,
And here's the first;

An ugly smile God must have worn
When he was making man,
Giving the new toy just enough of life
To make it shudder at the thought of death--

Behold! I see a shadow
On the marble eyes,
Suggestions of a stony misery
Form on the stolid lips.
I'll speak again -- hear this:

A cruel jest it is that we are men --
Rise and fight on, you avid scientists!
Make men laugh at last
At nature's fall and live forever --

But look! A lava boils
Within the bulging eyes,
Purple intense resolve
Colors the cheek
An apoplectic pulse
Throbs on the temples
Of this piece of rock!
And yet again -- and this time hear me well:

Smile and be glad that you can live awhile;
Clasp life close to you; take her for a mate,
Feel how she yields to you --
Her arms twine round -- forget the consequence
And lie with life --

Ah, see! the eyes
Are shining crystals now!
Arrested flushes
Tinge the Parian brow.
The mouth moves
And unaccustomed words
Jerk from the lips,
"Have done! I am
No poet -- I am Man."

RELUCTANCE TO WRITE

Would you have me write
The words that fit between
The rough insinuations of the race
Securing the race?

No?

Apostrophize the places
Pregnant angles
Hungry reflexes?

No.

When instinct rears
And stalks off, sweaty;
One is one's own -

Then to pen.

INSPIRATION'S SOURCE

Why the moon and water,
Trees on wind-swept hills,
A patch of brilliant flowers,
Or a flying bird?

Why not a sun-burned flat stretch,
Alkali, rank sweetness of the sweaty sage,
The ugly rasping of the tumbleweed,
Or the slight stirrings of a rattlesnake?

EVIDENCE FOR THE CONVICTION OF A SENTIMENTALIST

1.

I was one who buried birds,
Stood by shallow graves and laid
Scraggly prairie flowers on sparrows.
No sermons - not a rolling word
But God could not have missed
The sentiment.
Death was bad - why?
Because life was good.
Oh yes there was a sermon, now I think,
After the evening meal I heard it said,
"Damn those sparrows - eating up the seed!"

2.

There were lost lambs
With little breathless blats
- bottomless wooly backs.
Yes, lambs are lodestones yet for sentiment.
I poured them maturity through a bottle
And when they died saw wisps of fondness hang
Like the wool banners flown at barbs
On the lower strands of fences
Sheep have passed.

3.

I saw that colored stones had life in them,
 Collected some and did a wizard's work;
 Lived with them - specially loved a few,
 Then lost them to a blundering plow.
 (I've lost friends in the flesh as easily)
 I can still talk to nicely colored stones.

4.

Then that mysterious village one foot high,
 Gopher town and all its sandy homes
 Off in the pasture corner.
 Those rodents liked me if I remember right -
 I know that I liked them.
 True, gophers eat each other, I am told,
 But there's a clean-ness to their well-picked bones
 That isn't found in anthropophagy.

5.

Whether you say it now or years from now
 I was a sentimentalist who buried birds;
 Who kept his eyes on what things should most be,
 To miss exactitude.
 Enthusiast who slandered verity
 Which ploughed, inexorable, through the cells
 To actual nothing.

GOPHER

A gopher nearly died tonight!
Iniquitous yellow blob
Scampered into the roadway,
Arched his back
Over a wheel-smashed brother,
(Ghoulisb beast)
When Londine drove the nightshift
Out to work,
Jerked the wheel over
Nearly ditched us all,
" Get away gophie,"
Were the words he used--
Was Londine God?

ADOLESCENCE

The smeared moods of the young,
Energetically besmirched,
Have the appeal
Of an exploring infant's dirty face -
So happily soiled.
Yes and the intermittent cleanly streak
Immaculately revolting as a toilet-bowl;
The unendurable paleness of a Galahad
Moping in back yards-
"Kids are such funny things."

CARPE NOCTEM
(To be laughed at and remembered)

My loved one near and I not seeing her.
Hateful! I pace the floor and frown at books;
Then leave the house -- walk hatless through the rain,
Cursing myself, necessity, that damned robber Duty,
Who bans excess which is the only pleasure.
My love stays in -- prepares something for "then".
It's "now" I live and hate my solitude,
Though free as air or rain carousing about me.
To be three blocks from her -- a million miles!
My loved one chides me to be reasonable;
She means endure what can't be helped
If she knows the everlasting nowness of my spirit.
But she's right -- rather she's not quite wrong
That's life -- a lot of empty present
Wasted quite, in pointless thought of past
Or childish preparation for a future not our own.
Here I would be happy, now I can;
Past's gone, Future's not mine to hold.
Thus reasonably return I to my room,
Rain in my hair and dampened to the soul.

INTERLUDE

Seeing a blossoming flower by the road
Its petals red with passion for the sun
And leaves thrust forward yearningly toward life,
He stops and throwing down his heavy load
Bends over the flower and in an ecstasy
Crushes its sweetness close within his hand
Till he perceives the petals' mangled form,
And in surprise and sorrow flings it down,
Walking more rapidly along his way,
A perfume lingering sweetly on his sense.

CHURCH

Rain on the stones outside a house of God,
Inside a voice raised up in earnest prayer,
The tones that bring their answer from the walls;
And God himself is moving in the air --
Is muttering in the muted organ sounds.
What's mind here to deny that He can be
When I am near enough to Him awhile
To hear Him breathing in the leaves of books?
People rise up around me and the sound
Of singing comes upon my consciousness --
Of noises from a hundred anxious throats
All glorified and melted into one
By the grand bass strain running through --
That is God joining in the closing hymn.

DISINHERITED

Here's a strange thing,
How gray-green ghosts
Rush past me as I enter in this wood
And leave all uninhabited about.
Green excommunication shuts me out.
Child of Nature away to school so long
Mother's a trifle restive in my sight;
Her best secrets whispered pianissimo
Behind the branches of tall trees.
You know,
With such precocious young ones near
Nature must be careful what she says.
I've lost the key to the wood's back door
No longer can I reach directly to
The shelf where the jam jars stand;
I've lost the key and so must join
Those others disinherited who peck
At Nature's ankles with an inky pen.

EMPATHETIC PANGS

If we stand outside in the rain with despair,
And within the place which was ours
Wealth strokes and warms the machine till it purrs
But want blows cold in our hair;

Shall the belly be fed on pretty hope
Or do feet that trip on need
Become light and race and forget to bleed?
Shall cast-offs always stoop?

If man is kicked in the face, is it odd
That he spits out teeth - shall we not see blood?

MOODS SING

Sometimes there's an alkali flat,
Tedious, saline, yellow stretch,
Across which thoughts walk, thick-tongued,
Thirsty, breasting waves of heat.
Emptiness sweeps from miles around -
Banks at the back of the throat;
Brainfolds shake out a sulphurous dust of song:

Alkali flat! alkali flat!
Burned clean of every thought,
Tedious yellow alkali flat
Where the mammal man may live -
Or die - and matter not.

There are times too
A mountain swings up sheer
And is life. A tune is gasped
Between the heavy breathings of ascent:

A scrawny pine
Clings
To the timberline,
Sings
In thin air:
It's worth having come
To be there!

SHOCKER

Bend, lift, walk, place -
Stubble crackles under foot,
Cricket sound saws at the skull,
Dust crawls into nostrils,
Eyes helpless against acid sweat.

Bend, lift, walk, place -
Bundles retreat ahead
Across the field,
Sun burns down and glances
From the stubble.

Bend, lift, walk, place -
Wheat straws tear at ankles,
Wheat straws claw at the face,
Wheat beards gnaw
At the wrists.

OIL

Over our fields go people seeking oil -
There's the prosperous reek of crude
The sulphurous sump;
Robot lift and fall of the walking beam,
Tool dresser's hammer clanging,
The greedy thump, thump -
Of strings of tools knocking the rock aside
Making hole hungrily in the flinching earth;
Setting the long-necked casing for the pump.
Geologist presaging with a prayer
To gamble thousands on the core drill's load
-Secretive muddy lump.
If it's on your land the derrick stands,
Farmer, the land you've lived on lifelessly,
Battled listlessly,
Why there's a lift at the vitals with each thud
Of the sharp bit, that breaks the shale away
Stamping out misery,
Gay dreams come up from the sands
And the blind-to-hope can see!

HANG OVER

To live thus

Perched on the shoulders of an animal

Hauled through a welter of beer and baseball scores;

Today-

A syncopation hammering raw spots

On a resounding skull.

Today-

A space of skin with pores

When there seemed that

Which cried, Desire, Desire!

The sturdy shoulders riding squarely there

Cling to them - cling.

To be thus perched -

Thus dangerously free

Of essential illusion;

Here's an excruciating sanity,

And glass in the teeth.