

1986

# Diary of a skull

Randall Howard Watson  
*The University of Montana*

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DIARY OF A SKULL

By

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B.A. Sarah Lawrence College, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

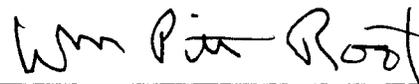
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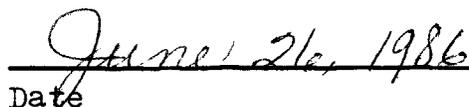
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Diary Of A Skull

poems by Randall Watson

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For all my family.

"Beauty dies. That is the source  
of creation." - Louise Glück

"these things speak the clear promise  
of heaven." - Dennis Johnson

I

## Bone Meal

I ride in oldsmobiles driven  
through shopping malls at night,  
their headlights lit up  
climbing the walls  
like stars. The security guard  
asleep beside an ashtray has  
thin lips, his deep  
artificially induced tan hangs  
like a shadow on his face,  
blue and green lamps arch  
above him as he sleeps, he dreams  
he is trapped in a small  
casket of fluorescent light.

I smoke cigarettes  
in gas stations abandoned  
by black haired immigrants  
wearing blue shirts  
with this guy I know who  
might be dying of cancer.  
He takes me shopping  
at Pandora's Box,  
buys a shirt that says  
Sunoco in red  
for eighty cents,  
telling the attractive cashier  
people's lives are like libraries built  
without calculating the weight of books.  
Once out on the street

he points out light trapped  
in the rear windows of repossessed  
Volkswagens he says race  
through Bayonne to the stars,  
light he compares  
to the delicate pieces of bone  
that make the hand.  
At 4th and 14th  
he runs out into the street  
like a train arriving  
at the station too soon.  
When he veers off into the crowds  
with the anger and abandon  
of a man who has just lost  
custody of his only child, he turns  
one last time to motion goodbye  
and disappears into a place  
where there is no time left  
to fill his life.

## Meeting The Air Like Strangers

In this wind people scatter like paper  
crushed by hand then  
thrown from a speeding blue car.  
Black weathervanes spin  
like quarters tossed from the sky,  
the phone line's dark ribbon bends  
in air, automobiles rise  
impossibly over the earth.  
We watch it all from here.  
The dancer in the wrestler's oiled arms  
begins to weep. The waitress  
counts her change. The fifty  
three year old check-out girl  
at Albertson's asks  
her boss for a raise, then  
gets ready to go home.  
The people we never think of  
gather in small rooms where the cold  
performs its magic in their hands.  
Their bodies meet the air like strangers,  
their mouths open for the wind.

## Outside The Ortiz Funeral Home

Gathered on the sidewalk  
a brown flock

of birds. You  
can hear

the thin  
beaks peck

at the pale  
stiletto shapes

of steeples,  
the shrill cries

perched on the backs  
of black coats

arranged  
in tight patterns  
of prayer

on the shoulders  
of the unforgiven.

## North Of Democrat Point

Nick Romeo, a guy I like  
and who used to play  
third base for the village tavern,  
runs a rib and macaroni salad take-out joint  
½ a block from the Brightwaters Butcher Shop  
where I work.

One cool morning he and his wife  
walk to work together  
and when the brown cuff of his shirt  
touches her blue sleeve  
a pattern of color is formed  
that displays their affection for each other  
in a way quite different from my own idea  
of it. I met them once at a bar  
on the bayside of the island  
and we laid down on our backs in the tall,  
wet beach-grass, stayed there for an hour.  
The moon split the waves like  
a ship's beam. The distant  
hum of a small outboard engine  
softened the night like rain.  
When they left I watched my hands  
trace my shadow in sand.

Two gulls pecked at a red circle of earth.

North of Democrat Point

I could see the eye of buoy 12  
open and shut and open and shut again and again  
but the shadow of a boat  
running with its lights down  
crossed in between me and that heartbeat,  
and for a moment I was utterly  
deliciously alone.

## In A Room As Locked As The Heart

In houses gray as barracks  
where death rests by the fire in a shoebox,  
a cheap casket wurd tight like a jaw,  
men and women murmuring dirty words  
embrace in an old oblivion,  
their bare, bone-stolen bodies  
broken by the weight of thought.  
Here night is solace and gift.  
Two teenagers, one boy, one girl,  
hung by the neck from steel wires,  
strung ten feet above the ground,  
sway in light breezes with scarves,  
opal sheets and tapestries of every kind,  
silent and groping for the green earth.  
An old man in a priest's tattered frock  
crosses the street, his face  
marked by the failed expression of his life.  
Bitch and shiv are new words for an old land.  
In a room as locked as the heart  
the nine-year-old son of an alcoholic  
waits for his father to come home.

## Knee Deep In The Wreck Of The Sea

Caught, procrastinate in sleep, he does not develop  
or contain his dream until he is lost  
in the obscure shape and length of its body,  
his forearms full of roses straining  
to hold light, his fingers  
wedged in the shadow and flash of flight.  
Medieval taverns rise, stone by stone,  
into place around the thatch-topped  
huts of the wind, then vast  
amounts of sand seen from the sky  
and cities, in the habits of glass leaning,  
curling up from the earth  
like flowers or wings. He sees  
his mother sweeping the floor of a grey house  
he has never lived in, dust gathering  
in the slow decades  
of her feet. He sees beyond  
the swollen pontoons and shattered columns  
of his life, knee deep in the wreck of the sea,  
east or west of the moon, to where light  
shrouded with aspen and spruce  
trickles on a far-off hill,  
where the image of his father's body  
still clings to the splinters of a tree;  
redwood patios surrounding the place  
of his death. Light in a closet  
at the top of a stairwell comes on,  
and the young man's thoughts climb  
back into their body, fixed and defined  
by its height and the weight  
of its hair. Everything returns to him  
in the particulars of his confusion:  
the dark hangar deck,  
fields like scattered paper flack,  
the bleak, limited shadows of his shoes.

## Film Treatment

It's about this rich kid, naturally,  
whose parents fight.

He's clean and lonely, has large,  
wide eyes, black hair, a pale Italian face.  
He's amazingly good looking. There's the obvious  
reach out and touch someone scene—  
an innocent young German girl most likely  
who puts him off. Then the runaway stuff,  
he gives it up to the old guy who takes him in,  
sucking the bastard's cock for dimes,  
putting it out on the street  
for nickel bags of smack.

There's a scene in a shooting gallery  
in an abandoned building over on Avenue A  
where he jacks it up into his thigh  
his eyelids and lips burning  
a bright blue. In his condition  
there's nothing he won't do.  
We put him back out on the street,  
give him a gun,  
point him towards a hardware store  
and he's off. When he stumbles through the door  
gun in hand, the proprietor  
levels a shotgun at his chest. We dim the lights  
and the audience shrieks. The kid is lost.  
You can hear the shotgun blast, see the mess  
it makes. The audience screams.  
They love it.  
They know.  
We've got them now.

## Margaret

Ten days after the day  
my father straddled the barrel  
of a 55 Chevrolet  
with blue wings  
the house sold  
to a man who drove up in a car  
the exact same year, model and color  
as my father's, only  
with grey interior,  
buckets up front  
instead of the cheaper  
modest, red and tan statement  
my father preferred. My mother kept  
my sister behind her  
and the unspoken knowledge between them  
allowed her the necessary departures  
resulting from his death.  
She spent more time  
in the various apartments  
she had fled to as a child  
and her complacency grew white  
as an unwritten obituary.

(Stanza Break)

Then the whole world changed.  
In a way, it resembled  
the profane and mysterious limericks  
my mother began to sing  
adapting a selection of old American  
Bandstand favorites to the crude poems  
of her failure and her pain.  
The car we travelled in  
travelled through distances of light  
and she found them in the middle  
of her being, where she confused  
the indistinct broadcasts of her heart  
with the radio's bleak dial.  
The only station she had been trained to receive  
was my father's eye  
and now her body was static  
and dead air.

She looked for work  
where she could find it  
and hired who she could find  
to sit with her son as she prayed  
he would escape the umbrella of his father's sin.  
It was not cruel. She feared  
for his life as he reached toward the date  
of his father's death.  
She remembered a wake  
embalmed by light.  
Time after time  
she moved her family to another town.

(Stanza Break)

When she waited tables  
in a small diner off route 25  
the vacuous conversations of her patrons  
reminded her of home.  
The 65 hours a week of work,  
a life burned in her back,  
burned for her children. She gave  
herself up to the coincidence  
that focused her existence  
and knew that it would not lift from her body  
till she died. Near the end  
she waited patiently  
on the impatient lines of people  
wanting death. Now her children  
remember her in their world  
and her name, Margaret, is alive.

## Legion Hall

Tonight the brittle air is laced with smoke  
that comes from houses burning by the lake  
where passive strangers' faces feed the fire  
that brings my daughter's image back to me,  
her body black as rotten wheat, her hair  
scorched stiff. What I recall is this:  
she went out dancing polkas with her friends  
at Legion Hall. They say a quiet drunkard lit  
the fire and barred the doors with garbage cans.  
They heard them screaming from the street.  
They brought the bodies out in stretchers made of sheets.

## Avenue A

At six AM  
the inhabitants of alphabet city droop  
like weeds in the heat  
of their occupations, carpenters  
with faces like brick stash  
empty beer cans  
in the walls of the offices  
they build, return to work.

Always, on mornings like this,  
I wake up, feel sick light  
like heavy armor take  
the eye cold  
to a brown haired woman's  
imperfect body as  
she passes by the thick  
churchyard lawn  
I slept on last night  
like a horse.

To my right a  
graceful black man plies /  
to the applause of cars, and an old  
woman holding an unlit cigarette  
in her left hand shouts  
in a language  
I can understand.

(Stanza Break)

In this light her face explains the mystery  
of speech, her wet hands work  
the pickets of the churchyard fence.  
At the edge of her body the whole world  
is as illegal as a Polish dockworker's  
desire for meat, and my thoughts move  
to the source of illegality, memory  
turns like a sick dog, I am  
accompanied by the odors  
of trombones and the incessant holidays  
of tears engaged in the celebrations  
of specific desires: music, a need  
for bread, physical love. A certain clarity  
covers me like a shawl or a cloud of smoke  
and I recognize that moment of life  
when my heart first opened  
to light in the confused addiction  
of her narration, and I remember why  
it closed, how the world sunk  
into my father's arms like an injection  
of barbiturates, how I was born  
under the sign of his death,  
with the eyes of an addict nodding  
out on the front seat  
of a stolen car.

## It Was How

It was how his heart was white as the field was covered  
with snow, where the peaks of his sleeping were birches  
coated with ice and the strict outlines of his dreams  
were struck and prodded with sticks and he was pinned  
in the shadow of that slow geometry, his body  
splayed like wire, his ears trained for thick ovations  
of ice. It was how he lay with his back on the ground  
eye timed to the passing flack,  
cirrus clouds like steel pins  
steaming in air; how he stood  
in the windows of his body  
naked and smooth in starlight  
where the hot emblems of his anger crossed the sky  
in slick formations of color and sound  
beating like the wings of geese,  
and it was how the alarm of his belly  
spread to his heart,  
how the siren of his illness  
pierced his skull  
and rooted in the contours of his brain,  
how the stubs of his arms tore at his face  
and his tongue flew out of his body  
his words lost in the act of this migration  
abandoned and empty  
as old cars frayed with light,  
as uncalculated and hard  
as trees.



## An Act Of Mourning

The face I knew wasn't yours.  
You met us at the airport every year,  
your hair cut too short to comb,  
your face the face of a man  
that wasn't you, face  
like a chart, face  
surgeons follow when they work,  
the resurrected face of a man  
with freight trains for teeth,  
his steel broken face held together by wire,  
his copper eyes the headlights of a ruined car.  
You met us at the airport every year.  
On nights when white clouds lit the sky  
you stood out drunk on the clack and stagger of stars,  
crooning like a bird at the constellations of spring.  
When storms a hundred miles away  
splintered in the eye like spears of light  
you said it was God's body come  
to reclaim the earth.  
I remember one particular night when you said  
if you had to die you'd rather drown  
in a small pond filled with copper fish.  
You said that you'd even prayed for it,  
prayed for it twice.  
You never got your wish.  
Three years later and two hours after the open casket  
confirmed your death, my third cousin

Mary Ann Raskin, took me out back  
of Wilkerson's Funeral Home  
to a plaster statue of Jesus Christ  
holding a bird bath  
where she took off her shirt  
and taught me the meaning of my body,  
while I, going along with her,  
thought it was some kind of ritual,  
an act of mourning for the dead.

## New World

In this world you are dumb.  
Bird and hoof will beat the air.  
Soon the body's alarm will strike  
with the force of seven heads  
and you will live in fear  
of the one thing you must know:

In the dream you cannot move within  
what comes beast is you.

## Men First Worship Stones

Men first worship stones.  
They do not sleep or wink.  
They do not scream at you.  
They do not rush around  
making fools of themselves.

If you pick them up they will not bleed  
or sweat all over you.  
They will not smell bad.  
They will not eat you.

If you watch for them  
they will disguise themselves.  
They are always there,  
one part earth, another sky;  
the thrill and color of motion  
close to the heart.

What a wonder to be so small,  
so young,  
to fit in the pocket of a child....

They do not dream.  
Not one jumps up or cheers.  
If you find them a thousand feet tall  
they will not challenge you to a foot race.  
They do not hate or punish anyone.  
They are atheists. They do not worship  
even themselves.

## Poem

When girls with green hair pray on the dormitory steps  
of all male universities,

when the holidays that prescribe for the dead  
celebrate the year round,

when the room filled crisp with light  
enters the asylum's eye,

the world will live out  
the end of its opulence,

we will sift through the bone of our forebearers  
like cannibals searching the acrid earth for word.

C Sharp  
for Captain Vere

Christ came kicking horses in my dream by the sea,  
where the charred ruins of a farm, steep with light,  
smoldered on the bleak hill, burnt spars  
scattered like trees, clouds slit open  
like Christ's eyes watching the innocent sleep,  
searching the homes in the valley below for signs of life,  
his body, full-figured, unscarred,  
rising through smoke like a flame.

## Easter

Out back Missus  
Riley, unconfused, plants  
peas in the rain, slips a finger  
into the earth's rich umbilicus.

A metal milk box rests  
on the steps behind her.  
Glad bags of grass  
cut under the nail-star  
sit in the street like squat hats.

She calls the night-sky tree,  
the stars fruit the souls  
of sleeping children,  
says she can see  
what lives and gives life  
best at night.

She spends her hours  
counting the years it takes  
to file each thought  
in the safe place of her heart,  
watches the wild grape  
turn to seed, waits  
before she plants  
for the wind that signals rain.

## Portrait Of A Man With A Stone

Inside the stone  
there are fruit, almonds,  
and rhubarb. A woman sips  
burgundy from a light blue  
egg shell. Her hummingbird eyes  
are green; flutter in tight circles  
around the purple room.  
Her hands and feet are tiny  
and breathe slowly. Her lips  
are white. She is pressing  
her hands together  
and look! How silver she sits!  
How sure!

## Riddle

Who falls  
and makes no sound  
when she lands? What mad wolf  
will rush headfirst for her throat  
of air?

Who walks  
offshore at night?  
What innumerable  
blue eyes open as she shuffles  
away?

Who drifts  
on the ridges  
of water on this earth?  
What could I ever hope for  
more than you?

## Ceremony

"During trance the Tungus  
 shamaness is believed  
 to understand the language  
 of all nature." - Mircea Eliade

On the first night she asks for jaguar and bat  
 and rubs her body with gum and the blood of a goat  
 killed by her own hand.

On the second night she asks for the bones  
 of sacrificed animals wrapped in straw  
 for a bell  
 horsesticks silk wine  
 red and yellow ribbons  
 blue and white ribbons  
 wooden cups  
 tea

On the third night  
 she asks for a horse and a bull and a knife  
 a striped or colored stone blue-spotted night  
 mist the blue sky east west  
 she throws the pieces of her heart  
 into fire and air.

She asks for a branch to hold a bird  
 in the middle of the sky

for the hide of a horse  
 for leaves  
 for hair

for the chain of arrows leading to the center of the world  
 where she finds them all.

## The Insistent Patterns Of Imperatives

The woman I'm talking to you about  
is here, sitting  
in the kitchen and smoking  
a cigarette with a filter  
papered in bright gold.  
In the living room  
the radio's on,  
the dark green  
backdrop of an oiled  
parasol gracefully decorated  
with bridges and porcelain birds  
casts green shadows onto the floor;  
stolen traffic signs arranged  
in the insistent patterns of imperatives  
flicker and grow dull. You should know  
that three days have passed  
since her father's death, the hardroot  
lodged in the throat  
of her mother's voice,  
and two nights have held her since  
instead of me. The piece  
of glass that plunges into the heart  
leaves a trail of light her eyes  
can sometimes stare at for hours.  
When the phone rings on the morning  
of the fourth day and the voice  
on the other end  
is as exhausted as her own

the shape that coils inside  
on the back of her skull  
turns white hot and attends her  
like wire....  
she can feel the terror  
of two worlds working her body  
into the horrible beauty  
of a moment she can never share.  
Now the days and nights will feed  
at her breasts and she will  
suckle them as if  
they were her own.

## Poem To A Future Wife

When I think of you  
looming like the low rafters of a church—  
halos haunt me,  
the light blue introductions  
of your feet.

## In This Vision

In this vision  
she is so beautiful  
if she raised an arm,  
an eyebrow light and bristled as fur,  
the dark hallways of appliances  
would start to roar, airport escalators  
crowded with women in pantsuits  
would break out in cheer,  
their small American flags fluttering  
like flyswatters or paper fans.  
We make love by a puzzle of the sea  
glued to her bedroom wall.  
When her pale, silk nightgown  
opens, shedding light  
like a new moon, her breasts,  
naked as eyes aroused from sleep,  
alert with desire triggered in dream,  
cast soft shadows onto my hips. Years pass.  
In the end of the story  
we live silent, awed,  
blinded by the barricades of light  
our bodies make as we age.

## Poem To A Girl Named Laura

You carry the calm within you:  
light wind crossing white cliffs;  
here where the aspen's swollen clatter stands,  
startled flocks of roses on your lips.

## Lucy In Blue

She lives in the tax free penthouse apartment  
of an international corporation  
where the photographic profiles of ambitious men  
in gray and red smoking jackets seem to wait  
for memorandums to come out  
of a hero's name. The mahogany  
paw of a reupholstered chair  
that has been in someone's family for generations  
claws at the floor, the sleek  
humming of an updated computer  
circles, chalk white in air,  
like a bird. At night  
she rises through the unbroken  
machinery of sleep to walk  
eighth avenue, her body like milk  
in the midtown light, her fists  
balled up like frozen poinsettias  
abandoned on the front steps  
of low rent apartments in the Bronx.  
After six drinks in a sleazy bar  
her misplaced heart beats  
in the ashes of a shop  
that has burned down, her face perforates  
with sweat, her eyes glow  
like the insistent embers of a whore's  
incorporated hair, and her runaway body,  
taking its first turn of the night with a man  
who cocks the dawn on his wrist,  
makes the world loud.

### The Anger Of Insects

Long after the hours of searching are done,  
lost in the opaque precision of her limbs,  
he hears the anger of insects pitch  
in the hollow center of her bone.

With one flash of his arm he could shatter her world  
but it would not heal him.  
There is a crack in his skull that rain will not fill.

He wanders the acres of her body like an incision,  
spends his life in the doorlight that uncurls before him  
like the dark blue procession of a chain.

## The Inquisition

What are you doing there now  
How did you get those  
Those are my arms, my shoulders  
That's my backbone, my teeth, my fingernails, my hair  
Do you want them  
Will you take them too?

Whatever it is that you are saying, please stop.  
Whatever it is that you are humming in your chair  
As you stare at me, please stop  
It makes you mad  
It is making you crazy inside.  
If I give you my back, my hair  
My fingernails, my shoulders, my arms, my teeth  
What will I do, tell me  
What will I do?

## South Of The Brain

This is where the bones of a woman  
who has left you  
can be sung  
in octaves that reach  
for the prehistoric shadow  
of your face.

This is where the crow sings,  
if you could call it song,  
perched in the leafless crown  
of a white birch  
scarred by fire.

This is where a bird's  
adoration of sky,  
its access to the heart of flight,  
defines the world—

the moment  
when the parasite in the horse's throat  
begins to breed,  
flesh where the worm drills  
straight for the heart.

Poem  
for Laura

Her letters came so  
surprisingly  
soon I held her  
there among  
the white sheets  
the unruly  
written word we  
had shared only  
for a few hours  
once at Marshall  
Field in an  
illegal  
embrace we  
never felt  
we had cheated  
anyone  
but ourselves  
waiting so  
long alone  
and I also  
remembering  
well how she fit  
beside me  
and how I  
noticed her  
eyes were meek  
anemones but  
unlike the fish  
the light did swim  
in and was  
entertained.

## Little Pile Of Cocaine, So Pure

A couple of years ago I met this little blonde girl  
with blue eyes and blue eyeliner  
in a small tavern over on sixth street.  
She wore bluejeans and a blue shirt and white  
boat sneakers with a blue stripe that encircled each foot  
like a water mark. We drove back to my sister's house in her car  
and when we got there she poured out  
a little pile of cocaine so pure  
the tiny rocks sparkled like hot blue stars  
that fit in the hand. Then she kissed me  
and said she wanted to make love right then and there  
and so we did  
and we made a sweet job of it.  
I went inside to get a blue pen  
and I brought my television back out with me  
and put it in the back of her car.  
I don't know why.  
I said I would call  
but I never did.  
I still carry the number around in a cigar box I painted blue  
three days after my father died.

## A Gift Without Landscapes

Once, when you looked up at the moon from the black  
thimble shaped butte we slept on  
you said it looked like a nutshell or a warm seed  
planted in air, that if you could swallow it  
it would blossom inside of you like a city  
or a small explosion in the heart.  
You said the whole world was as quiet  
as the eyes of an old woman  
waiting to die, that what you could hold  
close to your face with either hand  
was as gentle as the beast our bodies formed  
when we kissed, soft as water or air.  
When the moon fell we counted each breath  
following the sky down, and you called  
on all light's madness inside us to dance.  
Fast shadows plunged into the earth.  
Small colors covered the new ground.  
The gift you gave without landscapes  
fit in my eye like a star.

## 5 Years After The War: 6 Metaphors In Search Of Desire

When I passed windows an irresistable  
urge compelled me  
to enter them.  
I lunged at women smoking  
in the pale yellow  
booths of hotel bars. I sat  
on benches and the various lengths  
of cigarettes. Naked statues  
scattered in the park concertedly  
confused me.  
I felt sick.

It took five years  
to forget -  
and that's a lie.  
On free weekends I inhabited  
the chairs of beauty parlors  
and made lists of all the magazines.  
I looked for myself  
in the fantasies of couples  
who wandered aisles packed  
with underwear and lace. At night  
I counted diamonds formed  
by the store front's steel grills  
and multiplied them by a woman's hands.

This is the truth.  
What I've come to know  
now, alone,  
is one image flexed  
in glass, and the other  
beyond it: the condition of windows,  
the terrified conversations that continue  
isolated in the heart.

## What Silence Follows

Perhaps a storefront, a green awning  
or the BMW parked in front of you,  
perhaps the recurring silhouette of your face  
or what silence follows gracefully,  
maybe a Dodge Dart driven by a woman in a hair net,  
a man with a heart condition,  
a guy with nothing to lose,  
perhaps this is what moves me,  
maybe the wind pulls at the earth's muddy root,  
maybe a young girl rakes her front lawn clear of leaves,  
maybe starlight falls on our unacustomed ears  
like slow bits of applause,  
maybe my heart fills with people who cannot speak  
and the first word lost in that strange place is you.

## Love Poem: Arizona: 1974

We cut poles in a burn on the southern slope of a butte  
rising out of the trees like a bruised thumb,  
the basalt tower's blade gleaming purple and black where light  
and the sound of our voices made it smooth,  
rainwater running over the cool stone.  
You found a rock and said it was made  
out of a woman's tears  
and when you held it up to the sun  
I could see herds of blue horses  
saddled with clouds  
their yellow hooves like light.  
We bought a small plot  
of land at six thousand feet  
putting a house up  
where the whole earth spun  
and we crawled into our skin  
watching the world rise.  
Stars crossing the sky's palm  
whittled two red stones  
out of our hearts.  
Wind trotted the ridgeline  
into our eyes.  
On the southern slope  
trees stood like spears thrust  
in ash. We held  
the flame of our bodies  
in our hands.