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THE DOUBLED EYE

by

Emily Ransdell

B.A. Indiana University 1977

presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1982

approved by *Richard H. O*
Chairman, Board of Examiners
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Dean, Graduate School
date 6-29-82

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I would like to thank the editors of the following magazines where these poems first appeared.

CUTBANK

NAZUNAH

POETRY NORTHWEST

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ENTERING THE OLD BODY

Each time he enters
the old body it is like this.
Fifteen years old again, doubled
over, he peels back another layer
of grief. Blood lunges through
his temples and he slinks away
from the house, the lit windows
that claw across the lawn to snag
him back. He thinks my father
is dead but the dry vomit
inside him will not come.

I watch three beads of sweat
roll from his hairline
but there is no reason
to dab them away. He is not in
that body, Nightmares have
claimed it like a flood.

Each time he enters the old body
I let him go. A law
is written on the air:
it will be lonely and take
more than years.

THE DOUBLED EYE

On the lake, your boat's metal oars
flash like two mirrors held to the sun,
two mirrors in which the eye can find
no origin or end. It stared into the furthest
image and still sees itself squinting back.

Your father stands to cast a red and yellow
lure. The lake smoothes and the clear
gaze of his reflection meets yours. You look
toward the shoreline to point yourself away.

Everything else leans in, the sapling
limbs at the edge, the perfect curve
of the loon. It plunges into the water,
into the scarlet circle of iris that whispers
to you come here.

On water, all messages steady and clear.
Both of your faces slump toward the horizon,
which is closer than you like it, and rings
back the dull ripple of waves nudging the bow.

Except for the scenery this could be
long ago, when your father was ill and you stayed
at the lake the whole summer because he needed
rest. Your mother moved through the cabin
like a snake and all you remember her saying
was hush. Each day you sat in a rowboat
praying to the red bobber: sink.

Now your father draws deep on the green aroma

of cottonwood and fir. Whether or not
there is anything to say to him, you know
this one thing is true. The dark spaces
are swirling closed beneath you. Fish
are rising toward the glint of your lures.

AFTER THE WINTER, ITS GRAY ODOR

Here is the first crocus
opening miles away in your yard,
here is the wind that ripples over it.
Everything else is waiting,
the dill and lovage, the first
shoots of tansy beneath the ground.
After the winter, its gray odor
of sickness, I want to snip them
for pudding and a tonic of boiled tea.

But nothing happens.
The roots of groomed shrubs
are silent. What color
were their berries and leaves?

From here, your sons
moved outward, toward the world
and you could not coax them back.
You planted hundreds of bulbs
that autumn, mapped each spot
like a buried treasure on a board
nailed above the sink. In the center
you put a sundial whose shadow never moves.

Tonight when I saw you, the stillness
was different, not the work of drugs
nor the routine of dusk, nurses
on their hushed round to close
the windows and lower the shades.
It was the crocus and the sundial,
the calm horizon from which snow
has finally been charmed away.

How extraordinary

that you are dying,
that the earth turns back
to its flowers and trees.
I walk through your garden among
the painted signs: fennel, anise,
sweet cicely. Each marks the spot
where an herb will be.

WINTER PERSPECTIVE

We have eaten another meal
and I dry the dishes
with a yellow towel. I dry
slowly and with great
care. I turn an old bowl
in my hands as though it was new
or strange.

Nothing is beautiful,
no cardinals to skitter for breadcrumbs,
no children in bright hats to pass
the window on sleds. When this stops
we will find frozen mice
in the oat bins.

The quiet of winter clamps
down like a glass dome, as though
all this sat on a desk somewhere,
a paperweight some child turns
and turns so it always snows.

He sees it only from the outside:
white snow on the roof
of a red house.
Inside, there is never
any sound.

ANNIVERSARY

You come down, not
with a bunch of mountain
crocus in your hand, but with their live
memory held out to me like a gift,
the velvet of their petals still caught
between your finger and thumb.

Such a small gesture, your hand curled
to hold the air as it had held the crocus,
telling me unbelievably soft. But it was
not always that way. Once we needed words
to say a thing like that.

I have saved a picture of us
in which we have words for everything.
Blue suit, white dress, this
we thought, will say it all.

But we had not learned the danger
of language, that precipice glinting
in the light between your body and mine.
Do we open our arms in the morning
or let them drop limp at our sides? When
do we stop and listen for the voice
just under the temples, the one that
sometimes cries touch me, other
times stay away.

BLIZZARD

I cannot find a point
to focus on.

The horizon has lost its edge,
the river has dulled.

Its bottom is gone and the movements
of fish have disappeared.

Snow bends me like a branch. It turns
under my eyelids like ground glass,
glass between my teeth, your voice
at the back of my skull chiseling

the words you have been gone

a long time. I tilt my throat open
but what comes out is the single
howl you cannot hear from a safe
warm house, from marriage's deaf tongue
and thighs.

FINDING OUR WAY

As though they were exquisite
chocolates or rare lilies, you offer me
dresses; organdy, crepe de chine
and voile. You take me to a room
tiled with mirrors and light where the edge
of my vision reels. This is the dream
I want over and over, the shimmer
of silken bodies, this perfume
of color and sway.

Awake, I stare at the ceiling
and catalog our necessities:
the cupboard of pears and tomatoes,
the seeds, the kettle of bones.
Beside me, you go on sleeping,
your face plain, your mouth slack.
What is the difference between faith
and survival anyway? Sleep
is the fork in the river,
the split path, the blind guess
that gets us home.

MOTHER'S DAY POEM

In the myth
of our family you
were always grateful,
as though I had appeared
on your doorstep like a gift
wrapped in pink foil.

But tonight, out of the dark
theater where I watched a film
on the lives of rare
birds, the real moment
lifted its graceful
and long-neglected eye.
I heard a child's voice,
thrilled, triumphant with wonder.
To the swooping image
of a condor on the screen,
she cried birdie! birdie!

Something I had not yet named
beat in my body. It spun
back like a magnet, back inside
where I slept against the murmur
of your body, the hum
of your flesh. You stood
under the heavy limbs of a tree.
When you reached, both our
hearts leaped: peach.

Then there were other words:
cool as you let

your awkward body down
into the bathwater that
hot day; good when my father
rubbed loose the fear
lodged in the firey spokes
of your back. Yes to the clear
vibration of your voice as you
held your throat open past
the muggy night and sang.

PATTI

This was no made-up story
or pretend, Patti had brothers, had seen
their front-sides naked. Among us
she was always the one who whispered
this is what they do.

Late sun shot through my room
like a spotlight onto her bare
chest as she showed me
how to turn the flat buttons
of my nipples hard. Hers were copper
colored, like two pasted-on pennies.

She had snuck over to my house
with her brother's records and a ratty
Playboy she found strapped
to his bedsprings. From him
she had learned forbidden words
and all he asked in return
was to watch her touch herself.

When she said that two whole fingers
would fit inside, I felt
my heart lurch up to choke me.
Patti was one year
older and the rest of my life hung
on each word she said.

THE DISPOSAL OF DOLLS

At a clearing made by fishermen
on a still lake, someone has left a circle
of fire-blackened stones.
They are faceless and calm
and might have been here a long time.
They never let on.

No grown-ups are here yet. It is still
winter though birds have been fooled
and sing as though it is spring.
Children hear them and come.

They bring us, yellow-haired and broken,
dangly and crack-jawed under their arms.
They are bored with our flaccid bodies,
with the constant need to put sticks
in our backs to prop us up.
When we slump, they think we are dead.

By the cartload they bring us,
dumped and bent, no respect
for our taffeta dresses, our sailor suits
and safari shirts. To children
we are all the same.

When they have gone it is wonderfully
silent. Finally we hear beargrass
and starweed breathe.
We are happy.
All light converges through a pinhole
in one glass eye. The first head
blackens and smokes.

ROCKING MICHAEL TO SLEEP

As if loosening that brace
could relax you, or stroking
the fine blond hairs on your folded
leg, I hold you and we rock.
But your body coils away
from sleep's heartbeat, it shrieks
and jerks. The live wire in that
bad leg connects. I try pretending
you are my own son, offering the ease
of love to your ear. But love is a small
bone lodged sideways in my throat
as you pee through your trouser leg
and mine. Michael, this is my last
try. Let sleep in. I promise
only the good animals will find you,
only monkeys and bright birds.
I swear they won't hurt you. They'll
head straight under your breastbone
and quiet all the ghosts there.
They'll beat all the enemies away.

BROTHER IS SICK: THE VOICE OF SOOSIE

Mother is quiet, her head
bent to him. He stirs
and turns from her breast.
She wedges his lips apart with a rubber
nipple he lets drop to the floor.
He opens his mouth to one
cry, shrill then dull, sweeping
up the walls like the odor of fish.
It slices through the roof and is
frozen forever on the air.

Mother looks at me
and the meadow is green:
she sees the flashing bellies
of birds in her eyes. She dreams
of cotton for a thin skirt,
red, and cut wide to bloom
like a Christmas Rose when I twirl.

I dream too.
Of a blouse open at my throat,
of snow creeping back up the mountain
to sleep at the snowmaker's door.
Mother says the ice will get smaller
and smaller. It will be like watching
a boat head slowly away.

JAMES GETS LOST

Out in the middle of nowhere
a man is running. He is happy
pushing up the steady grade. When he reaches
our car he grins. He looks at us
through the green tinted glass
and in his eyes is the trust
of a small animal, the pride
of a good boy. He doesn't know
he is heading into darkness,
that it will shove at his lungs
and bang like a fist at the back
of his throat. Over and over
his mouth shapes its only word
like an urgent story: James.

I cannot tell him that this
is what lost is,
that no matter where
he is going, he will be
right here. Because we speak
two separate languages it is safe
to say come home. It is almost
dark. You will grow tired
and the forest's belly will soon
whisper sleep. But listen,
it is dangerous to sleep. The forest
is full of axmen in the shapes of trees.

AFTER ASHLEY'S BIRTH

For a time I thought
how ugly it must be, like the color
pictures I kept looking at
in Life Magazine: the huge bulb
of forehead, sockets and openings
half-formed.

Then, I stopped looking
at pictures. I brought in a switch
of forsythea and coaxed it into bloom.
That long month, the size of my body
unreal, I moved in a small circle
around house and husband, around
the yellow bloom.

Everything is different now.
Split open. The sharpened edge
of details beating the air.
We moved for so long in the same body,
same skin, same hands and shoes.
Now my heartbeats have lost rhythm,
each one falls away and lopes
into my belly alone.

This is how the body works, heart
and lung, heavy like lead sinkers on a line.
The line drifts aimlessly, past color
and light, past the secret crevice
where pearls lodge and grow.
It catches along the ridge
of the backbone and holds.

FIFTY-FOUR PIES

My neighbor pulls his slow
body uptown each day
just to stand among his knot
of friends. They look at
cars and women, at the electronic
time and temperature sign.
When he sees his reflection,
one-armed, in the plate glass,
it isn't him. But what if it is?
He can still light a cigarette in the wind.

His wife stays home.
She looks at recipes and pictures
of dishes rimmed with curled-up
parsley, slices of orange tucked alongside.
When the Molly caved, she baked
54 pies, one for each man's wife.
When she was done, the sweltering heat
broke open inside her, she sat down
in her kitchen at ate the last one alone.

Sometimes she misses the feel
of those days, the buzz of the copper
mines stretching miles beneath
the streets, the flattened cries
of shift whistles that turned each day.
She misses the wives, even the fear
that sucked them together when the disaster
horn blew, closing in like a boulder
no one could blast away.
But her husband comes home every
night now. They eat their supper
and play the T.V. and with his one hand
he rubs her back.

When she gets sleepy,
she prays for safety, not his anymore,
but other people's: the pope, who was
shot at, or the president,
or the bloat-tummied colored babies
she sees in ads.

Then she asks him to undo the chain
at her neck. Its one gem
is copper, an orange jewel sealed
in glass. All the wives had them,
for luck. He flips open the clasp,
lets it slide down her chest
and into her hand.

SUMMER'S LURE

In the throb of August,
the throb of a house asleep,
something woke me as I tossed
in my damp nightdress, something
called from the garden, get up.

So hot. Even in the dark
bees worked, single-minded, heading
for the lip of each open bloom.
I called what are you?
Bees kept rubbing through the ferny
leaves and blue petals, heat
beat up from the grasses and weeds.

From the darkness, I heard the grunt
of a man splitting pin oak,
the hard ring of his ax. Air rustled
from the stump he rested on, rippled
from the vacant space of his body like grain
in a storm. Who are you?

The heat answered come sit here
beside me. I'm tired. I sat down
beside the chopping log, smoothing chips
into the shapes of bread and cake.
My hands came away sweet
with the good perfume of wood.
I heard a nuthatch clatter high
above me and held my breath.

A breeze nudged the tomato vines.
It was the odor of sticks and dry hay,
the first tinge of red in leaves.

I leaned toward the space
beside me. It said lucky girl.
Go on, go on.

A MESSAGE FOR RITA COOK

I waited for my turn
at the telephone game,
for the moment when Rita Cook's
breath would slide like a nugget
of jade down my neck.
The table shimmering, bright
candies and punch, the trees
hung with red balloons. Each breath
I took whirled in my head like
the girls in their pretty skirts.

At the end of the game,
the mixed-up message announced,
Rita Cook's laughter changed
the air. She clutched herself
through her organdy dress, crying
how funny, o how funny.

No children, I cannot stand
the quiet in my yard. I go inside
to whisper through my house as though
to an imaginary friend. I remember
when Rita Cook's father would finish
the church service and come play
Drop the Hanky in his preaching robe. He
galloped around us, the handkerchief
like a hot potatoe in his hand. He was
a huge bird flapping his black, black wings.

Then he caught her, swept her up
in that great magician's cape: poof!
Rita Cook was gone.

Tonight, not a flutter of air.
I sit on the back step where the memory
of a long-dead woman shells peas
and snaps beans. The weight of her
heart drums on the touch-me-nots
like hard rain.

This is my house now, I tell her,
go away. Go to the place
where Rita Cook is. Whisper
this message in her ear.

AT THE LIVING MUSEUM

An ancient princess, her skeleton
 slung with gold beads, a single ruby
 to close her third eye. For the next
 life, flutes and spoons.

I enter a room where boys sit
 at a low table scratching stones
 with miniature tools. They chip and chip
 but no shell appears, no print
 of a delicate leaf. I move
 on through the museum and all
 the doorways squeeze down on me,
 all the glass and iron grates ~~hiss~~ do not touch.

Blood ticks through my legs
 like a metronome and I remember one moment
 as a girl. It was dark and cool and the open
 eye of stars pinned me flat to the sand.
 I was trapped, my father and mother kept calling
 but the wind carried all our cries the wrong way.

I walk past a case of stone fish eyes, centuries old,
 and the clay bowl a fisherman's wife would drop
 one in each morning ~~until the boat returned~~.
 One day my worst fear will really happen,
 I will stay out in a beach too long, or in snow
 or awful wind. Father and mother will find me
 but too late; I will be propped against a log
 like a dry gourd. They will braid me together
 with gold threads.

Father, mother, it is true that I will die. But you,
 you will move on to another shape. Perhaps
 stone fish eyes like these. They say a painted
 fish eye calms any hand that holds it, looks up

from any bowl or palm to say everything
will soon be fine.

STORIES

From the cold woodshop where we had run
for safety, I watched the hillside
glow orange from flames. The babies
played with shavings on the floor.
My mouth said don't eat that, while
in the distance our house burned.

In this country where wheat hisses in the fields
everything holds its breath and waits.
William McCoulough, slammed off his tractor
by a treelimb, fell into the bush hog blades.
The women swooped down over William's family
like kind white doves. Now they open
their good wings for us.

They clean us and feed us, bed us
down in a warm place away from the rubble
and the smell. I lay my head on someone's
old pillow. Rose sachet. Fragrance
of cedar. I close my eyes
to the flames and see a silver
thimble, my best cup. I keep thinking
of foolish things, The lemon geranium,
all that sheet music.

Put this story along with William McCoulough, along
with the calf's neck wrenched by a cyclone through
the crook of a tree. Put this along with the whispered
list of things found at harvest: hair and bones
and scraps of a red shirt rotting.
Be sure to say how fast the flames lurched
across the roof.

In the next bedroom, a woman reads
to my daughters. It is not me,

though it scarcely matters. I have my own
story. To the simple darkness here, I say:

See the hedgerows and the furrows
and the deep squares of green.
At the center of each is a tidy barnlot
and a white house. And in each white house
is a bed. That's where we are.
Blackbirds watch while we sleep. When they fly,
no one is there to see the brief
red of their wings.