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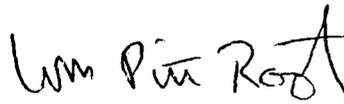
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EMPTYING THE LANDSCAPE

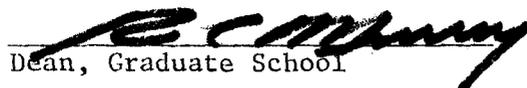
By Leslie Burgess

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
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Approved by:



William Pitt Root, Chairman
Examining Committee



Dean, Graduate School

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Notes to the Suburb from the Combat Zone

This is the war you never prepared for.
It rages beneath your manicured lawn.
You close your ears to its silent rumble
as if it were snow lighting on branches
outside your window, lit by the blue dusk.
It blankets everything with muted precision
while you look outward for enemies, listen
for jets and sirens, raise your son
with plastic soldiers and pistols
just right for his child-sized grip.
Your daughter you raise to wait, look
worried while she knits socks working
white snowflakes against the navy blue wool.

While you sleep, your house, its cold porcelain
perfectly white, will lull you with a blank stare.
Your son will still be waiting close to a jet. Ah,
but it will be your daughter who's been called
to battle. She'll have heard a hoarse voice,
followed the rough arm beckoning through a tunnel
in the snow where you planned to plant lilacs in spring.

In the Combat Zone she will fend for herself.
In this war there will be no hills and the sky
will disappear. The sides will not be clearly
defined. Blue steel and silk against bare flesh
will be her enemies here, her medals
for courageous combat, cold cash and heartbeat.

Your daughter will be a good soldier.
Champion of versatility, master of language,
she'll speak lawyer, gangster, street, and whore.
Her body, tuned to perfect pitch, taut as a bow string,
will repel any danger, and her eyes let nobody in.

This war will not be won or lost;
there are no sides. She will tire
of fighting against herself. She will cease
to see herself as all snake and hiss
and become a voice like a bridge.
This bridge will always be standing,
a place where everything can clearly be seen.

SECTION I

THE PROSTITUTE'S NOTEBOOK

Edges

This book is smooth,
the leather soft, cool.
I want to brush it
on my cheek. Its crisp
pages, gilded edges,
cut my fingertips
as I read on, the turning
of the pages part of the reading.
I turn them slowly
and sometimes even go back,
turn the same page twice
to make sure I've gotten
the full effect of every page.
Greedy, now
I use my tongue,
feel the edges
slicing in neatly,
taste the blood, the gold,
the soft brushed leather.

The Prostitute's Notebook

1. Learning the Language

Like the turning of things
I pass into the language
of this place as if led
here, my lips rounder,
a darker red, my voice
the full range of water.
I drip words as if I'm
the source of a hot spring
staining the rock
with my constant murmur.
I say *french or fuck*
becoming steam
over a trapped pool.

Or, I'm the glazed
lake of the desert
shimmering words
to you, *come here,*
come, until you fall
into me hearing
my harsh sandy laugh
trick, trick.

You see, it's all a matter
of timbre. These words
can roar like a river
crashing through its dug
bed screaming *mother*
fucker, spreading you
flat. Or, they can
stretch out prone
as an iced over lake
giving you your face back
perfect as it seems.

2. Thoughts While Fucking

I know. This makes you
nervous. But, you get
what you pay for.
It's like anything else -
you get out of it what
you put into it.
So, your body, like sandbags
dumped in some useless
place, suddenly comes
alive in hot metal
regularity, humming
and steaming. You make me
into whoever you wish.
Well, I leave you
my body, leave you
to your measured rhythms,
your private explosions.

This is not bitterness.
It's like the light
passing of wrist against
wrist, cloud over moon,
hand over eyes.
Some say I'm the vessel
for man's hate against
woman. I say I'm the vessel
for the sound of ocean
and wind but you
will never hold me
to your ear. Like the conch,
I'll lie unbroken on sand
long after you have paid
your fee, and gone.

3. Returning Your Compliments

Here is your brass bed,
the blue satin sheets.
The mattress I keep
for services rendered.
Workmen have boxed
the china, t.v.
and stereo.
You may pick them up
in the lobby.

I'll deliver your jewelry
personally wearing
the coyote you bought
for my birthday.
I've stitched little pockets
inside. Each piece
nestles between satin
and fur. I'll even tell you
where I've tucked what.
The gold spoon's inside
the right cuff and the 18 carat
dog bone, the left. The bracelet
of opals fits fine
in the waist and the rings
will line the neck.
It's the necklace you want most,
its intricate gold chain you loved
to slide over your teeth,
the little heart of diamonds
and rubies that rested
in the hollow of my neck.
Each link of chain, each stone,
each setting, lies somewhere
alone inside this coat.
These you must find.
I'll leave you sitting
on the sidewalk snipping
at my coat, your head bent,
your eyes straining
for a glimmer in the deep
grey fur. You'll never
know I've gone.

4. Black Carol, Singing

Ya'll called her
that funky black bitch.
I said it too.
Loud, slamming
my glass of VO& water
hard on the bar. I
called her crazy.
The night they took
her away we watched
from the window.
Carol, jumping from car
to car. From the hood
of a chevy to some pimp's
lime green Lincoln. That
mothafucka gonna be one
mad nigga, we said.
Carol kept singing
some bod y tole me
to de liv a this message,
her voice an arrow,
her smile a din in her face
that stayed up when she
was down. I watched her
bouncing leaving her smile
in the air like prisms
flash light on a wall.
She ripped her white blouse off
her black breasts dancing out
in the night and I remembered
her another night unbuttoning
it slow for the rich trick,
her smile toward me
as I did the same.

Three Snapshots of the Combat Zone,
Boston's Adult Entertainment Center

1. In Tasty's

In Tasty's Dino serves pasta.
Tonight, ziti's the fare. Four men
at the counter dip into their bowls
with fingers and bread; their elbows
on the formica countertop touch.
Dino's attention is in the back
of the cafe, at the tables. He writes
home to his brother in Brindisi
about the girls that come here,
how he gives them salad and bread,
makes jokes about their white
breasts. On a good night he slips
into the Pussycat next door for a beer
or whiskey. He watches Adele,
his favorite girl, dance; she grips
a lit cigarette with her pussy
to end her act. Her breasts
are the thick color of cream.
He thinks of his own wife
at home with his mother. Her breasts
are brown and taste like warm olives
and sun. She is a good wife.

2. Shopper's Garage

The shoppers who park here
love the grimy walls, low
ceilings, the ramps so narrow
they have to back their cars twice
before clearing the curve.
Stan, in his yellow Lincoln,
pulls into his spot between
two square block pillars
on the fifth level.
His car door snaps and echoes
like the ricocheting
of a bullet and he slips
behind the closest pillar
his hand sliding beneath
his beige linen sportcoat
for his piece. He laughs
at himself, begins his descent
down the ramp, walking in slow
deliberate steps, as softly
as possible in the echoing
chambers. No one hears him
but on the fourth level
he hears uneven breathing
and a sound like waves
lapping at sand. He feels
his prick harden and
rubs himself, the diamond
on his hand flashing faintly
in the stale light. On the third
level, all's dead quiet and
he moves along, straightens
his trousers shifting his weight.
He rounds the corner on level two,
glimpses a girl slipping from the seat
of a red cadillac, the black glint
of her boyfriend's face extinguishing
as the door closes. She jaunts down
to street level, not noticing him
and he follows after. Behind him
the key turns in the cadillac
making it pulse with the beat of bass
from the radio. Stan edges past
the gate of the garage nodding to Henry,
the keeper, and moves out to the street,
to do his shopping.

3. Those Men Who Name Themselves

They swoop in and out of King of Pizza
as if it were a feeder, they a flock
of evening grosbeaks. They knock
it to and fro in the winter air
their gold and black feathers
flashing and seed hulls flying
everywhere. Their beaks are honed
and polished like black patent leather
shoes, toes pointed, heels like needles.

Speed and Easy work as a team, Speed
talking and preening, his shoulders
twitching with every word
while Easy slides his smooth
hand inside a pocket or purse.
Delicious and Seldom-Seen
lean against a post outside
talking to one another
not hearing, watching the ladies.

Big Daddy and Sugar vie
for top of the pecking order,
keep their females following
low to the ground, waiting
for dropped seed. They swell
their chests, their bravado
of gold against the white snow,
their shrill songs,
keeps them alive.

Addressing the Pimp

1. Where I Thought You Lived

The first suburb, in a tall grey house
 set aside from the others slightly.
 Six rooms on the second floor.
 Off a long corridor where
 bare light bulbs point
 dim shining heads down
 toward a wine-stained carpet.

One o'clock.
 Six women march down the hall,
 each to her own room.
 All wear long white nightgowns,
 carry candles on silver trays.
 Their feet, bare,
 make sound disappear.

One-fifteen.
 You follow, enter each room,
 tuck each woman in, kneel
 briefly at each bedside,
 your head bowed
 as if you were waiting.

This is an old house.
 All the beds are of mahogany,
 built into the walls.
 When you enter each room
 a pale arm appears as the woman
 leans from her bed, touches
 your breast pocket and blows
 her candle out.

When all six doors are closed
 and there is no candle light,
 you sit on the hallway floor
 counting your fingers.
 Then rise, pace the corridor
 several times rubbing
 your chin and finally
 choose the door that opens
 to your good night's sleep.

2. Your Name

You would lean, arms
across chest, lids
half closed, and draw
out the one syllable,
then cut it off abruptly,
your voice a tree bending
in the wind then snapping up.

You would change it
back and forth.
Some days you were
Torch, others
Price.

Torch filled the sky
so that I had to make
contraptions to see
you at all.
You eclipse of the sun.
First, it was just
your eyes, then
it was your entire
body gleaming black,
burning from the edges.

Later on you came to prefer
Price. Your voice,
a slide of rocks
into canyon,
hit hard on the floor,
an abrupt echo
rounding into soft slaps
of sun on rock, saying
Price, Price. I'm my mama's.
Be mine, bdy, be mine.

3. Your Woman's Story

She has recurring dreams. In this one,
she's on a boardwalk in the snow.
Everyone wears a bathing suit and sandals.
The white heat hurts her eyes and
she can't find any sunglasses.
There are six miles of carnival tents,
narrow and tightly crowded that she
must enter and leave before she can go.

Everytime someone passes close
he whispers, *Price is looking for you.*
Then he becomes a grin that widens
and disappears and another
face grows in the air.
She tries to run,
ducks in and out of tents.
Frantic, she rests, peering
from doorways, panting fear
like spray and you walk up
behind her, touch her shoulder,
your fingers long as her arm and cold.
She jumps, her body stiff,
while you pull a pair of black
gloves from your bathing trunks,
put them on slowly. Leaping
from the boardwalk she dances
over snow. You can't keep up
but your arm grows and just
as she reaches the edge
your cold fingers in the smooth
black glove close around her throat.
She wakes up, every time.

4. Your Birthday

This is the dream
you have every year:

It will always be the same,
as if you were once again
charging, ramming your head
hard, but in the dream
everything is bloated
out of all proportion:
your tiny rosebud head -
adult and spongy;
the doorway of bones crossed
tightly against light -
dissolved and murky.
Nothing is clearly defined,
your charge toward air
suspended
as if you were a bull
gone down
as if you were heaving
your bulk up
through a sea of dust
and screams,
heaving slowly,
the haze of particles
red and dissipating
toward your eyes,
inward,
as if it all stopped
there.

What You Taught Me

(for MTH)

Your forearm always
glistened next to mine.
After months of sleep,
that neighboring, our veins
flowed together toward the Dead Sea.
Your sweat passed into my skin
leaking the drugs into my blood.
When the man tricked you for your debts,
sold you battery acid for horse
your arm dropped away from mine
and I fought the freezing of my blood,
turned from your dead black eyes
open flat against the light
still seducing me.

I walked out in front of a car
but only scraped some skin from my face.
I drank, each swallow of vodka
exploding in shards of light
like the clear liquid that needled
its hot clean path to death
inside your bloodstream.
Drunk, I ran in circles
until I broke my ankle
bone splintering my purpled
skin. In the hospital
I lay white, pumped full
of morphine. Black angels,
singing, led me away.
The archangel had your face
and he tempted me with promises.
I forced my eyes open,
forced myself out to the real world,
its grey light. Only my bones healed.

Here is the hoop you held
for me, coaxing me through
until I had the jump perfect.
The hoops became smaller
and smaller until I was jumping
through the dark hole of my own mouth.

I walk as if the sidewalks
are padded and the walls
absorb sound. If anyone
comes close enough to see
into my eyes, I steel them.
The air, for me, is clear
and it shoots antiseptic
into my lungs.

Emptying the Landscape

Torch, gazing at her, said
She's a landscape painting, this one.
And, as if she became the painting
he was looking at, he slipped her
from the wall in his gallery.
With his gift of talking to inanimates
he gentled her, saying, *I'll make you
perfect, airbrush your flaws away.*

Torch filled the air with his voice,
burned the field of her body
killing the weeds. He turned
the earth as if he had entered
the landscape, become hard and honest.
He cultivated the scene through seasons
as if his hands were always deep
in wet clay and he had kneaded
the flaws from the soil,
blown them from the hills of grain,
brushed them from the cottonwoods, the sky.

Torch. She's lifted herself from the canvas.
She's emptying the landscape you filled
with yourself. You were the flaw
you couldn't see, your back to yourself.
She's moved up into air, is moving still,
is speaking; her words wash you away.

SECTION II

WESTBOUND: LISTENING FOR A NAME

The Empire Builder, Westbound

This is all I've ever wanted.
 You said when I left it would be in a box.
 A wooden one with your face painted on it.

This is shining steel. New, bright as bullets,
 it soars above the ground, fierce and grinning.
 You're not even on the platform waving goodbye.
 We speed up, leaving Chicago, gathering country,
 packing it in the back cars. I leave no land
 for you to cross. There is nothing between us.

Just outside Winona the air turns to honey
 and the train creeps through, almost reverently.
 In the dining car the porter seats me
 with an older couple from Louisiana.
 They pat my hand, call me brave
 as the train quickens and the burnished
 field becomes your face spread
 in a golden smirk that we clack
 over. I raise my glass, watch the wine
 glow and swirl in the roselight of dusk.

And now the Milwaukee Road has ended.
 I have been hurtled into space
 away from you, and my father and mother.
 I imagine you all together waving goodbye
 from the platform in Back Bay Station.
 I curl into my corner, watch instead
 lights winking in the distance.
 Two days away and I still don't know my name.
St. Cloud. St. Cloud, a voice booms out.
 I draw the curtain against it,
 sink into the dark seat, and listen.

The night is sleepless across Minnesota,
 North Dakota. I walk back to the caboose
 against this forward motion, stand on the end
 gate, my nightgown whipping around my legs.
 Terrain sprawls everywhere, its surfaces
 shining like obsidian moons and I search them
 listening for the sound of a name I may claim
 as my own. I feel myself opening, my shoulders
 pinned against the cold metal door, and stare
 out at the field, watch it rolling as it throws
 sounds about, as careless with them
 as the sky is with stars.

What Nana Left Me

All that is left of her body
sits on the front seat
between my father and mother,
contained in a small square box
wrapped in brown paper,
her name printed delicately
in brown, once on each side.

We are of the same body, she'd whisper to me
over and over. Told me never to trust soldiers,
not to listen to priests. We rode in the car
like this, Nana between my mother and father,
singing "Faraway Places," her voice
a whine above the motor, her white hair
wild in the wind she searched
for the smell of salt.

* * * * *

In her front room purple curtains
shrouded us from daylight. Her voice,
heavy as plums, joined with the heat,
closed around us until we were back
on the ship, crossing to America.
No one spoke to her and she curled
back in a dark corner, her son
rocking in her belly. She hummed,
her voice a lurch against the ship's motion.

I'd watch her make silk flowers,
her thick fingers twisting the petals
alive. She made a garland for my birthday,
told me flowers would be my only friends
when she was gone. *They are like us,*
women, waiting to be picked by one hand or another.

* * * * *

We arrive at the beach and I run
through the sand as if she were a kite,
hold my hand out for the wind, catch
the smells, dead roses and salt,
mixing above me, feel the dust of tiny
silk petals on my arm, the sand dry
and cold on my feet, hear the murmur
of sea telling shore of far away places
its beckoning voice screaming with sun.

Approaching On Your Blind Side

At the dinner table I was always seated at your left,
so what do we know of each other now.
When you conjure up thoughts of me, daughter gone wrong,
how do you see me, a dim shadow small, moving too quickly,
an edge of light playing through water.
Do you fill in a face for me, hair, eyes and teeth;
is my body a mere wavering,
an elusive dance of forest dissolving in light and air.
Or do you see me in your mind as flesh and bone,
feet planted on ground, moving step
by definite step away from you,
toward some place you cannot see
or even imagine.

I wanted to please you, to live the life you traced
like a map in the air, but I couldn't see it.
My head averted, I tried to look from the side,
but your eye, the left one, flat and brown,
would always stop me with its seeming lack of pain.

At dusk, my veins become voices,
rise above my body whispering of other lives
I long to inhabit, float above the river
where the half-blind horse grazes
only at night, afraid of the day,
of what might approach on his blind side.
I brush over his long grey flank and he sniggers softly,
nuzzles his velvet nose against the space of blue
where my neck is, listens with his cocked ear,
blinks his left eye blindly.
This is the life you cannot forgive me
as I disappear, practice approaching
on your blind side. You, the horse,
the night air. None of you ever know I'm here.

First Touch

My knee molds itself
to the cup of your palm.
My eyes burn and blur.
Some certain future:

1. We will be in the forest
in a place like a room.
Unenclosed yet separate.
Light defines the edges.
Red, it filters through
trees. Your hands,
the sound of water,
its constant rush
quiet, move as slowly
as rock being worn
smooth. You reach, sudden.
Deliberate, through air
and rose dust, you take
my face. We speak;
the red light devours
our words.

2. Love is a word
I'm forbidden.
We defy this,
sink into mud,
holding on as our eyes
and lips cake shut.
Stopping, we become
a fossil pressed
together into clay.
Milleniums later
they'll argue
about whether we're
separate or some odd
mutant. I'll tell you
now. We're separate
as rock
and rain.

No Expectations

(for Stuart)

It's true. I expect
nothing. Nothing blooms
like this purple flower,
its green tongue bright
as crystal snow gone
to light. Nothing
do I expect from this
stem, these hard buds.

Their starry eyed opening
embarrasses us for we
contain ourselves from such
bursts of color, contain
our sophistication. We'd
sooner drop like petals,
feed the ground with the death
of our emotion, our own
brilliant burning.

Wilted and sad with fragrance
we stare up into the eye
of this purple flower
standing over us shameless
and brazen, this flower
always on the edge
of blooming one more time.

Hot Springs

(for Candace & Emily)

1. Turkish Bath

In Selçuk the men wear uniforms.
 They are suspicious of me
 and rather bored. The uniforms
 are the best part of their lives.
 Their wives clean them everynight.
 These men stand rigid in the sun,
 squint against the washed-out light,
 chewing and spitting, leaning
 against the old marble of the bath.
 Their brass buttons flash
 when they shift their weight
 from hip to hip.

At the door, I drop two coins
 into the basket, murmur *merhaba*,
 listen to my voice grow and mingle
 with their gravelly *iyim, teşekkür*
 then echo in the domed entry.
 In the cold room hollow voices buzz
 like reeds empty in the winter air;
 then in the tepid room they seep
 like earth in spring. In the hot
 room I play my flute for the sound
 of water, the notes repeating
 in the dome and voices rising
 in their wake. Here is the one
 I've been listening for: a small child
 tells me her name while in the entry
 the guards have barred the doors
 against the sound of my flute
 and her voice, their rifles raised.
 She says, *aşkın, aydın. You,*
like the moon, are always leaving.

2. Jerry Johnson

In Idaho the men wear nothing.
They are not suspicious. Nor
bored. We decide to ignore them.

Here there is water, the domed
ceiling endless. Voices rise
from the earth, live in rocks
that shift and rub together
in warm and cold currents.
I watch you listen, stretching
in the green waterscape, your body
perfect as it wants to be.

These men hear nothing.
That one sits thigh deep
chubby legs folded out.
He stares straight ahead
his gaze on the curve of rock
against your buttock.

We sink in the silt, let the current
carry us down, wind us limb by limb
around the smooth rocks. We listen
for a voice to stand out in the din.
You hear it, a woman saying, *we shall all
die here.* We know it is true,
and it's not yet our time.
The men see us leaving.
Stiff as statues in a domed
museum, they watch our lips move.

The Darkest Room

(for Bill)

Hidden like the black hollow
in a tree in the thickest forest,
it will be difficult for you to find,
my deep past that to you
is only a map I've traced
on the sole of your foot.
Feel your way carefully.
Light one small candle and
what you will see in its dim
light is a room with brick walls, barred
windows, hard wood floors. The furniture
simple and sparse. It's the ghost of a girl
I asked you here to see. You will not
see her but her dreams of birds
lie scattered, their wings folded,
their black eyes dulled. Imagine
this girl, piece her dreams together.
There is wood by the fireplace. Build
a tree; imagine the leaves, delicate
veins pulsing toward light. Breathe that light
into this room and call the dreams to life.
The tree will fill with birds, brilliant
birds, exotic in red and gold finery
as if this were a forest come alive after hard
rain. The girl will come to you with gifts
of leather bound books with gilt edges
no longer a girl but a woman asking for the sound
of your voice, her eyes the only dark place left.