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Even a stone [poetry]

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EVEN A STONE

By

Roger Dunsmore

B.A., Pennsylvania State University, 1960

M.A., Pennsylvania State University, 1963

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

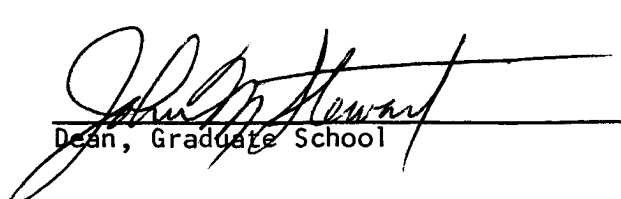
Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

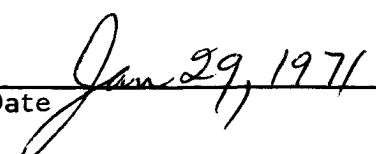
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Even a Stone

When some visitors unexpectedly
found Heraclitus warming himself
by the cooking fire:
"Here, too, are gods."

Virgin Toes
(for Cathy)

"One bursts through creatures when he
gives up something he has loved."

Meister Eckhart

Attic maiden,
daughter to Phaidimos,
nothing remains of you but these marble toes.
Not your name,
your grave monument,
or a father's grief for your lost fragrance.
Slender and orange,
even barbarians know they never
curled in the foamy dance,
see your whole beauty.

Of the left foot,
only a great toe,
hacked, topped
by a leather strip,
a piece of the second,
crumb of the third.
All the toes of the right foot remain.
They unfold me more
than a nimble-hipped porch maiden,
more than bronze colts
sucking bronze mares,
or she lions
(heavy dugs bloodied)
tearing antelope.

Attic maiden
daughter to Phaidimos,
more than all these
junked relics
your frailty in death
wounds God,
bursts through all things--
your hacked toes,
your father's grief.
These mutterings.

For My Daughter

Your trembling voice
two thousand miles
thru black plastic holes--
"Will I ever see
you again?"

Walking the dark of a hill
past oaks sun and lightning stripped,
I hunt a way
to weather so well.
A cock pheasant calls
the blackening sun
and leathery, brown leaves
turn bronze
a billion light years
(or your naked fear)
overhead.

Winter Light

One orange boat
slips from the harbor
and a cat is sunning on a shelf
beneath a white church,
red-domed like a mosque. . .
The church bell rings fast,
brings the smell of incense,
of fresh baked bread,
and a rooster crows:
small boats appear
out of the sea's quiet.
It will be another hour
before the sound begins
(their ink sacs blackening the shallows)
of octopus flung
on a concrete slab.
In that hour,
the light here is so old,
that it will pass--
the trace of night in the sea.

White Water

Where a fat tree,
tipped crazy, springs from
rocks in white water
gulls wade and wash in the shallows.
The broken spillway pokes
a ragged finger
into the stream.

A donkey follows me here
because I rubbed flies off his muzzle.
White water:
a new moon's bow,
the salmon's belly,
my flooded lust.

For Vincent Van Gogh

A red exorciser of demons,
grizzled, wise,
flat sword in his paw,
grins at the spider dangling
from a thread he'd like to cut
but can't--
Chinese characters in the way.

He hangs in the museum in Edinburgh,
Vincent,
where in the toilet on the top floor
every sheet of paper is stamped
"Government Property,"
and you are a peasant woman's dark face,
a child's spring orchard
blossoming all white and pink
with "Vincent" big in bright colors
at the bottom,
a grove of insane olive trees
thrashing towards suicide.

For a Woman Kissing All the Icons in the Byzantine Museum
in Athens

Angels catch Christ's blood in gold cups,
nailed arms thin as bread.
Crosses are faces peering
and John the Baptist
carries his head in a chalice.
God's face here is drenched
in fire and blood and gold.
Gliding like a Chinese dancer
from icon to icon,
you cross yourself with the hand
clutching pink flowers
tied to a small wooden cross,
whisper your prayer.
You kiss each saint on the hand,
strike them all first with your forehead:
the sound of lips on paint,
a bright poppy in your black lapel.
Nervous as a doe
with your great, dark eyes
you shy from the guard,
but the icons
hung on long wires from the roof
move in the slow dance of your kiss--
back and forth by the wall.

Stumbling out into the sun,
I hear birds sing in every tree
and you stand by the gate
looking back over your beauty at me.
Your forehead,
your lips, your singing feet,
your God--
final as the sea.

February Beach
(for my daughter)

The women's baskets burned on their heads.
A curl of smoke rose from a rice stem.

Weird sand tracks.
I find a plastic doll half-buried,
pink, without head or nipples.
Its arms gather debris:
A G.I. enters our schoolroom,
scoops Philip into his flooded arms;
dead in ten days
after telling
of wormy rice,
of the guards,
and wild asparagus in the Philippine hills.
Shabby Germans are imprisoned
near our farm.
One man, intensely thin,
fishes thru the barbed fence
for a ditched penny--
his whole life a thin stick.

. . .
We both feign sleep
or argue who was up last--
all your crying
til I know I'll have to go.
I snatch you overhead
and slam you into your crib
three, four times,
wanting to bash you
against the wall or floor,
until snapped with fear
I've hurt your spine,
your insides,
I fold you in my arms
and walk the house til dawn.
You are half-grown now,
ten thousand miles from me.
We must return,
you on my shoulders
clutching my ears, my curly hair
with your laughter,
return to those bashed nights
to rout that murderer,
or wander forever

in icy rooms.

. . .

Imagine
said Ivan
that it was necessary
to torture to death
only
one tiny creature.
Would you consent?
Tell me
and tell the truth.
No,
I wouldn't consent,
said Alyosha softly.

. . .

Cold rain on the sand
on stone walls--
and my thumb against the sworled smooth
of a pocketed shell.

Bitterroot River
(for my son)

We float a fast stretch
on our fear,
skim slick rocks.
Or skipping stones,
arms reach half way across.
Old Joe laughs on a log that looses
yellow-jackets in grass
by his bare ankles.

Driving back, stars fall
and you punch your fist in the watermelon.
I slap you,
and home,
give the dog the hip bone
of a moose
to gnaw a year,
sit with my ear in the creek.
The ladder stands in the cherry tree,
casts its shadow
into the moonlight on my hands.

For Sappho

"Like the hyacinth in the hills which the shepherd people
step on, trampling into the ground the flower in its purple."

Apples in the grass by the dried-up creek.
The dog heard something
smell them in the night.
Reaching from a kitchen chair,
I leave scabby ones for the crows.

On the highest limb
a lone apple turns sweet.
I start for the ladder,
remember your hyacinths,
heap leaves over my fear.

Blue Gypsy Door, Red Poppies
(for Janet)

A fisherman wades from his boat,
feet poking thru rotted shoes,
says the coast path
is too steep.
I break one stalk of rye,
roll the hard seeds in my fingers,
let pieces of stem and seed
be blown off the cliff.

Two stone buttresses
tip a small church into the rye.
The door and single window are pure blue
and the red dome flows down
its white walls.
Water below--
hunks of turquoise, pumice, black-green--
fans into windbursts.
So I dance the goat path,
rip my hand on sharp rock
and the dark blood keeps flowing.
An asphodel says my blood is good
and I hear the faint song of a sheep's bell.

The coast boulders are wind-eaten,
one is a bull's brooding torso.
I find a red poppy,
uproot it,
fold it in a broad leaf
so my hand won't wilt it,
tie the bundle with dry grass.
I want it for a woman
who shared my bed last night.

My moccasin's loose sole rips further,
flaps happily now.
More poppies everywhere,
whole fields of them,
dark-throated like gypsy girls.
Wind shreds the one I carry,
and leaping from a high stone wall onto the beach,
I bruise both my heels,
limp, flapping,
all the way home with my shredded poppy.

Cutting Wood in a Storm

A crippling wind on the hill.
I fuss with the Swede saw
by a cottonwood
down in high grass,
steel sweet in its trunk.
Sawdust spurts,
then straight-falling sleet freezes to my jacket.
Rain-light slams on the shed door.

At the porch
I wipe ice from the blade
with wornout jeans.
The stove is cold,
but two horses in a lower field
lean against the dark.

The Boulders

Some bird
was always riding the high limbs
of the dead cottonwood
below the house.
You saw it sweep the field
like a black princess.
The dentist below,
busy all winter with
his chainsaw,
got her this month--
brush stacked over the stump.

But in the open field--
two boulders
we never saw before.

After Reading Basho's Satchel

A spider's web strung
between two pieces of old wire.
Wisps of cloud deep in the sky.
Frail, frail wind.
And this boulder I sit on?
Worn where horses have rubbed away
their winter hair.

The Moors

Occasional sheep, flanks red-streaked,
huddle in round sod and stone huts
or shy at the bike.
Once a burned out farm and naked chimney,
dark birds in the scrub.
And out in the heather
a green Morris off the road
and two old guys standing round
as I come pushing my bike uphill.
I think to ask if I can help,
they are quicker:
"Would you like a cup of tea?"
And Christ yes, they've made tea
on a small stove in the middle of the afternoon
in the moors and I say yes.
One hands me a cake
with a cherry on top,
says he baked it himself.
He thumps his wooden leg,
France, 1917.
The one with false teeth
drips tea on his splendid tweed jacket
and they tell me how in winter
when snow is up to the sills
and a man can't potter in his garden
or paint the gate
it is very cold,
especially in bed at night.
They eat bananas and sandwiches,
but haven't enough for me,
and put a pill in my tea,
for they can't take sugar.
One loses the rubber band
he was trying to put around waxed paper
over the milk bottle
and I find it in the road gravel.
Before I ride off
they say to tell 'em back in Montana
that I met a couple of guys, anyway,
over here that weren't so bad.

I pump downhill
and across a narrow bridge
grinning so wide
horse's tails sweep a hundred miles of sky
overhead.

Girl in the Green Sweater

Peat smoulders in the iron stove.
You shake rain from your black hair,
dry by the fire.
Green sweater, Ireland in your breasts.
"Let's steal peat for a late fire."
"No. It isn't right.
They kill themselves to cut it!"

I find an old woman digging in the wind.
Our eyes touch in the rain
in the dark by the peat pile.
Quiet hands tug at the slabs.
It'll be cold tonight.
I lug the sack to the fire in your hair.

Streams of milk and sun
sing fresh into bright pails.
I want to say
I love you for shaming me.
You sleep late.
I leave in a silence of birds.

For Cathy

Tonight I find your face again
like that time in the dark,
and you silent as rain.
I run my hand across,
touch the tears.
Bare feet find warmth where my dog's body slept--
your face in my hands.

There are lovers on the beach,
one man and one woman
clutched together near rocks at the far end.
They want the night's first freshness
after all that rain.
A thousand insect wings drop onto sand in the dark,--
your face in my hands.
Every rain I find your face again.

Last Light on the Ponds
(for Jim Todd)

Around a bend in the road
mountains burn
over the river fog
and a whirlwind spins dust
a hundred feet up
from the plowed fields,
the white beehives,
your hands.
Trees hunger the sky.

An old man and an old woman
pull a wagon to the grocery store.
Elkhide moccasins
show above her dusty rubbers.

Then your smoke stubbed out on the dash
and birds on fire
flung from beyond
to the farthest, clear
edge of earth.

Even a Stone
(for Colly)

Five days since the blossoms
floated down stream.
And all day the wind.
All day the creek noise:
even a stone has love,
for the ground.
I bend over an anthill,
hear the faint hum,
or is it the blood-rush
in my ears.
Who hides here?
It cannot be known
what lies in the bones.
Even a stone.
Our cat playfully batters
a young robin
beneath the bedroom window.
I lie beside you
listening to the soft growls.

Five days after the blossoms,
apples come
like breasts on a girl,
on my girl who is ten
and big for her age
and on you who sleep here
beside me--
apples come.
Outside, a robin flops
like a brown paper bag in the wind.
The moon is full.
Awake, I stand in the footprints of elk
in the wet snow chanting,
even a stone.

Poem Written During the Need for Solitude After Kent State

I chain both the dogs,
hear them bark all the way
up the mountain.
Picking flowers in a sleet storm,
pieces of ice jump like beads
in the grass.
Everything,
even this white stone,
asks to be held
like a fistful of mountain flowers.

Greyhound

The man next to me
at the urinal in the Butte station passes blood.
It foams up over the drain.
Two guys just put it back in their pants
and walk away.

Across the aisle
a Crow Indian with a beat-up face panhandles the passengers
and a runaway boy and girl,
barefoot, clothes in grocery sacks,
hold each other in their sleep.

Black Horse

Beyond a screen of trees
the horses run--nickering.
One, a black, goes down
sliding in a cloud of snow.
All these stone ghosts:
the crippled man
wobbling across an open lot,
making it,
snow plastered to the front of his coat.

German Panzer groups
retreating to their villages--
tanks loaded with melons from Russia,
which they break open and eat,
sitting on the cobbles in sunlight.

And a dark girl on a Spring morning
who drops her bible on the sidewalk.

Light off the snow
keeps pouring in;
I wanted . . .
something to give
in this winter.

Beyond a screen of trees
a horse runs in the snow,
a black--nickering.

Making a Garden with Colleen--First Time

May 10

Ripped off sod with a tractor,
bare feet in the earth,
Laughter.

May 12

A bunch of calves wallowing
in the dust.
We didn't make it for them.

May 15

You hold the steel fence stakes.
I drive them in
with the five pound axe
and all night dream of your bare wrists.

May 23

Reached into the pumphouse
for the brass valve
to let water onto the garden.
Touched instead a snake
coiled back in the cool.
Next morning find his tail on the side porch--
your cats ate the rest.

June 3

Out in the dark
to put glass jars over tomato plants,
it goes suddenly cold across my open eye,
the wire strung for the dog--
(When I was young
a steel fence stake
all but six inches in the ground
punctured a tire on the big John Deere.
Surprised to find liquid, not air,
pouring from the hole,
I put my open hands to it
and they burned.
The eye felt like that.)

June 5

On hands and knees
you plant three new rows
of lima beans,
tho you can't stomach them.
I like them with cream and sage.

And the print of your hand
over and over
pressed in the soil of each row.

July 12

At dusk
hailstones big as ice cubes
beat the sunflowers to the ground.
Pumpkin leaves are riddled,
the whole garden in shreds.
You saw a dead pine on the hill
knocked flat by the wind,
and then the stillness.

August 25

Grasshoppers have eaten the silk
from the corn
but the green ears
are sweet in their husks.

August 30

Dill hangs on the back porch drying.
I got three wet cottonwoods
from a neighbor,
split them and stacked them
on the porch.
And their slightly medicinal smell,
with the dill,
drifts into the kitchen,
into your hair, breasts, hands.

Wind

The carcass of the elk
lies split in half lengthwise
on the concrete floor.
In an etching of Goya's,
the man is naked,
two soldiers hold him up-side-down.
Another saws at his crotch
with a curved sword.
The elk's head is gone
and his legs are chopped at the knees.
There are pine needles caught in his rib cage.
I put my finger in the bullet hole
thru his heart, my eyes
in the dead river of veins.
I'm given the teeth, the hide,
and fifty pounds of meat.
Up inside the hooves of a calf
born dead at our place
the soft ridges are clean as snow
that melts from limbs--
things that haven't touched the earth.

I wear the elk's teeth
strung around my neck--
remember marines knocking gold ones
out of dead Japs on Iwo,
and the ear in a jar
a kid brought to school.
The trees are full of a big wind,
of rainstorms,
showers of stone,
showers of milk, of blood, of iron.