

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1984

Fight with Myself and Believing

Shaun Gant

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Gant, Shaun, "Fight with Myself and Believing" (1984). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2343.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2343>

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

THIS IS AN UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT IN WHICH COPYRIGHT SUBSISTS. ANY FURTHER REPRINTING OF ITS CONTENTS MUST BE APPROVED BY THE AUTHOR.

MANSFIELD LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
DATE: 1984

A FIGHT WITH MYSELF AND BELIEVING

by

Shaun Gant

B.A., University of South Dakota, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1984

Approved by:

Wm Pitt Root

Chairman, Board of Examiners

R C Murray

Dean, Graduate School

June 5, 1984

Date

UMI Number: EP35158

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP35158

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

A FIGHT WITH MYSELF AND BELIEVING

T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

I SUCKING ON CHOCOLATE

To My Husband.....1

Traveling to Sioux City.....3

Actaeon.....5

Mamba.....7

The Eyes in Your Boots.....9

Sweet Throat.....10

Damn the Dimes.....11

Days on Santa Maria: Returning.....12

Thoughts While Sucking.....14

II MISSED DANCES

The Man Who Ran Off With Elvina in '62.....17

Aunt Annie and the Historical Event.....19

Grandma's House.....21

III MAKING THINGS GROW

Controlling the Birth of Avocadoes.....23

Art in America.....24

Making Things Grow.....26

Plum Tree.....28

Fingers.....30

IV A FIGHT WITH MYSELF AND BELIEVING

A Fight With Myself and Believing.....32

Bird-Girl in Winter.....33

The Woman at Fourth and Gerald.....	35
Quiet Ceremonies.....	36
Let's Say You're Dead.....	38
Our Questions About Time Cleared.....	40

SUCKING ON CHOCOLATE

"There is evidence that the chemical reactions which take place in the body after digesting chocolate resemble chemicals released when a person is in love or experiencing emotional elation."
--popular knowledge of the '80's

TO MY HUSBAND

Opening my refrigerator,
I see rotting sprouts and green cheese.
I got so tired of your food--tubs::
of yogurt and these old sprouts
that smell like sperm. You tied
the hairy things round my legs
drove off like Andretti for Texas.

Big Bend is the most beautiful sprout
in the world. You like it better than green
eyes. You took me there once.
After three days in the tent, you trusted me.
I drove to town for orange juice
and whole wheat. But I didn't come
back with your vitamin C. I didn't
even come back with your Subaru.

I sold the whole works to a car lot on main,
thumbed it to El Paso. I had a chance
to raft down the Grande
with the salesman,
but that meant dropping off

groceries at Big Bend.

I hurried up north.

Now I have my own Frigidaire

and I fill it with chocolate.

Next summer you may take a bus

to Montana. If you come looking

for your sprouts and singing about

Big Bend, I'll say, Lubbock.

That's where I lost your car.

TRAVELING TO SIOUX CITY

Traveling is vacant staring out the window,
waiting for the nosecone to come
into my pig-eyed view. It's shuffling,
silent jaw set, onto the silver car
and off to the hungry Midwest. I thrust
a ticket at a steward, sit by habit
in the smoking section. By now, Iowa's waiting
in the terminal in Sioux City. I wait
for the plane to roll me down wet pavement
back to the Mid-smothering-West
the mind-block covered with heads, split,
rolling blood. Smelling my own fear,
I vomit into a bag ripped from the seat ahead.

I'm coming back to you like always
in a plane full of innocents
acting as if things will be fine
once we land: sunny asphalt after grazing
vacations. I want to warn these sheep
the danger comes after contentment
the rendering plant waits, we animals in lines
walk off the plane with dignity to the washroom
not because we have to, but for the calming

ritual, the asylum of empty stalls. I walk
down stairs onto the concourse. There are no
waiting butchers, making love like piston guns
to the head, lining up questions to slice off
arms, kidneys, brains. I give up my seatbelt,
timetable, my porthole full of clouds..

But how can I shed these thoughts or you
harder to face than slaughter.

ACTAEON

She is hunting me in her sleep--
moonlight flowing with her gait
on ridged fields, her hair splayed
across the pillow and fading into deep
shadow. Afraid of her, I run across
streams of hair and grain. When I dream

I become hunter. I follow
her through the trees to her bath
watching her breasts rise with breath
a harvest to be reaped. Her light hips
trick the light and maybe there is no
death behind her moonlit brow.

I am so quiet, like a deer in her dream.
I lie beside her, still, not wanting
anything. She wakes and there are no fields
or deer or moon. It's us alone in a barren
room, dry, grey. She says it's over, gives me
a barbed stare, fletched smile, arrow

through my eye. It's not me that's lost,
it's the moon and the hunting she dreamed of.
She falls back asleep and I leave the room,
a real man, not a tranquil dream.

MAMBA

He had a face like a cobra's dance,
his eyes cut clean as diamonds in fine glass.

I watched him dance with a woman smooth
like jazz: shoulders rolling, hips twisting,

knees and toes filling in. They danced like
shapes drinking, shifting. He asked me

Do you think I'm a real man? I said No. My grandmother
shot the heads off men like you out on the prairie.

Hearing about my recent past, he said, Yes, it will
pass. And it did. In my green room we drank to health
and it came down to kissing. I said Yes, watched
coral rings of sun setting upside down. I wrapped

his body, slick from the lake, in strips of blanket,
coiled around him. Hypnotizing, swallowing, his body
became new parts of me. There was a dream laying eggs
as I slept with him in my belly. I woke to his blunt

nose and shiny skin. He'd been somewhere, smelled
like olives. I saw his gaze twist toward the trees.
I grew back my legs and stood, walked, leaving him

with a swollen nest of thin snakes winding groans.

I see him drinking now and then

with slim women. I just smile.

I offer him a coral, some memory cut

from my own head, a snake to bite him

when he says my name.

THE EYES IN YOUR BOOTS

stared up at me. They took
me apart breast by breast, taunted
me with laces and leather tongues,
bound me with my own hair. So I hid them.

I picked up the boots because
they are yours, because
you were coming by today.

I put one in a bag

one outside in a bush.

Unaccustomed to games
you couldn't find either.

I wanted you to find them,

wanted you to kick my side,
my stare, kick me good on the grass
wanted you to stand
on one found boot and speak: Bitch.

SWEET THROAT,

Our hair is the same color
and we have nothing else in common.
You're old and I'm old. Box of rain,
I hold you with my legs
and we fly off into our own. Let's finish
this run we started together and alone.
If I were to just see you on the street
sweet movement on pavement
would you fly off with me?
Could we swing on clothesline
like lobsters hanging by their claws
circle like buzzards or canaries
suck on chocolate all day
buzz like flies in a hot window?
And Beauty, out hair is exactly
the same color
through birds are flying off
and nothing else is the same.

DAMN THE DIMES

that fell out of your pockets last night.
They're the only clues she needs,
the one excuse to break a bottle over my head.

God damn those dimes. What's the difference
we hardly screwed? She'll imagine us there
humping in the bed with the dimes dancing

around our legs. Your shirt caught
on the bush like a thief and the rope
to the room still tied to the bedstead,

you're gone for sure and now I'll have to take
the garbage out every night for a week
just to make it up to her.

DAYS ON SANTA MARIA: RETURNING

Say it at sunset. Say it in the green
fiberglass fishing boat filled
with fat shrimp and two flat silver
bass. Say it while the shadows fold

around the sand and we run to the west end
of the island. Say it slowly, watch your face
in the water spilling in the cool sand.
Say it while we leave this place named

as a thousand other islands are named
for a sinner's intervening grace,
for the blessed among women. I will feel
the words by proxy, the wind carrying them

to my ears and legs. Say it. The birds
fly after our boat as we return to the sand
where we made love, your hair filtering the sun
from my eyes, where we saw hermits scud into green,

where we promised to come and unmake decisions.

The sun sets closer on my burnt skin

and I pray for more sun, more dolphins
to blast away my longing and your silence.

THOUGHTS WHILE SUCKING

I know this stuff is
fattening. Probably
three million calories a cup.
Chocolaté. Chocolat. Choklit.
It swirls at night in my belly-dreams
of hitchhiking. A van stops
and it's Marvin Carmicheal
heaving his bulk over the seat
like a huge chocolate bunny.
He smiles, opens the door.
Take a bite, baby.

I keep giving it up, running
my body with piston-like precision,
humming, steaming No cake for dessert,
no truffles for three more miles.

I see her, Lauren Bacall,
putting her lips together
in defiance of the sweet tooth,
and keep on jogging. I see
Shauna Grant, pet of the month,
porn queen of the universe, with
so much love she never needs chocolate
kisses, and keep on jogging. There's

Julia Child, herself, author of the best
recipe for mousse in the civilized world
and I jog past her.

Oh, chocolate demon rising
to suck the minds of thin-waisted virgins
into the sweets of sin, may you gain
weight in your arms after thirty,
and never pay the last installment
on your children's dental bills.
Your shrivelled hands warps its way
to my door every Valentine's day
and I will never forget it
inflating my thighs like basketballs,
twisting my sight from wholesome fruit.

You got me young, devil in an icecream cone,
German chocolate or rocky road. You turn
the corner, my head slams up against the van door.
The cone flies out of my hands,
bounces off the window. I'm afraid
of staining the seat or losing it all over the floor.

It sails back to me, splatters my lips,
hits my throat, goes down. I gasp and choke
and fight. I flail and swallow and swallow.

I want to wail and cry, my mouth
flooded and sweet.

MISSED DANCES

"Love 'tis teasing, Love 'tis pleasing,
Love is wonderful when it's new,
But days grow older, Love grows colder,
And fades away like morning dew.

--old Irish air

THE MAN WHO RAN OFF WITH ELVINA IN '62

Worst of all, there was beer
in the closet. Beer and three shirts
you shared with your brothers. Nothing
in that box house out on the prairie
was ours. The baby wasn't. She was mine.
I fed her every day you kept riding out
in the wind after sheep, shearing
them, butchering.

I wanted it to get better.
I went to a priest. Take off your clothes,
he said. You'll get your husband back.
You know what to do. I tried,
you got up and dressed.

After Elvina's baby came, I knew
you wouldn't be back. I had
to do it right. My baby
had no father, her baby
no name.

I don't look for you anymore.
I don't look for your face folded

in crowds like it's folded
in old letters. I imagine
it's '61 again. Back
when my belly
was flat and my legs
were good. Back
in the moment that froze
these smiles, this pose--
you and I leaning out
Claircie's door, my white
dress lifting, your
hand on mine, our
eyes looking out.

AUNT ANNIE AND THE HISTORICAL EVENT

She was dead when I met her mother. Her mother showed me pictures of her at twenty-two and I saw in her stance that no one had told her about puberty or menstruation. I became her at fourteen,

climbed the stairs to the attic after milking, trailing blood and stuck catalogues in to keep from dying. Later, we fooled everyone but him and he kept us pregnant, broke our ribs.

If we deserved better, it wasn't because we'd wasted our purity on catalogues it was because we didn't know the words virginity, clitoris, period. We couldn't ask

as if we'd never learn anything until our wedding night--what a man felt like or passion a wife should pretend. If she'd lived me at twenty-two, we would have avoided the priviledges

given to naive women--not counting it a failure to hate men who made us miserable

who refused to kiss us because we weren't virgins
who shrank our pain

into an unavoidable hour when we return
to the attic with a chair and rope.

It won't end like that, my feet three inches
from the floor, swaying to and fro in a missed dance.

GRANDMA'S HOUSE

A long road to grandma's house

she sang to me as we headed there
in her convertible. Thinking
of what was ahead, no doubt, my mother
herded the big Cadillac around potholes
past three cottonwoods
all that were left in the wind break.

The dust blew into the open car
into my face and I stretched
trying to turn off her music
though I sang, too. We were going
to her mother who wanted to keep me
who loved dust so much
she bought a whole prairie.

We rolled toward the house in a car
big enough to hold an ironing board
and all she owned. My mother singing
in an average voice, her neck bent low
on soft notes. My mother who fought priests
and divorce to keep me. Finally, giving in,
driving it all up to grandma's so she could

go to school. Now she sits in the Midwest
with rain scattering dust every afternoon
waiting for the mail. The relief
I send her will bounce the way we bounced
up to her mother's. I make the best
of her life. Debts and assets
blend together. Rejection, sun in windows
dancing across the room singing It's a long road

over and over. I make a right turn at a crossing
in my head that says Grandma's, but I don't
carry a baby, legs wrapped round my waist,
home for a visit. I go to school on the pill
and drag all my diplomas home in my car
their pages wrapped up like oranges or peaches.

I swerve to miss wedlock, stretch marks, a dust farm
where I'd wait for my own daughters homecomings.
Come here, I want to keep you, I'd say as they
patch my roof with college themes or baby clothes.

MAKING THINGS GROW

"We can see it coming when we
are going to be eaten."

--Lana Costantini
from "Our Advantage Over the
Vegetable"

CONTROLLING THE BIRTH OF AVOCADOES

This slit avocado worries me
with its ominous brown pit
and uneventful life. I eat
and forget all that: the vines'
endless twining, the valentines.
In fact, when you come home
I will again sing off-key.
Here is a root, you sing, here
is a peach blooming.
If I were to carry this avocado
into the bedroom, peel it slowly,
push my fingers into its soft pulp,
lie down and smear it across my belly
it would be brown in nine months,
my control burning the fruit.
I would not smile at its death
peach breath in wind
but would call all unripeness
this brown fruit.

ART IN AMERICA

I bought a book and some rice paper
to fold origami lizards and cranes,
ended up with a sailboat. I tried
another lizard, bent his legs
up behind his back, threw him away,
crushed snake. Tonight,

another project. I want to gag, my arms
in steaming dishwater full of liver
and chocolate. While dinner guests
laugh behind me, trails of brown and orange
froth around my arms. Before me stands
a figure of Cupid and Psyche,

a cherub nudging her thigh closer to his,
a tail of brown and white robe winds
down Cupid's leg. He is about
to place a wreath on her head
at the moment I'm posed
above the dishwater in an embrace

with chocolate liver brewing in swill.

I could fold in directions, made-up words,

pull a creature from the soap
like Michelangelo or Clodion found
their sculpture in rock. A changeless
creature, lizard-like, ancient and aging

waits for a summons from under these plates.
I lunge at the monster, grope for his scaly neck,
drag him dripping and writhing from water.
On his tongue, the mysteries of fugues,
mobiles, paper folding. His darting tongue
licks a thin line over the embracing lovers

waiting in agony to fall together
their stone turns to birds that fly up
into my face, past my guests, out the open
door. Bob and Tanya drop their forks
and run to watch wings skim trees and off.
I turn back to you, sweet monster, lick
your shiny toes.

MAKING THINGS GROW

And now I'm going to empty
all my suffering plants out the window.
Before I throw the first dry geranium,
a man, brunette with blue eyes, jumps
off the ledge, holds a flower between us.
No, he says. Save it. I let him have
a violet and go on trimming the dead.
We have an understanding about the bogonia:
a scarred leaf needs to be clipped to grow.
Depleted soil scares him. He wants
his fears neatly pinched back, his hope
sprayed with a bottle, his mind back
in fertilized earth. Sometimes he gives
me a clipping from a heart he's stolen.
I have saved all those clippings,
have them rooting in water. Now he's back
on the ledge, crouched, watching the severed
arteries open and the valves starting to sprout.
Watching me replant them, new red leaves
in my chest. I hear him scratching

at the window, see streaks of sun and rain
through his hair. Slowly, I turn my face from him,
Toward him.

PLUM TREE

The genius I love grows in the front yard.
His easy birth amazed experts who knew him
and told me in magazines the climate was all
wrong, don't expect miracles. I read and fertilized.
I looked like a brown girl planting fish
at his feet, supplicant, loving as required.

When the tree bloomed I made no mistakes,
no wide scars in the bark I loved, let no wind
blow hard. The world passed over, leaving
our garden behind. I read to him in the sun:
habits of raspberries, ants, tomatoes, when
to expect the plum. I envied long grasses

licking his trunk, roots digging down to his
touching, locking. I read, pruned each year,
forgave his fallow times. The day rose
and I gathered, had the feast before me,
ran my tongue under a pit and pulled it
from veiny meat, spit it into a hole beside him.

I made thick jam and we toasted the beginning
of fall, another frost making us skeletons.

The plum lost leaves, the pit its shell, I
my burden, books and sun. My tall one,
I'll lie down, weather chill in the morning,
survive snow under purple leaves.

FINGERS

They pick over carrots, peas, tomatoes--
checking fiber and strength not always
apparent to fingertips. They have always
been good at parallel parking, zippers,
salting eggs. Jump at the chance to twirl
spoons or sticks. They also steal grapes.
Which are a mystery to me. They steal grapes
easy as scraping pumpkins or old paint.
But in this pear, the secret not even they know.
Details from lives reflected in the shiny fruit
white ripeness from the south
where men pick and pick and still kill all
their chickens to make it through the season.
They come north picking cherries, filling
the market with red.

Ice cramps my hands passing over the fruit.
I pinch one, bruising the meat and the picker
sees. I avoid his eyes, buy two pounds
of heavy penance. His tough fingers grasp mine
holding the cherries and they bleed through the sack.
I turn and hurry past the market stalls, the thought

of his hands following, dodging through the crowd
and following, picking me up into fresh air.

I pull a cherry from the bag, then another,
hoping someone will find the trail.

A FIGHT WITH MYSELF AND BELIEVING

"Man, so long as he lives in the
World, does not know any Thing of
the opening of these Degrees in
himself."

--William Blake

A FIGHT WITH MYSELF AND BELIEVING

"An I.O.U. is an act of moral defiance."--Richard Ellman

You come crashing in I forgive it
remembering Joyce, orgasms, L.S.D.
My doubts bounce off you and settle in
with a bottle of wine. For someone
who never smoked, you have habits.
You have running around, drinking
down the street, shouting the significance
of Proust. I can't listen to speeches
anymore. I kick you out for a moment
and am alone holding a knocked up
lonely pause.

How do I play it, how
do I get the antidote? I need terrible
opium, serum of passive enticement.
When you're lured close as a neighbor
I never knew I had, I grab you,
esthetics and all, run for Nevada.
I owe you love, a broken nose,
a bad check and hemorrhoids.
I owe you a snapping slap with a glove,
duel in the alley with chainsaws,
a lover just like you.

BIRD-GIRL IN WINTER'

I hold this girl with nothing in my arms.
What use is advice to one who hunts
her own bread, finds fruit and vegetables,
gathers her own wood? I can't warn her.

The rich, static souls are birds of spring.
They taste yellow pitch in summer, smell
the good cottonwood falling in the ditch.
When I come, they speed over my resting knees,
feeling the pull. They've flown over her lined
nest, predicting my months of snow.

She still won't fly away from me.
My winter bird-girl forgot the lesson of shorter days.
By now it's too late. She's held in her cold kitchen.
I've frozen her letters and tickets in icicles big as seals.

My sullen trees feel their own cold sap, tightened roots,
not hers. Worried, they lean toward her window
as she plays house. At night their sleep comes deep.
Hers flits.

My snow piles deeper and thaws,

heaps and thaws. Trees with cruel branches
scrape her roof. The wind bends them
without pity into her dreams.

She hears the old hoot. Flight.
Molting her skin, she finds claws and feathers
for elbows. She struggles to the window,
wet wings folding.

THE WOMAN AT FOURTH AND GERALD

My feet tramp down dark third
walking a broken line in the street.
I hear a hiss by an old Ford. Not
a rapist: my stockings making a wish.
Marching on, heels through mud,
safety hose, hurricane hips. Desire
hides ahead on the wide branches of pines.
He follows and I put keys through fingers
and punch. Wind lifts my hair, my shadow.
I fall on the pavement and play dead. Leaves
bat my fear around to make sure. I rip open
my blouse and surrender. Rain comes
suddenly, soaking my breath, whipping
my skirt leg-tight. I hurry sweating
to a dark clutch of rooms.

QUIET CEREMONIES

for Pat Gant

You wanted it to happen with a bang or champagne--
the regular ways we have to mark time in our heads..
Twenty years ago that hope was like a birthday
fizzling up inside you: the best daughter. I've finally
begun breathing, noticing color, grasping at shapes.
You'd say the wait has done us good, taken some

brown out of our hair, made us strawberry growers.
The wait has locked out the children in us
that wanted to say something big, now, celebrate, go on,
getting married and pregnant too soon, our passion
ripping down every house we lived in. Commitments
to ourselves are hard to repeat. They force us to walk

as if we know exactly what we're doing. They led you
through two weddings, not even telling your mother
the second time. They keep my secrets, waiting
for experience to start breathing, living, telling
me something about what I've done. I've got
your voice, handwriting, tolerance and worry.

I rely on what you told me: the bottom can drop out
in an hour. I'll call you on Sundays,
save strawberries for when you come in June.
and if you can't make it, I'll be here inside us
for years, breathing careful buds.

LET'S SAY YOU'RE DEAD

I put aside all the previous things and imagine you as if you were alive and I say to you: Let's say you're dead. Close your eyes and imagine until you're dead in the dirt and it's winter. People up there are turning up the heat in their houses, putting on storms. And it's cold there in the dirt because you wish you were with them. You're getting wrinkles, and you forget your mother, it's been so long. Now you sink so far down you turn into fossil, neolithic, paleolithic, farther and the dead rot of you has ceased to compress anymore. You are harder than coal, harder than any diamond. But you still ache. Now I am passing you in age, here on the surface, and your father still lives in Idaho or Alaska. Now I can open my eyes and remember what you looked like lying there unable to do anything but sleep. Awake, your eyes were like watery fruit, but hard coals fixed on me and someone said you required nothing from us but our souls. Let's say you're alive. Open your eyes and say Sweet Jesus, I'm glad that's over! Come home in a new shirt, twenty years old and laughing like you're just back from Mexico or Trinidad or Ft. Lauderdale. Open them and ask for the jacket you left here one day.

I still have it. Open them. I'm waiting by this stone
with your jacket and I won't let you forget it.

I open my eyes

and you really die this time.

OUR QUESTIONS ABOUT TIME CLEARED

and I could see the sum of you
each of your red hairs changing in my mind--
first Aurora, now Macedonia, now women
scraping ice from an old car

cold snapping its jaws round their necks
claiming their faces. They throw snow
and pull things tight in my mind. One
shakes a glove, wet snow, a heavy question

falls to the curb, to her tracks. How
can I look forward and away from the ice
in my mind? I take more than my share
of an orange lying split between us.

Skin and flesh, you say, transparent food.

I hold a slice to your face, sweet and good
in the light. Citrus, think of apprehension,
death, truth, mundane truth asking day and day
and every day about sun, oranges, freezing rain

clinging to the blind windshield waiting to be cleared.
As you scrape, I can see your breath blowing
white rythms, the mastery of time in your step.
the women under your coat waiting cold and fresh.