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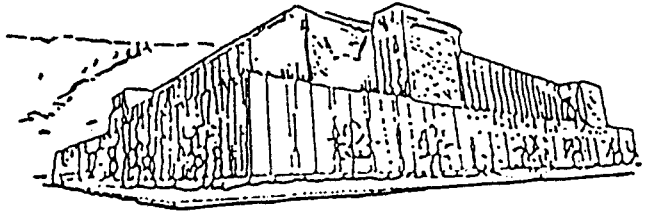
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A FULL MOON'S DUST


by

Marsha Hauck


B.A., University of Montana, Missoula, 1992

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1996

Approved by:



Chairman, Board of Directors



Dean, Graduate School

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A Certain Train of Thought

She swayed with the swells,
black boots balancing on the salt-water
slicked deck, full skirt billowed even more

in the wind. Her weight pressed hard
on her aching feet and she could hear the gentle
brushing of her laces on the rough

planks, but could not touch
or see them. The fist pounding her ribs
made breathing sharp.

She smiled to think of Johnnie
fending for himself among
the rowdy, whiskey drinking Scanlons.

If this little flax seed wears dresses
her name will be Anna.

There won't be cousins for awhile,
maybe never, but John promised
a brood to be proud of, and a cottage,

maybe Connecticut. There,
even the Irish can get jobs
laying heavy steel track, and black ties.

She watched the circling terns,
heard their white cries
as men sliced cod flesh off bones
and threw egg sacks back to the ocean.

He barely made it home
before turbulent rains began
eroding snow on winter slopes. Creeks
gorged, timbers stressed. A trestle
collapsed on the Missoula-Butte line
and my grandfather's engine
heaved into the rocky stream
hissing and spitting steam. Tons
of river water exploded up the canyon,
two men dead. Grandpa
was sick at home.
Fevered, feisty, he almost
took the call,
he'd never missed. Grandma made a fist,
shoved her man back into bed,
told the messenger to find another.
This engineer was staying home.
Grandpa always thanks his
Irish blood-luck for bad fish
he ate in a back alley cafe.

Grandpa's Arms

6

Grandma's humming
in the kitchen. Grandpa holds
me sideways in his arms, and sings
"Rock-a-bye baby" until the bough
of his lap breaks and I roll
onto Grandma's thick rose rug,
again, again, until his old man's arms
fall numb. A short tumble
from his branched knees
to the floor, but the distance
in my mind's wild apple tree
grows huge. Forty years he's dead
and still I practice flying away
like the swallows
in my parents' yard. I swing
from the cradle,
try to learn the feeling
of leaving.

I.

Sweet water splashes my face.
Crouched, I look for darting fish
among the pools. Mom balances
on a log, ducks branches low over the stream.
She swings a pole, red fly skipping
above the water. Small in her shadow,
I stand still as a pine tree.

A golden speckled trout, sun radiating,
leaps after the feathered hook.
Mom's green flannelled arm swiftly lifts
the surprised fish into air,
out of the moving body of water.

II.

Past our campfire, under the creosote soaked
trestle, young Belmont Creek, birthplace
of cutthroat and bull trout, rolls on.
Gravity forces her into muddy
Blackfoot River, through rainbow
caverns. Logs ride her
to the Clarkfork's Bonner dam.

Lost in Clarkfork waters our stream
grows old, almost dies, before oozing
through Missoula. Packing plant,
movie theater, the rough dives
on Front street empty their guts
into her living body.

III.

Our campsite near Belmont's mouth
rests as far from town as a child's
mind can wander. A wild forest
begins on the other side
of the creek where the black bear cub
stood on the bank this morning
and peeked into my tent. Mom dips
her long handled cup deep. Sweet
water takes away my thirst. Mint
mingles with pine scent, camp fire
smoke, Dad's thick coffee, fried fish
lingers in our canvas tent. I fall
asleep listening to water.

That 'Growing Up' pamphlet with cartoon
drawings of uterus and ovaries
lay concealed among the panties
in my dresser. Mom told me to read
it, two years before the hot
June I crept around in toilet paper
and blue jeans. Peggy and I whispered
as we pulled blades of grass
under the apple tree.
We both knew a little something
about blood, but not how
to talk to moms. Hers was dizzy
with six kids and evening rosaries.
Mine, napping on the couch,
her back to the room. After three days
I faced her, asked for help.
She looked as though I'd come a stranger
to the back door, holding out my hand
for a sandwich. "I'll be late
for the doctor. Here, use this."
Her eyes flashed warnings. Don't
come near. Don't ask questions.
I could not find the oasis
in her eyes. I could not read
the fear between her words. I felt
the desert surround us.
I didn't know
she was dying--
she didn't tell me that, either.

1

Prayer was measured by its length--
a good one was short and rare.
We stood with heads bowed, stomachs
rumbling. The pastor's tones rose
and fell, a flood of words
rode dust through sun's
filtered air. Knees locked against
a fall, I counted tiles
on the floor and wall.

2

Bedtime prayers. Mom taught
'now I lay me' and 'our Father'--
basic as brushing teeth.
I always remembered
to pray--before a trip to the dentist,
cavities burning holes
through my gums.

3

One July night on our knees
behind a tree
my sister and I watched
through the living room window.
The group gathered around our mother
their hands on her head.
Pastor Graff raised his black Bible
high, eyes closed tight, his other hand
at the bottom of the pile,
then his wife, Elder MacKenzie, and papa
looking like he'd taken a dare.

4

Every night I prayed for it
to go away until
I fell asleep. Non-stop--the way
I prayed for a pony
when I was ten. Then I'd ride in a car
through country with my family,
ponies everywhere, all colors.

Just one palomino, flaxen
mane shining in the sun.
Please, God, just one, waiting
when I get home. Please, God,
make her well, make it go away.

One August Sunday the pastor
preached about a mother
who could not live.
Her family asked God
to take her with Him.
That night
I changed my prayer.

CATAclysm

11

"Yellowstone Quake Shakes Missoula"
The Daily Missoulian, August 18, 1959

Even mountains fall sometimes.
Granite shifts. Cracks rip
through inner earth
like cancer. A cliff tumbles
into a lake, slides over a campground.
Twenty-nine people, entombed.

The upper bunk shook me awake.
I crawled down the ladder,
balanced bare feet
on the rocking floor, stumbled
toward light
spilling from the kitchen.
Aunt Amy faced father,
just returned from his hospital vigil.
Dad swayed in the entrance
hanging onto the door frame,
shaking tears side to side.

I slipped away.
For a few more hours,
I could pretend I didn't know
he cried. I dreamed
mother took us on a picnic.
My sister and I waded, caught frogs
in a muddy pond and Mom
ate a pill for cancer.

Oxfords circling on hardwood
woke me. I listened
to his feet pound the floor
for hours, black shoes polished,
round face set
long and sober, his mouth
straight. The August sunshine
expanded the air in my room
until I nearly suffocated
and I knew I must rise
to hear my father's news.

Double Death

12

When Grandma died, mama
dressed me right
for the funeral. A new black hat
and shiny strapped shoes
matched the black jacketed dress
she sewed overnight.
I think mama might have died
again if she knew I wore
the gauzy white confirmation
dress, with its field of pink flowers--
the one she sewed that spring--
to her summer funeral.

Straight from the bottle, the first slug
of Dad's vodka touches
my toes, sends lightning
between my legs. The black
house sleeps. Dad's car key, cold steel
in my hand, doesn't jingle.
Crushed into my pocket
his wife's cigarettes
beckon escape.

Doors click, slide, thud, close
quietly, and I'm out. The air
smells like bouquets
of red roses.

The '58 Olds, pink
as a prom dress, looms
in the moonlight. Gravel pops
under tires, steel bars
shatter. Steering wheel leather
warms in my hands.
I make a wide right turn, stop
at the light, concentrate
on the left turn in front
of the cruising patrol car.

With heat from the vodka tingling
I climb by Damon's house, glide
up the road on his hill, no lights
anywhere. He wouldn't even dream
that I would watch the valley
with him, and taste
his honeyed charm. Serious
little miss journalist,
wallflower, highschool nerd, goody-two-shoes
out teaching herself to drive
in her policeman dad's car without
consent would shock him into paying
attention. Parked in moon shadows

across from his house
I think if I were blond
and thin with iris blue eyes
I would tap on his window,
invite him out for ripe strawberries
dipped in real smooth, dark chocolate.
I light a cigarette, blow smoke
in the mirror, choke
and irritated eyes drip salt
onto my lips. Maybe it's my little sister
that makes me take this boat back
and park it. Lucky for me

she's there, I don't have
a house key. I tap
on our window, she promises
not to tell. I breathe air thick
with smoke, and the smell
of my step-mother's old pekingnese.

Even with four lanes and cement walls
I can't cross this pass in any weather
without thinking of my father.
Tires skid a little on gravel
and the car feels as though
it will spring cat-like
over the barrier. Don't know for sure
where he hung balanced
against a tree limb
and a snow-covered mountainside,
hip shattered, station wagon teetering
full length over a canyon floor
one thousand feet below.
Even in dry summer daylight
this sharp grade
makes me clutch the wheel. Back then--
middle of the night, mid-winter--
he had no clear reason
for being there when some nervous driver
on the two-lane snake of a highway stole
the middle, crowded him off the edge,
kept going. Pain
and no doubt whiskey
kept him alive for hours
frozen over the side, listening
to the screech of pumas
on the border.
A semi driver saw his headlights
against the trees.
Gasoline fumes mingled with booze.
He waited. Prayer?
Dad gave up in '59
when Mom died.
Until then he sat at the kitchen table
dressed in his policeman's blues, hat on,
head bent over the Bible waiting
for his squad car ride
to work. One shotglass at a time
he buried that life. Maybe by 1967
the prostitutes in Wallace looked good.
He never did say why
he drove ninety miles in January night,
what kind of emptiness
pulled him up over that greasy
snow-packed bitch of a road.

A distant train screeches
onto a siding, a freight
lumber by. Rumbles echo
the foothills in my mind.

Grandmother rocked me
on her lap, on the weathered steps
beside her house, her arms
wrapped around my body.

"Grandma, why don't you have a grandpa,
like my other grandma?"

"Little one, you wouldn't
understand. Lord
knows, I don't get it yet, myself."

"Didn't you ever have a grandpa?"

Grandma squeezes my shoulders.
"Night was coming, the wind
blew so hard
the windows shook. I was restless--
Your mama still inside
my tummy, kicking hard, tired
of darkness.

I stood in my kitchen cooking stew, watching
the tracks. Your grandpa should
come walking home that way.
The five o'clock whistle
had blown and he always stopped
for just one beer at the Union club. He said
the hot air of that mill made him thirsty."

Grandma stops talking.
Her warm breath stirs
the part in my hair.
"Dust blew like the dickens.
I saw a man walking through it,
and the train passing him.
He fell under its wheels."

I wove my fingers through hers,
made her sing again.
I had more questions, but I wanted
her happy. In a breathy voice
she almost sang, "London bridge
is falling down"
and the song about waiting for her lover
under the apple tree.

The train whistle rises above the hills.
My blood throbs to Celtic strains,
of pipe and horn, ancestral sounds,
and the passing train's music
echoes in my brain.

Grandfather Moon lived more than fifty years
the throttle warm in his rosy hands.
He wrote his own song
when he was twelve. In two years
his trains screeched
into gold camps, cities, ghost towns,
through a whole long life, then gone.

Grandfather Nimocks worked at the mill
in heat and dust pulling
rough lumber off the green chain
with his leathered hands.
He carried his lunch pail along
the tracks, wind stirring the few hairs
on his head. I wonder if my grandpas knew
each other--one waving from the cab
of his engine, the other dragging
what was left of himself
home through cinders and dirt.
Albert was his name. Before my mother
was born he slipped under the wheels
of a train.

Still, the full moon's load
of grandfathers' dust
pays the minstrel trains
through wind, rain, and this vein of blood.

Tyrannasaurus Rex, cumulus, becomes an engine,
an eagle swoops down, a child
picks daisies, clouds float by.
White puffs, wispy tails change shapes,
colors spin in revolving sunsets of the mind.
His hand rules the engine
sending shapes out over mountain passes,
down the valley floors.
Years mute the echo, screeching
tons of steel on steel,
pick up the steady scrape of brush
strokes on canvas.
Wheat on the framed prairie
bends with each labored breath,
tonight the farmhouse
has new spirit.
What moves in that second story window?

Their ashes lie scattered on the mountain.
White tail deer browse on winter's leafless
shrubs, safe, tan, anonymous.
Calm, nearly unseen, they glance
my way, then resume eating. Teeth pull
native grasses which lie dormant
among bits of bone and dust.
Tails wag, ears twitch, all senses alert
as they step slowly over richer ground.

Just three months ago we shared fresh crab legs
on the balcony over white sand with her.
Sea gulls screamed by, demanded
their share. Rhythmic ocean waves
lulled our minds. Her grandchildren struggled
with wild eyed dragon kites, blond hair
whipping in the wind. They pulled
string over hardened sand, dodged stranded
jelly fish, made friends. We watched
and sipped a dry white wine
he would have liked, and toasted
their nearly fifty years together. A single rose
marked their anniversary.

Her eyes glistened
as she spoke of him sitting
at the ocean's edge, listening.
It fascinated his mind, but his soul
stayed in the mountains.
She had sent his ashes home
without her, but not for long.
Now they both shine out
with morning frost. Prisms of light
bounce off that mountain, fill my eyes
with their radiance.

Sharing the Dance

Morning sand glitters against water,
glistening beneath the sky.
They pale beside the intense blue
worlds of your eyes.
You laugh
with a little secret
and I know the hands cupped
behind your back
hold mischief.
You reveal a horned toad,
eyes full, then closed, full again
as it looks back at us.
He is the first horned lizard I've seen.
I wonder, are we his first people? Innocent,
none of us seems to know
that by nature he should be reviled
and squirt blood at us through
those lazy eyes. Calmly, he senses
gentleness. I stroke his supple armor,
and even at twenty
I envy his skin's silky valleys.
He crouches, elbows tucked into his body,
clawed feet resting in your hands
as though even he knows your steady strength.

Released, he moves slowly to a rise
of brown stone. His tongue darts out,
snatches a fly, curls back, mouth
vanishes beneath the airholes
of his nose.
I would watch the toad
sun himself all morning
but he slides out of sight
between sandstone cracks.
I'm already thirsty for the canteen,
and for you. We shade ourselves
under a white flowering yucca,
in this first campsite of our married life.
Dew drips from the petals,
mingles with our sweat, seeps salty
then sweet, into our mouths.
Sand stirs beneath our feet,
waves lick the nearby shore.
We don't ever want to leave this place.

I kneel on rock and sand
at the Blackfoot's edge, splash
my face. Early morning air
whispers over the river
and up under the hair
on my neck. I feel ready
to waken my baby, Carmen,
snuggled in the tent with her dad.
Sunlight bounces off the ripples.
A salmon fly lands on my sweater.
Startled, I turn, flick
it back into the breeze. That's when
I see them, buffalo,
watching me from the shadows of pine.
I do not know how long
they stood there, hock deep
in river water. The bull is shaggy,
dark brown, mottled. He wades
between a cow and calf.
The cow whips her tail a couple
times as she measures my size
or truth against the river's width.
They turn all at once and clamber
into the forest. I try to explain
these buffalo. Unaware, unhurried,
they are already one hundred years overdue.

Black faces look back
through the battered stock rack.
Bleating calls muffle
as aged mothers
join their young.

Chased into corners,
caught by knotty wool
on necks and rumps, they're hoisted,
arms linked under bellies,
into the back of the truck.

Ewes stare out unwavering.
The farmer ducks her head,
years of frozen Februaries and midnight
birthings spinning through her mind.

The ewe led by a hand tucked
under chin circles in warmth
from a heat lamp. Grunts turn
to maternal coaxing. She baahs softly
to still unborn children.

Black bodies plop slimy onto clean straw
while mother licks them head
to ropy tail and nickers. Steam rises.
The farmer rubs these prizes
all over with turkish towel, cuts
cords, and dips
them in iodine.

The woman rolls
the heavy old ewe onto her back,
places struggling infants on the bag,
and squeezes colostrum into their mouths.
Her fingers guide
slippery tit into slippery lips.
Sheep urine and dripping milk,
a new lamb steams.
Lanolin softens her hands.

Now baahing sheep bump
down the driveway.
The farmer puts away old ropes,
and wraps her fingers in twine tied
bundles of wool hung in the shed.

She stands by the mirror,
smooth like silk, a swan,
one foot flat, the other pointed,
hooking the rail, arms stretched
and torso snug against her body.
Tights define strong legs in control
as she swings her leg straight
behind her.

I sit in the audience of mothers
and other fans, watching this
graceful cygnet of mine. Tension
aches in my throat
as she curls up, fetus like,
waiting at floor's center.

Enya's beat and melody rise above
the studio, and my daughter unfolds,
stretches her arms to the ceiling.
She circles the room in gentle leaps, each
one the flight and return to earth
of a powerful creature, strong,
controlled. Momentum increases. The arcs
give way to bursts of speed
running from corner to corner, terror driven.

In my child's body I see power
and torment. The spotlight's dark shadow
chases her. She stops, sinks
to her knees, doubles forward,
backward, then rises to leap
again, running from the darkness.

Standing tall she turns
to face the thing behind her.
As the last note lingers, she bends
and smiles, pleased with her own dance.
All the uncaged breath
flows freely from my lungs.

Music vibrates in the family room,
the house shudders,
footbeats quaking up the walls
to our bedroom. Our daughter dances,
leaps then spins and splits, thin
in the mirror, muscles hard as the oak
frame. Slap, slide, thud, her feet
make their own counter melody.

A famous anorexic in the news today,
found in her closet
beneath too-narrow clothing.
We imagine the sound
of scraping hangers, the moans
of her parents, the silence.

Rigid, we link arms in bed, ears straining,
united against sleep. Lights out, eyes
open, we lock fingers into each other's palms
and concentrate. Breath in, breath
out, toes curled, uncurled,
like when she learned to walk
or like teaching her to ride
her bike when she was four. She was
electrified by her power to move
alone, without us. Breath in, breath
out, flex the knees, loosen diaphragms.

Our speakers can't hide the squeal
of the sticky kitchen drawer. We listen
as though a burglar let the door thud
or dropped a wrench. We listen
between thumping heartbeats
for choke, and flush. Tonight
she will fill her emptiness
with peanut butter, or crackers,
or canned oysters until she catches sight
of herself, huge in any sliver
of glass. The music rocks louder
and I jump in place, almost
asleep. His snore
rattles heavy beside me,
weighs down the darkness.

Tigers spring from brush
Into sight, tawney against
Golden mountains, forelegs
Extended, galloping animals' muscled haunches
Ripple, power
Sending alarm waves.

Tigers disappear into ravines, re-emerge,
Indigenous elusive creatures of my dreams.
Goliath cats prowl near my sleeping house,
Enemies of my cloistered sheep.
Rams thicken lowered necks, ewes and lambs
Seek protection.

Tigers slam against windows
Inspiring confusion; inharmonious roaring
Generates comprehension.
Engaging in their night's hunt
Requires my presence,
Substitute sheep.

Tigers' snarling awakens me,
I listen, heart rattles ribbed chest.
Grimly I remember the bedtime search
Enough to probe flattened fingers against my breast,
Reviewing again the familiar terrain.
Somewhere left of nine o'clock the tip of one small lump.

You and I head home
on this same country
road again. Like our marriage
it feels safe, familiar.
Fence posts glide by,
deer eyes shine.
A wide eyed racoon leads
babies into the brush.
A horned owl swoops past our
lights, stars hover close
to black peaks.
Tonight the road changes,
the car takes us away,
like children, we stray.

Across the river,
ripples glisten. We listen
as tires hum a low bass tune.
One hand guides
the steering wheel,
the other caresses.
A pine forest opens,
quaking aspen nestle
at road's end.

My daughter broke a boy's nose in the sixth grade
for stealing her friend's books.

I counselled discretion,
but baked a cake.

She was always tough. She fell
straight onto her head from the swing set bars
when she was two. I held my breath,
waited for the scream
that never came.

She pushed herself up from the ground,
shook her toddler's body, hoisted
herself onto the A-frame
cross bar, grabbed
the top bar,
and swayed hand over hand, six feet above ground,
then swung by her knees on the opposite
end, down the other side.

Tough as silk, she's a model, a dancer,
a musician, born wild, and gentle.
She coaxes the best of Mendelssohn
out of the needy piano
in our library.

I am the woman who sits back, quiet, wishing
for pizzaz of my own. And now
I hang up the phone.

I feel like I am sliding off the roof in a rainstorm.
She tells me she's driving off to Salt Lake
to become a baptized Mormon.

Good women in Utah wear cotton under
pinnings, bear large families,
kneel before their husbands, keep
their mouths shut, while their men prepare
for the next world.

I pull myself up in my own yard
and prepare to learn new wisdom.
I must learn the tightrope balance of a mother
who watches the ropes
while her child takes off one hundred feet
above ground. I stay connected
to her life. I keep the nets
strong below.

My daughter Tana straightens "ones"
pulled from her pockets,
stacks quarters, tells me
about her day.
One man's well-done steak

done too well. He had
to have another,
his wife
had another, too.
A fat man's salad

came too close to the meal,
he refused it. She brought
him a large piece of chocolate
pie for dessert, made him
happy. He tipped well.

We talk. The cat at our feet
meows for fresh milk,
a taste of our chicken.
Plastic wrapped leftovers
wedge into our fridge,

somehow we make room.
With time to relax, we share
the newspaper. A story
about a master trivia tournament
commands attention, but we turn

the page. There we find
a Sommalian woman lying
in the road with her child,
skin stretched over bone,
one arm props the infant's

shoulders above the road's dust,
the other reaches out.
The woman's dark eyes
fill the page
like small black worlds

where 'food' is a foreign
word, babies die
in the street.
Tana's eyes lock onto mine.

This daughter of a dead cousin
sits in a jail cell sick
of orange coveralls.
"Listen, it'll only take
two hundred fifty dollars
to get me out." Her words
rattle the receiver.
She wrote enough rubber
to travel low class
from Missoula to Tallahassee
in a mid-summer heat
designed for two,
three kids
stuffed in the back seat
of her late mother's 280-Z.
Shove a bottle in each mouth,
change diapers
once a day
if it works out. Who cares
about cribs and clothes
left behind? Every town has a Salvation Army.
Panhandlers with their cardboard signs
and puppies down at the corner don't
know how to work
people like a mother
using her children
for door openers, meal tickets.
The parade of men
she picked up like numbered ducks
off some carnival midway.
The prize she took
riding next to her in the front seat
glowers from the courthouse wall,
the mall, the post office. Wherever
you look
you'll see him with his list
of dubious accomplishments
and \$20,000 bond. The corn
in my garden grew overripe
and went to seed
while I cleaned out the house
she abandoned. Her cat
had a litter
in the closet while I pulled nails
out of walls.
Now she claims she planned to return,
to make restitution, that the law
had no business taking away her family, and besides,
it's not her fault
that her ex-husband tipped off the cops.
Outside my window, blanched cornstalks
rustle in the wind.

"Fish is my favorite, cooked or raw"
says my friend, one eye slightly askew,
the other locked on mine. "Texture
is the critical issue. Can't
taste a thing
since firing that bullet
through my eye and brain."

"You're lucky you don't get sick" I say,
straightening the napkin
at my place. The timbre of her voice
turns brittle. "Listen, friend, I don't believe
in chance." One eye is serious
as sudden thunder and the other,
the glass one, stares askance.

Suppose the lattice arbour
that rises above the baby's
breath and bachelor buttons
in my neighbor's garden
should become something useful,
a gateway. With kelly green
bells ringing the edges,
cedar sweet, and laced with sunshine,
it would open into an island,
sheltered, safe. Friends
could reveal fears,
there secret lives, without peril,
or shout celebrations
in wild orange frankness,
like poppies, or air out abuses
for the sun to heal.
In my world, like my neighbor's,
that rusty-red arch stands decorative,
among the black-eyed Susans.

One phone call screams
into the country night, scatters
dreams. A friend is drunk, he's wrecked
his car. He wants to die.

We rub fog from our eyes. Twelve
miles of road, a curse,
its black rope stretches

in front of us. My daughter
drives wild, as though animals
don't jump out of ditches. Eyes
shine in darkness on all sides
and I pray they stay put
because she's not slowing down,
it's her friend's life.

The car jacks
and pops, and slides to a stop
outside his house. We rush in
with hugs, and kiss his stubbled
face. He's troubled, doesn't
understand why we
help a wreck like him.
He's ashamed of the mess he's in.
She gathers knives, screwdrivers,
antifreeze, sends them away
with me. He says we're only
scratching the surface
and I believe him. Our attempt
to save his life is an exercise.

On the slow drive back home
a young buck leaps
out of the ditch, twists toward barbed-
wire fence and back again into
headlights. He staggers down
the highway, imprisoned
by the glare in his eyes. His head

is smooth, tense, exposed. I wish
the animal would spring
off the road, go back and stay
in the shelter of willow thickets
and bunch grass. I stop my car
until he's safely out of way, but
that's all I can do.

A Near and Distant Seeking

A normal boss
would have said no
to his freight train blown hair,
the ragged beard. His eyes crackled
red and brown as almonds after a night
in the oven, when he spoke
about his last job--
two good years of scrubbing
between milk and meat in a kosher
retirement home and they liked
his cooking. All of that wiped out
by hepatitis,
a dirty bar glass in LaConnor.
The silver cricket in his ear
bobbed up and down
when I gave him the job.

With bacon for one hundred
sizzling a smokey kind of blues,
and bread dough thumping
'round and around, we played
our own strange harmony.
He spoke of oils, canvasses,
while zucchini for minestrone
flew to pieces
under his French knife.
Apron tied at his waist
he swept the floor, singing,
the bells on his shoes jingling.
My spatula slapped the grill,
muffled cymbal ringing.

The last time we spoke
he'd traded his knives
for a garage studio
in San Francisco, where he climbed
through a window, quarters
not meant for living.

for Dennis

On the ski trail
I met a teacher
who knows Ivan
from back when he was a forester
and the man
was a summer helper.
He said Ivan
was a good man.
They worked trails--
sawed out fallen
logs, shored up crumbling
retaining walls,
shared plenty of sweat.
Ivan laughed till his false
teeth fell out
when they could not
stand up straight
on a patch of muddy trail
and had to crawl,
hands and knees in slick
gumbo. That was thirty
years ago and now I cook
for Ivan in a retirement home.
The skier planned to come soon
to see his old boss.
Always polite, last night
Ivan stopped by--
told me not to set
his place for dinner. Instead
he pushed his chair
to the elevator, cane
in hand, then to the sixth
floor balcony.
An evening smoker
spotted him bent over
dead center
in an evergreen hedge below,
looking as though
he had found one last
patch of forest.

Through the barbed wire gate
of the camp at Birkenau,
across railroad tracks,
squats a village. There are no fences,
sheep are tethered along streets.

Inside the enclosure a motorcycle
pulls a small mower,
between long row after row
of paint chipped barracks.
Women follow the mower,

pitch forks scooping
the grass to a wagon.
High mounds of hay roll
through the exit
to feed the sheep of Poland.

Sheep rest as sweat rolls
off the backs
of the raking women,
fills the creases
of their faces.

Warm dust clouds settle
on the homes
and shops of the village.
The mower wipes dust
from his face and neck,
sips water from a canteen,
resumes mowing. No time for rest,

trainloads of knee high grass
will take all summer.
No time for rest.

Russian Recruits
Vilnius Lithuania, June 1989-January, 1991

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The news this week runs together in red
streams. War shreds Baghdad,
lives in Russia's Baltic
states are on edge, songs
of independence fill funeral halls.
Pictures of flower covered caskets
in Vilnius bring back to mind
new recruits catching
bouquets on a Russian train.

Two steps at a time they race
up through the station's narrow stairway,
their young boy faces grinning,
their newly sheared heads almost gleaming
in the dim light of this yellowed room.
Fifty boys throw themselves
into hardwood chairs, like sacks
of grain, slouched, waiting.
Old-man army uniforms hang
like cloths draped on the future--thin frames
promise to fill the baggy clothing,
soon. A sargent tends his soldiers, patient
as any father. Girls across the room
giggle, look over their shoulders, whisper.

Venders sell cheese pastries
along the tracks, their ice cream
long gone. Sun glints on the tracks
as people in suits and peasant clothes
cross the rails, walking all directions.
They carry brief cases, babies, and mixed
bouquets of flowers. Fifty young men hoist
olive-green packs onto a train,
bound for Moscow. Girls wave
and throw bouquets through open windows
as the Russian engine grinds
out of town. Boys smile
and grab at air. Uncaught
red flowers wilt on the empty track.

At the Ponceon on the Lido a cherub pees
into the mouth of a whale. We walk around
and around, watch the silver
and orange carp dart among the fountain's
underwater greenery into the whale's
belly. Breezes off the Adriatic
play notes up my spine, a slow harmony
rises as waves lap ancient mortared stones.
He is charmed by the size, the colors
of those fish. Another tourist
takes our picture, as we lean
against the pond's stone wall.
Gondoliers pass silently on the Grand
Canal, and I imagine them singing
operatic arias in tenors rich as hand
blown red crystal, basses booming replies,
as men vie for dazzling women.
Just the two of us snuggled in a gondola
gliding under the bridge of sighs
would be nice, but he chuckles and counts
the thousands of lira he saves
as we clamber onto the crowded
water taxi. I rummage for soda crackers
in my purse, and he counts the rolls of film
he still plans to buy. In the distance
I hear the blue-gray notes
of coins clinking into the whale's
vast gullet.

Twelve black-robed men and women,
red cowls draped around shoulders,
stride through the iron gates
of Trinity College. Stone walls
reflect ninety-five degrees
Fahrenheit. Each carries
a vanilla ice-cream cone, white
glistening white. They stroll
down the middle
of the cobblestone street,
past the banks and the booksellers,
into a future where at least
the pleasure of sweet
chilled cream is certain.

In the month larch turn to rust
a wild wind blows snowflakes sharp
as arrows out of the Bitterroot mountains
into the Lake Como valley. Mary and I
pull hats out of day packs and zip coats
higher, but search on, slipping through mud
of a drawn down reservoir. We yearn
for one shard, one petrified remnant
of ten thousand years of human

habitation. Willows rising up along the inlet
weave thoughts of game baskets, cozy
by the fire, notched bones rolling
across a hearth. We're startled
by a pair of herons, huge wings
beating hard, up from wine
colored bushes. Swirling kestrels
eye the shrunken lake. A king fisher
studies the choppy water
as we explore the extended

shore. The muddy lake floor
yields only a wiry fish line
and a broken green lure. We talk
about our children. Jesse asks Mary
about creation, about that one week
when the land and light and all creatures
and humans came into being, breathing,
before God took a day of rest.

Now the wheedling wind
coaxes our words away. Waving
branches scrape like bones. We sense
voices trying to break through
the noise. Closer to the shore
we hear or feel their presence.
Trees crack--seven notches.
Leaves rustle--laughter
in the wind. Birds swirling--
where're the fish?

Tires and engine strum a monotone,
years come, years go,
and again we drive
eighty miles roundtrip,
after a box of McIntosh apples.
Mountain ranges curve upward
on either side, surrounding
patchwork fields of wheat
and third cutting alfalfa.
Bitterroot mountain peaks arch visibly
into the tangible sky,
sharper than their partner range
across the valley. Trailheads everywhere.
Today we enjoy the beauty
from a distance. Still warm enough
to have windows down,
we hear red-wing blackbirds
sing "who-wee-who?" in their
dried cat-tail marshes. A hawk flies
over the wind shield, talons
dangling a water snake.
Squashes and pumpkins
poke orange bodies out
from withering vines.
Quaint old houses
are scattered among farms
and the apple orchards.
Eighty miles. Eighty miles
times thirty years--
those apples are still worth the trip.

Their hooves glide in light waves
above ground. They vanish and the world's mouth
swallows them. One rigid windmill
breaks the expanse of grass.
Following, I drive toward a junction,
sky of universe, infinite prairie.

Pronghorns pierce the frozen air as prairie
reveals distant antelope. Each tail waves
rhythmically, marking the junction
as legs drum the rock-hard soil. Every mouth
plumes frost as ringed necks rock above grass,
pumping the sage like paddles of a windmill.

Stillness. Nothing flows into the windmill
but the sun's rays. Tracks frozen into prairie
canvas are deposits of a warmer season when grass
shimmered in brown waves--
it bent the way antelope hair blown by God's mouth
stands and lies flat. This is heaven and earth's junction.

A coulee forms a junction
between the horizon and the world beyond the windmill.
Beneath my feet the ground slopes away and a canyon's mouth
opens taking with it the prairie.
Mild interest becomes excited waves
as fluid as whipped grass.

This valley is vast, but not bottomless. Its grass
floor grazes cattle near two rivers' junction.
Creatures splash the farthest banks, sending waves
like signals. Messages windmill
up from this kingdom's depths as though prairie
chicken had startled, each mouth

filled with grain, each grain a thought. I mouth
surprised words into air, as grass
ruffles across the prairie.
On the other side of this ravine desire's junction
with vision sets into motion a windmill,
propels my hope in silent waves.

A homely plain waves, and through its mouth
desire rises on a windmill. Antelope bound above grass
toward a junction, buoyant denizens of the prairie.

Silver threaded black jumpsuit, spike heels,
and Barbie Doll hair become a real person
inside the Silver Bar and Grill.
She pays for a burger to go
and forecasts a rare
weekend off. She will travel sixty miles
to Spokane, hasn't been out of town
for a long, long time. The floor
sinks toward the counter
where she stands, and my one Budweiser leans
that direction through the haze
from the bar.

Men play pool in work clothes
of miners. Balls sink
into called for pockets
and the T.V. drones on, ignored.
Despite the racket
this place with its thick turkey on rye,
potato salad on the side, three tables,
and working women settles on me
like the smell of baking bread.
Mingling of heat and coolness
between the sweaty grill tender
and the pancake-face-powdered patron
creates light in the dingy room.
A kid walks in, opens
his hand, asks the cook
for ten bucks. He barely nods
at the real person,
ear tips glowing pink under
a bi-level haircut. Clutching bills
he joins a group outside.
The cook and customer commiserate
about the cost
of raising kids. Burger sack
held daintily in fuschia nailed fingers,
she swivels out the door,
spike heels tapping past
boarded windows through dust reflected red
and amber in I-90's retired
stop light. By the time she slides
out of sight into a hotel
by the alley I've already wished
her a good trip
and all the luck in the world.