

1977

# Home again

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*The University of Montana*

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HOME AGAIN

By

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B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 1974

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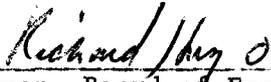
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1977

Approved by:

  
Chairman, Board of Examiners

  
Dean, Graduate School

11/2/77  
Date

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Some of these poems have been published or are forthcoming in:  
Cutbank, The Baratavia Review, The Hiram Poetry Review, Inlet,  
The New Orleans Review, The California Quarterly, and New Letters

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There's no gift for the dead, only the long roots growing, growing...

TALKING IT OVER

### The First Clear Act

Those were more than words that drove me gypsy.  
Your message came back uncanceled, except  
for the 'sorry', 'sorry', each star sings  
hard as sage in this man's prairie.  
Love gave out with the railroad  
miles away from Sacramento, or for that point,  
St. Joseph. I left that place more barren  
than an old woman. I left with an arsenal  
of violins. The grocer said, "Come back  
in twenty years, you'll do better."  
Like a lover I forgot the seasons.  
The weak stayed, faded into houses  
they call home. The weak live easily.  
There's something they know  
that we have forgotten. Our ears  
should be open to the broken phonograph,  
the town's silent music.  
Where in Kansas City is Stravinsky?  
I'm coming to life again.  
You'll receive this letter

from Montana where pain comes easy  
and the water's enough to get you drunk.

The View At Cedar Beach 1956

This photograph brings you back like the eyes of the newborn.  
There's Alfredo still fishing. Poor fool, forever  
tangled in his line. Waves lost their color  
and Maria's hat faded to nothing. That's how lives  
develop. They're depending on the pier.  
To one side, a gull nibbles at a squid Alfredo  
counted on. Maria, a little dream, motionless.  
She loved him for the odds and ends fished  
out of his sweater. She loved his lean cold body  
smelling of sea. Not even the crease across her shoulder  
can change that.

We Who Need Sorrow

When, around nine, night falls hard as buckshot,  
the smoking stars, the cigarettes,  
glow in the inexhaustible sky. Drunk,  
in the folding chair, you give yourself entirely  
to the gramophone. The radiant sprinkler  
runs on in the dark. At the Arcadia Ballroom,  
mad eyed girls dance till their breath is gone.  
Boys talk cars and wait for the right moment  
to lead or follow. It's warm in Omaha,  
there's music. Walking in his necktie,  
Tony Sorrentino hums Tuxedo Junction, then  
thumbs the highway blue for Eileen. It's  
strange to love. You wind up talking to the moon.  
If pears could be dreams, you're holding an opal.  
Every song brings back Astronomy. God knows  
the stars keep singing and your sons will learn  
to drink. The gold time piece you'll give  
to the oldest, and for the young one  
you'll go deaf a hundred times.

Talking It Over

I remember how he poured cement, shaped this pavement  
from simple religion. He was finished when 'it felt right',  
when he traced his initials, hard and irrevocable.  
That's all changed--the sidewalk and the weeds,  
the elm tree twice its size.

We make good memories for ourselves. From the bones  
of old houses, I give you the window, this glass  
where faces and names converge to hold us blinded  
in a world shaped by the world.

I remember how he poured a drink, then coughed at the stars  
on the screendoor. Again and again I hear his laughter.  
Like an old piano, he kept to himself the darkest notes.  
When he left, he left three bottles and a week's news  
on the front porch.

### Bad Weather

I'm forty miles from someone's town  
driving through driving rain,  
trying to forget the world's forever.  
Goodbye to the gutters dark and deep  
with leaves, goodbye to Aunt Agnes  
and small schoolhouse pranks.  
I hope the phone keeps ringing.  
I'm clear out of answers.

The radio died last week, this tune  
will have to do. There's a beer  
every ten miles and the highway  
might never run out. Not like  
Jane and the reverend's son--  
took off in the middle of a dream.

Whatever I felt has gone to rain  
and trees pass by like empty words.  
It's twenty to one and at two  
I cross the county line. The map's  
thick with lines and towns  
with other colors.

## Landscapes

Near my home the trees flow northward  
with the river broken by farms gentle  
and green. Each morning opens like a window  
of bright manzanita. In the doorway  
of my father's house, I stand between  
my body and the body of the land.  
In the shadow under the elder tree,  
a bluejay nods like any bluejay does.  
The river, loosely strung, seems to descend  
from the picture on my wall. Downstream,  
in shallow water, fish are lying in pockets  
with a sandy bottom. Soon they're taking  
nymphs beneath the surface, humping water  
toward the invisible. There's only my voice  
no longer heard and the stars darkening  
one by one. The spines of night fish  
stay intact, indifferent, they know  
only regret, the shifting of bones.

### Years Later

The front porch is fallen in with disease  
grown so big and so close to the prisoner  
in the glass wiped clean--cataracts removed  
by dreaming. Behind the silence  
in the rootcellar, insects hum in bottles.  
Dark crickets that sang of night.  
In the deep places where it is quietest,  
mice make nests out of hair, onions  
sprout shoots like fingers waiting  
to embrace you. Something waits  
for me as I come bending low.

**THE AFFAIR**

## Fasting

The old man on the train says he's a vegetarian.  
His head bends over from its own weight. I talk  
of the Fulton Fish Market, of eels we threw  
in the frying pan. They tried to hop out  
skinned and headless. He holds his breath.  
Something comes between us like glass.

Across the aisle a woman falls behind a crumpled newspaper,  
nothing but sad reviews. The waiter rubs the polished bowl  
of a spoon and looks out the window.

Still, this old man is silent as gauze. If he goes beyond breath  
his voice will escape and open around him. Then his hands  
resemble the bodies of fish and summer flies remind him  
it's August.

Directions To A Local Bar

Despite appearances, despite hard lines  
and mad cartography, this is not a topographical  
map. This is a barroom mirror with faces.  
How easily the blonde from Cincinnati  
ran out of luck. Tonight she remembers rain  
and traveling. Weather's the same,  
unpredictable. And who sees,  
against the roses, a pale photograph of Roberto Clemente?  
Not the drunk, two shot glasses away from the door,  
not the divorcee staring at the bruise on the wall.  
Maps have legends too, legends that measure continents,  
seas. In the late tide, a fisherman draws the moon  
floundering in his net. Here, the bartender  
pours a good drink and the world forgets.  
The dwarf leans his chair back on two legs  
and state workers lie to their wives.  
Eddie Moran puts on his cap  
and the door closes quietly on air behind him.

Hound of Heaven

At this moment a man stands  
in the doorway across the street.  
He's shadowed me for the past week.  
His name is Gomez. He lives on stale toast  
and sour milk. In the darkness of night  
he unfastens his shoes.

The park is crowded with spectators. Fear  
keeps me cold. Police vans turn away  
and start in another direction. I am lost  
in their black shapes.

In the hallway I hear his hurried steps.  
Something reminds me of myself and I turn.  
It works like a prayer. Everywhere I look  
there is the movement of dreams.

### The Affair

When the liquor fails at two a.m.,  
he polishes his drink, draws  
some smoke, and leaves the bar  
feeling expensive. If the moon rakes  
through leaves curling by the roadside,  
if the small light dances on the ignition key,  
he doesn't notice. Three minutes down  
Lark Boulevard, his blue Desoto pulls  
to the curb. An evergreen gives birth  
to a dark tree. His mind drifts  
to a small stone hut where birds fly  
in and out the shuttered windows.

Coming To

The boy in the third row just fainted.  
No one knows why, no one understands  
the small secret lying on the floor.  
They're afraid he might stay in his dream  
alone. I'm the last to get up,  
the first to forgive. I climb inside  
the unknown boy and follow  
his faint trail of breath. When I find him,  
we hold each other's breathing. We hold  
roses, our bright red fists in the air.

Learning To Live In Missoula

While you wait for change, the cashier  
profits from simple girls ready to give.  
Wind rubs their knees for joy,  
years later divides the orchard.  
There's something to be said  
for the boy in the overcoat,  
thin with traveling. Who needs sorrow?  
Remember women you hated and loved.  
They required roses.

Winter was never so kind.  
Because you walk in those dark trees  
the man that was always there  
will love again. Roses are only  
roses. Stars demand another  
season. This much is clear.  
Our best was not enough.

Our Italian Neighbors Invite Us To

A Knights Of Columbus Meeting

Four of us by a candle. We were sitting there, talking, when people moved in. Maria, upset by anything, bowed her head to the table and wept. A house of poured cement, the walls expanded.

We shouted back and forth over scrubbed clams. There was a boy in the Navy, a cat on the window sill.

Maria's face wet with tears, Alfredo fed her pasta wiped her eyes.

I heard enough noise for my whole life. A man shook his beard, looked over the cat and out the window. Quietly, he said, "The Jersey Shore looks like the coast of Italy on an evening like this."

HOME AGAIN

Day Into Night

In some aging town, a gray woman,  
with the hands of a reptile, finds  
pain easy as turning on the faucet.  
There's a coleus she waters  
in the window. It grows rootbound--  
arthritic in a faint clay pot.  
It happens every day. Her husband  
finds another face in the mirror.  
He's learned the technology  
of old age. And if daylight forgets  
to leave, no problem. They simply  
draw the curtains and wait  
for night to sink in.

Cannon Beach

Rocks--old relics from the brisk  
Oregon coast. The sea--great winged  
and white carried right to my feet.  
Each wave deposits the small gift  
then quickly snatches it back.  
In the shoals infested with full  
beds of urchin, every delicate  
creature's a flower in itself.  
The ocean has the same intricacy  
as the sky, yet as I look into the waves  
they're dying and being replaced.

A Fine Day For Driving

You woke dreaming those glasses soft  
on the table. The one filled with lilacs  
and the empty one. Admit it, you were crazy  
for love. There's too much sorrow in Omaha.  
The road threads through hills easy to trust.  
The road could give a damn. Isn't it time  
to swerve toward the stars? Take  
the next turn for boyhood's sake.  
Every tree can be a passing memory.  
If the sky unfolds like an open net,  
if the wind complains, keep it to yourself.  
And no one, no one will know how you left  
without a word in your brown suit.

A Private Insanity

We turn out the lamps between earth  
and the stars, our eyes fold up  
like acrobats, muscular and tense.  
I dream you, you dream me.  
The windows so bright, and the nails  
in the roof. The moon, white  
on the backyard fence.  
In the dark we see with our fingers.  
Do you want to know how voices  
sing in the night? Put back the dust.  
Announce the stars, the death  
of stars, the history  
of all the stars.

### The Way Water Develops

Imagine you've never been here. I've left  
the curtains open, the cellar is filling  
with water. You overlook everything.  
The sky flies up in a swarm of black.  
"Anyone here?", you call, and pull  
the electric switch. Words are nothing more  
than currents of air. Slowly,  
you begin to climb.

Now your shadow curls over the stair. I wait  
to see if you try the locked room.  
"Nothing must change", I whisper.  
You will stay here. Everything must remain.

I have forgotten how to speak.  
It's all in the mind. Here, in the shell  
of bone, the skull, I take the key from the lock  
and push the door open. If the whole world  
came in I would not mind. If the whole world  
came in where would that leave me?

Breach of Faith

At the concert stand, early comers  
spread paper on the seats. The parents live  
their own lives--the children theirs.  
The sky will not collapse.

She wears an old evening gown and tragic brows.  
When it comes to music, he hears nothing.  
Her hair escapes to her shoulders.  
He tucks a cigarette behind his ear.  
She sings from a hymn book, Episcopal,  
and wishes she was dead. Only a faint  
trace of smoke sings from his nostrils.  
Voices fall to dust. The sky remains neutral,  
its emptiness hurts.

The Hang Glider

Half-man-half-  
whatever part of the man feels  
like an enormous bird posing  
as a kite. I am here  
with you on the hillside  
south of Missoula  
watching a stranger dance  
his heart out. Secretly  
I am alone.

In the empty nest  
we find body hair.  
My one free hand  
fingers it like a cunt.

Again he arcs, rising  
then pausing (who can deny  
the thrill) in his  
animate death.

Home Again

Alone, simply by wishing, I abandon myself  
to the darkened evergreen, to the house  
we moved from years ago. It rolls back  
in the cold grass. All I want is to dream  
my uncle asleep on the divan. Our livingroom's  
unfinished. The blades on the electric fan  
move like thought. And somewhere, far away  
in his room, my brother wanders  
through his stamp collection, one country  
at a time. When he brings his eyes back  
they're his own again. I'm ready to believe  
the almanac. I'm ready to believe young girls,  
the way the moon gravitates in their thighs.  
Sally Walker, you are right, no matter how wrong  
you might have been. I can see where the yard ends  
and those dark thickets of the hill begin.  
We live out there, whoever we are.

ONCE IN A BLUE MOON

## Once In A Blue Moon

Red neon lights blink the night away, splash into the rain-washed streets bright as they were when you were a kid. Remember how the gutters ran random with colors when your old man changed the oil in his '57 Desoto? Well, its happening all over again, only now the brush strokes are pure wild fire. A longing for old-fashioned stars reaches into the eyes of bums, prostitutes, everyone window shopping at 1 a.m., everyone dodging the rain, waiting in the bars for better weather.

On the last barstool in Seddy's Lounge, Xray Mc Gee talks with such emotion that his mustache flutters away from his lips like an alien bat gently beating its wings. The Apricot Brandy is taking effect. Almost unconsciously, Martha Topaz strokes Xray's mustache with her swizzle stick, then squeezes his hand, and quietly whispers, "Honey, when are we getting married?" Again Xray's mustache takes flight. A half-crazed jukebox grinds away, not your ordinary 12% tunes, but full 151 proof sound that swells like waves in everyone's ears. The cowboy on Martha's right side rocks back and forth with the tide. When the jukebox pauses, he falls to the floor sprawling like a spent swimmer. Martha begins to notice that there are others in the bar. She looks at the bottles behind the bar, then looks at them again in the mirror. They resemble the people around her. She tries to guess what each person is

drinking; tries to read their labels. Some of them are filled and bubbling like champagne, others are nearly empty and sit somberly at the bar. One old man reminds her of a bottle of Whitney's Log Cabin Whiskey. Xray told her it was produced during the Log Cabin and Hard Cider presidential campaign of 1840 in the shape of log cabins at the Whitney Glass Works in Philadelphia.

When Martha counts her limit of labels, she wonders why Seddy's holds such an attraction for all these people. She looks for an answer, looks at Xray. Xray turns his glass of brandy in his hand as if he could learn something from the feel of the glass itself. The room is rising and falling. Xray looks into Martha's eyes and says, "You know, down in Patagonia, wild Llamas lie down to die. On the banks of the St. Cruz, the ground is white with bones. Once I counted twenty heads. They were'nt scattered or gnawed. I don't understand why, but before dying, the llama always crawled towards the river." Martha smiles at Xray and once again says, "Honey, when are we getting married?" Xray rises from the stool and says in his characteristic nasal voice, "I'll be right back."

Outside the rain taps its own rhythm while Xray drums down the dark street his mind already in Murphy's. Under his breath he keeps muttering, "I ain't happy and I ain't sad", over and over again. He says that forty-seven times before he enters the bar. He fumbles for some change and the bartender already has a beer in front of him. Again he turns that glass looking for an answer, an answer to that really big question. Day after day, sitting on the swivel desk rocker, filing the cards in the microfilm department, he thinks about it. He imagines what it would be like to have a woman sleeping next to

him every night, the same woman, and waking up in the morning to that woman. And maybe some kids. Some good looking kids to call him "Daddy", to get in the way. He wonders now. Exactly when was it that he made this dream? On the school bus when he was twelve and Nancy Miller let him carry her books? He doesn't remember and it doesn't matter. It might have been at twelve and it might have been at thirty. Or it might have been none of those times. That was more likely. It was more likely that the dream had never been made, but had just always been there; the dream that someday he would pick out a single woman and she would be right for him. Many nights, walking the streets he'd seen women who almost qualified. He loved them all and loved those who ignored him more than those who'd smile at him or nod. Long nights alone in his apartment that dream kept him alive.

Back at Seddy's, Martha entertains herself with a vision of Xray sitting in the john reading graffiti. At the other end of the bar, under a revolving sign that tells you it's time for another beer, a middle-aged woman takes off her wedding band and drops it into her drink. A minute or two later the man next to her takes off his ring and drops it to the bottom of his beer. Martha brings the stool back on two legs. She watches the man slowly slip his hand under the woman's dress like a teenager in the last row of the Crest Theatre. The woman blushes, then coyly remarks, "Harry, you old devil." Martha's seat wiggles and she feels a hand on her shoulder. Expecting to see Xray, she yelps at the sight of the cowboy's toothy grin.

At a dark secluded table in Murphy's, Anna Stromberg pops open a beer and pours a perfect head. Then she crosses her legs at the ankles and listens to the music that makes everything so good, the music that's always in the background. Anna has sipped three beers and her thin face glows gold-brown, her eyes have gone soft. Xray swing around and with a big breath says, "Anna, its good to see you.", then tries to kiss her. His forehead sports little beads of sweat. He's had so many drinks he loves Anna, loves everyone else in the bar, loves himself even. He's standing in a strange way, leaning back against the bar as if balancing himself. The bartender gives him a fresh drink, he spills it and shouts, "If they say the moon is blue, we must believe that it is true." Anna looks at him astonished and says, "That's ridiculous." Xray continues, "On December 10, 1883, there was a blue moon. Nobody knew what to make of it. Most of them stayed in their houses. Then in 1927, at Belfast, Ireland, even the few Irishmen not drunk, said the moon took on a blue tinge. Moons of green and blue are seen after volcanic explosions, through smoke-laden fogs, when moonlight shines through ice crystals high in the atmosphere."

He has shaggy black hair and he's grinning at her. Martha looks past him. He laughs as if she's said something funny, slaps his thigh. His chin and cheeks are slightly darkened because he hasn't shaved for a day or two. He grins so broadly his eyes bulge. Then he looks embarassed, the smile becomes awkward. Martha is trying her best to listen to the music, but the alternating deep and shallow breathing of the cowboy sets her heart racing. She feels her

hands shaking and moves them off the bar. She knows he's staring at her, even without looking. She turns in a sudden motion and the cowboy pushes his broad brimmed hat back on his head. "I want you", he says. Martha's lips half open, as though she wishes to speak but is uncertain what to say.

'Then there was a Mr. Hunt, in 1836, who spent forty-five days at New Archangel, boozing and bargaining with its roystering commander.'" Xray guzzles the last of his beer then signals to the bartender for another. Anna asks him, "Where's Martha tonight?" Xray stops for a minute then answers, "We both know I don't really like Martha that well." His head is bent solemnly like a young monk bowed in prayer. "Besides, she's too hungry for a man. I've gone through that before. It never works. Just leaves you with a hole in your heart, and an empty wallet. She's not my type. Then I don't know what that means. I only know that it never works and she's not right for me." Anna glances at him for a moment than begins laughing uncontrollably. She's making such a fuss that the few customers left in Murphy's forget their drinks. Xray nervously yells, "What's so funny!" Anna begins laughing all over again then finally tones down to soft tittering. "This is real nice. I mean any number of eligible men in this town and I run into Miss Lonelyhearts.

When Xray finally gets back to Seddy's, he looks for the same stool. There it is, its empty and so is the one Martha was sitting on. He sits down just in time to hear the bartender yell, "last call". He asks the bartender for a Bud

and stares hypnotically at the clock, following the second hand. "OK, drink up". The beer disappears, then the glasses disappear, and Xray walks out into the street.

A red fingernail gleams in the streetlight in front of the jewelry store. "Did you bring any money?" she asks with a smile, and fingers Xray's lapel. Xray flashes a 20 dollar bill. "Come on baby, lets go" she whispers. This is the most beautiful, ravishing, seductive whore in the world. There's nothing in Xray's mind, just desire. That's all, desire, but not thought.

In the amber-lit room he hears music. The room is small with a table, a lamp, and an unmade bed. The girl has long, blond hair and he stares at her breasts as she whispers obscenities in his ear. He doesn't understand her, but laughs anyway. Then she says, "OK honey, if you'll give me the 20 bucks, I'll be right back." She comes right back, and looks at Xray's naked body on the bed. She smiles, then says, "Baby, I'm gonna take you around the world."

And then, then, with an artistic movement, she runs her tongue from his ears downward, downward....The notes of a Spanish guitar floating on a breeze smacks of lemon blossoms from the Alhambra. Macchu Picchu rises before him. On the top a mysterious fog clouds his vision and then the whole earth quakes. Xray groans. Then he's in the warm sun sipping Mate Yerba, watching gauchos ride across the pampa. In Port Au Prince, the wild beating of drums dances across his body in violent rhythm. A wave claps off the Trobriand Islands, wrapping him in seaweed like hair, and the 'klee' 'klee' of gulls fills his ears. Then

he feels a burning sensation followed by the cool tingle of rain in Puerto Rico. Sunfish brush their warm fins on his face, coral scratches his thighs. In Tierra Del Fuego, a blinding light flashes across the sky. Xray opens his eyes and blinks in disbelief at the bright light bulb shining above him. He blankly studies the ceiling. What has happened? Then he sees the girl swabbing his body with a damp sponge. She looks into his eyes, then frowns and says, "OK doll, better get up and into your clothes."

Xray awakes in his own bed. The night is gone, only a terrible hangover remains. He runs to the bathroom and kneels in front of the toilet, waits for a half hour until that feeling leaves. He feels like collapsing on the floor, unscrews the cap from an aspirin bottle and swallows three of the pills without water. Then he thinks about all of the old remedies his father used to use, tomato juice, orange juice, hot coffee. He thinks about drinking a beer and almost throws up. When he reaches the kitchen, it's still hiding. It's too early in the morning and after 11 years he's used to winning. Xray feels for the stove, turns on the gas, and waits for the blue flame. It works like a prayer. Everything is the same. The philodendron silent and stillborn on the sill, the faucet dripping, the lace curtains dedicated solely to defining light. Just then the buzzer rings and Martha's voice echoes through the corridor, "Xray, Xray, its just me."