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In Various Hands

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The University of Montana

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IN VARIOUS HANDS

By

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Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

University of Montana

1980

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IN VARIOUS HANDS

The Following Poems First Appeared
In These Magazines:

CutBank: "Howling Man and His Young"
"Rain on the Face"

Ironwood: "Songs from a Bus"

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I.

I BLAME MY BODY

I BLAME MY BODY

An infant
lowered into this body
expected to find it compatible--
how to adjust to strange flesh
that contorts like a plant in the dark?
Hold it stiff like a statue,
eyes milk-white in prayer, hands
pressed together, how else
to keep the backbone straight--
or so they told me at St. Pats.
How many men maimed by poor posture?
That day I stole everyone's pencils
during recess--how was I to know
stealing was worse than poor posture?
I stood straight as Sister Philomene
tipped my desk to a shower
of #2 Ticonderogas. How was I to know
I would teach at a university some day
having stole pencils. I blame my body
don't you see? I never wanted to sit in this flesh,
never wanted this particular view.
If I could I would crawl back
like I do every night through several layers of dream,
each layer a mother's breast,
which breast to choose.

HALL OF EYES

When you open a door, another door
another, then another. They lead
to the hall of eyes,
your life swirling in each tiny globe.
Take your time. Press each one
into place. Amazing--
with this one
a boy with blood running down his face,
with this one a lover, no
a buffoon, fooled again.
With this one things go gray
and silent and fog grows deeper
with each breath.
This is the mirrored eye,
the one you always wanted.
You lay down now
and your breath accepts the air
as never before,
your face opens--
the white rose of your skull,
the wind blowing slowly
across parted bones
leaving behind only the life you lived.

HI MY NAME IS...

Trophy over the fireplace, plaque on the wall--
 the name waits, faithful dog,
 while you sleep. Willow hums,
faucet gurgles, syllables
 unheard, like too many passengers
 on a slow train through Spain.

Spoken, they couple like trains--
 the long Spanish, abbreviated British.
 Names more common than grass. This shifting face
 in the unlit glass calling alder, elm,
home. In the rhythm of couplings,
 names of kin: Gordon the father,
 Gordon the son, one brother,
 a forgotten sister. I ride

the neutral current of love,
 hear the vireo's clear note,
 mockingbird reply, remember
 father throwing lamps, all his names
 for mother we couldn't use. Her hands,
 waking me for breakfast, recall his name
 in grey: shepherd sitting in his field. Go
 pull down the slab.cull the water,
 oar of penis, oar of tongue.

There are birds that whistle their name
and names we can only whisper. Words we say
get up on two legs, assemble the day, the little
we have: willow humming in the yard,
stones in the garden, the spelling stars
more diligent than teeth. In the end
they make sense: roots
bound to the oblique
flower we wake to.

THE RUNNER

Morning. East Portal Park.

The boy holding the inside track

knows he's winning. Breath

pulls him on. Who runs

beside? Says follow me

and refuses to lead? At the finish

women with towels

like sweet Veronica: give us your face.

In the stands his father cheers, he knows

the boy will never win, too many hearts

to command, concerned hands. His father

won easily, hair neatly placed,

a face that never showed. His father lost--

one moment legs

then that wire out of nowhere.

The boy saw the runner

carry the torch down Franklin,

saw the ridge of veins

along his calves, heels blink past.

The flame must not go out,

Sister said, carried all the way

from Athens. He doesn't know

what to do with it. He'll run

home when he hears the news--
father dead, Nora crying. Breath
will mean nothing then. He'll hold it
like when his father stood him
on the hotel bed, lathered his face,
shaved it, said run along.

THE FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

for Dennis

I used to think everyone
was a robot but me. In the shifting
dark of my room I knew
Ma Kent hanging clothes on the line
had wires under her fingers
sending good and bad
to a dark god at his console.

I saw a movie where the scientist
fell in love with his creation.
Mouthing her syllables
confused his flesh. I looked
at others wanting to pry
an arm loose. Was I
a solid circuit too?

I plugged my finger into a socket--
a blue flame shot
across my room, my body
hummed under the jolt.
I went into the street
a boy-android out of control--
coils sparked, capacitors
fell to the ground. In the quiet

of my recovery I heard gears
in the walls, a river of wires,
a tiny radio in my heart.

Now my heart is a toucan
calling its mate. Somewhere
a pipe is being played.

Jadwiga lounges on her divan,
flowers falling to her cloisonne.

Roots coil in the dark; yes,
vines and wide leaves. I'm a lion
gurgling in the noon sun.

When I kill a man my claw
slices the air. Gears
unmesh. Wires spill from my teeth.
I chew transistors at my leisure.

HOWLING MAN AND HIS YOUNG

from an Eskimo sculpture

I

Howling Man no longer roams frozen fields,
at night no longer measures mouth
against black expanse, for Howling Man
no longer has mouth, teeth, snout.
His young bulge from his cheeks
wet, stiff-lipped, green like clay
or fresh grass. They sleep
curled amid she-wolves and lap dogs,
serpents crackling in the fire.

II

A man of quiet concerns,
I go through the day, hands
behind my back, fill the spaces
left by others. My young
are still inside me
lodged between my legs.
Sometimes I hold them in my hands,
feel their flesh wrinkle,
the grating of hairs,
the shuffling of bodies.

III

Nights, a new moon rolls in my sleep,
yellow galleons course through my chest,
black hairs stroke the liquid night
like upturned legs. There is a breathing
inside my breathing, a listening
beneath my listening. I awake
and hear a howl rising to my green tongue--
the voice of my young
shattering the night.
The voice of my young, like blank bullets
at a black mirror.

Cereus introspectus

In the folklore of leaves air promises a boat,
light brings images of a shoe and feet,
wind tells of a far shore
where we can feel the sea between our teeth,
taste salt and sand. Roots in our heads,
we'll carry our own darkness
as we move and sit and speak.

True, there are fronds among us unwilling to leave.
They prefer abundant mulch, thick forms
crawling through roots, a mind of bees. Others
know the man walking through the garden,
hands tucked in his pockets, is the wisdom we seek.
The trellis casts a shadow across his reverie.

Bottlebrush hums. Pomegranate
drops heavy globes. He does not see.
He turns in that first sea, before the banging
shutters, the pine scraping the window,
riding that sharp slap of light to where he stood
leaf-like under the moon, lapping darkness,
spiders spinning dreams, the cool touch
of filament.

Of him we sing.

When that boat arrives he'll be with us,
a stone moon in our private sky.

The coleus blooms, the spiderplant
drips to the sill.
Dust on the table,
ants along the wall, I want
out of my body.
I want the sticky trail,
the warm mulch,
one mole eating the dark for a home.

When I fell to the field as a boy
I couldn't lean on the loosestrife.
Briars refused to be hands.
I wanted pines
radiant to the heartwood,
a forest of fathers.
That was my Fresno heart--
jousting with trash cans,
riding the clothesline out of there.

Now I leave the window open
for the field to come in, the green
of a man whose deeper green
is private. The leaf on the sill
is the image I need, the idea of hands,
the private peach,
the elegant sound of rain.

II.

POSTCARD FROM THE BEARTOOTH

A warm day in the City,
mother carries her coat,
her white blouse and baggy pants barely in style
even then. Father as always
in white shirt, black shoes, pressed slacks.
The camera caught them smiling, mid-stride, left foot
slightly raised, caught the wino behind them
stumbling to the curb, the butt about to be crushed
by mother's next step, eyes that tell they don't know

the long drive back to Reno, fights over money
and whiskey, flying lamps, hurled threats, the cry of a man
who hates his name, a woman who never knew hers
for sure. For him, the drone of buses
Elko to Fresno, four wives, a lost leg,
a face that died like coal. For her
twenty years of Millie your order's up!
Coffee! More coffee!, nerves snapping
in Reno neon, a life random as Keno. They remain

in this cracked print, holding hands, breathing happily
past the bright displays, the indifferent camera.

ASYLUM

The boy lay in deep grass
behind the cottage, on his skin
dirt and tiny bugs. Sun was another face
to avoid, hot afternoons painting white
over white stone walls, Sister Anne
pointing at what he missed. He used bricks
to clean the toilets, Bon Ami on the mirror.
The face he drew
remained when he wiped it away.

He left notes for De Korn:

Vano in your coffee. Boiling oil
in your good ear. While he slept,
slid on blankets down the hall. Who needed girls,
he had Mrs. Healy's legs and nuns
sometimes let their hair slip. The dark
corridors of St. Pats
were all the boy knew of love.

Lilacs were a violence
against worn brick
gouged with hearts and names. In shop
he stared at the tired saplings,
tried China on the shortwave:

Hello China, this is a boy
in a Catholic institution.
Free me. All night

he pretends to be no one.

The pines have generous arms, the dust
warm breath. He holds
to the taste of stone,
feels the slow march of grass
into morning. The elm

slaps the shutters awake.

Floating single-file to breakfast,
he doesn't wonder
at the glow of plates, doesn't say
warm mush is a message, just waits
his turn. Behind the counter,
faces dull the spoons they serve with.

GARAGE IN FRESNO

Thick shrubs, the wild pomegranate tree,
gravel underfoot: I return to the damp garage,
a boy running along the stone path
for early solitude. Evenings
Papa worked here, the smell of turpentine,
tarps piled in the corner. Dan
the hired hand slept restless,
a thin moon through the boarded window.
Sanding the dresser, he did the Mash,
he did the Monster Mash,
that salami-faced jobber come west.

He left one night on a drunk
and Papa came back with Wheelin Dealin
Bob, bottle in his pocket, singing John McGrew
was a fucking fool, fucked all the teachers
on the first day of school. He spit
twice, said I'm ready. The cracked walls
were not, nor the splintered light, the tools
sagging on their dusty shelves.

Am I? I climb to the loft,
watch the gathering dust, the Junebugs
banging the globe. I wait. The words,
the easy words are not enough
to burrow the sour darkness for a home.

WAKING WON'T DO IT

to my stepmother

No leaves to hide under. No agapanthi
leaning against the fence. Only the drone
of the washer, only your hands
hosing the sidewalk, changing the birdbath.

You don't hear the garden closing in.
Sparrows twitter from the trellis.
Beetles sift through dust.
You don't see me with the fallen pears.

I follow a sticky trail, over rinds,
under husks, make a bed on damp stones,
hear water, my mother. I don't ask
for the light, that upright stance
without roots or wings. You tell me to get up.

I won't. I'll leave my head in the pulp,
let the garden turn slowly in dream,
the slow-walkers rising, smiling their green smile
from the mud beyond the body,
this stubborn repose.

LESSON IN WAKING

When he rose it was fall. Storms
on the horizon, down the street
a child playing with a broken drain. He sat up
and called you. You should've come,
you're his father. The sky broke,
he lay in splintered light
waiting for day to begin.

He runs in dark alleys, scuffling
with the Savines, racing hot cars
off Portrero Hill. It's grief,
only grief, his big plans
for making you love him. It's that wave

rolling over him again, you
on the opposite shore, fish more than fact.
He believed the Disney knickknacks,
you, over the sofa, putting chains
on the bus in record time.

It's okay, he'll endure the tangle of words,
your stiff hands pulling away.
He knows of a still pool where towhees
preen in clear light, where he leaves
his body. It's okay

take your sad things,
your toothbrush and gold watch,
take your chest, that thicket of hair.
When lights come on next door
he'll wait for his body to glow
as if he alone could bring on the day.

SONGS FROM A BUS

1

In Fresno the smudgepots burned all day.
The boy folded t-shirts in the grey suitcase,
headed for his father and new mother.
Pears, soft and brown, promised rain
next year, fertile fields. They lied.

These uncertain roads go on,
days like white lines through the heart.
Not the moon, his face in tinted glass;
the sounds he knows: clip clip
of a loose tread, click of hangers
miles from home.

2

There are conditions for caring:
Trust the shifting sky. Planted or not,
love the frenzy of roots,
the dark peach swollen to sadness.
Be the branch that lets go.

When the boy walks away,
his purblind heart thumbed to sleep,

follow his step, stoic oak, elegant willow,
through towns he never knew.

It is his life you live,
you only die in this one.

Carry your father like the sycamore
carries sleep, in memory, the way he carried you
in his groin. Every day, first willow,
then oak, all the sadness so abstract. Listen:
hollow birds on hollow branches
sing a name. Not yours. Not yours.

3

If I speak the right words will the rock
assume its place in my bed, my slow death
dream me pine-straight into the years,
numinous around the good hard wood,
tamarack among evergreen?

This bus is going home--not the scorched
San Joaquin, the flayed green of Missoula
where the Bitterroots lean over the valley
with open arms.

POSTCARD FROM THE BEARTOOTH

We left the loaves of hay behind.
Willows led us, fallen pines, the whisper
of ice-locked lakes. Above Saddlebuck
scrub pine gripped the rock face.
I found a clearing where lodgepole
pierced the moon. In my net a trout
mouthed the watery silence. I saw
you float away father, your grey back
rising to its own reflection.

We follow the morning sun over the next ridge,
Rough Lake subtle with crystals. You should be here
where thunderheads chafe the pinnacles.
We'd build a man out of the minimal foliage,
give him roots in dark crevices,
streams bubbling under ice.
When the wind rips at his chest
we'd show him the nest in his heart,
let him sing a dumb song.

No apples for us here,
plums or cheese, only fissures
under lichen. I carry a river with me,
a current dimpled by skippers. The ice
forming over the surface is a message
to you. It's the stones calling.

fountains of granite.

III.

SUMMER RAIN

ELEGY FOR MY FATHER

My father could carry me with one arm
down any street, his easy walk and pot belly
swaying, bent mouth whispering
in my ear. I feared the giant elm
across the street, feared the nights
he came home drunk hollering over dinner
Eat up! How else you gonna grow big
to drive a bus like me? The man
who chased me through the Truckee Depot
for his hat left me in Reno
at two, Fresno at five,
St. Pats at nine and sixteen.
On my own at eighteen.

Willows remind me of him,
falling leaves, jingling coins,
my own dazed look every morning
in the mirror, this crooked upper lip.
I remember nickel combs, dime toilets,
machines that roll Our Lord's Prayer
onto a penny, Gordon Loves Renee
on a piece of tin; dull hum of engine,
layer of breath on glass, shifting lights,
wondering how a life can be lived
in various hands, can go on
never knowing what comes. It hasn't changed,

I grow more like an elm than a man--
this need to hide forever, to love the dull hum
of a Greyhound, familiar towns--Reedley, Sanger, Sacramento,
white lines passing through the heart. I can't stop them,
can't measure the miles in dashes, fading breath,
thinning hair.

Up every morning with the fading moon
he filled his thermos, wore his hat
with the gold 20 YEARS OF SAFETY.
Over dinner he would laugh and talk of buses
rolling down 99, Post House food and brawling drivers.
He cried when his bus hit a woman head-on
near Tahoe, and in the hospital
when he thought he'd lose his leg.
He stood at the window,
watched the bottlebrush smothered with bees,
fearing shadows, leaves, the small woman
he married last. When he died
I couldn't cry. Warm air rushed my lips,
my throat stuck suddenly, that's all.
Alone, drunk, about to pass-out
in the patio, I say father
all good moments are yours:
the willow bending in the breeze,
the rose letting go.

MEMORY

This dim light across my desk,
sliver of moon in my window--
they are not real like bears
or snakes gliding through thick brush
are to a boy of twelve
beneath a breathing pine
with flashlight club and gunny sack
whistling so thin only the dead
could hear. Or swinging out

on a tattered rope
over a still pool, held for a moment
in mid-air by my own face
floating shafts of light, insects
dimpling the surface. I awoke
often in the backseat
dust thick on the windows
through coarsegold,
Nippenowausee, Papa's impatient fingers
punching the radio.

When he finished the cabin patio
Papa pressed my palms
to the wet cement, then wrote
Gordon August 1960 --
words cut deep in memory

hands like tracks
in sudden snow leading away
from this life
where nothing holds, there is
no center, only shale,
loose stones, drifting peril.
And the always falling body
never disturbs the sleeping water,
the sunken image.

PAPA'S NAP

He never understood
why hiding under the bed made me happy.
When he took his socks off
I saw hairs along his calves.

I could've made him fall like Goliath,
run like hell just ahead
of swearing hands. I watched him
lay his glasses beside the lamp,
felt the weight of care,
one paint-speckled hand
over the edge. I could've risen,
a wave tearing him from dream;
instead crept out to the hall,
Nan waiting, one finger on her lips.

ALTAR BOY

A small boy tosses and turns in his sleep,
salt and pepper cords under
Davey Crockett pajamas. At five a.m.
running down the Spanish corridors
of St. Pats. The man
he will be rises from his mattress
on the floor, a sleepy weekender
gathering laundry. The boy opens
the heavy sacristy door, big as the BIG BOY
machine that could wash a man. He chooses
the day's vestments--red and white,
always a sock missing, the elastic in the shorts
gone long ago, the smell of sulphur
and wax, candle to candle across the altar.
Always someone's rosary scraping
the pew, some old woman grunting
to drag sheets like dead bodies
from the washer, into the dryer
where they turn like souls in purgatory.
Mothers and workers return to their pews
after Communion, the wafer warm
as a towel from the dryer
the man folds. The boy
hangs his vestments. The day opens
like a missal, fresh and azure.

RAIN ON THE FACE

I

If rain, why not love?
Why not a tree with wings,
hands that journey farther than breath?

The child home from the hunt,
fire on the stove, deer hanging outside.
Above the pines the eagle glides
in quiet rain. There are
cracks in the wall
like intelligent hands.

Blood rushes gently under the skin,
rain laps the shingles. The boy fears
the tip of his penis, that his lungs might be
wet leaves on the window,
gray clouds mounting overhead; he dreams
of a father in the backyard, raking leaves,
smoke rising from the rusty burnbarrel.

II

On windy days walnuts blow
to the ground, the small dogs howl

at nothing. Her breath is slow, her fingers
thin. She bends
in any wind. Who needs a man needs death
she would say. She listens
to the dying cicada, the small breath
of the rose, the torn wind, the tiny stars,
the blind soliloquy of sleep.
Geese fly the river twice a year,
sparrows fly alone. I'm fine,
she says, My life is good. She lies.
Rain on the face is a bad dream.

THE YEOMAN SINGS

A wife knows how her body unfolds each night,
how it rides the shadows she dreams: amber boats,
green waves, how she needs the moon rising
inside her to measure the silence.

She gathers me in her arms, like a wave.

She doesn't see the hand I raise for help,
mercy is all I ask. Only the harbor,
drifting lights, the streaked sky.

There are sons awash inside her
crying out for names,
the weight of hands not yet hands,
the quiet thumping of boats.

The body is good as it rises to tea,
as it shoulders the air that would hold it back,
hope rising with the ribs, these legs
old truths ready to walk. Blue light
through the bevelled window, a sparrow
in the acacia...if not for a wife
this body could not measure itself.

Only the day battering bone,
the wash of light over the wash of sleep.
Flesh is the only shore I know.

DEAD PORPOISE AT GHALISSA

We caught catfish--
gills gaping, three of us laughing. Dog,
Billy said, hacking away
the skull: three white lobes,
the eye we sliced, the clear lense
rolling free.

Papa would bring home a dozen
trout at a time, rainbows
long as his forearm. I followed close
as he cast, that quick tug
and struggle underwater; felt
the hook in my throat when he pulled one
in. He'd smack it on a rock,
hand it to me, jerking
in the plastic bag at my hip.

Fresno. Summer days
drenched in heat. Nan
hung cotton on the patio
to keep away flies. I waxed floors
at St. Pats. In a white house on Main
Bonnie fought to keep sane.
The cat she ran over
flopped like a fish in the grass.

The Greek fishermen
row their boats into the slow
breathing Aegean. Evenings
they sit at the taberna,
drink ouzo. In dreams

I float through rocks, lost words,
familiar voices calling me deeper. I come
to a current where I swim free,
no longer bitter, Papa
in the boat above, asking
why a son would want to go so deep,
tugging at the life-line, calling
Come up!

In the end I'll take off my shoes,
walk slowly into the sea.
Let the gulls think of a strange fish
caught in some larger heart.

SUMMER RAIN

Out my window the alders are grey
in summer rain. Rain in the gutters,
my dog in the corner licking himself.
Sometimes he whines in his sleep
and wakes with a yelp like Bonnie
who told me her father was chasing her,
a mean man who looked like me.

The rain of '68.

Trees snapped and power lines
sparked in the streets. We made love
all night, her head on my chest when the elm
scraped the house. She looked up, frightened.

The young girl in the Vermeer above my bed
is not Bonnie. I'd be her father
if she ran to me
wanting a story: How the Old Ones
Learn the Dark. She'd be asleep
by now and I'd carry her to her room,
her night-light steady as the rain.

In my own dreams water
washes over me
from behind. I say father

come near me, tell me solitude
is a button, a lost shoe.
Give me your hand.

His face is blue
when he reaches out
and I wake in the spillways
ready for this fish-life again.

I carry my body like the river
carries sleep, the thin bank falling
a little more each night.
Other nights we are trees, father,
anchored in light. We fall
to the small mouths waiting.

The bugs huddled under stones
after a storm and puddles
were lakes I saw my father in.
I heard the patter of his breath
the night he died, his small voice
calling water, water.
There was nothing I could do.