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INSTRUCTIONS FOR A SECTION BREAKDOWN

By

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B.A., University of Montana, 1972

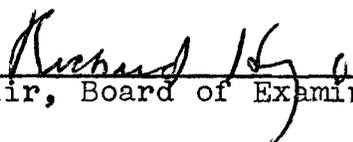
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1981

Approved by:


Chair, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

12-21-81
Date

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Instructions for a Section Breakdown

Douglas Myers

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"The Dense Color of the Biologist's Room" appeared in Cutbank 15. "Survey Chief at Bigfork" appeared in Cutbank 16. "Travelling Through a Cup of Water" and "Leaving Park County" appeared in Intro 12. "Birth of a Brush War, 1877" will appear in the spring, 1982, issue of Quarterly West.

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I

THE DENSE COLOR OF THE BIOLOGIST'S ROOM

I've spent years collecting anecdotes
of natural separation--
tales of salmon on a last run upriver,
the mating dance of stoneflies, the quiet
thrashing of bees.

What a waste of time. These rooms
empty like abandoned mirrors.

I spend whole afternoons watching winter:
the yard outside my window littered
with papery leaves, the spare lines
of church steeples and damp alleys
where dogs turn against the wind.
This year I feel a primitive comfort
in bare trees, like a ragged,
one-eyed crow.

It does not matter that light fails
early this far north.

It does not matter that wind mutters
in the stairwell like a familiar voice.
All I need is in a drop
of pond water under this lens,
all the basic arrangements

of predator and prey.

I sit at my desk keeping notes,
accumulating data, writing words that always
mean lamp, letter, autumn and dust.

THE HAIRLINE FAULT AT THE CENTER

Secretly we believe in the perfectly round
and this myth is universal: a man
and woman, halves of a whole stone,
roll downhill. At the bottom
the stone breaks and two
fragments begin crawling back.

So everyday in the morning
someone waits like spare change,
the pieces laid out on a dresser,
or stands at the bus stop
fingering the coins in his pocket
as he toes the crack in the sidewalk.

There is always a slight
variation--a different voice, a different
streetlight in the alley.

But one after another we wipe the dirt
from our knees and shuffle off, smiling,
in any direction.

LEAVING PARK COUNTY

All winter snow flamed each morning
on the Crazies, and I drifted through the days
like a raven through endless blue sky.
A man can lose anything here overnight.
Shattered boulders along the Sweetwater,
those cracked stones trapped side by side
by their own weight, are my idea
of a lasting connection.
Centuries won't heal them.

I have to thank Park County
for that lesson in permanence--
how even the river changes its bed,
how lone snow geese wait on the nest
whispering a name from the south.
Cattails rattle on, a voice in a dry wind
telling what happens in a two-bit railroad town.

Rusted rails arrow away from the heart
of this country. Knapweed shades the cross-ties.
It is not endurance that puzzles me.
It is an attic window overlooking
the church. It is getting out of bed
in the bloody sunrise of a January morning,

alarm clock humming on the nightstand,
a lovely shadow turning to the wall.

A WINTER SHIFT

Once every afternoon, the headrig
breaks down and this cranky stud mill
rattles into silence. Belts
clank to a halt, the edger
throttles down slowly, and millwrights
cover the jammed scrag saw
like bees on a honeycomb.

In the brief stillness, a few gentle
sounds murmur along the pond's lip:
lodgepole knocking softly
on the pier, a plaintive whistle,
the background drip of water.

My partner and I sit
on stumps of wood in the failing
sunlight, stealing a little break time.
Our backs begin to steam.
Tomorrow we'll wake with our knuckles
curled like claws, as though even
in sleep we gripped a pike pole.

Still, as the air cools our damp
wool clothes, the broad paints of sunset
start to blue on the mountains,

and the first faint star appears.

We rise and flex our fingers

as the line begins to run.

SURVEY CHIEF AT BIGFORK

The Missions close down like a wall
hiding the backcountry. There must be secret
passages up there leading to peaks that stare blindly
at one another. Snow covers tamaracks and bearberry
on the shaded north face and even bright days
freeze bare fingers to the transit.
Six hundred feet of backbone to run
and the ravens sail by like side-armed coins.

No town in Montana could ease this wind.
It blows all the way from Canada,
rounding snow into the curves
and bellies of winter. Pulling chain
down the line, it all comes clear: how you impose
order on a life where lovers walk out,
how you limit the world to a few bald colors,
geometric lines, a lasting desire to keep warm.

On the bay, storms polish the inner ice
mirror-smooth, til it shines back the midday moon.
Every boundary runs six feet above mean high water.
Measuring the way my life backs up
when things go wrong, I reach for simple
puzzles the brain can solve--the long leg
of a right triangle, the exact location

of original stones. Flathead Lake

shelters you from nothing at all.

In light this bitter, you can't hide your mistakes--

minutes missing in a circle,

cold nights, the drifted footprints leading in.

TRAVELLING THROUGH A CUP OF WATER

Winters I imagine swimming
from the bottom of this glass
back to the tap,
down a pipe to the well.
Through a dark seam
I track the drink to its source--
deep pools where cutthroat
float over sunlit gravel.
Or farther, back to snow,
back to vapor rising from a tidal pond
where sea urchins hunt in slow motion.

I envy B.C. in the funnies
shaping water in his hands,
round balls dipped from the stream,
molded, piled on the bank.
Hours I've tried to make
a globe held perfect by surface tension.
I want to see sunlight refract
through a glass-clear heart,
fanning rainbows through my fingers.
I want to put a mosquito fish in the center
and carry it in my hands
like a portable aquatic zoo.

It never works. Every night in winter
I stand at the sink,
water spinning into the drain.
Another river gathers below the street,
all the discarded streams of the city
running to an open sun.

FACING FACTS IN THE RED DESERT

After weeks along the dry washes
and daily exposure on the sun's
flat blanket, your convictions
begin to fray. You start to wonder
if most humans are like those creosote
plants which poison the ground around them
and live out their scratch-paper lives
in a naked circle of sand.

This could have soothed you once:
the idea that the world
runs some natural parallel,
that the wind really does moan,
birds sing, and the night cries
of the desert are wasted too.

You're not sure now.

Only erosion is certain, the steady
unfolding of days. In the parched
heart of the continent, the sky
is relentlessly clear
and never watches you.

LEARNING TO PLAY LEFT FIELD

In the restless hours after dinner
you brought out, night after night,
a black, thirty-eight ounce
bat I could barely swing.

In the quiet twilight
as crickets began to chirp
in the grass, you hit
graceful, curving flies against
the evening sun. I thought of them
as birds, Father, not baseballs,
doves filling the air between us.

I ran around those weedlots
and monkey-bars and saved one
falling body after another.

As streetlights winked on
one by one all around
the neighborhood, I heard only
the sounds of wind, wood
and leather, or the silence
that fell as I watched you
hit in the distance.

BIRD COUNT ON THE UPPER GALLATIN

Across these willowy meadows
I hear the clatter of a distant wedge
of Canada geese.

Their migration saddens me,
the certainty they live by
as they leave together each fall,
and turn, and veer through the wind.

I test the air with a few blades
of cheatgrass,
jealous of the flock's
high, thin flight,
as though at that altitude
they could brush their wing tips
along the curvature of the earth.

I pick a fragment of red dolomite
from the river and throw it at the sun,
trying to decipher the language
in those cries that pass overhead.
The stone falls back, as usual,
while I wait for a sign
or a clear, unwavering light.

LETTER FROM NAPA TO A FRIEND TEACHING IN DODSON
(for Jim Walker)

Wind scratches through the dried leaves
of California live-oak and dances
among the knotted grapevines
in a vineyard across the road.
Today I leaned against a locked
gate on a dusty lane outside Yountville
and remembered the night we talked
til dawn: moths battered their wings
against the porch screen and our voices
reached a low note of weariness.
This afternoon a covey of quail
invaded the garden, slipping nervously
through shifting patches of shadow.
They ate stray kernels of Indian corn
or swallowed the bare earth whole.
It was one of those little acts
of dignity that happen even here,
and I thought of you on the Highline,
that prairie wind setting its teeth
in the eaves of your house,
the razor-cold midnights when a pulse
of green light flares across the north.
I imagine you wake each day
the same way I do. You brew

a cup of coffee
to warm your hands thinking nothing
especially bad could possibly come.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR A SECTION BREAKDOWN

Every survey starts with the original stone,
identified by the scars cut deeply
into one face. These corners we call
monuments because they lie buried
like treasures in the forest floor.
Some men search for them on their knees
as though the reward were gold,
not the ashes of a burned post.
The idea is to find a point of origin,
a place of beginning you feel confidence in.

Once you find one, start. The difficulty
lies in seeing your world as a circle
that you are not at the middle of.
Instead, you live on the rim
and move along the boundary dragging a steel chain,
measuring forward, looking back--
especially looking back. Here,
as nowhere else, your backsite
has to be perfect. That is the problem:
this job demands you find where you're going
by never leaving where you've been.

NIGHT WATCH ON ALDER STREET

Because it is a Sunday evening
in mid-January and the windows
light one by one, I have
nothing to do but sit
in the gathering dusk
and think about house plants.

The schefflera, for instance,
our longest living domestic.
Given four hours of daily sun,
moderately dry soil,
and a handful of bone meal
twice a year, the schefflera
will grow six feet tall.

This, of course, guarantees nothing.

The plant eventually dies,
victim of spider mites.

The gardener, growing older,
mumbles at the coleus
and waters his windowbox chervil.

He patterns his life after the quiet
breath of a leaf, falling asleep
at night to the sound of a root's
tender thrust in the sand.

This is the illusion: that leaves
nod to us in the rain,
that the gardener's gentle life
earns approval.

That he will not strand his car
in a creekbed in the dark
twenty-five miles from home,
and if he does, the wild tangles of willow
will not lean over him in the morning
shaking their branches like chains.

There is a moon tonight,
a thin gold curl.

I prop my feet on the desk,
tired of the distraction,
the lost glove, the small
deceiving act. Tired at last
of the broken affair
and the final ring of a phone.
It is a new year, and hope
trails through our lives like a vine.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH AN AIRBRUSH

In this postcard, I have become
a blot in the foreground. Naturally,
Gem Lake makes a better picture
with only autumn's gold larch and the thin
dusting of snow over the cirque.
But I'm there, carefully hidden,
visible only to the practiced eye.
My dark blue coat
blends neatly with water,
and my legs have been disguised
as shadows on the rock.

My image has begun his new life
in the 4x6 boundary
of the print. He camps
openly on the shore, warms himself
in the plain morning light,
and believes he is a beacon
with a blue lake shining through his chest.

Travelling secretly by mail,
he often finds his way into rooms
full of abandoned shoe salesmen.
He brings them greetings,
messages from Montana:

"Love ya," or "I'll see you when...."
Sometimes, they tack him to the wall
where he fishes happily on his flat
postcard lake. The water is always clear,
and he whistles little tunes, singing gaily
to the trout, and smiles
when the salesmen peer sadly in.

CLARK KENT MEETS THE HEART OF CIVILIZATION

It's a swell idea, a twenty-four hour
lollipop in the news. It's a pinhole
in the daytime that lets in
carefully selected angles of light,
all upside-down and miniature,
like images in the camera obscura
of an old cardboard box.
Anyway, we all feel better thinking
there's someone out there in a blue bodysuit
who cooks lunch in the Fortress of Solitude.
Sure he watches over us,
keeping an eye out for the mean
dogteeth of life. But my goodness,
here is the moon shining on my house.
My friends the field mice
gather their bags in the street.
All the futures hang like flimsy
curtains the past keeps crowding up to.
On the other side, I suspect,
is more of the same: pine trees
bending toward the window,
the insurance long overdue.

SITTING DOWN TO PAY THE WATER BILL

Maybe you misunderstood and simply
expected too much: thick pan gravy
every day or a warm front
in the emotional weather.

When you wake each morning you find
another dream got lost from the shelf
or just broke during the night
after a long fall to the floor.
Someone always creeps in early
to strip the wreckage for parts,
so by daylight even the glass is gone.
Remember the plan for finding
your own little niche in the forest,
how sparrows gathered at the window
like a company of spectacled bandits
feuding over the seeds?

If you close your eyes, the mist
might still rise under the hemlocks and a string
of mule deer step lightly out at dawn.
The lead buck minces back and forth
as if he wanted to tell the rest
"Look, we don't have that much time."
And we don't. After all,
that perfect row of expectations

you've kept by the knickknacks
is already coming due. They've begun
to grow some dark spots
like the Halloween pumpkin at midnight:
you no longer notice the eyes or teeth,
only the shell protecting the flame.

MUSIC MY GRANDFATHER GAVE ME

As a boy on my first visit
I thought a metronome
triggered the strange, nervous motion
of your hands. I was only six
but remember how quiet it was
in your third floor studio,
how my mother spoke aimlessly
in the summer heat, how my father
pursed his awkward lips on the brass
mouthpiece of a new trombone. The weather
was cloudless and still, as though air
in Ohio never moved at all,
and I leaned out the window
watching a square of waxed paper
drift to the pavement below.

When we met next, twelve years later,
I saw for the first time how thin
the men in our family are--
you, my father, me.
Locusts hummed in the white oak
and I waited, eighteen and unannounced,
scuffing my shoes on the smooth
porch boards til the nurse

brought you, that evasive
look of the failed suicide
trapped in your eyes.
The true music of our family line
backed up on the air between us.

I dreamed an old man
walked with me on the beach
and as the sea crashed down
we built a clear, geodesic dome
on the sand. Waves thrashed
against the glass as the old man
leaned to me and whispered
that I was dead. In the wings,
my father waited silently,
as we have waited all our lives.
We held each other then, and even
in my sleep I wept
for those perfect mornings,
the taste of strawberry
fresh on my tongue.

RECOLLECTION, SOMEONE SAID, IS A TERRITORY OF ONE

Later, we assumed it was a problem of language,
our inability to describe perfectly the diagonal
shafts of yellow light on a stormy afternoon,
or the spokes of a spider web glittering in the rain.
Recalling what we saw, no one
could pin down the exact emotion, the near-fullness.

Summer evenings I spin for myself the fine threads
of hindsight, recreating the past as though it were
a woolen yarn I could weave to fit my needs:
I walked with a woman once along the river
as the sun slanted low, and watched the long rays
catch in the wings of caddisflies flickering
over the streams. I imagine it completely,
what she said, how I held my hands,
the window that closed between us.

It is a single strand of distance
where I invent the story, free to make up
all the satisfying possibilities. Every word, street
or conversation pried like nails from a board
bands, wrapping around me like a robe
around a contented swimmer who has finished the race
and thinks he has all the time in the world.

THE NEW MOOD OF THE COUNTRY

Here are the plums and feathers
raining down, the lemon-scented
confections. Here are the beery
kisses, the three-piece suits
that collect in the trees.
Clocks ripple ahead like pond water
or pine oil, flowing the same
direction. Here is the heartwood
and the dark streak in the grain.
Here is the sharp needle
in the miner's breath, the cross hairs,
the limp fish gulping
a vinegar rain, here is
the half cup of milk
floating its crust of bread
and the luminous beetles
that grow in the night.
Here are the splinters, the marrow,
the grease that shines on the wall.
Here is the sledge that falls
in the slaughterhouse, the ox
that drops to its knees.

BIRTH OF A BRUSH WAR, 1877

If you stand on the small
bluff overlooking the Big Hole
as it curves around
slow bends of willow
and dogwood, or walk along
the worn trail
east of the river
where grasshoppers buzz
through the buffalo grass,
you might come one step closer
to discovering the murder
that still lives in our bones.
Late summer burrows through
the meadow like a pulse
through blood, and you stand
at one more backwater of history
where the first streaks
of sunlight were reddened
by smoke, and Ollokot,
as he recaptured the dying,
knew that his god
was done. There were no
heroics. Gibbon's drunken men
charged through the willow beds

in a cold morning mist
and something sadly human
crooned over the water.
The dead were spared the long
bitterness of hope,
the last bag of pemmican
as it disappeared before winter.
Listen--the stuttered
cry of a heron
hiding in the reeds,
the dry hush of cattails,
a redwing, the faint music
Looking Glass heard
as he called to his sons
from the hill.

EROS AND THANATOS

This morning you read me a story
from the paper datelined Rome. A contessa
chained by her family in a closet fifty years
was freed by state police. Her two
sisters and a brother cited
family honor as their defense.
She was carried, blind and wormlike,
into a marble hall, into the sunlight
she no longer remembered where a rose grew
in a pale white vase and a plate
of abalone soaked in lemon.

In our bedroom the bright haze of sunset
pours in like a wave of impenetrable grace.
Caught in the easy complacency
of our quiet life, we strip silk
from ears of corn while a radio
drones on under the cottonwood.
Scallions lie wet and green
on the kitchen counter, the sliced halves
of tomatoes gleaming on a cutting board.
In our constant confusion,
you and I grow stately and distant
as angelfish, the sand carefully swept,

the dead taken away. Darkness
finally drives us to bed, but we lie awake
in the summer heat picking over
the fragments of silence, the slivers
of decency we cling to.
It's not as if the world were fresh,
nor cruelty especially new. We have simply
perfected our defenses.