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JANUARY RAIN

By

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts

1973

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CONVERSATION WHEN FLYING IN

In Missoula mountains end,
you can see them North against the sky
that endless grey rolling east. It's strange here winter,
the clapboard roofs, soundless air, trucks
traffic jamming through our town. We've got a sign,
silver like a sheriff badge,
just beside a river (where trout
no longer stop) flashing "Western Village",
"Rivers Edge". You can sit there tough
as neon, watch the current drift.
Ice jams build and crack. Further south
trains collide. There's music in the trees,
and the Orange Street bridge still holds.
Go on laugh,
say there's no Montana. I've seen the sky
break symphonic blue, then settle.
It's only here that ulcers bleed.
You better buy a place at Bonner. Visit in the spring.

YOU BET WE BUILT A LIFE HERE

You bet we built a life here, hard as bricks.
No telephone, no T.V., when we looked around
we saw fire, that's all. Then kids
came to crowd the attic beams, playing games
we never learned. Usually quiet they roared
with the first snow, and ran downstairs to hug the fire.
Your dad remembers. How long since she's been dead?
They'll tear the walls out years from now.

THE PLACE

It's not the birds. Not powerlines, nor ants
that make the place. Its this man
who sits on the porch chair, rocking inside
all winter. The pages of his book falling
with each snow. His wife, a warm woman,
cold in the kitchen, listens to the wind.
Every day he builds a fire so big
he reads words by it. In the spring
he stretches like a bear, and clears the porch
so the sun can come right on in.

WITHOUT A SHORE

Without a shore I walk around
a winter no one needs. What's a poem worth?
Any way two words touch,
a world clicks into place. I'm no fool,
there's another world that's always green.
Who believes in plumeria trees,
waves that call the shots?
Mokulua's still beautiful from Lanikai.

THERE ARE NO AZURE STREAMS

Like hell, there are no azure streams,
and the whitened roads
go flat not high. This land runs
downwind, past vines,
children, and others, living things.
You've had your day,
the rocking chair's been better, you
should have sworn
and built your life with paper bricks or stars.
It's too late.
Just feed your child that arrow, vain and cruel.
Take flight I say.
Throw stones past copper hills.

MARYLAND HEAT

You should see the night:
flare. It hits you like a bomb,
dead horses in the street,
war. You'd tear clothes off,
run naked through the barn,
pray for rain
and women. Between your eyes
trees melt. Kids go mad,
smack shadows, hunt for moon.
Even weeds are thick with summer.

DEATH OF A DISTANT LOVE

Slide your white body to the top of the bed
and let me lay here with my letter.

Pull the pillow over your eyes.

I have thick angry lines to read
from a half-empty page.

It's not your fault. Telephone words shot
like sparks into her ear.

You shouldn't cry, the letter was in the mail
before we came together.

HURRICANE

These waves blur like leaves in wind
and rocks roll hard to cliff.
Other children over hills seek death in angry water.
Whose bad luck comes on
once a year? Another sailor dies.
Streets point east to cut the chill,
we drive the other way.
Past harbors near a Southern slope
clouds unfold the sky.
Build summits to the highest peak,
swear past broken lives, we've lost the days
when sunsets fall golden on our seas.

ENTERING

Let me see those brown eyes again
lift the lids a little
so I can peek in behind the color.
There are veins in there that move
like tiny electric shocks in every direction
trying to make up their minds where they're going.

SAND CASTLE

Inside a yellow house
where sun bursts in in balloon colors
laying out China, made in Japan,
she licks her lips with a long slow tongue.
Friends come, hold up the world.
The walls grow thicker.
She makes a bed of orchids, believes in a porch
and watches the sky, waiting for rain.

THERE ARE GRAINS OF LIGHT OUTSIDE

There are grains of light outside
that slip through my fingers making long shadows.
If you look to the west, facing the wind,
you can watch the night slide away like a sheet
but do that tomorrow. This morning the sun
is a yellow flower sending petals into the sky.

WAR POEM

The moon swallows like a black mouth.
Rivers run red with tears.
Over wires that thread the field,
men, their faces like stone,
ride naked hearts to the edge of the earth.

THE PANTHER

Why bend over bars and look
you can see him curl
against the cage, perfect black
gone blind. Whose hair is lost to thundered
sky? The deep stride come alive,
this is no dance of will that drives.
Let's let ourselves go sad
with fear, the claw that strikes
the heart. This panther turns
with balanced limb when growling
from the dark.

THE SHARK

Say he sinks his teeth
shakes the head that is his body
and tears the flesh right off.

What will you do, all blood, water
deeper than you are? Pray for help
or God rising strangely from the sea?

And the rocks--you're lucky--
they'll appear
like sloops, light ships, a sail.

You'll think "To be aboard..."
On a final building wave
flare up, go white, turn blue.

NEIGHBORHOOD GAMES

We almost broke our backs like that
playing kids we never knew. You caught every pass,
a great surprise. And me so lean
if they wished me down, I died. Those days rise
sometimes, like plays right off a field: laterals,
returns, reverses near the side. Now at night
alone, the sea laid flat and green
I yell '8,4,7,5' then power through.

ON SEEING A 3,000 YEAR OLD GREEK SCULPTURE

What troubled wind brought you here,
body carved from stone? Classic steed,
reins of blood. Marble at the breast.
Other horses gallop hard
Phoenicians to the sea, but you
strike white beneath the skin, while I
on empty planes address
my crevice of a life. Whose hooves
repeat their perfect speed? Muscles
brush the thigh. A final turn,
darkened breath. Veins
explode in flesh and Socrates
is lost for good. Centaurs slowly rise.
Women at the mane undress.
I gallop with the dead.

THE BICYCLER

"Dangerous times" he yells. A stop sign jumps
out of the dark. He hits a branch,
downshifts, kicks right on Main
and heads home.

DUSK

Between darkness on the right
and the light to my left I walk a trail.
It weaves along a narrow ridge that rims the earth.
Sometimes with balanced eyes I look up
and see the sky stand dead still.
The earth wavers, ready to fall.

THE TRAGEDY

- I. Where did they find the hurt in all that blue?
Was it on the shore, beyond the ocean
where their God used to be? Don't ask
the father, he won't know. All alone, huddled
in himself like that his arms are full of cold.
Each limb chills the other while his face floats
stiffly on the sea.
- II. What about the boy, frail,
arm outstretched to the threshold
of his father? You know he'll fail,
his gown now almost black from blue.
- III. And the mother, never any death without her womb.
She must be blue inside, bluer than those waves.
So her shawl won't help. And where is she reaching?
There is no Mary to heal her wound.
- IV. But two and one is more than five.
What's killing us is all their pain.
Let's bring offerings of wine, hear the sea crash,
let this death be what it is, not more.
When we're that size we won't break
for good. I'll be the brown in the boys eyes
raging after life.

JANUARY RAIN

Hell, January rain knocks you down,
your best friend.

How do you color weather like this? Swim alone
on the clear water of the inlet and pretend the waves
aren't beating you to death?

Ride your heart hard into March.
You'll make it
with only a scar that turns white
in the sun. Women will crowd the shore
and count your winters.

What's killing you still lives.
Summer flares
on a trail you climb
where leaves fall green and quick
in angry wind.

THERE ARE WOMEN IN THE WIND...

Voices still, hair
cutting the horizon
like yellow stone,
they are animals
with wild eyes, doves
whispering together.
As someone dies.

AQUAMARINE

A hidden jewel in the turquoise light
I found your body on the broken bed
as the red shark skimmed the glass.
Through the blue I swam, tangling
and untangling among the reeds,
while long sand beaches of your thighs
waited for waves to wash me back.
I came ashore with wet eyes,
lips trembling, afraid to say:
"This morning when you touched me
was a whole world underwater."

ANOTHER KIND OF MUSIC

The sun is not outdoors, nor inside,
nor on the page of my book.

People crowd in through the doorways
to send messages with the whites of their eyes.

No one listens. We enter a hall
with a long wide slope. Leaning forward
I hear the walls breathe slowly.

I walk down, with care, to the dunes.
Now I am surrounded by wells with strong handles.
Their tired buckets drift on the sea.

THE THROWING STONE

This stone must be quartz, or gold,
its green stars glittering beneath my thumb.
So smooth, the earth must be inside
buried along a seam of milky way.
With this stone I can break the blue,
and crack the moon. Do you see it shimmering,
shimmering as it flies?

OUTSIDE, ALONG THE STREETS

Outside, along the streets, rain falls
in big drops. The stones are swallowed
one by one. In here my white hands leave themselves
in thick flashes that beat your thighs
from blue to black, until you
with fingers trembling shudder like a horse
under a bare bit.

I DO NOT ASK OF YOU

I do not ask of you, my flesh, impossible
salvation, thoughts that rove on quiet streets
unquiet nights, but from the honied bark and bone
perhaps a sudden breath
beside the wormwood or the pine, a tactile sense
of space and sea, and this, some falling fluid light,
your dazzling liquid eye.

IF YOU ASK

"What about when waves hesitate?"

I have to say there are stones
beaten bright by rain, tired horses,
or shivering eyes. And a huge moon
crackling in the foliage.

If you ask me what I mean
I have to show: a shore far away,
swallows, or forgotten kisses,
and say "Not these".

What I find is a sun
pressing pale horses. I remember
dark stones turned in the earth,
something that drops from the leaves, glass
in the skin

Blazing red- as the days fall
into themselves.

But look at the orchids, all wet
against the wind. At the sea-walls that split
wave after wave. Whose eyes are suddenly pale?
Whose mouth a wound? Not mine.
I love what fades, a mournful sound.