

1981

Lessons In the Possible

Karl G. Garson
The University of Montana

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LESSONS IN THE POSSIBLE

By

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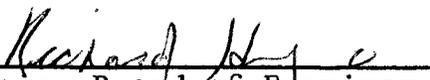
Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1981

Approved by:


Chair, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

12-14-81
Date

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these poems have appeared in the following publications:

Barney Street III

Barney Street IV

Northeast

Portage 1976

Portage 1977

The Mainstreeter

The Pointer

The Pythoness Press

The Stevens Point Daily Journal

A number of these poems are scheduled to appear in Lessons in the Possible, a chapbook to be published by Song Press in February, 1982.

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THIRTIES

January, Highway K

Pines cap a winter hill.
A green hand, palm down.

Big Dog

Running like hell,
hoping the back door is open.

Wren

The wren softly springs
the berried, wide-boughed cedar;
sanctuary found.

The Wilma Pigeons

A short pause from my cup sees them by,
the bright birds that are swift to the mill.

There they whirl over points of lost grain,
then descend, the first streaks in the dawn.

Crows

Crows rise against the dawn
from a rabbit
in the lane ahead.

Steady whip rolls
blacken my vision.

Kansas

This affair
is like skateboarding west across Kansas.

I puff Wichita away,
look to Dodge City
and beyond.

Killing Frost

Fall that came late
but came finally fast
with hard frost in tow,

caught those of us
with a shortage of baskets
and cellar dark.

Southern Wind

We trade sleep for the time
a few Olys give us.

Then late in night I drive the rain
while a remnant of you
scratches at my mind

like a Tennessee Williams screen door
in a yellow southern wind.

Venial Guilt

The Hail Mary and I
have been friends for years
and although
we don't belong
to the same club anymore
we still meet occasionally
for lunch.

Caribbean April

Asleep and measured by the moon
you fill this room like incense
from a Latin mass, with gregorians
that roll like breakers off Vieques
in the pitch of early April.

My lady, I'm a coaster by Culebra,
headed leeward for an eastern glow,
you, my Charlotte Amalie of the night.

At Sunset Lake

Ice shards
 mar the shore
and the reeds are shaken angrily.

Sand and loam
 are whipped to rest
beneath Orion's moon.

Oh sad
 or favorite time,
you shape well to the prevailing mood.

Suburban Sunrise

She believes in Level-Loop,
No-Wax,
and slick sinks
above sweet-running drains.

She's adamant in season
about oatmeal,
top buckles and mittens,

and scans dotted swiss
for life after sunrise.

Birch Drive, Morning

The first horned lark
is quick on the shoulder.

This bus—
yellow, black and
up Birch Drive,
fast on eight o'clock
and Jimmy Pazdra's house—
in spring too
with larks
and inclinations of the sun.

White Pine

Snow opens a palm
first at the base
of a particular pine
and frees wintered grass,
greedy for rain.

This last white pine
here skirmishes
with low-income housing
and similar infidelities,
and holds wilderness
guarded in heartwood.

Corn After Harvest II

I turn quietly in these rows,
consider the planting
a season past.

The sky is a deeper blue
holding clouds at a certain level
that say it is fall.

Grasses in their last green
lie between stalks.
There is a stillness to the earth.

And on the stalks
a rattle;
each leaf in the wind.

Fishes of the Mekong

They find safety
in rib cages.

Their young
dart
in and out
where eyes searched meaning
of these foreign waters.

Playfully
they nudge
rings from fingers
and gently tug the tags
still held tight to spine.

Murphy

She's that English actress
and absolutely magnificent in her role
of studied indifference.

Veronica Lake may have had
those eyes but
I only remember the hair.

Shirley Temple wore that barrette
dancing
with Bill Robinson,

and Liz Taylor
those boots
in National Velvet.

Return

Redwing measures
note this point of Aries.

Acres evict another frost.
Again they house spring's immigrant.

What they cannot absorb
ponds around the cattails.

I leave the cabin.
My young spaniel leagues ahead.

This eighty,
a fresh-washed cupboard.

Our steps,
the dishes back in.

Warning

Woe to the woman
harboring drunks
who shepherds tavern whippoorwills
and allows their litany
of roomspin, aspirintwo,
and mumbled brainwaves
to nuzzle inaccurately
against her sober breasts.

Deserted after quick eggs
by half-cup departures,
she'll find cold comfort
in once-bitten toast.

At the Gallery

You move at will,
at odd angles to my thoughts,
cubist of my fantasies.

Your hair lies
in fractured swirls
on pillows
of warped triangles.

Feet and hands
argue with geometry.

Breasts and thighs are evident
only after careful scrutiny.

Lady, you demand interpretation.

I sit here,
let you define my hours.

The Lady February

I have watched nipples rise
beneath the gauze of your blouse
quickly
the way a mood clouds across your eyes.

Have found your voice
soft as it is
an analogy of things so long denied me.

You have bound me in desire
as I would bind you to the bed posts,
and have covered passion
with the blanket
I would throw back

leaving you offered like a starfish,
and me the beachcomber.

Minor Rooms

Approached by March,
invaded by letters
for former tenants,
they gray evenly,
ride out the afternoon.

Wind lifts
the branches,
sifts snow from roofs,
still rooms ride evenly
gray in the afternoon.

Light changes.
Views knit in dusk.
Eyes turn inward,
follow glow upon gray
into evening.

Thirties

Seven gone

I sit behind walls
at odds with my father's dream.

I, conceived in cold,
travelled
a mother's summer
to this chill.

November
forgets first greens,
denies last thaws.

Gray
gathers in my spirit,
chokes anniversaries,
blocks seasons
until death
wings with geese.

Meadow Night

Fingertips against timothy
run to ready earth,
the rain begins.

A jay arrows the clearing

to try the oak,
the cedar and pine,
to settle for the aspen.
Night circles the meadow,

a dark cat
that counts fence posts
and takes the county.
The jay alone

sees rain yield a mottled sky.
An owl crosses,
a slow-thrown cleaver to the oak.
And silver-blue

the jay alone.

Hemlocks

The still inlet
floating stars
on our return
from Back Bay,

perhaps

hemlocks
somber runners
lacy over hills
to the channel,

or

esses
of hair
of firelight
circling your face,

make the recall of October
available in focus
on the occasions
corporal or spiritual
when we brush.

Monty Wooley on the Stairs

You climbed my stairs
into a trap
of homemade chicken soup,
slept after ripe pears,
cheese, and cheap chablis,
and never suspected
the series cast
Little Margie opposite Higgins.

Having had enough of winter anyway
you became
the Monty Wooley of my bedroom.

We died in summer reruns.

If our spring was a young Liz Taylor
then our fall was Shelly Winters.

An absolute bitch to have around.

A funeral grandmother
who smothered me in old woolens
and Woolworth perfume.

I gave the leaves Holden Caulfield kicks
and listened through the teapots
for Monty Wooley on the stairs.

Northern Highlands

Specifically, mixed.
Deciduous and evergreen,
second growth cedar,
bigtooth aspen, balsam, and birch.

But even more, this
is a Nick Adams forest,
the sun perched
half a tree height over December's frost,

its heat crystalline,
a cold diamond
caught between basswood and paper birch.
Snow covers the effect of twenty below.

We spend the night
headed northwest.
Deadmen hold us steady,
three to the wind,
one to the lee.

The taut tent
encloses considerable warmth,
is wind-loose at dawn,
condenses vapors
of hot chocolate,
brown, sugared oatmeal,
black tea and honey.

Then, skis waxed,
I roll the tent,
force out trapped air
and traces
of primordial cries
that marked
our dark sharing.

In Consideration of Warmth

Crone of dust,
crone then,
you inhabit dream
like a rake
shaken over innocence,

like a wrought heart,
a black tosser
of the crumb
from a widow's walk.

Even now, strangers in cafes flash your smile,
hurry my meals
and coffees,
throw me to the road too soon,

to the west
where, with thin excuse,
in anonymity,
I listen for your step.

Indentured by a fluke,
a pinch hit,
perhaps some lucky number
from his last good night,

I am left lone witness
to your fervor over pennies
and your casual gambol with blood.

Crone of dust,
crone then,
there is no time
the ties won't print
my struggle from your knife,

nor was the time
that your warmth
exceeded amniotic.

You, sneak thief,
are the brick that fell.
Crumbler, paint peeler—

I learn again.
The loss of my pencil case
is survivable.

LESSONS IN THE POSSIBLE

Happy Birthday, Michael Cashin

She said it was your ass.
"God what an ass!
Those cheeks never mesh
the same way twice,"

she mentioned, one of hers
flat against my window to watch
you yaw by on the close-in walk
a flight below.

All summer I endured a wake
of splashed-down glasses
because the rush at your parade
of shorts endowed her fantasies.

From that catalog of moves she turned
upon your name and caught it at a party.
Her vocabulary brought you home as Michael.
You remained a matter of time in mine.

Mike, by autumn I was wrong.
We've laughed apart the one tense time
I returned to find you there to meet me,
and found the story straight.

We've come to winter and your birthday.
This is from me. Be happy knowing
she reviews the walk that brings you by
and still allows you move invitingly.

One For Beth

Spontaneous and easy swimmer,
you break the lane in free-style.
I watch you all the way
until triumphant at the bench you catch
the towel I toss you, and toss me, "Chauvinist!"

I've never told what happens then
is better than your surface game,
that when you rest, you quiet to a deeper mood.
You tell some moments as a child
and then, unguarded, you become most lovely.

Later, as you practice violin, I watch
you ponder simple chords with such concern
I don't dare my laughter before those blue
and infant eyes, but when we love

I say, "Chlorine, chlorine will
kill me yet," and laughter takes us both.

Beth, leaving your warmth,
you've gone to swim in a Wisconsin blizzard.

When you return, dressed in St. Vincent originals
and call for a ride in a Bacall voice
husky from bad weather and celebration,
I'll tell you this because the words are right.

To leave you again would be a mistake.
You bring me back, always back;
a searcher returned to say,
"It must be here, I know it is."

Wisconsin February

The sun hangs, skewered on trees
that picket the sere west
like townsfolk come to torch a beast.

The moon has slow-risen, idle and white,
to watch me freeze a second month,
caught in half-life by frost light.

October has vanished without a trace.
The hard earth trades in rumors
and I weary of the rumor's pace.

Sure, February whistled fine
to ears that stepped
November and December's time,

but now it catches shallow breath
as March and April promise tales
I haven't faith to test.

Cardinal Virtue

Cushing sells bruised apples near a laundry.
By all appearance it is early Cleveland.
Sometime afternoon
or very near to midnight
skeletal acolytes dance on cider.

At the core of what is holy
reverence is redecorated in off-white.
Several trees rattle to communion.
The hosts prove elusive,
carom off the Platte,
disappear between clouds.

A vacuum fills the ciborium.
Crows feet etch its bowl.
Life is said to be impossible
beneath its lipsticked rim.

Corn at Harvest

Morning

The milking ends
while the stalks stabilize.

I fill the diesel
as night evaporates from forties.

The picker is attended roller and chain,
the wagon pinned.

The day rings crystal.

Again my lunch is hurried.

Afternoon

I pick a final acre
and draw the wagon to the bridge.

The light is four o'clock
over waters of the Baraboo.

Children gather at the crib,
watch ears rattle up the sides.

Their laughter counterpoints October.

It chirps favor for the quickened season.

Evening

I doze after supper
and see the tallow knuckle;

roots that consider sand
strung by a fall norther,

that hold earth
in a chill grip before tomorrow's plow.

Their rows assemble stripped and torn.

Arms stump at the quarter moon.

On Suicidal Prints

Larry, I've suspected the Bruegel,
heard insubstantive sorrows whispered
during evenings here.

Yet its final cry was not for us,
filled Collins Center's empty veins like
brake fluid
panicked in a one-car fatal.

This leads toward old debate,
trees alone in forests,
guilt and its denial.

What did remain, in morning fact,
was Winter Landscape
pitched face down atop your desk.

You're the next to know.

Thoughts in Available Light

I'd forgotten that snow
that came early to the mountains
and the need near evening
to close windows against the cold

for today the leaves were taken slowly
and the sun denied its point
in the October sky.

Now, as I leave Albertson's
and walk to the car,
what survives of the day
crowds light from deep angles
and abandons the west
to glow above the negative hills.

I stop to gather a thin jacket around me.

Missoula begins to candle its walls.

I think of how you wait with tomorrow
there in the dark fields of Iowa,
and how here I'll return home with ice cream,
weakened by the distance.

Supplication and Reply

I

Why do I talk to you now,
you gone away from my heart,
you faded like a shape from snow?

Why should I want to start
to offer clumsy words to you
when you're gone away from my heart,

when there's little I can do
to retrieve your easy grace
but offer clumsy words to you?

As I catalog our days;
recall the brush of ways, the sound of eyes
to retrieve your easy grace;

does it come as a surprise
and are you moved to ponder;
to recall the brush of ways, the sound of eyes?

Do you then begin to wonder
why I talk to you now,
and are you moved to ponder
why you faded like a shape from snow?

Supplication and Reply

II

Because of what I know,
that love is not my easy grace,
I faded like a shape from snow.

Love is also not: a list of days,
a brush of ways, a sound of eyes.
And it is not my easy grace!

What love is, is a surprise
which leaves a hollow in my heart.
A brush of ways! A sound of eyes!

I wish you wouldn't start
a fantasy of me and you
which leaves a hollow in my heart.

I see little left to do,
for I'm not moved to ponder
a fantasy of me and you,

and I don't trade in wonder.
Because of what I know
I'm not moved to ponder
why I faded like a shape from snow.

Whatever Happens, Happens Quickly

A preying robin dashes low and springs up tall.
The breeze drops a string of rain from the belly
of a phone line to the lawn beside the bird.
The line swings back to stillness, to gather.

A bone is found and carried from weather,
the last scrap of a 4-H project shot to beef.
Taken from a woodlot to be shelved above a desk
it is polished by a curiosity of hands.

The sapper runs her robin bursts in quiet,
between and through the rain-strung concertina.
A burst on automatic bleeds the humid air.
The night snaps off its color, readjusts its tension.

A phone rings at an unappointed hour.
Someone wakened happy may dash at it excited.
Jolted only to the night, they may respond with caution.
Either way, they answer it.

A relationship may keep its beat or fall to bones.
If it stays low it may warm to something further.
When it stands it has to worry over something quick.
It always sights the tallest of possibilities.

Lessons in the Possible

Eddy Street dachshund, my brown run of sharps,
why do you riff day and again
the measure of your chain
when you know its measure and its pain?

Unseemly frankfurter, mutant slug,
today you will flip once more
into the same grassy roll,
the same exclamation of dewclaw and snout.

There are other streets, velvet footstool.
My part could be left unplayed.
But your lessons, my overt mole.
Beyond the smile, they make the poem possible.

PICTURES FROM A '24 WEDDING

Missouri Thaw

To every creek and trace of this divide—
sure as a locomotive pulling slack
from every car in a long freight—
certain change occurs, a settling
of snow, a reopening of water.

The nerve beds stir, tendrils to light.
The Blacktail, Ruby, and the Dearborn turn.
The Madison and Sun, the Milk, the Nevada,
and the Hound, feel the pull of heat
that builds on the eastern slope.

Faint yet new, this February pulse
murmurs the thunder to come.
March. April. The Missouri free
to lock to rivers named for middle states
and Mississippi past New Orleans to the sea.

A Letter in Recall

And this is the typewriter that sits before me,
metal touched to a welter of keys in this room
where yesterday only your body sat before me.

In this act of recall, your body combines in a bloom
of Nolde and Ingres—expression and line
and metal touched to a welter of keys in this room.

Yesterday your movements in love—today my touches define
a body of words, a portrait reminiscent
of Nolde and Ingres—expression and line.

What I type in these lines seems deficient,
for today the ground for your soft cries diminished, became
a body of words, a portrait reminiscent

of metamorphosis—of an odalisque in flame.

Lady, release me from words, return on the tide of my calls.
For today, the ground for your soft cries diminished, became

in this room, one with the desk and the walls
and this, the typewriter that sits before me.

Lady, release me from words, return on the tide of my calls
to yesterday, where only your body sat before me.

Fat

Malevolent conversion of mindlessly ground
gastrointestinal slurry.

Guerilla victorious from the junk-hunger jungle
bandoleers drooped with eclairs.

Stuffer of the shoe, disabler of shorts, scourge
of the stitch on gelatinous prairies of pants.

Liar in the six-pack, heart's leech,
lover unfaithful by inches.

Fat, I hate your foul scat, your smear of smoked almonds
and old-fashioned tracked between L.A. and Oahu,

your supersuspension of lard slapped between buns
and left to howl from a mean web of diners.

Radial middle, I turn your cap tight, slip out
of your pull tab, spit up your cello-wrapped infants,

and I recoil from your warm double-dips,
your sugar cone option, your french vanilla song.

Iowa, from Montana

An afternoon which offers the possibility
of nothing begins to rain.
Outside the window a plum tree
declines from bloom.
The fruits of summer are a thin belief.

Maybe it is sunny in Coralville,
your Iowa town with its Florida name.
Perhaps the oaks on the library hill
gather shadows like sticks
thrown to a table in a children's game.

Here a Salt Creek truck passes TRAVEL BIG WYOMING
in tall red letters to my desert room.
I feel a Wyoming highway, that stretch below Teton,
187, Pinedale to Rock Springs where
a wave for help could flap in your rear-view forever.

But the incoming rain becomes harder
and the petals fall under fire.
I go back to the refrigerator
determined to salvage
the remains of afternoon light.

Now a train grinds rust from the lumberyard siding,
like this, the smaller metal sound of a tab
pulled to open the last beer,
to signal that one thing leads from another,
that with you there I've begun to drink more here.

April Snow in Wisconsin

for Cliff Weber

I

Spring had turned to the winter and won
 but then snow returned so thick in wind
 that plow clicked in my mind like a shutter
 while I looked two ways at the order of the farm.

The day became a trip postponed and a barn to clean.
 Measured by accumulations
 it tossed on the swell of weather.
 Roads closed. A neighbor called for help.

Had he phoned later with,
 "Come quick, the calves are dying,"
 the manure and its sweet steam
 would have been released over the lower forty.

But the load waited (it would not freeze
 in weather that wet) as I snapped the tractor
 free for the hurry through woods that marked
 good neighbors with maple and oak.

II

Two lay in the farmyard below the small barn
 which brought the only lee to the sadness
 and Cliff wrung his hands as he often did,
 he and I the only movement there.

Of the four in the barn three were gone.
 I kneeled to the other low in the wet mat of straw,
 to feel breath, to find some thin gift,
 an oddment to offer that good man in his grief.

Nine years ago this spring and my shout,
 "No you can't! No you can't!," still is my wish.
 But there was no startle to the small form
 that arched away from me, away from such surprises.

One by one then, snapped to the end of the chain
 they skidded, numb to the wet and deepening April snow
 as the M tractor and I, in strange cortege,
 bumped to the ravine of foxes and seasoned oak.

Pictures from a '24 Wedding

for Peggy

Smiles locked, centered on a clapboard church,
the party stands along gravel for snapshots.
There's sun and a veil tells of wind.

Someone says, "The film's gone." Another, "Let's
get drunk." They begin to move to a few parked cars,
Jack and Corrie crossing for the shiny one, an uncle's.

You imagine more, mornings when you get off shift.
A car from nowhere, quicker than her jump or scream,
picks the brightest target and is gone, north and fast.

The world breaks loose, circles the white dress,
sends a posse in a Model A, lifts her easy
to the widest seat, looks for ways to stop the stain.

They chase through town, pass friends who wave
best wishes at the streamers and the horns.
Jack, all that time, in back with the bride.

When he's in that day he tells you.
The time he marries Corrie. How the day
gets off real nice. How it is in '24.

I remember the Chrysler.
First that's all.
And the place we took her,
where folks said no chance.

Then the nigger fills my head.
His face. His hands on the wheel
and Corrie walking up ahead.
That stretch of gravel too,

from where they hit, to where
it drops away north,
through those cottonwoods
where Dwight took after.

The first time, your liberal cant gets bent.
But the file calls the madman's story straight,
his hatred set years before Brown and Topeka.

Some nights, only your syringe stops the NIGGER
pushing at the pale green walls of Warm Springs.
Mornings after those Jack has your mind.

You see a camera picked up from stones,
small black-and-whites that curl until a mother dies,
and a wrapped album Jack never returns to claim.

Instead, each day he kneels to gravel, turns her gentle,
sees her eyes go wide and flat. You see two minds,
how they stop together, frozen in a single frame.