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Mules

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The University of Montana

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MULES

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requirements for the degree of

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MULES

These poems appeared originally in the following publications:

Poetry Seattle: Another City

Porch: Hitchhiker

Review La Booche: Walking Out of the Tide (originally titled, Nothing To Do)

for my father and mother

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WALKING OUT OF THE TIDE

"a journey is kind of a limbo between lives"

Randall Jarrell

For weeks I've been plugging
these holes in my lungs

that run with salty water.
And one by one all my mermaid

friends have been asked to leave.
No more lemon-colored fish

to swim around my knees.
I wait for the tide to wash back,

clear the seaweed and hair from my face.

I

THE COBBLER'S JOURNAL

for Earl Holland

I love to sleep near bars.
The footsteps and voices belong to no one.

*

In bed, my feet argue the direction of my death.

*

Nothing surprises me, I love your twelve toes.
Such nerve, such balance.

*

I have never put my tongue in anyone's shoe.

*

In the morning I find footprints near my pillow.
The smallest dwarf protects me when I sleep. Last
night he left a message. "I have gone to Merida
to buy sandals. Don't sleep till I return."

*

How does he travel,
his feet are not winged.

*

Z said she had fallen in love--
I'm sure it's a woman.
She loved my tiny feet.

*

What I secretly wanted each Christmas:
a shoeshine kit, the tins of brown Kiwi.

*

Father, I was lying when I wore your shoes.

TRAIN WHISTLES

Whenever I hear them
I think of the times L. C. and I sat
on the bluffs above the tracks
by the Mississippi. We'd smoke cigarettes
and spit and smoke would curl
into the air and disappear.
Below, mudwater eddied and swirled and meant nothing.
Maybe one in every ten throws
I'd hit the silver rails
that wound north and south along the bluffs.
When I missed the current snatched the rock
and left no ripple. One afternoon a drunk
wandered up from Neelys Landing.
He stumbled on the ties between
the two rails and the pitch of his drunk song,
echoed by limestone, skipped across
the river to Illinois. For fun
we shouted down to him.
He wheeled and fell against a rail,
lay as still as a dead man.
We ran for two miles
then collapsed against the cool ground
on the side of a hill where the sun didn't hit.
And then we heard it:
one short blast then a long whistle
more insistent than our breathing.
When we hit the graveled road from home
we never turned back.

SILVER MAPLES

Each night I curled in a bed I feared
I would never fill. So I carved
my name on a branch that would thicken
wider than my father's thigh.
The starlings that landed there
I shot from the back steps--
my heart stuttered like their wings
when they fell. One afternoon
Monk Nolan killed a hummingbird
in the trappings of bridal lace
rimming our yard. I swore never to tell.

That night, father, you came home,
drunker than any man needs to be,
you shook my mother's neck,
cursing the money you lost at cards,
the highschool where you taught farm boys
Byron and the simple sentence.
You finally let go and cried
told my sister that we
had much to learn, my sister
who had already learned to strut
and twirl her fire baton
in brightening arcs at twilight.

It happened only once,
I forgave it all.
This afternoon my childhood
has fallen at my feet like a dead wren.
I grew no larger than you.

THE MAP OF LEAVING

Past unlit driveways aligning before dawn
Past jagged weeds shouldered off the road

Past the house of a boy who drowned
the dream of his parents filling with water

Past black flowers I tried to name
and trees whose leaves hinged on darkness

Past broken lingering factories
their footprints of rubber piled in gullies

Past the river stirring its mist
the cabin closed around its light

Past barns breathing under the surface of dew
and cattle dozing in the grass--

the huge rocks no one has moved
Past insects pushing their boulders against the sun

Past the crossroads where everything waits

TWO FIGURES IN MT. HOPE CEMETERY

We did not see the night shift pause
in the barred windows of Brown Shoe Co.
to look out over the graveyard
where we lay hidden between the grass
mounds, our bodies packed close as soil,
the taste of our sex rising in mist.
At fifteen we did not fear the dead beneath us.

That was twelve years ago and smoke
still gushes from the huddled stacks
in its hurry to resemble nothing.
I once hoped you wouldn't follow
forty years of family, take a job
stitching leather: the racketing,
thick needles. I have come back alone
to the damp ground of our first undressing
to watch those window lights burn,
if not in forgiveness, then to feel some gain
in the repetition of parting.

Where I sit under the cedar my hands
have stiffened in the mold of fallen needles.
At least you have a place. I have streaked
the fogged glass to watch the car's shadow.
Clocking out this morning
you'll walk past these bent rows of stones,
past your mother's house and the window
you would slide from like a thief.

HITCHHIKER

When I stopped for you, the sedan behind me
turned instinctively to the passing lane.

Against us, the prairie delivered its wind
deeper into the midwest. You fell asleep

on the backseat, legs curled up to your stomach
hands folded into your lap. All night

the pavement slipped quietly beneath the tires
disappearing into the unlit blackness.

When I looked back at you
I imagined you standing on some city curb

thumb pointed away from your blank face.
I thought of my older brother

who left home and for six months
hitchhiked from city to city

touching new scars that grew across his face.
When he returned he seemed

not to have changed from the person
who wandered onto the highway

with nothing. I asked questions
but he answered as if he thought

I wouldn't understand.

The next winter he left for good.

When they found him I told no one
what I felt slide out my bedroom window.

I walked the streets of our small town
until daylight, my only clear thought,

the moon dragging its thin blade
across the sky. When you awoke

what I thought bothered you most
was not the red scars the vinyl

had left on your cheek or that
it was still dark and your neck was stiff,

but you had nothing to say to me
or to the darkness held back by cool glass

on which you pressed your forehead.
I glanced outside the passenger window

where my reflection was mirrored.
In the growing light I could make out vague

forms of cattle as they moved along a path
between squat trees and barbed wire.

Maybe you thought the man you rode with
moved along a similar path or spoke too little

but that when he talked he wanted
to know too much. Maybe your dreams

held conversations with those who drove you
over these roads, and waking,

left you with nothing to say.
The wind pushed hard against my door.

Dawn unmasked the prairie,
my brother's swollen face loomed

in the high weeds of the ditch,
in the white flowers of jimsonweed

that bloomed along the highway, in your eyes
as you stared at the landscape.

DEAR READER, WITH APOLOGIES

If there were a window between us
that I could break with my fist,
if my eyes were knots of horror
you could not loosen from,

I would hide you and tell no one,
build a cage with a cover of dark cloth.
I would push bread within your reach,
with your spoon you could tap

echoes down the vacant halls.
I think of how your black eyes like birds
will search the cracks along the limestone.
You will love the white chalk of exile.

When it's dark I'll carry you to the turret
and select from among the stars
those I've named and want you to learn.
We could live like this.

ANOTHER CITY

In another city they might speak,
this woman with her morning coffee
this sculptor beside his chiselled rock.

But in this tenement whose shadow
stains each neighboring wall
he only keeps her awake. Up at six

she hears the metal against the stone,
folds her hands around her ears
then around the tulip's petals.

Its red bloom, open like her palm,
spins in the breeze. Tomorrow
she will walk to the window

and find its petals fallen to the floor.
Somehow she will think him responsible.
But let's say they meet in Miami

at the bus station and share a cigarette.
She might ask him about his work
or say something about her life,

maybe tell him about her dream
in which the tiny ball exploded
inside her abdomen and the kidney trouble

that followed. He might think this wonderful
and pull from his pocket a tulip
carved from stone, so small he could

slip it behind her ear. They would part willingly
like exhausted swimmers stepping out of the surf,
the tidepools collecting at their backs.

THE WESTERN MOTEL IN LAREDO, TEXAS

So what if a wrong turn brings us to this town
where bats snap flies from the neon glare,
their wings flashing like flipped coins.
Idling semis throb at the prairie's edge.
The clerk dozes against his bell, dreams of his dark
Honduran pen pal he knows he'll never see.
We slide from our clothes like snakes
and cling to the steamy underwater lights.
Occasionally a cattle truck rolls sadly by
and the evening gazette ruffles its box scores
and classifieds against the chain link fence.
Swim at your own risk the chipped sign warns,
but risk is what has driven us this far
into the hot landscape. We are desperate
but not bored, consider waking the clerk
to give him our money, the keys to our Dodge.
In Tegucigalpa the woman he dreams of
is selling mangoes under the orange awning,
the soccer match ended hours ago.
We sidestroke through the murky pool,
it is midnight, the lifeguard's gone home.

WHAT IS IT YOU COME DOWN HERE FOR

Tell a wild story when you return?
Talk to my brother who knows the city
where women swirl his head
with hair blond as flour.

My daughters play dominoes all afternoon.
Here, sit under the roof, I'll open a beer.
Maybe you would like to play? No.
They say it's fun to watch them fall.

Look at these parrots, the weeping fig,
the philodendron trailing down its trunk,
the volcano behind it all. Es bueno,
see how fast you learn the language.

My mother says leave your kind to the ticks.
Give her a chance, she will spit your way.
What does she know, she remembers Carranza.
I don't--the revolution didn't make me rich.

I could use your advice.
Follow me through this tall grass
where the ticks are too small to see,
to these big stones carved like my face.

Notice that oil pooling around the mound,
rich and black like a bowl of turtle beans,
the authorities have not seen it.
Only you have seen it

only you. I know nothing about the ways
of money. What do I do, disturb the dead,
forever chattering of corn and kings?
Or not disturb the dead?

VIOLINS FOR TWO

No longer crouched
behind the blue hydrangea
he's disappeared through sycamore
and pine. You will recover
but to know he no longer follows you
leaves you less assured.
So you start to drink,
carrying the vodka onto the porch
where you play the violin
hoping he'll return.

To attract attention you practice Vivaldi
until the storm clouds circle,
dark as empty cathedrals.
Thunder bows its applause
but that's all. You think of the dead
and the strategems of real estate.
At the edge of the garden
his feet smudge the bermuda grass.
Again he knocks at your statue,
again he's asked to leave.

THE PLAGIARIST

Across the street the box cars
approach each other indifferently
like the waitress nearing
her reflection on the cafe window
in whose grin you might mistake
the smirk of an old love.

Maybe she hands your five dollars
to the plagiarist when he rises to pay,
a man who'll give it
shamelessly in the bar tonight
as he sidles from one booth
to the next like a rumor.

Back in your room you sweep
your wilting socks into a corner
and begin to collect for another day
that honesty you depend on
late at night when the curtains
flap like old shirts over the fan.

Consumed, you whisper to the mirror,
but the plagiarist has heard
a few words you've said.
He handles your best lines
like the change in his pocket.
He might know what they will buy.

NAMES WE THOUGHT OUR OWN

Summer burned like an ember beneath my nail.
At night I thought I dreamt of nothing,
or of someone who would never meet me
either in this town or the next. Driving west
I changed the names of towns we passed--
saw Woodriver said Unworthy, saw Alton
said Dark Ages. You pretended not to listen
and looked over the landscape wondering
if this move would save us.
I slept against the window,
woke unrested to a striking match.

Volcanic ash flamed the sunset in Missouri;
the farmer, glancing from his brush hog to the sky
as we slowed to watch his work,
could have thought himself historic.
Did he want to be nearer the mountain?
Did he long for irreversible disaster?
Face black from burning the ditch,
he went in at dark to meet his wife
who could not stop talking of her dead sister
or the slow hands of their oldest daughter
who had carried brush to the roadside fire.
I saw how boredom had scorched her eyes.

That night in the motel I couldn't sleep
or dream; the circle of light above the lamp
did not grow smaller, and if the daughter
were now in the damp arms of a man

who would not look up across the slim
stalks of corn as he loosened
the buttons of her blouse,
she would keep her name.

GOD BLESS OUR SCARS

I hear only one voice.
On the radio someone is reading a story
of two children who have left their mother
and have begun a long walk, a necessary march.
And if it takes one year or six,
no difference. In the winter
they'll lie on a mattress of snow.

The children stop at a gate,
which they are unable to open,
and tired they slump against
its iron and curling ivy, their arms
a saddle for the moon
that rides their sleeping bodies
and lifts finally above the mountain
like a scar we carry
from the broken bones of childhood.

Last night I lay awake and plied
the strands of muscle in your back.
Our nights will end soon.
God bless our scars.

THE BIOGRAPHY

I no longer miss the warm cat
I held to my chest
or the white eyes of the hydrangea
I uprooted, their pillow of bermuda grass.

When I shoveled as far as my third wife
I took from her marble hands
my third and final heart
and dropped it into my sack,
brushing her hair from its red curves.

I kissed black dirt from the statues
of others until their eyes stared
like the scarred steel of my spade.
when it shattered I tunneled
with my hands and feet
filling my sack with lies
that hardened like coal.

I worked hunkered like a toad.

Once the full moon fell
into my hole like snow
and once I felt like climbing out.

How much I failed this life
I measured by those intractable jewels
I lost. Each one I stooped to retrieve

or chip from a vein of muck and roots
was heavier than the last.

The coldest shame won't surprise me
or swell in my throat like sadness.

MULES

Near the tobacco barns
and red-graveled roads
where my father grew up
in western Kentucky
the mules grow older
and begin to lose their teeth
as they gather around the rusted plows
and wait unharnessed. This morning
someone points at them from a car window
and disappears
down a county road that leads
to the jonquilled yards
and trellised porches
of old relatives.

I am a long way from home.
I think I may be the man
who tugged at their halters
each morning before dawn.
If I call their names
they will know.

THE SAWMILL

When the sun came up
sawdust rose into the breeze
and remained in the air all day
as it did in our eyes. But none of us
drove to work the next day
or for the rest of the week.
The tin-roofed operation
run by four men was quiet,
and those driving by only imagined
our movements in the building's shadows.

By evening only an orange glow
burned down beneath the shrinking mound
of charred slab wood behind the mill.
Smoke rose in thin trails
but smelled nothing like incense.
When a car rushed through the valley
and up the hill, its beams
moved like a flashlight
through an empty closet.

Around midnight
a dog might have returned to the mill,
nosing over hickory bark
or scraps of yellow poplar,
looking for a bone.
He might have smelled something
lifelike in the air,

and if he had walked near the circular saw,
sniffing the dampness
on the stained, wooden floor,
he would have lapped dried blood
until his mouth was full of dust.

When I try to think of you
and that morning,
think of ~~you~~ doing anything,
cursing, spitting tobacco, shoving boards,
there is always the awful ring of that saw,
your legs kicking at nothing,
the drenched log sliding toward me.

SONG OF THE DROWNED SON

Break this shell of night
so I can see what moves inside
and where the stars spill and freeze,
revolve their spinning hands.

Above a house I left across the plowed
waves of fields, the moon brings out
its constant stare. Dead leaves
answer the wind. My mother's room
is papered with a face I cannot wear.
Now elm leaves tremble like tiny bluegill
out of water. Small birds
call back my name to her.

SINKHOLES

1

Looking into the sinkhole
that my father and I had come upon while deer hunting,
I listened to his story about the mule
who broke a fence and ran until his bones
cracked against the limestone walls.

2

So I think about the print of the mule's hooves
as they must have found them
near the torn page wire and broken post,
split by his heavy thighs
kicking backward, then forward
through a field of timothy and thistle
echoing the sound of what might have been a deer
had it been quieter and more controlled.
They wandered with paraffin torches
through the washed-out ravines
until those same prints stopped at the sinkhole.
Satisfied they brought sparse details to their women
bent over between rows of sweet corn,
their hoes attacking slim weeds.

3

I tossed a branch into the dank hole
and listened to it carom off the rock
until that echo escaped into another cavern.

Now something has made me return to that sound
as I return at times to these faces
that crowd the mirrors into which I gaze,
as an unemployed son
returns with his good reasons to his father's house.

4

Soon after, a buck broke suddenly into sight.
I put the bead of my shotgun on his scant neck,
pulled the trigger
and watched him slip off
into a half-darkness of shade and early light.
Later, after I stopped hunting,
it was that darkness I remembered,
not the deer.

5

Once while floating an underground stream in a cave
a friend and I blew out our carbide flames
and we drifted without speaking
for an hour. Sparking my light,
I thought I knew something about that darkness,
that once inside it, it told me nothing.
Water stuttered down the moss-brown bank
and did not take my fear away.
We paddled on, our thin fires
extending an inch beyond our foreheads,
and saw a chasm open upward
but we couldn't see daylight,
only the twisted roots packed in clay and chert.
When we emerged ten hours later
the sun glared upon our muddy faces

and we returned to our camp.

I awoke at dusk,
whispered my name into my cupped hands
until I thought I could rise
and start another fire. Around its light
I sat and did not name the stars
that looked in from behind the trees.
And hearing a coyote,
whose cry was a man crying,
I was frightened,
frightened, as I had been when looking into that
sinkhole,
a black breeze had fanned my hair.