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### Night Should Have Boundaries

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NIGHT SHOULD HAVE BOUNDARIES

By

Terry Nathan

B.A., Shimer College, 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
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1978

Approved by:

Madeline De Grees  
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Uzzano, Cut Bank, The Borrowed Times,  
and The Montana Poets Anthology.

for Joel and Sandy

We are solitary. We may delude  
ourselves and act as though this  
were not true. But how much better  
it is to realize it, yes, even  
to begin by assuming it.

R. M. Rilke

The prisoner turns toward anyone.  
"I'm sorry. These seats are taken."  
My only window dreams at night.  
                  It's not going to last.  
It dreams of the terrible snow  
                  which I know is terrible.  
It takes the scissors upon itself.

Michael Burkard

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I

What Could Get Me Talking

## The Lake

It disturbs you, the lake growing  
out of evening, the rock pearled  
up the harbor delivering a row  
of boats. From this distance,  
clouds are like sacks of ice.

In the dream we share, night  
is pocked with sails, a sentinel  
holding in the pier. It disturbs you.  
Sometimes you want to say, yes,  
I've had enough. Then out

among meaningless plunges, the vague  
wake and sky we held from shore  
come apart. You sink through  
another seizure of waves,  
a soft explosion in your throat.

Along the lichen and pitched rock,  
the shore imitates your  
further shape. Your mouth gives in  
without a sound, confused  
under the continual white caps,  
approximates a dream.

There, beyond the waves, a calm  
has come down. Two gulls  
climb like white prisms into a wash  
of night, and the lake takes  
your final breath.

Across the slow tilting clouds,  
a boat slides from its bed.  
You turn this scene farther in:  
like a ghost ship on fire,  
the lake traces what you  
have lost, drifting.

## Night Should Have Boundaries

Days this white light warning you  
home safe. There in July, your window  
opens out to the lake. Gulls  
and you understand: the way beyond  
cut off. Sometimes you would nod  
or stand to watch, imagine small fish  
crawling across your window, wounds  
swarming tiny wings like emeralds  
above water. Then, looked out.  
All day the sails coming in  
and going.

                  You have traveled  
some distance before night, like so many  
carp for fresh blood. Friends tried  
talking you from the window.  
But always, the lake a mirror-writing  
of weather, the fish more than romance.  
I'd nod, think of you not laughing  
in this slant of light. The night  
should have boundaries to hold us near.

On the beach, gulls poised in sand,  
singing the shells your hand held  
out to water. Hasn't the lake  
gone on long enough? Waves  
falling forward, and you, unaware.  
But even then, in this room  
you are awake for small gains.  
Today, water wants to say  
dull green, the sky not just sky,  
opals gone your blue distance.

## Shells

i

They change for no one.  
Only the dead know how wild  
their insides wave about:  
because the dead too  
are a heart beat  
    we do not hear.

ii

We imagine they are out there  
like a lost swimmer,  
distant, crazed. Beneath  
the waves are fingertips  
spinning endlessly under:  
    water taking up their bodies.

iii

Our need for stricter borders.  
In our bodies, the space  
we make for pain is  
their calm. The deepest part  
surrounds: taking in  
    water insanely.

iv

Another story. Consider  
the interiors between  
shores. The ocean cradles  
each shell impersonally,  
    fluted eternally.

## Listening for My Father

Every room a separation,  
and you telling me secrets  
I could turn on myself.  
Taking your words, the ones  
I remember well, they invited  
this: our dull pulling apart.  
Now to say, I've left you father.

Tonight, I'm thinking  
how much earth we pushed  
over you. I want to tell you  
I welcomed those words  
that put you under, each spoken  
as if a last--but cannot explain.  
You in your chair, the anger  
floating up like fine rain.

That day they found you  
curled in your coat,  
you died miles from us.  
It was some silent neglect  
before you. I wanted to touch  
your face, we're so closed up.

Now, I'm stepping away, this  
memory, an immense abstraction  
twisting in the chest. It  
says we are the same--always.  
Some nights I hear you  
in that chair, turning edges  
of paper like a knife sharpening  
over the brain. Even now,  
I'm looking down my fists.

This Friend  
for Tom Mitchell

No one wants to tell you  
how to be alone, since you have,  
to drift through this day  
like dust filtered through  
a haze. Even thinking  
is less clear, and for some time  
I thought about ordinary things:  
leaving a lover, for example.  
That ritual included joyousness,  
then, loneliness returning.

I'm afraid of speaking  
from a damaged point of view,  
afraid of the history we make  
for ourselves, resisting  
each other. Glimpses of ugly moments  
that penetrate the heart like  
some object distinct on the horizon.  
I should be ashamed.

So today, this friend appears  
especially close. We talk  
of the need for a woman,  
a knife to cut away this crap  
about loneliness. I might  
come to know him better  
at the exclusion of myself.  
But my first urge is for  
a lover's incompleteness.

Crossing Over  
for John Nausieda

Dear friend, I write this  
before washing my face,  
which is a way clear of  
any sacrifice made today.  
The poem comes from  
a stricter need, a hollowing  
out like the skull washed  
of blood and water.

Through this, we gather  
light, a crossing over,  
as one crosses from sleep  
to some kiss that could make  
you lonely. Elsewhere,  
all moves through a dream,  
a lover's faint smell,  
the flowers bending  
from their roots.

I might open a newspaper,  
read about that mindless  
murder. But even then,  
the morning goes on  
without us. The dull  
spines of tulips we've  
not yet watered. Today,  
I've no simple reason  
to complete myself.

Sometimes we should care  
less for those unhappy,  
and living with this  
is special, like writing you.  
I want to rise gently,  
let this morning go on  
falling, its delicate wing  
agile across my face.

## What Could Get Me Talking

All night the vibrating  
wall of a shell. Resonance.  
My father whispers into the deep  
lake of his dissolving self.  
Does he hear it? That  
disappointed man inside  
me, filling the holes  
of a former voice.

Here is the problem:  
for a time I was desperate  
to know the story, the body  
under me unashamed. Like  
living among the dead,  
the absence of all else  
meant ugly statements.  
I wanted to speak through  
my father, wipe out  
the margin of sky between us.

So tonight, I follow  
the history of his death,  
remember the jerk  
of clarity that twists  
our bodies together,  
never to leave this father.

Could we repeat the pain  
of leaving ourselves in leaving  
the past behind? Because  
without these shells,  
the image of our hearts  
pulled apart, aren't we less  
than human, dwarfed by the dead  
who shout out loud.

## Pushing Out

i

From here the hands  
scatter waves above the water,  
the body goes out beyond the shore,  
beyond this bed--its silent  
undulation. The water rises  
daily around me, fills  
not as the lungs do,  
but with every breath,  
which is another life  
I keep from you.

ii

Tonight I push out alone.  
Your memory becoming  
the face of where it was.  
The loaves of bread neatly sliced.  
Each fingertip an intelligent  
spinning, under the soft layers.  
In this water I come to know  
the body drawing itself  
back into stone,  
into the interior  
between us.

II

The Sea Falling Through Itself



Beyond my window, this day  
begins, the heart pumping  
tiny explosions, the remainder  
of strangers leaning out  
en masse, to look.

## Gloomy Weather

It's that grey tolerance  
going out cloudy again. Hills  
mist shoulder to shoulder.  
Here in October, weather is a sponge storm.  
The day will start cows lowing,  
flurries of heat. Pigs are making  
barn yards murky-yellow. Even so,  
nothing is stricter. People  
precede a mood of rust. You go mad  
with harmony. Today, the local news  
reports rain for colorful pasture,  
bushes pushing up new roots.

Once crows dogged these miserable  
afternoons, cropping a coat  
of silk. They embraced  
eyes closed. You thought your  
town different. No changes, weather  
inscribed on leaves: a pact  
of earth and sky, and out of it,  
your home falling into jig-saw  
days. Soft moons in the kitchen.  
This is how it always was,  
the future's unending collapse.  
When you speak, cracks of dull  
thunder. You understand.

## Coming into Natural History

Like walking through a museum,  
the difficult swatches of skin  
sewn together, when skin was apology  
for elephants. And that mastodon  
dangling from ropes as a method  
of discovery, crumbles.

Your friend the curator has Siberian  
connections, though this is only one  
example of animals dipped in ice.  
You are living through strange shortages,  
facts kicked in cardboard boxes  
among the new standards of discovery.

Tomorrow, awful news. The curator's  
face escapes you as you wonder  
about animals never meaning to be,  
performing waltzes like a balloon  
over breakfast: stuffed pillow  
and frozen flowers.

White Balloon  
Baryshnikov

I like to speak  
through the empty space  
between--magenta, splitting  
the precious jewel,  
small slippers walking myself.

One night,  
the woman I dance with  
twirls too fast.  
I lose my breath laughing.  
We float apart,  
then hover like swallows  
fluted in the air.

For a time, no mistakes,  
a white balloon  
that makes its own  
sky. Afterwards,  
we are together again  
against the glass.

I don't want to hold them back,  
these best of friends.  
Maybe you understand  
I'm in circles.  
It goes on.

I feel I've carried my legs,  
this message, years  
going out. Walking away  
from themselves, they  
are like coral  
wavering in water.

A closeness, the heart  
an elegy  
bleeding softer.  
We carry the space between.

## Adverse Circumstances

The ordinary diplomatic shuttle  
burdens us, our hearts protecting  
the haze of long ago evenings.  
On the streets of Sharm el Sheikh  
we debated women shifting water  
from hand to hand. We were bored,  
and why not? Inventing a new word  
for war, we carried it screaming  
through Skokie among the neatly sliced  
lemons of garden parties. Meanwhile,  
dying from the brain out, we  
greeted the language of deserts  
with donkey eyes, everyone riding  
the business of dark suits.  
Who needed that place, ruinous  
among shadows of Valentino or any  
silent lover? Now, the evenings  
shed light on our gravity. We  
forget faces gathering like dust.  
And we the dying go on with our lives,  
the heart pumping upside down  
in frictionless pools.

## Threatening Weather

You could put a chair up  
to the sea--your room  
is a desk, its shadow,  
the bust of a Rubens,  
her breasts threatening  
as clouds. A ghost  
would enter, filling  
out flesh. No one,  
not even you could  
keep the sea from  
falling through itself,  
the inconsequential  
cliffs crumbling  
like that chair,  
its fire.

Say the room caught,  
made its own weather  
of tubas and chairs,  
and new clouds  
voluptuous as sun  
and the sea dream  
on your ears. You  
are a witness to water  
burning, and the woman  
who says these clouds  
are not real, is witness  
to weather. Now, turning  
the page you have the tuba  
and chair again, on fire,  
and all this time  
you've forgotten the mirror  
of sleeplessness, like  
a Magritte, a painting on fire.

Arthur Rimbaud

Huts are fashioned  
with rhubarb to the ground,  
the air dizzy with bees.  
Along the rain forest,  
ants loosen the earth  
and tunnel deep for loneliness.

The fever explores  
your thigh. Women  
are nursing invalids  
from this hot country.  
[In delirium, the expedition  
through the Alps, a boat  
to Africa. Sails quarrel  
with the wind.]

You lie in a hammock  
breathing the cotton soaked sweat.  
Slaves dance naked through trees.  
You imagine  
the eye of a panther  
skinned to death by flowers.

## The Air of Bolgako

When the major and his adjunct  
saw their salute go blank,  
when the clanking of rifles  
and buckles was silenced  
by streaks of daylight,  
they threw off their masks  
facing the air with  
great waves of laughter.

A cloud of dust spiraled  
like the wake of automobile  
exhaust and grew as no engine  
could make. On the farthest  
ridge, horses gave their grit  
teeth. Sheets of mists draped  
the stumps of apple trees,  
and the ground turned slime  
in the outlines of ferns.

They could hear soldiers  
tearing their knuckled hands  
until only hands remained.  
They could feel the beaded webs  
of spiders fan out poisonous.  
His stomach went numb  
and his face crushed white  
like cabbage in the gas.

Birds dissolved against spots  
of lighted forest. He felt  
a pain through his tighs,  
remembered the writhing  
trees, cries he could not kill  
as his eyes shut, petrified  
like the fisted corpse of a horse.

III

Death of a Heart

## Windows

Someone outside you wants  
to climb in. A clenched fist,  
a woman disappearing  
into her shadow, thin  
as a weapon. Does she own  
the voice cornering your  
mouth like a warm liquid?

When the lights close down  
from that last store, you  
get nervous. You hear  
an echo off the windows  
like fine rain. The streets,  
an open crotch, carry  
the knot that wears you out.

Imagining pain, you walk  
to the woman. She flutters  
like a blouse opening  
for anyone. Does her voice  
walk away saying, do you  
want to live in the arms  
of a hoodlum, live  
in the unlit hall?

Alone, you love this panic.  
The hand crawls like a worm  
screaming stranger behind  
her door and discovers  
the rich smell of blood  
beneath fingertips.

You imagine it this way:  
we have never left off  
lunging for the knife,  
the twinge of wounds  
that meant stumbling  
through the dark.

## Death of a Heart

Two friends disappeared, and the heart  
of another, whose bird flew out like music,  
walked evenings incessantly. His body  
wore fresh wounds of blood under a sore heel.

Days he would count blocks down to numbers,  
crouch in alleys picking what others left.  
Glimpses of loneliness, dull refrains  
in store displays. Once, to get away,

I gave him a dime, watched him walk  
for damage, eyes rolling. Sometimes  
I turned away as he came, bottle in hand,  
the pieces of mashed bread over a grey beard.

If I heard his feet shuffle, his mumbling,  
hands waving angry at the air,  
what of it? He'd argue street lights,  
grew to hate others as we hated ourselves.

Nights I followed him more than once,  
calling bluff at the top of my lungs.  
I told him lies. But he went on, slept  
with moons forgotten by most, for years

thought it needless to want friends  
and drifted through us. His heart bobbing  
the less among old dreams: sometimes he sang,  
seemed free of himself.

## The Wedding

Each time the resemblance  
seems more a part of her.  
The arms caught together  
are like dying limbs.  
A man steps up  
mysteriously, his  
heart out of nowhere.  
He tells her father  
it is for keeps.

The trees accept snarls  
as a final home. They  
dispossess themselves.  
Once I thought a man  
forgives the limbs  
that protrude like  
some purity of lovers.

He takes the whole,  
what falls and cannot  
heal for his own. This  
he says, is complicity  
enough. The man walks,  
walking into himself,  
always the same.

This for his own house.  
Now he is saying,  
it is not his heart  
so much as a scar:  
the one beneath her  
blouse from others,  
never to let go.

## Some Violence

I watch your hands  
work the loaves of bread  
as one watches a scar  
lifting through skin.  
Hands becoming the dough  
they curl, fat and white.  
When I enter this soft  
weight your hands skeptically  
fist, I take care  
to stand away.

You point to the earth  
where your husband  
lies irreversible  
as light. Tonight,  
the kitchen preserves  
some violence.  
The loaves of your hands  
grown blood-red  
with warning.

It is what we come to  
you say, the pure  
scar passing into a field,  
gathering like branches  
in a forest of widows.  
All day they whisper,  
"come in, come into me."

## A Strict Need

The loneliness we hold  
in ourselves is a tightening,  
not unlike a fisted shadow.  
But sometimes ashamed,  
I am grateful to you  
for leaving, as you have  
finally done, grateful  
to begin again.

Or perhaps there is a woman  
I love who asks nothing  
of me except hands  
opening affectionately.  
Tonight, I want to meet you  
among the scars we make  
for each other, to give up  
my heart as I would  
give these wounds.

Until that woman tosses me  
kisses, the love we have  
is terribly lonely,  
even helpless. Some days,  
there is a stricter need  
like leaving, an insistence  
for intimacy. My answer  
is yes--always, we are  
that much closer.

Anna, it just ended

14th and Kostner,  
you walked by the soft  
stones of flesh,  
feet sifting through slips  
of paper on sidewalk.  
The houses grew in threes  
up, and the streets escape  
for small tooled screams.  
Near the El tracks,  
barbed wire fence.  
You pitched fires  
and remembered  
calm evenings.  
On the back porches,  
the arrangement  
of silent zaydees.

\* \* \*

The telephone rings--  
after 31 years  
across the greater Baltic,  
clothes line stretched  
between grey building face.  
Dark voices whirled  
scroll-like alleys.  
The names have gone  
in the gutter swirls--  
for all your weakness,  
because nothing more can pass,  
you lift wandering feet  
and walk to the receiver.  
You might have remained there  
and remembered nothing.

## Dying Stars

Each time the breath seems more  
a part of the scene, a man  
walks through it  
and I am the same...

Tess Gallagher

To have looked until  
that last possible moment,  
like a swimmer, open-mouthed  
and pooling the dark,  
this is the water, the sky  
where we left you, your  
hidden body impossible,  
distant--stars falling  
eternally through starlight.

So much for the sky  
as it gathers  
its own disguise.  
The day you left us, I  
could have said forever.  
July and the last  
white of lilacs spread  
across the ground. It was  
our silent neglect you said.  
Those petals twisted apart,  
content with leaving.

Once I considered  
the dying stars of lilac  
cupped in our palm, breaking  
into nearness. What we  
failed to say tore  
from your heart,  
and heartless, I too  
could not do a thing.  
Father, the lilacs let go,  
their stars curling in.

Just so, each pool  
reflects another. I wait,

but still you do not answer.  
Your body given back to earth  
repeating itself--I take these  
stars even now without you.

## Notes

"Threatening Weather" is the title of a painting by Rene Magritte.

"The Air of Bolgako" is written after the short story "Bolgako" by Andre Malraux.

The epigraph in "Dying Stars" is from the poem "The Likeness" by Tess Gallagher.  
[from--Instructions to the Double]

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