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OUR TOWN AND OTHER GHOSTS

by

Donnell W. Hunter

B.A., Ricks College, 1954

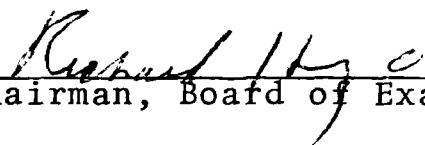
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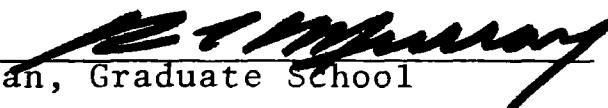
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1982

Approved by:


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

1-2-82
Date

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our town and other ghosts

*for my father, William W. Hunter
shepherd/poet, 1902-1971*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these poems have been published previously as follows:

"Children of Owl," a quarto issued by Stonehouse Press at the University of Nevada, Reno, 1982.

"Our Town," in *Northwest Magazine*, Portland, Oregon, 31 January 1982.

"Sound Pressure," a broadside in *Soundings 1981*, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1981.

Some poems have been accepted for publication by the following magazines:

"All That's Left," "At a Certain Point," "Graveyard," "Otto," by *The Bellingham Review*, Bellingham, Washington.

"The Barrier," by *yakima*, Yakima, Washington.

"I Wanted to Tell You," by *Crosscurrents*, Westlake Village, California.

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*If I fall in love with the ocelot
must I neglect the lamb?*

SOUND PRESSURE

*CAUTION: Sound pressure levels dangerous to the ear
may be present near the horn when it is
operating. Horn may start without warning.*

--Sign at Point Wilson Light

I want my poetry
to be like that:
dangerous, parting fog
without warning
like a barracuda
slashing through schools
of herring, like the king
salmon defusing
the ordered lives of thousands
of innocent candlefish--
a clear voice solid
enough for gulls to perch on
while they watch the unsuspecting
reader writhe in the sand
holding his head in pain.

OUR TOWN

isn't sure enough of itself
to post a welcome sign.
Winter need never visit us again.
We pride ourselves on our lack
of prejudice--everyone is white.
We can forgive and forget.

My farm forgives the marsh hawk
who flies into the desert each time
she wants to fast, the skunk who tramples
strawberries on his way to corn
leaving a residue of silence,
and the pennies that fall from heaven
and kill the chickens.

We have already forgotten
the woman who jumped from the balcony.
She left her sister's bracelet on the ledge
to prove she was honest. We no longer
remember how the drunk died on his way
to the bank to alter his will.
Each spring we count the lilies
in the fields, although no one knows
just exactly what lilies are.

When the sparrow fell, the sky
left town at midnight.

By morning all the shadows were gone.

I worry about the saxifrage
and each day ask the willow
where are the bees and when will whippoorwills
return to sing?

THEY CALLED IT MADNESS

that little itch that started singing
under my skull when I was ten and owls crept
in and out the basement window to roost
in the barn. We were too poor to own a river,
even a stream, but a canal ran through the farm.
We turned it off each winter, hauled water
for the cows. Flossie, the biggest, could kick
like St. Ignatius--Father broke our baseball
bat, rolled up his sleeve to show the bruises
on his arm. But I wanted to sing and prayed
each night I'd get the Sears Roebuck violin
listed in the outhouse catalog at \$9.95
for Christmas. Then the war broke out:
I got a rubber tank, a set of army men.
Patriotism begins at home.

They kept telling us that at school, and we clipped
out the news: Midway, Coral Sea, Wake Island,
the *Yorktown* blazing, about to go down. Two children
claimed religion, never would salute the flag.
We called them queer, turned recesses into hell
until they wouldn't come. Each Monday we spent
quarters for savings stamps--seventy-five, you got
a bond--at night peeled tin foil from empty packs

of cigarettes. Lucky Strikes were best.

We tuned the radio to short wave, bands three
and five. I couldn't understand those little
sounds crackling across all that sky,
but I knew the madness they contained.

It was the same as mine.

THE BARRIER

A tree is lost without the wind,
keeping thoughts to its leaves
ring by ring behind an implacable
barrier history can't change.
We found a pick buried in the crotch
of a Balm-o-Gillead the storm
blew down yesterday, the one
Grandpa swore he loaned his neighbor
but was too proud to ask a thief
to bring it back. *Let him fry
in Hell*, Grandpa said and bought
a new one to finish the water line.
They never spoke in twenty years.

OTTO

Now that Otto's buried we have
no one left to hate. He was meaner
than the rest of us combined.
He shot stray dogs, even those
that hadn't strayed, dragging
their bodies just across the line:
NO TRESPASSING THIS MEANS YOU!
He starved his horses till they girdled
all the elms. The county told him
cut them down before they fall.
He swore, fumed, cranked his chain
saw up at 3 a.m., woke the town.

There was a woman once, but she
ran off someone said. Maybe Otto
killed her. No one knew for sure.
Besides, who'd risk his wrath and turn
him in? It was easier hating.
No matter how mean we might become,
he stayed meaner. It made us feel good.
But it's harder now. Dogs run wild,
kill sheep and chickens.

We have only ourselves to blame.

THE FROG IN OUR BASEMENT

He must have fallen through the coal chute
when I watered the lawn.

A soloist seeking a chorus,
he never waits for sundown to proclaim
he was born a nocturnal amphibian,
but every time the stoker starts
he wakes where only solenoids
answer his song.

The cricket on the back porch
sneaks in each autumn once the screen
door flops loose: a concertmaster
with only one string.

Each night he tunes his violin.
We are grateful at first for remnants
of summer, but by January my wife
would rather sleep. I cut him off mid-syllable,
exile him to the barn.

I've become a sabbatical transplant.
The striplings in my dorm suspect I'm CIA.
My Mozart and Bizet drown under atmospheres
of rock and roll. My poems flutter in workshop
winds, weak as an oboe in the finale of 1812.

But after quiet hours begin,
I rub my elbows together like wings,
inflate the membrane of my double chin.

ADVENT

On the day the world ended I set the alarm,
not wanting to miss a good show. Jupiter
aligned the stars. Saturn and Mars watched
indifferent while Venus, a petulant coquette,
uncontested, dispossessed the east.
Mercury came late, as usual, unable
to tear himself from the sun. The moon,
double-ringed, was full. I could feel the tide
tug my waterbed. Owls beckoned outside.
Cats quarreled under the porch.
It was off to a good start.

The cow
didn't mind I came for chores early. I slipped
her an extra can of grain--let her die on a full
stomach, the least I could do. The wind, however, refused
to cooperate, teasing the roof, rattling
loose tin. Too much noise to hear if the earthquake
started yet. First squirts rang in the bottom
of the pail. It was starting to sound like any other
morning on the farm. What if the world forgot?

What if it didn't mark its calendar
and we all went back to old routines, losing

faith, grumbling--I've been fooled before.

I know how a Jersey reeks with scorn, her udder
distended, when you show up late. How can I tell
her tonight it's all a big mistake, keep my cool
when she kicks the bucket flat against the barn?

RATTLESNAKES

I remember Father hiding behind the kitchen door, a surprise for Mother on her way from work. I was too young to remember what he looked like after he left or how long--two weeks? two months? He was the same stranger each time coming out of the desert where he herded sheep.

I remember his stories about the sheep camp, the rabid dog frothing at the mouth. Father shot him with the coyote rifle, sent his head to Boise. It filled my dreams for weeks: the headless dog, rattlesnakes Father killed, weaving their rattles in the hatband he wore.

The baby tender's name was Bea. Perhaps it was short for Beatrice. I don't know. We didn't call them sitters then, but Bea didn't do much sitting. Mostly, I remember she chased us with the fly swatter, locking the screen to keep the dog at bay.
I'll tell your mother! she would scream.

If we could make it through the door,
we were safe--Bea was too afraid of Coon.
Telling Mother didn't scare us--too far
away, like punishment for sin. Time lasts
forever when you're young--unless you happen
to get caught like when we went swimming
with Daisy and her friends, some older boys.

They stripped off total, but Daisy kept
her panties on. Modesty was strong enough for us
to wear our shorts, not thinking later
we would have to tell how they got wet.
We splashed around, slid down grass banks
into the ditch, got mud in Daisy's hair.
Then Father came.

He was silent, leading us all the way home,
our guilt mounting with each step, our trousers
staining dark. We know what we had coming.
But he didn't whip us. We were surprized.
Maybe it was seeing Daisy's panties.
Maybe because the other boys were worse.
I don't remember. But he sat us down real
solemn, started talking serious about sin
and other things I couldn't understand.

He took off his hat, held it in his hands.
Each time his voice faltered I could hear
those little rattles in the band.

AT A CERTAIN POINT

ego takes over and all you have
left of good sense gets flushed
down the toilet or thrown
out with empty tuna fish
tins in the dumpster.

You can take a walk and watch
magpies return for the night
to cottonwood clumps by the river,
or you can sit facing the wind
on the edge of a juniper hill
to cool down.

You notice the incoming plane
turn on its landing lights,
a rival to Venus twenty miles away
only drifting faster in its slow
glide to the airport where nobody
you know will be arriving
exactly on time.

TRANSMIGRATION

When my body saw silhouettes
of geese this morning
it turned metempsychotic.
It was all I could do to bolt
it down, to keep the car
inside the passing lane.

When stars fled at sunrise
and the moon blanched pale,
my body wrenched again:
fly away. But I kept it
on schedule, met my classes,
gave it a shower to cool it down.

Then a tight flock of joyful
blackbirds passed over campus.
Everyone wants to leave,
but common sense makes me stay.
My body says I think too common.
Fly away, fly away, fly away.

THE LURE

The thread of my life is waxed,
ready to be wrapped on a hook, decorated
with fur and feathers, then flung in a pond.
The fish below--shiners, bluegills, pout--
will watch me floating, dangling helpless.
They will laugh themselves dizzy asking
what fisherman could be sucker enough
to fall for anything phony as that.
They will take turns swirling up through clear
water, at the last moment turn tail
and veer away. The man on the wrong end
of the line will see the ripple and twitch
back his pole. He will curse anxiety and luck,
make another cast. The fish will laugh again,
releasing bubbles of mirth.

This will go on
afternoon after afternoon. The sun will beat down
on the fisherman. He will keep casting and missing,
missing and cursing, cursing and--you may wonder
why doesn't he reach down into his tackle box
and try another lure? But the fish are right:
anyone who would cast me out will never come
up with the idea change is in order.

One day the pond will produce the fish who can match
wits with the fisherman: a long pike or heavy trout.
The others will scatter in panic, leaving him
to swim alone, under my shadow. Reflex will turn him,
slowly ascending, opening the dark cave
his jaws make when he holds his breath, gills slack,
tongue flat on the floor. He will feel the hook
tear flesh. His bones will tighten.
The reel will sing to the fisherman whose hands
will remember what to do. I will fall
in love with my captor. His pain will be mine
because he is the only one who ever wanted me.
Together we will rise just as the sun
drops into the kingdom of darkness
where stars refuse to shine.

ALONE IN MISSOULA

I am the last ivory-bill
woodpecker who hasn't been seen
since 1928 searching a cypress
swamp for a mate, tapping messages
centipedes count on their toes. I know
where the slope gives way, the kingdom
of grass where mountain turns plain,
dead leaves under yucca, mesquite,
chaparral. I know them all. I've seen
the prophet who wandered America
thirty-five years, the star-nosed mole
hunting a pole star to guide him at night,
Arcturus with his enormous eye like an owl
staring holes, a faulty string of Christmas
tree lights burning the carpet--the stain
will last forever. And the weather?
So far, all of it's March. Sunshine
of morning is snowfall tonight. You see one
cloud and you haven't begun to see them all.
Listen! They rise from trees on the hill.

LOUISE

My life turned arty right after Louise
began to sing, her magnificent eyes huge behind
thick lenses that kept her from going blind.

It was a sound I never heard in our town,
one I knew would drive dogs wild.

I fell in love with Victor Herbert
and with Louise, though I was just a child.

At home I ripped out paintings from old
issues of *Life* Grandma handed down, hid
them in haystack tunnels sparrows made.

If you were quick, you could catch
a sparrow in your hand, feel its heart beating
like wings, like my heart in church
that night Louise began to sing.

I bought a book of poems at the thrift shop
for a dime, recited lines to cows, imagining
I was old enough to court Louise, listening

in her parlor as she, still a spinster,
sings Victor Herbert and my heart beats faster.

SPANISH DANCERS

tap their way through dreams
rhythmic as rain. The animals gather
to listen. David makes friends
with a tiger. Naomi carries the fox
in her lap. Paul helps the wrens
decide which house to build.
A dragon-fly rests on the windowsill.
If I fall in love with the ocelot
must I neglect the lamb?

The music stops.
Three moths fly up to the ceiling,
dodging the wooden fan.
No one asks where they came from.
Does it matter?
We have peace in the kingdom.

The music begins again. Faster.
The guitars are sirens.
Faster. The dancers blur,
their whirls are flames.
Clouds drop to meet us. A star calls

from the east: *Remember? Remember?*

There is no awakening.

This is the peaceable kingdom,

and it never ends.

CHILDREN OF OWL

When you choose to follow owl
instead of otter, weasel, fox,
you make darkness your friend.
Crow is your enemy, winter
your season, cottonwood
your tree. The old ones tell you
this at twelve when you enter
the *kiva*, the sweat lodge,
the *watgurwa*, house of men.
They share the ancient secrets,
teach you sacred rites. Silence
is the ultimate virtue,
surprise the weapon you keep
sheathed like talons ready to strike
when stars reveal the slightest
movement below. Death must be swift,
merciful for the unsuspecting
rabbit, the foraging vole: a tuft
of fur, a spot of blood left
beside the perfect cross,
your track in the snow.

FINAL TESTAMENT

My father, since you have gone
the winds shift gears and sand
spills from your eyes. The west window
is cracked. So is the west sky.
Wind is my neighbor always coming to borrow
the hammer, some rusty nails, a cup of leaves.
She never brings anything back.
The lines on my face are scratched
negatives: straight and thin with no character,
my scars the same scars on the face
of the moon. The veins of my hands
tell the wrong story.

I forgot my name
until I saw it written on a grave.
But I will never forget the hour of my birth
nor the voice of the lost star
wandering like Arcturus looking for a new
constellation to join. Each fall
I dismiss the swallows forming battalions
on telephone lines. I forgive the starlings
getting drunk on apples neglected at harvest
and acknowledge the witness of robins,
the occasional good-bye of a tired crow.

I open the window to let night out of my room.

When I call to the lemmings, they ignore
the terrible scent of water.

Do not mourn for me if I leave to buy
fresh bread. Don't wake me if you find a smile
on my face, the pilot light gone
out in the oven. My hands can find their own
way home. Mail my scars to my brother.
Donate my poems to the thrift store or the museum
of forgotten arts. The sun needs no witness.
The woods will keep my secret forever.

If thrashers still sing in the undergrowth,
Christmas will not be a total loss.

GRAVEYARD

The plot I purchased
in the graveyard is underneath
a Norway spruce,
and I've never been to Norway.
The grass is Bermuda
mixed with Kentucky blue.
I've seen neither place.
If nothing else, death offers
a good excuse to travel:
no agents, no boarding pass,
no waiting in line.
The soil is good Idaho sand,
forever restless, always going
somewhere far away.
Ask the wind.

PRODIGAL

Our farm failed because Father
never could bring himself to sell
a cull, his attachment to the herd
never rational, but he gave each one
her name, and she answered night and morning
no matter how far in the west pasture
she strayed. *Home cows!* They would all
lift their heads, return single file
to the barn. Chores were never work--
he sang the pail brim full, billows of foam
blending warm scent with fresh cut timothy.
Only a fool would want to leave.

Yet each morning I listened to larks
rising to meet the sun and every night
danced beyond the hill with the moon
and fallen stars.

I WANTED TO TELL YOU

everything: how winter
has taken sabbatical along the Clark Fork
and the delicate stonefly masquerades
as hellgrammite. January joins
the willow sending messages underground,
and crows hunch their shoulders in high cottonwoods
dreaming they are ravens. The osprey . . .

But I keep stalling, like the widow
who checks the sand in her hourglass
before she goes to bed.

I adjust the paper, reset margins,
reverse the ribbon, clean the keys
like a fiddler who keeps tuning his strings
with the fond hope a toronado
will strike before the concert begins.

Let the world end without me.

The elderberry can give you my message:

*laurels are still dormant fragments
of oak leaves litter the lawn it has
been too long since we heard word
of the pika the oboe is in blossom.*

CHARIOT

I'm coming up in the dorm world,
residing now on second floor. If I can postpone
graduation long enough, I'll reach the roof,
wait there for ravens to glide down from the concrete
M on the hill. They will feed me bread stolen
from tables where my committee meets to defuse thunder-
bolts I write in partial fulfillment of my life.
This keeps me alive until my tuition's paid.
Then my chariot--gilded wheels (the best I can hope
considering my late start)--will descend,
its flames sputtering through Missoula smog.
With my left hand I'll grasp the buckboard, swing
my body up beside the driver who holds the reins.
He will bid me welcome, command me cast my mantle,
the hooded sweatshirt I wear to jog across the Clark
Fork each morning, to marauding crows.

I can see it now. Its blue spiral blends
with the river, parts the turbulence upstream.

TILLICUM FERRY

It's almost forty years ago. I lean against the rail,
scan the gray waters of Puget Sound. We look
for alcids--auklets, puffins, guillemots, murre--hope
for something rare. I've just turned fifteen. My friend
is fifty-three. She tells how one winter jaegers came
out of the north like Attila, scattering gulls in panic:
Bonaparte's, Heermann's, ring-billed, herring, glaucous-
winged. Landlocked all my life, their names are new.
I roll syllables around my tongue like lozenges,
a heady aroma. She wears a red felt hat. Faded.
Fashion means nothing. Her shoes are blockish, hose thick
brown, tweed skirt frayed where brambles snagged,
hiding sparrows with golden crowns. On the bus her voice
is scratchy, almost raucous when she recounts Duwamish
wood ducks, doubts the claim her rival found a dovekie:
She was alone, of course, and I don't trust her eyes.
Other passengers turn into their smiles, yet I don't blush
shame like I do with Father's palsied hands: the choice
friendship makes fiercer than the force of kin.
It's our last summer together.

My family moves to Idaho. Letters dwindle once a week
to once a year, then no answer comes. Her neighbor
writes senility, near blindness placed her in a home.

I don't want to know the end. No feather ever flits past
now unnamed. Prairie falcons soar--I note black axillars
beneath the wing. Juncos scold with kissing sounds,
each spring kinglets sing *sweeter, sweeter, sweeter*, flash
ruby crowns, and when skies turn overcast Seattle
gray I'm back on Tillicum Ferry scanning waves. I look
for dovebies, but all I find is someone's castoff orange
bobbing in the wake of Tillicum foam.

--for Violet Cannon

ALL THAT'S LEFT

in our town to bring us fame
is the graveyard and the church
since the midwife home burnt down and the midwife
moved away. We sold the school for salvage
and Annie closed her store right
after we got put on rural route and no one
came for mail. Now they plan to build

the new church five miles down the road.
That way we can't get born or baptized,
only buried here. We gave the mayor's
salary to the sexton and he bought
a backhoe to bury us quicker and in style.
Orville and the widow Mary, though,
are still alive except arthritis

keeps them pretty much at home.
They can tell you how things used to be,
how that Fisher kid grew up right
on Elmo's place, went to college,
started writing books. His novels got real
popular, but we don't like them much.
Sometimes, he even tells the truth.

COMMUTER

Our plane is going nowhere, it arrives
from nowhere, and the stewardess
has a run in her nylons.

The captain speaks: *welcome aboard,
the weather report, estimated arrival
time, oxygen masks drop at thirty
thousand feet, there is no need to be
alarmed, no smoking please.*

I start to sneeze, notice my feet
are bare. I knew I'd forget something.
I kept telling myself all morning.

We taxi the runway twice:
*fasten safety belts, in case
of emergency remember to tuck
your head between your knees, you'll find
where the exits are on the card in the back
of the seat before you.*

That seat is empty.

So are those across the aisle.

Is there anyone else? The shadow
of our landing gear folds
out of sight. We're aloft.

Climbing, climbing. Clouds
rush by--ice crystal rainbows
of spider web we saw
in the dew this morning.

I remember the roast
in the oven, the sprinkler I turned
on last night. We'll be gone two
years--did I plug in the pump,
who'll mow the lawn, take the clinkers
out when winter comes? I knew
I'd forget I kept telling myself.

Climbing, climbing. Where is that stewardess?
The one with the run in her nylons.

RECYCLED

Bury me biodegradable
in a wooden box or, preferably,
no box at all, perhaps a canvas shroud
at sea. Certainly no airtight wormproof
coffin of cold rolled steel the pallbearers
strain their backs to lift. Let them enjoy
their work. Invite my students,
the ones I graded F. They'll be glad
to see me recycled like the paper
they use to write their borrowed themes.
For the elegy read from my rejected poems
or, better yet, read the editors' notes.
They sound more appropriate:
they all begin with, *We regret . . .*