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Rebuilding the sky| [Poems]

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The University of Montana

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R E B U I L D I N G T H E S K Y

by

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B.A., University of Missouri, 1978

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

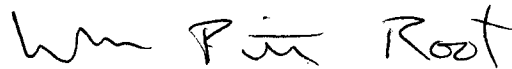
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The First Message

Even as you read this
you do not know it is for you.
The thin lines of words
slowly tapping toward you,
a stone shifting
far under the earth's surface
in a fault, or cave.
There is only a slight
shudder, one you can
pass off as easily
as a foundation settling.
Do not ask me how
I am able to feel this.
I would not answer
directly, even if
I could. Instead, I would
tell you how, as water
falls from the roof
into a barrel,
the staves swell
to keep it.

Movement West

If you must know,
I will tell you everything:
how the wind rises in trees
and how the oak holds
its leaves till spring
as if waiting
for the old self to be
sloughed off. Beyond the woods
without blaming the emptiness
of prairies or the absence
of buffalo, I do not
name the stars.

In the mountains
I pick fossils out of
a stream until the skin
on my hand breaks
and I can no longer send
the spiral messages
to you. Farther west,
I say redwood,
imagine their size
and age, the thick moss-ferns
at the base. Do not forget
the insects under
the lining of bark,
or the ocean wind
bringing water.

If I say blue-coral,
see the small bones
building toward the surface.

Exposure

It begins like this:
begonias in the window
below that
arrowheads
collected from a field I have
told you about. Each plowing,
each rain, they shine
as they must have
in the hands that made them.

There is no time to
talk about those hands.
Mine are calloused
from holding a pen
or pencil, sketching
lines for you,
showing you the angle
of the grasses
now brown in the marsh.

I will build a hut
of field rock in the woods
so at night my dreams
have all those trees'
shadows, and when we are alone
in all that dark,
even a whisper will
be light.

Letter to Penelope

You can believe that
I am returning. Tonight
I know we see the same
sky, clear and beautiful
like the siren's song.
The sounds I will never
be able to imitate,
though I try each night.
She is sleeping.
I walk out of the room, thick
with perfume and drunk on pomegranate
wine, to the beach and coat myself
with sand to shed the smell.
The lines under my eyes
grow dark with evening,
and the shadows in the sand
shape your dreams around me.
They change with each wave.
I have watched the fire
she keeps, seen what
she will not show me.
It is not easy to stand
here, my hair and beard
matted, and call to you,
thinking you lift your head
from sleep as if to hear me.

Steppe Farming

This thin land could be yours,
the earth soft
under the wing of your step.

And when I dock at Callao
doubting the stride of farmers,
I will come to you

without horses, a worn
leather strap across my shoulder
with all I own. Farther on

are the slopes, the obscured
pathways of the alpacas
you followed to stroke their fur,

whispering the word, easy,
easy, your voice a sound
nothing could shy from.

I practice short breaths
for that altitude,
and search for

the feathers of condors
to hide behind
when I reach you.

(stanza break)

The color of my eyes
will change as I stare
past you to the backbone

of the Milky Way, the stingy
air clutching my song.

Thirst

There is a thirst
we seldom recognize.
The times we ache for water
and open the cabinets
while we watch
the faucet drip,
by the time we get to it,
it stops. We turn the spigot,
nothing fills our glasses
but the hollow sound
a pipe makes in wind.

The bread we eat without water
sticks in our throats.
You look at me,
your cheeks swollen,
chewing the crumbs longer
than even you want to.
I swallow mine
like the bread of a communion.
We stare at the glasses
on the table, covered with fingerprints
no one could identify.

Hibernation

This one time
pass into water,
to the dark brown mud
at the bottom.
Pull up what
the farmers call
mussels. Mollusks
that have been here
longer than the limestone
or the fossils in it.
Put your hand on the rock,
its flatness a braille
message to you.
The words grown into
moss on a tree
before paper.
Go on moving
down, kicking to the bottom,
your arms above your head
like waving or covering
your eyes from the sun.
You are not sure,
now, in winter,
even the words
grow white.

Moths

I walk from the porch
the light goes only the far.
I think of the short flight
of insects
across water, the sound of air
in their bodies.
But I am in a field
filled with snow,
and the willow moths
lie in their pupa stage
until spring
with the indifference of tracks
days old in the snow.
I wish for this blanket of sleep
under the sweat of the stars.

Repentance

As I kneel at the twisted
wood of the altar, He
will examine the delicate
feathers of angels
pointing out the ash smudges
on the newest arrival.

And entering into a voice
He will understand, I cry,
"Here I am, my mud-covered
bones, the soot of my dreams,
I will not again ask
for the treasure of clean snow,

and to cover the branches
of my tree, I will ask
only for night, the dull
remembering under my skin
and purity in that chalky
taste." But He has abandoned

the easy drift of lace
on the communion table
the sweet flavor of grape
juice in place of wine,
a shade of purple to imitate
a torn robe.

The Rite of Fatima

They are burning
wax figures of children
in the town square.
Each winter the women
gather with their own;
it is to keep them whole.
The young ones,
the very young ones,
bundled from foot to head,
their necks stiff in scarves,
can only look up.

There is not much smoke
for them to watch
and in the cold the plume
goes quickly to the sky.
Swallows fly through the grey
into an alley. An old man,
more shrunken than his coat,
watches the birds,
remembers the pigeons
he raised
when he was young.
How fast they would
rise from his hands.

Bus Ride

"The drought has ended,"
is what I say to drunks
or shysters on bus rides
if one asks about the rain
or do I want a drink from his pint.
I talk about the distance out
the water smudged window,
and how it rained the day I carried
my old she-dog, Jacoby,
into the woods; I buried her
above the water line, her tail
and nose as close
as the stiff joints.
Rocks from a rockpile secured the bed
from coyotes. He nods
understanding the persistence of hunger.

I clean my fingernails
with a pocket-knife that belonged
to my grandfather, and played
mumbly-peg on a rotten wooden bench.
The blades smooth with their
own wear, like the springs under
him that take the bounces
or the coat assuming his shape.
The thick wool
was woven by three sisters
with hand spun thread;
it is the last one they made
before they gave up sewing
and the sheep to rest.

(stanza break)

I drop my head to rest
or to decide the color of my dreams.
The red headed woodpecker
in the passing windowscape
scours a lightpole for insects.
The black bill will not
show the creosote stain.

To My Other Self

We built cabinets
of a rare hard wood,
not hickory or pine
that split when dry,
but a burly oak and maple,
the grain twisted
its own way. The shelves
fill with a fine crystal
and painted china, each
piece slightly different,
not the every-day
plates with chipped edges
and coffee mugs
stained from so many lip
prints. We pull back the door.

I think of the slow stare
of Barbarossa as he opened
Charlemagne's tomb:
the upright bones,
the spider of a hand
still wrapped around the scepter.
Beneath it, the four-hundred
year old marble throne
held a luster.
But every piece must be
removed, one by one,
to keep a foothold.
Even the river falls

away from itself,
and the bed-stones smooth
each other in the current
with some glaze
a potter could not copy.

The Gardener

The sun rises for hours;
roots are thick from years
without the soil being turned.
The work is not easy
but he keeps digging, as if
he were familiar with labor
forgiving itself
the sweat. He wants to forget
cold hands at night,
the distance he feels
from himself when not crying.

The earth has not bent him;
he comes to it naturally, the way
stillness covers a pond
with no wind, or the indifference
of frogs sunk in mud.
His muscles swell with blood,
grow tighter with each stroke
each rythm of the hoe.

He stretches rope and wire
to mark the rows of sweet peas, okra,
and fast growing pole beans.
The worms generate the soil
between the small round rocks
and under the rye grass.

(stanza break)

He is not surprised by their lack
of features, the way they
give themselves to birds
or his desire to lie
face down in the dirt,
the sun warming his back.

February Ending

After three days the snow still melts,
washes nothing in its dirty
glut of water, and drifting
under this dog star I see my own
dust spread among the ashes
of moons, Ganeymede, Io, and
an unnamed satellite of Pluto.
I scrape myself against the atmosphere
to escape this world of slush,
to know the meaning of pure air
and to no longer sweat under the sheets
of women afraid of their own smell
and the flight of footsteps down
stairs, water running
in streets to the gutter. Here
I wish for the lifting of strangled
vines, for their roots spread
through the frozen soil to open for me.
Unlike this sky, I will speak
to the brown mesh and tangle myself
in the prayers that linger
in the dulled center of my childhood,
the light coming from windows,
the curtains drawn to keep the heat.

The Fuse

Even now that perfect
prayer dissolves, its crystals
thrown into water;
a sacrament held in
a globe of air beneath the surface;
there is no repentance,
no clearing my throat
of the dried bread
you asked me to hold
in my cheeks. I have swallowed
entire weeks, studied the semiotics
of algae and felt the slow
spreading across my fingers
and yours. The fist of love
clenched in my stomach
runs me past the ripened apples
you have tossed
along the path, the river's
inversion of sky and trees,
runs me to that chord
we know changes directly
into the next.

Unrepaid Loan

This is not the time to say thank you
for the slow blue music of Bessie Smith,
and the unquestioned unfolding
of seven fifty-dollar bills, Ulysses
S. Grant snug in my palm, my held breath
released. I see you now leaning against
that thirty-ton boat, knowing you
will move it those three inches
needed to tie the rope,
a calm and fat resistance to the tide.

The coarse short volley of laughter
you threw swells in the dense marrow of your bones,
and ash, the last wind blown wish anyone would
carry with them speaking to gamblers
in those short gasped breaths that pinned
you to your frame. I can feel the lost
wind you feared, loathing of your
wasted lung, the melody you earned
in the fret and downfall of words.
I carry their lead into the cold
burned-out smelter to relight the fire.

It is not of my own accord that I weigh
and prance along the scale of threat, pull
through the needle's eye again that thread,
but for the delayed plunging into the seeping
karst formations of my childhood, the long valleyed
walk past the sinkholes and oystershell mushrooms
to Bluefish, the cool swim in summer,

the cling of algae to my skin. You
have yet to finish pulling in your line,
the sinker heavier than the fat double Loumas
it keeps nine inches from the bottom
of the river. You have sunk there, grown over

and shining in the forgetful scut and murk
of upstream Dry Fork Creek. I can't wangle through,
I press my flat open palm
against the rocks to know each round and hollow,
take it as Braille past the loss
of bright sun and cloudy mixture of grief,
and understanding nothing more than the futile
grasping at song, those few notes, fading,
changing in the unopened dance
of night, Cassiopeia no more distant
than the sky and its echo in a single word.
I have not come here on a whim.

Naming the Stars

The bent night's legs
clamber up the hill west of town, aged another
day, worn calmer in the jute grass and moon.
No schooner quaked
so lightly in windshadows at dusk. Moss below
the water line
and timber line creeps up the bark on all
sides of the trees.

Were it so easy --
that mossy guide north to the eternal sleep
of tusky mammoths, frozen in tundra
at Dudinsk, where
ice stars glint in their eyes, and the Dippers
pour, back and forth,
the concoctions of the night, away from wind
and the sun's old sweat.

When will the wind
close its mast, give up its briney claws again
for the short nights? Orion's red robe pin
begins to blaze
this time of year, pandering that myth's old
songs of lust and
virtue, the only constellation named
for dawn and rain.

(stanza break)

A chrysalis
anchored in the breeze, or sunk in leaves' thick humus,
waits insouciant for the sun and nights
warm as this. Green
prayers in the birch ripen with bud again.
The dusky burst
of an unforgiving distance weds sun
and horizon;

and night's bent legs
spread darkly, seep into thin veins of hard coal
beneath the hill's squat. The steadily shifting
pressure of plates
and oceans lifts the crusty surfaces, faces
changed so easily,
distorted in a blue so dark its sleep
forms to crystal.

Two Missteps

I

The garden is filled with immature worms,
 thread thin they squirm in the turned soil,
 and feed on the dust of prehistoric ferns.

I understand some loyal
 dance to an unlearned music
 and sift dirt's toys
 through a child's burned hand,
 remembering the word, fluke;

the sun was a crow on the galley's prow,
 flapping madly across the flat blue sky,
 and lit on an Osage Orange in the fencerow;
 I stalked those doubloon-rimmed eyes,
 the only contrast with
 the syncopated
caw, cawing.

The sights of the .22

lined up and clapped, then silence, and the red
 on black feathers, massed so brilliantly
 on the mossgrown dirt, the dank air spread
 through shade. The hero in me ran
 to hold it up: one lead
 wing fell open and down,
 released the chest's warmth.
 My strut stopped midstep.

II

My legs bent and supple I rode toward

the washed out gully, the quickness of the
summer shower still flat and glistening
under the hooves, my only concern
the other side. The mudbed clogged full
with eroded silt and clumps of brush,
a scoured brown swash. I gauged the
water closely. We sprang across
our heads forward, mine looking down.
The position nearly perfect,
the lean of Pisa.

Gravity confounds even science; its clean
pull to that uncertain center. The quash
of your feet against earth clutched me
to the sopped fescue and orchard grass.
I'd forgotten the scene, the union
of muscles that carried me, and took
the twenty-eight steps back
to look into your sunlit and brown eyes,
my jacket smudged with mud and grass,
a tear flapping from my shoulder,
a feather pried loose.

Communion

Perhaps we have all become
relics, assumed the shape without
envy. We take the fine
plates down from the cabinet
and place them on the table
randomly. We select the few
insincere words we would say,
now, no one listening.
Goneril would do better.

Thoroughly eager to please and
hobbled with formality we spread
each course with glitter

trying to absolve our guilt.
Already we have weakened,
become that bit of flesh
laid out for nothing but our own
end. Yet we still continue

forsaking the lift of steam
offered to us. The quick
rise of applause to which we

yield so easily,
open mouthed and lazy
unable to see past the flat
reach of the table

(stanza break)

laden with aspics and rice
and those bits of poison
served to everyone.
There is no simple prayer.

Maybe that is too easy,
each turn labeled and set,
arranged at our own choosing,
laid never forgiven.

"Fate is Only an Excuse for Our Own Will"

--Byron--

From this point there will be dancing,
a smooth birl to catch the eye,
that green twisting leaf in the sun.
Events like this go on without a slip.

I fold sounds with my hands
slowly as this crusted surface

orbits that hot fat sun. I have come,
now, twenty-eight times to the same spot,
laid out my body, naked but no longer fresh;
years have flown on without me, blowing

across the desert of my skin, without
notice, without lifting the scales

enough to hear the tinkling harmony.
Xylem empty the bark to fill the blank
calling for my name. Dried oceans
usher in the hope of water, restless under
sand, the dust of music I still
expect to hear, neither cold nor harmless.

Fate has no shadow, and no night sky
open to the spilling moon
reminding me of the season's

(stanza break)

oily demonstration of love.
Udders I wait for do not
ripen, give no signs, no swelling,

only one drop of milk at a time,
white and tasteless; I come
needing one serious drop to help

wean me. I will pull into the circle,
invert the pulse of sea and cloud,
let the tight braid of my own
leash unravel to calm rivers of light.

Novosibirsk

"...from the palms of my hands
take bits of honey and sunlight..."

Osip Mandel'shtam

The winter has been kind
the last twenty-five years,
and you are restless.
The thin band around your wrist
still bears your name
and the weight of tundra.
Husks of summer flowers
above you have given up
the pollen bees searched for,
and dried seeds fall
forgetting the plant.
You do not grasp the pebbles
counted in your palm,
that last bit of sentiment
you felt before joining
the sheltered worms
in the short cellar days.

The lists of your wife lengthen
as she prepares the small house.
Abandoning pencil and paper
she puts all to memory,
the way a wasp anchors its nest
from instinct and need.
She kneads the bread
twenty four strokes and wishes

for a necklace of dried
baby teeth. The ones you never
used chewing. She sees nothing,
does not see your hair falling,
does not notice
thin hands of grass
dug up through the soil,
open to the air.

Rebuilding the Sky

Summer heat drains from the sky
and more slowly
from the slabs of earth and rock.
I do not wait for the echo
of words against new leather,
supple and twice chewed
by an Inuit.
My cheeks swell
with each mesh of teeth
as I pick the fallen
leaves from their shadows
and pin them to plank walls
to imitate the night sky.
Beginning like the moon
each night above the city
after it is crushed
and sprinkled across
the dark bowl.

The Alchemist

Even I have my sense, a shaded
victory to be ignored by you,
Euclid's "royal road"
north to the eagles.

I carve tiny hollow bones
night after night

weighing each gram
in my smooth separate palm.
Naturally I believe in feathers'
thin secret of sky,
each lift and drag of air
reviving your need for sight.

I collect thick crusted

beetle flesh, form it into dark
emeralds, the slow green sweat
laid out in place of eyes --
idols you will understand
even as you are sleeping,
valuable and cold, the last
effigy hung in the window.

Cold

Certainly,
by this fire,
I can mention
the emblem that has
turned in my mind
again and again;

the portions I must forgive
like seeds in the
mouth of a quail
in mid-winter,
the covey trimmed
to five birds,
the circle smaller.

I will never understand
this past or why
the stones' shapes
no longer change
as they have before,
when the earth was fire.

Finding a Deserted House in the Woods

Some things were left behind
in the shed -- framing tools,
old lumber, the brace and bits.
As if after the last hole
was drilled and filled
with its shadow,
everyone left.

I do not recognize
the house, and can hardly
distinguish the stones'
pattern on the patio.
Inside, the walls dull
in grey light, the doorknobs
worn. The attic is dark;
the sun has not cast
itself into the rafters
since the roof was
covered, and there is
no crack or seam of light,
like the cave beyond it,
where an Osage, passing
west spent the winter.
He lit fire after fire,
the walls smoked black.
He saw nothing.
I talk with him
in his own language
learning to scrape the husks

of cattail tubers, or to flake
chert into stone tools,
I ask him about the slow
covering of details
at night -- black chalk
on paper -- the soot in
the chimney that feeds
on itself and the bricks
holding it, and seeps
into the house. The dim
settling of sleep in
the dreams of children.

Season Change

The day and night
are the same length
once, and the gap
begins to widen
like the river you walk
beside, ignoring
the far off sounds.
You could be an Oglala,
your head covered,
a bag slung
over your shoulder,
but you're not.
Another winter has passed.
The sky falls into
a larger blue cavity.
You walk among oaks,
the shagbark hickory,
and loosen your shirt's buttons,
you look at the still bare
trees, leaves on the ground,
and see the skull of
of a cow
dragged into the woods
by a farmer.
They cannot bury them all,
only the diseased ones.
You imagine the curves

your bones will have
after they have
lain motionless for years.
If they will look
as distant as these,
or glimmer under the water
of someone's eyes
as they pass you
in the damp air of spring.

Echo

There is that moment
when you do not know
where you are
or who is lying
with you;
all the prayers you memorized
as a child are forgotten.

You open like the mouth
of a river into grass
and lie among
a weave of fescue;
flowers hang above your chest.

An axe falls
steadily chopping kindling.
The rhythms grow colder
but you keep listening
until you hear them
years late.

A stone tool held
by someone you never knew,
the wind growing dark,
a leaf from a tree
you do not recognize
scrapes across your leg
and you cannot follow.

Absence

I would have told you
the secret I have
been keeping, how
the hill outside is
really an ancient burial
mound. There are no bones
left -- only fragments
of stone. No one else
would know that,
that I am digging
only you.

There are the small
obsidian spheres
that were imported from
Colorado before it was
known by that name;
the translucent stones
can be used for healing.
I have used them myself
following the details in
the picture writing
on the walls of the cave.

The cave is deeper
than any found by men
and I know the passages.
They are branched
like the future
in the lines of my palm.
The original inhabitants

seem to trust me
with their home
and their secrets
and I can never betray them.
Only this once I thought
of talking, but there
is no one in the room
with me but you.