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THE RIVER OF THE WEST

by

Tom Rea

B.A., Williams College, 1972

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

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Out on de bleak ocean, mon.

--Peter Matthiessen

and above me  
a wild crow crying 'yaw yaw yaw'  
from a branch nothing cried from ever in my life.

--Galway Kinnell

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Some of these poems have appeared or  
are forthcoming in the following magazines:

CutBank  
Poetry NOW  
Quarterly West  
Silver Vain

and in a chapbook, Man In A Rowboat, published  
by the Copper Canyon Press, September 1977.

## Giants

At the time when giants strode the earth,  
picked their teeth with trees, left  
lakes in their footprints, threw  
mountains back and forth to pass the time,  
the ground was soft and the sea  
still warm. There were  
no words yet. We sat  
at the mouth of a cave in a canyon wall  
and stared at each other across a fire  
that would not stay lit. From time  
to time a mountain  
landed nearby. Your face  
would change at this, and watching yours,  
I'd feel the shape of mine change too.

## The Climber Takes a Breather

At this height, hawks fall up.  
Rock shreds the rain clouds  
and a sharp smell in the couloir.  
Ducks ravel off for Baffin and the Pole.

Drink it all or take a step:  
the rope would hold you  
dangling in blue air, the valley  
spread below you like a hand.  
What is a knot in the belly  
but the belly pulling through itself.

Something hits you like wind, but older.  
Suppose flat was a plant,  
rhododendron a word.  
The flat grows thick along the river.  
A muskrat slips down the current.  
Goats peer from crags  
nosing pools for rainwater.

You weren't bred for ledges.  
What is a knot. Push off sideways,  
take a long jump for desert,  
splash clean as a trained whale  
whose mother mourns the deep  
like a great trombone.



At the Natural History Museum

Ranked in a kick line, flailing  
their tiny forearms like infants  
the old tyrannosaurs creak,  
shift like cracking houses  
into step. I know that song.  
The music goes  
We're dying to be you, music  
from an earlier ooze, roar  
of the sea before shells.  
Those ribs could hold a ship  
turned over, fit for sailing past  
the Pleistocene and eight-foot beavers

to a time when each wet molecule  
hadn't thought of fossils, mineral  
moving in on animal, cell  
by rusty cell. Skeletons  
leap for the walls. The old guard  
whose song goes emphysema  
wheezing in the corner by the giant clam,  
tips back his head for one last  
lung-rattler, shatters it  
off marble floors, stony  
ears of lookers, and Mrs. Florio's  
third grade who don't touch.

They are on a field trip to Pre-Cambrian  
jumping and wiggling at the granite.  
All but calm Eileen, prettiest  
eyes in the class says Teacher.  
She behaves the whole long walk  
to the film room where they all turn  
eyes alone, little bodies  
streaming out behind like tadpole tails.  
The man's voice tells them  
how tiny their lives are  
next to rocks.  
Eileen believes him but Spider  
roots deep in his head  
for a frog-song, singing  
Swamp, how we loved in the swamp.

## Washington at the Forks of the Ohio

Washington's moon was a silver dollar  
 worn smooth. He claimed it  
 one night in his youth  
 as it sank in the Ohio.  
 Then it blurred, bled a cold light  
 toward him through the mist.  
 He felt himself grow outward softly,  
 the grim lines at his mouth not set.

He claimed it  
 with his outstretched  
 thumb, not for the King, or Virginia  
 but private, for his lean surveyor's eyes  
 trained to run straight lines direct  
 through hills and meadows, draw bounds  
 to mark us off from them, clear up  
 the difference.

He touched his face  
 and remembered dreams  
 his eye teeth falling out  
 sweet blood in the unplugged gaps.  
 And around his neck hung another moon  
 points up, a silver gorget.  
 Indians knew him an officer by it,  
 different from the men.

The distinction  
 lay cool and smooth to his touch.  
 Standing there at the Forks  
 the katy-dids wheezing  
 he wished things clearer, wished  
 he knew the pounding in him  
 for what it was. His first big failure  
 lay a month off at Fort Necessity  
 and his heart boomed toward it.

So when  
 you run your thumb over a quarter  
 over his face stamped on it,  
 picture him trying to squeeze that dollar-moon  
 and wring its secret, clue  
 to some rarefied geography  
 beyond men's boundaries and cheap routes west.  
 His arm falls. The wild forest  
 sighs all around him. A soft regret  
 swirls in his eyes, in the air, unnamed.

## Bear

The bear claws his name on aspen bark  
claws how high he can reach on a good day  
the berries fat and the salmon  
slow and careless.

Look at his haunch, how it moves under fur,  
think of the fat he can live off, think  
if he can chew fish and remember winter  
in the shiver of leaves.

On good nights the bear sees his uncle  
climb the sky. He lifts his nose and sneezes  
news to the polestar, turns home, and dreams  
of his heart and gimp left foot.

Bear's mate is the mean one, slouched back in the den  
with cubs. His cousin is dying in the Denver zoo  
one cage down from the pool where seals  
try anything for fun.

Lugs Benedict on the Coast, 1934

He dreams of saxophones and hounds  
baying in mesquite. Gulls dive the murk.  
Gold and evening move across the Sound.

Down in kelp, dolphin songs surround  
the rocks. He calls them Lucy, they moan back  
dreams of saxophones and hounds.

Sea mud licks his boots. Waves pound  
dust from his lips. His hands go wet.  
Gold and evening move across the Sound

like seasons. Seals come crowned  
with light. They thrive in bulk  
and sing like saxophones and hounds.

A chinook broke ice one night, his sister drowned  
in Horse Creek. Her bones beach up  
gold when evening moves across the Sound.

Years shove his eyes around.  
Whales breach and blow the sea like milk.  
He dreams of saxophones and hounds.  
Gold and evening move across the Sound.



La Bouillotte

((The Hot Water Jug), ca. 1728-31. Oil on Canvas  
Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin, French, 1699-1779)

The lie is stillness  
holds light as onions do,  
three small white ones  
laid between jug and water glass.  
Glass and jug line up, pull  
the light around them like a shawl.  
The shine on the jug's dull glaze  
softly warms the water in the room.

If cut, the onions would wet your eyes.  
Step out into the street, let sun  
warm your face. Color is only  
light that does not soak in.  
Horses clop by on cobbles, gutters  
steam and a man is selling limes.  
A thin crack runs to the horizon.  
The sky glows pale French blue.

A man walks through the doorway,  
steps out of his body and climbs  
heaven. His thumbnail  
is long and he runs it down  
the blue dome. Swallows  
dive around him he is yelling  
Lisette, Baptiste, come look, come look.

Young Women Picking Fruit

(1891. Oil on canvas  
Mary Cassatt, American, 1844-1926)

Rose has taken hold of the pear.  
The heel of her palm shows around it.  
Its red makes you think apple but look  
at the shape. How ripe. Her round  
arm goes up and pink  
gathers in the folds of her dress.

Susan sits in her hat  
gazing up at Rose, one elbow  
propped back on the chair. She wears  
a blue flowered print,  
lace at the neck and cuffs  
holding a pear in her lap.

You want to smell the rot.  
The flop of leaf  
against branch, apple opaque  
to the ground. Their skin  
glows like fruit. The green lawn  
soaks up daylight, soaks  
their talk and the moment  
that barely holds them.  
They could burst the canvas  
in a long soft slit down the middle.  
White pulp begins to show, turning  
slowly brown in the heavy garden air.

## Moonlight

(Oil on canvas.  
Ralph Albert Blakelock, American, 1847-1919)

The moon is a green wafer  
veined by trees.  
The leaves move, the leaves  
breathe roughly and the wind  
whirls down like sulphur from the clouds.  
Blown circles, Mr. Blakelock, you paint  
in a smooth noise. The water throws  
silver wriggles at the moon. Behind  
your back did the night get blacker?  
wild eyes peer from shadows, your hand  
go numb on the brush?

People don't paint at night.  
They sit at a table and hoot like owls.  
Next morning you got up in cold feet,  
the moon had tumbled down your chimney.  
You built a fire.  
Green licked through the orange flames,  
moon green, the breath in the bushes.  
Something yellow grew beyond the lake.

I wonder if you walked home drunk that night.  
Was it gin behind your eyes  
turned the sky that color? Pounded  
the blood in your ears toward  
thick brush strokes, blurred edges:  
the lurching green of your heart.



Sir George Nevill, 3rd Lord Bergavenny

(circa 1534. Oil and tempera on oak panel  
Hans Holbein the Younger, German, 1497-1543)

Mister, your face is heart of oak.  
You've been stuck a long time  
in that painting, lips  
a dreamless horizon, flesh  
skinned over the wood. You gaze off right,  
beyond the frame. I have this lurch  
to call you Captain, web your skies  
with tarred rope. High on the poop the mate  
calls above creaking timbers, calls the clouds  
God's lips peeling back, lightning  
the brazen laugh He saves for Englishmen.

Beyond the frame, gunmetal weather  
blues and gleams. A steady swell,  
salt tang of blood.  
Colors were duller then.  
A split world had turned passions  
brown as the fur at your neck.  
In the new race for continents  
you could hate a Spaniard like an angel.  
Hunting straits through wide unknowns,  
men discovered people. Natives  
untouched by papist hands.

Behind you, if that sky  
is a dull blade it won't rust.  
Your eyes control such things  
by habit. Rents come in forever  
from your green estates. Still,  
boring a narrow passage down  
through years, it is a lusher green  
you stare at. The charm of far waters,  
lands where the light falls  
solid as rock and iron. Where flesh,  
like singing, knows nothing of its end.

## Cape Cod Afternoon

(1936. Oil on canvas  
Edward Hopper, American, 1882-1967)

Blocks of light on the big house slant  
crazy off pitched roofs and gable ends.  
The green lawn breathes a lungful of ocean.

Someone has left a window open,  
a black square calling, Supper!  
and down at the beach in seaweed,

in rocks and tide pools, a child  
takes a lazy poke at a starfish.  
He's lost a sneaker and the scheme

to blame it on his brother. He drags  
a stick in the sand for a snake track,  
wiggly first, then wide curves. Gulls rise,

scream off toward Spain.  
Down at the harbor his friend Louie  
the Portugese crabber tells him

"Lose a shoe it floats to Africa,  
maybe you get a letter back." Water is flat  
around the boats, with rainbows. You can smell

sun on the dock wood. Here by the splintery part  
those summer people crashed their boat  
all laughing right up against. A lady

fell in and the sail went shivering crazy.  
The sky that day was orange, his brother  
found a clearie in the road that matched it.

Round and clear, like Daddy's Navy song  
O the ocean waves may roll.  
The lawn is turning gold now,

his bare foot chilly. Looking up,  
the house, the thinning light, he waves  
at the empty air.

Waves and waves like flags  
in the Bristol parade when music  
quits. Feet and thumping drums.

## Red Cloud and the Iron Horse

Silent Red Cloud stares from a knoll, his pony  
stolen from the Crows and a fine one.  
The locomotive chugs on the plain, makes  
its own wind. His eyes smoke like range fire  
and the train gets closer. Until he sees  
lounging against the great brass bell on the boiler  
a woman, red dress and her white breasts bared  
to the sun and all that grass.  
The pony snorts under him.  
There is no blood in his vision,  
grass brushes his hanging feet.

Down along the river  
his wife's brothers sing  
the chokecherry song. It is that  
time of year come round again.  
The tracks lie straight across the plain.

He fixes on one red spark  
its long arc moving toward him, feels  
the horse skit sideways and shudder.  
Something tips. The sky rim is a bowl rim,  
he is water and moving on a dead run.

Twice to drive the buffalo from a Blackfoot range  
and once to please a woman,  
he torched the prairie red and big.

High Plains, Wyoming

You could name a town after it, this clarity:  
yucca leaf on sandstone  
a kiss from eighty yards.  
Sun eats rock. What grows  
keeps a long time at it.

Once two Frenchmen  
might have made it this far  
but probably not. A.D. 1742, they were  
looking for the River of the West.  
They had no idea, they lost  
the astrolabe two days out. Louis  
and Francois Verendrye, thirsty.  
The river flowed only on the map.

But there was a time  
you could float to the ocean in a month,  
just drift, no portages, no falls.  
Wind that never had a sand grain in it  
lined your arms and you knew  
it was the right direction. You could smell  
by the banks, their peculiar mud.

## Man in a Rowboat

There was a lake once, and a great  
blue heron flapped across it, dragging  
legs and bad weather from the southeast.  
Fish jumped at a mayfly hatch, but  
their mood was not good and their eyes  
gave nothing away.

Put a man on the lake  
in a rowboat. He smells  
the storm but stays to watch  
bugs, fish rings in the fading light,  
and how deep he can see if he leans  
from the gunwales and looks straight  
down. The water  
has a way of pulling his eye  
that scares him. Thump the oars out,  
and let him bend toward shoreline,  
long slow strokes.  
Bring the heron back, low  
along the water and the man laughs,  
the first drops hit his neck.

## Magic

When doves fly loose  
from his hat, the magician  
feels his clean heart scorn  
the audience. The dupes,  
the way their jaws  
drop you'd think worms  
might crawl in, curl up  
for winter. His girl assistant  
holds the rabbit toward him  
on a tray. Its white  
trembles close to pink.  
Three times a week the fat old buck  
disappears. Thin air  
or trick drawers,  
it doesn't matter: When Miasmo  
kicks the spindly table to pieces

all the kids at Amy Boggs'  
eighth birthday party  
damn well take notice,  
their eyes logy from ice cream  
and way too long in the pool.  
The girl snaps her glittering leotard  
down over one hard buttock. Miasmo  
moves on to the snaking cane. Cannibals  
thinks Amy's mother, passing out  
the shrunken heads, it's a shame  
to frighten children like that.  
But where'd the bunny go?  
says Spider, thinking holes  
behind the wood pile, how he gets  
little enough to slip away.

## To Her Son on Mother's Day

Honestly Harold, how can you sit  
down in the cellar like that again, thrilled  
silly watching spiders  
tango out the drainpipe.  
Watch you don't catch cold or worse,  
bored, start moaning like the time  
water rose to an inch from the ceiling  
and you were trapped, breathed  
through a garden hose three days  
before the river went down.  
Bridges lay strewn along the bank  
that Monday, wrecked cars  
leaned on their tired shoulders  
already rusting. Remember? You swam  
upstairs at last and we went for a walk,  
your clothes stinking in the heat,  
the weather by then  
broken and the drought begun.

It was,  
you said, wonderful to be out. Downtown  
they were cleaning up the mud,  
a slow job, the big brushes  
somehow deafening. In the air  
steel rang repairing on steel.  
Cold wind rose off the dull water  
flapping like a sheet.

## Harold Dreams His Future

Spring mornings like this when nothing  
seems to come out right I think of myself old  
in a corner and cracked. Gills  
will be invented by then, new ways of breathing  
as the room fills up with water.  
Balloons swim by outside. We are on the 18th floor  
and it is beautiful the way they rise and bulge,  
fill the sky with color. People laugh  
and pour frothy champagne.  
Their affairs begin like the day,  
red streaks flecked with gold.  
The city thumps. People don't see me  
watching but they could, there is no glass  
in the window. I run my eyes  
along the corner of the room,  
the astonishing grain of floorboards.  
It is cool and pleasant, but empty.  
The gills work fairly well.  
About then my daughter slides in  
and we bump noses, solemn and dumb  
as two old goldfish in a cement pond.



## Harold's Wife

said she was not happy, said again  
 she was, said those worn stones, stories  
 always end when people get married:  
 groom and bride wave, toss  
 confetti from the steamboat deck  
 rumble off gaily in the stagecoach  
 take hands, walk simply  
 toward a plum-blue lake.

At the end the sky gets dark  
 fast, shade drawn against blank streets  
 clogged with cars. Plants shrink, strange  
 winds blow up from nowhere.  
 Now we're on our own.  
 Trunk to branch  
 to twig-tip: we grow  
 by spreading, end for now at our toes,

our fingers. Then touch me here she says,  
 meaning not breast or shoulder, meaning  
 some place serene and hollow,  
 plain light from small-town houses  
 spilled on the lawn.  
 Out in the barn the goats  
 swell toward milk-time. The night  
 looms at the doorway in thick heaps.

Oh but the night gapes lovely  
 with stars. I want it  
 all she says, how  
 can I roll it down to hand size?  
 Stars scatter from her fist like dimes.  
 Comes a muddy voice:  
 I eat, says the river.  
 Run down to me and I thrive.

## Harold Punches Out

So much for work thinks dulled Harold,  
stumbling home from the job  
pissed at the boss and mad  
for the typist's knees.  
Only quitting time feels  
real, street lights on at five,  
the air changed since morning.  
That hour in summer, fringed awnings  
lapped his hair past storefronts,  
bars soured the rich air like money.

Streets are thick now with snow.  
Money seems always a thin thing.  
Against the cold, say,  
turning the corner in time  
to see a kid skid his bike on the ice,  
plow into a small dog like Caesar  
conquering his pain.

## The Admiral's Women

They say Columbus  
 had four wives. Fatima  
 he met in a Tripoli bazaar.  
 From behind her veil the black eyes  
 lanced him. Years later,  
 the tint of her skin long forgotten,  
 her fingers on his cheek, there were days  
 those eyes came to him out of the brine-wind,  
 carrying faint scents  
 of dung and foreign spices.

Anna,  
 stout Genovese, stayed behind  
 while he traipsed around the courts of Europe  
 with his Plan. He would write her  
 at night from crumbling inns:  
My darling, they have turned me down again.  
She didn't mind. He'd  
 give it up pretty soon she'd think,  
 while her hands thumped dough or  
 chapped in dish water.

Helga, the third, he took for pure  
 information. Met her in Iceland, her uncle  
 knew the Western waters, and the tales  
 of fur-headed, flat-nosed men  
 in skin boats who paid dear for iron.  
 Late at night, wind  
 roaring from the hearth he'd pump her  
 for sailing times, currents, the shape  
 of coasts. She was the simplest,  
 her dull braids the color of new rope.

Last was Unth, the maharani.  
 He loved her best of all, tried  
 to teach her words. Agua, he'd say,  
 slapping the sea, or tierra  
 letting sand run through his fingers.  
 Her father was a Carib head man  
 until the sailors hacked him up, hung  
 the bits on trees. Bombay? he'd ask,  
 and she, in terror,  
 pointed West.

Albino Gorilla, Barcelona Zoo

Her eyes pink in the April sun,  
my wife told about him. Afternoon  
came later than usual.  
Sun whitened her limbs.  
She stretched like petals all  
flat with new tones coming,  
and grabbed her ankles. Bowed  
like that, she could roll to Chicago.

She says they did once, she and a crazy  
Spanish ape. Dust kept them going  
and low rumba music, softer than rubber  
on blacktop. They slept under bridges.  
They danced on bent street corners  
melting under the glare.  
People gave them ham. For water  
they drank what they could.  
Two good months she said, summertime.

The hammock quilts her back and the sky  
rolls under us like mercury  
but redder.  
Long blue Oldsmobiles sheet the land,  
their engines warm and idling.

## Phone Call

When the phone rings at night  
birds settle blackly on the line outside  
and listen in: sly chirps  
behind the words a friend is drunk  
it's three A.M., bars closed, and what  
am I doing? Dazed,  
my wife says "geese in the fall," her arm  
becoming fact on the bedclothes,  
her shoulders rolling.

Out there something waits for shape  
something in the night like cat fur  
rises to the brush of a hand.

The birds get louder. I'd tell him  
don't talk, we're tapped, but he might  
come over. Rivers run between us  
fast under a thin ice-glaze. The ice  
could crack, he'd drown, and who'd  
be guilty? Air hisses on the line.  
My wife shifts. The birds  
have flown off bored, but if the night  
had wings or arms it would soften  
at their cries, and open, open.

For My Brother in the Churches of France

e lo soleills plovil  
--Arnaut Daniel

The nave filled with perfumed moths  
clerestory light threw half the columns into shadow  
stubby candles everywhere, more smell  
than light, and light  
pooled deep blues and bloods from the rose window.

Each saint in his niche.  
Vines bruised your face,  
live vines, hanging  
like that hunchback behind the pews  
softly peeling a banana for years.

The Orinoco broke through the doors like children  
shrieking for lunch. You staggered,  
delight hot air in your belly, and rose  
up under the groin vault, a balloon in a rain forest.

Rain fell chiming from the arches.  
All eyes turned up  
prying cracks between each cut stone.

Smith

for Jug

Of course, when a man knows well  
what he does, it soothes the eye  
like balm on a hot sore to watch him:  
the long reach of tongs from forge to anvil,  
ring of the hammer as it draws  
taut curves from the slackened steel  
before the plunge  
burble and long hiss  
of cool.

He has shaped a loon cry.  
The air solidifies around him  
when he holds it up, laughing  
in the morning work light.  
The dying fire leaves  
orange spilled across his face.  
He hands me the new tool.  
All the things that hold him there,  
cap, skew leather apron, gloves  
cuffed to the elbows, glow.

## The Mast-Head

Looking out for whales from the Mast-Head, Melville  
 yawns that dreamy chapter  
 where he nearly lets go and falls in.  
 A finch slips out of a dive  
 veers off the eastern horizon  
 and the green islands humped below it.

Sailors call those islands Encantadas, they move  
 around. Birds have no trouble, but men  
 once they chart them, return to find them gone.  
 The bird curves back, and to keep from drifting  
 Melville chats with him, sharing  
 the big arc of the crow's nest when the ship rolls.

In his clear eyes sea and sky  
 join, the horizon a line  
 of release, or round arms holding. Embrace  
 me, finch, he says, but the bird  
 has dragon in him and keeps a wary distance.  
 Herman retreats to his dreams

of Union, one big soul and a certain  
 small Manhattan bar near the Custom House  
 famous for its pickled lizards.  
 The unfurled sails fill with a plop,  
 white hymn to the round blue sea  
 humming in the ropes. Herman

a hundred feet above the deck routine, thinks  
 "a part of every shore the round globe over,"  
 remembers the black Hudson sloshing  
 the Bowery docks, and brick  
 reflecting in the gutters. Birds  
 carve new shapes above the rising day.



April

The woods were dry.  
Snow gone a month and rain  
a month away. Cow dung  
steamed in the pasture, late  
afternoon. In the woods  
my grandmother burned  
tent caterpillars. The gallon can  
trembled, caught a flash of light  
when she lifted it  
to the sapling crotch,  
doused the gray cocoons in kerosene  
and kerosene spilled down the trunk,  
shined the bark and faded.  
The dry leaves curled  
dust around her shoes.

Can you see her face, the lines  
of it, that chin, those puzzled  
eyes when flames lurched  
toward the dry woods floor?  
Did she run, or shout? I  
was five. New red sneakers  
lifted my feet like wings. The worms  
writhed in their burning tents,  
curled, charred  
and stuttered up as smoke  
into the blue maw of sky.

## Plum

Snow can fall  
softly, as if down  
were its direction only  
by accident, the way  
when you entered a room  
my old Aunt Marian  
would look up, eyes  
bulgy and dim behind  
thick lenses, the accident  
of you and her in the same room  
unremarkable, if soothing.

Maybe she'd lick  
a stamp or straighten  
the antimacassar, not  
thinking how her daughter  
died alone from pills  
in a darkening room.  
One day, home  
on a Christmas visit  
my father will give me  
that same look  
and say "Oh,"  
the one round vowel  
hung between us like a plum  
that knows its own  
ripeness, and exactly  
when to fall.

## El Dorado

Pizarro built gilt cathedrals  
in his head, bright visions.  
Long before he killed the Inca he saw them  
shimmering high in the Andes,  
himself at the top, Christ-bright  
or hell, brighter: gold is soft  
and it gleams for whoever holds the hammer.

Thin soldier-priests leaned out the windows  
toward him, their arms stretched up, gold trumpets  
blaring their martial faith like noon  
in Madrid. Light in the tropics  
is hard, old pirate, can horror

last four hundred years? I can hate  
the doberman across the alley.  
But greed and blood, gold and severed limbs  
are never common, like hot stuccoed walls,  
meat on a white plate.

Last night he dined with me.  
I could goad him like a dog.  
And like a dog his grin  
mirrored my own. My face shone  
in his gold breast plate.  
Stink of conquest:  
El Dorado  
the gilded man he'd hunted so long.