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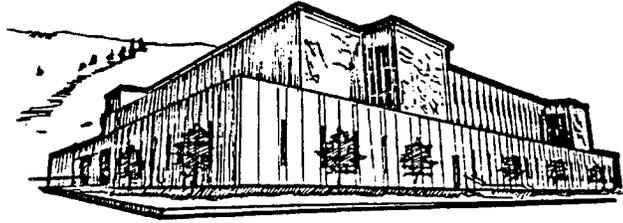
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University of
Montana

Road Cut Still Life: The Angle of Repose

by

Christine Vance

B.S., Northern Montana College, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

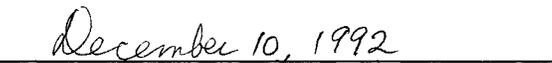
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Road Cut Still Life:
The Angle of Repose

At a certain angle it all stops
slipping, spells Setting
a wound stitched round with air,
gravity, unrelenting pressure unrelenting
settle.

And there in the forever of
hold still
the heart of form
holds seep and evaporate, holds
grain upon grain and the in-
between and then she
draws her brush
across the picture exposing
the flaw
the hollow of shape
where shape has been.

I

Eulogy

I meet my dead grandma
at the Salvation Army.
I'm trying on dresses
for her funeral. My eyes
slip to my flat black shoes
when I hear an old sound
an insect perhaps
and then she is handing me
another dress. Try this one
she says. What's it for?
Your funeral, I answer.
It is red and low cut. It's
perfect then, it'll show off your
neck, you have such a nice
neck and she brushes my hair
from my face. Who's going to
tell? she inquires.
I am. And what will you say?
Oh, the usual, you know
she was great and all that.
She pays for the dress.
Lets have lunch.

Crossing the street
I hear it again
hoppers in wheat
but more hollow.
I think of the metal balls
in her hips, the cancer
rattling her lungs.
I think of the aneurysm
exploded behind her ribs.
What will you really
say? She persists, so I tell her.
You were hard
to get along with
and you often were wrong.
She laughs back into her chair.
I think, pebbles settling
in a coat pocket. You hear
it then, she smiles,
thats's why I came.

From her blouse she brings
the rattles of a snake
laying them in my hand.
The first one I killed
on the porch, there were others.
I keep them to remind me
who I am.

To Bury Grandfather

I walk the ridge of mail box hill
to bury Grandfather,
watch wind
make velvet ribbons of wheat.

I kneel in the strawberries
to bury him,
eat until my hands and mouth
stain red, my knees turn green.

I stand on the threshold
wiping cobwebs from my lips
step into his shoes and waltz
the wooden floor.

I descend the cellar stairs
to bury Grandfather,
eat forbidden pickles and
next Thanksgiving's olives.

The Strike

I follow my father
over clumps of snow and cow manure,
scrape my nose with leather gloves,
stomp numb feet in black boots.

"The heart attack," he says,
his dog runs ahead, closing on feeding cattle,
"has convinced me of the importance
of fishing new rivers."

We dodge willows that snap sharp in our faces.
My fingers ache with threading purple worms
as I imagine the fish,
free and fluid in the darkness,

icy water pouring over bloody gill-slits.
I imagine the bait, the hook, the strike,
slack going out of the line,
the arch and heave of flesh.

the hub

deciding whether to suck
this blazing air
or abandon his withered lungs
my father-in-law lies dying
on the sofa his wife circles
silently his children
sway like cobwebs
drifting toward the center
driven back by searing breath

Homing

This morning, the first
scent of lilacs blows
in the yard you called home.
Inside you lie a few minutes
dead, the same grey as babies,
just born, before the first breath
and the blossoming pink.
By your watch seven-fifteen
becomes seven-sixteen. My head
settles on your chest; your ribs
the silent nest I fly home to.

The Wave Breaking
for my niece

The first I knew of birth
was a calf, its hind hooves
wound with a chain, a rope,
tied to a stud in the wall,
circling the cow's neck.
And a man to disjoin the two
that stretched together
until the calf thudded to the ground.
The cow also fell.

At your birth, Marisa
there was no man present
Just your mother, you and I.
Holding her hands and her eyes
I remembered the kittens born
in my room. I stroked
the cat's fur, watched the wave
breaking in her as she eased
her young into the night
then curved around hungry mouths.

Luona Remembers

She hears the music of her name
maybe God or the niece
that attends her now.
Maybe its the prairie wind
through scorched wheat
through an ashy leaning house
the wind whipping sheets on a line
whipping sunflowers against a fence
or a flowered dress around her legs
thirty miles to the church.
Maybe it's her husband
calls, waving his hat,
or her sisters waving back
as they leave, maybe her mother,
or a girl running barefoot
through spring grass, the beat
of a hundred wings
rising before her.

Fever

Accustomed to running for his life
Tarzan slid across the jungle floor
as if it were thick green carpet
or backyard lawn, as if his feet
weren't bare. At the river
he was a shaft of sunlight disappearing
into darkness and he would have swum
safely downstream except
for the explosives they threw after him.
Bafflement was red, trickling from his ears
as he climbed the opposite bank. And far away
Cheetah kept watch, like God, chattering
until Tarzan returned to stare,
deafened, into the trees. And I
was a feather on a green couch
recovering the loss of some organ, maybe
or adjusting to a stranger's blood.
And there was much yet to lose.

Family Treasures

Because light
bruises memory
they are saved
in a shoe box,
the black and whites
scraps of paper
hearts. We line
the glossy space
between edge
and edge, smile
and flash. All eyes
steadied
to the gaping
shutter.
In this family
to look away
is to be lost
or found out.
Frame after frame
we mouth happily.
Outside the white
square of this one
the lamp shatters.

Elegy for a Child Molester

During the years of arthritis, heart attacks,
strokes, we believed it evil
to remember and hate,
so we forgot and as best we could forgave.
You were helpless then and we knew that God
was exacting silent vengeance
as we watched you shrink.

At your death, we gathered, survivors
wife, children, grandchildren. One suggested
we should not leave you
alone all night at the church, but no one
volunteered to stay. We said, what a relief
it was, and better that way
for you.

Now we bury your pictures
in bottom drawers, then dig them back up,
scratch the clotted memories until
the blood cleanses the places in us
you've touched, try to separate your face
from the faces of all old men, your hands
from the hands of our husbands.

Louder Than Words

He likes the lull of her words
like strong hands--the thumbs
inching up his spine in tiny
circles--so he makes small answers
to prolong the talking. She tells him
everything, he thinks, his eyes
on the newspaper. First the domestic
news--the hands stop to massage his shoulders--
his eyes close. Then, did he hear about
the rape last night? He guesses
he did. Why, did she know the woman? No, but
she hopes he is caught--the fingers poke
at the trapezius muscles--hopes he pays,
it's not right, men--the nails scratch
red tracks in his neck--not right, women
afraid and men--the fingers slide
around his throat. He loosens his tie.

Cataloging Rape

I.

looks that kill
looks to die for
stiletto heels
all the better to eat you
my dear
you know you want it
you bitch
be a good girl
don't tell anyone
trust me
I won't hurt you
say you like it
say you made me do it
women say no, etc.
what does she expect when she, etc.
a ninety year old woman
raped and then
killed with a pipe
up her vagina
and through her diaphragm
a six year old boy
raped by a stranger
a woman beaten
so badly her family
can't recognize her
a woman staying alive
naked in a ditch till somebody finds her
a woman dying
a child raped by her mother's
lover, her mother, her brother
a rapist tying her up
painting her toenails

II.

You dream them again and again
terrorists with faces as empty
as your body, and guns. It always ends
the same, with you on your knees.
For weeks you wake each night, heart
pounding as if you had actually
heard somebody force the door
and follow your breathing to this bed
where you see your body turn in on itself
but can't feel it, move it, or make
a sound. You are a thought that swells
against the walls and ceiling. Escape.

III.

At fourteen, your hips
are narrow your breasts
new risen moons. Already
you know pot and beer
already you know
the rhythm of men.
One night you drink
with strangers.
Come with me
says the boy from Saskatchewan
I know secret places.
Miles away you are the skin
he beats his song on
his fist shatters
your cheek. Waiting
alone for morning, curled
against wind and frozen
stars, what do you sing
in the drumming rain?

IV.

A body like mine is whiteblue
ice, a snapping elastic mass
gouging earth and casting shadows.
The sparkle and glare of

bodyscape crusted over, deep
frostbiting mounds of pure dirty
virgin snow. After you're gone
I'll drift over your prints.
A body like mine is stiff

fluid winter giving way
a drop at a time. Slick
see-through shine of disappearing
freeze. A body like mine is thin
ice. Walk here at your own risk.

III

Also Known As

At 23 I said to myself,
"Stella, honey, get a man."
And he was a fast
black sports car man,
a grey at the temples,
three piece suit man.
So we became Mr.and Mrs.
Happily Ever After.
Then he got some little
princess pregnant.

His lawyer mailed me
the one thing he left behind,
my name. Stella Hawk.
I took it from the envelope
the syllables winging out
into spaces he used to fill
then circling back to fill me.

Ice Cream

Sure, I remember him. Every Saturday
he'd wait at Ice Cream! Ice Cream!
across the table from a large hot fudge sundae.
How about some ice cream? was all he ever said
and he smelled like the stuff you clean toilets with
because he'd scrubbed them all morning
at his old man's station
just so he could watch me eat,
spent money just to look at me.
And he never tried to kiss me
or walk me home, never even asked
if I'd be there next week. He'd just nod
if I talked and look at me like I was
really there. Sure I remember him. He had
two brothers, Brian and Delbert. I loved
them both.

Stella's Finest Nightmare

I'm seven, have a mother
and father. My hair is
the color of their laughter.
We fly, not walk, and wherever
we go we soar and dive and circle
and chirp like a flock of finches.
The sky is forget-me-not
blue, the air shimmers
where we have been. I glide
ahead on silken air and when I
turn they are gone and I am
falling in the darkness, an egg
dropped from the nest.

In Dick's Trailer Town

We kicked up some dust
on those dirt roads
threw stones at nests
until they broke loose
and toppled. And after the rain
we lined tadpoles in tire
tracks, waited for lessons
in force, how a body becomes
a rainbow. Or launched
whole grasshoppers into the fan or
tore their legs off and planted them
in hills of ants. And then one day
old man Dick threatened to hang
our dog if he caught her out
running again. After that,
the rocks in our pockets
were for him.

Stella Flunks a Test

First a doctor I never saw before
put on a lead apron to protect himself
from the xrays aimed at me,
then rubber gloves. I held my hand
in front of my face, admired the smooth
ruby nails, a perfect reflection in each
of the light behind me. The guy running
the camera was also protected
as the doctor slid a thin steel
tube through my cervix and pumped in
some dye. In the tv screen
by my head I could have watched
the dye fill my uterus
but the picture looked like a cock
gone too far, so I closed my eyes,
stuck a finger in my mouth and traced
the slick red surface with my tongue.
The dye was supposed to run out
if my tubes were good
and when it didn't, I bit down on the nail
till it broke.

Living Downtown

That year I ate saltines
and grape jelly, drank Hamm's
and Great Falls Select, smoked
homegrown on the roof.
And once in a while old Georgie
would show up in his Porsche
and take me to his place for cognac or
dry white wine, thick slices
of pastrami on sourdough
and sweet hot mustard.
He'd stroke me with hands
delicate as a woman's,
put on some dark jazz,
then teach me
everything he knew
one slow dance at a time.
I was smart enough to wonder
who the silk robe on the chair
belonged to and
hungry enough not to ask.
Then I'd stroll back downtown
to the room with no locks
and drink anybody's wine.
What wasn't taken from me there,
I just gave away.

Dream of the Rapture

first the thrum of angel's wings
snips of whispered conversation
then one begins to hum
the other harmonizes
and before you know it
you are wrapped in the song
like a Christmas gift
the wind whips your hair round your head
like a flock of doves
the brush of wings on your throat
as you begin to rise
body first, soul following
you are ripe and falling up
backward and higher
you slip toes first
into the throb of heaven
then
 you are recognized
and gravity
 takes hold

Naming Infidelities

The night I kissed Rory Minster, we were numb on Mad Dog 20-20 and he belonged to Kim Plass, as much as any 16 year old belongs to another.

The time I kissed Leon the Drug Man, he cradled the charm I wore in his hand, stroking it with his thumb and whispering of innocence, but it was only a wooden heart.

The last time I kissed Rick Lillemon, we agreed to meet in a dream at the river where we had once swum naked. Then he went back to Washington and a woman, and I to Havre and a man.

Today I kissed my husband, told him I loved him more than everything else put together. But would he leave me alone as I had important things to do.

Picks

pulled from your hat band
your pants pockets
the laces of your shoes
and none the day you sat
by the Missouri slick
and stark ass naked, fingered
the Moonlight Sonata on a dare.
We promised to be always
together, agreed if I died
first I'd come back a guitar
the body and neck the strings
all in your sweet quick
hands, always, that summer
you took it on the road.

The memory of our last kiss

presses down my tongue, presses
hard against my palate--the knowledge
of how close a thing can get
before you see it.

Self-Portrait as Her Lover

I found her stretched outside
in the buzz of neon and smoke
drifting through the door
of the Whitehorse Bar.
She was so tight and sleek
in her skin I'd have tried
but for a way she has
of warning a body off.
So I leaned back content
to watch the way she moved.
If you can survive love here,
you can survive anything
she offered. And I took her hand
followed her to the edge of town
into sage and prickly pear
and down at last to the Milk
where she laid me down on sweet
bedstraw, wound round me warm
as afternoon rocks.
But in the cool lavender of dawn
she was a wraith
the translucent left-behind skin
I had touched.

Paradise General

When God took the rib
from Adam, was it psychic
surgery? Adam lying peacefully, palms
open in anticipation while God pain-
lessly, perfectly slipped the rib
out through the smooth whole
skin? Or maybe the rib itself simply
dropped onto the Divine plate
like the drumstick of a Thanksgiving turkey.
Or maybe more indicative of things to come,
the Doc told the anesthesiologist to
put Adam out, sharpened up the blades
admiring his reflection in the glint
and drew the long division between
Adam and Eve. Then gave the command
to his assistant to plug in
the electric saw which buzzed like a swarm
of killer bees until the rib
was carved, chipped and bloody
from the blackening hole
in Adam's side. A few quick stitches to
keep the stuffing in and nothing to it
except that eternal ache.

Revision

what begins is lost
in what follows
sensation and thought

light enters a precisely
opened window becomes
chemistry and electricity

becomes symbol and story;
blood spattered shirt,
stale beer, the healed stub
of index finger: my father
as I kiss him goodnight

take any circumstance
cars at an intersection
describe it and it is yours

cars petalling back
from the center
dandelions in the wind

Echo

I listen hard
to the creak of bones
accordian breath
pressed out and what
does it mean
this motion? Talk
to me. Listen
to the light fall.
The flick of a switch
and that other light
rises to travel
the dark distance
of body--rope
knotted, fiber
against fiber
fraying filament of
primal memory,
whispering Listen
remember.
First rocking first
light, division
and differentiation.
Remember. First heart,
not mine, first heat
not me. Talk to me.
Whisper that light
that is my name.

Pomegranate Seeds

Each month a potential beginning
and the first drop reminds me
I will not go beyond this body
relinquishing each cycle
one of the finite number, ovum
turned out into time and body.
In a hundred years my sister
will be her greatgranddaughters.
Not them exactly, but the gesture
of hand, the inexplicable
love of yellow. And I will be
lines of poetry kept
by the family geneologist
words knotting my connection, one
way. Back.

Ordinary Semen

The sperm in ordinary semen
burst on the scene like
sailors oaring their way
to the great white siren
that calls above the whir
of whipping tails,
like the cavalry stampeding
to its manifest destiny.
or miners in search
of the motherlode.
But the sperm
in my man's semen
go just for fun, knowing
the end is always dead.
They swish and frolic
like the sports they are
backstroke in circles
and wink.

Red Days

Through tears she sees the shape
the inside of her uterus
an inverted triangle
an animal skull, bare
and shining in the prairie sun
fallopian tubes
spiraling and twisting
and there at the ends
clots of florescent dye
trapped in tight fists
of scar tissue.
Fear takes shape, glowing
white on a black screen
an image to supplant the shapeless
black she has felt
riding in her belly.

She remembers the man she loved
when she was twenty
remembers the care she has taken
these years, condoms, pills, diaphragms
spermicide. She sees the calendars
marked these years, each month
ten days in red.
All those precautions, excuses
all her mother's admonishments
all piled in a heap in front
of her bedroom door.

She knows what it means,
this test, has seen the shape
of her future and she is lighter.
For years she has carried
the little hope
a penguin with an egg on its feet
has imagined the shape
that was taking shape within
imagined the tiny spirit
that waited for shape
hovering as she took her temperature
made love and waited for the blood.
She has felt the warmth

of a small hand on her arm
felt for her breasts to swell
her belly to swell.

She knows what it means and now
instead of the fragile hope
she carries a glowing image
the triangular hollow
of her uterus, the lightness
and the warmth of pain.

Adoption

If I ever have a daughter
I will tell her how life begins,
the collision and soft thud
in the humus of a woman garden.
How cells divide innumerably
to swell the bud, then flower.
I will say that I felt her hover
like a bird closer even
when I knew my garden
empty, saw her float
like pollen and settle
to rest in my heart.
I will tell her I kept hope
alive in the sunlight
on the window sill
more than one season,
I will tell how nothing,
not even birth,
could keep us apart.

The Name She Gives Herself

I'm no bonespur
no palindrome
the same going away
as coming home.
Not the big bellied womb-
man, the little
hissing he. I am not
the forever
what is about to be
nor the always
falling darkness.

I call myself
the One who hears
many voices
the One who tastes.