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Spirit Laughing

James Gurley
The University of Montana

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THE SPIRIT LAUGHING

By

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B.A., Wake Forest University, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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WOT

NEW VOICES, 1979-1983 (Academy of American Poets)

for my parents; for Neile

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STORIES FOR THE FIRE

STEADY COMMERCE SOUTH

for Bain

From across the river I watch
tugboat captains yell home
the coal-filled barges,
and in my pocket
her postcard from Mexico rubs
against my leg: she writes
down south grapes are ripe
for the press and wasps
block only timid hands.

It's late as I walk home
another shift over;
along the Susquehanna workmen give up
forklifts, cranes, and
hard labor: the docks
loaded with diesel, coal, paychecks,
steel: and the men grimy--
each muscle a thin line of sweat
against the smog rising off this river,
the town that closes round us.
They settle down to bars or wives.

As I look at her card--
the trellis overburdened with grapes
and the smiling Mexican--
I'm back following the harvest
with her. I know the odor of that crop
we carried with us

on our clothes into town.
We raised the same scent to our lips
each time we drank.

Once, after we made love, she counted
a litany of places we worked,
small farms near Torreon, vineyards
south of Jalisco, large haciendas
with hundreds of workers,
all links stronger than blood.
In my apartment I tack this card
up with the others. They form a line
from California to Veracruz,
and I imagine her three bushels behind quota,
her arms dyed from juices:

she is watching the other workers,
a day's work beside them,
as they drink from their canteens
and bitch about money,
the latest gossip
of men and their brawls.
Then I'm with her in a Napa vineyard
picking from a full trellis,
wasps about us common as dust
while she whispers
how everything glows with desire,
even our hands, reaching
up through leaves,
have a color that doesn't fade.

AT MY UNCLE'S CABIN BY THE CHESAPEAKE

is where I first understood
rivers, walking along the wooden planks
of my uncle's pier, out into the
algae-bottomed creek slack with
summer. I saw plastic cans

floating like buoys above the surface
and underneath baited traps
empty now in the oil slick decay
of too many boats. The crab
harvest my uncle thrives on
down that year and none

for the kids who want to string out
their traps. He still won't move
to town, because this place has
its history: our cabin carved
out of alder and maple,

my grandfather hauling in his catch,
the creek swollen to river again,
huge boats scraping the bottom
clean, and even shrimp
plentiful and large. I hear
their stories of countless

birds, beavers and sandbars:
but I was twelve, tired
of the heat and lost in the
slow rings of water
breaking against the pilings.

Like a backwater chant
this estuary sends out a single
note, continual as breath:
it lulls me into a past
I never knew, the pier
washed away by storms

my father waist-deep
in water. He leans on a boat,
his body tense drawing a trap-line
near, the black oil slick gone,
the full river running strong.

But my hands turn over
a trap, battered and useless,
its bait picked clean, and
caught in the wire a dried-out shell
glistens empty above the slow
water to the bay, draining.

DANCE AT THE SENIOR CITIZEN CENTER

The scene is set so easily,
the shy drummer keeps pace
with our waltzes, the homespun afghans
sway to the step of our bodies
finally liberated from skin.
We have the floor, and our feet
move us about like the frantic dancers
in old newsreels. It is we
who are the contestants, wearing numbers
and dancing to popular tunes.
One by one we slumped to the floor,
exhausted and penniless.
Now, as the acned bass player steps forward
to announce tonight's lucky couple,
we sit idly in folding chairs,
our bodies trembling from the dance.
First the phony drumroll,
then the slow surprise
which is never enough.
I always expect more, even when
as in 1936, the year of dance marathons
and with the camera on us--
your skin glowed in fatigue,
my arms shaking more
than they do now,
and I could not save you
from falling. Somehow
we always seem to move
in slow motion, our shadows
barely able to keep up
with our bodies.

EXCURSION INTO PHILOSOPHY

We are no happy couple making love
in a park where pigeons watch:
outside this room lazy gulls squawk
that we lie in sweat,

your breath a marriage
of shirt and skin--
I read Plato, resting on your back,
believe that no breeze

could stir the air, raise
the curtain or your shirt to caress us.
Sunlight warms our hard
bed, burns the carpet,

and I stare as if to enter
its heat. This is the only
true science we share for hours.
Caught in the dank air

as I fall against you:
over the walls our shadows
spread like dust that
takes the shape of our bodies.

STORIES FOR THE FIRE

The chimney sweep stirs up soot,
plumes rising from our favorite house
on Eddy, the one I sold alone:
it's as if we were off again
at work or shopping, the money
we owed under the mat when my key fit.
The name on the mailbox was ours.
You'd return from Sears with tickets for India--
I couldn't be angry with you for that.
Black puffs cloud the air like memory,
and I still have it all planned out, the job
at Mountain Bell, parttime at Perkins:
if the house went in flames some night,
I'd blame it on the chimney sweep,
sparks that filled the den in a downdraft.
Now as soot and snow choke the air
that fire keeps returning--
when we camped up the Blackfoot
and saw the charred trees, the bones of elk
that flames could never make vanish.
You laughed; I smeared bone-chalk over my face
and pretended to be a spirit dancing
around the singed grass: You said it was beer
or the novelty of bones that made me
drunk in a frenzy of motion. It never wore off.
You went to Sears and never came back.
I drew plans for a fireplace
in every room and sold.
Now as soot gathers on the grass

I think of you scooping ash
in the Blackfoot, your hands warm from embers--
we lie together, hazy from wine
and you light one match after another
to see the flame rise.

SUNLIGHT IN A CAFETERIA

I've made it all up---her waiting,
her sly glances at the clock by my head,
her eyes luminous in noon sun

as she pushes aside her empty cup,
pretends to be alone. Is it
her red hair or the sun that absorbs

this room? I delight in her voice,
follow the curves of her legs beneath
the table, and I smoke cigarettes

until this cafe fills with
my desire: a delicate
wire unravelling between us,

like the sun across our tables.
It curls about her face,
taunts me towards her now,

a small tension which is pleasure
holding us free of our doubts.
She has undone me.

HOUSE ON A VACANT LOT

A mouse rattles in the attic.
My stash of beer warms
where mice have eaten away the wall--

they have mapped out plans for my departure.
I sit on the crooked floor boards
remembering when the carpenter came drunk.

He never could hold his booze.
I use the next empty
to block off another hole.

In a dream of that final offer
with buyers pacing out each room,
the line rings again and again.

The blank T.V. screen lights the room.
All I hear is static--
along the walls mice scratch to break through.

Rain again, no moon. The roof leaks
and in the cold room I imagine
drunken movers stumbling over boxes.

Here was never what could be a home--
a study in craftsmanship--
the builder always knew I would sell.

I don't need full price:
I'll take what's offered,
ignore the mice alive in the dark.

A SHORT VISIT TO BLANDING, UTAH

for John and Shelagh

As I round the bend into town
I realize this is hardly
the promised land: by dusk
the sidewalks, all three

roll up in despair. I check in
at the three star
motel, plain as the clerk's face
and look around---green walls

pocked and stained,
cigarette butts like dust under the bed.
I think of the gaunt Mormon wife
who cleans these rooms,

every Sunday her body
stiff from labor or prayer. This town
doesn't hold many indulgences
not bingo or teenage

drag races. Not even Indians
come out at night: Just two diners,
no bars, and the only movies are
rented from the motel. At the Elkhorn Room

I order a pasty enchilada
and watch as a slouching farmer
face carved like glass, slowly
reads his menu aloud.

Around me the regulars
gather--children of pioneers who
claimed the land from Pueblo
ruins and raised this town

from dust, spirits about like wind.
With simple meals, they are stern
families, righteous
over sagebrush and desert.

But I'm only here for a night:
as I walk back
to my room, one by one
the gas station, the 7-11

go black. Outside of town
at dawn a light wind
picks up: while the sleepers
breathe innocent as saints

I drive into clouds
of red sand scattering
through the Waputki
ruins cracking alive with sun.

ONE HOUR INTO MY WATCH

CAMP LEJEUNE

That owl hoots like some prop
in a WW1 flick,
where a guard shelters from a steady rain,
in a damp tent, wet--
but in my guard-like duty
as watchful, yet inattentive dolt,
I draw with my gun
stick figures by moonlight:
there's Harry, snoring,
and Jim talking to his dream--
They passed out from rot-gut booze.

Relief still three hours away,
in the movies some guard sweats rain,
only I squat in mud
watching some drunken farm kid
race his old man's pick up
out across the stubble--
his headlights beaconing
like flares or even searchlights,
the crazy way they illuminate the field.

I hear that owl again, like
I'm a Hollywood extra
and I'm suppose to whistle quietly;
but no one's here to listen,
except that kid, and he's speeding,
so doped-up he can only see
the furrow ruts and warren holes...

When the Ford smokes past
on its third spin, and the dirt flies up
past the headlights,
I'm sitting next to that acned kid,
laughing and passing dubies with
a cold beer between my legs, waiting
for my turn to race--
while in that movie I'd jump
when the owl flaps off,
fur and bone amidst the stubble,
our wheels spinning in some sinkhole.

SUN IN THE EL PALACIO HOTEL

Nothing but light on bare walls--
believe me, our absence
is a blessing, an offering
like a hand drawing the loose shade down.

THE STONE

I point to my skull, there it is,
the stone lodged under my hairline since childhood,
removed, it may cure me.

I wake to steady pulses---my stone again,
thrashing about like a ringleader,
scaring dumb animals
into a circle: a fine circus below the skin.

There is no use in drama. My skull a cage
with grey-striped tigers, armadillos
and monkeys whispering out through the conch of my ear.
I hear the nurse with breakfast:

her face mimics a bear's, a wide O
as she lays down the tray and inspects my scalp,
rubs the stone like a tumor, excites
the stone's child in its laughing folly--
she tells me how easily a scar heals.

He is coaxing the crocodile,
the angry armadillo too feels his whip--
I lie back and laugh:

all the animals I've seen, giraffes with knotted necks,
and doctors, a funnel for brains
even the stone winking out of his cage
have filled my sleep

with ether. Surgery at noon,
I imagine the spastic doctor and his nurse

planting knives behind every corner and my skull throbs
as the stone calls out: Bring on the elephants,
the two-headed llamas!

What to do without a stone? The damp air
about me like the stench of matted straw:
I faint as the doctor eases my scalp back from bone,
the nurse cradling my head like a child.

MARIA WAKING

How can I explain these lines that scar my flesh,
that cover my body on waking?
They could be faint brush strokes in bitter heat.
The balance of colors reflected on windows--
I let the sun blind me and they disappear.

I am more than a woman in the sun
who warms herself in pale light before rising.
All things come back in force at daybreak.
Whispered songs about my father
and his long, slow breath before speech.

I remember the harsh balance of paintings
that covered my room in color
in the cool dawn. My father up before the sun,
his coffee cup still steams in the kitchen.
Memory is no small thing.

The lines reappear across my body
in dull patterns, shapeless sketches of age.
I stretch into them.
Knowing it's imagination isn't enough.
I want to explain it all.

No one is redeemed by light.
A brittle halo spreads
with color about my room--
this morning I feel only naked.

RAGGED GROUND

OCTOBER

We come to gather cones, scattered
needles prickling our ankles--
my thermos of coffee against
this early chill. I turn
pebbles over with my hands,
their smooth weight a perfect arc
of light I skip
across the pond. It's late,
trees draw in shadows
from sky. Slowly
I drink, warming my hands
on the plastic, and watch
as you dismantle
a dried leaf, saying: look,
in this forest each tree and stone
carried with it bones that
have risen from the dark woods to us.
I admit only that this sanctuary
of gnarled trees, years of light
is a blood feeding our journey.
Around us cedar waxwings
go crazy eating choke cherries
their bodies banging frantic
against branches till they fall.
You tell me we must press on,
that night will catch us
soon. But there must be more
than our hurry, more
than the half-frozen ground
dark coming on us

like a hawk over this pond.
High from coffee I want
to run till we reach camp,
I can't. Something in those birds
catches my wind--and I
slump down among the
pine needles and stones
and ask laughing
why we linger, our feet crackling
over the year's hard edge.

PRAIRIE SUNSET

This is a land of nothing, flat
islands of grass and stone
shining black from the sky. Here
is your first clue: the rock
carved smooth by rain.

Now take a pebble in your palm,
and skip it across air,
by the time wind catches it
a sparrowhawk will appear.

Follow his flight, his wings
pointing you in all directions.
This is your second clue: his eyes
see only shards of color, the
broken pattern of leaves and trees
he creates before catching fire,
flying straight (you are sure)
into the sun, a sudden
burst of his wings burning flight:

as his feathers rain down
take this third clue as omen--
the trees were never real, were wholly imagined.
The same mist that rises from your tongue
now covers the empty ground,
and you must mold his feathers into fur
that will spread over your body
like moss, lichen to warm you
while the wind chases back your breath:

this is all you remember, the earth
stripped clear like a mirror
and the orange light shadowy now
as you try to piece together the clues,
the notes you made to yourself, the
mesh of dirt at your feet
that cannot keep you from poverty,
the promise a plow freshly turns,
the pale cave of sky darkening.

NIGHT HAS ITS OWN SYMMETRY

for Neile

While the wind grits its teeth
through the bones of dead birches,
I hunger for shelter
and light. Everywhere the dark
turns, making this land
a simple cosmology:
the fixed points of stars tearing
free of cloud, the land
unravelling before me with its
small lessons of tree
or rock. That is how I convince
myself that hunger like a worn weapon
will break, that the trail
curving out of this valley has
the geometry of mountain sky.

Night has its own symmetry,
shadows bending low
over the land, twisting the tight
spine of branches until
I can't raise them from dust,
the bones wrinkled like bent flutes
over bare hollows of earth.
Everything turns brittle here
and the wind like hunger
gnaws at the ragged
ground, that beautiful pattern
the body aches for.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

We drift out from shore, carry small lamps,
and forget sky, distance and the steady lapping
at the boat. Let the oars drop and dust
spreads into our skin. The lamps dulled,
we collect that fallen night dust
as it shines off our clothes.

Above us, rain burns in sudden sparks,
the lights cast off water, air--
and the dark lake fades beneath us:
only a flash now, a quick storm
that ignites wind and calls down rain.

The black shore clouds in mist,
and we are pushed from it by this wind
charged with shadows of birds, stones
from the lake bottom. The night sky
dredges the water, fish are tongues
of flame caressing our boat.

Everything--air, stones and wind--
arises in a swirl, a shower
of light that submerges us,
with only the slick oars
to grasp as we go under.

STORM AT TOFINO

Evening tide scrapes against this rock
as if to gnaw in the ground
and reach the bone of land, that light
which in darkness will echo
through soil and embrace my house,
leaving nothing but boards and wind.

I watch from my porch as wind
draws the storm about me, the rock
only a frail buffet for my house--
this is the fear that even takes ground
from me, casting spray like an echo
of fire in its crude bursts of light.

Dank clouds low with rain light
nothing, and force the wind
even further inland, yielding an echo
of thunder--they threaten to rock
brittle trees and snap branches, ground
the sand dunes against my house.

What protection is this decrepit house,
its shudders flailing, the light
shorted out, cables snapped to ground?
I'd have more shelter tricked by wind
and shadowed by bare rock,
my voice trailing like a beacon's echo.

I feel a crude force, an echo
thrust its current through my house:

it sucks into itself even rock
and bends aside all light,
to trap me here, apart from my body like wind
that touches blank space, not ground.

Lightning shatters, while the ground
rock absorbs the flame. The roots echo
in a furious spar twisting wind
like a shadow engulfing my house:
I can see no escape, no light
that could illuminate this rock.

What's left: only damp ground, my house
suddenly full of echo and light,
and a small wind floundering against the rock.

COMING UP CLEAN

for Dennice

This morning in the murky Clearwater even carp
won't touch our bait. No place to wade in,

we sulk by the banks, eyes dull with sleep.
Coffee numbs us. Our lines drift clean.

Cheap drunks, we cast for trout further
downstream, the only fish of the day a sucker.

Along Rock Creek before rain,
spinners snag on polished rock.

The wind is wild, a nagging undertow,
dizzy as three quick beers--

Birches don't shelter us, steady rain
circles the valley and we reel in, skunked.

FISHING AT SOMBRIO BAY

I saw it shimmer first off the surface,
break air and spray the boat
with light, its body glass
and my arms tense as it took the bait
in a huge wave. Suddenly it spun
a strange beauty loosed from the gills.
It rose in exhaustion, fierce
even straining in my net. Like a scar
my dull knife slips inside the body,
the deck slimy with its breath.

BIDDULPH'S GROVE

Shaking off a crude chill, robins
bring this forest back to color:
sun coursing to the elm's roots,
the frail buds clenched like teeth
to be pried open, pale, and barely fragrant.
I lean against the tree's shadow
and wait for the smooth arc of their flight
overhead: their black feathers hidden,
their blood-red unders puffed in song--
I watch as wind bends dead branches,
the afternoon showers over veiny leaves
and even trees learn a new direction.
Soon everything will come out of doors,
and I enter this forest where robins
fill each moist leaf with sound.

WILDFLOWERS

for Richard Jefferies, 1848-1887

I must tell you of the place,
not a name, but a field
bordered by alder, sycamore and oak
where they grow haphazardly
in thick brambles
easing back their petals for light,
their white roots
burrowing the moist soil.
Then comes the idler
who takes handfuls of
yellowhammers, bird's foot lotus,
and the occasional
blue veronica--
he gathers them all
not as names, but as color,
he studies their design,
the simple pattern
of yellow, blue and brown--
here he wanders
while blackbirds and finches
soar above, ignorant
of his delight.

PALMER

THE SPIRIT LAUGHING

Like a whale with his mouth locked open,
I swallow more and more--
first I draw a line, a universe,
a language recovered
with charcoal. I make the canvas
a laughing man, the beauty
of a model's thigh,
a necktie and a scarf tossed
carelessly on a sofa.
Nothing is lost: not the chain
around a woman's neck,
it's a live thing--a gesture
of her dress billowed in wind.
I swallow the beautiful street,
the houses and windows opening,
the sky stretching down
enveloping me: a model
and the canvas blossoms
with sun into the glimpse
of a body under loose fabric,
a couple embracing,
I go on all day like this
with my impatient line
remembering the syllables of the body,
the power of a whale churning
unfathomed waves.

VOICES AT THE ARMORY SHOW 1913

Such things are art now, Palmer?
You call this a movement,
those crazy men--Picasso and Matisse?
My daughter with her crayons
can break the body down
to chaos: even you can rise
half-drunk and imagine
yourself an artist, with
spastic vision like the blind man
outside hawking flowers. Why just
look at these works, where is
the beauty? Nothing is real
in them, not even a model's smooth
palm as with grace she draws
back her hair. Who could ever
want to paint like these fools
who cover their walls with graffiti?

Wait. These men are the genius
of disorder. It's no fluke.
Our decline is real.
They're no better than a zoo,
but people react. Listen:

*

"Where are the landscapes I knew
as a child, the beach
where I played: our artists

know what pleases, what
still lifes I want in my home."

*

"Dear, look at the pattern of your dress
and then this canvas: how similar.
I don't know much about art, what's new,
but this is odd."

*

"Our son could corral his drinking
friends and fill walls with
such amateur stuff. Run his model T
over a canvas and call it 'cubist'."

*

"All day I got to watch them
graze through and gawk. Them heels
scuffing up the floor. What's the
fuss about, just some highbrows
shocked silly 'cause they
don't like this new art."

Listen. They're not talking now
about us. You don't see
either, how this movement here's
like all the old ones: Paris,
the impressionists, all that gave way

to this. And when they walk out,
get on the next trolley,
these works still puzzle them.

But I tell you this, Palmer:
it won't last. I'd be a fool
to listen and start anew
as if this building, its windows
ablaze, and New York itself
with enough portraits to last
a lifetime, were not real.
That couple holding hands over
by the door, they know more
then we do: they will walk for miles,
downtown, past shop windows, cafes,
and saloons, imagine their life
is full and rich: how can
these artists in their rage
pull this crowd out of its dank
cellar? How can we change
the unwavering rule
like a burr to us, that says: paint
something tangible for our
decorous homes---

You've got to believe in more than
that. Dismantle the body once,
not as sinew or blood

but as solid chunks of color, form.
Outside this gallery is a world
everyone can see---so re-enter
the painting as what your mind
creates, the vivid texture
instead of place: let caution
give way to violence.

MONHEGAN ISLAND, MAINE 1918

No ships have passed but the wind
hard in from the Atlantic
searches out each cave and crevice
where light refuses to go.
Here, by these rock cliffs
pounded to raw stone
I set my easle up again.
Midday and I have
only sketched in the sky,
its undiluted blue.
Still I am content
to let coarse rock remain,
to let Manhattan slip
like driftwood out of sight.
Only the grass is moved by wind.
On Monhegan at last
my canvas fills,
the ease of my fingers
mixing rock and weathered grass.
For miles the ocean
cleared of barges, pleasure boats
that stray north of Gloucester.
I stare out like
some tourist in the Louvre.
There is no point in being romantic
about this island, the summer
that swallows me
in its drafts and warm air.
I paint, that's all. Wind

has no color, only the bend
of trees, rocks hissing in sun.
In fall I'll return
to New York, my blasted studio
where city buildings
dilate on canvas. But not now,
not with the full noon sun
about to step down
and claim the whole island.

SANTA FE 1922

August, and I look for what I know best,
a railroad yard, the gypsy girl
peddling flowers for tourists, the workers
who no longer feel the sun as a fierce
current that burns itself out
each day. I watch as the stark dry air
coats everything in dust,
even the railroad cars wavering in a haze,
the bleached adobe homes of people
who know no other means
than to meet the sun head on.

From my hotel window this landscape:
hills that twist light
into chaos, the market-square rich in color,
rag-dyed skirts, an arid-land's harvest--
I want to bring this place to order,
to make the almond-skinned girl
flirting in her new dress more beautiful
than the design of railroad ties
or the white buildings that spread out
like water through dust plains.

But everywhere the light touches it breaks
all beauty into harsh confusion--
in the streets there's so much bartering and anger.
Here is a language I can hold,
something of the order that dignifies their lives:

the body in its freedom, the awkward boys,
even the distant laughter of Mexican girls.
All I see channels this afternoon sun
in a line across everything, and everywhere
this dignity settles and is manifest.

SUMMER SHOWER

"Give me a philosopher to comfort me
in my old age."

Edward Hopper

Rain intrudes on the land and smoothes
the grass down. From my bay window
the maze of hills and shadow
becomes a city skyline. I know it well:
the movie theatres, saloons,
blocks of row homes and traffic.
I am always the solitary man. He
gazes from his room, wants to
show me the sketches, those
he could free with color and oil.
But this is small comfort. Especially for
a man obsessed with the loose way

a woman holds her coffee, the
wrinkled smile the waiter gives me
as he takes my order. I need
that urban pattern. That building
remembered after thirty years.
It comes back and lures me
from the curves of young alders
stretching into the hills. Back to
where I once thought I could hold
everything. The rain knocks about

randomly. Summer steam rising from
boards warped and weathered--
that's all I see. Not the
young painter who fills his art

with the thick brush of social
contempt. And still I need the
expanse of that optimist
who believes painting still matters.
Sometimes I don't believe it matters:
it all ends at the same place, the
airy room laid open to sky.
I paint it as known. The street corner
where a laborer, hands calloused,

struggles through a long afternoon.
The city skyline emerges from the hills
fresh as a swimmer from the beach.
But when I think of the eventual slow
decay of red brick, storefronts
in disrepair---I want to recreate
the window scene where
a woman reading had doubts, separate
from my intrusion. I have doubts.
When I look at a blank canvas

they spread inside me. Just as now
a scattering of leaves in rain
and wind mingles haphazardly
with stillness and color. I don't
want to think of buildings
anymore. What comfort is the small
hope memory holds because I'm
an old man just starting to look
outside myself? I still can't let go.