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SURVIVORS

poems by Pamela Rice

B.A., Southern Methodist University, 1978

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

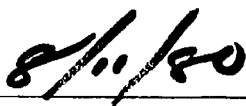
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I.

Grandfather Bringing in the Wood

It is this cold-as-wind afternoon
that sends the crows to cover in stronger pines.
Far behind our house, these cliffs, huge with snow,
cannot stop the wind. I see: Grandfather
creeping across the yard, a patch of snow
scraped by the brown of tumbling leaves,
Jake and Tip beside the stump at the woodpile.
The cold raises their fur. They do not bark.
All is silent but for the wind.
Winter. It is the wind.

Jazz

After Weldon Kees

The night the musician
with the sad, dark beard
sat down to play the piano,
I remembered what the rain said to me.
Tears glistened in his eyes
while the sounds of his playing
rose and died in the room.

What the rain said to me
was this: men cry
when their backs are turned,
musicians play all night
without looking up
while the sounds of women
come and go like rain.
And always, one of us remains
and finds him forgetting
to turn his back.
Then are we to blame

when at night, we can never
keep him out of our dreams?
And how could he have done this

to us unknowingly?

In a room he sits down

to play, his eyes glistening.

A woman watches. She will never forget.

The brown hands play on and on.

At Achena

Surrounding the bed
of the old blind woman
as she raised her brown hand
long and frail
into the air
we wondered
how she had got there
where the huge bed
that occupied the entire cabin
had come from
It was then Fred Jones
translated
while she spoke in the Seminole tongue
A wide-open window let heat in
and my beaded palms
clasped the warm iron bars
of the bed
almost touching
her white hair

From Whitehorse, Where You Left the Yukon

From Whitehorse, you come to Texas
saying that you are tired
of the snow. The pictures you took
of the Arctic hang on your wall,
crowded with silence,
frozen as the place you came from.
Now you aim your camera at me
crouched beside the azaleas, stretched out
on the frail grass that has survived
between the railroad ties. The train

rumbles south only on occasion,
and we have been lucky to catch the names
on the cars as they've passed:
Katy, Santa Fe;
and Canadian National reminds you of the infinite
whiteness, and you tell me you are different now,
that you've learned much from snow.

I always wonder
if it's a train shaking the house
or a man on the stairs.

The snow that came with you
muffles the sound of your coming,
and you climb in silence
the stairs to my room.

It's quiet, quiet.

Snow is a good teacher.

Where Laguna Madre Meets the Gulf

De un dia para otro--

Any day now, any time soon.

--Spanish proverb

No wonder the whole town's quiet this morning--
the boats started out before dawn and the gulls
went with them. You'd forgotten how gulls sounded.
You'd forgotten an entire language:
the way men in trucks yelled out of windows,
how ferry boat drivers always spoke too fast.
Still, there's the heat you remember, the heavy smells
of fish and salt, the channel dolphins you always loved
leaping circles around boats coming from the Gulf.

It seems so long ago that Daddy brought us here
with an eye to paint everything in this town.
He never did it, said he guessed the heat
just got to him. After twenty years the company
he worked for bought him a watch
and the town he loved rotted into this one.

One after another, boats come in.

When the catch comes off, the gulls are already full from eating fish. They perch on telephone poles and cry to each other across the road.

It sounds like an old proverb:

he still talks of painting, of wintering here only now his watercolors are cracked with age.

You can see the way he's started looking to you these days, the hope in his eyes you'd never think of disappointing. Across Aransas Pass someone reels in a catfish. You lean over the dock to touch the dolphins' shining backs. They remain elusive no matter what.

The Sheep and the Dog

You wouldn't recognize me now. Florida has made me browner, more wrinkled. Today it's sunny, as usual, and I am lying beside the pool wondering what made me leave. I change position and remember how I used to brush your wool and watch it curl, how it relaxed you to feel the pads of my paws against your back. You: so calm, smiling, always moving your square body in regular steps. I who was not born royal, loved you who were. And so, when the woman came and stood outside the fence and took our picture, I barked possessively and ran wild. You nodded faintly as the camera clicked, receiving her as a queen would, with dignity and distance. You tried to calm me, saying that humans are generally amazed by such as the two of us. But I'm telling you no human can appreciate the way you'd allow me to pounce on you and roll in the thickness of your coat, how we loved to read from Bonhoeffer and argue over the question in the back--how that book became as worn as rain and satisfaction could make it. And when the woman returned, bringing a copy of the picture, we both smiled when we peered through the fence at it, because the day she took it had been your birthday, and you were wearing the purple corsage I'd given you. That

picture I packed with me when we said good-bye. Now every-time I come inside, a little browner than before, I lay down my sunglasses; and as the picture before me catches my eye, I curse the dream that enticed me, smiling, into that darkness disguised as light.

The Exile

The day in October when the Amish
gathered in the orchards
to harvest cold, red apples
was the day Uncle Thomas
was taken away to the asylum.

The house still shakes
from the night he went out after a battle,
climbed the oldest tree by the road
and sat there three days, two nights.
Neighbors gathered
who had always thought him crazy,
Grandfather exploded,
the ambulance came shrieking
to our house,
and Grandfather stood cold and silent
while they strapped Uncle Thomas to the bed,
while he cried, "Damn you, Father, damn you!"

That day, the Amish,
like silent shadows in black coats,
looked up from the red piles to watch--
as the black car choked over the hill
with Uncle Thomas, screaming, inside it,
and cold night fell at last,
revealing the winter.

Two Photographs with Fish: 1961

We preferred pintos to fishing then,
favored pockets full of rocks
over any good catch of mountain trout.
Those horses took us places the Studabaker
couldn't--a trampled place in a barbed
wire fence let us through to the next pasture,
farther west, unprotected from sky
or a storm that might suddenly blow in.
Holidays, relatives came. Grandmother
had her own rod and rubber boots
brought all the way from Encinitas.
The days we spent at the river casting,
Grandmother knee-deep in the stream
taking the biggest fish,
talking to anyone who happened along.
In this one, she's turned her back to us.
A small rainbow's on my line
and you've got it between your hands
removing the hook. I can still remember
your words: don't worry, they can't feel it.

Easter, Uncle Dick flew down from Omaha
in a DC-3, brought his own vodka and cigars,
mixed you martinis well into the night
and brought up the war. Next day
he started asking after the fishing, was it good
this time of year, and we piled into the car
and headed for the mountains.

Nights he would take us downtown for enchiladas
and dancing with the mariachi band.

Years later, at 13, when the horses
got too old to ride, Uncle Dick's dancing
stole my heart outside Omaha
at a grill that had a juke box
while you stood by watching it happen.

Here's Uncle Dick holding the fish:
his bass is the biggest one on the string.
Mother's pointed glasses and bright lipstick
surprise me now though I recognize the same smile,
the same hands brushing back my hair.

And you Daddy, are younger than I ever remembered,
already brown and freckled from the spring sun
and a good catch of trout.

There are no photographs of us with the horses.

That was what I wanted after all--

the pintos and that broken piece of barbed wire

and the ride back from that field,

after dark, alone--carrying the silence

between us like a secret

found and carefully brought home.

With my Father at the Church of the Healing Sands

No one has left a crutch here in years.

The old ones still hanging on the wall
keep a dark vigil. Daily the priest says Mass,
burns candles for the poor or dead.

Christmas, the altar boy is out at dusk
lighting adobe-brown luminarias
on the roof and court-yard wall.

When Fred Jones comes by recalling the old days,
you listen like a son and the hills
turn white to violet over goats
scratching their heads against a splintered fence.

Small strokes, your hand larger than both
of mine, so cold you keep the other fisted
in your pocket. The priest you paint
bending over the well is inside
taking confessions. Prayers before Mass go to Mary,
be gracious this year, send a coat

or bourbon. In the snow, gray crosses
tell what's left: Joyce's father collapsed and died
over the woodpile last January.
She had to go to her aunt's in Truchas.

From the pump organ, carols drift out the double doors
and down the old road. We climb into the Studebaker
to head for supper and Mother,
and the town no one ever loved but you
will hide like an old need behind your silences
until something in you has to bring us here again.
On our way down the mountain the things we don't say
fill the car. I remember how the light fell
on old Fred's hands crusted with mud
and behind us, luminarias burn like a face
against the night we drive through.

II.

Wyeth's Christina

Christina's world was her hands,
the way they dragged her from the house
where dust gathered layers of stillness,
to the field, past the broken buggy
still standing high as her father's arms
had lifted her. Even now she thought she could hear it
creak with their weight, see it carry
them behind the mare toward places
that once called them. Now only the field called,
beyond the cut of yard where wild grass grew
dry with August flowers. Her hands
grasped the sod, frail legs followed.
And coming back, it was her world:
buggy, house, and beyond the house, the barn.
Beyond that only the hill, the tiny horizon,
and down in the field where wind
raveled her hair, the bent fingers of her hands
pulled her toward home.

The Performance

I hung on like the night
to my Uncle's coat,
climbing in and out of his tracks
in the illumined snow.
My twelfth Christmas.
All Nebraska was silent.
I awoke that bright morning
and spied him through the huge window
waving to me. He picked up something,
a cardinal, and held it next to his face
as he crouched to the window,
grinning thick-lipped
like a clown at the circus,
while the cardinal stood, eyes open,
blood-red and stiff as a museum piece.

Trawling the Gulf

Keeping the nets is the main thing. Gulls
can follow a boat miles out to sea,
tear at nets heavy with shrimp--they'll take most
of the catch you waited all night for. When dawn comes,
so does heat. Mornings you and the gulls dock in the lagoon
and men hoarding shade accuse you of screaming at them,
"Get up! Get up! Start selling shrimp!"

Rot is another thing.

Every month boats are out of water.

New wood must be soaked and bowed,
then given the useless job of painting.

Little Jesse darts about in the light around you;

he is sleek--like the channel dolphins he loves.

He copies everything you do and speaks the language
fast as anyone.

Laguna Madre, Aransas Pass, Gulf of Mexico,
the boom comes down and nets sink out of sight.

The gulls will not leave you alone. Smell of fish and salt
keeps them over your head, screaming at you,
knowing always you will fight each other for the same lives.

Existence

Where the splintered fence leans slightly
a girl can be seen ascending the hill
dense with bluebonnets
while farther off, without sound,
a man takes to the air
beneath the wings of a red glider.
Above him circles the hawk
who sees without understanding--
the ravaging clouds
let out a cry of thunder
and rain and wind drive down
on hawk, man, and girl
who bends to finger a beaten flower.

This Morning's Tornado

Tonight it's in the paper, how it killed forty people
in my hometown. This picture, taken just before,
shows the sky black, but should have shown the sky
green, calm, and the town moving about
in the language of animals, waiting.

I can't find the names of the dead.

This doesn't say whether Banks had opened the filling station
by the time it happened, if he looked up
with eyes dirt yellow, and saw it coming--
whether Mr. Moss saw anything at all
or if he forgot to pull the shades in the store,
if he sat with his head bowed
after the roof came off and the ancient
black shoes lay torn from their rows
out of the dusty bags.

I try to call Mother.

She would have watched me take the back path

to school. And J.T. Henley, in his sheriff's car,
would have chuckled this morning at any who trembled.
Even now I can see him out at the Ritz on the highway
waiting for the National Guard.

He is eating slowly eyeing Charlotte
who comes just close enough to pour coffee
and ring up the bill.

After Many Years, the Music

Late afternoon, early evening.

The birds that appear every morning at our window
have gone. Beyond the trees, a tugboat churns water
upriver, sends out three dull blasts
heard for miles. From our window
each clear note of the piano
drifts quietly out and down the road.
It is the music we lean to hear.

Always, before supper, she asks me to play.
I bang the heavy lid back, place my fingers
on the keys carefully worn and yellowed.
She'll ask for Song Without Words or Pathétique,
hum quietly in the kitchen while my hands
move over each familiar phrase. I'll sway
to rhythms we know: knife against the cutting board,
our feet thudding the road as we walk to Marie's
with sacks of tomatoes under our arms,
the movement of wings at dawn
when leaves filter the light we wake to.

We are glad for our music again. There were years without it, ten years since the storm took the roof off our heads, left us under the sky.

I was playing Für Elise for the third time, my aunt, coaxing the hands that could not span an octave. Mother pulled us into the yard screaming something I did not hear.

After that, Uncle Dick moved west as he had always talked of doing, promised a house in the country and room enough for a garden.

Who would have thought it would be like this, years after the frail promises? How I tried to keep up on any piano I could find, commit everything to memory, and now, having only regret for the time lost, I play them all just as I'd planned. She listens, and sometimes plays for me in the mornings as birds come to drink and bath. The swallow spreads her tail and flies away. We have our music: she can keep few secrets from us.

Letter to Mother in Dallas

You wonder why I haven't written. You say nothing happens there either, yet you've filled this whole page with scintillating conversation, like the woman at the last Christmas party we attended in Monroe who stood under the Moose head whistling carols on request. They all said we'd regret leaving Monroe-- I'm sure Grayson Guthrie still keeps his pad of dollar bills in his vest pocket, still tears them off when he needs them.

Don't tell me nothing has happened there.

I get the Sunday paper every Thursday.

Llonel (Mrs. Troy) and Janet Post appeared at the most recent function (on a Carribean theme) modelling the new spring collection. Another member of the Cotillion club got married.

And why don't you scrape up a hundred dollars and have your entire body re-done at Neiman-Marcus? They're having a sale--includes lunch.

You ask if it's still snowing. I reply, it's always snowing. The mountains are a barrier--you can walk out of town, but not out of this valley. I've seen it from the air, not a road nor hint of life. I don't write because at night I dream my letters get lost in the mountains, or never make it over the first pass. I write now knowing both of us are simply waiting until we fly out for the last time--toward somewhere, we don't know where--while we knock on the window and wave good-bye with surprising detachment.

Survivors:

St. Mary's Mission, Stevensville, Montana

Even in October we discover grass still green
despite the dominance of iron-hard sky
and 28 below. Our autumn drive, we followed a river
going north, stopped here before it turned west.
The priest keeps the old church locked
so we turn to the windows for friends:
I watch your uneven reflection peer back at you
and worry that we've disrupted the stillness,
that the ancient ghosts who give it up every summer
have gone into hiding again. Paintings
on the walls, you tell me, are stations of the cross,
done by someone who loved sky.
Faded Mary has a place near the altar,
carefully brought up the Missouri in '45.

Like a father, you hold me up to see for myself.
My ghost meets me at the window, teases
that these cupped hands are still a child's, scolds

my need to care and be cared for. The Bitterroots
stand over her in the window, snow on their peaks.
Winter's coming, and long wrestling over dark, slow months.
When you set me down it is with such gentleness
as disturbs neither frost nor fragile grass.
Above us, the stretched v of south-flying geese.

Here, Father Ravalli slept, loved
by his people. They knew this country,
knew survival meant acceptance of an outstretched hand,
or two hands rubbing ice over frozen skin.
Inside the new church, the windows
are clear glass, frosted from each cold night
longer than the last. Behind the crucifix,
there's a storm over the Bitterroots.
We'll turn to each other, to everything we've saved
since April: the memory of a road going home,
wood piled at the door, what we've learned
and passed hand to hand to become the religion we understand.
On any still night, say, January,

the only sound will be our breathing together
having given ourselves so easily
with the strength we take from holding each other.

Things I Didn't Tell You
for my mother

The wind's stopped, left the curtains limp.
Heat, thick as the smell of salt, makes sleeping
difficult. I prowls the house.
You shouldn't be so alone, you said.
You were right. A perfect whorl,
washed up yesterday, means a storm on the way,
dunes shifting with the wind, herons
flying inland to hide in some salt marsh.

The shells you left behind, olive,
double sunrise, the chipped sand dollar,
lie on the kitchen table. On the chair,
the big hat you said you'd have no use for
in the city. Mornings I woke to find you miles
down the beach, crouched under that green speck
of hat. I'd stand by the water
letting the tide roll in and out across my feet
and wait for you to come into sight.

Those pictures Aunt Barbara took
at Christmas show we're just alike.
I watched for your face under the hat,
thought of the years we've spent on this beach,
of the ancient Spanish treasure
we stopped looking for long ago, buried
somewhere in those dunes.

The wind came and went all day. The morning heat
wilted our clothes. Already your dress
had begun to stick to you. You packed all the shells
you could carry, took a last look at the kitchen
I let you take over as though you lived here.
Partly glad to see you go, but sorry
I had not hid it better. You looked hard
at the face you had thirty years ago
and turned your back, upset at what I didn't say.

Outside, a coyote prowls the shadows
for scraps of food. I had a present
I'd planned to give you and once had in my hand

but held it back. Over the Gulf,
clouds build near the horizon.
Behind them, the moon rises huge, lopsided,
making shadows of everything in the room.
I remember the dream I'd had of us
since we first came here: living off the water
rich as queens, we'd be the ones to find the bones
of that ancient shipwreck and the cache
of gold coins we'd dig up from the dunes,
the inheritance ours by right.

The Shorewatcher

for Richard Hugo

I come to the shorewatcher's house
in the evening, just at seven.

His eyes, two suns,
count the coming and going of waves.
"The birds, they don't stay," he tells me.
"In winter they come, but don't stay."

We make a toast on the sand.
"Two hermits have come together," I say.
He nods. An eye, a single sun, winks.
Like one alone too long,
my thoughts pour out, a rush of wind
on sand, encouraged by his deep laughter.

By night, we are drunk.
On the shore, above the coming and going of waves,
he reminds me gently that he is intelligent.
I believe I will haunt his memory

unquietly as he will haunt mine.

"You won't remember," he says.

"You are alone as I am alone. The waves,
they are always coming and leaving. The birds,
they come, but don't stay."

I see even at night, the eyes are brilliant suns.

I have nothing to give him when I go.

But I remember. Oh, I remember.