

1975

This close to home

Gary Richard Thompson
The University of Montana

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THIS CLOSE TO HOME

By

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Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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University of Montana

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THIS CLOSE TO HOME

The Following Poems First Appeared
In These Magazines:

AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW: "Desk," "In The Wild Rice,"
"Blackstone," "I Am Changing My Life," "Naming,"
"Golden Gate Park Poem"

CHARITON REVIEW: "Hold Fast," "The Hidden Map," "Don't
We Really Rise, Going Downwards"

CHELSEA: "Shaving," "Friends," "Riding In A Small Plane"

CHICAGO REVIEW: "Hard Pan"

CHOICE: "Angelique Poems"

CLOUD MARAUDER: "Note: William Land Park," "My Soul"

CUT BANK: "Two Keys"

DECEMBER: "Cesar Vallejo"

IRONWOOD REVIEW: "In The New Life I Will Allow"

MADRONA: "Wind From A Photograph," "Anniversary"

NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW: "Poet Dead At The Wall," "Cancer"

POETRY NORTHWEST: "One Way," "Saturday"

POETRY NOW: "Camas Prairie"

QUARRY: "Afternoon Wind"

RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY: "New Year"

SQUEEZE: "Breath"

THE SMITH: "Coming Home From A Bar"

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For there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

--Rainer Maria Rilke

I.

THE HIDDEN MAP

AFTERNOON WIND

there is a small hole in each day here
that whistles
when the wind blows from the north bay.
then we crawl into the warmth
of our homes
and breathe heavily, staining the windows
blue.

now the wind is a warm drink we serve
to our friends:
it is Russian, although the trappers
seldom travelled
this far south. we warm our hands

on the mugs and build a fire with the small
bones of our faces.
the blue windows become our religion.

you must understand this magic
happens
very late in the afternoon
when the work is done and the body
is tired
and willing to believe anything.

THE HIDDEN MAP

you are the center
of our long lost bodies: some maps
mark you
with a bold X others with a blood

red circle
it is said some merely point
the direction
with beautifully adorned arrows

all have some things in common:
the journey is desire
the dark cellars, the treasure
right now we are halfway to the church

already this paper is trembling in our hands

ONE WAY

sometimes your old life packs up
her torn clothes and moves
on: there is nothing to do
but watch her small face become smaller
her voice softer
her weather darker, colder.

sometimes there is an old kerosene lantern
that shines in the eyes of the wild
animals that lived long ago.
this is one way: there are others.
sometimes you must bend to the earth and listen
to your life listening to another.
each silence you share is a home you have passed by.

DESK

there is so much distance
between your face

and this poem
I want to write your dying eyes
deep into the histories

of oak.
feel your hands
touch
this desk where you breathed

so often.
and I want to touch simply
your lips
without the pain of the oaks
without the silence

of these poems.
I want once again to hold
the blizzards

that have fought so hard
for your eyes.

NOTE: WILLIAM LAND PARK

slowly my heart takes shape
and expands as a man expands when proud.
but along the tired roads of my face, my people
move slowly like priests.
that is the price I must pay for having known her.

somewhere in this forest there is peace.
somewhere in these hands is a man.
I am holding this pen like a madman.
I pretend I am making peace

treaties with myself.
that is not true, I know it.
the pen is a rifle:
I take aim on a small crowd of my people.

IN THE WILD RICE

in the wild rice fields two rivers
meet:
one river from the north bears soil
so fertile that the dead
grow
in their graves.
the other carries the cleaned bones
and empty skin
of animals that once lived
inside the mountain snows. when the sun fades
these old friends stay outside
and exchange
stories of the past and the silent days
when being a river
was something to be proud of.
for warmth, they drink up their own gifts.

now because they are drunk and tired
of the journey
they lie down in their deep beds.
friendship falls through the heavy water of sleep
like a stone:
some people would say this is home.

SNOWS

"when I stay I stay...forever"

the heart at first
sets out to tramp across the deep and powdered
skin of a woman but soon

the quick early years burn
the snow melts
the bones inside the love

begin to stiffen:
then the heart shivers and crawls inside
the man

and grows
the lips close tightly together
the eyes read calmly the news by candle light

and the mind
shifts slowly like a glacier ready to move
through each year

SHAVING

there are places in my face I have never been.
my hands are open country,
I drift back into the secrets of my name.

BLACK STONE

I.

the days are flat
 the nights always deeper always another world
 just beyond your own painful
 blindness you see again for the third straight day
 the doe in the Suisun valley

she is a black stone in this rolling field of alfalfa
 her eyes are seeds
 that grow strong each season against the wind of these hills
 and you listen with her perked ears
 turned toward you and your silence with strangers and yes
 on this the third day you see clearly the last flesh left
 smoldering within her damp skull

II.

the first bone is a woman
 thin as wheat left to dry in the fields where the harvesters
 save her for last

the legend remains:
 when she is dragged home the tired men get drunk
 the women slip down into fertility and the children
 sneak away at night to stuff her old body with straw
 stones and the earth muddy like a doll

she dangles from the left hand of the first born
 it is autumn in the eyes of next
 weeks storm but here in the arms of the children her body
 is worn like spring

III.

this time death is a narrow road

an unsure man dreamed
so his soul could finally walk out of the ragged
clothes of his madness
the man is old and the shadow his body makes
is an entrance into the perfect

color of wheat and the strangeness of each day is lodged
like a bullet in the back of his skull
he knows it is there just as he knows the stone he has painted
lies in wait on the road like a thief
the day is clear the wheat yellow and still in the distance

the black crows fall like rain

IV.

when the child plays in the grain
his arms and legs stretch out wide like a god's
laughter and the movement
of his body prints an angel in the silo

so the cat that is lost comes home
broken: your parents' grave travels
too many miles but comes home
now you are the man with the problems of the soil
now your wife stands with her left hand

at her breast: somehow this sickness will pass
through the family
somehow this stone that you throw will take life

V.

this clear night is wiped clean
like the knife left at the sight of an unsolved crime

some debts are paid with two coins from a sad face
some with the bars of a half moon
some with these few easy words you find yourself
whispering here in this valley
with your hands crossed over your eyes like black wings

the dark sinks into the flesh of the dark
places you have called home smell danger and run
like a bullet in the bore
you burn through the stubbled fields of her skull into an empty
socket where a black stone sees you come near...

LESSONS FOR FISHING THE SIERRAS

for Tom Crawford

wake up alone.
find breakfast and eat from the plate
of the earth.
look east for the sun and warm
yourself.
then carry the gear
in for miles and find a spot
with a lake.

drink from the fastest and coldest mountain
stream.
leave your fingers
in
until they turn red.
try now to understand yourself
as a stranger.
hold the line steady and deep.
disown your wife,
debts,
and small favors. forget your name.

now empty yourself first.
grasp the fish
firmly.
use a sharp knife and clean up
in cold water.
afterwards, throw back the eyes
which are not yours.

II.

STRANGER WITH A KEY

BREATH

after reading poems by Ray Carver

it seems now I have lived my life on the edge
of the sea.
I have told secrets I never should have put my hands
to: a black god,

a stillness
drifts across the water towards shore
where a thousand people
are waiting

patiently with their hands
in the empty pocket of my last breath.
yet I am still down here at the bottom

with two eyes
that see from the same side of my face.

FRIENDS

for Greg

I am sitting on the bottom of the municipal
pool lifting weights.

my close friends send air
in beer

bottles.
down here there are no enemies.
I am athletic

I wish I were funny!
someone on top is drinking the beer.

I want to tell you,
no!
I want to talk with you
about how I got down here.

ANGELIQUE POEMS

#3

I can imagine a whole town of women
like you
I will sit on the street corners with fire
and be a young man again
you will see me and never leave
because you are not here
all the vicious rivers flow towards my heart

"I do not miss you much anymore"

that is a lie
I have thought about this more often than oceans
you are every green field of my body
I run through in every cloud
your name is written in cotton and gold
you are not here this morning

and the sun comes up a deep red the color of my blood

#4

there are times
when the trees shake hands like murderers
when even my shallow thoughts black out the sun
when words
become nothing more than sections of a cow

on a map in a butcher shop
believe me these are times
when I suspect even the skin on my wrist is involved
in the conspiracy against me

and believe me also when I say
that these times stand still like an assassin
who has waited five hours for the parade to pass by

#7

even my bones are dark
all night there has been this musky presence
this deep breathing that prays

it will happen
I want to wake you tell you
that even the earth has been sad and the moon
has been quietly crying in a corner

please I just want you to see
that there is more than that vague feeling of warmth
more than this promise of dawn
for I will give you my love like a sun

that comes up day after day after day

#8

there is a shore to our bodies
and we walk with our hands
inside our hands
along
the shifting beaches of your breath

but you kiss me like this
and the ocean seethes like a used lover
the ocean longs
to be inside you like a man

but you kiss me like this
and my face goes for long walks
down your beaches
and my arms hold so much of your sand
my body swells with water
and then one wave crawls on his knees and I move you

#12

I have left my shoes on the borders
of your face your smile
again proves the existence

of some god
I am so tired
and there is this strange woman in one room
of my body: but that door is locked

the new moon stalks us as a spy
outside the house are people of rust
and ill will
it has been a long day

I sit down in the soft chair of your eyes

CAMAS PRAIRIE

for Dick Hugo

years ago a farmer moved
his good midwestern land west.
it spilled here in Camas Prairie
and he stayed.
the plans never changed:
his earth turned gold, the cattle thrived
and the house that he built
stood forever.

we pass through this dream
with our limit of trout,
each one a meal.
the calm dust that our car churns
drifts away from that man,
his dead land.
drinking and tired we cross the river,
this much closer to home.

MY SOUL

after reading Malcolm Lowry

sometimes a man just gets drunk
and reaches into the bottle
up to his elbows for his soul.
it will be a soft motion
as slow as the swell of the sea.
when I reach it,
it will know me as a friend and stop.
there will be a silence
that only the dead will understand.
when they find me
I will be cold and wrapped in my own blood
soft blanket.

TWO KEYS

those who survived had hearts
that would open
easily: these two rusted keys
tell us
the early settlers shared the things
they most treasured.

the two keys are the same!
then, the locks were simple:
perhaps
anyone was welcome
and any stranger with a key could let himself in
to your life.

but I saved these rusted old keys
because I like to think
they were just thrown away
by a drunken miner
who decided the secrets of life were somewhere
right out in the open.

SATURDAY

morning the mountain
opens slowly like the fist of an old town
drunk, quivering.
here in the palms of another life
the fingernails have dug wounds
against the dark.
my second day almost bleeds.

I have just traced the difficult blue
waters of my wrist this far
north to this, your place.
you take me in. we meet. we forget
our travels, drink coffee.
listen carefully, I am here
and happy
yet somehow always when I leave
you are saying goodbye from another room, your eyes
another way.

DON'T WE REALLY RISE, GOING DOWNWARDS

and wasn't the earth
once a plump, kissable girl, two hands,
a sun shining in every hip pocket

and wasn't your life
an easy step forward almost like rolling
downhill

and weren't your eyes like clean windows,
your hair snapped in the wind
your two breasts like seas to swim under

and isn't the sky really the same silk
blue, the raindrops still fall
and rise, and wasn't that kiss really

another that ripped through our lungs
like a bullet, and isn't desire
still a small boat drifting downstream

dragging an anchor

THE POET DEAD AT THE WALL

and they hide in their skulls
a vague astronomy
of shapeless pistols
--Lorca

I push myself longer into the night.
into the long shadows
of death for you.
I come

seeking the small windows of your wisdom.
the stockades and cities of your life.
but you stand at the wall

with ivy and the bullets.
with the bricks and the guns with the thorns
and the roses that push you

deeper inside yourself.
deeper into the long night and the longer
shadows of your death.

until suddenly without sound
you explode. pushing yourself rapidly

out of yourself

against the bricks and the bones
that shatter
and spit deep into the dust

and return to the rifles that steal roses.
that steal the fluid and the sea
that crashes against the bones in your head.

and now deep in the ground
you pull me with you into the dirt and the dead.
and for once like you
I see the blood
and the bones of the roses.

yet still we are separated by the sea
and by bullets.

NEW YEAR

outside an old man
bumps into himself on the terrible sidestreets
of alcohol.
in cheap rooms, young girls work delicately
on calendars, but still there are few days
with names.
one little boy longs to break the last toys of Christmas.

I close my eyes
and ride on the crest of one good year.
I am young yet,
I will stop drinking and hold your head
above water.

we are above this dark city:
because this face I find you in is still proud,
and all the clocks say 12
I give you sons with the strength of 365
revolutions of this earth.

III.

A FEW BRAVE HOUSES

WIND FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

the blue waters whispering
or grey
tell delicate lies
like a white yacht my heart drifts
out lonely

and there is no one on deck to see the clear depths

behind all this
a wild flower dries and breaks
the promises...

even the camera is silent
the green horse in the tree has pulled up lame in the wind

ANNIVERSARY

the stars are words I have said to you
when one falls
the code is broken
the message streaks to the earth for years

HARD PAN

six inches
below this city is another world
protected by hard pan.
the trees here live on the surface.
only a few brave houses
have basements: their owners store
half their memories
in another, deeper life.

at least here the earth
is solid. people born in this city
are very sure of themselves;

we could not dig up our dead if we wanted.

MICHIGAN FARM

for Carrie

this cyclone within me turns south
toward our richest plowed fields.
the century oak stands between me

and this angry dark eye.
all our cats are hiding in the silo.
I don't like cyclones very much,
they grow so fast

and carry whole houses within them.

AMERICA, SUMMER

"I am a virgin & a suicide"
--St. Geraud

this summer a death rubs
off on our clothing like the sun
that returns to the bottle
for brown skin.
listen to me: there is this guilt
that hangs words

from the high branches of my country.
there are these dead men
piling up so fast in my skull
that the corpses
are falling like tears from my eyes.
I am afraid I am America
and there is one bullet in this gun.
it is proud and will not hesitate
on its single journey through my heart.

TWO NOTCHES, THREE STONES

you brought me this far
with ease
then the trail died

and I stayed.
now I live this life
within my own two notches,

three stones
piled up like eyes
piled up like three eyes

that stare out just a little
ahead.
I can't understand why Lord

you brought me this far.
have you left me here alone
as some sign for myself?

BLACK WATER

I.

I was already past your darkness
 I guess, those cold nights when my brother's
 old lamp burned on
 in the faint glow of your nipples

you burned so long that we cried
 and slept the night wrapped in our bad luck
 when we woke our luggage
 was on some other flight with no seats

no trace of our names
 there is a life that we want and we want it!
 you said there was a way to go

about these things and I believed you
 then one morning the first blossoms of dawn burst
 and we were far away

II.

his voice was deep and deeper
 the scream that caught in your hair at the end
 of the flight
 I listened closely but there was no earth

no three stones stacked up in my face
 to guide me
 the lamp raged and I touched you in other places
 you once lived

in the distance an ocean heaved between two pillows:
 listen
 with some other life I could have spoken

clearly:
 oh listen to that nearly dead lamp flickering
 gently beside us

III.

there is stagnant water
in my cruelty, your desire
to leave bobs to the surface like a corpse
I have trampled alone this whole field

kicking ahead the few stones that I wanted
but you are always behind me
like a single hill I have walked over
and down my whole life

so in the darkness we exchanged some kisses
you watched the moon slide into the ghostly
storms of the night, and these years

I slept where we slept
and this night I heard your stranger's black rain
fall outside my window

SUNDAY.

for Dennis Schmitz

the hill comes up as the sun
pushes our cold pain
from the sky and any anger
has been left in the wheels of a bus.

here Sunday floats in with the waves
and this fire
burns into the sky like morning.
inside our veins the sea
swells with the rhythm of sad hymns.
this church is warm,
the face of God is green.

BLACKENED GRAVE

"The air we breathe is a blackened grave."
--Karl Krolow

they have reached the peak
and rest in the shade of an old tree.
they have climbed away from last summer,
the hill before the fire.

the day is strict,
still warm; I have watched the two
walk the trail back
and forth for an hour.
from here she seems to be speaking;
her hair drifts like the words.
he is off a few feet, one boot silent
in the blackened earth, alone
certain as a statue.

I AM CHANGING MY LIFE AT 5:30 IN THE MORNING

all night long
the windows have been breaking
the silence and my shadow

has been sitting
alone in another room, smoking
and outside
the storm has been pounding on the door all night

but inside
the hard dry wood of my first 23 years
burns easily...

and my old face
is still pressed against the glass
staring out
from two unexplored caves where the eyes
should have been

IV.

THE CHILD'S PROMISED SONG

CANCER

"the poet turns toward death in the spring"

now with the music.
now with the sheets and the moon.
now with silhouette of scars

in my eyes.
I enter the guitar and the water.
moving as oceans and chords

into the storms of your body.
but secretly the moon
follows you around all day.
touches you
as I will never touch you.

the guitar.
the water.
the loneliness of hearing you breathe.

NAMING

I stare at my voice that stays
flat on the table
like a piece of white paper.
it stares back at me.

the nurses look tired in their faces.
the doctors hang around
and chuckle,
this is a good one for the wife!
this is official.
your mother rests down the hall.

there is one more world
beyond this.
a woman will grow in the gentle country
of your name...
Malaga
through the clear, new sky of my voice
you stare back.

GOLDEN GATE PARK POEM

you said the Irish (the rain)
gathers in all things, plants, the church
the way a child runs naked through his homes the trees

you said the sky asks questions
gives answers, but here the silence is so wet
the sky is an ocean

the answer is 64 pounds per square inch
everyday a tree slips further into the earth everyday
one leaf

drops from a branch and becomes a small fish
in the depths the tree will multiply into thoughts
you said, the sun

today stays in the pond, grows her own language
as they rise through the water her words turn into legend
when she speaks the child listens

if she smiles the whole earth breaks down in tears

September 18
this is for Greg, Anne & Sean

THE NEW LETTER

the last letter
I sent was not a letter:
it was my hands shaking with 6 cups
of black coffee, the desperation
fingers typing madly the promised
song I tried to sing back
down the throat.

so it was St. Valentine's
day and I was tired, alone
drawing awkward hearts on my students'
poems.
I was silly; your candy heart
and that damned doily meant more than I thought.

it took years
but your message arrived
crumbled.
I ate it and it was still sweet.
now I am sending this new letter
to thank you.
because you will never know me
here is a photo
and my name signed in its old way.

RIDING IN A SMALL AIRPLANE OVER AN AREA I THOUGHT I KNEW

there are people down there I understand.
up here is silence
and several strangers look down from my eyes.

this airplane carries me inside myself.
but something is wrong,
I am thinking about how sometimes these things
break up in bad storms.

HOLD FAST

a vulture rests
on a limb up the cliff almost one
thousand yards away from these glasses.
the swaying red leaf,
his blurred head, makes him easy to find
in the field guide,
makes him almost too easy for us:
Turkey Vulture.
we watch for hours and nothing happens.

later a hawk holds
against the strong evening
baywind.
my daughter screams
when the wings change, fold back,
tuck in.
but I am watching the fine wing feathers
twitch casually like fingers
in the silent glass.

she already knows when the hawk
dives into her smallness
a fieldmouse will be clinging stiff
to the only soil it knows.
walking home in the near-dark
she takes my hand and we cling to our small earth.
she begins to sing hold fast,
hold fast,
hold oh so fast.

LIVE THIS LIFE RIGHT

for Emily

the directions say knead
the earth
thoroughly. so grasp the warm
soil with your fingers
and squeeze; go deep.
if this is done correctly,
you will feel

your fingers begin to take root.
this is the name
your father has given you.
grow in his soil,
then leave.
you owe him nothing.

he was just here like the earth.
he was a man
who tried to live this life
right.
he loved you.
he grew a few things
that sometimes came up and blossomed
when he watered them.

COMING HOME FROM A BAR AND FINDING YOU IN BED

my voice runs out across the floor trying to untie
the shoes you once gave me for the world
inside the last drink
sits down on the edge of the bed in your sleeping hand

my eyes pick up your clothes beside you asleep too
you have had a hard day in your bra
my arms look around you and rest beside your hair
the strangers inside both of us you in the sheets me
in the doorway

are sleeping and giving off moonlight our luxury

CESAR VALLEJO: FROM THE 1926 JUAN LARREA PHOTOGRAPH

it is true that a stone
when crushed gives off moisture.
but now Cesar, even the streets
are turning to water.

in the depths of my hands
the puddles are saying "Cesar Vallejo is dead...but"
rain water
comes gently, as you know
and sinks deep into the earth of a dry man.

Cesar, I want you to make all my speeches:
I want you to come right out and say this war
is wrong,
I want you to say the dark races

have been crushed by people with books,
that the far corners of the earth have been designed
by men with college degrees.
Cesar, there is something within me that wants

the dark waters of your face
to help me: to tell me what words
to put in a book, to tell me what rhythms
to sing to a woman,
to tell me what sounds I should make when breathing
the air.
Cesar, that is why I have been up all night
trying to find you.

but you, you
stand in your cemetery distance,
you shrug your shoulders and lean over some paper,
you write your words

so that no one can hear you.
yet I know your sadness runs downhill like a river,
and that you are the mountain
and the stone in this picture will always lean against you.

IN THE NEW LIFE I WILL ALLOW

my name to be autumn
in the torn family album of years
and bullets and skirts
raised over the heads of young girls

like flags

my country to be my face
with its warm roads that wind from the south
with its bones that know the first names of the trees
with its green floor

that rests on the fragrance of the water
within
the flower

my eyes to be the breath
of a woman when she suddenly wakes in a new bed
and is filled

for the first time
with secrets not even the fossils of the old earth
could explain