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Unbutton the blues of his arms

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UNBUTTON THE BLUES OF HIS ARMS

By

Ralph M. Burns

B. A., University of Texas, Austin, 1975

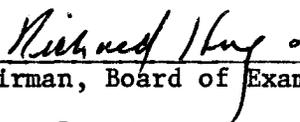
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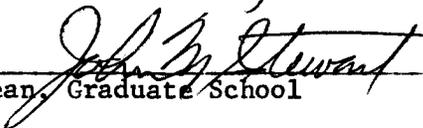
Master of Fine Arts

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Revision

It is late and little
things seem large: the rain
coming like hatpins, old
windows yammering wind.
Nobody's awake for miles.
Night locked out, you
check the children breathing
slowly. They give back
your face, but like a bad poem,
you show your face to everyone.

Three years old, another
country: a woman with
your shape lugs you laughing
on a tow sack over clods.
Dust floats in cotton.
Through the torn roof
of cottonseed, through
polished rows, voices first
find the ear. The sack
breaks. Green forms drop
furry onto leaves you swallow.

(Cont'd. with stanza break)

By the open window, all
afternoon is wrinkling
in the fields. Today,
September had you up against
the glass. Your old face
glows like a helmet and

nobody's awake for miles.

Divorce

My brother and I back from
nine ball. Far back we
wore silliness in our throats
like chili, rode the pink
flamingos to Dad's motel.

Opened a blue light
and smell of whiskey, Dad
getting it with a woman 60
I think and paid for.
Slid us 5 and back
at pool, we called spring
the cracking of balls.
The sun shone like a Buick.

Crows Feet

Cold stars and the moon go
fattening the arm of vine,
silent as buffalo.

The Indian wrinkles down
in well water like a page of wet
bible. Rainy globes of light
turn back. The river bends
abrupt, a frozen and single bow.
Let the Indian rise
from the crawly well.

Here when rivers ice, air
pockets bulge under
the lid, no trees nod
their laurelled heads, the wolves
naked as rain.

When he stares into long
fires, let arrows of ice burn
and dogs growl in sleep,
their light sounds magnified
by thunder

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

and divine things that do not
look divine.

Let their paws rot
with snow and the Indian rise
from the crawly well,
his braids knotted in turquoise.

Above the rainy moon
and fattening vine,
he watches fire's movement,
a bracelet of men dancing.
Moves between a river and a hill
where the image grows
in the time of windy buffalo.

Moses, Blind

When you come waving from umber
cliffs, the fire yet
in your eye, pine needles cling
to dry mud on dry shoes, ignite
under skin like new teeth.
When under fog and faraway
the mountains crease,
remember in madness
not the serpent in the rood,
but your woman who throws back
her head and laughs,
your thickened ear to the shell
of her belly, remember
the garden, rain chewing at the lettuce,
a dog chewing at the rain, his umber
face undone.

The louse drunk
with purpose trawls
a bearded brow down.

Tulsa County Home for Boys

Sweetgrass caught there dark on
the curb. The green of it goes on.

There's a white facility
in the afternoon. White
as curbstone and leaves slam up
against the windows. If the green
had eyes it would watch me leave
as the green goes on.

There are surely those children who
sing to themselves without
hearing. One cleans his ear
with a straw. Near the white curb
tonight children stop like an axe
at heartwood. They stop
blowing on the skin of imaginary friends.
They are washed and settled.

They stop like grass on watery curbs,
like an axe inside of noons long gone.
Afternoons caught in a circle. Today
I bought a lacquered toad
from a maniac. He was bald

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

with bells and white drapes splashy
with sun. The toad was wrong.
Nothing is very private.
Like boys opening every
window in the ward. Today it was hot.

Viol

When horses are nosing the cold on grass
say pearls cluster on their damp backs
and toadstools mildew under a sleeve of moon,
a velvet ear. But it is morning and green
and horses are nosing the cold on grass.

The maker of viols turns his other ear
to rosewood, to rhythms that move there,
dreams of spruce, where the violin sleeps.
But it is morning and green curds glisten
on mushrooms and ponies are nosing the cold grass.

Say the viol is a bell of water, an hourglass,
the body of a woman, the pear inside,
and it hangs there, in the motion of things.

Say the viol shapes a blue sound
of words freezing, surrounds fog
riding low on lips of horses, that it is summer
and spotted ponies are nosing ground from grass.
Their pink tongues curl like scrolls.

(Cont'd. with stanza break)

The violin lacquers velvet in the moon
but it is morning and spotted horses turn.

Problem

Let me show you. Now is
when you look away
the sun falling in the lake.
Turn. Let your right hand rise
and between fingers climb
any crack of light. Let
the rings you wear burn.
Something higher is inside
too much of your eye
and entering, you go blind.
The problem is to look away.
Maybe the gray wharf its years
melt and slide into a mirror
of mountains. Trees open
and close tight. Look the fires
limp like gulls across
the crowded water.

Auction

An owl muttered himself to sleep
in cottonwood. A mildewed mattress
went for two dollars, a vanity for ten.
And away from theatric of hands, an old man
kept the moon locked in muzzy vision.
Lamplight boiled in the lip of his eye.
I sat on naugahyde propped
by railroad ties. The old man
spoke and mountains burned his brain.

I only just turned eighty and
if you wonder why I don't look it
I'll tell you anyway it was the Lord.
Everyone and the moon locked
in vision. His boy standing by
twelve and retarded but a nice boy.
Wouldn't harm a thing, mister. And never forgets.

And the old man veed his fingers. When I was
a young man, Satan was on this side, Jesus
on the other. He pointed to the valley.

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

And I was here. Now we all know
vee stands for victory and
we all want victory so
I had to get from here to here.

A lanternfly sang around the boy's head.
He emptied out his pockets. A chewing gum
wrapper, two life-savers, a crayon.
From under a baseball cap his clear
eyes said Take. Eat. And his face widened
to a bridge.

All heads turned to the antique clock
huddled in canvas wings.
And the hands they waved like wheat
and the slow voice of wheat. The old man
pocketed his watch and like a deer, the boy
walked all directions of a dream.

And rain leaned toward the wheat
and the people they bid for his shadow.

Horseman Stops

Lamps swing on the night
side of the lake.
And fire shudders in water. Yeats,
you loosened the moon
from your eye, and it shuddered
in that water like a swan.
A beauty born from its own
body, from under the eyelid, under
stones that are yet greening
a slow and impotent rain.

Daws go screaming
from an oak leaning into the mask
it leaves.

In Bethlehem the dry wind
scales on his windy skin.
Your song is like itself,
but there is one fishing
all day by a lake,
and his love beats down
like a lamp.

Flasher

Every time he comes to the wounded rabbit
afternoon begins by the lake
still wiggling in the edge of weeds.
He's just left work and put on
the music of the flannel robe. He knows
obviously what women want is naked
and at the edge of water waiting
with a robe. The tree tops come and go
like lingerie on a line
and his ankles buckle out.

At a distance the young mothers begin
in the polished grass like sirens.
And he opens to them.
And his body opens for centuries to the light.

His eyes blur from the inside out
and he watches by. Today
the girls move in clouds of water.
They are white and tiny and they must sing
over the babies inside of them

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

like grackles and make the air clean.
He might know the fragile walls
in a landscape, the choir of light
moving to a siren. And he watches by.

Spiders wink the lake to parting
her serious lips. The water is singing to him.
Coming forth magnificent,
he makes the bodies move in moon's blood
like rabbits.

The robe stops and wraps its love around him.
Today he stopped the women
with a miracle. He stood naked
and potent in the broken light
like God.

Caesar, You Knew All About the Ides
But Morning Came Cerebral

A woman taps at the window,
her knuckles white with import.
Snow falls loose in her hair.

Wind raw and rattling,
your eyelids fat with sleep.

Only your woman talks through
cataract--Tonight a lioness drops
her boychild in the sprawling street
and armies march without fire in their eyes,
the air sharp as new wine.

Tonight she sends nancy boys
running to the senate and you waltz
like a mad prophet
to indifferent chorus, the private
language of friends, its false abrazo.

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

In the black moss of pine
last voices turn. You taste
red wine sharp in your throat, far back.
Snow falls on the woman,
glitters in her hair.
Malingering knives grin past
the patio and the pines say Now.
You wake. Sequins beat and blur.

Bookie

My father unbuttoning his arm
wears a soiled white phone like
a bandage. The hands, drunk
and serious, explain to the phone
how a wheel locks. My father, who, before
I woke, buried three baby chicks
I smashed playing circus, who
buried my brother across the street,
his face pushed in like an orange.
He speaks into a bandage,
black slacks loom around
his hips like a skirt,
he's filled with laughing
keys and quarters.
In a whirl of numbers, he remembers
his father coming from the fields.
Something had been eating on
the trees and he held two radishes grown
together like a heart. Unbuttoning
the blues of their arms, they ate,
talked about women and a circus, where

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

the old man shoved his fist up
a fat lady to find a rabbit.
Together they laughed with their keys.
My grandfather's hair, orange
and impossible. The blues on his
son came out like women, sleeveless
tee-shirts lapping the chest
of drawers. In a whirl of numbers,
he talks to imaginary men
about the women he shamed.

Music of the Spheres

The cicada leaves himself:
Pythagoras drunk on muscatel,

curlicues of tobacco in his beard.
Above the Attic hill, a goat,

ancient Chimera of landscape, coughs
in settling fog. The sound and the fog

wear the same indifferent head
and sleep above the lake.

The fog and the sound gather gauze
on trees, bright beads.

On the goat's hollow horn gnaws
the lion. The bright beads turn

white webs silver in the sun's blur.
Light stirs in the addled head, triangular,

(Cont'd. with stanza break)

full of ratio. What the cicada leaves
shivers in the sun.

CEC Tours a School for the Retarded

So wings of rain beat back
a boy's head it was pushed in like an island.
He was dumb as they thought alright
they with round names on their clothes
like pasties
they with their legs on fire.

So he grabbed a name like a dime.
The name went away it grinned at his hands.
Red and surprised the fingers came
like rooster tops
and shook in the rain like islands.
Combing the air they wanted the name back
so finally it left it just vanished so he cried.
He with hair surprised as a rooster
he with a face caved in like an ocean.

From the middle of rooms the names came laughing
because they thought so. And a voice like rain
said "Our goal is counting to fifteen."
Okay so the boy began to count it was loud.

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

After ten he walked and as he walked
he tested the ground like a bird.

Well there were no more numbers after ten
so he froze like sleep.

And the names came away their legs were on fire.

So he grabbed his penis like a minnow.

And the river said

I am not surprised.

1946. Let Be Be Finale of Seem.

A boy throws a baseball against a barn
all afternoon. White air pocked with swallows
hot after a wheel and he throws:

The ball's bang

and the barn make the only noise
turn over. In his hand and head he finds
the seam. Over like a dark wheel-
barrow, over like a palm. Today is Sunday 5:30
and winding up.

When the wind slides off a drop
ball, it knows all about itself.
And he throws through tunnels breaking
in the dust. The target,
its black lips. Sky billows to a tent.
It is raining and it's going to rain.

Randy

There are phrases like dead
drunk. Everyone outside screams their
laughter in and out of trees. Dad
is drunk and waltzing at us
with an air gun. Back of
the trees, we call him the enemy.
Through the bean flowers, through
the evening air, you sleep
in a glare of headlights.

Knees gone crazy, the only tree squats
like a jeweler. Dad stays drunk
and the wings turn backward
in his head. One bare road webbed
in dream like a branch, leaves ticking
at the window, cat stretching warm.
You are under leaves and
frozen fur gone crazy with the wind.

(Cont'd. with stanza break)

Mother, smaller with blinds
drawn down, bends down.
Her freckled shoulders freeze
at nine in a grade school gymnasium,
her spine chalked for posture. Back of
a semi, houses blink in the dark.
Your life the size of a B-B
and moving in.
The leaves tick against the window.

You are thirteen
frozen under leaves gone crazy
and I saw you standing
on a grade school stage with
a wooden sword like Custer.
And the parents were laughing and
the teachers.
You stayed up too long
and sang out like a rooster
and you would not fall down.

Your life moving in the size of a B-B.

First Day of Winter

The dog surely believes his feet
are dreams, the eyes never close.
The rainfall on his head, next
to nothing. Across the ocean,
a thick black line moves in
like the Iron Age, a few voices
carry from a soft pine boat.
Where strange fish are fighting
for territory, colors deepen.
Blue as the greenest forest where
dogs go stiff and dark. This,
the first day for wearing jackets
and whistling into dark
stiff hands.

Waiting

The raw mountain's edge lit
and unlit in dry heaves leaps
above black ice like fire.
Your tongue locks in its regal freeze
and I turn toward your shadow.

Here the trees stand sharp as daggers
eaten by the wind. You move
in the moon's dance, dark inside my rib.
You move in the stammer of my eyes.

I hear nothing but ground thawing,
cattails nod on blackening stalks,
the milk rising warm. I hear
nothing, the hush of night
noisy as wolves' rattling breath.

The old shapes growl in your throat,
your tongue burns in brush,
ancient coins fall from your mouth.
I raise my hands to my eyes and listen.

For My Father

There's the story of me sitting in the dark
of your lap, driving. You breathed bourbon
down like Agamemnon, the sweet of it
entered my brain. There's the bandaged boy
whose eye blooms in the moon as he guides
the car. Every time he leans you slap him
in the face. We are drunk
with drinking what is copied in that window.
There's a fresh black thread above my eye,
no better or worse. The weather tells
you beware of yourself. The way the clouds
dip down before April storm, amused
at our need for some small alliance. The weather
is an imbecile. You let me drive one hour
and the air caught color like the rain.
Father, you stretch out arms at home
way above yourself.

They are also bandaged.

Senator Proposes Cutthroat

Trout as State Fish

and it is Thursday, Dec. 23

and raining snow.

The bears are asleep
not dreaming about velvet eared women
or birds repeating themselves
that swim upstream into mountains
stream into pines
and raise their green heads
like bugles. Bears don't dream
about short tailed women
or official fish that arc
over deep water blackspotting
the wet face of fog
the color of sleep
that slips like night in the sea.

The breath of bear

warm and red like ants breathing

(Cont'd. with no stanza break)

in and out wet bark.

The angry sound of bear

snoring himself gray

a thousand legs on his watery back.

This will all be official in 1977

when ratified by the state senate.

None of the Colors

A red girl lalling all
she knows in a cheap bar holds
an olive to her eye and looks
careful through the hole:
under the blue lights of TV
love howls out like a tree
on fire, the fingers burn
red then white as morning. No bird
flies up from the ashes.
There is only a small animal
shaking like hell,
remembering the pink of a human face
on a nearer hill.
Grass covers gold its lace.

.

Vocal Fry

You heard eggs fry when
Miss Webster talked
and knew it must've been snot
hanging on some deep where
in that massive throat.
Being right and third grade
was exceeding presumption.
Impervious, I cupped my hands
to a scream: "Do vowels come out
like bacon?" Before every capture
there is discovery:
Miss Webster talked to one
rhythm, her fat hands walking air.
Before she fried like Brunhilde,
fish sat sparkling in her hair.
The moment of defiance, Wagnerian
in its rise, my lights went out
like opera, cheap candelabra
without the lyric flies.

Lattimore

Thunder's off but Claiborne,
toughest kid on Lattimore,
laughs in his necessary way.
All day the night walks in
like locust, dirty little kids
motor their hot fingers through dirt.
But Claiborne, cool in his empty
ribs, shadow boxes. Battering away
at his mother's head, his whole garden
stands up like another day. Claiborne
is through being literature.
Stomping a sparrow's back, he recalls
two words his father knew after the stroke:
cunt and damn. Claiborne Turl, bully of the block,
holds the neighborhood like the Borealis.
This night, the individual stars
defined, one night and one day
on the block.

Self-Commitment

The address is around here somewhere.
Trees dip long toward their shadows, drink night,
move the forest to a slow rot. Wet roots
push into pavement like long fingers
of crazy people I want to be
with them. This is a land where nothing lasts.

The address is passing the light
through windows beyond the pavement it will
stop. Then the gates and crossings, the doors
and people without robes trained to not
laugh at the mentally ill. Nothing
here lasts so I will say yes
I like coffee thankyou and here's
to decaying leaves, clusters of coffee grains
clinging to a thick white cup. I dance
around the rim, straddle a porcelain
crack, steam rises wet in my face.

I know this is a land where nothing
lasts. Wet roots push at pavement
like long fingers. Everyone is leaving. This is the land.