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WHAT REMAINS AFTER ALL

By
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B.A., Memphis State University, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment for the degree of
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My Father Awakening

The blackbirds die
again this year:
their wings drink moonlight
and lie in the frost.

In her room the sun glares.
On my mother's eyes,
my father's hand
lies in sleep.

In the silence of morning
they wake. He wipes the window,
coloring the cold trees,
looks for footprints,

for a man whose frail wings
have no coat, who stands
and speaks the words.

Receiving The Visitor

The sun flowers. Once
again darkness falls hand
over hand to the west
and the darker shapes
smelling of wet grass
disappear through fences.
With a knock at the door
I begin to hear. I know it well,

a dark suit, a man bearing flowers.
They will fill an empty vase.
What I do is
shut my eyes and listen.
A voice speaks:

I don't like my face touched
and I touch my own
to be sure.
This door, I open completely,
hold out my hands open to the light,

feel the blossoms, breath
against my face, tongues
that leap and burn.

What Beast

What beast will run with our dreams tonight?
The moonlit fields are streaked with shadows
that hide the moment
in the call of a wild hound,
that mask the blind stare of the moon
with the passage of a cloud.
I hear a murmur within the arcade trees
that frame the moon.
And from the moonlight, frame to frame
the leaves silently descend.
I feel against my leg the tail
of a dog, who knows
only the moment of a cloud,
the scent of a bird.
In the early morning, the sky will bleed,
fearing the bruised leaves like the dawn.

Something I Almost Remember

Again a dream, a knowledge
I almost have and feel the breath of
by the river in woods.
It lies in leaves
my dog stirs with her snout,
falls in the rain
she shakes from her back.

Memory arrives with the arc
of a flock settling on fields,
in the rigid point of anticipation
before she breaks. Rolling
into the grasses, she disappears.
Birds feather my neck.

She appears again like leaping
dolphin. My sponged footprints
behind, I want to kneel,
run into the waves with eyes open,
like she does,
to rise and fall and rise,
never wanting more than the chase.

With The First Wind

If we see the sun crack,
run into the maddening sea,
would the cities east of the Sierras
blink through the night and wait
for the sun to bathe them?
The sandy-haired one of the beach
takes up a guitar
and strums the moon into a face,
laughs, and wades into the wild water.

I walk to the crescent edge
and listen. From somewhere
at sea the wind drags up voices
wet with salt and bits of glass.
They speak of answers and a boat
to reach them. Their voices burn.
My blue eyes look to a room.

There I pin blankets
to walls and stare sunsets
into the core of my hands.
I look for the one whose wrist
shines pale. He knows the sun
will steam yellow again.
He knows the young
have no wrinkles. They smooth
away with the first wind.

To Fashion A Handle With Stone

You write of urine arcing
from rooftops, your young eyes

humorous. Standing naked before me
you speak of stars falling,

offer a flat stomach and balls as proof.
I don't know the edge,

the leached rock so composed
it attracts your envy.

I weigh stones in my palm, look
to their rough edge. You point out

the damp side, cold and dark,
train my hands to feel grit,

to see under water.

Your eyes, you say, are mystic.

They open and close in sleep,
see an ocean beyond our horizon.

On sand, trees have dried to bone
and a voice that has spoken

for years at your shoulder
whispers and becomes a man.

Here the ocean spits its useless salt
over everything. You remove your shoes
and walk, feel the tow
entice your ankles. For the first time
you speak with the stranger.
You ask for instructions, how to fashion
a handle decorated with stone. how
to attach the blade he draws from his coat.
Among shell and rock your feet touch
roots. You feel it grow, the excitement
of reaching your hand into the darkness
of a knothole solely to feel
what is inside. It's so easy
you think. Simply
place one's hand against the tree,
breath deeply and shout.

Covers

I inhale the last moment
of dark in a yawn.
The walls pressing like quilts
hold the night inside.

It settles,
the night, forming dark,
around my neck a necklace,
quilts I caress and draw
over my head.

Still in the darkness
I wait for the wind to numb me
away with the treelimb
burning in the moonlight.

II

because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of blackberry corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.

--Robert Hass

Not All Faces

That not all faces turn up
into the flowering heat, simply
confirms diversity: the prospect
of any poplar containing within its silver,
blackbirds, the possibility of not.
Perhaps sound, scratching branches, or
perhaps the silence of winter.
With either that we find, we must be content.
A small boy with a pellet rifle
holds a dying bird. Asks forgiveness.
Around him continues the relentless migration,
the reasoned patterns of flocks,
loose leaves in the air,
the man in a rocker who yawns into sleep.

As If It Should Remain
Ripening On A Branch

Not with one arm to gather fruit,
to clear away twigs and seedpods,
shielding eyes from the shocks
of light between leaves, but
with both hands outstretched,
consider each movement a promise.
Take for your own only that
which loosens in rough wind.
Right now: trees sing each to the other
as you stoop, sparrows rattle leaves,
the sky opens after a long rain
suddenly blue, and the air
overripe with the young scent,
the spotfires of mashed persimmon.

Orion

At twilight I slip across the levee
into a cluster of trees, lose myself in them
and remain until after dark.
I could believe life began here
where I shed the river fog
as I once did water.
I wait till hunger flushes me from the trees
and drives me into the starlit meadow
in search of prey, each sapling a weapon.
From within the circle of fire beneath a maple,
I rise when the Pleiades spark
in high branches. Each silhouetted limb
is a boundary I must cross, each phantom sister
a reminder of the distance I must follow.

Accepting A Promise

She arrives severly radiant, hair pulled
cleanly from her face, hands opened
with attritions of thaw. No longer
constant in plans, she plants freely
an early garden. Simply is.

It is not closed, this access
to the inner flowering of spring,
only changed. Joined in shadow, touch, and
learning with each crystal of snow that fades,
we separate the straw from the buds,
nourish each as prophecy,
accept the promise of difficulties:
shoot that struggle through April snow,
a darkness blooming, a growth rearranged.

III

Who's turned us round like this, so that we always,
do what we may, retain the attitude
of someone who's departing? Just as he,
on the last hill, that shows him all his valley
for the last time, will turn and stop and linger,
we live our lives, for ever taking leave.

--Rainer Maria Rilke

Toward Distant Water

1

The bluffs we drive from
sink slowly into what
must be the river, the gap
where Wolf river bites into
the Mississippi already gone.

We can close our eyes
to death. I close mine
to these Arkansas fields
and open them
to stark paddies, to people
bent at the waist, their pants
bound tightly at their calfs.

Some straighten and wave
others mouth greetings
I cannot hear.
They grow and blurr
then sharpen into streaks
of rain on glass.
The road climbs

from farmlands to mountains,
from farmers to folks.
You're singing again, a song
from these hills, how on a Sunday
a family gathers around a grave,
shovels earth with their own hands.
They bury their dead only once.

2

At sunset, near El Paso,
we scrape bones from the ground
with our boots,
stake our tent to the desert
between two cactus, and pour water
quickly over our hands, shivering.
In silence we sit at the fire,
hearing restless movement,
the shadows just beyond the bones.
You hold your fiddle close
at your neck. I watch the fire perform.
The song, from back home,
draws the darkness towards the flame.
Above, the Texas stars begin
their slow circle, pulling up,
growing more distinct as they turn.

3

At eight in the morning
a corner table
with beans, tortillas, and beer
and half a dozen hostile stares,
I feel a voice
that has followed me for days,
haunted me from billboards,
called to me with wrinkled feet.
I begin to see
more than empty palms, ragged
shoots of rice, more than

a kid asking how much
I'll pay for a woman.

4

At the church door, a stooped woman
speaks to us of candles,
collects money for a funeral.
We don't know that man
padlocked in a glass casket,
but pretend to look at the architecture,
the tense symmetry of tile.
We steal an occasional glance

at lips moving in silent prayer,
fingertips touching holy water
as if it were hot, pressing
its warmth between eyes.
Even in church I fear the water,
sprinkled and running on glass.

Returning

At times I have been righteous
without cause and turned my face away
from those who were sincere, from
grandfather who stood at his field's edge,
spoke of rain and how it soaked the ground
evenly, his sleeve snagged as he rested
against the wire fence. I misunderstood,
thinking he sought only excuses
for fields that lie in stubble,
that his words, it fell right nicely,
the rain, offer simple observation.
Leg over unsure leg, I make my way back
across that fence. On this side
positions seem more clear:
red barns and split wood fences
calm winter's stark trees,
field mice are torn by the sudden owl.
I stoop to take a frozen cob and shatter
its clear nest of ice.
There is no assurance of comfort here,
only the clay that grips each step
along the path. As I cross the field
soil gives grudgingly beneath my feet
and the barbs that once scarred my skin
come clear in the distance.

Afternoon At Seventy-Nine

The television reflects his face for hours
while the tip of his cigarette fades,
bending with the length of his thought.
His son wrestled his arm
to the tabletop years ago
and grins now maybe too much
as his wife undresses him for a bath.

He grips the air.

A photograph fills his eyes,
two men with their arms surrounding
one another like father and son.
A red carnation blossomed
a moment after the shot.
Now his prayers lie,
war relics in the cabinet,
dead as the soldiers who carried them.

And he can dream now with his eyes open.
Following the cracks in the wall,
through dust streaming in the window,
he remembers marks penciled on the frame,
measuring his son's tenth year.
He remembers the night he fell,
drunk, cracking the plaster with his head.

He hasn't the time now even to grow a beard.
But relieved to know
the certainty of his flower blooming,

he'll continue his pilgrimage of the cracks,
the effort of raising his arms
one more time
to have the shirt stripped from his back.

In This Life

In August magnolia blossoms stain and curl
inward. Juice runs to your elbow,
the peach carelessly bitten.
Out of fear you say that a child adjusts
to a lack of deciduous trees,
that a mind forms the even spacing of change
without seasons, without the constant support
of father and mother, of rivalry
between sister, brother and desire.
We've talked of this,
those who shed the skin of family
and start their own, and we agree
that the accumulating leaves are boundaries,
are surmountable. But you with a newborn son
ignore the flux of discovery: your son
lying on his back, touches his genitals,
your parents lift him and a breeze sifts his hair.
And what of the woman you touched with delicate hand
and later stood anxious as she vanished
into herself for hours and gave birth?
What of the trees whose bones rattle in October,
the sacrum of magnolia lapsing?
It will be right, you say, to hide your hands
in pockets, to allow the garden to lie fallow.
Your fascination with breaking new land,
with writing new tales to read to your wife and son,
won't untangle tradition.
You ask what it's like to discard the past,
crumpling each conversation like paper.

I can tell you that it hurts.
But to say that eyes clear like branches in season
would be too simple. For it follows,
confusion follows even this far.

Where You Have Not Lived

for Amy and Rubel

Each morning you rise
palms held open to one
another, the early gray
offering only routine:
the exhaustion of city
streets, crowds once again.
But this dream of leaving,
you hold on to, gather
strength from and continue.

Sky and skin seem one
color. To finally say
goodbye will be meaningless.
In this place, nothing is left.
Piece by piece, books, photos,
expectations have settled
into an empty house in Arkansas.

It will be easy for you
to leave the city, where sweat
in humid August is a penance.
There is reward in persistence.
Removing one thing at a time
will eventually empty a house,
will eventually empty pockets,
and the nest of friends
in which your dream grew solid.

What promises do you embrace

on land that lies
under river mud:
sixteen acres and a mountain,
fruit trees and Ozark folk
who sing more clearly
than people across the river.
You think it's difficult
to understand you from photographs.
But your smile as you dance
dirt over the roots of young
apple trees explains enough.

There are songs you'll learn
to sing among farmers. Perhaps
when your first crop matures
you'll look toward the eastern
haze, back along the creek's twists,
relax your hands from work,
and remember.

The Rocker And The Dog

Magnolia decay thickens
the air, heavy with fruit.
Beneath his arms sweat blossoms,
his sleeves rolled up from work.

Already damned August arrives,
and conversation draws up
like fields in the heat,
like the dog curling in shade.

He recalls singing in the fields
after dark, the children holding
jars lit with fireflies that burn
and die like days,

the jars forgotten by morning.
This heat has dried the bones
by the roadside and the tears
that came before. Kids gone,

the boards strain loud as ever
beneath the rocker,
under his shoes. And beer
numbs the night into one sound.

He closes his eyes and sees
the magnolia red with seed,
the yard-dog chained at a puddle
lapping away its face.

Distinctions

At a window I long for my future,
that it pull heavily at my cheeks and neck
like the relaxing twilight.
I long for its face to look back
with pendent skin and the assurance
that it is right to stand apart.
I think of my friend who grew
cold and afraid and took his life,
who thought that scars always heal in sunlight.
But still I wonder if his hand clutched
at the shifting light on the carpet.
And I am afraid, afraid each time
the phone rings and I let it continue
until it's relentless as his voice
calling. I question the dead,
their escape or release,
and know there is a distinction.
When I close my eyes, a woman in a country
at war rebuilds her shop and trades
with anyone. In a few days she'll fall
against her child, against her counters,
to finally stare into the sun.
I open my eyes to the glass
of scotch on the sill, the shadows
on my face from too little sleep,
the streetlight that grows suddenly bright.
But one night does not reflect another.
I no longer drive for hours
to forget the disappointment,

or the anger at having been abandoned.
Over and over,
the face that I draw
in my breath on the window means nothing.

What Remains After All

After three years I recall
your fire, built not for warmth
but for a center to focus on.
That night, like all others,
assumed ritual: the cigarette poised
to reflect an attitude, whiskey
without ice.

Maybe it's there you learned,
in the hive gray city, in the absence,

the conflux of bees
a substitute. In the smoke black

spoon and the clouding dilaudid
the swarm begins. The needle's sting.

The pulsed hum that burns
and echoes away.

You quit looking,
said you'd found stars in the grooved bore
of a gun. I didn't know
something inside you had begun to move,
to strip our religion of agreement
to bare brick, to rain gently
and increasingly harder.
I didn't know that change could be
as simple as loading. Disengaging.

Filling the chamber.

Again, again the needle thumps
steadily against the final groove.

The platter spins. The silence
deepens with each revolution.

Maybe it's there you learned,
in the harsh silence of each circling,

that everything curls into itself,
in time, a man into song.

Death does not come at once.
The steady throb of pulse accelerates
after the bullet,
but continues.
Perhaps as you watched the rug
sink quietly in blood, you knew
satisfaction, perhaps not.

The angry tread of tires
rode the street wet. At the sound
of sirens I no longer thought of change,
only routine. Only the constant lurch
toward morning, anticipated trains,
radios beginning to bleed through walls.

The nausea of too many cigarettes leaves

only vagueness, a peripheral whiteness
that blinds and directs.

It prepares me for looking up,
to what I know lies above the rooftops.

Stars. Resolved in photographs
into colorful patterns, it is best
that they remain
white, the street,
the deliberate map we observe.
We take one road leading outward, another
leading back in.

The Silence Before

It takes only
three fingers curled
over silent keys

the piano's face looks
back at my own looks
quite like my own
unforgiving and nervous

sound
about to move through air
geese in dark sky
the echo
of moon over water