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## What we find in shadows | [Poems]

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*The University of Montana*

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WHAT WE FIND IN SHADOWS

by

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B.A. University of Washington, 1973

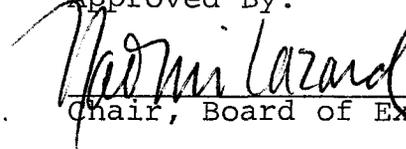
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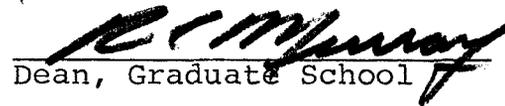
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For my father, Will, John, and Beth;  
and in memory of my mother.

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I

The Sky Remains

Postcard to Beth from Wallace

Beth,

On the back of this card is a photo of a giant russet potato on the bed of a truck. One's a full load. The farmer I met, Tuesday, grows one on each half-acre, rushing it off to market before spoilage sets in. Nothing much lasts here, only cheat grass thrives. Where it should be obvious, I can't distinguish the ore from the wreckage, or one slag hill from another. In the Silver Bucket Jimmy, a refugee from Lovelock, Nevada, drinks heavy from his mug. Shifts the horseshoe on the wall so luck'll never run thin on the floor. It's another way of life in this land where men survive the cold with stout shots, their private anti-freeze. Tomorrow, I'll leave early under stars locked in place and a new moon pulling me home. No matter how far off, keep me near. Tom.

Letter to Hugo from Seattle

Dear Dick,

You may shy from the smog in Glasgow skies like the smoke over Europe in that war. The war of men away from home, and the children feared wild in the woods. If you have the chance go to Ayreshire on the sea and breathe, and tell me is the air pure like I remember? Your letters and dreams found a home on book shelves last week. Your poems ride pages like birds on summer thermals. In Oregon you shaped our ears to What Thou Lovest...., and your poem, "White Center," made our eyes cloud over. I drove through your home town the other day. A trial was in progress. A near murder: a young woman stabbed, knives clear through her sternum. I never found the house you finally left. Only fern and salal growing in patches in fields. This morning your words rang true. Clouds hung black like lead in the north and birds too far to hear moved south. Wind found the lake and peeled the calm away. Let me know if my poems stray or swim near music. And may all you love and write echo what you need. Tom.

Letter to Beth from Missoula

Dear Beth,

I want you to know tides even out from  
the brush of day and I care for you as I do  
for the fumbling of lines on a page. Most dreams  
fade like sun-soaked wood, I want one that fills  
you out, full and happy. Tonight, music soothed me.  
Paul moved fingers over the neck of his fiddle  
like a strangler in love with his crime.  
Smoke filled the room as it does in old B-movies.  
Some days are better, and clouds lowering  
the boom don't bother me. Still, water  
wells up in my eyes, mornings, a reservoir  
of old fear. Now, I count myself lucky. Last summer  
I found my life better than before. Where salt-air  
hangs over the land in Astoria, man and nature  
blend smooth. Someday, I hope we can live there.  
Stand below the sea wall and watch the waves  
crush down to foam. Today, my heart moves in me  
like serrated tin. Winter brings snow  
white and clean as new souls. We lose much in it - -  
cars, old toys, sharp-edged shadows, even children.  
And I lose a part of myself. My hungry half  
sleeps like a bear. Remember when you are lonely  
and your spirits are low, I'm here. My shadow grows  
uneasy, but sends his best, so do I. You wear easy,  
and I think of you often. Tom.

Letter to Pavlich from Seattle

Dear Walt,

How goes the war of words and self? The one man has fought for years on end. I know mine began in Catholic school and church. Confession drove a demon from my soul (or so I thought). He lives with me now disguised as a muse. High masses with Latin and Gregorian chants washed on ears like the coupling and uncoupling of cars in the Great Northern yard. Today, I think of this and old world Italians and their warbled off-key song; and the boy who stole a host and said, I cut it in two and it bled real blood. Somedays (it seems) I hear the priest call for coin. What religion were you before words and their sounds pulled you away? I may move to Ketchum this fall. A new job for more money. The sky remains there, blue and dark on the night, and stars are as clear as they are anywhere. Come down when you have the chance. We'll drive to Silver City where men still claw raw earth and wolves grin past their elbows. I hope you make it over the pass and anything else in your way. Say hello to your good lady and mine words that assay pure as gold. Tom.

II

Divided In Two

The Dream I Never Had

The tide flaps loose on the wind.  
Sun yellows like hollandaise sauce.  
Clouds swirl off-white. The dog  
I never had and always wanted  
eats corn on the cob and grins  
from ear to ear. That afternoon  
I marry a woman I never knew.  
We live in a house empty of sound.  
My dog howls - - I'm hungry.  
I tell him to get lost.  
He takes a cab.  
He has no cash.  
I foot the bill.

Another Way of Living

Somewhere under the bluffs  
of Nova Scotia is a museum  
of oddities. Attractions featured  
are a two-headed man  
always of two minds,  
and a rooster with an enormous blue comb,  
his head the shape of a worn dime.  
Circus freaks are lined up in one room:  
the alligator man, Jo Jo  
the dog-faced boy, Myrna -- a woman  
with four legs and two wombs.  
And Lloyd -- half-man, half-sloth.

I find they're holding a ceremony  
in my honor and induct me  
into the Hall of Fame. The only living man  
with mercury in his veins,  
I fear change in weather.

I long to live in a world where men  
swim in oceans and filter air  
through gills. Salmon fill zoos  
with orchids and rare African Tulips.  
Wolves, the guardians of pure sound,  
howl in perfect pitch with the revolutions  
of full moons. And time is abolished:  
the laying over of waves on sand  
filling our need for clocks.

Finally, in this new land or seascape  
I might find a way to love  
the stunned silence of stars.

Instructions for My Embalmer

When you drain the fluids  
from my corpse, don't leave  
open wounds. I won't heal  
so easy dead. Before you carve  
me up examine my face. If I smile  
prop me up and give me some room.  
Save whatever advice you have  
for the next dead stiff  
fool enough to listen.  
If you have any class at all  
buy me a drink. Make it whiskey,  
water back. When my wife calls,  
have her forward my mail anywhere  
you choose. I'm through paying  
past-due bills, or pouring over  
drug store flyers. Tell her  
when she's short of cash and lonely:  
find a man, join the "Y". Don't forget  
to give old friends my best,  
which isn't much, but then again  
what have those dog-eared mumbler  
ever done for me? You tell them  
until I die, some small town  
south of every border known, I'll go on  
enjoying life from day to moon,  
loaning every blue star the air I breathe.

Divided In Two

By some slim chance I'm here. Police  
catalogue eight basic prints,  
mine are accidental. I breathe air  
meant for others. Born under the full-blown  
clouds of a blizzard, three months early,  
I should have died. How it must hurt  
to sift in air the first time.  
Our souls eager to take leave.

In my faith, the one I gave up so air  
would be less bitter, the unbaptized dead  
are pigeon-holed in Limbo.  
If given the chance I'd gather  
all the lost children in the local armory  
each year, and invite them to heaven.  
Or open up my shadow to the leanest one  
and keep him warm.

If one day I'm held accountable for all my crimes,  
even those heretical in nature, phone  
Pope John Paul. He's my cousin by right of air.  
If he denies me stretch my soul  
on the rack. Make it own up.

But if I die, drag me away  
from the jail of worms. Let me serve notice:  
I'll resurrect my shadow under the oddest moon  
known. Each of us drags along  
a thinner self. Until I die  
I'm divided in two.

III

The Last Voice

Where Shadows Rule

In the room where children sleep  
walls close off, glass in the window  
flows. Small fingers grope over the rug  
for hand-holds. I lose my edge in the gray wash  
of days. Clouds wait for the unborn,  
like lungs they rub on the hills.  
Grass is dead, but dead or alive  
slows erosion.

On another day in air I need to breathe  
waves peel off the ocean. Sea grass  
sprawls on the sand. Wind picks up  
where we leave off, reminds us days  
are never still. We invent our children  
and they dog our dreams. Somewhere in the world  
the dawn starts without us. We leave it  
for the shadows we know and the cold  
hard ground left frozen for months.

Solution of Roots

Before roots play blood-music under  
ground, the gray stucco of this hotel  
ridicules sky. Each gaze I plant outside  
finds day shading the walls.

When you wake a sleeping child --  
his eyes roll forward and a soul,  
rounding off corners on night sky  
and moon, sinks in. The struggle of roots  
in earth reminds me of how little we hold  
of how much we never know. In March  
we turned the earth with pitchforks,  
and pounded dirt clods soft. Still,  
I look for solutions in roots and scrape  
the salt off stones. If we could mine  
gold from our souls we would own  
all language: words more near music  
than sound allows. When young I thought snakes  
coiled inside walls. I left finger trails  
where they breathed, and named shadows for stars.  
At night I hid under the covers from double-edged dreams,  
and held on for all I was worth.

Filling Time in Moses Lake

This land moans each time the wind  
kicks loose. Dry ground pushes up  
blue sage that dies and rushes the highway.  
Starch mills force feed the sky brown  
and weather inversions hold the message in:  
rank smells kill.

With no easy life in view  
I miss the moon fooling tides flat,  
the wash of salt air on eelgrass.

In cultivated plots alfalfa and peas  
root in. Hills are blown away, or grow  
inside the earth. Here, dirt poor farmers  
are in enemy country. I feel the pull  
of factory life: men leaving this star-burned town  
for another. Even dogs, if given the chance,  
would take flight.

Today, the wind sock promises a cold  
distraction from the north. Waiting for harvest  
I know the moon comes up soft and drops  
like a hammer dwarfing the land.  
Some men claim the atmosphere  
makes it large and yellow. Others,  
citing local evidence, swear  
the moon drains topsoil off  
slipping light-headed into the lake.

Now, I dream the land before settlers  
arrived, before bombers touched down  
on the base and man made the desert over  
into something owned. Restless, I turn  
in the still night on my bed wanting voices  
to fill in the room where silence  
is piled up like nimbus before a storm.

Odd Motions

- Love Thy God (from a billboard)

Love Thy God.

If I found him I would. Sometimes  
men who milk a living off the land  
seem to know him. Our nuns said,  
He's everywhere. I scanned  
old Vatican stamps for a sign.

In the mission we found Carignano's murals  
preserved. He brushed the walls with the god  
he knew. I remember Latin falling on our ears.  
Sermons flooring me with conviction.  
Sins I confessed Saturdays, always venial,  
loomed over me.

In Ravalli five white crosses mark  
the bridge. It hangs on me: teenagers,  
Friday night, drunk, any month, always winter,  
dead. Must all survivors go through  
odd motions to live on?

I feel gravel pinch under our tires,  
and find myself somewhere else.  
In my imagined death logging trucks  
spill cut trees like jackstraws  
over the cowl, or dark mud-lush lakes  
soften bones to putty, and pull me down.

I need now one old friend, sky or moon,  
to fool me sane. When religion fails  
what good is a soul? How can I follow  
my shadow in off the field?

Photographs in Luke's

The men who posed for the camera  
are frozen and framed  
in black wood borders.  
Every dead one has a "star"  
in the corner of his photo  
like the ones Franciscans glued  
on math tests, for a job well done.  
Those still living rent stools out  
by the drink or wander through town  
looking for warm meals, and a soft touch.  
Some claim they've lost a fortune  
in Texas oil scams and worthless  
mining issues. Or seek it, still,  
humming some nameless tune they hope  
stars will swallow.

Outside, a northern blow from Canada  
crosses over borders invisible everywhere  
but on maps. I imagine their bones  
never dry out, and tonight I pretend  
I'm one of them. If flush with money  
I'd call out to one and all,  
Belly up to the bar, boys,  
drinks are on me, for us  
lonely men in love with our ghosts.

I know, certain as a dead man's bones  
are hollow, I'll find my grave.  
Any vagrant from fields of lean crops  
knows he'll claim a wedge of ground  
and all the mineral and air rights for his own.

For hours the storm won't let down.  
Spring runoff swells rivers full.  
Shadows in the night, my only neighbors,  
carve whatever light remains.  
Staring out in the star-flung space  
for what it can never give, I find  
he is me: the lone dog howling  
a near moon hollow.  
His cry for no one I know.

The Last Voice

Another tornado funnels through Louisiana.  
58 dead. 500 homeless. On tv I watch the storm  
unfold before us, and suppress my desire  
to laugh. I'm grateful it passed over  
the French Quarter, left jazz joints intact.

In the morning Angelus bells ring  
loud as ever. I hold down something inside,  
turn back on the Bay of Pigs,  
and the Missile Crisis. For weeks  
we stocked shelves with canned goods.  
Home alone from school one day  
we cowered in a corner of the dirt room,  
turned the radio on for instruction.  
I feared the last voices we'd hear  
were ours. I believed unshaven cossacks,  
faces the hue of fear and sky,  
would cut our souls loose.  
We played games of silence. Whoever  
spoke first lost. Ever since  
I've been afraid of saying too much  
of letting a fatal word slip.

Now in Missoula I mouth the cool syllables  
of winter and snow, afraid to know what lies  
behind it. Each iced up season  
fleshes out glaciers. Rivers slow.  
Gutters give way under the load.  
Snow becomes the rule and cold the mean.

IV

After the Wind Dies

For Frank Who Was Crazy

On days shock dulls your eyes,  
a voice needing air rattles  
in your ribs. Screams that heal  
rub a throat raw. They tear at ears  
you thought deaf. And you find no words.

In Colfax you wheeled on a hip  
doctors warned would break in time.  
Outside the Rose you kicked free  
of war haunts and stood alone  
on wind soured grass. They pulled  
you mad from Medical Lake  
twelve years back. Rumor is  
they let the wrong one go.

I remember you like the coyote  
tied behind Carlson's store.  
Eyes rooted wild. Face hungry in want.  
Howl taken by the moon.  
Even now in the ground  
you don't have the rope you need.

In Near Eclipse

Here, sage rushes off the hill like curved skeletons.  
Wind funnels over wheat. The Great Northern engine  
that severed your arm looms over this ravine.  
Blood was left on the ground like choke cherries.  
Surgeons worked through the night to make it whole.  
You say it's buried outside Tyler where water  
succors reeds and grouse hunch low  
in ground cover. Sometimes you feel it move,  
the brain fills out a message and fingers  
clench shut in brown soil.

Tonight with the moon in near eclipse  
you motion runners on. Your stump  
moving clockwise -- a sure sign  
the ball has fallen near the fence.  
Years back we lived out games of hide-and-go  
in the field the Church of Christ  
paved for parking.  
I still hear you screaming,  
Olly, Olly, ox in free.  
Waving every one home.

Another Shade of the East Side

Mrs. Beckham's shack weathers gray like the grave markers north of Usk. I was told Indians bury the dead there perpendicular under duff. And souls flow from a land they never own. We pulled old Esquires from her claw foot bath: porcelain the shade of dust filled skies you hate. Your father died of a coronary. Your mother dies alone in a childless home. Wind and dust become her family. She replaces you with illusion, and the hope religion lends. The disease you carry inside, a biological time-bomb, nailed your brother to the ground, his hands wounded birds. I never saw him the same. We carved his initials on the cedar that summer. Knife cuts oozed with sap and moss-hair fell from limbs.

Fell Down On Us

We chased each other behind granite  
slabs in the monument yard.

I marvelled over the smoothness  
of the stone. Older, I came to your stone face  
on the north ledge. Letters and numbers fading.  
They put you in the ground ten years past.  
Dead from disease, a leaking of the soul.

My cousin, your nephew, lies on the hill  
in the mausoleum. His plane nosed down  
in corn rows. When we burn beyond simple recognition  
they trace our past from dental charts and finger swirls.  
Those of us left behind listen for the right sound  
and curse the wrong wind. The impulse to put my ear  
to the ground grows strong. But I resist, dream rivers  
choking with fish. The sky, we can't name, honed blue.

After the Wind Dies

Sometimes for no good reason they leave  
and screen doors bang the wind home.  
How odd, hearing a voice alone.

Armand, humming songs from the war,  
wove a longshoreman's dance on the pier.  
Sometimes for no good reason they leave

and take well enough with them.  
A bullet cleaned him of doubt.  
How odd, hearing a voice alone.

Our radio farmed out the news  
Larry Ming drowned in Couer d'Alene.  
Sometimes for no good reason they leave.

Currents, washed through his lungs,  
left me scraping the fear off lily pads.  
How odd, hearing a voice alone.

Outside, a howling dog carves air  
and slow waves shame a full moon.  
How odd, hearing my voice alone:  
Sometimes for no good reason they leave.

Rehearsing Death

Father, we walked near the garden  
laying night crawlers in the coffee can.  
I pulled the electric prod from the ground  
and felt shivers of stars in my back:  
fish eyes from heaven.

I won't trace your shadow again.  
Never feel your muscles hard  
in sleeves. Or see the sweat  
drop from the end of your nose.  
When you left I searched the mill  
for reminders -- foot prints in dust  
on the floor, finger smudges on the walls,  
or cryptic marks in ledgers.  
I need now something to hold in my eyes,  
a will for my soul, an angel of guidance  
hovering near.

That old coin of deliverance we call moon  
shines on metal-flake at the dump.  
I go there on open nights, watch fires  
burn off methane. In this land gone silver  
over the tangle of roots and lush green  
smelling sour, I lead my shadow on.

Snow, Flour, and Wind

On bad days a mass of cloud shuts  
down the sky early. A small woman,  
my grandmother grows smaller each year.  
From her bed she remembers less,  
leaves stories off where she began them:  
always on the farm by the parish in the dead  
breath of storm, she calls out the words  
in Cree for snow, flour, or wind.

I still see her kneeling in the garden,  
coaxing radishes through stones  
and pulling up those bloody toes  
in a late summer inversion.

No one told her a son suffered suicide.  
Maybe the drinking forced Armand's hand,  
or the woman who left him to fill hours  
alone in full rooms. I must have it wrong.  
She must know more than she lets on.  
In the space between her words I hear  
air pulled down on lungs no longer  
willing to ease the load.  
The youngest, Sonny, still lies  
in a coffin in the photo on her bureau.  
Seventeen and dead from a fever  
that shook souls down to size.

Once, these immigrants, from a past  
of disinherited dream, bought passage  
on a train for the first warm wedge  
of land south. Often, I find her  
lying awake in her room, and wonder  
what she feels blurring these days  
in echo. I want to carry her out  
into the shade of the locust,  
and hold off what she hears alone.

What We Find In Shadows

for my mother

Just once, I need face  
the man who dug your grave.  
Was he pulled out of shape  
by the moon? Did he laugh  
stars blind? If grass over your stone  
would speak up, I'd search  
the long blades for reason.

In Kellogg I watch smoke pour  
out in layers over the valley,  
watch children in the school yard  
play hide-and-go-seek. I hear them  
call each other names  
they won't understand for years.

Who will watch over the children?  
Nuns claimed we all have guardian angels.  
If mine were here would I know him?  
Would he mince around and mimic  
our oddest gestures? What dark syllables  
would grass cough up in his behalf?

At home I found an old negative  
of you working in the mill  
during the war. Feed bags held  
over your shoulders are missing: air-brushed away.  
If you weren't smiling, the gap  
in your teeth clearly showing,  
I'd say something was wrong.

Today, I have no use for an angel,  
or the scoffer-of-stars. Mother,  
if you hear this, come out from  
the slag heap of night. Bury lies  
I hold inside in muddy ground,  
and dance under a moon that moves  
over us like a mole in search of a home.

Tonight, I'll move on, take whatever  
faded image I find of you, fearing the dumb  
glare of sky. Each breath knows  
my shadow, that half-starved self, hangs on.