Covenant so simple [poems]

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The University of Montana
A COVENANT SO SIMPLE

by

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for Carla

"Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all."

--Proverbs 31:29
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**Cutbank**: "The Monks," "Cattle Mutilation," "Skipping Stones"

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**Poems From the Earth** (anthology): "The Music Rushing Through You"

**Puerto Del Sol**: "Stigmata"

**The Red Cedar Review**: "Biking West Virginia"

**The Redneck Review of Literature**: "Rodeo"
"What was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?"

--Willa Cather
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I.

Three things there are too wonderful for me,
Four which I do not comprehend:
The way of an eagle in the air,
The way of a snake on a rock,
The way of a ship in the midst of the sea,
And the way of a man with a maid.

—Proverbs 30:18-19
Zeno's Paradox

Over breakfast, she tells him she had a dream.

I was so sad,
she says, because I knew it wouldn't last. No one knows what dreams are, you can't collect them like stamps.

He sips his coffee and looks at her as if her words were dead birds dropping from the sky.

I don't have the slightest idea, he says, what you are talking about.

Dreams. I'm talking about how you can't find your way back. Once, when I was a girl, I drove into the desert and slept. I had this dream about a man who danced around my truck all night long. In the morning I found footprints.

What footprints?
he says.

I found footprints all around the truck. In the morning.

He looks at her.

He doesn't know about the footprints, but her eyes are red,
her hair is wild, and she reminds him
of a bear he once saw from an airplane,
a huge blonde bear, magnificent,
galloping over the tundra—

Do you suppose,
she asks, I shall ever find my way
back?

galloping as he plunged
toward her, and she reared and shook
her soggy head, scattering light
in all directions.

It's like mist,
she says. There and not there
at the same time. You reach out for it—

flying

in and out of mist, he sees rivers
clogged with salmon, red slivers
struggling against the current,
driven by a certain need—

but nothing
is there, she says. Like mist.

I don't know
what you are talking about, he says.
Night, in a cornfield
(near Long Island, Kansas)

Hildreth and I
in a cornfield,
a long sweet
wavy Kansas
wind threading
the stalks, leaves
rasping against
each other. Hildreth
tosses her hair
back and smiles.
I smell a rainstorm,
alalfa, sweet-
clover. We are
rubbing tassels
of cornsilk
between our
fingers. Hildreth
has a wide
smile wide
cheekbones wide
hips, a farm
girl's hips
brown hair (so
like cornsilk).
She takes my hand
and begins to run
faster, faster, then
lets go and leaps
over an irrigation
ditch, suspended
in flight by a flash
of lightning that rips
the sky from top
to bottom. She
lands still running
into a field
of Blue-Stem Grama
and Side-Oats
wavy with wind
that even at night
has a purple sheen,
that baby's hair
sheen. We roll
in the grass like
notes from a cello
into the fulness
of rest, breathing
hard, laughing,
tugging on stems
with precise
pressure, feeling
the grass ease
from its sheath
as the first
fat raindrops
begin to fall.
Drunk and in need
of space, we fishtailed
through the cinders.
Stars were as thick
as fuzz on a peach,
the moon a sliver
working its way in.
The air the temperature
of silence, the night
wide open as a heart.
Owls hooted like indians
imitating owls.

In the root cellar, I held you. I wanted
to unwrap the moment
and give it to you,
but the wind and the
booze left me scattered,
unable to bridge the
distance between us.
I wanted to say that
it seemed a good idea
to raise pigs. To
rearrange our lives.
I watched the sunrise as you were sleeping.
I touched your lips, but you didn’t notice.
I knew what I wanted, but you were sleeping.

--for Carla
Net Hanging Song
--for Carla

A clove hitch cinched tight
A half hitch to the right
Once, twice, and again through the salvage
Four fingers' width and over again--

If I had a fish for each moment I missed you
I'd be high boat in the bay
If, for each knot, I might have kissed you
The days would have seemed less gray

A clove hitch cinched tight
A half hitch to the right
Once, twice, and again through the salvage
Four fingers’ width and over again--

Siberian wind rips in from the west
And the rollers are polishing stones
With no fish and no kisses I'm hanging a net
And wishing I wasn't alone.

A clove hitch cinched tight
A half hitch to the right
Once, twice, and again through the salvage
Four fingers’ width and over again...

--Kotzebue, Alaska, 1989
Wedding Feast

HOly SPIRIT PARKING ONLY
a sign outside the church
proclaims. Beside it
a Chevy pickup overflows
with men and women and children
feasting on barbecued ribs
and kicking up their heels
to the country blues wailing
from the chrome-piped
knobby-tired roll-barred
rifle-racked turtle-waxed
canary-yellow truck.
The bride, a rancher’s skinny
girl aswirl with freckles
and teeth, can clog or do
the two-step, country swing
like no one’s business, waltz
until the cows come home,
but she is two left feet
to the syncopated shuffle
of salsa, the carnival beat
of congas, timbales, a jungle
of drums and bells and whistles
with names she can’t pronounce
rolling from the stereo
of her brand new husband’s
leopard-skinned fuzzy-diced
low-slung hydrolic-jacked
red, white, and green Impala.
No one is sure how to move
in this Babel of music.
An old senora, hands held high
like tambourines, bounces lightly
toward the bride's father, inviting
him to samba. Baila! she croons,
Que bailen los gringos!
Embarrassed, clutching his Coors,
his hips are hopeless.
The bride begins a train
of children oblivious to rhythm,
snaking its way around a herd
of cowboys teaching the groom
to chew Skoal, around the truck,
around the wedding cake,
around the sign that says
HOLY SPIRIT PARKING ONLY.
Four boys are missing.
No one knows what has happened,
but each of them was last seen
at dusk, walking into the lavas.
Cowboys gather at the Two-Bar-Three
to speculate; there must be a cave,
and women who come out like bats
after their prey. And once a man gazes
upon those naked bodies glazed
by the setting sun, there is
no hope. He will vanish
without a trace, the way lava
swallows rivers.

The first to go was Jesus Cancino,
a wetback who lived in the basement
of a whorehouse, and could carry
a piano on his back. Next to go
was Nephi Stokes, a good Mormon boy
who followed the Word of Wisdom.
Then Wayne Mason, who had a scar
on his butt where a bull skewered him
like a marshmallow on a stick.
(He never walked so good after that;
sort of tight, all puckered up
from the memory.)
And now another one is missing.
And the cowboys recall that Rance Hansen
at the last rodeo swore he could ride
anything that bucks. And the boast
takes on a sinister new meaning
as they imagine the women living
in caves beneath the lava-- their eyes
bright as sap oozing from a burning log,
the sweaty skin, the silky hair,
the fatal confusion...

The sheriff has scoured the Malpais
a dozen times, finding only
a John Deere hat. Cowboys snicker
that he's looking for one good ball
before he has another heart attack.
The wetbacks say these women won't take
a man with cojones the size of raisins.

Still, four boys are missing.
No one knows what has happened.
And when the men pile into pickups,
and Lamont cashes out, wipes the counter,
locks the door and walks away,
the Two-Bar-Three is left
to the heads on the wall.
Casner is drunk. He plants
his stubby legs like fence posts
and sways. His wife calls him
an ignorant bastard,
but he just grins
and grabs a passing girl
by the waist.
Too old to ride,
the Brinkerhoff brothers
pass a bottle and spit, mumbling
about the stock.
"These cows," says Bliss,
"my mother could ride these cows."
A red-eyed Charolais
rams the stall
and jacknifes out the gate.
"Ride that bull!" Casner bellows,
losing his balance.
"Look at that boy,
he sure as hell
can ride a bull!"
The bishop’s daughter
steadies him. Casner fumbles
at her hair and grazes
on her freckled neck.
She throws her head back
and laughs. He draws her
tight as a knot.
Israel's Hands

He runs spidery fingers over bark, probing furrows, tracing scars on hoary old Fremont cottonwoods. His hands, huge, are stained rust and freckled, spattered from years of calves' blood, yellowcake and sun. I can imagine his first wife's head cradled easily, like a melon. It could be those hands on me now, gathering my hair like blossoms on one of his peach trees, spreading like a warm flood on my belly, rising to each breast, gripping and lifting the curve of my buttocks to press me close.

Apricots blush in the crabgrass and cicadas drone in the cottonwoods. The salmon cliffs burn. His first wife was fourteen, old enough to bleed. He was twenty-nine. Then her sister, and soon after, a flock of tow-heads locking each other in the root cellar, getting thrown from horses. But they're all gone now. Only Moses, the youngest, writes from Provo, of--what do you call it--software for computers. Both wives gone, one from cancer, one from a blizzard. Israel wandered for weeks in all the draws and canyons of House Rock Valley, searching for his first-sealed, his child bride.
It's a shame I manage the trading post alone, he says. I tell him I like alone. No one likes alone, he laughs softly. He says a woman's refuge is her husband.

The cicadas are quiet, everything still in that moment the day stops to reconsider itself. A halo of crimson hugs the cliffs, fading to a deep and vacant center of sky, faint stars. Israel asks for me with his eyes, but doesn't wait for an answer. He walks away, his hands caressing the waist of a tree, one of the old Fremont cottonwoods, solid as a rock and starting to die, from the inside out.
Women are backed up against the dam, more and more women pressing, pressing. He is not worried; his dam is perfect. Made to last for a godamned long time.

But these women come out of the mountains by the thousands, and they are clogging the intake towers. They don’t speak, they squish together, they keep on rising.

The women, pressed together, become water. He knows the water is deep and cold. He’s never really thought about water; He’s been very good at stopping it.

He opens the spillways on both sides, but the women keep rising and now he is trapped. They lap at his toes. He falls to his knees and says I’m sorry.

Or tries to, but the words don’t form. He says, instead, what a shame it is to let all that water go to waste, and then they engulf him and he is falling, falling, off the dam with the flood of foamy women cresting above him. They will dash him to pieces on the rocks, then carry his lifeless body like a trophy.
"And do you forgive me, Andrey?"

"What should I forgive you for, sir? You've never done me any harm."

"No, for everyone, for everyone, you here alone, on the road, will you forgive me for everyone? Speak, simple peasant heart!"

--Dostoevsky, "The Brothers Karamozov"
Going Down Fast

They call it "Rapid Disappearance Syndrome."
Drowning real fast, like Willie Fancyboy
who stood in the bow like a hood ornament,
tipping back the Bacardi like it was a horn
to blow. Then the skiff mushed sideways
and flipped Willie over, the anchor line
a noose around his boots. His waders filled,
sucked him down like a husky swallows food,
in one gulp. Only four feet of water,
but the wind whipping up and rollers pounding—they couldn't find him.

"Adii, it happens," people say.
"Them Fancyboys, they're like that."

--Kotzebue, Alaska, 1989
Cattle Mutilation

Casner and I
were checking rain gauges
when we found the cow,
stiff and bloated
like a balloon, her ears
neatly clipped off.
Casner shuffled away,
cursing. It's been happening
more and more, we find
one here, one there,
with glassy eyes
round as the moon.
Sometimes the lips
sometimes the eyes
sometimes the testicles
or even the heart.
And no blood, as if
it had been drained
beforehand.

Helaman Noyes thinks
Satan worshippers
are the cause of it.
Glen Ekker says
it's them goddamn
government people
doing military experiments
the sonsabitches.
Whoever it is,
they leave no clues.
It gives ranchers the creeps.
The strangest thing,
the worst thing,
is how the carcasses
go untouched. Crows
won't pick at them,
coyotes won't come near.
We left the cow
and drove away.
It's about time
we had some rain
Casner said.

--Hanksville, Utah, 1983
On highway twelve south of Tsaile
it was a body we saw, transfixed
by the truck's high beams, sprawled
over the centerline—a victim
of too much Thunderbird. Dad slammed
the brakes, gritting his teeth
for the thump that never came.
We searched the road, the ditch.
Some Navajos behind us saw it all:

Skinwalker, they said.
It got up and ran away.
That was no drunk.

All the way back to Flagstaff
our headlights brushed against
men turning into owls, coyotes.
My father wondered why a man
who wasn't drunk would sleep
in the middle of the road,
but I knew a witch needs
no reason.

Skinwalker, they said.
Always somewhere, waiting.
Walking the roads at night
humming his backward music
shaking his rattles of fear
looking for the chaos in everyone.
It was in '68, when snowdrifts
eight feet deep buried the line shack
for weeks, and wind howled through
the washes like shears on sheep.
On New Year's Eve the Tingey brothers
came to the shack, and DaVelle Brady
shot them both. Flagstaff police
nabbed her two days later, stumbling
out of the Rose Tree Lounge,
pretty well-lit and ready to fight.

In a voice like barbed wire,
she told the court how Ezra and Alma
hamstrung her dog, pumped him full
of rock salt, then hung him on a fence.
How they chased her with snow-gos
till she dove in a ditch.
How she bolted the door, but Ezra
hacked it down with an axe,
all the time swearing he'd burn
the shack down, burn the slut out,
the scheming slut who'd sleep
with a man three times her age
and be paid for it in stock...
And so she shot them both.

Leah Tingey sat in court,
in the second row. She held her head
low, but everyone could see her hair
long and coppery and fine as asbestos
cascading gently over her narrow
shoulders, her breasts, gently,
feathery, to her hips. Everyone
too saw DaVelle in her chair, legs
parted wide as an invitation,
chew-stained flannel unbuttoned
far enough to see the stem of the rose
they all knew was tattooed on her
left breast. DaVelle’s hair
was as greasy as camp breakfast,
one strand bobbing in front of her
mouth as she told her story.

The bishop in Snowflake said
her day of judgment been a long time
coming. What sort of woman, he asked,
would it take? And Leah, now,
has to raise six kids on her own.
See her sobbing now, her tiny
shoulders rising and falling
as if she had the hiccoughs.
And that woman... Jesus, he said,
it makes me sick to my stomach.

A court psychiatrist
decided she was unstable.
The women of Snowflake
knew she just hated men.
The Monks

are up with the sun
to pitch hay and milk the goats.
A young girl is at the gate,
watching. She is there
every morning, and the monks
are so silent, so strong
and supple beneath their robes.
One monk with a red beard
and eyes green as new grass
invites her into the chapel
to pray, but she will not go
because she knows Catholics
are in the palm
of Satan’s hand.

One night she climbs
over the fence and sneaks
into the chapel. She stares
at Christ, thin as a skeleton.
He seems so real, even the blood
carved dripping from his feet.

--Huntsville, Utah, 1981
She tries to hide it
by keeping a handkerchief
wadded tightly in her fist.
It happens at the worst
possible moments—
while holding hands
at the movies, eating
from a communal bowl
of popcorn, bathing
in the health club Jacuzzi.
But late at night
she strokes the scar
beneath her ribs.
Sometimes
along its tight-lipped seam
beads will form like dew
on a blade of grass.
Her hands unfold like roses.
The Nuns of Vorkuta Prison

In Vorkuta, there are nuns who lie face down in the shape of the cross, weeping and praying for the world. They pray and then wait, still as light, for Christ to meet them as an image meets itself on glass, shatters the glass, and is one thing.

The nuns were told to make bricks but they refused. They were put in straight jackets and the jackets were soaked to make them shrink. Still, the nuns would not make bricks. So they were put on a hill to freeze in the Siberian wind.

Crystals of frost, like knives, laced tree limbs as the sun rose over Vorkuta. The nuns were standing unchanged on the hilltop, simple and mysterious, transforming the feeble arctic dawn into a rich and burning light.

The guards would not touch them. Prisoners crowded around, to share their warmth. And now the nuns are not told to make bricks. They are left alone to lie face down in the shape of the cross, weeping and praying for the world.
"The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right."

--- Annie Peaches
Skipping Stones

Some skitter across the virgin sheet of water rapid-fire as the wingbeat of a ruffed grouse. Some veer like stricken kamakaze planes, plunge, then flutter to the grave. Some shave the river's thin skin, releasing with each touch a hidden light, shimmering like a flock of ladybugs in flight.

Like children, each finds its own way. Like snowflakes, no two are the same. Find the curve that says to the finger "You are my purpose," a stone that holds deep in its crystal center a longing to be deemed worthy of the other bank.
Berry Picking.

The humble blueberry hunkers down low to the ground, but it shall be exalted. The lowbush cranberry broods, but it too shall be lifted up.

Orange clusters of akpik glow like coals. The shiny ones aren't ready—they burn too bright. Let them mellow to a soft and fuzzy yellow, they will blush until their flesh is sweet.

Don't look! Just let the berries lead. They are stars that can't be seen directly. Submit to them and they'll submit to you.

Don't pluck! A berry, like a lover, responds to gentle pressure; when it's ripe will give itself completely over.

--Kotzebue, Alaska, 1989
Gravesite

A grey wind rips
through grass, picks
at the ribs of rotting boats.
Alder thickets hug the slope,
dissolving into the swell
of tundra. Listen...
Wind whistles
past the cross
of the old priest.
Roots twist like smoke
around his bones.
The echo of prayer, a hymn
sung softly, in Russian.
An old Upik woman
on her knees, rocking.
A woman that returned
each year with salmon,
and finally buried the priest.
The church is gutted
but the air is thick
with fish and salt, birth
and death, baptisms, weddings,
voices... sacraments.
Dust motes drift in shafts
of sunlight; eyes of saints
burn from the yellowed pages
of a prayerbook.

--Nushagak, Alaska, 1983
Long Enough

Long way from Bethlehem Steel, graveyard shift, casting iron bright as the sun, blinding, impressed on his retina, still.

Snow in all directions, white, blinding, dots tiny as fleas moving toward him. He sees the bull in his mind’s eye,
calls him closer, whispers, hears the voice of the caribou talking back talking back to him— that’s when he knows

he’s been on the tundra almost long enough to forget rivers of iron, almost long enough to sweep clean the slate.

—Brooks Range, Alaska, 1989
Seasons

I

Wind sharpens ridges
like a lathe, shaving
g edges, cornices hanging
too frozen to fall.
Splintered antlers
of a caribou skull
carve the air. Bones
shine in moonlight,
changeless. If I
stayed here, rooted
low to the ground,
maybe I would unlearn
so much thinking,
so much walking
from place to place,
so many
insipid gestures.
I am tired
of the illusion
that when I speak,
I mean something.
But these bones
impress me.
It is simple,
the way the mind slips
through the needle’s eye
to lay hold of itself
again.
II

Fireweed flames at sunset
through beads of water
and light. A loon cries
in the mist, and a beaver
glides like a zipper
on a silk dress.

In this season
I need to hear my voice leap
across lakes, and to have it
answered. Just as birches
love to display the cleavage
of sunlight not in isolation,
but from one to another—
a secret that exists
only when shared.
There must be language
to sustain such a secret.
It is elusive.

I can hear
the loon laughing
but can not find her
in the rising steam.

--Resurrection Pass, Alaska, 1982
Two Swans

Trudging knee-deep
through tundra I startled
two swans feeding in a pond

they rose in silent
tandem leaving only
ripples in their wake

I long
for a covenant
so simple

--Dillingham, Alaska, 1983
On The Road To Pie Town

On the road to Pie Town
this poem came to me.
Not the telling of it
but the necessity of it
rising thick as pitch
in grainy Ponderosa
that grows in cinders.
Not the words of it
but the swelling of it
like a thunderhead
gathering with rain.
On the road to Quemado
it came stalking.
Over each mesa
down each arroyo
it sought me out.

It came as a blessing
on the road to Pie Town
on the plain of San Agustín
where men read the stars.

—Pie Town, New Mexico, 1987
Adrift

He rides west into the Chukchi Sea, 
wind in his teeth and eyebrows aching, 
west into a sky of ashes, into fog 
where all directions draw him only 
further in. He finds the skin kayak 
like a feather resting lightly 
on the water’s silken surface, 
waiting for a body to lower itself 
into the perfect 0 of its empty seat.

Like the Irish monks who turned 
themselves adrift with neither oars 
nor sails nor destination, he waits 
for the Spirit of the Lord to breathe 
on the water. If only he can match 
the ocean’s terrible patience, he will 
be caught up in that breath swirling 
and rippling, welling up as it does 
from all places at once, to make 
all things new. He will celebrate 
sacred mass on the back of a whale, 
he will grow sharp as the point 
of a narwhal’s tusk, then slip 
into the presence of God, 
where there is no bottom, 
there is no shore.

--Sesholik, Alaska, 1989
IV.

"Come, spider, greet the sun
and be of good will.
Come, toad, give thanks to God
that you exist."

--Ruben Dario
The Music Rushing Through You
--for Mike Bucy

From the south rim we tramped
down muddy switchbacks
with your trombone

until we found a place
where Redwall limestone
hemmed us in, sheltered

from the wind. And then--
the music rushing through you
took the canyon by surprise--

notes vaulted from cliff
to cliff, slapping stone
with their brassy edges,

arpeggios returning
as chords; it was no longer
you alone filling the gorge,

but dozens of hidden trombonists
perched on ledges, suspended
from trees, leaning dangerously

into the chasm, pouring Brahms
and hymns and blues
into the wind.
Each note found a crack
and took root, growing
into a symphony—

Allegro swirling in alcoves
of Coconino sandstone, broad
Andante spreading out

on Bright Angel shale, spilling
over into the rough-and-tumble
finale of Vishnu schist,

making scattered hikers
wonder if it might be
Judgment Day.

--Horseshoe Mesa, Grand Canyon, 1985
At Peggy's

The night begins with reggae; clear the floor and stir it up, and we are tongues of fire wanting only to dance. Soon, time for poetry and ice cream: Vallejo and Goo-Goo Cluster, Rilke and Chocolate Chip Mint. A candle in the window burns, haloed by prisms of frost. On the other side of glass it's forty-five below, feathered limbs of birch sparkling.

I step out of steel drums and sonnets into a silence full and solid, possessing heft and weight. Crunching snow under boots, Huskies howling. Stillness rolling back. An aurora borealis overhead, quick-stepping to its own fine, thin music—violet patches like the soles of feet shuffling gently to a reggae beat, pale green sheets twirling, unravelling.
I lick my glazed moustache
and feel the tongue stick.
The air so sharp to breathe,
the night so alive with light!
Not the body of God, but the trail
She leaves behind: luminous
steam swirling off Her huge
and glorious body emerging
naked from the Sauna of Heaven
to dance awhile in the snow.

--Fairbanks, Alaska, 1986
Mixing

Crazy as a loon--crazy!
Free as a pancake--free! And quick--
so quick, and slick, slicker
than deer guts on a doorknob; they call me
slick Rick and I am slicker
than you can shake a stick
at. Smoooooooth, smooth as silk,
creamy as milk, and pleased, oh so
pleased with myself. Pleased as punch,
I'm just happy to be here in this poem, mixing,
mixing metaphors because I'm mad--mad
as a cucumber, cool as toast, drunk
as a fiddle and fit as a skunk.
If you open your heart like a box,
I will leap out at you because I'm
dangerous and sticky, sticky
as a Venus Fly-Trap, as watermelon
juice on your chin--sticky Rick they call me,
and I'm thick as a brick, not thin
like a poem, but thick as Georgia
mud on a tire (and just as slick)
and I'll kick your ass from here
to breakfast if you mess with me
because I'm tense as a barbed wire fence
and twice as jagged, ragged as a shirt tail,
jumpy as a superball in a wind tunnel;
I've got bees in my belfry and bats
in my britches, skivvies in a bunch.
Out for lunch. I am the man you meet at a street fair, grinning like a piano at every girl I greet, eager as a beaver and fresh as a flower (in just one hour), all on my own like a rolling stone. A pretty slick guy, a few bricks shy, a fly ball left of center, going, going, gone out of the ball park--Goodbye Mister Spalding! Holy Cow! I'm just happy to be here.
The Meatgrinder

Scramble up this narrow chimney and grip the ledge... shift your weight... for Chrissake move quick. Don’t look down and don’t slip.

Grab the knob and shimmy over the lip. Edge the thin flake, pray it won’t break... now scurry up those shallow buckets and dip to that nipple there... helluva time to rip your pants... hamstring’s starting to shake... move quick don’t look down and don’t slip.

Jam the crack and lay back... now flip yourself on to that shelf... a piece of cake. Now wedge into the crotch and twist your hips...

get a grip on that lucky strip of cleavage... make no mistakes... Move quick, don’t look down, and don’t slip.
Engine Crew

Behind the fire line we watch
the mountain burn, its shaggy back
dotted with spot-fires, twinkling.
We hear the distant crackle and whoosh
of crowning Ponderosa. Smokin' Joe,
the crew boss, lies on his cot,
fingerling the same old dog-eared
issues of "Swank" and "Beaver".
He fights fire to escape his wife.
Tony Manygoats sits on a stump
and ties feathers to a medicine wheel
to give his engine luck.

We all end up in the river.
The Salmon is our Jordan;
like Namaan the Syrian,
we wash away our leprous spots.
Arlen skinny-dips with girls
from the Targhee Hot Shots,
his vanilla butt cloven
like a mountain goat's hoof.

Then to our bags and the banter
of crews before sleep--bets placed
on when a tottering pine, gnawed
by flame at its base, will fall;
news of the Tahoe and Ojai fires.
Joe says whoooee, boys, hope we
get to fight the Fallon fire,
them girls at the Salt Palace
are really something else.

One by one the voices cease,
and a quicksilver moon fades
in and out of smoke, spilling
its light on the faces of dreaming men,
each one smoldering in his sleep.

--Salmon National Forest, Idaho, 1985
Arizona Pastoral

Follow the irrigation ditch
clogged with the drifting fluff
of sycamores, past the pen
where John Paul was gored
by the one-horned hereford,
the cellar crawling with black widows,
through the field where Chasmo sliced
a beehive with his machete, then ran
howling, pulling down his pants,
to the stock pond where you bagged
bullfrogs, sneaking through cattails
with a stick. Past your tree house
in the rotten Fremont cottonwood,
rigged with an alarm—an upside-down
rail we rolled stones down
into a coffee can, which meant
someone’s coming, quick
hide the Playboy.

Like someone who doesn’t have to come back.
Like someone who can be anybody he wants.
Down the road, and through the rail yards,
up an arroyo to shoot bottles. Restless.
Follow the ditch choked with Russian Thistle--
the sun blazing on your neck,
the air buzzing with cicadas
and watermelon beetles-- to a yard
of crabgrass littered with hubcaps,
the butter-mint yellow adobe of Dolly Vallejo,
a house always tuned to "Radio Mundo"
and always Dolly's wilted mother
complaining about the baby or the cat.
Past the cottonwood-- bearing witness
in its bark to an old love, the letters
now beyond recognition,
swollen like arthritic knuckles.

Follow the ditch to the creek.
Perhaps Dolly will meet you.
Take off your clothes.
Climb into the dead sycamore
that holds the knotted rope,
swing out over the water,
and let go.
Missing The Rapture

Your mother isn't home.
She is always home this time
of day, watching old movies,
ironing clothes, baking cookies.
At first, you don't worry about it.
You turn on the t.v. and grab a coke.
But her absence weighs heavy, and the house
is too quiet. Hours go by, and still
she isn't home. At first it isn't quite fear
that sneaks like a thief through the back door--
just a thought. Not even a thought, really,
just a voice chattering behind a thought,
saying what you have always known
would happen has happened.
It has happened without you.
"Now it's too late," rattles the voice,
and you can't shut it up.
It names your sins:
the tequila in your locker,
the Playboy under your mattress,
the itching powder in Brad Meyer's
jock strap, those daydreams
of Angela Martinez in silk panties...
and now you will have to live alone
through the Great Tribulation
where there will be weeping
and gnashing of teeth.
You will have the mark of The Beast branded on your forehead.
But just as you can imagine
the feel and smell of burnt flesh,
the screen door slams and your mother’s smooth soprano banishes the frenzy
that has been building in you.
Great is Thy faithfulness, she sings,
great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed Thy hand hath provided,
--It is the loveliest sound
you have ever heard, so you help her
with the groceries, smiling
as she reaches the high note--
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

--for my mother, Ruth Rozema
Blue Mustang

—for Carole

After the children have fallen
finally asleep and the day’s catch
of salmon cleaned, filleted, canned,
my sister sits like a sphinx
on the porch. It is raining,
gently. Smoke drifts and curls
from her cigarette like a net
gone slack at high tide.
Somewhere between contentment
and longing, Carole also drifts,
hers face turned upward in rain.

This sister and I, eleven years
apart, each have floundered
and found grace on our own
schedules. I hardly know you,
she says. What do you remember?

My sister drove a blue Mustang.
This is what I remember.
Drove it right through a STOP sign.
Why do big sisters do things?
No one knows. Their thoughts
are as remote as their bedrooms.
Twenty years ago she straddled
Chuck "The Chili Bean’s" Harley,
wearing go-go boots and a football jersey
with the letters BTR across her chest—
she said it stood for Big Tough Rozema.
Street quarterback, church pianist
pounding out "God of Our Fathers"
hungover from a Saturday night
spent with the engineers.

Twenty years ago, she shared a thunderstorm
with me as if it were a secret between us—
one only a six-year-old brother should know.
She tilted her face to the sky, and I
leaned back in imitation as raindrops
trickled into the corners of my mouth.
Ponderosa pine and apache plume--life
I didn’t know the names of then--
seeped into the drops, bitter and sweet.

Today, in this long Alaskan twilight,
her face is turned once again upward
in rain. I see the changes she has
weathered. No one stays the same.
She has a husband, three children,
a garden. And I remember a moment
I thought she would have nothing--
when she collapsed on the Mustang’s seat,
not hearing not seeing her littlest
brother shaking her shaking her shaking...
And I prayed and I ran for help and I wanted her to get up and drive that Blue Mustang, drive it the way I will always remember her— not slowing down for the STOP signs.

--Dillingham, Alaska, 1983
Biking West Virginia

Her chestnut hair is in a bun, some loose strands floating silky as milkweed to her freckled shoulders.
She smiles at you, placid as your coffee; with one look, you know her name is Norma and she has worked eleven years in this truckstop ministering to vagrants.

In the men's room you give in to curiosity and buy a SCREAMER for only fifty cents. Guaranteed to drive your lover wild. It looks like a spiked collar for a squirrel. You stuff it in your pocket before Norma sees you with it. Suspecting your depravity, she loves you anyway, and has left a pocket-size Gospel According to John next to your plate.
You ride through Blue Ridge towns
thick with the Holy Spirit
into the emerald sweep
of hills shrouded in mist
and the tight-weave
of dogwood and alder,
mitten hands of sassafras,
sudden jump and tumble of streams
speaking in tongues.

Which language is that,
you ask an old man with a voice
like rust on a barn roof.
Holy Ghost language, he says.
Which way to Phillipi?
 Doesn't much matter
which way the road turns,
you always wind up in the next town.

In a cow pasture
there are three crosses
welded of five inch pipe
and painted pastel blue.
You sleep at the foot of the cross
and wake to bellowing Holsteins.
First rays of the sun
split into rainbow
by dew that gathers itself
and drips from the downy
underside of tall grass.
You ride hard and arrive spent in Parkersburg at dusk, where nothing moves but the Ohio. Metallic, old, inscrutable, the way a thing is itself and nothing else. All at once you are free to plunge into it, leaving your old life on the surface like a film of oil, until what remains is only yourself, transparent, glistening on the far bank.

--Parkersburg, West Virginia, 1986