High water | [poems]

Neile Graham

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2543

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

This is an unpublished manuscript in which copyright subsists. Any further reprinting of its contents must be approved by the author.

Mansfield Library
University of Montana
Date: 1984
HIGH WATER

By

Neile Graham

B.A., University of Victoria, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1984

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

Date June 4, 1984
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of these poems have appeared in:
ARIEL
CANADIAN LITERATURE
DANDELION
WOT

for my parents; for Jim
CONTENTS

STORY GROUND
2 Anything You Say
3 Swutlak Builds False Spring
4 Swutlak Raises the Fields
5 The Man's Dark Voice
7 The Prophet as Traveller
8 The Master of Winter
9 This is Story Ground
11 Sleeping with Lambs
12 Another Case
13 The Name of the Hunt

THE HEADWATERS
15 Salamander Pendant
17 The Enemy's Garden
18 Evening Wind
19 The Stolen Bird
21 Parable of the Headwaters
22 Bitterroot
23 Settled in Montana for Winter
24 The Month we Reached Ocean
25 Map of Vancouver Island
27 Saltspring
28 Sooke River Story
GRACE
30 High Water
32 Lakeside Inventory
33 Thetis Island at Winter's End
34 My Grandmother's Photograph
36 Aubade in Grey
37 Woman in Bath
38 Washing at Sunset
40 Homage to the Artist
41 Letter from Walnut Street
43 Hero at the Gates of Hell
STORY GROUND
Anything you say can and will be used to make children uneasy, to make them sleep. You tell tales to the children dreaming of the dragon-keep, where all the pale maidens have clear eyes, modest hair, and breasts uncovered only in the struggle deep in the heart of the hero (you) who takes her from her scaly, lascivious lover. O the look in their eyes when they wake to your weeping, keeping sleep away--first by the magic of your voice and then by what you say.
Sky naked as flesh. The air cracked and cold as stone chipped like obsidian into a cunning blade. These days strip you till you’re raw as a man who sees just one direction, and you hold the wind like ice till it melts in your hand. The river’s skin peels and flakes, the river bleeds mud from the hills. Light pours from your flesh: a scarce, fertile rain. Clouds darken and shuffle in from the east. And now the night is a bear, his bulk a shy eclipse. Near morning his fur is black, clear as obsidian, his purpose never blunted. Wind shaves your hands.
SWULAK RAISES THE FIELDS

Around you, rock,
and light cuts it, divides
rock and fields. Bones and flesh.
Behind you light naked
on the fields you've crossed, on
beams of loose grass you've
pushed aside. Listen,
you hear the rustling angry sun
grain stuck in its throat.
You've walked too far not to know
the place where you stumble
the harsh breath you turn into
waiting in April heat.
Spring, and you come from
the fields, broken earth
breaking with light.
Once you dream it
something happens.
Even on the dark
face of the cliff, the man
breaks from rock, tears
his bones from fissures,
ribs from stone ribs.

Open sky channels
into his mind. Striding
newly down into the valley
of night slung low
from the hills, his eyes hold
the first light he sees.
His hands crumble at your door.

Weeks ago I lived underground,
there my world was larger.
The bones of my city
were the earth's ribs, and shook
with breath. Dust covered my hands.
The ceiling was the nearest sky, stars
were touchable, sparks that slid
from my arms to my belly.
I made light with small fire
and it held me.
The dark room
tightens around you. His voice
echoes as though shifting
through tunnels. The air
is clothed with dust
and the man's broken hands
hold flame.

You don't dare say
it's a dream. The cliff
keeps the scar of a man
at its base. What happened
shapes you, keeps you tracing
the dark hills for tunnels,
while light from your window
burns toward the cliff.
THE PROPHET AS TRAVELLER

The man who reads portents
knows everyone's name.

He knows direction: the angle
branches point in heavy wind.

When he comes to your door
offer food and a bed,
even if your daughter
goes hungry and sleepless.

If he dreams red dogs
under your roof, he warns

of fire. If he dreams long-legged
cranes stalking high grass, flood.

If mice, expect marauders.
If he has dreamt nothing at all

he will read tracks a bird,
broken-winged, left below your window.

Miles down the road he'll call
your daughter's name

you'll find her bed empty.
When she returns she'll say nothing,

but the child in her arms will sing.
THE MASTER OF WINTER

The light is wrong. He means it to be broken, forced through cedar and fir. Perhaps weaker, more like diluted sun from the season’s end. The wind shifts clouds for him. This is not enough.

He tries again. Places himself on the river’s edge. The heat is enough for high water, the drift of silt from the mountains. He wants to lose himself in the geography of rivers.

It is not enough. There is nothing that can say why he’s here, why he chooses this detail or that to mean something beyond what language carries.

He lives on the edge of knowing why rain collects behind roots on reddened soil. He wants sun to touch it at a sudden angle, turn it gold. He wants the water to spill over, to call it home.
Full moon in winter, the room fragrant with cedar smoke, a certain burning in this old man's eyes. This is story ground to the bone. This man, wrinkles slivered in his lips, this man with his few teeth brown and broken spits out bone:

A girl, call her White Owl, lived with a tribe that wanted fire. They wanted fire and sent her out to call on the wolves who kept it. She walked to open snow north, where she heard they hid their dens. She didn't know how to find them so let them find her, lay two nights and days in snow. The third night they dragged her to their den. They fed her asked her why. She said: I hear you have red eyes. They grinned. She said: Because you watch red dances no one has seen, know warmth red in the snow that turns snow to spring in winter. Their grins opened to bare teeth. She had only
an instant to grab a stick
from the fire they had hidden.
To slow them she lit
dry grass in the den. She
ran until she was tired,
till she found the first
tree of the forest
and she begged him to
hide her. He knew only one way,
so he burned for her
and tapped the next tree
who burned too and soon
built a wall between
her and the wolves and they burned
and in their arms, she burned
in flames that rose like
the northern lights in winter.
Soon fire spread to the tribe
and they saved it.

His eyes close. We
offer food. He bares his crumbling teeth and sleeps
by the fire. In the night we dream red trees,
red wolves and a young girl dressed in red with
stark white bones showing through her flesh;
when we wake he's gone, the scars his steps carved
slowly fill with new snow.
SLEEPING WITH LAMBS

The woman is not mad
but she dreams about snow
piercing the windows of her house,
snow tunneling through the earth
to her cellar, moist flakes
already forming on the sheets
of her bed. Wind surrounds
the house like wolves,
sinewy as tree branches
etched into sleep. Not quite
the dream she expected: four
white heads tucked beside her
as she turns to see them there, neatly
beside her, the blankets folded just
under their chins, the air warm
with the wool of their breathing.
ANOTHER CASE

In this story he names you Edward, the lover; you kill yourself.

Your only recognizable feature your hands which hold the rope

or revolver: he won't tell. He won't say whether they tremble,

whether they're determined as gravity or bullets.

Shock will find you spent in mid-air or staining the carpet.

Silent, hands moving in and out of pockets, he's the detective

who touches your notebooks and phone, cold flesh.

He brings the sheet to open over your face, he watches as

with one burst of the attendant's hands the doors jolt shut and your body shudders.

In the next scenes, characters continue, remember you only

as Edward who killed himself. They don't ask who was your lover.
THE NAME OF THE HUNT

Fire is the name I'd have taken
to carry with me, but I stole
what I could: your bed,
warm sleep, all the easy dreams.
They've done me no good, left
nothing but hunger and I hunger
through this long winter bare
even of snow. When the wind covers
me these nights, it tells me
you've hidden in a cave to wait
for spring. I warn you
it was there wolves
found me with no fire to keep
them away; I lay with them
three nights, and now we hunt
to kill our hunger. Hunt
for the first break of spring.
You must keep moving, keep
night from your bones; when
we pause on the face of the hill,
testing the wind, it's your voice
I listen for, you and what
I couldn't carry.
SALAMANDER PENDANT

Night is a black beetle caught in my hair, 
estars are its million eyes.

If I were a child I'd squeeze its body 
like warmed wax. I'm a woman who knows

ordinary men, the kind you might glance at 
in passing, for their regular

defined beauty. The kind who 
care for precision. A child

outside calls a lost animal, her voice 
earnest as a bird's decoying cats

from the nest. Maybe it's her beetle I've stolen 
and begun to dismember into its irregular

parts. A deeper voice takes over in the street. 
If I were an animal I'd follow.

On my chest salamanders sleep 
until they come near fire.

Salamanders stiffened by the breathing darkness 
ordinary men leave you in. Even inside

your own room, with the night glued 
against your window, seeping through despite
all the candles you can ever burn.
This beetle uses the moon

for a scarred and swollen heart.
Night's beacon luring me to darkness,

a hole torn through to
those fires that must lie beyond.
THE ENEMY'S GARDEN

Tell her: woman, you smell of meat,
your name is a lost name,
your blistered feet mind
their own way through the forest.
You can't guide her any further,
I've run ahead, painted yellow arrows
on all the right trees:
every third fir, every dogwood,
no alders. Tell her
there are bear in these woods
wolves that will love
the scent of her.

Tell her: woman, your hair is tangled
with memories I no longer
love, your hands are not the hands
that can hold me in the forest.
She's running now, she fears
each turn of the broken trail, fears
shadows under leaves.
She wants you to tell her
it's only a dream. Tell her
she's been dreaming
that alders fall, and
the dogwoods know it's spring.

Tell her: woman, I've slept on a bed
of fir needles, and the scent
warmed the night. You've only
ever wanted the naming,
and not the name: my ring
at the base of your finger, my hand
at the base of your thigh.
EVENING WIND

First the woman, her skin
tightening, her hands and leg
on the bed she's about to enter,
but she's turned, her hair barely
stirs in wind that knocks the curtains
into the room. She's turned to look past
the bricks that frame the window,
into the blank light there, wind
that breaks over her skin.
Cool air pushes in
from thousands of rooms from
the city around her, from the sea
beyond.

Across the sea
there's a shore and a city,
and by a window is a man naked
where air moves outward from his skin,
back to where the woman still
has not moved into bed:
the wind on her face chills her.
THE STOLEN BIRD

for Jim

You're still asleep
and light cuts through
the gap between blind
and window frame
to my palm.
Burning I say,
burning you repeat
in your sleep, then
turn to lie closer
against me. I hold
the light in my hand
like a bird—it beats
with blood and flight,
it's claws dig through
to my bones. The bird
in my hand burns
and I can't move my arm
or close my fingers,
can't wake you.
The bird spreads its wings
as I try to call
your name, settles
when my voice won't rise
from my throat. You're
still in night,
the bird and I burn
like sun
like morning.
Look you shout
from your sleep, and
my hand falls empty
your hand brushes
my thighs and
you turn.
PARABLE OF THE HEADWATERS

This is where it begins:
here where wind and sun roll
like boulders down the mountain.
Stones in the streambed play water
like lute strings, drawing and releasing them
in pulses that become one song.
I have seen hunters drink this water
and sing how bears come to slake
their whole winter's thirst, how wolves
wash their snouts free of the blood
of deer who drank here. Hunters
stop on the banks to forget their
hunt. They want to tell what the water
does to them all, vibrating
like a harp in their bones,
envoy of the light that never can
reach so close to the marrow.
BITTERROOT

for Greg

The river headfirst through
the valley, not moving to the sea
or the river not moving, in
light from the clouded moon

is just a little magic,
a few lies to teach you where
this city is.

Remember the wind
is from the east, that it
doesn't carry the far scent of
sea, only brittle air
from the mountains

splintering
in your lungs. From here
this river splits
to nothing, nowhere
but the invisible edge
of the valley,

tracing
boundaries you never see.
SETTLED IN MONTANA FOR WINTER

In winter you are the first thing that freezes in the space between word and word, between branch and twig where the leaves were lost in the first deep frost. We walk by the river, where ice forms halos around stones. You say south like an old man dimly holding to one thing he knows.

I'd rather say Canada, home, whose name is the sound of ice cracking and the bird's call across snow. I want to name the gap between us, we pad it with words, old sweaters to keep out chill, watch the river moving someplace we never go, south, where like new leaves your hands will open.
THE MONTH WE REACHED OCEAN

for Georgia

Prairie miles behind us with their only golden oceans of grain and we’re looking for a rocky shore, barnacles and kelp to tangle around our feet. We talked of nothing else for days. Miles before, my daughter took off her itching shoes and finally, salt wind against us, we guided each other to the retreating waves, gulls teasing us for bread, rain chasing us back to shore, where for as long as she remembered my child held her hand clenched tightly over a small pool of water in her palm, would sometimes stick her tongue in it, quick and puzzled as a bird.
MAP OF VANCOUVER ISLAND

This is presented
by the Queen's Printer.
This map excises something
north. Somewhere west as well,
you can tell because

east of both island and strait
the mainland stretches toward
and beyond the margins.
The island itself is far
paler green and brown

than anyone could imagine
an island being. The highways
are red, which no tourist
ever reported seeing on
the main asphalt lines;

it may represent the way
the roads all stop
short at water's edge,
some official kind of warning.
The sea itself is a flat,

soft blue, like a January
sky. No whitecaps.
No sailboats or gale warnings.
Dotted lines direct
the ferries. All
along the western coast,
areas in which many shipwrecks have occurred are indicated
thus (a black three-masted schooner going down).
SALTSPRING

for Brenda

Early island light
with characters: the heron
skimming from rock to rock, just off shore;
the crows that led me far down the beach
taunting me farther; the sea itself, coming in;
my friend inside, sleeping; the gulls; the terns;
the river otters who bobbed their heads
over the log below me, the last otter, hesitant, stared.

Light with objects: the shells
perfect and whole but still inhabited; plants
on shore rocks, clinging certain of soil and rain;
the stone whale, beached and buried; the weeds; the kelp;
the rock breakwater before me a path into the sea
in all its certainty; in my hand
a crow's feather, a pink shell
found broken for my sleeping friend.
SOKE RIVER STORY

Just past this river's yearly tide, somewhere in June, we rest on basalt smoothed by the river's age. Sleep beads your skin like sweat, or the breath water sprays to cool you. When I dive in, your hand brushes off the rain. Current tosses me downstream. It's not far to the ocean: there I'm swept far west, drift while you lie upriver sleeping, years of leaves rotting around you, your body burnt and frozen, washed but never moving. Finally the ocean beaches me; I slap shore gravel from my arms and thighs, then cut through salal along the river's bank. When I find you, you're asleep, a dream buzzing around your head. You taste like salt and sun brewed for hours of light, which doesn't explain why I can't wake you. This is the kind of legend that remains unwritten, that surfaces in your dream when the river sings beside you in its own hollow bed.
GRACE
HIGH WATER

hot wind came from the marshes
we wade through air thick
with rotting weeds
fish from the spawning steam
in Indian summer, in red
leaved shrouds fleshy anchors
our legs weigh us into the mud

dearth-chill from the mountains
we reach the rock and begin
to climb an old stream-bed
crevasse between mountains
shale and scree that run past us
like water

a leaf in the current
pushing ourselves the wrong direction
leaving the marsh for these foreign
heights, our hands fall away
from each other there it is
the first clue that we may
be lovers wait there's more

but the eyes and stance between the eyes
love, this is not beauty
but trial here is a place
we can turn and look
distance spreads the air
before us, winter and summer
meet exchange themselves again
casting but shade beyond the other lights
and we’re here, hands held
without touching
the sun fades with the heat
not setting but distant
we wait for the stars to fade in
brighten us waiting

sky’s clear/ night’s sea/ green of the mountain pool
and now sky is water but clear
and we breathe it to fill ourselves
we are not each other
not ourselves what is beneath us
is no longer the mountain
LAKESIDE INVENTORY

This is my pack, a bud that closes
around everything I own. At the centre,
its heart, is my life. When I
open it, my hands savour
the warmth that rushes from it like waves.
Inside I find my sandpaper towel
to strip the damp from my skin; insect shell
sandals to guard my feet from gravel and heat,
scars of the lake's shifting. A tin cup
so I can swallow the water that
swallows me. My notebook to fan
the lake's rain from my face.
My pen to etch my name
on the cup and in the pages of my book.
This is my pack, my pillow against the world.
This is my book, my blanket.
I leave them open to soak in
the perfect air, and peel my clothes from me.
The water cups my body as though my flesh
were a boat cradling my soul,
my arms are oars stitching
the air to the water.
THETIS ISLAND AT WINTER'S END

stones slide beneath
our feet like the waves
falling from each other February
and rain blurs all horizons
melding sky and sea our feet
lose their hold on
whatever we walk on where
is your cold hand your back
before me is broad and dark
against the certain grey

between us more of the nameless
space that cannot help but remain
logs below us stumble
into each other with the push
and stutter of waves my flesh
is cold and naked
under the winter bulk of
cloth which wind and rain
remove thoughtless as passion
but with the same cold fingers
MY GRANDMOTHER'S PHOTOGRAPH

The wind tonight is not quite spring
but holds a fragrant hint of mud
and blind shoots waking inhale
that scent. In gusts at once warm
and cool there is no room
for bare feet or women
like white birds in Grecian gowns.
It's not yet May and sixty-five years
have spun by. She's dead, who
in this photograph presses her
naked feet against the grass, raises
her arms to dance, a white shawl
drifting like feathers from
her hands. She knows nothing yet.
Her confidence is tender
as a bird's. I can't trust
the web spun between us to bind
her, it's stretched over so many years.
Looking at this girl, I wonder
how much I would explain to her,
how could I warn her that her first child
would be still-born? That she would defy
the doctor to conceive another, a pin
taken to the French safe the doctor
made her husband wear? That her daughter
would bear me and that I would remember her
old in the mahogany bed lying in regal
darkness at the end of the curving hall
and would know that all grandmothers are queens,
ever dreaming of this white-gowned
girl with waist-long hair stepping
into the history of her life and mine.
The wind pushing through her to me
is fecund with dreams and mud and doesn't
tie us. Each movement I make toward her
is another step in her dance, another breath
of wind pressing her forward into the season.
I remember pushing pins into her hair to keep it
from falling. Her hair dark as distance, yet
light as birds and the girl I create of her.
AUBADE IN GREY

Light splays across the room.
Inside it two figures move stiffly
like silhouettes
behind the screen of light, never
touching. What is it they're doing?
What is their story?
Has the man ever held
the woman's head in his hands, stroked
her eyes? Has the woman ever
turned to him from the window,
winter light and trees
captured in her face? Now imagine
it's Russia: the room is grey,
the one lamp open as confession,
the man and woman closed
as walls. What do they say?
Could she lean forward, shut off
the lamp, let daylight enter March-grey,
her eyes opening like clouds?
Then what would she say?
WOMAN IN BATH

Only in water is my skin relieved; like Marat
water releases me. I can

remove the cloth that binds me
and breathe. Water
lines my skin like a

coffin's satin. Here I float
at ease, removed, a simple
leviathan in a pool, or

an embryo asleep in
a jar. Marat's bath empties
of blood and the oily

leakage from skin
and its putrefaction.
This is how water

eases the flesh,
how it holds all
our pain discards.
WASHING AT SUNSET

My hands were in water and I
was crying. Simple as that.
I was trying to put something together,
more than tears and water. The sun squeezed
between cloud and mountain,
focused on the back of my shoulder.
I didn't move.

Simply wondering why the sky
opened like that, seeing
myself in the water
with the sun behind. For once
I couldn't see the lines that reach
across my skin, the cross-hatch of years
defining my eyes. The dark
shape of the water nods.
I don't know how to say yes--
yes to the man at my door
who asks to stay.

It's been weeks since he first
walked in. Under the bed
his clothes gather, and still
I've never answered him, never
let him see me wake
before he leaves. The sun feels
like his hand on my shoulder.
It's too late to tell him lies,
our motives are certain: the parody of self
that is sometimes beauty.
The warm flesh.
I'm afraid I fall through life and learn nothing. Simple as that. I want to put it together, have it all make sense. The sun will release my shoulder, I'll lift my hands from the water and open the door. His skin warms my hands, gives me something to hold.
HOMAGE TO THE ARTIST

To let you know. This is what we see as art.
The way we hold our faces in our hands
says so, the way we twist askance, so,
to share in the artist’s vision. You
say one egg is better than a cat going out
all angles over a roof. Shining shape.
Form luminous and held in a breath.
Name it fox’s eyes sweeping. A child’s
cheek. Oval more round than
the potter’s embrace. It doesn’t matter.
We here are a simple equation. An eye
for an eye. What your hands have made
our focus dismantles. This certain occasion
two eyes for one: the numinous egg.
LETTER FROM WALNUT STREET

to the Skeltons; to John

It's autumn, October. Home again, three months married, and we're planning for winter after summer days that pressed us into New York: the squalid hot urine smell of the city. I couldn't make sense of it—the derelicts in the subway, everyone walking as though armed, the museums full of anguish and beauty, my new husband distant beside me. At least I stopped trying to put it all into boxes.

Wiping the sweat off my throat all night at the Y. Jim naked and restless in the other bed. Saw Eva Hesse's fiberglass boxes mounted and holding nothing. Saw Starry Night and Dawn's Wedding Chapel. We saw too much heat and too much we can't touch in a city where strangers work hard to construct space beside them like shadows.

Running from lightning and rain in the Village, drying our shirts in a glass-walled restaurant. Saw Godard's Breathless in a stale and dank theatre. Walked through the streets our arms just touching, feeling sun and a film of dust that wouldn't fade from our skin.
We rode the wrong subway, emerged
to an empty morning that was Harlem
and a red-bandannnaed woman sent us out
through two blocks and Needle Park.
I can't understand the word
*ghetto* and what it didn't mean that morning.
The park was green, held only
a man walking dogs, two young men talking
intently, who hardly glanced at our fear
and flight, at our sweating white skins pushing us
closer, running to enter our safety again--west
to home and the cool of autumn.

But that was summer and over. Now
we're home and something between
the branch and leaves has taught
them to fly. Snapshots and postcards
spill like snow from the closet and
winter will take us by surprise again;
the naked snow and maples are
something we can't order and the leaves
are soon long gone.
HERO AT THE GATES OF HELL

for Bette

I'm afraid to ask the right questions. The ones that elicit instruction and guidance: how to hold a tree against weather, my hands against time. If only I hadn't come to this, seen how shadows hold a greater light across the darkness.

No one will believe me.

And when I return I will invest everything with strange new qualities. The morning sun will brighten my room in a way that will seem new, and when I wake to it, leave my bed and cross the cool floor to hold the pitcher, feel the good clay and its weight of clear water, I will think how the moment is so beautiful no one would ever know it's not perfect.