1978

Night Should Have Boundaries

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The University of Montana

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NIGHT SHOULD HAVE BOUNDARIES

By
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B.A., Shimer College, 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1978

Approved by:

[Signatures of Board of Examiners and Dean]

Date
July 19, 1978
Acknowledgements

Some of these poems previously appeared in the following journals and books:

for Joel and Sandy

We are solitary. We may delude ourselves and act as though this were not true. But how much better it is to realize it, yes, even to begin by assuming it.

R. M. Rilke

The prisoner turns toward anyone. "I'm sorry. These seats are taken."
My only window dreams at night. It's not going to last.
It dreams of the terrible snow which I know is terrible.
It takes the scissors upon itself.

Michael Burkard
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I

What Could Get Me Talking
The Lake

It disturbs you, the lake growing out of evening, the rock pearled up the harbor delivering a row of boats. From this distance, clouds are like sacks of ice.

In the dream we share, night is pocked with sails, a sentinel holding in the pier. It disturbs you. Sometimes you want to say, yes, I've had enough. Then out among meaningless plunges, the vague wake and sky we held from shore come apart. You sink through another seizure of waves, a soft explosion in your throat.

Along the lichen and pitched rock, the shore imitates your further shape. Your mouth gives in without a sound, confused under the continual white caps, approximates a dream.

There, beyond the waves, a calm has come down. Two gulls climb like white prisms into a wash of night, and the lake takes your final breath.

Across the slow tilting clouds, a boat slides from its bed. You turn this scene farther in: like a ghost ship on fire, the lake traces what you have lost, drifting.
Night Should Have Boundaries

Days this white light warning you home safe. There in July, your window opens out to the lake. Gulls and you understand: the way beyond cut off. Sometimes you would nod or stand to watch, imagine small fish crawling across your window, wounds swarming tiny wings like emeralds above water. Then, looked out. All day the sails coming in and going.

You have traveled some distance before night, like so many carp for fresh blood. Friends tried talking you from the window. But always, the lake a mirror-writing of weather, the fish more than romance. I'd nod, think of you not laughing in this slant of light. The night should have boundaries to hold us near.

On the beach, gulls poised in sand, singing the shells your hand held out to water. Hasn't the lake gone on long enough? Waves falling forward, and you, unaware. But even then, in this room you are awake for small gains. Today, water wants to say dull green, the sky not just sky, opals gone your blue distance.
Shells

i

They change for no one.
Only the dead know how wild
their insides wave about:
because the dead too
are a heart beat
we do not hear.

ii

We imagine they are out there
like a lost swimmer,
distant, crazed. Beneath
the waves are fingertips
spinning endlessly under:
water taking up their bodies.

iii

Our need for stricter borders.
In our bodies, the space
we make for pain is
their calm. The deepest part
surrounds: taking in
water insanely.

iv

Another story. Consider
the interiors between
shores. The ocean cradles
each shell impersonally,
fluted eternally.
Listening for My Father

Every room a separation,
and you telling me secrets
I could turn on myself.
Taking your words, the ones
I remember well, they invited
this: our dull pulling apart.
Now to say, I've left you father.

Tonight, I'm thinking
how much earth we pushed
over you. I want to tell you
I welcomed those words
that put you under, each spoken
as if a last--but cannot explain.
You in your chair, the anger
floating up like fine rain.

That day they found you
curled in your coat,
you died miles from us.
It was some silent neglect
before you. I wanted to touch
your face, we're so closed up.

Now, I'm stepping away, this
memory, an immense abstraction
twisting in the chest. It
says we are the same--always.
Some nights I hear you
in that chair, turning edges
of paper like a knife sharpening
over the brain. Even now,
I'm looking down my fists.
This Friend  
for Tom Mitchell

No one wants to tell you  
how to be alone, since you have,  
to drift through this day  
like dust filtered through  
a haze. Even thinking  
is less clear, and for some time  
I thought about ordinary things:  
leaving a lover, for example.  
That ritual included joyousness,  
then, loneliness returning.

I'm afraid of speaking  
from a damaged point of view,  
afraid of the history we make  
for ourselves, resisting  
each other. Glimpses of ugly moments  
that penetrate the heart like  
some object distinct on the horizon.  
I should be ashamed.

So today, this friend appears  
especially close. We talk  
of the need for a woman,  
a knife to cut away this crap  
about loneliness. I might  
come to know him better  
at the exclusion of myself.  
But my first urge is for  
a lover's incompleteness.
Crossing Over
for John Nausieda

Dear friend, I write this before washing my face, which is a way clear of any sacrifice made today. The poem comes from a stricter need, a hollowing out like the skull washed of blood and water.

Through this, we gather light, a crossing over, as one crosses from sleep to some kiss that could make you lonely. Elsewhere, all moves through a dream, a lover's faint smell, the flowers bending from their roots.

I might open a newspaper, read about that mindless murder. But even then, the morning goes on without us. The dull spines of tulips we've not yet watered. Today, I've no simple reason to complete myself.

Sometimes we should care less for those unhappy, and living with this is special, like writing you. I want to rise gently, let this morning go on falling, its delicate wing agile across my face.
What Could Get Me Talking

All night the vibrating wall of a shell. Resonance. My father whispers into the deep lake of his dissolving self. Does he hear it? That disappointed man inside me, filling the holes of a former voice.

Here is the problem: for a time I was desperate to know the story, the body under me unashamed. Like living among the dead, the absence of all else meant ugly statements. I wanted to speak through my father, wipe out the margin of sky between us.

So tonight, I follow the history of his death, remember the jerk of clarity that twists our bodies together, never to leave this father.

Could we repeat the pain of leaving ourselves in leaving the past behind? Because without these shells, the image of our hearts pulled apart, aren't we less than human, dwarfed by the dead who shout out loud.
Pushing Out

i

From here the hands scatter waves above the water, the body goes out beyond the shore, beyond this bed--its silent undulation. The water rises daily around me, fills not as the lungs do, but with every breath, which is another life I keep from you.

ii

Tonight I push out alone. Your memory becoming the face of where it was. The loaves of bread neatly sliced. Each fingertip an intelligent spinning, under the soft layers. In this water I come to know the body drawing itself back into stone, into the interior between us.
II

The Sea Falling Through Itself
Poem in the Ordinary Morning

Most mornings I ease awake.  
The pigeons find a new way  
to splinter through my porch.  
Below, the neighbor girls  
hopscotch, twisting their hair  
into knots, but don't get angry.  
The body pulls its own  
dumb weight, poking ahead slow--  
that familiar dream of kids kicking  
each other, the small assaults.

I know how these days fall  
like wings delicately whipping;  
how funny I am from this window.  
Still, I ought to feel good  
among multifarious sounds:  
the sky roars Speedy Gonzales  
without me. Gulls circle  
a sudden smell of alewives  
insistent as air.

The body knows  
at this hour what it wants.  
It wants to float out gently,  
the dull thuds of bus tires  
echoing between buildings.  
Near by, deliberations  
of the lake mix cool blues  
and steel. The day goes on

and it matters. Up against  
the waves, the fume of automobile  
exhaust rises toward incorruptible  
clouds. Mrs. Fishkin hangs  
her wash--jazzing with the wind  
like pastel greetings. Next door,  
my fat neighbor whizzes off  
in his Porsche among allegorical  
repairs, the art-deco.
Beyond my window, this day begins, the heart pumping tiny explosions, the remainder of strangers leaning out en masse, to look.
Gloomy Weather

It's that grey tolerance
going out cloudy again. Hills
mist shoulder to shoulder.
Here in October, weather is a sponge storm.
The day will start cows lowing,
flurries of heat. Pigs are making
barn yards murky-yellow. Even so,
nothing is stricter. People
precede a mood of rust. You go mad
with harmony. Today, the local news
reports rain for colorful pasture,
bushes pushing up new roots.

Once crows dogged these miserable
afternoons, cropping a coat
of silk. They embraced
eyes closed. You thought your
town different. No changes, weather
inscribed on leaves: a pact
of earth and sky, and out of it,
your home falling into jig-saw
days. Soft moons in the kitchen.
This is how it always was,
the future's unending collapse.
When you speak, cracks of dull
thunder. You understand.
Coming into Natural History

Like walking through a museum, the difficult swatches of skin sewn together, when skin was apology for elephants. And that mastodon dangling from ropes as a method of discovery, crumbles.

Your friend the curator has Siberian connections, though this is only one example of animals dipped in ice. You are living through strange shortages, facts kicked in cardboard boxes among the new standards of discovery.

Tomorrow, awful news. The curator's face escapes you as you wonder about animals never meaning to be, performing waltzes like a balloon over breakfast: stuffed pillow and frozen flowers.
White Balloon
Baryshnikov

I like to speak
through the empty space
between--magenta, splitting
the precious jewel,
small slippers walking myself.

One night,
the woman I dance with
twirls too fast.
I lose my breath laughing.
We float apart,
them hover like swallows
fluted in the air.

For a time, no mistakes,
a white balloon
that makes its own
sky. Afterwards,
we are together again
against the glass.

I don't want to hold them back,
these best of friends.
Maybe you understand
I'm in circles.
It goes on.

I feel I've carried my legs,
this message, years
going out. Walking away
from themselves, they
are like coral
wavering in water.

A closeness, the heart
an elegy
bleeding softer.
We carry the space between.
Adverse Circumstances

The ordinary diplomatic shuttle burdens us, our hearts protecting the haze of long ago evenings. On the streets of Sharm el Sheikh we debated women shifting water from hand to hand. We were bored, and why not? Inventing a new word for war, we carried it screaming through Skokie among the neatly sliced lemons of garden parties. Meanwhile, dying from the brain out, we greeted the language of deserts with donkey eyes, everyone riding the business of dark suits. Who needed that place, ruinous among shadows of Valentino or any silent lover? Now, the evenings shed light on our gravity. We forget faces gathering like dust. And we the dying go on with our lives, the heart pumping upside down in frictionless pools.
Threatening Weather

You could put a chair up
to the sea—your room
is a desk, its shadow,
the bust of a Rubens,
her breasts threatening
as clouds. A ghost
would enter, filling
out flesh. No one,
not even you could
keep the sea from
falling through itself,
the inconsequential
cliffs crumbling
like that chair,
it's fire.

Say the room caught,
made its own weather
of tubas and chairs,
and new clouds
voluptuous as sun
and the sea dream
on your ears. You
are a witness to water
burning, and the woman
who says these clouds
are not real, is witness
to weather. Now, turning
the page you have the tuba
and chair again, on fire,
and all this time
you've forgotten the mirror
of sleeplessness, like
a Magritte, a painting on fire.
Huts are fashioned
with rhubarb to the ground,
the air dizzy with bees.
Along the rain forest,
ants loosen the earth
and tunnel deep for loneliness.

The fever explores
your thigh. Women
are nursing invalids
from this hot country.
[In delirium, the expedition
through the Alps, a boat
to Africa. Sails quarrel
with the wind.]

You lie in a hammock
breathing the cotton soaked sweat.
Slaves dance naked through trees.
You imagine
the eye of a panther
skinned to death by flowers.
The Air of Bolgako

When the major and his adjunct saw their salute go blank, when the clanking of rifles and buckles was silenced by streaks of daylight, they threw off their masks facing the air with great waves of laughter.

A cloud of dust spiraled like the wake of automobile exhaust and grew as no engine could make. On the farthest ridge, horses gave their grit teeth. Sheets of mists draped the stumps of apple trees, and the ground turned slime in the outlines of ferns.

They could hear soldiers tearing their knuckled hands until only hands remained. They could feel the beaded webs of spiders fan out poisonous. His stomach went numb and his face crushed white like cabbage in the gas.

Birds dissolved against spots of lighted forest. He felt a pain through his tighs, remembered the writhing trees, cries he could not kill as his eyes shut, petrified like the fisted corpse of a horse.
III

Death of a Heart
Windows

Someone outside you wants to climb in. A clenched fist, a woman disappearing into her shadow, thin as a weapon. Does she own the voice cornering your mouth like a warm liquid?

When the lights close down from that last store, you get nervous. You hear an echo off the windows like fine rain. The streets, an open crotch, carry the knot that wears you out.

Imagining pain, you walk to the woman. She flutters like a blouse opening for anyone. Does her voice walk away saying, do you want to live in the arms of a hoodlum, live in the unlit hall?

Alone, you love this panic. The hand crawls like a worm screaming stranger behind her door and discovers the rich smell of blood beneath fingertips.

You imagine it this way: we have never left off lunging for the knife, the twinge of wounds that meant stumbling through the dark.
Death of a Heart

Two friends disappeared, and the heart of another, whose bird flew out like music, walked evenings incessantly. His body wore fresh wounds of blood under a sore heel.

Days he would count blocks down to numbers, crouch in alleys picking what others left. Glimpses of loneliness, dull refrains in store displays. Once, to get away,

I gave him a dime, watched him walk for damage, eyes rolling. Sometimes I turned away as he came, bottle in hand, the pieces of mashed bread over a grey beard.

If I heard his feet shuffle, his mumbling, hands waving angry at the air, what of it? He'd argue street lights, grew to hate others as we hated ourselves.

Nights I followed him more than once, calling bluff at the top of my lungs. I told him lies. But he went on, slept with moons forgotten by most, for years thought it needless to want friends and drifted through us. His heart bobbing the less among old dreams: sometimes he sang, seemed free of himself.
The Wedding

Each time the resemblance seems more a part of her. The arms caught together are like dying limbs. A man steps up mysteriously, his heart out of nowhere. He tells her father it is for keeps.

The trees accept snarls as a final home. They dispossess themselves. Once I thought a man forgives the limbs that protrude like some purity of lovers.

He takes the whole, what falls and cannot heal for his own. This he says, is complicity enough. The man walks, walking into himself, always the same.

This for his own house. Now he is saying, it is not his heart so much as a scar: the one beneath her blouse from others, never to let go.
Some Violence

I watch your hands
work the loaves of bread
as one watches a scar
lifting through skin.
Hands becoming the dough
they curl, fat and white.
When I enter this soft
weight your hands skeptically
fist, I take care
to stand away.

You point to the earth
where your husband
lies irreversible
as light. Tonight,
the kitchen preserves
some violence.
The loaves of your hands
grown blood-red
with warning.

It is what we come to
you say, the pure
scar passing into a field,
gathering like branches
in a forest of widows.
All day they whisper,
"come in, come into me."
A Strict Need

The loneliness we hold in ourselves is a tightening, not unlike a fisted shadow. But sometimes ashamed, I am grateful to you for leaving, as you have finally done, grateful to begin again.

Or perhaps there is a woman I love who asks nothing of me except hands opening affectionately. Tonight, I want to meet you among the scars we make for each other, to give up my heart as I would give these wounds.

 Until that woman tosses me kisses, the love we have is terribly lonely, even helpless. Some days, there is a stricter need like leaving, an insistence for intimacy. My answer is yes--always, we are that much closer.
Anna, it just ended

14th and Kostner,
you walked by the soft
stones of flesh,
feet sifting through slips
of paper on sidewalk.
The houses grew in threes
up, and the streets escape
for small tooled screams.
Near the El tracks,
barbed wire fence.
You pitched fires
and remembered
calm evenings.
On the back porches,
the arrangement
of silent zaydees.

*   *   *

The telephone rings--
after 31 years
across the greater Baltic,
clothes line stretched
between grey building face.
Dark voices whirled
scroll-like alleys.
The names have gone
in the gutter swirls--
for all your weakness,
because nothing more can pass,
you lift wandering feet
and walk to the receiver.
You might have remained there
and remembered nothing.
Dying Stars

Each time the breath seems more
a part of the scene, a man
walks through it
and I am the same...

Tess Gallagher

To have looked until
that last possible moment,
like a swimmer, open-mouthed
and pooling the dark,
this is the water, the sky
where we left you, your
hidden body impossible,
distant--stars falling
eternally through starlight.

So much for the sky
as it gathers
its own disguise.
The day you left us, I
could have said forever.
July and the last
white of lilacs spread
across the ground. It was
our silent neglect you said.
Those petals twisted apart,
content with leaving.

Once I considered
the dying stars of lilac
cupped in our palm, breaking
into nearness. What we
failed to say tore
from your heart,
and heartless, I too
could not do a thing.
Father, the lilacs let go,
their stars curling in.

Just so, each pool
reflects another. I wait,
but still you do not answer.  
Your body given back to earth  
repeating itself--I take these  
stars even now without you.
Notes

"Threatening Weather" is the title of a painting by Rene Magritte.

"The Air of Bolgako" is written after the short story "Bolgako" by Andre Malraux.

The epigraph in "Dying Stars" is from the poem "The Likeness" by Tess Gallagher.
[from--Instructions to the Double]

Special thanks to Sue, John, & Tess for their help and patience.