Offshore

George Manner

The University of Montana

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OFFSHORE

By

George Manner

B.A., Louisiana State University, 1971

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

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Approved by:

[Signatures and dates]

Date
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I. FLAWS AND WANTING
THE ARCADE

Besides two days' energy it costs money to stay out all night. Our relations suffer. A night crying child needs more love the next day. A wife alone in bed turns only once, dreams of walking a beach with her father who is a bastard.

Water drips in the sink. Spring, one fish caught with fins that don't fit his body.

Fatigue is its own kind of reckoning.

I sit on a fence next to the amusement park.

Falling on either side would mean certain death.

I have to choose between the roller coaster and darkness. One is full of fish, the other full of birds.... Amphibians survive.

The barkers take our dreams and defile them. Eggs hatch and the yellow of sickness turns to rock.

Rocks along any road. Where the branches of trees point to where the wind has gone.
THE COUNTRY PLACE BAR AND LOUNGE

The back room where the mops are,
and pails. The floor stained brown
where someone who chews spat. Long brooms
I pushed after hours when the lights
came on five at a time. The back door opens
to trashcans, a driveway of shells, a car
old enough to be a horse tied to a tree.

To dance Faye I get her mother drunk first,
ease that face down on the table.
I drink until I'm charming. Then Faye,
Faye with the warm spot between her hands.

The barmaid pirouettes into something else
I can touch. Faye's memory dries between my sheets.
I can't sleep there. I sleep on my feet
holding onto an old woman. Samba,
tango, cha-cha with giggles warping in
our throats. Dancing in and out of rooms,
through the bar.

In the gambling room we dance over waste.
Hold each other through the back room
which is to dance without music, she riding
my leg as if it, alone, were her lover.
FOR CRIPPLES

The man of the small room wakens,
stretches the way a snake stretches between
rocks while shedding skin, and blinks,
his raised face now painted for speed.
Breathing, his heart extends through ice
toward a surface, and being this alone
he calls his dog. The seeing-eye flashes half
animal, half man.

The man told me once, under his lisp,
he hated narrow-minded people.
There were no martyrs in his hate, none
in his love: women were created above,
and men below, and poets with the seeing-eye
moved between rocks leaving a trail.
He told me too that when a snake laughs his
belly does not shake.
STORY OF THE MAN WHO STUTTERED

The man who stuttered lived in spurts. He loved certain things: slow motion studies of football, sound of the sea in a shell, the ruthless marching onward of time (his phrase), and the tedium of hanging wallpaper. "Then he hung wallpaper, his tongue rested.

One night the man who stuttered dreamed his tongue was gone. It had flopped out of his mouth and down a wide street like a fish might. He ran after it. He came alongside it everywhere. It was licking the foreheads of baptized children, was swimming the English Channel, was sending old men off to war. It held a press conference speechless for one hour. The man who stuttered awoke, his tongue blooming inside him. He decided that he would kill his tongue. He took it to a bridge.

The man who stuttered jumped off the bridge. He did not stumble.
He fell slow motion like he liked
and a single scream followed him down.
He landed flat on his back, his tongue
jumped from his head. Or tried to.
As he sank, it waved hello to a crowd.
MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

Deep within a canyon rests a stone,
a sitting-place. There I am all night.
Always before I never wanted to mount
another, or larger stone. I could die
so easily up there

and anywhere else
I've never been before:
mourners at daybreak might
circle down
the side of another mountain.
THE BEAR:
A Tribute To Theodore Roethke

1
I would remember him
as a wheel remembers itself.
Then, in the turning,
he would be falling dust
that neatly fills my track.

2
There is a dampness that comes
from standing too long in a greenhouse;
the skin only knows this
in the sudden skin of night.

How many times have you walked
slowly in or out that door
and known what it is to live?

3
You ... a self-titled bear.
If I could recall myself
tracking the orbit of your eyes,
I would remember you
dancing loudly in a circus
or watching water spiral
along the Pacific coast.
PORTRAIT

1
Six around a table:
crying young man
girl without face
fireman
infant
father of mutants
killer in water-soaked shoes

2
Caked from the sleek friction of birth
and thighs that chose to sag shut,
a new beast wades through sack-water
spilling the juice of an old heart,
searches for himself in a forehead
mirror, quivers himself dry.

Each in his turn regards the beast.
Bunched together the six echo
what he might have said: be known,
known by eel and cow;
the cow bloated with hungry children,
the eel tattooing his mate's body
with shallow kisses.

In the beast's blinking eye any portrait
alters, six wonder what they have seen.
A mirror turned beneath a rainbow
by a boy of eleven, the silent vision
of wind seen in lightning, seven heads
rolled into one monstrous comedy....

And this is where I come in waiting
for the applause of a single hand.
With icicles or lattice-climbing vines
I would finger paint this likeness.
AARDVARK

First was the name:
when I found you
you were the first animal
in the dictionary. I loved you
because of the two a's that began
your name, they told me why
you had to be nocturnal.

Then I thought of you and your ants,
you... aardvark! Your name, it's what
the ants say with their bodies
when they swarm, they spell you
as they file beneath the separate blades
of grass, going home.
You, destroyer of ant order!

(Ant sleep:
    they dream of being shoe-wearers,
heavy walkers
up the boneless length of your tongue,
your conic snout. They fear the absolute
welling that comes alongside your tongue;
a protracted, mounting sound that surges
around their body segments and finally
washes over the tongue-edges to
carry them...)

The dictionary makes note of your
"enormous salivary glands,"
but says nothing of that sound,
that sound of which you are so proud
even, lonely, in love-making.
Aardvark, should I whisper your name?
WHISPER

Ride, ride the black cat's back
through midnight
toward a woman rising from bed
and the blood in her flying feet.
Ride the cat
until your legs disappear under fur.
Bending below trees
picture her god-white breasts,
your rude finger, the smile from your face
on the man who's having her.
Slide from the cat's sleek back.
Walk away
with the sheen spreading your thigh.
ONCE THE RIVER MOVES ACROSS

All the moths of one forest
fall asleep in the eye of a raven
in flight. I know the moths will awaken
and fall from the raven's one vision
to bloom at once among the hardwoods.

Somewhere else beyond, beneath a lake,
lies an unturned fossil. It is etched
with the wing of a bird and it turns
as the earth turns, close against the fallen
slope of a burial mound.

I know all this and have not moved. From
where I kneel the forest is stretched
into pairs of wings. Night birds
avoid the emptiness of gliding,
wing-beats convince them they're not alone.

Certain now I've come to a new place,
I have left the river behind. Still
I remember how the garfish surfaced,
showed his mud-yellow stomach, then slid
below again with the smile off my face.

At the base of this tree
I am known as the moss-kneed man.
I have no saliva, no ink of the tongue.
In this forest there is a gathering
and air gone yellow with the blood of insects.
RENNAM THE MAGICIAN

Born just past the horizon under
the eyelid of a seer,
squeezing the breasts of a madwoman
and telling her it is almost over,
he speaks with his teeth
on that swollen part of her, makes it even more
tender in her pain. She painted her face, gave in
like a martyr and had a throat deep enough for him.

Still Rennam doesn't fathom his own tricks.
Through the curtains what he thought was a tree
was moonlight between trees.
FABLE ABOUT THE MAN WITH EARLOBES
THAT DRAGGED THE STREET

As we walked
I said to my wife
Look, there goes the man
With earlobes that drag at his feet.
She was surprised of course
Having never seen him.
I had mentioned him in conversation,
Perhaps too casually,
She thought I was joking I guess.

But there he was alright,
Earlobes dragging in the street.
My wife would not deny it now.
How did they ever get that long
She asked and I replied that
I had no idea but once
They got that long
The bottoms became weighted,
Like curtains she asks and I nod,
The bottoms sag, I continued,
And stretch by themselves.
ROMANCE

Beneath the river's ice.
In the middle of a lake, whose head
surfaces to the chin?

Tired, half-sick he comes back.
Not shy this time, not flirting.
So sure of himself he comes slowly.
Crying is good only for the sound
drowning all others.

They say heartbeat
but I think wind
is the sound in the womb.
Pat, I cannot tell your story.
My father is still trying to enjoy his life.
A wife addicted to sickness and loving,
a daughter legally lunatic and on the way down,
another hiding behind diapers, soiled ... 
a son over a thousand miles away
among mountains.
You see Pat it's the pneumonia. It saved her.
In the oxygen tent it was Seattle again.
Poverty fun. Proud. And all the work, those
nice boarders who babysat sometimes. And
you see, it's how a word changes. Like murder.
Not the television word. More
the mortician's quickest hands, the darkness growing
around his thumbs. And the mouth of someone you've loved
always, closing over her secret that it, too, may grow.
And the fawning. She never grasped her periods anyway.
Her cajun husband elected vasectomy. That's it
for children. Funny, except the whining and coyness crap.
I told her I loved her. She enjoyed herself by the door.
Maybe now you understand Pat.
That your own father's eyes hurt, that he asked you
for the gun to kill himself ...
that your mother was at home waiting for you to fail.
That he killed an osprey by mistake and buried it,
placing the finger-thin trout by its mouth ...

that you wish your wife would iron your shirts.
Pat, I cannot tell your story.
It might upset someone. Or make them angry.
GOODEYE

for L.S.

1

In the brown gruff of the throat,
blown full like a cow,
you caress yourself in a victim pose.
The head at the end of the line turns back
as if saying no, not yet.
So you go back,

pick up your body like an old pair of pants
and put it on again.

The first time you showed class: a necklace,
dry blood from a barbwire fence.
I was sure I had saved you.
You said, Hit me! Hit me! and I was mad,
sick enough to do it.

2

If the blade is really sharp
and the wound is a slash wound
there is a moment before the blood comes.
That moment is called The Breaking of Glass.

So the man walked into a canyon
which was full of rock
and picked one up the size of a head
and placed it next to his and dreamed.
II. OFFSHORE
On my lawn
there are shadows among the weeds,
one is a fish, I cannot get too close.
I cover my ear with a shell
to make it feel at home. To let it know
I understand. It doesn't move at all.
It makes no sign.
How strange to be on land again.
I enter my house alone, lie down
and want to sleep. I remember sounds
offshore. An octopus climbing
derrick steel, a school of sea cats
twitching their poison whiskers.
I sleep.
In my yard, among the weeds,
a fish swims all night long.
It swims beneath my house.
RICHIE BOUDREAUX

The swamp opens in Boudreaux's salvaged eye.
He is dead tired and way too drunk.
Boudreaux has passed in time to the Atchafalaya
swamp where the same stillness is found
every morning along the mud-rooted leg
of the only white heron around these parts.

Boudreaux's paid-for teeth
jerk through the flesh of his upper lip.
He calls out to passion or God or wood.
It was something better he'd had in mind,
something difficult, hard! Boudreaux's
heart floats in its shallow pail.

When Richie's mouth quits bleeding
he spits out the healing Spanish moss.
On one bank of Bayou Lafourche a turtle warps
in the sun. Richie picks it up, presses it
to his chest as hard as he can. Both turtle
and swamp are wet to the skin.
DEPTH

Ten seconds
after my eyes closed
I sensed the shadows of two
great tombstones close together,
they became my eyes like doors
to a dark and noiseless sucking.

My arms at my sides, palms
down. "Dig here," I whispered,
"the face of the world."
THE LEFT EYE'S INSOMNIA

Heat thrives in shaved hair. Dark
hair curls into commas on the hospital towel.
A rolling cart moves them into memory
where they grow back again to buds. Time now
to give me up. A mound blooms in the corner
of a field and somewhere over that field an Indian
pronounces the final slow syllables.

Due south of Houma all roads end. The marsh is a motion,
a silence. A mouth too full of tongues.
Between some cattails a white heron stands on one leg saying,
To be a marsh guide one must have eyes in his knees, and
Yes, it's a good place to learn love-making.
Submerged plants are the source of all dreams.
The fine silt of prophecy settles in your eyes.

The naval eye. I cover it with a finger. I can feel
the tube it used to be, how the outer part dried and crumbled,
how the inner part fell away, drifting like an anchor chain.
I have translated weather into a face and I know
you'd have trouble finding me now. But if we were body
to body, you could look into my eye and I would say,
You see, darling, it is easy.
SWAN-DIVING

1
The cliff-divers in Acapulco
move up the stone ladder
that begins the Sierra Madres.
At the top
they pray in a Catholic way.
Arms stretched wide, legs together, back arched,
they leap into a narrow space.
The water in the basin comes in
full of heavy change.
The rest you know.

2
I cast a net of glass balls on the sea
just for the sound.
The waves answer.
It's a hot afternoon by the water
and this morning in church
moisture warded-up on the statue of Jesus.
He was hanging forward from the wall
on his cross. From the top of our church
it must have looked like the swan dive
to end all.
SHARK OF THE RED SEA

Shark was the first fish of the Red Sea.
When he came it was simply a nameless body of water. Shark took that body, allowed it to wash over his eight rows of teeth and the sea was named.

Maimed is a later idea, a belief of sailors' women. A special jealousy without object, a certain kind of sharing. The women knew little of Shark and his ways.

There are two legends about Shark, both unfounded: that Shark will never die of age, that Shark will never bleed to death. Even the other fish believe this. They wallow in their awe. Lies! I know. Buzzard knows too.

Flood is rare in oceans. The Red Sea does not stain its shore. Shark has seen to that. Balance. Order. In the Red Sea more than anywhere else, Shark and his kind.
WAVES OF BRAILLE

Darkness came, fit like a wool mask,
no holes to see through. I was walking
down, down through groves of pine so
steep I leaned into my future, the wind
tight around my throat.
And my dream was there: a narrow bed, empty
rumpled from use. I lifted quilts, turned
a sheet back. In the middle of that bed
lay a single pebble, tiny and smooth, the egg
of something dead.

Leaning against a tree, breathing like the ocean
I remember the Pacific's first wave. Oysters
huddled together, the crags of their dark city,
the one among them who dined on sand
and made a pearl... a small, perfect eye
looking into himself.
GLASS-BOTTOM BOAT

You move across the lake in a glass-bottom boat. You sit with strangers and all hold your breath, all donate their eyes to the cause beneath you. The lake palpitates like the crushing of a frog inside a snake, or your own probed pulse as you sat once beneath a tree at noon, eyes half closed.

With night in a glass-bottom boat you remain the single onlooker. Your face glazes into odd shapes. By day your eyes widen searching among fish for the one who bulges, swells in his noon sleep. You continue to search, the boat is always turning and you want to speak, to say the words I am sorry until you are sorry enough never to say it again.

Three days and your cry surfaces. On the fourth divers descend, swim even into the night armed with long underwater magnesium torches searching for the lungs of two ghosts, alone and alone, and you Mother, on the shore like a lighthouse tender.

The divers meet at the lake's center.
A person might begin to believe stories. Even beneath the water, the divers can hear your sobbing.
ATCHAFALAYA DREAM

I walk thinking of you,

thinking how nervous you would be

if suddenly an owl would stir.

The dark air would whisper secrets

at you. You'd cry, too afraid to hear.

Then I would put my arm around you

and smile and tell you to be calm

and you would smile and half-sigh

and I would love the swamp.
This time the bullet came slowly around
the bend in the river, dragging a yellow photograph.
Upturned faces, restless, came to see you
beneath the channel water. You became
a matter of sediment. Your only movement
was settling to the bottom.

Three days later in a hospital camp
you surfaced from dreams of bulldogs.
You had come back
the way skin grows over a wound.
CHASE

Because I was tired

of sharks
of watching sharks chased by dolphins
of chase

I slowed to a stop full
halt water men cities the wind-blur
of the sightless eye entirely stilled
globe turnless unconsciously I almost was

I tried to speak my tongue humped up in my mouth
I tried to see eyelashes blanched and knitted up
I tried to hear my ears descended my throat on a
heartbeat

I tried to feel I tried to feel
I did not
try to but I breathed everything in

each thing all at once
again started its life-quake my
legs moved the world
moved as before then
in the backwash of settling

down again I was tired too
tired to sleep vegetables
flowered and the bees turned knowledgeable

I ran for the edge
of anything the edges of all
things anywhere I ran and ran until
the only edge was that of my tongue

which I swallowed

and sleep poison-perfect
dripped from that tap
dripped through me and never
never
touched me still I cannot

pinpoint

in whose honor this race
and what the prize
"A SMALL PART OF THE PANTOMIME"

A wind
moving through Spanish moss
is not the same
after
after
there is a color
an odor
a brand new wind
blowing gray
toward the marshes
DIFFERENT VOICES TO MAKE IT THROUGH AGAIN

There is a voice
for children,
and one for the magician who
can get out of anything even suicide,
and one for the different kinds of loving.
And one more
for telling of all other voices, this is
the last voice. It is green.
I am what I will be. That is why green
is the growth color and the color of disease,
why moss is soft, why it feels like lips.

To see one single thing long enough.
The voice is of that thing. But sometimes
the voice of a lake with no fish
swells over into the others and even
into the last voice.
This has nothing to do with death.
An accident happened, you will walk away.
MOUTH OF THE MISSISSIPPI

It is time again to go to the mouth
where the river sickens into the sea.
Bodies of dice rollers, the confused,
two fair girls on their backs looking
back, whole trees with birdnests, all
rolling underwater in a mime,
dancing out the river's song.

It won't be long, it is never long until
the scavenging gar surfaces, his belly full
of mud. And the scavenging shark
driven to this mouth by fishing boats
trailing tuna blood, his passionate eyes.
Pilot fish turn back. The lighthouse sinks
another foot each year.

This has become a place to sleep.
The mouth opens like that of an old man
passed on. Dreams are not remembered.
One is. Dream of the gar. In it the sound of air
being swallowed by a fish, gillslits closed.
Once again you wake with a dry throat, terror
is a bird that doesn't fly south. Ever.
1

I am swimming alone in the Gulf of Mexico beyond glimpse of any land. Treading water. The fear is what will surface to take my feet at the ankles, or what will float by to sting the inside of my knees or, seeing blood, my plan to strike the White Fin's snout, missing that mouth until he goes away or I do, waking up in Montana surrounded by mountains that are afraid of me. I go to sleep calling for the archer to return with his flexed bow. This is the only way I can travel between these mountains and the Gulf full of bones, eyes, things that surface.

2

The archer's back bent like his bow straightens as the arrow rims its arc and falls to the water. A noise deep in the throat is the arrow descending. Salt splits, one wave crests into the next. The archer has hit his offshore mark:

I am swimming again in the Gulf of Mexico.
Treading water, all that remains in air
is my head, the magician part of me.
My body, its new weight, has shape distorted
by filtered light. I'm glad it is day now.
To swim alone in the ocean at night far
from shore is to be dead. And buried,
dressed by a shark in gray leather,
attended by barracudas thin from speed,
spoken over by bottom-dwellers with florescent
eyes while cherubic porpoises chant in a ring,
body tacked in state on a swordfish bill.
Seafloor currents are not strong here,
but constant. Your skeletal hand begins to wave.

Of course there will be divers who come by mistake,
men whose lives were different, men who reached
the sand bar as children and weren't afraid,
like you always were, to place feet firmly on the
bottom. Will these men — please! — know fear?
Or will they swim down to the waving hand
and grasp it calmly and call it friend?

3
Call the archer back. His bow arm full of the strength
that turns us in our sleep. The arrow
is a fish-hunter's arrow with fastened line.
The archer pulls. I awaken and drive to a mountain lake.
I sit on the shore. My reflection is cast away from me. It rides the lake's surface and always will until the fish rise. Or the wind. Then I will be changed again. My reflection will descend, it will cover part of the lake's floor. A space between boulders. Kelp will grow there. Rainbow trout the size of your arm will nap there at noon every day. At night my face will rise in pieces like the stars and reassemble above the lake's fog. Shore-hunting bear will be driven to frenzy just wanting a taste.