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Water Maps| [Poems]

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The University of Montana
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WATER MAPS

by

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CONTENTS

I. Ship In A Desert

Maze 5
Creosote 7
Breakdown 8
Trunk 9
Blind Horse 10
Still Life 11
Missing The Stop 14
Mother At Sea 15
Prodigal Daughter 16
Reunion 17

II. Kinships

After *Gauguin's* La Famille Schuffenecker 19
Bloodlines 20
Pears 22
Family Snap 23
Acts of Slow Motion 25
Grace 26
San Luis Obispo 27
City Park and Eucalyptus 28
Relocation 30

III. Water Maps

Water Maps 33
Body Sonnets 34
Home from Home 36
Near Pisgah 37
Flight 38
Thirst 39
Poet's Scramble 40
PART I

Ship In A Desert
Maze

My father stands straight as the Joshua rooted at mid-corral. He catches loose reins, swings himself across the naked back of our Palomino, heavy-bellied and gnawing the dry hitch. They cast a mean glance in a desert drinking them in, sand soaking hooves, desert barrels of water poking fetlocks. Like Joshua, my father will try a soldier's distance of hitch and stumble over cholla and sage. He reins the horse from gallop to lope, a heavy hand for patience. He knows the naked risk of journeys toward water. Naked faces of horse and rider wince in the desert glare. Trees dot the stretch and each heavy shadow is a person, blooming alone -- the Joshua milky with frenzies of yucca moths, rains of wings hissing at dark into the hitch of yellow bulbs at limb's end. A hitch in my stance makes a stranger shadow, like naked bones, but really a child wondering if reins take on life of their own, turn a father to desert paths that leave him sleepy, Joshua trees unmoved as his heavy head makes a cradle in the sand. The heavy river at the horizon moves in a crooked hitch and I watch my father, the horse, each Joshua they pass. The river draws them closer, naked and clear in its offer to quench the desert and the disbelief at a sudden smell of rains.
They're distant now and the jerk of reins
a guess. The horse's head droops heavy
as she dawdles over greaseweeds, desert
scraps not worthy of the blood it takes to hitch
the dry wisps from nearly naked
land, just shy now of the green turn -- from Joshua
trees and snakey desert. I'll imagine the last hitch
of reins over riverbanks, heavy
with live oaks, beyond each Joshua, naked.
Creosote

My brother swung a punch to the cold spot in my back. House shadows lost their cool and our hall was a boxing ring with no referee. I socked him until we both were losers, herded into coloress desert, our bare feet calloused against hot ground. Besides the road below and cars that sometimes passed, our yard stretched miles in creosote bushes, rooting every space, branches held like fingers without the grace of hands. At center, the bushes opened to empty rooms we didn't have to share. Forgiveness came in small plans made through branches lined with leaves, scent springing from below a deep green. With afternoon creeping up Cajon Pass, we sat inside creosotes huddling like quiet sand at the hum of approaching engines, only our whispers moving us the way the wind jostled the limbs.

At the horizon the river sweated. Our world was bushes, clean and windy. Nervous animals, we harbored near the smell of leaves.
Asphalt stretches for miles ahead of us
summer vapor rising in a desert
dream of water. My mother undresses

my sister and dry wind rustles
her hair. We leave a small shirt
stretched across the asphalt. Miles ahead of us

in humid air, stack of slender cumulus
wait like women in a seagirt
dream, sisters of water, their sundresses

in threads of thin floccus.
We walk near cholla with razor throats
asphalt miles ahead stretching us
to indefinite shadows, borderless
as horizons in the blanched desert,
waterless mother. Dreary under dresses

fabric brittle as sand, we sweat grace
to a grizzle in the heat, like salty dirt
in asphalt stretching for miles ahead of us.
Dreaming of water, my mother undresses.

Breakdown
Trunk

The scene inside was calm, a row of cigars
for babies born, pocketknives with folded blades
conversations filed in bundles by year

and war. Everything had its space--
the cigars comfortable as fingers
ready for an open palm or smooth face

to stroke. And numberless letters, tender
in their proper time-- the quick explosions
of new love banded like the surrender

each admitted. A tray of coins, Asian,
oxidized, scarves, silk with military
stripes. The order left room, occasion

to climb inside and close the lid, to curl
in the black scent of teak while measured air
reduced the crumbling summer to fall.
Blind Horse

Mothering her luckless sockets
I keep the mare to borders, guiding her
through an afternoon cruel with wind
and tumbleweeds breaking embraces at flank,
needling her lunatic dark. These fields

are mined in dens and burrows, timid animals
hiding just below a crumbling earth,
just below hooves and panic, a horse's
uncertain trip and spook, her wild barrel
through an unsympathetic terrain,
saddle burning with sun, a keen bouquet,
carving our shadows clearing bushes
by the tips of their leaves.
Still Life

1

Our yard is beach for the sailboat my father hauled here, christened "Yang Gweidz,"

Chinese slang for intruders, our own foreign devil marooned for all the years

we waited out the war that held my father missing. He hadn't planned

the boat's slow, desert corrosion, laquer black and red trim losing shine to a wind

that rose every afternoon, flailing the foredeck with diamonds of sand,

working fingernails just below the paint. Tumbleweeds hunched inside, broken refugees

of dustdevils. Delicate scorpions skittered the teakwood mast.

My brother and I pulled at the dull curls of paint, leaned on a dare into

the black hull holding a searing ocean of heat.
Aunt Barbara visited once from Utah green and hopeful. She was up earlier than anyone, kneeling for days in the yard with a small shovel, swearing the trees could thrive if we kept after foxtails that choked the sandy soil. The hose streamed beside her, filling all the cracked wells of plum trees and little apples the pine where an owl hid in a clump of brown needles. Before her visit ended iceplant crawled, muted green across the loose soil. Her last evening with us, Barbara sat in a tired chair rubbing blistered hands and delivering a last pitch and promise of oasis if we stayed just ahead of the weeds.

My mother listened from the wingback her mood like the martini in her hand. Barbara's voice, gravelled and steady took up the slack of a long silence in the house. My mother leaned toward her sister and the hope-- our yard blooming green as the hem of sycamores chasing the river current miles away.
The dog isn't moving much now.
Stretched across the kitchen floor
sleep keeps him from his aches.
Earlier I screamed his name
as he swung from the tail
of a frightened horse. He lost
hold at my call and smart hooves
smacked hard, left him lying in the field.
Running toward him I felt
the echo of horseshoe and skull
linger in the evening air. I thought

of how my mother's ankles ticked
when she walked the midnight
hallway of our house. That sound
send me fetal under sheets
Santa Ana winds humming
through window seams, her shadow
leaning in the shaft of light.

Outside, our yard hides jackrabbits,
the notice of owls and creaking mast
startling them frozen. I wonder how
loose tiles bear the old sounds, the dog's
shift of paw, my mother's measured steps,
the mare's whinny, out there in the wind.
Missing the Stop

The bus scissors slow through an afternoon
city of rickshaws and bicycles, spokes
unsteady in the crowded weave,
baskets brimming with open market
congestion of perch, peppers, rice,
the fecund green of beans, everything wrapped
tight in a salty something the child
beside his mother doesn't recognize.
He toes up dirt from the rubber mat
while women holding aisle loops brace
for wheezing brakes, their conversations
a cadence of tinkling glass
between roars of low gear and squeal,
ribbons of running children on sidestreets
busdriver in a backward mirror
reminding the child of faces -- his father's
somewhere back there in the foreign
confusion, his mother's tangled in silence
beside him, wondering what they'll do
what they'll do.
*Mother at Sea*

We visit every weekend knowing too soon
you'll leave the coast, pack in
plans you made to settle there.
Your house has twenty-five windows
and one hundred complaints.

You number them Saturday evening after dishes
are stacked in cabinets that won't close. The dark
closets swallow shoes, gagging on strings
and it's the beating of the tides, the spray
on the windows you can't wash away.

You don't notice that when waves crash at the point
the cove closes its arm around starfish.
We find them in calm water early
Sunday morning. My son strokes their cool spines
as they rest among sea anemone. He and I

look up to find you leaning on the boardwalk rail
your hand in a quick beckon, your face
drawn with worry. I know then, watching
you curl into your jacket like a snail, sea
breeze finding its way through the seams

that it's the ocean, maybe the black certainty
of the tides, the unconcerned gaze of water
always there when you're alone.
I take your grandson's hand
as we climb the steps to take you home.
I'm the wind in full moan
no matter how he flips the wingwindow.
Wrappers hiss on his dash. I've cracked

a weedy face in the road he travels
tapped valves loose in the truck
he never paid off. Speeding down

Pearblossom Highway, he sees
one after another piñon or yucca
contorted from years of gust

and devils. Forty miles
through their squatting shadows
is the only town, full of fruitstands

boarded by night. The Ford cuts
a fast shadow across
their wooden faces and he thinks

of my skin, smooth as cherries.
By the end of today's map, he'll fall
two hundred miles short

his destination. He'll rest, exhausted
in a Palmdale curve. The star-
pocked night is round as an eye

fair as the coyote giving
a father's cry from a canyon.
Dreams rock him until

sandstorms come between him
and the horizon. When he wakes
I'm there, hungry

around creosote and sage,
with the shifting shoulders
of a dune, moaning low.
Reunion

Lean muscles of desert run up from the Mojave River.
We could find delicate maps in sandy cores, imagine
the final lines of small animals--frantic scurries,
moonlight, the nimble clutch of owls
who took their time. We could take ours

hands held warm in the air, our skins losing
lines that have given us away. Curled
to a wreath around me, you'd be the lizard
pointing horns. I'd be succulent, a Saguaro
in summer blossom. Haughty in armour,
we'd flash tongues at the sun.
PART 2

Kinships
After Gauguin's La Famille Schuffenecker

Everything is closed but father's face, brows raised in tired crescents, lips framed in pleas to his daughters, listless in their woolen coats. Mother wears brown. Hands folded into her sleeves she's a circle round and dark as the black shawl that borders her face, her eyes searching the tidy corners. Outside,

an orange roof stabs the sky and clouds hover near the horizon. Such violences are muted in here where windows are opaque and a child's eyes shut tight against folds and buttons in her sister's lap. Father's feet are poised for a dance he'll never maneuver.
Bloodlines

Charlie drives his mother toward Leisuretown, a quiet grid of homes for the nearly finished. The trip is miles through Mojave Desert long past Barstow

where breakdown would leave them stuck with bratwurst sandwiches bought in Los Angeles two days ago. The radio blares ads— Buicks with airbags, a jingle's assualting Cappucino!

His father used to call from the livingroom, books crowded around him, radio prudent in the background. Charlie imagines a shorter lineage, bloodlanded with mother's Irish Gavins

kin to the likes of Uncle Patrick who used to stop by after shifts at Kaiser his hands sanded in years of concrete, slick as whistles. Patrick moved north to Tahoe

where he claimed he'd found his real mother. Charlie thinks ahead of Mom in Leisuretown, counting on Saint Jude to set things right in time. Charlie can't count

the number of times he's driven the desert, spread like a plate, empty to the rims and sunwhite. Only the sand pits save him from the invisible windshield. Hot rubber
reeks from the tires
fifty miles shy of Needles, a town
of many motels with pools,
their blue blinks startled as eyes of travelers
emerging from the desert. Charlie

shifts to another position
sweaty in the seat, the air threatening a quick
blast of bratwurst.
He glances at his sleeping mother
her mumu a blooming oasis.
Air hangs over me, limp in the livingroom rugs cleaned to square corners and never a boast of dust. My aunt dances slow imagined blues an emptied chair her partner. Uncle checks his cuticles, missing the dare in her liquid turns around the room. I'm caught beside my mother on the couch, a prisoner to the roaring boredom when Aunt's eyes kindled to flame, hip a curl of rich shadows. Pears gleam from the bowl as she offers me her hand.
Family Snap

My uncle hovers at the stove, furious
steam rising, cactus ears
simmering ancient odor
into a kitchen cluttered and sticky
from reaches of too many children.
My mother reads in the next room
walls and low music the only distance
from her brother playing man
of the house. He chirps
about survival and the wealth of deserts
as he cooks a meal of nutrients
and thorns. Jabbing at the plants, he talks
engine repair, politics, politics
and the latest bombings, talking over
the boil and into the next room
where my mother's impatience
grows. On the dull kitchen linoleum
my brother and I shift our weight,
dreading the dinner and mourning
the lost elation of an afternoon.

We trudged behind Uncle Charlie
digging prickly pears
hauling them in loaded buckets
the mile back to the house.
Out there Charlie was certain
with the chisel and quartz crystal,
our archeologist spotting
the white flash of a nearly buried
skull, a tiny mouse still
a frame of bones under sand, uncovered
with the delicate brush of Charlie's hand.

Charlie slides the plants, whispering water
onto our plates and seats himself
in my father's place. We supper
together with his lonely chatter.
My mother's face, a mocking sting,
is corralled in the small candles.
Acts of Slow Motion

1
Although it is he who decides
to come home again, my brother's head
is a hive of arguments, feet blazing
on the asphalt as underfoot a soft road gives
to the bully sun. This heat can trap
a tortoise on blacktop like a lone
chessboard in the middle of the road
brown cap holding heat against its own
frail animal. Desert shimmer
makes a milky shadow of our house
up ahead. We're waiting for him--
mom a pomegranate busy with answers,
everyone gathering anxious
stirring embarrassed tails
jumping to smalltalk like fleas.

2
Always first to rise
he's the mean wire booting
through the house, frontscreen
slammed like a flyswat. He's bent all day,
rabbit-thin, forcing mortar
into porous borders of brick,
someone else's dreamhouse rising.
Dawn kneeler at the fireplace
he grips irons and air
to draw the flame. Unsatisfied
cat lingering, he's poised to crackle
as water in the wood, his fingers
stained with iron filings.
Uncle Charlie and Nana were dancing near winter
on the roof of our porch in the dark.
She sang a loud Rosary, he sported new hoisery
and the dog kept the beat with his bark.
Good Nana suggested the trio take respite
so they jumped to the soft ground below.
It was then Charlie thought of the plans that were shot
for learning to play a banjo,
    banjo
    banjo
He yearned to play a banjo.

Now Nana was quick to know Charlie's grief
she'd lost a few tunes in her time.
She conspired with the pup to cheer Charlie up
and they offered him gin with some lime.
Soon all of life's edges were lost to new pledges,
    Nana said, "You should take up ballet!"
Charlie quickly confessed he loved bullfighting best
    and dreamed of a roaring Olé!
        Olé!
        Olé!
He dreamed of a roaring Olé!

The night was a coat of gentle forgiveness
the moon lent its milk to the scene,
Dear Nana and Charlie, the dog they called Larry
climbed back to the roof where they'd been.
Charlie, feeling subdued, softly whistled, *Hey Jude*
    while the dog scratched his back on the shingles.
Nana held to tradition and sang a rendition
of "Our Father" in thrilling alto
    alto
    alto
"Our Father" in thrilling alto.
San Luis Obispo

for my parents

We took a shortcut through the mission,
Spanish tiles slick with rain, eucalyptus leaves
clinging to the soles of our shoes. You paused,
mocking a Hail Mary at the steps
of the ancient chapel, words echoing
off shy adobe while I leaned against St. Jude,
tapping time on granite folds of gown.
We were warm with wine and careless
in the late hour. I remember

the moonlight catching shadows in your hair,
how you took its beauty for your own.
How easy it was at that moment, holding
night like a candle, your hand
on my shoulder as we walked on,
beyond the arms of the sanctuary.
City Park and Eucalyptus

It's afternoon in a town called boy, Chico, California, newborn to us just arrived.
I sit fingering flowers speared in a pattern across my skirt while you walk backwards through shade streaking the ground warm rain and dropping leaves with faces slick as bottoms of boats, cupping afternoon's wet heat. The sky, a bowl filled with eucalyptus leaves holds us under a green so close to black we think of squalls, camphor sudden as the smell of rain. Leaves pile like small talk around us, one more crowd in this town where we're looking for small claims. Yours is the sandbox, bordered but big enough for now. Mine is a bench, slowly warming up to me.
Swingsets clank and cars passing
swish through streetwater.
We’ll leave before five o’clock

rushhour across the sidewalk
slashing the squire, you
dawdling behind, afternoon

wind lifting your hair
your hands a grip
of the fragrant leaves.
Relocation

The neighboring brick burns.  
From our sill I see shadows of firemen  
hacking at ordinary walls, local residents
lining up like tired suitcases  
along the walk. Dumbwaiters
fume, smoke is filling the stalled elevator.

Behind a hard face
every breathless space swallows itself.  
I watch for the sudden crumbles, hiss
of falling walls, muffled
brickclaps in red dust-- all
the gestures of combustion, implosion's driving fist
and the passage of flames that leads at last
to the turn when the struggle loses urgency,
when lives fighting disintegration turn back
to their own beating hearts.
You sleep on a bed behind me, under
tunnels of lights and riddled shadows
your face framed to a crescent
in the blankets. Our room is nearly empty
save the beds and hollow drawers
carpet paths following some
previous occupant. Boxes marked "kitchen"
are stacked in the hall, your lamp, shadeless,
stands thin in the middle of a room
where we catch ourselves whispering to avoid
the sound of our voices bouncing off walls
hanging in the startled air
reminding us of all the words we hadn't meant
to use. Tomorrow we'll begin to unpack

things our voices know.
I reach to pull the sheets from around
your tossing and hear your breath, a steady hush

under the odd clank
of midnight ladders. Loose change
from the day flashes on the nighttable.
PART 3

Water Maps
Water Maps

Around alluvial fans and over sandbars the water moves. At every break in the river, branches fork, channels ease into cracking clay. Only rivulets make it to the mouth where an inlet opens and river passes spit and lagoon to the sea. Thirty-thousand feet above clouds spread in a floor. Strata ravels in spots of autumn light revealing the river below, sun flashing a fast zipper downstream. Cindercones and craters, the shadows of caves blacken in ranges. Should cumulus stack and congestion force rain from the squalls, some drops will fall short of any river, making paths in the narrow shafts of caverns, sliding past entrances and dimming zones to stagnate in cavespearl condense around flowstone or move toward crystal and gour pools accumulating motion in a rapid fall from stalactites, the only route remaining: wet descent to the hardest zones.
Body Sonnets

1

*For A Hand*

The weather has eventually seeped through
to sting the fingers, curl in the palm
to rob the gestures of each morning's new charge, the sunsoaked, slow, inviting calm
in a younger grip. Gone, too, is the scorch--
the pointer with its accusations, sure
and unthinking, raised fist, a blind torch
in blind dark. The years of heated urge
are feathered across a skin that lingers
close to its small bones, to moments of grief
that close the thumb in a cove of fingers
coiled from the strange brush of touch. Belief
returns, gibbous now as moons under thin
nails, slow to unfold and be held again.
With freeway speed the needle spreads a jagged grin on the empty stretch of chart, paper soaking up weaves of conversations flagged with gasps, a fury of lines that measure the interior explosions of sleep. Concentrating past the usual awe of your young mind, the technician seeks the signs of bursting, feral overdraw, collisions of movement and memory ability and heartbreak. I lean close, accomplice to an indecent entry a map of you exposed for diagnosis, censored of mystery so as to explain one chart of your unknowable terrain.
Home from Home

for my son

We thinned tomatoes all day, more
fruit than people down the road
in Russellville, Arkansas. Above squash
glistening like oranges, I tried to show you

shapes of spindle shells in clouds, Pacific tide
cupping the bleached moon. You turned instead
to the crowded dirt, broken pods of purple hulls,
okra tips mashed against tomatoes we’d missed,

black soil rotting red. You filled buckets without
complaint, finding riches in the curtain of crickets,
ballooning frogs murking daylight
with their pondwater tongues. We both

drew heavy breath as afternoon passed
and my only ocean, the open sky, slowly
closed to night. When I turned, I'd lost you
to possibilities-- catfish and black terrapins

caught in an evening's spin, the danger
darkness held in every acre of chiggerthick weeds,
pocked fields bordered with Arkansas trees
full of moon and shadowwrap, water moccasins

hammocking in branches. My shouts come
sharp as salt, aluminum screen and porchlight
framing the crooked show of my face,
rude crow inside me grating the breathless air.
Near Pisgah

We wake to mournful sounds
a bull in the near corral ailing,
insisting us from sleep.
The bedside lamp illuminates

your face, eyes searching
the ceiling as I rise, dress,
head outside where he hoofs again
and again a circle of dirt, the coarse

smell of frantic animal filling
his contained space. There is no
kindness he comprehends, no
soothing cluck can penetrate

his panic, the terror disease brings him.
Only distraction-- my waving arms and shout
moving him toward the shute and syringe,
a cure that will heal and calm him,

give what is now morning a break
from the racket of grief. You miss all this--
the farmyard drama, the heaving sighs
of the bull as he backs from the shute

to trot to the corner post. Light edges our
small mountain as I wander back to the house,
toward your zeal for sleep and silence
another morning stubborn with quiet.
Flight

for Amelia Earhart

A waning moon could not have thrown the rays that sent the gull off-course to Saipan sands.
A splay (like fingers) caught men's eyes today, relics for their nerves, their shaking hands, a woman's verse reduced to numbered bones?
The ocean babbles salt but still the sun is on a course that never finds a home beneath the trough where roots are stars undone. She must have held the view with light untapped in all the songs that restive hunters moan. Amelia's lunar frame may not be trapped in sunken visions culled by men alone.
Thirst

for my husband

Your bed is warm sand, a beach for me,
pelican with salted wings settling near berm.

The ocean gives a thousand mile fetch,
waves answer in confusion.

I'm free of the dive and beating wind
that cages clouds. The sky is chapped

with the pulse and spiral of spring.
Sparrows outside our window cling social

on the whipping branches. Afternoon is our flute,
arias rising from the sill into memories

of water, runoff and fool's watercress
in an overhang of sun. Anything

in this season draws me
to us, clouds loose from winter

making escapes for braver winds, a downstream
taking us like trout moving beyond thought

to the draw of our lateral lines, feeding
like bream and traveling toward salt marsh and sea aster.
Poet's Scramble

I thought I knew the pier like a gull,
yellow bill pinching at the fog that cleared by noon.
Stranger to water, I counted

every flash of foam, the white throats
of sandpipers running at the waterbreak, lurking
seacabbage in a wave's curl. At the café

the Cuban woman brought shrimp tacos,
chatting with her husband in strands
of music long as licorice dangling

from the corner stall. I walked afternoon's
cooling light certain of the slight give
in boardwalk planks and local faces

chapped with salted wind. I gazed
into any pair of eyes thinking I knew
the undertow that could take us all.

Tonight the pier is a hulk in thick fog.
Creosote posts keep track of fishing poles
emerging like lightning rods from slickers

hidden men wear. Their lines trail
toward shore where grunion are swept
from sand cradles to waters so deep

octopi turn moody red and the nautilus
moves to the last chamber. On the pier
pelicans I've seen dive straight

into breaking waters have taken to begging,
strange and enormous, turning forced smiles
on me, shifting their feet around
on the nervous structure.