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WANTING TO LEAVE MONTANA
AND OTHER POEMS

By

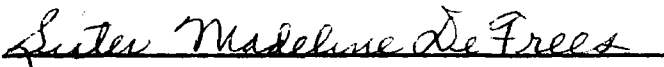
David Slabaugh

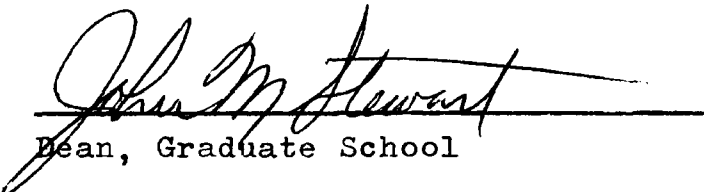
B.A., Eastern Oregon College, 1963

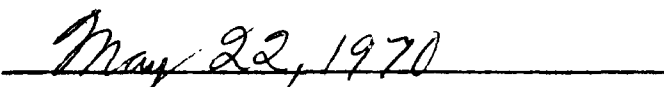
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Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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WANTING TO LEAVE MONTANA

AND OTHER POEMS

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WANTING TO LEAVE MONTANA

I won't crane my neck to see more --
what comes to me I love,
I said and checked the clock.
I'm pacified by certain nervous habits.
This stare tells you,
Watch your mouth now there's company.

Drive all night, and we're still in Montana.
Someone I think is you comes up fast
in the rearview mirror, red
light and siren, walks
with a snail's grace to my cold window
and asks if I want to come along.
I'd rather shoot or run but
I'll slow down, giving just my name,
address, anything my lawyer lets me say.

Keep that turtle alive until
we get his heart out -- it'll beat
for two days. Some animals die
on the end of a chain, or curl
into themselves like tomcats.
Under the diving board, dark face

and fin-white shoulders flowing
against the river, my brother shouted
Jump! I've got you.

You sing your first song
against the wind, unmoved by watching
what comes to us -- sagebrush, gas stations,
fences. Deer stand back of their eyes,
jump free into the darkness at my side.
Of women, of men I love,
which new one are you? What roads
do I memorize to get back in the dark?
The hitchhiker looks like someone
I should know, a wrinkled man, who sleeps
in the back seat without being told.
The outline of a cloud turns into a mountain.

POEM WRITTEN OUT OF LOVE

1.

In November, gasoline cans erupt over burning leaves,
I am going under with the roots, beyond your skin,
grass that grew to stiff points and stopped growing.
Bent grass on a rock wall rising like water
blowing past, we drop into the tunnel. Fluorescent
fixtures wink in the forward cars, the jolt advances,
lights here flicker and fail. Sap-channels
are cracking, the veins tight as straw, winter
drives us here, say all the passengers
elbowing in. Doors suck closed,
half-grinning runners slow and fall
back, tunnels branch and turn,
roots articulate themselves.
I'm here alone, grass
lost above and burning,
the root ends in a blind nub. In December, water freezes
just below the skin, its crystals surround me. Come in.

2.

I could never prepare for you. Tonight,
the first October midnight I forgot you, after
I had cleaned my desk, stacked papers

and books, your fury danced
on raw wood, arched
across blank paper.
I am still awake.

3.

Calendars accused us,
buses left from asphalt fields.
In August the words
of bodies we loved from
are silk fictions in a diary.
Your eyes snap cold and stop reading,
seeing my body is not the same you held
in close rooms. He is a ghost
I could slip into like a glove.
On facing sidewalks, parades of you and me,
each self beside a fawning ghost who dies
across the huge curve of the page.
August is ending,

my shoulder sees
your gesture
reach in the dark, my palm
becomes your odor, your ear speaks
with my tongue.
All that we forgot

flames through two bodies
in burning-glass focus,
the ant's caught in a tangle of grass,
they gaze into that lucid cloud to find
the world all arcing sun --

their form the vanishing-point
of a Renaissance courtyard, diminished
beyond the cold stares of courtiers,
embedded in paint that crumbles
from the moment the brush
takes it to make this painting.

A NEAR MISS

Once I close your door, my dream
stops. The sun's too hot, my ghost, the one
that knew you, sinks back.

The same mistake! Although
I take the off chance, the door's wrong
and I run before the deep bell echoes
from a carpeted back hall.

I said there's no need to return
to Catherine Creek. My brother Dick and I
dammed it with the leavings of a single
outcrop, hefted every stone
against the soft lumps in our skulls
and won. We found that just four rocks
will form a bright cairn on the ground.

If I can only wait,
the water's mirror will become
a loft window, murky,
cut into cubes by the sun. My spine
curves with current. Drop a rock
and all you will see of my skin
is an eddy in the same escaping water.

A STUDY OF SHINTO WATER PURITY RITES

"27XII67 Past the cemetery where we went for the view of Kiyomizu Temple, saw a naked pilgrim head bowed & motionless in a tiny grotto waterfall. Chuck wanted me to take a picture but I didn't."

Henry Maxwell's flume is falling apart
 from where it begins, an hour's walk
 above abandoned Sumpter's graveyard.
 Blue Rock Spring is clear enough
 to wash before you'd climb Hiei
 above Lake Biwa. Swirls
 into the trough, flattens out
 through jack-pine, drops around the sagebrush
 face of Shirley Mountain, splitting braces
 set in basalt cairns.

A green furrow
 runs this beeline, takes a hard left
 into Harvey Creek that's dry
 this time of year. Now a mile
 by one square foot of water, flat,
 the only sane event in all these ugly hills
 where everyone went broke or mad to strip
 free what's hidden in the rock
 with quicksilver.

Cuts an arc

you can taste like water across
two hundred feet of dripping
trestles in Lost Cabin Gulch,
slides on its belly across the bench
nearly lost in three-inch needles,
snakes into alder you walk around
to see it skim boulders the mill
backed up against, and shoot free
spinning the invisible wheel
to crash on the granite slab.

A spring blow

has scattered Henry Maxwell's mill.
If you pretend to be some pilgrim
throwing off your simple whites and beads
to walk out on the speckled stone
where remnants of the placid two-mile stream
break from the splintering spout,
that water will weigh on your shoulders
like a drunken god, and knock you to the ground.

MY AUNT AND UNCLE VISIT THE OLYMPICS

The engine caroms them across the map
all morning. Cups clang in the cupboard,
a family of nine Mexican peasants hitchhike
to market on the wide roof in the sun.
"That dustdevil's a black Olympian athlete,"
says my aunt. It balances the horizon,
spirals a red satin sash around its side.
Vultures struggle up with dignity to wait
for the hooting bus to pass under them into
light flashing from the sand road going south
then east, even to Yucatan.
They have never seen anything
like this, that sun
has always been like this.

And not, for once, fully alive in only
someone else's rooms, daily they wake
to a home they had never left:
Mexico in the bus proves more
like home than whatever it was
they had travelled through before.
"We've walked out on our lives," shouts
my uncle over the wind, "and right
out the back door into the open air."

THE SHINTO SHRINE

It serves old needs. Kids throw sticks in a pond
sacred to certain spirits and children's whim.

An old woman, back gone parallel
to the ground, bows lower at the torii,
but when her freckled hands clap for spirits
to attend, her hump uncurls as straight
as sight for the instant before she taps
back out, cane-head higher than her own.

Flipping my coin into the box after
they go, I clap as quietly as once
I prayed in my room, afraid my friends would know.
But I want nothing of these Shinto ghosts.

Here where a foreigner at least can love
the ancient, the broken pane behind my first-
immersion baptistry no longer grates
the spiritual nerves. Still, this one new gate,
its vermillion gleaming in a strange sun,
yields only next year's slide I show before
Korea, after Street Scenes of Japan.

OUT OF SEASON

What I kill I change, break
and drain the day's bright boredom.
Saw the grouse hen, froze
until I heard her chicks, then threw.

What won't peaceful beings kill
to keep the peace? The panic
ends in a boxed corner, then
they turn and stand --

the bear was blind. Or the caged
Berkshire sow, calcium-
poor, when she begins to tear
and swallow concrete. Red eyes, red teeth.

The hen drags both wings, over-acts,
her chicks shut up. Missed. Missed!

STOPOVER

The waitress says I should take it easy.
I try in the Cattleman's Bar that overgrew
the old lobby. Keystone laid in '03, rates fading
on brick beneath the aerials and greasy
three-inch stacks. Bay window in flames.
The town police-car waits till one o'clock
in front of the Standard Station.

Found the leather turtle eggs hidden in sand,
the rotten one burst in my face.
Lay naked on bare wood, river still
as the heron, dead snag the odor of slimy sun.
The bed talked to itself.

Hallways telescope beyond the shuttered door
of the dentist's office. Rancid oil in rags
at the third-floor janitor's cubby-hole.
Watery bourbon stains the burlap
scratched bare in the Turkey carpet.
She folded the long bathrobe
about her knees. Red neon
outlines the curtain when the flies
continually wake me in the night.

The Baptist kids come out from prayer at nine.
Their excuse will serve. I have something to go to.
The same dusk, I pull into a field.
It's just a stunt my eyes play when the road
has rushed at them too long -- that hay stubble
clears, then flows off like a broken wave.

WORDS ARE NOT ALL NAMES

My friend talks more about prison lately.
He says the long-timer begins to see words
curl from a mouth like tickertape
and drift toward the right-hand wall
or hammer the neon word to get it right.

Such walls turn darker as you look at them,
patterns on flat steel slide and recur.

But the neon metaphor blinds both of us,
I say, and convicts won't admit to walls,
if ever they speak of such nameless matters,
shared hallucinations, mutterings that hide
the sound of breath from the nearest cell.

XEROX

- i Under the black lid,
these shortest
strings.
Nighttrain, long bell
of the wormhole ear.
- ii I was standing in my backyard
deciding whether to go out or stay in
when a dog rattled his chain, and barked.
- iii When your eye
turns bone
I fold you in.
- iv In my grandmother's maxims,
farm girl
young woman
farm wife widow
gardening dry leaves
on my grandfather's grave,
the few wise men
spoke few words
and hard as dry clods.

EAGLE CAP WILDERNESS

Even the Nez Perce got out by November.
The Billy Jones Lake miner
stayed drunk in Joseph eight months
every winter. I admit my fear of getting lost
where even words won't settle,
or can't. I listen to my friends
roll rocks down some long chimney
into Hurricane Creek canyon. Whose words
are those bouncing off my stone ear?
Thistles stuff my mouth. It's hard
to live in a growing season fit
for only grass and wiry flowers.
Those groans echo someone else -- ignore them.
The cliff's too big for my binoculars
that pitch on two eagles
given up to drifting on a thermal.

I can't think my way into feather and wing.
Aluminum skin, perhaps, a search and rescue plane,
my eyes split to insect
facets, each to watch one wave
in a sea of waves. A nerve
I never felt before locks
on two empty life rafts rocking

on the warp, tilting to bias.
No debris. My fingernail can trace the arc
back to a few board barracks,
maybe a bar, beside the asphalt strip.
No real comforts -- only air
thick enough to breathe again.

THE TRAVELLING SALESMAN

Last night I got stoned and finally
felt at home in this town. Not today.
I envy the travelling salesman drunk
in Eddy's Club, who just confessed
to failing alone in motel rooms, hating
the L-shaped mend in the bedspread,
account-book on a clear pine dresser,
door only he will walk through, tomorrow,
to fail again. He can watch TV,
get drunk until he has to sleep
and always know how drunk he is.
He's only in Missoula for the night.

Still, people who die here every day
are his friends and one-night lovers.
Absorbed, he stares from a limousine
in every line of funeral cars
I stare at from the sidewalk,
standing with a woman I love who'd never
leave me, two adopted children I know
how to protect, a future I've made safe.

The salesman puts his big arm around
some friend who cries all the time.

I remember the date I last broke down;
my head's dried up. Survival manuals say
Sit in the shade and conserve water,
Don't run off weeping till you're dead.
I sit out of the sun, hearing above me
bedrock shift along dry faults,
pebbles break and roll. Derivative,
I listen to ghosts. Black clouds dump
rain on some huge canyon past the desert.

The travelling salesman lets me know
he's read Bishop Ussher, and that Eden
cracked down on visitors 6000 years ago.
In return, I read him this poem. I watch
this salesman in the mirror, and can see
it fails. The dry, too-literary talk
is boring. So he tips his schooner
and emerges looking for another bar.

DECEMBER 24, 1955

Those carp bones are still in the corner,
a cockroach drowned in the spit-can, and
it's 90 in here with the oilstove humming.
Tony you're deaf, you talk Swedish, forgetting
I'm not Ole but some neighbor kid
bringing pies for Christmas
and you're too glad to see me.
I'll come back once at least
to get the piepans. But
I'd rather shoot you some carp
in the drying slough next summer,
present them in a gunny sack
dripping scales, and sometimes
on the hottest days you tell
a story I haven't heard.
Your new year won't begin
until you move the rocker
out to the porch, soak up sun
and dream lives you lost
track of sixty years ago,
Christmas on long hillsides in Sweden,
or here with Ole alive. Now
I suppose you'll get cramps from gorging
too much apple pie, fall asleep feeling

your bones crack in the 12-foot drift
against the granary. I'll sneak out
and next July we'll leave the farm.
Even my grandfathers drifted west
before they settled in Illinois.
I'll move to Oregon and never
think of you again until today, cold
in Montana, waiting for 30 below.

ACCIDENT

Who's worse off? The victim
staring into shock, the void
of feeling wonder out of time:
the accident recurs behind
her eyes, the weed-stalk scratches
a neck without touching a skin, cool
and distant where it shields a coal.
Or to watch her live and know it?
My eyes come to, but my life is led
by words, easy gestures, mock
heroics when the cops come.
At night to sleep in my own bed.

LETTER

Dark and white furrows
repeat the roof tiles. Even
water runs in pattern.

But where you live
landscape fails in line --
hills hump and split,

valleys gorge on dike-
bursting floods, the best road
stretches Lombardy poplars

only a mile before
the bridge. With no straight lines
where do your eyes lead?

You can't see accidents waiting
on one horizon, sadness
won't be driven ninety miles

an hour without a swerve.

I stare down stringy hedgerows.

Light forms for miles above this town.

If your light and silence
break I will have the breaking
over with and go on.

THE SALESMAN DREAMING TWICE OF DEATH

Once the product sold itself.

The sample case fell open like a rich man's book
and told me what to give.

My body has no lines. It waits. Directions in italic
tell it to breathe out slow,
stop the column of air, stinking silo of the lungs,
keep my eyes to the ground,
a point of landing, a place for truth that will come
first to the body, falling into weeds, gravel and sand,
the ant dropping its carcass
to retreat by its own scent.

Roofs and trees fall toward a single edge.

A wind rises behind the darkness.

Foxes creep from the ditch onto the lane.

The wind, love, is your voice saying
this is a different wind, from the north,
from behind what you cannot see,
from fields toward the river,
wind blowing alfalfa from the single elm,

bringing the sour-bitter stench, the glaring fox red,
black feet on the sand, eyes wet as dens

below the dome of riverwater
sand shifting like oil under elbow and knee.
Can I stay? There's nothing to hold in this animal stink.
I fear the cold freedom of water and air.
My body is rising without me.
Don't drift past the reach of my hand.
Light is the way to the air, the light swells
like slime on a frog, bubble and skin, cold surfaces
break in my face, different from what I remember,
neither blow nor caress.
Whatever I was, I'm awake,
the sky broken among the black trees,
the great elms dancing to breathe in the single air.

SHE AWAKENS

More beautiful than awake,
you huddle near the zero of your sleep.
Chemical fires hum in the limp cells
warming surfaces of bone, percale, and air.
Fire is a play on surfaces,
nuclear walls of a body alone in its senses,
fish trapped in its choice of a tight parabola
into the wind, back to a different river
but same tug at the jaw. This eye doesn't close.
Death begins at the X of the imaginary line
around from the gill slits and the real
spine it intersects. The quick snap
vanishes in your catch of breath.
Where are you in your sleep or sight?
You turn, turn, and stop. Your love
of surface fire breaks down green water
into white water smoking on a cliff,
eye following the fall, and I
remember the roar of my ears, that darkness,
and your hand hissing into my skin.

UNFINISHED POEM

There's detergent in this water,
dead deer upstream, only
the faucet's safe.

Rapp Creek

disappears on bare stone, we mirror
another, a ripple of light
in the light between us,
or nothing.

Colors catch

the eye's edge, dark feet
in strong, invented shadow.
Who's pouring all this yellow light
along my hand?

Trees

dry in a tower of wind.
You can tell me nothing,
books curl open together,
blank pages blacken,
their light dancing
in the hollow of your eyes.

IT'S THE MIDDLE OF WINTER

The snow is beating
against my eyes.

A red-shafted flicker
arcs to a fencepost,
then a flock of brown birds
who must have lived
here all along
dive black through
the white flakes
like brain-cells
burning out: ten
thousand a day.

I could give a
footnote to prove it.

RYOANJI, A YEAR LATER

Rakutoso Inn

The ship was late,
the train made one last
slow run, we wake
to snow dusted
through window cracks
on quilts and red lacquer,
and this planned
embrace at last does not fail.

Ryoanji

On Katsumoto's land, the temple
burned to the ground in his own war.
The corridor's long-polished planks
lead to an unprepared-for turning
where the fifteen rocks still
rise from raked sand inside
this ancient and repeated burning.

LOUD NOISES KEEP ME AWAKE AT NIGHT

We have lived in more comfortable
houses than this house. I listen
if you'll limp to me from sleep,
and hear my body pause.

The door crashes open, all your eyes
and hands accuse me of deceit
and wild infidelity, of loving
myself too much.

At Ryoanji you shivered
in your warmest coat, learning
to watch a much-watched place.
You listened to the rocks

and I couldn't rouse you
from that landscape I didn't
design. By sleeping
you come to me. Most despairing

rage won't hide your body
when it abandons its glare
and you, to gain this ring
of light, limping where my body

balances between us, listening hard
to this poem being made for you,
freeing its words into the fire
you bring like darkness from your sleep.