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EACH NIGHT IN THIS ROOM

by

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B.A., Whitworth College, 1978

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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EACH NIGHT IN THIS ROOM

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I. Breaking The Surface Of Stone

At The Edge Of The Wood

The first snow circles
the edge of the wood.

Shinnying long and cold
into the sharp sky,
the birch waits, empty.

The air is blue ice
I could crack
with one word.

In Sleep We Were All Possibilities

Our bodies curved to dreams that summer
the way mine leaned into yours
lingering at the mouth of sleep.
The veering sun swam before us
as I followed you onto the waves,
through each town further south,
toward our emerald womanhood,
that coiled heart. We commanded rooms
like islands parents could not besiege.
Men dragged the streets for precious stones.
We imagined them drawing themselves
over the buckled hills. Lamps burned
in the windows, our breath
staining the glass with desire.

for Darcie

Breaking The Surface Of Stone

Current washes back as she sleeps
curving her slender tail.
She is dark red on a pebbled floor
set in the round of a mosaic.

Standing above her, a boy goes pale as cloud.
His fist loosens a coiled line.
The tight rings enter the water
without sound.

If only sun caught the line as it slid
into the narrow stream, if she saw
his slender shadow swaying over her, she would
turn from the thick spell and rush the current,
or arc from the water and shine for the boy.
Born for his body,
his twin.

The hook sinks in the current as she jerks.
Her dark body scallops the line
as it cuts back
and forth breaking
through the tiled surface of stone.

The Hungry

i

Along the railroad tracks
two boys, an airgun,
the river.

I never saw the boys;
what I did see I'll remember
forever—a grey-blue pigeon
dangling from their pole.

ii

In a movie a man
draws a woman into his mouth,
tucking her inside his teeth.
He sticks orchids like epaulets
to her naked shoulder.

iii

In the dark,
leafy hands brush
snow from the sunken tracks
of a moving animal.
Ferns gather in the moonlight
like green signal fires.
When I go down each morning
to gather fuel
men are pacing up
and down the river
listening for voices
that will call them
by name.

I Might Say To Him

If he plays with the curtain at the window,
the hot air curling up his arm,
I might say again, "It's hot. I can't move."
I remember other nights when he came to my room
and we drew pictures of animals on each other's backs,
his fingers so fine and delicate
I never wanted him to stop. We might shimmer
over the hot pavement; he is impatient
unfastening the small buttons on my blouse
holding them in his teeth like polished beads.
He says anything that comes into his head
and I understand. "Tonight we are lovely, lovely."

In The Third Year

From the slow reel of morning
we've become like the continuous
smooth ridges of a bowl.
The bath, each leg of the trousers,
the dark vest.
I have come to see it as this,
the folding and unfolding,
the feel of your body turning along my spine.
I say it is not enough to need you,
to become you as though becoming myself.
Like swallows we unravel our bodies
plaiting the silk into a fabric
of gleaming threads.

for John

Dusk From Fidalgo Island

for those lost from Anacortes

When the Americus and the Altair
went down in Dutch Harbor
grandmothers slapped rugs
against the backbone of the waves
like in the old country,
their breath white asters plucked
from their own mouths.

The sea took with it the slender spear
of childhood, sailing in its small skiff
through the islands, the length
of the dead stretching like a stiff braid
over the water. The sky swayed
with cormorants as they slipped quietly
through the channel walls.

After The Burial

The body prepares itself, glides
along the walls, lighting the lamps.
They flare with the brief scent of oil.
We can see the bedding, the glass of water,
the body going slowly
over the covers
like a cradle.

At first it seems harsh
the heart taken and divided into pieces
like dough. The body tries to reclaim it,
scaling the steep walls
the fingersteps slender troughs.
It no longer has the strength.
Already the lamps flutter like wings,
the odor of oil lifting itself
like a narrow moon.

II. The Ark

The Ark

They have come here unconscious of the balcony
that cradles them in its two arms.
She the bride, he the bridegroom,
the veil that wavers before them.
He fumbles in the dark sleeves
of a robe too large
that he cannot grow into,
bought for him years ago.
And yet they stand at the brocade doorway
as the vapor repeats itself infinitely
and the steam gathers in secluded corners
and grows, spilling through the doorways,
through the slim arch of trees.
The numbers click to the right, then the left.
Inside, the safe,
the procession of animals,
the alum at the door to purify themselves,
mates bound to each other by this narrow gate
they are summoned to,
their breath sweet with the long slips of forsythia
curving from between their teeth.

The Garden

Before she knew him
there were her hands
she might deny if pressed,
rhododendrons blooming
violently in her mouth.
It was her way of saying
it was not his fault,
like the pitcher left out all winter,
cracked, divided into two
parts. It could be that way
with her, the longing
locked in obedient rooms
of the heart.

Each spring they try again
carrots, beets, peas, deciding
how to set the rows.
She knows weeds will take over,
last year's potatoes running
up through the corn. He plows,
leaving a deep furrow
along the fence, shadow
gathering in long pools.
That night she dreams
vines curl over her thighs,
bud along her arms,
roots in the earth beneath
shifting slowly.

The Garden: After Pompeii

That first spring
insects and beasts
admired themselves
in the cold pools,
the blossoms trembling
with their knobs of gold.

After a few weeks
that was not enough,
the animals consorting,
tucking up their hooves.
The pumas laughed
in their language of dust and teeth,
how they could not be harmed,
infinite, caressing their delicate wrists.

There were people too,
in houses they built from the country of ash and mud,
and who, because they were people and could understand,
must give something for their perfection,
a small exchange for the loveliness,
for the dark forehead of god.
The stars swum heavily across the sky
as the mothers chanted, their hair
smoking with its little deaths.

*

A year ago scientists found a boy
curled into himself as though sleeping,

as though he might still open his eyes if spoken to
in the voice of his mother
woken at dawn to build the fire,
still with the thin gold ring encircling his finger,
the blue-black hair cradling his head.

Perhaps his mother had whispered some comfort
before the volcano's mouth of silence,
chips of stars weighting his eyes.
Whatever he became
in the paled moon of dreams
he took with him quietly,
sinking in the dusky bed.

Figure In A Lacquer Box

These carved walls
of stillness
the undulating vases
of peach blossoms
that sag into shallow pools,
the plate of tea.
1000 years she has knelt here
knotting her hair into a ladder
he might climb, carrying
his jar of paper birds.
Each night she wraps
in the silk robe he sent her,
the designs of flowers
crushed in it, the red moon
pressing its unyielding mouth
over the unbroken curve
of her eyes.

How Ho Hsien-ku Became One Of The Eight Immortals

Every morning I dusted the walk with petals
and scrapings of tea from my father's table,
watching for you. I still brought the trays of rice
as was expected, crab-walking from kitchen
to table with the enormous bowls of tea.
But I remembered the times when dust mingled
in our tracks, the hills, mother-of-pearl,
the night of sorrows you took from me
pretending to tuck them into your beard
like an old man. We wandered in the hills,
the earthen platter turning beneath us
on its bamboo legs, our bodies stirring
like flutes spiralling through the creviced
mountain. You were the best in Hunan,
driving the demons from me with your magic sword.
The fields were wet with their blossoms,
the minerals shining like fish eyes from the water.

After you had gone I was summoned to the court
of Empress Wu. How could I go
who had stopped with you beneath the enchanted peach tree
in the hills above Ling-ling. I who ate
the fruit from your hand. How could I go to court
who had become immortal with you, who had no servant,
only my own hand to hold this lotus blossom,
my one bare foot stepping onto the mountain,
to the curved shrine. I disappeared, shredding
the stars over the households, my belly round as a moon,
the way I will hold it forever,
perfect and fertile, waiting for your return.

The Gift

Like the others
I waited in the lavender room
skin washed in skin
the dark already fastening
its tight buckle.
You pressed me through the dark canal
and offered me to the crystalline air.
Already we had finished the compulsory
portions of water and myth.

This is the secret I keep
sheathed in the sacrificial dress
you wrapped me in. I have lost the words
whispered along the chancel walls, Mother,
born to this dark tether, this sanctuary
of private hands. I have forgotten
how my bones bent as soft as yours,
the one instant of recognition.

The fans turn like propellers,
my wrists tight as bows.
Shadows still surround me,
the mother I fail, the daughter within me
refusing to be born. It would be easy
to pass on what I still carry,
the secrets I mind better
than myself. And yet it is not reason enough,
this hard bench, everything that might be lost.
There will always be the miraculous,
the infinite rows of shoes.

Birthmark

When you married, you absorbed your husband's body
taking him inside carefully—

the hands that cupped your chin of bone china,
the mouth shaping words of glass.

You remember your daughter counting dominoes, her delicate
finger pausing in the white impressions of the tiles.

You wondered what she would find at your age,
if she would know certainty like her own name.

You hear couples marry older

but you know there is no promise

even in the child, a better reflection of your face
than the mirror's. The birthmark like a bruise
at the small of the back, shaken from your bodies and shared.

She will wear it the way you wear it.

There is nothing as certain,

not even the garden at planting,

the whispers passed to your husband in bed.

Families Eat Secrets Of Stone

Weights sink to the river floor and hold.
Parents mouth words, passing them through the circle of bone.
Families eat secrets of stone.

The mare edges the wire,
the tidy rim of the world.
Weights sink to the river floor and hold.

In a photograph, the family huddles around the girl
blind as glass. The web of cruelty now invisible.
Families eat secrets of stone.

Placemats divide the table into countries. Unspoken
negotiations climb like a river of stairs between them.
Weights sink to the river floor and hold.

Protect the demented aunt, closed in her room,
spinning her hands of rope.
Families eat secrets of stone.

Hunger's voice is a clatter of spoons, the darkness kept
between us and fed, taking our turns.
Families eat secrets of stone.
Weights sink to the river floor and hold.

The Fat Poem: An Interior Landscape

The doctor shakes his head,
forks up his half-glasses and points out
the dinette set on the x-ray, bad, very bad.
The washing machine and bits of laundry
beside it, the box of Toss and Soft.

Some think the practice odd—
I like the way the pieces inside me clang
together like a cubist wind chime.
Sometimes the corner of a table angles
out of my belly. I give it a shove
and slide it back into place
like a trick shoulder,
a prosthesis.

The doctor insists on an operation:
"I am not joking." Health risks.
He hold up the x-ray, his pointer
outlines a sprinkler.
I nod, admit he's right.
But he'll have to offer something better,
a compromise, leave a few trees,
some shrubbery, perhaps a lawn chair.

He takes a long instrument with a light
and probes the inner warehouse walls.

I like the feel of each piece
settling, I say, the home
building inside me. Sort of an early retirement.
I pat my stomach, feel lumps

of jostling sheep, the branches of raspberries
poking small tips through my abdomen.

The doctor gives me an ultimatum.
I look like I comply
but I pick up one of the potted plants
and a magazine from the front office,
swallow a stethoscope.

I imagine it, the contents of years
rolling from me, the barbecue and lawnmower
scattered over the operating room
like a second hand store.

Nothing left of me
but the small lumps of organs
gathered along my spine:
32 years of belongings, 4 houses,
14 jobs, 2 husbands.
What would be left,
to know by feel what's inside sure as the places
I've visited, these gaudy bracelets of gold.

Crossing The Border

i

In Salvador we float
a brown river. An infant
clutches the arched neck
of it's mother, children's arms
like twine over an inner tube.
We drop along the border
over river that bulges
like a mirage. We think
we are safe. One of the women
lifts her baby to her breast.
It clings like a heart
to the wrong side of the skin.

ii

In the markets girls cut
Christmas ornaments
from the lids of cans.
Bright as woven skirts,
sharp as the knives
of the Guardia, they hang
on curved hooks from fingers,
the soft flesh of arms, lips,
eyelids, messages scrawled
on them. "They have planted
a border of knives around Salvador.
Each blade peels flesh like sky."

iii

Air flutters along the handle
of a machete. It threads
the air with its singing.
We fall like shocks of wheat
and our parts are tied from the limbs
of pinyon trees. The children crane
their heads, their mouths open
to catch the beads of milk.

The Gardener / reply to "The Colonel"

after Carolyn Forché

Perhaps you checked his credentials yourself,
the bag of tools, the bundle of stakes, the trowel,
to insure he would not come to your rooms
your wife crying, "I have done nothing, nothing."
You know this trick.
Perhaps you even talked with him
asking of previous employment, and for whom.
Checking his eyes.

Surely you chose carefully
someone who would say nothing
of the hands he finds in the garden
swept there like pieces of broken pottery.
The scraps of faces
the mouths still open with their confessions.
But say you cannot cover everything,
that he sees how you carry your bayonette
like the stump of a woman's hand.
Perhaps he begins stealing from the house
bits of lace to cover the faces he finds sleeping
in the thick-tongued roots of the trees.

And perhaps one night he crushes
his body against the broken bottles of your foundation
and lets them press their edges
into him like knives,
then crawls through the house taking guns
from each of the rooms, the pistol left on the couch,

the one on the girl's nightstand, even the gun
you slip beneath your pillow.
He piles them in the street pouring gas,
a cord that curls into a vaporous moon.
The guns begin their slow reporting,
each of the names rung distinctly as yours or mine.

Each Night In This Room

A woman dreams of an unfinished house
and the two children she left there
in the frame of the window.
Her husband on the back porch reels fish in,
one by one over the railing.
Kohos, silvers, kings,
slide over the white linoleum.
They pile like silver coins
at the door; the children rush
to lift them up, flinging
them again and again
into the watery air.

Then the questions, the doctor
peeling back her eyes like ripe fruit.
She waits, as she always does, paleontologist
examining the fossiled remains
of a man, listening to the one high note
on the other side of the door,
breathy as a whistle that would make her crazy
if she didn't concentrate on the doctor's face,
on the blue veins of his hand,
the way they angle in the draw
between his knuckles.

She tells him again, in photographs
you can see indentations in the brain
made by figures etched over figures
like hieroglyphs, as though the brain
were layers of trembling gills,

the soft closing and opening
of each skin traced with the veiny
silhouette of memory.

In the morning a kingfisher has fallen
outside the window, it's neck tilted
too far over the wing
as though it were trying to hear
the sound the wind made as it plunged
through the shaft of air.
It looks too large to be dead, she thinks,
the way it lies there
day after day, perfectly still,
no one taking it and burying it
in a safe place. Instead it seems to be resting,
waiting for the wind to take it up again
softly in its two hands.