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Christopher D. Theim

*The University of Montana*

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My Fantastic Bags

Christopher D. Theim

B.A. Beloit College, 2000

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

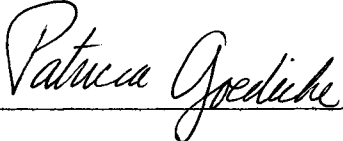
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The University of Montana

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Approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

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# My Fantastic Bags

## My Fantastic Bags

The Party	3
Names of Birds	4
Attendance	5
Good Morning	6
The Fruit and Rope Experiment of 1909	7
The Dimmer	8
Terrible Ditty	9
Tact	10
Honeymoon Restaurant	11
Rumors	12
The Hydroseeder	14
Air Traffic Control	15
What Some People Will Do	16
Consulting	17
I'm Not So Sure About It Anymore	18
Swing Set	19
The Stunt	20
A Motion	21
My Place	22

Fine Problem	24
Used Clothes	26
The Shell Game	27
Do Not Approach the Buffalo	28
A Nice, Quiet Neighborhood	29
Standard Poodle	30
Two Ducks	31
Old Rope	32
Loose Teeth	33
Our Ship Has Sailed	35
Total Points	37
My Fantastic Bags	38

## Bowline

When a small child was stung,  
the belly of the same fish cured him.  
At first, he pulled away,  
tiny hesitations, like tugs on a line.





## The Party

Someone has taken the lampshade  
off the lamp and now it is lost.  
Where once there was an orchestra  
of light playing through the room,  
now only a single note remains.  
We've stayed too long at the party.

Someone asks me if my sister is still  
tending to her azaleas.

When my father was young he worked  
at a construction site doing odd jobs.  
Walking upstairs in a building,  
perhaps to let a friend know it was time to eat,  
he fell through a spot in the floor.  
Sometimes I wonder what he was thinking.

It has been a while since we sang all the old songs.  
Soon it will be too late to make any more speeches.

In the morning the strong grass  
will make its calculated decisions  
toward the sun.

## Names of Birds

We went down to the lake to clear our heads  
And were mesmerized by a group of babies  
Gumming some grapes.  
Clouds, center-shot and full,  
Painted shadows on the grass.  
Women we barely knew rifled through our bags  
As we tried to guess at different shapes.  
When shadows passed over one baby,  
She gummed at another grape and disappeared.  
Parents taught their children about gossip early,  
So the remaining babies were content.  
It really seemed like they were happy.  
Birds looped signatures into the high, white apron  
And for a while, our desires were not  
Limited to the scope of five senses.  
When two lovers tipped their canoe out on the water  
The babies became suddenly excited.  
It occurred to me that the boat was turned on purpose,  
Babies taken into the atmosphere so quickly.  
All of a sudden, I was sitting in the boat, and a woman,  
Familiar with my valuables,  
Was peeking over the agitated side.  
The still horizon stretched out like a sentence.  
I have to trust the woman I barely know  
Even though it is my bag resting at her feet  
Mysteriously full of seeds.

## Attendance

At the continental breakfast of heaven  
my family is just now waking up.  
At the great door, at the croissant table,  
my relatives are wiping their eyes.  
At first I think they are still crying  
from all the funerals, their own funerals.  
At the continental breakfast of heaven  
my eyes also seem to be going away.  
The buffet table looks too manageable.  
Near the corner of a table, some children  
are playing inside a white tablecloth.  
At the moment, they act pleased, waiting  
to be surprised by their new friends.  
At the continental breakfast of heaven  
some dogs cower quietly in the corner.  
The dogs lick themselves continually.  
At first, no one knows how to feed them.  
At first, no one can figure out how to speak.

## Good Morning

The meaning of all this is hard  
to manufacture. Often a bolt or washer  
will not come in the little plastic bag  
with directions in every language  
but our own. It takes us all a while.  
Occasionally someone else's child  
will syncopate down the steps  
first thing to figure out what was left  
undone. He'll know right where to look  
to see our unfinished daily business.  
Should have shaved before the coffee.  
Should have cleaned out the ears  
more thoroughly. Even though we  
made them ourselves the paintings  
on our walls judge us day and night.  
We can hear them breathe through  
tiny nail holes in the wallpaper.  
Mother tells me not to worry,  
most of the meaning will make itself,  
and many of the portraits are of  
ourselves. Not to worry I exclaim but she  
is busy fussing with the tea.

## The Fruit and Rope Experiment of 1909

At night, the convicts said their prayers deep in the heart of the prison. It was widely reported that hope did exist, having been smuggled in at great cost.

The five men who were caught that year thought they were lucky, at first. Warden Singleton's face was soft as he questioned the men, one by one. Even the metal table and chair took on the quality of a country home. "Sit down," someone said. "Tell us what's on your mind." But the convicts spoke in a strange way.

When everyone became lonely enough, each convict was offered a piece of fruit, which they slowly enjoyed. Afterwards each man was given a picture of a long rope, and sent back to his cell.

On the way home, the Warden was troubled by recurring images of the five prisoners. It was a dark night, he noticed

He walked inside, set his keys down on the kitchen counter, and called out to his wife. When she answered, the Warden could hear from her voice that she was in the bathtub. He wrote a note that began: "If only I could remember my own name . . ."

## The Dimmer

Sometimes I go whole days without seeing  
the boy down the street in his window.  
I wonder if he's still sitting there waiting.

I wonder what he's waiting for while staring  
out onto the street as it begins to narrow.  
Sometimes I go whole days without seeing

the streets as they darken and start closing  
their eyes. Then the mind begins to go.  
I wonder if he's still sitting there waiting.

I think the boy can always see me moving  
around. What is it that he needs to know?  
Sometimes I go whole days without seeing

inside of the house that's always growing.  
I've never said "hi." I've never said "hello."  
I wonder if he's still sitting there waiting,

if already his hands begin their dimming,  
and the enormous shades start to close.  
Sometimes I go whole days without seeing.  
I wonder if he's still sitting there waiting.

## Terrible Ditty

I can  
hear the man who lives

next door in my  
apartment building singing

to himself through  
the paper walls still

he drops garbage  
bags into our

alley they hang out  
mid-air each

a decision  
they are

heavy can I  
hear the man who lives

many of us were watching  
were watching

me sip a little drink on  
my lunch break

## Tact

Do you see the yellow-  
jacket busy himself

into folds & not  
making hardly any sound—

but he must — like little  
scrapings on the plates

& single ones become  
many before

our eyes—  
all face front—

you must have known  
don't whisper into

my ears are delicate  
openings to others

come to your attention  
& hold a knife?



## Honeymoon Restaurant

The college boy who works  
at the fish & chip joint  
already has a hold on us.  
Next thing, he'll reel  
us in, from one salty  
bath to another.

Oh, he'll begin slowly  
enough. He will whisper  
at your lip just to set  
the line a little.

He might make promises  
of travel. I knew when I saw  
the angular eyed fish  
& the coral on his shirt.

Do you recall me saying  
something at the time?  
Now we are sitting here,  
waiting to order our own  
bowl of butter. Maybe  
if we are quiet, one of  
us could spear the boy's  
leg with a fork.

Maybe we could flee.  
I can't remember who  
got us into this mess.  
Do you think it might  
not be anyone's fault?

## Rumors

Her husband also keeps  
his cat's tails cropped  
on purpose offering  
little explanation.  
Sometimes the cats try to bite  
each other's missing tails  
as if loss makes them go  
furious and blind.

They are made hungry  
The kitchen is stocked:  
a little salt,  
a little lemon.  
The cat's cry is always a question,  
the intonation of a nail  
run across an empty saucer.  
The bowl rings  
caught in a momentary tongue,  
and mothers are keeping  
their kids home sick from school  
offering little explanation.  
We all believe  
they have grown tiny tails.  
During the day

the children are busy:  
a little tomato,  
a little basil.

But there is so much time  
to cry out in the pale,  
eavesdropping night.  
We all eat each  
other's darker voices,  
comforting and ill  
as a hearty soup.

## The Hydroseeder

I've circled the word hydroseeder  
In the classified section of the local paper,  
As if my neighbor might drop by and notice,  
As if he would stuff his hands tight  
Into his pockets saying "In the market I see,"  
As if I have any idea what a hydroseeder is.  
But it's right there. Someone is selling.

I hope the hydroseeder is large.  
A lumbering giant of a machine with silver panels  
And blinking lights, that from far off  
In the deep fog of the field might look like a face.  
Some feathery wheels and pedals that move  
On their own like an old player piano.  
The machine has a finite number of switches  
Set in certain complex combinations.  
A variety of uses. A "hot mama of a steal,"  
Teases the person who can be contacted anytime  
After 6 p.m. One hundred feet of hose.

The hydroseeder can be heard all over  
Because its noise issues out in every direction at once.  
I wonder about its smooth and peculiar names.  
Its steam easing grill. The geometric brain  
And other angular innards.

How many of us could fit inside?  
How many right in this room?  
Or what about just there in the doorway?  
Someone in the back raises a long and tentative hand.

## Air Traffic Control

She told me she would be early  
only partly due to the jet-stream  
she said she worshipped the avocado  
of her youth but she'd come anyway  
she said a lot of things but only sighed  
when asked how comfortable she was  
sitting in the Emergency Exit row.  
The late day only gets later.  
Most of us never earn our merit badges  
for arson or unmanned flight.  
How could they be revoked?  
We get ourselves into the loop only to stand  
in the corner. Redistribute the weight.  
I think the seats in my Ferrari are softer  
than the fur in your vintage mittens.  
It's colder here by the window.  
When did Schrodinger's cat get  
smug enough to ask for another meal  
on the last good set of china.  
We all get ourselves into a little trouble.  
She should have been here by now.  
She said the plane oozes through the air  
much like a bullet I joked jump in front  
but who would we be trying to protect?  
Should have. When the sauce runs down  
my chin I fear for the bib.  
A wide gate in our fence swings a little.  
One of the carolers is looking right at me.

## What Some People Will Do

The chimpanzees were everywhere, watching, and Jesus they were dirty. People passed. They crowded around the cages. Little kids were caked with ice cream stains, and one made a spectacle of himself slobbering into a cup of shaved ice. Soon all the children were imitating him. There were so many, after a while, one hardly noticed them at all. Something about those monkeys, though, about their eyes. The bigger monkeys get, the more you want to free them, set them loose where no one knows. The skin around the monkey's eyes was dark, and looked like leather. Soft, leather lids. "People eat that part if they have money," I told a child, in secret, as he was salivating.

## Consulting

We've all tried to take a little something  
for this or that, for what seems to be  
going around, for the problems with our  
eyes, to correct the posture of the walk.  
Sometimes a little nip and tuck is needed.  
Sometimes our loved ones can't get around  
the furniture, can't navigate the stairs.  
Bicycles on the lawn sleep now.  
Their spokes are planted into the ground,  
but the pedals still turn in a slight wind.  
They all point to the way out, where women  
hold the hands of their children as they run  
together down the street.

## I'm Not So Sure about It Anymore

Something that isn't round is rolling  
through the downtown shops among  
people's thoughts and afternoons.  
Sometimes it becomes small and hard  
as the stone that grows inside a stone.  
Sometimes it has an expansive wing-  
set. It is always hard to see.

You can be sure she knows it's there.  
You could take a count and set your watch.  
It used to be something we talked about.

Something that isn't round is rolling  
around the corner by the bakery.  
Sometimes the sun goes down accordingly.  
Sometimes she wakes in the night to take  
a little sip of water or think about her day.  
It is always hard to go back.

Something that isn't round is rolling  
down the stairs by the schoolyard  
where the grass has been worn in circles.  
Sometimes the bells sound like alarms  
and it takes us a second to stand.



## Swing Set

Not the red cheeks on the child in the market.  
Having my eyes. Again to the face. Not the face.  
The simple task of eating. Becoming difficult.  
The single-minded incantation of a swing seat.  
Predictability of action. Inaction.  
The mind's red seat begins a slow arc back  
into itself even before leaving. Not the mind.  
Is the dark wheel of this shopping cart broken?  
How many eyes have been down this aisle?  
The movement of light between aisles is unsteady  
Not unsteady or the silver cart.  
How many eggs did mother put in our cake?  
Not eggs or mothers. A territory over which  
control is exercised. The red seat arcs  
into the hand of a mother again across his face.

## The Stunt

the man bends a hair  
around a nail  
they are more  
scarce now  
his wife sitting  
down silent  
where will you go  
another nail  
extracted  
delicate work  
her hair and each  
nail in a box  
we will fall  
through the roof  
into our own  
house bites her  
calculating lip  
children see  
with their eyes

## A Motion

all day the man  
sits still palms  
face down on  
the counter  
thinking of his wife  
sitting silently  
under the kitchen sink  
she is cold until  
she is warm she  
sees his back he  
is thinking around  
his small need  
and her too soft  
insistence his hands  
braid together  
around his  
now hungry  
her body extends  
like a drawer

## My Place

Well hello again. Are you comfortable?  
Have you seen my collection of small cannons?

You look jittery. There is no need to be nervous,  
tonight, with the melodic moon attracting us so.

I have to say, at dinner, I fantasized the napkin  
in your lap was an emblem of disaster.

But now that we are home, facing my little  
cannon collection, a symbol in itself of utter

victory, I feel a prayer has been answered,  
a white flag of victory raised. Are you nervous?

Look at my sheets, pulled taut against the huge bed.  
Would you like to sit for a moment?

At dinner, I confess I cared.



## Fine Problem

1

Then I got up and once again  
went over the evidence.  
We had all gone over it for a while  
when someone said “thus – ”  
Mostly about the facts. Some ice and debris  
and a motor. The shed that stood and stood.  
A street that will never reopen.  
To think. They were right there  
in front of us this whole time.  
The bottom of her heel on the linoleum floor.  
Rest of the soles touch down.  
How one hand grips the kitchen  
counter. One hand into the soapy sink.  
Motion beneath the silver surface  
lifts out into the day air and down  
into the metal rack. Some adjustments.

2

Premise: a dense sphere falls  
down the staircase touching each stair.

Premise: a dense sphere falls

down the staircase only striking some  
stairs.

Premise: a dense sphere falls out of focus.

3

I have to say I turned the motor on myself

4

Let's be honest. We want the cure.  
Could we even leave? With pressure  
from all sides? I wonder if we might all  
just take some deep breaths. Call who you need  
to call. We have our reservations.  
The big circular conference table wells up.  
I think it might have a memory.  
Someone suggests we take off our shoes.  
A woman thinks about her son.  
There is a machine in the next room  
and a dollop of oil in a dark blue dish. Is it oil?

5

We like to talk while it works.

Someone asks how it works.

## Used Clothes

Our store has been losing business for some time  
but the mannequins have held to their loyal tongues  
and most people don't know about the window.

It has only been reported to those who need to know,  
by a few window-washers, employees, some children.  
Our store has been losing business for some time.

Sometimes a stray will stop and lick the glass.  
Sometimes a grown man drops to his hands,  
but most people don't know about the window.

Many people see nothing. Others linger long enough  
to report the window contains faint images.  
Our store has been losing business for some time.

Some people see their own reflections growing  
along the length of the glass. They become ill.  
But most people don't know about the window.

The other day, a child pointed at his father's smile,  
a woman knelt down to see her husband's hands.  
Our store has been losing business for some time  
and most people don't know about the window.



## The Shell Game

Sometimes I go whole days without seeing  
the woman who sells letter openers.  
My shirts often slide on like a stranger  
or the buttons need some coaxing through  
the tough part. Either way the woman  
drags a heavy foot through the grass  
up to our front door all the front doors  
in fact. We can never remember her name  
hardly can recall the names of all  
the openers. "My so many buttons on those shirts  
yes sir, and some of them are hiding?"  
The buttons on my shirt feel loose and I  
fidget with the string like a little neck.  
Pigeons on our roof jockey for position.

## Do Not Approach the Buffalo

Buffalo can weigh 2000 pounds and can sometimes sprint at 30 mph, three times a human's top speed. Many visitors to the park have been gored by buffalo.

Park officials make no bones about the animal's capabilities. The buffalo may appear tame but are wild, unpredictable, and often dangerous.

An old man traveling through the park wants to take all the animals on vacation, but especially the nervous buffalo. He wears a blue sweater that has

been unraveling. A thread stretches as far as we can see. One-way, all-expense-paid trips to the beach are what we owe the animals, he figures.

In reality, buffalo are spooked by young tourists, digging in the sand with plastic buckets and trowels. Park officials have nothing to say on this subject.

The man with half a sweater cannot be convinced. In his mind, buffalo could wade into the bubbling surf staring into the immense and distant ocean mist.

## A Nice, Quiet Neighborhood

My father stands there, an old man slicing  
his eggs. Raw egg mingles with the hard shells.  
Our kitchen counter is soaked. Shells cover  
his hands and arms. Is our house an American oddity?  
Do the houses of other nations have aluminum  
siding? Maybe people who have amnesia  
would consider our kitchen classic.  
You can ask them. They seem to be everywhere.  
I think that lunch does not apply here.  
People only have brunch.  
I think that my sister has been sleeping  
with fashion magazines piled around her.  
My father still stands, a man slicing his eggs.  
The house gets old and tired like a dream.

## Standard Poodle

If the problem is that he's set to high  
what makes the poodle so standard?  
The toy girl lying on the living room floor  
can no longer speak now. She has a tear  
the size of a nickel in her abdomen.  
Most of the objects that trip us at night  
(while we stumble around for a glass of water  
while we consult the staircases for help)  
have little bells to announce themselves.  
They are toys for him but we do not really  
know all the ways they are used.  
We cannot know everything that happens.  
Some are buried, maybe for safekeeping,  
others dismantled. Some squeak their own songs  
until they are forgotten upon a new arrival.  
The coffee spoons in the cupboard  
silently await our after-dinner instructions.  
His food is kept inside a large trash can.  
When the lid opens in the morning  
most of us are sleeping. When the lid opens  
in the evening we might walk to get the leash.

## Two Ducks

strolled down Main Street.  
The sun shone brightly on their bills.  
When they walked too close to a yelling  
bicycle, their heads jerked around  
as if guided by wires.

If they had found my two  
goldfish, they might have begun  
to question them, though I can tell you,  
the fish are not wise.

Though they are not wise,  
fish are never out of place.  
If they are not at home,  
they are no longer fish.  
*Hum* is their tank.

*Hum-hum* is my apartment,  
a trembling box of wood.  
I sit opening a box of letters.

One, a day in the beach-blond sun,  
salt and sand kneading our feet.  
A second, a girl in a skin canoe,  
paper thin and unsure.  
Even you, skin thin and thinning,  
ambling home.

## Old Rope

Watering systems of our neighborhood stop  
content to return to their own shallow thoughts.  
Once asleep, they dream of small fires and routine.  
Our back neighbors are lounging around on the patio,  
playing their bossanova music and crushing some ice.  
It's hard to notice the jump rope snaking into the woods.  
Before we put the contagious children to sleep  
we should give them some advice. The proper way  
to clip a toenail or wash a houseplant. We should  
wink at the women in the kitchen, casually discussing  
how deeply we have grown into our own regrets.  
"Oh Joan, how did your son end up in Annapolis?"  
"How's the eye," and "remember Charlie Trotter?"  
Before we leave, we should tell the healthy children  
about the boxes we buried when we were younger.  
They might wonder what responsible people wear  
to dig all those holes in the summer rain.

## Loose Teeth

The person who holds the patent on loose teeth  
Is far from here. I will tell you that much.  
I suppose it's not really a patent  
Since you can't hold a patent  
On a state of affairs. Can you.  
Something as ever changing as that.  
I suppose if you could we'd be in business.  
A little studio time for a commercial  
About the divot of pink skin  
Underneath a young string tooth.  
Put that baby on a loop and send it sailing  
Out across this great land until we land  
A record contract for our new jingle. For jiggling.  
Maybe a new ointment for pain: "inevitability."  
No, it's not really a patent but more  
Like a promise. More like a deal,  
And you can't even say the word "deal"  
Without sounding shady. The very vowels  
Spell back room smoke and camera.  
I won't lie by telling half-truths, though.  
We might be considered unstable  
Like a gaseous shape emitting a kind of light  
Popping up all over the screen. Easily excitable.  
Ready to jump the turnstile between states.  
Q: How do we know what happens?  
A: Someone has to look.  
So if you're asked why you're waiting

It's best to look dead on and repeat "waiting."  
Mostly for general mood, not so much  
For clarity's sake. But for the truth of the thing.



## Our Ship Has Sailed

Having no clue as to the exact location  
of the rest of his companions,  
he dropped into the state that isn't quite waking  
and isn't quite sleeping, in a yellow wicker chair.  
That pretty much brings us up to speed.  
There's a hanging plant next to him  
near a glass bowl filled with warm water.  
The plant remembers the water.  
The water remembers the river.  
When air passes through the window  
plant matter brushes across his cool head.  
Eyes dart around quickly inside their casings.  
He could be dreaming of the old coastline,  
not quite a straight shot, like the waves in his brain.  
Or it isn't a dream at all but the kind of vision  
you can only have when you're awake.  
I may have realized a little too late what he meant

when he said "thank you" that night.  
My idea of a good time is sleeping in the corner  
next to a sack of oranges. Then he said it again,  
right after, as if he hadn't really said anything  
in the first place. "Thank you." And he touched my arm  
so I almost didn't hear.  
I thought he might say it again.  
I thought he might say it so I was preparing myself.  
I might have to give a slight nod

while closing my eyes slowly for affect.  
I might have to look away, and back.  
What would be enough?  
Would I have to do the whole gesture again  
catching each of us in a stand-off  
forced to respond in groups of three.  
I heard far off insect claptrap and what could have been  
ice falling onto a cement patio and still further out  
the residue of someone's name remembering  
its own sound in an ear.

## Total Points

My mother who thinks I'm handsome and my mother who thinks I'm smart are playing badminton in the yard again. This usually lasts the better part of a Sunday afternoon. The sun has just started to hang low, a day growing into itself like a big shirt on a child. Neighbors amass on the patio, and soon there are enough people to warrant the serving of sweet iced tea. Passing by, my father mentions "you've got to look out for yourself in these matters," and retires inside. When a mother scores a point, a sound like a sick- bell chimes out, but no one is interested in the tally. If someone finally wins, the mothers will tell each other all of their most secret hopes. It seems like they have been playing for a lifetime. I might not find out who I am.

## My Fantastic Bags

The mall is so new and fresh today  
so utterly fantastic with fantastic people  
and their fantastic bags and bracelets  
that I almost forget. Whoever polishes the chrome  
has polished the chrome. A child on the first floor  
extends quite literally from her mother's loving hand  
on a leash. Choices are made. Choices are almost  
made. The man standing with dark gold sunglasses  
cannot see the mothers who race  
up and down the aisles as if their strollers  
had German engineering, as if all they want  
is one more in the win column.

A girl looks at my shirt as if it were put accidentally on.  
She looks like someone out of a magazine.  
No, she looks like the woman on page 45  
of last month's *Elle* Magazine,  
which was probably delivered, thoroughly examined  
and cut for collage on Tuesday, January 25<sup>th</sup>.  
The faces of everyone I meet and will never know

are so sweet and forgiving it pleases me  
to realize that, except for a few resident experts  
who know every stitch, I almost go unnoticed today.  
Not one of the girls standing at the Orange Julius shop  
has come over to make a scene, take action, wave her bags  
in the air as if to locate someone in charge.  
Not one has tapped me on the arm to pull me aside

and quietly let me in on her secrets.  
And she could. Standing by the payphones  
we would assume the presence of any two people.  
The man with the gold glasses touches his hand  
lightly against the slick wall  
remembering all the stories you have told him.  
You who have only just peered into my fantastic bag,  
and seen the eyes of something rare and delicate inside.  
Who have taught me so much by saying and doing  
so little, who have heard the music in the elevators  
and, for a moment, felt both alive and calm.