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WHAT WE FIND IN SHADOWS

by

Thomas H. Aslin

B.A. University of Washington, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

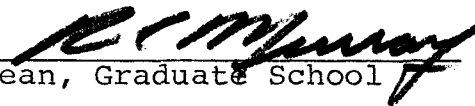
Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1980

Approved By:


Chair, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

5-30-80
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For my father, Will, John, and Beth;
and in memory of my mother.

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I

The Sky Remains

Postcard to Beth from Wallace

Beth,

On the back of this card is a photo of a giant russet potato on the bed of a truck. One's a full load. The farmer I met, Tuesday, grows one on each half-acre, rushing it off to market before spoilage sets in. Nothing much lasts here, only cheat grass thrives. Where it should be obvious, I can't distinguish the ore from the wreckage, or one slag hill from another. In the Silver Bucket Jimmy, a refugee from Lovelock, Nevada, drinks heavy from his mug. Shifts the horseshoe on the wall so luck'll never run thin on the floor. It's another way of life in this land where men survive the cold with stout shots, their private anti-freeze. Tomorrow, I'll leave early under stars locked in place and a new moon pulling me home. No matter how far off, keep me near. Tom.

Letter to Hugo from Seattle

Dear Dick,

You may shy from the smog in Glasgow skies like the smoke over Europe in that war. The war of men away from home, and the children feared wild in the woods. If you have the chance go to Ayreshire on the sea and breathe, and tell me is the air pure like I remember? Your letters and dreams found a home on book shelves last week. Your poems ride pages like birds on summer thermals. In Oregon you shaped our ears to What Thou Lovest...., and your poem, "White Center," made our eyes cloud over. I drove through your home town the other day. A trial was in progress. A near murder: a young woman stabbed, knives clear through her sternum. I never found the house you finally left. Only fern and salal growing in patches in fields. This morning your words rang true. Clouds hung black like lead in the north and birds too far to hear moved south. Wind found the lake and peeled the calm away. Let me know if my poems stray or swim near music. And may all you love and write echo what you need. Tom.

Letter to Beth from Missoula

Dear Beth,

I want you to know tides even out from the brush of day and I care for you as I do for the fumbling of lines on a page. Most dreams fade like sun-soaked wood, I want one that fills you out, full and happy. Tonight, music soothed me. Paul moved fingers over the neck of his fiddle like a strangler in love with his crime. Smoke filled the room as it does in old B-movies. Some days are better, and clouds lowering the boom don't bother me. Still, water wells up in my eyes, mornings, a reservoir of old fear. Now, I count myself lucky. Last summer I found my life better than before. Where salt-air hangs over the land in Astoria, man and nature blend smooth. Someday, I hope we can live there. Stand below the sea wall and watch the waves crush down to foam. Today, my heart moves in me like serrated tin. Winter brings snow white and clean as new souls. We lose much in it - - cars, old toys, sharp-edged shadows, even children. And I lose a part of myself. My hungry half sleeps like a bear. Remember when you are lonely and your spirits are low, I'm here. My shadow grows uneasy, but sends his best, so do I. You wear easy, and I think of you often. Tom.

Letter to Pavlich from Seattle

Dear Walt,

How goes the war of words and self? The one man has fought for years on end. I know mine began in Catholic school and church. Confession drove a demon from my soul (or so I thought). He lives with me now disguised as a muse. High masses with Latin and Gregorian chants washed on ears like the coupling and uncoupling of cars in the Great Northern yard. Today, I think of this and old world Italians and their warbled off-key song; and the boy who stole a host and said, I cut it in two and it bled real blood. Somedays (it seems) I hear the priest call for coin. What religion were you before words and their sounds pulled you away? I may move to Ketchum this fall. A new job for more money. The sky remains there, blue and dark on the night, and stars are as clear as they are anywhere. Come down when you have the chance. We'll drive to Silver City where men still claw raw earth and wolves grin past their elbows. I hope you make it over the pass and anything else in your way. Say hello to your good lady and mine words that assay pure as gold. Tom.

II

Divided In Two

The Dream I Never Had

The tide flaps loose on the wind.
Sun yellows like hollandaise sauce.
Clouds swirl off-white. The dog
I never had and always wanted
eats corn on the cob and grins
from ear to ear. That afternoon
I marry a woman I never knew.
We live in a house empty of sound.
My dog howls - - I'm hungry.
I tell him to get lost.
He takes a cab.
He has no cash.
I foot the bill.

Another Way of Living

Somewhere under the bluffs
of Nova Scotia is a museum
of oddities. Attractions featured
are a two-headed man
always of two minds,
and a rooster with an enormous blue comb,
his head the shape of a worn dime.
Circus freaks are lined up in one room:
the alligator man, Jo Jo
the dog-faced boy, Myrna -- a woman
with four legs and two wombs.
And Lloyd -- half-man, half-sloth.

I find they're holding a ceremony
in my honor and induct me
into the Hall of Fame. The only living man
with mercury in his veins,
I fear change in weather.

I long to live in a world where men
swim in oceans and filter air
through gills. Salmon fill zoos
with orchids and rare African Tulips.
Wolves, the guardians of pure sound,
howl in perfect pitch with the revolutions
of full moons. And time is abolished:
the laying over of waves on sand
filling our need for clocks.

Finally, in this new land or seascape
I might find a way to love
the stunned silence of stars.

Instructions for My Embalmer

When you drain the fluids
from my corpse, don't leave
open wounds. I won't heal
so easy dead. Before you carve
me up examine my face. If I smile
prop me up and give me some room.
Save whatever advice you have
for the next dead stiff
fool enough to listen.
If you have any class at all
buy me a drink. Make it whiskey,
water back. When my wife calls,
have her forward my mail anywhere
you choose. I'm through paying
past-due bills, or pouring over
drug store flyers. Tell her
when she's short of cash and lonely:
find a man, join the "Y". Don't forget
to give old friends my best,
which isn't much, but then again
what have those dog-eared mumbler
ever done for me? You tell them
until I die, some small town
south of every border known, I'll go on
enjoying life from day to moon,
loaning every blue star the air I breathe.

Divided In Two

By some slim chance I'm here. Police
catalogue eight basic prints,
mine are accidental. I breathe air
meant for others. Born under the full-blown
clouds of a blizzard, three months early,
I should have died. How it must hurt
to sift in air the first time.
Our souls eager to take leave.

In my faith, the one I gave up so air
would be less bitter, the unbaptized dead
are pigeon-holed in Limbo.
If given the chance I'd gather
all the lost children in the local armory
each year, and invite them to heaven.
Or open up my shadow to the leanest one
and keep him warm.

If one day I'm held accountable for all my crimes,
even those heretical in nature, phone
Pope John Paul. He's my cousin by right of air.
If he denies me stretch my soul
on the rack. Make it own up.

But if I die, drag me away
from the jail of worms. Let me serve notice:
I'll resurrect my shadow under the oddest moon
known. Each of us drags along
a thinner self. Until I die
I'm divided in two.

III

The Last Voice

Where Shadows Rule

In the room where children sleep
walls close off, glass in the window
flows. Small fingers grope over the rug
for hand-holds. I lose my edge in the gray wash
of days. Clouds wait for the unborn,
like lungs they rub on the hills.
Grass is dead, but dead or alive
slows erosion.

On another day in air I need to breathe
waves peel off the ocean. Sea grass
sprawls on the sand. Wind picks up
where we leave off, reminds us days
are never still. We invent our children
and they dog our dreams. Somewhere in the world
the dawn starts without us. We leave it
for the shadows we know and the cold
hard ground left frozen for months.

Solution of Roots

Before roots play blood-music under
ground, the gray stucco of this hotel
ridicules sky. Each gaze I plant outside
finds day shading the walls.

When you wake a sleeping child --
his eyes roll forward and a soul,
rounding off corners on night sky
and moon, sinks in. The struggle of roots
in earth reminds me of how little we hold
of how much we never know. In March
we turned the earth with pitchforks,
and pounded dirt clods soft. Still,
I look for solutions in roots and scrape
the salt off stones. If we could mine
gold from our souls we would own
all language: words more near music
than sound allows. When young I thought snakes
coiled inside walls. I left finger trails
where they breathed, and named shadows for stars.
At night I hid under the covers from double-edged dreams,
and held on for all I was worth.

Filling Time in Moses Lake

This land moans each time the wind
kicks loose. Dry ground pushes up
blue sage that dies and rushes the highway.
Starch mills force feed the sky brown
and weather inversions hold the message in:
rank smells kill.

With no easy life in view
I miss the moon fooling tides flat,
the wash of salt air on eelgrass.

In cultivated plots alfalfa and peas
root in. Hills are blown away, or grow
inside the earth. Here, dirt poor farmers
are in enemy country. I feel the pull
of factory life: men leaving this star-burned town
for another. Even dogs, if given the chance,
would take flight.

Today, the wind sock promises a cold
distraction from the north. Waiting for harvest
I know the moon comes up soft and drops
like a hammer dwarfing the land.
Some men claim the atmosphere
makes it large and yellow. Others,
citing local evidence, swear
the moon drains topsoil off
slipping light-headed into the lake.

Now, I dream the land before settlers
arrived, before bombers touched down
on the base and man made the desert over
into something owned. Restless, I turn
in the still night on my bed wanting voices
to fill in the room where silence
is piled up like nimbus before a storm.

Odd Motions

- Love Thy God (from a billboard)

Love Thy God.

If I found him I would. Sometimes
men who milk a living off the land
seem to know him. Our nuns said,
He's everywhere. I scanned
old Vatican stamps for a sign.

In the mission we found Carignano's murals
preserved. He brushed the walls with the god
he knew. I remember Latin falling on our ears.
Sermons flooring me with conviction.
Sins I confessed Saturdays, always venial,
loomed over me.

In Ravalli five white crosses mark
the bridge. It hangs on me: teenagers,
Friday night, drunk, any month, always winter,
dead. Must all survivors go through
odd motions to live on?

I feel gravel pinch under our tires,
and find myself somewhere else.
In my imagined death logging trucks
spill cut trees like jackstraws
over the cowl, or dark mud-lush lakes
soften bones to putty, and pull me down.

I need now one old friend, sky or moon,
to fool me sane. When religion fails
what good is a soul? How can I follow
my shadow in off the field?

Photographs in Luke's

The men who posed for the camera
are frozen and framed
in black wood borders.
Every dead one has a "star"
in the corner of his photo
like the ones Franciscans glued
on math tests, for a job well done.
Those still living rent stools out
by the drink or wander through town
looking for warm meals, and a soft touch.
Some claim they've lost a fortune
in Texas oil scams and worthless
mining issues. Or seek it, still,
humming some nameless tune they hope
stars will swallow.

Outside, a northern blow from Canada
crosses over borders invisible everywhere
but on maps. I imagine their bones
never dry out, and tonight I pretend
I'm one of them. If flush with money
I'd call out to one and all,
Belly up to the bar, boys,
drinks are on me, for us
lonely men in love with our ghosts.

I know, certain as a dead man's bones
are hollow, I'll find my grave.
Any vagrant from fields of lean crops
knows he'll claim a wedge of ground
and all the mineral and air rights for his own.

For hours the storm won't let down.
Spring runoff swells rivers full.
Shadows in the night, my only neighbors,
carve whatever light remains.
Staring out in the star-flung space
for what it can never give, I find
he is me: the lone dog howling
a near moon hollow.
His cry for no one I know.

The Last Voice

Another tornado funnels through Louisiana.
58 dead. 500 homeless. On tv I watch the storm
unfold before us, and suppress my desire
to laugh. I'm grateful it passed over
the French Quarter, left jazz joints intact.

In the morning Angelus bells ring
loud as ever. I hold down something inside,
turn back on the Bay of Pigs,
and the Missile Crisis. For weeks
we stocked shelves with canned goods.
Home alone from school one day
we cowered in a corner of the dirt room,
turned the radio on for instruction.
I feared the last voices we'd hear
were ours. I believed unshaven cossacks,
faces the hue of fear and sky,
would cut our souls loose.
We played games of silence. Whoever
spoke first lost. Ever since
I've been afraid of saying too much
of letting a fatal word slip.

Now in Missoula I mouth the cool syllables
of winter and snow, afraid to know what lies
behind it. Each iced up season
fleshes out glaciers. Rivers slow.
Gutters give way under the load.
Snow becomes the rule and cold the mean.

IV

After the Wind Dies

For Frank Who Was Crazy

On days shock dulls your eyes,
a voice needing air rattles
in your ribs. Screams that heal
rub a throat raw. They tear at ears
you thought deaf. And you find no words.

In Colfax you wheeled on a hip
doctors warned would break in time.
Outside the Rose you kicked free
of war haunts and stood alone
on wind soured grass. They pulled
you mad from Medical Lake
twelve years back. Rumor is
they let the wrong one go.

I remember you like the coyote
tied behind Carlson's store.
Eyes rooted wild. Face hungry in want.
Howl taken by the moon.
Even now in the ground
you don't have the rope you need.

In Near Eclipse

Here, sage rushes off the hill like curved skeletons.
Wind funnels over wheat. The Great Northern engine
that severed your arm looms over this ravine.
Blood was left on the ground like choke cherries.
Surgeons worked through the night to make it whole.
You say it's buried outside Tyler where water
succors reeds and grouse hunch low
in ground cover. Sometimes you feel it move,
the brain fills out a message and fingers
clench shut in brown soil.

Tonight with the moon in near eclipse
you motion runners on. Your stump
moving clockwise -- a sure sign
the ball has fallen near the fence.
Years back we lived out games of hide-and-go
in the field the Church of Christ
paved for parking.
I still hear you screaming,
Olly, Olly, ox in free.
Waving every one home.

Another Shade of the East Side

Mrs. Beckham's shack weathers gray like the grave markers north of Usk. I was told Indians bury the dead there perpendicular under duff. And souls flow from a land they never own. We pulled old Esquires from her claw foot bath: porcelain the shade of dust filled skies you hate. Your father died of a coronary. Your mother dies alone in a childless home. Wind and dust become her family. She replaces you with illusion, and the hope religion lends. The disease you carry inside, a biological time-bomb, nailed your brother to the ground, his hands wounded birds. I never saw him the same. We carved his initials on the cedar that summer. Knife cuts oozed with sap and moss-hair fell from limbs.

Fell Down On Us

We chased each other behind granite
slabs in the monument yard.

I marvelled over the smoothness
of the stone. Older, I came to your stone face
on the north ledge. Letters and numbers fading.
They put you in the ground ten years past.
Dead from disease, a leaking of the soul.

My cousin, your nephew, lies on the hill
in the mausoleum. His plane nosed down
in corn rows. When we burn beyond simple recognition
they trace our past from dental charts and finger swirls.
Those of us left behind listen for the right sound
and curse the wrong wind. The impulse to put my ear
to the ground grows strong. But I resist, dream rivers
choking with fish. The sky, we can't name, honed blue.

After the Wind Dies

Sometimes for no good reason they leave
and screen doors bang the wind home.
How odd, hearing a voice alone.

Armand, humming songs from the war,
wove a longshoreman's dance on the pier.
Sometimes for no good reason they leave

and take well enough with them.
A bullet cleaned him of doubt.
How odd, hearing a voice alone.

Our radio farmed out the news
Larry Ming drowned in Couer d'Alene.
Sometimes for no good reason they leave.

Currents, washed through his lungs,
left me scraping the fear off lily pads.
How odd, hearing a voice alone.

Outside, a howling dog carves air
and slow waves shame a full moon.
How odd, hearing my voice alone:
Sometimes for no good reason they leave.

Rehearsing Death

Father, we walked near the garden
laying night crawlers in the coffee can.
I pulled the electric prod from the ground
and felt shivers of stars in my back:
fish eyes from heaven.

I won't trace your shadow again.
Never feel your muscles hard
in sleeves. Or see the sweat
drop from the end of your nose.
When you left I searched the mill
for reminders -- foot prints in dust
on the floor, finger smudges on the walls,
or cryptic marks in ledgers.
I need now something to hold in my eyes,
a will for my soul, an angel of guidance
hovering near.

That old coin of deliverance we call moon
shines on metal-flake at the dump.
I go there on open nights, watch fires
burn off methane. In this land gone silver
over the tangle of roots and lush green
smelling sour, I lead my shadow on.

Snow, Flour, and Wind

On bad days a mass of cloud shuts
down the sky early. A small woman,
my grandmother grows smaller each year.
From her bed she remembers less,
leaves stories off where she began them:
always on the farm by the parish in the dead
breath of storm, she calls out the words
in Cree for snow, flour, or wind.

I still see her kneeling in the garden,
coaxing radishes through stones
and pulling up those bloody toes
in a late summer inversion.

No one told her a son suffered suicide.
Maybe the drinking forced Armand's hand,
or the woman who left him to fill hours
alone in full rooms. I must have it wrong.
She must know more than she lets on.
In the space between her words I hear
air pulled down on lungs no longer
willing to ease the load.
The youngest, Sonny, still lies
in a coffin in the photo on her bureau.
Seventeen and dead from a fever
that shook souls down to size.

Once, these immigrants, from a past
of disinherited dream, bought passage
on a train for the first warm wedge
of land south. Often, I find her
lying awake in her room, and wonder
what she feels blurring these days
in echo. I want to carry her out
into the shade of the locust,
and hold off what she hears alone.

What We Find In Shadows

for my mother

Just once, I need face
the man who dug your grave.
Was he pulled out of shape
by the moon? Did he laugh
stars blind? If grass over your stone
would speak up, I'd search
the long blades for reason.

In Kellogg I watch smoke pour
out in layers over the valley,
watch children in the school yard
play hide-and-go-seek. I hear them
call each other names
they won't understand for years.

Who will watch over the children?
Nuns claimed we all have guardian angels.
If mine were here would I know him?
Would he mince around and mimic
our oddest gestures? What dark syllables
would grass cough up in his behalf?

At home I found an old negative
of you working in the mill
during the war. Feed bags held
over your shoulders are missing: air-brushed away.
If you weren't smiling, the gap
in your teeth clearly showing,
I'd say something was wrong.

Today, I have no use for an angel,
or the scoffer-of-stars. Mother,
if you hear this, come out from
the slag heap of night. Bury lies
I hold inside in muddy ground,
and dance under a moon that moves
over us like a mole in search of a home.

Tonight, I'll move on, take whatever
faded image I find of you, fearing the dumb
glare of sky. Each breath knows
my shadow, that half-starved self, hangs on.