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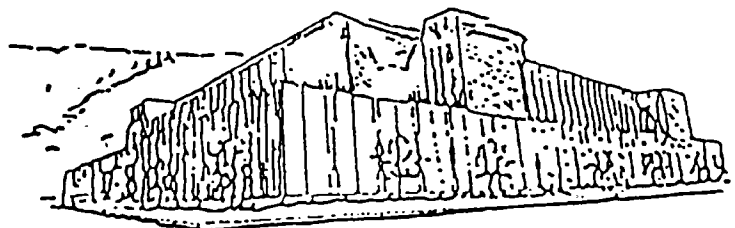
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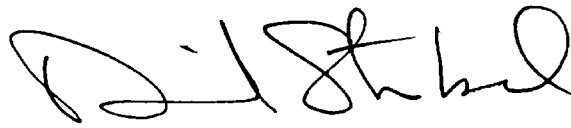
Poems by
Amy Barnes
B.A., University of Cincinnati, 1993

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1998

Approved by:



Chairperson



Graduate School Dean

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for Adlai and Sparky
and because of Elizabeth Wepler

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I

Bending

Bending trees swing the branches that fringe the waters
of Connacht. Gracias: for I, Amy, looked
out and up and saw the North Star. I'm hooked
in the branch of one of those trees bending.

Pluto is my favorite planet.
Because I like the name. Because the way
the name leaves my lips. It has been kissed into clay,
the name, and I keep mouthing Pluto.

Nights can be so bright in the country.
The blue light surrounds you and makes the bluegrass glow
and you ask 'How could life that moves so slow
be shown to be warmer than the starry skies?'

Circumstantial evidence is all I have
to explain why the road ends here and ends
here still. The tree branch leans and it lends
its palms out for rescue from the circumstance.

Drafty world, swinging the branches back and forth,
in and out of the water, cease this moving
and let me view the heavens without losing
my balance! This is only a draft.

Under the tree a bicycle is propped.
I want to get to it. To pedal fast
to make that feeling last as long as it can last.
To be in moonlight, away from trees, in the under.

Architecture

At the wrecking ball
we watch facades crumble
and dust shoot up higher than the hills.
Rusty bricks and glass fall
to our feet and shatter
under our soles. I test
the tones of the rubble with drumsticks
I carry in my pocket.
Porticos, I say. Porticos
and bass guitars for mattresses.
You do not respond.

In the wind I see the leaflets
dropped down onto the riverfront.
They are neon green
and lighting the overcast sky.
They catch in the broken down fence
and mold to links half embedded in the dirt.

The dogs sniff them. The dogs
nose the mounds for food,
for leftover letters stained
with the smell of meat.

I say: I will swing on that chain above the river,
my toes splayed around the cold steel ball.
Dogs will stare up at me, I say,
and cars will drive into the seven hills.

Luxuriating

The raspberries behind his house have not folded
into the dry ground. The walkway is stained with them,
and red handprints jot the door jambs.

She pulls one and then another berry,
shoving them into her mouth, licking the juice
flowing over her lips. She has been warned against
going to the bushes and breaking twigs
over her thighs and leaving leaves undiscovered
in piles. Clouds couple around her arms.
If the pink light returns, she will rise

and bundle her life and cross crab-like,
sideways, into the next state, leaving prints
like dashes diced in the sand. Swimming
in the humid air, her eyes become sticky.
The air coats her arms and bony hands.
The air, thick with mosquitoes, pillows
against her and she falls, dwindling
inside her shell in the Southern Ohio heat.
A thing fallen into someone
else's divisions and delicate sores.

The stolen raspberries melt in her hand.
She looks out over the water. It is calm,
creamed with dusk light. One and then one
again, she tosses the fruits
to the water opening in the low tones
of descent. She does not watch herself.
She does not notice she is sinking into the tide,
or that he stands inches from saving her

(no stanza break)

by the cuffs of her sleeves. For a while
the hem of her skirt stays dry.

Collection Time

How can country life that moves so slowly be shown
to be faster than the stars? She is beside me
pulling thread through batting and I ask 'The smallness
of the stitches doesn't make your hand ache, does it?'
'Are the stars out tonight?' Are they ever out here?
Why doesn't water collect in the daffodils?
At their fullest why don't they tip over? Buckets
on strings tip easily, don't they? Why do it then?
Why, when the points of the Big Dipper are dropping
out of formation one by one, push them back up?
Why does she say 'stars' when I ask if there are words
that will cup and cushion? Why's the Dipper fading?

Cresting

From the road she sees great dust clouds
floating over the fields into the trees.
She follows them, running to catch them
before they coat the hickories heavy with nuts.
She will climb unencumbered and catch
the dust on her sheened skin, rub it raw
into her neck and arms - great patches of gilt.

She is wearing her favorite blue dress.
It tears on briared bushes, and burs
bundle in the lace apron. As she crosses
the ditch tattered weeds tug
at her skirt and she smashes Queen Anne's lace
under her soles. The wild carrots are ripe.
She does not notice their royal green leaves.

In the fields men drive air-conditioned combines
and cut wheat. The girl gives way to them.
She treads lightly in the thin-stemmed crop
and lifts her dress to float it on the small crests.
She remembers glasses of colored water
feeding water-colored weeds and the morning light
reflected red against the window sill.

She is not prepared for the dust,
for its eventual coloring of the sunset,
or the icicles coming.
She wants to lie down in the field,
watch wheat wave over her body,
crack open hulls and eat the opiate.
If she looks up, she sees galaxies descending.

Absence

I stroke the fish,
the scales clumping to my fingertips,
embedding under my nails.

Iridescence piles on the counter.

The fish bleeds and colors itself pinkish.

Its gills open, flapping for water.

I run corner to corner in the rusty haze

with wide arms and the cupped hands of a swimmer.

Bare room but for the pictures of my body hanging on the walls—

stills of my legs in corners,

black and white,

my graying hair.

Will I need a sweater today?

In Chicago I will visit the Shedd

and walk between corridors of water.

The flounder will glide pink in the underwater lights

and swim inches from my head and hands.

Blue Hands

Those blue hands held out stained fabric.
The dye dripped to the floor, puddling at her feet,
bluing cracks in the concrete. Pots steamed
yellow and purple. She submerged herself
in the waters until the colors mixed
in her skin and painted her brown to the elbows.
There were only hours (hours until he returned)
to bejewel the table with crystal,
dress in draping wool. Arms bare and casting
rainbowed shadows, she leaned over the linen,
exacting places for butter knives and wine glasses.
She waited. She dipped spoons into water goblets
until they were cold and bright and she
could touch them to her cheeks, apply
the slight pains. The ice clicked like gravel.
Her hand went to the white stones over and over,
denting her until she was pitted and dusted.

Dream

I've put down my gun.
There is no hostility here.
Here, eat this peach,
lick the juice running down your chin.
The swirling gusts smell of ponderosa pine;
it will be easier to walk back.

It will be easier to pass the refineries
and inhale the rocky fumes reflecting light.
Lead me to the canal. I've left documentation
at the desk, and we won't be missed.
The women are busy preparing for your wedding,
baking tiers of the cake, licking frosting
from between their fingers.

Tomorrow the sculptures will be presented.
A turquoise dog expels a baby's head.
The Buddha, palms up, looks down,
a fish on his head.
Maybe they will appear in my next dream of you
as figures of speech projected from miles away.

Panorama

1

The iron railing warmed her palm.
When the heat dissipated into her body,
she moved her hand, placing it over
and over in sun-stroked spots.
From the balcony she collected
pieces of the valley: the smoke rising
from the river's edge, the steel hills,
the trains switching tracks in the yard.
Miles of lines spread out from her
and curved out of view up into the hills.

2

On the southern side women in blue pants
cooked corn dogs over barrel fires.
The smell scooped up into the air
with spritzes of cologne the women passed
between them. Fire leaked from beneath the barrel.
They watched it scorch the grass, hearing
the young ones slap their shoes
on the bridge leading to Kentucky.
They watched the sparks surge orange
against the blackening summer sky.

3

Dust piled in the kitchen corners.
For weeks he'd wailed against disorder
and wished a smallness would descend on him,
bringing him home at night against backdrops

(no stanza break)

of bright boat lights and water glow.
There was no hope. The balcony's paint peeled
in small scabs and he could no longer
dig his heels into the cement.
On his palms calluses formed against a grip,
hardening at each touch to terra cotta pots.

Paralysis

The man slides letters left
and right. Numbers glow in place.

A 'T' falls to the ground, lays
on the snow. I do not give it over

to the marquee man who daily changes his mind
about events and their importance.

I am near him. I am locating
my hands in the dark.

Beyond the marquee the mountains,
and satellites blink and move.

At Cyr a girl skips rocks
into the river in the moonlight.

I stare into the light at the black words.
They bow in the cold

wind chilling. Plastic letters fall
and drift into piles at my feet.

Out of Line

A woman threads
her needle. She
focuses hard on
the hole, thread
bending out of line.
Custom demands
it be a gift
of needlepoint.

All those little
'x's.' Smallness
of the stitches
doesn't make her
hand ache, does it?
Those crosses add
up to lattice
falling under
the weight of vines.
Why do it then?

In Deference

Go knock the icicles off your mule,
those shags hanging from his belly.
Pile them in translucent pyramids,
and I will walk around and around
with a lead rope circling air, warming it up.

Under the stars I murmur
and slick the frozen drip of water in my left hand.
The mule approaches blowing smoke,
then smokely disappears.
There is no guitar but I strum all the same.

Your goat is tied to a pole with three feet of rope.
He collapses into his icy bed
and I leash my collar to the rope in deference,
flit from circling and dangle my body
forty-five degrees from falling.

Three Prints from the Same Negative

I

The wind has turned prophetic,
bringing memories on pinions
when she least desires anesthetics.
Salt Lake is twelve hours away,
and south.
Still, archeology is practiced, and she digs
up their relics from stony dirt.
There is danger of erosion when it rains.

II

She does not hang up the photographs.

They are only paper ghosts --
as good-for-nothing as mantras.

In the subway the man with the beard and guitar
slips out of view. A red bandanna-covered head
replaces, and is replaced still by topcoat with ripped pocket.

III

The packaging is inexhaustible,
and dictated by facial nudity --
though only the surface pores are visible,
as she recalls.

I pledge allegiance to the flag. . . .

Fifty stars on a blue colorfield.

Psalms

The hall of mirrors makes them dizzy; queasy:
infinite faces mottled red from heat
surround their bodies in glass.

The women map and scour the floor
not knowing where the door
is hidden.

No one can talk: the view of thousands
of lips that move together turns their stomachs
saucier than before. The work is never easy.

Their mothers used to say that lipsticks make
the day. The mixtures meld the face into
perfection - never dull.

Eclipses push the moon away from sight,
and lipstick livens eyes.

But, lies

like this don't touch the women's lips.

Compress the reflections down to four. Reductions
slacken the pain and slake their thirst.

Be calm when you approach with coins
from mirrored sights.

The women want

no balm

minted from their unsightly work. At night
they see too many "me's."

Work is done on floors. They're singing psalms.

The Singer

Frequency and the body with which she makes
a sound add up to
a garden where all her lonesome thoughts are grown.

She fingers yellowed notes on friendships, making
a relationship
where the loam is blackest, and sweetly built up.

Would the mute bouquet be of poetry made?
A bundle of thyme?
Or the sweet grass braided long and carefully?

She memorized your laugh lines; the life they've made.
A portrait drawing
rendered in pencil reveals less than she'd

like to hold. Lines and flowers are the makings.
A medicinal
of smooth Echinacea could cleanse her pining.

She gathers rank scissors and basket to make
a flowering quake
of herself. A bouquet that will show the lake

she finds herself in. Her garden of songs makes
a survival steam
within her mind. She'll fill the rest in later.

Sassafras

I

'Last night, while eating tripe, I thought about my former lover Jane,' he said. *I am his new ritual (complete with organ-loving propensities) even though he needs to hold more than he gives. Others' exotic tastes excite Larry, and he adopts them briefly, then moves on quickly. I am not so Hun-like. I want time enough to study the way my body moves with the other; the way, sitting beside each other, we accomplish shifting legs without disturbance. In Rome I stretched my forearm across Marcel's chest for seven years before the fit was too loose and not good enough to continue. Forearm extended, I note my hand falls on Larry's shoulder. AT & T would have me believe that touching is done best on the phone. But, the palm that's curved around an arm is warmth and odor and sight. I curl my hand around the newspaper. Only surgeons and pianists take such care of their hands. My knees are knobby, knotted like hickory trees. The next girlfriend's won't pop when bent. He's told me so. But I don't care. It does not feel right - my hand on his shoulder. There's nothing left of his body I want to explore.*

II

An older woman was put away by her family for petting fish. She'd sit by the tank, alone, at feeding time and grab the fish by their fins. She'd pet them until their scales fell and gills flattened. Iridescent flakes built up until she held the evidence of touch. Purple and yellow. Black and blue. That's all she wanted. To know that touch is three dimensional even if the thing touched is translucent, slips between your fingers and eventually dies.

III

Last night, while eating tripe, I thought about my former lover Jane's fondness for merlot. She'd wave the cork under her nose to test its bouquet; assess its potential warmth. She knew the healing properties present in wines and mixed them frequently with Taro cards and palms. Last night, while eating tripe, I thought about touching Jane's palm in darkness, hand to hand, measuring my length of fingers against the other. Always against the other - as if it signaled the future. Bodies mechanical as plastic dolls. In the garden left to me wild sassafras grows. I pick long stems and rub the juice behind my knees, elbows and finger joints to lubricate for the eventual touch.

The Valley, 1991

Suspended air
and the black hills
mold the sky.
An empty barge
breaks ice. Pieces
flip in the wake, twist
in circles to the shore.
At the bank, bonfires
burn, deplete the city.
The valley, almost empty.

The Scent

A permission I grant myself: the scent
of a body after pulling down
memories. But of you? Our past appears
as striped pictures, a half-buried instinct
for our language I thought I could drown.
I forget my middle name, Elizabeth,
and only used it once-- with you.

There was only your shape pressed into
the mattress, and if you were only an approximation,
our disintegration was set. We wouldn't tour
Ohio where I was born, and instinct
drawing us closer wouldn't render us true.
I am named after my mother,
whose first name is Elizabeth.

Have you ever eaten cod? Or watched
their black bodies flip and twist on the beach
for scraps of bread? That summer I drove
up and down the lake honing my instinct
for impossible situations. Each
of us wanting! I named it, the thing
that blocked us. It is a fish with wide wings.

II

Something in This Memory

Drywall dust and dirt
drift into familiar corners,
coat my shoes,
billow by my face.
They soften me.

The plane slipping
over wood drops crisp curls
at your feet. The shavings
pile until you
stand in a sea.

I run the planks
spanning open floors.
From joist to joist,
I jump, jangle
the change in my pocket.

I walk up and down these hills
looking for you.
Between maples
and along fences twisted with wild wheat
I kick wet leaves.

Bent to the ground,
my fingers trace a face,
feeling the rough cut of stone.

The sycamore's skin,
molded and peeling,
flakes off onto my fingers;

(no stanza break)

flecks of green and black
stick to my skin.
The cold creeps in
through the chinks in my body.

The ground has soaked through
to my knees.
My feet fail when I walk.

Swimming Cold

I turn east. This eye of blue water
takes up more space than the mountains.
I look out across the sea, blank
except for my hand rising to graze your shoulder
or the cold pipe. It is two o'clock
and I have not begun practicing my voice.

It is three o'clock and I just
stretched my legs.

Four, and I think of motoring
beyond the reef. To settle in the deep.
To swim cold beyond the clear waters
with arms stretching toward the edge of sea.

The Body

1

These fingers
read your face:
dip in at the mouth,
circle moles.
These fingers bend smoothly.
They are slow, deliberate tracers.
Their wrinkles press clean. I watch the joints at your brow,
tips tentative,
drawing a line
to the end of your nose.

2

My leg crosses your lap,
wraps around your waist.
My toes sizzle in the winter sun,
sending warm waves to my shoulders.
My arms are light.
I hardly notice them
conducting symphonies behind your head.

3

You want to line up our skins
 in the light,
match our colored differences.

I only love you,
 and do not permit it.

I cover my breast,
 my legs sticking out from beneath the covers.

I think I see a white horse gallop past the window.

4

I am learning to walk on ice.
Feet and legs lurch from the body,
catching in someone else's imprint.
Breath in brown tree limbs.
Stumbling up stairs.

5.

I photograph my legs.

I stretch them over arm chairs,

light them in shadowy corners.

In the shower shots,

pipes protrude from my head.

A bare black and white body

pushing me along.

Full-Bodied

All turmeric and thyme,
full-bodied,
you pass through the room.
The glitter left behind
sticks to my heels and hands,
and I know I will find it,
weeks from now, floating in my hair.

This chair I sit in squeaks and the fridge buzzes.
The cooling kettle clicks a back-beat
to the ticks of mice crawling across my shoes.
Such a small sound.
There ought to be a cacophony,
at least heavier scratching from a chemist's pen,
a recitation of prayers.

Between dishes and dusting, laundry and laziness
I hang your outline on the wall.
On a curve, curving to the left, it hangs,
the wood paneling approximates flesh
where your arms would swell, and I am ready
to trace the outline for each room.
From this chair or that bed
the view would be the same:
Once, I placed this leg on your lap.
These hands fiddled with your collar.
I kissed your lips.

Kicking Up Clouds

She runs her hands through her hair
and collects the nettles in her palms
pinked by the stinging spines. She is sinking
into warm dirt, dozed under roots.

It is the afternoon of the stars.

She should spot them from the field
with red raspberries in her hands.

She should walk stiffly on stiff grass,
pause to listen for the loons gathered
in ditches by the roadside stand.

She could burst tar bubbles between her toes
if the dirt weren't comfort and the roots
weren't tethering her ankles to the land.

She could arrest music from the air.

In the stand the woman sits behind apples.
Red and yellow, orangish - she piles them
to attention in white crates. They would
tumble without her tethering
fingers. A hose she uses to wash fruit
hooks on her knees, and because the customers
won't wait to clean their fruit in wooden tubs,

they watch her, watch the water
puddle in the dirt and dust puff up
between her painted toes. If they're kind,
she will take the children to the trees
and take their picture pulling down apples
until stems snap, limbs flap into place,
and their fingers are powdered with white.

(stanza break)

Sun in the west. An orange sky in the field.
With dusty eyes the girl lunges
and falls. Lunges and falls toward the apples,
toward the strawberries and raspberries.
Each time she kicks up clouds behind
her heels that color the horizon
and drift over her body, over the field.

Abandon

He asks *What will the drift wood bring to me
if I study it? Study the small lives living there,
or the cracks of my own hands?*

The deciduous ground sinks and caves
as he walks through thousand oaks and broad-leafed
maples. He thinks he sees a gentleman
dressed in white whiling away hours
without consent, without mindfulness.

And what of the lake? She stands there
throwing bread to the gulls, inviting them
to lift her hem with their beaks

and flatter her knees with their feathers.

She's stood there for days testing crusts
and the soft insides, breathing in the attention
they have given her, flocking.

He hasn't jewels bespeaking adoration
to drape around her neck, and his back
weakens with every lunge toward water.

The sun sets on silk worm nests.

Even his hands shrink from their gilded frame.

In the Under

Be in moonlight, away from trees, in the under.
It is warmer here than the underside of palm fronds.

The women are preparing the bridal garments,
but the ice age creeps faster than their hands can stitch.

Place your hand in her hand and wrap your fingers
through hers; correct the break in her palm.

Bending like this should be done with the knowledge
that single butterflies could do it better

because she likes the name and the way
it presents its image at its telling: Monarch.

The women are darning blue socks with white thread,
and they have traveled far with lilies of the valley.

They are waiting for the snow to fall,
for the clean blue light of the moon glowing on snow.

The light will cut through pine needles just to get
to the edge of the earth where we sit.

Of Connacht, gracias: for I looked
down those famine roads and saw where my road ends.

Monarchs don't fly into the shaded chill.
They land in sun and slowly flap their wings

(stanza break)

to catch the rays and warm their bodies.

Wide wings retain warmth and pronounce stunned colors.

Height

She slips into the corn and dances
with the tasseled stalks. Her vaulted hands
switch and sway in the sun. Her fingers drum the sky
with silks. As she dances down the rows
leaves nick her arms and legs. Blue dress
and a face full of leaves, hands pitched
in air. They have come to see her fall
in the field on tramped ground. They have come
to sting the soles of her feet and swoop large
about her body. Swarm about her body.
She dances under the two o'clock sun
and does not think of the black water beyond
where the wind whips up fish into tornadoes,
where he watches the gaping gills
and eyes black and fixed. He leans into the water,
and spreads himself against the gulls.
His arms stretch short. His eyes tear in the brine.
Numb, he sways his hips against
the current, and jellyfish drift forth
with the sea. She circles him with outstretched arms,
her hands raised, not touching, her blue
dress sticking to her thighs. Her lips mouth
O. Sunshine on hair, she spreads
her hands flat against the air and the wind
winds between her fingers pressed toward
the sun. No clouds surpass her shadow.
She is warm-palmed and flapping; the wax
has not melted from her beveled bones
but remains firm and flesh-like in the light.

Wading in the River

She lifted her dress to let the sun
dry her thighs. She was wading
in the river again. Beyond
the retaining wall, she waited
for cut glass to knock at her knees
until they bled and the bubbled water
stung her irresistibly.
She watched the blood streak into the waves,
into the frothy flow of water. The shadow
of her legs spread thin into the current.

From the Kentucky side she counted
seven hills and two brittle bridges. Ten factories
grew gray in their ash. As she waved her leg
in the water a man offered her spare ribs
and candy from a chrome cart,
but paisleys patterned the ship's wake
and the barges carrying steel
pushed into view. Small white boats sped
past her, washing water into her eyes.
Her feet gripped mud and glass between her toes.

Boys walked by kicking stones
down stairs into the river,
waving their arms over the sides of bridges
rusted from humidity. They thought
she cannot know she is standing
in brown water, or that fifty red balloons
with white strings heed wind near her head,
hailing the sun as if she had set them

(no stanza break)

a float from her hair one by one
until she dropped plainly into the river's edge.

Inheriting Him

Look. Here he is.

I found him standing in a fountain -
brushed bronze and green at the elbows.
His arms and legs are pitted
and scratched finely from the jeweled hands
of worshipers. The lilies bob at his ankles.

I tour the crowd: They wear hats
with sun visors. They stare up at him.
At the tool belt around his waist.
One hands him shims
and they slip from his hands.
Another, my mother, bows, offering
hammer and nails on a blue towel,
but they sink to the shallow bottom.

I watch from my lawn chair,
sipping pink drinks with umbrellas.
I do not bend to the ground
or throw lightning over my shoulder for luck.

The square is littered with the remains of adoration:
sharp snips of shiny metal
spread like confetti,
thin pamphlets denoting wrist size,
height, number of hairs on his head at death.

On the sidewalk my nephew clutches his good looks
on a poster. A bare-chested man with sunned skin
drapes plumb line around his neck,
chalking in marks of worship,

(no stanza break)

and the crowd piles and chants in French.
I know some of the words. I read the plaque:
Il t'a aimé. Très bien.

Not my hand. Not my eyes.