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Walk with Clark's crows

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A WALK WITH CLARK'S CROWS

By

Thomas R. Madden

B.A., Carroll College, 1959

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

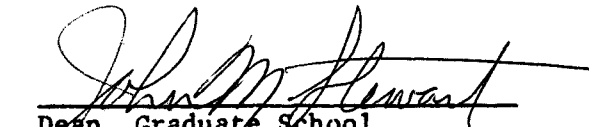
Master of Arts

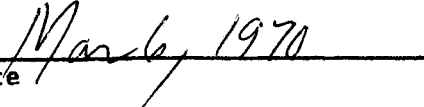
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

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"The Honor of Doorknobs" appeared in the Fall, 1966
issue of Voices International.

A PROSPECT OF HELENA FROM THE SOUTH

Even before boots, the hill with no name
was the toe of a stubborn boot
dividing the wet gulch from the dry
for the red mapmaker. Creeks sketched green,
not gold, nor the tracings for a later town.

We sleep and feed on this discovery
and we climb hunting its geography.
Why did a Wisconsin dream birth us here?
An English dream gone home by pouch
had to leave some blood behind.

But as we toe into the town
our eyes deny dry blood, blink
the solid town of homes and friends
until we read too many names. Our fingers
touch painted cards instead of hands.

The town cannot climb as we climb.
It waits as a bar of lime
for the heat of seeing and flakes,
dust in the throat of the dry canyon,

parching the memory of bears.

The town's bones flume north like clay.

Young ditches on the rim of the gulch

freeze east as cold dinners

to animals hungry for sand.

The valley takes its brown shovel face.

Trees breathe only with other trees,

axes ring only on wood, not sleep.

Yet a hill-sloped corral splashed our feet

with the first cry of horses and youth.

And the illusion of sketch marries dream,

a trapped surprise in an old box,

the glazed print of a dead photographer

who suffered under his black hood

on this limestone brow in the first decade

of dream, the first of the valley's death.

DIALOGUE

Frost said
if you have to look in a footnote
it's already too late.
Or I said that,
quoting him,
and then you said
or implied
that accumulation of information
is a deadly thing,
possibly referring to scholars,
but really
you were quoting Buber
who was referring to lovers.

Or maybe
you said your part first
and then
I came in with Frost,
a defensive maneuver,
really,
and unjustifiable,
as you said.
I said he had a point,

possibly referring to lovers.

It was a pity

I was quoting Frost,

who was referring to scholars.

CLARK FORK MARINADE

Wrapping my bones between weeds and backyard turds,
I stretched on my blanket and stared at my knees.
June sunbath failed to soften the caps of bone.
A bad month for sun next to a furniture store,
its electric organ thumping our crickets tuneless.
The little woman with the Paris-Seattle patois,
like a tiny Algerian beached in France,
frolicked our grubby sunbaths nearly bare.
Her fingers paired for sand-dune dice,
she hummed lessons from her guitar,
short tunes from Sorbonne kindergartens.
She showed me her nipple while she napped.

The wet brow of the June ghost covered my brow
with cotton too tight for an Irishman's cap.
Indigestible clouds gagged ridges to the north.
The annual umbrella of spindrift or milk
which ices the spring salad of lower slopes
packed the chamber of air within my head,
cracked ice between the outer wall of bone,
packed the inner metal core of cream.

Red turrets across the street push their tops
into the milk, square Milwaukee Road masonry,

empty and useless as pegged overalls.

A locked church bracketed by tracks,
the old depot's curved boulevard of cement
entices calfskin shoes toward the yellow footbox.

A brass nightlight over the inside clock times
the old conductors dipping their orange watches.

Near the ticket kiosk a young Presbyterian
in eyeglasses, with Gladstone bag neat in the dust,
waits to climb over the Atlantic spine to mind.

He thinks that sagebrush and pine
cannot flesh lancet windows or lawns.

But a cinder worried in a boy's eye greases
great six-wheeled malleys rocking in from the west
with the wind tarp still tied behind the cab.

The track the malleys shook curved enough for form.

Bridges pin Missoula to the land, slow its pacing
river to the sea. Higgins' bridge shields the depot
from tubed blood pumped north and south.

The Clark Fork mills without curves into a race
thick with salt, lipping and bending with jellied quartz.

Pounded like marmalade in the pit of the Hellgate,
the river roils from underground into the sun,
from an unseen black lake with a low roof.

It seemed so in dreams to Bitterroot Salish,

who waking would not try gates so purple with trees.
In the round boulders of the canyon bed
the Indians saw humped corpses of themselves.
Cutthroat trout taught schools of Piegan incubi.
For that magnificent Saxon Meriwether Lewis,
a yellow summer shirt and a goodbye
postponed the violent sleep foretold by old men.
His partner's misnamed fork became swift water
to a good trail. His upstream struggle
he kept geographical -- he pushed his horse
to drink at a rough map of lines and dots.
For Meriwether Lewis, the Clark Fork registered clear.
He never saw it glow red as blood
like the Salish boys did, clear in the morning
but flushed red by a mysterious calm
upstream in the afternoon.

A river of gravel and bones. Dead muskrats
and grass cuttings mar the unsealed bank,
sealed once except from cold washing,
the unstoppable flushing of hot flues
inside the gates, a fluid bath of trout
whose fine flanks scoured the roots clean.
Blades in bedrock downstream from the depot
bared a stone mortar shaped like a sap.

Was it shaped by a man? A geologist
reported it a probable quirk of the stream.
A French Canadian of Indian blood sees it
stained and thumping berries against a stone.

The river's power to preserve stone is such
strong chest-deep quest for salt
that the sap could have touched hands
either made or found. If my chest
could work out to a gravel bar now,
stand upstream as a sapling does,
knuckled roots clasped to steam-bed rocks
so deep they are all but dry,
my head could butt into ledge-knife grasses,
a goat high on gates. The morning freights
could drown my ears and make me run.
Water burns colder and deeper than sun.

JOURNEY

Lament for old stones and new boards.

Begin the morning with tears.

Abandon old ships quickly.

Remember that summer picnics
do not go beyond dark.

You will be back if the country
is Saturday morning all day.

MADISON ZOO

While it is true that monkeys are dirty-minded little children,
remember that in spring the pond stands out like new metal.
And that half-dressed hardwoods on the other shore
thrive in an arboretum, a fenced preserve or green gallery
for patient adolescents who are neither weave nor wash.

The pond, therefore, should distract the zoo.

Watching sleepy lions the question is
do they smell the water? One blinked
when an amazed baby shrieked.

Lions are lovable.

The female stretched from her nap
and rubbed the king's jaw. He seemed pleased.

But the tiger, perverse and unchurched,
urinates with a jerk of his tail. Watch it.
He has two mates and one of them is mean.

And the timber wolf, all alone, whines like a puppy.

Later, in the afternoon, we cannot join the schoolteachers on the lawn
nor cross the pond to watch a beetle catch colors on his back
unless we teach each other to hone death away with our legs.

FIREMAN'S SON

Fireman's son, when your hands were blunted strong
by the tipped pitches of American Legion hitters,
summer afternoons were as taut as baselines.

Sweat was free and each baseball
was gold, round and hot in the mitt.

Now I am sorry for your hands.

Slow comedians, grippers of porcelain,
like quarterbacks of coffee cups,
they humor the stomach after fried lunches.

Your manicurist has clipped your moons
to mirror carpets and quiet oak,
not the white cork of the plate
nor the Joseph shirts of legionnaires.

Fireman's son, I am sorry for your hands.

What happened to the triangle of muscle
between your elbows and the hickory bat,
a triangle big enough for girls to fall through?

You have not told your hands of the torpor
which buries your eyes in coiled hoses,
the torpor of the fire department,
the washing of trucks and the playing of handball.
Remember the fireman who dropped dead on the court.
His heart turned to oak. His eyes turned up

red as pine in an August blaze, and his head
grey as the auditor's clerk in the bleachers,
chronicler of our eighth-grade feats.

MAKE MINE VANILLA

If it wasn't for the delightful photo
of the lovely girl in the bathing suit
on the wall above the workbench
littered with oily knobs and sharp little keys,
the taste of cigarettes in such a small shop
would leave tired places behind the eyes.
The girl pauses in the bow of a boat
on the shore of a mountain lake.
She will jump in soon, you can be sure.
Perhaps she will invite you to jump in too.
If that fails, on your next fishing trip
she will wait on the bottom of the lake,
or maybe sleep quietly in the beach willows.
She will probably never take off the suit.
That is understandable,
because so few girls these days
pause nude in the bows of boats.

MONTANA SEAGULLS

Above hungry necks wheeling for salt,
the bullet eyes of Montana seagulls
pierce only brown valley clay
leached bland by Indian squattings.
Clamshells left when the lake died,
petrified by soft rubbings
against the shells of granite eggs,
would not tempt a gull from Tillamook.

Mountain gulls are arrogant as magpies,
their bowels black as wheatland crows.
With the craft of owls, they settle like chickens
on inland gravel near yellow schoolbuses,
studying the bursting of schoolhouse doors
with the indifference of sparrows.
While scattered girls dodge the knees of boys,
the gulls tongue salt from paper cups.

Yet one bleat spins my head
toward breakers, toward my father
tasting the sea at fifty-five,
the first ship inching from left to right.
Gull, pinch my wife's rose hips in your beak.
Pull for Oregon. Water freezes in this country.

A gull will turn gravel with his beak
and find rime between the stones.

THE MUSE

It was Bach,
I suppose,
who composed
a great organ toccata
or fugue
for some laughing girl
who poked her mother
in the ribs
all during
the first performance.

TOWER HILL GRANDFATHERS

After supper in December
thick cold settles on Tower Hill,
careful as an old man on a hard chair.
Pine spars of the fire tower,
ninety years old,
creak like iron knees.
The hill's seven surviving grandfathers,
pensioners without daughters,
go to bed covered with wool.

After supper in December
the Last Chance grandfather tests Oro Fino Gulch
with cracked fingertips as hot as California,
kneads Mount Helena's thawing limestone
until female shapes emerge.
The seven survivors cover their thighs
because his eyes--this ancient begetter
of cold-water miners, deserted privates,
desperate fathers--are tricky as a boy's.

After the first summer, all his sons remember,
they learned what they should have found
in the paws of badgers: earth is dug best
when braced and shored for basements.

After this supper, all basements smother
under remembered mud and straw.

The mountain's curves are as fat as a woman's,
except for the skyline,
cut from the steel sky with shears.

AIRBRUSH

In the current copy of Sunbathers' Quarterly
I saw naked girls with gentle crotches
smooth as the skins of mice
doing handstands on the beaches.

Young men with groins maimed girlish
by war or unspeakable disease
propped ankles with hairless thumbs.

WINTER DAWN

Winter dawn is not daylight
but chocolate wrapped in frost,
a sweet for throats aged at stoves.
A swab of cold enamel
to brush breath into metal tongues.
Frost, the worst pinch of the masked dome,
stirs the layer of recent soil
beneath mealy Masonic bricks
into secret matings. Sportive cracks
appear in disturbed rocks. Ashes
funnel through inches of sleeping dung
to charcoal beds. Imbedded nails,
buckles, bones, moments of crazed fire
escape into wooden streets.
Breakfast fires in dead hotels
elude boxed flame and rage the guts
of beds midnight warm.

Air at six is deadly as liquid gas.
At eight the throat, fretted potato raw,
bleeds into the early news,
but the pines pout like chocolate friends.

HOW OLD ARE BONES?

Buttocks must press flesh against limestone
bones stripped by wind for toes to scrape
through bits of glass as dead as flint to soil.
Wind stones Helena from holes in gulches,
releasing the smell of rodents, the reek of chippings
from rusted hammers The sound of an axe
driven out of rhythm by an exposed axman.

Romance is bony. Under a crust of lime,
a bone whitewashed in its own lime waits
like a boomerang. Rocks, casual middens
for much shattering, split the heart of marrow
quicker than old clay can foul the lime.
Did the first hospital cast its dead
severed tibias into gaping boxes?

This bone is whole, not a flag for toes
nor thumbmark for an exorcist.
It shouts horse, a minor strut for the stall
of a steaming beast, if not dog
gnawing ancient cow. My fingernails
tuck their parings under prodding cactus.
Relics conceal their meatiest secret.
How old are bones supposed to be?

This shard hardened as fossil
before the calcium core of my skull
floated memory in a cavity of glue.
Memory goes no further back than flesh,
an old man's work sweat on a cold day.
Photographs of flesh are meatier
than actual mineral in the hand.

But Victorian silver froze sunlight only,
the black tones of puritan gravel
without green willows or curves
of June water welling through fingers.
The palm holds the toe of its own bone.
Can this bone scrape water or lime
from the fat circle of its broken curve?

OCTOBER AT RIMINI

I need an October without the miners' women
leaped like frightful nymphs from frying pans
their men left rusted between crumbled logs.
I need an October without some miner's woman
sleeping in the charred stump of a ponderosa,
choked nearly out by wrists of lodgepoles.
I need an October without dead evening smoke
blurring through the moon into rotted kitchens,
framing the long laps wrapped in calico,
coddlers of warmth once but now drawn on the air
as thin as blueprints for Empire stoves.

The yeast of this moon makes the women bread
and the kitchens fill up with children.
The men retreat to sheds with brass hinges,
ashamed that hard tools should find
the same softness here as in the rocks.

A WALK WITH CLARK'S CROWS

That breakfast, Clark's crows terrified my coffee
with a question for a clerk or secretary:
can you tell moonrise from sunrise?
They chirred the coffee black and beaked it grey.
Early that September, the cat in the trees
had not yet been driven down by frost,
would not climb down for meat or water.
He preferred the taste of pine, or birds' beaks
dipped in Juniper. In October rain
the ladder drove him mad, since right angles
only bruise soaked bark. Trees are animals.

Dutch gnome, walk above the city dam
where fast water gorges, not below
where rocks wash out a British grey.
Go above the dam where rocks are chilled,
where you must push through willows and slip
in your city shoes on the fat boulders.
Find a drained trail stripped of new feet,
without crocuses, ringed by wooden pipes
which tube the creek through open roots.
Step over the campfire of some modern shooter,
cut from squaw's wood in the late winter.

Test your toes against old timers, virgin pines
with the bark still on, dead men in new suits.
They wedge the steering board of a Model T
in arms as careful as explosives.
The driving wheel epitaphs that Saturday
when the last full bottle fell and smashed.
If Clark could speak to his crows,
he would tell them to chew the aspen sleepless.

The footbridge we must find here
has spiked two planks painted white
to a pair of man-squared lodgepoles
with nails bright as dollars under rain.
Cross like a boy with a fistful of beetles.
Listen in midstream to hard granite beads
harvested into pools, but be brief
as a homeless cat drinking the wind.
This homemade gate next to the miners' road
closes nothing. See where three strands of wire
rusted apart, where a miner's lock and key
failed to freeze. Wait. I must cross on the rocks
because from above they seem cracked skulls.

We drift downgrade toward indoor sandwiches

and sleep. Let the crows chew on their milk
and nap themselves as black as afternoon.
Their sleep is the tune of a child on bones,
the man's in the flesh of his sleep.

THE MOUSE AND THE CENTIPEDE

(for Bill and Judy Madden)

The fat mouse in the brown winter coat
died in my garage, after brief torture
by cats. In the bottle of alcohol
he rested a moment on his side,
then began a slow roll with seasons
and tides. He floats like a fish
prodded by a spring creek,
nosing one day toward snow
and the next into a green nest.

The centipede arrived on my boot
and would have died of cold.
He tested the enamel table
with dozens of brisk feet.
Not a swimmer, in the alcohol
he cruised his giant mate
before curling into sleep.

HER FIRST ILLNESS

When my daughter was sick
the night roar of the creek
filled her empty room.
The cat could not find her.
He yowled at the empty crib.
Mother Goose and her children
circled the bed in step
with their shadows on the wall.
They did not dare to sleep.
The Brahms music box
did not dare to play.
The German's nightbird lullaby
was much too far from day.

SUNDAY MEAT

Father blew on the hardwood charcoal
to make it red as iron for Sunday meat.
He shrugged the prospector on Whiskey Creek
a blunt edge for his broad axe. A short blow
over the blade, his red wrist trimmed aspen hearts,
punched mites into notched logs. Minutes later
I pulled one out by its dry white head,
touched the yellow whorls wet with frost,
skimpy dampness of this morning's sweat.

Leggerini's square barn danced in his breath.
An ancient ponderosa stump, troubled by laws
for wind and heat, tempted a young boy
to push his sandy arm shoulder-deep
in any man-channeled spring.
The west wind, uncle with the hard hand,
pinched lawless heat in an egg of air.
Charcoal burned itself out, he said.
Ice-cold gravel is an edible as smoke.

THE HONOR OF DOORKNOBS

In the pride of his search for the birthplaces of water,
my father has hidden the evenings in his chair, dreaming of cats,
walking on Sundays by a privacy of roads to his mines,
into the watershed behind two Sunday bridges.
On weekdays he sells the difference between doorknobs and hinges.

He has never admitted the honor of doorknobs.
In his thirty-eighth year he showed me bobcat tracks
blazed in the young bark of quaking aspen.
The mad claws tore upward but did not come down--
we imagined that cat was chased into the sky.
Rabbits do not climb trees. Owls are clever birds.

In his fifty-ninth year my father failed a test
against young men who do not keep cats,
who know the words for younger doorknobs.
This dead honor commits him, thirsty for the Divide,
to the unmade words of dirt roads in daylight.
His final excursion makes concrete highways private.

He crosses the weekday bridge over Ten Mile Creek.
His feet renew dirt pitched too steep by Three-C boys.
The Sunday bridges are for feet. They span my father's words,
Minnehaha Creek before it is drunk,

near the pond where men dynamite beavers.

The Roman road for mine wagons walks into the watershed.

In deep snow you can't tell elk tracks from cow tracks.

My father and I thought we were a few feet from the shock

wild eyes exchange, until we saw the winter cows

salted with snow, looking as if there were no difference.

Elk are more mysterious than deer and cows do not know the difference.

The aspen is fat now. The claws are a mountain lion's.

DRESCHER'S FIREPLACE

(for Suzanne)

Country granite hollowed by black fire
the killed pine feeds stains orange
in the fat drippings of slow turkeys.
The oven door bleeds sweet yams.
The crescent of fat bubbles under the skin.
My foot breads the circle of wool
hickory takes as blanket.
My foot perches in a ring heated
at its jewel by meat made pitch.
The parley of couch and orange wing
shapes a salt beach Mediterranean
as oregano pinched on a saffron coast.

Old Drescher, the hearthmaker,
inverted his granite funnel
to focus dinners against winter's
dry indifferent squirrels.