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THE MAN WHO DELIVERED ICE AND COAL

by

Robert Behr

B.A., Fordham University, 1969

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

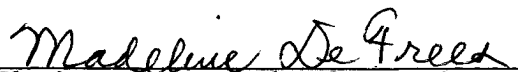
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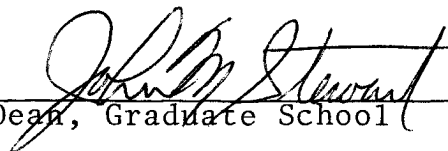
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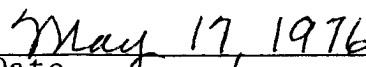
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1976

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ROOMS WITH CLOSED WINDOWS

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SUMMER IN OMAHA

There are salesmen hiding in our eyebrows,  
screen doors opening to business, a dog  
who waits for us all day and waitresses

deserving of our praise. By fits and starts  
hairlines recede. Thin women pack  
one suitcase, gather keys

to doors, the car, the safe and murky  
summer places. Our children  
climb the family tree: they sulk

on limbs and throw laundry  
to apples. I'll see you in the funnypaper,  
we've been yelling long sad years,

I'll see you on television,  
washing dishes at midnight,  
I'll see you making speeches to the cat.

We drive home in silence and dream  
of flying: laughter at the airport,  
quickly letting lovers go.

On the front porch in moonlight we see each other  
telling lies, the black trees get fat  
and our hearts shake like engines in old cars.



## BATHROOM

It's the peace of making a bed  
in the snow. I came here  
instead of wolfing down my friends.  
Keeping the porcelain warm saves me.  
The striped towel drifts  
in a rainbow from the rack.  
Books sun on the edge of the tub.  
I play with my face  
in a mirror flurried by soap  
and my loved ones  
linger between the specks  
waiting with hands folded  
their faces wrinkled and wanting more.  
But we can never talk about this,  
how I'm not here to wipe up and leave:  
I'm waiting for solitude.  
I'm waiting for the chrome to ignite,  
the faucets to howl.

## LETTER FOR MY TWIN SISTER

The trees have not stopped.  
Children stand on their playing fields  
in towns between here and you.  
Streetsigns turn silently.  
I hear the old joke that made a woman  
on the bus call you "bug's ear".

You're thin now. You've found  
a warmer skin without a husband,  
play the flute for three small rooms  
where once the flap  
of white curtains made you cry.

You call me, your voice carrying  
the big grey house. I've called you rival,  
friend. There are no more  
ghosts for us, you say. We'll scan  
the unlit floor by touch alone,  
let a new family take us in.

We'll speak with the kind mother:  
since the long minute back there  
when we were two soft eggs in her womb,  
you've been my mind-reader and double  
who walks under the other face of the moon.

## A TALE ABOUT A TABLE

I've been scraping years of paint  
from the table Old Swede built  
and I swear I've taken root  
in the grain. In there, fish shudder  
quietly like waves of heat. Old Swede  
said a table is a face, rest your hands  
on the skin and look inside. In there,

the fish. And our friends are there,  
good conversations and goodbyes.  
A table pays for the work, he said.  
A table will take you to Sweden.  
That funny old man died asleep  
and his table changed hands, twelve  
colors of paint slapped on by strangers.

I dragged it out here, white sand  
by the river: nearby, the small  
Selway Falls spin rock  
into pottery plates, bowls and jars.  
These afternoons I swim  
a tea-colored sleep. I never want  
my hands to break water.

## SEPARATION

We're brothers again.  
Finally I can see myself in your face.  
I waited for years, living alone  
in a room with your diplomas,  
a clamp on my mouth.  
Afraid of losing your daughters today,  
you scribble "divorce isn't enough"  
and a white page skids across the table.  
You drive slowly through lights  
in the rain. You buy a television to sleep with.  
We talk together in a room for two chairs  
and I'm frightened by the deep  
tunnel behind your eyes.

## THE HEAD OF THE HOUSE

I found a shaving cup  
glazed with the old man's French name.  
Everything else alive  
in those rooms with closed windows,  
his sister threw out.  
We are exiles  
who travel from him,  
from his wagon delivering ice and coal.  
Our children wake up to know  
someone is always dying  
and the children say yes  
and give him full grief.  
He was dropped  
through grass that today stands high and brown.  
I picture him on the cement bus stop  
raving of crime in America.  
I see the nicknames  
fly around his skull.  
He walks from church  
cursing the cross-shaped box of holy  
oils they carried to his bed.

## HE SAYS I AM NOT AFRAID

The boy on a motorcycle says I am not afraid.  
He's always in Omaha  
in a family lined against cellar walls.

The building flies away.  
He hates his city: those bricks piled  
into chimneys he never looked at.

Wooden stairs fall apart at his touch.  
Others climb, no complaints, marry  
and die. There's a boy

in this tall hairy body. I'm not afraid,  
he says. Today his hands  
are at his throat, he accuses the father,

he cries with old men, he ignores  
the woman's light touch at his lips.  
He says only he understands

the tornado, ladder of hell,  
lifter of rooftops and screaming radios.  
I have seen this boy begging for love.

I saw him put himself up for sale.  
I saw him trapped in a lake of smiles.  
The boy on a motorcycle says he's not afraid.

He doesn't see the foam in the mouth of the dog,  
can't hear the slow drip of water from the drainpipe.  
The immense wind spreads his hatred of the city.

He can't see the old man afraid in the hospital,  
the child set free forever in an empty room,  
the pigeon in the shade of the waiting car.

## IN YOUR BED THE SMELL OF GRANDFATHER

How the room changes with every  
wind lifting squares of paper from the table,  
the pace of wooden shoes upstairs.  
For days you've been afraid of the next room:  
it sits vigilant as a nurse reading  
a book, ready for your bell.

The yellow rug there looks warm.  
Why you can't move,  
despite no one else's bones but your own  
and a strong noise coming to your nostrils,  
no one knows. The old life's  
poison dies. You'll wake,

change clothes and leave no echo,  
no dust reminding the light.  
But now you judge the plant  
will stand one more day, that chair's  
not right for you, the phone  
can rage till it cracks.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SUNLIGHT

You wake from our life of settled brown leaves,  
you can't remember the time  
when there was no sun, when the whine of electricity  
fell through our bodies like a pill.  
We hid behind glass, touched switches on and off  
to keep alive, prayed for other voices, prayed for needles  
of light on the skin of fish and all for nothing:  
this is how we learned to sleep with a sea between us.  
Here began the piling up of paper in wastebaskets.  
We dreamed of the past, stirred coffee,  
we talked of that morning a mountain was born:  
the sun held it like a bubble on your index finger.  
And this is how you and I found the loneliness that will spare  
not even us when it funnels into the calm night, a siren.  
It was then I wanted to turn away  
from the pure stone at the center of our marriage, turn  
from the simple shadows in a room where we sat with friends.  
Now our heads thrown back and eyes locked  
we drive into the dense low sun of dinnertime.  
We see a ceremony of two white plates, food and coffee.  
We steer blindly through an intersection.  
We accept. We let this violence strike us every day.



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DREAMS OF WILD ANCESTORS

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## THIS NEIGHBORHOOD

You know the living rooms we dream  
so many times? That woman over there  
can't think until she sweeps the floor.  
Her husband needs his pipe. When they sit  
under the plastic chandelier, palms up,  
five children come to them.

Around the corner the cackling of lovers:  
our two local clowns in bed for a year. Of them,  
we see only steaming windows. We hear clanging  
pipes. Once he came to the door, his face  
bland as a photograph. A twitch  
in my arm and he was gone.

Here is my house, white stucco and a Spanish  
gate. The woman I love is smoking  
her yearly cigarette and she's better  
than a movie star. I tell her we're comrades  
with a grand purpose, winter sneaking up  
and I'm behind the door with a club.

My neighbor ten feet away sinking  
into his driveway: he's lost in a shadow  
of pigeons. Walking home from his office,  
he fell in love with everyone he saw  
and now he can't remember. A dog with tangled  
hair makes a circle around him.

I love the quiet grass with its perfect  
haircut, the birds aligned like chessmen.  
In our homes we call out for blue sky,  
the radiators clicking, empty bowls singing.  
If we look too hard, we don't find anything.  
If gypsies come through, we don't complain.

## BUDDIES IN THE SUBURBS OF PHILADELPHIA

A brother practices my dance step  
for the full-length bathroom mirror.  
His hair goes in five directions.  
The bare light bulbs weld a wedding ring.  
Downstairs the old woman lifts her raw hands.  
I line up the drinks friends will buy me,  
examine my teeth with a grin,  
a boy disgusted by vegetables,  
and head for the downtown trolley.

It brings me here. My neighbor Jack  
fizzles on the glass dance floor.  
A car hits a truck outside and you walk in.  
The last I saw your gruesome mug,  
you were in grade school growing up too fast.  
Let's unscrew a bottle and lose our memories.  
We'll be strangers at closing time,  
two men rattling their newspapers.  
Your sister's friend, the one  
who dove into my shirt at the bar,  
will take me home for coffee and bed.

There's a city painted on this wall,  
its airplanes settling in my shoulders  
and a skyscraper the twin of my spine.  
My friend, I won't leave here  
to join the cousins who gave up family life  
for the mountains. In postcards to them,  
we'll prove that we're alive. We'll stay,  
sleep alone until noon, our fingers  
inventing the easy face of a woman,  
the soft interior of a stolen car.

## NAKED MEN

Some say you won't be lonely in a crowd  
if you smoke a cigarette,  
if you yawn,  
if you page through magazines of naked women.  
Naked men are lonely.  
They have only the ringing of their ears  
and one soft-spoken uncle  
who sits nearby at the fireplace.  
Naked men think of their pants  
standing frozen in the yard.  
Sometimes naked men turn down promotions.  
Their legs give in  
and shuffle to the couch.  
Schizophrenics on a ward  
can make a man  
afraid of being naked.  
You can catch a naked man off guard.  
You can photograph him on the balcony.  
You can't trade names with him.  
You can't put words in his mouth.

## CIRCUS PEOPLE

## I

A roustabout snores  
alongside the thin woman from town,  
one hand hanging  
from the roof of the striped trailer  
and inside, the shy  
strong man  
pushes his chair from the plate  
on which a fly begins years  
of crossing.

## II

The sidewalk turns to sand.  
The boss, among wood houses, hears  
another town  
where his wife sits forever in a bathrobe,  
lampshade glowing like an egg above her.  
He touches the heads of schoolchildren.  
He says Pretty Morning to the roustabout  
who walks alone to him  
across the perfect street.

## III

They are all at table: the glance  
of the midget  
drops on the edge.  
She alone uses a napkin.  
She has smiled at children for thirty years.  
She is tired of asking.  
Now it's money: her mother  
speaks from the other side of the bowl.

## IV

The clowns leaning in the wide doorway,  
their noses in the rain,  
are just beneath the cloud that travelled

only to gather its bones  
and rest here, grey  
as elephant skin.  
The clowns chew gum and wait  
for more: the sun falls  
slatted on the dirt, the slow  
heart of the tent ripens.

## FROM HER INDOOR GARDEN AN OLD WOMAN SEES EVERYTHING

She sings and jewels have no price.  
The old woman smelling roses  
sees a car wreck turn to rust in a field,  
five children pose as police and birds fly away  
whispering. She can see someone nearby wake up  
yelling help, yes, I'll do anything.  
A man yelling, his mouth like a ragged tin can.  
Around him, people wave checkbooks  
and blood runs a road through walls.  
Sometimes we're surprised  
to get what we expect, the mayor says  
wiping his hands, we should control  
the meaning of death.  
In a bathroom a man cuts himself  
and there's ice in his veins. He leaves behind  
friends nodding glasses of wine, wild hats  
with flowers. He's slipping.  
Old women and men who scrub floors  
lift him to a bench and ask his name:  
it's noon, the building is quiet,  
this is the first time anyone has stopped here.

## IN THE BIGHORNS

Today you pull through me like a train.  
A year ago you left  
the motor running in the garage,  
your skin so blotted with rage  
they wouldn't open the coffin.  
I suffered and forgot.  
You came back as I drove  
down a mountain and I knew  
you would have lived  
if you had been born here.  
You're a prophet  
dropping hope on my table  
like tomorrow's newspapers  
and I spit at you.  
Dead trees fall  
and echo death in the ground,  
dragging you here  
where I'm sick but fighting.



## NIGHT

I carry a dream of wild ancestors.  
The stray dog puts his eye on me.  
He sniffs and I follow  
to this cold street my river.  
We are touched by yellow light from windows.  
Here sleepers journey  
talking with lifted hands  
the tops of chairs crushed against see-through curtains.  
I look toward my neighbor  
who sleeps with a future President, my grandfather  
reciting obituaries in the dark,  
my lover in white  
awake on her feet  
her eyes moving between the beds of old people.  
The dog's paws tap the sidewalk  
like a stone skipping water.  
Tonight it is just dog and man  
sitting nobly on an ice floe.  
Above, the half moon  
delicate as the tip of my thumb.

---

A MAN WITH BINOCULARS: GHAZALS

---

## I

Two deer run, jump the creek, leaving me  
smelling of alcohol, a man with binoculars.

Tonight, making sense, my face in the knotted wood door,  
my face in a magazine, a bottle of tears for public lips.

We eat too much on holidays. It's bad to celebrate  
with long-lost friends, just off the freeway and dizzy.

At the table I made jokes about insanity and death.  
My spine, a stack of rhetorical questions.

Afraid of anything moving at night, a ball of string  
rolling away, any outburst or glance from police.

## II

A cousin, the angry one, tried to stop  
your friendship with railings. What a killjoy!

That bridge you want to jump from, neighbor,  
is higher than your fear of height.

You walk into rooms, your stiff back sharpens  
and I say, since you've come, admit small pains.

You taught yourself mathematics: how easy to slide  
in bed, letting her interrogate the glass eye.

A dead bird falls on your bed. You're a saint.  
You're dreaming a look-in-the-eye will bring relief.

## III

He was beautiful inside and out, the tension  
of skin on his rib cage: a perpetual stretch.

Stop reading nasty books, they told him. Undulate,  
voluptuous. We see through some words like veils.

Before dawn a boy pedals to church. The priest waits.  
Listen! A fine, starched rain. Old women, businessmen.

If you haven't heard, you never will. Rockets  
leave here daily. Flowers cough. The pond farts.

Green trees shake off the mist. Good luck!  
At age twenty, a man's aspirations are chancy things.

## IV

Later, think of going home. This pot of coffee  
only bubbles once. We're not tired now.

Jazz piano on the third floor. Young plants breathe  
on the second. Innocent dust climbs the stairwell.

It's hard to kill cactus. Dem bones. Getting knocked around,  
enforced diets. Events transpire like cartoons.

Those colors don't match, my mother yelled.  
Change clothes! Decent women pass you up, money's over your head.

Can music say anything? Praying is old hat.  
The fat bird won't move until we drop a bomb.

## V

A loop hangs from your ear. A cigar in my mouth.  
What a boring way to make conversation.

Fifteen fingers and toes are mine. The rest: suck,  
nibble. Explore the tundra of Antarctica.

Birds skim the roof and come up alive.  
Extorting love is not as safe.

I walked in talking straight, no stains  
of regret. Man on a unicycle.

You're getting technical, she said,  
stop wondering about my gender.

They rang the bell and left. They laughed on the phone.  
They know we're not watching television.

---

JOURNEYS FROM THE POLES

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## LEAVING HOME

Prayers come back to you.  
The ghost swings from the closet door.  
Walls that tightened your loneliness  
speak again, but now you want them.  
This is the cave where you found  
the familiar touch.  
Your father rests in the doorway.  
His silences are lanterns  
of fear in this ancient room.  
Your mother is worried  
and the lines of her face,  
a soft web, won't push you away.  
You and your lost brother catch sight,  
journey from the poles.  
The wound is gone.  
You laugh about the cowboys  
who will laugh at your clothes.  
A magazine offers the sky to you  
and you want to walk into it.

## DAYS IN THE CAR

The flat road threatens  
to whip me through the sky.  
I remember a dying fog: it kissed  
our bed and the right words flew away.  
I crouch against the muscle of the wind:  
you, home, everything behind me  
comforting, bending like trees.  
I cry for you.  
The radio sings your picture on a field.  
I know you're getting up  
to shovel the walk: it's your religion.  
You'll swallow no one's lies.  
You'll walk in the white city.

I wait for deer to cross.  
You'll find me just below the rearview mirror.  
See the other man. He runs behind me,  
nervously yelling this news:  
your house leans toward the wide river,  
the moon is balanced in your window-frame  
like a coin on edge,  
the couple next door makes fierce love  
on the smallest lawn in the city,  
the night train is moaning  
on its tracks in our sleep.  
These details fit like wheels to axle,  
door to jamb.

## TRAVELING TO THE COAST

Our train left families on the platform floating.  
I pointed from sheer cliffs  
to China. Devil's Churn: a lookout  
where Indians made retreat.  
From there you and I hitchhiked,  
lovers in fog. We called the Pacific home.

The snowstorm came late and a kind woman  
stood like a crocus.  
She wore at her neck the butterfly  
sent by a friend remembering her voice.  
In that house we turned warm,  
taller than we've seen our bodies.  
Her advice to me: Be still,  
travel with light from the old world.

I've gone sour in all my previous returns  
but now the furniture looks good.  
Mail piled on the table  
vibrates like a tree. My ancient habit  
of carrying seashells to the bench  
comes back. The piano opens  
by itself. My fingers set free the dust.

YOU SEE THE EMPTY SWIMMING POOL AND WANT TO FLOAT

You say you'll drop the sadness and the winter coat.  
Friends can't do enough for you. They never will.  
You see the empty swimming pool. You want to float.

Dry leaves rake the bridge where once you choked.  
Framed in your house, you took a pill  
and swore, "I'll drop the sadness of this winter coat."

You hate mountains. You'll take no trips by boat.  
Wire and concrete hold your home. The silly  
boy who cleans the pool shouts, "Jump in and float!"

Friends whisper of the difference between jokes  
and cries for help. They see a car glide downhill.  
Inside, a sad man with his winter coat.

You can't talk to them. Their fat children quote  
new gossip at the fence, cracked voices getting shrill.  
You see the empty swimming pool. You want to float

through air, saying it all without a stroke:  
no need for arrows or words. A man who travels  
in spring, a sad man dropping his winter coat,  
you've seen the empty swimming pool. You want to float.

## A QUESTION FOR GRANDFATHER, 1957

I like the sound of night locks  
turning in their doors.  
In bed, waiting for a word from you,  
my prayers rise like too many push-ups.  
I'm the dumb one who doesn't call.  
I'm the hand who's all thumbs.  
You're alone in the room with no clock,  
the silent basement, and you're carving  
two benches into birds.  
You nudge second-hand nails toward middle age.  
Tonight, will we sleep  
without your leather hands  
turning the covers?  
I see how sleepwalking children  
hum to themselves,  
float past their elders  
and reach the next town.  
I'm listening to my breath  
and to the stairway asleep in its old wood,  
the stairway where eyes trust the dark.  
When you get here, there's a four-colored star  
I've memorized in the sky.

## LETTER FOR MONK

You step out to survey the country,  
your well-tuned car  
a coat.  
Through the silent states you mail  
your shadow ahead.  
Your leaving is no  
surprise: even our friendship, a bulb  
buried in winter,  
waited for this place  
to loosen itself and give to you.  
Three nights ago  
I woke too early, completely  
rested by a snow  
gripping the edge of spring and you  
were already gone:  
now stopped for a light,  
townspeople give you their faces, white  
storefronts defined in fog.

