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Hands have a mind of their own

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THE HANDS HAVE A MIND OF THEIR OWN

By

Sylvia Clark

B.A., University of Washington, 1975

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1977

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June 9, 1977
Date

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The title of the thesis comes from a line in a poem by Ed Harkness. Some of these poems have appeared in Assay, CutBank, Cafeteria, and Calyx.

Special thanks to my friends for their help and support.

for my mother and father

I. THE GONE SISTER

The Beacon

The Olympics break
in distance across the Sound.
The rigid lines never fade. They are hard
to get beyond. Still
I think west to Destruction
Island, an old station of light.
The tower looms dark with something I have
to remember.

 A hermit
lives there, tending the light.
I row toward him, pulling
the weight of my brothers, their hands
making easy trails in the phosphorus glow.

I confront the hermit alone.
He has been here since I was born
and his time is up.

 It is my job
to bring word of his replacement.
He shuts the door
in my face and I close my eyes.
There is no movement, the distance
heavy between us.

Tugs and Barges

Tugs pull barges back beyond the sand
the rushing seagulls never leave,
never falling back to where the light
falls close and old.

Close enough to see what light we can,
we crowd before the barges looking
light inside our eyes.

Old enough to know what barges bring,
we try old songs, the ones we used
to think we knew by heart.

The barges break. Tugs no longer pull
what we thought was brimming wheat.
Empty lines are dragging in the Sound.
Gulls fly up to watch. The boats turn,
moving north and out to sea.

Boat Stories

Noise. Motors. Pull out the plug
 in the bilge. Drain the swamp
 or we'll sink. Find forty cans
 in the rusty drain, the kind I know
 how to cook from. I am inside
 with the stove, the radio's on
 playing bad music from Anacortes.
 Sweat and kerosene line this cabin,
 the beans boil hard, we move north
 past homes lining the strait.

Between Indian and Marrowstone
 Islands, Mystery Bay glows green
 with the small deaths, the phosphorus
 wake of our rowing home.
 On shore rock is fallen
 and falling again on its broken name.
 Eyes are burning with water. The boat
 drifts beyond pilings, the rush of the sea.

Rivers of grease run between the old piers.
 The wind is up, scows
 and hulks slapping their thighs.
 Sailboats heel, their jibs
 swell in the wash and gale.
 I lie rocking sick
 and sweet on the lower bunk
 pressing my knees against the thick smell.
 The radio cracks.
 News from Foulweather Bluff;
 Point No Point next in sight.

Beware the water eaters.
 Their song is untuned, remorse
 climbing the mast. The reefing
 will hold, even in storm.
 This is no storm but a pull
 backward until I can sleep
 through waves straining with sound.
 Acknowledge this rest
 in the beat of bad song, your need
 for Marrowstone and the time
 crabs were visible
 under long rakes pulling them in.
 At home clams boil and get creamy,
 the sweet milk trembling your mouth.

Wearing My Indian Skirt

We row our way out to the Charlotte,
the last steam tug on the lake.
Boats here have stood
in standing water for years. Five hours
to fire this tub and there is no way
to get from here to salt water.
Peter and I dream Alaska. I wear
my Indian skirt, weeds
and scum from the bottom glisten.
The dinghy bobs alongside the broad beam
of this boat. I could row away.

North, across the lake, there are only
more trees. Close as hemlock
and fir to each other, we stand
in our way. What did we think of,
nights full of feathers and sweat
tight on our skins?
We thought we knew. We could even
dream Canada, dreaming all night
and the fire kept singing.

In every story with Peter
I wear this skirt. I bring flowers,
daisies of grass by the road.
Now Peter motors away. His gill-netter
heads north for Kodiak, salmon run deep.
I could have kept oars in my arms
or even this boy, been a cook
and his crew. Instead I stroke
slow dream to the scow, still unmoving
but full with the passage of men.

Pine, Hemlock, Cedar and Fir

Here is the crown of an old tree, a spire
for three hundred years.
Numerous cones are borne like pieces of light.
Resin blisters erupt on the surface, the pitch
and sway of wind on the columnar trunk.
Some firs not true, noble or grand
are pacific and silver. They shine
with offerings, bold attempts to keep up.
Hemlock wins out. Its bark cuts ridges
sharpened by sight. Exposed to elements,
scrub pine grows high among carbon and granite
waiting for rain. Downslope to water, cedars
run western and red, stringy and tough.
Near these scales and the tolerant hemlock,
near the truth of firs with their upright seeds
are the pendulous cones, the long bracts
of Douglas Fir, common in humid shade.

The Lone Pine Cafe is an Island

Land in this valley is dry.
Canyon walls steepen and bend
as the river bends. The lone pine
grows as the cafe grows
to the ground and the pine gets tall.
In this valley there's also
some soil we reach for, some bark
we scratch at and some kind of logic
that looks like pine trees
waving their cones.
Logic works into the ground.
We travel the river road
too many miles for peaches or apples
to keep the turns in their place.
Goldens bruised under pressure from hands
on the long curves when we knew
we'd get killed as we passed.
Those times you need an island cafe
in a river that goes on rushing
and swallowing signs that tell us
which way is south, the way
rivers and cafes and lone pines go
past what we need to believe.

Toward Yakima

I

Every father but mine is a farmer.
 I say it wrong. The land,
 he bought before I was born.
 Orchard land, rattlesnake hills
 turning thick green in mid-summer heat.
 We lived far away cool in the suburbs
 west of the pass. Soil too acid, he said
 and sandy for anything useful.

I never knew sweat until twenty. My life,
 Dad said, thrown away
 on some man, our house
 overlooked the wide valley where summer
 ran fierce and electric. Past the gap,
 ten miles south in careful rows,
 my father's trees. The first year,
 unlucky signs. The second, we got to pick.

II

Late August, the harvest should come
 in a week. Boots hauled out,
 peach boxes stacked. Brothers
 gone to spread bins. In the kitchen,
 in the twilight cool of screen door
 and porch, night coming on
 with its chill, a girl
 asks her father again. Ferns

darken, the odor of grass
 new mown settles over the neighborhood
 quiet. I could help cook, bring
 water, sell fruit on the road.
 The man adjusts a packed box.
 Can his youngest son manage
 the tractor, rough pickers -- and no,
 the orchard's no place for a girl.

III

Fine dust chalks my arm, turning white
the dark hairs. Fuzz
collects in the ditches, the crooks
and body hollows. I take peaches
into my mouth, juice
like sap dripping fast.
The slow river bends south
off this land. Grass ankle deep, the air
moving as wind
down the valley blows warm.

Hiking the Bogachiel

She starts into woods full of sound
 like water surrounding. Past points
 and bracts of large ferns,
 she brings her hands.
 They hang like stems undone
 at her sides. In this growth,
 forest and fungus too thick
 for crossing, strings of voyages
 keep playing back. Her conductor
 is rain like water
 like air heaving with stillness.

Plunging through streams to the source
 of wet socks, she wrings them out dry.
 Dampness remains. Moss
 drips in strands of confusion,
 the warp of a loom. The gone sister
 packs her trunk for return.
 Her boots clump heavy
 with mountain dirt, the soot
 of small fires. Sometimes she slips
 and inches back thinking to whom she must speak,
 ground roots, the face of her father
 and asking the same questions always,
 like what is right.

Each mile begins and evening
 comes on like sadness, the river
 a backwash of change. Fear turns sun
 in the far stream, the counter
 part to what she remembers.
 Shivers gather, old weather beating
 her hands for bearing wrong music.
 Her mouth forms a soft blowing sound,
 birds flying south,
 her southern adventure moving due west
 with hands open knowing she's empty.

The Rocky Ground of this Beach

for my father

I wear old shoes, wade in muck
ten years deep. Tides leave seaweed
thick on the branches of trees.
What I want is a broad beach
where combers wave down black basalt
fine and thin as the sun. Here,
sand runs out soon. Sticks
and barnacles break their way in.

I remember the logs we floated
around on, the logs you towed
home behind the gold Dodge.
Land slides heavy over that road,
the path, weaker each year.
One lonely Christmas my lover
and I followed you to the split;
there's where the land broke loose.

Now the tide fills my ears.
A thin stream wears at this ground
and opens a mouth in the bay. The drift
reverses itself and subsides.
I take off my shoes, make
my way through the good slime,
the flowering seaweed, kelp
and moonsnails and mud
that roots me baser than stone.

II. KEEPING IN TOUCH

Pine Songs

The songs wind us home up river
but fall like cones on rough ground.
There are answers we could answer to
if we knew the old rhymes, how a century
blooms at the right myth.
Now we take off our seed
and plant it in men, brothers
who find our names hidden
in moss and dead logs.
They will have to stir deep, assume
the hunter, their hands
raised against what they are.
They will return, shifting themselves
to new clothes, new skins
and harsh rags. Moving through sleep
of bears, we open the box,
let fly the old grief.

Reasons

I am the hunter. I live in Athens, the main town west of Franklin that has no love. My good friend Canine betrayed me last week to that fool from Stoutsville, Gerald McKee, otherwise known as the Coon. We have a whole gang -- me, Coon, Canine, Parker and Woolf. I decided to let Canine stay in, on one account. That he'd never tell the folks what we have in the shed. Canine's not much of a friend, this I discovered. The Coon is not at all wise, either. Both are dumber than me. And that's pretty dumb, seeing how we live in this town. Funny word, love. The reason we don't have any here is the gang and me, last year we rooted it out. It was starting to show up between cracks in concrete, not blossoms at first but leaves more like. We don't want no foreign plants like that loveroot around here, no sir. And I still don't plan to tell ma what we got in the shed till I'm grown.

Hunter Considers

Today while Coon and Canine weren't looking
I looked into ears. Floppy ones like Old Maude
our dog has, they keep hanging around.
Pointy cat ears are different, pink
as that doll's cheek Mary Lou
intended on using that rouge on
but we got to it first. The Coon,
he smeared it good on Mary Lou's knee
before Aunt Emma showed up. Emma said
we had no respect and I think she's right.
Mary Lou, she's a nice kind of girl
if that's what you like, but the gang
and me, we get tired of colors and paint.
By the way, ma wants me to clean the shed
but I let her know I liked mice,
especially their ears, they never flop.

Another Myth of the Lion

The lion is at home in his jungle.
He knows who is king and who
does not know who he is
is better not to be king. Dark buds
and the tremulous spices
flow their mild insidious way to his feet.
He knows he can roar away silence
and anyone in it. He says be calm
in a kingdom of place and style. He licks
a paw with his careful care
and strokes the shirt of his glowing coat.
Pacing, the lion is scarce in his jungle.
Words erupt on his tongue.

Nine Parts of These Days

I

Now I see I have done.
I have done everything wrong.
Friends are no longer drifting
the aisles, that clock is a vigorous
tick. I want to be home.
Red bugs raised in this night
decide what they must do. Walk.
Beware the corner, it is a snake.
This night I am through forgiving,
through becoming an inch, no miles left
and no steps. I stop
with seven words to give up:
mother home water brown dark
tree and dirt. I have left
and this is it.

II

Coats shrug off shoulders and rest.
Even old brooms have nice homes in the halls.

Do you know the riddle of oceans?
That when you step in, you sink?

In oozing fungus, little creepers dig in.
In this way, they live out the cold.

She drank all she could of salt drink.
Her fingers picked open shells.

Rocks make homes in dirt for themselves.
The sea, it keeps rushing at her.

III

These days go by fast and we don't count.
Nothing counts anymore but your hand
on my arm saying yes, this
is the way, this way
we won't have to forget.
I've been writing letters
unaddressed in envelopes
written to you. They pile
naked in stacks on my desk.
Keep in touch, you say to the walls
of the library, concrete and full
of your law. I tell you
I keep on falling, the weight
of your body pressing
against what I have to do.

IV

Walking this morning for money, I keep
my insides clean. Someone is singing.

How do we know when the bridge opens?
Hold one finger to wind.

If it stays wet, you're in luck.
Otherwise, draw the frontiers.

Opening the present of hands, the rain
falls down in dribbles. Five fingers.

The boundary closes between love and hate.
Through the wide gates, much rushing.

V

Each time I bury my heart, light
seeps in through dirt.
The last time it happened, yesterday,
I sat all night.
Leaves outside my window turn
with a color too late to begin.
This time the pale red of pounding
closes inside my ears.
I underline words, bending
to hear the beat
inside our hands, these bridges broken.

VI

Bugs and bears know the way of the jungle,
only, they are smarter than me.

If I can't lie, I'll have to whistle.
Sound rings itself like tin.

Once I saw a girl in a cloak
made of grass. She swayed.

The green girl one day picked up her shoes.
Dark churches go along on their avenues.

Heavy boots stomp signs in new snow.
Tongues flapping, her shoes plan escape.

VII

Wind carries small seeds in your hand
and it is open. I pry
into what I can see. Nothing
obsesses, you say, holding your knee.
My hand is limp inches away.

This morning, like any other, the leaves
on my windowsill turn
away from my looking. The street
remains empty, I shuffle
through years of return.
How many times will I wait
and say listen, my ears are resting.

VIII

He will be walking on cement. I will say,
Hello, it's been a long time.

February is still a cold month, no matter
what they say. Somebody stole my coat.

I hope they like those nice feathers.
Didn't you always like me in green?

I think his eyes turn my way.
My new coat is brown, like his hair.

Mostly I try not to think. It gets in my way
when I'm trying to make conversation.

IX

Not that it wasn't a nice coat, just
that it was too shiny.
Of all my things, this
was not precious, as nothing is
anymore. Leaves gather and winter
comes in open windows, a scent
of bare hills. Covers thrown,
I ask you in to share night
and think about ferns, how they push
against dirt, going under each fall.
My sister, the coat stealing woman
each day forgets she grows old.

I trust heat, my skin
to keep in this weather.
Ice freezes salt and the coat
you offer I'd wear all my life.
Even here with you, it gets that cold.

The Fulcrum

for Harry

We hold down two ends
of a log. The placement is firm.
The beach comes close in this balance,

moves farther away from the eyes
I use to grasp rocks
and moss clinging like scum.

Nights full of return I lean
an inch closer. The log
wants to reclaim its place in the sand.

Old digressions have followed us
into sleep. I remove them like strands
of seaweed caught in your hair.

At the Creek

for Rick

Now, beginning I think of the break.
 It threatens to carry me, name
 and home gone the way of his hand.
 I reclaim again and again these seeds
 and begin the forgiving. There is no grace
 in what I bring, only silence can stir

this air. I probe through slime, stir
 leaves crusting over with silt. The break
 is only a stick. Before, words of grace
 were useless, reminding me of a name
 I have not forgotten. Pansies, the seeds
 and the way she held song in her hand.

Now I think water. Your hand
 held firm, nearly as close as the stir
 these leaping bugs make, or the seeds
 that seem to crawl from the break
 in this rock. See how clearly the name
 of that leaf revolves on the surface, its grace

light as its shade. We sing grace
 at the table and do not think any hand
 could believe in our name.
 Instead, we look at the world, stir
 old reasons why we must break
 from the candles, the flowers and seeds

of our response. What seeds
 are planted in years, clean as the grace
 you say now should keep? I can break
 something small to begin, open my hand
 gently to push on the grass, stir
 through color and light to a name

with dirt at the root. This name
 is what we know. Leaves fall and seeds
 keep blowing back as they stir,
 finding their ground. I can't say grace
 but this is something; this is my hand.
 Yours returns calm and quiet. Break

becomes a harsh name I forgive. The seeds
 on wind we carry are full.
 This hand and this hand stir deep.

III. A DRAWING OF WOMEN

Last Night

Last night I cried for an hour
that I'm not a mother.
Unrooted, I plan sinking west
till I land on the coast of my father.
This has nothing to do with love
or anything like it. It's about
the putting aside of our lives.
I'm tired, for instance, of poems
full of lightness and dark, the sweet
way we have with sound.
It's nothing and people know this.
We keep no secrets, everything clean
and open like breakable glass.
Now, I'd rather not have a child
tearing my pages, crayoning
green and yellow for spring.
It's that I must learn to speak.
And have something to speak of.

In Grizzly Country

for the four women killed
since 1967, Glacier National Park

Bears need the chance to walk
at ease in the forest, unharmed
and unaware of this ground
we need to take.
Behind rules the bear must have wind
of our coming, must sense the approaching
man sure of his step. There are no rules
to keep us intact, no protection from claw
or tooth but soft speech
from mouths working the air.
A mother fights for her offspring,
sensing the fact that we kill
to save what we can. Any woman who carries
the blood scent around her must know
the bear is incensed
by hot smells neither can name.

Who owns this high country full
of presence, the circle of quartz
found perfect in bedrock?
In this high place of our breaking
to flowering grass, we resume our minds,
reminding ourselves without ease.

The bear is with those for whom quiet
is useless. She will tear flesh, break bone,
drag remains over lily and stump.
Extinction comes like an accident.
Woman and bear collide in a natural path,
the trees unlabeled and green.

Choosing Your Name

for Teri

If you are Willow then I am Phoebe,
a bird nestled high in the hair
blowing around you, blonde
to the fields waving, the summer
a valley of hills like brown women
who rest lovely and slow.

Willow, your old name is home.
It lingers in the pink adobe
walls and harsh tiles
of clean Alameda, your father
tan in December. You drove me wild
through streets crossing cable-car tracks,
the hills too steep, the runoff
too slick for the rough shoots
collecting like facts in your palm.

You turn them over like leaves, a life
growing inside. You, this man
and farm, Oregon flat and green.
He opens the door to your kitchen,
soft in the kerosene light.
Teri, forgive me, I'm wrong. Your home
must be here, rows of new peas
push back all efforts of sticks
or dry hands. This spring
I forget about wings
and walk on your ground toward shade.

The Snow Lady Comes Alive

for Kim, age 9

Thank-you for building me. I am glad
you give me a hat. I like the red
bucket effect and the brim pulled
low on my leafy ears.
I notice the small boy is eyeing me.
He puts his hands on the round forms
you have moulded onto my chest.
What are these, he asks and I smile
wide with my green bean mouth,
careful to keep the seeds.

Some nights, the moon may try
its familiar melt but only a crust
can harden over this skin.
I will choose my hour to soften.
These rock eyes watch the boy tumbling
about in boots but even now I see
you walk like your mother.
Some night, when I come
melting to your window, do not
be alarmed. I have only come to give
what is already yours. These breasts
you lifted once from the ground
can grow now under your skin.

Girl in the Garden

The plump girl sits in full sun.
Her dress is new, gingham checked
and the best blue shade.
Her hair is pulled tight, her chin
round with a double layer
of her own soft flesh. The mother waves
behind the camera. The girl looks away.
This is fifth grade, the year
she cuts out her face
and hides it away in a drawer. The garden

is lovely, a scent of new dogwood
and ferns, their fiddleneck heads
rise toward her half-closed eyes.
She turns away and goes back
to the fitting room, clerks
coming in to praise her sweet looks.
Her mother is handing the dress out again,
maybe a size fourteen. Smile

pretty now, they keep asking
and huge black sticks
in the night catch her eye or the moon
full in the crotch of a tree. Sometimes a candle
is something to wish on, she sees
herself in the moist fields of grass.
Now she pouts toward the sun, her eyes
squint and a large flower blooms
at her hem in gaudy design.
Already her young belly presses against
the taut belt of the skirt.

Spring Morning at the Nursing Home

It is April, the sun
is thin warmth
in her eyes moist with age.
The setting is flowering
plum and primrose, the plum
color close to the ground.
I'm reading from Yeats
and she stares over my head.
The beauty born in her lifetime
shines through her skin.
I was born in Dublin, she says,
the syllables low and guttural.
She is grasping the air, she wants
to know what to do. I read,
having nothing to say.
Now warm at her mouth, yes,
she did see Maud Gonne
standing there to be seen.
Beyond us the bay
floats thick with the tides return.
I wonder, she says, to herself,
does it hurt to die?
A jay, blue as her rosary,
squawks from the tree.

Wearing the Medallion

My mother has given me this. It hangs
 on my neck like a cross.
 She has given me all I can take, a packet
 of lace, green ribbons to tie back my hair.
What can the matter be
 now I am old enough
 to remember these songs?
Come back, come back, the blue heart
 is singing, come, these wide cliffs will open.
 A girl wheels through the streets
 alive and crying in the fair city,
cockles, cockles --
 I have no part in this chant.

Deaden the flute and drum, the oboe
 reedy and thin. If they insist
 I will play silent night
 the angels on high we have heard
 singing sweetly, singing...

How many harps does she need
 to string us all home, the years
 of plucking and lifting, her hands
 poised at the proper note?
 Sometimes I think she would drown us all
 in the deep tone of her son,
 the one with the cello.

What I do is never enough.
 Her harps keep crashing, the floor
 coming this close too often
 and I can't stand.
 Now she gives me her name
 and its weight repeats
 for hours like a bell in my hand.

Don't think I give up easy.
 I wear this gift at my neck.

The Swing

Down the path she wears thin
to its first early grass,
down below cedar and pine, swinging
her weight under taut ropes
where sap runs thick off the firs --
a clank of high chains, rough jute
right in her hands. Beneath
the boughs of an old pine tree, the song
keeps her rushing and everything's
going away, the dark blended voice
of the woman who stands looking out.
So safe, so high, the girl pumps close
to the sound and again, braids
sweeping dirt, her head going under
and down. Her mother, inside,
bends to the sink, the cool
running water, trying to hum:
and this is my child, my only
daughter, the one I stand for
here as she swings. Past high branches
and today she knows, she says,
why we named her and why
she's not a boy.

A Drawing of Women

My mother reading my journal draws
her dark picture over my words.
Three women emerge,
the shapes an iron wash
over my written specks.
In the middle I glimpse the full
belly and breast of one
who reclines long between the robes
of her two dark sisters,
their hair the color of light.

This light whitens the page,
shines in the naked middle witch
and laughs in the belly of women.
The breast line fades, is gone.
I slant the page, I cannot see
but rest in the long color of hair
and keep knowing I'll come to better light.

The Crawl

This water holds like a womb.
I stroke the cold, deep
where I want it to move.
In my ears I sense the collapse
of air. I wonder how far
one can go and not carry a tank.
No sound on the ocean floor, only
the faint struggle of ferns
trying to float. I pull back
as each day shouts to the surface.
I rest, float on my good side,
arms held up to the chill.
Some days I breathe in a rhythm
more sure than any I've known.
I learn to crawl slow
in this water that aches for a name.

Advice

Live where you sleep. Take no advice
with care and pretend this sludge
is open to what may arise.

Somehow the mouth remains wide.
If the beach is rock, still you must
live where you sleep. Take no advice

from kind old women. They try
hard to say that your song, crude,
is open to what may arise.

They are wrong. Their eyes
refuse to notice the wreckage.
Sleep where you live. Take no advice

and wake with a giant who lies
inside your skin. If your ear
is open to what may arise

you take the next thing. Besides,
the river may not be mud.
Live where you sleep. Take no advice,
open to what may arise.

Among Women

The pool fills with bodies smooth in the splash
and muscle of arms. Each woman
carries her fullness calm
and kicking inside her. I move slowly
among them, hands raised
in this stroking. Deep in the shape
of where we begin, I reach
down ripple to the breaking wave
where I rest. A white belly rises
beside me and falls between turns
of my head. Through rivers of water
I think of each child floating twice,
once for the mother of music
and again for the unquiet voice
that keeps giving in. Each
new stroke is release
for breath stone-bound in my mouth
and I let go easy as leaves
falling outside. Laps pass
like long rows of knitting these women
keep pulling home, the stitches gathering
tense and supple as we continue.